

## Interlingual Oulipo

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### Aignan and the Sphinx, or, Literature at the Border

In Chapter 3 of Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (1969), Anton Voyl imagines a combined version of the Oedipus myth and Thomas Mann's *The Holy Sinner* (1951). The protagonist of Voyl's story, Aignan, identifies himself as the answer to the riddle presented by the sphinx: "Y a-t-il un animal / Qui ait un corps fait d'un rond pas tout à fait clos / Finissant par un trait plutot droit?" (Perec, *Romans* 339). He then takes revenge on his questioner:

–Fais donc un saut dans l'à-pic, vilain Sphinx.  
–Oh, murmura l'animal, mais tu voudrais ma mort!  
–*That's right!* hurla tout à coup Aignan sans trop savoir pourquoi il utilisait l'anglais. (Perec, *Romans* 340).

In Gilbert Adair's English translation, Aignan cries "Si, si! [...] without knowing why an Italian locution should pop into his brain at such a point of crisis and climax" (Perec, *A Void* 28).

At first glance, the turn to English appears as a way of bypassing the lipogrammatic obstacle to expression. Yet it would not be difficult to find an affirmative formulation in "e-less" French. The dialogue functions primarily as a nod to the reader who knows the constraints governing Aignan's speech. The metatextual joke works according to the logic of the "paradoxical clue," to borrow Bernard Magné's expression—that is, a clue that reveals the presence of constraint only to those who already knew it was there (Magné 72), and which, as Christelle Reggiani has shown, is part of Perec's rhetoric of friendly complicity with the reader (Reggiani 167). John Lee, commenting on his own unpublished translation of Perec's novel, observes that he adopted the rule that grammatical deviations should add complexity to the text rather than being a facile solution to a translation problem (Lee 85). The same principle clearly applies to Perec's use of implicit translations as translinguistic solutions to the lipogrammatic difficulty. The episode of Aignan and the sphinx brings together the novel's key preoccupations of violence, paternity, absence, and enigma. Trapped in his narrative, Aignan both knows and does not know his own identity, and does not recognize the logic of his own speech. The riddle of his self-recognition and the mystery of the absent letter, hidden in plain sight, remain unresolved by his murderous victory over the sphinx. It is therefore fitting that the encounter with the liminal figure of the sphinx marks a transgression of linguistic boundaries as well as a point of crisis in the story.

This episode is only one of this novel's many forays into other languages, primarily English (motivated on the narrative level by the presence of English characters, such as Augustus B. Clifford), but also Italian, German, Latin (Perec, *Romans* 391), and Japanese—the novel cites a *tanka*, beginning "Kuraki yori," that is attributed to either Izumi Shikibu or Tsumori Kunimoto (395), and which is in fact a *cento* composed from poems by both (see Roubaud, *Mono no aware* 229, 233). *La Disparition* is a multivocal, and indeed a collaborative work that draws on the linguistic resources of Perec's circle of friends and deploys an expansive intertextuality. Playful polylingualism helps actualize the lipogram to maximalist, rather than minimalist ends: not content with exhaustively exploiting the resources of an excised French language, Perec pushes

his writing beyond the boundaries of any single language. This happens less because of the limited possibilities of a constrained French, than as an inevitable consequence of the inherent logic of the text: the otherness of foreign tongues exacerbates the strangeness of the displacement that has taken place within the French language. In this respect, *La Disparition* lends support to Bakhtin's claim about the close connection between polyglossia—the interaction of multiple national languages that “mutually animat[e] each other” (Bakhtin 65)—and “heteroglossia *within* a language, that is, the problem of internal differentiation, the stratification characteristic of any national language” (67). Bakhtin connects “other-languagedness” to a heightened consciousness of style:

For the creating literary consciousness, existing in a field illuminated by another's language, it is not the phonetic system of its own language that stands out, nor is it the distinctive features of its own morphology nor its own abstract lexicon—what stands out is precisely that which makes language concrete and which makes its world view ultimately untranslatable, that is, precisely the *style of the language as a totality*. (Bakhtin 62)

Polyglossia and heteroglossia thus both operate to heighten difference, revealing the incommensurability of idioms. Or, in the words of Harry Mathews, “a language says what it can say, and that's that” (Mathews, “Translation and the Oulipo” 69).

Bakhtin's view of the mutual untranslatability of languages and registers may be contrasted with quite another vision of linguistic totality—one that depends precisely upon translation. For Walter Benjamin, translation points the way to the “predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages” (Benjamin 257). Benjamin's idealized translator, whose work inevitably belongs to a “specific stage of linguistic history” (258), nevertheless breaks through linguistic barriers to deepen his or her own language and allow a glimpse of the supreme language, beyond the diversity of imperfect national idioms. We detect an echo here of Mallarmé's “Crise de vers”: “Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême” (Mallarmé 208). Looking forward in literary history, it is tempting to draw an analogy between Benjamin's “realm of reconciliation and fulfillment” and the Oulipian conception of a potential literature that, in theory at least, knows no borders.

Commenting in *Poésie, etcetera: ménage* on the notion of generalized potentiality, Roubaud emphasizes the possible extensions of Oulipian writing with constraints: “la pratique de l'écriture sous contraintes est envisageable (même si certaines contraintes ne sont pas généralisables partout) en toutes langues” (205). The Oulipian writer uses constraints that may well be tied in some instances to the historical forms of a given language, but nonetheless tend toward a translinguistic realm, invoking a conception of literary potentiality that cannot be limited to any one linguistic or cultural context. To conceptualize literary invention in terms of “constraints” is to undertake a deliberate decontextualization of form, convention, and rule in the name of maximizing their potential uses in the present and future (see Andrews). Removed from its time, place, and language of origin, the constraint emerges as potentially transposable and adaptable to other contexts. In practice, of course, this adaptability is relative; a given constraint will inflect different languages in different ways, and the constraint itself may require “translation” in order to function in another language. Nevertheless, the constraint can function as a point of connection or crossing-over between languages. Consider, for instance, Harry Mathews's and Oskar Pastior's English and German adaptations of Perec's “35 variations sur un

thème de Marcel Proust” (Perec, Mathews, and Pastior), which bring together various kinds of linguistic transposition with the act of translation. My suggestion here is that the Oulipian notion of potentiality presupposes that of translatability. Furthermore, aside from the realm of translation proper (or “askance from translation,” in Haun Saussy’s terms), the practice of writing using constraints entails both the reciprocal estrangement of languages, and the emergence of a utopian horizon of interlinguistic potentiality.

### **Multilingual Oulipo**

The increasing national diversity of the Oulipo’s membership and the group’s integration of multiple languages into its writings have led Camille Bloomfield to posit its identity as a “groupe-monde” (Bloomfield, “Anthologie”) and Marc Lapprand to speak of a tendency toward “(alter)mondialisation.” Given its modes of sociality and Parisian origins, the group does not necessarily aspire to cultural inclusiveness; but it does cultivate an interest in multilingual creation (and performance) beyond any national perspective. Of course, individual Oulipian writers occupy different positions with respect to the multiplicity of languages. Some members write primarily in one language, others in two (Harry Mathews and Ian Monk, for instance, contribute to the group in both English and French); some are translators, whether of poetry (Roubaud, *Traduire, journal*) or of a broader range of literary and non-literary texts (Monk, *Comment dire en anglais?*). Other Oulipians have taught outside France (Anne Garréta), or served as cultural ambassadors (Paul Fournel). Individual linguistic heritages carry different affective burdens. Perec’s work is marked by a profound sense being cut off from his familial linguistic heritage: “Je ne parle pas la langue que mes parents parlèrent” (Perec and Bober 59). By contrast, Marcel Bénabou, in his essay “Le multilinguisme des miens,” describes his positive experience of multilingualism during his childhood in Morocco, which placed him in contact not only with Hebrew, Arabic, and French, but also with a variety of “sous-langues” “le franrabe,” “le franbreu,” “l’hébrabe.” The resulting fascination with play between languages, he notes, is directly linked to his activity as an Oulipian:

Mais c’est bien entendu dans le domaine de l’activité littéraire que ce multilinguisme originel, reposant sur le croisement de circuits linguistiques multiples pourrait avoir laissé les traces les plus nombreuses: la désacralisation de la langue, la découverte précoce de l’arbitraire du signe, le goût du jeu entre les langues, le goût de la greffe, de la contamination, tout ce qui devait me mener, comme à mon lieu naturel, à l’OULIPO. (Bénabou)

A comprehensive account of the linguistic histories, competencies and affinities of Oulipians would also have to take into account various kinds of polyglot creation in which these writers have engaged, from Roubaud’s participation in the quadrilingual collaborative poem *Renga* (in collaboration with his fellow poets Octavio Paz, Edoardo Sanguineti, and Charles Tomlinson) to Oskar Pastior’s more directly Oulipian “Sextine éphémèrement polyglotte.” Rather than attempt an exhaustive overview, the following pages consider a few French-English examples that illustrate three distinct kinds of relation between two languages: Perec’s homographic *trompe l’œil* poetry, based on a bilingual constraint; dual-language poems by Roubaud that treat translation as a form of composition; and the mixed-language travel poetry of Roubaud’s *Churchill 40*.

## Between Languages

First published in 1978, Georges Perec's *Trompe l'œil* consists of a set of six poems based on bilingual homographs—words that can be read as French or English, but which have distinct meanings in each language. These are drawn from a lexicon first presented by Harry Mathews at a meeting of the Oulipo in 1975 (Bloomfield, "Homographic Translations"), and "generated to provide material for the composition of heteronymic, ambivalent, Anglo-French texts (Mathews, "L'égal français" 60). A similar constraint gave rise to Perec's occasional piece "Les Aventures de Dixon Harry," while Mathews and Oskar Pastior developed a German-English version of the constraint, *Deunglitsch*, in 1992 (Mathews and Brotchie 139; Bloomfield, "Homographic Translations").

In the original publication, the poems of *Trompe l'œil* were published alongside six photographs of trompe-l'œil images by Cuchi White, so that the poetry appears as a kind of textual equivalent of the visual image. While the photographs disappear from the reedited version published in the collection *La Clôture et autres poèmes*, the title *Trompe l'œil* retains the reference to the visual, continuing to associate the switch between languages with the phenomenon of the optical illusion. The collection evokes more than one mode of double perception: between text and image, reality and representation, French and English. But if Perec offers a textual trompe l'œil, which image, or which poem is the deceptive one? Rather than identifying the real poem behind the appearance, we are faced with an oscillation between alternative versions:

ICY  
MIRE VENUE  
N OSE  
ENGRAVER BRIBES PLATES  
D UNE  
AVERSE SALE (Perec, *Clôture* 32)

Read as French, the poem forms a meaningful (albeit elliptical) syntactic unit of relative complexity, with an identifiable subject ("mire") conjugated verb and infinitive ("n'ose engraver") and a prepositional phrase ("d'une averse sale"). The English poem, by contrast, appears as a juxtaposition of words, mostly nouns—mire, venue, engraves, bribes, plates, dunes, sale—with no evident semantic or syntactic connection. In other poems the French also proceeds through juxtaposition: "COIN A CHAT / CHOSE / BORNE" (Perec, *La Clôture* 34). Ultimately, however, developing an interpretation of the French or English versions may be beside the point. What is most striking is the difficulty of opting for one language or the other and maintaining the choice from line to line, or even from word to word. A gap opens up between the perception of the word and its interpretation, material representation and mental representation—a division not only between signifier and signified, but within the signifier itself (if we recall that for Saussure, the signifier is the acoustic image). In the process, both languages are suddenly rendered strange. As Antoine Cazé puts it, this is an "interstitial" text (Cazé 139). In other words, it is less a bilingual text than an interlingual text, placing the reader in an uncanny space between languages.

## Translation as Composition

The relationship between the French and English poems in Roubaud's *Traduire, journal*

is at first glance simply that of source text and translation. For Roubaud, however, these texts are “approximations” at translating poetry; they arise from the “confrontation” between French and other languages; and they involve “appropriations” of the original (7). Approximation, confrontation, appropriation; the subtitle of Roubaud’s earlier collection *Mono no aware* refers to poems “borrowed” from the Japanese. In his preface to *Traduire, journal*, Roubaud notes that the other language encountered is most frequently American English or Provençal; but it can also be French, or even a hybrid: “L’autre langue peut-être le français./L’autre langue peut-être le frenchglish” (7). The confrontation between languages seems to produce a reciprocal “othering”—or an experience of “other-languagedness,” in the terms of Bakhtin’s account of polyglossia.

*Traduire, journal*, includes Roubaud’s translations of works by Louis Zukofsky, Cid Corman, Jack Spicer, David Antin, Rosmarie Waldrop, Jackson Mac Low, George Oppen, and others, making the book a kind of companion piece to Roubaud and Deguy’s earlier anthology *Vingt poètes américains* (1980). However, the book also contains a series of self-translations, dated 1979. Whereas the work of other poets is presented only in Roubaud’s French version, for his self-translations Roubaud includes both French and English texts, arranged vertically on a single page:

**partout les**

partout  
 sous les objets la  
 verdure  
 dommageable. du  
 bout de musique ils  
 s’entourent et du bout de musique ils  
 passent la verdure à la  
 langue. ainsi que la  
 toupie sur  
 le sable. la  
 farine. elle peinait sur  
 la mémoire de la ligne  
 derrière  
 la verdure  
 dommagée. le cercle  
 en bout de musique.

**everywhere the**

everywhere  
 under objects  
 grass  
 detrimental. with  
 an extremity of music they  
 surround themselves and with an extremity of music  
 they bend the grass with their  
 language. Thus the  
 top spins over

sand. or  
 flour. it used to toil  
 along the memory of a line  
 behind  
 grass  
 damaged. a circle  
 at the end of music. (Roubaud, *Traduire* 192)

Should we automatically give primacy to the French text written by a French poet (and printed first on the page), or should we rather read the poems as a dual-language composition, written in Frenchglish? Either way, the inclusion of both texts on the page produces an interaction or “inter-animation” (Bakhtin) of the two versions, so that one appears to elucidate the other, bringing interpretative possibilities to light while also revealing the resources of its own language. For example, in the English poem above, “language” in line 8 resolves the ambiguity of “langue” (tongue/language); the addition of “or” in line 10 specifies the syntactical relationship of sand and flour, left uncertain by the French definite article; the repeated expression “bout de musique” is rendered as first as “an extremity of music,” and in the last line as “the end of music.” The symmetry in the French poem between the “la verdure / dommageable” (lines 3–4) and “la verdure / dommagée” (lines 14–15) is inflected both semantically and syntactically by the rendering “grass / detrimental,” “grass / damaged,” with the unusualness of the postpositive adjective in English generating some uncertainty as to its attribution (what has been damaged?).

Significantly, the poem “Un point à / a point where” (Roubaud, *Traduire* 196) takes linguistic duality as its subject. It is dedicated to Jean-Claude Milner, whose *L’Amour de la langue* (1978), we might note, distinguishes between the objectivity of the language studied by grammarians, and the subjectivity of the language where we each inscribe our desire (Lacan’s *lalangue*). Echoing these theories, the opening lines of Roubaud’s poem stage a linguistic drama, a scene of discovery that reveals the underside or the inside of the chain (of signifiers?):

qu’il y ait un point à son désir  
 il se trouva sur la chaîne  
 à soulever le plafond du vocable

that there is a point where to hang one’s desire  
 he found himself inside the chain  
 lifting up the ceiling of words (Roubaud, *Traduire* 196)

The third-person subject of the poem (the linguist?) later finds himself powerless “d’empêcher / que double sa syntaxe”; “to prevent / his syntax doubling” (196). To this split within language—corresponding perhaps to the division between grammar and poetry—is added the doubling of Roubaud’s poem into two languages, which in turn dramatizes the alterity of language as such.

### Travelling Poems

My final example, Roubaud’s *Churchill 40*, is a collection of travel sonnets that are also *travelling* sonnets, since they move between linguistic spaces in order to trace a map of personal and literary relations. The poem “Winston Churchill à Carcassonne, octobre 1940,” from which

the book takes its title, evokes the memory of a children's game in which the young Roubaud, in the role of Churchill, performs exalted heroics while playing at speaking another language, "mâchouillant des sons pseudo-anglais" (Roubaud, *Churchill* 171). The poems in the volume are not composed of the child's pseudo-English. However, the book's first section, "Bus-Stop: Infinity," contains a number of poems that combine French and English, and which were composed on Roubaud's journeys to the USA in 2000 and 2002. The poem "Éternel retour" begins in English, moves into French and then back again:

*On the 12<sup>th</sup> of march year two thousand and two  
I eat my first pancakes of the Millennium  
There's a book at the hotel I contemplate reading  
It is a "Culinary Mystery" by Diane Mott*

*Davidson. It's called "Killer Pancakes". Oh!  
I give up. Une gravure d'Andrew Jackson  
Est sur la table: debout, en habit noir  
Canne dans sa main gauche, haut de forme à droite*

*Perruque blanche souliers pointus turlutu  
Tu. Le ciel est lourd chaud, presque post-printemps  
Mais les arbres ne sont pas convaincus. Ils restent  
à bouder gris sans feuilles.*

*Denver, Colorado,  
Columbine Street. This is the Bucktel Bungalow  
Où je dors. Same room, same bed as two years ago. (Roubaud, *Churchill* 28)*

Originating in the immediate linguistic environment, the presence of English marks the incursions of the everyday into the poet's musings. Although the rupture between linguistic codes is marked by the use of italics, formally and thematically the two languages do not have obviously different functions, and ultimately the transition between languages can happen mid-line or mid-sentence (line 14). Shaped as a sonnet, the poem plays with the possibilities of rhyme and meter without settling into prosodic regularity. It offers the occasional alexandrine in French (line 9, line 11), English (line 2, line 13), or both (line 12, line 14), as well as an anapestic rhythm in the opening line, and a rhyme in the last three lines (Colorado, bungalow, ago—a modification of the rhyme scheme of the French sonnet's final tercet, which also echoes the final rhyming couplet of the Shakespearian sonnet). The line length varies between 10 and 14 syllables. Formally, the poem occupies a space between the French sonnet and American free verse poetry. The latter, with its free use of line breaks, offers for Roubaud an alternative to French *vers libre* (see Eastman).

### **"Toujours, traduisant"**

Roubaud's insistence on the encounter between languages may seem surprising given his repeated insistence on poetry's status as the "memory of language"—that is, poetry is the memory of a specific language with its particular history and rhythms (*Poésie* 22–23). Nevertheless, Roubaud asserts, the survival of French-language poetry depends in part on the process of translation-as-appropriation (*Poésie* 31). Moreover, as the poems of *Churchill* 40

suggest, and as Roubaud indicates more explicitly in ‘*Le Grand incendie de Londres*’, the posture of the translator stands for a particular mode of relation to the world, or to the plurality of possible worlds:

Cette double langue : les frontières de chaque langue sont les frontières d’un monde : monde du projet, monde du récit. Mais on ne peut parler que comme si on n’était dans aucune : « toujours, traduisant », *le Grand Incendie de Londres*. Voilà pourquoi il y a Londres. Londres, disait Alix, et cette langue (réelle) où ni vous ni moi ne sommes, « toujours, traduisant ». (Roubaud, ‘*Le Grand incendie*’, 172).

The notion of translation functions in Roubaud’s autobiographical cycle as a complex metaphorical construct, figuring multiple relationships: between project and narrative, between poetry and mathematics, or between the memory image and its textual transcription. But translation is not merely a metaphor. Roubaud is also describing his, and his wife Alix’s, relationship to actual languages, noting, far from any celebratory bilingualism, the real linguistic difficulty that they face (‘*Le Grand incendie*’ 336). Roubaud constantly situates his own use of French in relation to other languages, in particular the “pseudo-maternal” language of English, which was taught by his schoolteacher mother, and the Provençal abandoned by his father. (The latter is also a source language, associated with the origins of a European lyric tradition that brings together mysticism, love, and song—and that also allows Roubaud to separate the ideas of language and nation [Roubaud, *Poésie* 16]). “Toujours, traduisant,” with its odd present participle, becomes a refrain in ‘*Le Grand incendie de Londres*,’ It describes Alix Cléo Roubaud’s experience of existing in between two languages, French and English, and at home in none. “Translating” also refers to the couple’s shared existence, their double world or “biipsisme” (‘*Grand incendie*’ 209, 223), and their mode of being together: “toujours, nous traduisions” (‘*Grand incendie*’ 337).

“Les frontières de chaque langue sont les frontières d’un monde,” says Roubaud, slightly adapting the famous aphorism from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 5.6). Yet Roubaud also refutes this proposition through his appeal to translation. From language as world, he moves to the metaphor of language as a city—London, specifically, the “other” to Paris—and to the possibility of travel beyond borders. While constraints provide one mode of transportation for such linguistic journeys, which bring worlds into contact, Oulipian interlingualism is not only a matter of constraints. Openness to the formal resources of other languages, to the play between languages, and to the possibilities of linguistic cross-contamination and inter-animation, is intrinsic to the ethics and poetics of the group.

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