Words Apart: The Untranslatability of Velimir Khlebnikov and Eugene Jolas

⊙ Leanne Rae DARNBROUGH
KU Leuven

Abstract: This paper compares the linguistic revolutions of Russian Cubo-Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov and the American avant-garde poet and publisher Eugene Jolas in terms of their translatability. These two are prime examples for comparison because both were not only avid poets, but also renegade theorists engaged in apotropaic linguistic revolutions, desperately striving to stave off (or at least delay) the looming apocalypse via their words. While Khlebnikov strives to recreate a primeval language of transparency based on an exoteric mathematical structure, Eugene Jolas intentionally mixes languages to reflect more about their relations than mere words. Both strategies render the poetry of Khlebnikov and Jolas practically untranslatable but for very divergent reasons.

Keywords: translation, Velimir Khlebnikov, *Zaum*, Eugene Jolas, language innovation, poetry

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In his 1919 essay "Our Fundamentals," Velimir Khlebnikov asks his reader, "[w]ho wants to travel from Moscow to Kiev by way of New York? And yet what phrase from contemporary literary language is free from such detours? And all because there exists no science of word creation" (376). Aptly for the devotedly vatic poet, Khlebnikov foresaw my ambition more than a century before it came to fruition. This is an article that investigates the implications for translation on the word creation exploits of the Russian Cubo-Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov and the modernist/surrealist promulgator of transatlantic avant-garde writing, Eugene Jolas.

For many, poetry itself is an art of translation, wresting truth out of the ethereal clouds billowing around one on a foggy morning; an attempt to pin the vapours of imagination into transferable understanding. This is exactly why poetry is so damnably difficult to translate—any translation of poetry is already operating at the second level and for such poets, the very poetry of their words is enhanced by their ambiguity; ephemeral evocations of emotion, multiplicity of meaning and echoes of waking dreams. These poets defy translation by suspending the finality

of definition as a carrot perpetually dangled on a stick before the mule. I will refer to them as the esoterics. For other poets, though, translation is simply an unnecessary hoop they are forced to jump through. Poetry, for this second category of poets, ought rather to be as meticulously precise and as instantaneously apparent as possible. Such a poet's meaning is ideally revealed with an urgent immediacy and a crystalline purity. These poets do not attempt to defy translation with an endless deferral of concrete meaning but instead aim to transcend translation by rendering their poetry as obviously as possible. I will refer to these poets as the exoterics. Both categories operate in a zone of limited translation—but with opposite aims and thus, disparate results.

To accurately illustrate these two strategies of circumventing definitive translation I would like to compare two avant-garde poets and language theorists of the avant-garde: the American ingenue in Paris, Eugene Jolas (my esoteric case), and the peripatetic basket-case of mathematical poetry, Velimir Khlebnikov (my exoteric case). These two characters are particularly prime examples for comparison because both were not only avid poets, but also renegade theorists engaged in apotropaic linguistic revolutions, desperately striving to stave off (or at least delay) the looming apocalypse via their words. Jolas's journal *transition* was his playground for linguistic innovation, publishing his many manifestos such as "Revolution of the Word" (1929), "What Is the Revolution of Language?" (1933), "The Language of the Night" (1932) and the two "Wanted"s: "A New Symbolic Language!" and "A New Communicative Language!" (both 1932). While these (supplemented by other writings of Jolas) ostensibly appear somewhat similar to Velimir Khlebnikov's own radical interventions in language like his contributions to the Russian Cubo-Futurist invention of *zaum* or his proffering of novel alphabets complete with iconic "hieroglyphs"; the two poets were in fact at opposite ends of the spectrum of strategies to negate translation.

Chronology is the simplest scaffolding for argumentation, so I will begin with Velimir Khlebnikov. Repeated revolutions and wars left indelible marks on Khlebnikov's all-too-short life. Not only did he survive the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, the uprising against the Tsarist regime in 1905 and the First World War, but he was also present for the October Revolution of 1917 and the bloody conflict that followed the revolution. Raymond Cooke observes that after being involuntarily conscribed into the army, "the regimentation of military life as a reserve infantry-man […] was little short of a disaster for Khlebnikov" (16). That is in fact drastically understating the case. Khlebnikov himself affirmed his ineptitude for military service in a letter to Nikolai Kulbin, emphatically insisting that "I am a dervish, a Yogi, a Martian, anything you want, but I am *not* a private in a reserve infantry regiment" ("Letters" 108). After being detained on suspicion of espionage by both the Red and White armies, he checked himself into a mental institution in 1919 in hopes of never serving in the military again. He then experienced two episodes of typhus before, predictably and far too belatedly, being deemed utterly unsuited for the army. Unfortunately, the nomadic bard did not find peace following his discharge from military duties and "[a]fter the Bolsheviks had retaken [Kharkov] and he had left the hospital, Khlebnikov remained in and around [the city]. Dressed in rags or make-shift clothing, he lived in considerable poverty, and, although engrossed in his writings and calculations, his spirits seemed to have been at a low ebb" (Cooke 17–18)—as one would have expected given his predicament. He may have had malaria when he arrived, destitute and world-weary, in Moscow in 1922. Fatigued by months of starvation caused by relentless draught, he ultimately perished the 28th of June in the Novgorod province as a result of gangrene (19).

Khlebnikov tickles the imagination of scholars chiefly because of his involvement in one of Cubo-Futurism's most enduring (and perhaps also endearing) endeavors: the artificial (but

natural!) new (but paleolithic!) language of *zaum*. Apparently shucking conventional rules of syntax, *zaum* "drew attention to the arbitrary nature of all morphemic constructions by manipulating the word to generate itself: by means of applying suffixes and prefixes to the word in textbook-like exercises and creating word formation paradigms which did not exist in standard Russian, [Cubo-Futurists] created a new non-sense or trans-sense language" (Saule 51). While that may have been true of Khlebnikov's first forays into *zaum*, eventually it would become apparent that his vision for the language was one modeled after the communication of the natural world—later in "Our Fundamentals" he proclaims "[i]t is evident that language is as wise as nature, and only now with the growth of science are we discovering how to read it" (378–379). *Zaum* has also been described by Charlotte Douglas as "suprarational" (Introduction [*King*] 3) and "beyonsense" (Introduction [*Collected Works*] 20) and by Marjorie Perloff as "super-sense"—a term that highlights the plenitude of meaning *zaum* attributes to the individual sounds of the word (*21st Century* 126). Perhaps most charmingly are Khlebnikov's own appellations of *zaum* as "the language of the birds" (as evidenced by the extreme onomatopoeia of the first "sound plane" of his supersaga "Zangezi") or as "a star-language" (Steiner 195)—or even the language of the gods (Khlebnikov, "Zangezi" 333–334). However, for all his longing to create a language of instantaneous understanding, the self-referentiality of the word paradoxically evolved into a new creative instrument that actually required increased attempts at definition and delineation. Khlebnikov attempted to disprove Ferdinand de Saussure's claim of arbitrariness at the signified and signifier levels by digging down through stratified layers of language and mathematics. As a radical poetic linguist Khlebnikov believed he could prove atavistic affinities that would reveal a purer, Ur-Slavic language if only he could trace etymologies back far enough and connect sufficiently divergent linguistic traditions. The consonantal sounds that evoke such affinities should be expressed pictorially via a re-vamped written language which literally depicted their geo-spatial impulses.[1] This was an attempt to find meaning outside of syntax. Ian Probstein goes so far as to say "Khlebnikov erases the boundary between art and reality, image and reality, signifier and signified. He develops the idea of a 'two-faced' or even a multi-faced word, which has ceased to be a symbol" (16). Khlebnikov was not content with merely changing words. He dug down to what he perceived as the atoms of language, the smallest units of sound (phonemes) and the smallest units of written words (letters) in order to conjure up alphabets that both echoed a primeval myth and predicted a peaceful future. Yet paradoxically, in his radical abandonment of conventional language, Khlebnikov attempts to contain its runaway profligacy of meaning by wrestling it into the tyrannical confines of a natural, geometrical, spatial system that denies divergent interpretations even as it revels in the multiplicity of its derivations. According to Ken Hirschkop, "Khlebnikov simultaneously drills down to single consonant sounds and ascends upwards to meanings conceived in terms of mathematics and physics" (211).

The desire for a universal language was not unique to Khlebnikov. In fact, the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed an explosion of artificial languages. As the world paradoxically expanded via colonialism and shrank via technological advances in transportation and telecommunications, intrepid linguistic adventurers forged on into new territories of language invention. A universal language would be beneficial on so many levels: it would simplify trade and commerce, it would do away with the petty frustrations of communicating among foreigners and, most idealistic of all, it would foster greater understanding of one's fellow citizens of Earth. For one such as Khlebnikov, living in a time and place beset by warfare and revolution and bounced

between rivalling armies as a pawn in a game he never wanted to play, the beacon of hope offered by a universal language was irresistible.

At first glance Khlebnikov's writings do not inspire confidence in his linguistic scheme. His writing leaps deftly (but also maddeningly) between word games and a reliance on readers' awareness of the vagaries of onomatopoeic birdsong. An example of his wordplay is his punning on the river Volga in his short story "Ka" where he writes "[o]n the crumpled dry petal of a lotus I sketched a head of Amenhotpe [sic]; a lotus from the mouth of the Volga, or Ra" (103)—and Henryk Baran notes that the ancient name of the river Volga was Ra, also the name of the sun god of ancient Egypt (127). These ancient affinities appear everywhere for Khlebnikov, who visualized the world as an interconnected web of primeval meaning (re)generated by correspondence and juxtaposition. The natural world was also alive with messages. Khlebnikov's first publication was a scientific description of the oscine song of the Ural Mountains he tramped through as a teen (Cooke 5). He was, according to Cooke, well aware of the different meanings linked to tonal and melodic shifts in birdsong—an awareness he demonstrates in the *zaum* sound play of "Zangezi" (87).

PLANE ONE: THE BIRDS
(These are the birds' morning speeches to the rising sun.)

Chaffinch (from the very top of the fir tree, puffing out its silver throat) Peet *pate* tveechan! Peet pate tveechan! Peet *pate* tveechan!

Yellow Bunting (quietly, from the top of a walnut tree) Kree-tee-tee-tee-*tee*-ee—tsuey-tsuey-tsuey-*ssuey*ee.

Tree swallow Vyor-vyor *vee*roo syek-syek-syek! Ver-ver *vee*roo sek-sek-*sek!*

Mountain Sparrow Tyor*tee* ye*dee*gredee *(he sees people and hops into the tall fir tree).* Tyor*tee* ye*dee*gredee!

Yellow Bunting (rocking back and forth on a branch) Tsuey-tsuey-tsuey-*ssuey*ee.

*Green Chiff-Chaff (alone, flitting over the green sea of the pine grove, grazing the waves that the wind keeps forever in motion) Prue*yn! Ptsee*rep*ptsee*rep! Ptsee*rep! – tsehseh*seh.*

Yellow Bunting. Tsuey-tsuey-tsuey- *ssuey*ee *(rocks back and forth on a twig).*

*Blue Jay Pee*oo! *Pee*oo! pyak, pyak, *pyak!*

Barn Swallow Tsee*veets!* Tsee*zeets!*

Black Banded Warbler Behbot *eh*-oo-*veh*vyats!

Cuckoo Koo-*koo!* Koo-koo! *(rocks back and forth on a treetop).*

(Silence. A young birdcatcher passes, with a cage on his back.) (Khlebnikov, "Zangezi" 332–333).

The words of the birds ring truer for Khlebnikov than any grammar of humankind. To the layperson they are also nearly indistinguishable from the language of the gods presented in the subsequent sound plane. If anything, one could imagine Khlebnikov himself as the young birdcatcher, hoping to cage these wild words into systems. It helps, of course, that birds were traditionally used in arcane auguries and that the Egyptian god Khlebnikov associated himself most ardently with, Thoth (gifter of language to people), was often portrayed with the sleek feathers and long beak of an ibis. If this all sounds very esoteric, bear with me. Khlebnikov was not seeking the suspension of the secret, despite the fact that, according to George Steiner, "Velimir Khlebnikov, the Russian futurist who thought more deeply than any other great poet about the frontiers of language [said] 'Words are the living eyes of secrecy'" (231). Khlebnikov was desperately seeking the solution to the secrecy. If the words in circulation at his moment in time were "the living eyes of secrecy" then what the world needed was new words—constructed out of a new system—which dissolved the secret. He was going to show the world once and for all the answer to its problems.

Along with poetry, Khlebnikov was profoundly fascinated by the weird advances in non-Euclidean geometry; advances he believed could be used to divine the mathematical machinations of the universe, thus rescuing the future from the depths of yesterday's calculations.[2] The numerical, geometrical skeleton of his poetic language, though, was not intended to obfuscate meaning or blend it into the realm of the esoteric as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti would in his exhortations to "introduce numbers that have no direct meaning or value but that (being directed by their sounds and by the eye toward our numerical sensibilities) express the varying mystical intensities of matter and the unfailing reactions of our sensibilities" (141). There is actually nothing mystical at all about Khlebnikov's kooky, quirky system. Ultimately unsuccessful, he was nonetheless utterly devoted to discovering a blatant, exoteric, objective geomancy (Earth divination) in his geometry (Earth measure). To achieve this transparent communication, he frequently experimented with injecting wrangled alphabets, geometry, physics and destiny into his poetry. Turning back to *Zangezi*, Plane Eight contains "A Song in Star-Language"; another example of Khlebnikov's *zaum* research. Zangezi the character begins by accusing the letters R, K, L, and G of being "Alphabet war-makers," but war-makers who have reached the twilight of their power, for they now find themselves:

K in chains, in vain in chains,
while *G* and *R* collide in combat.
G falls, cut down by *R*,
and *R* now lies at the feet of *L*! ("Zangezi" 342)

That the glory days of this bygone set of icons have passed is evident from Zangezi's proclamation "Let the all-seeing sounds of a universal language whirl away the mists of time. That language is light" (342). What follows is the song, in which various letters are imbued with characteristics and personalities inherent to their sounds. For example:

Within a haze of green *KHA*, two figures,[3]

the *EL* of their clothes as they move,
a *GO* of clouds above the games they play,
the *VE* of a crowd that circles an unseen fire,
the *LA* of labor and the *PE* of games and songs. ("Zangezi" 342)

The envisioned utopia of this star-language is relayed by Zangezi, who claims to his crowd, "These are star-songs, where the algebra of words is muddled with yardsticks and clocks. And this is only a first draft! Someday this language will unite us all, and that day may come soon" (344). Helpfully, unlike Planes One and Two (The Birds and The Gods, respectively) Plane Eight includes a cipher for the letters—a cipher remarkably similar to the geo-spatial definitions Khlebnikov attributes to the consonants of the Cyrillic alphabet in his theoretical essays "A Checklist: The Alphabet of the Mind" and "Artists of the World!"; both of which demand a thorough revision of the icons (or hieroglyphics) of his language.[4] Eventually Zangezi concludes Plane Eight by stating:

> Planes, the lines defining an area, the impact of points, the godlike circle, the angle of incidence, the fascicule of rays proceeding from a point or penetrating it—these are the secret building blocks of language. Scrape the surface of language, and you will behold interstellar space and the skin that encloses it. (345)

Underneath the specious accretion of signs and symbols and sounds, Khlebnikov believes there to be a mathematical, geo-spatial, natural system of language. The challenge he sets himself is not to simply break with the contemporaneous laws of syntax, grammar, spelling or even letter formation—but to radically overhaul them in favor of a purer, Ur-Slavic language that remains truer to the bare skeletal bones of its natural foundation.

Ultimately, Khlebnikov's was a vaticination based on ratiocination (bonkers as that ratiocination eventually proved to be—for the cherry picking involved in the compilation of his *Tables of Destiny* failed to predict or circumvent the catastrophic events that were to come). The earnestness with which Khlebnikov approached his endeavor is heart wrenching. Pages upon pages of calculations, numbers woven into poems, periodicity of historical events charted on doodles of guitar strings,[5] ever-evolving glyphs of spatial and physical properties intended to impose the world of arithmetic onto the world of communication. None of it wants to be anything *but* plain as day and yet, in the end, it becomes marvelously incoherent—poetry balancing precariously on the cusp of madness and genius.

Eugene Jolas strides off on a different path altogether. Jolas's is a poetry of deferred comprehension; an ambiguity or polyphony of intention and understanding that revels in its own constant revision. Poetry, for Jolas, is not concrete. It is a state of being.

It is curious that, although living a life of considerably more comfort than that of Khlebnikov, Jolas was similarly migratory. Born in 1894 in New Jersey, he spent his youth in Lorraine—a region of France where French, German and a local patois all vie for linguistic dominance. With one parent of French descent and the other of German, Jolas grew up with a foot in both languages (and the familial go-between of English as well) and witnessed first-hand the rampant misunderstandings, miscommunications, and blocked messaging that could result from the clash of competing languages. Yet he also experienced the anarchic joy of speaking with a bi- or even trilingual vocabulary at one's disposal. There were words that conveyed senses that had no

exact counterpart in other languages, and these words provided ample inspiration for attempts at translation—but also spurred him on towards the retropoetics of macaronics. He returned to the United States in 1909 and embraced the colloquialisms of New York with the fervor of the new convert. He finagled his way into a variety of roles where his linguistic competencies were appreciated and expanded: "night schools, New York City tabloids, German-language pressrooms, and even the U. S. Army Medical Corps" (Rumold and Kiefer xii). Reflecting on this time Jolas would write, "I used to like walking the dilapidated streets […] a solitary and anxious immigrant, my head spinning with thousands of French and English words, with journalistic jargon, with army slang words that I had just finished typing up in the office, with words of encouragement for the occupied countries" ("Migrator" 45). Eventually his employer, the *Chicago Tribune*, shipped him back to Paris where he began meandering the city, musing on European culture and publishing the results as "Rambles through Literary Paris." This was when he discovered a trenchant niche in the market of avant-garde little magazines: his baby, *transition*, "sought to bridge the gap between the iconoclastic artist and the common reader, bringing the former to exposure and shaking the latter from complacence" (Rumold and Kiefer xii). David Allen Hatch concurs, claiming that "[f]rom the onset, Jolas envisioned his project as a collaborative environment, as a universal, multilingual, multinational, interdisciplinary laboratory" (49). His influence on the evolution of multilingual poetic expression was noted in James Joyce's limerick:

> There's a genial young poetriarch Euge
> Who hollers with heartiness huge:
> Let sick souls sob for solace
> So the jeunes joy with Jolas
> Book your berths: Après mot, le deluge! (qtd. in Rabaté 245)

How did Jolas envision this revolution of the word? Like Khlebnikov, he began with the paronomasia of neologisms, birthing bizarre patchworks of disparate prefixes and suffixes and mangling monikers into creative aptonyms. In his 1929 essay "Logos" he elucidated that "[a] dilemma faces the modern poet at the threshold of his development. He either will have to abandon completely the attempt to express his universe with the decadent instrument of unpliable and exhausted language matter, or else he will have to try to resuscitate the comatose word" (179). He concluded the essay by explaining the necessity of abandoning attempts at precision and punctuality in favor of embracing the esoteric mysticism and pleasure of a definition deferred:

> [t]he photographic conception of the word can no longer interest us. We desire a nomenclature that evokes an immediacy and the essence of an abstraction. The *état-limite* of the spirit cannot be expressed through the words which, by dint of having been used and abused, no longer evoke in us the primary image. Words have a reality which the dictionary does not know. *Etymology is for the archeologists of letters*. We demand the etymology of approximation and apperception. (183; emphasis mine)

The etymology that Jolas saw practiced around him was facing resolutely backwards, focused on ancient origins to the extreme neglect of the future. And what was Khlebnikov's precious *zaum* but a rapacious clawing and combing through the archeology of letters in search of primordial

roots and primitive icons? The search for missing language links that would stitch together syntax into new forms based on prehistorical roots was a lost cause for Jolas. Jolas would come to see an immediacy of comprehension as the death of the poetic pursuit for it would eradicate the "essence of an abstraction" which he saw as the necessary counterpart to the photographic immediacy of primal meaning. Unlike Khlebnikov, who keeps a wide margin from modernism, Jolas is both modernist and avant-garde. Jolas fits tidily into the description given by Steiner, who claims that:

> [t]he poetry of modernism is a matter of structured debris: from it we are made to envision, to hear the poem that might have been, the poem that will be if, when, the word is made new. This conceit of "unfulfilment," of an adumbration which is almost archaeological—these are the spoors, the lineaments of suggestion left by the absent poem. (181–182)

For all that Jolas decried the archaeology of etymology as too narrowly focused on its precise origins, he nevertheless delights in the extended *process*. For Jolas it is most definitely not the destination but rather the journey that swells his poetry with polymorphous links, allusions, puns, and rampant borrowings from other languages. An example that remains as ghastly relevant today as it was at publication is Jolas's apocalyptic poem "Earthgore,"[6] taken from his 1938 "autobiography of the night mind" *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels*:

> Nightfall floops organing the storm. We are so sere in reeve.
> Fleet flutter three and clush. The hill brills paniknouting war.
> Immobile jockeys flack in voot. Earth rocks and beebes.
> Light darkgloos low. It is a flameglast rooking deer and doom.
> Is end this? Planets shake in groar. Birds beak the golden satellites. Wildglands go chalk in fluvirane.
> Globes concussdance in mist. The sparklers flook and flake. A motor gurrs. Flimgored the comets zish in brail.
> The houses ginrock asps. Rats joggle sackcloth bibber woo. Hornbeasts moan wrack. Flushflish a whiner bursts into the esh.
> From deepworld start the plebs. A loo. A groal. In vocables of glish and gla the calls mishmash. O sting thy tod holds rocks abay.
> A revoluzzing glout. The storm in stala grims. Halt flows the singer's ring and bant. Space gloogloos catastrafing cassocked breasts of bray. (173)

The dystopian verse is awash with the paronomastic neologisms that Jolas (and an early Khlebnikov) felt would revitalize the stale, bourgeois languages that had become the weary medium forced on their contemporaneous poetry. "Darkgloos" manages in one word to evoke both the radiating gloom and its sticky persistence. Lurking between the lines and in the shadow of its bizarre syntax are German subtexts: the seemingly superfluous k in "paniknouting"; to "bibber" is to shiver in both German and Dutch and "O sting thy tod" reads "O sting thy death" (homophonically "hosting thy death") when the final word is translated from German to English.

Most horrifically prescient, "The storm in stala grims," when read aloud, could be mistaken for "The storm in stalag rims." The grim stalags of World War II were German prisoner-of-war camps, stations of suspended reality surrounded at their rims by stormy wars. While "Earthgore" was published in 1938 with a note that it was written in the spring of 1932—long before Hitler's notorious stalags erupted onto the German landscape—this anachronistic interpretation perfectly suits the doomsday thematics of the poem. Yet Jolas's indeterminacy of meaning obfuscates any direct and concrete interpretation. In fact, the very lack of punctuality and precision in the poem opens it up for my anachronistic, multitemporal interpretation. Jolas invites a reader's participation into the construction of his poetic meaning to a far greater degree than Khlebnikov does. As Jolas (together with a host of his peers)[7] would state in the final three proclamations of his "Revolution of the Word":

> 10. Time is a tyranny to be abolished.
> 11. The writer expresses. He does not communicate.
> 12. The plain reader be damned. ("Proclamations" 112)

The "Language of the Night" is an oneiric syntax available to all, whereas Khlebnikov's spatial alphabets, numerical poems and attempts to rescue the future with calculations of the past continually attempt to corral a profusion of meaning into a *system*.

Craig Monk has demonstrated the transition of *transition* from a meeting place of translated literature to a meeting place of literature in its original language, noting that

> Truly cosmopolitan, more than one-third of the poems and prose pieces from the first year of the magazine appeared in translation. Approximately one-half of the contributions to the second issue came from French, Russian, Serbian, and German works […] the first dozen issues also published translations from Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish, Yiddish, and Native American texts […] but in 1933 the magazine took an even bolder step: Jolas announced that he was dispensing with translation altogether, and was taking up a new policy of publishing non-English submissions in their language of origin. (18)

This new policy of presenting readers with source texts challenging their linguistic abilities is in tune with Jolas's concomitant turn to macaronic poetry—that is, multilingual poems wherein the poet adroitly leaps from one language to another as best suits their poetic impulse. These polyglottic poems transfer their suspension of comprehension to a novel dimension: while it is perfectly possible to translate the particular words and phrases (even in cases of Jolas's self-coined neologisms) into one's target language, one is left with the nagging unease that the tension between what is felt in one language is not necessarily what is meant in the other. Take for example the following excerpt from "Mots-Frontiere: Polyvocables":

> malade de peacock-feathers
> le sein bleu des montagnes and the house strangled by rooks the tender entêtement des trees
> the clouds sybilfly and the neumond brûleglisters ein wunder stuerzt
> ins tal with
> eruptions of the abendfoehren et le torrentbruit qui charrie les

gestes des enfants. […] (qtd. in Perloff, "Logocinéma" 153)

Similar to Khlebnikov's mission to safeguard the future of humanity from the bloodshed rained down upon it as a result of the evils of misunderstanding, Marjorie Perloff determines a heroic mission in Jolas's macaronics, stating that for Jolas "if only poetry could contain French + German + English in equal additive measure, the treacherous frontiers increasingly separating the nations of Europe might be crossed" (qtd. in Perloff, "Logocinéma" 153). In a fit of translation exuberance, I made an attempt to translate the poem myself (departing in some instances from Perloff's proposed phrasing), swapping portions from English to French to German and came to the following possible rendition:

Border-Words: Polyvocals

illness of plumes de paon
the blue breast of the mountains et la maison étranglée par les freux et les arbres of stubborness tendre
les nuages sybilvol et la nouveaulune scintburn a wonder falling
into the valley mit
ausbrüche der soirvoyages and the stromklang der die
gesten der kinder trägt

The primary difficulty was not in finding a satisfactory replacement word but rather in determining which of the three languages to swap to. That hesitation is the root of suspended meaning, the eternal ambiguity that Jolas deploys with an alchemical mixture of accuracy and ambiguity. Suppose, for instance, that one were to step outside the confines of the Anglo-Franco-German mix that Jolas stirs up. How would a translator translate such a poem into Mandarin, Lingala, or Inupiaq? It cannot be a case of simply translating each of the words, regardless of source language, into the target language. That would destroy the careful construction of ambiguity Jolas built with the poem. One would need to find two additional target languages, ideally with similar historical and cultural relationships to those of English, French, and German, and choose which portions of the poem would be translated into which of the three languages. The result of any choice focuses more on the relational matrix of the languages and the esoteric essence provoked than on the direct concept suggested by the words. Such a state of wonder and frustration is intentionally lacking in the poetry of Khlebnikov, who sought to rejuvenate language via an excess of systematic particularity.

Not surprisingly, Jolas was aware of the literary phenomenon of *zaum*, yet he seems oblivious to Khlebnikov's contributions. Instead, Jolas credits only the Polish-Georgian Cubo-Futurist poet Iliazd (Ilia Zdanevich) with its development and promulgation ("From Jabberwocky" 192)—and this despite the fact that works by both Khlebnikov and Jolas appear together in Iliazd's 1949 collection *Poésie de mots inconnus*. It is not that Jolas neglected Russian literature in *transition*; on the contrary, he promulgated it relatively profusely (in comparison to his American counterparts if not his European). According to Neil Cornwell (55) and Vladimir Feschchenko (143) *transition* published a panoply of works by authors such as Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Blok, and Mikhail Zoshchenko in addition to critical articles by El Lissitzky and Sergei Eisenstein—and even artwork by Malevich and Kandinsky. To be fair to Jolas, Khlebnikov remains a niche figure even

today and there is much reason to doubt that his works ever strayed into the hands of Jolas during the publication days of *transition*. But it is curious that Jolas, like Khlebnikov, would endeavor to create a new, universal language. Unlike Khlebnikov though, who saw such a language as being pinned to the rigor of mathematics and delving down into the deepest roots of communication, Jolas envisioned his language building upon the ascending popularity of English. Jolas's new English would envelop other linguistic possibilities from other languages as needed, mushrooming in accumulation without ever needing to cast its gaze backwards to past precedents. In describing his proposed new language (which he tentatively dubbed "Atlantica"), Jolas asks "[w]hy English, whose birth itself constitutes such a striking and efficient example of amalgamation, and which is already used by approximately six hundred million people, couldn't serve as the basis for that future language, for that expanding language?" ("Migrator" 461). Jolas will not construct a new language as Khlebnikov would. Jolas will cultivate one out of the womb of English.

While it is endlessly interesting to ponder the authorial intent behind the poetic oeuvre of Khlebnikov and Jolas, I believe that there is also sound scholastic reasoning for embarking on the quest. When we attempt poetic translation, we can do so with the aim of dispelling or preserving ambiguity. In the cases of Khlebnikov and Jolas one has to wonder to what extent do they deserve translation at all? One can transpose the sounds of the Cyrillic alphabet into Roman letters to get a sense of the sounds that Khlebnikov heard in his head, but it is doubtful Khlebnikov would have found the Roman alphabet any less troubling than the Cyrillic. Such a transposition also loses the historical and geometric links that Khlebnikov felt scaffolded all language, and which he had sought to prove in essays such as "Artists of the World!" With a linguistic literary oeuvre predicated on a utopic neo-Platonic transfer of thought, perhaps Khlebnikov is best left to his own devices. Let him be as transparent as he aimed to be. With Jolas, on the other hand, one is confronted by the necessity of multiple target languages to successfully translate his macaronics. The relationship between the languages chosen and the ineffable tones they invoke in poetry are crucial to an accurate translation. They also imply that there is more, far more, to poetry than an understanding of the signified. Linguistic relations and power balances are dynamic, shifty creatures and it is precisely their polymorphism that Jolas basks in. Both poets are, for all intents and purposes, untranslatable—but for entirely different reasons.

Notes

1. To read more on the specifics of Khlebnikov's alphabets, see Khlebnikov, "The Letter as Such," "A Checklist: The Alphabet of the Mind," and "Artists of the World!"

2. The most obvious case of Khlebnikov's redemptive mathematics is his *Tables of Destiny*, an excerpt of which is available in English translation by Paul Schmidt in Velimir Khlebnikov and Paul Schmidt, "An Excerpt from 'The Tables of Destiny.'" *October* vol. 27, 1983, pp. 59–73. His opening salvo, "Suppose I make a timepiece of humanity, / Demonstrate the movement of the century hand - / Will war not wither like an unused letter, drop / From our alphabet, vanish from our little gap / Of time?" speaks unambiguously to his determination to discover the chronicity of human events in order to subvert disaster.

3. Khlebnikov was not only fascinated by nature, mathematics and poetry but also ancient Egypt. Running throughout his oeuvre is the recurring motif of the "ka" (also the protagonist of his short story/novella *Ka* [1915]), the spiritual double of the deceased.

4. For a more elaborate discussion of the specific qualities of the letters and "hieroglyphs" Khlebnikov

discusses in these two essays, please see my earlier book chapter, "Calculating Crisis. Velimir Khlebnikov's Hieroglyphic Alphabets and the Moscow Mathematical Papyrus." *Crisis: The Avant-Garde and Modernism in Critical Modes*, edited by Sascha Bru, et al., De Gruyter, 2022, pp. 385–404.

5. An example of such a doodle is Khlebnikov's *Preparatory Sketch for Отрывок Из Досок Суьбы*, 1922, Ink on paper. Reproduced in Велимир Хлебников (Khlebnikov), *Стихотворения в Прозе Рассказы, Повести, Очерки Сверхповести, 1904–1922*, ИМЛИ РАН, 2004, p. 361.

6. To push my anachronistic reading of this poem to its limits, I cannot help but interpolate one-time US presidential hopeful Al Gore into the title, especially considering his 2006 environmental documentary *An Inconvenient Truth.* In more ways than one Jolas's poem seems to have predicted our present day with more precision and accuracy than Khlebnikov's mathematical *Tables of Destiny* (his magnum opus, an arithmetical calendar predicting future calamities based on the specious patterns of periodicity he believed to have unlocked from the chronicles of history) could have ever dreamed of.

7. The full list of signatories is as follows: Kay Boyle, Whit Burnett, Hart Crane, Caresse Crosby, Harry Crosby, Martha Foley, Stuart Gilbert, A. L. Gillespie, Leigh Hoffman, Eugene Jolas, Elliot Paul, Douglas Rigby, Theo Rutra (a pseudonym of Eugene Jolas), Robert Sage, Harold J. Salemson, and Laurence Vail (Jolas, "Proclamation" 112).

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