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Eugene Jolas: A Poet of Multilingualism

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Eugene Jolas, the first-time publisher of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939/2012), started his career as a translingual journalist and poet. A French-German bilingual, Jolas acquired English in adolescence, crossing the Atlantic to refashion himself as an American man of letters. A "Man from Babel," as he styles himself in his posthumous autobiography of the same title (1998), Jolas published poetry in English, French, and German and eventually arrived to an understanding of his linguistic predicament as representative of humanity's path back to a pre-Babel state. Thus, he repeatedly called for a new language, a poetically-charged polygloss, Atlantica, that would surpass Esperanto and allow poets to lead humanity out of a post-war "malady of language."¹ Here as elsewhere, this self-identified "homme migrateur presque symbolique" was right in his claim: "je fais toujours partie du cosmos inter-racial et inter-linguistique, j'appartiens au futur ("The Migrator and His Language," 1948; French draft Box 4, Folder 100; translation Jolas, 2009, p. 458).

This paper explores Jolas' largely unpublished legacy as a multilingual poet. In addition to published collections of poems in three languages, Jolas left a largely forgotten legacy of multilingual, macaronic, and outright nonsense texts that baffle by their inventiveness. These curious poems, which oscillate between virtuosic linguistic creativity and the construction of a new language, carve out a niche within the modernist movement for literally and metaphorically non-native use of poetic language. Jolas does more than simply create a multilingual collage; he is reconstructing the experience of a creative mind that knows no borders between linguistic systems. By forcing us into a world where any words can enter into any relationships, this experiment in a multilingual poetics invites the critic to think not in terms of poetic value alone but also in terms of method, and it is an extrapolation of this method that this article seeks to achieve.

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INTRODUCTION

¹ The concept of the "malady of language" was, for Jolas, closely linked with the historical realities that affect the "man of the atomic age." See, for example, Jolas, 2009, p. 460. Jolas was not the only voice in the modernist movement who was concerned with what he called the "malady of language," although his voice was perhaps one of the most original and determined. It suffices to mention Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's *Brief des Lord Chandos* (Hoffmannsthal 2000), which Jolas never missed a chance to quote in his own writings. Jolas' own "Inquiry About the Malady of Language" (1935, p. 144) gathered a large number of responses, many of them quite in line with his own thinking and in agreement with the basic premise that language is, indeed, in need of healing. C.K. Ogden, the creator of another 'universal language,' Basic English (which did not leave Jolas overly impressed), was among *transition's* contributors.

Among translingual writers, only a very small minority are recognized as poets in an acquired language. Mere faultless expression of a thought is a daunting goal to achieve for most non-native speakers, and we take our hats off before a writer capable of developing a style of their own in a second language. When it comes to poetry, the very thing that, notoriously, “gets lost in translation” (Frost, 1961, p. 7), literary criticism tends to fall silent, and surprisingly little has been written on the translingual literary achievements of, say, Samuel Beckett, Rainer Maria Rilke, Fernando Pessoa, Joseph Brodsky, or Jean Moréas. Indeed, how are we to make sense of an oeuvre that is all but inconceivable in the first place – which defies, by its very existence, our very notions of poetry as a form that enables the most dense and intimate form of expression known to literature?²

Eugene Jolas’ work is especially well-suited as a means to answering this question. This comparatively little-known writer³ stands apart from other translinguals of his time largely because his reasons for writing in a second language have nothing to do with experimenting with language or a desire to test out his own abilities. Perhaps the first poet to identify himself first and foremost through his multilingual makeup, he turns his background into a method and a fundamental principle of both life and art.

In this article, I use the term *multilingualism* to refer to writing in multiple languages and *translingualism*, more specifically, to writing in a language the author did not grow up speaking.⁴ Any translingual writer, then, is by definition multilingual and may choose to write in more than one language, which explains the overlap between the two notions. Jolas, who published poetry in three languages,⁵ and who grew up bilingual before acquiring his third language, English, is a clear example of such overlap. Yet, an analysis of his poetic output faces us with the precarious condition of translingual poetry, poised as it is between new form and self-effacement. I would argue that, being as he was on a quest for a poetic language based on foreignness turned into a creative principle, Jolas presents his readers with a poetics consciously structured around an essentially *translingual* ideal.

Jolas is unfortunately an all but neglected figure in literary studies today, known mostly for his publishing activity alone.⁶ between 1927 and 1939, Eugene Jolas was the editor-in-chief of a highly influential modernist journal published in Paris, *transition*, which he founded.⁷ *Transition* was a significant factor in modernist polemics of the time and started

² Yuri Lotman, for example, speaks of art as “the most economical, compact method for storing and transmitting information”, and makes it clear that poetry is an epitome of this principle (Lotman, 1977, p. 23, 27).

³ See, however, Perloff (2004), Kiefer (1995), Apter (2006), Spyra (2007).

⁴ Steven Kellman, notably, offers a broader definition of translingualism and his roster of translingual writers (Kellman, 2000, p. 117-118), therefore, includes names that would fall rather under the definition of multilingualism than translingualism as defined here.

⁵ Jolas published collections in all his three languages, including *Secession in Astropolis* (1929), *Hypnologue des Scheitelanges* (1932), *Epivocables of 3* (1932), *The Language of Night* (1932), *Mots-Déluge* (1933), *Angels and Demons* (1937), *Vertical* (1938), *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels* (1938), *Planets and Angels* (1940), and *Words from the Deluge* (1941). While all these collections are currently out of print, and few copies survive (see bibliography for the editions of all the collections except “Angels and Demons,” allegedly published by Transition Press in Paris in 1937), some printed copies, notably of *Hypnologue des Scheitelanges*, *Epivocables of 3*, *Words from the Deluge* and *Vertical*, can be found in the Eugene and Maria Jolas papers, Boxes 15 and 17. See Box 1, Folder 1 for a full bibliography and a chronological sketch of Jolas’ life and professional activity.

⁶ See, however, Perloff (2004) and Apter (2006) whose analysis of Jolas’ poetics anticipates some of the claims made here.

⁷ See Folio (2001) and McMillan (1976) for an analysis of *transition*’s work over the years.

more than one heated argument about the aesthetic premises of the movement.⁸ The journal introduced the English-speaking literary public to the work of such authors as Gertrude Stein, Gottfried Benn, Hans Arp, Andre Gide, Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Péguy, Yvan Goll, Georg Trakl, and Ernest Hemingway. But its major achievement is perhaps the publication of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939/2012), then known under the title of "Work in Progress." A long-term commitment to such a novel and heavily criticized work was an act of some courage, but also of considerable endurance; were it not for Jolas' willingness to try his French typesetter's patience and risk the fate of his journal multiple times when, for example, Joyce would send corrections after the proofs were all set and ready to print, Joyce's last masterpiece may have never developed as we know it.

Relatively recent publications of Jolas' posthumous autobiography (1998), followed by his critical writings (2009) have somewhat restored his reputation as a writer in his own right and as a voice in the modernists' path to collective self-definition. His poetic output still remains in the shadow, however, and part of my goal here is to help put it back on the map of modernist literature. My second hope is to introduce Jolas to the readers as an early theoretician of translanguaging and a poet who, without having the versatile genius of a Beckett or a Joyce, knew how to develop a kind of poetry that was distinctly his own.

Jolas' longstanding friendship with Joyce, of whom Jolas liked to say that "all the acoustics and sonorousness in all the languages of the world can be traced in *Finnegans Wake* (Box 14, Folder 270), was no accident."⁹ Like Joyce, his "bellwether in the neologistic pilgrimage" (Jolas, 2009, p. 124), Jolas sought to unite all the languages of the world in a single creative language. This language, however, was not confined to fiction; writing was, for him, ultimately a step towards a new way of expression, a symbiosis of language practice and imagination going far beyond stylistic ingenuity towards linguistic formation (and vice versa).

Jolas' vision started with his own experience as a teen immigrant in New York and, later, as a reporter for a series of American newspapers. Surrounded by immigrants' speech, a mix of languages, he dreamt up - or perhaps foresaw - the existence of a global idiom based on American English but enriched by sounds and meanings of other languages that would emerge from the immigrant community. Unlike artificial manmade languages, such as Esperanto, this language of the future would be alive and rejuvenate the creative mind. In his own multilingualism - not merely his ability to communicate but its workings in his mind - Jolas saw a model of that future ideal that would, one day, become the birthright of humanity as a whole contained within the "truly universal language." Whether because it would build a bridge across the Atlantic Ocean, or looking back to the Atlantis associated, perhaps, with a pre-Babel idyll, he baptized this language Atlantica:

Not [the language] of the "educated philistine" who demands signs to simplify his world of communication, not an auxiliary language that will never remind him of his solitude, not a quotidian language of gestures that flees from consecration. But a language that will dance and sing, that will be the vision of the "troisième oeil," that will bind the races in a fabulous unity. (Jolas, 2009, p. 284)

⁸ The June 1929 proclamation in *transition* declaring the Revolution of the Word, especially, resulted in a highly emotional controversy.

⁹ A draft survives of a poem Jolas wrote about Joyce (Box 19, Folder 341): "I mein freund schon lange her du ruhst/ in schweizer erde weit von dublin/ we walk again through the beloved city/ you are silent your [sic] see prehistoric worlds/ your inner eye is sunk into magdalenean epochs/your dream of the gaelic ile of brenan."

However, this utopian vision would never come true by itself. “One of the steps toward this language is the entrance into the prelogical” (Jolas, 2009, p. 284) adds Jolas, which can be accessed by two paths: the unconscious, especially as it is manifested in the dream, and the poetic, through which the consecrated “mantic” side of language can be developed. Here, Jolas’ search for the language of the future visibly coincides with the poetic practice of his one-time fellow travellers, the Surrealists and the Dada. The poet’s task is both to practice and to co-create *Atlantica*,¹⁰ a language that will need “words, millions of words” (Jolas, 1998, p. 272). Jolas’ treatment of multilingualism was deliberate and systematic:¹¹ as “a man from Babel” and “a man who belongs to the future”¹², his job as a poet was to lead the way to others.¹³

Jolas was thus arguably the first poet and critic to consciously treat multilingualism as a nascent literary method and to realize that multilingual poetry belonged together as an object of study capable of yielding the aesthetic recipe for a new kind of modernist poetics. For example, in 1947-48, Jolas worked on a pioneering anthology of multilingual poetry, where he planned to include a representative selection of the work, in different languages, of such poets as Samuel Beckett, Yvan and Claire Goll, Jean Wahl, Hans Arp, Eduard Roditi and himself. This “Multilingual Poets Project” did not come to fruition, but the novelty of the idea is best illustrated by the fact that Yvan Goll, one of the intended contributors, was himself unsure of what conceptual framework to apply to his work, referring to “une anthologie des poètes multi-lingues (ce mot existe-t-il?)” (Box 44, Folder 1006). Who knows, perhaps this anthology is still waiting for its publisher; in any case, the very fact of its conception, as well as the choice of poems, is a valuable testimony to the beginnings of a modern theoretical conception of multilingual poetics.¹⁴

What, then, constitutes multilingual poetry for Jolas? What we have of the notes for the anthology shows the extent to which the category was being created ad hoc, as it were; most of the poems represented are, for example, very different from what Maria Jolas, when sorting out her late husband’s papers, gathered into a “multilingual” folder. In the case of the anthology, “multilingual” seems to refer, above all, to largely monolingual work written by

¹⁰ See Kelbert (2014, p. 293-294) for a more detailed analysis.

¹¹ See Apter’s notion of Jolas as a representative of a “plurilingual dogma” (Apter, 2006, p. 111-112).

¹² “Je fais toujours partie du cosmos inter-racial et inter-linguistique, j’appartiens au futur” (Box 4, Folder 100).

¹³ A journalist by trade, Jolas was also intensely aware of social implications of multilingualism, citing, for example, the international Bilingual World (*Monde Bilingue*) initiative to foster knowledge of both French and English in schools, founded by Jan Marie Bressand in 1951. “It is quite possible,” Jolas comments (then crossing the phrase out and correcting to a more weighted “not impossible”) “that the adoption of the bilingual method might exorcise the curse of Babel.” (Box 4, Folder 83) Given Jolas’ vision of the worldwide processes of language mixing being inseparable from his own multilingual identity—itsself the starting point for a larger quest for the “pentecostal word” (Box 19, Folder 341)—it is no surprise that his wife Maria Jolas created the Bilingual School of Neuilly, which numbered little Stephen Joyce among its pupils. Here is how the poet’s daughter, composer Betsy Jolas, describes her education as one of the first of her mother’s students: “the teaching was clearly “*avant-garde*”; Montessori, Dalcroze, Theater (including making costumes and scenery), painting (often involving large group paintings) music (chorus, making instruments) etc. No textbooks, we made our own, whether for Greek or Math or Chemistry. The teaching was mainly in French, and followed French official programs but many group activities were held in English and there was a regular English class. I really loved this school.” (B. Jolas, personal communication, October 16, 2013). Also see Box 39, Folder 845.

¹⁴ Jolas, one could argue, represents an early attempt to conceptualize, notably, some aspects of what Yildiz (2012) refers to as the postmonolingual condition.

multilingual poets in different languages, united under the same cover for the future reader. In the case of Jolas' own poetry, Maria Jolas creates separate lists of his French, German and English poems and reserves a separate "multilingual" folder for the poems that do not easily fit into either of these categories. This includes both macaronic poetry (where elements of Jolas' three languages alternate in more or less equal measure) and work that represents an entire range of ways to make a single text multilingual, from fully comprehensible to incomprehensible even to a speaker of all three of the poet's languages, with all manner of gradations in-between. English seems to serve as a paradigmatic linguistic basis for a lot of this last group of texts, very likely because English was, for Jolas, an idealized language and the basis of the universal Atlantica language that would hold its motley vocabulary together.¹⁵ In these poems, Jolas is experimenting with the potential of the language to absorb foreign elements,¹⁶ with its malleability when approached by a poet determined to express the totality of his multilingual perception of the world within a single, albeit linguistically heterogeneous, framework. At the other end of the spectrum, we have texts that appear at the first glance to be entirely nonsensical and to fulfill a purely melodic function.

At first sight, two distinct groups of poems seem to emerge, which seem to fit into familiar preexisting categories. On the one hand, we have multiple texts that read as English with a number of invented words the meaning of which may, however, be guessed at; these fit, to an extent, into the mold of Joycean experiments with English. On the other hand, we have texts that Emily Apter describes as "harking back to the Klanggedichtung of Hugo Ball, foreshadowing the acoustic experiments of Alan [sic – EK] Ginsberg and John Cage in the fifties and sixties, and approximating Jorge Luis Borges's language of Babel" (Apter, 2006, p. 117). In reality, however, separating these categories leads to reducing them to something other than the highly original multilingual framework Jolas envisioned. In his poems, the two kinds of poetry exist on a continuum, and the example of mixed poems alternating nonsensical and English-based elements are the best indication that, ultimately, they were meant to merge into a single idiom, and perhaps a single poetics.¹⁷ Separating them is an exercise that is both necessary and necessarily artificial, but it is important to appreciate that, while constituting two complementary aspects of Jolas' poetics, these two kinds of poetic elements are processed very differently by the reader. They, further, elicit different reading when separated and when united within a single text. In the next three parts of this article, I will pause, first, on approaching an exclusively incomprehensible text by Jolas,¹⁸ then consider possible readings in the middle of the spectrum, and finally focus on a predominantly English-based collection of Jolas' poems.

SUMMONING MEANING FOR "MILLIONS OF WORDS"¹⁹

Consider, first, a poem entitled "Incantation" (Box 18, Folder 340):²⁰ the title may be the

¹⁵ See Crystal (2003), whose analysis of today's "global English" and even "Englishes" reads in an altogether new light when compared with Jolas' predictions.

¹⁶ Characteristically, his French and German texts (as opposed to ones where languages alternate) give less evidence of integration of foreign elements, and I will focus on the English corpus here; however, Jolas' English poetics cannot be fully appreciated in isolation from the other two languages.

¹⁷ One evidence of this intention may be seen in the fact that two kinds of vocabulary (based on existing languages and complete neologisms) exist side-by-side in Jolas' Migration Dictionary.

¹⁸ For reasons that will become clear from my reading, I prefer to avoid the terms *nonsense* or *sound* poetry as reductive, even though they sometimes become inevitable

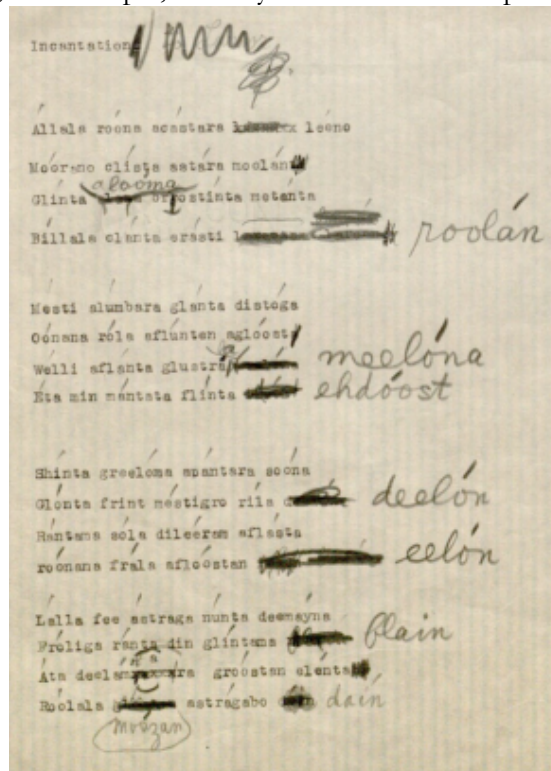
¹⁹ Quote taken from *Man from Babel* (1998, p. 272).

only word in it the reader can hope to understand:

Allala roona acastara leeno
 Moorano clista astara moolan
 Glinta aooms orostinta metanta
 Billala clanta erasti roolan

The first four lines give the reader a taste of the sixteen-line poem. What is the poet trying to say to us? What kind of poetry are we dealing with here? The answer seems obvious and also discarding: *sound poetry*. And perhaps, were this the only thing Jolas ever wrote, this may have been enough. This poet could then take a place alongside such writers as Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara or Kurt Schwitters, and we could explain - or rather, explain away - the strange words as an experiment with, and a way of overcoming, language. None of these words are familiar, the sound combinations have a soft quality about them and have no clear affinity with either of Jolas' languages; the pronunciation is unclear, stresses could fall anywhere; and in general, this reads at first as a sequence of made-up sounds grouped so as to form impromptu "words" and strophes. We could note the sound pattern, the long /oo/ and open /a/ sounds, note that the poet chooses here to give us a key to interpretation in the title and, after all, incantations have been known to work without being comprehensible.

Yet, here is, for example, an early draft of this same poem (Box 18, Folder 340):



To the poet, as we can immediately see, these words are far from arbitrary or replaceable. First, the text was initially called "Incantations," and the poet later chose that it be read as a single 'incantation' rather than that each line or strophe to be seen as a separate unit; we see

²⁰ Box 18, Folder 340.

also a dedication “to Lumor” taken out (this is particularly surprising since Lumor is an evidently fictional figure we will come across later in other poems²¹). The poem is written in a four-foot dactyl, scrupulously observed, and the double vowels are, judging from the meter, diphthongs, which suggests an English-like pronunciation. And, above all, even visually, the draft looks like a draft of any other poem, with words replaced thoughtfully, especially at the ends of the lines, presumably to improve the rhyme. Even the way previous versions are crossed out - effaced, rejected, made all but illegible - is telling. These words clearly matter; they seem to mean something definite to Jolas. In any case, the difference between the original “laroon” in line four and the ultimate “roolan” is crucial to the poet. The words may be made up, but it is hard to believe that they are intended for a purely aural effect, and even less so to undermine language. This is no Dada. In fact, when we read it carefully, with the eye of an English speaker with some background in European languages, associations start gathering: perhaps, “roona” may be associated with runes, and “moorano” and “moolan” with moor and moon; “clista” seems onomatopoeic; “glinta” is similar to “glint,” and “astara” evokes the sound of Latin *astra* with the future tense of Romance languages. Other readers may, of course, have different associations. While a traditional poem gives us both meaning and interpretation, then, “Incantation” seems to enchant us with its sound patterns in order to tell us something about interpretation without meaning.

Another poem, “Astralia” (Box 18, Folder 340), seems at first aesthetically very similar to “Incantation.” It begins as follows:

Shillaroo pleina
 Fullassa reina
 Vollava emplea
 Essencia littora
 Whirlalla grellila
 Rilltara affula
 Altagra inbruma
 Blitza eclaira
 Altara pleroma
 Fullina sternana
 OORANA

None of these words exist in English, of course, but - perhaps on a second reading and definitely once we learn that sound poetry does not mean a complete resignation of language to Jolas - a pattern starts to emerge. The beginnings of most of these words do have a specific meaning in one language or another: “pleina” and “reina” are Latin words that, together with the meter, immediately bring to mind “Ave Maria, gratia plena.”²² many other words contain the word for either fullness or altitude in different languages (“fullassa,” “emplea,” “vollava,” “affula,” “pleroma,” “fullina”); the sequence “inbruma/ Blitza eclaira”, in a way reminiscent of both English, French and German, reads like “a lightning goes/will go off in the fog”; “OORANA” recalls the German prefix *ur-* meaning original or ancient, and “sternana” refers back to the title, Astralia, the land of *Sterne* or stars. While it preserves its incantatory sound patterns, the poem becomes transparent to the reader with a definite progression of meaning that develops before our eyes from the beginning to the end.

²¹ For a separate poem entitled “Lumor,” see Jolas (1940b).

²² Another sound poem in the same folder is called “Mater dolorosa” and is written in the same vein.

WHEN NONSENSE GOES MACARONIC

If a poem such as “Astralia,” entirely made up of nonsense words, can suddenly sparkle with meaning, the reader cannot help asking: surely, if this poem is more transparent than the others, texts like “Incantation” may also work in a similar way and hide an interpretation from us? And if a meaning may be hidden behind those nonsense words, would they not then cease to be nonsensical and turn into grains of a different language? Jolas teases us even further by mixing, in numerous poems, comprehensible and incomprehensible nonsense elements, just like he freely mixes words and phrases in English, French, English and even Spanish in his macaronic texts. “Arra” (Box 18, Folder 340) is a good example of such a text, where the notion of concealment is given to us from the outset, before meaning is hidden behind unfamiliar syllables:

Arra

Crimes are hidden in the nettle-forests
 Fleeta boor rinde glossa aston
 A glasta groons in lallaboontarim
 The munsterbells thunder sin

Minder alaroots annafrintam rinf
 Goona brasts perimens
 Brinta briolster anagrim frilla
 A ghorla heelts the ropam in its juft
 Frimantana roons questicrams
 Ums rintors
 Ams froors
 The ancient guilt weeps

Only three of this poem’s lines may be considered English; and even there, made-up words obstruct comprehension. What are, for example, “nettle-forests:” actual forests of nettle, forests that look like nettle, or a metaphor for whatever it is that hides the crimes, like nettle with its shady and burning leaves? Or “munsterbells:” a kind of a flower, like a bluebell? Or monstrous bells? Or can they be the bells of a monastery? Each word, depending on the reader’s linguistic background, cannot but evoke associations and interpretations.²³ Further, unlike, say, “Incantation,” familiar grammar seeps through the unknown vocabulary: the articles, plural, the *s* marker of the third person singular, “in its juft” (Box 18, Folder 340). Because of the clearly English elements, we suspect, that is, that to “brast,” to “heelt,” to “roon,” to “rinter” and to “froor” are probably verbs, and “briolster” or “minder” may be comparatives. In any case, being mixed with “nonsense” lines in this very unusual way greatly affects the English lines: now they carry a much heavier burden of meaning, somehow all the meaning that we cannot grasp lays on these three lines. Not only they, but the entire poem is now about crime, sin, ancient guilt.... So much so that it hardly seems

²³ “Perimens,” a participle form of the Latin verb “to destroy,” is a particularly glaring example: surrounded by neologisms it reads as one, perhaps a compound of the more familiar Greek *peri* and Latin *mens*, which would seem almost self-referential in a poem based literally on circumnavigating the mind.

accidental that the made-up word “lallaboontarim” has the ending of the Hebrew plural with all the connotations of ancient crimes and redemption that language carries. This particular association is only reinforced when we discover that the made-up word “arra” occurs also in a different poem in Jolas’ archive (Box 19, Folder 341):

Tears
 Traenen
 Des larmes
 Traenen
 Tears
 The old sin hides in the nettle-blaze

Arra
 Sunma veerums dringaram
 Roolimana ist the rama
 The borderman prays in a fatigue of
 historic ciphers

Zurich, Spring 1935

Quite probably either an early draft or a revision of “Arra,” this brief untitled poem manages to combine nearly all the techniques we find scattered among Jolas’ multilingual poetry: quasi-macaronic alternation (including sometimes grammatical alternation, as in the phrase “roolimana ist the rama”), the mixing of languages, anaphora and repetition, made-up lines in a nonexistent language, the mixing in of a characteristic brand of English (characteristically simple syntax, use of definite article for general nouns, present tense, compound neologisms such as “borderman”)... Here, as in “Arra” and elsewhere, Jolas uses a range of devices, each encasing his made-up words into an array of linguistic reference, to nag us on in our search for a tangible, understandable meaning, and not for sounds alone. This is especially ironic given that the poet cites the place where the poem was written (not his usual practice), and it is a place he associates with his youth among the poets of the Dada movement.

But if, as we are made to understand, these cryptic poems are not there to discourage understanding (even if they may at first look as if they were), the reader cannot help wondering about their meaning. Does it even exist, ready to be deciphered? Does the poet himself know what stands behind “alaroos” or “frilla?” And in fact, in Jolas’ case, these questions are particularly pertinent, since the papers he left after he died did include a so-called “Migration Dictionary”²⁴ – a private vocabulary, with neologisms and compound words inspired by different languages all arranged alphabetically in an attempt, it seems, to contribute to Jolas’ projected language of the future, *Atlantica*. It contains hundreds of invented words, neologisms, and compounds with their etymology and meaning meticulously transcribed. Many words are informed by Jolas’ German background. Just as in German, he forms compound words like “helicoptermind” [verticalist mind], “Loreleybird” [chimerical bird], or “rumblemachine” [tank]. Jolas moves across the language barriers with

²⁴ The term is borrowed from the catalogue of the Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers; see Kelbert (2014) for a detailed analysis of the Dictionary; Box 12, Folders 246 contains the main typescript and Folder 247 includes additional notes.

surprising alacrity and with very few reservations: it seems almost as if he were thinking in all his languages simultaneously. Thus, we see words like *worldangst* meaning “cosmic fear”, or *despairwingdunkel* – an English-German compound meaning “desperately dark like sable wings.”

Alongside compounds, the dictionary also contains complete neologisms that may perhaps provide a key to such poems as “Incantation” and “Arra” and to the scores of Jolas’ other multilingual poems. For example, “alaroos” in “Arra” could be related to Jolas’ neologism “alaral” translated as “exclamation of joy,” the strange verb “to roon” or “roona” in “Incantation” (if it is a verb), to the word “roontaga” or “pretty girl” etc. Some of these words definitely have the potential to inform our reading: for example, the word “darkling” occurs often in Jolas’ poems and essays, and it changes our understanding significantly to discover that Jolas’ private meaning for this word was “demon.”²⁵ Other words from the dictionary occur in different poems: for example, “we heard the tiempocleft monotone of the téléscripateurs” (Box 19, Folder 341) or “In the brumous autumn evening, my melancholy dreamdrooms into a sonata”(“Angelic Perspectives”, Box 18, Folder 330) cannot be read in quite the same way if we know that, for Jolas, both made-up words had clearly defined meaning: a “time cleft” and “chanting while daydreaming,” respectively.

What of the other words, then? Would it not be marvelous if we could go to Jolas’ private dictionary and decode until all the partially or fully ‘nonsense’ poems make perfect sense to us? Is this not what Jolas was trying to say when he claimed:

I invented my own Atlantic language. I made the discovery of a multilingual form of poetry which corresponded to an inner need in me to express the linguistic monism which was my organic mode of thinking. Part of this poem is written in Atlantic Language? (Jolas, 1941, para. 2)

The poem in question, “Words from the Deluge,” a highly macaronic text, includes a single “nonsense” line: “they shouted their multilingual maledictions/ Lofeurs bummas loffari dortinos bloffos” (Jolas, 1941). If that is not the part written in the “Atlantic language,” what is? Unfortunately, any attempt to simply look up words from the incomprehensible poems shatters immediately: the words are simply not there. If the vocabulary lists were intended, rather like Joyce’s notebooks, for future use in poems, this use was not systematic. Indeed, the words that are most often found in the dictionary are not so much the incomprehensible neologisms as words that Jolas embeds into an otherwise English-sounding context, for example “A paramyth sheams rosarosily in moss” (Box 15, Folder 279).

In the end, then, we have to recognize that some of Jolas’ poems will remain undecipherable. Did these words actually have a clear meaning for the poet, inaccessible to us? If a certain word did not make it to Jolas’ private dictionary, it does not yet mean that he did not intend it to have a meaning; the dictionary, after all, was never quite finished. On the other hand, it is now hard to tell what came first: the neologism in a poem as the expression of the poet’s psyche, or the dictionary entry; if a word did not make it into the list, perhaps

²⁵ While “darkling” is not exactly a neologism (for example, “Darkling, I listen” in Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale*), the way Jolas uses it is strikingly different from the existing usage of the word as defined by the OED: an archaic adjective similar to ‘darkening’ and a noun substitute for it meaning “dark”. It is hard to say whether or not Jolas was familiar with the apparently rare 18th century usage as “a child of darkness; one dark in nature or character”; in any case, his reclaiming of the word in a very new context seems to be in line with existing words like “changeling.”

this was for a reason. What matters to us, as readers, is to understand that even the most incomprehensible of the poems are not to be read as deliberately nonsensical. As for what the meaning was, any poet creates a private vocabulary through the very process of writing, imbuing certain favorite words with a meaning particular to them alone, and the reader gradually gains partial access to that private language through the process of reading and absorbing the poet's work. For Jolas, for example, one such word is *frontier*; having grown up literally on the bordering and disputed region between French and German, and Germany and France, he writes poems entitled "The Frontier," "Return to a Frontier" and "Ode to the Frontiermen,"²⁶ and the word gradually comes to signify an existential state to him: "I would like to cry one word/ Frontier/ I carry it in myself/ Like a malevolent heritage/ Like a tranced music" ("Return to a Frontier," Box 19, Folder 341). His multilingualism, too, becomes a sort of frontierdom, and he calls onto others like him: "O frontiermen o wanderers/ I greet you/ Bordermen of the world" ("Ode to the Frontiermen," Box 18, Folder 330). Jolas, then, is taking an often unnoticed but essential feature of traditional poetics to a new level. If a word like *frontier*, which we mistakenly think we know everything about, gradually develops a private meaning we have to learn from scratch, how much more so a made-up word like *arra*. The only essential difference between the two words is that the latter is only comprehensible to the poet, while the reader may still have illusions about understanding the former. Both, however, are words in the making, both may one day end up in the poet's private dictionary, and insofar as he is gradually forging their meaning through his work, they truly are part of a developing language of the future.

In this light, reading Jolas' nonsense poetry becomes an exercise in understanding the non-comprehensible, a world full of words one can infinitely discover. If the foreigner's hell, and the curse of Babel that Jolas seeks to exorcise, is to be surrounded by babble that is meaningful for everybody else, the poet's heaven must be to be surrounded by an infinite number of words whose meaning can never be exhausted. In this respect, Jolas is doing something very original both with his made-up words, his polyvocables that can only be partially comprehensible to those of his readers who may not be multilingual, and - as an extreme manifestation of the same principle - in his 'sound' poems. Working at the very epicenter of the literary movements of his time, Jolas is acutely aware of the options around him. His published and unpublished essays trace sound poetry from tribal hymns to trends in modern poetry that "eliminated entirely any preoccupation with mere semantics," (Jolas, 2009, p. 188) Stefan George's *lingua romana*, Dada, Hugo Ball's "sound poems in which the balancing of the vowels is gauged and distributed according to the value of the initial line," (Jolas, 2009, p. 189) Tzara, Hans Arp, Iliaszd and the Russian *zuum* ("zaoum" in Jolas' French spelling even in his English essays) and many others. Clearly, Jolas had the insider's intimate understanding not only of what sound poetry existed in his time, but also of the difference between the messages it carried within different writers' aesthetic programs. And going through his list is enough to become certain that he is doing something entirely different. His nonsense poetry is made to be *understood*, by himself as well as by his readers, hopelessly, infinitely, inexhaustibly.

Above all, Jolas' poetry is about words. Words are its material, often its veiled subject, its hero and ultimate goal. His poems often focus on words in a way that may be unique to Jolas in the directness with which words, vowels, the music of speech are anthropomorphized. Words are not immaterial for Jolas; the poet observes them just like he

²⁶ See Jolas (2002), a rare modern edition of Jolas' poetry illustrated by the poet's granddaughter, Claire Illouz.

observed a “ruinenkranken Stadt” during the war, some mostly unpublished poems starting with lines such as: “My words were at war,” “My father-words came back,” “My mother-words went to the young spring,” “My America-words turned inward,” “My words amerigrated,” “The sorrow of language becomes daemonic,” or “Nos mots s'en allaient vers la mer” (Box 18, Folder 328). In most poems where a landscape is depicted particularly vividly, it ultimately turns out to be a verbal landscape, such as in his published collection “Epivocables” (Box 15, Folder 279) where a beautiful, magical and almost apocalyptic landscape includes a cactus with nine tongues and the indication “Slowly we rise between the canyons of words” (“From: Landscapes,” Box 18, Folder 329). The world is predominantly verbal for this poet, and therefore words must have the power to transform the world. New words and new ways of expressions are needed since, Jolas proclaims:

The period of the ‘lyric’ and ‘poem’ is definitely over. The world of sonnets, ballads, octaves, elegies, odes, is over. <...> New forms to present the identity of the ancestral world and the present world will have to be found; epic word-symphonies will have to be discovered; an interracial language will have to be forged to express the collective inner vision of mankind. The “poem” must change into a mantic compost which organizes the expanding consciousness of “the expanding universe. (Jolas, 2009, p. 281)

A “mantic compost”²⁷ - what better description for a verbal universe where multilingualism is a mode of thinking and creating, where the vocabulary of all the languages available to the polyglot poet is not enough, and where more and better words have to be constantly created, molded, filled with significance? Or should we say, with a glance back to Jolas’ lifelong fascination with German Romanticism – a rethinking of the *romantic*?²⁸

A TRANSLINGUAL POETICS IN ENGLISH

In contrast to his rich multilingual texts, Jolas’ predominantly monolingual poems are, on the first glance, strikingly simple and almost naive. Complex associative patterns often mask this simplicity but some of the unpublished drafts, where vocabulary and imagery are less developed, demonstrate the extreme straightforwardness of both sentence structure and syntax. This is clearly neither this poet’s strong point, nor his interest: most sentences are syntactically straightforward, very often in the present tense, and with a heavy reliance on pronouns as subjects, sometimes without clear antecedents. This is especially the case in his acquired language, English, almost inviting the interpretation that Jolas was ultimately inspired, even as a poet,²⁹ by the first structures he learned to trust and use in that language. Jolas’ macaronic poems tend to opt for a similar minimalism, whereby words from different languages offered themselves to his mind within a single grammatical pattern. In such

²⁷ Compare, for example, in “The Frontier” (Box 19, Folder 341): “We shall build the mantle bridge/We shall sing in the all the languages of the continent/We shall discover les langues de l’atlantide/We shall find the first and the last word”. As it is often the case with Jolas, the meaning of such idiosyncratic terms as “interracial,” “prelogical,” “pentecostalism” etc. have to be gleaned from the context; this is not to say that Jolas did not have a clear definition in mind (for some terms, such as “polyvocable”, he gives such definitions in his dictionary), but reasons of space prevent me from an inevitably lengthy search for such a definition where it is not provided by the author.

²⁸ See Jolas (2009), pp. 203-213, 309-326, 343-345

²⁹ In fact, especially as a poet: Jolas’ critical prose is, on the contrary, often very fluent and complex.

poems, he seems to stick to basic constructions shared by all his languages in order, perhaps, to facilitate transfer, a kind of vocabulary osmosis.

By the same token perhaps—but even more so because Jolas believed in and practiced an incantatory, litany-like type of poetic expression—his language is often anaphoric, with the sentences rolling on in a repeated syntactical pattern. However, the effect lies not in a specific phrase that is being repeated but often in something as mundane as a definite article or a pronoun, as in the following draft for Jolas' poem entitled "Atlantica" (Box 19, Folder 341):

The new language came with wingbeat of metallic birds
 The new vocabulary was a gustwind in the copse [sic] of the stonetrees
 where the undefested river had its source
 The ruins of the old tongues lay fallow in the dribblerain
 The new words made the great journey through the healing spring with the
 swirl of an ecstatic dance
 They were not affrighted by the violent darkness nor the torture of the
 hungry body
 They fell in step with the mechanical walk of the vigilantes who flailed the
 images of night
 They knew the granite horizon hid the luminous substantives in the gelid
 valley of the dreamers at midnight
 They knew the enthralled agony of the migrants will cease in the westering
 explosion when dawn would come with pyramids and hieroglyphic fire

Is it a translingual's command of the language that makes the poet use the definite article in cases where a native speaker would most likely have used most of these nouns ("new language," "new vocabulary," "ruins of old tongues," etc.) as general terms? Perhaps, especially as Jolas tends, on the whole, to use nouns without articles (even in the plural) with great reluctance. In any case, the effect is striking: a mix of linguistic awkwardness with genuine *ostranenie*, a rhythmic incantatory quality and a somewhat ominous connotation. The segment is divided into two parts, separating the lines that start with "the" from the ones that start with "they" rather as the litany of supplication is divided from the litany of thanksgiving (Jolas was Catholic). This creates the sense of an inevitable rhythm reinforced by "the," and the definite article now gives a character of preexistence to the new words and the ruins, as if they were the ones the reader must know about already and have always been meant to come in "a gustwind."

This peculiar treatment of general and plural nouns is part of a larger tendency to deliberate generalization in more or less everything that does not concern specific vocabulary choices. Often, personal pronouns are used as subjects without clear referents: "we," "they," and "she" are used almost more often than the "lyrisches Ich." A vocal proponent of multilingual perception, Jolas cannot treat his own bilingualism as an essentially private part of his work like so many translingual poets (regardless of whether or not their poems ever saw the light of print). The private becomes a way – and often the only available way - to the universal. Can this be why so many of Jolas' poems are written from the point of view of a fictional multitude? Much more often than a lyrical "I," Jolas speaks from the point of view of a lyrical "us", a multitude of like-minded "I's" that are sometimes reporters and more often unnamed. What we know best of this multilingual multitude is what they strive for:

We wanted to find the bridge to a reality where the nouveau homme surgira and where he will speak a new tongue.

We wanted to be ecstatic pilgrims to a redemption.

Nous sommes des voyageurs vers la fusion des mots wir reisen zu sonnenuntergaengen der hoffnung estamos peregrinos de lumen. We are going towards metaphors of navigation nous sommes toujours des explorateurs à la recherche de millions de mots <...> Nous sommes les foules à l'esprit de volcans
("Atlantica," Box 19, Folder 341)

As a poet who instigated a number of literary manifestos in *transition*, including the "Revolution of the Word" manifesto co-signed by a young Samuel Beckett (Jolas, 2009, p. 111-112), Jolas had some reason to speak for a group of fellow travelers.³⁰ However, the function of the lyrical "us" of his poems seems different from that of expressing the worldview of a particular group that the poet represents. Rather, the poems are creating the fellow travelers, conjuring them up into existence, as it were, along with a new language, a new reality, and a new peaceful Europe. Here, the poet's idealism comes from a realistic vision of the world's tragedies and a complete faith in the power of the word. The poems are often repetitive, and the same semi-mythical motives of a surreal and heavenly future occur again and again, mostly in the English or predominantly English poems, but also in French and in German. The "us," "the young builders of new symbols" seem to be a reflection of the poet's desire to create by naming, even unto the imagined multitude that would share his vision. Each poem is a step towards bringing up the future world of Atlantica, but also towards bringing up its inhabitants. For now, though, the "we" of the poem essentially stands for "I", or perhaps, "I and anyone who will share my vision." One draft of "Atlantica" starts off with the line "We are always homesick for America", and the poet crosses out the first and the last word and replaces them with "I am always homesick for Manhattan" (Box 19, Folder 341). Both the pronoun and the place go from the more general (Jolas' default) to the more specific, but the original version as the poet's almost default choice is telling.

As an example of how this kind of poetics may play out in a predominantly English text, I would like to turn to Jolas' English collection *Planets and Angels* (1940):

XI

This is a landscape with no far aches
This is a skyscape of enormous liberations

A thousand wonders are born
On the tranquil meads of silver
There is a forest of titan-trees
We midnight-blue into sleep

We play with moons and suns
We play with nebulae like children

³⁰ Joyce mentions the manifesto in his notebooks: "X revolution of the word/Manage --/Burial of old sense" (Jolas, 2009, p. xiii).

While we ride upward
 Always higher into a flame-world
 Always more deeply into galaxies of fire

We swarm into planet-snow
 The vowels rise into shimmer-shafts
 They change into glow-hearts
 They pass through the gates of the milky way
 And dance the heavenly ballads

The enigma of the dream is being solved
 In the glitter-flight of miraculous comprehensions (p. 19)

The poem evokes in the reader's mind a surge of vague images of carefree ascent into a different reality that has qualities of a paradise ("heavenly ballads") and is apparently located in space. Curiously, vowels are part of this ascent, which "change into glow-hearts ... and dance." Otherwise, if anything, the poem, despite the pronouncement that "the enigma of the dream is being solved" leads to incomprehension. What is the poet even talking about? He may be describing the process of going to sleep and dreaming, but there is no waking up and the space in which the "we" of the poem fall asleep (or "midnight-blue") already has the quality of a dream landscape. There is a suggestion of a storyline but nothing is happening despite the dynamism of the poem (almost every line contains a verb). Imagine thirty-five variations of the same kind, and you can imagine the entire collection. Reading it is a curious experience: the first reaction is trying to understand. Then, as soon as repetition sets in with the second poem, the reader experiences boredom or rather anticipation of boredom. No wonder, one may say, that Jolas' writings have not been appreciated! Yet, reading on, one starts seeing that this seemingly meaningless and not-all-that-exciting poetry is contagious; it functions as a hypnosis, working up in the reader a state of verticality, produced by the sheer cumulative effect of the imagery of elevation and upward movement, the lyrical 'us' that includes the reader, and the anaphoric structure.³¹

The hypnotic quality seems intentional if we consider the collection's preface on "verticalism:"

In its eternal essence, poetry draws from the same sources as the mystic experience. It is a psychic operation with aerial projections. <...> For the expression of this continuous law of ascension, language must be deprived of its journalistic, sociological, materialistic appendages. Language must become hymnal and liturgical again. (Jolas, 1940, p. 5)

In other critical writings, Jolas calls for an irrational "language of the night" which is closely linked to the notion of the vertical language and has direct links with the imagery of dreams.³² No wonder, then, that the thirty-five poems of the cycle, far from trying to awaken the reader like much of the avant-garde poetry of the time, brings him or her closer to a mystical – vertical, to use Jolas' coinage – language of the night.

The repetitive nature of the collection masks, at first, that it also tells a story. Starting

³¹ See Jolas' definitions of the "new forms" he invented and that aim for the kind of poetics exemplified in these example: *hypnologue* and (when a macaronic form is involved) *polyvocable* (2009, p. 276).

³² See Kelbert (2014, p. 291-295).

with a longing for a different reality, the poet depicts the angels “still in this town;” the burghers do not see them; their eyes are misty. Then (third poem) a change comes over the town:

The graveyard resounds with cedar-mourning
 An angel walks through the stubble-field
 And suddenly the night grows wings
 We hear a fluttering of comet-birds (p. 11)

Note in these lines, also, the use of neologism. Jolas does something astonishingly simple (an effect that another multilingual poet, Tsvetaeva, was very fond of in Russian): he uses the hyphen. The trick is to join two words into one; each of the expressions, “cedar mourning,” “stubble field,” and “comet birds” are perfectly grammatical, if unexpected, in English. The first noun qualifies the second: the mourning of cedars, field of stubble, birds like or coming from comets. The hyphen turns them into single units: mourning of the kind that cedars mourn, the stubble-field that is as natural as a cornfield, comet-birds as a comet-like avian species. A very good illustration of this device can be found in a different, unpublished, poem: “One heard the hunger-cries/ Of the nightmare-sick/ One heard the hungercries for himmelswellen” (Box 19, Folder 341). Through the reiteration without the hyphen, we feel the difference between “hunger-cries” and “hungercries,” a much more immediate form, almost animal in the pain and urgency it conveys, and miles away from the grammatical “hunger cries” English normally allows for.

The story goes on, and as the earth seems to prepare for a transfiguring change, the poet appears for a single poem only to rejoin a triumphant “us” that “plunge into galactic foam-flood” (p. 13). As the heroes ascend to a different realm, the hyphenated word formation continues, and it now rebels against grammar altogether, mixing different parts of speech in compounds such as “pine-gloomy expectations” (an adjective) (p. 14), “deep-silence” (adjective joined with the noun it defines, p. 13), or “flight-steeping” (a verb) (p. 13). At this point, the “angel Lumor” appears, both an angel and a titan and something of a guardian angel (we may remember him as a character to whom “Incantation” was first meant to be dedicated):

We listen to his ripple-words
 His music-grammar chants

He walks with us through the canyons
 Past the neon-lights in the cliff-city
 He glides through the babel-crowd
 And scatters cherubic metaphors (p. 15)

Remember here Jolas’ definition of *babel* in his private dictionary: “to speak in a confused manner” (Box 12, Folder 246). In the crowd of humans, the babel-crowd, Lumor is the poet, he brings music and metaphors, his words ripple like water. The poet then flies with Lumor, also referred to as “the Father” “into planetland” (p. 17). What follows is a triumphal description of their ascent into the clear space of vowels and “miraculous comprehensions” (p. 19). Let’s look at it again. What astonishes here is the contrast between the hyphenated compounds that enrich and complicate the language and the primitive simplicity of the

grammar. Most sentences – as elsewhere in Jolas’ poetry, especially in English – follow the standard pattern of subject-verb-predicate. All ambiguity, all complexity, all poetry happens on the level of the vocabulary alone, which is consequently highly noun-dominated. The use of the compounds and hyphens make adjectives superfluous, so that a simple “golden” in poem XVIII (p. 26) seems startling.

The paradisiacal picture takes a dramatic turn when “titanic armies of cherubim pass by” “in a cloud-burst of martial proverbs” (p. 21). This is a “paradise festival” (p. 21) rather than a war, but the military ring of these lines may prefigure the “tear-moans of the women” (p.34) later on in the poem, and Lumor’s anger at the demons he has to silence with “silver incantations” (p.33). The marching is like music, a Scriabin-like color arpeggio. The rising crescendo of the collection is marked by a rise in compound use. In poem XV, there are suddenly two compounds of three words each: “We listen to a smaragd-herb-brush in windclang” and later “Deeper we stride into sunplash/ Deeper we stride into a palm-sun-plash” (p. 23). Gradually, the vocabulary increases in entropy: in poem XVI, a first made-up word occurs: “Ether-flame quivers/ Purpling into floom” (p. 24). In the midst of compounds and neologisms (“the billow-floom of flight,” “kermesse-worlds”), the poet is lost as he is in space and asks only “Where is the word of the great transfiguration?” (p. 26).

The “mystic vowel,” “U” appears as if to answer his call: “this is the hour of understanding” and “stardust-forests scatter poems/ On the dancing dwarf Lumenella” (p. 27-28). Things appear largely as before, but now we learn, “We speak the language of cherubim” (p. 29), the poets no longer need Lumor for “cherubic metaphors.” Having risen into the “landscape of enormous liberations” (p. 19), they are also transformed. At one point the heroes seem to return to the “forgotten runes” of the past, then to forget and continue their “celestial migration” (p. 31), hoping to stay. Is that perhaps why they seem to still need Lumor’s protection:

XXIV

Angry is the angel Lumor
He shakes in holy wrath

He chases all the evil grimaces
That blast against our darkling words (p. 32)

XXV

When a fearface comes
When the demon swish-glides past
In the solitude of slumber
Lumor comes softly
To silence the babbling (p. 33)

Lumor’s wrath marks a progression in the poem’s mood, and this is reflected also in the progression in the vocabulary. “Darkling” has the private meaning of “demon” for Jolas (Box 12, Folder 246), and both are mentioned in close succession. Yet more strikingly, the poem’s lexicon is gradually enriched by first instances of vocabulary taken directly from the Migration Dictionary: darkling, babel, sidereal. The poems continue:

Lumor sings celestial folk-songs

To deafen the rumble of the guns
 To deafen the tearmoans of the women (p. 34)

Within the sidereal ascent, the earthly conflict – presumably, the first echoes of the World War – seems like a passing nuisance, and Lumor saves the day by his song. The heroes achieve a new harmony, culminating in a veritable feast of compound words in poem XXIX, they are handed cups by angels, drink and dance. This is the end of the story, but the linguistic story is not over yet:

The sounds of the animals twinkle
 Moa milla reena goon
 All the children join in the chorus
 <...>
 Our souls are shaken into wonder
 History collapses
 We go back to the sonant principle (p. 39)

Paradise is lost now, leaving the heroes “azure-drunken for eternity” (p. 41). They go back to reality, it seems, but suddenly “change into stars” (p. 42) as the poem ends by the poet, now again in singular, meeting his beloved, whose advent announces a “new world-age” (p. 43). But why is the crisis of the poem, the pinnacle of the incantation and its temporary collapse associated with a cryptic line that has the sonority of Jolas’ incomprehensible multilingual poems? The hypnotic ascent into a different realm, beyond both babel and history, is conveyed through an escalation of incomprehensible vocabulary and through a revolt against grammar, yes, but only insofar as grammar concerns word formation.

The hypnosis, then, is not only a play of associations with verticality; its purpose is to break the reader’s grammatical and imaginatory habits. Jolas’ work literally expands the reader’s consciousness by forcing him or her into a world where any words can enter into any relationships, not defining each other but becoming a single new concept. Anything is possible – what is a leaf-glow-dream? We do not know, and yet we do. How is harp-sound different from “the sound of a harp”? It is not, and yet there is a world of difference. Is the melodic line “Moa milla reena goon” nonsensical?³³ The answer is yes and no. Yes because it does not correspond to any signifier-signified relationship shared by speakers of any language. And no because, like the language of animals and children in the poem, it represents both the ultimate ascension and its limit, the turning point back to the “sonant principle” (p. 39) we return to when history - and language - exhausts itself and Atlantica saves the day. The incomprehensible line of sound poetry is enveloped in language and therefore carries a new burden of interpretation: the opaque surrounding lines call to it for a hidden significance, and its apparent nonsense is a token of new meaning that will be infinitely born.

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³³ *Babel: 1940*, published the same year, was helpfully analyzed by Kiefer (whose article includes also the text of the poem) and culminates in a similar mix of apparently nonsense and macaronic insertions: “For we are always building Babel/ ... Clasta allagrone sil boala alamata/ Cloa drim lister agrastoo/ Cling aratoor/ Es knistert es klappert es klirrt/ On tonne on mugit on meugle/ Toutes les ballades sont mortes”(Kiefer, 2001, p. 151).

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