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Between Borders: French-Language Poetry and the Poetics of Statelessness

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'Introduction', Greg Kerr & Véronique Montémont

This special collection explores poetic engagements with statelessness in a selection of poetry in the French language in the period since 1900. Evoking a position abstracted from established categories of being, place and political selfhood, statelessness speaks to the dramas of exile and migration as well as to the anxious positioning of poetry itself on the margins of prevailing discursive systems. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, events such as the Armenian genocide, the Russian Revolution or the rise of fascism and political anti-Semitism in European countries precipitated stateless persons onto the international stage. France was the primary host country for stateless refugees in those years (through its Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides), a factor that accounts for the high concentration in this special collection of French-language writing, translingual writing in French and translingual writing produced in France. Indeed, a number of the poets featured here (Guillaume Apollinaire, Chahan Chahnour/Armen Lubin and Ghérasim Luca) were themselves stateless, or claimed to be so, and as some of the contributions go to show, this suggests an underexploited frame of reference for understanding the evolution of avant-gardist poetry of the early twentieth century. While some articles draw on this context, others are marked by more contemporary configurations of questions of belonging, migration and translinguality. Though the selection makes no claim to be fully comprehensive, contributions range widely across national boundaries, notably moving between Armenian, French, German and Romanian literary traditions. Together they offer a compelling picture of the development of poetic practice in the modern and contemporary period.

It is the contention of this collection that while the theme of exile continues to receive attention in literary scholarship (Averis; Garnier and Warren; Mathis-Moser et al.; Ouditt; Schor), statelessness is to date largely unexplored.[1] If we consider the exile as one who has left a given place and subsequently arrives at another, the legibility of such a transition becomes questionable when, for instance, the borders of state or empire collapse or the bounded intactness of territories can no longer be assumed.

The languages of Europe designate the phenomenon of statelessness according to two broad trends: while a cluster often sharing the Latin root *patria* evoke a break with a strongly

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[1] One notable exception is Lyndsey Stonebridge's monograph (2018), which presents a literary history of modern statelessness, focusing primarily on writers of the the mid-twentieth century.

gendered idea of an ancestral homeland,[2] others infer a loss of political affiliations by reference to the *polis*, citizenship and the state.[3] The first of these trends offers some compelling areas of reflection in relation to linguistic dispossession, to problems of space and displacement, and to questions of authorship, anonymity and the rejection of the name of the father. The second raises the question of the individual's relation to political society and to its forms and functions. Both in various ways designate a condition of privation. Thus, while exile has been a feature of human societies since time immemorial, statelessness is more explicitly linked to the institutions of the modern nation-state and to procedures around citizenship and linguistic assimilation. Sharing aspects of the condition of exile (through the topoi of dispossession, displacement and non-belonging), statelessness elicits an additional set of problematics concerning space, civil identity and the accession to speech, among others.

To some degree, it is possible to view statelessness, then, by dint of its aporetic quality as the spectre that haunts the narrative of cosmopolitanism. While the cosmopolitan subject may be classically understood as one who goes forward confidently into the world with the certainty of being its 'citizen', the *heimatlos*, as Michel Deguy notes, reading Hannah Arendt, 'est un sous-homme, frappé d'atimie, non reconnaissable, inexistant' (Deguy 2004, 95). In the case of internally displaced peoples, statelessness may even equate to being constrained to stay in one place and, as Judith Butler observes, it therefore poses a challenge to dominant categories of understanding that remain attached to an experience of migration.[4]

Although some theoretical accounts of the phenomenon may present statelessness within a horizon of radical anonymity, the reality for asylum seekers and refugees is often not so much that their presence goes ignored or undetected but rather that they are exposed to procedures of documentation and identification to an exceptional degree. Formal administrative procedures around migration and naturalisation necessarily construct their experience in a particular way. This often occurs in a language other than their own, one to whose discursive imperatives they are required to submit. Thus, the displaced person who becomes the object of such procedures is in turn obliged repeatedly to self-justify, pressured to offer an account of themselves. While it connotes estrangement from a homeland and from political society, then, statelessness speaks also to a fundamental ontological anxiety pervading the self, its place and its linguistic productions.

In addition to pointing out the specificity of a de facto legal situation, 'statelessness' also offers a compelling metaphorical framework both to consider the work of a range of poets whose trajectories are marked by migration, translinguality and diasporic forms of identity, and to explore the anxious positioning of poetry in the margins of discursive systems. It is in this more expansive sense (which most often comprehends, but is not exclusively limited to, the experience of migration) that statelessness speaks to the difference that is characteristic of poetry, 'ce genre qui se pense et se laisse penser par un état d'exception au sein du langage' (Kelly, 53). Indeed, from Cadiot to Chahnour to Luca, the contributions explore the ways in which poetry evades instrumentalisation by dominant linguistic ideologies and discourses of nationality. Such an approach endeavours to affirm poetry's exceptionality, that is, its potential to except itself from established discursive regimes and ways of knowing. In this

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[2] *Apatride* (French); *apátrida* (Spanish/Portuguese); *apatrid* (Romanian); *Անհայրենիք* (Armenian).

[3] *Без гражданства* (Russian); *apolide* (Italian); *staatenlos* (German); *stateless* (English).

[4] 'The idea of passing from one bounded territory to another requires a narrative line in which arrival follows departure and where the dominant themes are assimilation and estrangement. Surely a certain thematic for comparative literary studies has depended on the legibility of that transition and the stability of those territories that constitute the 'then' and 'now' and well as the 'there' and 'here' of emplotment, topology, and narrative line. But I think both spatiality and location have to be reconceived once we consider the departure from within, the dispossession that demands immobility' (Butler and Spivak, 17–18).

connection, it is worth underscoring the significance of the translingual modes adopted by a number of the writers here, specifically since the translingual evokes a sense of restlessness – suggesting a condition of not being at home in any one language.

Since the age of European romanticism, poetry has been understood as a powerful vector of national identity. From Burns to Goethe to Pushkin to Solomos, the 'national poet' stands in metonymic relation to a territory, a language and a literary system. Such is even the case not just of the person of the poet, but of the forms and devices of poetic language itself. Indeed, if poetry can in this way be considered as an agent of patrimonial value, it may be because its forms, in the West and in Asia at the very least, are also in effect repositories of ancient tradition: in one sense, the haiku *is* Japan just as the alexandrine (the 'vers national') *is* the France of Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo. And yet, it is precisely because poetry has the potential to crystallise an entire literary tradition that it is also the literary territory whose forms are most subject to interrogation and redefinition. In his *La Vieillesse d'Alexandre*, Jacques Roubaud describes the rejection by Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud of metric patterns originating in the work of Victor Hugo as a kind of hostile takeover (Roubaud, 10). In the wake of Mallarmé and Rimbaud, it was Apollinaire, together with the surrealist poets and practitioners of *vers libre*, who asserted the right to transgress codes and invent new forms which tended either to reject outright traditional models of rhyme and syllable count or to embrace the latter anew.

Drawing on notions of exile, juridical non-belonging and translinguality, the problematic of statelessness contributes to, and indeed complicates, this understanding of the emblematic relation between poet, national or majoritarian language and literary system. Among the questions it raises are the following: in what sense might 'statelessness' offer a model to theorise the status of the poetic, to account for the figurative or metaphorical framework of individual poems, or to elucidate the adoption or rejection of established poetic forms? Does the poem set out to 'take back' possession of a language or to reflect critically on its naturalised uses? At what point does a non-native speaker acquire legitimacy within a language, and to what extent can one – or must one – adopt, or adapt, established models of phrasing, rhythm and versification? How does one approach the language of the other-turned-enemy when one's name is Paul Celan or Jean Sénac? Or, finally, to cite a question posed in an Armenian-language poem by Krikor Beledian: 'Qui pourrait / vivre privé de temps / étranger à l'heure / privé de lieu / dans le poème vertigineux / et rendre / habitable la dévastation de la parole ?'[5]

And yet, those who no longer have a homeland do not cease to exist; literary work, amid the upheavals of history and geopolitics, may provide an exceptional space in which a writing subject can stage its re-emergence, even amid the loss of its own grounding (in both the juridical and ontological senses of that term). The articles selected here, moreover, hypothesise that the poem offers a privileged space within which to intervene in the discursive recuperation of the experience of migration, and in which perhaps to assert a paradoxical kind of authority.[6]

In this regard, what specifically does poetic *form* bring to an understanding of statelessness? If statelessness opens onto an anxiety about self, place and language, in the context of poetry, that anxiety centres acutely and reflexively on the production of form. Questions over the value and function of form are posed when the poet's creative and critical energies are directed towards the inherited models of poetic tradition (such as the alexandrine

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[5] The poem's title in a published French translation is 'Terres renversées' (Beledian, 81). It reflects on the difficulty of continuing to write poetry in the wake of the events of the Armenian genocide amid a legacy of mass displacement and linguistic annihilation.

[6] 'C'est donc sur la seule force de l'écriture, sur sa seule « condensation démonstrative », que le poème peut compter pour tenter d'asseoir sa parole' (Pinson, 67).

for Apollinaire or Valery Larbaud) and the patrimonial demarcations that these accomplish. On the one hand, the reprisal of a particular poetic form may be evidence of a process of acculturation. However, in many instances, the fact that a form is transformed, denied or radically subverted points to a different outcome. Poetry is not simply the agent of a literary modernity of which formal innovation is one of the chief hallmarks; the poem also contests form in so far as the latter implies a process of assimilation and submission to a system of authority. For example, the suppression of punctuation in Apollinaire's *Alcools* can be interpreted as undermining a significant part of the linguistic system. In this sense, there is a political dimension to the gesture of many of the poets featured here, one that consists in moving beyond a system of canonical rules as applied to poetic language.

Form is also at stake in poetry's critical engagement with the very institution of language itself; the subversion of formal protocols underscores the poem's potential to perform a Deleuzian 'devenir-autre de la langue', radically subverting the standardised usages of a given language, via displacement of its established discursive parameters.[7] Experiments in glossolalia and at the limits of orthography or punctuation, as well as strategies of spatialisation and metric variation such as those in evidence throughout this volume offer the potential to reflect critically on the 'monolingualizing pressure' (Forsdick, 218) exerted by any given national idiom. It is through these various means, which in fact often attest to a crisis of form itself (and the latter's attendant logics of norm and exception), that, to use the terms of Michel Deguy, '[la] poésie préserve son milieu en veillant sur le langage' (Deguy 1971, 418). In this sense, poetry becomes a means by which to interrogate the possibilities (and limits) of its own privileged space, and of Theodor Adorno's proposition that 'for a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live' (Adorno, 87).

Articles in this special collection are divided into three sections, the first of which explores poetry's relation to the condition of statelessness primarily in terms of a willed estrangement from the values of the mother tongue, monolinguality and nationality.

Eric Robertson's 'No Mother Tongue? Translingual Poetry In and After Dada' reveals the centrality of translingual writing to the experiments of the European avant-gardes from Dada to the present day. Ranging across examples from Dada to Lettrism to contemporary translingual poets such as Anne Tardos, Robertson links the radical decomposition of sound and syntax present in such experimental writing to a pursuit of the inherent strangeness or alterity of language. For the poets considered here, translingual forms of expression offer a privileged means by which to problematise national or ethnolinguistic criteria as they manifest themselves in discourse.

Serge Martin's 'Avec Ghérasim Luca (1913–1994), extension du domaine des apatrides', dwells on the writings of Ghérasim Luca,[8] a stateless writer of Romanian Jewish origin who, following his arrival in France from postwar Romania, for most of his life deliberately eluded the possibility of naturalisation as a French citizen. As Martin shows, the fierce resistance to different varieties of identity assignment (whether on the basis of name, nationality or religion) that characterises the poet's life extends also into a desire to position his works outside stable generic categories. At the level of the text, this culminates in a poetics of verbal saturation through which Luca radically destabilises discursive authority and established categories of knowledge.

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[7] 'Ce que fait la littérature dans la langue apparaît mieux : comme dit Proust, elle y trace précisément une sorte de langue étrangère, qui n'est pas une autre langue, ni un patois retrouvé, mais un devenir-autre de la langue, une minoration de cette langue majeure, un délire qui l'emporte, une ligne de sorcière qui s'échappe du système dominant' (Deleuze, 15).

[8] The name adopted by the poet is spelt differently by different scholars as 'Gherasim' or 'Ghérasim'; the acute accent appears in Luca's publications in French.

A second strand of articles account for the centrality of statelessness – both as imaginary and as de facto condition – to the development of modernist aesthetics and avant-gardist poetics from the early twentieth century onwards. Statelessness here is not conceived solely in terms of dispossession: be they cosmopolitan travellers or exiles, the poets under consideration each propose a form of fragile synthesis between the culture they have left behind and the cultural, spatial or metric territory that they mark out in the act of writing. Taken together, these contributions elucidate the emergence of poetic practices increasingly abstracted from the norms of versification peculiar to a national culture.

In 'Rhythm Across Borders: Free Verse Between Cosmopolitanism and Statelessness in Valery Larbaud's *Les Poésies de A.O. Barnabooth*', David Evans situates the work of the French poet at a point of tension between late nineteenth-century nation-statehood and new, transnational modes of being. Through a survey of their translingual features and metric peculiarities, Evans shows how Larbaud's texts inaugurate a distinctively open and pluralistic textual space which places the poet at a key point in the emergence of a transnational literary modernism.

Anne-Sophie Bories's article 'Sex, Wine and Statelessness: Apollinaire's Verse Without Borders in "Vendémiaire"' focuses on the stateless French-language poet Guillaume Apollinaire, born Wilhelm Kostrowicky. Centring in part on how Apollinaire exploits the tensions between the norms of the standardised form of the French language and those of verse, Bories explores how the poem's numerous metrical transgressions and patterns of adoption and rejection of norms of versification focalise the poet's complex relation to questions of national belonging.

In 'Le funambule apatride ou la question du rythme chez Gherasim Luca', Charlène Clonts argues that the tension between poetic language and the language of social communication that pervades the work of Luca can be considered in relation to the poet's statelessness. Though Luca does not adopt traditional verse forms, Clonts identifies effects of segmentation generated by the *vers libre*, spacing, internal rhyme and the arrhythmical alteration of text and image in his work. These aspects of Luca's poetics point to a new awareness that rhythm could be elicited within linguistic structures themselves rather than being instituted from without by the formal apparatus of versification.

A final series of essays explore specifically linguistic dimensions of the problematic of statelessness. These articles investigate how the poem may respond to linguistic dispossession by its own acts of appropriation of the means of communication. They examine how poets effectively reinvent a language or experiment with it bilingually or translingually, by interrogating the expressive possibilities of adopting a new language, reworking a current one or taking up once more a language (and, by consequence, a body of work) previously set aside. Some of the poets considered here are stateless from the perspective of the law, while others set out to problematise the effects of linguistic standardisation. However, their work is commonly motivated by the subversive, deterritorialising possibilities that the poem introduces into the system of language.

Krikor Beledian's article 'L'Écriture comme réécriture chez Chahan Chahnour / Armen Lubin' delineates a poetics of rewriting in texts by stateless bilingual writer Chahan Chahnour / Armen Lubin, an Istanbul-born member of the Armenian diaspora who emigrated to France in 1923 in the wake of the Armenian genocide. Though rewriting is as much a feature of the writer's French-language poetry as his Armenian-language prose, Beledian awards particular focus to the little-studied Armenian oeuvre (here in French translation) via an approach that takes into account successive iterations of a range of texts, but one nonetheless distinct from that of literary genetics. Identifying the moment of first inscription with an originary loss which is then taken up and re-actualised with each instance of rewriting,

Beledian demonstrates the centrality of (re-)writing to the experiences of exile and the legacy of genocide.

Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Daisy Sainsbury's 'Language and Statelessness in the Poetry of Olivier Cadiot' assesses the poet's experimentations with grammar textbooks and the French regional dialect of Welche. Just as Cadiot's treatment of the pedagogical materials featuring in his work *L'Art poétic'* exposes the normalising pressures inherent in language acquisition, his collaboration with musician Rodolphe Burger points to the subversive resources for poetry to be found in local dialects and regional languages existing within the purview of a dominant national language. For Sainsbury, these features of Cadiot's work can be seen in terms of a strategy of deterritorialisation which resituates poetic discourse 'in relation to a state that it is not, and to a linguistic territory that it has moved beyond'.

Lastly, in 'Laurine Rousselet: la tentation de l'apatridie', Geneviève Guetemme explores the poetics of non-belonging in the work of a contemporary French poet whose creative practice mixes cultures, languages and media (notably through collaborations with the Moroccan multi-instrumentalist musician Abdelhadi El Rharbi). Though not herself a migrant author, Rousselet's writing is inflected by North African and Middle Eastern influences. In *Mémoire de sel*, a text that explicitly embraces the metaphor of statelessness, she mixes Arabic and roman script and subtly problematises ideas of place and linguistic attachments. Likening the poet's pluralist conception of identity and desire to render her own voice absent to an experience of Kristevan self-strangeness, Guetemme argues that Rousselet's work is strongly underscored by a perception of the fragility and impermanence of contemporary being.

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