f

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IN *f*RANCOPHONE LITERARY WORLDS, THERE APPEARS TO BE NO EXIT from language. The language question has been an integral—and at times touchy and acrimonious—topic for *f*rancophone studies, where postcolonial critique has cast a long shadow over the politics of language choice as a means of creative expression. As a complementary counterpoint to this approach, I would like to introduce a new, different constellation of international poets, essayists, and translators to the conversation. They are pushing the critical history of the language question and its preoccupations into a different realm, into which they provide refreshing, stunning insight. Far from having suffered the shell shock of a "cultural bomb" that would have had them think of "their past as one wasteland of nonachievement" (Ngũgĩ 3), one where *f*rench "was largely taught to the *exclusion* of other languages," where learning *f*rench entailed "giving up" the mother tongue (Rice 292), these writers may be viewed as altogether novel instantiations of the decolonized mind.

If Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's reflections may be construed as specific to colonial and postcolonial anglophone Africa, postcolonial *f*rancophone studies has long been preoccupied with the Maghrebi, sub-Saharan, Caribbean, and Québécois contexts. In the Maghreb, the creative, generous reflections of such theoreticians of literature and language as Abdelkébir Khatibi, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Abdelfattah Kilito, and Assia Djebar have nurtured fruitful debates on bilingualism (Bennani et al.), and Khatibi and Jacques Derrida have provided an enduring and compelling dialogue on monolingualism, translation, and untranslatability. The apex of the poststructuralist linguistic turn may be well behind us, but we have a far way to go before exhausting contemporary *f*rancophone literature's translingual complexities: its textual passage and unraveling across multiple languages, such as "the digraphic (Arabic/Latin) aspect" of script in sub-

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Saharan vernacular African languages (Lienau 421) or the intertextual and translational poetics across Arabic and *f*rench that I discuss here. Though Derrida points to translingual affinities in *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou, La prothèse de l'origine* ("Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin"; 1996), arguing how "in a sense, nothing is untranslatable, but, *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable" (103), in 1983 Khatibi was already thinking through the inaugural digraphic, translational-untranslatable poetics of a single, translingual phoneme such as *a* in Meddeb's oeuvre. Through a close reading of classical Arabic grammar and an exegesis of Meddeb, he demonstrates that "écrire en français pour un étranger (arabe) est [un] paradoxe" 'to write in *f*rench for a(n Arab) foreigner is [a] paradox' (182), which leads to idiosyncratic narratives that "*parle[nt] en langues*" '*speak in tongues*' (186): texts composed in a translanguage, in the translational, intertextual sounds, letters, and words of one tongue layered against the sounds, letters, and words of another. In a work such as Meddeb's landmark novel *Talismano* (1979), Khatibi notes:

> « [A] » remplace le (ع), phonème que ne connaît pas le français et qui, selon une pictographie archaïque (dite chamito-sémitique) est l'indice de l'œil : ça a commencé par un œil absent, par la cécité, de l'invisible et de l'illisible. . . . Tel est le texte bilingue, aux marges de l'intraduisible. (181, 183)
>
> "[A]" replaces the (ع), a nonexistent phoneme in *f*rench, and which, according to an archaic pictography (so-called Chamito-Semitic), signals the eye: it began with an absent eye, with blindness, to the invisible and the illegible. . . . Such is the bilingual text, at the margins of the untranslatable.

Khatibi here puns on the name of the Arabic letter ع (*'ayn*), which doubles as the Arabic word for *l'œil* ("the eye"). By swapping *a* for ع, *f*rench unwittingly maintains its cultural and linguistic blind spots. With an eye on such weaknesses in the language, *f*rancophone authors have stopped writing back and have begun to pacifically invade the *f*rench language from within. In this essay, then, what we see and hear through the translingual *f*rancophone text is entirely *autre*, other, at the margins of language and translatability: beyond *la langue de l'autre* ("the other's language"), in the combined senses of Khatibi and Derrida, and toward *une langue autre*, an altogether "other language." Captured in the chiasmus between the *-phone* and the *-graph* (Khatibi 205), suspending language in the enjambment between sign and sense, theoreticians and authors such as Khatibi and Meddeb were among the first to inject an amorous, translational mysticism into contemporary *f*rench.

So was Salah Stétié (born in Beirut, 1929). In a lover's discourse, he narrates his choice (a nonchoice) to write in *f*rench and his awakening as culturally Arab, as culturally Muslim:

> Je compris que j'étais Arabe et qu'en langue française, dans cette langue choisie pour moi par mon père mais aimée de moi par mon long accouplement avec elle, aimée de moi comme une personne peut être aimée, aimée d'amour, passionnément, oui, je compris ce jour-là que l'Arabe que j'étais s'accomplirait en tant qu'Arabe dans la langue d'en face, celle de l'autre rive de la Méditerranée, cette langue qui fut parfois celle de l'envahisseur et qu'il m'appartiendra bientôt, par mon œuvre (déjà je croyais à l'œuvre qui viendra), *d'envahir à mon tour pacifiquement. Pacifiquement, oui, certes*, mais sans rien renier de mes armes ni rien abandonner de mon bagage. J'entrais dans la langue française comme chez moi et le couvent qu'elle me paraissait parfois, je rêvais de le transformer en sérail, je veux dire d'adapter à ma propre structure intime les éléments d'un bâti imposé mais ductile et transformable. ([*f*]*rançais* 18–19; my emphasis)
>
> I understood that I was Arab, and that in *f*rench, in this language chosen for me by my father but loved by me for my long coupling with her, loved by me as a person may be loved, loved out of love, passionately, yes, that

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> day I understood that the Arab whom I was would be fulfilled inasmuch as Arab in the facing language, that of the other shore of the Mediterranean, this language that sometimes was the invader's and that will soon belong to me, through my oeuvre (I already believed in the work to come), *to invade, in my own turn, pacifically. Pacifically, yes, certainly*, but not by disarming myself nor by abandoning my baggage. I entered the *f*rench language like my home, and I dreamt of transforming the convent that it once seemed to me into a dwelling, by adapting the elements of an imposed, though ductile and transformable, assemblage to my own intimate structure.

In what follows, building on the debates over *f*franco-Arab textual bilingualism that began in the 1980s, I demonstrate Stétié's paradoxical idea of a pacifist invasion of language in the *f*rancophone literary sphere. In two translational moments that foil, in *f*rench script, a deeper Arabic intertext, my essay shows how literature and criticism work in multilingual situations, as they transform literary language through the aspiration of a single phonemic consonant—*f*.

[I]

In Stétié's 1998 translation and bilingual reedition of the famous *khamriya* (*éloge du vin* ["praise of wine"]) by Cairo's Sufi poet ʿOmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (1181–1235), his translational gloss of the untranslatable sacrosanct term *dhikr* (ذِكْر) opens the multilingual text to the poetics of the breath. In Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *khamriya*, wine forms an intimate bond with creation, memory, life, breath, and secrets:

شَربنَا عَلَى ذِكْرِ الحَبِيبِ مُدَامَةً سَكِرْنَا بِهَا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يُخْلَقَ الكَرْمُ
[. . . . . .]
وَلَمْ يُبْقِ مِنهَا الدَّهْرُ غَيرَ حُشَاشَةٍ كَأَنَّ خَفَاهَا فِي صُدُورِ النُّهَى كتْمُ
فَإِنْ ذُكِرَتْ فِي الحَيِّ أَصْبَحَ أَهْلُهُ نَشَاوَى وَلاَ عَارٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلاَ إِثْمُ
وَمِنْ بَيْنِ أَحْشَاءِ الدِّنَانِ تَصَاعَدَتْ وَلَمْ يَبْقَ مِنْهَا فِي الحَقِيقَةِ إِلاَّ اسْمُ
[. . . . . .]
وَلَوْ قَرَّبُوا مِنْ حَانِهَا مُقْعَداً مَشَى وَيَنْطِقُ مِنْ ذِكْرَى {مَذَاقَتِهَا} البُكْمُ

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Diwān* 158)

sharibnā ʿalā dhikri al-habībi
mudāmatan sakirnā bihā min qabli an yukhlaqa al-karmu
. . . . . .
wa-lam yubqi minhā al-dahru ghayra
ḥushāshatin kaʾanna khafāhā fī ṣudūri al-nuhā katmu
fa-in dhukirat fī al-ḥayyī aṣbaḥa
ahluhu nashāwā wa-lā ʿārun ʿalayhim wa-lā ithmu
wa-min bayni aḥshāʾi al-danāni taṣāʿadat wa-lam yabqa minhā fī al-ḥaqīqati illā ismu
. . . . . .
wa-law qarrabū min ḥānihā muqʿadan
mashā wa-yanṭiqu min dhikrā [madhāqatihā] al-bukmu

Nous avons bu *en mémoire de l'aimé* tel vin
qui nous fit ivres avant que fût créée la vigne
. . . . . .
De lui le temps n'a préservé qu'*un souffle*
comme, enfoui dans *les poitrines* des sages, *un secret tu*
Évoqué parmi les gens de la tribu, ceux-là
s'éveillent grisés, sans impiété ni honte
D'entre les flancs des jarres *il est monté*
et de lui ne reste, en vérité, qu'*un nom*
. . . . . .
S'ils rapprochaient de sa taverne un impotent, celui-ci marcherait,
les muets, au *souvenir* de sa saveur, *reparleraient*
(Stétié, *Vin* 8–11; my emphasis)

In memory of the beloved
we drank a wine;
we were drunk with it
before the creation of the vine.
. . . . . .
Time preserving nothing of it
save one last *breath,*
concealed like a secret
in *the breasts* of wise men.
But if it is *recalled* among the tribe,
the worthy ones
are drunk by morn
without shame or sin.
From the depths of the jars
it arose, though truly,
nothing remained
save *a name.*
. . . . . .

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> Could they bring a cripple
> near its tavern, he would walk,
> and from *mention* of its flavor,
> *the dumb* would *talk*.
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Sufi Verse* 47–48; my emphasis)

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem cycles through the multisensory miracles of the most beautiful wine in the world—so beautiful, in fact, that its very existence is brought into question by the verses that celebrate it: the poem recounts how it restores lost physical senses to the blind, the deaf, the mute—even the possessed, to whom sanity is returned by "un magicien [qui] traçait les lettres de son nom / au front du possédé" 'the wizard [who] write[s] / the letters of its name / on the brow of one struck by the jinn' (Stétié, *Vin* 13; Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Sufi Verse* 49). Yet the poem's opening verse is especially remarkable: "Nous avons bu *en mémoire de l'aimé* tel vin / qui nous fit ivres avant que fût créée la vigne" '*In memory of the beloved* / we drank a wine; / we were drunk with it / before the creation of the vine.' It asks incredible, unanswerable questions: What is this existent-nonexistent wine that precedes the creation of the vine, its origin and root? What kinds of impossible time and modes of being does this order suggest? Is this idea, in its modern *f*rench intonations, expressed by Baudelaire's "J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans" 'I've more memories than if I were a thousand years old' (*Œuvres* 73; *Flowers* 98)? or, in the American, by Michael Palmer's opening verse from his *Baudelaire Series*, "A hundred years ago I made a book" (163)? Stétié's translational verses furthermore mark a poetic occasion: occasional Mallarméan verse. Drink for Ibn al-Fāriḍ is occasioned by circumstance, the circumstance here being "en mémoire de l'aimé" 'in memory of the beloved.'

What this translation does not (cannot) capture is something to which Stétié obliquely refers whenever he discusses the linguistic and political ramifications of translating classical Arabic Sufi poetry into *f*rench. His incendiary choice to translate a wine poem as a remedy for the idiosyncratic immorality of alcohol in Islam highlights wine's ethical imperative and poetic admirableness. As he explains, his translations attempt to retain the mystical nature of the Arabic texts:

> Le vin est ici-bas, symboliquement et en attendant (toujours l'attente), l'un des chemins vers Allah qui est, quand on y pense—les soufis l'ont pensé—ivresse et vertige. . . . Le vin—si immoral au niveau des mœurs et si admirablement moral et poétique au niveau du signe et du sens—est cela dont, outre la prière et la méditation, mérite d'être honorée la Divinité au-delà de toute honorification admissible. C'est pour rendre plus visible l'évidence de cette assertion que je me suis offert l'audace de restituer en français le poème de la *Khamriya*—« La Vineuse »—d'Omar Ibn al-Fâridh, plus généralement connue, et plus platement, sous le titre de l'*Éloge du Vin*. (*Vin* 86)
>
> Wine here below, symbolically and in waiting (always the wait), is one of the paths toward Allah, who, when we think about it—the Sufis have thought it—is inebriation and vertigo. . . . Wine—so immoral in terms of custom and so admirably moral and poetic at the level of sign and sense—is that through which, in addition to prayer and meditation, Divinity deserves to be honored beyond all admissible homage. It is in order to render the truth of this assertion more visible that I have allowed myself the audacity of restituting in *f*rench the poem of the *Khamriya*—"The Wined Ode"—by ʿOmar ibn al-Fāriḍ, more generally, and flatly, known as the *Praise of Wine*.

On a poetic level, Stétié's translations strive to capture, above all, the musical essence (*Râbiʿa* 25) of the Arabic texts, "[dans lesquels] se confondent en une longue modulation unique l'épanchement de l'âme et le trop-plein du souffle qui la fait vivre" '[in which] are blended in a long, unique modulation the effusion of the soul and the excess of breath that enlivens it' (26). Technically, though, in terms of the choice of preposition, the Arabic

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line of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *khamriya*, *ʿalā dhikri*, means not "en mémoire de l'aimé" but "*sur* la mémoire" or "*à* la mémoire" 'upon mention of.' Mere evocation ("*Évoqué* parmi les gens de la tribu" '*recalled* among the tribe') shares the same root with *ʿalā dhikri*: *inn dhukirat*, "if mentioned," "if remembered." Further in the poem, the mutes who regain speech do so "au *souvenir* de sa saveur" 'from *mention* of its flavor,' *min dhikri madhāqatiha*. Toward the *khamriya*'s end, wine and beloved (*l'aimé*) commingle in the same line. The beloved is here ambiguously referred to with a feminine declension (*dhukirat*), which transposes previous mentions of divine love (love of god, the *habīb* in the opening verse, which is masculine in Arabic) into the love either of wine (*mudāma*, feminine in Arabic) or of the woman who is here called Nuʿm,[1] or of both.

وَيَطْرُبُ مَنْ لَمْ يَدْرِهَا عِنْدَ ذِكْرِهَا كَمُشْتَاقِ نُعْمٍ كُلَّمَا ذُكِرَتْ نُعْمُ
(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān* 161)

wa-yaṭrubu man lam yadrihā ʿinda
dhikrihā kamushtāqi nuʿmin kullamā
dhukirat nuʿmu

Et celui-là qui l'ignorait l'exulte [à sa
mémoire, *ʿinda dhikrihā*]
comme au rappel [*kullamā dhukirat*] du
nom de Nouʿm l'amant de Nouʿm
(Stétié, *Vin* 19)

One who never knew it
is moved by its memory,
just as one longing for Nuʿm
is stirred when she is recalled.
(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Sufi Verse* 50)

In his translation, Stétié omits the expression "à sa mémoire" 'by its memory' (for the two Arabic words *ʿinda dhikrihā*), present at the end of the first hemistich of the Arabic verse. Whether intentional or not, the omission is noteworthy. Its presence would have introduced additional philological and etymological layers of translational complexity to Stétié's many allusive renditions of the term ("mémoire," "évoqué," "souvenir"). Its omission, however, is far more revelatory because it points to a paradoxical absence. In its Arabic formulations in the mystic *khamriya*, *dhikr* doubles as a reference to the Sufi practice of *remémoration* or remembrance, the third principle of Sufism, according to the medieval mystic ʿĀʾishah al-Bāʿūniyyah (62–95), one of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's textual adepts (Homerin xvi–xvii). The principle and practice of *dhikr* may include, for instance, the recalling and recitation of the ninety-nine names of Allah in breathless pursuit of the hundredth mystical name, a practice today commonly associated with the short period following the five daily prayers during Ramadan—especially during the holy month's supplementary *tarāwīḥ* and early morning *tahajjud* wakes, which last for hours on a nightly basis, during the entire course of which the imam seals the Qurʾān several times. The *khatm* (خَتم)—reciting the holy book from beginning to end and then back again to the beginning—discloses yet another term associated with wine in the *khamriya* tradition: the seal of the precious wine in its precious jar, *khatma ināʾiha* (verse 8) in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's expression, "le sceau du récipient" 'the seal of its jar' (Stétié, *Vin* 11; Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Sufi Verse* 48). The *khatm* is even a term that serves as an epithet for the Prophet Muḥammad, "Sceau des Prophètes" 'Seal of the Prophets' (Djebar 306): خَاتِم المُرسَلين, *khātim al-mursalīn*. The drinking in question, then, the inebriation that it causes, is godly, prophetic: *dhikr al-habīb* is both "en mémoire de l'aimé," remembering Allah the Beloved, and remembering and praying to Him through the mention (*dhikr*) of His name(s). God is wine; wine, God.

The close reader of the multitongued soundings in Stétié's total work, *Le vin mystique*, will hear whispers, in this translational genesis in progress, of a new *f*rancophone lyric. Characterized by a translingual, mystical turn and focused on the poetics of the breath, the new *f*rancophone lyric finds

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divergent and convergent inflections especially in contemporary Maghrebi literature, often construed against "un fond soufi très fort" 'a pronounced Sufi background' through a "chaîne de transmetteurs" 'chain of transmitters' (Habib Tengour qtd. in Sanson 22, 157). I think especially of Meddeb, who inscribes his lifelong oeuvre of poetic cycles from *Tombeau d'Ibn Arabi* ("Tombeau of Ibn Arabi"; 1987) to his near-posthumous *Portrait du poète en soufi* ("Portrait of the Poet as a Sufi"; 2014) under the aegises of great Sufi poets from Persia to al-Andalus, such as Ibn al-Ḥassan al-Niffarī, Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, and Muḥyiddin Ibn ʿArabī.

[II]

Through the translational semantic proliferation of a single term, writers working in more than one language and literary tradition pare the essence of poetic linguistic expression (Gleize 25–41) to its most basic elements: phonemes, consonants, vowels, tics, whispers, breaths. If, through translation, Stétié has altered his imposed, ductile, transformable *f*rench-language dwelling ([*f*]rançais 19) by adapting it, making it part of his own Arabic poetic assemblage, and by modulating in a translational idiom the semantic polyvalence of the Arabic term *dhikr*, a younger writer pares language down further to a single consonant: a sound, which on its own does not metrically register even as a single syllable. This striking genealogical and intellectual anomaly comes from Ryoko Sekiguchi (born in Tokyo, 1970), a rare *f*rancophone writer who continues to profusely publish translations, self-translations, and original, genre-defying work in both Japanese and *f*rench. In 2005, she composed in *f*rench a poetic text *à rebours*—backward, against the grain. Giving it the title *Héliotropes*, Sekiguchi takes a double cue from (1) the Qurʾānic *āya* ("verse") 75.16 from *sūrat al-Qiyāma* ("The Resurrection"), لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ, *la tuḥarrik bihi lisānaka li-taʿjala bihi*, "Ne remue pas ta langue en lisant le Coran comme si tu voulais hâter la révélation" 'Do not rush your tongue in an attempt to hasten [your memorization of] the Revelation' (75.16), and from (2) a historically unprecedented linguistic and literary invention: the medieval Andalusian Arabic *muwashshaḥ* (pl. *muwashshaḥāt*), after which she structures her entire book.

The *muwashshaḥ* (tenth to fourteenth century) single-handedly reversed every generic, linguistic, and cultural convention in Arabic, from the classical Jahili *qaṣīda* ("polythematic ode," pl. *qaṣāʾid*) to the awe-inspiring *muqaṭaʿāt* (the "initiatiques lettres" [Meddeb 18], the 'initial' or 'initiating letters' of the Qurʾān) and the linguistic purity of sacred Qurʾānic revelation, recitation, memorization, and remembrance. Of varying lengths, the classical *qaṣāʾid* presented a loosely connected narrative through a codified set of themes and movements, like the Qurʾānic chapters that came after them (Ḥussein 1–5). Whereas the *qaṣīda* maintained a textual unity through meter and the same rhyme repeated at the end of each verse, the *muwashshaḥ* was "a kind of stanzaic poem in which the stanzas begin with segments (*ṣimt*, pl. *aṣmāt*) in a rhyming sequence that is different for each stanza and end with segments (*qufl*, pl. *aqfāl*) sharing the same rhyming sequence in every stanza" (Corriente 110). The genre's major disruptive force was its backward construction from and anticipation of its end, the *kharja* ("exit" or "way out"), the final *qufl* ("lock"; Hanlon 35–36), which simultaneously establishes "the distinction between the voice in the *muwassah*, which is that of a man, and that of the *kharja*, usually a woman's voice" (Yahalom 29).

In the *muwashshaḥ*, the linguistic opening doubles as closure and poetic end or exit, or, in the idiolect of contemporary *f*rench poetics, as *sortie*—the title Jean-Marie Gleize gave his 2009 collection of theoretical and poetical essays, as well the title of a recent

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essay by Hélène Cixous collected in *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* ("The Laugh of the Medusa and Other Ironies"; 2010) on "long[s] accouplement[s]" 'long coupling[s]' (Stétié, [*f*]*rançais* 18) with and within languages. The *muwashshaḥ* not only completely reversed poetic and sacred order but also irreverently turned it on its head. The opening couplet (*maṭlaʿ*) anticipates the meter and rhyme of the *kharja*, but the *muwashshaḥ* assumes circular Qurʾānic ritual formalism in which beginning and end merge into one (in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem, the *khatm*, "le sceau du récipient" 'the seal of its jar' [Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Diwān* 158; Stétié, *Vin* 11; Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Sufi Verse* 48]), as if to delineate the threshold that separates them: in an apotropaic moment of poetic invention that preempts any finality, the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning in a liminal moment of passage.

From a linguistic standpoint, the *kharja* represented a departure from classical Arabic into colloquial forms of the language or other languages. For instance, if a poem were composed in classical Arabic, its final verse could be in colloquial Arabic, Mozarabic, or Romance Andalusian transcribed in Arabic letters. The Arabic script thus foils verses composed in Romance Andalusian in a remarkable moment of utter linguistic disjuncture between sign and sense. To be sure, the percentage of non-Arabic *kharja*s is small, "48 out of a grand total in a corpus of some 600 poems" (Jones, "Final Tadmin" 61), but "the use of Romance material is unparalleled in Arabic either before or since" (Jones, *Romance Kharjas* 13), and it constitutes "a quantum leap from traditional Arabic poetry" (Smart 113). The *muwashshaḥ* leaves the speech of the Arabic Qurʾān (*qurʾānan ʿarabiyyan*), leaves its Arabic tongue and hand, operating mysteriously on poetic reality, only to reveal not a secret but an irreducible linguistic and relational alterity. If, as Jean-Claude Milner, Giorgio Agamben, and Daniel Heller-Roazen all agree, the fundamental distinction between prose and poetry relies on the possibility of enjambment or "the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit," "a prosodic pause to a semantic pause" (Agamben 109), then we may understand the *kharja* as the opposition of a scriptural limit to a phonological limit or as the opposition of an auditory pause to a semantic pause. As with the Qurʾānic *muqaṭaʿāt*, "il y a vers dans une langue, dès qu'il est possible d'insérer des limites phonologiques sans avoir égard à la structure syntaxique" 'there is said to be verse in a language from the moment in which it is possible to insert phonological limits without consideration of syntactic structure' (Milner 300; Heller-Roazen 114). "The possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose," because "verse is, in every case, a unit that finds its *principium individuationis* only at the end" (Agamben 109). Verse "defines itself only at the point at which it ends" (111), and enjambment becomes "nothing less than the fundamental principle of poetic unity" (Heller-Roazen 104).

There hardly exists a piece of classical Arabic poetry in which some verses do not begin with either the transition *and* or *then*, the vowel و (*w*) or the fricative consonant ف (*f*), both of which originate in the Semitic letter ו (*vav* or *waw*). In the *muwashshaḥāt*, the distinction in voice between the body of the poem and the final one- or two-line *kharja* would be impossible without the transitional verses that precede it: وشَدا الجَميع من حال الوَجَل, *wa shadā al-jamīʿu min hāli al-wajal*, "and all chanted from a state of dread," or فَأَعْلَنَتْ إذ دَّهَاها منه الضنا والاشتِيَاقْ, *faʿlanat idh dahhāhā minhi al-ḍinā wa-l-ishtiyāq*, "[and] then she declared, for she was struck, by him, into suffering and longing" (*ʿUddat al-Jālis* 236, 244). In structuring *Héliotropes*, Sekiguchi leans against the possibility of linguistic passage or movement from one voice to the next, from one tongue to another. She spreads out select scientific names and foreign pronunciations across the 120 stanzas that form her book. She evokes a left-handed structure with the blank

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white page on the left-hand side of each sheet of paper in the book, which suggests an invisible or at best barely perceptible westward movement, "gauchère" ("left-handed"), from text page to blank page, like the heliotropic phenomenon in some plants' movements, like the movement of the eyes from the end of the right edge of the text to the beginning of the line on the left edge. In the following stanza, the two playfully split words at the edges of the first stanza ("gau-chère" and "pas-sive") sound at least like four more things: the encircling game Go (*gau*) cherished by Oulipo and central to the poet-mathematician Jacques Roubaud's ∈ (1967), the dearly beloved of the *muwashshaḥ* (*chère*), reverie-inducing promenades and negations (*pas*), and the botanical species of perennial onion ("cive") known as *allium fistulosum* (*sive*):

> Il est un corps continuel de prononciations étayé par divers noms savants de plantes et de ce contre quoi ils s'adossent. Une certaine longueur que laisse passer la structure gauchère et le phénomène qui risque d'être dit par distraction « ce qu'elle contient » ; cette obliquité infime, il fallait qu'elle coule le plus clair possible sans la charger d'un poids supplémentaire. La distinction des voix passive et active a été d'abord interdite, et à peine le regard jeté vers la troisième, la lettre *f* avait déjà fait son apparition ; nous l'avons prononcée, la même chose nous est advenue. (7)

> There is one continual body of pronunciations braced by the diverse scientific names of plants and
> what they lean against. A certain length that the left-handed structure allows to pass and the phenomenon that risks being called
> in distraction "what it contains"; this infinitesimal obliquity, it had to flow as clearly as possible without piling on supplementary weight. The distinction between pas-
> sive and active voices was forbidden at first, and no
> sooner had sight been cast upon the third, than the letter
> *f* already made its appearance; we pronounced it, the same thing befell us.

The infinitesimal heliotropic slant, Sekiguchi seems to tell us, operates in the manner of the lightly aspirated, transitional "letter *f*" (و, ف, ١): a frugal passage from oneself to the other. The distinctions that these voicings in verse introduce oscillate between active and passive. The Persian-born Abū Nuwās (756–814) had written:

فَفِي الْغِناءِ بِنَغْمٍ يُضْرَبُ المَثَلُ

fa-fī al-ghināʾi bi-naghmin yuḍrabu al-mathalu

Then in tuneful song the proverb goes (84)

وتغنّى على المدام ثلاثاً

wa-tughannā ʿalā al-madāmi thalathan

And over wine thrice sung (673)

In *Héliotropes*, as the structure and "distinction between pas- / sive and active voices" allow the poet to quote herself, other poets, or well-known sayings and proverbs (Jones, "Final Tadmin" 65–67), "what it contains," in Sekiguchi's formulation, befalls us in the reverberating apparition-aspiration of "the letter / *f*." So about halfway through *Héliotropes*, Sekiguchi writes:

> La réverbération de l'haleine ف retentit jusqu'ici, et quels que soient le bruit et le surgeon du vert cespiteux, il parvient habilement à trouver la brindille en pente tellement aiguë qu'il semblerait impossible d'y poser une patte, jette l'autre en l'air comme un hamac, *et s'adresse ainsi de temps à autre* : « Ils sont mis à distance avec toutes les langues pratiquées aujourd'hui sur cette terre, tandis que chacun d'eux indique avec exactitude une seule orientation définie. Il en est ainsi dans tous les jardins, partout où se fait le va-et-vient de ceux qui changent de place en s'envolant. » (59; my emphasis)

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> The reverberation of the breath ف dins
> up to here, and whatever the noise and the
> basal shoot of the clumping green, he
> manages
> to skillfully find the twig at such a sharp
> slope that it would seem impossible
> to set a foot there, throws the other up in
> the air
> like a hammock, *and thus addresses himself*
> *from*
> *time to time*: "They are placed at a distance
> from
> all languages practiced today
> on this earth, while every one of them
> indicates with accuracy a single defined
> orienta-
> tion. It is so in all gar-
> dens, wherever there exists the coming-and-
> going of
> those who change places by flying."

Can I translate a work back into a language in which it was originally never written? or even thought? As Pierre Joris asks of the Morrocan author Driss Chraïbi's scandalous first novel *Le passé simple* (1954):

> What would happen if the title were translated into Arabic? I nearly wrote "back into Arabic"—but a back is unwarranted, Chraïbi wrote from and into [*f*]rench, that is the whole point of the book—the novel's own desire is to be an accurate temporal arrow, forward from the old Arabic-Islamic tradition to the modernity of the colonizing civilization. (10)

Sekiguchi's work reverses the politics of postcolonial literary prose described by Joris, as she writes from the then already forked tongue of a new multilingual medieval genre into an indeterminate contemporary *f*rench book at the interstices of itself. If I were to cast "et s'adresse ainsi de temps à autre" into Arabic, it would give us وبالتالي يقول من وقت لآخر, *wa-bi-l-tālī yaqūlu min waqtin li-ākhar* or, even more apropos, فيقول من وقت لآخر:, *fa-yaqūlu min waqtin li-ākhar*. Her uncanny letter *f* (ف, و, ١) reappears when translated back into Arabic. Hot on the tracks of Khatibi (186, 205) and Heller-Roazen's pursuit of literature "speaking in tongues," here, it appears, is *une langue* ("a tongue," Sekiguchi's) *qui parle en langues* ("that speaks in tongues," the *muwashshahāt*).

f deforms and unfurls a language undone: Stétié's aporetic notion of a pacifist invasion of language takes less the form of *f*rancophonie's initial surrealism-tinged linguistic destruction than a rediscovery and resurrection in and through a *f*rench language surface of classical Arabic literature and mystical Islam and Sufism. In this light, the *kharja* in particular, the final close, the final lock, marks an exceptional site of transference between languages in passage, a liminal moment of transit where languages are placed at each other's threshold, freely interwoven into each other, each becoming another language, becoming something other than language as such—that is, characterized by a basic correspondence between visual sign and uttered sense. Pac*if*ically invaded.

Notes

All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

1. An etymologically complex word, *nuʿm* as a term of endearment here signifies "apple of one's eye"; more broadly, it has connotations of acceptance and the bestowing of blessings and beatitude. Among other words, its root gives the ostrich its Arabic name, *naʿāma*.

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