Aussi / Or

Un Coup de dés and Mistranslation in the Antipodes

Fig. 1: Lorenz Attractor, Chaoscope, 2009.

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Abstract

“Shipwrecked on the shoals of contingency”, Australian poetry is haunted by Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem *Un Coup de Dés*. Its publication in *Cosmopolis* in Paris in 1897 struck a nerve or, rather, a vessel within Australian poetry bloodlines, starting with Christopher Brennan. *Un Coup de dés* was the score that inspired him to compose “Musicopoematographoscope”, also in 1897, a large handwritten *mimique* manuscript, or pastiche, that transposed the more extreme aesthetics of an avant-garde French Symbolism into the Australian poetic psyche. Now well into the twenty-first century, *Un Coup de dés* is still a blueprint for experimentation in Australian poetry, spawning a number of versions, two of which are homophonic mistranslations—“A Fluke” by Chris Edwards and “Desmond’s Coupé” by John Tranter—both published in 2006, and both revelling/rebelling in the abject, and in “errors and wrecks”. This essay/assay provides a comparative reading of these homophonic bedfellows, traces their relation(ship)s to their antecedents, to various theories of translation and punning, and begins an enquiry into the significant influence of Mallarmé’s great “vessel” on Australian poetry and poetics.

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aussi

The French adverb aussi means “also”, “in addition”, “as well”, and “too”. It is also used as a comparative, as in “as”, as an exclamatory “so”, and also at the beginning of sentences as a “therefore”, or “consequently”. Its English homonym is “Aussie”, of course. And its meaning of “too”, T double-O, might fancifully be taken for the English number “two”, its double, or even tu = you.

or

The French noun or is two different words with two different Latin origins. One, from Latin aurum (and popularly orum), is a noun meaning “gold” (with adjective, “golden”); the other, from Latin hora, is a conjunction meaning “now”, “but”, “in fact”, “as it happens” and, more rarely, “thus” or “therefore”. Its doublet is heure = “hour”. In English heraldry, “or” also means gold. The English homonym for or is obviously “or”, that infinitely useful word that links alternatives, but we also have “ore”, “awe”, “oar”, and “aw”. From Middle English, “or” is a reduced form of the obsolete conjunction other (which superceded Old English oththe). “Or” can also be found as a suffix in English nouns denoting a person or thing with agency: “escalator”, “resistor”, or “conductor”.

aussi

Un Coup de dés by Stephane Mallarmé, a gnomic poem of the late nineteenth century, full of esoteric symbolism and disjointed syntax, that broke with convention, exploding from the left margin across the page, and across the gutters of eleven double-page spreads, in scattered fragments—like disjecta membra—visual, musical, collage-like,

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and typographically diverse, looks like many things on the page: rocks emerging from the white foam of the sea; ash on the table to be swished about by some diviner; a mobile, hung across a child’s crib; threads or strings blown in the wind; constellations in the night sky; it could even be seen as a representation of Brownian Motion.

or

Pedesis (from Greek: πήδησις /pɛːdɛːsis/ “leaping”), which is the random motion of particles suspended in a fluid (a liquid or a gas) resulting from their collision with the quick atoms or molecules in the gas or liquid. The term “Brownian motion” can also refer to the mathematical model used to describe such random movements, which is often called a particle theory.

Fig. 2: Brownian Motion, gif, Wikipedia.

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3 There are two representations of the “Big Dipper” (U.S.) or “The Plough” (U.K.) in the poem’s fragments. The Big Dipper is an asterism that represents the seven brightest stars of the northern hemisphere constellation Ursa Major.


or

The atomic law of the clinamen—the minimal swerve of an atom in laminar flow. Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery, evoking Lucretius’ use of the clinamen in literature, compare the movement of atoms to the movement of letters: “Atoms ... are to bodies what letters are to words: heterogeneous, deviant, and combinatorial”. Citing Paul Valéry, who saw the words in *Un Coup de dés* as “atoms of time that serve as the germs of infinite consequences lasting through psychological centuries”, Rasula and McCaffery then note:

The spaciousness evoked here is a reminder that, in Epicurean cosmology, the contextual prerequisite of atoms is a void. We might say by analogy that void is to atoms what space and *différence* are to letters. Mallarmé’s spacing in *Un Coup de dés* solicits—as integral to the experience and the eventual dice-throw of the poem—the backing of that void (the ground of emergent figures) through which the lettristic swerves disseminate.  

aussi

Its full title, *UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N’ABOLIRA LE HASARD* (“A THROW OF THE DICE WILL [N]EVER ABOLISH CHANCE”)—perhaps a serious interpretation of probability—describes the event of the poem and, like dice, its words bounce or leap through the double-page spreads in corresponding large and capitalised typeface: *UN COUP DES* 

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7 I have translated *JAMAIS* as “[N]EVER” to preserve both possible meanings of *jamais*, “never” and “ever”.

DÉS (“A THROW OF THE DICE”) appears alone as a title page, JAMAIS (“WILL [N]EVER”) appears on the following spread with a few fragments of text below it, N’ABOLIRA (ABOLISH) three spreads later with much more surrounding text, while LE HASARD (“CHANCE”) rounds out the phrase a further four spreads on, marooned in the most chaotic double spread of the book (in terms of the number and variety of particles on the page), two spreads from the end. Every fragment of the poem that falls around this title, thrown across the sea of pages in variously sized typeface, switching between roman, italic and capital letters, unravels and overlays in what Alain Badiou describes as “a stupefying series of metaphorical translations around the theme of the undecidable”? Or, as Mallarmé dubs it in his Preface: “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea”. Lines of text, if read from the upper left, across the book’s gutter, to the lower right, “speed up and slow down the movement ... intimating it through a simultaneous vision of the Page.” Within these subdivisions, fragmented images surface as remnants of some lost-at-sea narrative, wavering, oscillating, vibrating throughout: the Master of a vessel, standing at the bottom of a shipwreck, his fist holding the dice shaking eternally at the stars, the lurching ship, a feather hovering over the Abyss, the proposed rolling of the dice between possible outcomes. “All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice”, to quote the last line, yet, “A throw of the dice will never abolish chance”—a decisive act with a result determined by ever greater and obscure forces. or

Inertia.

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11 Mallarmé, “Un Coup de dés”, Collected Poems, 144–5

12 Inertia, in classical physics, can apply to a body in uniform motion or at rest. It was Isaac Newton’s first law of motion from Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica: “The vis insita, or innate force of matter, is a power of resisting by which every body, as much as in it lies, endeavours to preserve its present state, whether it be of rest or of moving uniformly forward in a straight line” (in Isaac Newton, Newton’s Principia: the mathematical principles of natural philosophy, trans. Andrew Motte [New York: Daniel Adee, 1846], 72).
Henry Weinfeld, one of Mallarmé’s translators, sums up the various angles from which to read *Un Coup de dés*: “What is allegorised … is the ebb and flow of humanity’s continual struggle to seize hold of the Absolute: the Master-Seaman’s confrontation with the oceanic abyss, the Poet’s confrontation with the white page, the Philosopher’s with the Void, and Everyman’s with the ‘errors and wrecks’ (to borrow Ezra Pound’s phrase) of experience.”13

**aussi**

When Paul Valéry first witnessed the event of *Un Coup de dés*, he remarked: “It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal forms”,14 which seems like a reaction that Theodor Adorno might have classified as “astonishment vis-à-vis what is beheld rather than vis-à-vis what it is about.”15 According to Immanuel Kant, however, space and time are nothing but forms of intuition; they are the base of all experience, *à priori*. We make non-empirical, singular, immediate representations of space and of time and it’s only through these representations that we can experience things as distinct from ourselves/our inner mental states.16 By this he means that we don’t come to our understanding of space and time by first observing the objects we experience and then “by abstraction”. Our sensibilities are a jumble of representations, and so our interpretations of a poem, which itself is contingent on language and how it’s arranged on the page, is thus, and inevitably, a representation of a representation, a construction of a construction.

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14 Weinfeld, “Commentary”, 265.


aussi

As Mallarmé wrote to André Gide, shortly after the poem was first published, likening the shape of the poem to a constellation locking into place: “the constellation will, fatally, assume, according to the precise laws and in so far as it’s possible in a printed text, the form of a constellation. The ship will list from the top of one page to the bottom of the next, etc.: for, and this is the whole point ... the rhythm of a sentence about an act or even an object has meaning only if it imitates them”.17

aussi

Negative space does the semantic inverse, according to Jacques Derrida, who suggests that the “rhythm” of the white spaces in *Un Coup de dés*—“as if without support”—succeeds in collapsing space and time:

The white of the spacing has no determinate meaning, it does not simply belong to the plurivalence of all the other whites. More than or less than the polysemic series, a loss or excess of meaning, it folds up the text toward itself, and at each moment points out the place (where “NOTHING / WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE / BUT THE PLACE”.18), the condition, the labor; the rhythm. As the page *folds in* upon itself, one will never be able to decide if *white* signifies something, or signifies only, or in addition, the space of writing itself.19

or

As Octavio Paz writes of Mallarmé: “The meaning does not reside outside the poem but within it, not in what the words say, but in what they *say to each other*”.20

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Mallarmé states his own (subjective) objective best: “This aim, I call Transposition; Structure, another ... The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet speaking, who cedes the initiative to words, through the clash of their inequalities; they light each other up through reciprocal reflections”.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{aussi}

“Shipwrecked on the shoals of contingency”,\textsuperscript{22} Australia is haunted by this poem. Its publication in \textit{Cosmopolis} in Paris in 1897 struck a nerve or, rather, a vessel within Australian poetry bloodlines, starting with Christopher Brennan. \textit{Un Coup de dés} was the score that inspired him to compose “Musicopoematographoscope”, also in 1897, a large handwritten \textit{mimique} manuscript, or pastiche, that transposed the more extreme aesthetics of an \textit{avant-garde} French Symbolism into the Australian poetic psyche. Now well into the twenty-first century, \textit{Un Coup de dés} is still a blueprint for experimentation in Australian poetry, spawning a number of versions, two of which are homophonic mistranslations—“A Fluke” by Chris Edwards and “Desmond’s Coupé” by John Tranter —both published in 2006, and both revelling/rebelling in the abject, and in “errors and wrecks”. This essay/assay will provide a comparative reading of these homophonic bedfellows, will trace their relation(ship)s to their antecedents, various theories of translation in the process, and will begin an enquiry into the significant influence of Mallarmé’s great “vessel” on Australian poetry and poetics.


\textsuperscript{22} Weinfeld, “Commentary”, 266.
In his reluctant introduction to *Un Coup de dés* (he only wrote it to appease the wishes of the periodical *Cosmopolis*), Mallarmé “retain[s] a religious veneration” for “the ancient technique of verse”, to which he “attribute[s] the empire of passion and of dreams”. He may well have been attempting to appease traditional readers, but at the same time Mallarmé is alluding to a crisis which, at first, plays out as a revolution in French prosody, but “is not merely a crisis of poetry or verse, but a crisis of modernity—indeed, a religious crisis that manifests itself in poetry or verse”. Furthermore, in his famous essay *Crise de vers* Mallarmé struggles with the admission that “Languages [are] imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking … the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proffering words that would otherwise be, when made uniquely, the material truth. This prohibition is explicitly devastating, in Nature … where nothing leads one to take oneself for God”.

He demonstrates that languages are at once imperfect and multiple, that there is no necessary or natural connection between word and thing, between sound and sense, offering the example that *jour* (day) is a dark sound, for instance, while *nuit* (night) is a bright sound. This is the same as Ferdinand de Saussure’s revolutionary formulation—that the relationship between the linguistic signifier and what it signifies is arbitrary. This suggests that Mallarmé’s crisis was also a crisis between subject and object, and explains how he came to a poetics of indecision, polyphony and counterpoint. Adorno had similar aesthetic concerns in mind when he wrote of the subject-object bind:

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24 Weinfeld, “‘Thinking out afresh the whole poetic problem’: Brennan’s Prescience; Mallarmé’s Accomplishment”, *Southerly* 68.3 (2008): 11.


In the artwork the subject is neither the observer nor the creator nor absolute spirit, but rather spirit bound up with, performed and mediated by the object.

For the artwork and thus for its theory, subject and object are its own proper elements and they are dialectical in such a fashion that whatever the work is composed of—material, expression, and form—is always both.27

aussi

Jacques Derrida describes Mallarmé’s poetics as “and/or”, citing Mallarmé’s deft use of homonyms and puns and their chain-like linkages across his oeuvre not as a crisis but as the key to its understanding, and to new possibilities for literature:

Let us not forget that these chains, which are infinitely vaster, more powerful and intertwined than is even possible to hint at here, are as if without support, always suspended. It is the Mallarméan doctrine of *suggestion*, of undecided allusion. Such indecision, which enables them to move alone and without end, cuts them off, in spite of appearances, from all meaning (signified theme) and from all referents (the thing itself, and the conscious or unconscious intention of the author). Which leads to numerous traps for criticism, and numerous new procedures and categories to be invented.28

or

Weinfeld describes Mallarmé’s chains with an almost religious fervour; even at the same time as acknowledging the immanence of words and things:

polysyllabic chains of homophonic rhymes, rhymes that will hyperbolically, but also actually, evoke the island of poetry from which the spirit has been exiled and in which it can dwell ...

---


For the inhabitants of Mallarmé’s mythical island, subject-object distinctions and discrepancies between words and things no longer obtain. Everything is immanent and no longer transcendent; everything comes immediately to the eye, to sight itself, and so there is no longer any need for the visionary.  

aussi

Regarding Derrida’s “doctrine of suggestion, and undecided allusion”, there is a little known theory of anagrams that Saussure worked on in his many unpublished notebooks. Tracing the works of Homer and others to discover laws governing the distribution of consonants and vowels, Saussure accidentally noticed recurrent groups of phonemes that combined to form prolonged echoes of words of special import—hidden motivic theme-words embedded in poetic texts. Jean Starobinski, in unearthing these unfinished theories, enters into conversation with Saussure’s notes and addresses some unanswered questions of the origin or function of the anagram-forming process. Applying a Claude Lévi-Strauss phrase, “phonic tinkering”, he aligns Saussure’s process with a poet’s, and describes the poem in general as an emanation—an “act of words” [fait de parole] which “appears as the superfluous luxury of the hypogram” (the hypogram being the semantic nucleus of a poem, whether a title or motivic theme-word). One of the key conclusions Starobinski comes to is that “the words of a work are rooted in other, antecedent words, and that they are not directly chosen by the formative consciousness.” In other words, the poetic process, however procedural, is largely unconscious—words are written one by one, yet patterns of words upon words form subliminally. Starobinski continues: “To the question What lies beneath the line? the answer is not the creative subject but the inductive word. Not that Ferdinand de Saussure goes so far as to erase the role of artistic subjectivity, but it does seem to him that this subjectivity can produce its text only by passage through a pre-text”.

29 Weinfeld, “‘Thinking out afresh the whole poetic problem’”, 21.
31 Jean Starobinski, Words Upon Words, 121.
or

As Julia Kristeva has written: “every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it”. Kristeva argues that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of inter-textuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double”.

aussi

Saussure and Starobinski’s theory of anagrams need not only be applied to Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*. Derrida focuses on the expansive use of the word “or” throughout Mallarmé’s oeuvre as an example of his punning chains (“or” is just one of many words employed in this manner). As suggested previously, “or” isn’t stable as a word. It’s a noun (“gold”), an adjective (“golden”), and a conjunction (“now”), and its English homonym “or” is a conjunction that links alternatives, giving the “otherwise” equal billing. Mallarmé utilises the sound and meaning of “or”, not just as a word on its own, but within words, and amongst many other similar concatenations, to redouble semantic indecision and scatter meaning: “no identity is stable enough, of itself, to give rise to relationships of the whole and the part, of cause and effect”. Derrida then shows how, in a single line from Mallarmé’s *Les mots anglais*, we can gain a taste for how the word or and its multiplicity might concatenate across an oeuvre: “une eclipse, ...

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33 Saussure’s anagrams are a ghostly kind of intertextuality, a term associated with poststructural theorists that refers to more than just the “influences” of writers on each other. Julia Kristeva coined this semiotic notion, proposing that language has powers which not only exceed individual control but also determine subjectivity. Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 37. Roland Barthes had similar ideas when he wrote: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the AuthorGod) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (in Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath [London: Fontana, 1977], 146).

or, telle est l'heure”, which translates as “an eclipse, now, such is the hour”. The other meanings of gold, goldenness, money, seasonality, midnight, time, epoch, are all at once there. In this golden light, the fragmentation that is so indicative of modern poetry under the modern subject might be seen as refractions of the word that Mallarmé has “by disintegration, liberated”. And so, if we now apply to Mallarmé’s line an extreme translation (a mistranslation at the level of letter and word, swerving as one may) using an Australian vernacular, we can get: “An eclipse! Gold! Such is life!” Or, homophonically: “You kleptos, tell a lie”.

aussi

So what is mistranslation? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to mistranslate is to translate (something) incorrectly: “passages from the Bible were either mistranslated or taken out of context”.

or

“Take a poem, or part of a poem, in a foreign language and translate it word for word according to what it sounds like in English … Try this with a language you know and then with one you don’t know. Don’t use a dictionary, just rely on what your ears hear and go from there … Use slang and other nonstandard English words. Let the syntax take care of itself.”

aussi

Mistranslation in poetry, according to many experimenting or procedural poets—as in Charles Bernstein’s instructions above for a homophonic translation—is a means to an end, a constraint-based, generative practice, whereby a poet “translates” another poem (usually from a foreign language) into something newly mistaken. Transposition from


Oxford English Dictionary.

one mode to another, as a practice/praxis, shortcircuits control, bringing chance to the fore—the poet is at the whim of words and their swervings. To double-up (or double-down) on Walter Benjamin’s “Translation is a mode”, let’s think of mistranslation—predicated on ceding the initiative to a pre-text—as a mood “in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation”.38

aussi


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humpty Dumpty</td>
<td>Un petit d’un petit</td>
<td>A little one of a little one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat on a wall.</td>
<td>S’étonne aux Halles</td>
<td>Was surprised at the Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humpty Dumpty</td>
<td>Un petit d’un petit</td>
<td>A little one of a little one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a great fall.</td>
<td>Ah! degrés te fallent</td>
<td>Oh, degrees fail you!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the king’s horses</td>
<td>Indolent qui ne sort cesse</td>
<td>Lazy is he who leaves stops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And all the king’s men</td>
<td>Indolent qui ne se mène</td>
<td>Lazy is he who is not led</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t put Humpty</td>
<td>Qu’importe un petit</td>
<td>Who cares about a little one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Together again.</td>
<td>Tout gai de Reguennes.</td>
<td>All happy with Reguennes39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

or

One of the classic *avant-garde* contemporary examples of homophonic translation is the Zukofskys’ *Catullus* (1969), in which Celia and Louis Zukofsky take a visceral approach to the material surface of the original Latin of Catullus’ poetry—it’s shape, sound, and rhythm—and translate it into English by trying “to breathe / the ‘literal’ meaning with


him” (note the quotations around “literal”, as if to redefine it). They dismantle the concept of transparent literalism (the dominant mode of most translations) and at the same time redefine semantic correspondence. In poem #22, Catullus ridicules a fellow poet for insisting on new papyrus for his prolific but poor verse, instead of using the cheaper palimpsest:

\[
\text{idemque longe plurimos facit uersus.} \\
\text{puto esse ego illi milia aut decem aut plura} \\
\text{perscripta, nec sic ut fit in palimpsesto} \\
\text{relata: cartae regiae, noui libri,} \\
\text{noui umbilici, lora rubra membranae,} \\
\text{derecta plumbo et pumice omnia aequata.}
\]

The Zukovskys translate this like so:

\[
\text{his damn cue’s long reams of preoccupied verses.} \\
\text{Put his goal at ten thousand, some decked out plural.} \\
\text{Poor script, eh? not so it fit incest in palimpsest—} \\
\text{reallot: quires, regal eye, new cylinders,} \\
\text{new little umbiliform roll ends, rubric lore, thongs,} \\
\text{membranes ruled plumb o (my) all equated with pumice.}
\]

Josef Horáček describes the Zukofskys’ approach: “Syntax breaks up considerably, with phrases sliding from one to the next without precise boundaries; certain words could be read variably as part of two adjoining phrases. Vocabulary now oscillates freely from archaic to mundane to bawdy: the distinctions among different levels of diction are

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43 Zukofsky and Zukofsky, trans., *Catullus*, not paginated.
effectively erased. Semantic correspondence is fully subordinated to homophony but not in the least ignored.”

or

Mistranslation can be seen as any of these: “word writing”, palimpsest, a doubling, a mirroring, a homage, a parody, high jinks, a remix of a classic score, or a combination of these. There is always a trace of the original, however far a mistranslation departs, so it could also be seen as a ghosting or a haunting—as in, the haunting of a location. Whatever the preferred method, whether loose or “pedantic”, this “witty translation game” requires alternative ways of reading, and other interpretive approaches.

aussi

“Mallarmé does not belong completely to French literature”, writes Derrida. His “or-play” is “a brilliant demonstration of a recourse to the homonym, to what Aristotle denounced as bad poetry, as an instrument of rhetoric for sophists”. Having “broken with the protocols of rhetoric”, his poetry “escapes the control of [muted classical and philosophical] representation … demonstrates in practice its nonpertinence”, and makes him at once a sophist and an outlaw of Plato.

A cast out. Which could be one reason why Un Coup de dés has spawned a number of mirror images, or mistranslations, in the Antipodes—it resonates with Australian sensibilities of the outsider or the reject. Former prime minister Paul Keating was

44 Horáček, “Pedantry and Play”, 114.


46 Horáček, “Pedantry and Play: The Zukofsky Catullus”, 108.

accused in 1994 of calling Australia “the arse end of the world”\textsuperscript{48} proving how this hard-done-by outsider sensibility is a national preoccupation. In saying so, Keating also perpetuated, however obliquely, the idea of Atlantis that Plato perpetuated—that this huge island continent was located somewhere on the opposite, underside of the world (\textit{antipodes}, originally from Greek, means “having the feet opposite”, which chimes neatly with mistranslation's tendency to undermine the foot of a poem). Taking place at the bottom of a shipwreck, \textit{Un Coup de dés} resonates because of its preoccupation with the impossibility of understanding existence, so to speak.

\textit{or}

\textit{Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato}: “The constellation is changed, the disposition is the same” / “The same minds under different stars”.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato} is also, oddly enough, the motto of the University of Sydney.
At the end of the nineteenth century, Mallarmé’s poetics haunted the work of the young Australian poet Christopher Brennan, whose formal variations of the Symboliste style have since defined his oeuvre.\(^5\) The work of Brennan’s that is often overlooked, however, or thought of as an anomaly, is his handwritten Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope & Pocket Musicopoematographoscope, a large facsimile of two poems that mimic the appearance of Mallarmé’s Un Coup de dés, that were composed in the same year, 1897, but that weren’t formally published for nearly 50 years after his death (1981). The central poem in it, “Musicopoematographoscope”, spaced across the page like Un Coup de dés, but not utilising the gutter and double-page spread as syntactic Abyss, is clearly Brennan’s response to some indifferent reviews of his more formal work. John Tranter, in his 1982 review of Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope & Pocket Musicopoematographoscope recounts Brennan’s stab at his reviewers and condemns it: “The main burden of its complaint can be traced by following through the poem the words in large capitals: ‘I don’t give a tinker’s damn for the public and they return the compliment’.”\(^5\)

In large capital letters, this title phrase echoes the style of the embedded and elongated title of UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N’ABOLIRA LE HASARD, fragmented across a number of

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50 Poems 1913, for instance, is a transplantation of and homage to the more formal Symboliste aesthetics; it is an oeuvre that came to haunt Australian poetry: Brennan was the start of a chain of poets, including Judith Wright, John Shaw Nielsen, Gwen Harwood, A. D. Hope, James McAuley, and Kenneth Slessor, among others, who refracted a European-influenced literary modernism through the first half of Australia’s twentieth century. In the latter half of the century, the significance of these poets and their heritage came to be taught and studied first, and predominantly, at the University of Sydney. From the early 1990s until 2012, the University of Sydney dedicated an entire Honours English unit to the influence of French Symbolism on Australian poets.

pages, but not its Idea. Not necessarily aiming to “translate” Mallarmé’s “and/or” poetics, Brennan rather self-consciously sticks to the letter of the “law of correspondences”, the slightly simpler idea that poetry be an evocative network of symbolic associations:

O that I grant you // being / existent / undeniable / irreducible // in all heaviness / immovable / without wings / a brick  

or he flat-out critiques his critics:

THEY // Bentley’s bungler’s / from the leather & duft / I long ago renounced / hither rush / hawklike / their claws / & dirty their noses

Occasionally, “Musicopoematoraphoscope” toys with, or rather breaks the toy of, Mallarmé’s “and/or” poetics. And this is where his poem becomes exciting. On the title poster page (fig. 3), Brennan mocks Mallarmé with a punning Australian vernacular, using words like “Maisong”, “Paree”, and “Malahrrmay”. Here, Brennan also mocks himself and his imitative, parodic translation—his poetic dalliance, or liaison, with the French—bringing to mind Judith Butler’s writings on drag: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.” If we think of translation as drag—of the poet pretending to be another, of how a translation is ostensibly one language system imitating another—it reveals the imitative structure of language itself, and by extension its ability to queer.


55 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137.
Are these instances of homophony a transnational echo or a wild colonial (mis)appropriation? Kate Fagan, in an essay on Chris Edwards (whose misappropriation of Mallarmé will be discussed next), describes Brennan’s poem’s “maverick flamboyance … its feral nature” as effecting “a kind of satirical distance from anxious Anglo-colonial readings that might relegate Australian literature to a second rung after transplanted European models”, and as suggestive of “a deeper unease about the legitimacy of antipodean takes on cultural internationalism”, citing John Hawke’s *Australian Literature and the Symbolist Movement*, and placing Brennan at the avant-garde of this lineage:

Hawke has argued persuasively that in the late nineteenth century “there was a stronger interest in Mallarmé’s poetic philosophy in Australia than virtually anywhere else in the English-speaking world”. Brennan’s surrealist description of
Mallarmé as a “Hieratico-byzantaegytic-Obscurantist” hints at a specialised reading of Mallarmé’s centrality to the emergence of poetic Symbolism, while its maverick flamboyance—or perhaps its feral nature—suggests a deeper unease about the legitimacy of antipodean takes on cultural internationalism. There is a finely nuanced critique to unwrap here about late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Australia on the cusp of modernism, and the larger-than-life or monstrous artistic objects generated over subsequent decades by that tension—including for example the poems of Ern Malley, and more perversely, the Jindyworobak Movement. For now, I simply want to propose that “innovation” in non-Indigenous Australian poetry is marked historically by strong international identifications and sporadic refusals, and to observe that the twentieth century manifestations of these dialogues are strikingly evident in the avant-garde (or post-avant-garde) alignments of Chris Edwards’ poetry.56

Stephanie Guest, citing Walter Benjamin, describes Brennan’s poem as both an “abundant flowering” of Mallarmé’s eternal yet “ever elusive text”, as well as an “abundant de-flowering”.57 Illicit, it is at once a version and an inversion (a “sporadic refusal”). One could say it’s also about aversion, as diversion. Its deviation, or deviance, also recalls the atomic law of the clinamen.58

Brennan’s phrase on the title page, “freer use of counterpoint”, is indicative of the swerve his poem takes from the original. It speaks to the interplay of the two texts and parodies Mallarmé’s “musical score”. Moreover, its multiple inferences reveal the underlying conceit and erotics at play: “counterpoint” comes from medieval Latin contrapunctum, which is a melody pricked or marked over the original melody. From punctum we obviously get “to prick”, pricksongs too (music written, or noted, with dots or points), and we don’t need to go much further. Ears are pricked to all the counterpricking going on.


57 Stephanie Guest, "Nothing's Lost: Towards a Poetics of Transnational Unoriginality in Australian Poetry" (Honours thesis, Department of English, University of Sydney, 2013): 58.

58 Rasula and McCaffery, Imagining Language, 532.
Another notable moment of linguistic intercourse comes in Brennan’s final line:

Fig. 4: Christopher Brennan, final line of “Musicopoemographoscope”, Hale & Iremonger, 1981.

On the page, the word “does” appears just above “has” and acts as an alternative way to read the line, allows for other meaning: “does” appears as a half-pun on Mallarmé’s “Dés”, and the English translation “dice”, and speaks to the illicit dice-play involved between a poet, and their chancy, risky business with “them”, their readers and critics. It says everything about Brennan’s grievances in one allusive/illusive line, whether he was aware of this skewed homophone at the time or not.

While Brennan’s tract may seem unnecessarily churlish in parts, I’d argue that there’s a nascent “and/or” poetics—an early or-play—at work here in Australian poetry. There is certainly a hint of larrikinism, a deliberate maverick contrariness and queerness, evident in Brennan’s process. We have to remember that Brennan was very quick to pen his parody of Mallarmé; it was penned the same year, 1897, that Un Coup de dés appeared in Cosmopolis. Despite his own and ongoing Mallarméan project (that of introducing Australian poetry at large to the more traditional forms and imagery of French Symboliste poetry), by simultaneously and urgently rolling the dice on “Musicopoemographoscope”—his spoof poem that upends the very same Symboliste vogue—Brennan ended up presenting two different options for Australian poetry just as Federation loomed in 1901, the year that established Australia officially as part of the Commonwealth and a “successful” colonialist state. The former option, an arguably more colonial poetics, was adopted almost ubiquitously in twentieth-century Australian poetics, while the latter and alternative (and far more playfully experimental and subversive) is only more recently being explored.
Now, over a hundred years hence, Chris Edwards and John Tranter have both written homophonic mistranslations of Mallarmé’s Un Coup de dés. Both were published in Jacket in 2006. Edwards came first and encouraged Tranter, according to Tranter writing about Tranter in the third person, to also finish and publish his mistranslation as a “friendly rival”. The next two subchapters will compare these two homophonic bedfellows and their “anti-versions” of Un Coup de dés.

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IV

Collage poet Chris Edwards, who knows all-too-well the connotations of that descriptor (the French verb *coller* means “to paste, stick, glue”, while *collage* is French slang for an illicit sexual union60), took to *Un Coup de dés* with a “willy-nilly … mish-mash of approaches” (note the self-consciously silly and phallic double entendre). Or, more technically, he mistranslated it with “a variety of transformational logics”, including homophony, paranomasia, litotes, malapropism, mimicry, metonymy, and translation. Yet he sticks to many of Mallarmé’s poetic principles:

At the heart of things, at the heart of the poem, at the heart of the Idea with its double proposition, is division, according to Mallarmé: the gap, the fold, or, more famously, the Abyss … The unit of composition in *Un Coup de dés* is not the line or even the page, but the double-page spread, and the Abyss is physically embodied in the fold or gutter dead centre. It’s a place the eye can’t quite see into, full of stapling, stitching and gluing.61

aussi

Maintaining the visual form of Mallarmé’s poem, Edwards’ “A Fluke” is a clever and ludic mimicry that parodies Mallarmé’s notion of pure literature at the same time as achieving a kind of pure “litter chewer”, rustling and mucking about in the gutter of the double-page spread and in the gulf between itself and *Un Coup de dés*:

Mallarmé’s notorious difficulty, his untranslatability—figured, for example, in the abyss between the English translations I relied on for the sense of his poems and the mutant music I could hear in the French—inspired “A Fluke”, my mistranslation of *Un Coup de dés*, which it only now occurs to me was an attempt at


61 Chris Edwards, “Double Talk”.

27
pure literature, marred perhaps inevitably by its own impure thoughts. (One can only remain philosophical about it.)

Edwards’ mutant music, his slippage from pure to impure, his awareness and adoption of this as a philosophy, reveals the libidinous nature of such a translational project—i.e. his bending the original text over—and thus an abject revelry in the resultant collapsing of signifier and signified. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject refers to the human reaction (such as horror, spasms, nausea) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object, between self and other. A corpse (traumatically reminding us of our own materiality) is a prime example for what causes such a reaction; other things, however, can draw the same reaction: blood, shit, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk.

Incidentally—or just dentally—Derrida compares Mallarmé’s method of writing, and the form it took, to the careful cutting up and reallocating of body parts: “Mallarmé knew that his ‘operation’ on the word was also the dissection of a corpse; of a decomposable body each part of which could be of use elsewhere”. He then quotes Mallarmé from *Les Mots Anglais*:

> Related to the whole of nature and in this way coming closer to the organism that possesses life, the Word presents itself, in its vowels and its diphthongs, like a piece of flesh, and, in its consonants, like a skeletal structure difficult to dissect.

And this might be how Edwards sees the poem, as a body to dissect into its many parts, but also as an abject provocation.

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65 Derrida, “Mallarmé”, 117.
Kristeva’s notion of the “abject” is in direct contrast to Lacan’s “object of desire”, his “objet petit a”. The objet petit a allows a subject to coordinate his or her desires, maintaining the symbolic order of meaning and intersubjectivity, whereas the abject “is radically excluded” and, as Kristeva writes, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses”. Our reaction to such abject material re-charges what is essentially a pre-lingual response in us: “as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live”. Edwards lifts the already dismembered body parts of Mallarmé’s poem from the gutters of the past and re-enlivens them, dramatises them in new gutters, for new readers. His blatant gay erotic imagery, his abject subjectivity, is also designed to shock those readers expecting a “straight” translation, perhaps showing them what they have “thrust” aside.

Where the French of Un Coup de dés has:

\[
\begin{align*}
\textit{cette blancheur rigide} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{dérisoire} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{en opposition au ciel} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{trop} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{pour ne pas marquer} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{exigument} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{quiconque} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{prince amer de l’écueil} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{s’en coiffe comme de l’héroïque} \\
\textit{irrésistible mais contenu} \\
\textit{par sa petite raison virile} \hspace{2cm} \\
\textit{en foudre}\textsuperscript{67}
\end{align*}
\]

\textsuperscript{66} Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 2–3.

\textsuperscript{67} Mallarmé, Collected Poems, 136–7.
“A Fluke” reads, in Australian English:

\[ \begin{align*}
&\text{this blank rigidity} \\
&\text{derides} \\
&\text{in opposition to the ceiling} \\
&\text{tramp} \\
&\text{porn-palmer} \\
&\text{exegetical} \\
&\text{cock-up} \\
&\text{prince amid sewage} \\
&\text{your hair-do may well be considered heroic} \\
&\text{oh irresistible make-over} \\
&\text{parsed by rational virility} \\
&\text{fondler}^{68} \\
\end{align*} \]

or

To quote Fagan: “In an exemplary queering of his own text, Edwards performs a drama of progenitorship by robbing ‘A Fluke’ of stable lines while reinstating its ‘sameness’ as a fair copy”.\(^69\) Note the quotation marks around “sameness” because, of course, it’s not a like-for-like French-English translation and rather a corpse brought back to life, a “prince amid sewage”, an “exegetical / cock-up”.

In Edwards’ hands (fingers, or ears), Mallarmé’s full title, \textit{UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N’ABOLIRA LE HASARD}, is broken down, contorted and reassembled into, “A FLUKE? [N]EVER! NOBLE LIAR, BIO-HAZARD”. The brackets around the “N” are to cover both meanings of \textit{jamais} at once: “never” and “ever”, also allowing for an echo of the “Never Never”, that Australian settler version of the Abyss or void—the outback. Edwards explains his choice of title as “the remains of a quarrel ... it reminded me of the quarrel 


that broke out in me between various possible mistranslations at every turn of phrase.”70 The third wheel to this quarrel is Plato, his “old quarrel” between poetry and philosophy, and his “noble lie”71

Edwards’ “fluke”, an unexpected piece of good luck, speaks to Mallarmé’s prismatic subdivisions of the Idea (that a throw of the dice will never abolish chance), the “noble liar” to Edwards’ misreadings, and “bio-hazard” of his misrenderings. As in Mallarmé, all of Edwards’ fragments that fall around the title to form the poem are deduced from the flukes laid out in the title. A “fluke”, incidentally, can also be a parasite, a flat fish, the triangular bits on an anchor, and anything resembling that shape, like barbs on a harpoon or the tail of a whale.

These connecting flukes are Mallarméan chains, but Edwards isn’t creating knock-off, fake jewellery made of flukes (however much Mallarme’s La Dernière Mode might have something to say about the connection between fashion and poetry). Edwards’ chains are the stuff of chaos.

aussi

According to Edwards, in writing “A Fluke” he was guided mainly by what he calls in his “homophonically (mis)translated” preface, “the latent conductor unreasoning verisimilitude imposes on the text” (in Mallarmé’s preface it’s a fil conducteur, meaning “guiding thread”),72 which alludes to (presciently, in Mallarmé’s case) the strange attractors of string theory/chaos theory. Strange attractors make an interesting theory for mistranslation, as Edwards writes:

An attractor is the state into which a system will eventually settle. The black holes around which galaxies cluster are examples of attractors; cultural attractors

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70 Edwards, “Double Talk”.

71 A fourth wheel might be William Butler Yeats: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (in Yeats, Mythologies [London: Macmillan, 1924], 331).

include chiefs, tribes, states and anything that gives us identity, like religion, class and world view. Strange attractors are a special class. They live in phase space, a multidimensional imaginary space in which numbers can be turned into pictures. Fractal objects, they consist of infinite numbers of curves, surfaces or manifolds, and as their name suggests, they draw things toward them.\textsuperscript{73}

![Image](image.png)

\textbf{Fig. 5: Paul Bourke, ”The Lorenz Attractor in 3D”, 1997}

So, here, mistranslation is a gathering together of multiple swerving objects, objects that become interchangeable (by dint of their correlations and correspondences), which brings to my mind (strangely) George Bataille’s \textit{Story of the Eye}, an erotic novel that is “really the story of an object”, a composition that “should be called a ‘poem’”, as per Roland Barthes. The initial object of attraction in the narrative is the Eye, but then other globular objects become variously and erotically interchangeable, in both form and content: an egg (in French, egg is \textit{oeuf} and eye is \textit{oeil}), disc-shaped objects like a saucer of milk, then testicles. A secondary metaphorical chain concatenates from these, \textsuperscript{73} Edwards, “Double Talk".
“made up of all the avatars of liquid: tears, milk in the cat’s saucer-eye, the yolk of a soft-boiled egg, sperm and urine”. At the climax of this erotic tale even the sun comes to stand in for the Eye as a “urinary liquefaction of the sky”, drawing together the eye-egg-testicle metaphor. Accumulated image-associations form an epic “cataract”, in both senses of the word:

by virtue of their metonymic freedom they endlessly exchange meanings and usages in such a way that breaking eggs in a bath tub, swallowing or peeling eggs (soft-boiled), cutting up or putting out an eye or using one in sex play, associating a saucer of milk with a cunt or a beam of light with a jet of urine, biting the bull’s testicle like an egg or inserting it in the body—all these associations are at the same time identical and other. For the metaphor that varies them exhibits a controlled difference between them that the metonymy that interchanges them immediately sets about demolishing. The world becomes blurred; properties are no longer separate; spilling, sobbing, urinating, ejaculating form a wavy meaning, and the whole of Story of the Eye signifies in the manner of a vibration …

I hope this goes some way to explaining how a homophonic translation, or simply a poem, can work as a system of attraction, of wavering objects—where the poem is not an object but many similar objects oscillating; where these word-images, these image-associations, become interchangeable—a poem in which any one of these objects could equal another. Object = desire = fetish = dream. A similar compositional approach occurs (in terms of the imagery used) in Bataille’s “Solar Anus” (which Edwards quotes from in his epigraph), but let’s look back to the flukes of “A Fluke”, in which Edwards’ word-images vibrate alongside and askew from Mallarmé’s. Here’s a double-page spread (reduced in size) of these fractal objects (imagine the gutter down the middle):

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75 Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye", 125.
EXCEPTÉ
à l’altitude
PEUT-ÊTRE
aussi loin qu’un endroit

fusioone avec au delà
hors l’intérêt
quant à lui signalé
en général
selon telle obliquité par telle déclivité
de feux

vers
ce doit être
le Septentrion aussi Nord

UNE CONSTITUTIONAL
fraude d’oubli et de désuétude
pas tant
qu’elle n’énumère
sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure
le heart successif
sideralement
d’un compte total en formation

veillant
doutant
roulant
brilliant et méditant

vant de s’arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

Toute Pensée émet Un Coup de dés

EXCEPT
for the attitude
MAYBE
his aussie loins proved quaintly adroit

once fused with the wrecked and disorderly
whore of the internet’s
counted signal
engendering
saloon tales obliquities and declivities
on fire

versus
say deadhead
less petrol oh Signor

UNCONSTITUTIONAL
fraudulent doubler of desuetude
part ant
querel of the numerous
sucker of clogged surfaces vacant and superior
each hurt succeeding
in mentioning sideways
the constantly totalled formation

veiled
doubting
roly-poly
brillianted emetic

I want to see Rita
of the collapsible derrière oh sacred

toupéed one my little mate I guess you’ll want the code word eh? 76

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We can read and misread many notions in Edwards’ flukes here, but I want to concentrate on some of the more Australian nuggets in the language for a moment:

EXCEPTÉ
à l’altitude
PEUT-ÊTRE
aussi loin qu’un endroit
fusionne avec au delà

EXCEPT
for the attitude
MAYBE
his aussie loins proved quaintly adroit
once fused with the wrecked and disorderly

Edwards uses the more colloquial “maybe” instead of “perhaps”, turns altitude into “attitude” and aussi loin into “aussie loins”. Now, considering the literary meaning for loins (the region of the sexual organs regarded as the source of erotic or procreative power), we can read into this as saying that, besides the attitude (Mallarmé’s hifalutiness), his literature (his sexual organ) hangs, much like the shape of the poetry on the page, a little to the right, as the Australian saying goes, and it was only right (as in, adroit, not politically to the right) once it had fused with the “errors and wrecks” caused by its intertextual relations with Edwards.

Further down the page, zooming in on the lines: “veiled / doubting / roly-poly / brillianted emetic // I want to see Rita of the collapsible derrière oh sacred”; Rita, here, and her strangely attractive derrière (perhaps a half-pun on Derrida), in causing this shiny vomit of a poem to emit from Edwards, surely come to represent the promiscuity of the pun and its ability to collapse the sign and the signified … no?

To end the poem, Edwards mistranslates Toute Pensée émet Un Coup de dés (“All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice”) into “toupéed one my little mate I guess you’ll want the code word eh?” Where Mallarmé rounds out his poem almost neatly with his openly enigmatic and existential poetic statement (on how each thought emits a ripple into the universe, affecting the course of history, perhaps), Edwards plays the parodist by presuming that the reader will want to find the code word in the final line of the poem, as if with a code word they might be able to solve the poem, as many have tried to with Un Coup de dés. It’s a sly comment on how gnomic Mallarmé is (and how gnomic
poetry can come to seem to readers who seek singular or straight meanings in poetry and, by extension, in their being in the world). Edwards' conclusion is also a bizarrely prescient comment on the future gnomic leader of the free world, that “toupéed one” who may want the code word for nuclear weapons some time soon. After all, Australia’s “little mate”, when it comes to political and military ties (and, dare I say, expediency), is often the President of the United States of America.

I thought to suggest that Chris Edwards is like Casper, the friendly ghost, with a gentle abjection borne out of Bataille. But, considering his view that writing poetry is “play space-time”,77 I’m beginning to think that Edwards’ all-seeing Eye and disembodied voice are those of the Transformer, Unicron (quite literally a “Solar Anus”)—a robot who can transform into a planet in the shape of a massive eye that can see into the Abyss of space, and who, with a quietly deep, futuristic voice, attracts space junk and other gutter-dwellers, other abysmal life (textually speaking) toward him—“a god of chaos who devours realities”78 ...

77 Edwards, “Interview with Chris Edwards” (my emphasis).
Fig. 7. profkilljoy7z, “Unicron Eats the Death Star”, Deviant Art, 2012.\textsuperscript{79}

or

... is he a unicorn?

or

Perhaps Edwards is taking a leaf (toking a life / talking a loaf / teaking a loft) from (with) James Joyce who, in his Cyclops episode of \textit{Ulysses}, parodied through much rude punning the Apostles’ Creed (statement of Christian belief dating from the fourth century; ostensibly drafted by the twelve apostles of Jesus):

They believe in rod, the scourger almighty, creator of hell upon earth and in Jacky Tar, the son of a gun, who was conceived of unholy boast, born of the fighting navy,

\textsuperscript{79} See also: “Unicron transforming”, Youtube, to hear his voice, see him transform and attract objects and others toward him: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG4GaPcLgOs.
suffered under rump and dozen, was scarified, flayed and curried, yelled like bloody hell, the third day he arose again from the bed, steered into haven, sitteth on his beamend till further orders whence he shall come to drudge for a living and be paid.80

aussi

etre un autre // Esprit // pour le jeter

as at the neither either // nor or // of the Spirit self-jettisoned

Edwards plays cleverly on a reader’s proclivity to read sexual puns (and often of a queer bent) into the text. His deliberate paranomastic tactics of lapsus and misreading mean that words he has not mistranslated can just as easily be misread by the reader. Take the above fragment. To have the vagueness of “the Spirit” (not to mention the self) jettisoned is often Edwards’ prerogative in his poems, but his queer and deliberate inappropriation of the high-minded language of Mallarmé, his sexualising of its content, his use of litotes (to downplay his intentions but emphasise play with another)—allowed this reader to see “Spirit self-jettisoned” as “Spirt self-jettisoned”.

or

Maybe the last word on Edwards’ mistranslation is the first word, as in Edwards’ epigraph, from Bataille’s “Solar Anus”: “It is clear that the world is purely parodic—in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.”81


John Tranter’s “Desmond’s Coupé” is an anti-tract in the spirit of Brennan’s “Musicopoematographoscope” (whose own anger he criticised, ironically) only the spirit is purple, far more rimbaldien in Tranter’s take-down of the comparably goody two-shoes Mallarmé. Regarding the development of Tranter’s poetics, Fagan and Minter have argued that:

By 1968 Tranter was navigating a chiasmic cultural parallax, attracted to both American metapoetic and post-Romantic French Symbolism. This contest defines the direction of his first three books—the final “crisis” of which is played out in The Alphabet Murders. Tranter’s solution to history was an inverted, Orientalising dialectic, and its synthesis was in the seminal figure of Arthur Rimbaud.

I would argue that Tranter is still navigating the same chiasmic cultural parallax but with extra parody. In his late work, including Starlight and Heart Starter, Tranter responds incessantly to canonised poems with constraint-based versions and anti-versions of his own, “an ambiguously postcolonial strategy” to simultaneously uphold and upend European and American modern poetic traditions. Starlight in particular contains various recapitulations and decapitations of poems by Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Ashbery, Eliot, and Mallarmé, including “Desmond’s Coupé”. A self-reflexive and abject tirade toward the poetic urge to highfalutin-ness, Tranter’s inversion of Un Coup de dés is an uncomplicatedly left-justified, jokey dream narrative that undercuts Mallarmé’s inability to make a narrative decision. Its punctuated Ashberyesque or

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82 Standard French adjectival form of Rimbaud; the English being “Rimbaldian”.


Surrealist flow of ideas, speechiness and sound-association allows for the geriatric Desmond to stumble about and actually encounter other life forms (unlike the Master in *Un Coup de dés*), and for the speaker(s) of the poem to attack the conceits of Mallarmé’s notion of the “pure work” (*oeuvre pure*). Despite its distance in form and syntax from Edwards’ version, the poem’s generative technique was the same for Tranter: it’s largely a homophonic mistranslation utilising the same transformational, paranomastic techniques.

If we look for the full mistranslation of Mallarmé’s title *UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N’ABOLIRA LE HASARD*, embedded in the stanzas of Tranter’s poem, we get (in non-capsitals): “Desmond’s coupé is full of jam but that won’t abolish folly in Hansard”\(^{85}\), which seems a deliberate nod to Edwards’ “noble lie”, and to any truth that an authority, political or otherwise, might pretend to wield—Hansard being the name for the verbatim transcripts of Parliamentary Debates in most Commonwealth countries.\(^{86}\)

“Desmond’s Coupé” is a “disrespectful pie”, as Tranter states in his University of Wollongong doctoral thesis, “in the face” of not only Mallarmé, but of literary decorum and tradition, too.\(^{87}\) Writing in the third person, ironically, and possibly as a parody of the split subject, he quotes himself describing his own mistranslation of *Un Coup de dés*:

> dealing with the work of an important poet like Mallarmé takes us into the realm of the “anxiety of influence”, as Harold Bloom labelled it: the need to learn from past masters without being overwhelmed by their mastery, and the need for any

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\(^{86}\) The word Hansard also arguably dates back to the records of the Hanseatic League, for Baltic trade.

\(^{87}\) Tranter’s doctoral thesis, “Distant Voices”, contains a creative component called *Vocoder*—a collection of poems that make up the first three-quarters of his subsequently published collection *Starlight*—plus an exegetical component in which Tranter provides notes to all the poems in *Vocoder*, historical notes to all his published books of poetry, and an essay about dream-work and how his three main poetic influences (Rimbaud, John Ashbery and the hoax poet Ern Malley) have come to bear on his poetics. The exegesis is a fascinating self-portrait (Tranter writes in the third person about his work) and would be worth studying purely for the psychoanalytical aspects of how an author sees, or cannot see, certain aspects of his/her own work.
artist to clear the undergrowth of history to make room for her or his own new
work. That uneasy mixture of respect and aggression colours my poem.88

But does Tranter suppose that his methods for dealing with his influences are entirely
conscious and intentional? If so, he perhaps misunderstands Bloom who insists on the
salience of misrecognition: in one of his seven ratios of misreading, he explains that any
writer taking on the burden of tradition enacts an unconscious “swerving” or
“misprision” so as to make it new and avoid the accumulating anxiety of past excellence.
The “swerving” is the law of the clinamen here, again, but take “misprision” too, which
Bloom adopts/adapts from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 87”, an erotic poem that he rather
reads as an allegory of any writer’s relation to tradition: “‘Misprision’ for Shakespeare,
as opposed to ‘mistaking’, implied not only a misunderstanding or misreading but
tended also to be a punning word-play suggesting unjust imprisonment.”89

While Bloom unfortunately overlooks (and elsewhere downplays) the erotic and its role
in the affairs of influence (see my previous analysis on the “promiscuity of the pun” in
Edwards), perhaps he has unconsciously lifted the idea of the linguistic swerve from a
forebear of his own. In The Burden of the Past on the English Poet, W. Jackson Bate opens
by quoting Samuel Johnson on the topic: “It is, indeed, always dangerous to be placed in
a state of unavoidable comparison with excellence”, and then unpacks the “original,
rather ominous sense” of the word “dangerous”: “it means ‘having lost one’s freedom,
having become ‘dominated’ … subjected to the tyranny of something outside one’s own
control … A cognate is our word ‘dungeon’”.90 There’s no mention of Bate’s danger or
dungeon in Bloom, but if he has read Bate, he couldn’t possibly have misread him,—
surely not—taking on some of his ideas and swerving unconsciously from them … No, no
room for misprision in Bloom … But back to Tranter’s prison/prism.

88 Tranter, “Distant Voices”, 118.
89 Harold Bloom, preface to The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, Second Edition (New
York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xiii.
90 W. Jackson Bate, The Burden of the Past and the English Poet (London: Chatto & Windus,
1971), 3.
Tranter’s constant re-negotiation of his literary forebears, his choice to write versions and anti-versions, is his conscious act to avoid said danger. But how language filters through him—as in, playing with poetic techniques that “cede the initiative to words”—is a process that relies on the unconscious. No matter how much he signposts his intentions with notes and witty asides as to his procedures (see his doctoral exegesis), the symbolic Other of language is beyond his control. It’s almost as if Tranter over-explains his homosocial dalliance with his male poetic forerunners to hide the anxiety of misprision taking place. In any event, “Desmond’s Coupé”, as artefact of the poetic process, and as abject experiment, certainly comes out swerving. Mallarmé’s “sauf … que le rencontre ou l’effleure une toque de minuit / et immobilise”, for instance, becomes in Tranter’s misprision (or Desmond’s dungeon): “so far, so good, // where recounting the effluent is the talk of the minute / and it immobilises you”.

While offering a self-consciously aggressive critique of Mallarméan poetics, “Desmond’s Coupé” is also extremely funny and jazzy. Punning on the French du gouffre, Tranter resurrects the clarinet player Jimmy Giuffre and then, in true ventriloquist mode, has him playing guitar, as though he’s a member of Tranter’s own covers band. Mallarmé might be a master of the enigma, but Tranter is a master of prosopopoeia, which is the speech of an imaginary person, or the conjuring of an imaginary other to speak to or through. Dozens of Aussie characters flit through Tranter’s anti-tract, each allowing him to banter with the dead Mallarmé. On top of homophonic mistranslation, Tranter improvises a number of times, not so much with purple prose as with flourishes of word-sound association.

This is how and where Tranter appears and reappears like Disney’s Cheshire Cat, distortedly reiterating and purposefully overdetermining Mallarmé’s fragments of pure


93 Tranter, Starlight, 18.
literature. From the French, *avance retombée d’un mal à dresser le vol / et couvrant les jaillissements / coupant au ras les bonds*, Tranter has, “makes him think he’s dead and buried or makes him realise he’s a bad dresser on a plane or in jail / but you don’t dress for jail / and people don’t wear a jacket on a plane anymore. / Raise the bonds.” Later, Tranter manipulates the French, *le temps / de souffleter / bifurcées // un roc*, into “Time to snaffle / a bifurcated soufflé, / thinks the old bird.”

“Desmond’s Coupé” is rife with these mini car crashes of sound and sally. And at times, Tranter comes across like Australia’s John Ashbery, in terms of being a medium for the vernacular, only Tranter has a more parodic bent, and a more scathing and cynical tone.

![Cheshire Cat](image)

**Fig. 8:** S “Cheshire Cat”, screenshot, *Alice in Wonderland*, Burbank: Walt Disney Studios, 1951.

Tranter’s inversion of *Un Coup de dés* is pure entertainment and pleasure at the expense of Mallarmé. His punning stunts are replete with downplaying Aussie vernacular, abjectivity, and naughty banter. His goofy narrative spoofs Mallarmé’s notion of the “pure work” (*oeuvre pure*), or, as Edwards would say, “gives it the finger.”

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95 Edwards, “A Fluke”, 51.
VI

There are dozens of mistranslated suitors that resonate for both Edwards and Tranter: _ombre_ becomes “hombre”; _enfouie_ becomes “phooey”; _sombre_ becomes “sombrero”; _barbe soumise_ becomes “barbequed sunset” in Edwards and “barbeque or so you surmise” in Tranter.

Interestingly, “_CE SERAIT_” (“it would be”) is translated by both Edwards and Tranter into Pig-Spanish: “_QUE SERA_” for Edwards, and “_que sera, sera_” by Tranter. _Que sera sera_ (“what will be, will be”) is a pseudo-Spanish exclamation used to convey a fatalistic recognition that future events may be out of the speaker’s control (... could _Un Coup de dés_ be a long drawn-out analogy for this sentiment?). The phrase rose to popularity as the title of a pop song from 1956, which both Tranter and Edwards would undoubtedly have been subjected to in their formative years.

or

Who is haunting whom, here?

_aussi_

Reading these four poems side by side—_Un Coup de dés_ and its “veiled inversions at a juncture whose supremacy’s probably // celluloid / oh puerile shadow” (as “A Fluke” describes them)⁹⁶—at some point they begin to merge into each other’s shadows, and superimpose. In the line: “..._and gives it the finger // COMME ÇA_”,⁹⁷ Edwards can be seen as translating Tranter. In the lines: “eating soup and getting vaguer / ... he enters the aisle, bending his knee / like a bat flopping into the sea,”⁹⁸ Tranter could be transmuting

⁹⁸ Tranter, _Starlight_, 17.
Brennan. In the lines: “the fair white page // whose candour / illumes / the mystic signs /// Abracadabra,” Brennan might be commenting on Edwards. And, strangely enough, Mallarmé comes to translate all his Australian mistranslators in the lines: “An insinuation simple / in the silence enrolled with irony / or / the mystery hurled / howled // in some nearby whirlpool of hilarity and horror”, i.e. Australia.

aussi

During the first drafts of this assay, a plagiarism scandal in Australian poetry was creating a whirlpool of hilarity and horror in which Freud was invoked: “Everywhere the signs that a poet has been here before me”. One poet in particular was accused of not citing his theft of other writers’ lines, lines that included the Freud doozy above. His defense was that he was writing centos. In terms of plagiarism, Brennan, Edwards and Tranter’s mistranslations recall pre-eighteenth-century attitudes toward originality, or what was called “creative imitation”, whereby the imitation and strategic revision of prior authors was a kind of “filial rejection with respect”. Moreover, as Northrop Frye jokes in Anatomy of Criticism: “any serious study of literature soon shows that the real difference between the original and the imitative poet is simply that the former is more profoundly imitative”.

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100 Mallarmé, Collected Poems, 134–5.


102 The term plagiarism comes from the Latin plagiarus, which literally means “kidnapper”, and dates back to the first century AD, in the Oxford English Dictionary. The history of plagiarism is a long and complicated one and I don’t intend to rewrite it. In the end, this study of mistranslation is conducted in the spirit of epistemological anarchism: not seeking to find the solution to issues such as plagiarism, but rather playfully misreading those issues so to uncover various absurdities that might generate new critical excursions through aesthetics.

The imitative elements of a homophonic translation seem to allow, or even encourage, a kind of jokey vitriol, an ironic deadpanning in the translator. I tend to think of Brennan, Edwards and Tranter’s inversions as three big jokes. They certainly adhere to Sigmund Freud’s theories on jokes. He wrote of how jokes are an interaction between unconscious drives and conscious thoughts, and he believed that jokes let out forbidden thoughts and feelings that the conscious mind usually suppresses in deference to society.\textsuperscript{104}

\textbf{aussi}

Anne Carson psychoanalyses a crisis in Hölderlin’s translations, which were idiosyncratic, went through years of compulsive revision, “forcing the text from strange to more strange”, and used increasingly violent choices for words as he closed in on his own madness:

Maybe Hölderlin was pretending to be mad the whole time, I don’t know. What fascinates me is to see this catastrophe, at whatever consciousness he chose it, as a method extracted from translation, a method organised by the rage against cliché. After all what else is one’s own language but a gigantic cacophonous cliché.

\textsuperscript{104} Each of the mistranslations analysed in this essay could fit, at various instances, all three of Freud’s categories for jokes:

1) The mimetic joke: which is a process involving two different representations of the body in our mind. For example, in the phrase “Their hearts are in the right place,” the heart has two representations. One is anatomical while the other is metaphorical;  
2) Tendentious jokes: which are jokes that have to contain lust, hostility or both; and  
3) Non-tendentious jokes, where the joke applies “to one and the same act of ideation, two different ideational methods”.

Nothing has not been said before. The templates are set. Adam long ago named all the creatures. Reality is captured.\footnote{Anne Carson, \textit{Nay Rather}, The Cahiers Series #21 (London: Sylph Editions, 2013), 18–20.}

When one approaches the blank white page (as Mallarmé did so warily), its empty surface is already filled with the whole history of writing up to that moment: “it is a compaction of all the clichés of representation” already extant in the writer’s world, in a writer’s head, in the probabilities of what can be done on this surface.\footnote{This paragraph was paraphrased, switching “the painter” to “the writer”, from Carson, \textit{Nay Rather}, 20.}

The act of mistranslating, then—of writing over, through, or under a given text—is also a catastrophising, a method for disrupting or undercutting the originality of the original, but also a way of pointing to the inherent cliché in one’s own language, and in poems of the canon, even knowingly mimetic templates such as \textit{Un Coup de dés}.\footnote{According to Carson (\textit{Nay Rather}, 4), “Cliché is a French borrowing, past participle of the verb cliché, a term from printing meaning ‘to make a stereotype from a relief printing surface’. It has been assumed into English unchanged, partly because using French words makes English-speakers feel more intelligent and partly because the word has imitative origins (it is supposed to mimic the sound of the printer’s die striking the metal) that make it untranslatable”. The word cliché then is onomatopoeic, and a neologism for an untranslatable sound. In a sense, from its journey from action to word, you could call it a homophonetic translation, or a mistranslation.}

\textit{aussi}

Both Mallarmé’s and Derrida’s writings have a particular penchant for mimesis—are self-conscious of it, and employ it. Mallarmé’s prose poem, “Mimique”, beginning with the word “silence” and ending with “reading”, plays on the varying meanings of mime and mimesis so as to demonstrate the inherent repetition and mimicry in writing, thus offering us a way to read his own work. Roger Pearson’s description of the poem makes this clear: it’s “a written text describing a silent mime, a mime (as event) by a mime (Margueritte) who has written a visible (but to the reader of ‘Mimique’ invisible) text … about a performance which is an unwritten page of monologue, itself a silent
monologue in a dialogue with a soul (a reader of a dead wife) who doesn’t speak.”

And if we substitute ‘poet’ or ‘poem’ for ‘mime’ in the previous description, we conjure a definition of Mallarmé the translator of silence.

or

“Mimique” is another example of Mallarmé’s “or-play”. It even contains the word or (“gold”), along with other classic Mallarméan words that create chains of association such as fantôme (“phantom”, “shade”, “shape”), blanc (“white”, “blank”, “space”), hymen (both “membrane” and, archaically, “marriage”), which, along with the poem’s syntactical ambiguities, act out an imitation, not of a referrent or a reality, but of the notion of mimesis itself:

here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, under the false appearance of a present. That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction ... Surprise, accompanying the artifice of a notation of sentiments by unproffered sentences ...

ici devançant, là remémorant, au futur, au passé, sous une apparence fausse de présent. Tel opère le Mime, dont le jeu se borne à une allusion perpétuelle sans briser la glace: il installe, ainsi, un milieu, pur, de fiction ... Surprise, accompagnant l’artifice d’une notation de sentiments par phrases point proférées ...

aussi

In “The Double Session, or Mallarmé’s Miming of Mimesis” (La double séance), Derrida “executes a kind of ‘pas de deux’—both a dance of duplicity and an erasure of binality—

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with the history of a certain interpretation of *mimesis*. What is initially striking about "The Double Session" is the suggestive typographic spacing. It takes Mallarmé’s prose poem “Mimique” and inserts it into an L-shaped quotation from Plato’s *Philebus* (which is concerned with the nature of thinking and art); it has quotations in boxes from *Un Coup de dés* and *Le Livre*; it reproduces Mallarmé’s handwriting at one point; and the pages are often loaded with footnotes. The reader’s attention is clearly being directed to the syntactical function of spacing in the act of reading. Barbara Johnson, Derrida’s translator, writes:

> Through such supplementary syntactical effects, Derrida duplicates and analyses the ways in which Mallarmé’s texts mime their own articulation, include their own blank spaces among their referents, and deploy themselves consistently with one textual fold too many or too few to be accounted for by a reading that would seek only the text’s “message” or “meaning”. By thus making explicit the role of the materiality of space within the act of understanding, Mallarmé—and Derrida—demonstrate the untenability of the logocentric distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, between ideality and materiality.

Derrida argues that mime—and by implication, writing—doesn’t imitate or copy some prior phenomena, idea, or figure, but constitutes the phantasm of the original in and through the mime:

> He represents nothing, imitates nothing, does not have to conform to any prior referent with the aim of achieving adequation or verisimilitude … We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing: faced, so to speak, with the double … that nothing anticipates, nothing at least, that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference … this speculum reflects no reality: it produces mere “reality-effects” … in this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist, since there are mimes and phantoms. But it is a difference without

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110 Barbara Johnson, "Translator’s Introduction" to *Dissemination*, xxvii.

reference, or rather reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh.\textsuperscript{112}

or

The ante-simulacrum, the pre-copy of a copy.

aussi

Throughout “The Double Session” Derrida puns on Plato’s \textit{antre} (“cave”) and Mallarmé’s \textit{entre} (“between”). What he is getting at is a characterisation of the “space of writing”—in which writing is not the revelation of truth but an “event” (“hymen, crime, suicide, spasm”) where “the simulacrum is a [perpetual] transgression”, and where—to continue the sexual metaphor—binaries such as desire and presence, void and fulfillment, become indistinguishable, collapsed, folded over/into one another. The page, the folded tissue or veil of the hymen, is transgressed, but it’s “fiction”: “What takes place is only the \textit{entre} (between), the place, the spacing, which is nothing ...” Endless mirrors, a deadlock of meaning, where “nothing happens”, becoming suspense: “Hymen in perpetual motion: one can’t get out of Mallarmé’s \textit{antre} as one can out of Plato’s cave. Never min(e)d [\textit{mine de rien}]”\textsuperscript{113}

or

Eternal return.

or

In returning to Derrida’s suggestive typography, where “Mimique” is inserted into Plato’s cave full of shadows, and where a play of representation seems endless, one

\textsuperscript{112} Derrida, “The Double Session”, in \textit{Dissemination}, 206.

\textsuperscript{113} In French, \textit{mine de rien} means, in its colloquial sense, “as though it were of no importance”; but literally it can mean “a mine full of nothing” (in Derrida, “The Double Session”, 208–16).
doesn’t have to think of this concept in Nietzschean terms, as if “some day or night a
demon [might] steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as
you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times
more ...’”114 The inability of a text, of literature, of genre, to escape its own terms, and to
escape the play of representation, can be more productive than that. Mallarmé is more
productive than that. And so is Edwards, especially. For instance, is not the gutter to
Mallarmé what the cave is to Plato, just in a new configuration? And is not the gutter to
Edwards—in which the gutter exists literally in the work but also figuratively between
his work and Mallarmé’s—a cave within a cave, a cave outside a cave, and a cave
between a cave, in which a new dimension is breached?

or

Existing entre the antre, Mallarmé’s Un Coup de dés tears the page, while, entre the autre
antre, Edwards’ “A Fluke” tears the shadow of the page. Edwards’ homo-erotic imagery
and metaphors in his doubling over of Mallarmé’s text make “A Fluke” a literal
inversion, meanwhile tearing heterosexual literature a new one, so to speak.

aussi

Derrida’s writings are useful in explaining how a text, how literature, is always meta. In
many of his essays, but particularly in “The Law of Genre” (genre in French also means
“gender”), Derrida shows how language is always structured from its opposite, its other.
Through two important rhetorical tropes, chiasmas (repeated inversion/reversal of
words) and catachresis (taking a metaphor to extremes), he explores the relationship
between citation and récit (re-citation)—or language versus speech—and how such
binaries, when examined extensively, cannot hold up over multiple iterations. He makes
the argument that any category that arises (say, a poem, or a visual poem) seems to
come from within itself, but also from outside. It comes from both outside and inside,
hence Derrida’s imagistic use of invagination and (en)folding.115

114 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, 1887, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage,
1974), 341.

Derrida attempts in *Of Grammatology* (his science of writing) to invert the assumption that writing represents speech. He explains that, in the “play of representation”, we don’t know which is the chicken and which the egg, because if writing is the representor—the mirror—it thereby reflects speech and things, distorting and perverting them. It splits what it represents and offers up a trace, a *différance*, a double, a supplement, a spectre (all key Derridean terms). Writing is

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116 The Klein bottle is an example of a non-orientable surface; it’s a two-dimensional manifold against which a system for determining a normal vector cannot be consistently defined. It’s a one-sided surface which, if traveled upon, could be followed back to the point of origin while flipping the traveller upside down. Another related non-orientable object is the Möbius strip. Whereas a Möbius strip is a surface with boundary, a Klein bottle has no boundary (conversely, a sphere is an orientable surface with no boundary). The Klein bottle was first described in 1882 by German mathematician Felix Klein. Incidentally, it may have originally been named the Kleinsche Fläche (“Klein surface”) but was then misinterpreted as Kleinsche Flasche (“Klein bottle”), which ultimately led to the adoption of its current term. See Francis Bonahon, *Low-Dimensional Geometry: from Euclidean Surfaces to Hyperbolic Knots* (Providence: American Mathematical Society, 2009), 95. For active gif, see: https://plus.maths.org/content/os/issue26/features/mathart/kleinBottleAnim.
A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three.\textsuperscript{117}

\textbf{Fig. 10:} "Timescape" of Chopin's Mazurka Op. 68 No. 3, CHARM: AHRC (2009).\textsuperscript{118}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{timescape.png}
\caption{"Timescape" of Chopin's Mazurka Op. 68 No. 3, CHARM: AHRC (2009).}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{118} This colorful triangle might look like abstract art, but it's actually a visual representation of the similarities between different recordings of the same piece of music. It's a "timescape". The horizontal axis represents time, and the colours show how similar the recording being analysed is to other specific recordings. What is being measured is the relative duration of each note, or the artist’s unique rubato. The image is a timescape for Arthur Rubinstein's 1939 recording Chopin's Mazurka Op. 68 No. 3. See: CHARM: AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music, \url{http://www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/projects/p2_3_2.html}. 
In other words, we can’t escape on any level how writing is a play of representation, how writing is always already illicit play, our “nefarious complicity” with “meaning”. What we think are truths are “in fact” already multi-face(te)d. Our attempts at “meaning” are reductive. What we try to reduce to a singularity is already three-dimensional. Truth in writing is a chimera, yet traces of truth are there—via the “living presence” of speech, as Derrida calls it, through which “the signifier and the signified seem to unite”.\textsuperscript{119} Like the television, or film, or the phone—writing is a technology that reproduces ghosts. Truth is unreproducible > Writing is forever not > Righting feverish naughts > Writhing in forgery knots. Yet in the speech-y nonsense of punning, truth forms.

\textit{aussi}

According to Gelett Burgess, “Nonsense is the fourth dimension of literature”.\textsuperscript{120} This nonsense-mining fourth dimension is where the plays on words of Edwards’ “A Fluke” and Tranter’s “Desmond’s Coupé” begin. Their poems offer “Surprise, accompanying the artifice of a notation” (from “Mimique”, above). They foreground mimesis: we already know when we start to read that the phantasm of the original, the antesi- simulacrum, is Mallarmé’s \textit{Un Coup de dés}. Homophonic translation is like a feedback loop gone loopy, glitchy. Extra mirrors and reflecting pools reflect back distorted or disturbed magnifications—which whirl/whorl us into a fifth dimension, where representation equals \textit{représentation}—more \textit{multi-nefarious} than before—and where “truth” and “meaning” become even more material, become “literal” again, not only space junk but the filaments in space too, whether we choose to see them or not. Some might need a Hubble telescope. It’s the inverse of Mallarmé’s white page. Edwards’ and Tranter’s inversions agitate and blink in black pools of the sky.

\textit{or}

According to Edwards, paraphrasing Robert Duncan, a significant forebear of his:


\textsuperscript{120} Gelett Burgess, \textit{The Burgess Nonsense Book} (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1901).
The poem ... is “multiphasic”, “polyvalent”, space enmeshed in time, duration embedded in place (whether page or auditorium). As its recipients, we experience “the concords and contrasts in chronological sequence, as in a jigsaw puzzle [sic],” but Duncan also asks his readers (and listeners, presumably) to bear in mind “the time of the whole,” in which “each part ... is conceived as a member of every other part, having, as in a mobile, an interchange of roles”.\(^{121}\)

From there/here—with the poem vibrating above the Abyss as mobile, as constellation—it’s up to us where we take our “play space-time”, our imaginations. As Mallarmé puts it, “it is up to the poet, roused by a dare, to translate!”\(^{122}\)

or

Do we need a new definition for translation? Attempting to offer a global classification of translation’s linguistic aspects, Roman Jakobson distinguishes three kinds:

1. intralingual translation, or paraphrase;
2. interlingual translation, or translation in the most common sense;
3. intersemiotic translation, in which, for example, verbal signs are reencoded in nonverbal sign systems.\(^{123}\)

Yet each of these classifications presumes the existence of one language and of one translation in the literal sense, that is, that one language can be seemlessly transferred into another—that, as Derrida puts it, “each linguistic system has integrity”.\(^{124}\)

\(^{121}\) Edwards, “Interview with Chris Edwards”.

\(^{122}\) Mallarmé, "Mimique", 175.


\(^{124}\) Derrida, “Roundtable on Translation”, in The Ear of the Other, 100.
If we’re going to categorise translation, then, we might also turn to Australian poet and critic Peter Porter for how not to cordon things off. In “Saving from the Wreck”, his essay on translation, he plays the school teacher; helpfully laying out seven categories:

1. Uncompromising Scholarly;
2. Aesthetic Scholarly;
3. Recreative Scholarly;
4. Exhuberant Scholarly or Over the Top!;
5. Literal;
6. Imitation; and,
7. Ecumenical Slovenly.\(^\text{125}\)

Of almost all these categories Porter is scathing, in terms of what makes for a “successful” translation and not a shipwreck, exclaiming: “I think we simply have to admit that much of what passes for translation today is just organised dissemination of misinformation.”\(^\text{126}\) While Porter acknowledges overlaps in the types, he only mentions homophonic translation once: “More bewildering is Louis Zukofsky’s aim in translating Catullus of finding English words which are homophones—or nearly so—while still being approximate translations of the Latin”, and lumps this mode into Uncompromising Scholarly.\(^\text{127}\) Of course, it wasn’t simply Louis Zukofsky’s work, but his wife Celia’s too. Porter seems to overlook this gendered fact in much the same way he ignores other forms of translation, while narrowing the parameters of translation to what is sometimes and elsewhere referred to, in terms of a seemless semantic translation, as “transparent literalism”.

Maria Tymoczko writes of the prevalence of this kind of translation, historically: “The history of Western European translation privileges an implicit literalism that has been

\(^\text{125}\) Peter Porter, ”Saving from the Wreck“, in Saving from the Wreck (Nottingham: Trent, 2001), 37–47.

\(^\text{126}\) Porter, “Saving from the Wreck”, 47.

\(^\text{127}\) Porter, “Saving from the Wreck”, 41.
used to disseminate the empires of religion, secular rule, and commerce throughout the last five hundred years.”

Despite Porter’s conservative critique, that falls in line with classical tropes, attempting to uphold the canon rather than recognising alternatives that twentieth and twenty-first century poetics have developed, he manages to concoct (within his categories) a couple of excellent descriptions that could also be applied to a category that I’ve been calling, up until now, “mistranslation”, of which homophonic translation would be one fraction. On damning the process of “Imitation” (another fraction of mistranslation)—of writing versions like those of Robert Lowell, for instance—he writes: “The basic rule seems to be that the translator finds in a finished work of art the bones of one of his own. He is struck by a form of pre-echo”.

What if the aim of a translation is the “dissemination of misinformation”? or to illuminate—or even set fire to—pre-echoes? Homophonic translation is, after all, part-rendering and part-rubbishing of a forebear’s work. And, in any event, writing always already peddles in the symbolic Other that is language, as per Lacan. Results have had to pass through the unconscious. Writing is always already a “translation”—of thought, or of internal monologue. A mistranslation, through its word-play techniques, its use of latent forms of language such as the pun, brings some of the unconscious elements to the surface, makes them “present”, an event. Let’s not forget, here, Mallarmé’s fil conducteur and Edwards’ “the latent conductor unreasoning verisimilitude imposes on the text”. We could add to this Walter Redfern’s “Puns are a latent resource of language”. Disseminated throughout a poem, puns are “unearthed” by the poet during the ludic process of writing; puns “illuminate the nature of language” and make the reader a participant in the unearthing—an event that encourages collaboration. On quoting Roland Barthes and his pleasure over puns, Redfern, ever the archivist, writes:


129 Porter, “Saving from the Wreck”, 45.

Experimental psychologists have shown quantifiably what most people know instinctively and by experience: that it is authoritarian personalities who most dislike ambiguity. Hence the double meaning practised in all forms of underground literature. However, as well as pointing outwards in this way, wordplay always points inwards and refers to the duplicity of language itself. This is clearly dangerous territory. The *quiproquo*, one of the multifarious forms of punning, can extend to a whole situation: a misreading as well as an alternative reading superimposed on reality.\textsuperscript{131}

\textit{or}

“... the unquestionable charm of the incorrect line”.\textsuperscript{132}

\textit{aussi}

Redfern’s description of wordplay doubles as a felicitous description for the methodology behind mistranslation and homophony in poetry. An overly self-conscious psychoanalytic version of this methodology—a *quiproquo* misreading of sorts—can also be found in Freud’s “questionable” re-membering of “Signorelli”, an Italian artist’s name he forgot while on a trip to Europe’s so-called “subaltern”, the Balkans. For Freud, the pun is a psychic release-valve in which humour alleviates the stress of repressing unpleasant truths.

He initially thought the painter’s name was either “Botticelli” or “BoltrafHio”. That he couldn't remember the name, Freud claims, meant that he was suppressing a disturbing memory (a former patient who suicided). Freud's unconscious had also attached to the memory a sexual content, which concealed itself through forgetting the name: “He had formed an unconscious association between the Italian painters and the Bosnians’ valuing of sexual enjoyment over life”.\textsuperscript{133} Yet Freud, as he often does, reassembles his


\textsuperscript{132} Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 201, my translation as opposed to Johnson's.

own “unconscious” processing of language remarkably well, often writing about these instances many years later and explaining the way puns work in his own repressed sexual desires—in this case, for the supposedly “pathological, anal, ‘archaic’; and in need of Oedipalization” Balkan other. He makes a connection between Signorelli and Herzegovina via Signor and Herr, both meaning “Sir”. Trafoi, apparently the location he received news of the suicide, is linked to Boltraffio, while Bosnia was where the conversation took place, and Botticelli, a logical final step:

Yet Freud, in his analysis, also forgot to include the fact that he’d remembered seeing a picture of the painter Signorelli himself, found in the lower left corner of one of the painter’s frescoes. The picture, a kind of signature, was therefore a third substitute to the forgotten name Signorelli. The “signature” can be interpreted as a reference to the Latin verb signare and this word, instead of Freud’s signore, then leads us back to a simple analysis of the Signorelli parapraxis.134 As would Freud’s own name, Sigmund. The Bosnia-Herzegovina associations (Bo and Herr), that Freud himself introduced to bridge the gap between two failures of memory, are no longer necessary. As conscious as Freud is of his mind’s movement through language, there are still slips he can’t keep track of, voids he can’t fill, proving by default his own hypothesis—that the unconscious

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thrives on the unreliably interchangeable structures of language. For Freud, the pun is also a subversive device whose tidiness enhances the illusion of self-mastery. So even when we don’t believe a word he says, at least we can witness the stunning leaps, lapses and lapsus in Freud’s imaginative written accounts.  

aussi

The *quiproquo* wordplay methodology has its echo in Gregory Ulmer’s coinage, the “puncet”. In an anthology called *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, Ulmer illuminates the puncet at play in both Derrida’s and Lacan’s oeuvres, a Mallarméan/malleable use of the pun, shape-shifting across and shaping their ideas. For a couple of *pat* instances that *tap* into this idea I’m trying to teethe/tease out, Lacan interchanges terms such as *dires* (sayings) and *désir* (desire), anagrams of each other, while Derrida champions the punning stunts in *Finnegans Wake* (read ahead for Derrida’s *quiproquo* reading of Joyce via the Tower of Babel myth). At its core, the puncet is a methodology that “allows language to say what it knows, which allows the unconscious to show itself in the play of language”.

or

Another example is evident in Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of *jouissance* (bliss). Generally left untranslated to include the meaning of sexual orgasm, a *jouissance* drives the subject (similar to Freud’s *the death drive*) to repeatedly attempt to transgress the


136 A separate though no less important example of punning that can shape and shift an oeuvre is embodied in one of Marcel Duchamp’s pseudonyms, Rrose Sélavy. The name is a pun on the French phrase *Eros, c’est la vie*, which translates to English as “Eros, that’s life”. Duchamp signed written works with the name, and his cross-dressing alter ego allowed him to collaborate with Man Ray on a series of photographs. The pseudonym appeared in subsequent projects by other artists and writers, including in a collection of aphorisms, puns, and spoonerisms by the poet Robert Desnos.

prohibitions, or err against the law, imposed on his/her enjoyment—to go beyond the pleasure principle. But going beyond is also painful, and akin to Bataille’s erotic philosophy, particularly as he refers to anguish (“when the bounds of the possible are over-reached, a recoil is inevitable”\(^\text{138}\)), and as epitomised, here, in Lacan’s mention (or “di-mention”, an anglo-version of Derrida’s \textit{dit-mension}—another dimension opened up between the lines by “said” punning):

“Who does not know from experience that it is possible not to want to ejaculate? Who does not know from experience knowing the recoil imposed on everyone, in so far as it involves terrible promises, by the approach of \textit{jouissance} as such. Who does not know that one may not wish to think?”\(^\text{139}\)

This last question places \textit{jouissance} outside/beyond the Other (the Other being Lacan’s definition of the unconscious, of language as symbolic structure), as Ulmer writes: “\textit{Jouissance} refers, then, to a fourth sense, the four senses being sense, non-sense, common sense, and \textit{“jouis-sense”}. The fifth sense (\textit{jouis-sens} in French), “carries the insistence of desire in the chain of signifiers, productive of homonyms and puns”\(^\text{140}\). This is the fifth dimension that homophonic translation flirts with, as di-mentioned earlier.

\textit{aussi}

Mallarmé fondles the puncept in his \textit{Crise de vers}, the crisis he also called a “liberation”. He wrote of the “double state of speech” (or the “double state of the word” in most translations) and its place in the “the pure work” / “the book of verse” / “the Book of Books”:

An order innate to the book of verse exists inherently or everywhere, eliminating chance; it’s also necessary, to eliminate the author: now, any subject is fated to


\(^{140}\) Ulmer, “The Puncept in Grammatology”, 175.
imply, among the fragments brought together, a strange certainty about its appropriate place in the volume. It is susceptible to this because any cry possesses an echo—motifs of the same type balance each other, stabilizing each other at a distance, and neither the sublime incoherence of a romantic page, nor the artificial unity that adds up to a block-book, can provide it.141

In other words, “the book” is imaginary, unconscious, the Other: “Everything becomes suspense, a fragmentary disposition with alternations and oppositions, all working toward the total rhythm of the white spaces, which would be the poem silenced; but it is translated to some extent by each pendant. I want to consider it an instinct ...”142

A pendant is an artistic composition intended to match or complement another. Given its meaning of a match or parallel, the pendant is also the pun. And wordplay is instinctive, requiring the poet to cede to their unconscious or disappear and, as Mallarmé would have it (and as noted a number of times already), “cede the initiative to words, set in motion by the clash of their inequalities”. In homophonic translation, the poet can also seed the initiative to words, set in commotion by the clash of their equalities.143

or

Is mistranslation any different to “translation”, or to “writing”? There seem to be too many issues with the word “translation” itself for it to hold. Do we need new categories

141 Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse”, 208.
142 Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse”, 209.
143 Incidentally, regarding puns: John Pollack, a former Clinton speechwriter and author of the book The Pun Also Rises, suggests that puns generally fell out of favour during the Enlightenment, when the form’s reliance on imprecision and silliness was out of kilter with the prevailing spirit of sophistication and rational inquiry. See John Pollack, The Pun Also Rises: How the Humble Pun Revolutionized Language, Changed History, and Made Wordplay More than Some Antics (New York: Gotham, 2012).
to add to those above, do we need other words for translation, or is the word translation simply splitting itself the way language and writing do?\(^{144}\)

As outlined at the beginning of this assay, Mallarmé proposes “Transposition; Structure, another”, a notion that allows words, “through the clash of their inequalities”, to “light each other up through reciprocal reflections”, and which “gives you the surprise of never having heard that fragment of ordinary eloquence before ... bathed in a brand new atmosphere”.\(^{145}\) Transposition, in Rasula and McCaffery, “is not a simple transit but a dichotomous zone of interaction”—interaction between languages, between aurality and visuality, between the imperfections of signs.\(^{146}\)

or

To cite Mallarmé’s *Crise de vers* again, this time at greater length:

Languages imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking: thought considered as writing without accessories, not even whispers, still *stills* immortal speech; the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proferring words that would otherwise be, when made uniquely, the material truth. This prohibition is explicitly devastating, in Nature (one bumps up against it with a smile), where nothing leads one to take oneself for God; but, at times, turned toward aesthetics, my own sense regrets that discourse fails to express objects by touches

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\(^{144}\) While I’m simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing dichotomies of translation, I might as well construct a few separate categories for “mistranslation”, or “versions”:

1. Re-version — a re-membering of a poem, post-Orphic coming back together.
2. Subversion — an undermining, a re-fragmentation, a return to the Underworld.
3. Aversion — a version to rid one’s self of prior influence through textual annihilation.
4. Diversion — a version to distract, deviate, divert: be the deviant, be the clinamen!
5. Inversion — an upside-down version, a Down Under conceit: a writing backwards through the original text.


\(^{146}\) Rasula and McCaffery, *Imagining Language*, 203.
corresponding to them in shading or bearing, since they do exist among the many languages, and sometimes in one.\footnote{147}{Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse”, 205.}

Mallarmé’s crisis didn’t stop him from thinking that poetry had the answers. He expounds further that “verse would not exist” (his emphasis) but for this very untranslatability in Nature (as mentioned earlier, he makes the point that the signified and the signifier in language rarely match—\textit{nuit} is a bright sound, \textit{jour} is dark), and that poetry, “philosophically, makes up for language’s deficiencies, as a superior supplement”. “[F]aced with the breaking up of classic literary rhythms ... and their dispersion into articulated shivers close to instrumentation,” Mallarmé heralds poetry’s ability to \textit{transpose} itself into new forms for new eras, “for an art of achieving the transposition into the Book of the symphony ...”\footnote{148}{Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse”, 205–6 and 210.}

\textit{or}

Is verse, or poetry, really any better than any other use of language in translating Nature? As representation, even if poetry can be symphonic? Poetry, despite its complex aural, visual, musical, multilingual capabilities, is still restricted by systems of language; it’s still a construct, fabrication, go-between, chimera, shadow. Perhaps poetry is just better at being a ghost, at shape-shifting, at being other ...?

\textit{aussi}

While Mallarmé gifts us the term “transposition”, Derrida writes, in \textit{Positions}, of how translation could do with another definition, a substitute: “In the limits to which it is possible, or at least \textit{appears} possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of \textit{transformation}: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another.”\footnote{149}{Derrida, \textit{Positions}, 20.}
In other words, the problematic difference between signifier and signified is doubled in translation. “Transformation” as definition goes a step further than Mallarmé’s “transposition” in relating the mutational aspects of writing.

aussi

Most conversations about translation evoke the story of the Tower of Babel from the Book of Genesis, a story that “is always in our interest … to reread closely.”150 In The Ear of the Other, Derrida writes of “the great challenge to translation”, Finnegans Wake, for its multilingual punning methodology. In “The Puncept in Grammatology”, Ulmer quotes first David Hayman and then Umberto Eco, who identify the “principal lesson” of Finnegans Wake:

“The Wake belongs to a class (not a genre) of works which invite the reader to perpetuate creation”. Eco agrees: “The search for ‘open’ models capable of guaranteeing and founding the mutation and the growth and, finally, the vision of a universe founded on possibility, as contemporary philosophy and science suggest to the imagination, encounters perhaps its most provoking and violent representation—perhaps its anticipation—in Finnegans Wake”.151

Derrida describes how a Babelian motif runs from one end of the book to the other (the book, of course, is circular, with the last sentence only being completed by the incomplete opening sentence). Derrida picks out the moment in Finnegans Wake when Yahweh interrupts the construction of the tower by the tribe of the Shems152 to condemn humanity to a multiplicity of languages—“which is to say, to the necessary

150 Derrida, “Roundtable on Translation”, 100. George Steiner’s After Babel, most importantly, is a comprehensive study of translation which deals with the “Babel problem” of multiple languages. See Steiner, After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).


152 “The tribe of the Shems” is Derrida’s terminology, not Joyce’s. Derrida stresses that their name, Shem, already means “name” in Hebrew.
and impossible task of translation”. In that moment in *Finnegans Wake*, the three words “And he war” appear. Derrida asks, then continues:

> despite the multiplicity of languages, cultural references, and condensations, English is indisputably the dominant language in *Finnegans Wake*—all these refractions and slippages are produced in English or through English, in the body of that language. French would translate the English as: *il-guerre* (he wars), he declares war. And that’s indeed what happens: God declares war on the tribe of the Shems who want to make a name for themselves by raising the tower and imposing their tongue on the universe. But obviously the German word *war* influences the English word, so we also have: He was, he was the one who said, for example, “I am that I am”, which is the definition of Yahweh. And then one also hears the ear, which is very present in the rest of the text. *One hears a thousand things through other languages* (my emphasis).

Derrida describes how translation can’t mark “the fact there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues”. So then, if it is always in our interest to re-read this story closely, the Tower of Babel is surely a reminder story of a reminder story, as humanity continually needs reminding of the plurality of languages and the plurality *within* languages. Babel is the name that God imposes on the tower and the Shems. Babel is itself the name of the father, therefore God is imposing his own name on the Shems, which, when they come to translate it, can “confusedly be understood as confusion”. Derrida continues: “Babel equals Confusion. This is the paradigm of the situation in which there is a multiplicity of languages and in which translation is both necessary and impossible”.

By imposing his untranslatable name which must be translated, God produces what Derrida calls a “disschemination”, which has at least four senses: dissemination,

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153 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 258. It mustn’t be forgotten that, despite its multilingual punning stunts, *Finnegans Wake* should also be viewed as being written in Irish English as a subversion of the hegemony of the English language.

deschematization, de-“Shemitizing”, and derouting or diverting from a path (the word *chemin* meaning path or road); and which forces the Shems into a position of “Translate me and what is more don’t translate me”.  

or

BABBLE.

aussi

With so many double/treble/quadruple entendres in the story of the Tower of Babel, it would seem that translation, “necessary and impossible”, is actually—always and already—mistranslation. According to Derrida, even the word for tongue is mistranslated. The Hebrew word signifies “lip”, so the Shems in fact desire to impose their lip on the universe.  

or

Perhaps hoping to enact the inverse of the Shems—Brennan, Edwards and Tranter give the French Euroverse some Australian lip.

or

After such a babbling anecdote, it can now be argued that homophonic mistranslation attempts the inverse of translation (at the same time as a “literal” sound/phonetic translation), in that it teases out “several languages or tongues” already in the one linguistic system. Homophonic mistranslation attempts to subvert/invert the hierarchy of one language over another by transforming the sounds of one linguistic system (and its many tongues) into sounds from another linguistic system (and its many tongues). (Remember, in both Edwards and Tranter, we’re reading an Australian English, replete

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with its many colloquial tongues, subverting the mother tongue first of all, while also subverting the literary French.) In a homophonic mistranslation, every word becomes a little tongue looping between languages—a complex interaction of soundplay, a methodology seen and heard in *Finnegans Wake*.

or

As Random Cloud writes of *Wake*, linking the pun to an erotic multiplicity, and to an everlasting destruction of singularity in language: “James Joyce conceived of *Finnegans Wake* as a circe, a simultanus short-circuit of all myth (Every Thing Equally and Immediately Remote), an indefinitely wyrm-edened book—in a word, an apocalapse.”157

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aussi

Remember, a “fluke” is a trematode worm, a parasite. Writhing round. Much like this assay’s pushing of buttons / brushing off Putins / bushy put-ons.

or

With its tail between its legs, the tower of Babel, allegorically, is a phallic symbol brought down by a declaration of non-independence, of plurality and multiplicity—by, simultaneously, a circulation (plus re-insertion into itself) and a “disschemination”.

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158 Edwards, “Double Talk”. 
In an interview with *Poetry International Web*, Chris Edwards writes/speaks about the reasons he returned to poetry after twenty years underground, not publishing any poetry, undergoing his own *crise de vers*. He cites Hélène Cixous' writings on phallocentrism as a vital influence in his poetic revival, and at length:

Hélène Cixous’s essay (or polemic, or manifesto) “The Laugh of the Medusa” revived, or revised, my interest in poetry in the early 1990s. “Nearly the entire history of writing,” she wrote, “is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is the effect, the support and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism.” “There have,” however, “been poets who would go to any lengths to slip something by at odds with tradition ... But only the poets—
not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffman would say, fairies.” Cixous called for volcanic upheaval, seeing in women and poets alike a “capacity to depappropriate unselfishly”, producing “a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organised around any one sun that’s any more of a star than the others.”

aussi

Jacques Rancière describes the crisis in verse at the end of nineteenth century, the dispersing of the French alexandrine: “The poet no longer has a model, celestial or human, to imitate. Henceforth, it is by the mere ‘dialectic of verse’ that he will be able to revivify the seal of the idea, by forging together, according to an essential rhythm, ‘many scattered veins of ore, unknown and floating.’”

While there were no poetic models worth imitating, because the models had grown stale (needing “disschemination”), there was a renewed need for “forgery” (Mallarmé uses the English word)—to forge together new forms.

Considering these Australian “versions” of Un Coup de dés, perhaps now, in the twenty-first century, after all the fragmentation of the twentieth, there is a growing desire for a return to form—to rejoin with rejoinders the “cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros”—aware that there could only be such a reunion with form if it were interconnected and fragmented. As Edwards can visualise:

I like the idea of treating Australian poems, including Ern Malley’s, not as dot-like entities (e.g. lyrics) or sites of authorial self-presence (meaning in isolation), but as

159 Edwards, “Interview with Chris Edwards”.

string-like (there's that lyre again) interwoven filaments—nodes, if you like, in a worldwide network of sociocultural webs (meaning as oscillation and experimental flux).\(^{161}\)

At the heart of this statement are the impossible, the invisible, and the plural—the many ineffables that the poem seeks to mine and forge into new forms that oscillate between the decidable and the undecidable, between the known and the unknown, between and beyond borders, between ears. As Rancière concludes, quoting Mallarmé’s _La musique et les lettres_: “Poetry is meditation, doubt transformed into hyperbole and that which ‘projects, to a great forbidden and thunderous height, our conscious lack of what, up there, gleams’. One can say that this projection is a deception (superchérie) or forgery. But the forgery is also the work done by a goldsmith in ‘sowing doubt with rubies’.\(^{162}\)

or

A homophonic translation hyperbolises the doubt of “our conscious lack of what, up there, gleams”, and “our unconscious lock on what, down here, glean”. Homophony hangs on the split dualities of words, highlighting the signifier, dispersing the signified, while collapsing the ground beneath both. Where Mallarmé’s chains of suggestion intertwine and coalesce, increasing in power as we trace them across his oeuvre, a mistranslation’s network of suggestion spreads across platforms, across eras, and erotically, across multiple authors.

or

“[E]very word or letter I looked at was suggestive, and it wasn’t always easy to remain faithful to all of them at once ...”\(^{163}\)

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161 Edwards, “Interview with Chris Edwards”.


163 Edwards, “Double Talk”.

72
or

**Un Coup de dés** becomes exactly what its oscillating, borderline-polygamous poetics designed it to become: an ALSO-MACHINE, generating genomes, liminal looms, fantastical phantasms, altered alternatives, *other* others, *aussi* Aussies.

**aussi**

For all Mallarmé’s spouting of the *oeuvre pure*, the “search for the One Book all poets are attempting to write”, he may well have spawned *the One Poem all books are attempting to write*. *Un Coup de dés* and its musical imagery, its vast landscape visuals and blank spaces on the page, its seductively (mis)translatable gutter-talk, its untouchable lack of meaning locked into correspondence with the Other; its (mis)rendered thought—and, above all, its *multi-nefarious* “and/or” poetics, its self-positioning as confused Master—have created some of the most perfect preconditions for a mistranslation storm. Infinitely reproducible, a shipwreck for endless spelunking, a spectre to haunt the haunted, the mobile to hang over the skyline and join the constellations. Storm clouds on the horizon. This is its great modernist haunting, shimmering:

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“CONSIDERED A LOST CAUSE AMID CIRCUMSTANTIAL /
EVERLASTING INTESTINAL SPASMS //

WOULD OFFER YOU UP A LIKE SHIPWRECK ...”164
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... on these impenetrable shorelines Down Under.

or

The best modern literature, says Kristeva, explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries crumble, where we are confronted with an archaic space before such

164 Edwards, “A Fluke”, 43.
linguistic binaries as self and other, subject and object. The transcendent and sublime, for Kristeva, are simply our attempts at covering over the breakdowns (and subsequent reassertion of boundaries) associated with the abject: “On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject”.\(^{165}\)

Literature spelunks the cave, the lack, the want, that language is structured around. Kristeva elevates poetry and certain experimental forms of fiction because of their willingness to play with and break apart grammar, metaphor and meaning—because they “compel language to come nearest to the human enigma, to the place where it kills, thinks, and experiences jouissance all at the same time. A language of abjection of which the writer is both subject\(^{166}\) and victim, witness and topple. Toppling into what? Into nothing ...”\(^{167}\)

A literature of the void, I would say, but not Mallarmé’s. I’m thinking of Edwards’ [N]EVER [N]EVER. In its “double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” rigadoon with *Un Coup de dés*, “A Fluke” exhibits the “laughter of the apocalypse”.\(^{168}\) Edwards’ skilled homophonic mistranslation—its surface play, subjective but ambivalent attitude, its suspended exclamations, its absurdity, its gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure—lays bear the fact that language is at once contingent, arbitrary and limned with the abject fear of loss. Or, as Kristeva writes: “Not a language of the desiring exchange of


\(^{166}\) To clarify, through these various theories—some from the philosophies of deconstruction and some from science and psychoanalysis and elsewhere—I’m not arguing that subjectivity can be erased and I’m not advocating for the erasure of the other; quite the opposite, in fact. I’m arguing that the techniques used in experimental mistranslations can be used to subvert hegemonic structures within literature and the world. See my coda, part VIII, for a treatment of the political implications of these literary strategies regarding Australia.


\(^{168}\) Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 204.
messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges".169

or

An apocalapse lapping/laughing at Australian beaches.

Australia is still in the shadow of the image it has always had. Lost in antipodal space, we have hardly diverged from that perspective in which antiquity first beheld our hemisphere, its “other”, millennia ago. Only its shadow lengthens as evening falls across the land. It is as though we are endlessly absorbed by it, into it. Whence that wasted prospect in our eyes. Our deserts, desolation, desertion. That country constantly reflecting on its own revolving.\(^\text{170}\) —Paul Foss

Plato’s Atlantis—that mythical antipodean land of abundance and treasures, that piece of “pure invention” that European colonial expansion eventually invaded and conquered—turned out to be “Australia”, a country populated not by a great white race who would

create huge trade, but by races of Aborigines who had lived on and knew intimately the multiple landscapes of the continent. Yet, since it was “discovered”, a discourse of the void and its related imagery resounds through our colonial literature, from the early explorers who described *Terra Australis* as a wasteland,171 to the “whitewashing” of Australian history, as if the first Australians could simply be banished into the void from whence they appeared.172 The dispossession of the first Australians “underwrote the development of the nation” and over two hundred years would pass before Australia’s highest court, the High Court of Australia, rejected the fiction that when Australia was discovered it was *terra nullius*—nobody’s land—and rather recognised that Indigenous peoples have native title: land rights that existed before the British invaded and which can still exist today.173

We still mostly live on the coast facing out. In the early twenty-first century our shores are still symbolic barriers.174 Despite being, since 1788, a land of migrants, the entire country has recently been excised from the migration zone so that asylum seekers can

171 Paul Foss writes: “From William Jansz of the *Duyfken* (1606) to Cook of the *Endeavour* (1770), and beyond, the antipodal simulacrum is draped over the country like a shroud. It is still hear here, haunting the present with its echoes”. For descriptive quotes of the “wasteland” that Australia’s “discoverers” encountered, see Foss, ”Theatrum Nondum Cognitorum”, 31–3.


173 See ”Mabo v Queensland”, No. 2, HCA 23, 175 CLR 1 (June 3, 1992).

174 Successive governments have adopted a somewhat anti-immigration catch-cry, “Turn back the boats!” The lives of many refugees, or “boat people”, risking the boat trip to Australia have been notionally saved (but also rerouted—to Gulag-like offshore processing centres or back to their countries of origin, often risking persecution), but the loud and manipulative rhetoric has only increased the sense that Australia is zealously protective of its borders, callously indifferent to those claiming asylum. Former immigration minister Scott Morrison, for example, instructed Border Protection staff in 2013 to replace the phrase “asylum seeker” with “illegal maritime arrival” and “client” with “detainee”. See Tom Clark, “Calling a boat person a spade: Australia’s asylum seeker rhetoric”, *The Conversation*, October 22, 2013, [http://theconversation.com/calling-a-boat-person-a-spade-australias-asylum-seeker-rhetoric-19367](http://theconversation.com/calling-a-boat-person-a-spade-australias-asylum-seeker-rhetoric-19367).
be “processed offshore”. Completely surrounded by water, and now excised from the migration zone, Australia is literally an island, an isolate, as Foss writes: “Even with that island called “continent”; the terror of isolation merely grows in proportion to the size of its inner space. Big or little, islands die from the inwards out”.

aussi

Australia’s body politic often privileges an unimpeachable sense of nationalism through a celebration of a distorted idea/ideal of the true or real Australia. To advance any criticism of Australia is to become, somehow, and in some circles, “unAustralian”. In a country where racism is rooted in the police force, where Indigenous Australians die in custody, and asylum seekers are tortured in offshore prison camps, where Indigenous sporting heroes are simultaneously cheered and jeered, where sharks lurk in more headlines than in shipwrecks, where mining the reefs and the outback for natural resources is more important than preserving those resources, where explorers Burke and Wills died, discovering little more than what colonials would expect to find, and where the mirage of coastal living gives way to the driest continent in the world—


176 Foss, “Theatrum Nondum Cognitorum”, 35.

177 Before he was ousted as prime minister of Australia, Tony Abbott of the Liberal Party opined “that everyone has got to be on Team Australia”. It was broadly debated in the media what he meant exactly, whether it was anti-terrorist rhetoric, scaremongering, or something even more insidious to be applied to “everyday Australians”. See Anne Summers, “Tony Abbott’s Team Australia entrenches inequality”, Sydney Morning Herald, August 23, 2014, http://www.smh.com.au/comment/tony-abbotts-team-australia-entrenches-inequality-20140821-106sdk.html.

178 In August 2015, the Australian Border Force police unit set up the ominously named “Operation Fortitude”, an operation that would have seen police stop people on the streets of Melbourne for random visa checks (a process that would have relied on racial profiling) had there not been a huge public protest. Political rhetoric, however, continues to push this racist agenda.

179 In 2015, AFL star Adam Goodes of the Sydney Swans was widely booed by opposing fans for miming an aboriginal war dance on the field, while NRL star Jonathon Thurston was universally lauded for winning the premiership for his team the North Queensland Cowboys.
it’s important to reflect on the political implications of poetry such as that discussed in this essay: poetry generated by paranomasia—by the difference and sameness in words; a poetry of multiplicity that questions truth, mastery, authority, and symbolic structures by trespassing upon and through them, undermining them; poetry that “offers you up” a serious parody, serio ludere, a paradox in terms; a poetry of unreason, that transgresses boundaries.

In “Living On: Borderlines”, Derrida writes of the inability of “the institution”—in his case, the university—to accept the undecidable in language and in translation. He could just as easily be talking about the nation state: “What this institution cannot bear is for anyone to tamper with language, meaning both the national language and, paradoxically, an ideal translatability that neutralizes this national language. Nationalism and universalism. What this institution cannot bear is a transformation that leaves intact neither of these two complementary poles”.

or

What Australia sometimes cannot bear—what there seems little room for—is difference, ambiguity, the other. Australia is subaltern (with its own sub-categories of the subaltern within) not so much because it is Down Under, or because its internal vastness and isolation in the south is mistaken for an Abyss, but because Australia carries on the project of the West.

Both Mallarmé and Derrida defy the Master. In Mallarmé’s case, he ditched his “Book of Books”, of which only fragments survive, and, late in his writings, fragmented his verse—in Derrida’s words, he opened up the “space of writing”. The result was Un Coup de dés, a poem that attempts the impossible: to find a form that renders thought and chance into language. It demonstrated a kind of mastery that Mallarmé’s poem simultaneously wishes to shake off, as in the metaphor that reverberates through the poem: the Master shaking his fist at the impossibility of abolishing chance. Derrida goes one step further in his continual wandering away from writing, from “the father” who cannot be questioned. Via the puncept and citational methodologies, his deconstructive

writings wander away from writing (as authorial representor of truth). Debunking categories and genres, his writings waver and blur the lines between literature and philosophy.

or

Altering the project, inverting the master—"UNCONSTITUTIONAL"—the methods of or-play and forgery employed by Brennan, Edwards and Tranter present a riposte to the Western (and particularly the Australian) canon, to authorial representations of language. Their mistranslations also open up terrain that Australian poetry might traverse by drawing our attention to the shaky nature—the unstable meanings and interchangeable structures—of language, the illicit affairs of writing as representation, the chaos of multiple tongues, rather than settling on the singular, or the ideal.

Language is unstable. Borders between languages, even within a language, are unstable and permeable. Homophony breathes the "literal". Mistranslation offers changeability and transformation. Its implications are for a poetry that is open in form but not formless, diverse in character, and continually malleable. When thought of as transformation, mistranslation is both reverential and disrespectful. It is an upending and a re-reading, and offers alternative ways to think at the crossroads of multiple languages.

aussi

Australian poet Peter Minter recommends a radical revision of approaches to reading our local poetic traditions. Instead of a single authorial nation or nationality through which to view Australian poetry, Minter proposes an "archipelagic map": "Rather than 'the Land' and its monocultural aesthetic, we might imagine a polyphony of terrestrial islands, archipelagos of habitus and poethical emergence". Each island in Minter's vision becomes

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an outcrop of sensibility amidst oceans of inscrutability, or what ... Édouard Glissant termed the *chaos-monde*. A crucial stage in the emergence of a poetics of relation, the *chaos-monde* (chaos world) is the liberation of the world from representability: “the way Chaos itself goes around is the opposite of what is ordinarily understood by ‘chaotic’ and ... it opens a new phenomenon: Relation, or totality in evolution, whose order is continually in flux and this disorder one can imagine forever”. The whole world is an archipelago, representability cohering at the edges of ever shifting shores.¹⁸²

In terms of the aesthetic potential of an archipelagic model, Minter leaves this open-ended, preferring to outline the cultural and psychogeographical implications, but I think it is clear how *Un Coup de dés* and its *chaos-monde*, its scattered fragments in flux and relation, has created an archipelagic map that appeals to Australian poets seeking otherness and indeterminacy and a map for rebellion.

or

The poem as *echipelago*.

aussi

Foss describes maps as “stratagems for the abolition of distance ... They constitute vanishing lines, escape machines, a beacon of fascination”, which could also describe "A Fluke", “Musicopoemographoscope”, or "Desmond's Coupé". Foss goes on: “maps may be an empty simulation, as in the most beautiful imaginings of Plato ... which, even if ... not meant as reality, certainly had the effect of sending countless men in search of new lands over the ages and contributed to the way in which they were shaped”. A third and final description of maps by Foss is relevant here, in terms of a metaphor for poems: “what they refer to or give bearing to is not territory as a fixed substance, but territory

as fluid field”. And so we come full circle, tail in mouth (or cheek), to Brownian Motion.

or

In the fluid field of the page, archipelagos emerge, scattered fragments swerve, invisible filaments waver; various and other histories echo, words intertextualise, disappear and reappear slightly altered, othered (yet in relation to one another for their very being there).

or

How much can the poem-map be explored? Thinking of the poem as an exploration sounds innocent enough, but exploration has its problems or limitations, particularly in the Australian postcolonial context (in which colonial exploration by white Europeans is not only recent history, but celebrated history), and therefore by extension in the context of rewritings and appropriation by/of Australian writers. These connotations (of the word exploration—that of men in power infiltrating a supposed *terra nullius* that is not *terra nullius*) serve as warning to those seeking power, control, and especially domination, in the intertextual exploration and appropriation of another’s writing. Defy Mallarmé’s Master; sure, but beware of becoming the master.

aussi

Speaking of the “erotics” of language, particularly of the highly libinal nature of language-tampering, but also of the oscillation-dissolution of the “I” into the “other” into the “them”, one can thereby also too rapidly dissolve certain political them(e)atics at stake in appropriation: perhaps most notably in the current context regarding “sexuality” and “race”.

Almost all the rewritings I’ve examined in this thesis are men-rewriting-men-rewriting-men, which at the very least exhibits a homosocial lineage, of an a-sexualised-material-

able-to-be-resampled-without-any-prohibition-but-custom-and-copyright. But in some of these cases, the explicit homosexuality of these specific men is clearly at stake, and clearly has a political resonance: not least for Edwards in this essay. But this then may suggest that even such samplings also operate some covert elisions: for instance, is “women’s poetry” able to be re-cited by men today with the same effect? Or vice-versa? I’d say absolutely to the latter, as there is a feminist context to the rewriting of “men’s literature”, an upending or dispersion of a patriarchal hegemony. But hetero men rewriting/over-writing/appropriating women’s poetry…? That’s another fettle of kitsch, so to speak. As I’ve tried to establish in this thesis, there are many excellent queer displacements that exist, in regards to appropriation in literature. However, I don’t mean to gloss over the fact that all writers, regardless of sexual orientation or desire, have ethical responsibilities.

aussi

Ditto for race and colonial issues, as I’ve implied already in this coda. I’m thinking now of the American poet Kenneth Goldsmith’s 2015 reading at Brown University in which Goldsmith spent thirty minutes reading the autopsy report of Michael Brown, a young African-American man recently killed by police.184 This “poetry” reading was absolutely a kind of literary appropriation, and one that was presented as if verbatim, as if the autopsy report was being entirely re-contextualised (a technique he employs across his oeuvre) to highlight (through the mundanity of the language structures appropriated) the mundanity in this case of the mounting deaths of black African-Americans at the hands of mostly white police. The heart’s in the right place, but when Goldsmith ended the reading with a description of Brown’s genitalia, it became clear that he had deliberately edited the autopsy for shock value, thus representing (and perhaps repeating) a blatant accentuation of white domination (and fetishisation) of black bodies. One could argue (and Goldsmith has, convincingly to some) that this was the point (he did in fact introduce his reading as being of a poem called “The Body of

Michael Brown\footnote{Alison Flood, “US poet defends reading of Michael Brown autopsy report as a poem”, The Guardian, March 18, 2015, \url{https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/17/michael-brown-autopsy-report-poem-kenneth-goldsmith}.}, but he was subsequently and rightly criticised—by African-Americans and non-Anglo and Anglo Americans alike—for his performance’s allegedly illicit appropriations (of the injustices) of black experience in contemporary America for further white self-aggrandisement.\footnote{See CAConrad, “Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw”, Poetry Foundation, June 1, 2015, \url{https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw/}. Here, thirty poets of multiple racial and sexual orientations strongly object to Goldsmith’s appropriation of the deceased and black body of Michael Brown.}

or

The problem of the limits of appropriability is clearly then a major and intense and ongoing international discussion, and one that will continue. In most situations, the limits are not so much a question of taste as power. The abject in Edwards works because it is directed at his own queer subjectivity in the face of traditional literary power structures, whereas the abject in Goldsmith merely apes, so to speak, his white privilege, even as he employs an extreme style of appropriation to challenge traditional literary forms.

So while I’ve been advocating for certain boundaries/borders of the imagination, traditional and aesthetic and emotional, to be breached, there are always social and cultural boundaries/borders that need to be treated with ethical respect. Going beyond can be painful to certain others (to re-echo Bataille’s erotic philosophy, as he refers to anguish): “when the bounds of the possible are over-reached, a recoil is inevitable”. In other words, sometimes the defiance of the master may under certain circumstances require stringent self-limitation in the appropriation of others’ texts. There are symbolic barriers that need dissolving, and others that need shoring up, so to speak.

And here I return to the pun as subversive device, whose tidiness enhances the illusion of mastery at the same time as undoing it. At its core, the puncept is a methodology that, to bring back Ulmer, “allows language to say what it knows, which allows the
unconscious to show itself in the play of language”, and thus and most often reveal authorial intent.

aussi

Plato’s Republic never actually existed, yet the utopic Atlantis myth he instigated (as a literal Antipodes, an “opposite earth”) still persists on Australian shores, and the colony still generally thinks of its centre as void. Its being void is a furphy and delusion, of course—abundant life, Aboriginal communities, and Dreamtime tracks resonate like filaments through the “outback”. To overturn our anxious Anglo-colonial readings and our Eurovisions—any unease we might have about the legitimacy of antipodean takes on cultural internationalism—and, furthermore, to alleviate the stress of repressing unpleasant colonial truths, Australian poetry could do more than simply breathe the littoral, however utopic that might seem; Australian poetry should breathe the littoral and the void, the never never (what we think is impossible) by ceding the initiative to words and space. Engaging the materiality of words and the space of the page in the composition of poems helps to unearth the untenability of the logocentric and phallocentric distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, between the ideal and the material, the singular and the multiple. Using an inverse logic, misprision removes the prison, danger undoes the dungeon. Art is chance.

or

For Australian poetry to create notions (archipelagos, say, as opposed to a single nation) of itself, from out of (or within) the terra nullius myth that has been perpetuated—we must invert and disperse the hemispheres. We must simultaneously reflect (not reject!) the abject—in order to transform, in order to live—as well as look within (into the never).

End