

METAMORPHOSES OF THE LETTER IN PAUL CELAN, GEORGES PEREC,
AND YOKO TAWADA

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This comparative dissertation project examines the critical status of written signs (letters of phonetic alphabets, Sino-Japanese ideograms, mathematical symbols, and punctuation marks) in translational, multilingual and intermedial techniques in literature since World War II and in an increasingly global and multicultural world since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Romanian-German poet Paul Celan, French author Georges Perec, and Japanese-German author Yoko Tawada respond to historical, political and literary moments in Europe that challenge the capacities of verbal arts to articulate turmoil, transformation, and silence, by transfiguring the very medium of writing on the micro-level of individual written signs. International scholarship on these authors and theoretical work on translation and multilingualism focus heavily on reference and meaning, frequently conflating word-fragmentation with illegibility. Often overlooked are elements of writing not widely considered to be vehicles of meaning. In response, this dissertation offers strategies for reading what might appear nonsensical as sensory, and the unreadable as newly legible.

This project draws on the history and theories of writing systems from Plato's *Cratylus* to debates on logocentrism (Jacques Derrida), as well as studies on writing and media, particularly the concept of notational iconicity (Sybille Krämer, Wolfgang Raible, Friedrich Kittler). It argues that Celan, Perec and Tawada subtly transform the very material of writing at the elemental level of written signs, treating letters and by

extension texts as material objects in continual transformation. Relatedly, this project shifts its focus from translation as the reproduction of something familiar to transformation as the creation of something new, in order to illustrate that a transformative approach to translation gains far more than what is lost in translation, and that it gains something in addition to the semantic meanings that may accrue in translation. In doing so, this dissertation project offers the microperspective of written signs to Celan, Perec and Tawada scholarship in particular and to the literary humanities in general.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gizem Arslan was born in 1980 in Istanbul, Turkey. She graduated in 2003 from Franklin and Marshall College (Lancaster, PA) with majors in English and German and a minor in Comparative Literary Studies. In August 2005, she entered the Department of German Studies at Cornell University as a graduate student. She is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of German at Knox College in Galesburg, IL.

For my parents
Hülya and Ziya Arslan
and my grandparents
Müşerref and Hüseyin Girgin

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INTRODUCTION: LETTER FORM IN TRANSFORMATION

1. Literary and Artistic Experimentation with Written Signs

This study investigates paradoxes of textual materiality, that is, the paradoxical presence of textual absences as well as the transformation of textual elements that appear to be fixed. How can that which does not carry meaning partake in games of signification? How can an element of text, whose body presumably dissolves the moment it is deciphered, in fact possess a recalcitrant materiality? How can one sign, fixed on a page, be at once many, and even belong to more than one system of writing? How can a building block of text question, disrupt or dissolve the unity of a single text, the text medium at large, and the language(s) in which it is written?¹ If a medium is that which stands between and acts as intermediary in the broadest sense, how can any medium be made visible—and legible—despite that status? Textual materiality, medial paradoxes and textual transformation in literary studies, particularly in media studies and translation studies would call for a study of cosmic proportions. This study's object of analysis is by contrast minute: the individual written sign and literary experimentation with written signs.²

In the realm of literature, perhaps the primary strategy of letteral experimentation is fragmentation. Texts, lines, words, and even individual written signs are broken down into their constituent parts. This strategy forces the reader's eye into an encounter with individual written elements instead of a monolithic text. Individual written signs become objects of scrutiny in themselves, irreducible to their identity or sound value. Though they are not widely regarded as vehicles of meaning, they partake in—but often disrupt—games of reference and meaning,

¹ The word "medium's etymology betrays the status of medium as an intermediary, as something standing in between. *Medium* in classical Latin means "medium middle, centre, midst, intermediate course, intermediary." This study understands a medium very generally as anything that conveys (e.g. language, information), acts as intermediary (e.g. to comprehension, to experience) or tool. As will become increasingly clear, however, the term itself is multivalent. In addition, this study will illustrate various ways in which the text medium is anything but neutral or transparent or merely supplemental to the content it conveys (Oxford English Dictionary, "'Medium, N. and Adj.'").

² This study understands a written sign as any element of text understood broadly. These could be individual letters of the alphabet and individual elements of any writing system (e.g. ideograms in Chinese, Japanese and Korean), numbers, mathematical notation, and punctuation.

acquire multisensory potential, operative function (as in mathematical writing) and materiality on the page. Some signs do so despite their conventional function of signaling absence (e.g. the number zero or prefixes of negation). Letteral experimentation therefore tests the limits and potential of text and reading, and relatedly, of image and spectatorship.

To take one example from the literary arts, Herta Müller's collage-poetry prompts reflection on the role of written signs in dissolving the limits of text as medium, revealing its materiality, productively disrupting textual flow and readerly experience, as well as questioning the unity of text and language by focusing on the fragmentary instead of on larger units of utterance. Müller's collages are comprised of text clippings in one part of the page and collages of color in another. Although visual and textual collage are presented together, neither is a representation of the other. In fact, Müller's texts and images cannot be deemed representational in a general sense. Differences in color and font between the strips of words and letters that compose the poems both draw attention to the visibility of writing and disrupt the linearity and ease of reading that uniform written types offer. Also importantly, text and image draw attention to the process of their production—or their madeness—and status as three-dimensional objects; the text is not in a perfect line and has clearly been stuck there by hand, the images are seemingly inexpertly cut out with uneven curves and edges, while both text and image clippings cast shadows on the white background onto which they have been stuck, jutting out of the page as paper-objects (Müller). In Müller's collage-poetry, letteral experimentation betrays certain parallels with media in its paradoxical materiality, its role in meaning and sense-making, and its relationships to silence and absence.

In his introduction to the history and theory of media, Dieter Mersch identifies three main sources or origins of the concept of media: aesthetics (connected to questions of materiality), language (connected to problems of representation), and technology (connected to questions of operativity) (Mersch, *Medientheorien zur Einführung* 14–16). As Müller's collage-poetry demonstrates, written signs in letteral experimentation are not mere elements of representation or communication. Müller's work grants written signs a recalcitrant materiality: quite literally in

relief on the page, this material demands to be seen as an object and image, irreducible to its identity or sound value, fragmenting text and language that were already non-representational.³ Here, letteral presence is paradoxically also a kind of absence (it does not appear as such but renders intelligible something other than itself) and functions under a kind of withdrawal (it disappears as letter the moment it is deciphered). As such, its presence resembles that of medial presence (Mersch, “Mediale Paradoxa. Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und Medien. Einleitung in eine negative Medienphilosophie” 2). Any medium has to relay but not itself be visible. Müller’s textual fragmentation and the letteral form thrown into relief interrupt and suspend the unity of text. In this suspension and in revealing the way in which text was produced, Müller’s collage poetry paradoxically renders the textual medium visible in interruption, suspension and medial play. It forces encounters with fissures, traces and furrows in the structure or instantiations of text and language.⁴

2. *Writing and Media*

In media studies proper as well as in more recent interdisciplinary reflections on the status of writing as image, number, ritual and operation, the linearity of alphabetic writing is closely associated with a purported transparency of written signs.⁵ The concept of written transparency implies that all written signs refer either to sounds or to their identity without surplus, and that a letter is consumed by the reading eye without the need to linger on it. According to this view, written signs would be considered distinct from images that may have more complicated relationships to sound and are not easily reducible to identification.

³ The operational dimension of writing is not explored in Müller’s collage-poetry. This dimension of writing will be discussed further in the sections to follow, and literary experiments with operative writing will be demonstrated in more detail in the relevant chapters.

⁴ Transmedial strategies in literature are understood here as strategies that “ensure the fracture of the media in the medial itself,” that is to say, interrupt, fragment, obstruct or distort the text in order to break it out of itself and enable reflection on the nature of the medial and of the text as medium (Mersch, “Transmedial Strategies in in the Aesthetic—The Literary and Its Other” 3). This may also involve textual strategies that show that the text is also something other than a text: that it might be image, sound, or body.

⁵ See for example Krämer and Bredekamp; Koch and Krämer; Kittler, “Number and Numeral”; Kittler, “Perspective and the Book.”

Distinctions between the linearity of alphabetic writing and pictoriality (and its two-dimensionality) constitute some of the primary foci of two seminal works in media studies: Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and Vilem Flusser's *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987). McLuhan is credited with popularizing the term *media* and theorizing "new" media (television and computer) in relation to the old (photography and film). McLuhan and Flusser (who largely adopted McLuhan's epistemological framework) importantly explored the implications of the arrival of new media for alphabetic script.⁶

Like many media theorists before and after them, McLuhan and Flusser investigate the relationship between the oral and the written. However, they place special emphasis on the linearity of writing on the one hand and the two-dimensionality of images and image-like textual elements on the other. McLuhan calls alphabetic writing visual, rational and linear, and contrasts it with ideographic writing, where "the ideograph even more than the hieroglyph is a complex *Gestalt* involving all of the senses at once. The ideogram affords none of the separation and specialization of sense, none of the breaking apart of sight and sound and meaning which is the key to the phonetic alphabet" (McLuhan 34–35). In a similar vein, Flusser deems alphabetic writing inappropriate for the realm of images, which is suitable only for spectatorship and not for readership. Claiming that "[t]he alphabet is a clear rejection of ideographic writing," Flusser insists on a distinct realm of writing: linear, in phonetic alphabet, and wholly distinct from images (Flusser 21, 30).

McLuhan and Flusser's insistence on textual linearity poses important challenges to the literary arts. In his introduction to Flusser's writings, Mark Poster holds that literary experiments of the twentieth century fall short of disproving Flusser: "Try as they might, theorists such as Roland Barthes and writers from Laurence Sterne to Raymond Queneau and the Oulipo group

⁶ Though the two media theorists have a common project, Sjoukje van der Meulen observes an important point of divergence between them in the theoretical strategies they propose for an age of new media: "whereas McLuhan welcomes the defeat of writing for a wide variety of reasons, Flusser considers the image culture brought forth by the media a serious challenge to historical consciousness and critical thinking." According to van der Meulen, "while his [Flusser's] work is unthinkable without McLuhan, Flusser disagrees with his approach to the whole environment of media in the Cold War period. Flusser believes that an entirely new form of critical theory—and not the mere "understanding" of media—is the right response to the new media society" (Meulen 186).

have at best great difficulty in constructing texts that allow or encourage the reader to find her own way through the page” (Flusser xiv). While there might not exist a literary text that makes readers lose their way on the page or disrupt linear writing entirely, particular attention to two things can illuminate literary strategies by which authors can achieve two-dimensionality—even three-dimensionality—of text and disrupt this linearity. The first is constituted by visual elements that have existed in the print medium as documented in the history of the book. The second is attention to particular literary strategies explicitly directed at phenomenal sense-making (over semantic sense-making).

In his historical reexamination of Johannes Gutenberg’s movable type, Friedrich Kittler critiques both McLuhan and Flusser for their assertions that writing is essentially linear. Kittler holds that pictoriality was always at the heart of the printing press. The movable type of Johannes Gutenberg, whose galaxy of the print medium McLuhan appears to mourn even as he heralds the arrival of the electronic age, “was never intended for mass production as such, but rather was supposed to compete with the calligraphic elegance of manuscript pages” (F. A. Kittler, “Perspective and the Book” 39–40). For Kittler, this demonstrates that pictoriality was in fact the goal of the printing press.

Kittler’s historical arguments about pictoriality in early book culture find support in the findings of Wolfgang Raible, who illustrates that pictorial elements in writing are not new but can be dated back to the Middle Ages. According to Raible, the development of western alphabetical writing accords with a global tendency: At the outset, the written text is simply to be read aloud. Thus, one finds in early texts what Raible loosely terms “Graphem-Phonem-Korrespondenz” [correspondence between grapheme and phoneme]: Chains of letters are written without spaces to distinguish one word from another; these chains are somewhat hard to tease apart and require that they be read aloud.⁷ When texts become available to a larger audience and

⁷ A phoneme is “a unit of sound in language that cannot be analysed into smaller linear units and that can distinguish one word from another.” A grapheme is “[t]he class of letters and other visual symbols that represent a phoneme or cluster of phonemes (...); so, in a given writing system of a given language, a feature of written expression that cannot be analysed into smaller meaningful units.” (Oxford English Dictionary, “Phoneme, N.”; Oxford English Dictionary, “Grapheme, N.”)

silent reading becomes more prevalent, books are made more readable with the introduction of textual elements that may or may not have oral equivalents: more easily identifiable letter forms, and many ideographic elements that aid the reader in acquiring an overview of the text. Periods in superscript as in certain Latin inscriptions, chapter headings, column titles, markings to indicate paragraphs, lists with marked items, short summaries on the margins, footnotes, as well as writing in different colors, font sizes and fonts constitute common indicators of this shift (Raible, “Von der Textgestalt zur Texttheorie. Beobachtungen zur Entwicklung des Text-Layouts und ihren Folgen” 29).⁸ In short, the wide availability of books and the practice of silent reading initiate changes in book culture that break up the linearity of earlier European texts in favor of affording a clearer overview of the entirety of text, as well as making fuller use of the two-dimensional space of the page by incorporating ideogrammatic elements.⁹

This multidimensionality of writing suggests that we bring heightened scholarly attention to those aspects of writing that cannot be captured by terms such as “communication,” “transcription,” and “symbolic structure.” Sybille Krämer opposes the “schemata of language or image, symbol or *technē*” [Schemata von Sprache oder Bild, Symbol oder Technik]. She asserts instead that “writing as medium is a hybrid creation; it is an intermedial phenomenon” [Schrift

⁸ “hochgestellte Punkte wie in bestimmten lateinischen Inschriften.” For further elaborations, see Raible, *Die Semiotik der Textgestalt* and Raible, *Zur Entwicklung von Alphabetschrift-Systemen*.

⁹ It is important to note here that “ideogrammatic elements” does not suggest that alphabetic writing is not already pictorial in some ways, nor that ideogrammatic writing is purely pictorial. Some but not all Chinese ideograms are pictograms, and some of them do “explicitly refer to the reproduction of written forms and contain in their structure an element indicative of action with the hands,” as Thomas Blenman Hare indicates (Hare 67). However, it is also true that Chinese ideograms often contain a variety of pictorial, oral and semantic cues, from which many Chinese and Japanese speakers glean the meaning and pronunciation of ideograms. Ernest Fenollosa, whose essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” had great influence on Ezra Pound, famously ignores this fact and propagates a common misconception about the way Chinese and Chinese-derived characters are read by Chinese and Japanese speakers. Assuming that Chinese characters have “no basis in sound,” Fenollosa advances that the Chinese written language has, “through its very pictorial visibility, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue” (Fenollosa and Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* 44, 55). Fenollosa overlooks the way Chinese and Sino-Japanese ideograms are often read without an eye to their pictoriality, and that they often contain clues about their pronunciation. Readers of Chinese and Japanese tend to read ideograms as conventional signs, “without any longer seeing in them the visual metaphor - the visible etymology- which so impressed Fenollosa” (The Brazilian concretist poet Haroldo de Campos quoted in Perloff 72). For a more detailed discussion of Fenollosa’s essay, see Haun Saussy’s preface to the 2008 edition of “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (Saussy in Fenollosa and Pound, “Fenollosa Compounded: A Distinction” 1–40). For the relevance of this discussion to the legacy of the avant-garde (particularly international concretism) in the digital medium, see chapter 3 in Perloff.

als Medium ist eine Hybridbildung; sie ist ein intermediales Phänomen]. She focuses on performative aspects of writing (texts that enact what they say) as well as on those capacities of writing that spoken language cannot capture. She does so in order to replace the “or”s with “and”s (Krämer, “‘Schriftbildlichkeit’: Oder über eine (fast) vergessene Dimension der Schrift” 160–161, 174). To give one example, mathematical notation and calculus can be regarded according to Krämer as one way in which writing can become operative (in performing mathematical operations) and the locus of thinking can be shifted from the mind to the page (since the page too becomes a locus of cognitive activity) (Krämer, “Operative Schriften als Geistestechnik. Zur Vorgeschichte der Informatik”). Although she links writing with technology, her move is important for suggesting that writing is not only a tool for recording speech or conveying information, but an object of scrutiny in its own right. Intermedial in nature, the written sign partakes in the construction of meaning (*Sinnbildung*) (Koch and Krämer 12).¹⁰

Homing in on this in order to explore how one single written symbol can participate in writing as intermedial phenomenon, Friedrich Kittler gives written signs their place in the history of media. Although Kittler does not focus on the visual form of individual characters, he seeks to “unfold the essential unity of writing, number, image and tone.” According to Kittler, letters were once used to record language, mathematics (letters corresponded to numbers), and music (letters designated tone). Claiming that media studies “only make sense when media make senses,” he adds importantly, “it is not the meaning of signs to make any sense, they are there to sharpen our senses rather than ensnare them in definitions” (Kittler, “Number and Numeral” 57, 55). The distinction between making sense and making senses is of crucial importance for two reasons. First, Kittler’s essay illustrates that the intermediality of writing is not an emerging phenomenon but one overlooked since Aristotle. He adds that for much longer than previously thought, letters presented readers with multiple reading possibilities (letters, numbers, or musical

¹⁰ Here, I translate the word *Sinnbildung* used by Peter Koch and Sybille Krämer as “construction of meaning.” As will be demonstrated in this introduction and explored further in subsequent chapters, the German word “Sinn” can mean several things, including “sense,” “meaning,” “significance,” “object,” “tenor,” and “spirit.” The multivalence of the word “Sinn” is important for understanding the tensions between sense-making and making senses as they relate to the multivalence of letters.

notation) which were left to the reader to discern. Second, Kittler's letters do not necessarily "make sense," in that they do not lead to singular definitions. They rather allow inherently multiple readings, for phenomenal sense (the sensory experience of text) as well as semantic sense. This analysis does not seek to present texts in general as image only or to oppose the visual to other capacities of text. Rather, its focus on the intermedial should be understood as a plea for an enriched reading of literary texts that avails itself of their multiple sensory capacities.

Kittler's attention to sense-making in particular draws attention to an important tension in possible readerly strategies for approaching individual written symbols. As suggested by Herta Müller's collage-poetry, textual fragmentation that disassembles text into its constituent elements and reveals processes of textual production (a transmedial strategy, that is, one that prompts reflection on the unity of the text medium and what may lie beyond it) hinges in part on letter form as a non-representational, protean, intermedial element that introduces gaps, fissures and interruptions into the text medium. These interruptions unsettle the stability of text and language. As scholarship on the intermedial nature of letters suggests, modes of reading attuned to multivalence and transformations of letter form does not merely offer an enriched readerly experience. As the ensuing discussion will elaborate, letter form in transformation has the capacity to render new analytical depth to an important realm of textual and linguistic transmission and transformation: translation.

3. Languages and Letters (Multilingualism and Translation)

This study will respond to two strands of a growing body of scholarly work on transnationalism, translation, and emergent forms of literature and culture: scholarship on multilingualism and translation studies.¹¹ Although David Gramling laments that research on

¹¹ The term multilingualism is difficult to define, but will be used here to refer loosely to the co-presence of two or more languages in a community, in one person, or in any elements of literary and cultural production. For a similar definition and a broader discussion of literary multilingualism in the twentieth century in the German context, see the introductions to Yildiz, "Beyond the Mother Tongue: Configurations of Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century German Literature"; Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*. In addition to the texts to be discussed shortly, see Bhatti for a European-Indian perspective on multilingualism, De Courtivron for bilingual authors' reflections on their relationships with their languages, Schmitz-Emans for a recent German-language reflection on literature and

transnationalism since the 1990s paid inordinate attention to culture to the detriment of language, recent scholarship in both strands is increasingly addressing this lacuna (Gramling, “On the Other Side of Monolingualism” 354–355). This study shares the attention paid by scholarship on multilingualism and translation to emerging forms of linguistic plurality and interrelations, and a commitment to investigating literary strategies that challenge hegemonic (often West-centric) and homogeneous paradigms pertaining to language and literature. However, it critiques both strands’ overinvestment in reference and meaning (with a few exceptions), and seeks to extend the existing lines of inquiry into those elements of language that attention to semantic sense and inattention to textual fragmentation cannot capture. As Naoki Sakai’s work on translation suggests, focus on the visuality of text and on letter form has the potential to illuminate the ways in which letter form in translation can challenge linguistic and textual unity in new ways.

Some important recent scholarship on multilingualism in the areas of applied linguistics, film and literature explores the subjectivity of multilingual language learners, linguistic multiplicity in recent German-language film, and multilingual attempts to overcome a paradigm that imagines individuals and communities as possessing one “true” language. Doris Sommer, a highly regarded expert on minoritarian literature and bilingual virtuosity, has conceptualized “bilingual games” as a collection of strategies to bring individuals and communities to use language in creative, politically conscious and subversive ways, adequate to an age of globalization and mass migrations (Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* xi–xxv; Sommer, *Bilingual Games*). In the area of applied linguistics, Claire Kramsch explores symbolic form and symbolic power in the context of the foreign language classroom in order to investigate subjective experiences of learners and thus better understand the subjective realities

multilingualism. Translation studies in its earlier forms was primarily occupied with the practice of translation, but translation studies today investigates the task and presence of the translator in literary works (e.g. Brodzki, inspired by the works of Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin), translation as productive force and a mode of reading (Glazova), and its relationships to world literature and the global literary marketplace (Apter; Walkowitz; Bleich; Mary Besmeres), gender and translation (de Bary; Simon, *Gender in Translation*), and –national- geographies and translation (Bermann and Wood; Simon, *Translating Montreal*) This introduction will treat the following two foci of translation studies in more detail: the relationship between translation and national languages, as well as translation’s role in defining what a language is.

(i.e. “perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and values”) that these learners construct and that mediate their experiences in a new language (Kramersch 7–16).¹² In the realm of literary studies, recent work by Yasemin Yildiz and David Gramling grapple both with the tensions between multilingualism and the monolingual paradigm, and the dilemmas that arise when they are confronted in literary texts, film, and in the global marketplace. Yildiz describes “monolingualism” as a pervasive paradigm that imagines individuals and communities “to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation.” Her work studies “the workings of the monolingual paradigm and multilingual attempts to overcome it” in the German-speaking context (*Beyond the Mother Tongue* 2, 4). In his work on Turkish-German film and German public discourse on multilingualism, David Gramling explores “dilemmas that arise when monolingualism and multilingualism collide on the free market” (Gramling, “On the Other Side of Monolingualism” 354). In addition, he critiques both German public discourse and multilingual speakers in Germany for prescribing and performing “public monolingualism” while calling upon German teachers, researchers and lawmakers to “become accountable for language-diverse cultures in the Federal Republic” (Gramling, “The New Cosmopolitan Monolingualism” 130, 138). These new scholarly approaches attempt to cultivate multilingual practice and discourse in everyday life, in the classroom, on the global marketplace, in the public sphere, and in literary-artistic creation.

Likewise resisting homogenizing impulses at work in analyzing language, literature and culture is translation studies as “interdiscipline” (that is, not in its earlier normative form but in its current one, allied to comparative literary studies) (Chow 217–231). In a globalized and plurilingual world plagued by legacies of oppression by colonial and communist regimes, translation studies seeks to allow possibilities of comparison and translation that open up

¹² It is important to note that Kramersch acknowledges the materiality of textual forms as constitutive (albeit not exclusively) of second-language learners’ subjectivity. Among the elements that compose learners’ developing realities in the new language are “the sound of a word, the shape of a letter, an intonation contour, or a sudden switch of linguistic code construct attitudes, beliefs, and other psychological realities” (7).

intelligible relations (between texts, languages, cultures) without reducing differences. Where it differs from studies on multilingualism and where this study sees itself aligned with its commitments are its more pointed concentration on linguistic borders and ways of challenging them, linguistic transfer and transformation, as well as its increasing—but, as I will argue, still insufficient—attention to linguistic forms that resist equivalence and easy transfer. Additionally, both translation studies and scholarship on multilingualism are heavily invested in reference and meaning—with a few exceptions as will be discussed below. This study will argue that sustained attention to seemingly non-sensical elements that result from various literary strategies of fragmentation and intermedial play with letter form are not ancillary to but pivotal for giving new analytical depth to the term translation.

Literary studies in general and studies on multilingualism and translation in particular generally investigate larger units of utterance (e.g. words, phrases, sentences), widely considered to be vehicles of meaning and amenable to interlingual transfer. However, Claire Kramsch, Emily Apter, Rey Chow and Naoki Sakai offer some notable exceptions to this general tendency. In the field of applied linguistics, Kramsch's work is significant not only for offering to change practices as well as perceptions of learners in the second-language classroom, but also for acknowledging and seeking to work with non-semantic elements of language ("foreign sounds, shapes, rhythms, intonations"), given their real effects on the "embodied self" of language learners (See particularly Chapter 2 of Kramsch). In comparative literary studies, Emily Apter has recently launched a critique of the assumption of translatability in world literature models of literary studies. Apter's work is inspired by Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), an international dictionary of important untranslatable terms. Against existing models of world literature and infused with the specificity of individual terms from the *Dictionnaire*, she champions the term "untranslatables," which help rethink comparative literature in "site-specific in ways that avoid reproducing neoimperialist cartographies" and refuse hegemonic global paradigms (582). Like Apter, Rey Chow highlights "problems of unevenness" that attend relations (including translation) between Western and non-

Western languages, texts, and cultures (Chow 570). Arguing against linguistic nativism and cultural pluralism, Chow regards linguistic equivalence not as a given but rather as “a type of potentiality we seek to explore in language” (575–576). In brief, Kramsch’s attention to non-sensical elements of language in the multilingual experience of second-language acquisition, Apter’s focus on the linguistic, cartographic and cultural specificity of untranslatables, as well as Chow’s refusal to regard equivalence as a given in translation evidence heightened sensitivity in the fields of applied linguistics and comparative literary studies to linguistic forms that resist equivalence and transfer. This study acknowledges these important gestures, but pays keener attention to seemingly nonsensical, nonequivalent and language-specific letter forms in transformation. It proposes that we rethink the units that compose singular languages and the ways in which literary texts reveal the fissures in any unit one may call a language.

Naoki Sakai’s work on translation offers some important interventions in this regard. Sakai frequently argues against the notion of languages as natural, autonomous and closed entities. He treats linguistic address and translation as problematic and nontransparent phenomena, where the transmission of meaning can never be guaranteed (Sakai, “Ito Jinsai: The Text as the Human Body and the Human Body as the Text”; Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*; Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?”). Written signs are not his objects of analysis. However, he turns to them in several key moments to articulate problems of linguistic dislocation, plurality, the politics of linguistic address and of national languages.

In the first of these moments, Sakai refuses Roman Jakobson’s tripartite classification of translation into intralingual translation, interlingual translation, and intersemiotic translation.¹³ His first reason for it is that “viewed from the position of the translator, neither the unitary unity of a language nor the plurality of language unities can be taken for granted” (Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity* 10). In addition, Jakobson assumes that there is an inside and an outside of

¹³ Here are Jakobson’s definitions of each term cited from his 1959 essay “On linguistic aspects of translation”: “(1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. 2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. 3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 145, emphases in original).

language, a binary Sakai continually seeks to problematize (Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?” 72). If, like Sakai, we regard language as a heterogeneous system and linguistic address as nontransparent, it becomes impossible to differentiate between rewording within the same language, for instance, and translation between different languages. Importantly, another factor attending a written text further complicates this classification. Sakai recalls the difficulty of distinguishing between verbal and nonverbal signs, a problem thrown into relief by texts with a salient visual component: “Is a calligraphic text ‘verbal or nonverbal? Is it a text to see or a text to read? Is it possible to translate a calligraphic text? If it is, in what sense is it so? What are the conditions under which the verbal is immediately equated to the linguistic? A series of questions like these will gradually suggest to us that there could be discursive formations in which the propriety of ‘translation proper’ can hardly be taken for granted” (Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity* 10–11). For Sakai, the visuality of a calligraphic text is perhaps linguistic in some way, but it cannot be readily classified as verbal. Because its translation would probably need to be both interlingual and intersemiotic (calligraphy in another language as well as in another script), it both questions and expands the term “translation proper.” Sakai therefore suggests that Jakobson’s term takes for granted the unity of singular languages and the plurality of language unities, and forgets that texts can have additional dimensions irreducible to the verbal. This becomes apparent when the visual world of a text in addition to its verbal contents becomes the object of translation.

In addition to the visuality of texts, a later move in Sakai shows that written signs can disrupt the so-called naturalness and unitary nature of national languages by revealing the artificiality that permeates political attempts at language-building and the heterogeneous nature of so-called national languages. Arguing that the unity of a language is more a regulative idea than empirical fact, Sakai turns again to calligraphy and written signs, in order to reveal the artificiality of modern attempts to build a national Japanese language: “The distinction of the domestic and the foreign became effectual only when the semiotic functions of graphic signs were reconfigured” (Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?” 73–74, 79). Modern Japanese

includes three writing systems: *kanji* (ideograms, the term literally means “Chinese character”), *hiragana* (a phonetic syllabary used to write particles, suffixes, verb and adjective inflections, Japanese words for which there are no *kanji*, and to transcribe thus facilitate the reading of obscure *kanji*), and *katakana* (another phonetic system used to transcribe foreign words, whose characters correspond to those of *hiragana*). Sakai explains that *kanji* were adapted from China in Japan between the first or second century and the seventh century. From the ninth century onward, *hiragana* and *katakana* were developed for simplification purposes (writing *kanji* requires both a prodigious memory and dexterity, since there are thousands of *kanji*, and writing one sign can require up to thirty strokes in strict order).¹⁴ Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, a group of writers began to project onto the past “an archetypal unity of the Chinese or Japanese language” by means of co-figuration (Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?” 81). That is to say, these authors sought to figure Japanese *kana* (*hiragana* and *katakana*) as Japanese signs, and *mana* (*kanji*) as Chinese, pitting so-called Japanese and Chinese signs against one another in order to co-figure Japanese and Chinese as linguistic unities. They did so in spite of the fact that *kana* were derivatives of *mana* and that *mana* were originally regarded neither as Chinese nor as Japanese, but simply as “an authentic or true character,” and “this economy of semiotic ascriptions to *mana* and *kana* had nothing to do with ethnic difference between Chinese and Japanese” (Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?” 79–80). For Sakai, the politics of founding a Japanese ethnos targets written signs, assigning them *ex post facto* origins in a clearly demarcated linguistic space. When one investigates their history and pays sustained attention to their materiality, however, these signs reveal that the unity of national language is only possible in a relation of co-figuration with another language. Read as independent, nontransparent and material elements of text, Japanese *kana* and *mana* reveal “disjunctive instabilities” in the

¹⁴ Thus, *hiragana* and *katakana* are abbreviated or simplified *kanji*. The traces of this simplification can still be observed today. When Japanese give or describe names verbally, they describe the individual *kanji* in the names, since one phonetic reading can correspond to many configurations of *kanji*, and one cannot know the precise name until one can visualize the Chinese characters of the name. Since *katakana* contain some simplified *kanji* elements, a *kanji* can sometimes be reconstructed from the *katakana* forms derived from it. Thus, if a *kanji* in a name contains one or more *katakana* elements, a Japanese-speaker will describe the character saying something along the lines of “it contains the *katakana* ‘e’ and next to that, the *katakana* ‘ka’.”

relations between so-called national languages and their writers, readers, and speakers (Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?” 85). In addition, just as national languages are co-figured in relation to one another, so are other terms closely associated with language: the verbal and non-verbal, sense and non-sense. Read with attention to their visuality, written signs call upon us to rethink the limits of individual languages and of language as such, challenging political and interpretive attempts to regard them facilely as unities. This study holds that this potential that inheres in written signs is not limited to *mana* and *kana* but generalizable to all written signs written under the sign of translation, as following discussions of letter form will elaborate.

4. Letter Form

Admittedly, some important difficulties attend formal inquiry into written signs, inquiry that would go beyond their identification and function as elements of sound transcription. In a brief call to expand the scope of literary inquiry into the aesthetics and politics of letter form, Simon Jarvis acknowledges difficulties that inhere in exploring those aspects of readerly experience that are “at once hard to get rid of, and hard to universalize: the aspects, in particular, which concern the materiality of language.” Yet he critiques existing inquiries into letter form for circumnavigating systematic analysis of the effects of shapes of letters on the reading experience “by means of a rapid appeal to the notion of mere contingency” or ignoring them by “ruling out the very possibility of moving from attention to interpretation” (Jarvis 234, 233). In his reflections, Jarvis homes in not on the monolithic materiality of text or of the print medium, but on the individual elements of writing. Pointing out that “there never has been and never will be a letter form which communicates only the identity of the letter without any surplus,” Jarvis contends that letters belong to the material world of text and are irreducible to identificatory and contingency-focused modes of reading. Instead, the letter’s body is a sign “contained within a symbolic economy,” which cannot be thrown away once decoded. There is an excess, at once inessential and “an unacknowledged ground of, or weather for, intersubjective feeling.” Therefore, inquiry into the aesthetics and politics of letter form, he asserts, might account for

authorial and institutional choices of one type of letter form over the other, as well as affective responses to texts (Jarvis 234, 238).

Textual surplus and what Jarvis terms “letter form” and “the letter’s body” are not reducible to games of sense and reference, which renders them recalcitrant objects of scholarly inquiry. “Form” is a diffuse yet important term in aesthetic theory that often serves as a term of differentiation. It is used to differentiate between genres, between form and content, or between form and formlessness. In addition, “form” has double status as a term of abstraction on the one hand, and for referring to concrete properties and characteristics of artistic and literary works on the other. Therefore, it can almost be termed a negative term that “does not appear,” yet “targets precisely the visibly concrete” (Städtke 463).¹⁵ Reading texts and their constitutive letters with an attention to letter form requires reflection on the “surplus” of textual elements versus their content or identity, between an abstract meaning and the concrete, material world of text. Jarvis challenges this status of form as not visibly concrete, choosing to read it as nontransparent. Jarvis’s critique of transparent readings of letter form constitutes by extension a reexamination of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetics, marked by a hermeneutic approach to artworks that sought to investigate and interpret their meaning. In this period, “[f]orm as material embodiment only has a mediating function: It becomes transparent to the extent that meaning emerges in the process of interpretation. The suitable medium here is the ‘form of writing,’ for the interpretation of art above all the literary text” (Städtke 485).¹⁶ By contrast, Jarvis seeks to redeem the material dimensions of letter form, where form would no longer have a mediating function but would be an object of analysis in itself.

This study shares Jarvis’s attention to letter form and conviction in the importance of exploring textual materiality and excess beyond the semantic. However, it shifts focus slightly

¹⁵ “In der Realität kommt ‘Form’ nicht vor, doch der Begriff zielt genau auf das sichtbar Konkrete ab” [In reality ‘form’ does not exist, yet the term targets precisely the visibly concrete] (Markus Schäfer-Willenborg, “Form und Rhetorik,” in J.Fohrmann/H.Müller (Hg.), *Literaturwissenschaft* (München 1995), 220, cited in Städtke).

¹⁶ “Die Form als materielle Verkörperung hat dabei nur Mittlerfunktion: Sie wird im selben Maß transparent, wie im Verlauf der Interpretation der Sinn hervortritt. Das geeignete Medium ist hier die »Form der Schrift«, für die Kunstinterpretation vor allem der literarische Text.”

from Jarvis's suggested areas of inquiry. Jarvis focuses on individual instances of institutional and literary choices of particular letter forms (e.g. why road signs or poetry are printed in a particular font), and the affective responses they elicit. The focus is not on typographical choices in literary texts but on literary strategies at work on letter form as such, and not on affective responses to the material dimensions of text but on new methodologies for reading letter form. As will be elucidated shortly, translation broadly conceived is an intensified form of reading, and letter forms in transformation call for new interpretive strategies attuned to transmedial literary strategies at work on texts and to the materiality of writing (e.g. Herta Müller's juxtaposition of text and image that also exposes the medial strategies at work in her collages). In addition, letter form in the context of translation illuminates the ways in which this form is *transformed* (e.g. when Georges Perec's letter *e* transforms into the mathematical symbol \in that indicates membership to a set).

5. *Writing and Letters in Translation*

Jarvis's insistence on scholarly inquiry into letter form shifts focus towards textual elements that escape the scene of signification and hermeneutics, and insists on form as distinct from content or identity. David Wellbery identifies this lack in hermeneutics and notes that sense-oriented, signifying, hermeneutic approaches to literary texts have been challenged from four main directions: poststructuralism, post-war analytic philosophy, cybernetics' introduction of the concept of "noise" as a necessary condition of signification (no sense without nonsense), and literary texts themselves that challenge the primacy of meaning for literary activity (Wellbery 12–15). Of particular importance for this analysis are his critique of the work of poststructuralism in general and Jacques Derrida's writings in particular, of "the hermeneutic presupposition of *Sinn*," and his attention to the status of translation and translatability in this disrupted scene of writing (Wellbery 11).

These challenges are not sequential, but the poststructuralist attention to the primacy of writing introduces possibilities beyond hermeneutic or semantic sense into writing. Wellbery

both credits and critiques poststructuralism, particularly the work of Jacques Derrida, for showing that exteriority is not ancillary to but constitutive of writing. This, for Wellbery's analysis and for Derrida, achieves two main and related objectives. First, Derrida's critique of phonocentrism (the primacy accorded to speech over writing in Western thought) reveals that writing is not exterior or ancillary to speech but is constitutive of it, even prior to it (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 168–171). In other words, exteriority is at work even in the interiority of expression: "the improper name of this exteriority, which is, of course, no longer mere exteriority, is writing" (Wellbery 17).¹⁷ Second and relatedly, writing proves constitutive of reading, in that texts are not merely subject to an author's intentions and do not refer to an outside world or external referents. All signs are subject to "substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references," playing a game of infinite referral and deferral of signs. This has broad implications for scenes of writing and reading alike, only one of which is that critical reading does not necessarily glean but "produces" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158–159). If a written sign no longer cleanly picks out or refers to an object in the world but partakes in a game of "infinite referral," reading and writing are "no longer dominated by the concept of meaning." Wellbery observes thus that accident and non-sense enter the scene of writing and rip apart, tear, disrupt or fragment the scene of signification and hermeneutics (Wellbery 11, 14, 23).

For Wellbery, signification has been subject to rupture under the sign of translation and untranslatability. Wellbery observes this outcome in the terms "Writing," "Écriture" and "Schrift." While they are direct translations of one another, they mean different things in three linguistic, literary, and theoretical traditions. More importantly, however, their graphemic constellation is different (i.e. they appear different on the page, they are written differently), testifying to "writing as the possibility and the impossibility of translation (...) writing as that

¹⁷ In his observations, Wellbery also critiques Derrida's exposition of the exteriority of writing. If exteriority is constitutive of signification, if "inside and outside, expression and indication," are intertwined, then the notion of exteriority itself is not left untouched by this. Thus, poststructuralism "encounters its own paradoxical ground, which is to say: the limit of its capacity to observe it, by this reading, the signifying scene has been ripped apart by its incapacity to observe the observation that produced it" (Wellbery 17–19).

which rips apart the signifying—the hermeneutic, the sense-oriented, the translational—scene” (Wellbery 12). Wellbery shows the untenability of translation as a hermeneutic or sense-oriented practice by emphasizing precisely this graphemic dimensions of translation. Second, Wellbery believes that writing’s intervention into the hermeneutic scene introduces accident and non-sense into this scene. Wellbery makes a plea for methodologies of “reading of the unreadable, a reading that adheres to the moment of accidentality and non-sense that marks the work in its singularity and in the singularity of its history” (Wellbery 23).¹⁸

Offering new strategies for reading the accidental, seemingly unreadable and nonsensical elements of texts constitutes the main objective of this study. While Derrida’s and Wellbery’s avowal of the primacy of writing, the disruptions of hermeneutic approaches to texts and translation’s role in this disruption are indispensable for initiating a search for such interpretive strategies, this study will diverge from Derrida’s and Wellbery’s terms in three important ways. First, as distinct from Derrida’s exposition of the “ellipsis both of meaning and of form,” where form cannot be dissociated from “the concept of appearing, of meaning, of self-evidence, of essence,” this study insists on form as an independent concept (Derrida, “Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language” 173, 158). Instead of attempting to divorce form from meaning altogether, it seeks to suspend reflections on semantic meaning in literary texts in order to regard translation and its elements as forms, that is, as independent structures subject to change, not only as semantic but also as sensory elements.¹⁹ Second, this heightened attention to the sensory in turn initiates this study’s deviation from Wellbery’s terms “unreadable” and “non-sense,” since attention to the sensory can offer strategies of reading what might appear nonsensical as sensory, and the unreadable as newly legible. Third, it recalls Jarvis’s observation of the irreducibility of the materiality of language, of textual excess and of written forms, and contrasts it with Derrida’s profession of infinite referral/deferral in the scene of writing and

¹⁸ As a possible point of entry into this problem, Wellbery suggests that literary studies take their cue from artworks and ways of encountering and interpreting artworks as nonverbal creations.

¹⁹ This will be elucidated in more detail in the subsequent discussion of the status of form for Walter Benjamin’s essay on translation.

signification. As Dieter Mersch observes in his study on the materiality and presence of signs and the moments of their setting, Derrida's investigation cannot sufficiently account for the real or implied presence of breath in writing and its performance, as well as those dimensions of writing and speech bound with body and materiality (Mersch, *Was sich Zeigt* 110–112). As subsequent close readings of literary texts will reveal, literary texts at times metonymically link written signs to bodies, intimate breath, and call for their performance. In these moments, the material, bodily, and aspirative dimensions of writing refuse to be read with reference to a trace, or as signs merely masking the absence of a signified.

Despite some inattention to literary strategies at work on letter form and to the sensory and performative dimensions of writing, Simon Jarvis's call for a systematic analysis of letter form and David Wellbery's recognition of writing's potential to disrupt translation as hermeneutic practice are important for this analysis for the following reason: They shift attention from semantic dimensions of writing and text towards written forms, and argue that literary analysis, theories of translation and everyday practices of reading must take into account letter form and graphemic constellations of writing. While Wellbery suggests writing's impact on hermeneutics, semantics and translation, and Jarvis defends letter form, the following section will consider the closer links between textual fragmentation, form—particularly letter form—and translation, as expounded in Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (The Task of the Translator), perhaps the most influential reflection on translation written in the twentieth century.

6. *Form in Translation*

Like Jarvis and Wellbery, Walter Benjamin poses some direct challenges to the status of form in nineteenth-century aesthetics as transparent and serving only mediating function. In addition, his work often explores surface phenomena and fragmentation in texts and artworks, as well as non-semantic dimensions of translation. For Benjamin in general artworks and texts become material entities, no longer symbolically perceived in a totalizing complex of meaning

but allegorically, under the sign of rupture and ruin. Benjamin is a reader of surfaces, of things in the world, of artworks, and of texts.²⁰

“Übersetzung ist eine Form” (Translation is a form), writes Benjamin (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4:9; Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 1: 254). Benjamin’s “form” is quite distinct from letter form, but his essay illuminates the non-communicative properties of texts, the necessity of transformation in translation, the relationship between translation and linguistic form, the dependency and independency of original from translation, and the status of translation as a relationship not between texts but between languages. Though first translated in 1968 by Harry Zohn as “mode,” Benjamin’s choice of the word “form” is deliberate and intended to provocatively highlight “the tension between the relative independence of translation and its dependency on something other than itself—an ‘original,’ a work,” and ultimately to question the notions of wholeness and harmony that are dominant in aesthetic theory (Weber 57–58). In his analysis of Benjamin’s “form” in “The Task of the Translator,” Samuel Weber indicates that “form” is crucial for Benjamin’s translation theory in several ways. First of all, “mode” suggests a modification and not an independent structure, for which the term “form” would be more appropriate. Second and relatedly, if translation is an independent structure, then in order to become translation, the original has to be *transformed*.²¹ Third, for Benjamin, translation as matter of form is distinct from translation as a matter of content or meaning. Moreover, translation as form implies “a relationship not between *individual works* so much as between

²⁰ Anson Rabinach draws attention to the importance for Benjamin of “perception as a reading of the configuration of surfaces,” while Paul North suggests that Benjamin substituted “pure appearance” (*Schein*) for the romantic concept of form that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rabinach 62; North 78). This does not suggest a parity between Benjamin’s interest in surfaces and his possible advocacy of *Scheinkritik*, but rather indicates that both aspects of his thought point away from totalizing complexes of meaning toward fragmentation and surface phenomena. In particular, the translation essay itself moves away from the communication of meaning, as Carol Jacobs points out, wresting its words from their definitions, ultimately defining translation itself as undefinable (Jacobs 756, 758). This section will develop Benjamin’s preoccupation with surfaces and form only in the translation essay. For discussions of the role of surfaces in other essays, see also Eric Downing’s analysis of “Schicksal und Charakter” (Fate and Character) and Christine Ivanović on various essays, to give only a few examples.

²¹ “A work can only ‘work,’ do its work, have effects, be significant, insofar as it goes outside of itself and is transformed, by and into something else, something other. This is why ‘to signify’ is not simply the same as to ‘be important.’ To signify is to be transformed” (Weber 63).

singularly dividial languages.” Thus translation is not a matter of linguistic content. Rather, it focuses on the “form of language” and not on literary forms (Weber 69–70).

What does Benjamin’s translation theory have to offer to an understanding of letter form and to letter form in translation? First, Benjamin’s theory is non-communicative, that is to say, it is not a theory of what content translations communicate. Given that written signs are not widely understood to be vehicles of semantic meaning, Benjamin’s theory is particularly fruitful for understanding the processes by means of which non-semantic textual elements undergo translation. Second, its focus on translation as form suggests that the original and translation are independent, albeit in a translational relationship to one another. In undergoing translation, the original is transformed. As will be seen in ensuing discussions of literary texts, when letters as material and protean elements of literary texts undergo translation, they are less translated in the semantic sense than transformed.

Seen as textual elements of transformation, written signs’ transformation into other symbols (mathematical notation, numbers, capsules of memory, objects, visual marks on a page) already anticipate and negotiate the changes undergone by a text in translation rather than resisting them. For Benjamin and many more theorists of language, articulating that which lies outside language—or outside or beyond one language—is just as important as articulating what one language or language as such may include. Benjamin introduces the word “form” into his essay to highlight the independence of the translation from the original on the one hand, and the dependence of translation on something other than itself on the other (Weber 57). Written signs too can stand at the threshold between texts and languages, and they continually test the boundaries that constitute and deconstitute them.

7. Letters in Paul Celan, Georges Perec and Yoko Tawada: Contexts

This study analyzes texts written under the sign of translation from the microperspective of letters. It relates the often metonymic or synecdochic associations between protean letters and protean bodies to the visual and aural world of texts and languages. Letters and bodies, images

and sounds, and different writing systems threaten at any point to transform into one another, owing in part to the transmedial nature of written signs on the one hand, and to the rearrangeability of these smallest legible textual elements on the other.

Though the history of letteral experimentation in literature is long, this study will focus on the immediate post-World War II and post-1989 contexts in Western Europe, periods marked by historical, political and literary turning points that challenged the capacities of verbal arts to articulate turmoil, transformation, and silence. World War II and the Holocaust brought death, displacement and destruction on a global scale. Authors whose biographies and literary works are marked by this period often thematize geographic and linguistic displacement, and their works are often read rightly as responses to trauma, catastrophe, and mourning. Additionally, their literary output can be understood as reflections on the limits of language, language's ability to articulate the unspeakable, and on that which lies beyond its capacities, such as silence and absence (e.g. of the many dead who disappeared from the world, whose voices and testimony will never be heard). However, those approaches to literary works that treat silence and absence as themes and tropes and the beyond-language as a realm of metaphysical inarticulability, overlook some very material ways in which literary authors paradoxically admit silence, absence, chaos, and cacophony into their works on the typo-topographic space of the page. While this study does not set out to discredit existing readings of literature written under the sign of the Holocaust, it does seek to supplement existing interpretations of texts that engage in letteral experimentation and textual fragmentation, showing how interpretive strategies attuned to the materiality of writing and of the multisensory capacities of text can enrich existing readings of these literary texts. Read with an eye to intermedial and transmedial strategies at work in individual written signs, the lettered reading this study advances seeks to show that what is often neglected as nonsense is in fact sensory, and that cacophony, chaos, silence and absence are at times paradoxically present on the space of the page. This study thus seeks to read literary texts in the multidimensionality that they often achieve precisely by means of letteral experimentation.

For this reason, the first part of this study will be dedicated to the works of Romanian-

Jewish poet Paul Celan and French-Jewish author Georges Perec. Celan and Perec's biographies are marked by personal loss, as well as geographic and linguistic displacement.²² While Celan chooses German and Perec French as their sole literary language respectively, their work is characterized by an intense preoccupation with translation, the materiality of language and a multilingual sensitivity.²³ Celan and Perec constitute two cases of post-war authors whose oeuvre is multilingual and the critical literature on which is dominated by the long shadow of the Holocaust and attendant metaphysical themes of trauma, absence, and loss. While silence, absence and the unsayable are undoubtedly themes and tropes in Perec and Celan, this study investigates their paradoxical yet quite material presence on the page. Both authors exploit linguistic fragmentation and the letter's intermedial and transformative potential on the typographic space of the page. Incorporating elements of other languages, extralinguistic sounds, protean written marks, ciphers of absence, and mathematical symbols at the elemental level of the written sign, their texts reveal themselves to be in continual transformation.

The fall of the Berlin Wall saw increasing mobilization of people and markets, the emergence of new media (including the World Wide Web and mobile technology), and geographic, political and economic realignments as the Cold War era ended. If this is an era of intensified global encounters (of people, cultures, languages), then how are these encounters made perceptible on the space of the page? And how do literary texts configure, make visible and play with digital encounters in the "old" medium? Scholarship on emerging forms of literature and culture since 1989 are abundant, and these studies address the co-presence of multiple languages, cultures, and the extended compass of national literatures. However, there has been insufficient attention to date paid to key ways in which textual fragments, particularly written signs, become sites of contact between languages, writing systems, and senses. While in

²² The war forced Celan to relocate from Bukownia, in today's Romania, to Paris, where he was a poet, teacher, and translator. His family perished in the Holocaust, and Celan himself took his own life later (1970) in Paris. Perec's parents were Polish-Jewish immigrants to France. His father was in the French army and was killed on the last day of *drole de guerre*, and his mother was seized in Paris, sent to Drancy and was probably killed in Auschwitz. As well as being exposed to Yiddish, French and Polish in his childhood home, in his adult life he was member of *Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle*, an international group of writers and mathematicians.

²³ In addition to being multilingual, both Celan and Perec were active translators.

the post-war context language's other was most poignantly figured as silence or absence, the post-Wall context urges the literary arts to reflect more pointedly on the ways in which languages include, encounter, embody, or exclude other languages. Intermedial letteral strategies in the post-Wall context encourage authors and readers alike to reflect on letters as sites of contact.

Transformation, multilingualism, travel, and writing are among the foremost preoccupations of German-Japanese author Yoko Tawada, who is unique in global letters for developing her literary and essayistic output in two languages (Japanese and German) "independently and simultaneously" (Yildiz, "Beyond the Mother Tongue: Configurations of Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century German Literature" 157). Tawada's literary languages are German and Japanese, but the languages and geographies that appear in her work span four continents and can be considered global in scope. Tawada has been publishing poetry, essays, short stories, novels, plays, a libretto, and has been performing with music since 1987, and her work thus spans the time from the fall of the Berlin Wall to today. More important, however, her work is often read under the sign of translation, travel, and gender.²⁴ However, with some notable exceptions, few studies have explored the connections between her multilingual output and her intermedial techniques at work on written signs (Sino-Japanese ideograms, letters of the Latin alphabet, punctuation, and mathematical symbols including numbers).²⁵ Letteral strategies are pivotal for understanding Tawada's reflections on new media and increased mobility. More broadly, her literary strategies and the challenges she gives her readers call for new modes of reading attuned to her texts' transformative and protean capacities in the digital age.

A secondary context relevant for contextualizing post-war and post-Wall intermedial strategies at work on letters are the twentieth-century avant-gardes, particularly surrealism and concretism. While distinct from Celan, Perec and Tawada in poetics and practice, twentieth-century avant-gardes constitute a point of orientation for contextualizing these authors. Celan

²⁴ See relevant references in Chapter 3.

²⁵ Some important exceptions are Kim, "Ethnic Irony"; Kim, "Writing the Cleft: Tawada Translates Celan"; Arens; Knott.

studied the avant-gardes closely as a young man in Czernowitz, wrote some surrealist poetry early in his career, and there is a tendency in early scholarship on Celan to read his work as surrealist.²⁶ Perec's work with strict literary constraint and his literary affiliation with the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (OuLiPo), on the other hand, can be considered a direct foil to surrealism. In fact, the OuLiPo was founded as a reaction to surrealism after a fallout between André Breton, the founder of surrealism, and Raymond Queneau, who later began the OuLiPo with the mathematician Francois Le Lionnais. Tawada's literary practice borrows some important strategies and images from surrealism, but as will be shown, differs from it primarily in its non-automaticity.²⁷

An aesthetics of destruction and ruin dominates the avant-gardes more generally. This destruction can in fact be better characterized as an aesthetics of fragmentation, that is, of breaking up textual elements such that they may be read, experienced, and assembled anew. More specifically, in futurism, which inspired and influenced movements such as surrealism and Dada, words have object-like status. Instead of attempting to perceive a reality beyond the word or an object of art, futurists sought to reveal the reality in word- and art-objects in and of themselves. The road from this approach to literary and visual arts and a literary preoccupation with the materiality of language and the page is not all too long, as both an aesthetics of fragmentation and the object-like status of textual elements are among the foremost preoccupations of Celan, Perec and Tawada.

Concretism, on the other hand, is credited with "making the sound and shape of words its explicit field of investigation." (Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 59), and evidences a lyrical obsession with words and smaller textual elements that the Swedish concretist Öyvind Fahlström called "worlets." Concretism's insistence on "language as concrete matter" importantly challenges the transparency of the word (Fahlström 110). Marjorie Perloff observes that

²⁶ See in particular Felstiner for a biographical account of Celan's encounters with the surrealists and Ryland for a literary-historical contextualization.

²⁷ See Brandt for surrealist features of Tawada's poetics, and Adelson for an important objection to this interpretive perspective.

“concretist texts—texts in which letristic or morphemic form is inextricable from meaning—anticipate contemporary digital poetics, where letter, font, size, spacing, and color are used to generate complex verbovisual configurations” (Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 13). This study does not argue for a direct lineage from the avant-gardes to Celan, Perec and Tawada’s work or to letteral strategies in particular, nor to their larger literary-historical context more generally. In fact, as will be shown in the individual chapters, all three authors deviate in important ways from avant-garde aesthetics (if one can generalize so broadly). However, avant-gardes’ aesthetics of destruction, ruin and regeneration, as well as their attention to texts’ visuality and materiality become an important precursor, foil, and interlocutor for all three authors respectively.

8. Letters in Paul Celan, Georges Perec and Yoko Tawada: Texts

Two often treated points of entry in Celan and Perec scholarship, literary multilingualism and the dynamic between sound and silence, need to be read in terms of the co-presence of different writing systems in Paul Celan and Georges Perec’s texts. Tensions between the consonantal Hebrew alphabet and the Latin alphabet (which includes vowels as discrete symbols) must attend readings of word fragmentation, silence, and dialogic address in Celan’s poetry collection *Die Niemandrose* (*The No-One’s-Rose*—1963). The first chapter of the present study treats two letters and a punctuation mark: *aleph* of the Hebrew alphabet, *O* of the Latin alphabet, and quotation marks. It reads the letter *aleph* as marker of unpronounceability, but also metonymically as body. *Aleph*’s paradoxical status as silent letter and the first letter of creation recall Celan’s own poetic project of a literary creation that tends towards silence. *Aleph* initiates the caesurae and circumcisions that permeate not only Celan’s poetic images, but also his words and his lines of text, understood as material, almost corporeal creations on a page. This analysis then treats the letter *O* as visual mark, vocative particle, and cipher of absence, as well as quotation marks as dramatized written signs, to revisit Celan’s preoccupation with poetic address, translation, and the materiality of language as typo-topographic phenomena.

The second chapter investigates the lipogrammatic constraint (omission of the letter *e*

without sacrificing orthographic or grammatical accuracy) in Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition* (*A Void*—1969). By omitting the most frequently appearing letter in written French, Perec's multilingual novel also manipulates French letter frequencies, treating letters of the French alphabet as elements of a mathematical set. Perec's intertextual references to Jorge Luis Borges suggest that Perec's novel aspires to the typographic entropy in Borges's fiction-essay "The Library of Babel." Simultaneously, Perec employs *e*'s status as endangered phoneme and unsounded vowel in order paradoxically to place in relief multiple possibilities of sensory experience on the space of the page. As evidenced by Perec's collection of essays *Especies d'Espaces* (*Species of Spaces*—1974), Perec views the page as a two-dimensional space where writing can take place as performance. The performance of writing and the paradoxical presence of absence in the form of written signs suggest that for Celan and Perec, writing is less a practice in silence and absence than of paradoxical play between metaphysical absence and material presence.

Writing in a different historical context, Tawada explicitly names Celan as a muse, and she responds both to Celan's poetry and the concretist poet Ernst Jandl in her literary and essayistic work. Tawada's poetics strongly resemble some of Perec's oulipian experiments, while her readings of Celan's poetry suggest that she, Celan and Perec are all invested in the materiality of writing on the one hand, and on the other, in linguistic thresholds that open up expression to multiple possibilities. The third chapter analyses Tawada's engagement with Walter Benjamin's translation essay, her novel *Schwager in Bordeaux* (*Brother-in-law in Bordeaux*—2008) and her intertextual work *Opium für Ovid* (*Opium for Ovid*—2000). Tawada's treatment of Benjamin's essay betrays her investment in readerly encounters with texts that pivot on written signs, as well as her selective engagement with Benjamin that embraces his preoccupation with textual surfaces and the materiality of language while challenging Benjamin's dismissive treatment of readerly experience. The 2008 novel *Schwager in Bordeaux* consists largely of German text printed in black ink. However, Sino-Japanese ideograms (*kanji*) fragment the German prose, in the form both of rubrics printed in blue ink and full-page

multicolor illuminations (as in medieval manuscripts). *Opium für Ovid* additionally reveals links between letteral and bodily transformation. Thus alluding to visual aids in early book culture, presenting playful scenes of interlingual incomprehension, and demonstrating the further divisibility of Sino-Japanese and Latin orthographic symbols into fragments, Tawada fashions texts in which concepts of readerly incomprehension and textual indeterminacy are inoperative. Instead, Tawada offers the terms multivalence and transformation. In their status as protean images, foreign bodies, numbers, capsules of memory and tools of encipherment, all orthographic symbols reveal one another's multivalence as signs in continual transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

LETTERAL LIFE: DIMENSIONS OF CAESURAE, ADDRESS AND CITATION IN PAUL CELAN'S LETTERS

1. Paul Celan and Written Signs

Paul Celan was arguably the greatest German-language poet of the twentieth century and certainly the most prominent proponent of what can be called poetry after Auschwitz. A Romanian Jew whose family and friends perished in the Holocaust and who lived the rest of his short life in self-imposed exile as instructor and translator in Paris, Paul Celan and the language of his poetry were marked by the perils of the Third Reich.²⁸ Holding that German poetry “has become more sober, more factual,” distrustful of beauty, grayer, Celan forged a poetic language that refigured the capacities of verbal arts to articulate silence as well as the scourge of war and genocide, thus challenging Theodor Adorno’s early claim that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* III: 167; Celan, “Reply to a Questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore, Paris, 1958” 15; Adorno, *Prisms* 34).²⁹ Exemplified by his problematic relationship with the influential Gruppe 47 [Group 47] that evidenced surprising insensitivity to his Jewish background and reacted unfavorably to Celan’s at times hermetic language, Celan’s entry into the German literary scene was thorny.³⁰ His gradually established

²⁸ In his “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen” (1958), Celan famously suggests that language passed through perils and emerged “angereichert von all dem” [enriched by all this]. Celan’s statement resists a triumphant reading even as it appears to celebrate language’s survival. Celan tellingly places the word “angereichert” in quotation marks. The word is translated as “enriched” but can also mean “enReiched,” that is, that it acquired elements of the Third Reich. (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* III: 186; Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 395). Like the other famous chronicler of the language of the Third Reich, the Romance philologist and survivor Viktor Klemperer, Celan does not accept that language has escaped unscathed. (See for instance Klemperer’s discussion of the prefix *ent-* (“de-”), as in *Entnazifizierung* (denazification) in his philologist’s notebook (Klemperer 9). Many thanks to Peter Gilgen of Cornell University for pointing out the wordplay between “angereichert” and “Reich.”

²⁹ Adorno modified this claim in *Negative Dialectics*, directing the question away from that of writing poetry after Auschwitz and raising “the less cultural question of whether after Auschwitz you can go on living” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 363).

³⁰ Gruppe 47 was an influential literary association founded in 1947 by Hans Werner Richter that sought to give young writers a platform to present and promote their work; it also awarded a yearly prize. It began to dissolve in the late 1960s as student protests gained momentum. For a brief description of Celan’s 1952 reading before the group, see Felstiner 64–65. For other accounts of this meeting, see Sanders and Lenz. For a discussion of latent anti-Semitism in the Gruppe 47, see Briegleb. For more general histories, see for instance Mandel; Kröll; Braese.

status in German letters was also beset by troubles, most notably the Goll-Affair, in which Claire Goll, the widow of deceased Jewish poet Yvan Goll, accused Celan of plagiarizing her husband's poetry.³¹ However, Celan's singular poetic language as well as his insistent yet subtle remembrance of Nazi atrocities and their enduring marks render him one of the most significant literary figures of post-war German letters.

Related to Celan's historical context is his refusal of traditional style, themes and motifs. Bernd Witte credits Celan for refraining from taking stylistic recourse to either ancient myths or traditionalism in the post-war decade as "an epoch of Classicism acting modern" [die Epoche eines sich modernistisch gebärdenden Klassizismus]. Positioning Celan with reference to other German poets of this early postwar period, such as Wilhelm Lehmann, Elisabeth Langgässer and Gottfried Benn, Witte singles out Celan for transforming Baudelaire and Mallarmé's modernist and hermetic poetry into what Witte calls "the dark poem." Both Baudelaire and Mallarmé in Witte's view refused to be transparent, while Celan's refusal of transparency was acutely mindful of the dark history of the Third Reich (Witte 72–73).³² As James Rolleston holds, Celan's poetry, in contrast to Benn's, is marked by the immediacy of violent historical encounter (Rolleston 37). However, Celan's contributions to German letters are by no means limited to the immediate post-war decade, for they extend to his death in 1970 and beyond. Most notable among these are his personal, readerly, and poetic encounters with Martin Heidegger; his engagement with possibilities of testimony and bearing witness, dialogue and poetic address; as well as his approach to silence and absence in language. Scholarship on Celan in the form of articles, seminars, and dissertations was already being produced during Celan's lifetime. The vast body of international Celan scholarship continues to grow with many studies situating him

³¹ For a more detailed account of the Goll affair, see for instance Wiedemann.

³² Witte is not making a facile claim that Celan saw himself as a literary successor to Baudelaire or Mallarmé. Although Celan's insistence on the singularity of his poetics does not foreclose possibilities of literary-historical work, Celan resisted juxtapositions or comparisons with Mallarmé and others. For a lived instance of Celan's aversion to this comparison, see Aris Fioretos's recapitulation of Gerhart Baumann's memoirs on Celan (Fioretos ix). For a discussion of modern lyric that explores constellations of obscurity, representation, and allegory in Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Celan, see especially De Man.

within the German literary and philosophical tradition in various ways.³³ Other critical work addresses paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities that permeate Celan's writing in particular and literature after Auschwitz more generally. This work highlights such topics as false testimony as the only possibility of testimony,³⁴ repetition and difference,³⁵ and perhaps most prominently, possibilities remaining to language and poetry after genocide in saying the unsayable.³⁶ The latter two themes will constitute the analytical focus of this chapter, which aims to contribute insights to our scholarly understanding of silence and absence in Celan's poetic work, and specifically to illuminate the poetic structures of fragmentation and repetition through an analysis of his translation of written signs as nearly identical textual elements.

Tropes of silence and absence in post-war European letters can and have been examined from several perspectives. In a literary-historical and somewhat pragmatic vein, George Steiner observes a general withdrawal from language in all spheres of human activity beginning in the seventeenth century. "[U]ntil the seventeenth century, the sphere of language encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality." With developments in the domains of analytical geometry and algebraic functions, however, mathematics ceases to be a form of dependent notation for verbal statements. Thus, Steiner writes in 1961, "today, it [the sphere of language] comprises a narrower domain. It no longer articulates, or is relevant to, all major modes of action, thought, and sensibility" (Steiner, "The Retreat from the Word" 24). However, Steiner discerns a necessity for new modes of expression in the post-war European context, and in particular he suggests that "[i]t is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours," and he links the withdrawal or rather failure of language explicitly to mystical experience (Steiner, "Silence and the Poet" 39). Shira Wolosky Weiss sums up this putative

³³ For a study investigating links between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger, see Lyon and Lemke. Pöggeler and Frey constitute only two of many studies that explore Celan's links to modernism and German literary history more generally. See also Menninghaus and Hamacher; Fioretos; and Colin for excellent edited collections of essays on Celan.

³⁴ See Guyer (particularly chapters 6 and 7).

³⁵ See Szondi; Hamacher; Derrida; Guyer.

³⁶ See Weiss; Colin; Olschner; Glazova.

connection between mystical experience and language's failure in the "inexpressibility topos," that is, the common idea "that words can never adequately express ultimate meanings," a prevalent and long standing idea in European letters. "In particular," holds Weiss, "it opens to view an ambivalence toward language deeply embedded within the Western tradition, in which language is seen at best wanting, at worst profane, compared with the truth it would express" (Weiss 1). The inexpressibility topos is closely allied with theology and mysticism, and Paul Celan was certainly well read in Jewish mysticism, philosophy, theology, and Hasidism and the Kabbalah, particularly in the writings of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Gerschom Scholem, and Margarete Susman, some of the most important thinkers in Jewish mysticism in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁷ Paul Celan's poetry additionally addresses inexpressibility and silence after Auschwitz, that is, the incapacitation of language in the face of unspeakable cruelty, human suffering and loss of life.³⁸ However, Celan's engagement with silence and absence is not limited to the realms of language mysticism and testimonial possibility. While silence and absence are often justifiably highlighted as tropes and motifs in Celan poetry and scholarship, these tropes also operate in what might loosely be termed the material dimensions of Celan's engagement with silence and absence.³⁹ That is to say, as I will argue here, absence and silence are paradoxically present and perceptible on Celan's textual surfaces as typo-topographic spaces crucial to his poetic work.

These material dimensions can be understood in several ways. Editors of Celan's manuscripts and special editions illustrating the development of his poems through several drafts note Celan's preoccupation "with external textual form, with blank spaces, the line-break and—in earlier versions much more so than in published ones—also with the graphic ordering of textual elements" as facets of his work worthy of emphasis (Celan, *Sprachgitter* ix; Celan, *Die*

³⁷ Buber and Rosenzweig, friends and collaborators, were both well known for their work on dialogue and the relationship between self and other. Scholem was the founder of the modern study of the Kabbalah and is credited with disseminating knowledge of the Kabbalah among Jews and non-Jews alike. Susman was a German-Jewish poet, essayist and activist, known for her writings on the status of Judaism in Christian contexts.

³⁸ See for instance Chapter 13 of Liska. See also Felstiner, "Probing the Limits of Representation"; Fridman; Levine.

³⁹ See footnote 7.

Niemandrose ix).⁴⁰ They thus point out that the visual impact of Celan’s manuscripts and his handwritten corrections and substitutions are key to a better understanding of Celan’s texts and textual surfaces. Relatedly, Celan’s response to Germany’s violent history in mid century is described as a poetic language of wounding, implosions, and caesurae.⁴¹ My approach will stress agents of fragmentation that are at work not only in Celan’s poetic images as such but also in his textual surfaces, at the level of Celan’s poetic lines and words. I am not the first to address Celan’s attention to textual surfaces. However, Celan scholars tend to focus either on the thematic and philosophical implications of Celan’s textual fragmentations and interruptions, or to locate silence in Celan’s texts in textual elements other than written signs, such as the blank spaces of the page. Krzysztof Ziarek notes Celan’s “complexity of language—dislocated syntax, splintered words, broken and fragmentary images.” Instead of plumbing the multivalence of the text itself, however, Ziarek chooses to stress instead that this complex and splintered language “continuously unworks the poetic text and keeps it open to the signification of otherness” (Ziarek 134).⁴² Jacques Derrida reads wounding and circumcision in Celan’s words by focusing on bodily dimensions of language and its inscription but does not directly address typography (Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan”). Werner Hamacher, in his seminal essay “The Second of Inversion: Movements of a Figure through Celan’s Poetry,” understands Celan’s broken words as abyssal, marked by caesurae running through all Celan’s poetry:

Just as the functions of the sign break down in the face of an “object” such as the abyss, death, or nothingness, conventional units of meaning—words and sentences, strophes, which are also turns—likewise dissolve, having been infected, as it were, with this death, and they thus leave room for an altered form of speaking and for the interruption of speaking itself. (Hamacher 355)

⁴⁰ “Andererseits sollten die ausgewählten Blätter genau und auch mit den an ihrer graphischen Gestalt ablesbaren Spuren von Celans Arbeit wiedergegeben werden. Bei einem Dichter, der so sehr mit der äußeren Textgestalt, mit Leerstellen, dem Zeilenumbruch und – in früheren Fassungen noch mehr als in den veröffentlichten – auch mit der graphischen Anordnung von Textelementen arbeitet, schien es uns sinnvoll, hier den Akzent zu setzen.”

⁴¹ See for example Hamacher; Rolleston; Liska, “‘Roots Against Heaven.’ An Aporetic Inversion in Paul Celan” and Schestag.

⁴² For another excellent discussion of Celan’s verse breaks as a performance of breathlessness, see Chapters 6 and 7 of Guyer. She argues that Celan’s German translation of the script of Alain Resnais’s 1955 film *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Nacht und Nebel*—*Night and Fog*) reveals the failure of negative knowledge by performing breathlessness.

Revealing linkages between the dissolution of semantic meaning in Celan's poetry and the fragmentation of his textual elements, Hamacher regards these fragmentations as rendering interruption visible. Hamacher does not dwell on individual textual elements, however, and extrapolates his analysis to the metaphysical dimensions of Celan's poetry, arguing that in encountering its own absence, coming and going, the poetry breaks free (Hamacher 387). Citing Hamacher, Ziarek suggests that the trace of "the other of the text" is "the whiteness of the written page."⁴³ On the example of the musical organization of "Engführung" (Stretto) from the 1959 collection *Sprachgitter (Speech-Grille)*, as well as the two lines of dots at the end of the poem "Einem, der vor der Tür stand..." (To one who stood before the door) from the 1963 collection *Die Niemandrose (The No-One's-Rose)*, Jacob Steiner too observes that silence enters the landscape of Celan's texts in the graphic organization of Celan's texts, but he too does not dwell on individual textual elements such as written signs (J. Steiner, "Sprache und Schweigen in der Lyrik Paul Celans" 135).⁴⁴ The presence of Celan's silences and absences on the page is thus often linked by scholars to the interruption of poetic language, to Celan's creative interventions into the poetic and philosophical possibilities that inhere in poetry, and in the textual dimensions of fragmentation, brokenness and splintering from which scholars induce the thematic dimensions of silence.

Another and related mode of poetic interruption in Celan that has both textual-material and thematic facets is paronomasia, that is, "the term used in ancient rhetoric to refer to any play on the sounds of words."⁴⁵ This can describe the puns and repetitions of nearly identical words in Celan's oeuvre. Peter Szondi's influential study of Celan's translation of Shakespeare's sonnet 105 suggests that Celan's paronomasia is a figure of repetition and constancy, one that allows Celan not only to speak of constancy in the sonnet, but also to perform it: "repetition—the

⁴³ Ziarek does not specify whether he means the blankness of the unwritten page or the blank parts of the written page.

⁴⁴ This chapter will offer a slightly different reading of the poem "Einem, der vor der Tür stand."

⁴⁵ "paronomasia" *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Chris Baldick. Oxford University Press, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Cornell University. 24 March 2012 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t56.e845>>

syntagmatic realization of the constancy motif—is not restricted to those passages whose explicit theme is constancy, but stamps the sonnet as a whole” (Szondi, *Celan Studies* 13). However, Hamacher points out that in Celan’s poetry, repetition is never the repetition of the same. On the contrary, repetition and paranomasia serve “the diversification of linguistic units (syllables, words, syntagms) through which they open themselves to a multiplicity of other—and indeed, *a limine*, indeterminable–unities,” which Hamacher claims takes place “under the appearance of correspondence” (Hamacher 355).⁴⁶ As Ziarek too observes in line with Hamacher, this diversification is linked to the rhetorical figure of inversion in Celan, a “wounding” of language, the irruption of words, syllables, and syntagms from within, “a splitting of meaning, a distance between the written and unwritten” (Ziarek 141). In accord with Hamacher but with Celan’s translation of Shakespeare’s sonnet 71 as her focus, Sara Guyer reads paranomasia instead as a figure of translation, one that demonstrates that “a disarticulating relation of sameness is one way of describing the relation between a work and a translation” (Guyer 173). In contrast to Szondi’s understanding of Celan’s translation as performance in a language of constancy, Hamacher and his readers Ziarek and Guyer advocate reading paranomasia in Celan as a device of dissolution, implosion, and fragmentation into “indeterminable units.”

Despite these significant analyses of links between the division, implosion, or dissolution of Celan’s textual elements on the one hand, and historical, ethical, intersubjective and philosophical impulses that run through Celan’s work on the other—and despite Celan’s preoccupation with textual surfaces and graphic elements as documented by the editors of his manuscripts—little scholarly attention has been paid to date to Celan’s engagement with other fragmented aspects of his textual surfaces, namely those that pertain to written signs.⁴⁷ These

⁴⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Hamacher’s intervention, see Guyer 172–173. Guyer too points out that Hamacher uses the word *paranomasia* instead of *paronomasia*, although he appears to refer to the same phenomenon. It is possible that Hamacher is hinting at the divisibility and multivalence of the word *paronomasia* itself by placing emphasis on the versatile Greek preposition *para* (beside, near, by, along, past, beyond) over *onoma* (name).

⁴⁷ A written sign here is understood as any individual character or punctuation used in a writing system, and a writing system is any script or system of writing. Besides Hamacher, Szondi, Ziarek, Steiner, and Derrida, see also Schestag 1994 and Schestag 2004.

smallest legible elements of Celan's typo-topographic space of the page are noteworthy for several reasons. First of all, Celan was well read in the Kabbalah and Hasidism, and he was certainly familiar with cryptographic modes of reading Jewish scriptures.⁴⁸ These prime three techniques consist of *notarikon*, the use of acrostics to decipher hidden messages; *gematria*, which uncovers mystic relations by using the numerical value of words derived from numbers corresponding to each Hebrew letter in the word; and *temurah*, exegesis by anagrammaticizing passages, phrases, or words (Eco 31–32; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 100).⁴⁹ Second, Celan's familiarity with Jewish exegesis is not only apparent in his work but also inscribed into his identity as a poet, into his proper name. Paul Antschel (Ancel) rearranged the letters of his family name to form Celan, while the name of his son, Eric, was an approximate anagram for the French *écrits* (the second person singular imperative of the verb "to write"). Third and most important for an analysis of Celan's textual depths and surfaces alike, written signs in Celan's poetry are not merely incidental tools of his writing. Rather, Celan's strategic use of the written signs of the Hebrew alphabet and its Latin counterpart is pivotal for a fuller understanding of Celan's preoccupations with poetic address and dialogue; literary translation; transformation of the German idiom; and the materiality of language. These are some of the most important elements of Celan's work.⁵⁰ Written signs in Celan are not only transparent elements of sound transcription, but also intermedial elements, that is to say, in my reading of them, notational signs for mathematical operations, visual marks on a page, and paradoxical ciphers of absence. When written signs in Celan poems are read intermedially (with attention to their multiple visual and aural capacities as I will suggest), they must be read as signs that are themselves undergoing continual transformation and gesturing toward alternate possibilities of

⁴⁸ For studies situating Celan within a Jewish context, particularly with respect to Kabbalah and Hassidism, see for example Sowa-Bettecken; Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*; Fussl; Mosès; and Perloff.

⁴⁹ Hebrew letters also correspond to numbers, which makes the method of *gematria* possible. Scholem points out that these three techniques, widely believed to be kabbalistic, are prominent in the literature of Hasidism. The Kabbalists who made frequent use of them, such as Jacob ben Jacob Hacoheh or Abraham Abulafia, were influenced by German Hasidism (Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 100).

⁵⁰ Study of Celan's drafts and supporting materials for *Die Niemandrose* and other poetry collections show that the Cyrillic alphabet also plays a role. However, this dissertation chapter will limit its focus to the significance of Latin and Hebrew alphabets for Celan's writing.

reading. Given the above discussion of disruptive and non-semantic dimensions of Celan's silences and interest in nearly identical words and names, the continual transformation of a Celan text at the elemental level of written signs suggests that an even more radical instability inheres in all his textual units.

This chapter aims to illuminate the lettered operations that make this transformative instability possible and will first revisit previous discussions of Celan's literary multilingualism and his transformation of the German idiom, which have focused on the importance of both translation and transformation for Celan's poetic oeuvre overall. Although Celan was an active translator from French, English, Romanian, and Russian, this chapter suggests that the term "transformation" better captures the changes undergone by a text in translation, the irreducibility of one language or idiom to another discrete language, and most important, the capacity of "transformation" rather than "translation" to incorporate surface phenomena as sensory elements of a body of text undergoing metamorphosis. This chapter thus aims to expand the understanding of Celan as a multilingual poet by understanding his multilingual texts as multivalent in a pivotal letteral sense. That is to say, Celan's literary language carries within it at least two writing systems' (the Hebrew and Latin alphabets') relationship to sound and visuality, and often brings these two writing systems in contact in various ways.⁵¹ In addition and relatedly, Celan draws readerly attention to sensory and semantic multivalence at the level of written signs.

Celan's claim that poetry "shows a strong tendency to silence" (eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen) is well known, widely cited and effectively discussed (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 18, 32a; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 18, 32a). However, Celan's use of vowels, semi-vowels and consonantal writing systems in his poetry evidences a material treatment of the relationship between language and silence, or rather, between the pronounceable and the unpronounceable. Celan's work was written almost entirely in the Latin alphabet. However, his references to letters and silence at

⁵¹ For a discussion of the presence of Hebrew writing in Celan's poetry, see Behl. Behl does engage references to Hebrew and the Hebrew alphabet as an added dimension in Celan's poetry, but does not treat the letters themselves as intermedial or multivalent.

times make perceptible the presence of other writing systems in his oeuvre as indicated above. The relationship between language and silence in Celan can also be read as the relationship between a letter as the purported transcription of a sound, a visual mark, and cipher of absence. This chapter seeks to read absence, silence and the unheard in Celan as attendant on writing systems, the sets of sounds they purport to represent, and most important, those sounds that stand on the threshold of the repertoire that these systems afford. Without arguing that writing is a mere representation of human speech, I read Celan's engagement with tensions between different capacities of the print medium as enumerated above. The perceptibility of multiple writing system and the intermediality of individual letters in Celan's poetry offer an added material perspective from which to read Celan to the letter, so to speak.

A detailed study of Celan's manuscripts would no doubt be revelatory for a close investigation of the emergence, change and disappearance of textual elements in Celan's multiple drafts, editions, and omissions. Celan's editors note, however, that he very often worked with a typewriter, sometimes from the first draft onwards, suggesting that he periodically produced and grappled with nearly identical marks on a page (Celan, *Die Niemandrose* ix; Celan, *Sprachgitter* ix).⁵² However, Celan expected to be read, not primarily in manuscript, but in printed format. While Celan's entire oeuvre could be investigated with an eye to his treatment of written signs, this chapter will focus primarily on his poetry collection of 1963, *Die Niemandrose*. *Niemandrose* is regarded as a very important early work of Celan's, a "Schwellentext" [threshold-text] coming at an important juncture in Celan's private and literary life (Lehmann and Ivanović 20; May, Gossens, and Lehmann 80; Witte 75). This chapter focuses on *Niemandrose* for the following reasons. First, *Niemandrose* arguably constitutes Celan's most refined and extensive engagement with Jewish mysticism, philosophy, and the Kabbalah. In his extensive commentary on *Die Niemandrose*, Jürgen Lehmann indicates that no other collection of poetry by Celan incorporates as many Jewish or Hebrew words, or so many

⁵² Admittedly, typewriters themselves are rarely identical. Although a single typewriter may produce uniform letters, there is sometimes minute and sometimes great variation between the shapes of symbols produced by different typewriters, and a typewriter may be identified on the basis of its mechanical idiosyncrasies.

references to Jewish mythology, mysticism and religion (Lehmann and Ivanović 12).⁵³

Niemandrose was also written on the heels of false accusations by Claire Goll that Celan had plagiarized poems by her husband Yvan Goll (a bilingual German-French poet of Jewish background who had been diagnosed with leukemia) after having been commissioned with their translation. Goll's accusations were eventually and conclusively proven to be unfounded.⁵⁴ However, the initial precipitousness with which German-language media disseminated Goll's accusations, coupled with Celan's already problematic relationship with the German cultural and literary scene, ensured that the accusations would haunt Celan until the end of his life.⁵⁵ Thus, the question of loyalty of translation versus transformative effects of translation had recently acquired particular urgency in Celan's literary life. Finally, *Niemandrose's* appearance comes on the heels of two important poetological prose texts by Celan in 1960, namely his Georg Büchner Prize acceptance speech, "Der Meridian" (The Meridian) and *Gespräch im Gebirg* (*Conversation in the Mountains*). The former addresses problems of dating, commemoration, and problematic relationships between art and poetry, while the latter deals with (im)possibilities of dialogue and address. Both texts grapple with the historical, linguistic, ethical and geographic dimensions of encounter, a vital concept for approaching Celan's poetry.⁵⁶

This chapter will read silence, absence and transformation in what can roughly be named surface phenomena in *Niemandrose*. Specifically it will explore the pointed absence of the letter *aleph* in "Einem, der vor der Tür stand," a poem that just as pointedly brings together elements

⁵³ The abundant references and concepts related to Judaism and Jewishness, however, can be understood less as appropriation than as a critical engagement with Jewish tradition.

⁵⁴ For a more detailed account of the plagiarism accusation and its representation on German-speaking media, see Wiedemann.

⁵⁵ Although Celan's work did receive some favorable reviews, among others by the highly regarded poet and literary authority Karl Krolow, his work was often underestimated and misunderstood as surrealistic, overly metaphorical, and even insufficiently edited (May, Gossens, and Lehmann 61–62; Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 70–71). In a May 1952 meeting of the Gruppe 47, Celan gave an overall well received reading that was nonetheless not a great success. Members of the group generally proved unreceptive and insensitive to Celan's literary project, as well as to his status as a survivor who had lost his family to the Holocaust. Two of the group's most common objections to Celan's poetry were that it was not politically engaged (defense of politically engaged literature was one of the group's main tenets) and too hermetic (Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 64–65).

⁵⁶ "Der Meridian" will hereafter be referred to as *Meridian*. Although this chapter will deal primarily with the poetological import of *Meridian*, it does not regard this text as poetological statement alone. For more detailed discussion of *Meridian* as Celan's engagement with Georg Büchner's oeuvre, see Müller-Sievers. For a discussion of *Meridian* as speech as well as instance of Celan's critical engagement with rhetorical tradition, see Mendicino.

of Jewish mysticism and the materiality of written signs in this missing letter. Posited as the first letter of creation, *aleph* is of great import to Jewish mysticism. Transcribed into other languages as “a” or “e” and transported into other alphabets as a vowel (e.g. the Greek *alpha*) while having consonantal value in the Hebrew alphabet, it is also a significant letter in any discussion of writing systems’ differing relationships to sound phenomena.⁵⁷ In “Einem, der vor der Tür stand,” *aleph* acquires bodily contours in the figure of the Golem as I will demonstrate. The discussion will then turn to the opening poem of *Niemandsrose*, “Es war Erde in ihnen,” which introduces linguistic and thematic problems treated throughout *Niemandsrose*, namely poetic address, problems of enumeration, and figures of the innumerable, the absent, the silent. “Es war Erde in ihnen” presents counting and spelling as interlinked phenomena that in turn are linked to a larger problem concerning the legibility of the world as such. The sound-world of a Celan poem is by no means negligible.⁵⁸ However, this section will turn to the visual transformations and the unpronounceability of Celan’s textual elements in order to revisit poetological problems of address, silence, absence, and countability on the typo-topographic space of Celan’s page.⁵⁹

The chapter will then turn to *Meridian*, which shares some of *Niemandsrose*’s sensitivity to the intermediality of written symbols and which addresses visuality as well as the dimension of sound, the unheard and the barely audible in Celan’s poetry. Bernd Witte characterizes the circular structure of *Niemandsrose* in terms of the latter’s tendency to trace multiple routes towards an abundance of expression, while also inscribing silence and nothing in its midst. This characterization resonates with Celan’s depiction of poetry in *Meridian* as that which continually turns and returns and which exhibits an inclination to silence (Witte 75, 83–84; Celan, *Der*

⁵⁷ To give one example, in Plato’s *Cratylus*, many of Socrates’ etymologies are based on triliteral consonantal roots (e.g. on *alpha*, *pi* and *lambda* for the provenance of the name *Apollo*; on *alpha*, *lambda* and *theta* for the word *aletheia*). This is significant, because the Greek alphabet incorporates vowel sounds as letters in their own right (in fact, this is the great innovation of the Phoenician and Greek alphabets), as opposed to the consonantal Hebrew alphabet. Socrates’ treatment of the vowel *alpha* as though it had consonantal value is a telling indicator that Greek wordplay was strongly influenced by Semitic writing. Many thanks to Frederick Ahl of Cornell University for this very important and suggestive observation.

⁵⁸ This is evidenced famously by the uncanny contrapuntal rhythm of “Todesfuge” (“Deathfuge”) from *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (*Poppy and Memory*—1952).

⁵⁹ It is important to note the semantic affinity between the German words *zählen* and *erzählen*. The English definitions, “to count” and “to recount,” respectively, perhaps best capture this affinity.

Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien 8, Sec.32a; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 8, Sec.32a). Important for *Meridian* and *Niemandrose* is that both texts withdraw from and exceed their semantic content. The literary text does so in part through its engagement with tensions between visual and auditory capacities of written symbols on a page.

2. Multilingualism, Translation, and Transformation

Celan's multilingual writing not only borrows words and phrases from French, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Latin, as well as rather obscure terminology from astronomy, anatomy and geology that heighten the sense that foreign words abound in his texts.⁶⁰ This multilingualism can neither be understood as a direct biographical product of Celan's geographic and linguistic displacement from Chernivtsi⁶¹ to Paris, nor as a product of his translation work between multiple languages. Celan's multilingualism clearly involves but is also irreducible to the presence of words from different languages. Rather, I understood Celan's literary multilingualism in the sense articulated for the twentieth century by Yasemin Yildiz, "as the co-existence and interaction of at least two languages, be it at the level of individuals, communities, discourses, or texts" (Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue* 4).⁶² The co-presence and interactions of multiple languages are part and parcel of Celan's literary output, influencing and at times determining the composition of his poems. The poem "Bei Wein und Verlorenheit" from *Niemandrose* is one such example, in this case composed around multilingual puns on the French *neige* (snow), German *Neige* (dregs, end, remains) and English *neigh*. The chance visual affinity of these words (their pronunciations in the three languages are noticeably different) becomes a compositional principle and informs the central problematic of the poem, as Celan paints a snowy landscape against which he negotiates

⁶⁰ For a detailed account of the presence and relevance of terms from astronomy, geology and anatomy for Celan's poetry, see Tobias.

⁶¹ The city known today as Chernivtsi has changed hands many times over its long history. In the early twentieth century it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (as Czernowitz), then was taken over by the Kingdom of Romania (then named Cernăuți), then the Ukrainian SSR, and finally the independent Ukraine. Celan is generally considered a German-speaking Romanian poet.

⁶² For a more thorough exposition of twentieth-century German literary multilingualism, see the introduction to Yildiz.

problems of rendering sound in writing and language (Celan, *GW* I: 213). The co-presence of multiple languages in Celan's oeuvre is not limited to such instances, however. In fact, Celan's poetic language does not address different languages as distinct from one another. Rather, as Yoko Tawada suggests in her essays on Celan, Celan draws heightened attention to fissures within and between languages and disarticulates them as unities (Yoko Tawada, "Das Tor Des Übersetzers Oder Celan Liest Japanisch" 122; Kim, "Writing the Cleft: Tawada Translates Celan" 233). This move is most apparent in Celan's treatment of German, his chosen language of literary production.

Although Celan's literary language was by and large German, it was a German all his own, one transformed by his use of multiple languages, idiosyncratic word-splitting, some neologisms, and terminology drawn from astronomy, geology, and anatomy.⁶³ Celan's transformations of German and German poetry in particular were at first grounds for Celan's contemporaries to dismiss his poetry as inaccessible. Later similar arguments interpreted this feature of his work as attesting to Celan's project of recreating the German language by rendering it other to itself. Beda Allemann, a one-time colleague of Celan's at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris and an editor of his collected works, contrasts the German acquired by most native speakers to the poet's German, calling the latter "eine Sprache der Verfremdung innerhalb eines uns doch geläufigen Idioms" [a language of alienation within our common/familiar idiom]. Allemann observes that Celan's transformations of German as a familiar language and idiom have rendered him particularly prone to facile reproaches that his poetry is hermetic, and she cautions against attempts to "decode" Celan's language into a familiar idiom (Allemann 8–10, 13). Acknowledging Celan's purported hermeticism but seeing it as a symptom of twentieth-century poetry in general, Christine Ivanović and Jürgen Lehmann propose a reading of Celan adequate to his "demand on the reader to immerse himself in a new linguistic reality, in ever renewed, concentrated reading" ["Aufforderung an den Leser (...) sich

⁶³ On Celan's use of languages of astronomy, geology and anatomy, see Tobias. Celan's multilingual work and fragmented words will be discussed in further detail in this chapter.

(...) einer neuen Sprachwirklichkeit einzulassen, einzulassen im immer erneuten, konzentrierten Lesen" (Lehmann and Ivanović 7).

Celan's poetry thematically links language and transformation, notably but not only in the poem "Chymisch" from *Niemandsrose*, which juxtaposes names, silence, and gold as objects of alchemistic transformation (Celan GW I: 127). In their reflections on newly accessible Celan materials (Celan's correspondence, translations of his poetry, his notes on the 1960 Büchner Prize acceptance speech "Der Meridian") and several decades of Celan scholarship, Ulrich Baer and Amir Eshel link these often recognized dimensions of transformation and language in Celan, observing the "transformational dimension in and of Celan's poetry—the impression that he prompts and prods language for it to change before our very eyes" (Baer and Eshel 7–8). Whereas Baer and Eshel point out that this pointedly transformational dimension is of interest to scholars and non-specialist readers alike, translation as a transformative practice is of more general interest for much scholarly work on Celan.

Additionally, Celan's extensive translation work from various European languages is often rightly counted both as foreign texts that he rendered into German and also part of Celan's own poetic practice as a practice of transformation.⁶⁴ Celan translated from French, Romanian, Russian and English into German after settling in France and while also earning his living as an instructor at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris. Translation entailed linguistic choices, and the originals underwent some significant changes in Celan's hands. While Yvan Goll was alive and before Claire Goll went public with her accusations of plagiarism, Celan's translations of Yvan Goll's poems "went unpublished because, Claire Goll later claimed, they bore too clearly the 'signature' of Paul Celan." This failed encounter constituted Celan's "first major undertaking as a translator of poetry" (Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 60). These Celan translations were different in telling ways from both the original and earlier translations by other translators. So much so in fact that Peter Szondi declares that "Celan's translations are Celan

⁶⁴ To give one example, an edited collection of essays on Celan's translation work, as well as on his poetry in translation, is entitled *Poetik der Transformation*. See Bodenheimer and Sandbank.

poems” (Szondi, *Celan Studies* 10). Textual analyses of Celan translations constitute an accepted interpretive approach in exploring Celan’s treatment of the Romantic tradition, repetition, silence, and testimony, among others.⁶⁵ Most often, it is the transformative elements in Celan translations that become decisive for these scholarly analyses.

Because transformation is a frequent theme and trope in Celan’s poetry and Celan scholarship alike, and because transformation is the most descriptive term for Celan’s approach to his literary production and translation practice alike, the term becomes especially fruitful for exploring Celan’s relationship to language and literature. For this term acknowledges rather than obliterates the changes undergone by texts in translation, and it acknowledges the irreducibility of one language world or idiom to another. Moreover, because it addresses changes in *form*, an analytical emphasis on transformational questions in Celan’s writing can incorporate changes in the surface phenomena of a text understood as material. This explains the need for a more detailed exposition of Celan’s engagement with the materiality of language and texts.

3. The Materiality of Language

Another important and ever-present element of Celan’s poetry is his preoccupation with the materiality of language, which can be understood in several ways. First, Celan’s vocabulary frequently and pointedly references concrete objects and bodies. To give a few examples, geological and botanical terms abound in *Niemandrose* (1963), while geology (e.g. ice formations), anatomic vocabulary (e.g. pertaining to wounding and sickness), and the language of astronomy permeate the posthumously published *Schneepart* (*Snow-Part*—1971). Rochelle Tobias analyzes the languages of geology, astrology and anatomy in Celan’s work and emphasizes the centrality of “forms of embodiment” for all three scientific disciplines and

⁶⁵ See for instance Szondi, “The Poetry of Constancy,” for an analysis of the performance of constancy in Celan’s translation of Shakespeare’s sonnet 105. See Chapter 6 of Guyer for an analysis of breathlessness and death in Celan’s translation of Shakespeare’s sonnet 71. Guyer too treats the translation as carrying Celan’s signature, and she concludes that Celan makes a statement in this translation about the impossibility of true testimony. See Glazova for an analysis of poetic dialogue between Celan and Osip Mandelstam including an analysis of Celan’s translation of Mandelstam’s “Sleeplessness. Homer. Taut sails.” This dialogue hinges on darkness and silence in translation.

Celan's oeuvre. These scientific languages and Celan's language all reference bodies in some form: a celestial body, a sedimentary body, an organ, or a limb (Tobias 118, 1). Second, the materiality of Celan's language can also be understood in terms of the materiality of his texts, which call upon the reader to enter them like a landscape or assemble them like fragmented objects. Celan borrows a term from geography for his presentation of poetry in "Der Meridian," which not only employs rich spatial vocabulary ("topos research," "tropes," "map"), but also performs the repetition of dates and the returning that it discusses (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 13; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 13). Peter Szondi's close reading of the poem "Engführung" (Stretto) from *Sprachgitter*, for example, is based on the observation that the poem is a landscape exhorting the reader to enter it (Szondi, *Celan-Studien*. 49–50).⁶⁶

Third, and most important for this analysis, Celan thematizes and explores the materiality of writing as a collection of visual marks on the typo-topographic space of the page. That is to say, Celan's writing engages and transforms the very medium of writing: the page as typo-topographic landscape and the written signs on it. Thomas Schestag's detailed readings of Celan's idiosyncratically split words and fragments illustrate Celan's affinity for anagrams, as well as the rearrangeability and puzzle-like nature of letters, syllables and words (Schestag, "Buk" 411–415). However, Celan's sensitivity to the materiality of the writing medium also extends into punctuation symbols and other written microelements.

Jürgen Lehmann suggests that Celan's silences become visible (and legible) on the page in the form of quotation marks. In light of themes of "breathing and speechlessness, the interruption and failure of language, the reduction of speech toward silence" [Atmen und

⁶⁶ Rochelle Tobias disagrees with Szondi's reading of this performative dimension of Celan's poetry, where the poem not only pronounces that it is a poem but enacts its utterances. In her work on the discourse of nature in Celan, Tobias holds that the poem cannot be "an instantiation of its own utterances, insofar as it, like the very phenomena it represents, is subject to time." The poem is always re-placing and re-presenting itself, and thus is incapable of being itself in any stable sense (Tobias 5–6). Tobias is joined in this view by Werner Hamacher, who holds that Celan's repetitions are never repetitions of a self-identical unit. The performative dimension of Celan's poems already gestures towards continual re-performances and transformations and questions the stability of the poem. As the re-readings of Celan's meridian will suggest, the instability of the poem, too, is inscribed in the poem's utterances and its self-performances, as the meridian is a tool in determining time as well as location.

Verstummen, Abbrechen und Versagen der Sprache, Reduktion des Sprechens bis hin zum Schweigen] in *Niemandrose*, periods, colons, dashes and other indicators of pause and silence acquire “almost always semantic valence” [fast immer semantische Valenz] and require interpretive attention. According to Lehmann, the combination of the dash and colon acts as one of many inversions in conversation with and at times modifying Celan’s conceptions of space and time in the *Meridian*.⁶⁷ Markers of pause and silence have a paradoxically positive paginal presence as a result and call for the page to be read as a materialization of space (of the written page) and time (of the process of writing). As this chapter will show in moving beyond Lehman’s insights, quotation marks in the *Meridian* serve both to sever citations from the rest of the text and also, in their visual likeness to organs of hearing, to dramatize Celan’s practice of overwhelming the speaker’s voice in citations.

Yet Celan’s employment of written signs is not limited to those textual elements that typically remain unpronounced. Some aspects of Celan’s treatment of letters in the Hebrew and Latin alphabets constitute some of his most poignant negotiations between sound and silence, absence and presence. This treatment is closely linked to Celan’s literary multilingualism as adumbrated above. However, Celan’s multilingual writing can and should be understood as intermedial and involving the co-presence of multiple writing systems. For the literary analysis of *Die Niemandrose* advanced here, the interaction of the Hebrew and German languages and their writing systems will be of primary importance. The consonantal Hebrew alphabet and the Latin alphabet, which includes vowels, have very different relationships to sound phenomena in writing: Written classical Hebrew involves only consonants and no vowels designating frictionless sound, whereas the Latin alphabet involves both. By allowing these two writing systems to come in contact, Celan renders the relationship between silence and sound perceptible on the space of the page.

⁶⁷ Hamacher’s exposition of the figure of inversion in Celan is extremely influential in Celan scholarship. Here, there is little doubt that Lehmann is using Hamacher’s term. As will be discussed later, inversion for Hamacher involves the physical inversion of persons and objects depicted in texts, inversion of textual figures (e.g. chiasmus), and in a more expansive sense, “the negative positing of the negative” (Hamacher 350).

4. Celan and Hebrew Writing

Hebrew is one among many languages that appear in Celan's oeuvre. In addition to German as the chosen language of his literary production, as noted above, words and word-games in English, French, Spanish, Dutch, Yiddish, Russian, Latin, and other languages appear at varying levels of frequency and prominence, particularly in Celan's later works. *Die Niemandrose* is particularly rich in its references to Hebrew, the Judaic tradition, and Jewish mysticism as I have also noted above. As this section will argue, however, Celan's engagement with Jewish mysticism does not necessarily entail an engagement with the failure of language to express the inexpressible. On the contrary, as Shira Wolosky Weiss has demonstrated, Jewish mysticism accords language, and particularly the letter, positive and substantive status, and Celan's poetry evidences his understanding of this positive status. Without attempting to perform a kabbalistic reading of Celan's oeuvre, this section of the dissertation will discuss the co-presence and interaction of Hebrew and German in Celan's positive engagement with language, the landscape of the page as typo-topographic space and the intermediality of individual written signs in order to unearth the material-textual dimensions of Celan's relationship to sound phenomena and poetic multivalence in writing. Because the Hebrew alphabet is consonantal and the Latin alphabet includes vowels, each alphabet not only has a different set of written signs altogether but also a different method of relating to sound in written form.

In metaphysical discourse, as Weiss details, language is often depicted as a realm of division, materiality, and linearity, in contrast to the divine, which is associated with wholeness, transcendence, infinity, and even silence. Seeking to discover the "power of language as figure rather than instrument," Weiss argues that intersections between metaphysics, language, and history in Celan's poetry suggest that, for Celan as well as for the Jewish mystical tradition, language is a positive, commanding, and central figure (Weiss 4). In her reading language becomes the realm of devotion and relation to the divine. This is where the divine unfolds in creation, irreducible to instrumentality and indomitable to silence (Weiss 221, 215). Referencing the kabbalistic tradition, Weiss demonstrates that "[t]he processes of life in God can be construed

as the unfolding of the elements of speech” and that, for Celan’s literary world, the kabbalistic notion of world creation holds for literary creation (Weiss 215). Whereas the divine has long been regarded as beyond speech and predication, Weiss suggests that Celan’s language too resists facile reduction to figuration and reference. The divine for Weiss exists in language and calls for a positive attitude towards language. Celan’s poetics, in this view, is in accord with Jewish mysticism’s commitment to language and textuality, that is, in its commitment to language as the commanding, central figure, and to the letter in all its aspects and senses. “Throughout his later work, Celan’s cosmos takes shape as letters, writing, language” (Weiss 204, 216). While this chapter will build upon Weiss’s emphasis on the positive dimensions of language and its component parts, it will focus on written elements as such where Weiss chooses to focus on the thematic and referential significance of written elements. In addition, where Weiss induces the importance of a positive language for Celan from these written elements, this study will follow deductive vectors from language to textuality to letters when it explores the micro-dimensions of some of Celan’s larger preoccupations with silence, absence and the limits of the sayable.

Klaus Reichert and Jürgen Lehmann suggest various ways in which Celan’s language world is shaped by interlingual associations between Hebrew and German. Celan had studied Hebrew and could read it (although it is debated how much), and Hebrew words appear frequently in his works.⁶⁸ As Reichert argues, the deeper structure of Celan’s literary language evidences engagement with and appropriation of linguistic forms that are particular to Hebrew and not to German, such as nouns conjugated like verbs (thus making time-words from static ones, such as *ichten* from the personal pronoun *ich* [I]), paratactic style (among other things, frequent use of the conjunction “and”), intensified use of prepositional forms, superlatives built by doubling words whose superlatives do not exist and/or are illogical (e.g. the adjective “nackt” [naked]), separating epithets from the names they modify, and concentrated use of the

⁶⁸ These Hebrew words are almost always transliterated. See Rokem on this point.

imperative, which in Hebrew has more forms and can be used in more varied ways than in German (Reichert 156–160).

The presence not only of Hebrew words and expressions, but also of Hebrew linguistic structures in Celan's German, means that Celan's German does not use Hebraicisms alone. Rather, Celan's incorporation of Hebrew is a structural component of a creative translational gesture that frees words and expressions from rote use and familiar contexts in order to open them up to new possibilities of meaning (Lehmann and Ivanović 29). Yoko Tawada captures this semantic openness in Celan when she muses on Celan's poetry collection *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (*From Threshold to Threshold*—1955): "I began to regard Celan's poems as gates and not as houses in which meaning is preserved like a possession" (Ich fing an, Celans Gedichte wie Tore zu betrachten und nicht etwa wie Häuser, in denen die Bedeutung wie ein Besitz aufbewahrt wird) (Yoko Tawada, "Das Tor des Übersetzers oder Celan liest Japanisch" 134). Tawada implies that Celan's poems and his words in general can be read as "gates" or to use Celan's word, as "thresholds." They do not contain or circumscribe meaning; rather they open up possibilities for varied encounters with texts and words. In the case of Celan's Hebrew-inflected German, it is the formal structures of the Hebrew language that enables this opening.

The co-presence of Hebrew words as well as its formal structures is linked to the general multivalence of Celan's language and its openness to the foreign. Reichert describes this openness as "Mitmeinen des Fremden" [the foreign's co-meaning]. Reichert also holds that Hebrew and German semantic possibilities, while they might contradict one another, must nonetheless be read together as co-participants in the production of meaning. In addition to the strategies named above, Reichert indicates there is an alphabetic component to this *Mitmeinen* with broad implications for correspondences between language, memory, and ethics in Celan's poetics. This additional component for Reichert is the consonantal Hebrew alphabet and Semitic word formation. In Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, words are formed from trilitteral or three-consonant roots. "The root (...) is a set of consonants arranged in a specific sequence; it identifies the general realm of the word's meaning. Grammatical meanings, such

as part of speech and tense, are reflected in the stem's vocalic (vowel) and syllabic features—the pattern.”⁶⁹ Nouns, adjectives, and verbs are formed from these roots in various ways, for example, by inserting vowel values, doubling consonants, lengthening vowels, and/or adding prefixes and suffixes. Vocalic manipulations of Semitic roots ultimately decide the word's meaning, and depending on the vowel values added to the consonants, the same root may have several distinct, and as Reichert points out, even contradictory meanings.⁷⁰ This Hebraic characteristic gives Hebrew words, and by extension Celan's words in German, “eine außerordentliche Streuungsbreite” [extraordinarily broad diffusion] (Reichert 161). Celan's many composite nouns in *Die Niemandsrose* are frequently remarked in Celan scholarship. Lehmann observes that syndetic copulative compounds (short and simple univertiated phrases that appear as compounds) consisting of three lexemes are characteristic for *Niemandsrose* (e.g. “Gabe-und-Wort”). Moreover, every Hebrew letter of the alphabet is associated with a word in which it appears prominently (e.g. *bet*, the second letter, meant “house,” “tent” or “family”), which makes it easier to learn the alphabet. Trilexic composite nouns in Celan's poetry can thus be seen as Celan's German counterparts of triliteral Hebrew words composed of three Hebrew consonants, whose combined meaning depends on vowel values added to consonants to build Hebrew words (Lehmann and Ivanović 30). This important observation introduces the co-presence of the Hebrew language and Hebrew alphabet in Celan's multi-lingual poetry and points to a key interaction between Hebrew and German in these texts as well.

Semitic writing's relationship to sound phenomena and its relationship to pronounceability have particular import for the potential for semantic diffusion in Celan. Pronounceability takes on two meanings here. The first is related to the sound spectrum of the language, that is, the sounds represented in the alphabet as opposed to those that are not (e.g. the German *u* with Umlaut, *ü*, does not exist as a written sign in English). The second and related

⁶⁹ "Semitic languages." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/534171/Semitic-languages>>.

⁷⁰ Reichert gives the example of the consonantal root *qdš*, which, if pronounced *qadaš*, means “holy,” but if pronounced as *qadeš*, means “whore of the Temple” (Reichert 161).

meaning pertains to a language's exclusivity, that is, the writing system's pronounceability by a non-native speaker of Hebrew.⁷¹ With reference to the first meaning, the modern Hebrew script in which the Holy Scriptures in Hebrew are written and its predecessor the ancient Square Hebrew script, are considered to be purely consonantal. They each contained twenty-two letters, of which four (*aleph, he, vav, and yod*) "are also employed to represent long vowels." It is believed that these letters were originally used only as consonants, "but gradually began to lose their weak consonantal value (...) and became silent, eventually were utilized as the so-called long vowels." They are called vowel-letters, vocalic consonants, and also *matres lectionis* (Diringer and Regensburger 2006).⁷² Thus, even those elements of Hebrew that were to represent frictionless sound of vowels had some consonantal value, which means that frictionless sounds originally had little place in Hebrew writing, and the writing as such is unpronounceable without the writing on the page being supplanted by sound.⁷³ This is the reason why inexperienced readers of Jewish holy texts often need to consult a recording in order to be able to read passages aloud. This phenomenon is of pivotal importance too for the exegesis of holy scripture. Identifying the sounds preceding and succeeding every consonant is essential for understanding the holy text, and misidentifying these supplemental sounds might lead to misinterpreting the text altogether.

This characteristic of Hebrew writing relates to the second meaning of unpronounceability. The Hebrew writing system is difficult for readers to master who are not privy to the spoken language. The West Semitic invention of the Hebrew alphabet was a revolution because the letters were named after words in which they prominently appeared. As a

⁷¹ Derrida's seminal essay "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan" is named after a password, and one of its objects of analysis is precisely the exclusionary potential of language on the one hand, and the mutual irreducibility of idioms on the other.

⁷² *Mater lectionis* is "a consonantal sign which indicates that a vowel sound is to be supplied" as a guide to reading. "Mater lectionis" is thought to derive from a Hebrew expression meaning "mother of the reading." Classical grammars and kabbalists differ in the sets of letters they accept as *matres lectionis*, but *aleph, he, vav, and yod* are generally accepted as the set. "mater lectionis, n.". OED Online. September 2011. Oxford University Press. 10 October 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114945?redirectedFrom=mater%20lectionis>>.

⁷³ In his primer of phonetics, Henry Sweet states that "[a] vowel may be defined as voice (voiced breath) modified by some definite configuration of the super-glottal passages, but without audible friction (which would make it into a consonant)" (Sweet §32).

result, “[w]riting had never been so close to speech, but it remained unpronounceable, except by a native speaker,” that is, someone who would know what sound the letters stood for and what vowel sounds to supply to the written consonantal signs (Powell 158–159). In fact, “as Hebrew speech passed out of daily use, and familiarity with biblical Hebrew steadily dwindled, it became necessary to introduce some form of vocalic distinction in order to read and explain the Holy Scripture correctly” (Diringer and Regensburger 206–207). This resulted in the addition of a system of dots and other diacritical marks to indicate vowel value and length, and the sign *gershayim* to denote acronyms.⁷⁴

However, as Reichert indicates, the use of *matres lectionis* does not diminish the “associative potential” [*Assoziationsspielraum*] of Semitic roots. It is in this potential attendant to Semitic consonantal roots that Reichert attributes the “Nähe des Unvertrauten” [the proximity of the unfamiliar] and “Vielstelligkeit des Ausdrucks” [multifigurality of expression] as central and non-contingent poetic strategies in Celan. “In der Überschneidung dessen, was ein Wort auslöst, und dessen, was es ursprünglich heißt, in dieser kalkulierten Wertigkeit entsteht die Realität der Sprache Celans” [At the intersection between that which a word releases and that which it originally means, in this calculated valence the reality of Paul Celan’s language comes into being] (Reichert 162). Reichert thus suggests that word associations and word transformations in Celan are not only bilingual (German-Hebrew) but also based on the Hebrew language’s internal multivalence owing to its logic of word formation based on its consonantal alphabet. Reichert believes that the method of “Rückübersetzung” [translating back] of Celan’s German words into Hebrew is the most suitable interpretive method for exploring the multilingual resonance of Celan’s poetry and the linguistic memory at work in each of Celan’s words. This entails not only a translation of semantic meaning of German words into their Hebrew counterparts, but also involves methods of literal exegesis of the translated Hebrew words in order to reveal the semantic multivalence at work in their roots.

⁷⁴ *Gershayim* is always written before the last letter of the non-inflected form of a word and has many uses. One of these is to signal that a particular cluster of Hebrew letters do not build a word but an acronym. It is also used to differentiate between homographs.

While Reichert focuses on triliteral roots and the multivalence of words to which various vowel values are supplied, this analysis will focus on the multivalence of single letters. It will therefore show that Celan's texts' sensory and semantic potential alike function not only at the level of words and larger units of utterance, but on written elements that are believed not to carry meaning, yet hold both semantic and sensory potential. As the following analyses of Celan's poems "Einem, der vor der Tür stand" and "Es war Erde in ihnen" suggest, Celan's engagement with Jewish myths and language mysticism hinges on letteral elements of writing. While "Einem, der vor der Tür stand" omits an all-important yet unpronounceable vowel, "Es war Erde in ihnen" shows that Celan's preoccupation with tensions between the sounds and visual presence of written signs is not limited to Hebrew writing, but extends to the Latin alphabet as well.

5. *Lost Letter of Creation*

As mentioned earlier, the Hebrew letter *aleph* is not a real vowel. Like all other letters of the Hebrew alphabet, it has consonantal value. In his study on the forgetting of language, Daniel Heller-Roazen identifies it as "a letter that none can pronounce." *Aleph* is much more a glottal stop, "a mere gesture of articulation," treated "as the silent support for the vowels it bears, deprived of even the non-sound, the interruption in articulation, it is thought to have once expressed" (Heller-Roazen 19–20). Despite the near-absence of its sound, however, *aleph* has privileged status in the Jewish tradition. Gerschom Scholem notes in his study entitled "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala" (The Name of God and the Theory of Language of the Kabbalah) that *aleph* is the source of all speaking and Hebrew sounds, the point from which all language, including the name of God can begin. While *aleph* disappears from the process, it remains the "Indifferenzpunkt alles Sprechens" [point of indifference of all speaking] and the letter that embodies more than any other the unity of God and his creation (Scholem, "Der Name Gottes Und Die Sprachtheorie Der Kabbala" 39). Despite its abstinence from the first stages of creation or precisely because of its exceptional modesty, *aleph* "becomes the

fundamental principle of all construction,” becoming the first letter of the alphabet and carrying the numerical value “one” (Heller-Roazen 20–22). In his speculative reading citing Maimonides and Scholem, Heller-Roazen claims that the entirety of God’s revelation was “reduced to a single letter whose sound none can recall.” Heller-Roazen holds that the only sound heard on Mount Sinai was the contraction of the entirety of God’s revelation to one barely audible sound. Therefore, according to Heller-Roazen, “[a]leph guards the place of oblivion at the inception of every alphabet” (Heller-Roazen 25).

In the following Celan poem from *Niemandsrose*, “Einem, der vor der Tür stand,” *aleph* operates as the absent letter on which all life depends. Recalling the story of Rabbi Löw and the Golem of Prague, the poem is replete with references to half-creation and interrupted or non-human sounds. According to legend, Rabbi Löw made a creature to keep watch lest hostile Christians attack the Jewish community but commanded the creature to perform other tasks as well. Every Sabbath the Rabbi removed the *aleph* from the writing “emeth” (truth) on the Golem’s forehead, which then read “meth” (dead), at which point the Golem collapsed into the clay from which he had been formed. *Aleph*’s withdrawal allows this reversal of creation. According to Scholem, the Golem’s existence rests on a mystical combination of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and Scholem suggests that even reversing the alphabet’s order could also mean death (Scholem, “Der Golem von Prag und der Golem von Rehovot” 83,82). In this reading, not only *aleph*’s presence but its order of appearance is of decisive importance for the Golem’s existence.

Einem, der vor der Tür stand, eines
Abends:
ihm
tat ich mein Wort auf —: zum
Kielkropf sah ich ihn trotten, zum
halb-
schürigen, dem
im kotigen Stiefel des Kriegsknechts
geborenen Bruder, dem
mit dem blutigen
Gottes-

gemächt, dem
schilpenden Menschlein.

Rabbi, knirschte ich, Rabbi
Löw:

Diesem
beschneide das Wort,
diesem
schreib das lebendige
Nichts ins Gemüt,
diesem
spreize die zwei
Krüppelfinger zum heil-
bringenden Spruch.
Diesem.

.....

Wirf auch die Abendtür zu, Rabbi.

.....

Reiss die Morgentür auf, Ra- —

(Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* I: 242–243)

To one who stood before the door, one
evening:
to him I opened my word — : toward the
clod I saw him trot, toward
the half-
baked
brother born in a
doughboy's dung-caked boot,
him with his god-
like loins all
bloody, the chattering manikin.

Rabbi, I gnashed, Rabbi
Loew:

For this one —
circumcise his word,
for this one
scribe the living
Nothing on his soul,
for this one

spread your two
cripplefingers in the hale-
making blessing.
For this one.

.....

Slam the evening door shut, Rabbi.

.....

Fling the morning door open, Ra- —

(Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 171)

To recall the name of another poetry collection by Celan, the poem begins and ends at a threshold. Words and doors open and close in both cases, recalling for purposes of this dissertation Tawada's observation about Celan's gate-like words and prompting Otto Pöggeler, another reader of this poem, to ask whether word and door may be one and the same thing (Pöggeler 343). In the poem, at first the speaker narrates this opening, while at the very end, the word "Rabbi" appears interrupted or rather opened up. The changeling [*Kielkropf*] towards which the one before the door plods is itself little more than a substitution, since witches or gnomes leave behind these creatures in place of newborns they steal (Neumann 175; Pöggeler 343). It is inferior, "halbschurig" (half-baked), born in excrement.⁷⁵ Most important, it is incapable of human speech. The creature chirps (*schilpen*), and as though to chime in with him, the speaking I makes gnashing (presumably his teeth), grating, gritting sounds (*knirschen*). The German words *schilpen* and *knirschen* each contain only two vowels. Both their onomatopoeia and their semantic meaning suggest the sounds of animals (birds in the case of *schilpen*) or objects (sand or stone in the case of *knirschen*). The speaking I's address to Rabbi Löw is in all probability barely audible, let alone understandable. Moreover, it appears that both the manikin and the speaking I in the poem produce primarily—perhaps exclusively—consonants, as the onomatopoeia of the verbs and the importance of Hebrew writing in this poem suggest. The poem additionally severs words and speaks of circumcising words. On the space of the page, this

⁷⁵ "Halbschurig" refers to the second shearing of sheep, from which wool of inferior quality is obtained (Neumann 175).

severing is at work on the words *halb-schürig*, *Gottes-gemächt*, *heil-bringend*, and of course, *Ra-* (*bbi*). At the level of sound, however, the speech of the manikin and the speaking I too are severed from vowels.

This visual and aural severing acquires bodily dimensions in the multivalence of the word *Gemächt*, which means “penis,” but also “creation” and “concoction, lousy job.” The creature has a *Gottesgemächt*, meaning either the male organ of a god, the creation of a god, or the bad concoction by a god. Given that the Golem is a faulty creation by man of a “manikin,” it is safe to assume that all of these possible meanings coexist in this word. What can God’s organ of procreation bring about but creation? And how can man’s barren creation of the Golem, in a blasphemous desire to create a man, be anything but a manikin [*Menschlein*] and inferior concoction? The important word *Gottesgemächt* in the poem is interrupted by a dash, a written symbol of severing, and the word spills over into the next line. Not the referent, but the word *Gottesgemächt* is thus circumcised, even before the speaking I implores the Rabbi to do just this, to circumcise the changeling’s word. Celan thus carries the severing from the extratextual referential dimension to the two-dimensional world of the page, while simultaneously according the written words status as bodies by subjecting them to circumcision. But what is “das lebendige/ Nichts” that is to be written into the creature’s soul after his word is circumcised? Peter Horst Neumann suggests that this represents a paradox in much mystical thinking, one that also appears in other poems in *Niemandsrose*, notably in *Psalm* [Psalm] (“Ein Nichts [...] blühend” (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* I: 225) and *Mandorla* [Mandorla] (“Es steht das Nichts in der Mandel” (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* I: 244) (Neumann 176). The paradox of absence and presence in “living Nothing” is best captured, as Pöggeler too suggests, in another circumcision, namely of the word “emeth” (Pöggeler 346). In fact, split into the *aleph*⁷⁶ of revelation and creation and the “meth” of death, the parts of “emeth” correspond

⁷⁶ *Aleph* is often transcribed into English as the letter “e,” even though the sounds do not correspond. The correspondence between these letters lies not in their sounds, but in their similar modes of disappearing from language. The disappearance of *e* will be treated in greater detail in the next chapter on Georges Perec’s *La Disparition*.

loosely to “living” and “Nothing.” If read in this way, “emeth” is a Hebrew word in which what Reichert calls “Mitmeinen des Fremden” can be read. As a circumcised word, or precisely in the suggestion of its severing, it houses both life and death.⁷⁷ This paradoxical nature of “emeth” recalls its Ancient Greek counterpart, *aletheia*, also meaning “truth,” and the Ancient Greek tendency to denote concepts by negating their opposites. Derived from the Greek verb *λανθάνω* (to escape notice), *ἀλήθεια* means literally “that which does not escape notice.” To recall that *Lethe* is the name of the river of forgetting, *ἀλήθεια* also means “that which cannot be forgotten.” Since the word *ἀλήθεια* is essentially a negation of forgetting and escaping notice, like “emeth,” it cannot but recall its opposite even as it negates it.

The phrase “living Nothing” can also be interpreted quite differently, however. It can refer in its entirety to the letter *aleph* as the disappearing, absent letter that is nonetheless the prime letter of the alphabet and the beginning of creation. That is, the entire phrase “living Nothing” can be a paradoxical and expanded form of *aleph*, the forgotten letter into which God’s entire revelation has been condensed. If Rabbi Löw were to obey the speaking I’s imperatives, he would bring the Golem to life by inscribing the absent letter of creation into his soul. Neumann suggests that the spreading fingers for the blessing could also refer to writing, since the words “Wort” (word), “Finger” (finger) and “Hand” (hand) are not infrequently interlinked in Celan’s works with writing (Neumann 176). If so, then this is a scene of writing in which writing can only be interrupted, or rather, in which the creative gesture embodied in the letter *aleph* itself operates as an interruption and a severing. If human speech can be summed up as *vox articulata* as in classical grammars, then Celan disrupts this articulation in several important ways (Vogt-Spira 297). He reduces human speech to chirping, gnashing, and gritting, as though frictionless sounds, that is to say, vowels had disappeared from his sound-world altogether. Moreover, he simultaneously opens up and severs his words so as to reveal the co-presence of nothing and

⁷⁷ The author of the present study acknowledges that Reichert’s exposition of “Mitmeinen des Fremden” is based on triliteral Semitic word roots that cover a large semantic field. Since *aleph* has consonantal value, its removal would result in a different root. This chapter seeks to expand Reichert’s concept of “Mitmeinen” to include the multiple lexical possibilities afforded to readers when Celan fragments his words while leaving both the fragments and the word in the same poem to be read together.

something, of life and death in a single word. He does so in this poem by rendering perceptible one sound that is neither written nor heard. This revelation is only possible in a word's circumcision on the page and not that of any ostensible referent.

6. Celan and Operative Writing

As the previous discussion demonstrates, Celan directly addresses Hebrew writing and its relationship to sound phenomena both by withdrawing the Hebrew letter *aleph* from his poem and by inscribing the poem with *aleph*'s paradoxical status as prime and unpronounceable written sign. The following discussion will illustrate that Celan's preoccupation with written signs' relationship to silence and absence is not limited to the Hebrew alphabet, but extends to its Latin counterpart as well. In the case of the Latin alphabet as it is addressed in the opening poem of *Niemandrose*, "Es war Erde in ihnen," Celan's engagement with written signs encompasses both letters of the alphabet and mathematical notation. By addressing non-semantic dimensions of writing and gesturing towards written signs' role in mathematical notation, Celan expands the scope of his writing to include both semantic and phenomenal sense. Additionally, he employs signs of counting and address together in order to plumb the potential of writing to illustrate difficulties attending enumeration and poetic address. Enumeration (of any subject that appears in any way in a poem) and poetic address relate with different emphases to the question of what constitutes and what deconstitutes any human subject that might be addressed or interpellated in a written or spoken text. Enumeration additionally recalls the question of the quantifiability of genocide. Both questions of counting and of address are of central poetological significance for Celan.

What is widely termed the formal language of mathematics and mathematical notation in particular differs from natural languages in that it is not primarily associated with sound transcription. Mathematical language and notation constitute what Sybille Krämer terms "operative writing," that is, "de-semanticized" writing that performs cognitive operations (Krämer 531–534; Krämer, "Operative Schriften als Geistestechnik. Zur Vorgeschichte der

Informatik”). Numerals were initially simple scratches on sticks and stones or collections of pebbles or pieces of clay. “De-semanticized” writing does not suggest that the meaning of mathematical operations cannot be expressed or explained in everyday language, but that such operations can function as media and tools, irrespective of the meaning of their elements.

The rules of calculus apply exclusively to the syntactic shape of written signs, not to their meaning: thus one can calculate with the sign ‘0’ long before it has been decided if its object of reference, the zero, is a number, in other words, before an interpretation for the numeral ‘0’—the cardinal number of empty sets—has been found that is mathematically consistent. If the one-times-one . . . etc. is given as a written table, then calculation problems can be solved without the person performing calculations even being aware that he or she is not only constructing and deconstructing graphical patterns, but also using *numbers*. More pointedly stated: the spirit can be realized without consciousness and signs can be manipulated without interpretation. (Krämer 532)

The Greek number system based numbers on the initial letters of numeral names,⁷⁸ while letters of the Hebrew alphabet have corresponding numbers.⁷⁹ Reading a literary text today does not necessitate reflection on the origins of letters and numerals or require that readers discern whether they are reading letters, numbers, or musical notation. However, as Friedrich Kittler suggests, letters and their numeral counterparts once presented readers with precisely these three reading choices. Read with an eye to their intermedial potential, written signs do not necessarily “make sense” in that they do not lead to singular definitions (F. Kittler, “Number and Numeral” 52, 56–57). Yet they can allow for multiple readings, for phenomenal sense (the sensory experience of text) as well as for semantic sense.⁸⁰

Thus the presence or perceptibility of numbers in a literary text does not suggest the eradication of semantic sense, but rather a demand for a reading that takes into account the visual materiality and operative potential of writing in textual elements. In his poetry as well as his prose, Celan frequently invokes counting and numbers, notably in “Zähle die Mandeln” from

⁷⁸ This does not mean that operative writing is primarily associated with sound, but that it avails itself of the universal technique of abbreviation.

⁷⁹ The number values of Hebrew letters and the absence of vowels in Classical Hebrew play a central role in Jewish mysticism. The earliest known Jewish text of this tradition, *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) spoke of creation as a process involving the 10 divine numbers and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

⁸⁰ In chapter 2, the intersections between operative writing, mathematical sets and the Latin and Hebrew alphabets will be discussed in more detail.

Mohn und Gedächtnis (*Poppy and Memory* —1952), in which the act of counting is again interlinked with poetic address (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* I: 78). Similar motifs can be found in *Die Niemandsrose* (for instance in “Die Silbe Schmerz,” in which numbers, counting and the uncountable are juxtaposed). Here invocations of counting paradoxically reference the uncountable and unquantifiable (e.g. numberless victims of the Third Reich) and also the unity of the elements being counted. For example, in “Zähle die Mandeln” it is unclear whether the speaker and the addressee are themselves discrete units, since the addressee becomes “selbdritt” [three-self, third-self]). This numerical instability and possible multiplicity are also performed by reading written signs on a page. Although written signs are presumably identical to one another in the printed book medium, they can be read in several different ways as I have noted throughout this dissertation as letters, visual marks on a page, and as numbers. When written signs are read intermedially in the putatively singular medium of the printed book, they show that the poem’s instabilities are not limited to its semantic units and its speaking subjects alone, but also present in the materiality of its medium.

The letter *O* in “Es war Erde in ihnen” appears as a cipher of silence and absence, but also of sound.⁸¹ It also appears as a likeness of the number 0, a visual mark of the incessant exercise of digging invoked by the poem, and as a likeness of the final circular object in the poem, the ring. This *O* thus participates on the elemental scale of the letter in what Werner Hamacher terms inversion in Celan’s poetics. This is inversion “in which the phenomenal and linguistic world is opened onto a caesura that not a single shape of this world can exorcize, since each of these shapes results from it” (Hamacher 360). The letter *O* both concretizes a gap on the space of the page, and in its refusal to be read as a single sign, withdraws from any stable and unitary system of communication or sense-making. It both multiplies the text’s valences and opens up gaps and holes on its surface. One of the texts that best present this abundance of

⁸¹ Here I use the term “cipher” in its layered meanings as the number zero (and in fact any numeral), a “symbolic character of hieroglyph,” and a cryptographic or disguised mode of writing. The additional meaning of this extremely suggestive word, “person who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth, a nonentity, a ‘mere nothing’,” will become important in my upcoming discussion of poetic address in “Es war Erde in ihnen” (Oxford English Dictionary, “‘Cipher | Cypher, N.’”).

absence on the space of the page is the first poem “Es war Erde in ihnen” (“There was earth inside them”):

Es war Erde in ihnen, und
sie gruben.

Sie gruben und gruben, so ging
ihr Tag dahin, ihre Nacht. Und sie lobten nicht Gott,
der, so hörten sie, all dies wollte,
der, so hörten sie, all dies wusste.

Sie gruben und hörten nichts mehr;
sie wurden nicht weise, erfanden kein Lied,
erdachten sich keinerlei Sprache.
Sie gruben.

Es kam eine Stille, es kam auch ein Sturm,
es kamen die Meere alle.
Ich grabe, du gräbst, und es gräbt auch der Wurm,
und das Singende dort sagt: Sie graben.

O einer, o keiner, o niemand, o du:
Wohin gings, da's nirgendhin ging?
O du gräbst und ich grab, und ich grab mich dir zu,
und am Finger erwacht uns der Ring.

(Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* I: 211)

There was earth inside them, and
they dug.

They dug and dug, and so
their day went past, their night. And they did not praise God,
who, so they heard, wanted all this,
who, so they heard, witnessed all this.

They dug and heard nothing more;
they did not grow wise, invented no song,
devised for themselves no sort of language.
They dug.

There came a stillness then, came also storm,
all of the oceans came.
I dig, you dig, and it digs too, the worm,
and the singing there says: They dig.

O one, o none, o no one, o you:

Where did it go then, making for nowhere?
O you dig and I dig, and I dig through to you,
and the ring on our finger awakens.

(Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 134–135)

The rhythm of digging in the poem is both visual and aural, as the recurring phrase “sie gruben” [they dug] punctuates the poem. If one recalls the process of inversion at work in Celan's oeuvre, according to Jürgen Lehmann, the recurring phrase “they dug/dig” can be read as a paradoxical reversal of the line “they shovel a grave in the air” from “Death-Fugue.” The figures here have earth inside them, and instead of shoveling in the air, they dig into the earth and into themselves (Lehmann and Ivanović 51). The poem recalls a biblical beginning, when “the Lord God formed man from the dust on the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). The Hebrew *adamah*, here translated as the word “ground,” also means “arable land,” which God's breath animates into life. However, God, breath and arable land have all withdrawn from this opening scene. Those digging have earth inside them, but this earth appears to be lifeless. The incessant activity of digging does not appear to have any purpose or goal other than the activity itself, it is an empty, non-agrarian exercise. No seed germinates. God is absent from the world he knows and wills, a world that does not praise him.

More important, however, breath and sound are absent. Those digging “heard nothing more,” “did not grow wise, invented no song, /devised for themselves no sort of language.” They do not sound out a breath, that is, they do not call or sing, which typically involves sounding vowels in speech and musical tone. Those digging do not “grow wise” or devise a language and thus cannot forge language and reason into *logos*. In Friedrich Kittler's account of Homeric song notated by letters of the Greek alphabet, “the tone letters struck up did what vowels, as indicated by their very name, are said to do: they called—and like the sirens they called out to their hero” (F. Kittler, “Number and Numeral” 57).⁸² This initial scene of “Es war Erde in ihnen” is one

⁸² The Greek alphabet was derived from the Phoenician alphabet, closely related to the Hebrew consonantal system. The Greek invention involved turning the Phoenician *matres lectionis* into vowel sounds, and the Greek alphabet is credited with introducing vowels into alphabets as letters in their own right, without which consonants cannot be

without the breath, language and song of vowels. The *O* of the vocatives to come later emerge in this early section only as shapes of gaping holes in the ground.

Nothing less than a sea-change can transform this scene, and the silence of the beginning could be the lull before the storm that comes in the fourth stanza. What follow are rhythmic invocations of digging, but with one important change. Now it is not an empty or generic “they” that dig, but “I,” “you,” “the worm,” while a singing voice speaks of the digging. As Yoko Tawada points out in her reading of this poem, this conjugation of the verb “dig” is not an empty grammatical exercise but musical, much like a theme and its variations. The series of conjugations act like linguistic seeds that anticipate the botanic terminology and tropes of *Niemandrose* (Yoko Tawada, “Die Krone Aus Gras” 75). Extrapolating from Tawada’s insight, I could say that the conjugations germinate the scene, multiply the acts and actors of digging and render their contours less vague than the impersonal “they.” Just as importantly, breath has entered the scene in the form of the singing voice that speaks. While it is still unclear whether the digging becomes an agrarian exercise, the linguistic world of the poem has gained dimension through the—botanical—proliferation of conjugations as well as singing and speaking.

However, the speaking and germination do not end there but culminate in a series of vocatives. Grammatically, the vocative is a case where that which otherwise stands in the nominative (i.e. as subject) becomes an addressee. This stage appears to be the beginning of any real communication in the poem when one speaking being calls to another: “O one, o none, o no one, o you.” Both the rhythm of digging and the series of vocative *O*s punctuate the fifth stanza. The beginnings of sound that had insinuated themselves into the fourth stanza as breath and song now take the shape of a vowel and call out to an addressee. The nature of this addressee and the act of calling deserve particular scrutiny here. Hamacher cautions against reading Celan’s

pronounced. Not surprisingly, the importance of Greek innovations in writing, particularly of vowels, is of supreme importance. “All the alphabets in use in Europe today stand in direct or indirect relation to the ancient Greek.” In addition, “[t]he Greek pre-Socratic philosophers were perhaps the first to ponder about the nature of sounds and letters, about vowels and consonants (even the mutes), about syllables and words” (Diringer and Regensburger 356–357). Thus, the Greeks not only developed the alphabet to such a degree that it equipped Western tradition with a mode of communication kept to this day; it also gave Western thought some of the prime philosophical texts that link letters to music as well as to certain concepts and states.

speakers and addressees as positive figures. Arguing that the caesura that runs through all of Celan's poetry "disperses every unit and every condition that makes unity possible" (Hamacher 360), he holds that Celan's "I"s and "you"s are disarticulated by this fissure as the communicative power of language is disrupted:

I and Thou, which, according to dialogical theories, should reciprocally constitute each other, deconstitute each other in the chiasmus—it, too, an inversion—of their crossed attempts to get a grip on themselves and to make themselves capable of being grasped, until this deconstitution makes them into figures of an encounter with nothingness. (Hamacher 373)

The caesura of inversion both separates and binds; it also deconstitutes the speaker and addressee as parties of communication. But what are the letteral dimensions of inversion at work in the letter *O* and Celan's vocatives?

The vocatives count, address, and mark the entities that follow them. The first is "one," the next "none," then a "nobody," followed by a "du," as the poem alternates between calling "one" and "no-one." Each *O* articulates sound and addresses. However, it simultaneously constitutes the addressee and deconstitutes him in addressing the object of address alternately as "one" and "no-one." The words introduced by these exclamations refer both to human subjects and numbers. The words "einer" (one) and "du" (you) designate one person or a quantity of one, while "keiner" (none) and "no one" (niemand) designate both an absence and a set of null value. John Felstiner reads a "waltzing rhythm" in this and suggests that "the voice cries to a company of pronouns with open-mouthed *o*'s, ciphers in search of someone" (Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 152). Felstiner identifies the nothing inscribed into the form of the *o*; the *o* of address for him is also a cipher, a zero, a gaping hole that might never be filled. It is possible to read this stanza as a series of numbers by substituting 1 where a quantity of one is referenced and 0 where the quantity is zero.

Especially in the last stanza Celan's visual poetics becomes apparent in the encounter between the sound of the letter *O* and this impossible counting enabled by the visual resemblance of the letter to zero. This contact and interaction between the different capacities of writing and

written signs constitute the foundational moment of writing in this poem as the moment in which caller and addressee are inscribed on the page as “I” or implied by the word “one” as the number 1. In response and by contrast, the letter *O* of the multiple vocatives and the number 0 implied by “none” and “no one” are inscribed as the possibility of their absence or death, almost visible on the space of the page as holes dug into the earth. The possibility of absence is heightened by references to units of null value, without which it might have been possible to overlook this absence as possibility or potential. Celan lends the possibility of a third dimension to this circular yet two-dimensional form, as a ring “awakens” in the last line of the poem. Because the ring could both refer to the shape of a ring or to the object itself, it remains ambiguous whether the circular form attains this third dimension. The ring awakens as the “I” and “you” become “we,” a possible figure of circumscribing, yet also of a circularity and gap inscribed into this relationship from the first invocations of digging to the vocative address.

Although the vocative *O*s designate address, the letter *O* refuses to be read as a sign of communication. The multiple readings the letter invites as phenomenal sense (the image of the hole), cipher of absence (the number zero), and the ambiguous ring disrupt communicative language and participate in a mode of sense-making that cannot be communicatively contained by semantic sense. If the final image of the ring is the concretization of these many circular forms into a concrete object, then the potential materialization of the ring at the poem’s conclusion might be the paradoxical extension of the very element of writing (the letter *O*) from the two-dimensional space of the page into an almost graspable object.

Celan’s caesurae and the (in)decipherability of Celan’s textual elements are among Jacques Derrida’s objects of analysis in his reading of Celan’s poem “Schibboleth” (Shibboleth) from the poetry collection *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*. Of primary importance for Derrida’s reading is that a caesura in Celan is never properly singular, a single point in time, but continually recurring and re-turning, like a date. Like Hamacher, Derrida holds that a repetition in Celan is never a repetition of the same, even as return and repetition are inscribed in the caesurae. Not limiting his analysis to *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*, Derrida also reads the “ring” of

“Es war Erde in ihnen” as a figure of this return. Derrida identifies a link between the form of the ring, the human body (the fingers *are* the ring), its vectoral potential (circular trajectory of a communication) and its message:

A ring awakens on our finger, and the fingers are the ring itself, in “Es war Erde in ihnen” (GW 1:211/ P 153). But above all, since a date is never without a letter to be deciphered, I think of the ring of the carrier-pigeon at the end of “La Contrescarpe.” The carrier-pigeon transports, transfers, or translates a coded message, but this is not a metaphor. It departs at its date, that of its sending, and it must return from the other place to the same one, that from which it came, completing a round trip. Now the question of the cipher is posed by Celan not only with regard to the message but also with regard to the ring itself, sign of belonging and alliance, and condition of return. The cipher of the seal, the imprint of the ring, *counts*, perhaps more than the content of the message. As with *shibboleth*, the meaning of the word matters less than, let us say, its signifying form once it becomes a password, a mark of belonging, the manifestation of an alliance. (Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan” 19–20)

Although rings are often worn by members of particular groups, who are deemed to belong together (e.g., in marriage), Derrida is aware that the ring need not act solely as a coded message or sign of alliance. In the case of “La Contrescarpe” in particular, the ring is a sign of provenance instead. As Jean-Marie Winkler notes in his commentary:

Die Brieftaube, die einst als Bote für militärische Mitteilungen eingesetzt wurde, trägt normalerweise einen Ring, mit der kodierte Angabe ihres Heimortes. Die Lesbarkeit betrifft somit nicht die Botschaft im Brief, sondern die Herkunft der Taube. (Winkler 335)

[The messenger pigeon, once deployed as carrier for military communications, normally wears a ring with the coded indication of its place of origin. The legibility thus applies not to the message of the letter, but to the provenance of the pigeon]

Derrida’s association between the awakening ring of “Es war Erde in ihnen” and the ring of the carrier-pigeon of “La Contrescarpe” (also from *Niemandrose*) is particularly apt, since both poems exceed their content in ways that render the decipherment of content alone insufficient for a readerly encounter with the poem. Celan’s question in “La Contrescarpe” is not where the pigeon is from but whether its ring is decipherable: “Scherte die Brieftaube aus, war ihr Ring/ zu entziffern? (All das/ Gewölk um sie her –es war lesbar.)” [Did the carrier-pigeon

sheer off, was its ring/ decipherable? (All that/ Cloud around it –it was readable.)] (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden* I: 282; Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan” 20). For Derrida, the physical form of the message defines not its content but its physical trajectory.⁸³ It does not originate from a sender and conclude its operation by delivering a message to an addressee. Derrida’s reading of “La Contrescarpe” highlights tensions between deciphering and reading. The physical form of the ring needs to be read alongside its message.

This tension is of equal import for decipherment, counting and the form of the ring in “Es war Erde in ihnen.” Derrida offers: “The cipher of the seal, the imprint of the ring, *counts*, perhaps more than the content of the message. As with *shibboleth*, the meaning of the word matters less than, let us say, its signifying form.” This statement by Derrida shifts the focus of reading away from deciphering towards attention to form. It is unlikely that Derrida, so sensitive to and innovative with homonyms and etymologies, would not be aware of the etymological link between the number zero and encipherment, but he does not pursue this line in his analysis. It therefore bears elaborating in my analysis that both “cipher” and “decipherment” are derived from the Sanskrit *śūnya* by way of Arabic. The Arabic *ḥifr* means “the arithmetical symbol ‘zero’ or ‘nought’ (written in Indian and Arabic numeration).”⁸⁴ Derrida importantly opens up a reading for the signifying form of the “cipher of the seal” or “the imprint of the ring,” whose material imprint on paper would be the circular shape of zero. That the form of the ring suggests its trajectory rather than its message, and that it remains unclear whether the message arrives at its point of departure, offers another reading of the word *entziffern*, literally de-ciphering, that is, voiding the ring of its zero. Read in this way, the word *entziffern* suggests an instance of inversion, in Hamacher’s terms a “negative positing of the negative” (Hamacher 350). Derrida’s emphasis on the word “*counts*” is significant for its double meaning of “having value and

⁸³ It should also be noted that the poem asks about the decipherability of the ring, while transferring questions of legibility to the clouds around it.

⁸⁴ “cipher | cypher, n.”. OED Online. September 2011. Oxford University Press. 12 October 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33155>>. The number zero was first used in decimal systems in India and made its way west through the Arabic numeral system and mathematic treatises, which were later translated into Latin.

significance” but also “number, enumerate,” and “calculate.”⁸⁵ One does not begin counting with zero but with 1, and in counting one adds 1 and not zero to the last term. In emphasizing that the circular form of the cipher “*counts*,” Derrida already suggests that this would be a catachrestic yet necessary counting, as Celan’s invocations of counting mentioned above already are. In directing readerly attention away from the content of the message to its physical form and implicitly toward its attendant physical and mathematical properties, Derrida voids the message content while concretizing the cipher as the material form of the ring. The signifying form of the ring for Derrida is the figure of turning and returning, manifestation of alliance, or password. However, it is also its material form, its shape and its imprint that makes encryption and decipherment possible. The ring both invites this decipherment and resists it.

These intermedial readings of *O* as vocative particle, cipher of absence, mathematical symbol, and material object on a page suggest that Celan appeals to the operative capacities of writing in order to make perceptible in his poems a textual presence that cannot be captured in semantic sense alone. Absence and the troubled poetic address become legible only in an intermedial encounter with surface phenomena in the text. Although Celan’s printed pages necessarily entail repetitions of the same set of written signs, Celan employs these identical elements so as to render them non-same. His written signs not only serve as vehicles of meaning, but also invite various possibilities of reading their form and material presence on the page. These readings continually gesture towards possible alternate readings, as letters, numbers, and images that transform into one another and undermine the stability of the text at an elemental level. As the following section will show, however, Celan’s employment of written signs is not only an exercise in multisensory reading, but also of great import to the temporal dimensions of Celan’s caesurae and to his poetic strategy of citation.

⁸⁵ "count, v.". OED Online. September 2011. Oxford University Press. 13 October 2011 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/42619?rskey=QRITei&result=4&isAdvanced=false>; “count, v.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary and Thesaurus. 13 October 2011 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/count>>

7. Meridians

This section will trace the circular forms of meridians and the paginal presence of quotation marks in Celan's 1960 Büchner Prize acceptance speech entitled "Der Meridian."⁸⁶ Celan's visual poetics suggest some affinities between the meridian and the letter *O*, both marks of re-turning that oscillate between materiality and absence. The meridian is a tool of orientation, figure of spatial and temporal splitting, and one of encounter and return.

Jürgen Lehmann draws attention to a lack of spatial markers in "Es war Erde in ihnen," observing that both the word "nirgendwohin" [nowhere in a directional sense] and the question mark at the end of the second line of the last stanza indicate loss of direction. It is also possible, however, to read "nirgendwohin" against the grain as an instantiated nowhere, as direction toward a kind of utopic space. Lehmann recalls "Der Meridian," where Celan indicates a route "im Lichte der U-topie" [in light of u-topia] towards the poem (Lehmann and Ivanović 55; Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 10, Sec.40b; 8, Sec.31f; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 10, Sec.40b; 8, Sec.31f). In my reading, the routes and directional nowheres that he pursues in the case of "Der Meridian" and meridians, draw a circle back towards the point of departure.

Celan's conclusion in "Der Meridian" highlights the circular structure of his speech, which thematizes the globe's revolution, among others, in the etymology of the words *topoi* and *tropē*: that is, both "place" from the Greek τόπος and "turning," again from the Greek τρέπω. Celan delineates his path in delivering his speech, declaring "ich bin am Ende –ich bin wieder

⁸⁶ The Georg-Büchner-Preis (Georg Büchner Prize) is a significant literary prize awarded to German-language literature. It began to be given in 1923 in memory of Georg Büchner by his German home-state Hessen, in the state capital Darmstadt. It was originally given annually only to artists from Hessen. It was not awarded from 1933 to 1944 and then became a general literary prize in 1951. It is now awarded annually by the *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung* (The German Academy for Language and Poetry). Article 4 of the Constitution of the Prize reads "Zur Verleihung können Schriftsteller und Dichter vorgeschlagen werden, die in deutscher Sprache schreiben, durch ihre Arbeiten und Werke in besonderen Maße hervortreten und die an der Gestaltung des gegenwärtigen deutschen Kulturlebens wesentlichen Anteil haben" [Those authors and poets may be recommended for the Prize who write in the German language, who distinguish themselves through their work to an exceptional degree, and who take on a significant role in shaping the contemporary German cultural life] "Satzung des Georg-Büchner Preis" http://www.deutscheakademie.de/preise_buechner_satzung.html. Retrieved 10.9.2011.

⁸⁶ English translations in brackets are my additions.

am Anfang (...) Ich bin auch hier, in Ihrer Gegenwart, diesen Weg gegangen. Es war ein Kreis.”
[I am at the end—I am back at the beginning.(...) I took this path, here too, in your presence. It was a circle] (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 10–11, Sec.42a, 42f; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 10–11, Sec.42a, 42f). Yet there is one more moment of encounter, that between this “I” and a circular path of writing around the globe.

Ich finde etwas—wie die Sprache—Immaterielles, aber Irdisches, Terrestrisches, etwas Kreisförmiges, über die beiden Polen in sich selbst Zurückkehrendes und dabei—heitererweise—sogar die Tropen Durchkreuzendes—: ich finde ... einen *Meridian*. (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 12, Sec.50c)

[I find something—like language—immaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while—cheerfully—even crossing the tropics: I find ... a *meridian*.] (Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 12, Sec.50c)

Celan's meridian is of the earth but also immaterial. After all, meridians do not exist in the world except by convention. Celan likens the meridian and its path to that of poetry. The trope of this convention thus entails a multiple encounter, between poetry and poetry, between the poet and himself, and between the poet and the meridian. Celan's choice of the meridian as site of encounter is significant for the meridian's double function as a tool of orientation in space and an indicator of time difference, but also for its function of traversing the circumference of the earth and dividing it. The meridian might be the more apt figure for speaking of temporality, splitting, and encounter in poetry in non-semantic terms for this reason. Speaking of time and meaning in Celan's poetry, Hamacher observes:

The word of time does not refer to objective data or abstract meanings; it is only as the withdrawal of objectivity and meaning. The language of finitude is the chronic retreat of the referential and semantic functions of language, because with each one of its words—all of which bend representations into life—the world and the very being of the things thus spoken are brought to the point of disappearance. In turning to speak to its own ground, Celan's poetry can assert the condition of its possibility only as the condition of the impossibility of its stable semantic subsistence, and so it opens up the abyss of its own futility. (Hamacher 353)

According to Hamacher, the semantic potential of language is subject to time (Hamacher 352). This subjection implies for Hamacher, however, that language withdraws from stable

conditions of sense-making and becomes non-representational, since by referencing things in the world, the language of time paradoxically erases its referents. In my reading, the meridian constitutes the figure of this dimension of time in Celan's poetry. Not only is the meridian itself both terrestrial and immaterial (in that it is only an imagined sign), it also becomes the figure of time and splitting *par excellence*. It is an imagined site of encounter that deconstitutes the parties of encounter by temporalizing and splitting them.

In his Büchner Prize acceptance speech, Celan remains cognizant of the meridian's capacities of temporal and semantic disarticulation, yet he finds consolation in its power to allow continual encounter (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 12, Sec.50a–c; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 12, Sec.50a–c). The meridian allows for orientation on what appears to be a global, even universal scale, albeit not in any conventional geographic sense despite Celan's reliance on the convention of the meridian as such. Celan states clearly in his prize acceptance speech that his place of origin cannot be found and does not exist on a map (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 12, Sec.49b–d; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 12, Sec.49b–d). Still, his project of "topos research" (*Toposforschung*) "in the light of u-topia" (*im Lichte der U-topie*) can be read against the grain as the search for a place that could be found on a map, as Lehmann suggests (Lehmann and Ivanović 55; Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 10, Sec.40a–b, 49a; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 10, Sec.40a–b, 49a). This dissertation reads "*U-topie*" as a real non-place for Celan, a place of *U*. The Greek *psilon* is a semi-vowel that stands at the threshold between the presence and absence of sound, that is to say, between the frictionless sound of a vowel and the friction, trill, hiss, or buzz of a consonant.⁸⁷ With respect to audibility in Celan, Kristina Mendicino dissects Celan's phrase "*Majestät des Absurden*" ("majesty of the absurd"), which was elegantly read by Jacques Derrida in his seminal essay "Majesties" (2005). However, Mendicino does so with attention to its

⁸⁷ The author of the present study acknowledges that the German transcription of the lowercase *psilon* differs from the Greek original.

reference to “an unheard dimension of speech,” since it “literally signals an intensified (*ab-*) deafness (*surdus*) [...]. It would seem indeed that something ‘unheard’ enters Celan’s audible speech” (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 12, Sec.49b–d; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 12, Sec.49b–d; Mendicino 639). Taking Celan and Mendicino at their word, this chapter suggests that the *U* of Celan’s “*U-topie*” could be understood as a locus of this unheard dimension of Celan’s speech. That is, “*U-topie*” calls for the visual form of *U* to be read alongside its semantic function as a prefix meaning “not” and the endangered status of *psilon* as one dimension of “*Der Meridian*” on the cusp of being unheard. As a letter, the German *psilon* (*Y/y*) corresponds to the Greek *Y/ v (upsilon)*. It can be considered an endangered phoneme in German, with recurrent yet unsuccessful attempts to discontinue its use. *U* can also be read as a turn on the space of the page, alongside Celan’s invocations of “re-routings [...] creaturely routes, [...] a sending oneself ahead toward oneself, in search of oneself [...] A kind of homecoming” (Um-Wege [...] kreatürliche Wege, [...] ein Sichvorausschicken zu sich selbst, auf der Suche nach sich selbst, [...] Eine Art Heimkehr) (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 11, Sec.46; Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 11, Sec.46). *U* can erase its place (*topos*) by negating it, but read visually, it simultaneously designates the space as a *u*-place on the space of the page and performs the turns of which Celan speaks. Encounters with the text that the meridian, the *U*, and “Es war Erde in ihnen”’s *O* all invite, call for an encounter with the semantic instability of Celan’s poetry and the intermedial, sensory possibilities of reading the smallest elements of Celan’s texts. These possibilities extend from letters of the alphabet to punctuation marks, those elements of writing that were never meant to be pronounced.

In *Meridian*, Celan throws into relief precisely these unheard elements in citing a passage from Georg Büchner’s *Leonce und Lena* (Leonce and Lena):

Gibt es nicht gerade in “Leonce und Lena” diese den Worten unsichtbar
 zugelächelten Anführungszeichen, die vielleicht nicht als Gänsefüßchen, die
 vielmehr als Hasenöhrchen, das heißt also als etwas nicht ganz furchtlos über sich

und die Worte Hinauslauschendes verstanden sein wollen? (Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien* 12, 48c)

[And yet: isn't *Leonce and Lena* full of quotation marks, invisibly and smilingly added to the words, that want to be understood perhaps not as "Gänsefüßchen" [little goose-feet], but rather as "Hasenöhrchen" [little hare's ears], that is, something not completely fearless, that listens beyond itself and the words?] ⁸⁸
(Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* 12, 48c)

The invisible quotation marks posited around the cited words generate associations of a distinctly visual nature for Celan. At first, these marks are likened to "little goose feet," that is, bodily parts whose form and prints on the ground both resemble quotation marks.⁸⁹ Celan decides on rabbit ears as the better choice, a pair of bodily organs that not only resemble quotation marks visually but also perform analogue functions in a body and body of text: that of listening.⁹⁰ Celan's speech is then replete with a dizzying array of citation from Büchner as well as other authors. While Celan explicitly names some of his sources, others are much less recognizable as citations for an important reason. In her incisive reading of *Meridian*, Mendicino persuasively argues that "an unheard-of capability of language to remember" is pivotal to the *Meridian* in particular and to Celan's oeuvre in general, that is, language's capacity "to take-in [sic] its past and its future, so that what is spoken in the present always entails what is not-yet or already spoken—and *thus* unheard." Citation is one important strategy by which Celan achieves this remembering. Mendicino suggests that "the first thing that the *Meridian* does is radically diffuse its speaker by condensing many temporalities and personae in the same words," particularly by overwhelming the speaker's voice with citations (Mendicino 641, 635).⁹¹ In performing a certain permeability between Celan's citations and the body of his speech on the

⁸⁸ English translations in brackets are my additions.

⁸⁹ "Gänsefüßchen" [little goose feet] is an idiomatic expression for quotation marks in German. The more technical and commonly used term is "Anführungszeichen." As signaled by its diminutive ending *-chen* (the non-diminutive word would be "Gänsefuß" [goose feet]), "Gänsefüßchen" is used mostly by children or by adults speaking to children. Celan's use of the expression in the formal context of an awards ceremony is an unusual choice that cannot be casual.

⁹⁰ Celan has chosen precisely organs of hearing as the best visual analogue for quotation marks, which suggests that seeing and hearing for Celan are both significant for the world of the text.

⁹¹ While Mendicino focuses on the event of Celan's speech, the analysis here focuses on the written text of the Büchner Prize speech. Celan's reference to the rabbit-ears suggests that the written page is significant for him even as he is delivering an oral address.

typo-topographic space of the page, the rabbit-ears dramatize Celan's practice of citation explosion and the ensuing disarticulation of the speaker in *Meridian*. Even as—or precisely because—he is delivering an oral address, and even as he proceeds to cloud his voice with that of his cited authors, Celan does not allow his audience to forget the visual form of the quotation marks on a page. In doing so, he refashions them, not as markers that separate the author's statements from that of another source, witness, or interlocutor. Rather, he conjures up the visual form of these markers to blur further the boundaries between the body of his speech and the citations in it: the quotation marks do not so much confine the words within them as act as porous organs seeking to perceive the words beyond and let them in, almost as the human auditory canal extends into the body, allowing sound waves to enter the body from the outside world. In his oeuvre in general, as we have seen, Celan is not only receptive to the visual impact of written signs, but he also frequently subjects them to transformation. In addition, he often literally throws them into relief as bodies in the case of his choice of “little hare's ears” that conjure up thoughts of an animal's body instead of the two-dimensional “quotation marks,” actors in a dramatization of the written text.⁹²

8. Conclusion

Paul Celan's language is frequently described as a language of wounding and caesurae and known to test the limits of the sayable in the wake of the Holocaust, gesturing towards the unsayable, the unheard, the unquantifiable. His multilingualism as biographical fact, literary sensitivity and poetic practice too is undeniable, prompting scholarly reflections on his translations and the presence of other languages in his oeuvre. This chapter pays sustained attention to an additional dimension of this multilingual writing, one that probes the limits of the transcribable. In addition to different grammatical structures, words, and expressions in Celan,

⁹² The “dramatization” of written signs is a term used by Erika Boeckeler in her doctoral thesis on artistic experimentation with the alphabet in the early modern period. Boeckeler links letters and typography with bodies. In the wake of letterpress printing, Boeckeler argues, this dramatization of the alphabet produces a new kind of literacy and expands narrative possibilities. See the introduction to Boeckeler.

what Klaus Reichert terms “the co-meaning of the foreign” can be expanded to include the interactive presence of Hebrew writing in Celan’s German, as well as the multivalence of the Latin alphabet in Celan’s poetry. Letters appear and disappear in Celan as visual marks, numbers, ciphers and objects. They call for an enriched readerly sensitivity to the intermediality and multisensory capacity of letters as written signs, and the at times conflicting modes of reading they invite. This suggests that Celan’s poetic strategies of fragmentation, repetition and paronomasia, so often read by scholars as being at work in Celan’s words and syllables, must also be read in relation to Celan’s letters. The fragmentation and recombinations of words are not incidental but pivotal for a reading of the strategies with which Celan responds to the semantic and referential potentials of language in his post-war context in the aftermath of genocide. The sensory capacities of texts, writing systems, and written signs for him resist participation in unified semantic systems. Celan’s writing thus calls for multisensory and multivalent readings, in which the sensory world of the text will always exceed any singular reading.

These possibilities are manifest in several forms. First, by employing silence not only as trope or theme but as embodied in a letter (such as *aleph*), Celan suggests that silence is paradoxically present in the very medium of writing. Thus silence for Celan does not lie just beyond his texts, but is part and parcel of them, at times as a paginal presence. Second and relatedly, Celan employs the additional multisensory capacities of letters as visual marks, numbers, and objects, thus disrupting the semantic unity of his texts at an elemental level. Third, Celan uses individual letters (such as the *U* of *U-topia*) paradoxically to perform an impossible orientation on the typo-topographic space of the page. The *U* of *Utopia* additionally invites an almost unheard sound into Celan’s speech. Finally, Celan dramatizes quotation marks, similar to the letter *U* in their near inaudibility in speech, to perform explosion of citation on the space of the page and drowning the speaker’s voice in citational excess. This writing gestures beyond communication to the possibility of non-communicative and performative language, and it highlights notation at the elemental level of the letter.

In the context of the geographic, affective, and linguistic aftermath of genocide, Paul Celan's literary and essayistic work calls for critical attention to non-communicative and non-referential capacities of writing. Once contemplated as image-text, the letters *aleph*, *O*, *U*, and Celan's quotation marks reveal the intermediality of Greek-derived Western European writing systems. In their unique position among the smallest elements of Western and Western Semitic writing, they reveal writing as visual, aural, and operative practice that opens literary language to inter- and intralingual encounter, orientation, and a reevaluation of the very capacities of writing. Celan's transformations and severings of the letter transform the very material of literary production at an elemental level.

CHAPTER TWO

PURLOINED VOWL: LIPOGRAMMATIC CONSTRAINT AND LETTERAL ENTROPY IN GEORGES PEREC

1. Mathematics, Linguistic Eclecticism, and Oulipian Translation

Paul Celan's poetry and prose are intensely preoccupied with the materiality of language and multiplicity of languages, preoccupations he shares with the French oulipian Georges Perec. In addition, the vocabulary of geology, astrology, and physiology, as well as invocations of counting and mathematical operations are implicitly present in Celan's works. Georges Perec shares Celan's interest in the materiality of language and introduces mathematical operations into his works. However, while engagement with mathematics and mathematical language is a preoccupation for Celan, it is absolutely constitutive of Perec's work: The structure and elements of Perec's texts, references, and inspiration are derived from mathematics. As a member of the literary group *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature), which consisted of writers and mathematicians experimenting with mathematical constraints in literature, Perec produced some of his best known work in conversation, consultation and even partial collaboration with other OuLiPo members.⁹³

Like Celan and Tawada, but with some important shifts, Perec's biography too is defined by geographic and linguistic displacements. Both branches of Perec's family were Jewish emigrants from Poland who settled in France in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Second World War brought with it displacements of a different kind and with different motivations for Perec's family. The French State (or Vichy France) with its authoritarian and anti-Semitic policies, and the German occupation of northern France forced the family from Paris into hiding in southern France. Geographic displacements therefore defined Perec's formative years through

⁹³ *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* will be referenced throughout the chapter as OuLiPo, the shorter and more common name, which was used by OuLiPo members and its readers alike. Authors, works, and activities related to OuLiPo will be called "oulipian," a common adjective for describing a text, strategy, or tendency typical of or related to the OuLiPo.

the emigration of his parents' families to France shortly before Perec's birth in 1936, his father's death in 1940 near Yonne by Champigny in French military service on the last battle day of *drôle de guerre*, his mother's deportation to Auschwitz in 1943, and a war-childhood spent with his aunt's family and his grandmother in hiding in the south of France. These displacements occupy an important place in Perec's oeuvre. The short autobiographical account *Récits d'Ellis Island* (*Ellis Island Revisited: Tales of Vagrancy and Hope*—1980) tells of the branch of Perec's family that emigrated to the United States during World War II. The semi-autobiographical novel *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* (*W, or, The Memory of Childhood*—1975) attempts to reconstruct Perec's World War II childhood from the shards of his relatives' and his own memories, and from a few remaining photographs. Running parallel to these childhood memories is the narrative of a fictional land called *W*, the population of which is obsessed with Olympic games practicing sports reminiscent of German labor camps in World War II.⁹⁴ Unlike Celan and Tawada, Perec never left the country of his birth. Of what can be called his geographic displacements, only the flight to southern France and a trip to Ellis Island (in order to gather material for the book by the same name) were undergone by Perec himself. However, Perec readily draws links between his family's displacements and his own in his autobiographical narratives.

Another way in which Perec's oeuvre reflects displacement is in linguistic displacement and multiplicity. Even though Perec's literary language remained French and his works were never written too far from Paris, Perec's oeuvre cannot be considered monolingual.⁹⁵ Beyond his

⁹⁴ Perec's mother, Cyrla Perec, most likely died in transport to or in Auschwitz. Perec no doubt had concentration camps like Auschwitz in mind while writing *W*. However, in the final chapters of *W*, Perec somewhat misleadingly cites Raymond Roussel's accounts of Nazi labor camps "for Aryans, such as Neue-Bremm, near Saarbrücken" in order to depict the camps for the extermination of Jews (Perec, *W, Ou, Le Souvenir D'enfance* 219–220; Bellos 551–552).

⁹⁵ To recall Yasemin Yildiz's formulation, the monolingual paradigm "constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one 'true' language only, their 'mother tongue,' and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation" (Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue* 2). Perec wrote exclusively in French, but he remained acutely aware of the languages with which he grew up (Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, French) and those with which he was intensively involved later in life (particularly English, but also German). All of these languages also

translation work from English into French and his collaborative projects in German with the *Saarländischer Rundfunk* [Saarland Broadcasting–SR], Perec’s oeuvre is invested in experiments in translation, multilingual word games, and in an expanded multilingual sense, in the languages of art and mathematics.⁹⁶ As his great oulipian novels *La Disparition* (A Void—1969) and *La vie mode d’emploi* (*Life a User’s Manual*—1978) as well as shorter works entitled *Je me souviens* (I remember—1978), his posthumously published essay collections *Penser/Classer* (*Thoughts of Sorts*—1985) and *L’infra-ordinaire* (The infra-ordinary—1989) attest, Perec was fascinated with collections, lists, and any writing forms with claims to exhaustiveness (e.g. dictionaries, encyclopedias).⁹⁷ The eclecticism of Perec’s genres and languages reflects this fascination. Priding himself in never having written two similar books, he could count in his oeuvre eleven works of fiction (novels and short fiction), as well as essay and poetry collections, plays for radio and the theater, film projects, screenplays for television, musical collaborations, an introduction to the Japanese board game *go*, crossword puzzles, many contributions to periodicals, as well as self-published pamphlets of palindromes, poetry, short fiction, essays, and fly-sheets.⁹⁸ As this chapter’s discussion of the oulipian novel *La Disparition* will reveal, however, the eclecticism of Perec’s genres and especially his fascination with lexical, stylistic and multilingual

made it into his oeuvre in various ways. Perec also partook in numerous multilingual literary projects with OuLiPo collaborators and visual artists. One example is *Variations/Variations/Variationen* (1997) with two fellow OuLiPo members: the American author Harry Mathews and Romanian-German translator and poet Oskar Pastior. *Variations/Variations/Variationen* conducts oulipian experiments on well-known and often quoted sentences from Marcel Proust, William Shakespeare, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Another notable example is a poetry collection using only those words that have the same spelling but different meanings in French and English (e.g. chat, coin) entitled *Trompe-l’œil* (*Trompe-l’oeil*—1978) in collaboration with the photographer Cuchi White.

⁹⁶ All of Perec’s radio plays were first aired in German translation in Germany, a result of extensive correspondence with the *Saarländischer Rundfunk* and intensive negotiation and collaboration with his German translator Eugen Helme.

⁹⁷ *La Disparition* will be discussed in further detail in this chapter. *La vie mode d’emploi* cannot be reduced to a novelized list, but every one of its chapters incorporates a list of items Perec drew up before setting off to write the novel. The essay collection *Je me souviens* contains long lists of details from the past, while *L’infra-ordinaire* contains one list of everything Perec has eaten and drunk in the year 1974. *Penser/Classer* contains notes about Perec’s writing practice, as well as an essay on Perec’s consultations with a friend on how to acquire and organize a library. For Perec’s interest in dictionaries and exhaustivity, see for instance “Le Cabinet D’amateur. Revue D’études Perecquiennes.”

⁹⁸ Some of Perec’s multimedia projects were collaborative, particularly his work for film, television and radio. His introduction to *go* was written with Pierre Lusson and Jacques Roubaud.

exhaustiveness permeate the microcosms of his individual works and not only the macrocosm of his oeuvre as a whole.

In addition to the links between Perec's eclecticism and his multiple languages as one manifestation of this eclecticism, Perec's oeuvre evidences another important and consistent engagement with translation understood broadly. Owing in part to his membership in the international OuLiPo and its bi-, tri- and multilingual experiments that brought various members from various countries into collaborative projects, Perec frequently practiced translation in various ways. First of all, he was an active translator, particularly from the English. Most notably, Perec translated fellow oulipian Harry Matthews's 1966 novel *Tlooth* into French as *Les Verts Champs de Moutarde de l'Afghanistan* [The green mustard fields of Afghanistan—1974].⁹⁹ Second, Perec practiced literal translation—especially of proper names—in everyday life as well as in his literary works in ways related to his authorial identity and personal life.¹⁰⁰ In doing so, Perec playfully engages the common notion that various valences of meaning, idiomaticity and other linguistic specificities and flavor get lost in translation. With reference to Perec's play with proper names, Bellos traces the origins and metamorphoses of the name *Perec* derived from the Polish *Peretz*, which means either “pepper” or a “salt-bread ring” or just “bread ring” in various languages including Polish, Hungarian, and Serbian, and is related to the German word “Brezel,” known in English-speaking countries as “pretzel.” In a speculative vein that is supported to a degree by Perec's biography (Perec's semi-autobiographical novel *W* is riddled with memory gaps) and oeuvre (as will be discussed shortly, Perec's works involve not only gaps in memory but lost or omitted letters and persons), Bellos suggests that “Perec turned a multilingual pun into a kind of destiny” (Bellos 5). In *W*, Perec mentions that the name *Peretz* means “hole” in

⁹⁹ *Tlooth* presents great challenges to its translator, because it is full of wordplay, spoonerisms, and otherwise substituted or missing letters, all of which generate layers of meaning.

¹⁰⁰ In his biography of Perec, David Bellos suggests that translation—particularly translating poetry—is another kind of writing under constraint. Bellos links translation and writing under constraint, since poetry is “a matter of shifting things around, which is what translators also do, in a sense.” Bellos names *Trompe-l'œil* “perhaps the most rarefied development of Perec's 'artpoetry.’” The poems were written using the “Mathews Corpus,” that is, Harry Mathews's compilation of all words that are spelled the same way in English and French but have different meanings (Bellos 672). The title *Trompe-l'œil*, a direct borrowing from French into English, means the same thing in French and English, but cannot be included in the Mathews corpus.

Hebrew. The word “bretzel” [pretzel] makes an appearance earlier in this novel, where a barman asks a character whether he would like to have pretzels to eat with his beer. Considering that Perec reveled in puns and word games of all kinds, this game with the words *Peretz*, *Perec*, and *brezel* is most probably deliberate (Perec, *W, Ou, Le Souvenir D'enfance* 56, 30). Perec's translation game paradoxically multiplies his proper name and draws attention to gaps and voids in translation. Third and most important, Perec's translation strategies are oulipian in their attention to form over meaning. In his essay “Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese,” Perec's fellow oulipian Harry Mathews explicates the oulipian attention to form in translation, seeking thus to illustrate the ways in which oulipian literary strategies expand the term “translation” itself. Mathews gives examples of oulipian games at work, for instance on the phrase from Jean Racine's *Phèdre*, “C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée.” Literally, the phrase means “Here is Venus unreservedly fastened to her prey.” An oulipian translation may be “*I saw Alice jump highest--I, on silly crutches*. Explanation: a rule of measure has been applied to the original. Each of its words is replaced by another word having the same number of letters.” In another translation, “the sound of the original has been imitated as closely as possible--*C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée / Save our news, toot, and share as uproar at a shay*.” Another translation avails itself of semantic content but with a twist: “*At this place and time exists the goddess of love identified with the Greek Aphrodite, without reservation taking firm hold of her creature hunted and caught*. Explanation: each word has been replaced by its dictionary definition.” A fourth translation and one most pertinent to the upcoming discussion of Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition (A Void)* is “*Look at Cupid's mom just throttling that god's chump*. Explanation: all words containing the letter e have been excluded.” Mathews admits that these are not translations in the traditional sense, but rather translations that seek to expand the concepts of “translation” and “sense” altogether by drawing attention to textual forms:

The preserved sense hardly makes these two translations faithful ones. And yet all four examples can be considered translations. What has been translated, however,

is not the text's nominal sense but other of its components; and we may call these components "forms," taking "form" simply to mean a material element of written language that can be isolated and manipulated. So the first pair of examples are direct translations of forms: in the passage from one language to another, forms rather than sense are what is preserved (number of letters, sound). The second pair are replacements of forms--not only the words but a form of the original has been replaced, in one instance a lexical context, in the other the choice of vowels. These strange dislocations of the original may seem cavalier, but they are useful in drawing attention precisely to elements of language that normally pass us by, concerned as we naturally are with making sense of what we read. Nominal sense becomes implicitly no more than a part of overall meaning. (Mathews)

The attention to form moves the translation away from allegiance to faithfulness and semantic sense (this Mathews calls “nominal sense”) and seeks to “preserve” something else. In the first two translations this something is either the number of letters or sound. The third translation can be understood as a parody of faithful translations: meaning has been translated faithfully to the extreme. If one is to understand the semantic meaning itself as a literary constraint with which a translator has to contend, then translating semantic meaning without any attention to other constraints (for instance alexandrine verse in which all of Phèdre is written) shows the ways in which a text can become absurd when semantic meaning alone is taken into account in translation. The fourth translation, which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter, calls readerly and writerly attention to the smallest building blocks of texts not considered to be vehicles of meaning by themselves: individual letters of the alphabet. Here, loss in translation is not a pitfall that a translator is to avoid, but the loss of a single element of writing is precisely the goal of translation. In all cases, the translations illustrate in playful, creative ways the various ways in which translation for nominal or semantic sense is only one dimension of the theory and practice of translation, and that a more expansive view of translation has to take into account form as well as content.

2. Perec, Borges and Lipogrammatic Constraint

Perec's preoccupations are, then, mathematical experiments in literature, linguistic displacement with its attendant gaps and voids, lexical, stylistic and multilingual exhaustiveness

and heightened attention to changing forms in translation broadly understood. This chapter will argue that these preoccupations find one of their richest and most fundamental expressions in Perec's treatment of individual written signs in Perec's 1969 novel *La Disparition*, particularly of the letter *e*. In *La Disparition*, without sacrificing grammatical or orthographic accuracy, Perec succeeded in producing a novel of over 300 pages in which the letter *e* does not appear once.¹⁰¹ *La Disparition* is comprised not only of various genres (e.g. journalistic, mathematical, sociological texts as well as other literary genres such as poetry, fiction and essays), it also includes shorter texts in English and German, expressions in Italian and literary terms from Japanese, as well as a plethora of literary constraints (in addition to the lipogram in *e*, there is another shorter lipogrammatic section that excludes both *e* and *a*, as well as a palindrome, another sentence that includes every letter of the alphabet but *e*, and a sonnet, among others). In its eclectic composition, the novel evidences a desire to become a total book on the one hand. On the other hand, it draws attention to its missing letter as visual mark, object, mathematical symbol and indicator of the presence of other writing systems within the novel.¹⁰²

This chapter will read Perec's gestures towards infinity in the overall eclecticism and combinatory possibilities of the writer's *e*-less alphabet in *La Disparition*. In addition, and to recall Mathews's formulation of oulipian translation as drawing attention to textual elements often overlooked, Perec's missing letter *e* in *La Disparition* seeks to expand existing possibilities of reading individual written signs by expanding and transforming *e*'s and by extension letters' potential for sense-making. This chapter will plumb written signs' multiple capacities as elements of a mathematical set, ciphers of absence that paradoxically gesture towards both infinity and absence or towards "the omnipresence of absence," and as visual marks on a page subject to entropy and transformation in Perec's oeuvre (Motte, "Constraint on the Move." 725). Traces of the violent histories of the twentieth century and Perec's personal losses are undeniably

¹⁰¹ The literary constraint in which a letter of the alphabet is excluded from a text while preserving grammatical and orthographic accuracy is called a lipogram. This constraint will be discussed in more detail shortly.

¹⁰² The novel does not contain the letter *e*, but circumnavigates it suggestively, describes its form, and likens it to other signs to which it has a visual resemblance.

present in Perec's oeuvre. Scholarship on the OuLiPo in general and on Georges Perec in particular often treats the letter *e* accordingly as a marker of absence, but plumbs its referential potential rather than its sheer presence, its meaning rather than its form, or its sociological, familial and metaphysical dimensions instead of paying sustained attention to its minute workings in Perec's texts.¹⁰³ While the absence of *e* in *La Disparition* certainly has referential potential, meaning, and various extratextual dimensions, this chapter will argue that existing studies on Perec tend to overemphasize reference and meaning, that they attempt to fill Perec's voids rather than investigate them.¹⁰⁴

In addition, as will be discussed later, Perec's literary work is often read in terms of a triumph of sense and literary language over the threat of nonsense in the face of extremely constrictive literary constraints.¹⁰⁵ Perec's mastery of literary constraints is incontestable. Besides having received two prestigious literary prizes during his lifetime, Perec also broke records for the longest palindrome and the longest *e*less text written ever in French. Existing readings treat references to cacophony in Perec's text as the emergence of nonsense against which Perec triumphs by allowing sense to emerge in the face of constraint. Recalling Mathews's call for attention to textual elements frequently overlooked, this analysis will argue that these existing readings need to be supplemented by an analysis that explores written form over content. As the following analysis will show, Perec's work does not necessarily refer to nonsense as danger defeated. Rather, it also invites modes of reading for textual and letteral form beyond semantic sense. In Perec, an encounter with semantic incomprehensibility is part and parcel of the processes of writing and reading. In addition, some of Perec's texts, including *La Disparition*, have a performative dimension, that is, they enact what they do.¹⁰⁶ For both the formal and performative dimension of Perec's texts, a reliance on content and meaning is

¹⁰³ See for example Burgelin; W. Motte, "The Work of Mourning"; W. F. Motte, *The Poetics of Experiment*; Béhar; Heck.

¹⁰⁴ In this analysis, "reference" will be used to designate that dimension of language that assigns words or expressions to objects, people or concepts.

¹⁰⁵ See for example Neefs; Motte; Magné; Magné; Ribiere; Bénabou and Reilly; Montfrans; Reggiani.

¹⁰⁶ In the essay "La Page" (The Page) from *Espèces d'Espaces* (*Species of Spaces*—1974), for example, Perec writes vertically and diagonally while proclaiming that he does so (Perec, *Espèces d'Espaces* 21–22).

insufficient and needs to be supplemented by readings that focus on changing letteral form and sense-making that takes the sensory into account.

The particular attention to letters here two reasons tied to Perec's and the OuLiPo's literary commitments. In general, Perec's claims to exhaustiveness and his implicit and explicit references to total books and total libraries have letteral dimensions. First of all, in a kabbalistic vein that regards universal creation as a linguistic phenomenon, Perec's and OuLiPo's literary experiments evidence two chief tendencies that testify to their ambition to create works with claims to completeness, and that further testify to the letteral dimensions of this ambition. Perec and other OuLiPo members (e.g. Raymond Queneau and Jacques Roubaud) tended to produce works into which infinity is inscribed as potential. Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (One Hundred Billion Poems—1961), which can be considered the very first oulipian work, includes ten sonnets with the same rhymes, each corresponding line of any one sonnet exchangeable with that of another. If all the combinatory possibilities of this work were exhausted, one could read 10^{14} , that is, one hundred billion sonnets. Perec took Queneau's premise two steps further (from lines to words and from words to letters) and made not the line but the individual letter the smallest exchangeable element of text.¹⁰⁷ *La Disparition* was based on a letteral constraint, and was meant to be the longest grammatically and orthographically sound *eless* text in French, that is, one containing the greatest number of words and characters. As Alison James notes in her study of chance in Perec, *La Disparition* is lexically saturated and things are “ultra-said,” which stretches the novel and the possibilities of the French language to its limits (James 136). Second, some oulipian literary constraints that Perec adopts, such as anagrams, palindromes and attention to kinship between orthographic and mathematical symbols evidence minute attention to the smallest building-blocks of writing. Some of these constraints also echo three key tools of the kabbalistic exegetic tradition: acrostics (*notarikon*), number

¹⁰⁷ This is not to suggest that other oulipian authors do not experiment with written signs. The OuLiPo works with literary constraints such as anagrams, palindromes, bananagrams (anagrams written in order to produce not a single word that makes sense), etc. Two examples are Jacques Roubaud's poetry collection entitled \in (1967) and Oskar Pastior's anagrammatic poetry. In order to work with these constraints successfully, attention to letters as building blocks of language is indispensable.

values (*gematria*), and anagrams (*temurah*). Oulipian constraint in general and Perec's adoption of it thus betray a desire to write narratives of a potentially cosmic scale, while inviting modes of reading attentive to the smallest building blocks of writing whose combinatory possibilities underwrite this cosmic gesture.¹⁰⁸

The OuLiPo shares this interest in cosmic writing and contemplation with Jorge Luis Borges, one of Perec's muses whose work Perec directly and indirectly references in his own. This chapter will deal most closely with Borges's literary essays "The Library of Babel" (1941), "The Aleph" (1945), and "The Zahir" (1947), the last of which is cited *mutatis mutandis* in *La Disparition* (D 139; V 122).¹⁰⁹ Borges's "Library" constructs a universe as library including all possible combinations of twenty-five written signs.¹¹⁰ Borges thus conceives of the universe as not only linguistic but typographic creation. This chapter will read Perec's *eless* novel *La Disparition* as an intended subset of this typographic universe. Perec's universe in *La Disparition* regards itself as complete despite its recurrent hints at the exclusion of the fifth of twenty-six symbols that comprise this universe. Simultaneously and paradoxically, the novel gestures towards the larger cosmos of which it is a subset. The *eless* universe of *La Disparition* includes several open doors through which the phoneme could enter, but the entropy of the remaining written signs is as complete as written French will allow.

Perec treats universality as letteral exhaustiveness. The visual transformations of the letter *e* in his novel *La Disparition* demonstrate that the orthographic system which is singular in Borges is multiple in Perec and in fact not even limited to writing, because it includes mathematical language, ideograms, objects and images. With eclectic references to the formal language of mathematics, Japanese poetry (under constraint) and calligraphy, musical

¹⁰⁸ Because some literary constraints were simply small-scale mathematical-literary games, there was a general desire in the OuLiPo to produce longer works that would then also help OuLiPo become more accessible and open to the public (Bellos 586–587).

¹⁰⁹ From this point forward, *La Disparition* will be referenced as *D* for the French original, and *V* for the English translation by Gilbert Adair (*A Void*).

¹¹⁰ Borges works with the twenty-two letters of the Spanish alphabet, to which he adds two punctuation marks (the period and the comma) and the blank space.

performance and notation, Perec also demonstrates the intermedial and multilingual possibilities of reading a single written sign.

3. *Georges Perec and the OuLiPo*

The OuLiPo was founded in 1960 by the writer Raymond Queneau and mathematician François le Lionnais, who sought answers to the question, “what are the possibilities for incorporating mathematical structures within literary works?” (Roubaud, “Bourbaki and the Oulipo” 123). Having begun with ten members, OuLiPo has expanded considerably since its founding and is still active today.¹¹¹ Queneau had become a member of the Surrealist group in 1924, from which he broke in 1929 after a dispute with André Breton. As Jacques Roubaud, French poet and mathematician and member of OuLiPo, mentions in his introduction to *OuLiPo Compendium* (1998), “it was the Surrealist group that acted as foil to the OuLiPo” (Roubaud, “Introduction” 37). Queneau’s successful endeavor to prevent the dissolution of the OuLiPo in the manner of the Surrealists and other literary groups of his day is only the most simplistic way in which Surrealism was OuLiPo’s foil. More important are OuLiPo’s adoption of mathematical structures and its conscious choice of arbitrary constraints, which can be read as a direct response to the Surrealist preference for dream logic, the subconscious, everyday coincidences and automatic writing.

Queneau’s exposition of potential literature thus deliberately distances itself from other literary groups and movements such as the Surrealists and the Tel Quel group.¹¹² Seeking to dispel misconceptions about the OuLiPo, its composition, its goals and the methods by which it

¹¹¹ Members of the OuLiPo are considered members even after their death unless they commit suicide in the presence of a notary with the sole purpose of ending their membership. Since nobody has exercised this option yet, the group has a total of thirty-seven members altogether. The “live” and active membership of the OuLiPo has doubled since its founding.

¹¹² The radical Tel Quel group was named after the review *Tel quel*, and was particularly influential in the 1960s and 70s. In partial response to Jean Paul Sartre’s concept of *littérature engagée*, Tel Quel defended the concept of *nouveau roman* (new novel) and autonomous literature, and provided the context for important structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes.

seeks to achieve these goals, Queneau proceeds by defining that which the Workshop for Potential Literature is not:

1° Ce n'est pas un mouvement ou une école littéraire. Nous nous plaçons en deçà de la valeur esthétique, ce qui ne pas dire que nous en faisons fi.

2° Ce n'est pas non plus un séminaire scientifique, un groupe de travail «sérieux» entre guillemets, bien qu'un professeur de Faculté de Lettres et un de Faculté de Sciences en fassent partie.

Enfin, 3° Il ne s'agit pas de littérature expérimentale ou aléatoire (telle qu'elle est pratiquée par le groupe de Max Bense à Stuttgart).¹¹³ (Queneau, *Bâtons, Chiffres Et Lettres* 322)

1. It is not a movement or a literary school. We situate ourselves prior to all notions of esthetic value, which isn't to say that we care nothing for them.

2. Nor is it a scientific seminar, a "serious" working group between quotation marks, even though a professor from the Faculty of Sciences belongs to it. It is thus in all humility that I submit our works to the present audience.

Finally, 3. It has nothing to do with experimental or aleatory literature (such as is currently being practiced by the Max Bense group in Stuttgart, for example).

(Queneau, *Letters, Numbers, Forms* 182)

The positive aims of the OuLiPo, as declared by Queneau, are "[p]roposer aux écrivains de nouvelles 'structures,' de nature mathématique ou bien encore inventer de nouveaux procédés artificiels ou mécaniques, contribuent à l'activité littéraire" ("[t]o offer writers new "structures," of a mathematical nature, and also to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures that might contribute to literary activity") (Queneau, *Bâtons, Chiffres Et Lettres* 321; Queneau, *Letters, Numbers, Forms* 181). This involved discovering, rediscovering, inventing, and working with formal constraints in literature, preferably those inspired by mathematics. As Jan Baetens and Jean-Jacques Poucel point out, and as all members of OuLiPo were well aware, literary constraint is not limited to the discoveries or output of OuLiPo alone. It is in their view a universal phenomenon: "all periods, all languages, all types of literature provide more or less self-conscious examples of constrained writing, some more rigorously defined and some more directly motivated than others" (Baetens and Poucel 614). The OuLiPo even devised a term for the discovery, rediscovery or borrowing of literary constraints that predate OuLiPo: "anticipatory

¹¹³ Max Bense was among the first to conceptualize concrete poetry. The well-known Austrian concretist Ernst Jandl was part of the Stuttgarter Gruppe/Schule (The Stuttgart Group/School), which explored the possibilities of visual or concrete poetry.

plagiarist.” Some common examples of formal constraints that far predate OuLiPo but were adopted by it are the sonnet, anagrams, palindromes, and so on. In Queneau and Le Lionnais’s view, however, the power of most traditional constraints had been exhausted. OuLiPo thus sought “a way out between a nostalgic obstinacy with worn-out modes of expression and an intellectually pathetic belief in ‘total freedom,’” and the group looked to mathematics as its creative resource (Roubaud, “Introduction” 40, §30). Some new forms discovered and developed by oulipians were the bananagram (an anagram from which, ideally, all possibility of rational meaning has been removed), legal français (a vocabulary consisting of words spelled identically in English and French while having no meaning in common), N + 7 / S + 7 (a text in which every noun (N) is replaced by the seventh noun following it in a chosen dictionary), among many others.¹¹⁴ As Roubaud emphasizes in his introduction to oulipian poetics and Alison James cautions in her work on chance and form in Georges Perec’s oulipian works, this should not be understood as the elimination of chance and freedom from the artistic enterprise, but as Roubaud puts it in a formulation of artistic freedom as, “the freedom of difficulty mastered” (Roubaud, “Introduction” 41; James 108–131; Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 81). There is a strong element of anti-chance in oulipian poetics, as exemplified in Georges Perec’s multiple and complex system of constraints for his novel *La vie mode d’emploi* (*Life a User’s Manual*—1978) and his heterogrammatic poetry in his collections *Ulcérations* (*Ulcerations*—1974) and *Alphabets* (*Alphabets*—1976).¹¹⁵ However, chance lives on in oulipian poetics, and constraints themselves are subject to transformation and/or systematic neglect. Bernard Magné notably reveals the strategies by which Perec introduces some freedom of form into *La vie mode d’emploi* by incorporating into the system of constraints elements of transformation and chance, while James observes that “the OuLiPo’s self definition as ‘anti-chance’ is best understood in terms of a

¹¹⁴ For an alphabetical listing of all oulipian literary constraints with definitions and examples, see Mathews and Brotchie.

¹¹⁵ Perec’s heterogrammatic poetry, to be discussed in more detail later, uses only the letters *e, s, a, r, t, u, n, l, o,* and *c*, the most commonly occurring letters in the French language (Perec sometimes substitutes the last letter *c* by others in the alphabet). Heterogrammatic poems need to use this set of letters only, with the added constraint that no letter may be repeated before the entire set is used.

response and challenge to chance” (Magné, “Transformations of Constraint” 193–209; James 225). OuLiPo understands mathematical constraint as an aid and not obstacle to creativity, a new means of unlocking potentialities of literary language (Perec, “Qu’est-ce Que La Littérature Potentielle?” 13–14).¹¹⁶

As indicated by the specializations of its founding members, OuLiPo was conceived as a collaborative working group of writers and mathematicians. It took its inspiration from the Bourbaki Group (founded in 1935), a group of mathematicians based in Paris publishing their findings under the pseudonym Nicolas Bourbaki with the goal of founding mathematics on set theory.¹¹⁷ Bourbaki’s founding predates that of OuLiPo. Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais were both familiar with and inspired by the work of Bourbaki, particularly by the axiomatic method, which they sought to apply to literature: “Bourbaki’s initial plan –to rewrite Mathematics in its entirety and provide it with solid foundations using a single source, Set Theory, and a rigorous system, the Axiomatic Method – was explicitly adapted by François Le Lionnais for the Oulipo” (Roubaud, “Bourbaki and the Oulipo” 127).¹¹⁸ Rejecting mathematical realism in favor of formal games, the Bourbaki “provided the Oulipo [sic] with a partial justification for the arbitrariness of the literary constraint” (James 125).¹¹⁹ The Bourbaki factor is not evident in every literary constraint employed by the OuLiPo. It is more salient in Perec’s

¹¹⁶ Although OuLiPo remains exclusively literary and focused on the written and spoken word, its influence has spread to the visual arts in the form of the OuPhoPo (founded 1995) for photographers and OuPeinPo (founded 1980) for painters. There are further groups for tragicomedy, graphic literature, architecture, etc.

¹¹⁷ The official name of the group is *Association des collaborateurs de Nicolas Bourbaki* (Association of Collaborators of Nicolas Bourbaki). Its founding members were Henri Cartan, Claude Chevalley, Jean Coulomb, Jean Delsarte, Jean Dieudonné, Charles Ehresmann, René de Possel, Szolem Mandelbrojt, and André Weil. The group is still active and has offices at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris.

¹¹⁸ The axiomatic method is “in logic, a procedure by which an entire system (*e.g.*, a science) is generated in accordance with specified rules by logical deduction from certain basic propositions (axioms or postulates), which in turn are constructed from a few terms taken as primitive. These terms and axioms may either be arbitrarily defined and constructed or else be conceived according to a model in which some intuitive warrant for their truth is felt to exist. The oldest examples of axiomatized systems are Aristotle’s syllogistic and Euclid’s geometry.” “axiomatic method.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 30 Jul. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/46255/axiomatic-method>>.

¹¹⁹ Bourbaki also appears to have inspired OuLiPo’s tendency to publish its anthologies under the name OuLiPo, while its authors also publish individual works. Roubaud notes, “its products –proposed constraints and their illustrations –are attributed to the group, even if certain constraints are invented by individuals” (Roubaud 1998: 39). Although Raymond Queneau was already a major literary figure before founding OuLiPo and did not hesitate to exercise his influence in order to promote OuLiPo, he was reluctant to do the same for OuLiPo authors individually.

reduction of the set of letters of the French alphabet from twenty-six to twenty-five in *La Disparition*, the alphabetical reorganization of sentences in the collaborative project *Variations/Variations/Variationen*, as well as in anagrams, palindromes, and so on. Some other oulipian constraints such as S+7 involve something closer to simple arithmetics. In addition, what Harry Matthews terms “eye rhymes” (i.e. rhyming words for the order and composition of their last letters instead of their pronunciation, as would be the case for “rough,” “trough,” and “dough”) are perhaps better explained with the oulipian attention to the visuality of written language.¹²⁰

Few oulipian literary constraints dictate visual manipulations of the text (the eye-rhyme is a notable exception), but many have important consequences for the visual experience of oulipian texts, and which become important for reading the various visual effects of *La Disparition*. This is particularly visible in but by no means limited to oulipian poetry. Although some of the best known works to come out of OuLiPo have been long works of prose (Perec’s *La vie mode d’emploi* is a prime example), OuLiPo experimented heavily in shorter forms, particularly poetry. In her analysis of citational literature in the twentieth century Marjorie Perloff compares concrete poetry, in which the visual form and distribution of text and images are just as important as the content of the work, with oulipian poetry, which she judges to be less successful than oulipian prose.¹²¹ Concretism is typically very attentive to the spatial arrangement of texts, but visuality is not among OuLiPo’s primary concerns. Nonetheless, Perloff observes an oulipian sensitivity to the visual forms of written language. This sensitivity is evidenced in a moment of contact between concrete poetry and OuLiPo in Jacques Roubaud’s preface entitled “Sables, syllabes” (Sands, syllables) to the Brazilian concretist poet Haroldo de

¹²⁰ See corresponding entry in the *OuLiPo Compendium*.

¹²¹ In her work *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), Perloff argues that the twentieth century saw the rise of new techniques of producing poetry that relied not on creativity per se, but on citing, recombining, and otherwise manipulating already existing texts. This in turn revolutionized the concepts of originality and creative genius, earlier thought to emanate from the author, and involving the creation of “original” texts. In an interview with Marcel Bénabou and Bruno Marcenac, Georges Perec also notes this trend and admits to employing similar strategies in his own work: “since the surrealists, we are moving towards a kind of art that could be called “citational” (...). It’s a device I like a lot, that I like to play with” (M. Bénabou, Marcenac, and Perec 27–28).

Campos's 1984 *Galáxias*. In this preface Roubaud produces a poetic text in its own right, which Perloff recognizes as "a visual as well as verbal composition" that exploits the page layout and conjures the landscape of the page in references to "la plage" [the beach] and "la page" [the page] (Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 78).¹²² Perloff then argues that "the choice of constraint [in OuLiPo] is designed to produce poems in which the semantic is conveyed primarily by the visual and phonic elements. Here form really *is* meaning (Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 84). While this analysis suggests that form is not necessarily meaning but appears in its own right in OuLiPo's literary production in general and in Perec in particular, many constraints result in a visual impact that in turn make visible what constraint might be at work in that text. For example, the visual form of a snowball (a poem in which every line contains one more letter than the last) and anagrammatic poetry, to give two examples, produce comparable visual effects. Since they are dependent on the number of letters in each line, they necessarily reflect this dependency in the visual form of the resulting poem, which begins with one or two letters in the first line, and builds by adding a letter to each line. The end product then resembles a right triangle. For this reason, the visual form or effects of an oulipian text can hint at the constraint or even describe it. Jacques Roubaud was not referring to the visual effects of oulipian texts when stating one of the "laws" of oulipian constraint, that is "[a] text written according to a constraint describes the constraint," but the visual form of an oulipian text can very well describe the constraint and thus can merit as much attention as its nominal sense (Roubaud, "Introduction" 42, §40). The visual significance of the text or the page is not limited to oulipian poetry alone, as the following discussion of Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition* will show. Although most of *La Disparition* is written in prose with occasional attention paid to text layout, the text results in a singular visual experience. While the twenty-five letters left at Perec's disposal appear with far greater frequency, the novel hypnotically and continually describes and throws into relief the visual form of the letter *e*.

¹²² Although the addition and subtraction of orthographic elements from words and texts are by no means limited to the OuLiPo, Roubaud's association between *page* and *plage* is strongly reminiscent of the style of Harry Matthews's *Tlooth* (1966).

4. *Total Books and Universal Libraries*

As Alison James notes in her work on chance in Georges Perec's oeuvre, Perec is joined by the rest of OuLiPo in his fascination with the total book (James 121). As noted above, Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* attempted to produce a number of poems that could be read only over several lifetimes. Jacques Roubaud's introductory essay to Haroldo de Campos's *Galaxias*, entitled "Sables, syllabes," likewise attempts to realize a galactic ambition. Marjorie Perloff observes that Roubaud's introduction, "with its rhythmic, anagrammatic title," works in very similar ways to Campos's text, which "is defined as a 'flux of signs,' without punctuation marks or capital letters, flowing uninterruptedly across the page, as a *galactic expansion*" (Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 76–77). While Queneau and Roubaud's texts can be published between two covers of a book, the texts incorporate galactic expansion as potential.

Georges Perec's comparable fascination with comprehensiveness is well documented and apparent throughout his oeuvre. It is most striking in his fascination with dictionaries and lists: To give an example of the first, the character Cinoc from *La vie mode d'emploi* transforms his task of eliminating all obsolete words from the *Larousse* into that of assembling a dictionary of forgotten words (Magné, "Georges Perec: faire concurrence au dictionnaire" 23; Perec, *La Vie Mode D'emploi* 361). Perec's *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu Parisien (An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris—1975)*, on the other hand, is an attempt at an exhaustive list of all things seen over the course of three days at the Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris.¹²³ Bernard Magné observes that Perec's fascination with completeness stems from his oulipian ambitions to plumb the depths of literary constraint and explore all the things that can be said about one fragment of the world (e.g. to write the longest possible novel without the letter *e* in *La Disparition*, or create the great oulipian novel with a staggering number of constraints, as in *La vie mode d'emploi*) (Perec and Magné 13–14). To say all that can be said about one portion of the world is, however,

¹²³ For a more thorough list of Perec's dictionaries and lists, as well as of his ambition to compete with dictionaries' claim to exhaustivity, see Magné, "Georges Perec: faire concurrence au dictionnaire."

also to construct a world onto itself, a microcosmos. Moreover, a total book or a total collection of utterances can also be understood as a work under mathematical literary constraint: Just as leaving out or substituting letters and other elements of writing constitute textual constraints, so does the inclusion of all elements of writing. Such writing under constraint would paradoxically constrain the rules of language use while maximizing the potential of utterances. Jorge Luis Borges, one of Perec's muses as noted above, presents one of the best-known and most influential texts on the totality of what can be written, expressible in twenty-five written signs.

Borges's literary essay "The Library of Babel" is not the first of its kind. In 1939, two years before "The Library of Babel" was published, Borges himself wrote a brief review of total libraries in the Western tradition, from Aristotle to Kurd Laßwitz, the father of German science-fiction. Borges identifies the correspondences of the total library as "well known and varied: it is related to atomism and combinatory analysis, to typography and chance" (Borges, "The Total Library" 214). Among the thinkers Borges cites, Cicero and Laßwitz most explicitly associate the ambition of total expression with individual written signs. Cicero finds Democritus' atomism as ludicrous as the belief that if countless copies of letters were shaken together and spread out on the ground, they would produce the *Annals* of Ennius (Borges, "The Total Library" 215; Cicero II:37).¹²⁴ Borges draws attention to Laßwitz's use of "the universal written signs, not the words of a language," as the elements of his game in the story "Die Universalbibliothek" (The universal library—1904), which figures an evening discussion between a publisher and a professor triggered by the question of distinguishing the superfluous (or the repetitive) and the essential (or the new) in scholarly publishing of the day (Borges, "The Total Library" 215). The suggestion that the "human mind is inexhaustible" but that the total number of possible combinations of all letters is very great yet finite, triggers the central question: "How is the inexhaustible to be finite?" The answer is the Universal Library, which contains all possible combinations of the letters of the Latin alphabet, numbers, punctuation marks, and the blank

¹²⁴ James also cites Cicero's refutation of Democritus in her work on Chance in Perec and OuLiPo (James 3).

space (Lasswitz 137–141).¹²⁵ However, unlike Borges's "The Library of Babel," Laßwitz's Library remains a hypothesis and a formula, despite the spirit of experimentation evoked in the story: the total number of volumes in the hypothetical library is for Laßwitz $10^{2\,000\,000}$. The number itself would take weeks to expand (Laßwitz: 145-146). As the characters suggest, what characterizes this Library is that the texts in it have not been composed as such by virtue of "continuous, serious work" but compounded together as a chance combination of symbols. In this dynamic between sense and chaos lies the central tension in the story. The impulse to create and identify the new against the repetitive or superfluous triggers a set of reflections that then result in the calculation of a formula yielding maximum superfluosness. As far as the production of sense is concerned, the Library contains dizzying arrays of nonsense.

In contrast to the hypothetical nature of the Library in Laßwitz's story, Borges's Library is none other than the universe itself (Borges, "The Library of Babel" 51). The "classic dictum" of the Library is that "[t]he Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is inaccessible," which would mean that the Library is infinite ("The Library of Babel" 52).¹²⁶ However, the narrator of "The Library of Babel" believes that the Library is infinite because it is periodic, that is, each section that obeys the law of the Library below repeats itself *ad infinitum*. The fundamental law of the library has been discovered by a brilliant librarian using principles of combinatory analysis.

¹²⁵ Laßwitz's Library uses one hundred written signs, including all uppercase and lowercase letters, the digits from 0 to 9, punctuation marks and the space. It appears to take the number 100 as a ballpark figure on which to base its calculations (Lasswitz 139). Borges, on the other hand, uses the twenty-two letters of the Spanish alphabet, the period, the comma, and the space. In Perec's *La Disparition*, there are continual references to sets of twenty-six elements of which the fifth (*e*) is missing, with twenty-five remaining. In Perec's case, however, the remaining twenty-five are exclusively the number of letters in the French alphabet minus one.

¹²⁶ All emphases from Borges are original. This echoes another essay by Borges entitled "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal." Drawing on a wide array of thinkers from Xenophanes to Pascal, this essay presents the history of the different intonations of the metaphor "an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere," which was commonly used by the thinkers it names to describe divinity. The sphere was also regarded as "the most perfect and most uniform figure." Borges illustrates that this metaphor began its life as a definition of God, but in the course of history, was also attributed to "The Divine Being," to a physical state attributed to the four elements, to the universe, and, in the case of Pascal, to nature. An "illusory library" figures in this essay as well, and contains a disputed number books "in the pages of which are written all things" (Borges, "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal" 190).

This philosopher [the genius librarian] observed that all books, however different from one another they might be, consist of identical elements: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also posited a fact which all travelers have since confirmed: *In all the Library, there are no two identical books*. From those incontrovertible premises, the librarian deduced that the Library is “total” –perfect, complete and whole- and that its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two written signs (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite)–that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language. (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 54)

If the Library does include all possible combinations of all written signs, that means that the Library behaves like a closed system that obeys a kind of orthographic version of the second law of thermodynamics, which deals with the concept of entropy, “[t]he measure of the disorder of a system.”¹²⁷ This law states that “all closed systems tend toward an equilibrium state in which entropy is at a maximum and no energy is available to do useful work,” that is, all closed systems tend towards maximum disorder.¹²⁸ Thus, it is as though written signs were introduced into this system in finite yet vast numbers, and jumbled into a disorder that generates texts by random concatenation of written signs. In his discussion of the total library, Borges himself draws a link between this library and the long life of Cicero’s typographic image. The universal library could be understood as a vast version of Cicero’s jumbled letters, which produce the *Annals* of Ennius, its innumerable alternate versions, as well as books explaining how and why nothing recounted by Ennius ever happened (Borges, “The Total Library” 215).

This entropy has a consequence that might be obvious but which requires further elaborations of our common expectations of sequences of written signs as we write and read language. These expectations are correlated with factors of entropy and redundancy when language is understood as a series of communication signals (i.e. in the case of the following example, the alphabet) in isolation from the meaning of the transmitted messages. In *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Claude Shannon associates the relative entropy of a

¹²⁷ "chemistry." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010. Web. 2 June 2010 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-32511>>.

¹²⁸ "thermodynamics." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010. Web. 2 June 2010 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9108582>>. A good example of this is an ice cube dropped into a bowl of water at room temperature: the cube will melt and disperse itself in the water, and it will not freeze again. The process tends towards maximum disorder, which is to say that the ice cube disperses, and is irreversible, which is to say that the ice cube will never refreeze and reform.

language with the unpredictability of an average distribution of characters in the alphabet of a given message. In contrast, the concept of redundancy refers to the predictability of the distribution of characters given the structure of the language in which the message is transmitted. For example, “[t]he redundancy of ordinary English, not considering statistical structure over greater distances than about eight letters, is roughly 50%. This means that when we write English half of what we write is determined by the structure of the language and half is chosen freely” (Shannon and Weaver 56). If every other letter in ordinary written English is taken out, the result will still be intelligible. In the case of the Library, however, one cannot speak of a language legible in this way. Because of the fundamental principle of the Library’s composition, which dictates what the narrator calls “the divine disorder,” it is impossible to expect what the next letter will be, let alone the next word. The Library thus obliterates writerly intention and readerly expectation at the elemental level of the written sign.

The induced laws of Borges’s Library echo the negotiation of tensions between chance and (aesthetic) closure as adumbrated by James: “The paradox and strength of the Oulipian [sic] constraint is that it is at once an organizing principle and—in its arbitrariness and in the complexity that it may generate—an embodiment of chance” (James 121). The Law of the Library can then be understood as none other than a paradoxical mathematical constraint.¹²⁹ It is a constraint in that it postulates elemental rules of the Library’s composition according to the principles of combinatory analysis, thus dictating the premises of all writing in the Library. This dictates the totality of expression. However, the constraint also risks rigidifying all expression: If the Library is to contain anything that can ever be written with a given set of written signs, the constraint of the Library has already dictated the totality of expression.¹³⁰ According to the

¹²⁹ The element of chance enters the Library too. The law of the Library stands and describes its principle, but the Library in fact does not contain all combinations of all typographic symbols. The reason, as the narrator of Borges’s text reports, is that innumerable books have been destroyed by madmen, heretics, and others (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 55–56).

¹³⁰ In fact, this rigidity or freezing is described aptly by the Count Paul Arnheim in Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*—1921–1942). Having gone to the court library in search of the most beautiful thought of which man is capable, Arnheim learns that librarians are not universal scholars but keepers of order alone. They read only catalogues and never the books themselves. From what he learns of catalogues and

Borges text, everything can be written, but everything has already been written. “To speak is to fall into tautology,” observes the narrator of “The Library of Babel” (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 57).¹³¹ Anything written in the Library is not even citational. All citations too have already been made. In *La Disparition*, Georges Perec responds to Borges’s premise with an important modification. As discussed above, Perec’s work in general and *La Disparition* in particular strongly suggest a fascination with a cosmic claim to comprehensiveness, which Borges’s fictional Library achieves on many levels: the typographic entropy of the Library is maximal, the semantic content covers all that can be expressed, and the Library itself is infinite in that it is periodic.¹³² Perec certainly gestures towards this totality of typographic and semantic variance as well as to complete inventories such as that of the Library. In *La Disparition*, Perec sets out to write the longest *e*-less text in French, his manuscripts and notebooks suggests that he has done painstaking work with dictionaries in order to include the maximum possible number of *e*-less words in French in the novel, and there are also various references to libraries, dictionaries and encyclopedias in *La Disparition*, which suggest a fascination with complete lists and the totality of expression on a thematic level. Perec’s important modification is the systematic withdrawal of *e* from his cosmos and his choice of deliberate oblique references to this lost element. While Perec gestures on the one hand to the totality of utterance, he consciously produces its subset under lipogrammatic constraint.

metacatalogues, he extrapolates a theoretical total order, and compares this order to “Kältetod” (death by freezing) (Musil 464).

¹³¹ Although the narrator of “The Library of Babel” uses the word “speak” in this translation of the fiction-essay, there is little to suggest that he is interested in much beyond written texts. Immediately following this statement, he adds “This wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of thirty volumes of the five shelves of one of the innumerable hexagons—and its refutation as well.” By “this wordy and useless epistle,” he is most likely referring to the text “The Library of Babel,” which can be understood as the narrator-librarian’s brief note to the future. Later in the text, he discusses the idea of infinity in the context of the library, then interrupts this line of thought with the statement “I have just written the word ‘infinite’” (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 57–58).

¹³² The librarian-narrator points out that all combinations of the twenty-five symbols would make the Library very large but finite. He postulates that the Library is infinite because it periodically repeats itself into infinity: “If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder” (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 58).

5. *La Disparition and Chaos*

La Disparition is a lipogram in *e*. “Lipogram” comes from the Greek *leipein*, a versatile verb meaning “leave standing, leave remaining, spare,” but used also in mathematics, for “subtract” or “have something subtracted” (Liddell et al., “λείπω”). “Gram,” from the Greek *graphein*, “to write,” is also related to the word *gramma*, the Greek for “letter” (Liddell et al., “γράφω”). The lipogram is a constraint by which one letter or more of the alphabet is omitted consistently from a text without compromising orthographic or grammatical accuracy. The OuLiPo compendium notes that “most short and many extended passages of literature are unintentional lipograms.” Owing in part to this unintentionality, “the lipogram passes unnoticed unless it is announced” (Mathews and Brotchie: “lipogram”). Georges Perec, member of OuLiPo from 1967 onwards, probably discovered discussions of the lipogram “in the cyclostyled minutes of the early meetings of OuLiPo,” which contain Claude Berge’s remarks that the “interest of a lipogram was in proportion to the natural frequency of the letter(s) missed out. (...) The greater the frequency of the letter omitted, the greater the potentiality of the constraint.” By this logic, the most demanding and most creative lipogram in French would be on the letter *e*, the most commonly occurring letter in written French (Bellos 395).¹³³ *La Disparition* was neither the first lipogram nor the first lipogrammatic novel ever written.¹³⁴ The American Ernest Vincent Wright had written a novel titled *Gadsby* in 1939, which contained over 50,000 words without *e*. The OuLiPo was aware of this text. *Gadsby* made evident the double challenge of writing an oulipian lipogram in *e*. First, this task would be just as difficult in French as it would be in English and had not yet been attempted in French. Second and more important, *Gadsby* was and still is a work of little literary interest, though now valued among some book collectors. Thus, for Perec,

¹³³ Susan Kiernan notes a comparable feat in Italian, a text by eighteenth-century Italian priest Luigi Casolini written entirely without the letter *r*, which Kiernan finds striking “given the richly rhoticized character of the Italian language” (Kiernan 43).

¹³⁴ Georges Perec is also the author of a short history of the lipogram, in which he lists some lipogrammatic texts preceding *La Disparition*. He dates the oldest lipogram by Lasos of Hermione to the 6. Century B.C.E. Lasos’s texts entitled “Ode to the Centaurs” and “Hymn to Demeter” do not contain a single sigma (82). The last lipogram Perec includes in his history is Ernest Vincent Wright’s *Gadsby*, written, like *La Disparition*, without *e* (91). For more examples of lipograms, see Perec, “Histoire Du Lipogramme.”

writing a lipogram was both a linguistic and literary challenge, as well as an implicit defense of the literary value of the constraint itself.¹³⁵ *La Disparition*, published in 1969 and translated in 1994 into English as *A Void*, is more than 300 pages and 50,000 words in length. It does not contain a single *e*. It did not sell well at first. René-Marill Albérès, a reviewer for *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, did not notice the absence of *e* in *La Disparition*—to the delight of Percec, who was thrilled to foil a professional reader. This reviewer dismissed it as “un roman violent, cru et facile” [a violent, raw and facile fiction] (Albérès). Today, along with Percec’s early non-oulipean novel *Les Choses* (*Things*—1965) and *La vie mode d’emploi* (*Life a User’s Manual*—1978), widely considered his oulipean masterpiece, *La Disparition* is considered a major contributing factor in Georges Percec’s renown.

A tortuous whodunit inspired by detective fiction, the social upheaval of May ’68 and some political scandals that swept France at the time, *La Disparition* tells of the disappearance of an Anton Voyl (Anton Vowl), the efforts of his friends who look for him, and their disappearances in turn. The *Avant-propos* (Introduction) is subtitled: “Où l’on saura plus tard qu’ici inaugurerait la Damnation” (“In which, as you will soon find out, Damnation has its origin”) and paints a tableau of political, social and fraternal disintegration after an announcement that “on risquait la mort par inanition” (“our country now risks dying of starvation”) (*D* 11; *V* vii). All institutions of authority are leveled, and men forget the ties that bind them. In his biography of Percec, David Bellos accounts for the chaos and series of disappearances as “the only possible outcome when a letter has been purloined: in a world destabilized by the removal of a mere nothing, a letter shape, an empty symbol, death ensues” (Bellos 401). In his seminal 1988 introduction to the work of Georges Percec, Claude Burgelin links the havoc and lawlessness of the “Introduction” precisely to the law laid down by the literary constraint of the lipogram. The enforcement of the inflexible law of the constraint obliterates all other laws, that is, all other laws that ensure familial and social order. Because the law of the lipogram takes away what Burgelin

¹³⁵ Percec’s “Histoire du lipogramme” too is a defense of the constraint as well its brief history.

characterizes as “[l]a lettre primordiale, la lettre ombilicante” [[t]he primordial letter, the umbilical letter], all social and familial ties, laws and mores are destroyed. Violence and chaos ensues (Burgelin 95).

Burgelin’s reading is informed by interwoven alphabetical and human filiations that bind and undo *La Disparition*’s cast of characters: Members of a large clan whose one branch is both sired and systematically killed by a bloodthirsty “man with a bushy chin” (a stand-in for Georges Perec himself, whose physical description in chapter 21 of *La Disparition* of this man is unmistakably his own).¹³⁶ Anton Vowl, the man who disappears, is a member of the clan and the second of a set of sextuplets, which corresponds to the five vowels in the French alphabet and the semi-vowel *y*. Therefore, Burgelin identifies the havoc in the introduction as a consequence of the disappearance of an omnipresent yet often unpronounced element of the language, a sign of fraternal ties and fratricide alike.¹³⁷ Burgelin suggests that the loss of the letter *e* erases testaments of all human and alphabetical ties and thus causes their dissolution. He thus places in relief the cohesive function of the letter *e* in two important and interrelated ways. First, the exclusion of an enormous set of words -on account of their inclusion of *e-*, bans *e*’s cohesive work in the French language as an indispensable component of many French words, without which the *e*less language of the novel abounds in Anglicisms, Latinisms (as well as German, Japanese, and Italian), archaic usages and a plethora of synonyms, circumventing the lack while thematically referring to voids, absences, cacophony and silence. The French language, once

¹³⁶ Perec’s description reads “Il montra du doigt un portrait qui paraissait l’ahurir. Il s’agissait d’un individu aux traits plutôt lourdauds, pourvu d’un poil chatain trop abondant, touffu, ondulant, plutôt cotonnant, portant favoris, barbu, mais point moustachu. Un fin sillon blafard balafait son pli labial. Un sarrau d’Oxford sans col apparaissait sous un tricot raglan matron à trois boutons fait du plus fin whipcord. Ça lui donnait un air un brin folklorain. On l’aurait pris pour un zingaro, pour un gitan, pour un forain ou pour un paysan kalmouk, mais on aurait pu tout autant y voir (par soumission aux goûts du jour) un hippy grattant son banjo ou sa balalaïka dans un boxon à Chinatown ou à Big Sur” (“So saying, Swann points at a portrait of a skinny man with long, curly, slightly wispy hair, thick hairy brows, a dark, bushy chin and an ugly, narrow gash scarring his lips. Sporting a woolly cardigan with four buttons on top of an Oxford smock without a collar, our man has a faintly folksy look about him, calling to mind a zingaro or a gypsy, a camy or a Mongol, but also (switching to a wholly distinct mythology and iconography) a hippy strumming his guitar in a barroom in Haight-Ashbury or at Big Sur or in Katmandu.”) While he was writing *La Disparition*, Perec had long curly hair, a beard without a moustache, would wear the kinds of tunics he describes in this passage, and had a scar above his lips (*D* 237-238 ; *V* 218).

¹³⁷ In the novel, members of the clan can be recognized by the letter *e* inscribed on the skin of their forearms, both as a sign of the curse and a sign of belonging. The mark is reminiscent of the numbers branded onto the forearms of Auschwitz and Birkenau prisoners and the blood group tattoos of the Waffen-SS alike.

deprived of a key element, incessantly points towards the missing element in an astounding variety of expression. Second, the loss of the semantic field of cohesion allowed by words containing *e* is extrapolated to themes of social and familial disintegration. The letter *e* is, after all, included in the French words for “father” [père], “mother” [mère], “I” [je], and most importantly, the homophone of the French *e*, “they” [eux]. It is important to note Burgelin’s observation that both of these phenomena point to two faces of an already existing lack. The first pertains to linguistic conventions. The letter *e* is very often mute in French, a fact reflected in Anton Voyl’s name, which, if supplied with the missing *e* and reversed, reads “voyelle atone,” a silent, or unpronounced vowel (Heck 61). The second face of the lack can be understood as a human tendency to violence inscribed in history, particularly that of Perec’s war-childhood years, and all those who lived it and died in it. The heralds and proscribes destruction and the loss of cohesion (orthographic, familial and socio-political). This law ensures therefore that the silent letter *de facto* becomes a silent letter *de jure*. In so doing, the law prescribes, proscribes and concretizes a phenomenon already observed in the French language (Burgelin 95).

La Disparition is often read as a story of “loss, catastrophe and mourning” associated with Perec’s life as a Jewish orphan of World War II.¹³⁸ The influence of the Holocaust and the loss of his parents on Perec’s oeuvre, as most poignantly evidenced in his semi-autobiographic *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, (*W, or, The memory of childhood*—1975), is unmistakable.¹³⁹ *La Disparition*, written without *e*, has been read as a case of eye-for-an-eye retribution for the historico-biographical excision, as Susan Kiernan observes with respect to the lipogram in

¹³⁸ See Lejeune; Burgelin; Béhar; Motte, “The Work of Mourning”; Motte, *The Poetics of Experiment: A Study of the Work of Georges Perec* for some prime examples of this reading. In his biography of Perec, Bellos elaborates on the evidence of Perec’s parents’ deaths. Bellos provides a reproduction of the “Acte de Disparition” dated August 1947 (lit. “Document of Disappearance,” the word *disparition* used as a euphemism for death), furnished to Georges Perec the orphan by the French authorities. This document provides the dates and locations of his mother’s arrest and deportation.

¹³⁹ *W*’s dedication reads “pour E,” which could refer to Perec’s aunt Esther Bienenfeld and/or his favorite cousin Ela Bienenfeld, but also to “eux” (them), whose French pronunciation is the same as that of “e,” and which could refer to his lost parents and/or all the victims of Nazi atrocities and Vichy France’s part in assisting or allowing them. In this later work, too, the letter *e* possesses the potential for referring in concentrated form to multiple strata of loss, as *w* traces the multiple threads of Perec’s childhood. However, the sheer multiplicity of both *e* and *w*’s visual forms and their near-absence from the novels *La Disparition* and *W* complicate these readings.

general and to *La Disparition* in particular: “To excise a letter from the alphabet is to inflict a wound on it in compensation for a wound inflicted” (Kiernan 47). In my assessment, Perec’s literary strategies often invite yet also subvert the implied equivalence in reading the loss of *e* as exchange: wound in the alphabet for a wound in the family, *e* for *eux*. Thus, this chapter deviates from these interpretations that stress the representational potential of the letter *e* as a tie that binds and is then lost, sought and mourned. The analysis presented here instead seeks to plumb the multilingual and intermedial potential of written signs without attempting to fill in the voids of Perec’s oeuvre. The purpose of this is to explore ways in which Perec exposes the non-representational potential of written language on the level of the letter: as image, mathematical symbol, musical notation, and element of calligraphic text.

This chapter also seeks to elaborate the ways in which Perec introduces chaos and cacophony into his work in his Borgesian treatment of the alphabet. The constraint of the lipogram stipulates that grammatical and orthographic accuracy not be jeopardized. *La Disparition* obeys the constraint, but it does so with continual gestures toward alphabetical chaos *à la Borges*. Without privileging sense over nonsense, or presence over loss, this chapter reads the orthographic dimensions of incomprehension and bafflement in *La Disparition*. The novel cannot be read for its referential language, as René Albérés, its first negative reviewer, had done. If the lipogrammatic novel is read without attention to the very element it omits and its work with those that remain, the novel will in fact appear to be nothing but a “violent, crude and facile fiction.” By exploiting and derailing typographic conventions to a maximum, Perec suggests that the orthographic perspective is part and parcel not only of the writing but also of reading that the *La Disparition* desires. On the lexical level *La Disparition* may sound strange but conventional. On the orthographic level, however, it aims for maximum entropy in its use of a lacunary French alphabet. The text evidences this most acutely in moments when the abolished *e* and the ensuing chaos wreak havoc in the novel by causing death and panic. The sound is excised from the letter of a phonetic alphabet, as it achieves a silent yet distinctly material presence, which in turn renders it an especially reactive and explosive element in the novel’s universe. Perec thus

reveals, extends and heightens on an elemental level moments of chaos and incomprehension. These moments are not obstacles to the encounter with his text but are indispensable to it. They arguably call for a new mode of reading that counts and analyzes those parts of written language that are not considered to be vehicles of meaning. By parsing the text into its smallest elements and multiplying them, by suggesting semantic fields that lie far beyond the scope of the text at hand, Perec seeks to exhaust the orthographic dimensions of sense and senses.

6. *The Page as Map, The Letter as Universe*

When speaking of the process and craft of writing in his essay “La Page” (“The Page”) in the collection *Especies d’Espaces* (*Species of Spaces*—1974), Georges Perec describes the preoccupation of the writer as a fashioner of geography or rather a world. In “La Page,” he depicts geography as writing and writing as geography, both compressible into a single letter:

L’espace commence ainsi, avec seulement des mots, des signes tracés sur la page blanche. Décrire l’espace: le nommer, le tracer, comme ces faiseurs de portulans qui saturaient les côtes de noms de ports, de noms de caps, de noms de criques, jusqu’à ce que la terre finisse par ne plus être séparée de la mer que par un ruban continu de texte. L’aleph, ce lieu borgésien où le monde entier est simultanément visible, est-il autre chose qu’un alphabet? (Perec, *Especies D’espaces* 26)

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet? (Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* 13)

Perec proceeds to juxtapose images of accountants lining up columns of figures, pastry cooks stuffing lines of cream puffs with cream, pianists doing their scales, and writers forming lines of words (Perec, *Especies D’espaces* 29; Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* 15). Writing here is both a sequential activity (like accountants, pastry chefs and pianists, writers progress along a line) and one at work on material objects (its is as though words are objects that the writer simply lines up). In addition, against a model of the creative genius, Perec posits the

writer as a handworker assembling words. Though this text does not necessarily preclude the possibility of reference, the space of the page for Perec is not so much a world filled out through referential meaning. Rather, it is a typographic and topographic space onto which the writer dispenses letters of the alphabet and words as parts of a series or set, like a musical scale or a row of cream puffs. Typography here becomes a kind of topography. Words and letters “saturate” the border between sea and land, not a line designating the coastline.

It is striking that Perec includes a reference to Borges’s *aleph* on the one hand and to lines of text on the other, because the depiction of *aleph* in the original Borges text poses a direct contrast to the progression of writing. In the short fiction entitled “Aleph” by Borges, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the alphabet in general become places. More interestingly, aleph becomes a single point that contains nothing short of the world. This is not a place of which language speaks with the aid of letters and words. In Borges’s “The Aleph,” the entity designated by the Hebrew letter is figured as a minuscule place on earth “where all places are – seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending” (Borges, “The Aleph” 282).¹⁴⁰ This place distinguishes itself therefore in the simultaneous totality it renders visible. This is contrasted with the linear progression of written language, as the narrator laments “What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive” (Borges, “The Aleph” 284). Perec alludes to this kind of successiveness in his reference to “continous ribbons of text.” Borges’ *aleph* implies the possibility of all moments when the author’s gaze is fixed upon one letter, not as an isolated element in a series of signs, not a bridge between one letter and the next, but as a single and vast entity to itself that demands contemplation. This letter embodies objects and places in condensed form. It does not express anything, but it reveals itself as cosmos instead. The letter *e* in *La Disparition* demands similar contemplation, as this chapter will argue. This intense contemplation of a single letter on the one hand and the stringing together of letters on the other

¹⁴⁰ “[A] lowercase letter” is one of the meanings of the word “minuscule.” (Oxford English Dictionary, “Minuscule, N. and Adj.?”)

constitute two quite different yet complementary vectors of Perec's literary project in *La Disparition*. While Perec's novel treats the remaining twenty-five letters of the French alphabet as rearrangeable elements of a set, it focuses on the missing letter as an object of contemplation.

Borges's choice of *aleph* for the name of this microcosm and Perec's choice of *e* as the omitted letter of *La Disparition* are neither accidental nor arbitrary. *Aleph* begins the Hebrew alphabet, and the omission of *e* presents the greatest lipogrammatic challenge for Perec, but there is a far more important reason for their choice. Both letters are on the verge of silence: *e* is often—but not always—unpronounced in French, and *aleph* has not vowel but consonantal value, and is barely pronounced as a sound in its own right. Both letters are therefore particularly well suited to displaying capacities of letters that exceed sound transcription. In his study of the forgetting of language entitled *Echolalias*, Daniel Heller-Roazen investigates the silence and forgetting already inscribed in *aleph*. In Hebrew, the letter does not represent a sound. As discussed in the previous chapter, *aleph* is a glottal stop, “a mere gesture of articulation” (Heller-Roazen 19). Despite its silence, its significance for the Kabbalistic tradition is considerable. Gerschom Scholem, summarizing the theological doctrine of the eighteenth-century rabbi Mendel of Rymanow, claims that all Israel heard at the scene of Mount Sinai was this letter. According to Heller-Roazen's speculative presentation of the Kabbalistic tradition, the entirety of God's revelation is contracted into the single letter *aleph*, the beginning of the word *anokhi* for “I.” Thus the silent letter embodies in condensed form the entirety of God's revelation (Heller-Roazen 24–25).

Aleph is typically transcribed into French and English as *e*. In his chapter on endangered phonemes, Heller-Roazen describes *e* as an unpronounced vowel, a phonetic lubricant that helps avoid consonant clusters. To demonstrate, Heller-Roazen gives the example of “la fenêtre” [window] versus “la fnetre.” The difference is negligible for a French speaker. “fnetre” is perfectly understandable and is in fact the more commonly used pronunciation in everyday French. Heller-Roazen calls *e* an “endangered phoneme” that is highlighted only in cases when one examines poetry, in which case one needs to sound out the *e* in order to understand rhyme

and meter. “One has no choice,” concludes Heller-Roazen: “if one wishes to have anything at all to do with the music in the language, one must leave an acoustic door open in case the threatened syllable should wish to present itself.” Thus, for Heller-Roazen, the *e* in a French text localizes the possibility of the emergence of a sound, but also the failure of that emergence (Heller-Roazen 30–31). If Heller-Roazen’s analysis is accurate, then the letters *aleph* and *e* are by nature on the verge of articulation but always in danger of disappearing. The tendency of these letters towards silence rendered them particularly suited to explorations of the materiality of a text that foregrounds *e*’s visual metamorphoses over its sound value. When the sound of *e* does unexpectedly and implicitly enter *La Disparition*, the results are chaos, cacophony, and often death. In addition, the resulting sounds, though not transcribed in the text using the letter *e*, are unintelligible to its intradiegetic audience. If Perec’s lipogrammatic novel responds in any way to these aspects of *aleph* and *e*, then Perec’s banishing *e* altogether from his text both fulfills the potential of the sound’s non-emergence and opens up the text to the reverse possibility, the threat of *e*’s explosion back onto the page.

7. *Metamorphoses of e*

In *La Disparition* Anton Vowl and his friends are plagued by the elusive yet deadly apparitions of “un rond, pas tout à fait clos, finissant par un trait horizontal: on aurait dit un grand G vu dans un miroir” (“a sort of parabola, not fully confocal in form and fanning out into a horizontal dash—akin to a capital G in a mirror”) (*D* 19; *V* 4). This apparition is later identified as a Zahir, after the Borges story by the same name. Chapter 12 of *La Disparition* even cites—*mutatis mutandis*—that story’s first sentences, which tell of various apparitions of the Zahir. Perec attributes the text to “Borgias” (*D* 139; *V* 122). Borges defines the Zahir thus:

Zahir in Arabic means “notorious,” “visible”; in this sense it is one of the thirty-nine names of God, and the people (in Muslim territories) use it to signify “beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad.” (Borges, “The Zahir” 161)

In Borges's version, the Zahir can be anything or anyone and multiple things at once. It always becomes an object of compulsive contemplation, until, gradually, the obsessed can do nothing but turn an unfaltering gaze on it until the day they die. In *La Disparition*, the Zahir again takes on many forms and spells immediate death for whoever sees it. Among the Zahir's many forms in *La Disparition* are a work of Japanese calligraphy, an oddly shaped piece of mold on a billiard table, as well as a stone found on the foundling Douglas Haig's navel, which is then made into a ring and worn by his surrogate father, Augustus B. Clifford.¹⁴¹ Clifford's ring-Zahir has three signs engraved on it (circuitously described because the novel cannot include *e* but refer to it through circumlocutions): the letter *e* itself, the mathematical sign for infinity (∞), and the sign \in .¹⁴² and which in set theory designates the inclusion of an element in a set. All three signs are visual permutations of one another: the mathematical sign for infinity looks like two ∞ s joined at their outer ends to form the number 8 tipped 90 degrees, and the sign \in 's resemblance to the uppercase *E* hardly needs exposition. In this way, the letter *e* appears and reappears, creating a hypnotic effect in line with the powers of Borges's Zahir. Moreover, the two non-alphabetical symbols do not belong to any phonetic alphabet but to the formal language of mathematics, which draws attention to the operational capacity of writing as it is used in mathematical operations and symbolic logic. These symbols also have a semantic function. The sign for infinity could designate the seeming endlessness of disappearances and murders in the novel or allude to the cosmic ambitions of the novelist discussed earlier. The sign \in , on the other hand, is used in set theory to indicate the inclusion of an element in a set. Since it is found on newborn Douglas Haig Clifford's navel, it indicates both familial belonging (belonging to the set of the family) and alphabetical belonging (the letter *e*, though excised from this text, still belongs to the set of the alphabet and its loss is felt). By placing all of these signs on the single object of the ring-Zahir, however, Perec encourages them to be read together as metamorphoses

¹⁴¹ Augustus B. Clifford's initials are A.B.C., the first three letters of the alphabet. Given the novel's intense attention to the alphabet, this can hardly be an accident.

¹⁴² \in is also an allusion to the *OuLiPo*, because \in is the title of the 1967 poetry collection by the oulipian Jacques Roubaud.

of the letter *e*. In losing its status as a distinct mark on a page, *e* becomes metonymically linked to bodies (to the baby Douglas Haig as its navel and as a sign tattooed onto the arms of members of the clan) and to its own physical metamorphoses as a body in its own right. In the processes, *e* is no longer easily categorizable as letter. In its visual impact and multiple semantic possibilities, it becomes ideogramized, which challenges the boundary between letter and word.¹⁴³

The ideogramization of *e* does not necessarily involve importing orthographic signs into *La Disparition* from non-Western writing systems. Perec does not do this explicitly. However, his treatment of the absent *e* not only includes multiple references to mathematical writing but also allows for the legibility of a symbol irrespective of its sound value. Ideograms differ from letters of the phonetic alphabet in that their legibility does not necessarily rest on their pronunciation, and also in that ideograms can have various and wholly disparate pronunciations depending on context (This is particularly true for Sino-Japanese ideograms). Thus, the following passage in which Augustus B. Clifford encounters Japanese calligraphy does not necessarily suggest that Augustus sees a Japanese translation of *e* or an ideogram that resembles it. Instead, the passage treats writing as image and craft. The legibility of the image does not rest on cognitive comprehension of content but visual and tactile recognition of text produced as a visual artwork:

Il allait sortir quand, soudain, il vit, dans un coin du salon, sur un piano droit, l'obscur carton à kaolin noirci à l'indian ink sur quoi, suivant Savorgnan, Vowl avait fait blanchir par un artisan hors pair un tanka japonais. Ça lui parut fascinant. Il s'approcha. Il prit dans sa main l'oblong carton, suivant du doigt l'insinuant parcours du subtil signal nippon. Soudain, il poussa un cri affolant, inhumain:
- Ai! Ai! Un Zahir! Là, là, un Zahir!
Sa main battit l'air. Il tomba, mort. (D 134)

Vowl had paid a first-class artisan from Japan to paint a tanka. Drawn to it by an almost morbid fascination, Augustus picks it up and holds it flat in his hand, staring at Vowl's tanka, a pictographic symbol of an incomparably finicky

¹⁴³ The dictionary definition of “ideogram” (listed under “ideograph”) reads “[a] character or figure in a writing system that represents something conceptually without depending on a particular name for it, as in Chinese characters and most Egyptian hieroglyphics or in numerals” (Oxford English Dictionary, “Ideograph, N.”). Additionally, ideograms are individual written signs in Chinese and Japanese and appear in compound nouns, verbs and adjectives. However, they can sometimes also stand alone as words.

calligraphy, and tracing out with a long almondy thumbnail its insinuatingly squiggly contours.

At which, and totally without warning, a horrifying, inhuman cry is thrust out of him:

‘Ai! Ai! A Zahir! Look, look, a Zahir!’

With his flailing hand caught in mid-air, Augustus falls down in a fatal swoon.

(V117)

In its treatment of the multiple capacities of writing under constraint, this passage extends the scope of Perec’s oulipian writing to non-Western, and specifically, to ideogrammatic writing without including it in the body of the text. First, a *tanka* is a type of Japanese poem, one with very strict rules governing number of lines and number of syllables in each line. This constitutes one of many allusions in the novel to various literary constraints.¹⁴⁴ More important, a *tanka* is written, not painted. However, the “finicky calligraphy” and “squiggly contours” of the *tanka* throw into relief those aspects of writing that have little if anything to do with the transmission of linguistic content: the artisanal skill channeled into calligraphy as *technē*, calligraphy’s central focus on writing as visual composition, and in this case, writing as artful erasure, since the French version makes quite clear that Voyl’s *tanka* is produced by whitening the surface of Chinese clay prepared with Indian ink.¹⁴⁵ The Japanese writing system is itself a hybrid system that combines phonetic and non-phonetic writing techniques, can be written both horizontally and vertically, and recalls a Japanese predilection for good penmanship, often deemed more important than content. It is probable that Clifford has no access to what the *tanka* means. This results in a certain kind of reading, albeit not for meaning or sound. Augustus B. Clifford’s experience of the *tanka* is tactile and visual: he studies the image by both looking at it and tracing it with his fingers. In this moment he both sees it as painting and reperforms the act of painting by retracing the form, recognizing the object as a Zahir without deciphering a message. Indeed, the Zahir’s potency is not in what it communicates but what it does; it kills whoever sees

¹⁴⁴ The oulipian writer Jacques Roubaud even published two volumes of French *tanka*. See Jacques Roubaud, *Mono no aware. Le sentiment des choses. 143 poèmes empruntés au japonais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), and *Trente et un au cube* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

¹⁴⁵ India ink, also called Chinese ink, is itself a striking choice of material, because it is used for producing images and texts alike. It was formerly used for calligraphy and printing. Today, however, it is used mostly for drawing. “ink” and “India ink,” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 10 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/288371/ink>>.

it. Thus the different manifestations of the Zahir perform important functions. First, in the form of Augustus B. Clifford's ring, they present *e* in its visual transformations as a written image and mathematical symbol, which invites a visual reading of the letter that highlights the ties between the natural languages of the novel and the formal languages of mathematics. Second, they extend the operational (mathematical) capacity of the letter into other writing systems, into writing conceived as craft, and into multisensory modes of reading that attend it.

These modes of reading, however, largely overlook the sound-world of the *voyelle atone*. Augustus B. Clifford can pronounce only two things: “[A] Zahir!” voices his recognition but not that which the Zahir says, and ABC also yields “un cri affolant, inhumain” [horrifying, inhuman cry]. These can be the cries of a terrified dying man. However, can they also be perceived as the proper pronunciation of the Zahir and not as arbitrary cacophony? Clifford's dying cries and its preceding scene of reading deserve closer scrutiny regarding the novel's treatment of the relationship between spoken language and the written word. In his historical analysis of the usage of the terms for “letter,” *elementum* and *littera* (associated with the Greek στοιχείον and γράμμα respectively) Gregor Vogt-Spira explores changing views on the relationship between spoken and written language in classical grammars. Some early grammars describe the letter in terms of a very important trisection: its name (e.g. “alpha”), its graphic form (e.g. α), and its phonetic function (Vogt-Spira 301–302). Clifford's scene of reading recalls this trisection if we take the Zahir to mean any manifestation (or metamorphoses) of the deadly written sign. Its name is Zahir, it is written in finicky calligraphy with squiggly contours, and its pronunciation is given as a horrifying, inhuman cry. But why should one assume that the horrifying cry is in fact the pronunciation of the written form? Why does it have to be a pronunciation of *something*? If we recall Aristotle's formulation in his *Poetics* of the letter, it cannot be. According to Aristotle, “[a] letter is an indivisible sound, not every such sound but one of which an intelligible sound can be formed. Animals utter indivisible sounds but none that I should call a letter” (Aristotle 1456b). If human sound is distinguished from other vocal phenomena on the basis of its transcribability into writing, as Aristotle suggests, then Clifford's cry cannot have a

corresponding written form. However, it can have one if one considers vocal phenomena under the sign of writing. Vogt-Spira suggests that this reversal dates back to the Renaissance and the wide availability of books beginning in the thirteenth century. According to Wolfgang Raible, the rising book culture of that epoch effected a textual turn from phonetic-auditive decoding toward ideogrammatic elements that target the eye (Raible, *Zur Entwicklung Von Alphabetschrift-Systemen* 34–38). This is a turn away from Aristotle’s conception of transcribable sound towards pronounceable writing (Vogt-Spira 314). Clifford’s horrifying, inhuman cry, may thus be nothing but incoherent sounds uttered by a human. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that his cry is a response to a written symbol or the visual metamorphoses of an inadmissible written sign, an allograph for the ordered chaos of pronunciations that *La Disparition* does not transcribe but does describe instead.

8. Portals

La Disparition describes the visual form of the letter *e* as noted above. This does not preclude the possibility of leaving open an “acoustic door” for the “endangered phoneme,” to borrow Heller-Roazen’s phrasing. While the written French of *La Disparition* does not include a single *e*, its acoustic world includes many approximations and homophones of syllables that can be written with *e*, such as “maldiction” to be discussed shortly. The typographic world of *La Disparition* is defined by the same principle of a constraint under which language is given free rein and stretched to the utmost limit. Strictly speaking, Perec obeys *La Disparition*’s lipogrammatic constraint. However, he does leave acoustic doors open for *e*’s repeated insinuation, and at times explosion, into the novel.

Perec’s novel includes one instance particularly reminiscent of Heller-Roazen’s example of “la fenêtre”’s indistinguishability from “la fnêtre” in spoken French. When the character Olga Mavrokhordatos, a one-time opera diva, sees the Zahir, we first hear “un cri assourdissant” (“a horrifying cry”) (*D* 212; *V* 193). Olga then falls, severely injuring her head:

Olga divaguait. Puis son pouls tomba. Son cristallin s'opacifiait. Son poumon vagissant laissait sortir un chuintis sifflant. Dans un sursaut final, la bru du Consul parut vouloir à tout prix glapir un mot. Un son inouï jaillit, fusant, qui finit dans un gargouillis balbutiant. (D 213)

Olga now starts raving. Loud palpitations ... a gradual clouding of vision ... a croaking lung giving out a sibilant whistling rasp ... and a final spasm coinciding with a wish, an almost fanatical craving, to say a last dying word. An astonishing sound bursts forth and spurts forth, finishing in a gargling snort. (V 194)

The passage, like many in *La Disparition* that describe the death of a member of the clan, abounds in words describing cacophony and unintelligibility. Since these death scenes are almost always brought on by a character's seeing the Zahir and the three visual permutations of *e* on it, the ensuing cacophony has something to do with an acoustic disturbance caused by *e*. This unintelligibility appears to describe Olga's dying sounds and her last words alike in ways comparable to the elusive pronunciation of the aural text before Clifford. As far as her friends are able to discern it, Olga's last word is "maldiction" [maldiction], which, in spoken French, is indistinguishable from the word "malediction" [malediction] (D 213; V 194). Pun-loving Perec suggests in this wordplay that the only way to miss the warning against the familial curse is indeed by maldiction. Considering that *es* that are elided in everyday spoken French are enunciated in French opera and in the recitation of French poetry, Olga the opera diva would both have excellent diction and know not to endanger the phoneme *e*. How, then, is the other characters' *e*less comprehension of "maldiction" to be understood? In her analysis of reading signals in *La Disparition*, Alison James notes:

In *La Disparition*, the problem of interpreting appearances is explicitly linked to the role of texts in the plot and thereby to the difficulties of reading. For example, Voyl's friends notice that some poems he has transcribed occasionally allude to some of the character's own obsessions (...) yet they attribute this conjunction between Rimbaud and Voyl to pure chance (D 116/ V 100). They therefore miss the clear indication of the nature of their predicament contained, for example, in the lipogrammatic version of Rimbaud's poem "Voyelles," (Vowels) –rewritten here as "Vocalisations." Of course, the characters are not in a position, as Perec's readers are, to recognize the textual manipulation; since the universe of the diegesis does not contain a single *e*, the poem is presumably not a transformation at all for the intradiegetic readers. (James 88)

In the world of the novel, where clues of *e*'s absence abound, all characters are as obstinately blind to these clues as they search for them. As James observes, *La Disparition* forges a close link between appearances, texts and reading. The intradiegetic readers are utterly oblivious to the *e*lessness of Rimbaud's text and may not realize that it is a rewriting at all. James thinks it natural that the characters be ignorant of this difference in a universe that does not contain a single *e*. However, James's astute observation pertains only to the characters' reactions to written texts. It may be expected that the intradiegetic audience would not be able to discern the *e*lessness of a written text if they were presented with written material. But what happens when these characters need to "read" sounds? They could, of course, simply willfully misunderstand any sound containing *e* and classify it as unintelligible. The reason for that is that in *La Disparition*, modes of hearing and speaking are also determined under the sign of writing. The word pronounced like "maldiction" could be written two ways. In my reading, however, the characters of *La Disparition* can no more hear words or phonemes that have been excised from the written text than they can read them. The word thus remains "maldiction" throughout, in which the potential but not the actuality of "malediction" is inscribed. Both the word "maldiction" and its accompanying vocabulary of cacophony, nonsense and incomprehension gesture towards an ordered linguistic chaos that lies just beyond the scope of the novel and at times explodes within in cacophony and unintelligibility.

9. Orthographic Entropy and Heterogrammatic Constraint

The tension between linguistic repetition and (dis)order is perhaps the leading force of textual production—and overproduction—in *La Disparition*. The question of the inexhaustibility of the finite posed by Laßwitz and Borges (the vast yet finite permutations of any given set of typographic symbols) is addressed in the lacunary universe of *La Disparition*, which is reduced by one letter. The language of the novel references linguistic paucity (an often quoted example is having at one's disposal "un mot sur trois" [one word out of three] but the novel performs the

inexhaustibility of expression under constraint to dizzying effect (D 153).¹⁴⁶ Bernard Magné defines Perec’s lexical project in *La Disparition* as the construction of a vast lacunary dictionary without *e*, where the reductive gesture paradoxically becomes creative (Magné, “Georges Perec: Faire Concurrence Au Dictionnaire” 15, 17). In a similar vein, Alison James observes, “[d]espite the text’s insistence on restricting the means of expression, this supposedly constrained discourse is subject less to lack than to proliferation,” while Burgelin reads *La Disparition* as “un hymne à la fécondité narrative, à la fertilité textuelle” [a hymn to narrative fecundity, to textual fertility] (James 136; Burgelin 109). As one of many possible examples, this phenomenon can be observed in the novel’s rich vocabulary to describe Olga’s dying sounds: “assourdissant” (deafening), “divaguer” (to rave), “chuintier” (to hiss), “glapir” (yap, shriek), “son inouï” (unprecedented/extraordinary (lit. unheard of) sound), “fuser” (to erupt, to ring out), “gargouillis” (gurgle), “balbutiant” (mumbling, stuttering) (D 213; V 194). Both James and Magné’s statements pertain to the lexical dimensions of Perec’s text at the level of words as the smallest units of utterance. Despite scholarly attention to modes of textual proliferation in *La Disparition*, and given the letteral nature of the constraint, it is striking that Mireille Ribière should be one of a very few scholars who devote some attention to the typographic world of *La Disparition*. Mireille Ribière holds that the lipogram in *e*, as the principle of textual precomposition in *La Disparition*, generates two competing factors, and she believes that the novel successfully negotiates the tensions between them. These two factors are the discovery in the face of the challenge of the diminished linguistic resources at the author’s disposal, and the inertia that arises because of increased occurrences of the same. Ribière observes this inertia on the level of *La Disparition*’s vocabulary and written signs: With the exclusion of *e*, the remaining five vowels appear more frequently. Because *e* is usually added to adjectives modifying female nouns and many adjectives contain *e*, there is a limited number of adjectives modifying feminine nouns. In addition, certain conjunctions and expressions such as “donc”

¹⁴⁶ The non-lipogrammatic literal translation here is mine.

(therefore) and “par surcroît” (moreover) appear over and over again (given the impossibility of varying them with alternate expressions containing *e*).¹⁴⁷ Ribière argues that Perec exploits the challenge of the lipogram to a maximum by revealing the perversity of the constraint as well as introducing elements of lexical, intertextual and multilingual “effervescence” into his text. This is to say that Perec's constrained text makes use of a stunning variety of vocabulary, genres and languages despite the limitations of the lipogram (Ribiere 187, 194). Although Perec’s alphabetical games in *La Disparition* have been listed by Bernard Magné and David Bellos, discussions of what these manipulations achieve in the novel remain limited (Magné, “Georges Perec: Une Autobiographie Desmodromique”; Magné, “Georges Perec: Faire Concurrence Au Dictionnaire”; Bellos). Ribière’s discussion too lacks further detail about the specific typographic effects of the constraint and the creative labor it performs in the novel. Evoking orthographic redundancy in Shannon’s *Theory of Mathematical Communication*, Borges’s “Library,” and Alison James and Jacques Neefs’s discussions of Perec’s heterogrammatic poetry, this section will read the visual impact and orthographic arrangement of *La Disparition*’s text as a gesture towards the orthographic entropy of Borges’s total library.

Shannon’s *Mathematical Theory of Communication* is primarily concerned with the encoding and transmission of information and not with content or meaning. However, a few remarks Shannon makes concerning entropy and redundancy are relevant to Perec’s project and the orthographic nature of his preoccupations.¹⁴⁸ Shannon provides the example of Basic English and James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* in order to illustrate concepts of entropy and redundancy in the English language. “The Basic English vocabulary is limited to 850 words and the redundancy is very high. (...) Joyce on the other hand enlarges the vocabulary and is alleged to achieve a compression of semantic content” (Shannon and Weaver 56). This is to say that in the spectrum of Basic English, the reader’s expectations of what comes next in the text and the author’s capacity to surprise are both limited. In Joyce’s case and, as this section holds, in Perec’s case,

¹⁴⁷ In fact, even “par surcroît” is not used much in written French. The more common expression is “de surcroît,” which was of course unserviceable to Perec.

¹⁴⁸ Redundance for Shannon is related to how predictable the next letter or series of letters in any text is.

the unpredictability or entropy is high because of the variety of vocabulary that these authors use. Perec's work under constraint means on the one hand that the letters of the alphabet other than *e* appear with greater frequency and are thus more redundant. On the other hand, however, his use of unusual and archaic synonyms as well as those of Latin, Italian or Arabic origin have the same effect of decreasing redundancy in the French language as do Joyce's usages in English. If we recall Shannon's comments on the legibility of basic English at the removal of every other letter, the redundancy also has an orthographic dimension, which Perec likewise exploits.

The orthographic variance in *La Disparition* certainly benefits from Perec's astoundingly rich lexical variety in the novel. Alison James notes, "[t]he necessity of replacing forbidden words with synonyms and paraphrases seems to provoke a dizzying lexical 'saturation'—things are 'ultra-said' (to borrow two terms from Voyl)." James echoes Ribière's observations on "effervescence" in *La Disparition* (James 136). This lexical production—or overproduction—is naturally dependent on the letters used to compose the words and involves their parallel (over)use. However, the orthographic variance is not dependent on lexical variance alone. Perec's use of the palindrome, mathematical expression and lists of names in ascending and descending alphabetical order, his inclusion of all of the letters of the alphabet except *e* in one sentence, and a reference to his own heterogrammatic poetry certainly cannot be read in terms of their lexical variance alone, although they do attest to Perec's painstaking work with dictionaries in order to uncover the maximum number of *e*-less words in the French language.¹⁴⁹ *La Disparition* is readable and "makes sense" but is consistently preoccupied with presenting itself as a universe of concatenated series of letters according to principles other than that of conveying meaning. The lexical variance and the above-mentioned alphabetical manipulations need to be read as Perec's attempt at creating the greatest possible orthographic entropy in "natural" French.

¹⁴⁹ Perec's drafts for *La Disparition* contain page after page of words in alphabetical order that do not contain the letter *e*. Some lists are organized alphabetically, others according to the number of letters in each word, others yet according to the part of speech (Fonds Perec, Microfiche 86, 1, 44-45; 86, 1, 55; 86, 1, 62, 1; 86, 1, 66, 6r°&6v°; 86, 1, 110, 1-7, 86, 1, 111r°).

If Borges's universe is a library in which all combinations of all twenty-five written signs are contained and where entropy is maximal, what testifies in *La Disparition* to a comparable ambition? Even if Perec's challenge was to write the longest lipogram in *e* in French, does that necessarily mean that the lipogram extends beyond itself? In the scene following Olga's death, Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan, the father of the sextuplets standing for the six vowels of the French alphabet, pronounces "la Loi du roman d'aujourd'hui" [the law of the contemporary novel] (D 217).¹⁵⁰ Sustaining the tension between pronouncement of textual economy and its prolix realization, Savorgnan's pronouncement challenges the very law it announces:

quasi la Loi du roman d'aujourd'hui: pour avoir l'intuition d'un pouvoir imaginatif sans limitation, allant jusqu'à l'infini, s'autonourrissant dans un surcroît colossal, dans un jamais vu allant toujours croissant, il faut, sinon il suffit, qu'il n'y ait pas un mot qui soit fortuit, qui soit dû au pur hasard, au tran-tran, au soi-disant naïf, au radotant, mais, qu'à contrario tout mot soit produit sous la sanction d'un tamis contraignant, sous la sommation d'un canon absolu! (D 217)

I would actually put it forward as not a paradox but a paradigm, a matrix, if you wish, for all works of fiction of today. To intuit an imagination without limits, an imagination aspiring to infinity, adding (or possibly subtracting) to (or from) its quasi-cosmic ambition a crucial factor, an astoundingly innovatory kind of linguistic originality running through it from start to finish (...) such a work of fiction could not allow a solitary lazy or random or fortuitous word, no approximation, no padding and no nodding; that, contrarily, its author has rigorously to sift all his words –I say, *all*, from nouns down to lowly conjunctions– as if totally bound by a rigid, cast-iron law! (V 198-199)

This pronouncement of the Law of the novel indicates and performs the performative paradox that drives lexical and typographic overproduction in *La Disparition*. Given that the characters are in the process of discussing the events around them as the quasi-baroque plot twists of a work of fiction, this Law appears to be none other than that of *La Disparition* itself. Because of the literary constraint of the lipogram, there cannot be a single word placed in this novel by chance, as Savorgnan states. Savorgnan appears to argue for Spartan textual economy here. Yet, in a humorous array of synonyms and exaggerated emphases, the French original text offers five synonyms in close succession for the expression "by chance": "fortuit," "au pur hasard," "au

¹⁵⁰ This non-lipogrammatic translation is mine. The published English translation is cited below.

tran-tran,” “au soi-disant naïf,” “au radotant.” As James observes, “[t]he constraint is therefore far from functioning as a law of the ‘mot juste’ or of brevity. Even if there is no random word in this text, since all are consciously selected (D 217), *La Disparition* seems to demonstrate that there is no necessary word either” (James 136–137). It is of course possible to read the lexical overproduction of “by chance” precisely as the novel’s ability to allow for chance in the face of literary constraint. It is certainly a part of the author’s imaginative power approaching infinity, or, according to the lipogrammatic English translation, his cosmic ambition, which Savorgnan clearly suggests stretches beyond the limits of the novel itself. The novel ends, but does not do so before linking its lexical and orthographic overproduction to a “quasi-cosmic ambition.”

Perec’s alphabetical manipulations gesture towards this infinity of textual production. The Law of the novel that bans chance demands “un surcroît colossal” [a colossal increase], and the law is not lexical but typographic. As Bernard Magné points out, exploiting to the maximum the field of possibilities is one of Perec’s major preoccupations in his choice of literary constraints and work under constraint (Magné, “Georges Perec: Faire Concurrence Au Dictionnaire” 13). Perec’s drafts and sketches for *La Disparition* contain list after list of words organized according to a variety of criteria: the first twenty-six words in the dictionary without *e*, followed by a list of the twenty-six last words in the dictionary without *e*, as well as the longest existing words in French without *e*, in descending order of the number of letters they contain, followed by a note suggesting that Perec planned to include one long word per chapter of *La Disparition* (Fonds Perec: 86, 1, 110, 1-7). The deliberate use of words beginning with the last words in the dictionary not only increases the occurrence of potentially seldom used words, but also the recurrence of *z*, a letter one does not encounter particularly often in written French. In addition, and more important, some of Perec’s sentences and phrases redistribute the frequency of letter use in written French and appear in the novel in key moments, which either leads to an encounter with another character or announce a seismic event, such as an appearance of the Zahir. Anton Voyl’s scribbles end with the sentence “[p]ortons dix bons whiskys à l’avocat goujat qui fumait au zoo” (“I ask all 10 of you, with a glass of whisky in your hand –and not just

any whisky but a top-notch brand- to drink to that solicitor who is so boorish as to light up his cigar in a zoo”) (D 68; V 52). Voyl’s friends follow the sentence’s instruction and go to the zoo, even finding a smoking lawyer named Hassan Ibn Abbou, who is later revealed to be the third of the sextuplets. What renders the sentence extraordinary and catalogic for the compositional principle of *La Disparition* is that it contains every single letter in the French alphabet except *e*. If we are to understand this sentence as a miniature version of *La Disparition* (or catalogic of the novel in that it typographically summarizes and represents the novel’s constraint), then we can also better observe the ways in which the novel plays with existing letter frequencies in French. The letters *w* and *z* occur seldom in written French (particularly *w*, which is used only to write words of foreign origin). In this sentence, less commonly occurring letters therefore appear in nonrepresentative frequency. In another feat that privileges orthographic rather than semantic repetition and mirroring, *La Disparition* also contains the palindrome “[u]n as noir si mou qu’omis rions à nu!” (D156).¹⁵¹ Recognized by Douglas Haig Clifford and his surrogate father Augustus C. Clifford, this phrase is written, like the *tanka*, black on white, such that its colors already indicate a reversal. It is taken to be a bad omen. After comprehending it, Augustus B. Clifford tells his son that they have to flee immediately, explaining later that the curse of the Zahir is at hand. However, what these sentences *say* to the clueless characters who almost obstinately overlook the absence of *e* in their universe is quite different from what they *show* to the reader in their negotiation of typographical possibilities. Independent of the meaning of the words, these expressions both signal the novel’s organization and act as plot-driving catalysts. However, they act as such only as a result of the typographic choice of the order and set of elements that compose them. That is to say that the typographical principle of the novel, which these sentences and words exhibit in concentrated form, incessantly call upon the reader to encounter its letters as elements of the alphabet as set, and the lipogrammatic alphabet as the subset of the French language as composed of these elements, and the page as a set of symbols

¹⁵¹ There is no palindrome in the corresponding passage of the published English translation.

that wants to be read in terms of individual letters as well as words and sentences. Moreover, the sentence containing twenty-five letters of the French alphabet as well as the palindrome are microcosms of orthographic variance at odds with that of “normal” French. Some key moments in the novel and structural ambitions of the novel even become illegible without sustained attention to its orthographic composition as this analysis demonstrates.

Perc’s great oulipian novels are not infrequently mentioned alongside his heterogrammatic poetry collections *Alphabets* (1976) and *Ulcérations* (1974), by Perc and his readers alike. Heterogrammatic poetry is an extremely stringent constraint, in which the composer of the text can use only the eleven most commonly occurring letters of the French alphabet (*e, s, a, r, t, u, n, i, l, o,* and *c*) and has to have used up the entire set before he can repeat a letter. *La Disparition* alludes to heterogrammatic poems by naming a fictitious author, the “grand Sartinuloc” ([great] Sartinuloc) (D 110). In reference to Perc’s lacunary dictionaries and challenges to the limits of language, Magné cites Perc’s heterogrammatic poems in addition to the two lipogrammatic novels, while Jacques Neefs chooses to discuss the role of constraint in *La Disparition* on a continuum of alphabetical constraint at one extreme of which are the heterogrammatic poems (Magné, “Georges Perc: Faire Concurrence Au Dictionnaire” 17; Neefs).¹⁵² This is unsurprising, particularly for the novel *La Disparition*, since it shares the lipogrammatic constraint with heterogrammatic poetry. That is, *La Disparition* and heterogrammatic poetry too are composed by purging one letter or more from the alphabet without jeopardizing orthographic or grammatical accuracy. In the case of the novel, it is the letter *e*, the most commonly occurring letter in written French. In the case of the poetry, the omitted letters number fifteen: Perc’s heterogrammatic poems in *Ulcérations* utilize only the eleven most commonly occurring letters in French, while *Alphabets* includes ten commonly

¹⁵² The present chapter does not focus on the other lipogrammatic novel, *Les Revenentes* (*The Exeter Text: Secrets, Jewels, Sex*—1972) largely because it sacrifices orthographic accuracy. *Les Revenentes* is a monovocalism in *e*, that is, *e* is the only vowel used in the text. This presents some obvious challenges, which Perc was able to circumvent only by systematically breaking grammatical and orthographic rules. One important example is his spelling of “que” [that] as “qe,” which is legible but is not a word in written French.

occurring letters plus one (the last letter changes from section to section).¹⁵³ The literary constraint is heterogrammatic; no letter can be repeated before the entire set of eleven letters is used up. It is also isogrammatic: the number of letters used is always the same. It is additionally anagrammatic: each line of the poem always uses the same set of letters. The titular first poem of the collection *Ulcérations* reads thus (Bellos 535):¹⁵⁴

COEURALINST
 INCTSAOULRE
 CLUSATRONEI
 NUTILECOSA
 IRECOULANTS
 ECOURANTLIS
 OLECRAINSTU
 LACOURSEINT
 RUSE

Coeur à l’instinct saouël,
 Reclus à trône inutile,
 Corsaire coulant secourant l’isolé
 Crains-tu la course intruse?

*O recluse with your useless throne
 and the drunken instinct of your heart,
 Sinking pirate saving the man alone,
 Do you fear the intruded race?*

The heterogrammatic poems are the culmination of the dynamic between lexical resourcefulness and highly controlled redundancy on the orthographic level, to the degree that the language of the poems relies on an eleven-letter subset of French.¹⁵⁵ Jacques Neefs’s description of the set of eleven letters as “elementary particles constituted by the most frequently used letters of the language” is apposite and suggests that the world of each poem is self-consciously physical. Another heterogrammatic poem’s depiction of law as “silo” presents the constraint as a container that allows only certain letters to pass through in specific formation and

¹⁵³ In a discussion of heterogrammatic poetry in his biography of Perec, David Bellos suggests that the choice of the number eleven was technically motivated, but that the number eleven also happened to be of particular “commemorative significance” for Perec. His mother was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on 11 February 1943. In addition, “it recurs in his subsequent poetry and fiction in many places where it has no technical necessity—notably in the address of the block of flats in *Life a User’s Manual*, 11 Rue Simon-Crubbellier” (Bellos 535).

¹⁵⁴ There are no extant copies of the privately printed first edition, and this selection is excerpted from David Bellos’s biography of Perec. However, several examples have been published in anthologies. For full descriptions and analysis of Perec’s heterogrammatic poetry, see Association Georges Perec.

¹⁵⁵ In his discussion of the heterogrammatic poems, Bellos recalls Perec’s enthusiasm for crossword puzzles, which would have further heightened his sensitivity for redundancy in the French language. Bellos also claims in his biography that Perec “must have been selling crosswords for anonymous publication as early as 1971, since a scribbled budget forecast for 1972 shows a line of income under ‘X-wds’” (Bellos 576). Beginning in winter 1975-76, Perec became the crossword-puzzle setter for the illustrated weekly *Le Point*, which he continued until 1981. Crossword puzzles, as Claude Shannon indicates in a fascinating aside, are predicated on the redundancy of a language. If the redundancy of a language is about 50% (which is the case in English), a two-dimensional crossword puzzle is possible. If the redundancy is 33%, a three-dimensional crossword puzzle will be possible (Shannon and Weaver 56).

supports Neefs's reading (Perec, "Ulcérations" 337).¹⁵⁶ Regarded as a universe containing only eleven elements, the distribution of eleven letters in *Ulcérations* tends at once towards maximum order and maximum entropy because of the poems' heterogrammatic, isogrammatic and anagrammatic nature.

Alison James notes regarding an important verse that "the starting point for these poems is the visual unit of the letter rather than the musicality of sound," indicating that the poems are primarily invested in producing letter combinations true to the constraint, regardless of the sounds and rhythms these letters may produce. The poetry tends towards "babble," James suggests when citing a poem from *Alphabets* (James 139). Although James notes that Perec's heterogrammatic poems "separate language from its referential usage," and both James and Neefs cite the poems' references to the constraint that governs them (in the case of the poem Neefs analyzes, the law is a "silo," a reference to the visual appearance of the poem on the page as block of letters), both scholars ultimately privilege meaning over this visual form (James 137; Neefs 64). James reads the heterogrammatic poetry as a case in which "the highly codified and rigid constraint does not eliminate chance but, paradoxically, creates it—generating chaotic results, founded on the arbitrariness of the sign and dependent on the strokes of luck that produce meaningful combinations" (James 141). Jacques Neefs likewise notes that the Perec poems evidence triumph over a "mutilating order that imposes nonsense," when meaning emerges from a set of jumbled letters. Both scholars appear to regard the meaningful poems that emerge from jumbled letters as a product of chance or the triumph of the author over nonsense. Perec clearly intends to produce something recognizable as language in his heterogrammatic poetry. Neefs suggests as much in suggesting that "there is always a possible meaning at the edge of the voice" (Neefs 64). However, Neefs's and James's readings appear to regard the heterogrammatic constraint as an obstacle to the emergence of sense and poetry, while ignoring that the sensory as much as the sensical may be part and parcel of the textual product and its readings.

¹⁵⁶ Cited in Neefs 64.

Perc's heterogrammatic poetry sometimes includes additional constraints. Sometimes Perc wrote words in acrostics, sometimes he always put the same letter along a diagonal line between two corners of the eleven-letter grid. Thus, it appears that Perc wrote so that the words would emerge from the letters, but just as important, with an eye to their distribution on the grid and the visual experience of the grid. The visual form of the grid, of words distributed within a grid in apparent disorder, before the eye supplies the lines and breaks, is a necessary part of the reading experience of heterogrammatic poetry. The perception of the appearance belongs to the reading experience, and, as *La Disparition* shows in occasional eruptions of nonsense and unintelligibility into the novel, is not separated from the text by any distinct borders. Reading with an eye to the distribution of written signs and the ordered chaos of this distribution recalls the nonsense that attends the production of Perc's literary language. It also recalls its visual impact, which both necessitates and renders possible such a reading.

10. Conclusion

Georges Perc's lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition* and his heterogrammatic poetry present striking examples of the impact of individual written signs in the composition of the visual world of the written page. The typographic dimensions of themes of loss, catastrophe, and mourning in *La Disparition* have been amply treated in Perc scholarship, but in ways that assign typographic symbols meaning or catalogue constraints at work on typographic symbols. These approaches evidence an emphasis on reference and meaning in Perc's texts and insufficient attention to typographic and textual forms in their own right. This asymmetric focus on meaning over form has the result that the sensory perception of Perc's texts and textual elements have been regarded as sensical or nonsensical, but not as sensory. Rather than reading the missing letter *e* as a stand-in for that which is lost (in Perc's childhood, in history, or to humanity), this chapter reads the letter as multisensory element and visual form in *La Disparition*. As a member of the OuLiPo, a literary group experimenting with mathematical constraints in literature, Georges Perc paid acute attention to the multiple capacities of written signs, as visual marks on

a page, operational tools used in mathematical calculation, ideogrammed symbols, and ciphers of absence. Relatedly and in line with the oulipian fascination with set theory inspired by the Bourbaki Group's project of founding mathematics on set theory, Perec's manipulations of written signs in his work treats them often as elements of a set (i.e. of the French alphabet). Perec's lipogrammatic project in *La Disparition* can thus be understood in two interrelated ways. First, Perec aims to place in relief the multiple capacities of the letter *e* in his excision of the letter from the written world of the novel. Second, the lexical overproduction and orthographic manipulations of Perec's text both increase and alter the orthographic variance of written French. Both literary strategies can be understood as Perec's attempt to plumb the sensory, operational and visual capacities of individual written signs and of the modes of reading they invite as a collection of symbols and part of the typo-topography of the page. Perec's letteral manipulations also perform at times the modes of orthographic reading they invite, as this chapter's discussion of *La Disposition* has demonstrated. The overemphasis on sense versus nonsense in Perec scholarship stages a battle from which only sense emerges. However, heightened sensitivity to the sensory capacities of Perec's texts allow a reading where something that might be called nonsense is not obliterated, but rather where the typographic, visual and mathematical can be perceived.

CHAPTER THREE

RE-MEMBERING SIGNS: FOREIGN BODIES, LETTERAL IMPURITIES AND TRANSFORMATION IN YOKO TAWADA

1. Language, Translation and Transformation in Yoko Tawada

Born in 1960 in Tokyo, Tawada studied Slavic languages and literatures at Waseda University before making her first trip –famously by Trans-Siberian Railway- to Germany in 1979. Since 1982, Germany has been her residential base through an international career of nearly forty original works of fiction, poetry, plays for radio and the theater, a libretto and a jazz and spoken-word CD entitled *diagonal* in collaboration with the pianist Aki Takase. Though Tawada wrote her first work of poetry and fiction in Japanese, original works of poetry, essays, fiction, theater plays, and radio plays in German began to appear in 1988.¹⁵⁷ Since then, Tawada has become one of few contemporary writers who have “consistently and deliberately developed their literary work in two languages simultaneously” (Yildiz, “Beyond the Mother Tongue: Configurations of Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century German Literature” 157).¹⁵⁸ Numerous prizes such as Japan’s prestigious Akutagawa Prize for emerging writers (1993), the German Adelbert von Chamisso Prize for authors of non-German-speaking background (1996), the Tanizaki Prize (2003), and the Federal Republic of Germany’s Goethe Medal for non-German proponents of the German language abroad (2005) all testify to Tawada’s renown for her literary

¹⁵⁷ Tawada’s first book to be published in Germany, *Nur da wo du bist ist da nichts/ Anata no iru tokoro dake nani mo nai* (1987) was written in Japanese and translated into German by Peter Pörtner. It appeared in a bilingual edition where the German text, written from left to right and across the page, and the Japanese text, written from right to left and vertically, began on opposite ends of the book. Therefore, in this bilingual edition, translations did not appear on opposite pages except in the very middle.

¹⁵⁸ Unlike Nancy Houston, another contemporary author who writes original works in English and French and translates her own work from and into these languages, Tawada typically writes original works in Japanese and German but does not translate her own work. One exception to this is the 2004 work of fiction *Das nackte Auge* (The Naked Eye), which Tawada wrote simultaneously in German and Japanese and translated into the respective editions.

production in both languages.¹⁵⁹ In addition to German and Japanese translations, her work has been translated into English, French, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, Russian and Chinese.

Tawada is often counted among authors of non-German background living and writing in Germany in the wake of transnational labor migration from the mid-1950s onwards. However, unlike authors such as Turkish-German Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoğlu, or Italian-German Franco Biondi, Tawada neither writes for nor can be counted as a member of a sizeable bilingual community. In fact, as Yasemin Yildiz points out, Tawada's bilingual production takes place "precisely in the absence of such a community" (Yildiz 158). Not only is there no immigrant Japanese community in Germany that can be traced to labor migration comparable to Turks and Italians (among others), but Tawada's literary output speaks "to global phenomena rather than migration debates in Germany in any narrow sense" (Adelson, "The Future of Futurity" 159).¹⁶⁰ Tawada's works often feature the experiences and observations of a female narrator loosely sketched as East Asian or somewhat less loosely as Japanese, in equally vague European and primarily German contexts. While evidencing a critical stance towards modes of belonging that privilege biological, national, and linguistic ties that bind, Tawada's texts avoid overt political statements.¹⁶¹ Rather, they parody and subvert social, ethnographic, and linguistic

¹⁵⁹ The Akutagawa Prize, named after Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, the father of the Japanese short story, is the most prestigious prize for Japanese-language literature. The Adelbert von Chamisso Prize is named after French-born Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838), who fled the French Revolution and settled in Berlin to become a well known German-language author. The prize in his name has been awarded annually since 1985 and been popularly named the prize for "Gastarbeiterliteratur" [Guest-worker literature], linking post-World War II transnational labor migration to the phenomenon of German literatures written by authors of non-German heritage. In many cases including Tawada's, this link does not hold. The Tanizaki Prize is named in honor of the Japanese novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1865-1965). It is one of Japan's most coveted literary awards, given to professional authors for a full-length work of drama or fiction.

¹⁶⁰ Adelson cautions against the tendency in Tawada scholarship to treat Tawada as a migrant author. Like some of the Tawada scholars she names that are exceptions to this tendency (Sigrid Weigel, Christine Ivanovic, and Yasemin Yildiz among others), Adelson deliberately chooses to treat Tawada's work not as a literature or poetics of migration.

¹⁶¹ The expression "ties that bind" is frequently used to refer to old and new configurations of culture, nation and ethnicity in general, and to literatures of migration more specifically. See Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration*, particularly the introduction, for new analytical reconfigurations of "ties that bind" in German literature in the wake of transnational labor migration. While she does not abandon the concepts culture, nation and ethnicity altogether, Adelson insists on "a scalar understanding of interactive contexts—as opposed to a dichotomous model of discrete worlds" and on considering "figural functions of ethnicity" in order to reevaluate the "explanatory power" of familiar concepts of ethnicity and ethnic cohesion (11).

protocols. The author's narrators react with naïve surprise at the peculiarity of everyday practices and reflect upon the oddities of everyday language usage in old and new contexts. As the latter strategy suggests, in emphatically reflective ways, language is as much the subject as medium of Tawada's texts.

Tawada's engagement with language often involves playful investigations into tensions and fissures between form and meaning, with broad implications for an understanding of nation, gender, and language in an age of intensified global encounters. Yasemin Yildiz identifies an "aesthetics of detachment" in Tawada's bilingual poetics, with which Tawada rejects modes of inclusion associated with nation, gender, and human subjectivity (Yildiz, "Beyond the Mother Tongue: Configurations of Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century German Literature" 159). Highlighting the linguistic dimension of attachment and detachment, Susan Anderson identifies a literary strategy of "surface translation" in Tawada, a pointedly literal translation that plays with textual surfaces with a "heightened attention to form and literality." This strategy, Anderson argues, makes visible the ways in which "meaning attaches to and detaches from form," which in turn critique the notion of depth associated with language and culture that foreigners or migrants are perceived to be incapable of penetrating. By performing surface translation, Tawada's literary project aesthetically probes German culture and reveals the artificiality of accustomed modes of perceiving both German and Japanese culture (Anderson 50). Shifting focus from Tawada's challenges to accustomed modes of understanding nation, culture, and gender, this chapter will turn its attention to the ways in which Tawada's texts reconfigure language in their attention to textual surfaces. Once suspended from semantic meaning, Tawada's engagement with the materiality of written signs and their transformations activates new modes of reading in which attention to the sensory—over the sensical—is of the essence. Tawada's poetics not only explores how meaning attaches to and detaches from form, but the ways in which form transforms at the smallest scale in written texts, thus revealing sites in which linguistic and bodily unities big and small are disarticulated.

This chapter will first outline reflections on inter- and intra-lingual translation and mobility in Tawada's own literary and essayistic output and in the existing body of international scholarship on Tawada. Existing analyses include frequent references to dimensions of space and vectors of movement, particularly in "translation" [Übersetzung], "metaphor" [Metapher] and "transformation" [Verwandlung], and their relationship to travel and geographic space. My analysis will do this as well, but it will focus more pointedly on movements and transformations of textual figures and text-images in Tawada's multilingual texts, with particular emphasis on Tawada's preferred term "transformation" [Verwandlung]. As I will demonstrate, this key term applies well to the translation of literary texts, as well as to similar but non-equivalent forms of individual written signs of different writing systems.¹⁶² Of particular interest here, as Leslie A. Adelson notes, "is not merely the 'trans' but in an acute sense the 'form.'" Adelson observes that in readings of Tawada's texts written under the sign of translation and travel, attention to form "yields grounds for more movement still but no stable comparisons," and activates ever new modes of reading in and between the lines of Tawada's texts for meaning, metaphor, but more importantly for "a trans-lated likeness beyond metaphor" (Adelson, "Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks: Trans-Latio in Yoko Tawada's *Das Nackte Auge* (2004)" 10).¹⁶³ Adelson's investigations of Tawada's thought-image [*Denkbild*] of transformation gesture towards the cosmic.¹⁶⁴ This analysis, on the other hand, will focus more closely on the material world of the page from the microperspective of individual written signs, whilst sharing Adelson's attention to

¹⁶² Here, I understand multilingualism as literary multilingualism, that is, "as the co-existence and interaction of at least two languages, be it at the level of individuals, communities, discourses, or texts" Yasemin Yildiz, "Beyond the Mother Tongue: Configurations of Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century German Literature," 2006, 4.. For a more thorough exposition of twentieth-century German literary multilingualism, see the introduction to Yildiz's dissertation.

¹⁶³ Adelson's observations rest on a close reading of the figure of parallel rails in Tawada's 2004 novel *Das nackte Auge* (*The Naked Eye*) and its intertextuality and interlinear references to Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" [The Task of the Translator]. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, Tawada's literary and essayistic work engages very often with Benjamin's translation essay in particular and with Benjamin's thought in general. In addition, "transformation" [Verwandlung] permeates Tawada's work as idea, theme, trope, and I will argue, literary strategy at work on Tawada's textual surfaces.

¹⁶⁴ Adelson observes that Tawada shares with Walter Benjamin an interest in reading not only text but things in the world and beyond, including celestial bodies. In the case of Adelson's analysis, the celestial bodies are the Pleiades, after which days of the week have been named (Adelson, "Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks: Trans-Latio in Yoko Tawada's *Das Nackte Auge* (2004)" 9–10)

form in translation and translated likenesses of textual forms. As several scholars have observed, Tawada's attention to phenomenal sense as opposed to semantic sense and her attention to individual written signs (particularly the Latin alphabet and Japanese writing systems) serve to "defamiliarize the very material of writing," with broad implications for understanding literary multilingualism and the writing subject in the twenty-first century (Yildiz 78).¹⁶⁵ Tawada's texts are generally acknowledged to be written under the sign of translation.¹⁶⁶ However, translation in Tawada acquires dimensions beyond reference and meaning, expanding into the material world of text and writing. By observing written signs in transformation with an attention to written form in Tawada's literary and essayistic works, this study will illuminate ways in which Tawada's literary strategies expand the purview of translation by calling upon new modes of reading. These new modes of readings, this study will suggest, require sensitivity to this defamiliarization of the medium of writing and the irreducibility of the materiality of written form. By employing the term "transformation," this study reads the phenomenal in addition to the semantic.

Tawada's literary and essayistic work engages those elements of language that do not communicate content, as well as those dimensions of translation that hinge on written form. For both strands of these preoccupations, Walter Benjamin is a key interlocutor. While the former recalls Walter Benjamin's thoughts on language as such, the latter recalls his reflections on translation. Tawada often explicitly references Benjamin's work or alludes to it. In order to illustrate that Tawada's attention to written signs is not incidental but pivotal for understanding her literary strategies of fragmentation, multilingual writing, linguistic disarticulation and transformation, this chapter will first examine Tawada's reading of Paul Celan's *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* [From Threshold to Threshold] (1955) in her essay "Das Tor des Übersetzers, oder

¹⁶⁵ For a translator's view of Tawada's written signs and their materiality, see Banoun, particularly pages 45. For the defamiliarizing effects of Tawada's bilingual writing and its implications for understanding language and identity in the twenty-first century, see also chapter 3 of Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*. For an incisive account of Tawada's challenges to ethnographic protocol, see Kim.

¹⁶⁶ The studies to this effect are too many to name. A few notable hexamples in addition to the ones already cited are Slaymaker; Ivanović; and Genz. See also John Namjun Kim's forthcoming book on Tawada and Paul de Man, *Ethnic Irony: Autobiography of the Living Dead-Translation and Migration from the Great Beyond*.

Celan liest Japanisch” [The Gate of the Translator, or Celan Reads Japanese] and its particular engagement with Walter Benjamin’s “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” [The Task of the Translator]. Although Tawada scholarship frequently cites Tawada’s and Benjamin’s essays in relation, it treats individual written signs and parts of written signs as incidental rather than pivotal to Tawada’s poetics. However, in my assessment, Tawada is intensely preoccupied with fragmentation in the philosophy of language and the world of things, as her oeuvre’s links with Kabbalistic tradition, the European avant-garde and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later language philosophy suggest. A poetics of fragmentation is most elementally evident in Tawada’s use and thematization of letters. As the reading of Tawada’s essay will reveal, written signs as protean elements are at the thematic, visual, and material center of Tawada’s theoretical and literary engagement with translation and transformation.

While paying sustained attention to individual written signs, this chapter also contextualizes them within long-standing traditions and strategies of writing in order to better articulate Tawada’s transformative contributions to European letters. Therefore, this chapter plumbs visual capacities of writing through the concept of “notational iconicity” (Sybille Krämer) and the aural dimensions of translational writing through the concept of “exophony” (Christine Ivanovic and Tawada). While each concept will elucidate particular dimensions of Tawada’s writing (namely visual and aural transformations of written signs), Tawada’s literary strategies are not allied to one over the other. In fact, this analysis will show that Tawada not only activates multisensory capacities of writing in her texts, but that she both engages and challenges the concepts of notational iconicity and exophony.¹⁶⁷

Close readings of Tawada’s intertextual text *Opium für Ovid: Ein Kopfkissenbuch für 22 Frauen* [Opium for Ovid: a pillow-book for 22 women] (2000) and her most overt inclusion of Japanese and German writing systems in the novel *Schwager in Bordeaux* [Brother-In-Law in

¹⁶⁷ Tawada treats the term exophony explicitly in her essayistic work and has published an essay on exophony in Japanese. For a thorough discussion of this concept in Tawada, see Ivanovic; and Ivanović, “Exophonie und Kulturanalyse. Tawadas Transformationen Benjamins.” The same is not the case for notational iconicity. In this analysis, notational iconicity is more an interpretive lens for investigating Tawada’s work than a concept Tawada directly addresses in her writings.

Bordeaux] (2008) will illustrate the strategies by which these texts present sounds or images of individual orthographic symbols in momentary isolation. These moments then disarticulate the differences between and within writing systems by presenting written elements and their sounds as likenesses of one another, while also offering multiple and multilingual lexical possibilities for given letters or sounds. This strategy is not limited to those works by Tawada in which multiple writing systems appear or are thematized but can be generalized to all of Tawada's oeuvre. Instead of presenting nonsensical fragments (Anderson; Arens; Knott, "Sign Language: Reading Culture and Identity in Tawada Yoko's 'The Gotthard Railway'") or manifestoes of unreadability (Martyn; Wägenbaur), Tawada's oeuvre in my analysis recrafts writing and reading as multisensory phenomena that are related but not reducible to desires for comprehension and legibility.

2. *Mobility, Translation, Metaphor, Transformation*

Tawada's treatment of spatial mobility is no doubt closely associated with themes of translation and linguistic mobility, but Tawada scholarship often portrays these themes as a poetics of transgression or border-crossing.¹⁶⁸ Citing Yasemin Yildiz's observation regarding this dominant discourse, Brett de Bary challenges the geographic fixity of "Eurocentrism and 'the West'" that underlies the critical construction of "this 'boundary' as that between Germany and Japan." De Bary also criticizes translation studies for its reliance "on the same modern regulatory schema of translation that distributes difference as national, cultural, and ethnic difference". This standard notion of border-crossing, de Bary contends, serves only to reify borders as transitional spaces between familiar and fixed geographic, national, cultural and linguistic spaces, confining "ethnic writers" in the role of native informants (de Bary 42). Against this model Yildiz holds that Tawada's linguistic imagination offers new "transnational imaginaries," that is, "mental maps that negotiate the diverse social, cultural, political and

¹⁶⁸ See especially Breger for a discussion informed by Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) of Tawada's mobilization of "third space" and "mimicry" to blur bodily, gender and national boundaries. Additional scholarly articles on Tawada will be referenced as relevant throughout the chapter.

psychic forces that interact with a heightened intensity today and that are not limited to any given national context” (Yildiz 77).¹⁶⁹ When Leslie A. Adelson generalizes the importance of linguistic and spatial movement in Tawada’s oeuvre, she similarly alerts scholars to new configurations of movement in the author’s literary texts. Citing Doris Bachmann-Medick’s work on new approaches to movement and space in arts and literature in the early twenty-first century in response to catastrophes, conflicts, intercultural encounters and subversions of Western expansionism, Adelson endorses Bachmann-Medick’s call to scholars “to pay more refined attention to specific ‘forms of movement’ (258) in contemporary literary texts in order to grasp what cultural transformations of subjectivity are afoot.” As Adelson goes on to argue, “[t]his is certainly relevant to Tawada, a writer whose textual figures are so frequently and pointedly on the move” (Adelson, “The Future of Futurity” 6–7; Bachmann-Medick).¹⁷⁰ Adelson’s remarks additionally suggest that close interconnections are in play between movement motifs and textual figuration in Tawada’s writing. That is to say, we need to scrutinize not only the relationship between movements *and* textual figures in the author’s oeuvre but also the movements and transformations *of* textual figures in Tawada’s writing.

Tawada is highly aware of linkages between translation and mobility, implied in the spatial dimensions of the terms “Über-setzung” [trans-lation] (carrying over) and “Meta-pher” [metaphor] (carrying beyond or over), both of which are preferred terms in Tawada scholarship for speaking of language in movement. Both metaphor and translation are understood literally in Tawada scholarship as a “carrying over,” between geographies, languages and cultures.¹⁷¹ The author’s awareness of this is perhaps most evident in the 2002 collection of short texts *Überseezungen* [Overseetongues], the title of which melds the words *Übersetzung* [translation],

¹⁶⁹ Yildiz identifies strategies whereby Tawada privileges inorganic modes of belonging that challenge “naturalized links between subjects and languages” (78).

¹⁷⁰ Bachmann-Medick’s essay recounts a long history of “spatial appropriations” and conceptions of space in Western literatures since the eighteenth century and references a variety of literary texts and artists’ projects, but it does not relate its analyses to Tawada’s literary output.

¹⁷¹ See especially David Martyn’s analysis of the cultural dimensions of metaphor in Tawada along with Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Salim Alafenisch, two other bilingual authors living and writing in Germany (Martyn).

Zunge [tongue] and *Übersee* [overseas].¹⁷² Christina Kraenzle holds that *Überseesungen* as a whole constitutes “Tawada’s most sustained reflection on the interconnectedness of mobility, geography, language, and identity to date,” while acknowledging that these themes constitute the focus of most of Tawada’s works (Kraenzle 1).¹⁷³ Analyses of Tawada’s work and poetics frequently assert the impossibility of translation as a loyal transfer of meaning from one language to another. Rather, her writing is generally taken to collapse the possibilities of equivalence between the original and translation, between the tenor and vehicle of any given metaphor, resisting readability and translatability.¹⁷⁴ Investigating relations between metaphor, culture and space, David Martyn reads Tawada’s short text “Das Fremde aus der Dose” [Canned Foreign] from the 1996 essay collection *Talisman*. He concludes that Tawada’s text implicitly criticizes the cultural specificity of metaphors. Martyn holds that readable texts necessarily affirm their own localizations within cultural topographies [“kulturtopographische Verortungen”], which Tawada’s texts resist and undermine by presenting readers with “a kind of manifesto for unreadability” [“eine Art Manifest für die Unlesbarkeit”] (Martyn 740). In a less spatial vein Keijirō Suga understands Tawada’s poetics as translational, and translation itself as a kind of metaphor. Suga claims that the workings of metaphor imply the impossibility of equivalence and identity between a vehicle and tenor, and by extension between an original and its translation. According to Suga, the non-identical terms of a metaphor intimate their nonequivalence in their very demand to be understood as equivalent. Thus, translation understood as metaphor

¹⁷² *Überseesungen* is frequently categorized as a collection of essays. However, it should be noted that Tawada often challenges genre distinctions between essay and fiction. In addition, her only long work of fiction to receive the subtitle “Roman” [novel] is *Schwager in Bordeaux* (Brother-in-Law in Bordeaux—2008). Unlike in English, where the word “tongue” can refer to language and the organ, the German word “Zunge” refers only to the organ and thus the usage is both rather striking and reminiscent of the title of Turkish-German author Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s 1992 short-story collection *Mutterzunge* [Mother Tongue] and of themes of loss of speech in Tawada’s earlier short novel *Das Bad* (The Bath—1989). As Christina Kraenzle points out, “the word *Zungen* also suggests a link between language and the body, or between sound and its physical production” (Kraenzle 2).

¹⁷³ In addition to Kraenzle, see for instance Christine Ivanovic’s introduction to her edited volume (Ivanovic, “Vorwort”); Anderson (2010); Chapter 3 of Yasemin Yildiz’s monograph on literary multilingualism (Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*) and the relevant dissertation chapter “A World of Homonyms: Reading Bilingualism through Yoko Tawada’s German Prose” (Yildiz, “Beyond the Mother Tongue: Configurations of Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century German Literature”); Knott; and Banoun.

¹⁷⁴ This chapter chooses to use I.A. Richards’s influential terms “tenor” and “vehicle,” where the tenor is the subject to which the metaphor is applied, and the vehicle the metaphorical term or expression itself (See Richards, particularly Chapters 5 and 6).

necessarily takes leave of any claims to equivalence in relation to the original (Suga 23–24). More radically and quite possibly inspired by Tawada’s own text “Tawada Yōko does not exist,” Margaret Mitsutani questions the very existence of an original text in Tawada’s treatments of translation (Mitsutani 35).¹⁷⁵ Kraenzle reads the purported equivalence of a list of terms and their definitions in “Ein chinesisches Wörterbuch” [A Chinese Dictionary] from *Überseetzungen*, in such a way that the text becomes “less about simple translation than about untranslatability,” relating “the blank spaces that exist between words” to “gaps characteristic of lives lived in the intersections of languages and signifying systems” (Kraenzle 12). The terms of metaphor, original and translation, or even entries in a dictionary may all demand to be understood as positing relations of equivalence while suggesting the nonexistence of this equivalence. However, this chapter understands this dual move as a starting point for Tawada’s poetics rather than a declaration of the impossibility of translation, metaphor or readability on her part. As suggested by Bernard Banoun, Tawada’s French translator, “in her (Tawada’s) German texts, (...) the possibility and impossibility of translation appear to be inextricably linked, since translation as traversal (of a writing system, of a language, of a mode of thought into another) is already practiced in the original” [“in ihren deutschen Texten, (...) erscheinen die Möglichkeit und die Unmöglichkeit des Übersetzens unlösbar verbunden, denn die Übersetzung als Übergang (eines Schriftsystems, einer Sprache, einer Denkweise in eine andere) wird bereits im Original praktiziert” (Banoun 461). Tawada’s essayistic work supports Banoun’s observation. In her second Tübingen Poetics Lecture, which is dedicated to the problem of translation, Tawada remarks: “One cannot translate the letters. It is in fact not the text that cannot be translated; it is the script.” [“Die Buchstaben kann man nicht übersetzen. Es ist eigentlich nicht der Text, den man nie übersetzen kann, sondern die Schrift”]. This is not a statement about the absolute untranslatability of texts or writing systems. Rather, Tawada elaborates that a literary translation

¹⁷⁵ In the playful essay “Tawada Yōko does not exist,” Tawada argues for her own nonexistence. The text has an additional performative dimension, since it was delivered by the author herself at a symposium at the University of Kentucky dedicated to her work (March 13, 2004). The volume in which this essay is published is a collection of all presentations at the symposium (Yōko Tawada, “Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist”).

has to work with the problem and impossibility of translation rather than try to obliterate it. In doing so, she points out an important distinction between absolute condition and structural possibility: untranslatability—and illegibility—are possibilities that inhere in any text and with which authors, translators and readers always have to contend (Yoko Tawada, *Verwandlungen* 35). Thus, for Tawada, the impossibility of translation attends translation, and this impossibility is particularly evident in the writing system rather than the ideas or concepts included in a text. Ideas can be rendered in another writing system, but a writing system is much more difficult to render in another writing system. In this sense my analysis will build on an existing minor chord in Tawada scholarship and strengthen the analytical purchase of Banoun's insight through a critical emphasis on written signs.

Tawada's texts present moments of likeness or sameness in order to create tensions or oscillations between apparent sameness and its very impossibility. These tensions are often most visible in individual written signs as the smallest elements of texts and non-semantic markers of linguistic difference: As the smallest element of writing, an individual written sign is more likely to resemble another written sign or unit of utterance in another language than larger units, such as words, phrases and sentences. In addition, one way of telling apart languages would be to look at the writing system in which a text has been written. Needless to say, this way of distinguishing between languages is also non-semantic, since it has no recourse to the content of a text. More importantly, however, likeness and translation in Tawada's written signs serve to defamiliarize the familiar (in this case, a purportedly unitary language) and dismantle the unity of languages by breaking them up into their smallest written components and showing how one written component could in fact be read as another. One example of this is Tawada's treatment of the letter *O* in her short story "St. George and the Translator" (translated from the Japanese *Arufabetto no kizuguchi*, literally "The gaping wound of the alphabet"), which both thematizes translation and suggests non-semantic possibilities for it. In it, the narrator, who is a translator, has trouble keeping the whole of the text in mind and notices to her dismay that the text keeps breaking into fragments. She observes *O*s scattered across the page and likens them to "holes

eaten away by the letter ‘O’” (Yoko Tawada, “Saint George and the Translator” 121, 113). The letter *O* therefore becomes a visual image of a gaping wound in the text, a cipher of absence (by dint of its resemblance of the number *0* and the holes it creates in the text surface) and implied counterpart to the Sino-Japanese ideogram 口 (read *kuchi*, meaning “mouth” or “opening”). This mutability of written signs calls for new modes of reading the newly legible (not illegible) elements of texts. Read with an eye to its materiality and its protean nature, an image, sound, or concept that appears the same but has different functions and valences in different languages, the letter allows for different lexical possibilities for the reader. It gestures as well towards multiple possibilities of reading the same text. In “Saint George and the Translator,” the narrator muses, “[p]erhaps translation was something like a metamorphosis” (Yoko Tawada, “Saint George and the Translator” 121). As elements in translation, metamorphoses of the same sounds, characters and concepts both reveal the multivalence of individual characters and gesture already in the printed medium towards possibilities of reading and writing that new media could allow.

Tensions between the impossibility or possibility of translation as an exact and loyal transfer of meaning from one language to the other do not rest on an operational difficulty from which Tawada shies away. Rather, Tawada’s attention to non-content-based modes of translation allows these tensions to come into especially clear relief. Tawada achieves this by means of acoustic translation, visual translation and hyperliteral translation. Banoun identifies acoustic translation as the translation of the sound of a text into words of another language that sound similar but have different meaning. Banoun gives Tawada’s text “Slavia in Berlin” in *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte* (Language police and play polyglots—2007) as an example. There, Tawada substitutes proper names of continents, countries and cities for German adjectives, nouns, verbs and other parts of speech (Banoun 463). Some of Tawada’s live performances also involve such acoustic translation where the sound and not the meaning of a text is rendered in the words of another language.¹⁷⁶ What Susan Anderson terms “hyperliteral

¹⁷⁶ In these two cases, I refer to languages in the conventional (homogenous, unified) sense. However, Tawada’s literary strategies undermine this convention.

translation” or “surface translation” in Tawada can be linked to acoustic and visual translation, as it is based in part on “shapes and sounds of letters and syllables,” but more generally to “associative signification, based on observing and playing with the surface phenomena of language” (Anderson 57).¹⁷⁷ In an essay on Tawada’s play with protocols of reading that attend ethnography and the parabolic personal pronoun “I” in Tawada’s “A Vacuous Flask” [*Eine leere Flasche*] from *Überseetzungen*, John Namjun Kim reads a moment of synaesthetic translation, in which “the sight and sound derived from *ich bin* [sic] are ‘metaphors’ that translate semantic sense into phenomenal sense, that is, into semantic non-sense.” When Tawada’s “I” is synaesthetically translated as a brushstroke on a page and the word “bin” is translated acoustically into Japanese as “flask,” they remove themselves in Kim’s reading from the contexts of sense-making and are transformed into semantic nonsense. Brought into visual and acoustic resonance, the shape “I” as brushstroke and the acoustic space of a bottle perform translation as synaesthetic practice and void semantic content (Kim, “Ethnic Irony” 346). This translational production of phenomenal sense and its relationship to semantic sense challenge existing notions of sense and legibility by creating a productive tension within “sense,” which can be understood and read as sensory or semantic or both.

The two instances of synaesthetic translation described above (between *O* and □ and “I” and a brushstroke on a page) testify to Tawada’s attention to translation as sensory phenomenon at work in the smallest units of written language, not only in letters of the alphabet, but also in punctuation marks and geometric shapes that come together to form individual characters at certain junctures. In her analysis of translated likenesses in Tawada’s work, Adelson indicates a need for a comprehensive study of “likeness” in Tawada that addresses the “complex status of likeness and comparison in [Walter] Benjamin’s writing and thought” (Adelson, “Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks: Trans-Latio in Yoko Tawada’s *Das Nackte Auge* (2004)” 24). While scholars such as Christine Ivanovic, Susan Anderson, Miho Matsunaga, Hiltrud Arens and others

¹⁷⁷ While Anderson mentions letters and syllables, her analysis focuses on words as the smallest units of utterance.

at times invoke Benjamin's theories of language and translation to explore Tawada's insistence on non-content-based modes of translation and attention to surface phenomena in languages, insufficient attention has indeed been paid to date to Tawada's sustained focus on translation as transformation between elements of writing systems. This chapter analyzes this scholarly lacuna and additionally investigates the multisensory capacities of written signs in Tawada. It does so in order to illustrate how Tawada's challenges to the notion of language as homogeneous, unitary and familiar rest primarily on her literary strategies at work on the materiality of written signs and the written page, and not on the semantic content of her texts.

For the capacity of Tawada's favored trope capture change in both form and content, this analysis insists on "transformation" over "translation" as an operative term. This is in part owing to Tawada's own predilection for the terms "Verwandlung" [transformation] and "Metamorphose" [metamorphosis].¹⁷⁸ Besides making *Verwandlungen* [Transformations] the title of her 1998 Tübingen poetics lectures, and writing *Opium für Ovid* featuring twenty-two female characters from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Tawada gives explicit reasons for her preference for the term "Verwandlung" [transformation]. She pointedly prefers this term over "Übersetzung" [translation] in a short introduction to volume of texts by emerging German-speaking authors that she edited. This volume, which is itself entitled *Verwandlungen*, was published in 1998. Tawada there describes her response to questions about the quality of translations of her work.

Damals kam ich auf den Begriff der Verwandlung, um kreative Möglichkeiten der Übersetzungsarbeit zu verteidigen. Texte verwandeln sich von einer Sprache in eine andere. Bei mir verwandeln sich die Texte auch von einer Gattung in eine andere. Außerdem verwandeln sie sich in ihrem Entstehungsprozeß von einem Haufen Notizen in ein Manuskript, von Druckfahnen in ein Buch. Manchmal verwandeln sie sich weiter in elektrische Buchstaben im Internet oder in Tanzbewegungen auf einer Bühne. (Yoko Tawada, *Verwandlungen* 7)

[Then I came upon the concept of transformation in order to defend the creative possibilities of the work of translation. Texts transform themselves from one language

¹⁷⁸ Adelson notes that "Tawada's well known predilection for *Verwandlung* is not always felicitously translated as 'transformation,' which obscures the sense of something going awry or askew entailed in the prefix *ver-*" ("Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks: Trans-Latio in Yoko Tawada's *Das Nackte Auge* (2004)" 15).

into another. My texts metamorphose from one genre into another. In addition, during the production process, they transform themselves from a pile of notes into a manuscript, from galley proofs into a book. Sometimes they transform themselves further into electric letters on the Internet or into dance movements on a stage.]¹⁷⁹

Against the assumption that a translation must always be an incomplete representation of an original, Tawada seeks here to present translation as a fully transformed entity, one that no longer lays claim to sameness with the original even while the relationship between original and translation may be that of kinship.¹⁸⁰ Tawada's preference for transformation over translation also holds that transformation is the nimbler term. It better allows free movement between genres, between embodiment and virtuality, and between textual incarnations as different objects (e.g. notes, proofs, books). The focus on "forms" of text becomes apparent yet in another way for Tawada's preference for the term: The accent it places on the body of the text over its meaning is pivotal for her (Yoko Tawada, *Verwandlungen* 7).¹⁸¹ I evaluate the heightened reflexivity of transformation in Tawada's presentation of the term and the process, particularly in her employment of the German verb "sich verwandeln" (to transform oneself). Tawada's choice of this reflexive verb and her emphasis on the "Körper der Texte, die sich verwandeln wollen und dafür uns Autoren als Mittel benutzen" [bodies of texts that want to transform themselves and use us authors as means to this end] also entail a "Leichtigkeit" [lightness] that she enjoys in connection with this term. She states too that texts do not appear without an author.¹⁸² However, as the following analyses will show, Tawada's choice of letters and tropes in *Schwager in Bordeaux* in particular are too deliberate to be ignored as self-willed transformation of a text. While Tawada often presents or reports on moments of surprise encounters between languages

¹⁷⁹ This English translation uses only the word "transformation." This chapter will almost exclusively use the term "transformation" due to the significance of changing *forms* in Tawada's writings. It will use the terms interchangeably only in the discussion of Tawada's intertextual engagement with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin refers to the concept of kinship in his translation essay. For a discussion of kinship in this essay, see Weber 53–78.

¹⁸¹ As has been discussed in the introduction, "form" is another key term for Walter Benjamin's translation essay.

¹⁸² Tawada plays with the idea of not existing, as in the previously cited short text "Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist," but her very choice of performing this text suggests that she regards her nonexistence as possibility and not fact. However, both Tawada herself and some Tawada scholars rightly problematize autobiographical readings of her work. See for instance Kim; de Bary; Breger; and Brandt.

and their elements, the crafting of these moments of encounter are closely and deliberately linked to Tawada's literary project as such.

The transformation of foremost importance for this chapter is that between writing systems. It can be inferred from Tawada's statements about transformation discussed above, but also from her Tübingen poetics lectures (also discussed above) that translation for Tawada is importantly the transformation of written signs into one another. This transformation is perhaps most apparent between phonetic alphabets like Western European languages (which purport to transcribe the sounds of a language), and those containing ideograms, particularly pictograms, such as Chinese and Japanese. For example, Tawada's detailed reading of the physiognomy of Japanese translations of Paul Celan's poetry evidence great sensitivity to transformations of German words and letters into Sino-Japanese ideograms and radicals. Tawada's focus on individual written characters rather than on larger units of utterance, on translatability as structural possibility over the historical realization of translation, and on the autonomous form of translation over that which is lost in it, reveals the central significance of Walter Benjamin's thoughts on translation for Tawada's analysis and her choice of Benjamin as her primary interlocutor for her close readings of Celan's poetry.

3. Benjamin's Words and Tawada's Letters

Tawada's literary and essayistic work includes recurrent references and allusions to the thought of Walter Benjamin, particularly his work on language. Direct references are to be found in Tawada's dissertation *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie in der europäischen Literatur: Eine ethnologische Poetologie* (2000) and in her essays. The latter include the third and last of her Tübingen poetics lectures collected in the volume *Verwandlungen* (1998) (entitled "Gesicht eines Fisches, oder das Problem der Verwandlung" [Visage of a Fish, or the Problem of Metamorphosis]),¹⁸³ her readings of Benjamin's essay "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" [On

¹⁸³ The word "Verwandlung" has been translated into the English here as "metamorphosis," because of Tawada's engagement with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in this essay by Tawada.

the Concept of History] alongside Heiner Müller's works for theater and Japanese Nō plays,¹⁸⁴ and "Das Tor des Übersetzers, oder Celan liest Japanisch" [The Gate of the Translator, or Celan reads Japanese] from the 1996 essay and fiction collection *Talisman*, in which Tawada closely reads poems from Celan's 1955 collection *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* [From Threshold to Threshold] alongside Benjamin's essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" [The Task of the Translator]. Benjamin's translation essay is perhaps the most frequently cited theoretical work in scholarly discussions of Tawada's poetics and textual figures.¹⁸⁵

Although Benjamin's thought is of considerable poetological significance for Tawada's oeuvre in general, Christine Ivanovic warns that Tawada frequently omits elements of Benjamin's work or shifts Benjamin's emphases:

Tawadas Benjamin-Bezugnahmen bleiben dabei bewusst fragmentarisch. Sie rekurriert zudem vorrangig auf wenige ausgewählte Momente von Benjamins Gesamtwerk, während zentrale Aspekte seines Denkens weitgehend unberücksichtigt bleiben. (Ivanović, "Exophonie Und Kulturanalyse. Tawadas Transformationen Benjamins" 177)

[Tawada's references to Benjamin thereby remain consciously fragmentary. She focuses on a few selected moments from the entirety of Benjamin's oeuvre, while central aspects of his thought remain largely unconsidered.]

More to the point, Ivanovic observes that Tawada, like Benjamin, is invested in surface phenomena in the world of things and in the world of language. That is, wary of content and expression, Tawada and Benjamin both propose modes of reading in which readers transform multivalent surfaces of writing into literary text through a process Ivanovic names *Verdichtung* [compaction]. *Verdichtung* refers to multiple possibilities of interpreting surfaces "als Schrift-

¹⁸⁴ Yōko Tawada, "Körper, Stimme, Maske. Korrespondenzen Zwischen dem Theater Heiner Müllers und dem japanischen No-Theater".

¹⁸⁵ See for example Adelson, "Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks: Trans-Latio in Yoko Tawada's *Das Nackte Auge* (2004)"; Anderson; Arens; Ivanović, "Exophonie und Kulturanalyse. Tawadas Transformationen Benjamins"; Matsunaga; Mitsutani; Tanigawa. Not all Tawada scholarship deals exclusively with the essay on translation, however. Ivanovic 2008 explores resonances between Benjamin's reminiscences of his Berlin childhood and Tawada's text "Klang der Geister" (*Talisman*, 1996), and Ivanovic 2010 references the larger arc of Benjamin's thought and aspects of it which Tawada does and does not treat in her own work, with special emphasis on Tawada's dissertation (discussed below). Also, see Brandt, "The Unknown Character: Traces of the Surreal in Yoko Tawada's Writings" and Brandt, "Schnitt durchs Auge: Surrealistische Bilder bei Yoko Tawada, Emine Sevgi Özdamar und Herta Müller" for discussions of Tawada's surrealist aesthetics. Among Brandt's sources in the former essay is Benjamin's essay "Surrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz" (Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia).

oder Zeichenkonstellationen, die nicht etwas ausdrücken, sondern den Blick in sich hineinziehen um der Verdichtung willen” [as constellations of writing or signs that do not express something, but draw in the gaze for the sake of compaction] (Ivanovic 185). While Ivanovic extrapolates here from Tawada’s 1987 short story “Bilderrätsel ohne Bilder” (Picture-puzzles without pictures], the non-expressive, almost hypnotic form of reading she describes is echoed in Eric Downing’s analysis of non-content-based modes of reading in Benjamin, especially in his observations about graphology, that is, “[t]he study of handwriting,” or “[t]he art or science of inferring a person's character, disposition, and aptitudes from the peculiarities of his handwriting.”¹⁸⁶ “In reading, graphology attends to a form of meaning to written words that is ancillary to their semantic content,” Downing holds, adding that Benjamin not only understood graphology as reading sign-things, images, but also divorcing them from the relationship of signifier-signified (Downing 566–567).

In her analysis of affinities between Tawada and Benjamin, Ivanovic carefully points out important ways in which Tawada shifts some emphases of Benjamin’s thought. While neither Downing nor Ivanovic denies Benjamin’s preoccupation with bodies, Ivanovic observes that Tawada’s oeuvre is more centrally preoccupied with bodies than Benjamin’s (Ivanovic 180-186).¹⁸⁷ Lastly, Ivanovic is additionally joined by Hiltrud Arens, Susan Anderson, and Miho Matsunaga in her observation that Tawada’s engagement with Benjamin’s translation essay leaves out central aspects of the latter text. Benjamin suggests that while an original can anticipate its translation at its inception before the historical realization of translation, the original and translation remain distinct from one another. Once a text has been translated once, it cannot be translated further (Benjamin, *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften*. 56). Arens and Anderson observe, however, that Tawada collapses the distinction between an original and translation in claiming that several originals can exist side by side and that a translation can find

¹⁸⁶ "graphology, n.". OED Online. June 2011. Oxford University Press. 28 June 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80845?redirectedFrom=graphology>>.

¹⁸⁷ Downing suggests in footnote 35, “We might say Benjamin sees graphology as a physiognomy of words, physiognomy as a graphology of the body.”

its original instead of vice versa (Yoko Tawada, *Verwandlungen* 3; Anderson 55–56; Arens 61). In an important addition to shifts in emphases enumerated by Ivanovic, Tawada’s reading of the translatability of Celan’s *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* foregrounds the role of reader and receiver. In her choice of first-person narrator, Tawada presents the essay on Celan’s poetry not only as the product of a reading process as such, but as impossible without the eye of the reader.¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, Benjamin’s essay, despite Benjamin’s original intention to publish it as the introduction to his translation of Charles Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*, discusses translation and translatability in the absence of audience. “[K]ein Gedicht gilt dem Leser,” declares Benjamin, “kein Bild dem Beschauer, keine Symphonie der Hörschaft“ [No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience] (Benjamin, *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften*. 50; Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 253).¹⁸⁹ Despite Benjamin’s exclusion of audiences from his translation essay, however, reading and fragmentation are of undeniable importance to his oeuvre. Downing links the work of graphology in Benjamin’s oeuvre with the fragmentation of written surfaces into letters:

[I]t [graphology] seeks to read another, differently present realm of significance by decomposing words into the materiality and activity of their letters, even parts of letters; these are then construed as what Benjamin calls a set of hieroglyphs that, like allegories, function according to a differently ordered logic from that ruling their immediate, ordinary content and meaning. (Downing 566)

Downing’s depiction highlights the significance of individual letters and parts of letters for Benjamin on graphology and further links this mode of reading to allegory, which Benjamin understands in terms of fragmentation and ruin in *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (The Origin of German Tragic Drama).¹⁹⁰ As discussed earlier in the introduction, Benjamin’s

¹⁸⁸ The importance of the role of the reader is important throughout, but perhaps most evident in Tawada’s statement: “einen Zufall gibt es vielleicht in der Literatur, aber nicht in der Lektüre der Literatur” (Yoko Tawada, “Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch” 123). Tawada both distinguishes the work of the reader from that of the text and emphasizes important aspects of Celan’s translatability unforeseen in Celan’s writing process. These aspects are essentially nonexistent in the Japanese translation before a bilingual reader discovers them.

¹⁸⁹ Many thanks to Leslie Adelson for pointing out Tawada’s insistence on the pivotal role of the reader and audience despite and in response to Benjamin’s exclusion of it from his theory of translation and translatability. On Tawada and reading in this regard, see also Adelson, “The Future of Futurity.”

¹⁹⁰ While allegory, its relationship to ruin and fragmentation, its destructive force at work on the symbolic order and bourgeois life are of great importance to Benjamin’s work, this chapter will limit its observation to its link to fragmentation.

insistence on allegory and surface phenomena is linked to his quest to wrest texts and artworks away from totalizing complexes of meaning. As Downing points out, Benjamin seeks another mode of reading, not for “ordinary content and meaning” but for a different kind of significance. That is to say, for Benjamin, the diminished dimension of texts (that is, their fragmentation into smaller elements, particularly letters) require a new mode of reading. In fact, texts demand to be broken down and read in this way. This link between modes of reading not allied to the symbolic and the fragmentation of a text into orthographic symbols and their parts are of great importance for Tawada’s essay and poetics, which do not operate in an allegorical mode but seek to activate modes of reading similar to Benjamin’s. While Tawada scholarship observes this move to fragment texts and activate new modes of reading, no scholar observes that for Tawada, translation is importantly and more radically the transformation of one writing system into another.¹⁹¹ Moreover, Tawada’s response to Benjamin’s essay on translatability hinges not on words as Anderson offers, and not necessarily on individual Sino-Japanese ideograms as Ivanovic suggests. Tawada’s fragmentary moves not only break up texts into their smallest legible elements, but more drastically divide letters and ideograms into smaller units still. For Tawada, reading or translating the physiognomy of a text involves reading and transforming the physiognomy of individual printed characters and of geometrical elements that compose such characters. Letters and ideograms—as well as their yet smaller components—are pivotal for translation in Tawada’s writing project, precisely because they are rarely vehicles of what one might call meaning. Unallied to signification in any ordinary sense, they are less-anchored textual elements free to be perceived as textual form instead of textual content. Tawada allows these forms to transform into one another and thus show –and not say- languages’ performative, visual and bodily dimensions on the one hand, and the dissolution of languages as exclusionary unities on the other.

¹⁹¹ As discussed earlier in this chapter, Anderson identifies letters and syllables among the surface phenomena she deems central for Tawada’s translation practice, Arens links translation, fragmentation and letters in her poetological reflections, and Ivanovic identifies the letter *O* and the Sino-Japanese ideogram 口 (*kuchi*: mouth, opening) as traces of translation and violence on the surface of text in “Saint George and the Translator.”

For Benjamin and Tawada too, translation is no longer merely a matter of rendering one text in a foreign language. Rather, as Samuel Weber points out, translatability for Benjamin must be understood as a “relationship not between *individual works* so much as between *singularly individual languages*,” since “compared to the original work of poetry, translation focuses on the form of language, as distinct from its relation to, subordination under, or unification with a specific content or meaning.” (Weber 69).¹⁹² In writerly affinity with this precept, Tawada seeks to dismantle the idea of languages as distinct units from one another, but she seeks also to dismantle unities *within* those languages. John Kim identifies the creative labor performed by the “cleft” between languages, citing Tawada’s essay on Celan and Benjamin: “Es muß zwischen den Sprachen eine Kluft geben, in die alle Wörter hineinstürzen” [There must be a cleft between languages into which all words collapse] (Yoko Tawada, “Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch” 122).¹⁹³ Kim identifies the cleft as “a trope of linguistic incommensurability,” but not one that circumscribes languages. This cleft “does not articulate the difference between languages, rather it disarticulates them as unities” (Kim, “Writing the Cleft: Tawada Translates Celan” 233). Kim’s observation is specific to Tawada, but has broader implications for an understanding of linguistic unities in general. Naoki Sakai observes that the purported unity of language is nothing but a regulative idea and is not based on empirical fact. An understanding of translation, therefore, needs to take into account not so much something like a “border” between languages across which translation is performed, but rather the strategies that attend “bordering” as process that opposes the givenness of “border.” For Sakai, “translation suggests our contact and encounter with the incomprehensible, unknowable or unfamiliar,” and has to come to terms with discontinuities between essentially uncountable, undemarcated languages (Sakai, “How Do We Count a Language?” 71, 83). Kim’s specific and Sakai’s more general views on translation and discontinuity are reflected in Tawada’s important statement about the movement between borders in Celan’s title *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*: “Es geht nicht darum, eine bestimmte Grenze

¹⁹² Emphases in original.

¹⁹³ Translation by John Namjun Kim.

zu überschreiten, sondern darum, von einer Grenze zu einer anderen zu wandern” [The aim is not to cross a particular border, rather, to wander from one border to another] (Yoko Tawada, “Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch” 128).¹⁹⁴ The space of the gate or the border can never be closed, never be instrumentalized for passage from one region to another. Importantly for Tawada’s oeuvre however, the cleft’s capacity for disarticulation extends not only to languages, but into the unity of words, which remain elemental for Benjamin’s translation essay. Yet words are insufficiently elemental for an understanding of the literal nature of Tawada’s treatment of Benjamin in particular, and for Tawada’s poetics in general.

Typically translated into English as “literalness,” Benjamin’s term *Wörtlichkeit* quite literally means “wordliness,” and is quite central to Benjamin’s reflections on translation. Samuel Weber clarifies this important nuance in translation and explains its significance as a unique term in “relation to language in which syntax—the sequential arrangement of words—takes precedence over the time-and-space transcending rules of grammar and semantics; in which the ways of meaning, their distribution and relations, have priority over what is meant” (Weber 75).¹⁹⁵ For Benjamin, then, *Wörtlichkeit* consists both in a singular attention to individual words and to their sequential arrangement. Tawada engages this term in Benjamin’s translation essay and her reading of the Japanese translation of Celan’s poetry is attuned to the literal, but her reading of Celan via Benjamin sets some important accents that distinguish her approach from Benjamin’s. Namely, Tawada evidences heightened attention to words in isolation (and not in sequence), as well as to smaller units of written language than words. According to Tawada’s

¹⁹⁴ All translations by Gizem Arslan unless otherwise noted or cited. In *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* as well as in her manifesto “Against Between,” Adelson holds that “the trope of ‘betweenness’ often functions literally like a reservation designed to contain, restrain, and impede new knowledge, not enable it.” She calls for critical work, particularly in literary analysis, that heeds the beckoning of sites of enabling, opening, contact and encounter. Adelson gives as an example Tawada’s invocation of “the ‘between’ of Celan’s German-language poetry” and points out that in Tawada’s reading, Celan’s poetry “does not mark a border (*Grenze*) between two distinct worlds but a threshold (*Schwelle*), a site where consciousness of something new flashes into view.” This suggests that the disarticulation of languages is not a destructive but a productive activity, and seeks to cultivate rather than obliterate new capacities of linguistic activity: “For Tawada reading Celan, the word is a site of opening, a threshold that beckons” (Adelson, “Against Between: A Manifesto” 21, 24).

¹⁹⁵ See Weber, 74-78 for a more thorough exposition of Benjamin’s *Wörtlichkeit*, which he translates as “wordliness” or “word-by-word syntax” (74).

essay “Das Tor des Übersetzers, oder Celan liest Japanisch,” the appearance of seven Sino-Japanese ideograms containing the radical for “gate” (門) in the Japanese translation of Celan’s *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* embodies the translatability of Celan’s poetry as a structural possibility irrespective of the historical realization of translation (“Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch” 126).¹⁹⁶ To a degree, metamorphoses of the radical reveal the *Wörtlichkeit* [literality] of translation in the Benjaminian sense of literalness, but they also reveal the unique status of the word for translation. Benjamin’s essay on translation famously accords primacy to single words over the syntactic unity of the sentence.¹⁹⁷ Regarding the status of the semantic unit of the word in translation more generally, Tawada shares Benjamin’s wariness of the putative primacy of the syntactical unity of sentence, content and meaning, as they both focus on smaller units of language as sites that attest to a text’s translatability. While Tawada adapts this idea, she transforms it considerably in several key ways.

First, for Tawada, that which embodies the translatability of Celan’s work is not a word but a single character and radical 門 (read *mon*, meaning “gate”).¹⁹⁸ Second and relatedly, as mentioned above, the reader dismissed in Benjamin’s essay takes center stage in Tawada’s essay. Not only does Tawada present her essay as a process of reading Celan in Japanese translation through Benjamin’s essay, she also presents the translatability of Celan’s poetry as that which becomes visible only in a particular mode of reading. The radical 門 is not always a word in its

¹⁹⁶ A radical is “[a]ny of the set of basic Chinese characters which, sometimes in a modified form, constitute semantically or functionally significant elements in the composition of other characters, and are used as a means of ordering and classifying characters in dictionaries.” “radical, adj. and n.”. OED Online. November 2010. Oxford University Press. 20 January 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157251?rskey=VVzeqz&result=1>>.

¹⁹⁷ Tawada too cites this frequently cited passage from Benjamin: “Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht, sondern läßt die reine Sprache, wie verstärkt durch ihr eigenes Medium, nur um so voller aufs Original fallen. Das vermag vor allem Wörtlichkeit in der Übertragung der Syntax und gerade sie erweist das Wort, nicht den Satz als das Urelement des Übersetzers. Denn der Satz ist die Mauer vor der Sprache des Originals, Wörtlichkeit die Arkade“ [A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade] (Benjamin, *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften*. 59; Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 260). As Christine Ivanovic points out, however, Tawada omits pure language from her analysis despite citing this passage, though Tawada is probably aware of its significance for Benjamin (“Exophonie und Kulturanalyse. Tawadas Transformationen Benjamins” 194).

¹⁹⁸ A radical can also be a character in its own right, but appears most often as an element of a character consisting of two or more radicals, as is the case in the Japanese translation of Celan’s poetry collection (See footnote 44).

own right; neither are its seven metamorphoses in Mitsuo Iiyoshi's Japanese translation of *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*.¹⁹⁹ Still, Tawada contends that all seven ideograms have something to do with gates at the semantic level (the ideogram for "threshold" makes this relationship clearer than some others), but she also explains that this semantic dimension is not always apparent, as in the case in the ideogram 聞 (hear). Radicals can become important for identifying and classifying ideograms (e.g. in dictionaries), and the reader will typically perceive an ideogram as one unit without paying attention to its composition (Yoko Tawada, "Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch" 127). The translatability of Celan's poetry reveals itself for Tawada only in the presence of a reading eye, one that literally analyzes the ideograms, that is, breaks them down into their components.²⁰⁰

Moreover and third, the Sino-Japanese ideograms are placed into such a relationship with German words here that the German words can no longer be read apart from the visual component of the gate that attends them in Japanese translation. It is conceivable that other translations of Celan's poetry would not involve such a high frequency of ideograms containing the radical for "gate." It would thus appear that this reading of the gate into the German text is one lexical possibility among many. However, the radical 門 is also non-coincidental and pivotal for the possibility of any translational reading of Celan's poetry in Tawada's articulation, because it signals the openness that attends all of Celan's work. Tawada writes: "Ich fing an, Celans Gedichte wie Tore zu betrachten und nicht etwa wie Häuser, in denen die Bedeutung wie ein Besitz aufbewahrt wird" [I began to perceive Celan's poems as gates and not as houses in which meaning is preserved like a possession] (134). Here the gate is not an incidental product of Iiyoshi's translation or a figure that Tawada has fashioned independently of her reading as a

¹⁹⁹ These seven metamorphoses are 門 (gate)、聞 (hear)、開 (open)、閃 (flash, glitter)、闕 (threshold)、闇 (darkness)、間 (space, interval). Most of these ideograms can be used alone, as part of a verb, in which case they would not appear alone but be inflected using the Japanese syllabary *Hiragana*, or as part of nouns in which they would appear alongside other ideograms. That is to say that they can sometimes be counted as words in their own right, but this will often not be the case. Therefore, they are both words and parts of words.

²⁰⁰ The etymology of the word "analysis" suggests breaking something into its component parts. "analysis" comes from "post-classical Latin *analysis*," meaning "act of resolving (something) into its elements." In ancient Greek, "□ἀλυσις" is the "action of loosing or releasing, fact of dissolving, resolution of a problem, in Hellenistic Greek also solution of a problem *analuein* to unloose, undo" (Oxford English Dictionary, "'Analysis, N.'").

result of general reflections on translation. Rather, the gate becomes a non-coincidental figure contingent on this particular instance of reading, but one that becomes critical for perceiving Celan's words in any language. Moreover, the radical for "gate" does not mimetically represent Celan's translatability, but rather, as Tawada suggests, "embodies" [*verkörperte*] it. In Tawada's formulation, then, not only do the written signs become forms independent of a relationship of representation, but they additionally acquire bodily dimensions and are placed in relief on the space of the page. This release from a relationship of mimetic representation is compounded by Tawada's emphasis on seeing: Tawada muses that Celan's poems are not so much translatable as that they "peer into the Japanese" ["ins Japanische hineinblicken"]. She thus suggests that in addition to embodying translatability, the metamorphoses of the radical for "gate" are literally sites of opening in the Japanese translation through which one can peer into the German and vice versa (Yoko Tawada, "Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch" 126, 125).

References to seeing and light perceived through the gate abound in Tawada's essay, in which she explains the ideogram for "darkness" as a sound blocking out the light from a gate, while "interval" is conceived in the corresponding ideogram as the sun shining through a gate.

Dissecting the prominent ideogram for "flash," or "glint" (閃), which contains the radicals for "person" (人) and "gate" (門), Tawada muses that the person standing in a gate would be particularly well-positioned to receive light from another world. She extrapolates this position of potentiality to the poem in translation, calling it a "Strahlenempfänger" [a receptacle for rays] "[d]enn es empfängt immer etwas Fremdes und niemals sich selbst" [because it always receives something foreign and never itself] (131).

Thus, the radical for gate fulfills several functions that are pivotal for Tawada's concept of reading, writing and translation in her essay. First, the seven metamorphoses of the radical for "gate" do not represent but embody translatability as visual marks on a page, which attests to Tawada's insistence on the body of the letter and the materiality of text concretized in the act of reading. Second, the radical not only embodies but performs this opening literally as a site of opening on the page through which Celan's poetry in German and Japanese are cast as seeing

one another. It does so as a space unto itself, as mentioned above, disarticulating the unity of the spaces and languages around it. Third, it takes on these functions only in those moments in which it is read and written *as* a distinct element unto itself. This mode of reading is not possible if one conceives the ideograms or Celan's words in their unity and it becomes possible only when ideograms and words break down. Lastly, Tawada's essay does not completely dismiss semantics but is careful not to grant it primacy. After all, all ideograms that contain the radical for "gate" at a semantic level, and Tawada does muse on the meaning of Celan's words and expressions in both languages. However, as evidenced by Tawada's discussion of the ideogram 閃 for "flash" or "glint," the seeing and eye breaks down the ideogram into its component parts and synthesizes a meaning based on the visual components and not vice versa. In addition, it should be noted that Tawada presents her essay not as a finished product of reading, but as a narrative of the history and process of her reading Celan in Japanese translation. This suggests that the figure of the gate requires continual reading in process and draws attention to the production of relations in this process of reading. It is thus not a word or an entire ideogram, but a constitutive part of an ideogram that as material mark performs reading and writing as processes. These processes in turn can be performed in continual repetition, as it is clear that Celan's poetry is not only singly legible, as even a single reader may have multiple and continual interpretations, but also not singly translatable into Japanese, but into any other language. Tawada's essay leaves open the possibility that another reader of another translation of Celan would come up with different connections. She also clearly states that openness is not a product of the singular relationship between Celan's German original and its Japanese translation, but that it is a quality of Celan's poetry itself. If Celan's words are open as gates, they do not open into the Japanese alone.

4. Opium für Ovid *and Metamorphoses of O*

The visual form of a pictogram such as 門 is meant to resemble the object it signifies. Therefore, it can be argued, it can function as visual mark upon a page in ways the letters of the

phonetic Latin alphabet cannot.²⁰¹ The following passage from one of Tawada's works pointedly dedicated to the theme and products of metamorphosis demonstrates, however, that for Tawada a letter of the alphabet too can be multivalent and every bit as capable of transformation.

Each chapter of *Opium für Ovid* features a female character from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* transplanted in her metamorphosed form into what appears to be contemporary Western Europe. Occasionally, one of these characters is acquainted with another titular female figure of another chapter. The chapter entitled "Coronis" takes its name from Coronis of Larissa, a princess of famed beauty, who cheats on her lover Apollo with a youth from Thessaly. A raven reports this treachery to Apollo, who kills Coronis in a fit of jealous rage. Apollo's rage, however, soon turns upon the spying raven. He chars the white raven's feathers, turning its feathers black, the color they have retained to today. Somewhat unusually for the female characters in Ovid and Tawada, this story is not of Coronis's but of the raven's transformation.

Tawada's Coronis is an émigré author from a communist dictatorship. While the dictatorship and its secret police appear to have forced surveillance and persecution into her former life, she is still troubled by birds, whose appearance in front of her window arouse uneasiness at the haunting sense of being observed. Among interwoven and intertextual themes of witnessing, spying and betrayal (and the refusal to betray) in both the original story in Ovid and Tawada's version, Tawada's Coronis develops an eye condition in which a dark spot in her field of vision resembles a dark insect. When she goes to the doctor for an eye examination, the doctor attributes her condition to age and gives her an eye test.

Der Arzt setzt eine Probebrille auf Coronis' Nase und zeigt auf ein Plakat, auf dem
Reihen von Buchstaben zu sehen sind. Sie sehen aus wie konkrete Poesie.
„Was für einen Buchstaben sehen Sie dort?“
Coronis sieht ein O, aber mit einer anderen Brille sieht sie ein Q, mit einer dritten ein G.
„Was sehen Sie nun?“
fragt der Arzt.

²⁰¹ The definition of pictogram is "[a] pictorial symbol or sign, esp. one representing a word or phrase; a record or system of writing consisting of pictorial symbols" and is derived partly from the Greek γράμμα, "something written, letter (of the alphabet)." See "pictograph, n." OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press. 25 May 2011 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/143492> and "-gram, comb. form." OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press. 25 May 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80545>>.

„Ich sehe jedesmal was anderes. Durch häufigen Brillenwechsel Mehrdeutigkeit erleben, soll das der Sinn einer Brille sein?“ (Tawada 83)

[The doctor places test glasses onto Coronis' nose and points to a chart, on which rows of letters can be seen. They look like concrete poetry.

“What kind of letters do you see there?”

Coronis sees an O, but with another set of glasses she sees a Q, with a third, a G.

“What do you see now?”

asks the doctor.

“I see something different every time. Experiencing ambiguity through frequent change of glasses, is that supposed to be the point of wearing glasses?”]

Coronis's experience of ambiguity appears to be that of the transformation of the letters she sees. The letters O, Q and G have sounds associated with them; but they are meaningful in this scene only as discrete objects of vision. Coronis's overall impression of the chart is one of poetry, that is, not a series of randomly selected letters but letters composing text of some kind. However, Coronis observes a particular resemblance to concrete poetry, in which the visual form is just as important as the meaning of the words in it.²⁰² Already here Coronis' reading eye begins to take leave of the sounds for which the letters stand in favor of their visual form. Coronis never actually pronounces or otherwise identifies any of the letters she sees, despite the doctor's urging. It is unclear whether she acknowledges that her reading eye might be supplying no less than an extra mark to the letters G and Q on the chart, which resemble the letter O and which one can approximate by adding a line to the letter O. Her reading is already a form of writing to the extent that her eyes supply the very material of writing, a kind of ink in the shape of a dark spot in the eye, to the text before her. This small insect resembles Coronis's namesake in Ancient Greek grammar, the term “corōnis,” meaning “[a] sign resembling an apostrophe (’), placed over a vowel as a mark of contraction or crasis.”²⁰³ The word “corōnis” itself simply nothing other than a typo-pictographic presentation of a hook, as “κορωνίς” means “hook” in

²⁰² It is striking that Coronis refuses to read the letters on the chart as isolated letters, her first gaze at least choosing to see them as poetry. She immediately highlights a tension between the totality of a text, the individual letters in it, and the potentially conflicting modes of reading they invite.

²⁰³ “coronis, n.”. OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press. 5 June 2011
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/41803?redirectedFrom=coronis>>.

Ancient Greek (Smyth §62).²⁰⁴ If Coronis is named after this sign, then the coronis writ small is not only likened to the body of a small insect but also becomes a part of Coronis's body (since a defect resembling a coronis is housed in her eye). The metonymic link to Coronis (as the name attached to the person Coronis) calls upon us to read Coronis as a small black spot signaling the omission of a letter and its sound (as is the function of the grammatical term, reflected in Tawada's Coronis's refusal to pronounce the letters on the chart). The myth of Coronis in Ovid is not the story of Coronis's metamorphosis but the raven's, but in Tawada's version Coronis's visual defect renders her a creator and reader of metamorphoses. Coronis' eye defect resembles a *déformation professionnelle*, both a physical deformation of her eye from age and use, and the author's irrepressible physical urge to write and rewrite even in the absence of pen and paper.²⁰⁵ Most important, however, Coronis interprets the metamorphoses of the letters O, Q and G not as errors in her physiological faculty of vision or as identifiable written shapes. Rather, the reappearance of letters in different forms constitutes an experience of "Mehrdeutigkeit" [ambiguity], the literal rendering of which in English would be "multivalence" or "multiplicity of meaning and interpretation." For Coronis, each letter that she does not pronounce but reads, rereads and misreads, indicates [*deuten*] or illustrates [*deuten*] something.

Coronis's experience of multivalence in the metamorphoses of the letters in the Latin alphabet foregrounds the visual form of the letters and reveals some of the ways in which letters and parts of letters become integral to Tawada's poetics. First of all, these letters can be transformed into other members of a set, much in the way bodies are transformed into other bodies in Ovid's original *Metamorphoses*.²⁰⁶ Second, the grounds upon which these letters can

²⁰⁴ The full entry in Herbert Weir Smyth's standard grammar for Ancient Greek reads "Crisis (κρῖσις mingling) is the contraction of a vowel or diphthong at the end of a word with a vowel or diphthong beginning the following word. Over the syllable resulting from contraction is placed a ' called coronis (κορωνίς hook)" (Smyth §62).

²⁰⁵ *Déformation professionnelle* is a French term that can be translated literally as "deformation due to profession," but which designates the habits or obsessions one acquires as a result of one's profession. The doctor states clearly that the cause of Coronis's condition is age, while the narrator supplies the important information that Coronis experiences the most intense pleasure and arousal as she writes (86). Coronis's insistence on reading the chart of letters as poetry can also be understood as another effect of this *déformation professionnelle*.

²⁰⁶ In her second Tübingen poetics lecture, dedicated to the problem of translation, Tawada observes "Dagegen ist jeder Buchstabe des Alphabets ein Rätsel. (...) Er ist weder ein Abbild noch ein Piktogramm. (...) Die Buchstaben des Alphabets sind unfafßbare Phantasietiere. Weil sie als Einzelwesen von jeder Bedeutung frei sind, sind sie

be transformed into one another is not aural but visual. The sounds associated with the letters O, G and Q are not similar in the least, in part because O is a vowel and G and Q are consonants. Lastly, Coronis' experience of the different forms of these letters with different meanings is a moment in which the letters become not only intermedial elements (aural, oral and visual) but are also associated with different semantic possibilities.

Coronis's case does not display the full spectrum of Tawada's strategies of fracturing not only words but the visual forms of letters, or severing the link between their written and spoken forms in a language. Presenting the letter chart as text, only to withdraw the pronunciation of letters from the protocol of an eye test, Tawada presents individual orthographic symbols as metamorphoses of one another, and potentially as vehicles of meaning. Although this meaning is not pronounced in the chapter entitled "Coronis," it is inscribed in the letters as possibility. As the following discussions of notational iconicity [*Schriftbildlichkeit*] and exophony will suggest, however, letters and bodies have further potential for Tawada. This potential is more thoroughly exploited in Tawada's multilingual text *Schwager in Bordeaux*.

unberechenbar. Allein durch Kombinationen entstehen Wörter. Während man ein Ideogramm nicht auseinandernehmen kann, kann man jedes alphabetisch geschriebene Wort sofort zerteilen und neu zusammensetzen. Allein durch diese oberflächliche, technische Operation kann man den Sinn des ganzen Satzes zerstören. Wenn man die Buchstaben anders aneinanderreihet, entsteht ein ganz anderer Sinn. Der Kunst des Anagramms liegt die Magie des Alphabets zugrunde.“ [On the other hand, every letter of the alphabet is an enigma. (...) It is neither a copy nor a pictogram. (...) The letters of the alphabet are unfathomable magical creatures. Since they are free from any meaning in their singular being, they are unpredictable. Words come into existence by combinations alone. Whereas an ideogram cannot be disassembled, every alphabetically written word can be taken apart and pieced back together. Even with this superficial, technical operation, one can destroy the meaning of an entire sentence. When letters are strung together differently, a completely different meaning arises. Underlying the art of the anagram is the magic of the alphabet.] (Yoko Tawada, *Verwandlungen* 30). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* begins with the invocation: "My soul would sing of metamorphoses./ But since, o gods, you were the source of these/ bodies becoming other bodies, breathe/ your breath into my book of changes" (Ovid 3). Since Ovid so clearly states that the transformations of which he tells are between bodies, a reading of the metamorphosis of the letter in relation to Ovid's work suggests an analogy between letters and bodies. Tawada's essayistic writing supports this link. In her Tübingen poetics lecture cited above, and in her 2009 Cornell Lecture on Contemporary Aesthetics entitled "The Letter as Literature's Political and Poetic Body" (discussed further below) Tawada often speaks of letters as bodies, not only foregrounding their physical presence as marks on the page, but also speaking of them as "bodies," "animals," also speaking of them as bones after the reader has consumed the text (Yōko Tawada, "The Letter as Literature's Political and Poetic Body").

5. Notational Iconicity and Exophony

The field of research known as notational iconicity [*Schriftbildlichkeit*] posits that a text, even one written in a phonetic alphabet, can be more than the transcription of sound and serve more purposes than that of communication.²⁰⁷ Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp name several objectives in their introductory manifesto to the volume *Bild, Schrift, Zahl* [Image, Writing, Number] (2003), which is dedicated to new scholarship aiming to reconfigure the relationship between text, image, notation and calculation. One of these objectives is to dismantle the hierarchy of writing and image, against what Krämer and Bredekamp term “the misrecognition of the epistemic force of image” [“[d]ie Verkennung der epistemischen Kraft der Bildlichkeit”], while also reconceiving the relationship between oral and written language by exploring those elements of written language that evidence sound-neutral graphism [*lautneutraler Graphismus*] (Krämer and Bredekamp, “Einleitung” 12).²⁰⁸ Focusing on practices, rites and *technē* in general and on the visual, performative and operational (e.g. mathematic languages and sign systems) capacities of written language in particular, scholarship on notational iconicity investigates these capacities in order to afford equal status to those that are related to sound and communication.²⁰⁹ In an essay dedicated to the concept of notational iconicity, Sibylle Krämer opposes the “Schemata von Sprache *oder* Bild, Symbol *oder* Technik“ [schemata of language *or* image, symbol *or* *technē*], arguing instead that writing is inherently intermedial and hybrid.²¹⁰ She elects to focus on the performative aspects of writing (texts that enact what they say) as well as on those capacities of writing which spoken language cannot capture: footnotes, italics, super- and subscripts, and so on (Krämer, “‘Schriftbildlichkeit’: Oder über eine (fast) vergessene Dimension der Schrift” 160–161, 174). Aside from her work on

²⁰⁷ As its German name suggests, this concept of writing [*Schrift*] lays particular emphasis on its status as image [*Bild*], largely in response to phonocentric views of language transcription (notably as exemplified by Ferdinand de Saussure) and general tendencies related to the “linguistic turn” in the humanities.

²⁰⁸ In this introduction, Krämer and Bredekamp argue vehemently against the semiological-structuralist conception of culture as text, calling rather for an enriched definition of culture and text as an amalgam of rituals, practices, and techniques (*technē*) (Krämer and Bredekamp, “Einleitung” 11–13).

²⁰⁹ From the Greek *technē* for “art” or “craft,” *technē* is a concept that emphasizes practices and rites, generally opposed to or distinct from the domain of knowledge and understanding expressed by *episteme*.

²¹⁰ Emphases in original.

operative writing (writing used in the formal languages of mathematics and computer science in particular), Krämer does not touch explicitly on the notational iconicity of letters. However, she credits Jacques Derrida for deconstructing the alleged primacy of speech over writing. Yet Krämer moves to foreground the visual in writing against Derrida's association of writing with the discursive. For Krämer, the distinction between the phonetic and the ideographic functions in two ways: First, she asserts that the elements of spoken language in no way resemble purported corresponding elements of written language. According to Krämer, the relationship between written and spoken language is *intermedial*, between the media of phonemes and graphemes, and not *intramedial*, that is, not a product of internal transfer between written and spoken forms of language. Second, for Krämer, the impossibility of determining the identity of elements of written language on the basis of their physiognomy is pivotal for her argument for notational iconicity as a differential system. That is to say, scholarship in notational iconicity pivots around differentiating between its elements rather than the identification of types, but with heightened attention to their visuality (Krämer, "'Schriftbildlichkeit': Oder über eine (fast) vergessene Dimension der Schrift" 158–159, 162–164).

Although the import of letters as visual symbols and elements of notation for Krämer is undeniable, it is Friedrich Kittler who focuses exclusively on typographic symbols (letters in particular) in his new history of media. Although Kittler does not focus on the visual form of individual typographic symbols, he seeks to “unfold the essential unity of writing, number, image and tone” and he does so by investigating the differentiation and re-integration of letters, numbers, numerals and tones in different writing systems (Kittler, “Number and Numeral” 51–52). According to Kittler, letters were once used to record language, mathematics (letters corresponded to numbers) and music (letters designated tone).²¹¹ This intermediality of letters Wolf Kittler's analysis suggests, is supported by their provenance. In his refutation of Jacques Derrida's critique of logocentrism, Wolf Kittler points out that in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Thoth, the

²¹¹ For a more thorough discussion of operative writing as a tool for cognition and the developments in mathematical calculations allowed by algebraic symbols, see Krämer, “Operative Schriften als Geistestechnik. Zur Vorgeschichte der Informatik.”

Egyptian god of the moon, reckoning, learning, and writing, is the inventor not only of letters but also of numbers, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, as well as board and dice games (W. Kittler, “Aphrodite Gegen Ammon-Ra: Buchstaben Im Garten des Adonis, Nicht in Derridas Apotheke” 207–208).²¹² As discussed earlier in the introduction, Friedrich Kittler’s claim that media studies “only make sense when media make senses,” adds importantly, “it is not the meaning of signs to make any sense, they are there to sharpen our senses rather than ensnare them in definitions” (Kittler, “Number and Numeral” 52, 56–57). This intermedial view of writing and letters highlights the multivalence of written elements beyond sound transcription and beyond the semantic. It also shows that Tawada’s literary strategies of fragmentation and her heightened attention to the multivalence of written signs does not so much add new capacities to writing but highlight the existing intermediality of writing.

As Krämer argues for the hybridity of writing and the iconicity of writing in natural and formal languages, the concept of notational iconicity is heavily invested in the visuality of writing. Yet, even though Friedrich Kittler argues for renewed attention to the multiple and intermedial capacities of letters, neither Kittler nor Krämer addresses multilingual texts in particular, choosing to focus rather on the intermediality of writing as a universal phenomenon. By contrast, albeit in theoretical and textual analyses that do not engage writing systems as such, Christine Ivanovic elaborates upon concepts of exophony and echophony, which address the auditory capacities of writing as well as the politics of multilingual writing in more specific

²¹² Wolf Kittler’s essay is a response to Jacques Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism, that is, the primacy of the spoken word over written language. Both Derrida’s critique and Kittler’s response pivot on the status of the phonetic alphabet, particularly the Greek (on account of its inclusion of vowels in the writing system), since Derrida reads the phonetic alphabet in Plato as an imitation of sound. In *Writing and Difference* (1978) in particular, Derrida argues that a perfect imitation no longer imitates, since its essence is its non-essence. Through close readings of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Cratylus* in particular, and of Derrida’s reading of *Phaedrus* in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Wolf Kittler argues that for Plato (and Socrates), writing, not the voice (spoken language) is essential to language (195). By extension, Wolf Kittler holds that theories that regard Greek writing as *aide mémoire*, mnemonic device, duplicate or *hypomnemata* miss an important nuance in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Cratylus* (196): “Sokrates suspendiert also nicht die Stimme, wie Derrida behauptet, erst in dem Moment, wo er sich den differenziellen Elementen der Sprache zuwendet, er denkt sie vielmehr immer schon im Zeichen der Schrift –und zwar der griechischen“ [Thus Socrates does not suspend the voice, as Derrida claims, only when he turns his attention to the differential elements of language. Rather, he always already conceives it under the sign of writing, and Greek writing in particular.] (W. Kittler, “Aphrodite Gegen Ammon-Ra: Buchstaben Im Garten Des Adonis, Nicht in Derridas Apotheke” 194–197).

contexts. First expounded by Tawada but with a longer history in geography and multilingual writing, these concepts are arguably related to the insights articulated by Kittler and Krämer. Ivanovic links experiences of the mother tongue and memory to sound phenomena in new multilingual literatures in general and Tawada's oeuvre in particular.

According to Ivanovic, exophony is originally a term from toponymy, used to categorize foreign words for geographic locations, such as "Munich" for the city "München."²¹³ Later, the term entered literary discourse as an alternative to the terms "Anglophone" or "Francophone," which suggested linguistic and geographic coordinates that were too narrow for adequately designating authors who wrote in English and French but who hailed from former colonies (mostly in Africa). In its current and more general use in literary studies, Ivanovic defines exophony as a strategy whereby authors with multilingual sensibilities seek to orient their writing independently of cultural and political spaces with which particular languages are typically linked (Ivanović, "Exophonie und Kulturanalyse. Tawadas Transformationen Benjamins" 171). Exophony in this definition implies experiences of the polyphonic character of every language and dispenses with the concept of national literatures or writing pivoting on a single language (e.g. Anglophone, Francophone). This does not imply that exophonic texts are necessarily written in more than one language, but rather that they evidence authors' attempts to transcend "belonging to particular cultural spaces and their languages of articulation" ["Zugehörigkeit zu bestimmten kulturellen Räumen, in deren Sprachen sie sich artikulieren"]. (Ivanovic, "Exophonie, Echophonie: Resonanzkörper und polyphone Räume Bei Yoko Tawada" 223). The Tawada scholar Keijirō Suga refers to exophony as translational poetics, albeit one not specific to translation but to all literary language: "a basic condition of an innovative literary language that is always trying to implode and break its own vessel from within" (Suga 27). Exophony implies not only the polyphonic character of every language but also of any speaking subject in that language. Ivanovic points out that this understanding of self upsets the notions of

²¹³ Toponymy is "[t]he place-names of a country or district as a subject of study." (Oxford English Dictionary, "Toponymy, N.")

what is internal and external, or what lies in the past, present and future, concepts that are of pivotal poetological significance for Tawada's oeuvre (Ivanovic, "Exophonie, Echophonie: Resonanzkörper und polyphone Räume bei Yoko Tawada" 223–225). The question of the internal versus external in particular recalls Sakai's and Kim's reflections on borders and bordering, and is in fact closely related to problems of translation in Tawada. Referring to Tawada's own essay on exophony, Ivanovic observes that for Tawada, linguistic and bodily movement correspond to one another. Therefore, exophonic writing not only upsets the inside and outside of the speaking self and the physical body, but correspondingly of any purported linguistic unity.²¹⁴ As will be shown in Tawada's novel *Schwager in Bordeaux*, Tawada's translational strategies in this text disarticulate linguistic unities in part by employing physical bodies as such and letters as physical bodies alike.

6. *Written Fragmentations in Schwager in Bordeaux*

The original German version of *Schwager in Bordeaux* consists largely of German text printed in black ink. However, Sino-Japanese ideograms (*kanji*) fragment the German prose, in the form both of rubrics printed in blue ink and full-page multicolor illuminations (as in medieval manuscripts). These colorful ideograms sometimes appear singly, sometimes in pairs, sometimes one ideogram appears several times, and sometimes with parts printed at odd angles.²¹⁵ Thus alluding to visual aids in early book culture, presenting playful scenes of

²¹⁴ Tawada's essay is only available in Japanese and I am therefore unable to discuss it in this chapter. Ivanovic writes: "Indem körperliche und sprachliche Bewegung einander korrespondieren, kann des weiteren nicht nur Sprache als Raum gedacht, sondern über die Sprache und das Sprechen auch der Körper als Raum thematisiert werden. 'Reisen außerhalb der Muttersprache' –*bogo no soto e deru tabi*– ruft nämlich andererseits die in Tawadas Texten gerade in Bezug auf den leiblichen Körper immer wieder auftauchende Umkehr des Verhältnisses von Innen und Außen auf, was für die Autorin ebenfalls von existentieller und von poetologischer Bedeutsamkeit ist." [As bodily and linguistic movement correspond to one another, language can furthermore not only be regarded as space, but rather the body can be thematized as space above language and speaking. Then again, 'Traveling outside the mother tongue' –*bogo no soto e deru tabi*– invokes the ever recurring reversal of the relationship between inside and outside in relation to the physical body, which is of equal existential and poetological significance for the author.] (Ivanovic, "Exophonie, Echophonie: Resonanzkörper und polyphone Räume bei Yoko Tawada" 225).

²¹⁵ There is a Japanese version of *Schwager in Bordeaux*. In this version, the German text is translated into Japanese, and the single ideograms printed in blue in the German version are flipped into mirror images. The author states that she wanted a foreign body [*Fremdkörper*] in her German text, and that the flipped Japanese ideograms appear uncanny to eyes accustomed to reading Japanese (Yoko Tawada, Compact Seminar "Der performative Körper der poetischen Sprache" [The performative body of poetic language], Cornell University, Spring 2009, personal

interlingual incomprehension, and demonstrating the further divisibility of Sino-Japanese and Latin orthographic symbols into fragments, Tawada's text calls for sustained attention to elements of writing not commonly considered to be vehicles of meaning.

The printed ideograms, in their radicals or as a whole, often have a semantic connection with parts or most of the section of following German text. In several instances that will be discussed below, however, the resonances are multiple, with some semantic, some visual, some aural, and some a combination of these. For the most part, the text relies on the German alphabet and Sino-Japanese ideograms. However, it also features some French and Romanizations of Japanese words and sentences.

The narrative tells of Yuna, a Japanese woman living and working in Hamburg, her co-workers, friends and acquaintances, and her travel to Bordeaux to write an unidentified text in a house belonging to the brother-in-law of her friend Renée.²¹⁶ The existence of German and Japanese writing and Yuna's various displacements (from Japan to Hamburg, from Hamburg to Bordeaux) are accompanied by the coexistence of languages in the novel even beyond the German and Japanese that Yuna speaks (e.g. French, Chinese, Bulgarian, Finnish, English, Portuguese). Bi- or multilingual cities and countries figure here (e.g. Brussels, Belgium, Canada), as do moments of real or imagined contact between different languages.²¹⁷ Events in the German text continually frustrate and subvert protocols of reading and speaking that hinge on the communication of comprehensible content by continually presenting the reader with moments of incomprehensibility, miscommunication and unexpected modes of

communication). Thus, the Japanese translation does not incorporate more than one writing system, but seeks rather to disconcert through the uncanny presentation of the familiar.

²¹⁶ As mentioned before, Tawada's main characters are often only loosely sketched as Japanese, and the cities in the texts are usually not explicitly defined as German. *Schwager in Bordeaux* is unique in identifying Yuna as Japanese, including a dialogue in Japanese, however brief, between Yuna and a young man (145-146), and for clearly labeling the two major scenes of action as Hamburg and Bordeaux.

²¹⁷ In one scene, for instance, Yuna notices her first favorite manga, *Blackjack*, in the display window of a comic-book shop. Noticing the reflection of a young man from Bordeaux ("das Spiegelbild des einheimischen Jungen") looking at the same book, Yuna uses a sentence from her French phrasebook to say that it is an interesting book. The young man, after a long pause, replies in Japanese that he likes it too, and that he has already read all of it (145-146).

communication.²¹⁸ The co-presence of two writing systems (individual Sino-Japanese ideograms followed by short scenes in German), on the other hand, amplifies the question of comprehension and communication by continually presenting the reader with unaccustomed written signs: The ideograms appearing alone are puzzling to Japanese and non-Japanese readers alike. While a non-Japanese speaker might not be able to read them at all, a Japanese speaker too would be unaccustomed to reading ideograms in isolation, since that is often not the way in which ideograms appear in Japanese. Ideograms have meanings and allow for semantic associations, but a single ideogram is often not a word by itself. Thus, the isolated *kanji* gesture towards the gamut of their usage but their semantic meaning is rendered diffuse because their meaning would typically be derived from the context in which they appear. That said, the printed ideograms, in their radicals or as a whole, often have a semantic connection with the German text that follows. More often, the resonances are multiple, a combination of semantic, visual, and aural. However, not all of these multiple resonances might be available to a reader at one time.

As discussed earlier, problems of illegibility are frequently addressed in Tawada scholarship. Writing about the narrator of Tawada's *Das Fremde aus der Dose* (1992) inability to read a foreign city like a text, Susan Anderson foregrounds the narrator's persistent naïveté and her role as "translating outsider" (in a privileged position because not subject to assimilation). Anderson therefore astutely observes that the narrator is not at a disadvantage because "the depth of meaning" eludes her. She holds instead that the narrator's quest for meaning is productive not because it yields meaning, but because it propagates the acts of translation and reading in and of themselves (Anderson 63). While the primacy Anderson accords to translation and reading as productive activities holds for Tawada's literary practice, this presumption of a quest for meaning (even if it is thwarted and yields unexpected and creative results) fails to explain some of Tawada's very striking narrative and linguistic moves here and elsewhere. In the long work of fiction *Das nackte Auge* (*The Naked Eye*—2004), for instance, the

²¹⁸ In one scene, for instance, Yuna miscommunicates with Maurice, the brother-in-law of a friend, because she gets bad reception on her cell phone and because he speaks German with her, a language she understands but does not expect to hear from Maurice (8).

narrator conspicuously lacks curiosity when it comes to understanding and learning foreign languages spoken all around her. In Tawada's essay "An der Spree" from *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte* (Language police and play polyglots—2007), the narrator proves incapable of orienting herself in Berlin despite a plethora of street signs, train stations and clearly identifiable public transportation. *Schwager in Bordeaux* offers perhaps the most striking cases in which reading is not a search for content alone but as heightened attentiveness to writing systems in minute detail.

How are the ideograms and German text to be read, if the reading necessarily oscillates between incomplete typography and fragmented sense? Yoko Tawada suggests an answer to this problem of reading in her Cornell Lecture on Contemporary Aesthetics entitled "The Letter as Literature's Political and Poetic Body" (2009). In this lecture, different translation practices evident in the 1927 and 2006 Japanese translations of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* initiate a series of reflections on readers' changing organs of vision. Tawada additionally reflects on the ways in which readers relate to the capacities of different writing systems (the Japanese writing systems *kanji*, *hiragana* and *katakana*, the Latin alphabet, and the Cyrillic alphabet) to represent and present images, sound and meaning. In the third millennium C.E., Tawada observes, what she calls "manga-eyes" perceive the text in smaller, picture-like units. She muses that this must have prompted the editor of the 2006 translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* to include an unusual number of paragraph breaks for eyes accustomed to grasping at once one manga panel or the amount of text that will fit in the screen of a cell phone. For Tawada, manga-eyes perceive a text as much as image as text, an intermedial property that manga pictures share with Sino-Japanese ideograms: "I sometimes have the feeling that a manga picture can be read like an ideogram. Perhaps this is why it isn't considered particularly desirable to print mangas in color. The pictures have to be printed in black and white so the eye can automatically read them as script" (Yōko Tawada, "The Letter as Literature's Political and Poetic Body"). Tawada suggests that a manga picture can be read like an ideogram, that is, as visual script. I suggest that by doing so, she opens up the possibility for the reverse: for an

ideogram to be read like a manga picture, that is, as scriptural image. Moreover, each ideogram could then be read as a single frame in a story told in a sequence of frames, composing an account told not in pictures and words, but in ideograms, including picto-grams (from the Latin *pictura* for picture and the Greek *gramma*, for writing).

Yuna's explanation for keeping a notebook of ideograms (not continuous Japanese text but randomly scribbled single ideograms) supports the possibility that every ideogram and every section of German text could be read like a brief manga panel. When asked why she keeps jotting down ideograms into her notebook, Yuna replies:

Ich will alles notieren, was mir passiert. Aber es passiert so viel und auch noch vieles gleichzeitig. Deshalb schreibe ich keinen Satz, sondern nur ein Ideogramm für jede Geschichte. Aus jedem Zeichen würde eine lange Geschichte entstehen, wenn ich es später auseinanderfummeln würde. (Yoko Tawada, *Schwager in Bordeaux* 72)²¹⁹

[I want to note down everything that happens to me. But so much happens, and much of it simultaneously. So I don't write a sentence, but just an ideogram for every story. If I were to jumble it apart later, a long story would emerge from every character.]

If Yuna is storing her experiences into the compact form of ideograms for future unpacking, then her activity of writing can be described not only as a kind of note-taking or diary-keeping, but something between note-taking and drawing. After all, some of these ideograms are pictograms. Yuna's coworker Nancy puts her finger on this possibility by speaking of "the characters you're always painting," thus highlighting both the art and skill of painting and the practice of writing, perhaps also recalling the Japanese obsession with good penmanship (Yoko Tawada, *Schwager in Bordeaux* 74). The possibility of recording events in ideograms would suggest that Yuna is storing the language she would have spoken onto a page as storage medium. This pertains to a widespread concept of writing as medium that preserves

²¹⁹ The ideogram that precedes this passage is 記. It is composed of two radicals, and is therefore a single yet composite sign. 言 refers to speech and language, while 己 means "self, oneself," "personal, private" or "sixth in rank." However, 己 originally meant "to unravel," a meaning now assigned to another ideogram. Thus, the ideogram 記 means "account; history; chronicle; annals; record" or "to write down; to note" or "to remember," which have clear semantic connections to the German text.

utterances for future addressees and memories for the author: writing as storage medium or *aide mémoire*.²²⁰ However, Yuna's notebook does not and cannot preserve all details of a moment or event. Rather, it appears to be shorthand for a moment or a sequence of moments in time, a shorthand so compact that it fits these moments into a single ideogram. The text is both elusive and suggestive in its treatment of the legibility of these ideograms, in that it provides multiple possibilities for their comprehension. Some friends who see her write the ideograms nod although they do not comprehend, others ask persistent questions. Ultimately, however, both Yuna and her friends face the certainty or possibility of incomprehension. Yuna is the author who supposedly understands her ideograms, but it is unclear whether they will be legible to her in a later moment of unpacking, since she may have forgotten the details of the event that prompted the writing of the ideogram, or the event altogether. If the ideograms are compacted mnemonic devices for events from Yuna's life, they may never be expanded in full. In response to Nancy's questions about her notebook, Yuna explains to Nancy only her reasons for writing the ideograms. Neither the text nor Yuna ever give explicit definitions of the ideograms, although the corresponding word—or one of the ideograms in it—often appears in the German section that follows. Moreover, Yuna does not claim that every ideogram has a semantic connection with the events she jots down. Yuna's ideograms are not arbitrary, but they do not necessarily have close semantic connections with the entirety of text that might be the ideogram's unpacking. Nancy also suggests that these ideograms might not even necessarily be linguistic. She says outright that she cannot read the ideograms, while speaking of them as things that Yuna paints rather than writes. She likens them further to barcode, legible only to a machine (74). These ideograms might not belong to the realm of language after all, not even of communication. The novel does not suggest one referent (a thing, person or event) for an ideogram or bypass the problem of reference and semantic content altogether. What does it then

²²⁰ In his exposition on Plato and the status of writing and the Greek alphabet for him, Wolf Kittler argues against this prevalent concept of writing as *aide mémoire*, mnemonic device, or *hypomnema* (a Greek term meaning “note,” “public record,” “commentary,” “draft”) expounded by scholars such as Luc Brisson, Gerard Naddaf, Barry Powell, and William Chase Greene.

mean to write an ideogram for every story or event from daily life? What kind of reading does this snippet invite and what kind of reading possibilities does it offer, if it appears thus to bypass the semantic meaning of the ideogram?

Schwager in Bordeaux provides multiple lexical possibilities, including incomprehension, for its readers. It does so not only in the reaction of its characters to Yuna's ideograms, which themselves often skirt the question of what the ideograms mean. However, both the German text and the ideograms become newly legible if one pays attention to the various strategies by which they are fragmented. Nancy's comparison between a barcode and a Sino-Japanese ideogram is of crucial importance here, since many ideograms and all barcodes can be broken down into smaller elements. Ideograms, as mentioned above, can incorporate various radicals, which can stand alone as ideograms and suggest a general semantic field, though their definitions might not have direct connections with the meaning of the ideogram.²²¹ A barcode likewise consists of a series of white and black lines, the white lines designating the value 0 (zero) and the black lines 1 (one), which form lines of binary code. The bars represent the binary digits 0 and 1 in particular sequences, which in turn represent numbers from 0 to 9 and are meant to be processed by a digital computer.²²² The unique sequences of numbers indicated by a barcode can then be indexed to a particular item on sale at a store or a patient in a hospital. By suggesting links between ideograms and barcode, *Schwager in Bordeaux* criticizes mechanical and conventional (and not natural) links between written signs and their meaning on the one hand, and readerly desire for comprehension on the other.

Instead of feeding readerly desires for comprehension, then, *Schwager in Bordeaux* literally nourishes readerly practices of a different kind: attention to fragmentation and surface phenomena. It does so by foregrounding features of words and ideograms that have little to do

²²¹ As an example, a radical designating flora appears in the words for "grass," "flower," "leaf." However, it will also appear in the ideogram for "young." For a detailed exposition of this radical, called *kusa kanmuri* (crown of grass) and its recurrence in the Japanese translation of Paul Celan's *Die Niemandrose* (1963), see Yōko Tawada, "Die Krone aus Gras."

²²² "bar code." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 09 Jun. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/52455/bar-code>>.

with their meaning but much to do with textual surfaces and their role in mathematical operations. In one scene, for instance, Yuna refuses to read a menu in a language she can understand, insists on ordering from the menu in French (a language she does not understand), and focuses on the length of menu items instead of their meaning. It might appear unlikely that one of the tritest features of a word, its length, should be of any significance to a work of literature. However, associations between letters, numbers and things hinge on this simple arithmetic reading of the kind Yuna performs at a restaurant in Bordeaux:

Sie wollte lieber aus der einheimischen Karte etwas Unbekanntes bestellen als aus der Ausländerkarte etwas Verständliches. (...) Yuna wählte einen bestimmten Salat, weil er den längsten Namen trug. Wenn der Name lang ist, gibt es mehr Zutaten und somit auch auf Dauer eine längere Überlebenschance für die Konsumentin. (Yoko Tawada, *Schwager in Bordeaux* 83–84)

[She wanted to order something unfamiliar from the local menu rather than something understandable from the foreign one. (...) Yuna chose a particular salad, because it had the longest name. If the name is long, there are more ingredients and, in the long run, a greater possibility of survival for the consumer.]

That something as incidental as the length of a word would correspond to the size of the word's referent is absurd. However, a menu is a very particular kind of text that is implicated in claims to reliable enumeration and reference, as well as the promise of consumption. It is an inventory of food that claims more or less to correspond exactly to the dishes available in a restaurant for consumption, calling upon its reader as consumer to participate in selection.²²³ Yuna participates in this game quite differently, by positing a correspondence between a word's physical property (length), the physical properties of its referent (number of ingredients and presumably portion size) and that of its consumer's life (long). Tawada's humorous exposition of this impossibility serves—somewhat literally—to whet the reader's appetite for the incomprehensible. Instead of encountering incomprehensibility as the impossibility of gleaning meaning, Tawada offers the possibilities of other modes of reading that emerge precisely from a moment of incomprehensibility.

²²³ As such, the menu is there for a reading particularly cognizant of itself as selection, as the etymology of the words *lesen* and the Greek *λόγος* suggest.

This mode of approaching a text becomes particularly important when Tawada introduces the body of the letter to be read and consumed in its incomprehensibility. In fact, the moment of incomprehensibility is precisely what sets in motion readerly attention to translated likenesses of written signs that may involve the semantic but are never reducible to it. In this scene, Yuna decides to go swimming. At the pool, she locks all her belongings except a dictionary into a locker, which can be locked and unlocked by punching in a code of one's choosing. As she is swimming, she sees a strange woman approach her dictionary and begin to read it. The woman then simply takes the dictionary with her, prompting Yuna to pursue her in order to recover the book.

乙

Der frisch gewischte Flur war leer, die Diebin war spurlos verschwunden. Zoe, rief Yuna. Die Diebin muss Zoe heißen oder zumindest müsste ihr Name mit einem Z beginnen. Der letzte Buchstabe des Alphabets war noch frei. Aber was nützt ihr ein freier Buchstabe, wenn er ihr wegläuft? (Yoko Tawada, *Schwager in Bordeaux* 196)²²⁴

[乙

The freshly mopped hall was empty, the thief had disappeared without a trace. Zoe, called Yuna. The thief must be called Zoe or at least her name must begin with a Z. The last letter of the alphabet was still free. But what's the use of a free letter when it runs away from her?]

This section of the text, as well as others like it, cannot be read without attention to the multivalence of the ideogram for “second in order,” “double” in resonance with the letter Z of the Latin alphabet and with the Arabic numeral 2, which are presented in continual transformation into one another. In addition, letter forms stand in metonymic association with bodies and people (as any given name does with any person who carries it). The character 乙 means “two,” “second in order,” or “double” in Japanese, and its visual resemblance to the number 2 and the letter Z hardly needs exposition. Although Zoe may or may not be the name of the thief, the letter Z is metonymically linked to the body of the thief. Something similar could be said of the number 2: the thief is an uncanny double, strange and familiar alike. One of the

²²⁴ In the original text, all inserted Kanji are printed in dark blue, which sets them apart from the German text written in black ink. This choice, along with colorful graphic art based on these Kanji calls for these characters to be encountered as something other than text.

clues for her close connection to Yuna is her knowledge of the correct code to Yuna's locker, which Yuna herself has forgotten. When Yuna muses that the last letter of the alphabet is free for the thief's name, she implies that the second-to-last letter *Y* is taken by Yuna, leaving the last letter, *Z*, to be occupied by the "second in order," her "double." More than this, however, Yuna's name is suggestively divisible into "Y" and "una," that is, the letter preceding *Z* in the alphabet and the number 1 (one). The name *Zoe* is likewise divisible into the letter *Z* and "oe." The verb *oeru* in Japanese means "to finish," "to terminate," descriptive of what the Latin letter *Z* does to the alphabet.²²⁵ Thus, Yuna doubly precedes *Zoe* as letter and as number. However, Yuna also precedes, or rather, pursues *Zoe* as body, in that she runs after her. Thus, in this short section, the letter *Z* and the ideogram 乙 resonate as bodies, letters, concepts, images, sounds and numbers: The letters' and numbers' ability to stand alone or walk away render them free bodies whose multiple lexical and medial potential is unleashed only when they are regarded in isolation from the names and sounds with which they are associated, as visual metamorphoses of one another. In their status as protean images, foreign bodies, numbers, capsules of memory and tools of encipherment, Tawada's written signs reveal one another's multivalence as signs in continual transformation.

7. Conclusion

Tawada's texts present words and written signs in momentary relation, but also highlights that these words' or written signs' posited relationship has no grammatical or etymological basis. The same holds for 乙, *Z* and 2. On the other hand, the text brings together different visual forms and sounds and plumbs them for their combined semantic and sensory potential to forge semantic and sensory potency in individual written signs, and this is anything but accidental.²²⁶ When Bettina Brandt draws attention to Tawada's links with surrealist aesthetics, in particular

²²⁵ *oe* is the verb stem. *-ru* is the infinitive ending for all Japanese verbs, like the German *-en*.

²²⁶ This potency speaks to the trisection attributed to each letter of the alphabet: 1. its name (e.g. "alpha"), 2. its graphic form (α) 3. their pronunciation ("a") Gregor Vogt-Spira, "Vox und Littera. Der Buchstabe zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schrift," *Poetica* 23 (1991): 295-327. The third term is of particular significance, partly on account of the way it is named: *potestas* in Latin, or *Vermögen* in German, meaning "power" or "faculty."

the surrealist fascination with found objects (*trouvaille*) as well as with dissection and fragmentation, she too holds that dissection and fragmentation create spaces in Tawada's writing in which new knowledge is created (Brandt, "Schnitt durchs Auge: Surrealistische Bilder bei Yoko Tawada, Emine Sevgi Özdamar und Herta Müller" 78–79). However, while Tawada's characters' encounters with the bodies of letters may often appear incidental and surprising, Tawada's choice of characters and text is too deliberate to be called strictly surrealist.²²⁷ Therefore, she shares the fascination with fragmentation without submitting to chance.

Tawada's treatment of the semantic, visual and aural capacities of texts and writing in *Schwager in Bordeaux* resemble her treatment of the possibility and impossibility of translation. That is, when Tawada brings two writing systems together, she creates a tension between the unity and fragmentation of their written signs. The fragmentation of a symbol always attends its unity, as the purported singularity of its referent attends the multiple lexical, aural and visual choices embodied in it, much in same way the untranslatability of a text attends its translatability. The connection that Tawada posits between linguistic plurality and multivalence of writing is achieved on the level of the operational letters in Tawada's intensely lettered oeuvre.

²²⁷ See Adelson's observation to this effect in "Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks: Trans-Latio in Yoko Tawada's *Das Nackte Auge* (2004) 14.

CONCLUSION

Reading and seeing are part and parcel of literate experience. From the moment we begin to learn to read, written signs' relationship to the sounds we already produce and hear gradually becomes apparent, as do the ways in which written language is unlike spoken language. When we become lettered, we also acquire the status of seers of language. Literary texts such as those by the international concretists and the OuLiPo respond precisely to this double status, by producing literary works in which the visual form of text is just as important as the meaning and sound of its words and creating a language the poetry scholar Marjorie Perloff calls "verbivocovisual" (Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 64).²²⁸ This multisensory dimension of text is not limited to literary texts, however. As Simon Jarvis observes, even something as pedestrian as a road sign has textual excess, that is, something about the text that will remain even once its letters have been identified and its words deciphered. The form of those letters may "call up decades, atmospheres, places, moods," betray shifting political landscapes, or serve as a locus of "intersubjective feeling" (Jarvis 238). My analysis made a series of distinctions that originate from literacy: distinctions between sounds of language and the visuality of writing, between the various senses employed in reading (primarily hearing and vision), and between the meaning of what we read and the written forms before us. While written signs are with us from the moment we become readers, this study has chosen as its focus strategies at work in literary texts with greater demands on their readers than comprehension. In fact, this study warns that reading for comprehension (that is, semantic sense) alone can be an impediment to a fuller encounter with texts. As Yoko Tawada points out in her readings of the Japanese translations of Paul Celan's poetry, a Japanese-speaking reader will typically perceive a Sino-Japanese ideogram as one unit without paying attention to its components, all of which may offer different visual, aural or semantic cues (Yoko Tawada, "Das Tor des Übersetzers Oder Celan liest Japanisch" 127). Her

²²⁸ Perloff borrows this term from Swedish concretist Öyvind Fahlström.

reading of Celan's translations, however, pivots on the contact between the visual and semantic dimensions of Celan's words. This tension only becomes palpable when the reading eye disassembles the ideogram into its visual components and reassembles it visually and semantically. As Tawada's essay demonstrates, attention to the visuality of written signs can initiate creative labor by disassembling a literary text in order to reassemble it anew, and critical labor by plumbing the sensory and semantic reach of its translatability. Reading only for the text's semantic dimension would fall short of both attainments.

Though Tawada's reading anatomizes ideograms by breaking them down to their component parts, attention to letter form and its transformations advocated in this analysis does not constitute minute close reading alone. In fact, probing written signs' potential for multisensory sense-making requires intensive engagement with the following critical questions: What is a vehicle of meaning in any text, particularly a literary text? What does it mean to translate a literary text from one language into another, to subject its forms to transformation? What capacities of text are captured by the writing system in which it is written that are not conveyed by meaning alone? Individual written signs draw readerly attention away from structures of meaning toward transformed and translated likenesses of textual form. Read with an eye to its forms, any text yields additional layers of multivalence. Multivalence can refer to a written sign's status as transcriptive symbol (i.e. letter of the alphabet), mathematical sign and object of contemplation (Perec); vocative particle, vowel, number, visual mark signaling absence, concrete object (Celan); transcriptive symbol, ideogram, number and body (Tawada). This multivalence at the level of individual written signs may or may not have to do with semantic dimensions of texts. Important is that written signs are not transparent but multivalent, that is, they are elements of sound transcription in writing, mathematical operations in language, visual marks on a page, and material objects too. A critical approach attentive to inter-media aesthetics as they relate to written signs and the writing systems to which they belong addresses the materiality and visual, aural, notational (e.g. music) and mathematically operational (e.g. mathematical equations and calculations) capacities of the print medium at the elemental level of

the letter. It also heeds the call of literary authors (e.g. Yoko Tawada) and literary critics (e.g. Simon Jarvis) alike in paying sustained critical attention to the aesthetics and politics of letter form. In heeding this call, this study has treated sound, silence, cacophony, and chaos not only as tropes, but as attendant to different writing systems' relationships to sound phenomena and mathematical notation, and as part and parcel of the material experiences of writing and reading.

As Tawada's essay on the translatability of Celan's poetry illustrates, reading written signs as multivalent has broad consequences for the study of translation. Semantic and visual fragmentation and sensory transformation in literary texts pose challenges to the practice and theory of translation: The questions arise as to how to translate textual elements not widely considered to be vehicles of meaning, and whether current theories of translation are adequate to engaging these literary strategies. I argue that the concept of transformation instead of the term translation affords at once a more expansive and more precise perspective into the literary strategies at hand, for several reasons. First, the concept of transformation better captures changes in linguistic and visual forms. When Naoki Sakai asks "Is it possible to translate a calligraphic text?" the answer is that a calligraphic text with all of its semantic content, visual formations and ornaments may best be transformed. Second and relatedly, this study has shown the ways in which the nonsensical, the illegible, the accidental can become newly legible when critical attention shifts from the sensical to the sensory. As Dieter Mersch and David Wellbery observe, artistic experimentation can contribute greatly to our current understanding of texts, media and the text medium (Mersch, "Mediale Paradoxa. Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und Medien. Einleitung in eine negative Medienphilosophie"; Wellbery 22–23). If, as Wellbery holds, the interruption of the sense-oriented scene of writing "exposes limits of hermeneutics for reflective engagement with art," the concept of transformation can critically engage the confluences of artistic and literary sense-making. Third, my analysis seeks to give renewed analytical depth to the term translation, which is sometimes used to refer to phenomena that might more accurately be called transmission, metaphor, or survival (all of which are related but

not always necessarily equivalent to translation).²²⁹ In focusing on individual written signs rather than on larger units of utterance, I intend to show the ways in which written forms are *transformed* in acts of writing by artists and literary authors and acts of reading by us. This shift from translation as the reproduction of something familiar to transformation as the creation of something new is at the core of this analysis. For this reason, this study has shown that a transformative approach to translation gains far more than what is lost in translation, and that it gains something in addition to the semantic meanings that may accrue in translation.

In my analysis, I have remained attuned to the aesthetics of letter form and initiated a new methodology for pursuing letter forms in transformation. In doing so, this study is limited in scope to the “old” typeset book medium and explores innovative literary moves by Paul Celan, Georges Perec and Yoko Tawada that gesture beyond this medium. Given that experimentation with letter form was already present in other media (e.g. film and audio) and that it is now expanding further in digital media, calligraphic texts old and new, international concretism, lettrism, and digital poetry remain areas for further inquiry. In addition, letter forms and letteral experiments are not limited to the literary arts. Art historical research as well as studies of albums, catalogues, pamphlets, even the postal service, could contribute greatly to the interplay between writing and image in general, and to experimentation with written signs in particular. Also importantly, this study has heeded only half of Simon Jarvis’s call to develop further critical work in the aesthetics and politics of letter form. While it has studied the aesthetics of letter form, the politics of letter form remains an avenue for further scholarly investigation.

²²⁹ See for example Brodzki; Suga.

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