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## Eugene Jolas's Multilingual New Occident

Ania Spyra

Eugene Jolas perfectly fits into any consideration of the dynamic transitions between the New and the Old Worlds. Not only does his work and life span Europe and the Americas, but also his most critically acclaimed achievement is the international artistic journal called *transition*, which he founded in Paris in 1927 to provide a space for exchange between these two worlds. In fact, his whole artistic career was spent on fostering connections between the two continents, which were, and probably still are, often imagined in opposition to each other. As I argue in this essay, Jolas in his journal and in his multilingual poetry enacts a universal language to postulate an artistic community uniting Europe and America into "the New Occident".

Jolas led an inter-Atlantic life. Born in Union City, New Jersey in 1894, he grew up in the conflict of languages and cultures of his immigrant parents, French father and German mother, who resettled with their children back to the European frontier-land of Alsace-Lorraine, when Eugene was two years old. He spoke fluent German and French when at seventeen he went back to the U.S., where, while working as a journalist at various immigrant papers, he learned English and started writing poetry in his three languages, at first separately, but by the late 1920s in all of them at the same time with immixtures of Spanish, Dutch, Old Norse, Maya and made-up tongues. To break up with formulaic understanding of linguistic standards and to postulate the reality of multilingualism within any nation state, Jolas strove to conceptualize a new language. This multilingual cosmopolitan poetics or *cosmopoetics*, as I call it reshaping

Bruce Robbins's neologism *cosmopolitics*, opposes uniformity and monologism proposed by western concepts of national identity. Thus, Jolas's poetics becomes relevant to contemporary discussions of linguistic boundaries of and within nations, disciplines and international communities, such as – for example – the European Union.

Robbins and Pheng Cheah in their *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998) come up with the neologism cosmopolitics to name a radical form of cosmopolitanism in an attempt to clear the term of its imperial legacies and tendencies. Both editors suggest extending the emotional and political investments in a nation-state beyond its borders to encourage actions conscious of their global implications. I suggest *cosmopoetics* as a term more appropriate to describe Jolas's literary experiments, because although they are informed by the political context of the 1930s (language purity movements, anti-multivocal ideology of the U.S. melting pot, or totalitarianism of Stalinism and fascism in Europe), they remain above all literary and linguistic – rather than political – interventions. Still, Jolas hopes to foster cosmopolitan attachments: thinking and feeling beyond the nation in a multitude of languages.

Talking of cosmopolitan attachments in the introduction to *Cosmopolitics*, Robbins evokes the thesis of Benedict Anderson's seminal *Imagined Communities* that links the emergence of nationalism to print capitalism; he extends that thesis to note that electronic or digital capitalism that many currently live in creates communities that transcend national borders (Robbins 3). It is worth remembering at this point that Anderson sees print capitalism as responsible also for promoting standardization of a national language, which united various idiolects into one language potentially understandable by all readers. Jolas's poetry and his journal *transition* combine these two characteristics but on an international scale; both strive to create connections above national borders through acting out an international imagined community speaking one multilingual tongue. The apparent oxymoron of a multilingual language points to the main tension of Jolas's cosmopoetics: an attempt to include difference and variety within a universalizing vision.

He conceptualized the new tongue in two ways. At times, influenced by Jungian psychology, he called this "super-tongue for intercontinental expression" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 2) the "language of night" and envisioned it as an expression of the collective unconscious of all people; at other times it became "the great American Language" (Jolas, t. 19/20, 141), "Atlantica" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 272), or "the language of the New Occident" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 273), which he witnessed on the streets of New York. Both these sources of the universal language, psychological (collective unconscious) and sociological (the street), were perceived as equally organic or natural, and thus situated Jolas outside of the 1930s debate of Basic English versus the artificial languages (such as Esperanto, Novial etc.), because he saw both sides of this debate as upholding non-natural and uncreative languages. Unlike these universal languages, his concept of the new language of the Atlantic community was based not only on an assumption of easier international communication, but also on the belief that it "would facilitate intellectual communication and creative expression on a universal basis" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 273).<sup>1</sup> This ideal of intellectual communication and creative community Jolas put into practice in his conceptualization of *transition* as, to begin with, a circle of friends united in admiring the beauty of challenging art (t. 1, 136), but which later developed into a much larger intercontinental community.

The idea behind the "intercontinental magazine" (86), as Jolas referred to *transition* in his autobiography *Man from Babel*, was to present to an English speaking audience the works of the international avant-garde of writers and poets of all origins writing in Paris (*Man from Babel* 93). Jolas promoted and published all literary and art pieces that broadened the concept of comprehensible language and accessible art. In the magazine

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<sup>1</sup> As Craig Monk in "Eugene Jolas and the Translation Policies of *transition*" notes there is an unresolved tension in Jolas's idealistic search between what Umberto Eco classifies as a "universal" and a "perfect" language, which differ in that a universal language is one shared by all people, "the language which everyone might, or ought to, speak," whereas a perfect language is a tongue that expresses ideas perfectly (2-3, 73).

Jolas himself could also expound on his own poetics and linguistic theories in a series of essays, questionnaires, manifestoes and poems thus providing a timeline of his poetic preoccupations across the years. Whereas many of the ideas central to Jolas's visionary and neo-romantic ideology – international community, new hybrid creative consciousness, revolution against the simplifying influence of the market economy on language and literature – underpinned even the earliest issues of *transition*, his multilingual poetry did not start appearing until much later, only in the late 1930s.

Similarly, the journal itself grew gradually more and more multilingual.<sup>2</sup> The introduction to the inaugural issue of *transition*, co-written with Elliot Paul, promised to invite writers from other countries “to appear ... in a language Americans can read and understand” (t. 1, 137), which at first meant that the journal was exclusively Anglophone. Later, the journal mirrored Jolas's own transforming aesthetic, and started publishing also texts in languages other than English, with the assumption of the readership's familiarity with French, Spanish or German. The last issue of *transition*, for example, contained six poems and an essay in French, one poem in each Spanish and German, and Jolas's own multilingual “Frontier-Poem.”

Written in Strasburg in 1935 and published in the last issue of *transition* in 1938, “Frontier-Poem” is probably the best example of Jolas's poetic enactment of a borderless cosmopolitan community. The poem balances an equal mixture of English, French and German, and blurs the boundaries between them. The poem's cosmopoetics resides also in the fluid, borderland imagery as it begins with a description of rivers that horizontally cut through space; their geographical location in the borderland of Lorraine specified with the reference to the Rhine. Also, asserting that the place in which it was written was Strasburg situates the poem in the city that Jolas saw as the closest to realizing the dream of

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Monk provides an interesting reading of *transition's* increasing multilingualism as an expression of its editor's growing disappointment with the possibilities of translation.

“frontierless Europe,” a term he used in his autobiography (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 57).<sup>3</sup>

But the poem remains above all a subconscious dream journey rather than a geographically situated voyage, which points to Jolas’s interest in contemporaneous psychology. The dream takes the speaking persona back to his home, described with the German word ‘heim’ and thus situated within that language. The dream journey through the landscape of wineries, vintners, and folksongs is taken in a boat, at dusk or at twilight, always at a liminal moment “between tag und nacht” (220).<sup>4</sup> The rivers are part of the fluid imagery of the poem, which repeatedly comes back to “flusslandschaft” (river-land-landscape), “tendres streams,” or the Rhine that “coule à travers” the speaker’s soul. The movement of the poem,

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<sup>3</sup> Jolas’s evocation of Strasburg in the “Frontier-Poem” points to his involvement in the 1920’s with artistic group l’Arc (the bridge) created by Henri Solveen who wanted to “make Alsace a supranational bridge between two cultures and languages” (*Man from Babel* 59). Jolas describes Solveen saying that “his internationalism, or rather cosmopolitanism, contrasted sharply with the nationalist forces that were beginning to assert themselves in Alsace, forces that had their roots in political ideologies such as that of Action Française” (*Man from Babel* 61). Solveen was also the one who suggested that “a movement starting from the Alsatian matrix could become really European and be an active link across the Franco-German frontiers only if a central force were welded together in Strasburg” (*Man from Babel* 61). Jolas “felt that the ‘Bridge’ should be content to start as a sort of symphonic aspiration, in which all the linguistic voices might be heard” (*Man from Babel* 62). The group was also clearly leftist in its leanings, or as Jolas put it, it was “in violent opposition to the bourgeois philistine” (*Man from Babel* 62). The group’s preoccupations reverberated with Jolas’s own obsessions at the time: “I myself continued to be haunted by the dream-image of a frontierless Europe ... Strasburg, I felt, came nearer than any other city in Europe to making realizations of that ideal possible. ... Alsace had a supranational aura” (*Man from Babel* 57). His focus on Strasburg seems especially portentous, bearing in mind later history of unification of Europe, which at that time seemed a remote, although much talked about, ideal, to which Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi’s *Pan-Europe* (1926), the first book-length consideration of the idea, would attest.

<sup>4</sup> References to this poem will appear in parenthesis. All the translations of languages within this poem are mine; I give them either in parentheses or in single quotations within the sentence. I would like to thank Eugene Sampson for the assistance with translation of German neologisms.

however, goes against the horizontal orientation of the rivers in the vertical and visionary direction: "the whirl of the visionary went the spiral way/hymnologues glided upward" (220) and thus signals Jolas's proposed literary style of "vertigalism".

The division between the persona of the poem and those he seems slowly melts away and a collective speaker asserts their freedom and strength. The collective 'we' describe themselves as "die celestial wanderers prêts à monter l'étoile" [ready to climb the star] ready to seek vision in a vertical ascent. The utopian vision, however, is counteracted by the reality of the horizontal borderland divisions. After a stanza of affirmations and excitement comes a sentence: "nous sanglotons dans la solitude de notre freiheit" (223), which denies, it seems, all that came before; why does this collective 'sob in the solitude of their freedom'? The next stanza suggests that it is the frontiers that divide them, the "savage laws" that retain them. Freedom from the divisive frontiers, in turn, is promised by the messianic figure of "paradiseman" who "ist noch weit von hier" (still far from here) (223), and whose existence is related to language, because the next stanza calls for writing of an unforgettable book of illuminations through "flamewriting of the oortext" (223), evoking existence of a primary, original text.

What is significant, however, is that the vision of unity the Jolas proposes is never accomplished; it is always postulated and longed for but not achieved. Like a choir repeating 'we' and 'nous' and 'nos,' singing together, the collective narrator demands:

Nous voulons des fougues de vocables  
Nous voulons des orchestras de mots nouveaux  
For the language of man is tired and sick  
For the grammar of man is soaked in disease (223-224)

Although 'fugue' means enthusiasm in French, the word's closeness to orchestras of the following line seems to bring to mind also the English 'fugue' to stress the musical vision of the new language and new words. Moreover, fugue is a contrapuntal composition in which a short melody is

introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts, in a structure similar to the poem itself, which began with one speaker only to successively include others. The physicality of this vision, the rendition of language as sick, on the one hand, and the musicality of the new language show that Jolas strives to offer a renewed, organic language, to escape from the prescriptive attitudes to language and its correctness that dominated his age. That the new language is imagined as having a universal, worldly reach becomes evident in the following stanza, when the dream journey takes the speakers into a catalog of geographical directions, which is another characteristic of cosmopoetics:

Nos voiles se mettent vers l'escaut  
Towards the billows of the manche  
Towards the british isles  
Towards the african greenwhorl  
Towards the roarsea round the azores  
Towards the visionary americas of our minds (224).

The sails can take the speakers anywhere, and the expansiveness of the vision reaches even America, differing from other places in its always utopian, 'promised-land' status. All these places can be connected with one bridge:

We shall build the mantic bridge  
We shall sing in all the languages of the continents  
We shall discover les langues de l'atlantide  
We shall find the first and last word (224)

Although the bridge is figured as prophetic, the word mantic has in it a semblance of 'semantic' as well, evoking linguistics, an association, which is corroborated by the focus on language that closes the poem.

But who is included in the 'we' of the poem? The last stanza with its evocation of "all the languages of the continents" suggests all-inclusiveness and thus corroborates Jolas's perfectly utopian notion of a language which



does not simplify in any way, but on the contrary, through unending inclusion mirrors the Babel of multilingual world. "This new language should not number several hundred thousands words, but millions of words" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 272) he writes in the autobiography. Aware that such inclusiveness may sound imperial, he also adds

it does not mean that the great languages will be completely annihilated or absorbed into the 'big language.' These individual languages will continue their separate existence, but only their essence will flow into the thundering ocean of the language of the future (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 272).

This emphasis on the separate existence of the languages with their dialects and slang is one technique he employs to avoid making his language an imperial unity. Another is that, as soon as his vision begins to seem boundless, he consciously erects its linguistic borders and quotes only "Anglo-Saxon, Greco-Latin, Celtic, Indian, Spanish, French, Canadian French, German, Pennsylvania German, Dutch, Hebrew, the Slavic and Slavonic languages" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 273) as absorbed into the universal tongue. The only non-Western and non-Indo-European languages mentioned here are 'Indian,' probably tribal languages of Native Americans rather than the Indian Subcontinent; and Hebrew, already spoken in Europe and America.

However, if *Atlantica* is so specifically limited, it is clearly not universal. That is why I prefer to call Jolas's vision universalizing, envisioning a process or a beginning of thinking "in supracontinental categories" (Jolas, *Man from Babel* 273) rather than promising an already existing universal unity or language. Jolas understands that no community is ever all-inclusive; that is why although he promotes thinking across borders and languages, the scope of the international community he offers is limited to a particular locale and language. By not erasing particularities and by limiting his proposed community to the Occident, he avoids turning his project into an imperial one. Again, what is more important in his vision is the insistence on thinking beyond the nation or any other category that unifies through a totalitarian erasure of differences.

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