PIERRE ALFÉRI

from *To Seek a Sentence*

4. INVENTION

THOUGHT

A thought is a possible sentence. A sentence owes its rhythm—the rhythm that carries it, and the rhythm of the referent by which it carries things—to syntax. A thought's first articulation is through syntax; thought is, therefore, directly involved in the understanding of the sentence as an operation, as language set to rhythm. (A thought has nothing to do with the psychological response of an isolated word—whether idea or representation.) But language is more than the totality of sentences that have already been formed, and the domain of thoughts is found precisely in this excess. Thought is not an empire within the empire of language, but the loan that language takes out against itself: possible language. (It is a retrospective illusion—the other side, abstract and passive, of invention—that presents thought as an empire according to which the loan of language seems perpetually overdue.) This possibility must be acted upon prior to any intuition. A new sentence is possible to the extent to which it is sought. To think means: to seek a sentence.

DISORDER

We can only seek a sentence by means of other sentences. It is here, in the most concrete moment of invention, that a thought belongs. An evasion forestalls every thought: the evasion of the sought-after sentence. And a disorder follows: sentences rush in as provisional replacements. They come to mind because they have already been used; they return because of the inertia of language, to anonymous memory or passive use. Seeking thus passes by way of retrospection, the evocation of sentences in familiar forms. But, from the point of view of the sensed sentence, these seem used-up, unusable. (A voice chooses; it cannot hear itself at first except by refusing.) And so retrospection becomes active: It revokes the sentences that are evoked, sweeping them back into a past more distant than that of anonymous memory: a completed past. A new sentence invents itself out of that which retreats into an artificial distance, an artificial void.

ANALOGY

By evoking and then revoking a series of available sentences, we are doing more than pushing aside an obstacle; we are processing a material. Used-up sentences come to mind, are taken notice of, because they are linked by affinity. Of course, we vary the words at will, and the groups of words are altered entirely; the affinity does not attach to words taken singly. It depends upon a certain relationship between words, a relationship we try to re-identify in each sentence, and to sustain while specifying it through these changes. This internal relationship brings to light certain syntactic traits of each sentence, an aspect of rhythm that is constitutive of meaning. The affinity that dictates the return of some sentences more than others comes down to, then, a relationship between relationships—an analogy. The Analogy has, as a principle, the sought sentence itself, which becomes accessible via the discovery of analogy. (Invention is only circular in appearance; it's more like a spiral, with the anonymous memory of language at the periphery, and at the center, the definitive form of the sentence.) Indeed, the thought that thus links several used-up sentences coincides with the sought sentence, with the sentence looming up, passing from shadow into silhouette. The possibility of a sentence consists only in the movement of its seeking; it is in this seeking that it is a thought.

THE CUTTING EDGE

This retrospective thought is a foundation. By treating the sentences that immediately come to mind as used-up sentences, we place them far enough away that they can gravitate around an unpronounced sentence without any longer acting as an obstacle to it: the movement toward the past is at first a negating one. But the sought sentence is itself caught up in a retrospection, this time an affirmative one. The absent object that is sought orients the seeking, in effect, as if it preceded it. And if the revoked sentences appear to be variations on a theme, it's because the result (that they have been made into a series) seems to be its principle. By retrospection, thought produces—invents—an analogy heretofore invisible. By making sentences recede, and then following what is in fact only a premonition as if it were a memory, it unearths a buried possibility, held in common by a particular set of sentences. (The invention of a melody must pass through musical dread.) It isn't a mean or a compromise between used-up sentences, but a new possibility partaking of certain aspects of their syntax, an extreme possibility to which each one responds only partially: their fine syntactical point, the cutting edge of their possibility. (Invention is an individuation; the new sentence stabilizes this saturated state of language, where sentences bump up against one another.) When this type of possibility is thought all the way through, a new sentence is formed.

DEMAND

The only successful invention is the one that is at the same time improbable and faithful to a demand. Overlook nothing of the sensed possibility: such is the general form of the demand. "To overlook nothing" means: not to stop at the used-up sentences that come to mind, but also: not to yield to "correctness." (True faithfulness in language yields nothing to language, is faithful to its possibilities more than to its usage.) There are syntactic forms that are irreplaceable and "incorrect." "Correctness" consists in a mean of sentences already formed, sanctioned by usage; the cutting-edge possibility sanctioned by a new sentence consists in an analogy that has been, up to that moment, invisible. Grammar and invention are perfectly compatible, but we must demand concessions only from the former, or we run the risk of betraying the latter. More generally, the risk of disguising or forgetting the sensed possibility increases with the time of the seeking. If it isn't always reparable, this forgetting

is always perceptible. One could always choose to say nothing rather than to half-say. Overlook nothing: on this sole condition, a new sentence appears in all its necessity.

RECOGNITION

The necessity of a new sentence is put to the test at the moment it is read. When we come across it in its finished state, at first we see only an accident. And so we replace it with the used-up sentences that return to mind, guided by an affinity between them and the sentence we have read. This is the initial gesture that is referred to when we say that we have "understood the meaning" of a sentence. Then we locate, in a constellation of sentences similar to the one that presided over the invention, the singular and exact analogy that indicates their cutting-edge possibility. If we recognize in it the sentence we have read, that means it was necessary. (The interpretation is only circular in appearance; a spiral, once again, but traveled in both directions and more quickly, since its center is already determined.) And, we say: "It couldn't be better said." Literature exists when this second evidence, that of the necessity of the sentence, trumps ordinary understanding, the evidence of its meaning.

THE "UNSAYABLE"

Possible sentence, a thought is therefore also the bringing to light of this possibility, the retrospective gesture that unearths it from a set of used-up sentences. Literature is pure—that is to say, free—thought. But don't we say that it draws its power from the "unsayable," which suppresses it? This monolithic obstacle is the other side of representation. We fabricate the unspeakable by maintaining the confusion between saying and imitating, between literature and figurative painting. A sentence says things and has no need to imitate them: it names them. A sentence says a thought and has no need to represent it: it specifies the syntactic form the thought has been seeking. Literature does not count among its tasks that of imitation—or even "self-representation." (The *mise en abyme* is imitation's last refuge: a dead end.) The only task of literature is to invent new syntactical forms, new rhythmic patternings: to extend the language. To say, in this sense, no longer leaves any place for the phantom of the unsayable; like the horizon, it recedes with every sentence. The only

obstacle is the totality of overused sentences that, at every turn, evade their own cutting-edge possibility. Each sentence has its obstacle and not a single one is insurmountable.

5. CLARITY

THE DECLARATION

Literature tends toward clarity. That which presents itself for what it is, is clear. But all that is presented to us is presented through language. And so it is language itself that has the most direct access to clarity—by way of the facts of language that present themselves for what they are. Now, language presents itself in sequences that each have their own rhythm: it words itself. Clarity, then, is above all the characteristic of a sentence in which the language declares itself by way of some specific rhythmic aspect—the characteristic of a declaration. This primary clarity—the relation of language to itself, which is hardly a relation at all—would appear to become harder to grasp the clearer it gets. Yet, it is felt: literature exists only as a testimony to it. (Clarity is only secondarily concerned with the relation of a representation to what it represents. And yet, if language were not the site of a primary clarity, a veto would be opposed to all its instrumental usages, all these effects of representation.)

PLATITUDE

The domain of clarity is not located between language and what lies outside it. The relation between words and things is one of reference. This relation occurs when we make use of words—and not when we merely quote them: Even when quotation and use are combined, it cannot be any more or less clear. Neither is the clarity of language one of ideas. Ideas—mental representations that are "clear" or "confused"—are secondary effects of language, but no single sentence can be summed up by way of their combination. To say that by understanding a sentence we *see* something is only to use a metaphor. To understand a sentence is to follow a rhythmic movement that is irreducible to

an image: there is no position, no point of view for contemplation. (The clarity of language is blind, and owes nothing to sight.) Finally, clarity is not the adequacy of a sentence to an intention, if what is understood by "intention" is a will-to-speak which is not itself a sentence. If an intention does precede a sentence in the mind of the person who pronounces it, then only he will be able to judge such an adequacy; the clarity of a sentence is that which is most manifest in it, which offers itself up to all. Clarity is the capacity of language to display, to lay out its own possibilities: it takes place only on the surface.

ECONOMY

A sentence is clear when it is faithful to its own possibility in language. If such faithfulness is not self-evident, it is because it is not identical with what is allowed by grammar, and above all because the possibility itself is unclear. The possibility of a sentence, to the extent to which it solicits thought, is buried beneath other sentences that have already been used, is held in common by them as their cutting-edge possibility. It isn't yet what it is, and yet, only by making it appear retrospectively can a sentence present itself as what it is. The clarity of a sentence thus presupposes, in general, its newness: Used-up sentences generally no longer present themselves for what they are, the very act of "wording" is erased. A sentence is clear when it casts a new clarity on used-up sentences with which it carries out a common possibility. For this to happen, the sentence must appear as the only imaginable form of this possibility. It thus appears, necessary in retrospect, at the time of the process of comprehension, when we evoke other sentences in order to interpret it, and we find ourselves forced to return to it: "It couldn't be better said." Because there are things that cannot be said simply, clarity has nothing to do with simplicity. And yet it characterizes something that does not stray, something that won't leave anything out of its own possibility, which responds to a "cutting-edge" possibility while neither adding to it nor taking anything away. (Clarity is the elegance of a syntactical form, in the sense in which in mathematics, they speak of the elegance of a proof.) A clear sentence is the rhythmic condensation of several used-up sentences. Clarity is therefore the justification of the invention of sentences in the economy of language.

TRANSPARENCE

Only language is truly clear and it is clear only in a singular rhythmic patterning, in a sentence. But doesn't clarity cause the forgetting of the very thing that produced it—the sentence in its "transparence"? It is true that with hindsight a clear sentence, faithful to a new possibility, leaves us in the face of things, of referents, as if they were appearing for the first time. But it is precisely that; the sentence declares itself, unbound, in a free relation to its outside, thus without transparence. And if it makes itself forgettable, it does so to make itself recognizable in its newness, to make recognizable in language, through it, its own possibility—as letters make us forget them in order to recognize the word they form. Rhythm remains as it disappears, not in transparence, a vision of the outside, but—on the contrary—in a clarity both opaque and resistant, a pure surface: an impression.

6. VOICE

COHERENCE

Literature imposes a voice. In the clarity of the impression, invented sentences are able to link themselves in a discursive chain, but also into the form of a braid. The abundance of formal variations, the specter of syntactical possibilities that are actually exploited in a finite set of sentences are themselves also finite, and if it responds to some internal necessity, this limit is that of a kind of braid. What we call a *voice* serves as an example of this type of formal braid: linguistic tics, recurrent tricks and tones, a singular interlacing of linguistic traits—an idiom—below the sounded qualities of the voice, the delivery, the timbre and melody. (Multiple idiomatic voices may alternate within each person's voice, and each may be held in common by multiple sounded voices.) The minimal coherence of a text, its freest unit, is not drawn from discourse, but from the voice. Understood in this way, the voice is not a metaphor, for it may be imposed by writing alone: a braid of syntactic forms, of mute rhythms, is a purely written voice. (In speech, an idiomatic voice is already writing itself, in the sense that it abstracts itself away from its sounded qualities.) Literature gives a new resonance to language in every instance, because in every instance it imposes a singular voice that can't but write itself: a de-timbred voice.

THE BRAID

The emission of a voice follows a completely different logic than the invention of a sentence. We invent a sentence by discovering an affinity between certain used-up sentences, founded upon an analogy. This analogy concerns certain traits to the exclusion of all others, and its principle is in a unique syntactical form: the sought sentence. We emit a voice by interlacing a great number of traits in order to braid together a great number of sentences. Affinities and analogies proliferate and do not reunite in any sentence; cohesion is not about identity, but density. (When a literary voice becomes rarified and dries up by uttering a definitive sentence, it has not understood its own textual nature.) Of course, a voice's traits are a matter of syntax in the broadest sense, that is, of rhythm: lexical, rhetorical and semantic traits as well as grammatical constructions. And the braid is formed precisely from their reuse and their alteration from one sentence to another: echoes of a particular twist or turn, or a particular trope, or a particular section of an associative series in the continuous call of one word to another, etc. And yet, this braiding does not presuppose any form that would be common to all sentences, or impose itself as their only possible organization; the interlacing of these syntactical traits is no longer, itself, syntactical in nature. (A text is more than a long sentence or a large form, for, in the organization of its sentences, its idiom presents itself always as being capable of producing other organizations and other sentences.) This is why there is no representative sample of a voice: the braid that defines it is without a model. Like a sounded voice, a written voice imposes itself only as an irreducible variety of tones, twists and turns, forms, paces. (If voice has a secret it would not be able to speak it.) It does not have access to any level of generality in the language; it follows rhythmic lines, weaves the syntactical threads of sentences according to a progressive kinship. It is self-identical the way a string is, even though no single thread persists from its beginning to its end.

THE TEXT

It is the voice that establishes the text as such. The syntactical relations of proximity between sentences obey only the demands of sequencing: narration, argument, dialogue, etc. They constitute only the order of discourse. If a text needs a voice, it is because it is above all a network of relations between non-contiguous sentences. And this network is immobile; it hovers over the linear

unfurling of discourse. The voice is its own coherence: it constitutes it as text, as fabric or as tessitura. (Poetic coherence is superior—because freer—than the coherence of a narrative, of reasoning or of talk in general; it is strictly textual.) Each sentence disposes of its immediate context—the chains that link it to its neighbors signify nothing more than the singular, abstract manner of linking—and finds room in an imperturbable space, like a free particle acting on other particles from a distance. By way of the voice vested in it, the text is exposed in all its clarity as a simultaneous set of sentences, related by kinship in the instantaneous space of language. And the impression reveals this simultaneous nature of text, the equality of all its elements, its immobility; it alone compensates for the discursive myopia of reading. (The block of writing is not the frozen image of an unfurling. It is the very—the only possible—presence of voice.)

PROCESS

In the emission of a voice, the establishment is a retrospection. The braid that constitutes the voice has no model. Thus voice never precedes text in any form; it never presents itself anywhere until a set of sentences has been formed. Any recurrent rhythmic elements must show themselves before, in retrospect, even the slimmest sliver of a voice can appear. One can extend the braid, let it orient one in the network and let the network expand around it. (In literature, the real themes are neither ideas nor evoked objects. Like themes in a fugue, they are above all syntactical threads.) And so, once again, the voice distinguishes itself—or, extinguishes itself—retrospectively; we go on, or we begin again, etc. The process of the voice is thus free: it is an establishment, and it is necessary: it is a retrospection. (The back and forth movement of writing is not reflected in its immobile result—the text—but in its *contrecoup*, which is reading. Reading begins where writing ends—in the dislocation that concludes a fugue, the disarray.) Unlike the invention of a sentence, this process may be re-launched. A great number of sentences is required to expose, in full clarity, a braid that is irreducible to a syntactical model: a text, more likely several. For a text does not in itself exhaust the relations of kinship that it creates between sentences; as singular as it may be, it opens onto another. (To dispose of a voice once and for all—that would be to be saved.) This "et cetera" in the voice, the necessity of its process, is therefore the necessity of a text, but also of literature.

"STYLE"

The necessity of braiding, if it prevents the imprisonment of voice inside a definition, does enable it to be recognized at first glance. (A voice becomes imprinted like a face.) The cohesion of a written voice is such that a literary text generally can't help but stick to just one, even while forcing it like a ventriloquist to put forth multiple simulacra of voices—"characters," for instance. If a "poet" or a "writer" does the same thing from text to text, his name no longer signifies the shifting personality of an "author," but a voice so pregnant that it requires many mouthpieces, many modes of braiding. This is why, even though no single sentence possesses the whole secret, it is often enough to hear one or two sentences to be able to put a name to a voice with which one is already familiar. But this evidence of voice becomes trivial when it becomes evidence of a "style," that is, in the illusion of a personal, embellished voice. Voice is not the reflection of a psychology; it belongs to no one. (Only one who has no voice will write.) And neither does voice let itself become fragmented, like a repertoire of embellishments. Vocabulary, grammatical construction, rhetoric, and prosody are subordinated to voice, which determines their rhythmic role in the overall syntax of each sentence. The task of literature is therefore not to produce "stylistic effects" according to the whim of the "author," but to imitate a voice that it comes to discern, little by little, from far away, echoing, in language.

LYRICISM

To imitate a voice: we could call this task the lyrical task of literature. But doesn't lyricism reside, first and foremost, in the expression of feeling? Returned to its point of departure, it discovers itself stripped of any expressive pathos. If literature imitates voices like so many formal braids, the domain of these possibilities isn't in the secrecy of a soul, but, already, in literature. Instead of a regression into the chimera of an interior, personal voice, an infra-linguistic timbre, lyricism is, then, the imitation of an anonymous, inaudible voice, which can only write itself, and bestows upon the text its newness, its genuine singularity. (A literary voice is in itself neither blank, nor sweet, nor coarse: it is an unspoken voice.) In the written voice, in this initial echo, retrospection coincides with the establishment of the text as such. Literature is therefore content to affirm, and definitively breaks with imitation. For to imitate a voice is simply to emit it.

CODA: MEANING'S WEATHER

FLOW

Written over the course of the year 1990, in parallel with the composition of a first, equally brief book of poetry, this short treatise attempts to shed light on an intuitive idea of literary practice. What may seem like recklessness or, worse, presumptuousness—the decision to proceed by way of uninterrupted assertions, bound together by no reference or example—was in fact dictated by my desire to present disarmed hypotheses, reduced to their simplest, and most contestable formulations. Rhythm assumes the lead role, that is, the structuring of a flow—a flow that will not itself becoming naturalized, or even characterized. Description is reduced to the form of an impulse, a force or drive, to the obvious phenomena of a continuous, spontaneous movement—that is to say, life. But this reserve comes at a cost: a haze which, suffusing several terms, prevents them from rising to the rank of concepts. "The meaning of a sentence," we thus read at the close of the second chapter, "is the overall effect of its rhythm"—a definition that appears both vague and reductive for what seems to constitute the very element through which literature moves.

HAZE

Is this haze avoidable? Meaning, in a sentence, is presented in a sequential manner. The sequence puts words in order: it points out syntactic pathways between them, and semantic affinities. This composition, which provides the rhythmic basis for the apparition of meaning, depends only partially on grammar and logic. For meaning, at least in literature, appeals to sensibility as much as to understanding. It shows, and it touches; it reacts. It has neither the validity of a syllogism nor the truth-value of a proposition, not even the substance of content. In the waters of the dominant signification of words, it makes a stain that flows and spreads. It produces itself; it may translate itself into other languages—but it cannot speak itself. After we have read any sentence of a novel, its meaning continues to quiver, to distort itself, to vibrate—and only in vain can we attempt to close the circuit. (There is no such thing as a paraphrase.) For we have played on the tension-wire of meaning, we have pressed on the string to hear the harmonic. The overall effect remains essentially unstable; it is traversed by waves. Where meaning is alive, a certain haze is necessary.

CLOUDS

This fluid that becomes animated, that whirls and ebbs in the bed of the sentence, turns it (for those who read it) into a site of experience. It brings about a transfusion. Since the effect remains partly incalculable, the transfused experience remains a power of affect, a volatile essence. The semantic content matters less, in artistic production, than the manner in which meaning produces itself, offers and refuses itself, unfolds itself, holds itself back. In its emission it adopts a certain silhouette, like a smoke ring. Fully heard and felt, each sentence leaves behind the memory of a volume with evanescent edges, which more or less coheres with its precursors. And one might see, in lifting one's eyes from the book, these memories of hazy, shifting forms cohabitating, coming together or coming apart.

SKY

So a physiognomy appears, which resembles less the expressive one of a face than a relief in the atmosphere, a diurnal sky. Produced by delicate and complex interactions, without any veritable precedent, the sky appears nonetheless at every hour of the day with the simplicity of its obviousness. Its light is diffuse, its clouds bear a family resemblance to one another. Likewise, at the end of a novel or a poem, a slack meaning has unfolded, clear or opaque, dense or scattered, tempestuous or calm. It might appear right in the center, showing either its full face or its dark side. But it could just as well portion itself out into equal masses, like a sky dappled with clouds, or into layers, like the sky after a rain. When the currents come up against each other, it storms, there is thunder or lightning. At times it becomes frayed and (gets) lost on the periphery. Sometimes it sucks its breath up in a cyclone of redundancy. As each page turns, it can re-charge itself, change itself up, just as it can reveal itself, glowing.

CONSISTENCY

If meaning is of a fluid order, its coherence in a text pertains less to architecture than to dynamics. This coherence is analogous to the state of a body elevated to a certain temperature by a rhythmical movement. How do the smallest meaningful units join together or separate themselves? How do those floating droplets, which seem to join together at random, pulled along by a Brownian

motion, populate the air with phantoms as well-defined as clouds are—cumulus, or stratus? The secret of consistency is simpler than processes, more mysterious than conscious manipulation. It depends on weather conditions, on fluctuations in the reactive in which the text bathes. Its consistency is as tenuous as that of water in air.

MOOD

The image of the consistency of a meaning given by the uninitiated sky, at turns foggy, gloomy, or radiant, appears marred by psychology, even morality. As it acts upon our mood, the weather becomes its own infinitely nuanced reflection; we rarely perceive it without reading a mental hue into it. The overall meaning of a text, because it is evenly sensory, sentimental and intellectual, itself also will always have the qualities of "thymia." As with other artistic forms, it is animated by contagious moods, which temper it or rip it apart, and directly affect us. The intensity, subtlety and evanescence of the aesthetic experience depend on this—are decided by the meteoro-humoral aspect of meaning. Prior to any interpretation, any analysis (rhetorical, stylistic or other), the manner in which meaning happens and the kind of consistency that it takes on affect the body and its thoughts.

TASTE

Taste and its seasonal modifications are more surely guided by this sense of meaning than by a marked preference for particular themes or genres. Readers who are passionate about literature (when nothing encourages them to be) are instinctively following the invisible path of mood—a climatic slipstream—to find themselves affected by the meaning in some particular play of illumination and shadow, see it happen in a certain light. What they seek is not a sentence, but the most hospitable surface and season of the sky.

Translated by Anna Moschovakis

Pierre Alféri, *Chercher une phrase* (1991; Christian Bourgois, 2007).

CRAIG DWORKIN

Accents Graves/ Accents Gravés

Pierre Alferi's *OXO*—Cole Swensen's translation of his 1994 book *Kub Or*—makes me wonder what it might mean to write with an accent.

Let me say this clearly, from the start: I do not mean to suggest that the translation shows any lack of competence. Quite to the contrary, in fact, *OXO* is a perfect example of what it means to translate fluently, *sans un accent étranger*. Indeed one of the book's most immediately obvious accomplishments is Swensen's skillfully natural rendition of Alferi's signature mix of artificed form and relaxed colloquial language, his weave of the sinuous and elliptical phrases of spoken language within rigid written forms.

But alongside references to masters of the French language, including the modernized naturalism of Gustave Flaubert and the precision artifice of Stéphane Mallarmé, the poems in *Kub Or* note non-French accents, or summon figures whose speech would likely betray a foreign trace. Most pointed, perhaps, is a mention of the speech of the "patagonian thalcave," which refers the diligent reader ("cf. page further / on") to a character in Jules Verne's *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* (*In Search of the Castaways*).[1] Specifically, Thalcave appears in a chapter in which accent, idiom, and natural language are all explicitly thematized and debated. As the characters in Verne's novel attempt to communicate, they comment on language acquisition, the relations between different national languages and dialects, and ultimately find the solution to their communication problems hinging on the power of accent:

> The native listened but made no reply.
> "He doesn't understand," said the geographer.
> "Perhaps you haven't the right accent," suggested the Major.
> "That's just it! Confound the accent!"

The chapter ends with the caveat: "'If I don't catch the accent,' he said to the Major, 'it won't be my fault.'"

Other moments in *Kub Or* are similarly explicit about their attempts to "catch the accent." In the poem "*we are the robots*," "the voices of kraftwerk" are heard speaking "in the manner of phrases clipped off answering machines,"

and in the poem "tai chi" the eponymous bodily movements, accentuated by their stylized mannerism, are described as a series of "unnatural even / verbal postures that lacking / an asian precision have / but the charm of discomfort." Accent is implicit in a great many other references as well: "vacationers" and "tourists"; the "dervish / burger on the rue dupuis" where they serve the great "chawarma"; the multi-cultural linguistic indiscretion of "agostino novello supercopter akira," and the lexical allergens of a number of words not native to French ("batman" and "mdvanii," "walkman" and "pepsi," "rock" and "grunge"). First among these, of course, is the stylized brand-name phoneticism of the title *kub or*, a ubiquitous French brand of instant bouillon marketed by MAGGI since 1912 with the slogan "insist on the 'K'," and its hint of the Malaysian "Kubor." Additionally, the titles of several poems point to individuals who would inevitably insist too much on certain letters, speaking French with an accent (Ivan Goncharov, Robert Walser, the young Charles Ives), and if the local cityscapes glimpsed in *Kub Or* are decidedly Parisian, Alferi takes pains to specify that it is the Paris of "la france d'henry james"—a place pointedly on the outskirts, inhabited by non-native speakers: Jonathan Sturges, William Dean Howells, and James Whistler.[2]

Those latter names, moreover, suggest the 'howls' and 'whistles' of uncontrolled speech, like the clucking chuckle of a woman's "glousse" in one poem, with its onomatopoeic corruption of the Greek *glosse* [tongue], a slurring echoed by the recurrent spit and dribbled drops that repeatedly pool and drain through the pages of the book, rhyming with a rain of sprinkles and splashes, sputters and bubbles, carbonated spray and filming sap. Money is pointedly "liquidated," and insults, like those from a "llama mad" spitter of curses, are described as a "liquid pleasure." Alferi's poems are thus 'productive,' in the physiological sense, and all that spittle emphasizes the corporeal byproducts of speech, with their attendant effects on pronunciation (the "liquid drop or accent" as Derrida, following Francis Ponge, might say).[3] Cumulatively, the poems in *OXO* suggest that saliva is the medium in which language dissolves—or perhaps, paradoxically (in the terms of the book's final poem), that it is the very fluid absorbed by "tampon words" as they "unfurl" like the boiling bouillon cube of the book's title.[4] Though writing in this book is figured as skeletal, with "lines of whalebone" and "chrome bones," speech is figured as a melt and liquefaction, a language without organs.

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Even without the mention of Thalcave or the vacationing tourists, and even in its most recherché and academic French, *Kub Or* would pose the question of what it means to write with an accent. Alferi's book, before any translation, is itself an example of what it means to write fluently, but with a (foreign) accent. Like several poets of his generation, Alferi writes with a typically French extension of a certain American poetics.

As Jacques Derrida has written, "on n'écrit jamais ni dans sa propre langue ni dans une langue étrangère" (one never writes either in one's own language or in a foreign language), but there is also a more local and less theoretical way in which this has become true for a certain group of poets, including Olivier Cadiot, Emmanuel Hocquard, Claude Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach, Dominique Fourcade, and Joseph Guglielmi.[5] A continued literary and personal correspondence between these poets and a small number of American poets has led, as Guy Bennett and Béatrice Mousli argue, to a contemporary moment in which we no longer have "two distinct poetries, each following the trajectory of its own particular evolution, but rather [. . .] two parts of what has virtually become the same poem, written simultaneously in two different languages."[6] As an index of this mode, one might note the title of Alferi's 1997 book, *Sentimentale journée*, which is either an anglicized inversion of French syntax (in which one would expect "*Journée sentimentale*") or the partial translation of Laurence Sterne's title into French. In either case, the absorption of one language by the other is incomplete, and both readings are equally telling and typical of the transatlantic mélange catalogued by Bennett and Mousli.

This crosscurrent condition is due in part to exigencies of translation and travel, but it also results from the reception history of certain avant-garde American poets in France, specifically William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky (both of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, were themselves reacting to tendencies in modern French poetry, recasting it with distinctly American accents). This is not the place to trace that reception in full, and one would want to include George Oppen in such an accounting, particularly for Alferi's work, but the literary magazines singled out by Bennett and Mousli give a good indication of the continued importance of a particular modernist American tradition for poets of Alferi's generation. In 1977, the journal *Europe* published a special "objectivist" number, introducing Zukofsky, on equal footing with Ezra Pound, as "clearly the most important poet of our time" (sans doute, avec Pound, le poète américain le plus important de notre temps). Bennett and Mousli note the importance of the similar special issues that followed, singling out the "Williams issue" of *in'hui* (no. 14 [1981]), and the early issue of *Java* (no. 4 [Summer 1990]) that was again devoted to "*les objectivistes américains*." The

previous year, Alferi himself had translated several of Zukofsky's essays for the series Un bureau sur l'Atlantique from Éditions Royaumont, continuing two decades of translations which kept Zukofsky's work more readily available in France than in America, where until recently it was only erratically in print. In 1970, *The First Half of "A"-9* was translated by Anne-Marie Albiach and published in *Siècle a Mains* (no. 12), then reprinted in 1980 in Jacques Roubaud and Michel Deguy's widely influential anthology *Vingt poètes américains*; the translation of the first seven sections of "A" by Serge Gavronsky and François Dominique appeared together as a volume in 1994, the same year as *Kub Or*, with other sections to follow. Since the early '70s, translations of individual sections of "A" and a number of shorter poems have also been published by others, notably Roubaud and Serge Fauchereau, in journals such as *Action Poétique*. Moreover, Zukofsky remained centrally relevant to a younger generation, as indicated by Alferi's own translations and the repeated name checks of three of Claude Royet-Journoud's journals, which ran, serially, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s: *"A"*, *Zuk*, and *LZ*.[7]

This particular objectivist tradition, what we might consider a stylistic accent, is especially marked in *Kub Or*, which combines the quotidian subjects of William Carlos Williams's spare early poems, as well as his sense of the supple and suddenly switching syntax of colloquial speech, together with Louis Zukofsky's understanding of poetic form as an abstract and mandarin numerical artifice. In place of Williams's simulated domestic notes ("This Is Just To Say") and appropriated public signage (as in poem XXV of *Spring & All*: "Careful Crossing Campaign / Cross Crossings Cautiously [. . .] Take the Pelham Bay Park Branch / of the Lexington Ave. (East Side) / Line and you are there in a few / minutes // Interborough Rapid Transit Co."), Alferi registers posters boasting a "benneton sermon" or a "one / line caption great deal" for "a voice / activated bed." His language "sampler," as the penultimate poem names its omnivorous recording device, transcribes the language around him: fragments of advertising copy and shop signs, newspaper headlines and sound bites, the consumer warnings and instructions of product packaging. Somewhere between quotation and ventriloquism, the poems in *OXO* absorb the language of urban space and public speaking: "open sunday / mornings thursdays open late"; "chirac resigns"; "youth gangs welfare / a little courage my dear"; "in case of transit . . . " With a veer into found language typical of *OXO*, the poem "regular" seems unable to help taking on the language of advertising (though the actual product, tellingly, is never quite specified):

if it's true that it contains
quite naturally the enzyme
necessary for modern
life then this built-in-leak-proof
agent protects enriches
the ozone layer at the
low low price of regular

Alferi similarly updates the suburban *tableaux vivants* glimpsed through the windshield of Williams's car. Recall, for comparison, the uncorseted curbside woman in Williams's "The Young Housewife" or the frozen poses in "Right of Way," which moves from the "nameless spectacle" of a trio of figures to "a girl with one leg / over the rail of a balcony." Translating that visual attention from New Jersey to Paris, Alferi's poems provide a similar treatment of urban street scenes, in his case populated by garbage men, construction workers and roofers, small business owners, a homeless man and a street vendor. One might be tempted to read such poems in the tradition of the *flâneur*, but the pace is far too fast, more rapid than *une allure naturelle*, and the glimpses actually too fleetingly transient.[8] Signs and posters are briefly seen and only barely read before disappearing past the "rubber / rail of chatelet-les-halles' / moving sidewalk" or the steep slant of the "metro stairway." Moreover, nothing ever seems to surprise or shock; at most, the perambulations provide moments of lightly erudite irony. Far from the chance scenes of risqué shock which the *flâneur* hoped to encounter, the gaze in Alferi's poems merely falls on a newspaper headline read over someone's shoulder or a snippet caught on the television glimpsed in someone's room, focusing for a moment on a garbage can or a pigeon. At its most absorptive, one poem lingers, for just a few steps (the forty-nine steps of their metrical feet, to be precise), on the vaguely hypnotic yawn and close of a band-aid over the blistered heel of some stranger walking just ahead down the sidewalk.

Framing and reflecting the passing world in these ways, the rectangular blocks of text begin to suggest the windowpanes they repeatedly describe. One poem features a "boy at a window," and another turns on the reflection of a café owner. In "street vendor" a drinker and a pedestrian are separated for a moment on either side of a bar window. Through ground floor windows, office workers and business men are caught in their daily commercial poses, unheard but seen talking on the phone. And a range of other figures are glimpsed through storefront shop windows, including a "very old and beautiful" glass-eyed antique doll displayed in the poem "shop sign," who seems to reappear in the poem

"gallery owner," transformed into as the unexpectedly attractive older woman, wigged and taxidermied and standing "bored at the window."

That bored gallery owner is typical of the characters observed by the markedly more alert and quick moving consciousness of the poems. In contrast to that organizing consciousness (not quite ever a persona proper), characters in the book are daydreamers, struggling to keep pace, sunk in "profound languor" or casually "blasé"; they are personified by an immobile dissipative "slacker" and a child leaning in unthinking idleness. If people in these poems move at all, they do so "slowly" or indifferently, letting themselves be carried by the moving sidewalk without any "interest . . . at all."

Swensen translates all this with a sympathetic attention; like the organizing consciousness of the original poems she is alert to the felicitous moments—the singularities of language—that open fleetingly in the shift from one language to another, and she is quick to take advantage of the possibilities they offer. For just one example, the quite literal and straightforward translation of "gloved" for "ganté" in the poem "préservatif" (condom) smartly multiplies the repetitions already present in the poem's first lines with an agglutination that Jacques Derrida would recognize as a *+gl* effect.[9] For Alferi's opening "on aime s'aimer ganté," Swensen gives: "how we love to make love gloved." With 'love' tucked snugly into "gloved," its triple rhyme across the line quietly compensates for the English version's dissipation of the more densely compacted repetition of "aimer" hard upon "aime" and its rhyme with "ganté." Moreover, it nicely underscores the play between the acute force of the word's emotional rhetoric (as it might be deployed in the same sexual encounter that involved the condom) and the dilutions of its colloquial idioms ('I'd love to'; 'I love ice cream'; 'I love rock and roll'). Similarly, Swensen keeps the scientific "hevea" (the rubber plant that is the ostensible source of the condom, its milky "sap" mingling with an image of semen). This choice loses the visual rhyme in French between "hévéa" and "sève" (sap), but Swensen again compensates nicely, with just the right touch, by creating a similar rhyme in the previous line between "film" and "form" (which in Alferi's original is "manière"). The translated poem, as a whole, reads:

> how we love to make love gloved
> premie incubated in
> a film in the form of a
> wedding ring of hevea
> sap when naked it goes limp
> and crumples when worn it shines
> saying touch but do not touch

In the exchange of traditions and languages at stake in translation, the way in which the source text and its translation "dit touche et pas touche" (say touch but do not touch), we find an "alliance" (wedding) that matches mouth to mouth—or tongue to tongue, as it were, in this particular French kiss. "OXO," we should remember, might also stand as the abbreviation for hugs and kisses, the closing of a love letter, the mark of an intimate correspondence.

In contrast to the limp collapse of the condom's flaccid deflation, as well as all the other scenes of relaxed complacency in *OXO*, each described in the elliptical, casually quotidian language on display in "condom," every poem in the book conforms to a rigid formal structure. With a fractal mathematics, the book is divided into seven sections, each with seven poems, and every poem, in turn, has seven lines, each with seven syllables ("seven times seven times seven time seven," as the "preface" puts it). This septemetric homology resonates with the three dimensional cube of the book's title, and Swensen has further suggested that all translation is in fact a kind of cubing which "makes the page a three dimensional object."[10] These "hard cubes" of strict measure "compacting the trash" of daily ephemera recoded in the poems—formless "ordure" (rubbish) compressed into manifest *ordre* (order)—provide a counter to their quotidian scenes and serpentine syntax ("the snake let's imagine it" as the poem "true poetry" begins). One should note, however, that those extremes are not as stark as they might be, and the play of fixity and formlessness interrupt one another with a dialectic structure; while Alferi consistently adheres to the syllable count, it is reckoned according to a casual, commonplace convention rather than the complicated and counterintuitive rules of classical French prosody.

Even without the reified syllabics of French metrics, the form in *OXO* does point to a poetic tradition. Moreover, it again betrays the trace of Alferi's distinctive poetic accent: genuinely and natively French, but with an unmistakable American note. The poetic "cubes" in *OXO* make a direct allusion to two previous books, one French and one American. With their repeated numerical structures, they restage Jacques Roubaud's *Trente et un au cube* (*31 Squared*) (Gallimard, 1973), in which the book's thirty-one poems are comprised of thirty-one lines of thirty-one syllables (they also follow a staccato tattoo rhyme scheme which alternates between only two sounds). At the same time, with their brevity and abrupt syntax, Alferi's cubes also point to the similar metrics of Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*, published posthumously in 1978: a series of eighty poems, each measured in eight line units with five words per line.

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To ask what it means to write with an accent puts one on the cusp between spoken and written language. On the one hand, in what is currently its most frequent usage, accent is a quality of spoken language. To speak 'with an accent' is to mark a simultaneous insistence and cession of language, inscribing the phonological markers of one language or dialect within the grammar of another. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, accent is: "the mode of utterance peculiar to an individual, locality, or nation," or simply "the way in which anything is said; pronunciation, utterance, tone, voice; sound, modulation or modification of the voice expressing feeling." In prosody, similarly, accent denotes "the stress laid at more or less fixed intervals on certain syllables of a verse, the succession of which constitutes the rhythm or measure of the verse." Accent, in all these denotations, describes speech rather than writing; it can be measured in vocal performance but not on the page. In some strict sense, such accents cannot be written (even to try and direct or indicate a desired accent requires deforming orthography through the grotesqueries of 'dialect' writing). However, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* also documents, "accent" was originally something proper to writing, denoting a written "mark" or diacritical sign, such as those used in French (but not, I want to emphasize, in standard English). In this sense, "accent" describes typography rather than speech; it is something read on the page rather than heard in speech.

OXO makes me wonder what it means to write with an accent in this sense as well, since the book (like *Kub Or*) prints Alferi's name without the diacritical mark that it sometimes bears: "Alféri."[11] Whether one or the other version is simply in error, I can't say; but the difference resonates, with a barely perceptible tremor, through the book. Most obviously, it again raises the question of national language. With the accent, the Italianate name seems more fully absorbed into French, as though the accent is a mark of linguistic acceptance, a kind of onomastic passport stamp. Accordingly, the status of another Italian name in one of the poems, "agostino novello" (the *nom de religion* assumed by the thirteenth-century Matteo de Termini), as well as all of the French, changes its orientation slightly. Additionally, the diacritic indicates a certain shift in pronunciation, emphasizing the vowel but softening the name's metonymic associations by moving it ever so slightly away from "iron" (fer) and closer to a "fairy enchantment" (féerie).

These effects are admittedly minor (it's only the difference of an accent, after all), and probably without repercussion, but the lack of an accent also provides a written reminder of the flattened tone, or "ton mat," that Alferi has cultivated in his writing. One could call writing without an accent in that sense the "neutral accent" ("on pourrait l'appeler l'"accent du neutre,'" as Alferi has

in fact written).[12] Almost a rebus, the lack of an accent on the title page is a sort of visual compliment, or analogue, to the style of the book that follows. The book, and its mode, are written under the unaccented sign of "Alferi."

Phonetically, the moment of emphasis that an accent indicates corresponds to the "singular" moment—both the singularity of experience and the experience of singularities—which Alferi has pursued from his very first book, an expository work on the philosophy of William of Ockham.[13] Similarly, in an essay on Henry James and Maurice Blanchot, significantly entitled "Un accent de vérité" (An Accent of Truth), Alferi writes:

> L'accent, le ton, est la pente que prend une ligne de sensations à partir d'une différence d'impression, d'un point-singularité qui fait événement. [. . .] Les accents sont de petites déclivités sur le plan d'impression.
>
> (Accent, tone, is the slope that a line of sensations takes from a difference of impression, from a point of singularity that makes itself felt. [. . .] Accents are little clinamenatic dips in the geometric plane of impression.)[14]

In *OXO*, Alferi's philosophical investigation leaves explicit arguments about Ockham and Blanchot behind, but his theoretical arguments about the accent are nonetheless continued by other means, with a lyrical test of the range of relations between the discretion of the moment and the continuity of experiential flux, between stasis and movement, the particular and the abstract. *OXO*, as I have suggested, takes the "neutral accent" of colloquial speech and found language as a ground on which to inscribe a poetic text of metrical systems and the carefully engineered mirco-events of rhythmic syntactic disjunctions and flows. Thanks to Swensen, *OXO* is a book of emphases that is never emphatic, displaying an attention without tension (without stress, *sans un accent*).

Writing about Henry James's oeuvre in "Un accent de vérité," Alferi makes a claim in terms that one might apply to his own books, including, especially *OXO*:

> cette question d'accent, pour futile qu'elle puisse paraître au regard enjeux théoretiques de ces livres, je crois qu'elle fut déterminante pour les lecteurs de mon âge quand ils les découvraient

> (that question of accent, as trifling as it might seem from the perspective of the theoretical stakes of these books, could, I think, be decisive for readers of my generation when they discover them).[15]

Alferi is clearly one of the writers of his generation to have discovered the importance of that question of tone, and in *OXO*, at least, he writes, quite literally, without the trace of an accent.

Notes

[1] *OXO* (like *Kub Or*) is unpaginated, with titles following each poem in uncapitalized italics. Perhaps even more than titles, these lines are best understood as captions, since they also appear beneath the series of photographs by Suzanne Doppelt included in the book. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations are from these books.

Verne's novel (originally published in three volumes between 1866-68) has gone through many editions; for the passages with Thalcave see Chapter XV.

[2] Alferi has written elsewhere about the importance of this meeting in James's garden; see "Un accent de vérité," *Revue des sciences humaines*, special number on Maurice Blanchot, 253 (1999).

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/ Signsponge*, *en face* translation by Nicholas Rand (NY: Columbia UP, 1985).

[4] "OXO" is the brand name of the British equivalent of the French Maggi brand bouillon cube.

[5] Jacques Derrida, "Survivre/ Journal de bord," *Parages* (Paris, Galilée, 1986) 147.

[6] *Charting The Here of There: French & American Poetry in Translation in Literary Magazines, 1850-2002* (New York: Granary, 2002) 89.

[7] For more on Zukofsky's influence in France, see Marjorie Perloff's excellent "Playing the Numbers: The French Reception of Louis Zukofsky," in *Verse* 22.2/3 (2006): 102-120.

[8] *Les Allures naturelles* (*Natural Gaits*) is the title of one of Alferi's books, also translated by Swensen (Paris: P.O.L., 1991; Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1995). For further evidence of Alferi's literary use of Parisian peripateticism, see *Le Chemin familier du poisson combatif* (Paris: P.O.L., 1992).

[9] See Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974); eponymous translation by John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

[10] Bennett and Mousli, *Charting* 137.

[11] Andrew Zawacki reminds me (personal correspondence, 25 July, 2006) of another indecisively accentuated name in the case of Emmanuel Levinas (at times Lévinas), where the instance of the accent seems to announce an uncertainty or discomfort over the relation of religious and national identities; the accent as a line of suture or separation between the notion of the "Jewish" and the "French."

[12] Alferi, "Un accent de vérité" 169.

[13] Pierre Alferi, *Guillaume d'Ockham: le singulier* (Paris: Minuit, 1989).

[14] Alferi, "Un accent de vérité" 167.

[15] *Ibidem* 170.