

## Cat in the Throat: Caroline Bergvall's Plurilingual Bodies

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Caroline Bergvall's poetic practice incorporates foreign elements to create a distorted and disarticulated English. Challenging national language and monolingual culture, her plurilingual texts emphasise the impossibility of a single cultural origin. Of French and Norwegian background, she adopted English as an adult. Bergvall defines plurilingual poetics as a 'writing that takes place across and between languages.'<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Perloff describes her as an 'exophonic poet,' whose practice is 'the processing and absorption of the "foreign" itself.'<sup>2</sup> The absorption of language through the body, the ways in which language defines bodily experience, is a central concern in Bergvall's oeuvre, a collection of which appears in *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts*.<sup>3</sup> The works collected in *Meddle English* focus on multilingualism in its relation to queer sexuality and the role of feminism in experimental poetics; Bergvall describes her feminist politics as 'embedded' in her work around bilingualism.<sup>4</sup> As an interdisciplinary artist, elements of performance, audio and visual art are engaged with in her writing. The written text, in English, is constantly breaking out of itself, attempting to cross the borders of language and medium. This double crossing (of both language and genre) also serves to 'double-cross' the reader, forcing them to actively engage.

The term 'Meddle' used in *Meddle English* evolved from the ideas present in an installation entitled 'Middling English' at the John Hansard gallery in 2010,<sup>5</sup> where language was imagined as 'a series of intersecting lines or tissues of lines.'<sup>6</sup> The meddle is both an else-where and a process of 'denaturalization of one's own personal and cultural premise.'<sup>7</sup> Bergvall's 'meddle' English can be thought of in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's concept<sup>8</sup> of a minor literature operating through deterritorialisation.<sup>9</sup> Bergvall's plurilingual idiolect, a 'collective assemblage of enunciation,' is writing 'finding its own patois.'<sup>10</sup>

A cross-genre collection, *Meddle English* gathers texts spanning over ten years, many of which have been adapted from audio-visual and performance pieces. The texts invite readers to engage differently with the printed page through typographic experimentation and visual collage. Aspects of spoken language and other bodily sounds are explored. References range from

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Bergvall, 'Performing Writing at the Crossroads of Languages', *Translating Nations* edited by Prim Poddar (Aarhus: Aarhus UP, 2000) 248.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'Language in Migration: Multilingualism and Exophonic Writing in the New Poetics', *Textual Practice* 24:4 (2010) 731-3.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Bergvall, *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts* (London: Nightboat, 2011). Henceforth *ME*.

<sup>4</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, 'An Interview with Caroline Bergvall', *Contemporary Women's Writing*. 5:3 November 2011. 235. Print. 243.

<sup>5</sup> In collaboration with DvsNarchitectural duo, musicians Adam Parkinson, Zahra Mani, designer Alex Prokop. Ran from 6 Sept. to 23 Oct. 2010 at John Hansard Gallery, Southampton.

<sup>6</sup> 'Middling English', *ME*. 5.

<sup>7</sup> 'Middling English', *ME*. 19.

<sup>8</sup> In her scholarly article 'Writing at the Crossroads of Languages', Bergvall explores 'the poetic and cultural significance of thinking about language in this Deleuze-Guattarian "minor" scale.' *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* edited by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature' trans. Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature* Vol. 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 18.

canonical literary works, academic scholarship, contemporary art and popular music. In each case Bergvall transforms and incorporates – (mis)appropriates, digests – other material into her own work. Bergvall’s embodied plurilingual identity is expressed as a source of friction and resistance: ‘To make and irritate English at its epiderm, and at my own.’<sup>11</sup> This idea of ‘irritation’ is developed in a piece entitled ‘Cat in the Throat.’<sup>12</sup> In French ‘one needs to spit out a cat in order to clear one’s throat.’<sup>13</sup> In English, one would need to spit out a frog. With both languages inhabiting the body, ‘fighting off one language with another language’<sup>14</sup> becomes an apt description of the act of writing. The French cat, *chat(te)*, is also slang for ‘one’s pussycat.’<sup>15</sup> To ‘write with a cat in one’s throat,’ is to engage with sexuality and conflicting cultural and linguistic influences.

Bergvall speaks of her poetic practice as a ‘traffic’ between languages. A traffic implies a constant coming and going, a chaotic *circulation*. It also evokes the traffic jam as traffic can get backed up, blocked (like a blocked throat). One can also speak of data traffic, signals between communication systems. ‘Traffic’ also means an illegitimate activity, one that undermines authority. Trafficking perverts the course of the exchange of values, of legitimate transactions. Identifying as queer, multinational and a non-native speaker of English, Bergvall explores the potential for the construction of a minor literature: ‘A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language, it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.’<sup>16</sup> Engaging with feminist issues within post-modern poetics, Bergvall belongs to a group of women poets whose approach (both feminist and experimental) places them ‘out of everywhere’<sup>17</sup> and who claim this displacement as the very position of poetry.<sup>18</sup> By locating her practice ‘else-here’ and focusing on sites of untranslatability,<sup>19</sup> Bergvall proceeds through Deleuze-Guattarian deterritorialisation; ‘a movement out of the territory, away from the place of habit, of recognition and of safety.’<sup>20</sup>

Moving out of the territory, of the place of habit, also means moving into the foreign, adopting and accepting foreign elements. Bergvall evokes Edouard Glissant’s notion of creolisation, and his insistence on the build-up of sediment in the creation of identity.<sup>21</sup> This metaphor is taken up in ‘Middling English’ to explore the materiality and ‘rot,’ the role of decomposition and accumulation in linguistic and cultural history. Bergvall interprets the ‘creolization’ of English as a vital and dynamic force, insisting on the creative possibilities of creolisation and *métissage*.<sup>22</sup> Writing is imagined as a digging through various layers of

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Middling English.’ *ME*. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Originally published in Jacket 37. *Jacket2*. Web. Summer 2009. Reprinted in part in *ME*: 156-8.

<sup>13</sup> *ME*: 156.

<sup>14</sup> *ME*: 156.

<sup>15</sup> *ME*: 157.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 16.

<sup>17</sup> Title of the cornerstone anthology *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK* edited by Maggie O’Sullivan (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Rosemarie Waldrop, in response to an audience member’s remark that being a woman writing experimental poetry, she is ‘out of everywhere’: ‘I take that as a compliment. I’ve more or less claimed this is the position of poetry.’ Quoted in Maggie O’Sullivan’s introduction to *Out of Everywhere*.

<sup>19</sup> Bergvall, ‘Writing at the Crossroads’ 221.

<sup>20</sup> Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010) 39.

<sup>21</sup> Bergvall, ‘Middling English’, *ME*.

<sup>22</sup> Positive and dynamic aspects of this succinctly relayed in Edouard Glissant, ‘Métissage et créolisation’, *Discours sur le métissage, identités métisses* edited by Silvie Kandé (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999) 51-52.

linguistic sedimentation - like Deleuze and Guattari's 'rat digging its burrow,'<sup>23</sup> burrowing through historical layers to arrive at a levelling, middling and meddling of English.

In 'Short Chaucer Tales,' Bergvall is digging through language, 'meddling' with Middle English, riddling it with contemporary slang and references.<sup>24</sup> The insistence here is on recreating the chaotic vitality and dynamism of Middle English, by exploring current trends, variations and creolisations:

The dispersed, intensely regional transformations of English active in the Middle English of Chaucer's days are again to be found in the inventive and adaptive, dispersed, diversely anglo-mixed, anglophonic, anglo-foamic languages practiced around the world today, as they follow or emerge from the grooves of military, commercial, cultural transport and trafficking.<sup>25</sup>

'Short Chaucer Tales' critiques ideological violence inscribed in the language of authority and privilege. Subjects range from the market economy to the Catholic Church. A section entitled 'London Zoo' pays homage to a Dubstep album released by The Bug in 2008.<sup>26</sup> By mixing lyrics from 'London Zoo' with Chaucerian influences, Bergvall operates a kind of cultural levelling that insists on the necessity of destabilising hegemonic language:<sup>27</sup>

Like fistfuls of hair puld out of social fabrik  
Like disregarded chicken bones litring the streets  
SO MANY THINGS IT GET ME ANGRY  
SO MANY THINGS IT MAKE ME MAD  
I GOTTA SAY AY<sup>28</sup>

The chorus of The Bug's 'Too much pain', its volume and force indicated by capitalisation, rips through the metaphoric passage on social catastrophe. Bergvall's insistence on the physicality of language responds to Bernstein's notion of sound 'as language's flesh.'<sup>29</sup> In the plurilingual body, it is the clearing of the (cat in the) throat, where 'the spittle can be resistant.'<sup>30</sup> This 'friction inside the speaker's mouth ... brings awareness of connection and obstruction.'<sup>31</sup> Bergvall's goal is 'to show the sounds of language as explicitly composed of the body's

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<sup>23</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 18.

<sup>24</sup> *ME* 21-38.

<sup>25</sup> 'Middling English', *ME*. 14.

<sup>26</sup> The Bug, *London Zoo*. Ninja Tune, July 2008. CD.

<sup>27</sup> Bergvall's appropriation of various Afro-Caribbean and black London dialects could raise some interesting questions, especially when placed in the shadow cast by Gertrude Stein's use of African American English in 'Melanctha' and the uncomfortable questions it raised. The political nature of Bass Music, its anti-capitalist narrative, is inflected with issues of race and social justice. Bergvall's involvement with Bass culture is long-standing, and in 2009 she collaborated with DJ /Rupture on 'More Pets' (*Solar Life Raft*). How do Bass Music politics relate to those of the anti-capitalist and largely white Language poets?

<sup>28</sup> 'Fried Tale (London Zoo)', *ME*. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Introduction', *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 21.

<sup>30</sup> 'Cat in the Throat', *ME*. 156.

<sup>31</sup> 'Cat in the Throat', *ME*. 158.

mechanics.<sup>32</sup> This body is also culturally and historically defined, compressed and oppressed by competing authorities.

The submission of the female body to cultural discourse is illustrated in 'Goan Atom.'<sup>33</sup> The sounds of clichéd parlance and childish phrases are reinterpreted in an exploration of the disarticulated female body. The text proceeds by accumulation, creating associations through plurilingual puns and portmanteaus, which are then torn away, 'expectorated,' spat out in contractions and monosyllabic sounds. The text is strewn with 'stubborn chunks'<sup>34</sup> of untranslatability. Repetition and fragmentation recreate 'an act of stuttering that valorizes and enables the manifestation of the inherent plurilingualism contained within any living language.'<sup>35</sup> Clichéd formulations are subverted through a kind of dismemberment; Vincent Broqua aptly describes this as deconstructing clichés through 'an anatomisation of language.'<sup>36</sup>

'Goan Atom' takes as its starting point the photographs of disarticulated mannequins by artist Hans Bellmer<sup>37</sup> and their dialogue with Urica Zürn's anagrams.<sup>38</sup> The muddled letters of each four-letter word recreate beastly, vulgar sounds; unwanted emissions that a civilising language attempts to hide.<sup>39</sup> They're also, before each section, variously taken away and reassembled – disarticulated letters mirroring the disarticulated bodies of Hans Bellmer's mannequins. The 's' sound at the end of cogs, gas, fats is isolated and repeated over several pages, towards the end of the section entitled 'Gas.' In the audiotext version, the 's' consonant is repeated over approximately fifteen seconds, sounding something like gas escaping.<sup>40</sup> This serves to remind us that 'the body speaks in mysterious ways and from unexpected orifices.'<sup>41</sup>

As body and words are disassembled and disarticulated, they literally start falling apart - as both the sounds (in performance) and the words themselves separate:

Woo pops  
er  
body portion  
to the flo  
ring the morning  
it's never matt  
ers what goes back  
ow w<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 'Cat in the Throat', *ME*. 158.

<sup>33</sup> *ME*: 63-122. First published as *Goan Atom* (Berkeley: Krupskaya, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Homi Bhabha's term in *The Location of Culture*: 'Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable element – the stubborn chunks – as the basis of cultural identification.' (London: Routledge, 1994) 219. See Bergvall's use of 'stubborn chunks' in 'Writing at the Crossroads of Languages.'

<sup>35</sup> Bergvall's reading of Deleuze-Guattarian 'stuttering' in 'Writing at the Crossroads of Languages': 209.

<sup>36</sup> Vincent Broqua, 'Delineating a 'non-place' in the UK? 10 notes on experimental poetry written by women: Caroline Bergvall and Redell Olsen', *E-rea*. 6.1 (2008).

<sup>37</sup> *La Poupée*. 1935-36.

<sup>38</sup> 'her anagrams, which are about language-constraint and fit, and his grammar of the body, which is based on anagrammatic imagination.' Caroline Bergvall in Linda A. Kannahan, 'An Interview with Caroline Bergvall. *Contemporary Women's Writing* 5.3 (2011) 248-9.

<sup>39</sup> A fascination with vulgar bodily emissions is of course found in the works of minor literature's exemplary figure Samuel Beckett – Bergvall sees his practice as an 'expectoration of the English language', see 'A Cat in the Throat', *Jacket* 37. *Jacket*2. Web. Summer 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Caroline Bergvall, 'Gas' (Segue Series Reading Nov. 2000). Charles Bernstein and Arl Filreis Dirs. *PennSound*. Centre for Programs in Contemporary Writing. University of Pennsylvania. Web.

<sup>41</sup> Bergvall, 'A Cat in the Throat', *Jacket* 37. *Jacket*2. Web. Summer 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Bergvall, 'Goan Atom', *ME*. 76.

Who, or more aptly what, is speaking in ‘Goan Atom’? Language’s (violent) inscription in the body is played out as the female body itself speaks, a ‘poupée de cuir, poupée de çon.’<sup>43</sup> This a more aggressive variation of Gainsbourg’s title lyrics *Poupée de cire poupée de son*,<sup>44</sup> deepening the pun to expose the underlying violence. The sexual violence suggested in the song (and its performance by an ingénue France Gall) is crudely materialised in the print version of ‘Goan Atom.’ The simple replacement of ‘son’ with ‘çon’, the presence of the ‘c’ (*con/cunt*), startles the French reader for whom the phrase resonates with the Yé-Yé music of the mid-sixties. The doll-body is broken and dismembered, spread and exploded - like Gainsbourg’s *poupée de son*, broken into a million pieces of sound (*brisée en mille éclats de voix*). The other voice, that was also present in Short Chaucer Tales, is that of the patriarchal law, the ‘EVERYHOST’:

Abodys a corps  
 Abody sa corps is cur bed  
*lie in it*

says the EVERY HOST  
 For whom still sleeps encore in bod  
 in your bedY vient in corps  
 Make fl  
 esh sometimes much agreed  
 encore encore  
 in corps accord  
 mate loot with loot<sup>45</sup>

The phonetic spelling of ‘Abodys’ recalls the pastoral American ‘a body’ to mean a person. The contraction is graphically ‘keeping body and soul together.’ It seems to be a sort of translation – a ‘body’ in English is indeed a ‘corps’ in French – but far from being equivalent, it evokes the sinister ‘corpse’ in English or even ‘corps,’ as in bureaucratic or military. But ‘Abodys’ corps (or a person’s body) is also a ‘cur’ – a mongrel dog. A mongrel in bed – cur. bed. – or also a body that’s *curbed* – a body that’s been curbed, restrained – in French *courbé*, a body or a back *courbé* is bending under a weight, a strain or an oppression. The EVERY HOST – the religious and patriarchal law – says ‘*lie in it*’- from the English expression ‘you made your bed, now lie in it.’ The every host, as you sleep, ‘Y vient’ (in French) to ‘make flesh’ but in doing so is tearing the ‘fl/esh’ apart.

As the reference to Gainsbourg’s song suggests, ‘every mouth is ador.’<sup>46</sup> The ‘çon’/*con/cunt* is the source of irrational discourse, of idiocy (*connerie*) and of the *idiolect* – idiosyncratic speech.<sup>47</sup> ‘Goan Atom’ gives voice to the *con(s)* as embodied yet dislocated female voice(s). The ‘pussycat’ speaks; the *cat/cunt*’s discourse is irrational, does not belong to human, articulated

<sup>43</sup> Bergvall, ‘Goan Atom’, *ME* 72.

<sup>44</sup> Literal translation ‘doll (made of) wax, doll (made of) sound’. Serge Gainsbourg, *France Gall, Poupée de cire, Poupée de son*. Philips, 1965. LP.

<sup>45</sup> Bergvall, ‘Goan Atom’, *ME* 107.

<sup>46</sup> Bergvall, ‘Goan Atom’, *ME* 101.

<sup>47</sup> George Steiner develops the notion of ‘idiolect’ as a language or ‘parlance’ that contains ‘privacies of reference singular to the speaker or writer,’ and which could only ever partially translate in *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998) 94.

language. The poet Anne Carson examines this notion in her essay ‘The Gender of Sound,’ as she explores the Greek and Latin consensus of the female body having two mouths, which are linked and must both be locked, for ‘when it is not locked the mouth may gape open and utter unspeakable things.’<sup>48</sup> It is not civilised language, but uncontrollable emissions, spontaneous secretions that proceed from the second mouth and therefore must be controlled:

NO  
workable pussy  
ever was su  
posed to discharge at will  
all over the factory  
sclamation mark<sup>49</sup>

Fragmentation and lack of self-possession caused by language violence is also explored in ‘Cropper,’ where Bergvall begins by asking: ‘How does one keep ones body as ones own, what does this mean but the relative safety of boundaries.’<sup>50</sup> ‘Cropper’ includes passages that at first glance seem to be translated, only the translations don’t quite correspond.<sup>51</sup> As they are not wholly equivalent in content, the phrases also dialogue with each other. In the first half, all the English phrases begin with ‘Some’ and all the Norwegian phrases with the homophonic ‘*som*’ which means ‘as’ or ‘like.’ The French phrases begin with ‘*ceux*’ – those. The three initial words interact with each other as some/like/these. As the first half progresses, so the translations correspond less and less to the initial English phrase. In the middle of the text, the French and Norwegian disappear and are replaced by two lone English phrases: ‘Some bodies are forgotten in the language compounds/ Some immense pressure is applied on to the forgetting of the ecosystems some escape from.’ These two phrases draw the thematic chiasmus, situated at the midpoint of text. As the text progresses, the translations become increasingly equivalent, to end with the phrase: ‘Some that arise in some of us arrive in each of us’, followed by roughly equivalent translations in Norwegian and French.<sup>52</sup> This concession to translation is used to explore the fact that, ‘for an overwhelming number of persons,’ the violence contained within language prevents one from keeping ‘ones body as ones own.’ Bergvall’s own experience is of being ‘torn to pieces’<sup>53</sup> in the passage between languages, of being silenced by the voices of the ‘law.’

This experience is recounted in ‘Croup.’ Croup is a respiratory condition common in children, triggered by an acute viral infection that impedes breathing and is marked by a barking cough. The piece begins with a seemingly straightforward narration, recounting the difficulty Bergvall experiences after being asked to compose a text in Norwegian. What follows is a lyrical account of origins, as she is ‘lifted up from childhood lipsings,’ ‘suddenly awake in ones own language’ and in one’s own sexuality. Language and sexual awakening coincide in a syncretic exploration of sight and touch:

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<sup>48</sup> Anne Carson, ‘The Gender of Sound’ *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995) 132.

<sup>49</sup> Bergvall, ‘Goan Atom’, *ME* 99.

<sup>50</sup> *ME* 147.

<sup>51</sup> *ME* 147-151.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Some that arise in some of us arrive in each of us/ noen some reiser seg i noen av oss kommer frem i hver av oss/ qui se levant en nous se relèvent de chacun de nous.’ *ME* 151.

<sup>53</sup> ‘To flesh out in one lettre and be torn to pieces by the next.’ ‘Croup’, *ME*. 141.

Words r vibrations pattns of activity, units prefigurd that steep us into prefab. Colour a reminder that beings n objects r vibrations in the end but vibration. Depth of contrast, intense attraction spread across our volumes.<sup>54</sup>

‘Croup’ is characterised by a proliferation of plurilingual puns and homophonic evocations, as well as a symbolic duality of light and darkness, voice and silence. The first language, French, is ripped out and replaced by the language of the law. French is presented as feminine, a sensual presence of light and vowel-rich melody, to be destroyed by approaching darkness and heaviness:

She appeard to me frankly. Lifted me up from childhood lipsings, showd me the field the dawn aurora thru the bursting green of the French valléy, all around the arbouring trees blind us with shards of verre in the light mounting silver birds slivering past. Voila she led me to the river, eau eau pressed me down lifted my long brass towards the seal of the summer sky, up-chemised my shirt peléd layers of cloth and peeling skin, couchd me safely profoundly on this earth.

The child is then given language, an ‘exacting luminescence’, by ‘She,’ the embodiment of the French language, placing a lump of saliva on her tongue. Her ‘lipsings’ evoke ‘lipping’ which, like stuttering, is a speech impediment. But lip-sing also evokes a sensual idea of sound coming from lips, a reminder that language is spoken through the mouth. The birth into language is associated with light, with the melodious vowel rich French described as ‘its crucial tra la la’. This language will be torn out violently in the passage to Norwegian, encroaching darkness like the encroaching consonants. The ‘law’ will intervene, the first, oral language – located in the body, in the mouth is replaced by the language of a choral consensus:

Nonono came the voices choral came the law. Loud verbal hindrances, they tear through my mysteries. Nono no body be language sexd in this way, a crowd moves in, anuls this ovr-exposure to light. Tear down subsequent years, reorganise my orgns. I lose my one, corps déserted, first language beatn out of it. How will I speak.<sup>55</sup>

A hindrance, an impediment to speech (perhaps a cat, or a frog) must be cleared before the second language can be spoken. Loss of voice is also caused by disease (*the croup*), by rot or decomposition.

Disease and decomposition can affect the voice, the source of spoken language, but can also attack the written text. This is explored by Bergvall through her discussion of the holes in Sapphic manuscripts. In ‘Material Compounds’ she reflects on Anne Carson’s translations of Sappho.<sup>56</sup> She responds, in a personal and poetic manner, to some of the concepts explicated in Carson’s introduction to her translations.<sup>57</sup> Bergvall notes the use of brackets and ellipsis<sup>58</sup> to represent elements of the text that have been lost, disintegrated and erased over time and accident:

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Croup’, *ME*. 143.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Croup’, *ME*. 141-2.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Material compounds.’ *ME*. 130-32.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Three years previously Josephine Balmer published ‘bracketed translations’ of Sappho under the title *Poems & Fragments* (Bloodaxe Books, 1992), and has published her own verse intermingled with her translations of Catullus in *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions* (Bloodaxe Books, 2004). Edith Hall describes feminist and subversive classicists such as Balmer as ‘transvestite translators’ whose works re-examine the role of translator as companion subject (‘Subjects, Selves and Survivors’, *Helios* 34:2, 2007.135.).

Anne Carson's bilingual and bracketed translations of Sappho's lyric ardour makes it a poetics for our time, a language of the erased, of the stranger, of the visual stutter and hyphenated or elliptical being. Of the co-existence of written and erased.<sup>59</sup>

Carson explains her use of brackets as follows:

Brackets are an aesthetic *gesture* toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it ... I emphasize the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss *the drama of trying to read* a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp - brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.<sup>60</sup>

The 'papyrological event' is not so much the degradation, but the drama of trying to make sense, to fill the gaps - giving free reign to the imagination, but not focusing on the gaps themselves as equal in meaning. The 'imaginal adventure' Carson allows the reader is reinterpreted by Bergvall in a literal manner:

She uses brackets to stage a connection between text and 'papyrus dust.' The brackets want us to imagine the corrosive dust, the holes, the rot, the degradation of the text's material support.<sup>61</sup>

Bergvall muses on Carson's decision not to include *all* the gaps as brackets:

The text's material history is allowed to resonate at the heart of the poetic work but as she comments, 'to represent all the erasures would riddle the pages with brackets.' One wishes she had. Why put some in and not the rest?<sup>62</sup>

Carson's aim, as a translator, is to let another speak: 'I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through. This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor.'<sup>63</sup> The goal remains to make Sappho, or rather Sappho's text, 'sing and speak.' Representing all erasures would make it unreadable, truly a 'language of the erased.'<sup>64</sup> Bergvall is not focused on the Sapphic text but on 'Sappho-compost.'<sup>65</sup> This insistence on materiality is perhaps the source of another critique of Carson's approach:

Carson, in her introduction to *If Not, Winter* writes: 'It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?' Sure. But leave what matter where?<sup>66</sup>

Carson dismisses the question of Sappho's lesbianism somewhat flippantly: 'Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people's time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship.'<sup>67</sup> She refuses to engage with the 'matter' – the matter of Sappho's lesbianism, and the matter of Sappho's body. Her equation of women with music, the

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<sup>59</sup> Bergvall, 'Material Compounds', *ME* 130-1.

<sup>60</sup> Carson, 'On marks and lacks', *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, xi. (Italics mine)

<sup>61</sup> Bergvall, 'Material Compounds', *ME* 130.

<sup>62</sup> Bergvall, 'Material Compounds', *ME* 130.

<sup>63</sup> Carson, 'On the Text', *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, x.

<sup>64</sup> See Federman on experimental writing and unreadability, footnote 17.

<sup>65</sup> Bergvall, 'Material Compounds', *ME* 131.

<sup>66</sup> Bergvall, 'Material Compounds', *ME* 131.

<sup>67</sup> Carson, 'On Sappho', *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, x.



most ethereal of arts, enforces this refusal. On the other hand, Bergvall asserts that ‘Forever the rot will cohabit with the readable. The ruin with the erudition. *The love with what’s left.*’<sup>68</sup> The love does and must cohabit with the ‘matter.’ The love *is* the matter.

Elsewhere, Carson notes that it is woman who exposes what should be kept in ‘by projections and leakages of all kinds,’ and that the task of patriarchal culture is the censorship of such projections.<sup>69</sup> Just as the female body leaks out and projects, resists totality, so too does the plurilingual experience escape neat categorisation. A return to materiality, to the corporeality of sound, allows for spontaneous, uncontrolled projections. ‘Cat in the Throat’ is a reminder of the fact that articulated language is what separates the human from ‘asocial groaning,’ ‘articulated language is all that becomes possible once the cat, the animal, the pure physiology of sound, has been successfully removed from my throat.’<sup>70</sup> Choosing to speak with a cat in one’s throat is a return to the pre-linguistic, a refusal of articulated language and of civilising (patriarchal) authority. The female voice is the animality of speech, or perhaps what Deleuze and Guattari describe as those ‘qualities of underdevelopment’ that a language tries to hide: ‘the barking of the dog, the cough of the ape, and the bustling of the beetle.’<sup>71</sup> The cat’s patois.

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<sup>68</sup> Bergvall, ‘Material Compounds’, *ME* 131. (Italics mine)

<sup>69</sup> ‘The Gender of Sound’, *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995) 129.

<sup>70</sup> ‘A Cat in the Throat’, *Jacket* 37. *Jacket2*. Web. Summer 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ‘Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature’ trans. Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*. Vol. 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 26.