How Not to Teach Multilingual Writing

Paradoxically, multilingual writing is an oddity even though it's widely practiced. The more upheaval in the world, the more people travel and relocate, the more languages will bump into each other, as if they too were travelers, cosmopolitan beings themselves.

Before I can say why or how multilingual writing should or should not be taught, I have to explain why I myself engage in this intermingling of languages. Multilingualism may be at the root of some of my writing, but something entirely different may be at the root of another writer's writing. And it's probably the root causes that we keep returning to, as if radicalness were to be understood in terms of rootedness.

I grew up learning one language after another, like many Europeans born during the Second World War, moving from country to country, learning language after language by necessity, being equally comfortable in all of them. I don't much care whether we're conversing in French, Hungarian, German, or English. When I'm going from site to site on the Internet, I often don't realize what language I'm reading, until I make a conscious effort to identify it. Similarly, when writing poetry, I don't necessarily make a point of noticing the language I'm writing in.

I don't feel predominantly English speaking, even though I've lived most of my adult life in New York and am definitely most comfortable in English today. But give me a few days in Paris and I'll be just as comfortable there, as I would be in Vienna or Budapest. This particular condition, I suspect, is at the root of my own multilingual writing. However, unlike Eugene Jolas, whose work I admire, I don't consider the intermingling of the languages I know a "facile escape," as he put it. Au contraire—it's neither facile, nor an escape.

Here is "Ami Minden," a multilingual poem that was first published in 1991 in the literary journal *Conjunctions* (#16) and a year later in my book *Cat Licked the Garlic* (Tsunami Editions, 1992), where it appeared repeatedly on several pages, always superimposed over different images. This constituted a kind of score. Shown a few pages below. It's also included in my most recent book of new and selected works, *The Dik-dik's Solitude* (Granary Books, 2002). The languages used are French, Hungarian, German, and English.

Ami minden quand un yes or no je le said

viens am liebsten hätte ich dich du süßes

de ez nem baj das weisst du me a favor

hogy innen se faire croire

tous less birds als die Wälder langsam verschwinden.

Minden verschwinden, mind your step and woolf.

Verschwinden de nem innen—

je vois de void in front of mich—

je sens, als ich érzem qu'on aille, aille,

de vágy a fejem, csak éppen (eben sagte ich wie die Wälder

verschwinden). I can repeat it as a credo so it sinks into our

cerveaux und wird embedded there, mint egy teória

mathématique, "d'enchâssement" die Verankerungstheorie in

der Mathematik, hogy legalább . . .[1]

In this poem "Ami Minden" the meaning of the word *ami,* if you look at it from the French point of view, is (male) *friend*, but if you're reading it as a Hungarian word, it means *that* or *which*. The word *minden* means *everything* or *all* in Hungarian. So *ami minden* could mean *all that* or *friend everything*, or *all friend*, and so on.

My prerequisite for writing multilingually could be nothing more complicated than achieving a certain state of mind, creating an environment that is favorable to abandoning the barriers between languages and dealing with the rhythm, balance, harmony of the sounds, and even meaning—but without a particular focus on any language's identity. This state of mind can be difficult to achieve, because it's virtually impossible to conjure it up intentionally. All I can do is create the conditions for inspiration, or as I prefer to think of it, the freedom to write. Creating an environment to create, in my case, could be simply having a comfortable amount of free time ahead of me and, if possible, an empty desk, which would encourage an empty mind. I'm referring to the kind of emptiness from which new thoughts are more likely to emerge than from a mind cluttered with worry. The composer Claude Debussy writes on this subject

> "Time spent carefully creating the atmosphere in which a work of art must move is never wasted. As I see it, one must never be in a hurry to write things down. One must allow the complex play of ideas free rein: how it works is a mystery and we too often interfere with it by being impatient—which comes from being too materialistic, even cowardly, although we don't like to admit it.
>
> You put such strong pressure on your ideas that they no longer dare present hemselves to you, they're so afraid of not being dressed in a way you'd approve of. You don't let yourself go enough in particular you don't seem to allow enough play to that mysterious force which guides us towards the true expression of a feeling, whereas dedicated, single-

minded searching only weakens it."[2]

When I finally reach this state of mind, I'm hardly conscious of it until later, after it's over, after the words have come forth in an easy, though never facile, stream.

Elements of meaning in a poem become apparent only long after the writing . . . if I'm lucky. By losing myself in languages, in the sounds of words rather than their meaning, I allow new meanings to arise spontaneously. I know I'm not alone in this; almost everyone who writes does it to learn something, to discover, to invent. The act of writing is not necessarily the notation of some preconceived thought, although it can be that. Often, however, it is a process of coming to conclusions or realizing that no conclusions are possible.

I do love to teach. It's always an honor. And I always leave feeling that I've learned a great deal, that I've confirmed and clarified and even understood certain aspects of my ways of working by attempting to make them clear to others. I don't purport to know more than my students, but I probably have a longer road behind me and can help prepare them for what they're likely to encounter along their own paths.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, I teach only intermittently. When invited, I participate in panel discussions, I visit a class here, give a lecture there, teach a week-long seminar in Vienna or Boulder, or teach an online class in cyberspace. More on this later.

Encouraging the invention of new forms, I use my multilingual writing mainly as an example of doing something radical, something completely personal and unique to one's own self.

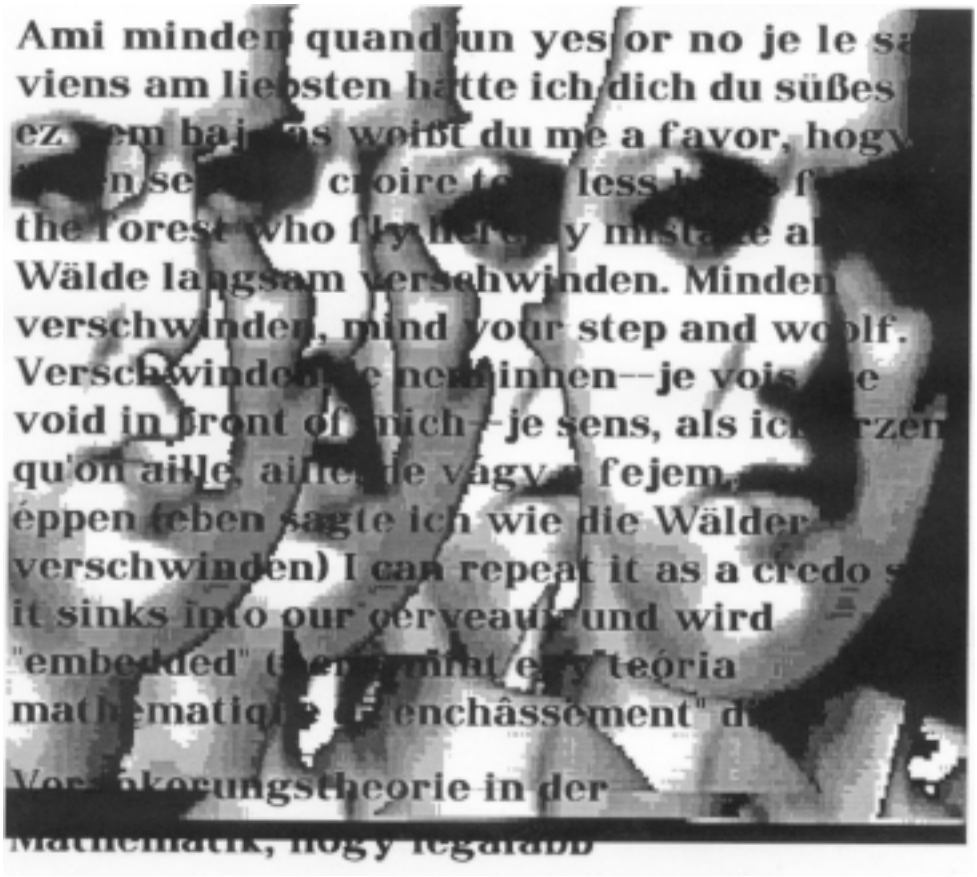
It seems that by switching from one language to another I arrive at some deeper truth than if I were to remain within the confines of a single language. Although I teach multilingual writing, I don't suggest to my students that they should write using more than one language at a time, unless they themselves are multilingual. What I do propose is that they write using multiple forms of expression, using all means available to them.

So when the subject of my class is multilingual writing, the writing in question is mine, not the students'. I tell how I mingle languages the way they naturally occur in my mind, and I suggest that my students, too, try to find that spot, that place of their own, where they can write in ways they never dared to try before. I don't suggest that these new ways involve using new poetic forms or new languages; rather, I encourage them to find a locus of personal truth within their heart or liver or wherever it is we write from—perhaps the brain, though I suspect that every part of us is involved in the process.

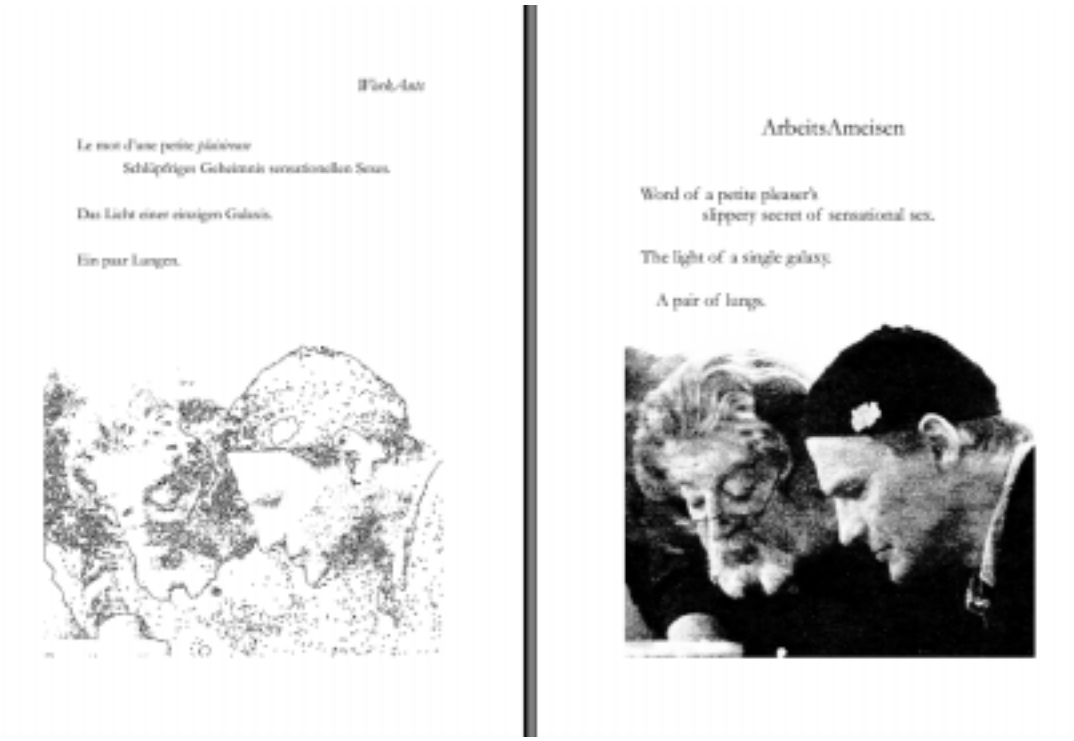
Here is an example of what you can do with (or to) a poem like "Ami Minden," where by superimposing an image over the text, I've created a performance score. My guidelines to performing it are: "Sentences, words, and word fragments that are printed over white, are to be read normally, using a normal tone of voice.

Sentences, etc., printed over gray, but still legible, are to be whispered—*audibly*. Different shades of gray indicate degrees of loudness. The darker the gray under the letters, the softer the whisper should be.

Black areas are to be interpreted as silences lasting as long as the words obliterated by them. Each performer should decide for herself what those words may be."[3]



Below is another example from *Uxudo,* in which I reserve the left-hand pages for translations, transliterations, and other clarifications of the original poem on the right-hand page.



From *Uxudo*[4]

Text on left-hand page (the translations):

WorkAnts

Le mot d'une petite *plaisireuse*
Schlüpfriges Geheimnis sensationellen Sexes.
Das Licht einer einzigen Galaxis.
Ein paar Lungen.

Text on right-hand page (the original text):

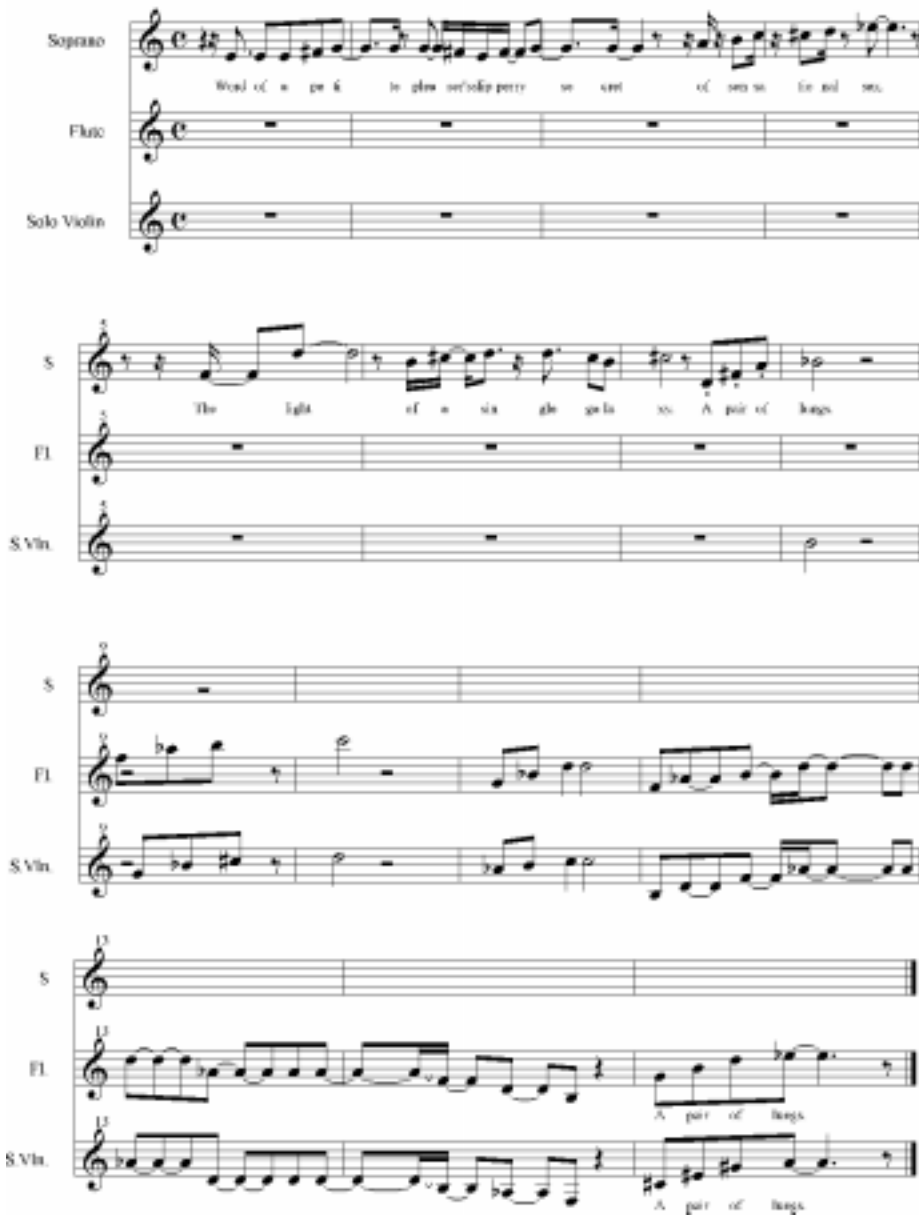
ArbeitsAmeisen

Word of a petite pleaser's slippery secret of sensational sex.
The light of a single galaxy.
A pair of lungs.

Later, in the spirit of "use all you have," I set this, and other poems, to music. The soprano, Mary Hurlbut, the flutist Andrew Bolotowsky, and the violonist Theresa Salomon premiered the pieces at Roulette, in New York, 1999.

WorkAnts

Arnic Tardot



Another interesting experience for me has been teaching online, which I did in 1999 for a school in Vienna, a private school for poetry that is no longer extant, save for an Internet version. This virtual class basically consisted of what amounted to e-mails going back and forth between me and the students until I encouraged the school to set up a forum where students could discuss their work among themselves and not depend on me for every bit of communication.

Teaching in cyberspace is clearly different from teaching in person. When I'm sitting or standing in front of a class, students experience me in intricate ways that defy description—the sound of my voice combined with a gesture, a facial expression, the texture of my clothes, etcetera. In an online class, students' experience of the teacher seems relatively impoverished, but there are advantages too—no distractions and no ephemeral things of the moment. Your message is completely in your writing, and since most writers tend to be graphomaniacs anyway, it's not hard for them to adapt to the situation.

At the same time that I was teaching this online class, I was invited to Hawaii to participate in the "Alter Englishes" festival. Early each morning, using the computers in the University of Hawaii at Manoa's library, I would implore my Viennese students not to imitate me, but to find their own ways of writing, and later in the day I would explain to my Hawaiian students why my work has no conscious political intentions. Yet, of course, it's politics that's behind my knowing many languages. If Hitler hadn't pursued European Jews all over the continent, I might speak only French, as I was born in France. Or maybe, without Hitler, I would never have been born at all, since my parents (Hungarian father and Austrian mother) met in France, in the Resistance. So, do I have Hitler to thank for my existence? I shudder to think in those terms—but there's a certain truth there, and it would have to follow that my existence and, indeed, everyone else's, is a political statement.

Good art is primarily about ideas, which can be political or not, unilingual or not. The important thing is that the ideas be interesting to the artist at the time of the creating the artwork.

Below is an example of a poem using many neologisms. Multilingual writing inevitably led me to neolingual composition. Words are spelled for the anglophone reader so they're pronounced as I intended them to sound. "Shightenberby Gravitas" was first published in the Chilean literary journal *Caballo verde para la poesía* (nº extraordinario, Santiago, 2002) and is included in *The Dik-dik's Solitude*.

Shightenberby gravitas
Mellifelly boo-boo
Goober ginger wistenbarber
Semitenter fifer

Ginny ganga zubenmeter
Kiss me Wendy bumper veil
Selfamigo face flamingo
Senten garvel shivering

Flexi fondo Melissande
Jumpy gumbo epigraph
Viva cactus Velcro dexter
Humdrum fenugreek basking shark

Fandidia jumping Joe
Cinderella sentiment
Vexing kneecap bloody contact
Buster Keaton piggyback

Money-mouse Moby Dick
Aftershaving aquavit
Sandalwooden afterthought
Genuflexing mudsling

Bunnyrabbit whispers
Jelly-pepper ding-dong

Candlestick asparagus
Documenta flip-flop

Unerotic cummerbund
Difficulty sitzbath

Sindbad rickshaw
Rottweiler recipe

Pixel granite *kickerley*[5]

An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title "Why I Write the Way I Write" at the conference on Poetry & Pedagogy at Bard College, June 24-27, 1999). It was extensively updated and retitled in 2002.

Anne Tardos

[1] *Cat Licked the Garlic*, Tsunami Editions, 1992, p. 4

[2] *Debussy Letters,* selected and edited by François Lesure and Roger Nichols. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, p. 122 (in a letter to Raoul Bardac, 1901)

[3] C*at Licked the Garlic*, p. 7.

[4] *Uxudo*, Tuumba Press / O Books, 1999, pp. 36, 37

[5] *The Dik-dik's Solitude: New and Selected Works*, Granary Books, p. 34