

Experimental article

'Nordhavn offings': Writing with/in (three) languages [haibun]

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Navigating between terse prose passages and the intense poetic images of the haibun, I use this hybrid form, which itself transcends cultural and generic boundaries, to reflect on my creative practice as an academic author, literary translator, research-based poet and writing tutor. Translanguaging, transreading and transwriting are akin to feeling at sea not because of the proverbial loss of direction, but because the visible sea at a distance offers safety from inshore dangers. Such offings become translocal waters of playful experiments which may assist public and private cartographies.

Keywords: translanguaging, multiliteracies, multilingual writing, creative writing, home languages, avant-textes

The dimmed lights and the hushed gallery space – a welcome respite from loud, since lively, discussions in full light among the delegates. I pause before a painting as the word of its title swims into the porthole of my attention. *Offing*. Something marine?

Nordhavn offings

*In this way, when I write bougie and so evoke light,
on the inside the Italian word bugia, which means lie,
is 'lunging' and attracting around it a darker semantic field.*
Jean Portante

This not knowing in any of the languages I know – my home English; Polish I was born into; Russian, Latin, German I picked up during my literature, linguistics and translation studies; rudimentary Danish into which I've just moved – singles me out as a non-expert reader of the painting's text. It signals the capacity not to be underestimated in our academic communication, where the instant recognition of domain-specific terms comforts with the sense of belonging.

today only the spilt glare
signals the sea *havet : morze*

The organizers of the centenary symposium devoted to the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, who made her homes in Canada and Brazil, have invited me to Halifax, Nova Scotia,¹ to share my knowledge: more than a decade of close reading of her poetry. My poring over her word choices recorded not only in published poems, but also in multiple drafts archived at Vassar College, upstate New York, where I was fortunate to spend my Fulbright scholarship – submerged in the darker semantic field of this one author, who confided in her fellow-writer: ‘My passion for accuracy may strike you as old-maidish – but since we do float on an unknown sea I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way very carefully.’²

the horizontals care
fully displayed
against the turbines and cranes *turbiny*

Suspended among my own multiliterate words and thoughts – of a scholar resorting to cognitive poetics, which understands literary texts as the most dramatic and textured expression of the human mind constructing meaning. Of a scholar learning from genetic criticism to see any text as ‘avant-texte’: ‘*the totality of formulations that, as previous possibilities, have become part of a given work of writing.*’³

the blue underlined
with emerald
or is it turquoise *turkus*

As a literature scholar, writer and writing tutor, I’m eager to investigate the extent to which texts ‘write themselves despite, or even against, authors who believe they are implementing their writerly craft.’⁴

¹ How clouds change shape in eighteen words: Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Sestina’ and its two Polish translations. The Elizabeth Bishop Centenary Symposium. Nova Scotia, Halifax, June 2011. I moved from Kraków, Poland, to Copenhagen, Denmark, in July 2009.

² Elizabeth Bishop in a letter to Robert Lowell, cited in David Kalstone’s *Becoming a poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (1989, p. 213); cited in my book, *Cognitive poetic readings in Elizabeth Bishop: Portrait of a mind thinking* (2010, p. 79).

³ Jean Bellemin-Noël, Psychoanalytic reading and the avant-texte, *Genetic criticism: Textes and avant-textes*, ed. Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden (2004, p. 30); original emphasis; cited in my book (2010, p. 83).

⁴ Jean Bellemin-Noël in Deppman (2004, p. 6), cited in my book (2010, p. 83).

lustre of the littoral
underpaths of Polish

'I agree with Bellemin-Noël that "for the [genetic] researcher nothing is more valuable than a new word, one that extends a series and brings an added clarity to it. Such a word, in general, has been repressed [in later drafts]: it is nowhere to be found, at least not as a readable, visible whole. And it happens that the avant-texte can permit us to discover this lost word".'⁵ As a multilingual reader and translator, I add my own avant-textes – I 'make gradual inroads upon words, images, thoughts, emotions and silences of the original poem and its variants: its multiple readings, drafts, annotated versions, re-drafts, renditions into another language, unpublished and published texts.'⁶

the white spotting of a whale
ferry – breathturning my first language lunging

Communicating our expertise as multidisciplinary and multiliterate academic speakers and writers, we reach out not only to those who already know, but also to those who want to learn. As a teacher of (research) writing (in English), I encourage authors to cast their nets wide: to catch the attention not only of their peers, expert readers, but also of non-experts. Eager learners of new words.

the right half of the harbour
outsparkles the left left for languages

Words and concepts that float. That need to be ferried across. Translated. Translanguaged.

two bulging lamps slowly slide back
as the ship pushes forward Danish wedges itself between
Polish and
English

The dimmed lights and the hushed classroom space – anticipation among the novice and more experienced writers. We hope for a trusted community. We are about to introduce ourselves. On the whiteboard I write: *home language*. 'What do you think it is?'

⁵ Jean Bellemin-Noël in Deppman (2004, p. 34), cited in my book (2010, p. 84).

⁶ For my discussion of the poem-in-translation 'not so much as a locality bounded by the translator's native culture, but as a place expanding while the translator traverses the surrounding territories of the page, textual variants and readings in other cultures,' illustrated by three case studies (my avant-texts of three contemporary Polish poets: Marcin Świetlicki, Marzanna Kielar and Krystyna Miłobędzka), see: Placing the poem in translation, *Placing poetry*, ed. Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding (2013, pp. 41–67).

a sudden raft topped with orange
squats midwater

svimmelt hen over det hvide

We borrow home language as a specialist term from Translation Studies to give 'native tongues' a wide berth. 'What are yours?' I ask the new class. And myself.

mute wind turbines mill the
haze on the horizon

dizzy over the white

'Language we feel at home at?' 'Languages we come home to.'

one turbine has stopped
mesmerized
by the slate hulk tearing itself
off the coast

pijane ponad bielą

Writing to the prompt of my first five questions in the new semester, most students point at the accurate word as their biggest challenge. That's when we read together about translanguaging. About multilingual writers and their strategies of back translation, rehearsing and postponing. About multiliterate readers and their natural tendency to rethink their word choices more frequently than monolingual writers (nowadays a rare species, anyway). The not-to-be-underestimated sigh of relief and comfort of recognition.⁷

the punch card of portholes
slotted into
the row of S-tog windows

Ord som flade fisk der flaprede

'(...) My lexicon is vast – and it is translingual – and I love it! // Freedom to peruse my thoughts. Freedom to pursue them through multiple languages to a final destination and not get stopped at every layby of "correctness" along the way. // Not needing every mono-language to be perfect – using only one of them to express my dreams, my dares, my fantasy Queendoms. // Now my expression is set free from these restraints. Free to explore the richness, the diversity, the quaintness and the quirks of each and every language I know, and even those with which I have only a nodding acquaintance. // Side-tracked from writing by thinking I needed to be monolingual. // Berating myself for not being better at any one individual language. // Using my semiotic repertoire and enacting my

⁷ Velasco, Patricia and Ofelia García, Translanguaging and the writing of bilingual learners. *Bilingual research journal*, 37 (2014), pp. 6–23.

pluriliteracies I can bring ideas, abstractions, feelings, dreams and fantasies to the drawing board ready to be assembled into “un objet d’art”.⁸

the golden streak claims larger
much larger area

Words like flat fish that flapped

‘This is what happened to me upon reading “Translanguaging.” Before reading this article, I have struggled with the academic and grammatical correctness of the languages I know. I never felt very competent in any of them and used the fear of making a fool of myself that this generated as a form of procrastination. The realisation that mixing languages could be an equally valid way to write has given me a boost in my communication methods, both written and verbal – and possibly affecting my body language as well?’⁹

smear by the rain
the grey
electricity shack

Bathing in a drop’s quiet light

The dimmed lights and the hushed gallery space – the Danish poet Pia Tafdrup is reading her published words. The most accurate words that have floated to the surface through the depths of her darker semantic fields, her avant-textes. *Trækfuglens kompas* is the book she’s signing for me: one of the readers-listeners who surround her; the one who concentrates hard to understand as many words of a new home language as possible.¹⁰

early morning concealed by the red of the S-train
early afternoon the red revealed in the rescue
boat on the pewter waves

Bader mig i en dråbes stille lys

‘Dear Pia, // Thank you once again for your reading – always a pleasure to listen to Danish poetry, especially so clearly “enunciated” as your delivery. // I must admit it was comforting to hear that your translator into English prefers written Danish to spoken Danish :). I can certainly sympathize (at the moment at least) with McDuff. For me it is much easier – still – to read Danish than to speak it; and when I speak it, I seem more comfortable with non-Danish speakers (nydanske) – Turks, Albanians, Iranians who reside in my Ørdrup neighbourhood and run

⁸ Quoted with the permission of the author, participant in my course: English in a flash: Creative writing of short-short texts, spring 2021.

⁹ Quoted with the permission of the author, participant in English in a flash: Creative writing of short-short texts, spring 2021.

¹⁰ Under ‘Best regards’ Pia Tafdrup wrote: ‘13/11 – 2010.’

bakeries, pizza places or hairdressing saloons. Conversations in Danish have a different flavour there, as you can imagine.’¹¹

waves relax to ripples
Monday-tired with
their shimmer routine *mig submerged in English*

‘I look forward to your 2 new books in English. As I mentioned, I have your *Queen’s Gate* and *Tarkovsky’s Horses*, both in the original and in English. And – you will see in the poem I am attaching, as promised – I have “used” your poetry and the work of Inger Christensen to learn Danish (and to learn to like it). This poem was published in *Shearsman* magazine last autumn (funnily enough, they have misspelt the title into “offerings,” so the poem will run again in the spring issue – a dual appearance, coinciding with its dual character, in a sense). As a bilingual speaker who writes in English, was born into Polish, and now lives in Danish, I am drawn to “plurilingual” poetry as one way of understanding of how we function (mentally too) when we cross borders in various senses. Moreover, I grew up in landlocked Kraków and the sea and islands have always been my “home” (I guess by juxtaposition) – that’s why I am so amazed that not all passengers on my S-tog train look at the sea the moment we approach Nordhavn :) This poem grew out of my little project: to write what I saw for a month, jotting thoughts down only within a 1-2 minute stop when the C-train waits at Nordhavn, on my way to Amager and back, travelling to work at the university.’¹²

one wind turbine scoops the warm
sheen
in the corner
of the train window *me : mig : mnie emerging
to breathe*

¹¹ My email to Pia Tafdrup, answering her invitation to show her the poem I mentioned during our exchange.

¹² The Word document where I saved my email to Pia Tafdrup is dated 11/04/2014. Nordhavn offerings first appeared as Nordhavn offerings in *Shearsman* 97&98 (autumn 2013, pp. 94–96). It was reprinted with the corrected title in *Shearsman* 99&100 (spring 2014, pp. 98–100). *svimmelt.../Ord.../Bader ...* – Pia Tafdrup, *Min mors hånd, Dronningeporten* (1998, p. 13); *dizzy.../Words.../Bathing...* – David McDuff’s translation of Tafdrup’s *My mother’s hand, Queen’s gate* (2001, p. 11); *pijane...* – my translation of Tafdrup’s Danish and McDuff’s English into Polish (2011). My epigraph comes from Jean Portante and Pierre Jorris’s *Whales, ghosts and nomads: A dialogue on multilingual poetry, Poetry Wales* 46.3 (winter 2010, pp. 10–14).

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