

The Reader as Multilingual Soloist. Linguistic and Medial Transgressions in the Poetry of Cia Rinne

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Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht den Lyrikband notes for soloists (2009) der transnationalen Lyrikerin Cia Rinne mit einem besonderen Schwerpunkt auf der Frage der literarischen Mehrsprachigkeit und der Intermedialität des Textes. Ausgangspunkt ist Naoki Sakais Verständnis von Übersetzung als „bordering“ (Sakai 2009); hier wird die Rolle des Lesers von notes for soloists als Erzeuger sprachlicher Grenzen hervorgehoben. Hierbei funktioniert Rinnes mehrsprachiger und intermedialer Text als eine Art Partitur, die Leser verschiedener Sprachkompetenzen auf unterschiedliche Weise realisieren. Es wird veranschaulicht, wie die Dynamik zwischen dem gedruckten Text und den verschiedenen artikulatorischen Möglichkeiten des Textes die Leser in eine Sphäre zwischen Sonorität und sprachlicher Artikulation versetzt; eine Sphäre, die normalerweise kleinen Kindern, die noch keine Sprache beherrschen, vorbehalten ist. Dabei wird die Kontingenz sprachlicher Grenzen ins Auge gefasst, zugleich werden jedoch auch mögliche Verbindungen zwischen verschiedenen für die Leser unbekanntem bzw. bekannten Sprachen vorgeführt.

Keywords: bordering, Cia Rinne, intermediality, literary multilingualism, poetry

1 Background and Aims: Multilingualism and Literary Studies

Multilingualism in literature is a rapidly growing field of research amongst linguists as well as scholars of literature, and the methodology is being increasingly developed (cf. Sommer 2004; Yildiz 2012; Tidigs 2014). However, there has so far, at least in a Nordic context, been a heavy focus on prose (e.g. Ekman 1995; Malmio 2011; Grönstrand 2012; Tidigs 2014, with Refsum 2010 and Grünthal 2012 as notable exceptions dealing with poetry), and narrative aspects of literary multilingualism in particular (e.g. Lilius 1989 & 1992; Haapamäki & Eriksson 2011; Landqvist 2014).

In this article, we will highlight the multilingual and intermedial poetry of transnational writer and artist Cia Rinne (b. 1973) as an example of how poetry can create, negotiate and deconstruct linguistic and medial borders. Our focus is on her volume *notes for soloists* from 2009. In our reading of Rinne, we draw on the notion of translation as an activity of “bordering” as it has been developed by Naoki Sakai with regard to linguistic borders, i.e. an understanding of translation as an ambiguous practice, “not only a bor-

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der crossing but also and preliminarily an act of drawing a border, of *bordering*” (2009: 83). That is, translation bridges gaps between language communities, but it also simultaneously produces these borders and notions of languages as enclosed entities. Sakai’s effort to visualize these processes of bordering is part of an ambition to “reverse the conventional comprehension of translation that always presumes the unity of a language” (2009: 71) where “difference is substantialized” (2009: 72). At the core of Sakai’s argument is, thus, an ambition to question the conceptualization of the world’s languages in terms of a group of countable artefacts: “Is language a countable, just like an apple and an orange and unlike water? Is it not possible to think of language, for example, in terms of those grammars in which the distinction of the singular and the plural is irrelevant?” (2009: 73).

This strive towards a different conceptualization of language and language borders is in line with the case that sociolinguist Jan Blommaert (2010: xiv) makes for “a view of language as something intrinsically and perpetually mobile, through space as well as time, and *made for* mobility. The finality of language is mobility, not immobility.” According to Blommaert (2010: 12), “conventional treatments of [...] patterns of shifting and mixing (for instance ‘code-switching’, where ‘codes’ are understood as artefactualized languages) fail to do justice” to the complexity of language repertoires characteristic of globalization. This also holds true, we argue, for linguistic and medial border transgressions of the kind that Cia Rinne’s poetry displays. Where code-switching would be too static a concept for this type of literary multilingualism and intermediality, Sakai’s concept of the border as process enables a theoretically refined reading for the following two reasons: It remains attentive to the various linguistic potentialities of the text, while it at the same time provides an analytic sensibility for the interaction between the multilingual text and its readers, as an ever-changing process.

The bordering of translation, we argue, is also crucial to the *multilingual text itself*. In the processes of bordering the reader is, or rather readers, in the plural, are of utmost importance. By examining how each particular reader is an active participant in the border constructions and crossings of the poetic text, and furthermore, how the reader is essential to the creation of textual effects, we will show how multilingual and intermedial works of art can challenge notions of linguistic borders, translation and comprehension.

2 The Multilingual, Intermedial and Transnational Poetry of Cia Rinne

Before demonstrating this in Rinne’s *notes for soloists*, however, a short background on her poetic work, especially its intermedial components, is necessary. In fact, the whole concept of a clearly defined body of literary work, regarded as an enclosed whole, becomes problematic in Rinne’s case. Her writing takes place on multiple material levels:

in the shape of printed poetry collections; in digital, online versions that play with the possibilities of linking visual signs and letters via hyperlinks and online animations; as sound collages of her own voice reading the poems, as well as her live, singular performances. The various media-formats of her poems also themselves explore the contingent borders between artistic media by attempting to transpose other medias' modalities of expression within their own medium.

This kind of medial transpositioning can, for example, be to invoke the visual and acoustic character of the written text through textual means. Rinne's works also combine different media within one medium, such as text and image. Following Irina Rajewsky's and Werner Wolf's terminologies, Rinne's poetry can thus be described as a vivid example of "media combination" (Rajewsky 2010: 55) as well as a fusion of "overt/direct intermediality" and "covert/indirect intermediality" (Wolf 1999: 54). When reading Rinne's poetry, it is important to keep this extended medial horizon in mind, because it encourages you as a reader to regard yourself as another extension of her work, as yet another medial manifestation of it – and thus, as a co-creator in Rinne's poetic process.

Literary critics and scholars have described Rinne's work as a new incarnation of so-called concrete poetry, with roots in European modernist works of the inter- and post-war period, as well as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-poets in the US of the 1950s and 1960s. The poetry scholar Marjorie Perloff, for instance, has noted the continuity between the Austrian concretist poet Ernst Jandl's and Rinne's use of "letter, font, size, spacing, and color [...] to generate complex verbo-visual configurations" (2010: 13).

The title of Rinne's first collection of poetry *zaroum* (2001) is a play of words combining the so called "zaum" poems of Russian futurism and the German words "warum/darum". The collection is characterized by a playful minimalism, juxtaposing figures, sketches, symbols and letters, often structured in serial sequences. Combined together, they give rise to humorous wordplay and philosophical questions. The online edition *archives zaroum* (2008) was published as a sequel to the printed version, utilizing the digital format to further enhance the playfulness of the prequel. *notes for soloists* differs from *zaroum* mainly due to its acoustic character. It was published in 2009 by the Swedish publisher OEI editör, which also publishes the journal "for poetic production" *OEI*, known for its focus on the materiality of language and the role of and play with technology in the context of poetry. The sound work *sounds for soloists* (Rinne & Eskildsen: 2011) features Rinne herself performing one possible reading of *notes for soloists*, with music and sound design by Sebastian Eskildsen.

On a more general level related to border crossings in language and literature, it is important to note that Rinne's poetry – precisely because of its multilingual nature – does

not fit the present institutional frameworks for financial aid to authors, often modelled to fit the nation state and a single national language. Thus, Rinne's works tend to fall outside these institutions produced by the workings of the "monolingual paradigm", as it has been elaborated by the German Studies and literary scholar Yasemin Yildiz (2012). Instead, Rinne is part of a transnational community of contemporary avant garde poets, a "multilingual space of sound poetry" (Olsson 2013: 183, 200), notoriously difficult to confine to one single nation state and linguistic community. Rinne's poetry, alongside many of her colleagues' works, demonstrates the need to think beyond the imagined communities of national languages and literatures when studying contemporary poetry.

3 Multilingualism, Intermediality and the Reader in *notes for soloists*

An important dynamic in *notes for soloists* is the tension between the visual (e.g. letters, orthography), the acoustic (e.g. sounds as expressed by the letters, differently with different languages), and semantics (including e.g. homonyms). The word play creating and highlighting these differences is sometimes monolingual, but also often multilingual, drawing on two or more languages, as in the first section of the book, "notes for two":

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*  l
   one
   ohne
   oh no
   ono
   on
   o.

   (oh no)
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*  No to
   no, two
   is a number, too
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(1) From "notes for two", Cia Rinne, *notes for soloists* (2009)

The second part of this excerpt works mostly monolingually (even though "no" means "no" in more languages than English), exploring the acoustic similarity and the orthographic and semantic difference between "to", "two" and "too". The first part, however, moves from English ("one") to German ("ohne"), back to English ("oh no"), the Japa-

nese name “ono”, the simultaneously English and French “on” and finally to “o.”, which could also be linked to the number zero, becoming a meditation on oneness and being without.

As seen in these passages, *notes for soloists* is made up of small monolingual passages in different languages, bi- and multilingual passages with words from different languages, as well as passages that are so intrinsically multilingual that different languages even inhabit the same words. This last quality is evident in the following example, where the active participation of the reader is crucial:

* war was
was war
was war?
war war
war was?
war was
here.

(2) From “notes on war & god”, Cia Rinne, *notes for soloists* (2009)

In Rinne’s rendering of this passage in her sound work *sounds for soloists*, she articulates the first two lines in English and the third in German; in the fourth line, the first “war” is articulated in English but the second “war” in German, highlighting the visual identity but the acoustic difference between the words. The fifth line is articulated in German, while lines six and seven once again are spoken in English.

A comparison between the printed poem in *notes for soloists* and the spoken poem in *sounds for soloists* instantly highlights the tension between visual sign and pronunciation. To put it simply: There are so many ways this passage can be rendered in speech, with articulation affecting semantics as well as linguistic borders. As Marjorie Perloff (2010: 136) states in connection with poet Caroline Bergvall and composer, writer and artist John Cage, sound undercuts sight – and the ambiguity of the visual letters is foregrounded.

The printed text, then, is not yet completed or finalized; it is produced by the act of reading, and with each reading it can be re-shaped differently. Rinne’s own version in *sounds for soloists* is not the “correct” or “definitive” version. Instead, the printed text resembles a musical score, ready to be enacted by a performer (see also Hertzberg

2014). Thus, the reader transforms into an interpretative soloist of the text, rather than being its passive consumer.

What this enactment sounds like depends, to some extent, on the linguistic capacities of the reader; it is not, however, dependent on the reader being bilingual. The passage can be read monolingually, in English *or* in German (with the exception of the final “here”). But it can, of course, also be read multilingually, and differently every time, with the border between English and German ever changing, marking its instability.

On the one hand, the two languages communicate with and complement each other. The different words and languages inhabit the same letters. Read silently, the languages co-exist, each written word bilingual in a way that cannot be silenced by a translation that would require a definitive choice of “target language”. On the other hand, when spoken out loud, one language is being pushed out in the materialization of the other. The border between English and German can be renegotiated each time the poem is “performed” – but still, the dynamics of the poem is intrinsically linked to the overlappings and discrepancies between languages, meanings and sounds.

As seen by these two examples, Rinne’s wordplay – perhaps too fun-sounding a word for the intricate linguistic dynamics that her works demonstrate – does not simply result in nonsense. When we juxtapose this passage with the title of the section, “notes on war & god”, we notice that meaning has not taken flight completely, and that the English “war was” can be read as answering the German question “was war” (as vocalized in *sounds for soloists*). In the sound work, other noises, such as gunshots and the machine gun-like sounds of the keys of a typewriter, reinforce this interpretation. A silent reading, however, offers up other interpretative possibilities. The English “was” also corresponds with the meaning of the German “war” – and thus the poem might also be read as a continual loop, repeating the same word, only in two languages, finally escaping into the singular “here”.

4 Concluding Discussion: The Contingency of the Linguistic Border

To a certain extent, sense and meaning depend on what you comprehend, and don’t comprehend. Since *notes for soloists* shifts between English, German, French and Spanish, using these languages simultaneously and in an intricate manner, the level of comprehension varies according to each reader. We argue that Rinne’s poetry can teach us to scrutinize the role of the reader, more specifically how it demonstrates an important criticism of the conception of an “ideal reader” of the multilingual text.

Firstly, Rinne’s poems exemplify how we as readers are integral to the poem coming into being, turning “the score” of the book into a work of sound poetry when reading it

out loud – an act that, in turn, forces us to sacrifice other multilingual potentialities of the written text. Secondly, Rinne’s poetry challenges the idea that the ideal reader of this text is the perfect polyglot, able to “understand” everything, if by “understand” we mean “being able to translate”. Rather, Rinne’s wordplay propels the reader to wander around in the strange territory of an unknown language, where language is not yet automatized “meaning” but still sound bites, or acoustic materiality. As Doris Sommer states in her seminal *Bilingual Aesthetics* (2004: 30), “the delays and difficulties” that monolingual readers, or readers without “complete” language skills encounter in a multilingual text “probably make them better targets for aesthetic effects than readers who don’t stop [in order] to struggle”. In Rinne’s work, we argue, the intricate play of multilingual and intermedial tensions enables even the multilingual reader to return to this mode of experiencing language as materiality. Following our line of argument, there cannot be any single ideal reader of Rinne’s poetry, since every individual reader regardless of linguistic background becomes an interpretative soloist of the text.

As Daniel Heller-Roazen has pointed out with reference to Roman Jakobson’s studies on children’s language development, infants who begin “to form their first recognizable words [...] have at their disposal capacities for articulation that not even the most gifted of polyglot adults could hope to rival” (2005: 9). Reflecting on Jakobson’s studies, Heller-Roazen argues that in learning to properly speak the mother tongue, the child simultaneously loses his or her almost endless articulatory abilities and linguistic potentialities in favour of one sanctioned tongue. He writes: “Perhaps the loss of a limitless phonetic arsenal is the prize a child must pay for the papers that grant him citizenship in the community of a single tongue” (2005: 11).

With reference to this reasoning on the articulatory potentiality of the infant and the silencing of these faculties by one sanctioned language, we argue that Rinne’s poems in *notes for soloists* rekindle the multilingual potential in the monolingual text by activating the linguistic and articulatory capacities of the reader. A striking effect of reading Rinne is that you actually begin to read the poems out loud in order to be able to comprehend them, a process that also heightens one’s sensibility for the actual sounds of language.

As we have demonstrated in this article, there is no single ideal reader of these texts. Instead, every single reader of these poems participates in an ongoing linguistic process, where the borders between known – as well as unknown – languages are constantly being renegotiated. *notes for soloists* teaches us to pay attention not only to the potential multilingualism in every monolingual text, but also to the mobility of the linguistic border: Every time one tries to finally pin it down, it takes flight again through the stubborn linguistic practice of readers with varying linguistic backgrounds. Rinne’s poetry, with its invitation to participate on the part of the readers, accentuates the contingency of

linguistic and medial borders. Drawing on Sakai's notion of translation as an act of bordering mentioned in the beginning of this article, we have highlighted the reader of Rinne's poetry as the producer of borders between languages, but also as the forger of paths to languages known and unknown, to the sounding sphere of language in the making.

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