

On the Frontier: Eugene Jolas and Multilingual Modernism

Juliette Taylor-Batty
Leeds Trinity University

ABSTRACT: Multilingual writing challenges our perceptions of “national” languages in relation to cultural identity; it often challenges what Yasemin Yildiz defines as “the monolingual paradigm.” The modernist writer, editor, and translator Eugene Jolas consistently explored and sought to transcend the borders of languages and national identity in his translational and multilingual editorial and poetic practice. Jolas is well known as the cofounder of the modernist magazine *transition*, but his poetic work has been relatively neglected, partly because it combines and switches between languages in odd and unsettling ways. Focusing on his multilingual poetry as it appears in *transition* 23 (1935), this article argues that this work is important precisely because it is unsettling. Jolas’s poetry centers on interlingual and intercultural difference, involving the reader in processes of movement, migration, and transition between languages; it thus pushes us to explore and challenge our own linguistic “frontiers.”

MULTILINGUAL WRITING MAKES US THINK HARD about how we define languages: it challenges our perceptions of “national” languages in relation to cultural identity; it often challenges what Yasemin Yildiz defines as “the monolingual paradigm,” according to which “individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’” through which they are “organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation.”¹ The work of the modernist editor, writer, and translator Eugene Jolas is particularly interesting in this respect. A self-styled “border-man”² and lifelong

¹ Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 2.

² Eugene Jolas, *Man from Babel*, ed. Andreas Kramer and Rainer Rumold (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 119.

migrant, he consistently explored and sought to transcend the borders of languages and national identity in his translational and multilingual editorial and poetic practice. Jolas is best known as the cofounder and editor of the magazine *transition* (1927–38), famous for its “Revolution of the Word” manifesto in 1929 and for publishing early extracts of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* under the title *Work in Progress*. Jolas also, however, produced a significant number of multilingual creative texts, which appeared both within the pages of *transition* and as separate publications. These have largely fallen into obscurity, and Jolas as a writer has received limited and sporadic critical attention.³ This neglect is partly because his work combines and switches between languages in odd and unsettling ways. Jolas described his own experience of “[passing] through the German, English and French languages on a continuous voyage” over his career,⁴ and his multilingual poetry often prioritizes movement between languages rather than integration and synthesis. The strangeness of Jolas’s poetry is, however, important: it tends to emphasize the frontiers between languages even as it constantly crosses those frontiers. By making us confront interlingual difference, it also pushes us as readers to challenge our own linguistic “frontiers.”

Jolas’s multilingualism is experimental, by which I mean that he is constantly trying out different ways of defamiliarizing languages and combining them. As a result, his output is stylistically as well as linguistically diverse. The magazine *transition* provided an outlet for Jolas’s experiments. In its earliest phase, *transition* was committed to translating texts into English, and Jolas’s contributions are mainly translations, with some poetry in English. The magazine began to question and reject the function of translation, however, and starting with volume 16/17 (1929) published some texts in their original languages. In *transition* 22 (1933) Jolas officially proclaimed a move to a trilingual editorial policy of publishing texts in the original, ostensibly because of the particular challenges in translating linguistically experimental texts.⁵ As Jolas translated less, so

³ More critical attention has been paid to *transition* than to Jolas’s own writing, which received almost no critical attention at all (other than book reviews) until the twenty-first century. Some important studies of Jolas’s writing have appeared, though they are limited to individual essays and parts of books. They include Marjorie Perloff, “Logocinéma of the Frontiersman: Eugene Jolas’s Multilingual Poetics and Its Legacies,” in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 82–101; Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 112–19; Ania Spyra, “Eugene Jolas’s Multilingual New Occident,” in *New/Old Worlds: Spaces of Transition*, ed. Rodica Mihaila and Irina Grugorescu Pana (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2007), 418–26; Eugenia Kelbert, “Eugene Jolas: A Poet of Multilingualism,” *L2 Journal* 7, no. 1 (1 January 2015), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9f7486t2>; Eugenia Kelbert, “From Babelbank to Atlantica: Eugene Jolas and His Language Laboratory,” in *Philologie und Mehrsprachigkeit* [Philology and multilingualism], ed. Till Dembeck and G. Mein (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Winter-Verlag, 2014), 275–309; Delphine Grass, “The Democratic Languages of Exile: Reading Eugene Jolas and Yvan Goll’s American Poetry with Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt,” *Nottingham French Studies* 56, no. 2 (July 2017): 227–44, <https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2017.0183>. Studies that focus primarily on *transition* magazine tend not to include much in the way of analysis of Jolas’s own poetry, with the exception of Cathryn Setz, “Nietzsche’s Spider: Forging and Furnishing the Revolution of the Word,” *Affirmations: Of the Modern* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 2017): 28; Cathryn Setz, *Primordial Modernism: Animals, Ideas, “transition” (1927–1938)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Rainer Rumold, “Archeo-Logies of Modernity in ‘transition’ and ‘Documents,’ 1929/30,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 37, no. 1 (2000): 45–67. Two editorial projects have been crucial to the revival of interest in Jolas: Andreas Kramer and Rainer Rumold’s edition of Jolas’s posthumous autobiography *Man from Babel* and Eugene Jolas, *Critical Writings, 1924–1951*, ed. Klaus H. Kiefer and Rainer Rumold (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

⁴ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 146.

⁵ As Jolas writes: “With this issue, *transition* enters upon a new policy of tri-lingual publication. The crisis of language is now going on in every part of the Occident. It seems, therefore, essential to retain the linguistic creative material intact, and to present constructive work, as much as possible, in the original.” Eugene Jolas,

his own writing became increasingly multilingual: *transition* 22 is also the first issue to contain a multilingual work under Jolas's name,⁶ and by *transition* 23 (1935), Jolas was using the magazine as a place to publish a wide range of different kinds of multilingual experimentation, much of which was later to be included, in revised form, in his collection *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels* in 1938.⁷ Jolas contributed eighteen entries to *transition* 23, in a range of different languages and multilingual techniques: we find editorial and critical writing (in English and in French), poetry and prose based in English and in French, prose in English with trilingual sections, neologistic writing, and poetry that is fully trilingual.⁸ It is as if *transition* 23 was itself attempting to move beyond conflict and Babel toward a new linguistic aesthetic. Jolas, however, never really "settled" on a distinctive style or multilingual aesthetic, and this is another way in which his poetry can be seen to be "migratory," always in movement.

This makes his poetry unsettling for the reader. Dougald McMillan is critical of Jolas's writing, judging that his failure to find an audience for his trilingual poetry was due to the uncertainty of "Americans, French, and Germans . . . as to the national category he belongs in,"⁹ but as Marjorie Perloff points out, this very assumption of "national categories" "is to judge Jolas by the very norms he was attacking."¹⁰ Even Perloff, however, otherwise so sensitive to the subtleties of Jolas's multilingual and migrant identity, appears to fall back on conceptions of "native" and "national" language in attempting to discern why Jolas's multilingualism is so much less successful than that of certain other writers. She critiques Jolas's "somewhat clumsy additive technique," an "A + B + C method" that merely juxtaposes languages,¹¹ and argues that "despite his expertise at translating one of his three languages into either of the others . . . , Jolas did not quite have the hard-core language base of a Joyce or a Beckett, the latter being able to write his novels in a 'foreign' language (French), precisely because he was so sure of his native tongue."¹² Joyce's "absorptive" English, moreover, is "not so much a form of multilingualism as a reinvention of English as magnet language."¹³ Implicitly, for Perloff, Jolas's writing is less successful because it is not "based" in native competence in one particular language, because it foregrounds the differences between the languages he uses, and because it does not integrate or synthesize those

"Glossary," *transition* 22 (February 1933): 177. For analysis of *transition*'s translation policy, see Craig Monk, "Eugene Jolas and the Translation Policies of *transition*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32, no. 4 (December 1999): 17–34.

⁶ Jolas had previously included one poem that contained a small amount of French and German in *transition* 8, but under the pseudonym of Theo Rutra. Otherwise, all his poetry (including that under Rutra's name) is in English and/or neologistic English until *transition* 22, where we find one piece, "Intrialogue," which makes very extensive use of French and German as well as English. "Intrialogue," *transition* 22 (February 1933): 21.

⁷ Eugene Jolas, *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels* (Paris: Transition Press, 1938).

⁸ One form of writing that is missing from *transition* 23 but that he experiments with elsewhere is writing made up of nonsense words that are not based in any recognizable language. At first glance, this writing bears affinity with Dada sound poetry. For analysis of this aspect of his poetic output, much of which was unpublished, see Kelbert, "Eugene Jolas."

⁹ Dougald McMillan, "*transition*": *The History of a Literary Era, 1927–1938* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), 116.

¹⁰ Perloff, "Logocinéma of the Frontiersman," 92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 89. Perloff's judgment of Beckett is problematic because Beckett wrote in French precisely to move away from any such "hard-core language base" and as a means of becoming *less* sure of himself linguistically. As he told Ludovic Janvier, for example, he turned to French "avec le désir de m'appauvrir encore davantage" (with the desire to impoverish myself even further). Ludovic Janvier, *Samuel Beckett par lui-même* [Samuel Beckett by himself] (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), 27.

¹³ Perloff, "Logocinéma of the Frontiersman," 88.

languages. Likewise, Emily Apter's otherwise astute analysis of Jolas concludes that "[i]n hurling language into trilingual limbo, severing its ties to language and region, Jolas may have been the more rigorous international modernist . . . , but his dogma was at greater risk of going poetically nowhere." Joyce, on the other hand, is the more successful writer "because he never strayed too far from the speech rhythms of Anglo-Irish vernacular."¹⁴ For Apter, Jolas's poetry is at its most successful where its interlingual mixing is clearly justified by its subject matter—for example, in his poetic responses to the Second World War, where the languages used are grounded in a specific political and geographical location.¹⁵ I certainly do not dispute the fact that Jolas is not as good a writer as Joyce. It is telling, though, that both Perloff and Apter choose to blame Jolas's *multilingual* techniques for that inferiority. If we leave aside questions of literary quality, I would argue that what is interesting about Jolas's work is precisely his attempt to find a new way of fusing languages that is distinct from Joyce's and that centers on interlingual mediation and transition—on the frontiers between languages.

Jolas's editorial, translation, and creative work all form part of the same utopian linguistic and literary project. All, moreover, are acutely concerned with the notion of the "frontier." He published a number of collections of poetry from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. By 1941, with his collection *Words from the Deluge*, as Delphine Grass has recently demonstrated, Jolas's multilingualism can be read as a form of political resistance to fascist nationalism and to the particularly virulent form of "monolingual paradigm" that that entails.¹⁶ His earlier work is less explicitly political, though his multilingualism is nonetheless ideologically charged. The magazine *transition* in particular provides an outlet for a huge range of different kinds of literary experimentation by Jolas, and it is thus in the context of *transition* that I will be reading Jolas's poetry in this article.¹⁷ The magazine was designed to create editorial and linguistic "bridges" between nations, languages, and continents and thereby to promote various forms of "synthesis": interlingual, intercultural, intercontinental, interracial, psychological, and literary. The commitment of *transition* to a "revolution of the word" also made it a natural home for Jolas's own writing: within its pages, we find Jolas's translations, editorial and critical work, manifestos, and responses to the avant-garde literature of the day. Indeed, Jolas's literary and editorial projects run closely in parallel with each other: as the magazine develops, so does Jolas's poetry, particularly with respect to translation and multilingualism.

For Yildiz, modernism unsettles the monolingual paradigm but generally presents that challenge within a single language; she argues that it is in the latter part of the twentieth century that "postmonolingual" writing emerges that is much more visibly multilingual.¹⁸ This might be the case in the context of Germanophone modernism about which Yildiz is writing, but the

¹⁴ Apter, *Translation Zone*, 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ As Grass ("Democratic Languages of Exile," 236) explains, the poem "Migration," in *Words from the Deluge*, illustrates Jolas's hopes for a "new internationalist paradigm" among New York's multilingual migrant workers and within a multilingual press. Grass contrasts "Migration" with Jolas's reaction to a speech by Hitler, which he describes as having "an ungrammatical ring, as if spoken by an illiterate." The crowd's response is a "roar" that "seemed like an irrational grunt emitted by one huge throat."

¹⁷ Mansanti notes the importance of *transition* in disseminating Jolas's own writing, with over 178 pages of the magazine devoted to his poetry and fiction. Céline Mansanti, *La revue "transition," 1927–1938: Le modernisme historique en devenir* [The magazine *transition*, 1927–1938: Historical modernism in the making] (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), e-book, <http://books.openedition.org/pur/32713?format=toc>.

¹⁸ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 26–27.

Anglophone context is very different, and Jolas provides a crucial example of the impact and significance of multilingual experimentation in the early twentieth century.¹⁹ Yildiz's term "post-monolingual" is extremely helpful in understanding Jolas's project. The term holds a complex range of associations: it denotes both "the period *since* the emergence of monolingualism as a dominant paradigm" and "the struggle against the monolingual paradigm." Combining the two, it refers to "a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or reemerge."²⁰ Jolas's writing perfectly encapsulates that tension. On the one hand, Jolas explicitly embraces multilingualism. On the other hand, he views his own linguistic heritage as an incurable "glotto-pathology" that is only exacerbated by his migration to America²¹ and from which he wants to protect his own children.²² Babel, a theme to which he returns throughout his critical, creative, and autobiographical writings, is frequently perceived as a curse.²³ His poetry both reflects and challenges such a linguistic ideology and forms part of a utopian linguistic project that uses Babel to counter Babel. Jolas's project is thus, I would argue, an important and underrecognized example of postmonolingual practice.

Jolas's ambivalence toward multilingualism is directly related to his own complex cultural and linguistic heritage. He was born in New Jersey to a French father and a German mother who had both emigrated to America in their youth. When he was two, he and his parents moved to Forbach in Lorraine, the home of his father's maternal family and a Franco-German disputed territory.²⁴ He was later to describe the impact of the region's "old frontier anguish" on him.²⁵ In that "hybrid world of the Franco-German frontier," he describes people as "[swaying] to and fro in cultural and political oscillation, in the twilight zone of the German and French languages."²⁶ This linguistic complexity was apparent in terms of bilingualism (the mother's Rhenish German and the father's French) but also in interlingual mixing: the children learned a "Franconian *patois*" in the streets and heard their parents regularly conversing in what Jolas defines as a "probably . . . crude, immigrant" form of English. The enduring attachment to America and to the English language that Jolas's parents maintained was so strong that his father was known locally as "the American."²⁷ Jolas himself idealized the "magic name" of his birthland and considered himself an "American in exile" rather than a European.²⁸ When he moved to New York as a young man, he viewed himself as an "immigrant from Europe" who "was really coming home to

¹⁹ For further exploration of Anglophone multilingual modernist writing, see Juliette Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁰ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 4–5.

²¹ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 10.

²² As Jolas (*ibid.*, 149) writes: "I did not want our children to repeat my experience; I did not want them to belong to a 'lost' generation that has one foot on one continent and the other thousands of miles away. Above all, I did not want them to become linguistic hybrids, like their father."

²³ See, e.g., *ibid.*, 271.

²⁴ Jolas, in his autobiography (*ibid.*, 5), highlights the instability and conflict inherent to the region, which was deeply felt within his family: "In July 1870, a bloody battle was fought on the hills outside our town, and after having been a French community for over two hundred years, Forbach became German, as a result of the Treaty of Frankfurt. An integral part of Lorraine, it has changed political allegiance three times since then and is today once more part of the French nation and of the department of the Moselle. Four brothers and a sister were born in this anomalous and unstable orbit and have participated in its vertiginously changeable destiny."

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

[his] native land.”²⁹ This “homecoming” was also a linguistic alienation, however, because Jolas at that time had very limited knowledge of English. Initially surrounded by the “gross phonetic distortions and . . . frequently vulgar obscenities” of the immigrant communities within which he lived and worked, and struggling to move beyond awkward processes of internal translation from German to English,³⁰ Jolas nonetheless began to write poetry in English at the same time as he was gradually acquiring the language. He eventually mastered it successfully enough to achieve his ambition of becoming an American reporter, producing poetry in English as well as in French, German, and a mixture of all three.

Jolas consistently identifies as an American by birthright and by cultural affiliation, and English plays a significant role throughout his oeuvre. When he talks of being “American,” however, it is emphatically as an *immigrant* American. Indeed, it is precisely this immigrant status that for Jolas *makes* him American and that forms the basis of his lifelong Euro-American aesthetic and linguistic project: “The fact that I was an immigrant American sufficed to make me different from the other American poets I knew. For I was an immigrant who had never lost contact with his native speech, with the evolution of his European sources, and who had felt the enormous problem of language in daily living. . . . I belonged to the European tradition and language as well as to the American tradition. I was a neo-American poet.”³¹ This runs counter to dominant schools of thought of the time, where there was widespread concern about the impact of early twentieth-century mass immigration on the United States and about the perceived “corruption” of the American language as a result of “foreign” influence.³² Such ideologies seep into how Jolas was described by contemporaries: his newspaper colleagues remind him of his accented speech, for example,³³ and his friend Sherwood Anderson tells him that although he is “an American in feeling and words,” he nonetheless “belong[s] to the immigrant class.”³⁴ In his introduction to Jolas’s 1926 collection of poems, *Cinema*, Anderson makes it clear that the author is *not* American, defining him (incorrectly) as “an Alsatian, with a mixture of German and French bloods, married to an American woman.”³⁵ Jolas’s desire “to be thought of as an American himself” is, Anderson condescendingly implies, *only* desire (“Well, his heart is here”).³⁶

Jolas’s multilingualism challenges such preconceived notions of national identity. In his poetry, he blends and moves between English, French, and German, and in his editorial work, he attempts to bring as many cultural and linguistic elements as possible together within the pages of *transition*. Jolas’s editorial opening to the tenth anniversary (and final) edition of *transition* is

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 146–47.

³² See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 16–18.

³³ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 84–85.

³⁵ Eugene Jolas, *Cinema* (New York: Adelphi, 1926), 8–9. Jolas corrects Anderson’s error when he reproduces this introduction in *Man from Babel* (though he does not signal the error in the original text), specifying his nationality as “an Alsace-Lorrainer” and, interestingly, changing Anderson’s plural reference “German and French bloods” to the singular “German and French blood” (Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 86). It is difficult to know whether this amendment was deliberate or not (*Man from Babel* was compiled posthumously from unfinished drafts left by the author, and unintentional authorial errors are thus more likely), but this change is nonetheless significant in the context of Jolas’s border origins, suggesting a conception of mixed blood (and frontier identity) as a new entity constructed from disparate elements (rather than merely a mixture of disparate elements).

³⁶ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 86.

entitled “Frontierless Decade,” and the idea of the “frontier” recurs throughout his oeuvre and *transition*.³⁷ Jolas wants to transcend frontiers, and much of his project is avowedly universalist. As he writes in his autobiography, *Man from Babel*: “I believed . . . that such a review [as *transition*] could become a sort of center around which would gravitate all those who shared what I felt was a universal impulse to push back the frontiers of the mind and its means of expression. This, to a border-man like myself, was the quintessence of action.”³⁸

When Jolas talks about frontiers—as the above quotation illustrates—he is talking not only about linguistic and national frontiers. His work persistently centers on crossing psychological frontiers and on expressing (and promoting) an expanded consciousness that draws on dreams, daydreams, and hallucinations.³⁹ (It is no coincidence that *transition* published many key surrealist works, some translated for the first time into English.)⁴⁰ He develops the term “Vertigral” to describe his endeavor, which he defines in *transition* 22 as follows: “of or pertaining to the tendency of seeking a mystic synthesis in primal language.”⁴¹ Volume 22 of *transition* is peppered with additional statements and definitions, including the following:

VERTIGRAL: The Permanent Revolution of Language.

VERTIGRAL: Die Suche nach der Ursprache.⁴²

In trying to counter the condition of Babel, however, Jolas does not try to reduce multilingualism. Indeed, it is in linguistic multiplicity and in combining languages that the potential *Ursprache* can be found.⁴³ In his preface to *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels*, Jolas details his attempts to develop a “vertigralist” language by experimenting “with new grammatical arrangements in the three languages, in which, organically, I have thought and written, as a poet,” and by making “multilingual alloyages because my unconscious worked naturally in that direction.”⁴⁴ A dominant response to multilingualism in the modernist period is to critique it as cosmopolitan “artifice”—an “unnatural” form of language that counters the dominant Romantic perception of the “mother

³⁷ Eugene Jolas, “Frontierless Decade,” *transition* 27 (May 1938): 7–9. As he was later to sum it up, *transition* was motivated by a youthful “vision of a linguistic and creative bridge between the countries of the Western world” (Jolas, *Critical Writings, 1924–1951*, 121).

³⁸ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 119.

³⁹ In his preface to *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels*, Jolas states that it is impossible to use an “exhausted language” to express “the delicate machinery of the dream-life” and explains how he works at creating a new language that might be able to do this: “I . . . tried to go beyond my predecessors by demanding the *expansion of the frontiers of language* to keep pace with *the expansion of consciousness*” (17–18).

⁴⁰ Mansanti (*La revue “transition,”* 129) describes *transition* as “la grande revue anglophone du surréalisme” (the main Anglophone magazine of surrealism), representing around twenty-five surrealist writers, sixty-odd published texts, and many more examples of surrealist visual art. Indeed, Mansanti adds, the majority of French-language texts published by *transition* are surrealist. The first chapter of Breton’s *Nadja* was published the same month in English in *transition* and in French in *La révolution surréaliste*. Céline Mansanti, “Between Modernisms: *transition* (1927–38),” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, vol. 2, *North America, 1894–1960*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 729.

⁴¹ Eugene Jolas, “Transition’s Revolution-of-the-Word Dictionary,” *transition* 22 (February 1933): 122.

⁴² Eugene Jolas, ed., *transition* 22 (February 1933): 127.

⁴³ In this respect, Jolas’s writing echoes Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay on translation “The Task of the Translator,” which presents the possibility of different languages gesturing toward a pre-Babelian “reine Sprache” (pure language). Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften* [Illuminations: Selected writing] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961), 65; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 79.

⁴⁴ Jolas, *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels*, 17.

tongue” as superior because it is “natural” and inextricably linked to a “rooted” national identity.⁴⁵ Jolas’s emphasis, on the other hand, is on multilingualism as an “organic” and “natural” condition. Moreover, by linking it to his own unconscious, he is suggesting that it is artifice—the conscious mind—that places borders between languages and that places limitations on how those languages can be combined and used.

The magazine *transition* as a whole maintained a recurrent interest in literary bilingualism and multilingualism, not as artificial modernist multilingual effects, but as inherent to the complex linguistic heritage of individual writers⁴⁶ and in relation to natural forms of linguistic creolization, to the development of English as a world language, and to language change as it occurs in living speech.⁴⁷ Jolas’s theoretical writing celebrates hybrid and creole linguistic forms. Although the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto makes no explicit reference to multilingualism or to Babel, it is directly related to Jolas’s own experience of interlingual contact, conflict, and synthesis (he writes in *Man from Babel* that the declaration grew out of his experience of being “caught in the labyrinth of idiomatic interfusions and transformations” throughout his life).⁴⁸ Indeed, an important essay by Jolas, “Logos,” which appears in *transition* 16/17, argues that there is an inherent relationship between interlingual contact and positive natural language change and uses examples such as interlingual borrowings in the history of Indo-European languages and creole French to defend the poet’s creation of new linguistic forms.⁴⁹ For Jolas, American English holds a privileged position because of the effect of mass immigration to the United States. As he writes in 1930: “The mysticism surrounding the ‘purity of the English language’ has, I believe, lost its force. In the crucible of the immense racial fusion of indigenous and immigrant America there is occurring today an astounding creation that ultimately will make the American language, because of its greater richness and pliancy and nearness to life, the successor of British English. . . . It is in the immigrant development of the new America that the possibilities for a fundamental revolution of the word are inherent.”⁵⁰

This interest in interlingual mutations, transformations, and syntheses and overt celebration of creolizing linguistic forms is by no means representative of the period. As Perloff points out, it stands in stark contrast to Henry James’s declaration in 1905 that the new immigrants were reducing the “ancestral circle” of the American language to “a mere helpless slobber of disconnected

⁴⁵ For analysis of the perception of multilingualism as cosmopolitan artifice, including resistance to Jolas’s magazine by F. R. Leavis, see Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction*, 32–38. For a trenchant critique of the “monolingual paradigm” in the context of Romanticism, see Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Victor Llona’s “Foreigners Writing in French,” *transition* 2 (May 1927): 169–74, which pinpoints “a determined straining towards an interpenetration of languages and other racial elements” as characteristic of writing in the decades following the First World War, and which mentions a range of writers, including James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke, Joseph Conrad, Valery Larbaud, Panait Istraiti, J. Kessel, Emmanuel Bove, Jules Supervielle, Jean Cassou, and Julien Green. See also the glossary of *transition* 19/20 (June 1930): 395–97, which makes a point of noting the bilingualism of contributors, including Vincent Huidobro, Alejo Carpentier, and Ivan and Claire Goll. It is no coincidence that the fictional contributor Theo Rutra, under whose name much of Jolas’s neologistic experimentation with the English language appears from *transition* 8 onward, is also a multilingual immigrant, described in a biographical note in *transition* 22 as “a Czecho-American poet, living in Brooklyn,” who “is now at work on a modern Aztec dictionary.” Jolas, “Glossary,” *transition* 22 (February 1933): 178.

⁴⁷ This is particularly apparent in *transition*’s defense of Joyce’s *Work in Progress*. See, e.g., Eugene Jolas, “The Revolution of Language and James Joyce,” *transition* 11 (February 1928): 109–16; Carola Giedon-Welcker, “Work in Progress: A Linguistic Experiment by James Joyce,” trans. Eugene Jolas, *transition* 19/20 (June 1930): 174–83.

⁴⁸ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 108.

⁴⁹ Eugene Jolas, “Logos,” *transition* 16/17 (June 1929): 28.

⁵⁰ Eugene Jolas, “The King’s English Is Dying—Long Live the Great American Language,” *transition* 19/20 (June 1930): 146.

vowel noises” akin to “the grunting, the squealing, the barking, or the roaring of animals.”⁵¹ Indeed, it prefigures later twentieth-century postcolonial perspectives which valorize creole languages and English as a world language.⁵² This perspective (alongside an interest in the linguistic deformations that occur in children’s language and in sleep) contributes to Jolas’s assertion, in “Logos,” that “[t]he poet by deforming traditional words or by creating word combinations is only following an organic law of linguistic psychology.”⁵³ In effect, the “revolution of the word” is a natural, organic process. In this respect, Jolas’s perspective and multilingual poetic practice is very different from certain other modernist texts, such as D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which, though also concerned with linguistic plurality and interlingual difference, manifest a suspicion toward processes of interlingual mixing.⁵⁴ F. R. Leavis explicitly berates *transition* and Joyce’s *Work in Progress* for being mere empty “cosmopolitan” artifice that “uproots” the English language from its essential “Englishness” and that is the product of a damaging technological modernity.⁵⁵ In *transition*, on the other hand, multilingual experimentation is presented as an essentially organic, natural manifestation of language change, and interlingual synthesis is foregrounded. In Jolas’s own writing, language (and in particular the English language) is viewed not as a repository and an expression of national culture and identity but as a potential bridge between cultures—a redemptive “truly universal language” that can counter Babel.⁵⁶

Jolas’s utopian project is more conflicted than his *transition* editorials and manifestos would suggest, however. Indeed, his poetry and his autobiography reveal his own ambivalence toward his trilingualism. The long poem “Logocinéma of the Frontiersman,” which appears in *transition* 23, is particularly significant here: it is an autobiographical expression of Jolas’s complex linguistic heritage, which, at first sight, embodies a sense of “frontier-anguish,” even psychosis, in its dramatization of languages at war. The poem devotes a stanza to each stage of Jolas’s linguistic development. Part 1 focuses on the mother tongue, German—literally, the language of Jolas’s mother—and is entirely in German. The child’s language is presented in idealized terms, as a linguistic medium that is natural, elemental, and transcendental. The picture is of a blissful prelapsarian language closely associated with the natural world: “die jungen Worte waren wie Wein / sie goldschäumten

⁵¹ Perloff, “Logocinéma of the Frontiersman,” 83.

⁵² As Perloff (*ibid.*, 94) writes, “Jolas’s ‘polyvocables’ of the 1930s, his *mots-frontiere*, look ahead to the intense poetic interest in marginal languages, dialects, creoles, pidgins, and alternate soundings that we have witnessed in recent decades, especially in the U.S.”

⁵³ Jolas, “Logos,” 29.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of multilingualism in *The Waste Land* and in *Women in Love*, see Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction*, 30–32, 43–48, 52–59.

⁵⁵ F. R. Leavis, “Joyce and ‘the Revolution of the Word,’” *Scrutiny* 2, no. 2 (1933): 193–201. For a discussion of the distinctions between Jolas’s and Leavis’s perspectives on Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, see Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction*, 32–38.

⁵⁶ Eugene Jolas, “Workshop,” *transition* 23 (July 1935): 104. As *transition* becomes more multilingual—and as it uses English less and less for translational purposes—so we find an increasing focus on the possibilities of English as a universal language. By *transition* 23, Jolas is declaring the need for “an inter-racial language” which might “express the collective inner vision of mankind” (100). In *transition* 24, Jolas invokes “a super-language the basis of which, on the North-American continent, for instance, may be considered a definitely Eur-American language.” Eugene Jolas, “Race and Language,” *transition* 24 (June 1936): 112. By *transition*’s final volume, Jolas (“Frontierless Decade,” 9) is declaring that “*Transition* is in search of the Euramerican language of the future.” Jolas’s later concept of “Atlantica language” is, as Kelbert (“Eugene Jolas,” 53) writes, founded on English, most notably because of its ability to “absorb foreign elements.” For detailed analysis of Jolas’s development of the concept of “Atlantica,” including his unfinished dictionary project, variously entitled “Entramericana,” “Migration Dictionary,” and “Atlantica,” see Kelbert, “From Babelbank to Atlantica.”

im Floeteherbst”; “meine Kindesworte schimmerten selig / meine Kindesworte flammeneilten durch Mondsavannen.”⁵⁷ Yildiz describes how the “*Muttersprache*,” during the Romantic period, becomes shorthand for “a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation.” German thinkers, moreover, were at the forefront of this.⁵⁸ We can certainly see that myth evoked in Jolas’s words in German. This idealized unity contrasts with the rest of the poem, however. In part 2, Jolas’s words “chevauch[ent] une lavefrontière” into his father’s tongue, French, and the act of straddling both languages brings verbal sickness (“alle silben krankten am hassfieber”), violence, conflict, and fear: “des massacres de syntaxes,” “violencehymnes,” “clameurage,” and “déchirures.”⁵⁹ This representation of bilingualism as strife and conflict relates of course to the political linguistic conflicts of Jolas’s region, but it also reveals a lingering adherence to the monolingual paradigm: the problem is not so much that of crossing a linguistic frontier as of straddling that frontier, existing at the boundary between two languages. Indeed, Jolas tends to keep languages in relatively distinct categories, particularly within the first section of the poem.

It is at the end of part 2 of “Logocinéma” that we find the first hybrid word of the poem, and this happens within the framework of the English language. The “New World” is invoked as a source of linguistic hope, and Jolas’s words seek a utopian ideal in “les grandes tanglepleines des Amazonas / dans les romanceamériques ivres de colibris.”⁶⁰ Up until this point, French and German have been kept separate: even when a line of German comes into the otherwise Francophone part 2, each line of poetry itself is monolingual. The Anglo-French word “tanglepleines,” however, presents the possibility of a productive mixing (tangling) of languages working in complementarity. Jolas’s critical writings celebrate the ability of English as a language to assimilate diverse elements, to transform itself into a medium that can contain heterogeneity without diluting difference. It is significant that the first hybrid word of “Logocinéma” is expressed in the context of Jolas’s desire for emigration and precedes the move to New York. Parts 3–5 of the poem highlight the importance of English, the third language and the language of modernity, the city, and rebellion: “my words amerigrated / my words saw steelsparkle / my words nightstormed concrete / ... / manhattanwords swarmed shiverdawn.”⁶¹ In Jolas’s collection *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels* (1938), which includes a number of texts from *transition* 23 in revised form, he writes yet more explicitly of New York in relation to Babel: “So many languages rilling around me. Will they never become one? It would be a new age. New words. New syllables.”⁶² Later in the sequence, the speaker goes up a skyscraper in an elevator: “This is the Tower of Babel, someone said beside me.”⁶³ It is in the context of English that Jolas can begin to mix languages, and in his poetry, English is often the language which he uses to write about trilingualism: in “Logocinéma,” when Jolas returns to his “motherwords” (German) in part 6 and to his “fatherwords” (French) in part 7, the dominant language is now English. Part 6 contains no German at all, and part 7 has only

⁵⁷ Eugene Jolas, “Logocinéma of the Frontierman,” *transition* 23 (July 1935): 187.

⁵⁸ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 9.

⁵⁹ Jolas, “Logocinéma of the Frontierman,” 187–88.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 188–89.

⁶² Jolas, *I Have Seen Monsters and Angels*, 90.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 93.

four lines out of fifteen in French.⁶⁴ Indeed, as we will see, English tends to provide a structural and grammatical framework for Jolas's most multilingual writing.

Overall, however, "Logocinéma" embodies a sense of "frontier-anguish," even psychosis: it tends to separate languages out into distinct stanzas and it dramatizes languages at war. The final part, 9, of "Logocinéma" is a trilingual expression of an apocalyptic Babelian state of "tri-words" in "chaosnight":

toutes les nuits étaient squelettiques
 die hunde schriegen sich tot in den hecken
 les forêts de la lune mystèrebrulaient
 the world was earthquakedarkling.⁶⁵

Jolas's neo-Romanticism is apparent here: his depiction of trilingualism as chaos echoes Herder's conception of interlingual and intercultural mixing as a "Babylonischen Sprachenmischung" (Babylonian mixing of languages), a "Cerberus . . . , der aus neun Rachen neun verschiedene Spracharten, . . . herausstößt" (Cerberus which barks out nine different sorts of language from nine mouths).⁶⁶

Linguistic frontiers in "Logocinéma" reflect personal discord and political conflict. However, by highlighting the differences between English, French, and German, the poem also highlights the borders between those languages, forcing the reader to engage in interlingual difference as the poem moves from one language to another. Apart from the Germanic (and Joycean) compounding of words, the poem tends to avoid mixing languages within individual words or even, for much of the poem, within individual lines. This reflects an ambivalence toward interlingual mixing but replicates for the reader a specific consciousness of borders, a focus on the frontiers between languages and the difficulties—as well as the possibilities—of transition between them.

Indeed, Jolas also presents a nascent sense of English as a bridge or medium for such border crossing, not least because it is the predominant language used within the poem to express trilingual conflict. Ultimately, English becomes something of a unifying force, countering much of the fragmenting force of the more multilingual passages (and, of course, providing an anchor of comprehensibility for the poem's predominantly Anglophone readership). Part 8, for example, which details the "chaosnight" of Jolas's three languages, uses English to represent the psychic conflict of French and German (and thus implicitly to mediate between the two languages). It presents a vision of nomadic linguistic upheaval that reflects psychic conflict but also—when placed in the context of the "Revolution of the Word" ambitions of the magazine—presents a productive vision of linguistic revolution:

⁶⁴ It is worth noting, however, that the English of part 6 assimilates one potentially Germanic element: the creation of compound words.

⁶⁵ Jolas, "Logocinéma of the Frontierman," 191.

⁶⁶ Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Werke* [Works], vol. 1, *Herder und der Sturm und Drang, 1764–1774* [Herder and Sturm und Drang, 1764–1774] (Munich: Hanser, 1984), 82; Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51. Herder's negative representation of interlingual mixing here reflects the Romantic cultural-nationalist conception of language as the expression of a nation's *Volksgeist*. Jolas, however, in championing creolizing forms of language, can be seen to move away from Romanticism, even as he reflects it in his conception of his own trilingualism as "pathology" (and therefore deviant, unnatural). Indeed, in his later postwar writings, Jolas is unforgiving in his critique of the legacy of German Romanticism in elements of Nazi nationalist ideology. See, e.g., Eugene Jolas, "Romanticism and Metapolitics," in *Critical Writings, 1924–1951*, 214–18.

my words trioed strife
 my triowords nomadstrolled
 my delugewords flowed through the heraclitean sluice

declinations slipdrooped debris
 accusatives clingclanged leaps
 genitives icarusfell
 verbs sweptwisted sounds
 substantives strainscaled adjectives
 patois words wedded artwords
 sunverbs flightrocketed against nightnouns⁶⁷

This passage performs a transformative, irreverent antigrammar, rebels against the confines of linguistic correctness and poetic appropriateness, and transcends boundaries, mixing “patois” with “artwords.” It is notable that much of Jolas’s *lexical* poetic innovation within the poem (as above) is in English, which is also the predominant language of his neologistic experimentation more generally (much of which was published in *transition* under the pseudonym Theo Rutra). In his critical essays, Jolas celebrates Joyce’s practice as moving toward an ideal linguistic universality. In “Logocinéma,” his conception of English reflects his conflicted personal experience of trilingualism: English functions as a transitional and translational language that manifests the impact of other languages but does not fully assimilate them into the lexical unit.

In *transition* 23, we find a prose sequence called “Paramyths from a Dreambook.”⁶⁸ The sequence reflects Jolas’s preoccupation with interlingual synthesis and creole forms: we find reference to the mysterious language of a “part negroid, part hebrew” race, an “allemanic patois,” creole French, and the “frontier-grammar” of Jolas’s own “Lorraine patois.”⁶⁹ The first “paramyth” of the sequence, “Musique de la syntaxe endormie” (Music of the sleeping syntax), is especially interesting because it presents a more hopeful form of multilingualism than “Logocinéma.” It begins with an unpunctuated rhythmic flow of words that reflects an impatience to cross frontiers: “Dans l’atmosphère des frontières quand et la trance of the nighting thoughts wither the harvest of the word-sick is there no train fast enough to hurry up durch die dunkelheit ohne tunnel where fait image le fugitif éclore malheurs éclat vision ivre orage enregistre and la bourgade how enfermé was the weltbild.”⁷⁰

Moving between English, French, and German, Jolas, unlike Joyce, does not actually mix languages within individual words. Instead, trilingualism is a means of crossing psychological borders to the unconscious and to the language of dreams: there is “no train fast enough” to reach

⁶⁷ Jolas, “Logocinéma of the Frontiersman,” 190.

⁶⁸ Jolas defines the term “Paramythe” as “[u]ne forme de prose qui tient entre l’essai, la légende, le conte magique, le conte populaire, le poème en prose, la nouvelle, et qui donne un diagramme psycho-synthétique des expériences du rêve, du rêve diurne, des hallucinations hypnagogiques, des images eidétiques, des fantaisies, des visions, de l’inconscient individuel et collectif.” Eugene Jolas, “Transmutation Vertigraliste,” *transition* 23 (July 1935): 107. “[A] prose form partaking of essay, legend, magical fairy tale, folk tale, prose poem, story, and which offers a psycho-synthetic diagram of experiences of dreams, daydreams, hypnagogic hallucinations, eidetic images, fantasies, visions, and of the individual and collective unconscious” (Eugene Jolas, “Vertigralist Transmutation,” in *Critical Writings, 1924–1951*, 275).

⁶⁹ Eugene Jolas, “Paramyths from a Dreambook,” *transition* 23 (July 1935): 18, 21, 22, 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

a subterranean “*dunkelheit*” (darkness) where he can find a multilingual “*éclat*” (brightness, illumination) of vision and linguistic “insurrection” and violence. Crossing frontiers, whether geographical, linguistic, or psychological, becomes a means of breaking out of the stifling insularity of a “*weltbild*” (worldview) that is “*enfermé*” (enclosed). What is also interesting (and especially apparent when one tries to read the passage aloud) is the way in which Jolas highlights transitional words that are flanked by two languages and could belong to either: do we pronounce “*trance*” in a French or an English accent? Is “*tunnel*” in English or German? These words, bordering two languages, highlight what languages have in common as well as their differences: they smooth the transition from one language to another even as they highlight the complexity of such interlingual shifts.⁷¹

Volume 23 of *transition* also contains a sequence of poems aptly entitled “*Mots-frontière*” (Frontier-words) which further illustrates Jolas’s preoccupation with the frontiers between languages. In Joyce, languages are absorbed into a disjunctive harmony whereby they complement each other.⁷² Jolas, however, moves between languages in such a way as both to emphasize interlingual difference and to smooth those transitions. The first poem of the sequence, “*Polyvocables*,” presents shifts between English, French, and German as part of a fluid, organic process. (This reflects Jolas’s own statement that “*French, German and English are mingled quite naturally*” in his poetry.)⁷³ The poem juxtaposes strange and incongruous images and three different languages, but this multiplicity is tempered by two important stylistic elements: interlingual sound patterning and unpunctuated rhythmic and syntactical continuity.

malade de peacock-feathers
 le sein blue des montagnes and the house strangled by rooks the tender *entêtement* des trees
 the clouds sybilfly and the neumond brûleglisters ein wunder stuerzt ins tal with
 eruptions of the abendfoehren et le torrentbruit qui charrie les gestes des enfants
 les étoiles s’apprêtent à flamber in the ritual of the stone-age and the loneliness of the fearworld
 sickers into
 the moisson of the hirondelles les vagabonds s’arrêtent am lichtrain it is seraphic in the syl-
 labes of the
 evecome and the amoureux are happied by yoreverbs that lightchantent and whirltournent in
 la possession du sang.⁷⁴

When, for example, we read of “the tender *entêtement* des trees,” the disjunctive shifts between English and French are mediated by the phonetic similarities between the English “tender”/“trees” and the French “*entêtement*.” Likewise, English and French words echo each other phonetically in pairings such as “seraphic”/“syllabes” and “evecome”/“amoureux,” and Anglo-French hybrids are brought together in the strong, if fleeting, dactylic rhythm of “happied by

⁷¹ This prefigures a technique used in Jolas’s later poetry collection *Words from the Deluge*, where, as Grass (“*Democratic Languages of Exile*,” 238) demonstrates, the use of words which exist within more than one language highlights “the inherent multilingualism of each Indo-European language at use in the poem.”

⁷² As Milesi has argued, the “miscegenated portmanteau word . . . aptly reconciles, as it were through a process of at-one-ment, estranged languages and cultures they represent into a localized, transcultural synthesis.” Laurent Milesi, “*Joyce, Language and Languages*,” in *Palgrave Advances in James Joyce Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 154.

⁷³ Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 190.

⁷⁴ Eugene Jolas, “*Mots-frontière*,” *transition* 23 (July 1935): 65.

yoreverbs that lightchantent and whirltourment.” (Anglo-German and Franco-German patterning becomes more prominent later in the poem in phrases such as “flees into fleszacken” and “l’opulence der liebessuechte”). As in “Musique de la syntaxe endormie,” we find words that smooth the transition between languages by emphasizing interlingual similarity: in “le sein blue des montagnes,” for example, because the word “blue” is very similar to the French “bleu,” it facilitates the transition from French to English. Other words seem to function in two languages at once: is “sickers,” for example, an English neologism or a grammatical Anglicization of the German verb *sickern*, “to seep” (either of which would work semantically in this sequence)? English, again, is central to the poem, but in this case it is particularly prominent in a grammatically as well as semantically transitional function, with English conjunctions and prepositions like “and,” “with,” “in,” “into,” and “of” often serving as a “bridge” between words or phrases in two different languages. The overall effect is one of simultaneous disjunction and blending, of movement between languages, and of interlingual transition. Unlike Eliot’s *Waste Land*, however, where different languages are presented as schism and disjunction, and where untranslatability is highlighted,⁷⁵ Jolas’s attempt to provide phonetic and syntactical “bridges” between languages, especially via English, means that the reader not only is made aware of the frontiers between languages but also is made to cross those frontiers.

Jolas produces an art that is unsettling precisely because of its focus on border crossing and on transitions between languages. Jolas’s editorial and creative practice might seem, at first, to be contradictory: as an editor and theorist, Jolas desired “synthesis” and “universality” through mixing languages; as a poet, however, he maintained a creative ambivalence toward trilingualism and limited the mixing of languages at the lexical level. On closer inspection, we begin to see how both of these impulses interrelated and intersected. By avoiding more complete forms of “synthesis,” Jolas was able to place the concept of the frontier center stage. The “frontier” in Jolas means many things, as we have seen: he explored and tested geographical, political, psychological, and linguistic borders. Jolas’s writing reflects a conception of universalism that does not homogenize or assimilate difference: his aesthetic of migration foregrounds movement and border crossings and argues against immigrant assimilation to a target language and culture. The journal *transition*, in its later stages, refused to translate texts into English and thus refused to “assimilate” linguistic difference into the “target” language (English) or the “target” text (the journal itself). Likewise, Jolas’s poetry moves away from using English as a primary language of composition, or as a language into which “foreign” elements can be “translated.” Instead, English becomes a structural host for linguistic diversity and for a number of different kinds of multilingual composition. Rather than attempting a Babelian amalgamation of languages, Jolas’s work highlights instead interlingual and intercultural difference, involving the reader in processes of movement, migration, and transition between languages. Those processes are difficult for the reader, and often uncomfortable. We can feel subjected to that famous declaration in the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto that “THE PLAIN READER BE DAMNED.”⁷⁶ However, that difficulty is important. This is writing that takes us outside the “monolingual paradigm”; we need to remember not to judge it by the principles of that paradigm. A

⁷⁵ See Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction*, 30–32.

⁷⁶ Eugene Jolas et al., “Proclamation,” *transition* 16/17 (June 1929): 13.