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Greg Kerr, *Exile, Non-Belonging and Statelessness in Grangaud, Jabès, Lubin and Luca: No man's language*. London: UCL Press, 2021. 204 pp. £20.00. (pb). ISBN 9781787356740; £40.00. (hb). ISBN 9781787356757.

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Reading poetry and reading a good book about poetry demand work from the reader. If literary language is important, then there is nothing more satisfying than doing the work of poetry. Greg Kerr's book, *Exile, Non-Belonging and Statelessness in Grangaud, Jabès, Lubin and Luca: No man's language* is filled with poetic possibilities. It reveals the trails of nomadic word sculptors whose unstable souls seek stability; they have not fallen into the abyss. The poets studied in this volume, fully consciousness of the dangers of their landscapes, express themselves in shifting lands of poetic language. Kerr articulates their journeys with frightening accuracy.

Kerr begins his discussion by stating that the “emblematic relation of poet and national culture” is how we historicize literature and that “those figures consecrated by tradition as ‘national poets’ often stand in metonymic relation to a territory, a language and a literary system” (p. 1). These premises remain in the readers’ minds as the discussions advance and they do not always sit well (which may be the point). What is a nation state in today’s world? How do we collectively arrive at such conclusions? What is canonical? Who and what is Othered in the veracity of these statements? Kerr positions the four poets he studies in contrast to this historicizing practice, allowing the poets to dismantle the initial premises he sets forth. He questions how language, belonging, statelessness and exile interact and he does so on philosophical levels, leaning on Blanchot, Arendt, Derrida, Rancière and others to reveal the underlying disquiet of the relationship between human experiences and language. He shows how language itself contributes to a sense of exile and, following Agamben’s lead in relation to poetry, argues that poetry is a place of loss. Poetry is the textual space where the need to go beyond what has been written is enacted, producing an outcome that might actually be unsayable. In the introduction, we learn of the existential distances and the lack of belonging that each poet expresses in his or her own way (Camus’ discussions of the absurd and exile fits into this discussion). Kerr laments the role of national institutions in the historicization of literature and his conclusions boldly describe the nation state’s current instability. Kerr hypothesizes that the multilingual, displaced, stateless poets he presents provide evidence of failing state institutions unable to place these poets who give voice to the necessity of redefining, or simply defining, from a more global standpoint, the nation state.

In the book's second chapter, Kerr studies the poetry of Armen Lubin, a pseudonym for the Armenian Chahnour Kerestedjian (1903-1974) who hailed from Istanbul. Kerr indicates that Lubin suffered "with tuberculosis of the bones" (p. 23) and spent twenty years of his life in the wards of various sanatoria. As well, Lubin bore witness to the atrocities of the Armenian genocide which he survived to finally attain refugee status in France. Kerr opens with an examination of Lubin's first novel, *Շահան Շահնուր, Նահանջը արանց Երզնի*, written in Armenian, originally published in 1929 and now a prominent part of the Armenian canon.[1] This highly autobiographical novel relates experiences of the "catastrophe," as the Armenian genocide is known. The next major work by Lubin examined is a prose text entitled *Transfert nocturne* which was awarded the Prix Rivarol in 1955 wherein Lubin details his life in hospital wards.

When Kerr arrives at Lubin's poetry, he provides readers with a tercet, a quatrain, and then what he calls an "irregular sonnet" (p. 34).[2] Formally speaking, Lubin's poetry was not innovative. The syllable counts were not strict and remind readers of the French Alexandrine. What makes Lubin's poetic oeuvre important are its themes of statelessness and exile. When addressing the impact of Lubin's use of couplets to express physical suffering and his harrowing considerations of death, Kerr highlights how the couplets reinforce "harried efforts towards speech" and "utterances [that] do not accede to any properly affirmative or declarative quality" (p. 36), underlining how the couplets develop Lubin's themes. He then quotes Philippe Jaccottet who suggests that the couplets communicate a "solemn and seemingly exhausted character, lacking any affectation" (p. 36). Formally speaking, the use of couplets suggests an almost timid approach to poetry, a possible outcome of the poet's lived experiences. Further, Kerr addresses orality in Lubin's poetry and sees in the poet's writing "the effect of underplaying its status as construction or composition" (p. 37), thus elaborating his thoughts on how, through poetry, Lubin archives, documents and (re)produces his unusual and often unseen experiences. The poetry is self-aware and acts to "gain currency around a given event," it "offers to observe language in the act of producing and preserving itself" (p. 41) and "establishes its own precarious truth" (p. 48) by developing a form of Rimbaldian seeing. Kerr is sensitive to Lubin's lack of poetic inventiveness and explains it well. He proposes that Lubin's poetics oversee a "weakening of the structures of affirmation" (p. 48), intimate a "condition of passivity" and "norms of affirmation and the strictures of poetic convention" (p. 49). Addressing "his poetry's rather conventional formal character... [and] light constructions" (p. 50) Kerr lauds his ability to communicate "extraordinary existential and philosophical weight" (p. 50) through these formal constructs. Lubin, a physically disabled refugee psychically harmed by the Armenian catastrophe, chose not to reinvent poetic forms, perhaps due to inner fears and a will to conform to the practices of his host country and language. As the first chapter of this book on poetry, Kerr succeeds at highlighting the particular means of expression to which Lubin availed himself in attempting to express the virtually inexpressible.

In the next chapter Kerr focuses on the poetry of Edmond Jabès, a poet who has received more critical acclaim and attention than Lubin. He was born in Egypt to a Jewish family, expelled in 1956 by the Nasser government, and witnessed the atrocities inflicted on Jews during World War II. Although not a religious man, he was knowledgeable in Jewish law and the workings of the Kabbala. Formally, Jabès does not write poetry in verse, stanzas and rhymes. He prefers to write in blocks of poetic text without regard for innovative versification. Jabès questions what it means to write. He is impressed by the potential of language, all while remaining wary of its fallibility. Kerr's goals are clear: he will focus on Jabès's emphasis on imagery and his sensitivity to the "exilic qualities of writing" (p. 58).

Kerr reveals profound expressions of detachment and distance in Jabès's work, filtered through seeing and writing. Initially, Kerr addresses a "re-engagement with Kabbalistic sources" (p. 64), defined by a semi-mystic apprehension of the act of writing. Jabès's "non-theological" grasp of the story of creation, influenced by the sixteenth century Kabbalist mystic Isaac Luria (64), infers that by contracting infinite light, God created the finite, or humankind, in darkness. Thus, just as negative space is a necessary starting point for the act of creation, writing too seeks out negative space to begin building structure in order to create. Approaching writing from this theoretical angle forms and informs Jabès's texts. He has no use for mimetic or narrative stories since writing need not draw pictures of ephemeral realities. To write is to communicate from darkness, from and ultimately about exile. This is not to say, according to Kerr, that Jabès eschews the image per se. He eschews images that are pre-determined, that function as tropes and that have cultural meaning. His images are inter-connected through sounds of language (assonance, interior rhymes, alliteration) and from Surrealist practices of automatic and dream writing. Kerr ties together Jabès's beliefs and actions by focusing on his engagement in seeing and communicating his particular versions of the visual. For example, when interacting with Jewish law, Jabès refers to how one observes the letter of laws written in the Torah as another act of seeing and gazing. Therefore, law governs not only how to interact with others, but also how we see and observe them. Kerr interprets Jabès's graphic spacing of texts on the page as exemplary of the poet's approach to the visual. Open spaces on the page are negative spaces that leave room for creation and interaction. Jabès is also known for displacing letters within words, an act that brings forth other words and other meanings. Kerr's insight into this particular practice is revealing.

Kerr's interpretations of Jabès's writing provides us with mystical, spiritual and philosophical versions of exile and statelessness. For example, Jabès's practice of displacing letters "underscore[s] the principle that inheres in language of its necessary transformation and recombination," an insightful and enriching declaration (p. 80). When creating images, suggests Kerr, Jabès is not leaning on them for meaning, "but rather to be rendered indistinct" (p. 92), which I take to mean re-inventing and re-creating himself through the making of images: Jabès integrates himself into the (re)creative process. Regarding the poetics and genre of text that Jabès produces, Kerr states plainly that it would be "misleading to qualify it as poetry" but these texts engage in "different kinds of rupture" that may only be achieved through unique writing practices (p. 93).

The next poet Kerr studies is Gherasim Luca, a Romanian born poet who was expelled from his country because of official antisemitism. Luca was a multilingual Surrealist poet and theorist who lived undocumented in France for more than forty years and who committed suicide in 1994 by throwing himself into the Seine. Kerr begins his work on Luca by highlighting two essential elements of Luca's *Dialectique de la dialectique*. In this theoretical work on the practices and goals of Surrealism, Luca rejects dialectical thinking as the basis of rational thought and rejects, as well, the Oedipal approach to psychology that reinforces a belief in one's fatherland. Luca rejects viewing "class struggle as an expression of a father-son conflict," seeing in this conflict "identitarian attachments of class and nation" (p. 106) and prefers to see himself, in his version of statelessness, as a member of an international Surrealist movement which rejects national boundaries and struggles against monolingualism.

At this point in Kerr's study, having gradually constructed an argument that demonstrates how fragile, poorly defined and even dangerous, the traditional nation state is, words to shore up his eventual questioning of the apparatuses that uphold the nation state would have been welcome. Luca's poetry, which draws from the poet's theoretical premises rejecting the "fatherland" and embracing international Surrealism, reveals a disintegration of language, representative of the nation state's weaknesses. Kerr states that in Luca's poetry there is "a sense of estrangement from...linguistic expression itself, and from the intuitive understanding that treats a given language as an object available to possession or appropriation depending on one's status as native or non-native speaker," (p. 102) which reminds us of both Jabès and Lubin. Inherent to such an approach is Luca's victimhood during the Shoah and shunning of the use of languages as "vectors of patrimonial value" (p. 110). Luca's poetry embraces what Kerr calls "repeated slippages" of the literary tongue, allowing words to crumble and reconstruct themselves (p. 133). "Disintegration" is part of Luca's practice, as is casting "suspicion...on the axiomatic modes which characterize" language (p. 133). Luca breaks down the edifices of the patrimonial state, an act visible in his efforts to disrupt syntax, preferring, according to Kerr, to happen upon the "'improper' accidents of orality" (p. 139). Luca goes so far as to produce a poetry where the "originary logos is pulverised in a radically disseminatory phonesis," part and parcel of "the stateless poet [who] offers a way for thinking postmonolingually" (p. 140). Here, Kerr's analysis risks sounding over-interpretative, which is why his own description of a crumbling nation state would be welcome. Are sounds without recognizable syntax, accidents of orality, linguistic disintegration and repeated slippages a value-laden pathway to a stateless world? Kerr's discussion of Luca's poetry is not in opposition to previous criticism and while it is true that said poetry represents a breakdown between a nation state and a language, how available is such writing for all to grasp and to follow? [3] Such language practices run the risk of being unapproachable, even incomprehensible. Kerr's own thesis about the status of the current nation state would help frame Luca's work.

In the penultimate chapter, Kerr focuses on the poetry of Michelle Grangaud, a member of the group Oulipo. Grangaud's biography is different than those of the preceding poets as she was not stateless nor expelled from Algeria, her country of origin. Addressing the dominant themes of Grangaud's poetry, Kerr states that she instead maintains a "recurrent thematic preoccupation with the institutions (such as libraries, asylums or the transport system) that characterise life in an administered society" (p. 148). Grangaud uses language governed by constraints, an Oulipian practice, to compose unique poetic texts, but she is not attempting to dismantle the institutions that define a nation state. Instead she interacts with the language used by a state's institutions, allowing readers to disentangle, or at least reexamine, the relationship between statehood and language. Kerr underlines the fact that members of the group Oulipo produce writing governed by constraints because constraints are "liberating" (p. 149), however it is not clear when and how he brings that essential Oulipian notion to bear on his interpretations of the Grangaud's work.

When addressing her initial publications, books of anagrams which brought her attention and notoriety, Kerr discusses Grangaud's thoughts about the proper noun and her sense of belonging. [4] Here, states Kerr, is where Grangaud's contribution to the discussion of "statelessness and non-belonging contained in this study is most pressing" (p. 151). Grangaud was "more or less compelled" to leave her country of origin, but she did not experience "migration" as did the previous poets in this study. Instead, "Grangaud sees non-belonging as coincident with our contemporary social condition," her works communicate "that there is something fundamentally inappropriate in language's mediation of human relations," and, states

Kerr, she sees “a form of radical non-belonging not as the loss of community, but as its very condition” (p. 151). By grouping Grangaud into this field of stateless poets, it is unclear if Kerr is extending the parameters of non-belonging and what it means to be stateless, or if being so is a more general experience that we all share. Is belonging even possible if “radical non-belonging,” a term Kerr may have coined, is the “very condition” of community and if language is unable to mediate human relations? These conclusions about Grangaud’s writing are based upon the poet’s avoidance of the proper noun, leading her to “subvert the connotations of univocity, indivisibility and self-identity” (p. 151). Critically speaking, how strong is this argumentation? Where does it leave us in terms of belonging to any group?

Grangaud’s writing expresses apprehension about language, the proper noun and about inventiveness vis-à-vis pre-existent literary figures and formations, but does it represent a stateless and non-belonging poet? One of the books of anagrams that Kerr discusses is entitled *Mémentos-fragments*, which “consists of a series of anagrammatized titles of books, paintings, literary citations, street names and so on.” Kerr argues that they belong to the statelessness and non-belonging writing of the poets previously studied because “readerly interest at least in part derives from how the poem gestures towards or deviates radically from the signification ascribed to the particular set of linguistic units presented by the title,” which is a direct outcome of any anagram. The anagrams’ titles determine its letters and refer to past “books, paintings, literary citations,” which does not necessarily designate non-belonging (p. 152). In fact, it could be considered positive and critical engagement, as artists often refer to and are influenced by past artistic activity. When Kerr focuses on questions of intentionality in the writing of anagrams, he declares that in Oulipian fashion “Grangaud rejects notions of authorial intentionality or originality” and he underlines how some Oulipian writing emphasizes “intellectual technology rather than...aesthetically motivated activity” (p. 154). Grangaud welcomes one outcome of writing under constraint: it reflects “the activity of the unconscious...as a *consequence*” (author’s emphasis; p. 154). Is that a consequence of “intellectual technology”? Grangaud is a poet influenced by dreams and psychology and writes as a pathway to her unconscious. It could be said that access to the unconscious is liberating and, in this way, we happen upon a particularly Oulipian version of intentionality which, in fact, goes hand in hand with originality. Kerr covers previous work on the anagram by Jean Starobinski, Jean Baudrillard and Ferdinand de Saussure. However, one of the primary purposes for writing anagrams is to uncover the secret meaning of a word, its possibly mystical emanation, and such results contribute to the liberating aspects of the anagram, one of which could be the discovery of one’s unconscious. In my own studies of Grangaud’s anagrams, I concluded that there is an economy of meaning in which Grangaud can overcome intentionality imposed by the limits of the anagram, but not entirely: writing can never avoid subjectivity.[5]

Kerr completes his study by focusing on Grangaud’s *État civil*, whose actual subtitle is *Inventaires*, an important element of the book’s poetics. Grangaud’s work on the civil state is a direct questioning of the ways in which a state defines its civilians and she writes about numerous methods of “inventorying,” a particularly Oulipian practice. Grangaud is unafraid to approach the practical language by which a state acts upon and appropriates those living within its borders. Kerr underlines Grangaud’s reprisals of civic code, administrative records, and he appreciates *État civil* as an “encyclopaedic project which inventories a vast, synchronic cross-section of discourses, with sources drawn from radio reports, dictionary-style definitions and excerpts of dialogue at a global scale” (pp. 165-166). He underlines Grangaud’s efforts to disclose a “‘gap’ in the emerging symbolic order, the space of a difference as yet unaccounted for” (p. 177) and how



she subverts “gestures of discursive appropriation,” concluding that “there is something in the nature of the human relation that does not lend itself to the gesture of appropriation” (p. 178), all noteworthy conclusions. Grangaud’s works are radical forms of both engagement and estrangement at the same time: paradoxical, but not necessarily signs of statelessness and non-belonging. With all the dangers attached, might I generalize and declare that Grangaud’s writing activities are very French: intellectual and intelligent approaches to dismantling the language of the State, a virtual national pastime. Such dismantling demands engagement.

Kerr’s general conclusions about poetry, that it has the power to “bring language to a place where its power to name or articulate is suspended or disrupted,” that it “also inherently problematizes the notions of part-taking, property and possession” (p. 186) are refreshing because they articulate poetry’s powers, political and ideological roles. Referring to Agamben, Kerr speaks of poetry’s maturation in a process of “‘appropriating expropriation’ and ‘expropriating appropriation’” (p. 187) and, referring to Rancière, he speaks of poetry’s “paradoxical mode of ‘unbelonging belonging’” (p. 186). This type of radical engagement with state apparatuses, whether it be the poetry itself or Kerr’s analysis, feels necessary at this moment of global history. The paradoxical positions of the poetry that Kerr studies—appropriating expropriation, expropriating appropriation, unbelonging belonging—“offer a counterpoint to a pastoral view of poetry as the privileged expression of a community’s inalienable, ancestral values” (p. 187). Kerr’s rejection of the pastoral view of poetry is an accurate and articulate position. Poetry plays a role in global cultural exchange because “the structures of the nation state [are becoming] less tenable, or less adapted to the character of human mobility across the planet” (p. 188). The striking success of Kerr’s study is to have shone light on the paradoxical nature of belonging, best exploited by poetic language.

## NOTES

[1] Armen Lubin, *Շտհան Շտհնր, Լսհանըր առանց Երգի* (Paris: Masis, 1929). This book was translated into English and French subsequently: Armen Lubin, *Retreat Without Song* (London: Mashtots Press, 1982); Lubin, *La retraite sans fanfare: histoire illustrée des Arméniens* (Chambéry: L’Act Mem, 2009).

[2] Contemporary examples and writing of and on the sonnet signal that the sonnet is not necessarily a “regular” form. We have only to think of the differences between the French, English, Portuguese and Italian sonnets as examples. The French review, *Formules*, published an entire volume dedicated to the sonnet where we read “nulle forme ancienne n’est moins fixe, nulle forme ne transcende plus les frontières, nulle forme reçue n’est plus susceptible d’une individualisation formelle (Alain Chevrier & Bernardo Schiavetta, “Éditorial,” in *Le Sonnet Contemporain: retour au sonnet* (special edition), *Formules* 12(2008): 7). The volume can be downloaded at the following address:

[https://www.academia.edu/38988666/Formules\\_no\\_12\\_complet\\_Formules\\_revue\\_des\\_cr%C3%A9ations\\_formelles\\_et\\_des\\_litt%C3%A9ratures\\_%C3%A0\\_contraintes\\_Le\\_sonnet\\_contemporain](https://www.academia.edu/38988666/Formules_no_12_complet_Formules_revue_des_cr%C3%A9ations_formelles_et_des_litt%C3%A9ratures_%C3%A0_contraintes_Le_sonnet_contemporain).

[3] For example, see Serge Martin, “Avec Ghérasim Luca (1913-1994), extension du domaine des apatrides,” *Modern Languages Open* 1(2019):15, pp.1-10,

<http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.223>.

[4] Kerr does not mention Grangaud's book of anagrams entitled *Renâtres* (Noeux: Ebofade, 1990) or the pamphlet, *Les formes de l'anagramme* (Paris: Bibliothèque oulipienne, 75: 1995).

[5] See my "L'Anagramme et l'intention du poète," *Formules-Forme et informe dans la création moderne et contemporaine* 13(2009): 215-226.

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