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ZWEIKLÄNGE: ON WASSILY KANDINSKY'S MULTILINGUAL ART

Abstract:

Wassily Kandinsky was an artist who worked in multiple genres and media, including the written word. His literary works include thirty-eight prose poems published in the 1912 album *Klänge* (*Sounds*), four stage compositions written between 1908 and 1914, and occasional poetry composed in the 1920s and 30s. Kandinsky felt compelled to engage from time to time in what he called a “change of instruments” by putting the palette aside and using in its place the typewriter. However, “changing instruments” did not only refer to the crossing over from visual into verbal art. It also could mean switching languages. Research has thus far paid insufficient attention to the fact that Kandinsky was a multilingual poet and self-translator working in three languages: his native Russian, German, and French. Many of Kandinsky’s poetic texts exist in two parallel versions as a result of self-translation. It is not always easy to determine which version came first. By writing a text in two languages simultaneously Kandinsky engaged in what has become known as synchronous self-translation. As a visual artist, he added an additional component of intersemiotic bridge-building by correlating his Russian and German prose poems with a sequence of corresponding woodcuts. This article explores Kandinsky’s multilingual oeuvre in the context of his visual art. Kandinsky’s notion of the “Zweiklang” (dual sound), in which two distinct elements coexist simultaneously in a state of undecidability, furnishes a conceptual illustration for the bilingual constellation of his parallel poems. I will argue that Kandinsky’s multilingualism played a crucial role in the evolution of his art. The fact that he was a foreigner working in languages “not his own” gave him a creative license that he would have lacked if he had remained wedded to his native tongue.

Keywords: Kandinsky ♦ *Klänge* ♦ multilingual poetry ♦ self-translation ♦ intersemiotic translation

Wassily Kandinsky was an artist who worked in multiple genres and media, including the written word. In a self-characterization published in 1919 he introduced himself as a “painter, printmaker, and author” (1994: 431). As an author, Kandinsky is best known for his theoretical writings,

especially the seminal treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual in Art) published in 1911. However, Kandinsky wrote not only expository prose, but also literary texts. They include a series of prose poems that came out in the 1912 album *Klänge* (Sounds), four stage compositions written between 1908 and 1914, and occasional poetry composed in the 1920s and 30s. In his 1938 essay “Mes gravures sur bois” (My woodcuts) Kandinsky wrote that he felt compelled to engage from time to time in a “change of instruments” by putting the palette aside and using in its place the typewriter. As he explained, “I use the word ‘instrument’ because the force that prompts me to work always remains the same, that is to say, an ‘inner pressure.’ And it is this pressure that often asks me to change instruments” (1994: 817).

“Changing instruments,” for Kandinsky, did not only concern the crossing over from visual into verbal art. It also could mean switching languages. Kandinsky had three languages at his command: Russian, German, and French. At the beginning of his career he wrote most of his works in his native Russian before self-translating and revising them in German. The scenic compositions of 1908–9 and the treatise *On the Spiritual in Art* exist in both a Russian and German variant.¹ After 1912, Kandinsky tended to write directly in German. His memoirs *Rückblicke* (Backward Glances) of 1913 were first written in German and later self-translated into Russian. In his poetic writings, Kandinsky also evolved gradually from his Russian beginnings to a Russian-German bilingualism in which the German language began to play an increasingly important role. After his final departure from the Soviet Union in 1921, Kandinsky became essentially a German-language writer, before evolving towards a German-French bilingualism after 1933, when he was forced to emigrate from Nazi Germany to France.

Kandinsky’s cosmopolitanism meant that he turned away from the linkage between native language and poetic creation posited by German Romantic philosophy. His multilingual practice rather resembles the medieval and early modern period, when poets frequently and routinely switched between different languages. In going back and forth between Latin and various vernacular idioms, these authors exhibited a rather weak sense of “language loyalty.” It is only with the advent of Herder that language was enshrined as the embodiment of the national “soul,” which made literary creation in a non-native language a problematic endeavor. As Leonard Forster has pointed out in his pioneering monograph on multilingual poetry, in earlier periods the writing in multiple languages resembled the creation of art in different media. As Forster puts it, “[L]anguage is of course the medium in which all poets work, but this was true in a different sense for poets before Romanticism, for medieval, renaissance or baroque poets, than it has been since. Just as the artist need not always paint in oils, but also in water-colour, or may draw in pencil or charcoal or silverpoint, or may have recourse to woodcut or etching, so the poet may use more

¹ On the different linguistic incarnations of *On the Spiritual in Art*, see Podzemskaia (1997).

than one language” (28–29). Similarly, as Forster also has noted, switching languages became a more common practice again in twentieth-century avant-garde and conceptualist poetry, where language is treated as simply a kind of raw material.

We might be inclined to look at Kandinsky’s multilingual practice as no more than a pragmatic accommodation to the different linguistic milieus that he happened to inhabit in the course of his life. The need to adapt himself to new environments is hardly a sufficient explanation for Kandinsky’s multilingual poetry, however. Not every poet who moves to a different country begins to write in that country’s language. Marc Chagall, for example, another Russian-born painter who wrote poetry, lived in France much longer than Kandinsky, yet despite his fluency in French he used only Yiddish and Russian for his poetic writings. Aneta Pavlenko, a prominent psycholinguist who studies emotions and multilingualism, has argued that the intimate link between the mother tongue and poetic creation accounts for what she dubs the “L2 poetry problem.” The emotional rootedness of poetry in the native language, according to Pavlenko, prevented Chagall from writing poems in a language that he learned only in adulthood. As she explains: “The language acquired at the age of 24 did not provide emotional access and relief. In contrast, Russian acquired in his adolescent years did offer this emotional connection, as did his mother tongue Yiddish” (2014: 295). Pavlenko’s explanation is predicated on the Romantic notion of poetry as a vehicle of emotional self-expression. But surely this is not the only way to experience or to define poetry. For Kandinsky, the linguistic border-crossing responded to a creative need that would have remained unfulfilled by remaining within the monolingual orbit of the native language. To be sure, he knew German since childhood, having learned the language from his Baltic-German grandmother, and as a member of the pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia he had a solid command of French. But the decision to begin writing poems in French when he was already in his seventies would be inexplicable if we regard poetry as a form of emotional self-expression that can be satisfactorily performed only in the mother tongue.

Many of Kandinsky’s poetic texts exist in two parallel versions—Russian and German—as a result of self-translation. It is not always easy to determine which version came first. In some instances he first drafted a text in Russian and then translated it into German, in other instances he worked in the opposite direction. The practice of writing a text in two languages simultaneously has become known in contemporary translation theory as synchronous self-translation. Aurelia Klimkiewicz defines this phenomenon as “the simultaneous process of writing and self-translating, blurring the boundaries between original and self-translated text” (2013: 190). The most prominent practitioner of this approach in the twentieth century was Samuel Beckett. By writing his works at the same time in French and English, as Rainier Grutman argues, Beckett was able to create a “dynamic link between both versions that effectively bridges the linguistic divide” (2009: 259).

In spite of his extensive practice of self-translation and his penchant for theorizing, Kandinsky never reflected explicitly on his method of translation. However, his theoretical writings on art can provide insights into his attitude toward language as well. On a fundamental level, poetry had the same spiritual mission for Kandinsky as the visual arts, music, or any other form of artistic creation: its task was to harmonize the soul with the world. The different arts become homologous for Kandinsky and thereby translatable into each other, as suggested by the metaphorical “translation” of visual art into music that we find in the treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, where he writes: “Color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key” (1994: 160). “Changing instruments,” aside from denoting the switching of media or languages, can also serve more concretely as a metaphor for (self-)translation. In spite of the different sounds produced by different instruments, Kandinsky implies that the underlying spiritual message remains the same. Just as a musical piece is enriched by being played with a variety of instruments, a poetic text gains in depth by being incarnated in more than one language. Aside from the interlingual transfer between Russian and German, Kandinsky also experimented with intersemiotic bridge-building by correlating a sequence of prose poems with a sequence of woodcuts in his album *Klänge*. One could argue that the juxtaposition of texts and images in *Klänge* functions analogously to an *en face* edition of self-translated poems. Similarly to a text presented in two different linguistic incarnations, Kandinsky’s prose poems and woodcuts map onto each other without being identical in any way.

Klänge is the only substantial collection of Kandinsky’s poetry to appear during his lifetime.² Published by Reinhard Piper in Munich, this luxuriously produced album, with a cover embossed in gold on fuchsia-colored material, combined thirty-eight prose poems with twelve color and 44 black-and-white hand printed woodcuts in an edition limited to 345 copies. Digital reproductions of the cover and the fifty-six woodcuts can be found on the [Web site](#) of the New York Museum of Modern Art.

The woodcuts date from 1907 to 1912, while the poems, according to Kandinsky, were written between 1909 and 1911. The relation between image and text is quite complex. Clearly, the woodcuts are not simply an illustration of the poems, or the poems a comment on the woodcuts. Rather, both media make an independent, contrapuntal contribution to a new kind of synthetic art, fulfilling an imperative voiced in *On the Spiritual in Art*, which appeared roughly at the same time as *Klänge*. As Kandinsky wrote in that book: “And so, finally, one will arrive at a combination of

² For an English translation by Elizabeth R. Napier, see Kandinsky 1981. This edition provides the German original texts in an appendix. An alternative, more literal English translation by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo can be found in Kandinsky 1994: 291–339. Both of these editions also contain black-and-white reproductions of the woodcuts.

the particular forces belonging to different arts. Out of this combination will arise in time a new art, an art we can foresee even today, a truly *monumental art*”(1994: 155).³

Even though Kandinsky published his album in German, we know from his correspondence that his original plan was a Russian-language edition with the title “Zvuki” (Sounds), which was to be published by Vladimir Izdebskii, a sculptor acquaintance in Odessa. This edition was to contain seventeen prose poems, displaying a different layout of texts and woodcuts than the German version. For unknown reasons, the Russian edition never materialized.⁴ Kandinsky’s Russian prose poems are not simply the “originals” of the German texts that were later included in *Klänge*, however. He seems to have worked on the Russian and the German version of the album more or less simultaneously by self-translating his drafts in both directions. Stylistically, the prose poems collected in *Klänge* are quite heterogeneous. Even though Kandinsky did not date them, a chronologically early or late provenance is readily apparent from the manner in which they are written. The texts evolved from a fin-de-siècle symbolist style towards a radical modernism that seems to anticipate concrete poetry as well as the iconoclasm of the Futurists and Dadaists.⁵ Conventional narrative prose written in coherent syntax gives way to an alogical, disruptive discourse that highlights sound over semantics.

Kandinsky’s literary evolution parallels the development of his visual style reflected in the woodcuts in *Klänge*, which vary between figurative ornamental *Jugendstil* and almost complete abstraction. The vignette next to the poem “Lied” (Song), for example, entitled “[Der Schleier](#)“ (The Veil), displays the folkloric “Russian” style typical for Kandinsky’s early period. Interestingly, the accompanying text is one of only two traditional poems in *Klänge* written with line breaks and regular meter. “Hügel” (Hills), the opening text of the album, is accompanied by a vignette in a more abstract style, even though it still contains a figurative element: the center of the image displays two riders galloping up a steep hill from right to left, a key symbol for spiritual striving in *Klänge*. In some of the woodcuts, the representation of external reality has become extremely stylized and reduced. This is the case, for example, with the full-page woodcut “[Schwarzer Fleck I](#)“ (Black Spot I). The only quasi-figurative element consists of three curved lines in the upper left corner. As we know from Kandinsky’s own explanation in his 1913 essay

³ Kandinsky’s emphasis. The most thorough discussion of the relationship between the texts and images in *Klänge* can be found in the unpublished 1989 PhD thesis of Patrick McGrady.

⁴ The history and structure of the planned Russian edition are discussed in Sokolov 1996. A maquette reproducing the order of the texts and images has been preserved in Kandinsky’s Munich estate and was partially published in facsimile in Kandinsky 2007: 389–97. Additional manuscripts of prose poems intended for the Russian volume exist in Kandinsky’s Munich and Paris archives. Sixteen of the Russian texts kept at the Centre Pompidou in Paris were published in the appendix to a Moscow edition of Kandinsky’s memoirs (Kandinskii 1994: 164–171).

⁵ Both the Moscow Futurists and the Zurich Dadaists, somewhat misguidedly, welcomed Kandinsky’s prose poems as an illustration of their own aesthetic revolution. For more on this, see Wanner 2003: 116 and 120.

“Das Bild mit weißem Rand” (The Picture with the White Edge) appended to his memoirs, this figure is meant to represent the three horses of a troika (see Kandinsky 1994: 389). The absence of external representation does not signal a lack of meaning, of course. In his PhD thesis devoted to *Klänge*, Patrick McGrady (1987) has interpreted the “Schwarzer Fleck” woodcut as follows: “The troika flies off the sacred hill in its usual manner toward the upper left, bearing the enlightened in its cart. ... The spiritual wind it generates ignites the forces which will soon extinguish the menacing blackness of materialism” (214).

The prose poems that Kandinsky wrote after the appearance of *Klänge* further developed his trajectory toward radical abstraction. As the Russian art historian Boris Sokolov has shown, Kandinsky planned another volume of texts and woodcuts in 1914 under the title “Tsvety bez zapakha” (Flowers without Fragrance), but had to abandon his plans because of the outbreak of the war. Some of these texts exist only in Russian, some only in German, and some in both languages. Overall the tone has become more pessimistic, as the messianic hope expressed in *Klänge* has given way to nightmarish and threatening forebodings.⁶

The whimsical poem “Sonet”/“Sonett” kept at Kandinsky’s Paris archive presents an example of his more radical style. Both the Russian and German manuscripts are dated 10 May 1914.⁷ Here is my translation of the German text:

A Sonnet

Laurentius, did you hear me?
 The green circle burst. The yellow cat kept licking its tail.
 Laurentius, night has not irrupted!
 Cucumismatic spiral sprung up sincerely in the right direction.
 The purple elephant did not stop sprinkling himself with his trunk.
 Laurentius, this is not right. — Is it not right?
 Labusalututic parabola did not find its head nor its tail. The red horse kicked, and kicked, and
 kicked, and kept kicking.
 Laurentius, nandamdra, lumusukha, dirikeka! Diri-keka! Di-ri-ke-ka!

The nonsensical title “A Sonnet,” appended to a text that clearly is not a sonnet, anticipates the absurdist writings of Daniil Kharms.⁸ Rather than presenting a coherent discourse, the poem looks

⁶ See Sokolov 2011. Sokolov provides the complete Russian text of eleven of these prose poems. The corresponding German version of seven of them can be found in the collection of unpublished poems in Kandinsky 2007.

⁷ The Russian version has been published in Sokolov 2011: 176, the German one in Kandinsky 2007: 543.

⁸ See “Sonet,” one of Kharms’ “mini-stories” written in the 1930s. For more on this text, see Wanner 2003: 133–134.

like a verbal rendition of a semi-abstract painting. The only remaining vestige of figurative representation is provided by the animals, which are cast in expressionist colors reminiscent of the paintings of Kandinsky's friend Franz Marc.⁹ They mingle with abstract geometric figures, the circle, the spiral and the parabola. While the circle is still given a concrete color (green), the spiral and parabola are qualified with unintelligible adjectives that sound a like a parody of scientific discourse. At the end, the text turns into a sequence of neologisms that gradually disintegrate into individual syllables. Language has ceased to function in any kind of referential manner. Kandinsky's word creation parallels the verbal experiments of the Russian Futurists, who tried to reach a deeper level of meaning through "transmental" (zaumnyi) language. It also anticipates the sound poetry of the Dadaists. The final line resembles Hugo Ball's famous poem "Karawane" written in 1917. Ball greatly admired Kandinsky's prose poems and recited them at the Zurich "Cabaret Voltaire."

Kandinsky wrote the German and Russian version of the poem on the same day. There are no major differences between the two variants, except that the Russian text is written in the present and the German in the past tense. The third line also looks different in Russian: "Lavrentii, do net eshche daleko!" ("Laurentius, it is still far to the 'no'!"). Both variants, however, can be reduced to a similar statement, the assertion that positive being, at least for now, still prevails over nothingness. The fourth line is generated in both languages by etymological play with the root denoting "right": "pravil'no v pravil'nom napravlenii" corresponds to "aufrichtig in der richtigen Richtung." In the Russian version all the words related to animals—"kot," "khvost," "slon," "khubot," "loshad'" (cat, tail, elephant, trunk, horse)—contain a stressed "o." This sonic uniformity perhaps indicates that Kandinsky first conceived the poem in Russian before translating it into German. In any event, the opposition between the two languages disappears in the last line, which is written in an invented idiom that is neither Russian nor German. The linguistic differences fade away as the two versions of the text converge in more or less identical sounds.¹⁰ The ultimate, utopian reconciliation of the two languages can only happen when they abandon their referential function altogether. In the final vanishing point of Kandinsky's artistic path, there is no more

⁹ In *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky explains how the figure of a red horse differs from a red dress or a red tree: "The very sound of the words creates an altogether different atmosphere. The natural impossibility of a red horse necessarily demands a likewise unnatural milieu in which this horse is placed" (1994: 201).

¹⁰ There is a slight difference in spelling between the two versions. The Russian text, as transcribed by Boris Sokolov, reads "Lavrentii, naudandra, limuzukha, direkeka! Diri —keka! Di—ri—ke—ka!" However, Kandinsky's handwriting allows for various interpretations. In the German manuscript, the word transcribed as "nandamdra" might very well be "naudandra." Of course, in spite of the identical sounds, the neologisms could still be perceived differently by German and Russian recipients. For a Russian, for example, the "a"-ending might signal a feminine noun. (I am indebted to Miriam Finkelstein for this observation.)

difference between Russian and German, as the individual idioms merge in the universal language of abstraction.

What prompted Kandinsky to write his poem simultaneously in two languages? Most likely, he was driven by the same impulse that made him create parallel and mutually interdependent sequences of texts and images in *Klänge*. As Christopher Short has observed (2006): “In *Sounds*, words in the poems function conventionally and, simultaneously, move toward free graphic form, becoming abstract. At the same time, the images in the album are representational and, simultaneously, move toward free graphic form, becoming abstract.” To name a specific example, the point and the line can function both as punctuation marks in the linear sequence of the text and as visual images in the space of the white page, where the verbal and visual texts enter into communication and competition with each other. In his theoretical writings, Kandinsky used the neologism “Zweiklang” (“two-sound”) to describe the flickering effect created by elements that allow for two conflicting readings simultaneously. The 1926 treatise “Punkt und Linie zur Fläche” (Point and Line to Plane) describes “Zweiklang” as “the balancing of two worlds that can never attain equilibrium” (1994: 541).

The double incarnation of Kandinsky’s prose poems in Russian and German creates an effect akin to a “Zweiklang.” The two linguistic versions map on to each other while retaining their distinct characteristics. The oscillating tension between two sign systems becomes visible in instances where two contradictory readings of a grapheme are offered simultaneously. A good example for such a phenomenon is provided by the title of one of the German prose poems in *Klänge*. Printed in capital letters, it looks as follows:

HOBEOE

“Hoboe” is an archaic German word for oboe. In modern German the musical instrument is called “Oboe,” even though at the beginning of the twentieth century, both “Oboe” and “Hoboe” were still in use. The reason why Kandinsky chose the latter variant is obvious: a Russian speaker might read this word as “HOBEOE” (“HOBEOE,” meaning “something new”). With its double encoding in the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet, allowing for both a German and a Russian deciphering, the title provides a perfect example of a Kandinskian “Zweiklang.” It is interesting to note that Kandinsky refrained from translating this text into Russian, possibly because the Russian word for oboe—ГOBOЙ—would not have created the same bilingual effect.

The Russian scholar Vladimir Feshchenko has argued that Kandinsky’s interest in self-translation was ultimately intersemiotic rather than interlingual. In this view, the different linguistic versions of his poems become mere variants of a more fundamental “translation from the language of painterly perception into verbal language” (2015: 208). It is certainly true that there is an analogy

between the border crossing involved in the transition from visual to verbal expression and the act of interlingual translation. Nevertheless, one can find only few examples of direct “translations” between specific paintings and texts in Kandinsky’s oeuvre.

A rather curious example of an intersemiotic self-translation is provided by an early German poem that Kandinsky included in a September 1903 letter to the painter Gabriele Münter, who by then had become his de facto wife:

Die weiße Wolke, der schwarze Wald!	(The white cloud, the black wood!
Ich wart’ auf dich. O komm doch bald.	I wait for you. O come soon.
So weit ich sehe, so weit nach vorn,	As far as I see, so far ahead
Das glänzend gold’ne, reife Korn.	The radiantly golden ripe grain.
Du kommst ja nicht. O welcher Schmerz!	But you do not come. O what pain!
Es zittert und blutet mein armes Herz.	My poor heart trembles and bleeds.
Ich wart’ auf dich. O komm doch bald.	I wait for you. O come soon.
Ich bin allein im schwarzen Wald. ¹¹	I am alone in the black wood.)

The poem, one of the first that Kandinsky ever wrote in German, is hardly a masterpiece. The problem does not necessarily stem from an insufficient command of the German language, though. Rather than a linguistically awkward text written “with a foreign accent,” Kandinsky’s poem looks like the effusion of a sentimental German with a penchant for banal rhyming (the notorious pair “Schmerz”—“Herz” [“pain”—“heart”] is probably the most shopworn rhyme in the German language). With its emphasis on visual impressions and stark coloristic contrasts the poem has a certain painterly quality, however. Kandinsky himself, in his letter to Münter, commented that it would perhaps make a good subject for a “drawing on black cardboard.”

Writing this poem constituted a double border crossing for Kandinsky: as a painter, he was branching out into verbal art, and as a Russian native speaker, he ventured into a linguistic territory beyond the mother tongue. In his letter to Münter, he indicated that he was less than satisfied with the outcome. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Kandinsky decided to “translate” the poem back into his primary medium, as it were, by turning it into a work of visual art. The result was a gouache on dark grey board, which he gave the title “[Weiße Wolke](#)“ (White Cloud). The painting is part of the permanent collection of the Kreeger Museum in Washington, D.C.

“Weiße Wolke” depicts a blue rider on a white horse following a path winding through blooming trees toward a vanishing point between hills, which is obscured by a thickly painted white cloud.

¹¹ Cited in Kleine 1990: 181.

The black wood of the poem is nowhere to be seen (except, perhaps, in the dark background), while the golden corn has metamorphosed into a few colored dots in the crown of the central blooming tree. The bleeding heart of the poem is indirectly represented by a few red dots near the stem of the tree, which look like droplets of blood amidst the white flowers covering the meadow. The color blue, which is not mentioned in the poem, plays an important role in the painting. It predominates in the crown of the blooming trees and also traces the movement of the road and the curve of the hills. Later, in his treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky characterized blue as “the typically heavenly color” (1994: 182). The “Blue Rider” became the name of Kandinsky’s expressionist art movement and the title of the well-known almanac of 1912.

Overall, the painting makes a more optimistic impression than the poem. With its subtle interplay between lines and dots and carefully crafted coloration, it is certainly a much more compelling work of art than the text that served as its inspiration. In Kandinsky’s defense, it has to be said that he never intended to publish his poem. It was a private message sent to Gabriele Münter shortly after the consummation of their relationship. Münter’s biographer Gisela Kleine speculates that Kandinsky’s design may have been to restore a sense of romantic distance that had become shattered through physical intimacy (180–181). Given that Münter knew no Russian, Kandinsky had no choice but to write his poem in German if he wanted her to understand its message.

Kandinsky did become more confident in writing German verse in the years that followed. This can be seen by the metered and rhymed poems inserted in his stage compositions, which exist both in an original Russian and a self-translated German version. In some instances, the German translation surpasses the Russian source text in poetic boldness. For example, the Russian “shrouds of death” (“smerti pokrov”) in the play “Black and White” become “blackdead veils” (“schwarz-tote Schleier”) in German (Kandinsky 1998: 105–106). The neologism “schwarz-tot” emphasizes the dichotomy between black and white, which is worked out more explicitly in the German translation than in the Russian original. We see Kandinsky taking risks here that he eschews in his more conventionally written Russian text. While the Russian poem looks like the work of a derivative symbolist, the German translation, despite its awkwardness—or perhaps *because* of its awkwardness—occasionally shows genuine flashes of poetic inspiration.

One could speculate that it was easier for Kandinsky to conduct creative experiments in German, since he was “deforming” a language in which, as a foreigner, he enjoyed a certain freedom. The occasional “strangeness” of Kandinsky’s language, be it in German or Russian, could be an intentional effect rather than simply the result of stylistic clumsiness or foreign linguistic interference. The unusual, even ungrammatical passages in Kandinsky’s poetic writings in German cannot be attributed to the fact that Kandinsky, as a Russian native speaker, had an insufficient knowledge of the language. His more utilitarian prose and correspondence show an entirely correct command of German syntax and grammar. And yet, in his German prose poems we find “strange”

passages such as the following: “Es sich entreißt dem schwarzen Traum. Der Tod das Leben will” (“It itself tears from the black dream. Death life wants”).¹² Kandinsky certainly knew German well enough not to commit such elementary syntactical mistakes (the correct word order would be “Es entreißt sich ... Der Tod will das Leben”). In fact, the manuscript of the poem shows that Kandinsky first wrote the passage in correct German before altering the syntax.¹³ The reason for this change has probably to do with rhythmic considerations—“Es sich entréißt dem schwärzen Tráum. Der Tód das Lében will” scans as an iambic line. The parallel passage in the Russian version of the text—“Ot chernogo sna vyrvalos’. Khochet Smert’ Zhizn’”— shows no regular rhythmic pattern (Sokolov 2011: 177). The syntax of the second sentence is also somewhat unusual, however. It looks as if Kandinsky is trying to “hammer in” his point with two stressed monosyllabic words at the end. As we can see, rhythmic elements are a key consideration in Kandinsky’s writings, but he violates the syntax of German more radically than that of his native Russian to achieve the desired effect.

Kandinsky stopped writing poetry in his native Russian altogether after his final departure from Russia, but by adding French to his poetic repertoire in the 1930s he demonstrated to what extent multilingualism had become a crucial feature of his artistic self-definition. Beginning to write poetry in a new language at Kandinsky’s advanced age—he was already past seventy at that time—was certainly a remarkable decision. We can surmise that it was Kandinsky’s previous experience as a bilingual poet that gave him the necessary flexibility to branch out into a third language at this late stage in his life.

The two languages in which Kandinsky wrote poetry during the final decade of his life were not exactly equivalent, however. The German poems continue the linguistic experimentation of the pre-war years. Many of them are written in a radical avant-garde style reminiscent of Dadaism. Shot-through with neologisms and ungrammaticalities, they create a sort of free-floating content in a verbal analogy to Kandinsky’s paintings of the same period. The combination of existing lexemes with neologisms resembles the juxtaposition of vaguely representational “biomorphic” shapes with abstract geometric forms in Kandinsky’s late style from the 1930s and 40s. The oil painting “Dominant Curve,” for example, combines overlapping monochrome circular shapes with something resembling a pink embryo and an assemblage of floating forms that look like marine microorganisms. It also features the outline of a staircase that can be read in spatially contradictory ways, offering another example of a “Zweiklang” in analogy to Kandinsky’s use of polysemy in

¹² “Auch so.” Kandinsky 2007: 553.

¹³ A facsimile of the first page of the manuscript of “Auch so” is reproduced in Kandinsky 2007: 534.

his German experimental poetry (“[Dominant Curve](#)“ is on display at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.)

Kandinsky’s French poems are written in a quite different manner. They contain no neologisms, puns, or ungrammaticalities. Rather than experimenting with linguistic means, they follow conventional French usage and syntax, sometimes adopting a colloquial tone. Their prevalent focus is on scenes of daily life. In painterly terms, the imagery of Kandinsky’s French poems rather evokes his pre-abstract period than his style of the 1930s, as can be seen in the following example, dating from March 1939:

Lyrique

(Lyric

C’est de la cheminée rouge
Que sort la fumée blanche.

From the red chimney
Emerges the white smoke.

C’est sur l’assiette jaune
Qu’est posé un concombre vert.

On the yellow plate
Lies a green cucumber.

C’est sur la bicyclette noire
Qu’est assis un homme violet.

On the black bicycle
Sits a purple man.

La route monte.
La bicyclette monte.
L’homme monte à son tour.
La fumée monte.
Elle aussi.

The road rises.
The bicycle rises.
The man rises too.
The smoke rises
As well.

Le concombre ne bouge pas.
Une sinistre tranquillité.¹⁴

The cucumber does not move.
A sinister calm.)

Presenting a sort of cross between landscape painting and still-life, the poem contains an assemblage of concrete objects that are all shown in their “natural” colors. The only exception is the purple man, who looks like a figure out of Kandinsky’s earlier color dramas. Even though there is an element of movement indicated by the rising smoke and the bicycle, the overall impression is static rather than dynamic. The general upward movement is resisted by the cucumber, a symbol

¹⁴ “Lyrique” is the final poem in the posthumously published [album](#) *Kandinsky: 11 Tableaux et 7 Poèmes*. The English translation is mine.

of material lifelessness and stasis in Kandinsky's work. One wonders whether this cucumber is not conceptually borrowed and "translated" from Russian, as it were. Salted cucumbers are a typical part of humorous discourse in Russian, evoking "zakuski" and alcoholic banter.¹⁵ There may be an element of self-deprecating sexual humor as well: if we read the cucumber as a phallic symbol, its failure to "rise" would explain the gloomy note on which the poem ends.

Kandinsky's visual art of the 1930s contains nothing resembling the content of "Lyrique." Interestingly, though, the somewhat enigmatic title is a self-citation referring to a much earlier work, the oil painting "[Lyrisches](#)," which is kept at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Created in 1911, this iconic image displays a jockey on a galloping horse rendered in a semi-abstract style. As a leitmotif, the horse and rider came to symbolize Kandinsky's spiritual strivings and his overcoming of figurative representation. A full-page color [woodcut](#) of "Lyrisches" was also included in the *Klänge* album.

Does the interlingual translation of the title "Lyrisches" into "Lyrique" imply an intersemiotic transposition of the picture into a work of verbal art (just like the woodcut in *Klänge* was itself a "translation" of the oil painting)? If so, the poem would have to be read as a deflating self-parody of the earlier image. The horseman has metamorphosed into a bicycle rider, the dynamism of 1911 has given way to a static mood, and the bold leap into abstraction has become a semi-comical return to representation tinged with Russian alcoholic humor. Perhaps Kandinsky wrote the poem in French because German had become so familiar by now that he needed a new language to "defamiliarize" the image.

Kandinsky's use of colors is of particular interest when we compare "Lyrisches" with "Lyrique." The predominant colors in the woodcut are yellow, red and blue (in addition to the black horse drawn on a white background). The land and sky to the left are in the "heavenly" color blue, indicating the rider's spiritual destination. The rider's legs and arms are yellow—"the typically earthly color," according to Kandinsky (1994: 181)—while his head and torso are mixing red with blue. Patrick McGrady explains this coloring as follows: "Here, the red has been 'cooled' by blue, and, because of the rider's inclination, it can be seen as turning into blue. Mentally, the rider has begun to move in the same direction as his horse travels physically, and thus on both levels he can properly be identified as an incipient blue rider" (42).¹⁶ In "Lyrique," the "rider" on his black bicycle sports a similar color as the rider in the woodcut, inasmuch as violet results from a mixture of red and blue. However, the color of the "homme violet" seems to have rather negative connotations, perhaps illustrating Kandinsky's assertion, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, that violet "has

¹⁵ I am indebted to Natasha Lvovich for this observation.

¹⁶ Interestingly, in the oil painting the rider has a (mostly) yellow head and a green body.

something sad, an air of something sickly, something extinguished about it (like a slag heap!)” (1994: 189). The colors yellow and red make an appearance in the poem as the colors of the plate and the chimney. However, the color blue, with its transcendental connotations, is nowhere to be seen. Instead, we have the green cucumber. Green is a color that is absent in the woodcut (although it does appear in the oil painting). For Kandinsky, green indicates inertia and the absence of movement. His description of the color in *On the Spiritual in Art* sounds almost like a comment on the cucumber in “Lyrique:”

Passivity is the most characteristic quality of absolute green, a quality tainted by a suggestion of obese self-satisfaction. Thus, pure green is to the realm of color what the so-called bourgeoisie is to human society: it is an immobile, complacent element, limited in every respect. This green is like a fat, extremely healthy cow, lying motionless, fit only for chewing the cud, regarding the world with stupid, lackluster eyes. (1994: 183)

As an intersemiotic translation between image and text, “Lyrique” is a rather exceptional phenomenon in the context of Kandinsky’s oeuvre, where direct “self-translations” between paintings and poems are quite rare. In *Klänge*, there is no straightforward correspondence between individual woodcuts and prose poems. The sequence of images and texts relate to each other as do the voices in a polyphonic composition. Rather than fulfilling an auxiliary function subordinate to the message conveyed by the visual art works, Kandinsky’s poetic texts make their own, independent contribution to his project of a synthetic “monumental” art. It is impossible to say what is primary or more important in *Klänge*, the visual or the verbal layer. Likewise, in Kandinsky’s synchronous creation of parallel pairs of bilingual texts in Russian and German, the traditional hierarchical relation between original and translation gives way to a complementary “Zweiklang” in which both incarnations of the poem enjoy equal importance within their respective linguistic orbits.

As Kandinsky made clear in *On the Spiritual in Art*, his syncretic use of different media does not mean a complete fusion of their expressive means. As he put it, “[o]ne often hears the opinion that the possibility of substituting one art for another [...] would refute the necessity of differentiating between the arts. This, however, is not the case. As has been said, the exact repetition of the same sound by different arts is not possible” (1994: 191). The same could be said, of course, about the parallel linguistic versions of a text resulting from self-translation. While seemingly saying “the same thing,” the two variants nevertheless differ completely in their outlook and expressive means. Kandinsky’s ultimate intention was to reinforce his spiritual message by conveying it in more than one medium. In his words: “Repetition, the piling-up of the same sounds, enriches the spiritual atmosphere necessary to the maturing of one’s emotions (even of the finest substance), just as the

richer air of the greenhouse is a necessary condition for the ripening of various fruits” (1994: 191).¹⁷ Translation, needless to say, is another form of *repetition*.

How important, then, was Kandinsky’s multilingualism for the evolution of his art? Kandinsky’s biographer Jelena Hahl-Koch has argued that crossing over from painting into poetry gave him the necessary freedom to grow as an artist, since he “felt himself less constrained in a field in which he was not a professional, and therefore was able to ‘play’ and experiment” (124). Even though Kandinsky wrote poetry throughout his life, the peak of his literary activity falls into the watershed years of his career before World War I when he transitioned from representational to abstract painting. It is important to note that Kandinsky created his experiments not only in a medium in which he was not a professional, but also partially in a non-native language.

A crucial question is whether the bilingual nature of Kandinsky’s prose poems affected their transition toward radical modernism. It would be misguided to claim that Kandinsky was more “modern” in one language than the other. The trend towards verbal abstraction happened in both Russian and German simultaneously. However, the authorial revision inherent in the process of self-translation allowed Kandinsky to “tune up” and sharpen his texts in accordance with the trajectory of his creative evolution. Moreover, the fact that he was a foreigner writing in a language “not his own” gave him a creative license that he would have lacked if he had remained wedded to his native tongue. As a result, his striving for a synthetic “monumental art” reunited not only the visual arts with poetry, music, and theatre, but also involved the interplay of languages in a bilingual “Zweiklang.” As a synchronous self-translator, Kandinsky anticipated the later practice of twentieth-century bilingual writers such as Samuel Beckett, and as a visual artist working in multiple media he added an intersemiotic dimension to the puzzle of translatability. The idea of “changing instruments” by expressing the same underlying message through completely different external means informs his correlation of mutually interdependent sequences of prose poems and woodcuts as well as the constellation of parallel texts or “sounds” in different languages generated by his Russian *Zvuki* and German *Klänge*.

¹⁷As in the title *Klänge*, the word “sounds” does not necessarily refer to actual acoustic phenomena here, or the signifier of the verbal sign, but rather the “inner vibration” of the soul generated by a work of art.

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