The Bilingual Muse

Wanner, Adrian

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Chapter Two

Wassily Kandinsky’s Trilingual Poetry

Not many people are aware that Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), one of the most celebrated artists of the twentieth century and an originator of abstract art, was also a poet. Even fewer have paid attention to the fact that Kandinsky was a multilingual poet and self-translator working in three languages: his native Russian, German, and French. 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 was during that time, as Kandinsky later put it in his 1938 essay “Mes gravures sur bois” (“My Woodcuts”), that he felt most compelled to engage 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.”¹ Kandinsky’s biographer Jelena Hahl-Koch has argued that crossing over from painting into poetry played a crucial role in Kandinsky’s artistic evolution. It gave him the necessary freedom to grow as an artist, since, according to Hahl-Koch, Kandinsky “felt himself less constrained in a field in which he was not a professional, and therefore was able to ‘play’ and experiment.”² 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 languages in which he was not a native speaker. Changing instruments, for Kandinsky, could also mean switching languages.

Kandinsky’s trilingual poetic oeuvre has received only sporadic attention thus far. One reason for this neglect may be the fact that his poems are not easily accessible. Even though Kandinsky wrote poetry his entire life, not much of it was published during his lifetime. His most significant poetic publication is the album Klänge (Sounds), a collection of thirty-eight German prose poems, which appeared in Munich in 1912. Later in his life, Kandinsky published occasional poems in various journals. Starting in the 1990s, many more previously unpublished poems began to “seep out” somewhat hap-
hazardly from Kandinsky’s two main archives, kept at the Gabriele Münter and Johannes Eichner Foundation in Munich and the Musée National d’Art Moderne (Centre Pompidou) in Paris. Most of the existing Russian versions of the Klänge texts, based on the manuscripts at the Centre Pompidou, were published in Moscow in 1994. In 2011, the Russian art historian Boris Sokolov drew attention to the existence of a multitude of additional prose poems in Russian and German that Kandinsky wrote in 1914 as a sort of sequel to Klänge. The German variants of seven of these texts were included in a 2007 edition of Kandinsky’s writings, together with a number of other previously unpublished works. This edition served as the source for an anthology of Kandinsky’s German poems that came out in Berlin in 2016. Kandinsky’s Russian poetry, by contrast, has never appeared in book form and remains largely unknown. With very few exceptions, even the Kandinsky specialists in Russia have shown little interest in his Russian-language writings.

Many of Kandinsky’s poems exist in two versions—Russian and German—as a result of self-translation. The absence of a satisfactory edition makes the study of these parallel texts a somewhat cumbersome enterprise. The people who transcribed Kandinsky’s Russian and German manuscripts do not seem to have consulted with each other, perhaps because they lacked a common language. As a general practice, the editors bringing out Kandinsky’s poems focused on the work written in one language without paying any attention to the existence of a “double” in a different idiom. This is a regrettable omission. For one thing, consulting the self-translated variant would have helped to avoid some of the mistakes that occurred in the deciphering of Kandinsky’s not always very legible handwriting.

Kandinsky had not always been a multilingual writer, of course. His first poems were written exclusively in his native Russian. The same holds true for his theoretical and theatrical writings. At the beginning of his career, Kandinsky drafted most of his works in Russian before self-translating and reworking them in German. Even in his earliest Russian essays, however, we find German expressions such as “Überschneidung” (intersection) and “Gegensatz” (contrast) inserted into the Russian text. The stage compositions of 1908–09 exist in both a Russian and German version, as does the famous treatise On the Spiritual in Art. After 1912, Kandinsky tended to write directly in German. His memoirs Rückblicke (Backward Glances) of 1913 were first written in German without a Russian draft and were only 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 came to play an increasingly important role. After his final departure from the Soviet Union, Kandinsky became essentially a monolingual German-language writer, before evolving towards a German-French bilingualism after 1933.
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We might be inclined to look at Kandinsky’s multilingual practice as simply a pragmatic accommodation to the different linguistic milieus that he happened to inhabit in the course of his life. He was a voluntary Russian expatriate in Bavaria from 1896 to 1914, a refugee from the Soviet Union in Weimar Germany from 1921 to 1933, and a refugee from Nazi Germany in Paris after 1933. The need to adapt himself to new environments is hardly a sufficient explanation for Kandinsky’s multilingual poetry, however. Marc Chagall, who lived in France much longer than Kandinsky, only used Yiddish and Russian for his poetic writings and never switched to French. For Kandinsky, the linguistic border-crossing clearly responded to a creative need that would have remained unfulfilled by remaining within the monolingual orbit of his mother tongue.

KANDINSKY’S FIRST STEPS AS A TRANSLINGUAL POET

Kandinsky began to write poetry at an early age. In his memoirs Rückblicke he mentions that “like many children and young people, I tried to write poems, which sooner or later I tore up.”12 Nothing of these juvenilia seems to have survived. The earliest known poems can be found in the notebooks dating from Kandinsky’s ethnographic expedition to the Vologda region in 1889, which are preserved in his Paris archive and were published for the first time in 2007.13 The same edition also contains three more early Russian poems of uncertain date.14 Thoroughly conventional in style and form, these texts reflect the late romantic and symbolist literary environment in which Kandinsky had grown up.15 Displaying a melancholic mood, they depict a provincial funeral, a nature scene in late autumn, and a self-admonition to remain silent that seems inspired by Fedor Tiutchev’s famous poem “Silentium.”

The self-reflective poem “Poeziia” (“Poetry”) deserves particular attention, since it formulates the program that Kandinsky set for himself as a budding poet:

Цветы поэзии рассеяны в природе.
Умей их собирать в невянуший венок.
И будь хоть скован ты, но будешь на свободе,
И, будь хотя один, не будешь одинок.

The flowers of poetry are scattered in nature.
Know how to collect them in an unfading wreath.
And, even in fetters, you will be free,
And, even alone, you will not be lonely.
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Kandinsky later included a German self-translation of this poem in his manuscript *Riesen* (*Giants*, 1908–09), the first version of what eventually would become his stage composition *Der gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*):

Die Blumen der Dichtung sind über die Welt gestreut
Sammle sie in einen ewigen Kranz
In der Wüste wirst du nicht einsam sein
Im Gefängnis frei

The flowers of poetry are scattered over the world
Collect them into an eternal wreath
In the desert you will not be lonely
In prison free

While the Russian original of the poem has received no attention, the German version has become a focus of scholarly scrutiny in connection with Kandinsky's stage compositions. Naoko Kobayashi-Bredenstein interprets this text as a manifesto of Kandinsky's synthetic art, in which he intends to achieve a “harmonic relation between different religions, peoples, and cultures.” The fact that the flowers of art and religion bloom even in the desert, according to this interpretation, signals the “immortality of the spirit.” At the same time, the allusion to prison and desert suggests the “arduous path of the artists and believers.” Locating a possible source for the poem in Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso*, Kobayashi-Bredenstein is unaware that Kandinsky is quoting his own Russian poem in a German self-translation. The purported internationalist message that she detects in this text works better in the German than in the Russian version, which features “nature” instead of “world.” The same holds true for the image of the desert, which, while not incompatible with the concept of being alone, only exists in the German translation. As can be seen, Kandinsky's self-translation from Russian to German implied subtle forms of rewriting and reinterpretation. The fact that he translated the poem into German prose without attempting to preserve the iambic hexameter and “AbAb” rhymes of the Russian original shows that, at least at the time of the composition of *Riesen*, he was not yet confident enough in his command of German versification to attempt a metrical and rhymed version. As we will see, this was to change when Kandinsky worked further on his stage compositions.

The earliest poems that Kandinsky composed directly in German were addressed to the painter Gabriele Münter, his former student with whom he had fallen in love in 1902, and who by 1903 had become his de facto wife (Kandinsky was at that time still married to his first wife, Anna). In a letter to Münter on October 27, 1902, Kandinsky mentions a German poem written...
in July of that year in which he expressed his state of bliss. In September 1903 he sent Münter a poem in a quite different mood:

Die weiße Wolke, der schwarze Wald!
Ich wart’ auf dich. O komm doch bald.
So weit ich sehe, so weit nach vorn,
Das glänzend gold’ne, reife Korn.

Du kommst ja nicht. O welcher Schmerz!
Es zittert und blutet mein armes Herz.
Ich wart’ auf dich. O komm doch bald.
Ich bin allein im schwarzen Wald.

The white cloud, the black wood!
I wait for you. O come soon.
As far as I see, so far ahead
The radiantly golden ripe grain.

But you do not come. O what pain!
My poor heart trembles and bleeds.
I wait for you. O come soon.
I am alone in the black wood.

It looks as if Kandinsky’s strained emotional state made him search for a form of self-expression that went beyond ordinary prose. In his correspondence with Münter, Kandinsky mentioned that he had composed a few beautiful poems in Russian, but he expressed dissatisfaction with his ability to write poetry in German. The problem did not really lie in a poor command of the German language. Kandinsky’s poem, rather than a linguistically awkward text written “with a foreign accent,” 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. Kandinsky himself, in his letter to Münter, commented that it would perhaps make a good subject for a “drawing on black cardboard.”

He actually completed this picture, a gouache on dark grey board, which he gave the title Weisse Wolke (White Cloud). The painting 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. 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.
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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.

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 Münter shortly after the consummation of their relationship. Münter's biographer Gisela Kleine speculates that Kandinsky's intention may have been to restore a sense of romantic distance that had become shattered through physical intimacy.\(^{23}\) 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.

"Die weisse Wolke" is one of several poems, or "little songs," that Kandinsky wrote for Münter, all of them in a similar tone and of similar quality.\(^{24}\) The playlet Abend (Evening), a more extended literary text in German, dating from the time when Kandinsky and Münter resided in France in 1906–07, was also essentially conceived as a private communication between the two lovers.\(^{25}\) Quite different in tone from the earlier quoted poem, this humorous and slightly erotic dialogue between two cats, "Minette" and "Wasska," shows Kandinsky from an unexpectedly light-hearted and even bawdy side (for a Russian speaker, the name "Minette" evokes the slang term for oral sex).

How good was Kandinsky's command of German? Even though he grew up in Russia and never received any formal schooling in German, the language was not unfamiliar to him, given that his maternal grandmother was a Baltic German. In his memoirs Kandinsky mentions that he spoke frequent German during his childhood.\(^{26}\) An important influence was his maternal aunt, Elizaveta Tikheeva, who became a sort of replacement mother for him when Kandinsky remained in the care of his father after the divorce of his parents in 1871. Tikheeva used to tell him German fairy tales.\(^{27}\) If German was not Kandinsky's mother tongue, it was thus nevertheless his "grandmother tongue," his "aunt tongue," and—perhaps most crucially—his "wife tongue." Technically speaking, Gabriele Münter, who was Kandinsky's companion from 1902 to 1916, was not his wife, since he never formally married her, but he considered his relationship with Münter to be a "Gewissensehe" ("marriage of conscience").\(^{28}\) One surmises that Münter reinforced the positive emotional connotation of the German language that had been implanted in Kandinsky by female members of his family during his childhood. One of
the terms of endearment he used for Münter was “mein deutsches Ellchen” (“my German Ellchen”—“Ellchen” being a folksy diminutive of “Gabriele”). In a letter to Münter on November 16, 1904, he wrote: “The Russians take me for an alien and have no need for me. The Germans are good to me (at least better than the Russians). I grew up half German, my first language, my first books were German, my engine [Motor] is Germany. . . . I have a good feeling toward Germany. And, finally . . . my Ellchen is a German.”

However, even though he ended up living in Germany for a total of almost thirty years, and in spite of his familiarity with the language since early childhood, Kandinsky did not pass for a native speaker of German. When Münter mentioned his Russian accent in a 1910 letter, Kandinsky reacted with vexation. He said he would never consent to change his pronunciation and claimed that some people even found the sound of his “l” particularly “pretty.” The publishers and editors of Kandinsky’s German writings often criticized his style, which they found “foreign”-sounding and in need of revision. At the same time—as is bound to happen with emigrants who have spent a long time away from their country of origin—Kandinsky’s Russian was also criticized for its “foreign” or “German” quality. Boris Sokolov argues that Kandinsky’s theoretical writings are composed in a “strange Russian language” replete with Germanisms. Kandinsky was unable to publish the Russian version of On the Spiritual in Art in the modernist journal Apollon because he refused to make the stylistic changes demanded by the editor, Sergei Makovskii. In a letter to Münter from St. Petersburg, Kandinsky wrote on October 30, 1910: “Makovskii wanted to publish my brochure, but, here too, my language is an obstacle. But I don’t want to change anything. I find this stupid [So was finde ich dumm].”

As we can see from this quote, 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”). 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 reveals that Kandinsky first wrote the passage in correct German before altering the syntax. The reason for this change has probably to do with metric considerations—“Es sich entreißt dem schwärzen Träum.
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’ Zhizni”—shows no regular rhythmic pattern. 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. As we can see, rhythmic elements are a key consideration in Kandinsky’s writings, but he violates the grammar and syntax of German more radically than that of his native Russian in order to achieve specific rhythmic effects. One could speculate that it was easier for Kandinsky to conduct such experiments in German, since he was “deforming” a language in which, as a foreigner, he enjoyed a certain freedom.

Kandinsky’s increasing use of German as a literary language was thus not only determined by pragmatic factors—the fact that he lived in Germany and was addressing a German audience—but also by artistic considerations. Precisely because of its “foreignness,” German could at times serve as a more attractive medium of creative expression. Moreover, German was the prevalent medium of Kandinsky’s spoken, daily-life communication and was unencumbered by any history of formal writing. Jelena Hahl-Koch, who made a word-for-word comparison between the German original of Kandinsky’s Rückblicke and the Russian self-translation that came out in Moscow in 1918, notes that the Russian language of his memoirs is “closer to the conventional written norm, and therefore more dry and complicated,” whereas the German is “more shaped by the spoken word, and for that reason makes a more unconventional and lively impression.”

While Kandinsky’s beginnings as a German poet may have been rather inauspicious, he gradually did become more comfortable with writing German verse. From a purely private matter between him and Gabriele Münter, his German poetic writings began to turn into a more professional affair. This development can be followed by taking a closer look at the poems in Kandinsky’s theatrical compositions, to which we will now turn.

**THE SELF-TRANSLATED POETRY IN KANDINSKY’S STAGE COMPOSITIONS**

Partially inspired by Richard Wagner’s idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, Kandinsky pursued his own quest for a new synthetic form of “monumental art” with the stage compositions that he began writing in 1908. In addition to Wagner, other formative influences include the symbolist dramas of Maurice Maeterlinck, the theatrical theories of Edward Gordon Craig, theosophical and anthroposophical doctrines, and the iconography and narratives of Christian eschatology. Kandinsky’s theatrical pieces combine
colored lights, music, and dance into an abstract spectacle without a conventional plot and are largely devoid of dialogue or monologue. While they have attracted a host of different interpretations, almost no attention has been paid to the fact that nearly all of Kandinsky’s theatrical texts exist in a Russian and a German variant. Der gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound), Kandinsky’s best-known stage composition, was first conceived in German under the title Riesen (Giants), followed by a Russian version called Zheltyi zvuk (Yellow Sound), which remained unpublished until the 1990s. A reworked German version bearing the same title, Der gelbe Klang, was included in the almanac Der blaue Reiter in 1912. Attempts to stage the play remained unrealized because of the outbreak of World War I. In addition to The Yellow Sound, Kandinsky wrote several more “color dramas” that remained unpublished during his lifetime and have only come to light relatively recently. They include the pieces Green Sound (Grüner Klang/Zelenyi zvuk) and Black and White (Schwarz und Weiss/Chernoe i beloe), which also date from 1908–09. In both cases, the Russian version preceded the German translation. A short piece called Black Figure (Schwarze Figur) exists only in German. A later piece called Purple (Violett), which differs considerably in style from the earlier compositions, was written in 1914 and later reworked and partially published in 1926 during Kandinsky’s Bauhaus years. In that instance the German text, which is more extensive, appears to be the primary version.

For the most part, the text of Kandinsky’s theatrical compositions consists of stage directions (for lack of a better term) rather than spoken dialogue. However, his three early pieces from 1908–09 contain several inserted lyrical passages written in traditional metered and rhymed verse. Comparing the Russian and German variants gives us an impression of Kandinsky’s struggle with poetic form and the difficulties he faced when transposing his texts between the two languages.

The Yellow Sound opens with a hymn performed by a concealed chorus while the stage is illuminated in dark blue light. Since no such song exists in the earlier Riesen manuscript, we have to assume that the Russian version appearing in Zheltyi zvuk is the original text:

Твердые сны . . . Разговоры утесов . . .
Глыбы недвижные странных вопросов . . .
Неба движение . . . Таинье скал . . .
Кверху растущий невидимый вал . . .
Слезы и смех. Средь проклятий молитвы.
Радость в слиянии. Черные битвы.
Мрак непрогляднейший в солнечный день.
Ярко светящая в полночи тень.
Hard dreams . . . Conversations of rocks . . .
Motionless clumps of strange questions . . .
Movement of the sky . . . Melting of cliffs . . .
Upwards growing an invisible wall . . .
Tears and laughter. Prayers amidst curses.
Most impenetrable darkness in a sunny day.
A brightly shining shadow at midnight.

With its impressionist vagueness and diffuse mysticism, this choral hymn is reminiscent of early twentieth-century symbolism. The lack of verbs evokes the “nominal” style cultivated in Russia by Afanasii Fet and Konstantin Bal’mont. The paradoxical, oxymoronic semantics have been interpreted as an expression of synesthetic harmony and balance, or, conversely, an evocation of the primordial chaos before Creation. The dactylic tetrameter, with a caesura in the middle of each line, evokes the chorus of an antique tragedy. Opposing concepts are expressed in chiastically arranged lines.

In German, this song takes the following form:

Steinharte Träume . . . Und sprechende Felsen . . .
Schollen mit Rätseln erfüllender Fragen . . .
Des Himmels Bewegung . . . Und Schmelzen . . . der Steine . . .
Nach oben hochwachsend unsichtbarer . . . Wall . . .
Tränen und Lachen . . . Bei Fluchen Gebete . . .
Der Einigung Freude und schwärmeste Schlachten.
Finsteres Licht bei dem . . . sonnigsten . . . Tag
Grell leuchtender Schatten bei dunkelster Nacht!!

An English translation of Kandinsky’s German translation was published by Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo:

Stone-hard dreams . . . And speaking rocks . . .
Clods of earth pregnant with puzzling questions . . .
The heaven turns . . . The stones . . . melt . . .
Growing up more invisible . . . rampart . . .
Tears and laughter . . . Praying and cursing . . .
Joy of reconciliation and blackest slaughter.
Murky light on the . . . sunniest . . . day
Brilliant shadows in darkest night!!

It becomes evident that Kandinsky strove to be as literal as possible in the German translation while retaining the meter of the original Russian. He
largely succeeded in this task, even though the dactylic tetrameter is replaced by amphibrachas in four of the eight lines. In line 4, however, the German meter falls apart, probably because Kandinsky wrongly assumed that the word “unsichtbar” (invisible) is accented on the second syllable rather than the first. Remarkably, the same word—“val,” “Wall”—appears at the end of the line in both languages, taking advantage of a semantic and sonic coincidence between Russian and German. While the rhymes have disappeared in German, the number of ellipses has significantly increased, conveying to the German text a slowed-down, halting cadence. Claudia Emmert has argued that these ellipses create a semantic indeterminacy, with the word “Schmelzen” (melting) either applying to “Himmel” (sky) or “Steine” (stones), while the latter could also be syntactically connected to the “Wall.”48 The Russian text only allows for one reading (the stones are melting). The second line is also rather confusing in German. Literally it says something like “clumps with mysteries of fulfilling questions.” Presumably Kandinsky meant to say “clumps filled with mysterious questions” (which the Russian text would suggest), but was pulled astray by his attempts to preserve the meter. The double exclamation mark at the end of the German version looks like an attempt to introduce an element of “intensity” into the German text by means of punctuation.

While Kandinsky made no effort to retain the rhymes in the translation of this particular hymn, he did so with the remaining lyrics inserted in his stage compositions. They include two poems in the play *Green Sound*, presenting a post-apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem and the rhymed monologue of a mysterious blind cripple.49 Remarkably, in the latter case there are even more rhymes in German than in Russian—in the Russian version, only the even lines rhyme, while the German text consists of fully rhymed couplets.

The fourth, and last, example of a self-translated poem in Kandinsky’s stage compositions can be found in the play *Black and White*. I will first cite the Russian original (followed by an English translation) and then the German self-translation (also followed by an English translation):

Страх в глубине и предчувствий пороги
Холод в вершинах. Крутые дороги.
Ветры безумные. Смерти покровы
Свяжи, разорвавши оковы!
Оквы разбитые,
Страны открытые!
Свяжи, разорвавши оковы!
Нарушено что—возродится
И черное тем победится
Свяжи, разорвавши оковы!
Fear in the depth and the sills of forebodings
Cold in the heights. Steep paths.
Insane winds. The shrouds of death
Tie together, having torn up the fetters!
Shattered fetters, Discovered countries!
Tie together, having torn up the fetters!
What is destroyed will be reborn
And the black will thereby be vanquished
Tie together, having torn up the fetters!

Anxiety in the depth, the joy in foreboding.
Cold mountain tops and vertiginous tracks.
Black-dead veils. Wild-raging winds.
White silence. Tear up and tie together!
Torn ribbons! Discovered far-away lands!

The torn [is] tied together
The black [is] overcome!

This hymn expresses some of Kandinsky’s central artistic tenets discussed in his treatise On the Spiritual in Art, emphasizing the need to choose an arduous upward path towards enlightenment and salvation, and the breaking of the chains of convention to reach a new synthesis. Interestingly, the concept of the “white silence,” which will help to overcome the forces of darkness, appears only in the German version of the text. As in the previously quoted example, there are some oddities in German, such as the superfluous ungrammatical “n” in “Berggipfeln,” or the neologism “Fernländer,” which seems to have been chosen for purely metrical reasons (the correct
term in German would be “ferne Länder”). However, another neologism in the German text, the adjective “schwarztot” (“blackdead”), is rather compelling precisely because of its strangeness. It has more poetic force than the “shrouds of death” in Russian, and it also 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. We also find alliterative sound effects that are missing in Russian (“Schwarztote Schleier. Wildrasende Winde”). The slogan “Zerreißt und binde!” (“Tear up and tie together!”) sounds catchier in German than in its somewhat cumbersome Russian wording. Overall, the German translation could be considered an improvement over the Russian original. While the Russian poem looks like the work of a derivative symbolist, the German text, despite its awkwardness—or perhaps because of its awkwardness—shows genuine flashes of poetic inspiration.

In sum, we see that Kandinsky, in translating his stage compositions from Russian into German, tried to convey as much of the form as possible of his Russian lyrics, with somewhat mixed success. While the Russian versification is technically competent, writing German verse clearly presented a more arduous challenge. This does not mean that individual passages could not come out successfully, though. Rewriting his poems in German gave Kandinsky the opportunity to revise them and add shades of meaning that were absent in the original draft. In some cases the German version surpasses the Russian original in poetic boldness.

**RUSSIAN VERSE TRANSLATIONS OF GERMAN ORIGINALS**

Translating the lyric poetry in his stage compositions from Russian into German seems to have emboldened Kandinsky to try his hand at composing original poetry directly in German. By subsequently translating these texts “back” into Russian, he reversed the chronology established in the scenic compositions. The volume *Klänge* contains two poems in metric verse, entitled “Lied” (“Song”) and “Hymnus” (“Hymn”). Both are German originals. The Russian version of both poems preserves the meter of the source text (iambic dimeter and trimeter in “Lied,” and trochaic tetrameter in “Hymnus”). The second poem will be considered in more detail here. Depicting the gradual submersion of a tattered red cloth into blue waves, “Hymnus” is one of the more accomplished of Kandinsky’s compositions written in formal German verse:
Hymnus
Innen wiegt die blaue Woge.
Das zerrissne rote Tuch.
Rote Fetzen. Blaue Wellen.
Das verschlossne alte Buch.
Schauen schweigend in die Ferne.
Dunkles Irren in dem Wald.
Tiefer werden blaue Wellen.
Rotes Tuch versinkt nun bald.\textsuperscript{53}

Hymn
Inside rocks the blue wave.
The torn red cloth.
Red tatters. Blue waves.
The closed old book.
Gazing silently at the distance.
Dark erring in the wood.
Deeper grow the blue waves.
Red cloth will soon sink below.\textsuperscript{54}

The Russian self-translation of the poem is as follows:

Гимн
В глубине вода синеет.
Краснеет в клочьях весь платок.
Красны клочья. Сини волны.
За печатью старый том.
Взгляды молча в дали; в дали.
В темном лесе черный ход.
Все синей, синее волны.
Тонет в клочьях весь платок.\textsuperscript{55}

In the depth the water is blue.
Red in tatters is the whole cloth.
Red are the tatters. Blue the waves.
Behind a seal the old volume.
Glances silently into the distance; into the distance.
In the dark wood a black motion.
Ever more blue, more blue the waves.
In tatters will sink the whole cloth.
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The “hymnic” nature of the poem becomes manifest in its stately form—trochaic tetrameters featuring alternate feminine and masculine endings, with rhymed even lines, and a musical web of sound repetitions and alliterations. This musicality is to a large extent preserved in the Russian translation, which keeps the trochaic tetrameter except for the iambic line 2. Even though there are no rhymes in Russian, the masculine endings all contain the stressed vowel “о,” which creates a sense of sonic uniformity (“плоток”-“том”-“ход”-“плоток”). The German poem is characterized by numerous “w”-alliterations (pronounced as “v”), conveying to the text a soothing quality—“wiegt,” “Woge,” “Wellen,” “Wald,” “werden,” “Wellen.” While it is impossible to reproduce this exact effect in Russian, the translation nevertheless features multiple “в” sounds as well (“вода,” “ves’,” “волны,” “волнь,” “ves’”). In addition, the “к” alliteration in “краснеть в клочьях” and “красный клоч’я” semantically reinforces the link between the tattered cloth and the color red. The Russian version underlines the incantatory nature of the piece with repetitions (“в далi, в далi,” “синей, синей”) that are absent in the German original. The first two lines of the German poem create a contrast between bright vowels in the first half and dark vowels in the second half of each line. The Russian version features a similarly conspicuous sound effect in the last three lines, with a preponderance of stressed “о” interspersed only intermittently by an occasional “е.” The gradual disappearance of all vowels except for “о” at the end illustrates the drowning of the red cloth in the all-encompassing blue wave.

The Russian translation exploits a particular quality of the Russian language which has no equivalent in German (or English), namely the possibility of turning colors into verbs. “Синет’,” derived from “синий” ([dark] blue), can mean anything from “to be blue,” “to turn blue,” “to appear blue” to “emitting a notion of blueness.” The first two lines of the Russian version feature two such color verbs derived from the colors blue and red. Another particularity of Russian syntax is the absence of the verb “to be” in the present tense. As a result, the Russian translation features more complete sentences than the German original. Line 3, for example, contains two complete statements in Russian. By comparison, the German version appears more fragmentary and impressionistic. Technically, the second line, “Das zerrissne rote Tuch,” could designate the direct object of the verb in the first line, “wiegt,” but this reading is foreclosed by the period. The grammatical subject of the verb “schauen” in line 3 is equally unclear. Both in the German and Russian versions, every line of the poem ends with a period, contributing to a free-floating, meditative atmosphere that is devoid of a coherent discursive argument.

In terms of content, we can observe an interesting spatial switch in the translation of the first line, which relocates the blue wave from German
“interiority” to Russian “depth.” Potentially, this change makes the Russian image more metaphysical than psychological. By the same token, the apocalyptic reference to the book “behind a seal” becomes more explicit in the Russian version, while the German version merely mentions a “closed book.” In addition, the outdated form “v lese” (as opposed to the modern “v lesu”) conveys to the Russian text a more archaic flavor. On the other hand, the German term “dunkles Irren” is more specific than the Russian “chernyi khod.” Interestingly, the image of being lost in a dark forest, possibly inspired by the opening of Dante’s *Inferno*, already occurred in Kandinsky’s 1903 poem to Gabriele Münter, which also featured the rhyme “Wald”–“bald.” Comparing the earlier poem with “Hymnus” shows the significant progress Kandinsky had made as a German poet in the intervening years. With its creative association of sounds, colors, and traditional poetic form, “Hymnus”/“Gimn” demonstrates Kandinsky’s mastery of German and Russian versification and his abilities as a self-translator.

Overall, though, it seems that Kandinsky became increasingly displeased with his forays into formal poetry. In a letter to Gabriele Münter from October 27, 1910, he distanced himself from the stage compositions he had written the year before. In particular, he had grown disenchanted with the poetic passages. In his words: “For me these things are already quite outdated, especially many of the poems in them. I would freshen them up.”

In Kandinsky’s quest for artistic innovation, conventional rhymed and metric verse had become something that he felt he needed to leave behind. This does not mean that Kandinsky abandoned poetry, however. To the contrary: poetic writing became of increased importance to him during the years when his painting evolved from figuration to abstract art.

MOVING TOWARD ABSTRACTION: KANDINSKY’S BILINGUAL PROSE POEMS

The protean genre of the prose poem, shaped by the French poet Charles Baudelaire and introduced to Russian literature by Ivan Turgenev, became Kandinsky’s preferred vehicle of poetic expression in the years after 1909. Many of his prose poems are included in the volume *Klänge* (*Sounds*), the only substantial collection of Kandinsky’s poetry to appear during his lifetime. Published by Reinhard Piper in Munich in 1912, this luxuriously produced album, with a cover embossed in gold on fuchsia-colored material, combined 38 prose poems with 12 color and 44 black-and-white hand-printed woodcuts in an edition limited to 345 copies. The woodcuts date from 1907 to 1912, while the poems, according to Kandinsky, were written between 1909 and 1911. The relation between the images and the text
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is quite complex. Clearly, the woodcuts are not simply illustrations of the poems, or the poems an ekphrastic comment on the woodcuts. Rather, both media make an independent, contrapuntal contribution to a new kind of synthetic art, fulfilling an imperative voiced in Kandinsky’s treatise On the Spiritual in Art, which appeared roughly at the same time as Klänge. As he wrote in that book: “And so, finally, one will arrive at a combination of 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.”

How exactly the visual and verbal elements are meant to relate to each other in Klänge has been interpreted in various ways. For our purposes, the bilingual aspect of Kandinsky’s prose poems is of the most interest. Even though Kandinsky published his album in German, we know from his correspondence that his original plan was a Russian-language edition entitled Zвуки, which was to be published by Vladimir Izdebskii, a sculptor acquaintance in Odessa. This edition was to contain seventeen prose poems, and it displayed a different layout of texts and woodcuts than the German version. For unknown reasons, the Russian edition never materialized.

Kandinsky’s Russian prose poems are not simply the “originals” of the German texts that were later included in Klänge. Rather, he seems to have worked on the Russian and the German versions simultaneously in an act of synchronous self-translation. In some instances he first wrote a draft in Russian and then translated it into German, while in other instances he worked in the opposite direction. It is not always easy to determine which version came first. Some of the German manuscripts in the Paris archive are helpfully marked with the Russian word “perevod” (translation), indicating the primacy of the Russian text. The manuscripts themselves can also provide clues. If the German text contains additions and deletions while the Russian is a clean copy reflecting the corrected German version, this obviously suggests that the poem was first drafted in German. Some of the prose poems exist only in one language and were never translated. More often than not, however, assigning the primacy to one language or the other remains a matter of conjecture. Boris Sokolov has tried to find a method for resolving this issue with a set of criteria that allegedly characterize the original version. They include “adequate” language use (as opposed to foreign calques), compactness (based on the assumption that a translation tends to expand rather than to shorten the original text), the use of euphonic effects, and neologisms. Needless to say, this is far from a foolproof method, especially in view of the latitude afforded to a self-translator. In any event, the fact that the first version could be either in Russian or German indicates that Kandinsky had become equally comfortable with the two languages in a sort of balanced bilingualism.

Since the form of the prose poem necessitates no attention to meter
Wassily Kandinsky’s Trilingual Poetry

and rhyme, Kandinsky’s self-translations of these texts are generally more literal than those of his formal poetry. Nevertheless, one can find subtle differences between the German and Russian versions. For example, in the poem “Hills” ("Kholmy"/"Hügel") the German color adjectives “bluish” and “yellowish” are replaced by “cold” and “warm” in Russian (in On the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky describes blue as the quintessential “cold” and yellow as the quintessential “warm” color). In “Bassoon” ("Fagot"/“Fagott”) the “deep” sound of the instrument becomes “dark” in Russian. In addition, the branches of a tree are compared to an “etching” in Russian, but not in German. In some instances, Kandinsky added entire sentences in translation. Thus, the Russian version of the poem “Bell” ("Kolokol"/“Glocke”), after a statement pointing to the necessity of ink for writing, adds the comment “so is today my soul in an unbreakable fusion with ink” (Kandinsky’s emphasis). Even though Kandinsky transfers the action from the German villages of Weisskirchen and Mühlhausen to the Russian Pokrovskoe and Vasil’evskoe, the bell continues to ring “in German” (“deng, deng, deng, deng, deng”). An interesting case of implied bilingualism can be found in the title of the prose poem “Hoboe” ("Oboe"). The text exists only in German, but the archaic term “Hoboe” (as opposed to the modern German “Oboe"), which is written in capital letters (“HOBOE”), can also be read as the Russian word “novoe” (“something new”). The title thus presents an example of Latin-Cyrillic and German-Russian double coding.

Stylistically, the prose poems collected in Zvuki/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 prose poems evolved from a fin-de-siècle symbolist style toward a radical modernism that seems to anticipate concrete poetry as well as the iconoclasm of the futurists and Dadaists. Conventional narrative prose written in coherent syntax gives way to an alogical, disruptive discourse that highlights sound over semantics. In that sense, 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 prose poems that Kandinsky continued to write both in German and Russian after the appearance of Klänge further developed this trajectory. As Boris Sokolov has shown, Kandinsky planned another volume of texts and woodcuts in 1914 under the title Tsvety bez zapakha (Flowers without Fragrance), but he 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.

A crucial question is how 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 languages 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. Comparing the Russian and German versions can therefore give us clues about the general development of Kandinsky’s artistic technique.

An early example of how Kandinsky revised his prose poems while translating them can be found in “The Return” (“Vozvrashchenie”/“Rückkehr”). This text exists both in a Russian and German version, but it ended up neither in the planned Zvuki nor the published Klänge collection.71 The prose poem tells the melancholy story of a young man returning to his homeland, which he finds changed into a lifeless geometrized cityscape of transparent cubic glass buildings under a black sky. In rewriting the poem in German, Kandinsky tried to tone down its decadent fin-de-siècle character. Thus, he replaced the “purple-red flowers, similar to roses” looming in the sky with “purple-red stains,” and the black panthers with shining narrow green eyes who are lying in wait at each building become in German simple black stones. However, it seems that the reworked German version still did not meet with Kandinsky’s approval, and he excluded this text from the published version of Klänge.

The prose poem “Spring” (“Vesna”/“Frühling”), included both in the Zvuki and Klänge collection, presents an example of Kandinsky’s more mature style. Here is Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo’s English translation of the German text with a few inserted clarifications and corrections:

Be quiet, you garish fellow [literally: motley man (bunter Mensch)]!
Slowly, the old house slides down the hill. The old blue sky sticks hopelessly amidst branches and leaves.
Stop calling me! [“Ruf mich nicht hin” implies “Don’t call me to come here”]
Hopelessly, the ringing hangs in the air, like a spoon in thick gruel.
One’s feet stick in the grass. And the grass wants to prick through the invisible with its points.
Lift your axe over your head and chop! Chop!
Your words can’t reach me. They’re hanging on the bushes like wet tatters.
Why doesn’t anything grow, only this rotting wooden cross at the fork in the road? And its arms have penetrated the air to right and to left. And its head has pierced a hole in the sky. And from its edges creep stifling [literally: strangling] red-blue clouds. And thunderbolts [“Blitze” means “lightnings”] tear and cut them in places you least expect, and their cuts and tears mend
invisibly. And somebody falls like a soft eiderdown. And someone speaks, speaks—speaks—

Is it you again, you garish fellow? You again?72

This text, like many others in Klänge, expresses a necessity to become “unstuck” from an ossified material world in order to break through to a new spiritual realm, a process that may be painful and violent and entail “chopping away” at one’s stultifying old habits and surroundings. The speaker seems reluctant to heed the voice calling him to engage in this transition. The religious dimension of the process is hinted at by the figure of the cross. Although seemingly in a state of decomposition, the cross will be able to pierce through the stifling confinement in which the speaker finds himself trapped. The coming apocalyptic storm, evoked in a sequence of “biblical” sentences beginning with the word “and,” will be a destructive event, yet will ultimately lead to healing.73

Boris Sokolov lists “Spring” among the texts whose original language cannot be determined, since the Russian and German variants do not deviate from each other significantly. Nevertheless, there are some interesting differences between the two versions. The Russian text lacks the word “hopeless” (“hoffnungslos”), which appears twice in German. Did Kandinsky add or suppress this word in translation? A clue can perhaps be found in the “strangling redblue clouds” (“erwürgende rothblaue Wolken”). The corresponding Russian passage has “dushnye sizye tuchi” (“stifling blue-grey clouds”). “Erwürgend” is a rather strange German translation for the Russian adjective “dushnyi” (stifling). A more normal German equivalent would have been “stickig.” “Erwürgend,” the present participle of the verb “erwürgen” (to strangle), literally turns the clouds into active agents engaging in the activity of strangling. Perhaps the image was suggested to Kandinsky by the Russian verb “dushit’,” which is etymologically connected to “dushnyi,” but only as a faded metaphor. The actual strangulation occurs in German. By the same token, the color of the clouds changes from “sizyi,” denoting a blue-grey or dove-colored hue, to a more aggressive and threatening “rotblau” (redblue). It seems reasonable to speculate that Kandinsky wrote the text first in Russian and then radicalized it when he transposed it into German, which would explain the addition of the word “hopeless.”

Another interesting difference concerns the “cuts” and “gashes.” The German words “Stiche” and “Schnitte” are semantically overdetermined, since they also refer to genres of visual art: “Stich” can mean “etching,” while “Schnitt” is a component of the word “Holzschnitt” (woodcut), that is, the kind of picture which makes up the visual component of the album Klänge. Kandinsky seems to point to the role of his own art in the metaphysical “healing” process. The Russian words “prokoly” and “prorezy” do not have
this double meaning, but the prefix “pro-” indicates a process of “breaking through” towards a different, more profound reality.

Kandinsky’s path toward abstraction was driven by the same impetus toward a spiritual breakthrough. This impetus can be observed both in his pictorial work and in his prose poems. In his more radical texts, Kandinsky dispenses entirely with conventional syntax and semantics. Rather than narrating or describing a transition toward a new spiritual state, as happened in “Spring,” the language itself reflects and embodies this transformed quality. The whimsical poem “Sonet”/“Sonett” held in Kandinsky’s Paris archive presents an example of his more radical style. Both the Russian and German manuscripts are dated May 10, 1914. 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 is clearly not a sonnet, anticipates the absurdist writings of Daniil Kharms. Like “Spring,” the text is structured as a one-sided dialogue with a non-responding mysterious stranger. We also find incantatory repetitions of words and sounds, which is a frequent device in Kandinsky’s prose poems. At the same time, rather than presenting a coherent discourse, the poem looks like a verbal rendition of a semi-abstract painting. The only remaining vestige of representation is provided by the animals, which are cast in expressionist colors reminiscent of the paintings of Kandinsky’s friend Franz Marc. 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, which seems to evoke associations with the phonetics of an imaginary African language, resembles Hugo Ball’s famous poem “Karawane” written in 1917.77

Kandinsky wrote the German and Russian versions 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 na pravlenii” corresponds to “aufrecht in der richtigen Richtung.” In the Russian version all the terms related to animals—“kot,” “khvost,” “slon,” “khobot,” “loshad’” (cat, tail, elephant, trunk, horse)—contain a stressed “o.” Perhaps this sonic uniformity indicates that the poem was first conceived in Russian. In any event, the opposition between the two languages becomes neutralized in the last line, which is written in neither Russian nor German. The linguistic differences fade away as the two versions of the text converge in a sequence of more or less identical sounds.78

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. As Christopher Short has observed: “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.”79 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 word “Zweiklang” (two-sound) to describe the flickering effect created by elements that allow for two conflicting readings simultaneously. His 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.”80

One could argue that the double incarnation of Kandinsky’s prose poems in Russian and German creates an effect akin to a “Zweiklang.” The two 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 graphic shape are offered simultaneously, as in the double-coded “HOBOE.” The final, utopian reconciliation of the two languages can only happen when they abandon their
referential function altogether, as happens at the end of “Sonett.” In the final vanishing point of Kandinsky’s artistic path, there is no more difference between Russian and German, as the individual idioms merge in the universal language of abstraction.

KANDINSKY’S LATE POETRY

Kandinsky continued to write occasional poetry for the rest of his life. However, compared to the burst of activity in the years before World War I, his later poetic output was much more sparse. The corpus of his published post-war oeuvre includes a total of eleven poems written in German and five written in French. During his years at the Bauhaus, Kandinsky published only one poem, “Zwielicht” (“Twilight”), which came out in 1925 in the anthology Europa-Almanach.81 This “synthetic” volume contained reproductions of the works of important avant-garde artists (including Kandinsky) alongside poems by Blaise Cendrars, Else Laske-Schüler, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, among others. Most of Kandinsky’s late poetry was composed after his forced departure from Germany and emigration to France in 1933. Four German poems written in 1937 appeared in the New York quarterly Transition, edited by Eugène Jolas, in 1938.82 Three German poems from 1937 were published in 1939 in the fourth number of Plastique, a journal founded and edited by the artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp.83 Seven additional poems in German and French appeared posthumously in the album 11 Tableaux et 7 poèmes, which came out in 1945, and in Max Bill’s book Kandinsky from 1951.84 One more French poem kept in Kandinsky’s Paris archive was published in 1992.85

Overall, Kandinsky did not radically change his poetic style in his later writings. There are fewer prose poems and more lineated “traditional” poetic texts, but without any recourse to regular meter and rhyme. The most obvious difference, compared with Kandinsky’s previous poetry, is the change in languages. After his departure from the Soviet Union in 1921, Kandinsky stopped writing poetry in Russian altogether. He continued to write in German not only during his years at the Bauhaus, but also after his relocation to France in 1933. In addition, he also began writing poems in French during the final years of his life. This development obviously presents a challenge to those who posit an essential link between poetic creativity and the emotional connection offered by the mother tongue. One could speculate, perhaps, that Kandinsky felt an emotional need to cross Russian out of his psyche and distance himself from that language after his forced departure from his native land. It is not that Kandinsky completely abandoned the Russian language, however. His third wife, Nina, whom he married in 1917, was Russian, which means that his language of domestic communication remained Russian even
after his final departure from Russia. Or rather, it reverted to Russian after the intermezzo with Gabriele Münter, when German had been for a while Kandinsky’s “wife tongue.” In spite of the change in domestic circumstances, however, German, rather than his native Russian, remained the primary language of Kandinsky’s poetic writings for the rest of his life.

One can find pragmatic explanations for why Kandinsky ceased to write in his native language after 1921. Since he had been stripped of his Soviet citizenship and was completely cut off from the public in his country of birth, writing in Russian would have limited Kandinsky’s readership to the relatively small audience of Russian émigré circles in the West. On the other hand, German was not only the language he used professionally up to 1933 in his position as a professor at the Bauhaus, it was also an idiom that he had perfected over the years as a medium of artistic expression. This may explain why he held on to it even after his forced departure from Germany. The switch to French in the late 1930s is more surprising. Of course, as an educated member of the prerevolutionary Russian intelligentsia, Kandinsky had a solid command of the French language. His interest in French literature and culture had been long-standing. Furthermore, he now lived in a French-speaking environment and was personally acquainted with some leading French poets, including André Breton. Nevertheless, beginning to write poetry in a new language seems a remarkable decision, especially when we consider Kandinsky’s advanced age—he was already past seventy at that time. 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. When comparing the German and French texts written in the 1930s, we notice an interesting difference. The German poems continue the linguistic experimentation of the prewar years. Many of them are written in a radical avant-garde style reminiscent of Dadaism. At the same time, Kandinsky manages to make creative use of the specific resources offered by the German language. In the poem “S,” written in May 1937, he experiments with the way German builds polysyllabic words out of separate particles with their own independent meaning. The poem begins with the untranslatable lines:

Un—regel—mässig
Regel—mässig
Mässig

“Irregular / Regular / Moderate,” the English rendition given in the Lindsay/Vergo edition of Kandinsky’s writings, misses out on the word-building game
as well as the “s”-alliteration alluded to in the title of the poem, while a literal translation of the individual components would result in the nonsensical “Un—rule—moderate / Rule—moderate / Moderate.”

Some of the German poems depart even more radically from standard vocabulary. Shot through with neologisms and ungrammaticalities, they create a sort of free-floating content, as in the first stanza of “Von-Zu” (“From-To”), written on August 2, 1936:

Kurben spritzen entblösste Striche
Unscheinbare wollen jagen umsonst
Au! er dreht sich tobend in Zausmal
Unten—oben—allerseits Nichts
Nichts.88

Kurbs are splashing denuded lines
Unprepossessing ones want to hunt in vain [or: for free]
Ouch! he is rotating ragingly in Tusslement
Below—above—on all sides Nothing
Nothing

The word “Kurben,” possibly a mutation of “Kurven” (curves) or “Kurbeln” (handles, cranks),89 combines geometric shape with mechanic action, while the even more unfathomable “Zausmal” seems to contain the lexical root of the verb “zerzausen” (to ruffle up), perhaps combined with the second syllable of “Denkmal” (monument). Lacking any kind of concrete representational content, the stanza evokes a mood of frantic agitation in empty space, creating a verbal analogy to Kandinsky’s paintings of the same period. The free combination of existing lexemes with neologisms resembles the juxtaposition of vaguely representational “biomorphic” shapes with abstract geometric forms in Kandinsky’s late painting style of the 1930s and 1940s. The oil painting Dominant Curve, for example, which dates from the same year as “Von-Zu,” 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 an analogy to Kandinsky’s use of polysemy in his German experimental poetry.90

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, such as a little brown chicken ruffled up by the wind in a vacant lot for sale (“Midi”), or a “nonou” (nanny) taking a stroll with a baby
who, in a slight touch of surrealism, crosses paths with a large white horse moving from left to right while the nanny is moving from right to left ("Les Promenades"). In the poem "Le Fond," a piece of string with knots leads to a mock-philosophical debate about numerical sequences. 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
C’est de la cheminée rouge
Que sort la fumée blanche.
C’est sur l’assiette jaune
Qu’est posé un concombre vert.
C’est sur la bicyclette noire
Qu’est assis un homme violet.
La route monte.
La bicyclette monte.
L’homme monte à son tour.
La fumée monte.
Elle aussi.
Le concombre ne bouge pas.
Une sinistre tranquillité.

Lyric
From the red chimney
Emerges the white smoke.
On the yellow plate
Lies a green cucumber.
On the black bicycle
Sits the purple man.
The road rises.
The bicycle rises.
The man rises too.
The smoke rises.
As well.
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 of material lifelessness and stasis. 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. 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.” However, the poem’s somewhat enigmatic title is a self-citation referring to a much earlier work, the painting Lyrisches. 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 included in the Klänge album. Is the French poem 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. The passage from Lyrisches to “Lyrique” may convey Kandinsky’s disillusionment with the messianic hopes expressed in the Klänge woodcut. By the time he wrote the poem, the anticipated dawn of a new spiritual age had been crushed by totalitarian dictatorships both in his country of birth and his adopted German homeland. Perhaps Kandinsky wrote the poem in French because he needed a new language to “defamiliarize” the image. His use of colors is also of interest. In the woodcut, the “heavenly” color blue indicates the rider’s spiritual destination. But in the poem, blue has disappeared altogether. Instead, we have the green cucumber. Kandinsky’s characterization of the color green 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.
The poem “Le Sourd qui entend” (“The Deaf Who Hears”), written in the same month as “Lyrique,” summarizes the poetics of simplicity that Kandinsky embraced in his French poetry, but it also functions as a more wide-ranging statement about his artistic credo:

Le Sourd qui entend

Comment dois-je raconter cette histoire?
Elle est très simple. C’est pourquoi qu’elle est compliquée.
La simplicité—voilà la difficulté.
Les choses les plus simples sont toujours les plus compliquées.
Et inversement.
Si je vous dit : au bord d’une grande route se trouve une petite pierre.
Que pensez-vous : est-ce simple ou compliqué ?
Et que pensez-vous, qu’est-ce qui augmente la simplicité ou la complication
Si je vous dit : une petite pierre se trouve au bord d’une grande route ?
J’ai mon opinion à moi.
Le plus simple et le plus compliqué serait de dire :
ROUTE-PIERRE (et après quelques secondes) GRANDE-PETITE.
C’est de l’impressionnisme spirituel.
Répétez encore une fois (une fois suffit)
ROUTE-PIERRE (sept secondes) GRANDE-PETITE.
La simplicité embrasse la complication.
Et inversement.
Il faudrait seulement avoir de l’oreille.
Arrêtez-vous un instant sur la grande route et regardez la petite pierre.
Regardez avec l’oreille.
Le sourd le comprend mieux encore.

The Deaf Who Hears

How shall I tell this story?
It is very simple. That’s why it is complicated.
The simplicity—here is the difficulty.
The simplest things are always the most complicated.
And vice versa.
If I tell you: on the side of a big road there is a small stone.
What do you think: is it simple or complicated?
And what do you think, what increases the simplicity or complication
If I tell you: a small stone is on the side of a big road?
I have my own opinion.
The simplest and most complicated would be to say:
ROAD-STONE (and after a few seconds) BIG-SMALL.
This is spiritual impressionism.
Repeat one more time (once is enough)
ROAD-STONE (seven seconds) BIG-SMALL.
Simplicity embraces complication.
And vice versa.
One only would need to have an ear for it.
Stop for a moment on the big road and look at the small stone.
Look with your ear.
The deaf understands it even better.

In its combination of writing, hearing, and vision, the poem summarizes Kandinsky’s program of an all-embracing synthetic and synesthetic art. Similarly to many of the texts in Klänge, Kandinsky directly tells the reader what to do by supplying a concrete scenario of “actions,” including even a pause of prescribed length. In this sense, the poem functions as a combination of meta-discourses, including comments on the writer’s own narrative technique (“How shall I tell this story”), experiments in verbal permutation and condensation reminiscent of Chinese ideograms, and a sort of theatrical script. The statement about simplicity and complexity echoes a thought that Kandinsky had expressed more than a quarter-century earlier in a letter to Gabriele Münter: “Yes, I think that ultimately and finally everything is one. It is a double simultaneous movement: 1. from the complex to the simple 2. vice versa. This is why subconsciously I always sought to unite these two streams in my pictures.”

The dialectic movement between simplicity and complexity—or between unity and difference, if we want to use the concept expressed in the letter to Münter—also provides a clue to Kandinsky’s multilingual practice. The different linguistic incarnations of his parallel poems are one in that they express the same semantic or “spiritual” content, yet they differ in terms of their individual encoding, forming a kind of unresolvable “Zweiklang.” By offering multiple wordings of the same underlying “fact,” “Le Sourd qui entend” demonstrates how self-translation becomes a form of rewriting in a continuous quest for cognition and illumination.

**SELF-TRANSLATION AND INTERSEMIOTIC TRANPOSITION**

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 Kandinsky 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.”98 Kandinsky’s notion of “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.

Even though Kandinsky stopped writing poetry in his native Russian after his final departure from Russia, by adding French to his poetic repertoire late in life he demonstrated to what extent bilingualism had become a crucial feature of his artistic self-definition. In writing poetry in other languages, Kandinsky did not mean to abandon his Russian roots, of course. His aspiration was to become not a German or French poet, but rather a universal artist who transcends boundaries between languages as well as artistic genres and media. This ecumenical attitude resembles Marina Tsvetaeva’s embrace of a poetic universalism beyond national categorization, as we will see in the following chapter. Kandinsky’s cosmopolitanism meant that he turned away from the linkage between native language and national poetry posited by German romantic philosophy. His multilingual practice rather resembles the medieval and early modern period, when poets frequently and routinely switched between different idioms. As Leonard Forster pointed out: “Language 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 than one language.”99 Similarly, as Forster has also 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.

Kandinsky used a musical rather than a painterly metaphor to characterize his artistic border-crossing: he talked about “changing instruments.” This is not surprising inasmuch as music, the abstract form of artistic
expression par excellence, furnished a key conceptual framework for Kandinsky’s aesthetic theories. It is not by accident that he gave his album of woodcuts and prose poems the title Sounds. Many of his paintings bear generic titles like “Composition,” “Improvisation,” or “Impression.” His quest for a new synthetic art involved an attempt to appropriate the semiotic system of music in his painterly practice. Kandinsky’s theoretical writings brim with references to music, where, as we have seen, colors and shapes become the equivalent of musical sounds and keys.

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 Kandinsky’s poems become mere variants of a more fundamental “translation from the language of painterly perception into verbal language.” 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 a few examples of direct “translations” between specific paintings and texts in Kandinsky’s oeuvre. At best, we could point to the early “White Cloud” poem and its transposition into a gouache, or the deflating parody of the painting Lyrisches in the poem “Lyrique.” In Klänge there is no direct, straightforward correspondence between individual prose poems and woodcuts. The sequence of images and texts relate to each other as do the individual voices in a polyphonic composition. Rather than fulfilling an auxiliary function subordinate to the message conveyed by the visual artworks, 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, 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.

Kandinsky’s syncretic use of different media does not mean that he believed in a complete fusion of their expressive means. As he put it in On the Spiritual in Art: “One 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.” The same could be said, of course, about the parallel linguistic versions of a self-translated text. While seemingly saying “the same thing,” the two variants nevertheless differ completely in their outlook and expressive means. Kandinsky made it clear that his 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

Chapter Two
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.”\textsuperscript{102} Translation, needless to say, is another form of repetition, which explains the prominent role that self-translations came to assume in Kandinsky’s writings.

Kandinsky’s versatility in multiple media does not mean, of course, that writing poetry had the same importance for him as creating works of visual art. There is a reason why he is more famous as a painter than as a poet. Kandinsky’s metaphor of “changing instruments,” if we want to take it literally, raises the underlying issue of professionalism. A gifted amateur who knows how to play more than one instrument (such as Kandinsky himself, who played the cello and the piano) is probably more inclined to change instruments than a professional musician who has spent his entire life honing and perfecting his mastery of one instrument. A celebrated cello soloist is unlikely to do double duty as a piano virtuoso, even though he might on occasion enjoy playing the piano recreationally. In this sense, one could argue that Kandinsky’s poetic multilingualism was facilitated by his primary occupation as a professional artist. Since he was ultimately not as invested in poetry as he was in painting, it became easier for him to switch languages, given that he did not depend as much on a particular idiom to express his artistic design. But what about professional poets? Can they “change instruments” as easily? We will take up this question in the chapters that follow.