Poetic Solicitude: Two Languages and the Lyric Voice of *Ex Nihilo*

Paul D. Morris

Université de Saint-Boniface

Canada has frequently struggled in the attempt to accommodate linguistic diversity, despite the country's defining history of contact between foreign languages and cultures. Dialogue through and across different languages has rarely been easy. The reasons for this long-standing difficulty are undoubtedly many, although a key structural obstacle must certainly derive from the representational powers inherent in language. Language, it seems, inevitably communicates much more than it states *au premier degré*. In the public sphere of administrative and judicial policy, for instance, linguistic representation is inevitably implicated in the struggle for implicit and explicit forms of sociopolitical power. Even in less overtly ideological contexts, language choice remains fraught due to its defining capacities as a medium of symbolic messaging, most powerfully perhaps as a marker and shaper of identity, whether individual or collective. Irrespective of the content or context of a given utterance, the language in which it is made may itself signify something of the language's relative position in the social and political order. Canada's policy of official bilingualism provides the example of a government attempt to attenuate the imbalances of language's communicative and symbolic power in the public sphere. And while this measure has succeeded in fostering mutual awareness and official recognition of English and French in administrative and judicial settings, it has also inadvertently accentuated awareness of an essential asymmetry between the two languages (Leclerc 495). The very need for the equalizing intervention of a government policy reveals a fundamental difference in the linguistic *rapport de force* that persists between the two official languages in Canada. In the most pessimistic reading, this asymmetry equals what Sherry Simon, in referring to R-Albert Benoit, once termed a "servilité [...] à la fois d'ordre linguistique et politique" (*L'inscription sociale* 52).

Similar difficulties often pertain in the cultural arena as well. To adapt a well-worn

literary reference evoked by Margaret Atwood and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, despite their proximity English and French are as frequently the sources of solitude as solicitude in Canada. The linguistic and cultural divide that offered a title to MacLennan's famous novel and gave metaphoric expression to what is for some the Canadian national condition is rarely bridged. This is despite MacLennan's implicit counter-intention in quoting Rilke in the epigraph to his novel: "der Liebe, die darin besteht, dass zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüssen."[1] The transformation of differences into a source of solicitude is no simple matter. Nonetheless, although rare, bridgings of the solitudes are not unknown. The 2021 bilingual collection of poetry by E.D. Blodgett and J.R. Léveillé, *Ex Nihilo*, is one such example of poetic solicitude, a work of art that transcends the ideological and identitarian perils of bilingualism to become the expression of a poetic vision greater than that attainable in either language or by either poet individually.[2] In this article, I wish to investigate the nature of this joint, bilingual poetic dialogue through discussion of the conditions that made

260 it possible. *Ex Nihilo*, I will suggest, transcends the language-based sectarianism latent in bilingualism to allow the two languages to "protect, touch and greet each other" in the expression of a poetic voice that is more than the English of Blodgett and the French of Léveillé. This poetic transcendence is made possible due to the confluence of three essential factors: the complementary poetics of the two poets, the formal potential inherent in the modified *renga* that structured their exchange, and the self-abnegating capacity of Blodgett and Léveillé to both lead and follow the compositional example of the other in the elaboration of poetic images and stylistic devices that, together, bend and synthesize into a shared arc of thematic expression. The differences between the two poets—their poetic identities and separate national languages—are essential to *Ex Nihilo*, but only to the extent that they are expressed and then synthesized into something greater. Paradoxically, it is only in acknowledging and accommodating the *différence* posed by the two languages—including the two poetic identities shaped by and anchored in the respective languages—that *Ex Nihilo* is able to transcend the solitudes of the two languages. The solicitude of *Ex Nihilo*, as suggested by Rilke in his letter to a young poet, is shaped in the liminal space where contrastive pairs of difference—beginning with the languages of the two Canadian poets Blodgett and Léveillé—touch to greet and protect each other in one sublimated lyric voice.

Blodgett's and Léveillé's *Ex Nihilo* is a *renga*—a traditional form of Japanese linked poetry in which two or more poets engage in a poetic dialogue. The first poet begins with a poem to which the second poet responds with a subsequent poem in the development of an accruing chain of poetry that is—in game-like fashion—at once rule-bound and free, disciplined and spontaneous. Each poet engages with, and builds upon, the sense and spirit of the preceding poem, while in turn contributing the essential element of originality and variation that allows the dialogue to progress. *Ex Nihilo* consists of 178 poems, 89 poems by each author, beginning with verses by Blodgett directly engaging his poetic interlocuter with an address that makes

intertextual allusion to a previous collection of poetry by Léveillé (*Poème Pierre Prière*). The poetic conversation that is to be *Ex Nihilo* is begun through invocation of Blodgett's prior dialogue with the poetry of Léveillé:

> you spoke of how the wind
>   had certain shades (1)

Léveillé concludes the collection with a poem whose final word announces the renga's (provisional?) end while also lexically signalling its *début*, a gesture of circularity that suggests the possible beginning of a renewed dialogue: "*depuis le début en leur fin*" (90; emphasis in original).[3]

The poetry of *Ex Nihilo* by Blodgett and Léveillé, to be discussed in further detail below, shares significant points of comparison, although with sufficient differences to foster a contrastive dialogue of style and theme. The shared poetics of Blodgett and Léveillé—individual in expression but kindred in spirit—is the first factor enabling the volume's transcendence of their linguistic singularity in English and French. Both authors have well-established oeuvres that favour an abstract, frequently aphoristic form of poetry. Disciplined in the care and conscious use of adopted stylistic devices, it is a poetry that seeks to amplify the creative generation of meaning, including via the conventions of typographical presentation. The order-imposing constraints of punctuation, syntax, punctuated line breaks, and even capitalization are habitually minimized by both poets as a means of maximizing the combinational potential of words and their interconnections within the poem and on the page. Léveillé and Blodgett privilege the *parole* over the *langue*, the unique and provisional over the standardized and explicit. The two are also similar in their willingness to accompany their poetry with visual imagery and illustrations, a choice of presentation that serves to accentuate the plasticity of language while fostering the creation of associative layers of meaning that extend beyond the verbal (see, for example, Léveillé's *Montréal: poésie* and Blodgett's *Poems for a Small Park* and *Horizons*). Both poets display awareness of, and generative intertextual engagement with, a broad range of international poetic models, from Basho and Rumi to Rimbaud and Dickinson, figures who amplify and reflect tendencies within their poetry.[4] This frequent, even characteristic, citation of other poets in their verse is a portion of their overt signalling of the literariness of their poetic endeavours.

Their poetry is not only an expression of thoughts on the world and experience, but also evidence of self-conscious participation within the enclosed domain of literature. This heightened commitment to engagement with the aesthetic as a particular, non-discursive way of knowing and perceiving is also revealed through the inclusion of other arts in their poetry, particularly painting, photography, and music. In quoting Shitao, a figure also alluded to in *Ex Nihilo* (44, 67), Léveillé affirms the capacity of writing and the other arts to achieve, via their separate means, a similar creative rather than representational end: "'Les gens croient que la peinture et l'écriture consistent à reproduire les formes et la resemblance. Non! le pinceau sert à faire sortir les

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choses du chaos'" (*Sondes* 15). In terms of verbal communication, both poets favour hermetic, highly lyric texts that evoke layers of intuited understanding. Their poetry communicates not through an appeal to discursive language, but via intriguing invocations of images and perceptions that are anchored in the concrete (the phenomenal) – birds, animals, stones, water, and so on—but that are in turn suggestively associated with abstractions (the noumenal)—eternity, infinity, emptiness, the inexpressible, and so on. This combination of the elemental and the abstract, the provisional and the absolute, creates a sense of knowing that is always inferred and multivalent, never certain or final. The phenomenal in the world becomes a worldly instantiation of something eternal. Across their respective oeuvres, Blodgett and Léveillé are masters of forcing understanding to oscillate—despite the deceptive simplicity of the language—between the multiple alternating meanings latent, rarely explicit, in the arrangement of their richly polysemantic language. Final meaning never *arrives* in their poetry; it is always *emerging*. Line breaks, sonal qualities, homophonic and **262** homosemous resonances, pairings of images, intertextual allusions, and a range of other stylistic devices expand the potential meanings of the simplest of linguistic references to physical objects.

The enigmatic, at times paradoxical, quality of their writing derives from a continually interchanging sense of sensual pleasure in the "thingness" of the real, along with the mystery and awe that accompanies contemplation of the real. In the poetry of both Blodgett and Léveillé, the stone is made to reveal its Shklovskian "stoniness," but also to intimate the ineffable, metaphysical wonder and enigma of its inexplicable existence. Finally, both poets have demonstrated longstanding interest in the potential of language itself as both the medium and object of poetry. One element of this poetic self-awareness of the dimensions of language is expressed via the presence of multilingualism and translation in their writing. A further, related off-shoot of their shared interest in language is bilingualism, a particularly evocative facet of their respective oeuvres that has also received critical attention (Mannani; Rodriquez). Léveillé, due to his belonging to the Franco-Manitoban minority community within a majoritarian anglophone province and country, is most habituated with what Eric Annandale has referred to as the necessity "de composer constamment avec l'Autre, cet Autre étant anglophone quant à la langue, mais provenant d'origines culturelles et ethniques diverses" (70). Just as his poetry frequently engages with the "languages" of the other arts as well as other national poets, so has he experimented with the creative potential of bilingual texts (for instance, in *Dess(e)ine II / II Drawing(s)*). A polyglot, Blodgett, too, frequently incorporates multiple foreign language into his writing (for instance, in *Poems for a Small Park*). In creative terms, however, French and English seem to share a certain privilege in his poetic oeuvre in terms both of translation and bilingual composition. Blodgett's *Transfiguration* is a 1998 volume of bilingual poetry, a renga, composed with and translated by Jacques Brault. More recently, Blodgett's 2016 collection *Horizons* consists of verse written in alternating stanzas of English and French.

This native receptivity not simply to the presence, but to the creative potential of the linguistic other is central to the artistic identity of both poets and a pre-condition of the achievement of *Ex Nihilo*. As noted at the outset of this article, in sociopolitical contexts bilingualism, rather than serving as intended as a medium for fostering mutual comprehension, frequently functions as a sign of difference inevitably, even if unwillingly, reifying identitarian categories of *dominant-dominé*. Given their sensitivity to the representational powers of language, it is no coincidence that Léveillé and Blodgett have both reflected on the social and political realities of language usage in Canada. They are cognizant of the implications—including inequalities—that language choice can harbour. Neither avoids acknowledgment of the legitimate social and political concerns associated with language politics as an essential facet of individual and collective cultural representation. Nonetheless, both also seem intent upon overcoming the sectarian hazards of language choice, not by using their poetry to articulate a competing ideology, but by harnessing the non-dogmatic potential of poetic communication to transcend the zero-sum reasoning of binary calculations of linguistic power and status. Léveillé as a minority-language author is particularly attentive to the communitarian and artistic exigencies of his choice of language. As *homme de lettres*, Léveillé has consistently sought to represent the history and cultural specificity of his native "communauté minoritaire" via a variety of initiatives—including his own creative writing—that demonstrate his engagement with multiple institutions dedicated to disseminating the writing, cultural history, and artistic production of the *francophonie de l'ouest*. Léveillé has directly addressed the importance of his rootedness in his linguistic and cultural community and his deep concern for its flourishing:

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> la communauté minoritaire dont je suis issu m'intéresse vivement: je participe à de nombreux colloques et à des revendications sociopolitiques pour faire valoir sa production culturelle et j'ai fait publier une anthologie de 600 pages qui examine deux siècles de poésie au Manitoba français et qui témoigne de l'influence de l'écrivain dans la communauté franco-manitobaine. (*Logiques* 29)

Despite this demonstrated commitment to the sociopolitical flourishing of Franco-Manitoba, however, Léveillé's first allegiance as an artist is to the republic of letters, an aesthetic realm with a constitution different from that of political communities bounded by "national languages":

> L'écriture doit transcender le discours des communautés, qui sont essentiellement des manifestations d'une existence culturelle et 'behavioriste.' Elles sont constituées d'idéologies et d'idoles; composantes nécessaires à leur incarnation, qui demeurent tout de même de faux dieux. L'écriture est un acte—non pas une mission ou un objectif à atteindre, mais une chose en soi. (*Logiques* 30)

Léveillé's primary fidelity to the aesthetic function of literature, his rejection of "une écriture socioréaliste qui n'est que propagande," assures both his rootedness in the French language—his native language and hence surest instrument of verbal creation

—and his equanimity in the presence of other languages. As indicated in an interview with Paul Dubé, Léveillé's preference for French despite his advanced facility in English is a matter of artistic preference rather than sociocultural identity: "Passer d'une langue à l'autre? Non, je ne le pense pas. Évidemment, j'écris en français, non en anglais! Pour écrire en anglais, il faudrait que je me penche sur toutes sortes de règles de grammaire, de stylistique, que j'oublie et que j'ai négligées" (*Logiques* 13). It is Léveillé's commitment to the language of poetry that is the primary guarantor of his fidelity to French, the language with which he can best serve that commitment.

Blodgett has also reflected frequently in both discursive and poetic contexts on the sociopolitical and aesthetic dimensions of language choice, as well as bilingualism. A considerable portion of Blodgett's career as a scholar was at the intersection of language and (literary) culture. Beginning with *Configuration: Essays in the Canadian Literatures* in 1982 and concluding with *Five Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada* in 2002, his contribution to the study of Canadian literature was distinguished by a sustained attempt to provide synoptic understanding of the specificities and commonalities of Canada's literatures. Within this effort, moreover, Blodgett expresses awareness of the essential discrepancies of sociopolitical power that pertain in Canada, despite such administrative measures as official bilingualism: "binarism in Canada, while it is a violent stasis, masks, in fact, an anglophone hegemony" (*Configuration* 9). This same assessment is echoed later in a claim that "the role of language and culture in Canada is, as in most bilingual countries, asymmetrical" ("Towards a Model" 199). Despite this reality within the sociopolitical order, Blodgett seems equally committed to demonstrating that aesthetic representation is receptive to the linguistic other, both as a means of augmenting the reservoir of polyvalent meaning within the literary system, but also as a means of documenting the "thingness" of cultures that are manifested in the world via differing languages. To this latter point, in a video clip titled "*Poems for a Small Park*: The Question of Language" that accompanies the online version of the collection, Blodgett indicates how the presence of multiple languages was "inevitable" within his poetic representation of his chosen subject, that the "foundational languages" in question and their attendant cultures "guided how [he] understood […] the situation of Edmonton as a particular kind of city growing at a particular time." For Blodgett, such considerations were "part of [his] ordinary thinking" (*Poems for a Small Park*). Thus, for both Léveillé and Blodgett, linguistic specificity—including the presence of the linguistic other—is an inevitable portion of culture and the poet's voice; within the socio-political sphere, language comes with the possibility of constraints, but within the aesthetic realm of poetry it is a fundamental source of enrichment and diversity.

A second factor contributing to the solicitude achieved by *Ex Nihilo*—its capacity to rise above the differences of national language—rests within the generic conventions of composition adopted by Blodgett and Léveillé. As noted above, *Ex Nihilo* is a renga, a form of Japanese linked poetry defined according to specific formal and even lexical conventions (Jin'Ichi). In the introduction to the collection, Léveillé

indicates that he and Blodgett were not attempting to reproduce the generic speci-ficity of the form, but rather to fulfill "la valeur fondamentale: une communication entre deux poètes à travers la poésie: une communication entre deux poètes à travers l'un de l'autre. Véritablement à travers. Et doublement, puisqu'il s'agit, ici, d'un échange bilingue" (n.p.). The fundamental value is the dialogue, the non-constrained exchange between two interlocutors whose development depends on the consent of the other. Jin'Ichi describes the festive, banquet-like context native to the history of renga compositions wherein the rules of engagement are to be respected but not to the point of impinging on creativity (33-36) and this game-like quality is preserved in subsequent renga: the acceptance that ground rules must be observed, but the "play" of the exchange depends on their spontaneous adaptation to the moment. Jacques Brault, in his prefatory note to the collection written with Blodgett, *Transfiguration*, makes explicit reference to the paradox of this ludic dimension: "un jeu grave mené en toute innocence" (n.p.). The free play of the renga rests upon the desire to par-ticipate in a spirit of discipline and flexibility: the willingness to be mutually guided and prompted by the poetic intervention of the other. Implicit in the notion of the renga's dialogue is more than a receptivity to exchange, however. For the renga to advance, each poet is required actively to engage with the contribution of the other in a manner which necessarily alters his voice through augmentation from the other. Each poet is required both to foreground and restrain expression of his personal poetic voice. Only after internalizing—making his own—the poetry of the other can he offer back a poem intended to influence the other. In a brief article commenting on the composition of *Transfiguration*, Blodgett discusses the necessary willing-ness to be transfigured by the renga: "Since each response was designed to continue, and add to a proffered figure, my attention bore primarily upon what I took the inner sense of Jacque's poem to be. […] The text to be responded to requires under-standing, and the nuances must be at least perceived and felt in order to be *played* upon" ("Transfiguring" 16-17; emphasis mine). Likewise, Léveillé's writing provides repeated affirmation of the spontaneity, improvisation, and *jouissance* at the heart of his poetics. The jazz-like combination of discipline and freedom native to the *renga* form is aptly expressed, for instance, in the title of one of Léveillé's previous books of essays and interviews: *Logiques improvisées*. The *renga* form of *Ex Nihilo*, there-fore, presumes a concert of two voices who are guided but never overwhelmed by the poetic language of the other. In the case of *Ex Nihilo*, the poetic dialogue is enriched by the presence of two national languages. The exchange emerges out of the contact of two poetic identities that are each shaped by the poetry in the signature style of the other, including engagement with the language of the other. Out of the dialogue between languages and poets results a kind of depersonalized poetic voice that is at once a summation but also transcendence of the respective components. The inti-mated meaning of *Ex Nihilo* is a product of poetry expressed in two languages, but also of awareness that, taken together, the poets and their languages have superseded what each was capable of communicating independently. The meaning of a dialogue

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is thus more than the simple addition of the two *paroles*.

The thematic nature of that poetic synthesis and transcendence constitutes the third indicator of the achievement of *Ex Nihilo*. As previously noted, both Blodgett and Léveillé favour a non-discursive form of poetry where meaning is intuited rather than explicated. This impressionist manner of suggesting meaning is reminiscent of the communicative power of music which expresses an emotional register but which has no fixed system of lexical semantics. It is undoubtedly for this reason that various of the excerpted comments quoted on the cover and flyleaf of *Ex Nihilo* make reference to music, fugues, rhythm, and cantatas, just as Léveillé evokes "harmonie" and "contrepoint" (n.p.) in the foreword. Despite the challenges to interpretation posed by the poetry of *Ex Nihilo*, however, a form of meaning accrues in the manner of a surging tide of poetic waves, a central image of the collection, washing onto the shore of readerly understanding. Over the course of the collection, in a process of swelling and receding, linked images and impressions accumulate around which thematic understanding takes shape. These emergent themes do not guide understanding in the direction of earthbound sociopolitical meaning, but rather lift it into more universal, transcendent realms that are framed in terms of wonder and mystery rather than discursive certainty: the nature of time; the beauty of nature; the solace of poetry; the mysteries of the ineffable, the paradoxes of expressing the *indicible*; and so on. A curious, and striking, feature of the volume is the manner in which the meanings implicit in these evocations emerge not simply from their presence in the poems, but also through their often-paired juxtapositions with other images. This structural feature of the collection's composition suggests that meanings arise—*ex nihilo*—not just out of consideration of things in and of themselves, but out of the liminal space of their contact in the world, including between lines of poetry. To adopt the imagery of *Ex Nihilo*, a wave and a shore really only take on meaning at the point of their contact. Perception of one is dependent on contemplation of the other. In his *avant-propos* to Blodgett's bilingual volume *Horizons*, Léveillé identifies this very point: "Une pause, un blanc, une éclaircie, le véritable silence de la poésie. C'est dans ce moment vide que surgissent les 'choses' avant de retourner à leur origine" (n.p.). In an analogous manner, the contact of English and French in the volume offers metonymic representation of the interaction of difference and the communication of something—a reflection—greater than that possible to either separately. Again, in his *avant-propos* to Blodgett's *Horizons*, Léveillé astutely identifies the dynamic of creative linguistic contact between English and French in a manner germane to *Ex Nihilo*: "les deux langues agissent dans une même sphère de regard, d'approche, de sensibilité malgré leurs différences, ou bien plutôt en exaltant les différences, pour retrouver une unicité de *réflexion*" (n.p.; emphasis in original). Although *Ex Nihilo* does not arrive at an explicit discursive realization, through this meeting of differences, an arc of intimated understanding and even solicitude is traced: an accumulative sense of the cosmic grace of existence and an intuited sense of eternity and return.

Ex Nihilo begins in dialogue with Blogett's second-person address—"you"—to

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Léveillé and his allusion to Léveillé's poetry, itself an indication that the dialogue had already been initiated in the aesthetic sphere prior to the launching of this volume. It is worth quoting at length the first two exchanges of poetry (4 poems) in representative illustration of the complex, free-flowing interplay of form and content, theme and sound in the dialogic creation of meaning:

> you spoke of how the wind
> had certain shades

> curtains of
> the lengthening afternoon

> infinity falls slowly through
> the late light

> *le vide prend la forme qu'il veut*
> *et tout ce qui vient va*

> *je reste en place*
> *pour l'éveil de la nuit*

waking in the dark
as if one were asleep
inside a tree

so near the breath of leaves
their slow music unfolding
and the stars

on oublie que la nuit
poursuit sa descente
jusqu'à la levée du jour

bruissement dans les hauts bois
un orchestre de rien du tout
(1-2)

Apart from attributing an initiating communicative act to Léveillé—"you spoke" —Blodgett's invocation of Léveillé's "wind" makes laconic reference to "shades," a physical quality not generally attributed to the wind, as it suggests a visible quality, colours or perhaps spirits or ghosts. The first word of the following line immediately suggests still another synonym for shades, that of "curtains"—the window coverings that in the following couplet trace the descent of the sun in the late, "lengthening" afternoon. The evoked image of a "falling" sun is linked in the final couplet of this first poem to "infinity," a darkness that will descend as the "late light" of afternoon fades, heralding the end of the waking hours of the day and the onset of a darkness.

In his first poem, Léveillé's poetic response takes up the reference to "infinity" in the form of *le vide* and, in a manner not unlike the Blodgett's "wind," accords it unusual attributes, here both a *forme* and a personification as an entity with the agency to come and go. In a play on Blodgett's previous second-person address, Léveillé answers with the first-person pronoun and via the oxymoronic evocation of the *éveil* of the very "night" that had been implied but not explicitly named in Blodgett's first poem. Blodgett's second poem—in self-reference to one of his earlier volumes of poetry *Apostrophes VII: Sleep, You, a Tree*, itself a reference to George Seferis—returns to the images of darkness and sleep suggested by Léveillé's *nuit*. Introduced with the reference to a "tree" is also the sonal quality of the rustling of leaves as "slow music." Léveillé begins the following (fourth) poem with another pronoun, the impersonal *on*, extending a trajectory of pronoual reference through "you" and "I" to "one/ we" in a gesture that recapitulates the collection's sublimation of the two poets into a greater impersonal voice. Both the "you" and the "I" achieve higher completion in "one/we." Likewise evoked is a distant echo of the *vide* associated with forgetting as well as a recapitulation of notions of descent and rising, now of the *jour* rather than the *nuit*. Léveillé's concluding couplet names the rustling, the *bruissement* suggested by Blodgett's "music," transforming it into an orchestra, the first of an extended motif of music throughout the collection, while also conjuring the murmurous alliterations of the previous poems: the sibilant *se*s of the first poem, the fricative *f*s and *v*s of the second poem and again the sibilants of the fourth poem. Throughout *Ex Nihilo*, this ongoing *va-et-vient* of themes, associations and stylistic effects converge in dialogue to highlight and accentuate the similarities and differences of each poet in their respective languages. Yet, ultimately, as with the wave and the shore or the sea and the sky, it is at the moment of poetic convergence that the two distinct voices and languages find their contrastive definition but also ascend into something greater than the mere sum of the two.

This form of exchange of themes and devices is virtually endless in *Ex Nihilo*, making the identification of an overarching theme and developmental trajectory at best provisional. Nonetheless, the poetic dialogue in the collection does seem to unfold in a manner that recapitulates the central organizational device of the volume —the "greeting" (in Rilke's sense) of *différence* as a prelude to a form of solicitous sublimation into something greater. In the most immediate sense, the difference is represented by the two separate poetic voices speaking in their respective national languages. But this organizational principle is enacted at a thematic and formal level as well. At the level of form, the very sounds of the respective poems are used as links across the languages. Here, for instance, the play of the English and French sounds of *o/au* and *Sufi/suffit* form the link between two poems:

> on the shores of stars
> Sufis inside the sun
> whispering o

> *au commencement*
> *la fin me suffit* (54)

It is on the thematic level of imagery, however, that the generative potential of this play of difference is most productive. Throughout the collection, images of paired opposites recur repeatedly: day and night, movement and stasis, sound and silence, light and shadow, wave and shore, earth and sky, sun and moon, life and death, plenitude and emptiness, ascent and descent, nouns and verbs, war and peace, among others. These specific things, whether individually or in contrastive pairs, are themselves fodder for imagistic tableaux that evoke endless interpretive possibility due to their lexical simplicity in the barest of verbs and nouns; for example:

> as one who stands beside the sea
> water rising and falling
> the sound it makes without end
>
> as one who hears infinity
> unable to speak a word
> that is not drowned and washed away (21)

Evoked here are implicit and explicit pairs of contrasts: individual and sea, rising and falling, sound and silence, infinity and end, speechlessness and word, standing and being washed away. Conjoined in six lines of verse, intimated meaning is generated through the deceptive evocativeness of the unadorned words and, especially, the sheer combinational possibilities encouraged by the pared down syntax. Even the anaphoric "as one who" at the beginning of each stanza suggests repetition and comparison without ever settling into a specific designation. The cumulative effect of this interplay of images and concepts is reinforced by the capacity of both poets to render them at once quotidian and wondrous precisely because, via the combinatory turn of poetry, they can be made to also intimate the inexplicable. This combinatory turn is particularly resonant in the expression of epigrammatic paradoxes:

> *je me tais*
> *tout est dit* (21)

or

> *ce qui ne se mesure pas*
> *est compris*
> *ce qui est indicible*
> *se trouve dit*
>
> …
>
> *le temps file*
> *et il est toujours là* (25)

The overriding sentiment elicited by the accumulation of interlinking images oscillating between the specific and the abstract, physical perception and intuition, the

declamatory and the paradoxical is the wonder, awe and mystery of epiphanic meaning (*Logiques* 30). And although the generative potential of this poetic dialogue is endless—like all games, constrained only by the will to play—the collection does bend toward a conclusion.

The catalytic force leading the developmental arc of meaning does not reside within a specific discursive message, or even a particular metaphysical conception of being. Indeed, one of the many subdialogues of *Ex Nihilo* is the exchange of philosophical responses to the nature of existence. The volume is replete with references to various thinkers and their belief systems—Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, Greek mythology—each suggestive of their respective manner of contemplating the ineffable. The collection privileges none in particular—"no Pentecostal / series of cries" (90)—but rather references them in evocation of the commonality of their concerns. As the poetic dialogue advances, however, it seems to amass recurring images of return and renewal. Repeated references to children develop into a persistent motif of rebirth and innocence framed in association with "paradise reborn / in time again" (86). References are made to "the slow appearance / of the sun at dawn" (86), of a "crossing to the other shore" (88) and "a new cosmos com[ing] / momentarily into being / reshaping the universe" (89). The recurrent allusions to "*la comédie*" (73) and the laughter of children—"*le dire / de l'enfant / est un rire*" (83)—indicate a convergence of the comic and the cosmic, a divine comedy unlinked to any specific system of thought but nonetheless evident in the wonder of being. Out of this intuited contemplation of existence emerges not certainty or discursive knowledge, but rather grace, a feeling of equanimity, privilege and gratitude in the face of a cosmic order seemingly defined by beneficence and beauty:

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> *le mystère n'a pas de contours*
> *il est mouvement*
> *rythme spirituel*
>
> *dans la grande indifférence*
> *de l'univers*
> *la gratuité apparaît*
>
> *c'est une grâce* (86)

The seeds of the synthesizing notion of return and renewal, although more insistent towards the end of *Ex Nihilo*, were also implicit earlier in the collection. In a stanza composed in reference to the act of writing, Léveillé likewise makes an allusion suggestive of the cyclical nature of existence. There is no period to the line of being:

> *sur le point de*
> *mettre un point*
> *la plume retourne*
> *au commencement* (35).

It is likewise with Blodgett's and Léveillé's *renga*. It is thus appropriate that the final stanza of the poem evokes an image of the *fin*, but one which suggests a synthesis, a creative sublation, in anticipation of a repetition of the life-giving energy of the sun and a renewed poetic dialogue:

> *langue de feu*
> *langue de foi*
> *langue de joie*
> *venez taire*
> *le babil de Babel*
>
> *ayez la gravité des astres*
> *qui oeuvrent en silence*
> *depuis le début en leur fin* (90)

In keeping with the central thematic preoccupations of this analysis, particularly with regard to language, these final verses end in an appeal to a new beginning. Through a three-word evolution of sound and sense—the aural progression through *feu* to *foi* to *joie*—a startling *appel* is made to bring to silence the babbling of the (national) languages of Babel. In their place is the supplicating wish that these elemental languages of fire, faith, and joy serve—sun and star-like—as the generative life-giving energy of celestial bodies. Absent from these lines is reference to either the poets, Blodgett and Léveillé, or their respective national languages, English and French. In a concluding line that evokes both a *début* and a *fin*, the preceding poetic dialogue is implied to have developed through solicitous poetic exchange into the creation of lyric voice greater than the sum of the *différences* of the two.

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Notes

1. "love consists of this: that two solitudes protect, touch and greet each other" (Briefe 7: 42).

2. It is a striking irony that the efforts of Blodgett and Léveillé, and their innovative publisher, At Bay Press, to bridge the solitudes rendered their collection ineligible for entry in competition for certain national awards. Neither exclusively English nor French, *Ex Nihilo* was left *hors compétition* for a Governor General's Award, for example.

3. Throughout *Ex Nihilo*, Blodgett's English-language verses are presented in regular font, while Léveillé's French-language poems are presented in italics. This convention will be followed in the citations in this article.

4. *Ex Nihilo* features explicit reference to an entire library of writers, including Keats, Rimbaud, du Bellay, Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Mallarmé, Zhuangzi, Villon, Hölderlin, Breton, Cohen, Lamartine, Dante, Ponge, Baudelaire, Blodgett, and Léveillé.

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