

## CRAIG DWORKIN

*Accents Graves/ Accents Gravés*

Pierre Alferi's *OXO*—Cole Swensen's translation of his 1994 book *Kub Or*—makes me wonder what it might mean to write with an accent.

Let me say this clearly, from the start: I do not mean to suggest that the translation shows any lack of competence. Quite to the contrary, in fact, *OXO* is a perfect example of what it means to translate fluently, *sans un accent étranger*. Indeed one of the book's most immediately obvious accomplishments is Swensen's skillfully natural rendition of Alferi's signature mix of artifice and relaxed colloquial language, his weave of the sinuous and elliptical phrases of spoken language within rigid written forms.

But alongside references to masters of the French language, including the modernized naturalism of Gustave Flaubert and the precision artifice of Stéphane Mallarmé, the poems in *Kub Or* note non-French accents, or summon figures whose speech would likely betray a foreign trace. Most pointed, perhaps, is a mention of the speech of the "patagonian thalcave," which refers the diligent reader ("cf. page further / on") to a character in Jules Verne's *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant (In Search of the Castaways)*.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Thalcave appears in a chapter in which accent, idiom, and natural language are all explicitly thematized and debated. As the characters in Verne's novel attempt to communicate, they comment on language acquisition, the relations between different national languages and dialects, and ultimately find the solution to their communication problems hinging on the power of accent:

The native listened but made no reply.  
 "He doesn't understand," said the geographer.  
 "Perhaps you haven't the right accent," suggested the Major.  
 "That's just it! Confound the accent!"

The chapter ends with the caveat: "If I don't catch the accent," he said to the Major, "it won't be my fault."

Other moments in *Kub Or* are similarly explicit about their attempts to "catch the accent." In the poem "*we are the robots*," "the voices of kraftwerk" are heard speaking "in the manner of phrases clipped off answering machines,"

and in the poem “tai chi” the eponymous bodily movements, accentuated by their stylized mannerism, are described as a series of “unnatural even / verbal postures that lacking / an asian precision have / but the charm of discomfort.” Accent is implicit in a great many other references as well: “vacationers” and “tourists”; the “dervish / burger on the rue dupuis” where they serve the great “chawarma”; the multi-cultural linguistic indiscretion of “agostino novello supercopter akira,” and the lexical allergens of a number of words not native to French (“batman” and “mdvanii,” “walkman” and “pepsi,” “rock” and “grunge”). First among these, of course, is the stylized brand-name phoneticism of the title *kub or*, a ubiquitous French brand of instant bouillon marketed by MAGGI since 1912 with the slogan “insist on the ‘K,’” and its hint of the Malaysian “Kubor.” Additionally, the titles of several poems point to individuals who would inevitably insist too much on certain letters, speaking French with an accent (Ivan Goncharov, Robert Walser, the young Charles Ives), and if the local cityscapes glimpsed in *Kub Or* are decidedly Parisian, Alferi takes pains to specify that it is the Paris of “la france d’henry james”—a place pointedly on the outskirts, inhabited by non-native speakers: Jonathan Sturges, William Dean Howells, and James Whistler.<sup>2</sup>

Those latter names, moreover, suggest the ‘howls’ and ‘whistles’ of uncontrolled speech, like the clucking chuckle of a woman’s “glosse” in one poem, with its onomatopoeic corruption of the Greek *glosse* [tongue], a slurring echoed by the recurrent spit and dribbled drops that repeatedly pool and drain through the pages of the book, rhyming with a rain of sprinkles and splashes, sputters and bubbles, carbonated spray and filming sap. Money is pointedly “liquidated,” and insults, like those from a “llama mad” spitter of curses, are described as a “liquid pleasure.” Alferi’s poems are thus ‘productive,’ in the physiological sense, and all that spittle emphasizes the corporeal byproducts of speech, with their attendant effects on pronunciation (the “liquid drop or accent” as Derrida, following Francis Ponge, might say).<sup>3</sup> Cumulatively, the poems in *OXO* suggest that saliva is the medium in which language dissolves—or perhaps, paradoxically (in the terms of the book’s final poem), that it is the very fluid absorbed by “tampon words” as they “unfurl” like the boiling bouillon cube of the book’s title.<sup>4</sup> Though writing in this book is figured as skeletal, with “lines of whalebone” and “chrome bones,” speech is figured as a melt and liquefaction, a language without organs.



Even without the mention of Thalcave or the vacationing tourists, and even in its most recherché and academic French, *Kub Or* would pose the question of what it means to write with an accent. Alferi's book, before any translation, is itself an example of what it means to write fluently, but with a (foreign) accent. Like several poets of his generation, Alferi writes with a typically French extension of a certain American poetics.

As Jacques Derrida has written, "on n'écrit jamais ni dans sa propre langue ni dans une langue étrangère" (one never writes either in one's own language or in a foreign language), but there is also a more local and less theoretical way in which this has become true for a certain group of poets, including Olivier Cadiot, Emmanuel Hocquard, Claude Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach, Dominique Fourcade, and Joseph Guglielmi.<sup>5</sup> A continued literary and personal correspondence between these poets and a small number of American poets has led, as Guy Bennett and Béatrice Mousli argue, to a contemporary moment in which we no longer have "two distinct poetics, each following the trajectory of its own particular evolution, but rather [. . .] two parts of what has virtually become the same poem, written simultaneously in two different languages."<sup>6</sup> As an index of this mode, one might note the title of Alferi's 1997 book, *Sentimentale journée*, which is either an anglicized inversion of French syntax (in which one would expect "*Journée sentimentale*") or the partial translation of Laurence Sterne's title into French. In either case, the absorption of one language by the other is incomplete, and both readings are equally telling and typical of the transatlantic mélange catalogued by Bennett and Mousli.

This crosscurrent condition is due in part to exigencies of translation and travel, but it also results from the reception history of certain avant-garde American poets in France, specifically William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky (both of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, were themselves reacting to tendencies in modern French poetry, recasting it with distinctly American accents). This is not the place to trace that reception in full, and one would want to include George Oppen in such an accounting, particularly for Alferi's work, but the literary magazines singled out by Bennett and Mousli give a good indication of the continued importance of a particular modernist American tradition for poets of Alferi's generation. In 1977, the journal *Europe* published a special "objectivist" number, introducing Zukofsky, on equal footing with Ezra Pound, as "clearly the most important poet of our time" (sans doute, avec Pound, le poète américain le plus important de notre temps). Bennett and Mousli note the importance of the similar special issues that followed, singling out the "Williams issue" of *in'hui* (no. 14 [1981]), and the early issue of *Java* (no. 4 [Summer 1990]) that was again devoted to "*les objectivistes américains.*" The

previous year, Alferi himself had translated several of Zukofsky's essays for the series *Un bureau sur l'Atlantique* from Éditions Royaumont, continuing two decades of translations which kept Zukofsky's work more readily available in France than in America, where until recently it was only erratically in print. In 1970, *The First Half of "A"*-9 was translated by Anne-Marie Albiach and published in *Siècle a Mains* (no. 12), then reprinted in 1980 in Jacques Roubaud and Michel Deguy's widely influential anthology *Vingt poètes américains*; the translation of the first seven sections of "A" by Serge Gavronsky and François Dominique appeared together as a volume in 1994, the same year as *Kub Or*, with other sections to follow. Since the early '70s, translations of individual sections of "A" and a number of shorter poems have also been published by others, notably Roubaud and Serge Fauchereau, in journals such as *Action Poétique*. Moreover, Zukofsky remained centrally relevant to a younger generation, as indicated by Alferi's own translations and the repeated name checks of three of Claude Royet-Journoud's journals, which ran, serially, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s: "A", *Zuk*, and *LZ*.<sup>7</sup>

This particular objectivist tradition, what we might consider a stylistic accent, is especially marked in *Kub Or*, which combines the quotidian subjects of William Carlos Williams's spare early poems, as well as his sense of the supple and suddenly switching syntax of colloquial speech, together with Louis Zukofsky's understanding of poetic form as an abstract and mandarin numerical artifice. In place of Williams's simulated domestic notes ("This Is Just To Say") and appropriated public signage (as in poem XXV of *Spring & All*: "Careful Crossing Campaign / Cross Crossings Cautiously [. . .] Take the Pelham Bay Park Branch / of the Lexington Ave. (East Side) / Line and you are there in a few / minutes // Interborough Rapid Transit Co."), Alferi registers posters boasting a "benneton sermon" or a "one / line caption great deal" for "a voice / activated bed." His language "sampler," as the penultimate poem names its omnivorous recording device, transcribes the language around him: fragments of advertising copy and shop signs, newspaper headlines and sound bites, the consumer warnings and instructions of product packaging. Somewhere between quotation and ventriloquism, the poems in *OXO* absorb the language of urban space and public speaking: "open sunday / mornings thursdays open late"; "chirac resigns"; "youth gangs welfare / a little courage my dear"; "in case of transit . . ." With a veer into found language typical of *OXO*, the poem "regular" seems unable to help taking on the language of advertising (though the actual product, tellingly, is never quite specified):

if it's true that it contains  
 quite naturally the enzyme  
 necessary for modern  
 life then this built-in-leak-proof  
 agent protects enriches  
 the ozone layer at the  
 low low price of regular

Alferi similarly updates the suburban *tableaux vivants* glimpsed through the windshield of Williams's car. Recall, for comparison, the uncorseted curbside woman in Williams's "The Young Housewife" or the frozen poses in "Right of Way," which moves from the "nameless spectacle" of a trio of figures to "a girl with one leg / over the rail of a balcony." Translating that visual attention from New Jersey to Paris, Alferi's poems provide a similar treatment of urban street scenes, in his case populated by garbage men, construction workers and roofers, small business owners, a homeless man and a street vendor. One might be tempted to read such poems in the tradition of the *flâneur*, but the pace is far too fast, more rapid than *une allure naturelle*, and the glimpses actually too fleetingly transient.<sup>8</sup> Signs and posters are briefly seen and only barely read before disappearing past the "rubber / rail of chatelet-les-halles' / moving sidewalk" or the steep slant of the "metro stairway." Moreover, nothing ever seems to surprise or shock; at most, the perambulations provide moments of lightly erudite irony. Far from the chance scenes of risqué shock which the *flâneur* hoped to encounter, the gaze in Alferi's poems merely falls on a newspaper headline read over someone's shoulder or a snippet caught on the television glimpsed in someone's room, focusing for a moment on a garbage can or a pigeon. At its most absorptive, one poem lingers, for just a few steps (the forty-nine steps of their metrical feet, to be precise), on the vaguely hypnotic yawn and close of a band-aid over the blistered heel of some stranger walking just ahead down the sidewalk.

Framing and reflecting the passing world in these ways, the rectangular blocks of text begin to suggest the windowpanes they repeatedly describe. One poem features a "boy at a window," and another turns on the reflection of a café owner. In "street vendor" a drinker and a pedestrian are separated for a moment on either side of a bar window. Through ground floor windows, office workers and business men are caught in their daily commercial poses, unheard but seen talking on the phone. And a range of other figures are glimpsed through storefront shop windows, including a "very old and beautiful" glass-eyed antique doll displayed in the poem "shop sign," who seems to reappear in the poem

“gallery owner,” transformed into as the unexpectedly attractive older woman, wiggled and taxidermied and standing “bored at the window.”

That bored gallery owner is typical of the characters observed by the markedly more alert and quick moving consciousness of the poems. In contrast to that organizing consciousness (not quite ever a persona proper), characters in the book are daydreamers, struggling to keep pace, sunk in “profound languor” or casually “blasé”; they are personified by an immobile dissipative “slacker” and a child leaning in unthinking idleness. If people in these poems move at all, they do so “slowly” or indifferently, letting themselves be carried by the moving sidewalk without any “interest . . . at all.”

Swensen translates all this with a sympathetic attention; like the organizing consciousness of the original poems she is alert to the felicitous moments—the singularities of language—that open fleetingly in the shift from one language to another, and she is quick to take advantage of the possibilities they offer. For just one example, the quite literal and straightforward translation of “gloved” for “ganté” in the poem “préservatif” (condom) smartly multiplies the repetitions already present in the poem’s first lines with an agglutination that Jacques Derrida would recognize as a *+gl* effect.<sup>9</sup> For Alferi’s opening “on aime s’aimer ganté,” Swensen gives: “how we love to make love gloved.” With ‘love’ tucked snugly into “gloved,” its triple rhyme across the line quietly compensates for the English version’s dissipation of the more densely compacted repetition of “aimer” hard upon “aime” and its rhyme with “ganté.” Moreover, it nicely underscores the play between the acute force of the word’s emotional rhetoric (as it might be deployed in the same sexual encounter that involved the condom) and the dilutions of its colloquial idioms (‘I’d love to’; ‘I love ice cream’; ‘I love rock and roll’). Similarly, Swensen keeps the scientific “hevea” (the rubber plant that is the ostensible source of the condom, its milky “sap” mingling with an image of semen). This choice loses the visual rhyme in French between “hévéa” and “sève” (sap), but Swensen again compensates nicely, with just the right touch, by creating a similar rhyme in the previous line between “film” and “form” (which in Alferi’s original is “manière”). The translated poem, as a whole, reads:

how we love to make love gloved  
 premie incubated in  
 a film in the form of a  
 wedding ring of hevea  
 sap when naked it goes limp  
 and crumples when worn it shines  
 saying touch but do not touch

In the exchange of traditions and languages at stake in translation, the way in which the source text and its translation “dit touche et pas touche” (say touch but do not touch), we find an “alliance” (wedding) that matches mouth to mouth—or tongue to tongue, as it were, in this particular French kiss. “OXO,” we should remember, might also stand as the abbreviation for hugs and kisses, the closing of a love letter, the mark of an intimate correspondence.

In contrast to the limp collapse of the condom’s flaccid deflation, as well as all the other scenes of relaxed complacency in *OXO*, each described in the elliptical, casually quotidian language on display in “condom,” every poem in the book conforms to a rigid formal structure. With a fractal mathematics, the book is divided into seven sections, each with seven poems, and every poem, in turn, has seven lines, each with seven syllables (“seven times seven times seven time seven,” as the “preface” puts it). This septemetric homology resonates with the three dimensional cube of the book’s title, and Swensen has further suggested that all translation is in fact a kind of cubing which “makes the page a three dimensional object.”<sup>10</sup> These “hard cubes” of strict measure “compacting the trash” of daily ephemera recoded in the poems—formless “ordure” (rubbish) compressed into manifest *ordre* (order)—provide a counter to their quotidian scenes and serpentine syntax (“the snake let’s imagine it” as the poem “true poetry” begins). One should note, however, that those extremes are not as stark as they might be, and the play of fixity and formlessness interrupt one another with a dialectic structure; while Alferi consistently adheres to the syllable count, it is reckoned according to a casual, commonplace convention rather than the complicated and counterintuitive rules of classical French prosody.

Even without the reified syllabics of French metrics, the form in *OXO* does point to a poetic tradition. Moreover, it again betrays the trace of Alferi’s distinctive poetic accent: genuinely and natively French, but with an unmistakable American note. The poetic “cubes” in *OXO* make a direct allusion to two previous books, one French and one American. With their repeated numerical structures, they restage Jacques Roubaud’s *Trente et un au cube* (31 Squared) (Gallimard, 1973), in which the book’s thirty-one poems are comprised of thirty-one lines of thirty-one syllables (they also follow a staccato tattoo rhyme scheme which alternates between only two sounds). At the same time, with their brevity and abrupt syntax, Alferi’s cubes also point to the similar metrics of Zukofsky’s 80 *Flowers*, published posthumously in 1978: a series of eighty poems, each measured in eight line units with five words per line.



To ask what it means to write with an accent puts one on the cusp between spoken and written language. On the one hand, in what is currently its most frequent usage, accent is a quality of spoken language. To speak ‘with an accent’ is to mark a simultaneous insistence and cession of language, inscribing the phonological markers of one language or dialect within the grammar of another. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, accent is: “the mode of utterance peculiar to an individual, locality, or nation,” or simply “the way in which anything is said; pronunciation, utterance, tone, voice; sound, modulation or modification of the voice expressing feeling.” In prosody, similarly, accent denotes “the stress laid at more or less fixed intervals on certain syllables of a verse, the succession of which constitutes the rhythm or measure of the verse.” Accent, in all these denotations, describes speech rather than writing; it can be measured in vocal performance but not on the page. In some strict sense, such accents cannot be written (even to try and direct or indicate a desired accent requires deforming orthography through the grotesqueries of ‘dialect’ writing). However, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* also documents, “accent” was originally something proper to writing, denoting a written “mark” or diacritical sign, such as those used in French (but not, I want to emphasize, in standard English). In this sense, “accent” describes typography rather than speech; it is something read on the page rather than heard in speech.

OXO makes me wonder what it means to write with an accent in this sense as well, since the book (like *Kub Or*) prints Alferi’s name without the diacritical mark that it sometimes bears: “Alféri.”<sup>11</sup> Whether one or the other version is simply in error, I can’t say; but the difference resonates, with a barely perceptible tremor, through the book. Most obviously, it again raises the question of national language. With the accent, the Italianate name seems more fully absorbed into French, as though the accent is a mark of linguistic acceptance, a kind of onomastic passport stamp. Accordingly, the status of another Italian name in one of the poems, “agostino novello” (the *nom de religion* assumed by the thirteenth-century Matteo de Termini), as well as all of the French, changes its orientation slightly. Additionally, the diacritic indicates a certain shift in pronunciation, emphasizing the vowel but softening the name’s metonymic associations by moving it ever so slightly away from “iron” (fer) and closer to a “fairy enchantment” (féerie).

These effects are admittedly minor (it’s only the difference of an accent, after all), and probably without repercussion, but the lack of an accent also provides a written reminder of the flattened tone, or “ton mat,” that Alferi has cultivated in his writing. One could call writing without an accent in that sense the “neutral accent” (“on pourrait l’appeler l’accent du neutre,” as Alferi has



in fact written).<sup>12</sup> Almost a rebus, the lack of an accent on the title page is a sort of visual compliment, or analogue, to the style of the book that follows. The book, and its mode, are written under the unaccented sign of “Alferi.”

Phonetically, the moment of emphasis that an accent indicates corresponds to the “singular” moment—both the singularity of experience and the experience of singularities—which Alferi has pursued from his very first book, an expository work on the philosophy of William of Ockham.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in an essay on Henry James and Maurice Blanchot, significantly entitled “Un accent de vérité” (An Accent of Truth), Alferi writes:

L’accent, le ton, est la pente que prend une ligne de sensations à partir d’une différence d’impression, d’un point-singularité qui fait événement. [. . .] Les accents sont de petites déclivités sur le plan d’impression.

(Accent, tone, is the slope that a line of sensations takes from a difference of impression, from a point of singularity that makes itself felt. [. . .] Accents are little clinamenetic dips in the geometric plane of impression.)<sup>14</sup>

In *OXO*, Alferi’s philosophical investigation leaves explicit arguments about Ockham and Blanchot behind, but his theoretical arguments about the accent are nonetheless continued by other means, with a lyrical test of the range of relations between the discretion of the moment and the continuity of experiential flux, between stasis and movement, the particular and the abstract. *OXO*, as I have suggested, takes the “neutral accent” of colloquial speech and found language as a ground on which to inscribe a poetic text of metrical systems and the carefully engineered micro-events of rhythmic syntactic disjunctions and flows. Thanks to Swensen, *OXO* is a book of emphases that is never emphatic, displaying an attention without tension (without stress, *sans un accent*).

Writing about Henry James’s oeuvre in “Un accent de vérité,” Alferi makes a claim in terms that one might apply to his own books, including, especially *OXO*:

cette question d’accent, pour futile qu’elle puisse paraître au regard enjeux théorétiques de ces livres, je crois qu’elle fut déterminante pour les lecteurs de mon âge quand ils les décourraient

(that question of accent, as trifling as it might seem from the perspective of the theoretical stakes of these books, could, I think, be decisive for readers of my generation when they discover them).<sup>15</sup>

Alferi is clearly one of the writers of his generation to have discovered the importance of that question of tone, and in *OXO*, at least, he writes, quite literally, without the trace of an accent.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *OXO* (like *Kub Or*) is unpaginated, with titles following each poem in uncapitalized italics. Perhaps even more than titles, these lines are best understood as captions, since they also appear beneath the series of photographs by Suzanne Doppelt included in the book. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations are from these books.

Verne's novel (originally published in three volumes between 1866-68) has gone through many editions; for the passages with Thalcave see Chapter XV.

<sup>2</sup> Alferi has written elsewhere about the importance of this meeting in James's garden; see "Un accent de vérité," *Revue des sciences humaines*, special number on Maurice Blanchot, 253 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/ Signsponge, en face* translation by Nicholas Rand (NY: Columbia UP, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> "OXO" is the brand name of the British equivalent of the French Maggi brand bouillon cube.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Survivre/ Journal de bord," *Parages* (Paris, Galilée, 1986) 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Charting The Here of There: French & American Poetry in Translation in Literary Magazines, 1850-2002* (New York: Granary, 2002) 89.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Zukofsky's influence in France, see Marjorie Perloff's excellent "Playing the Numbers: The French Reception of Louis Zukofsky," in *Verse* 22.2/3 (2006): 102-120.

<sup>8</sup> *Les Allures naturelles* (*Natural Gaits*) is the title of one of Alferi's books, also translated by Swensen (Paris: P.O.L., 1991; Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1995). For further evidence of Alferi's literary use of Parisian peripateticism, see *Le Chemin familier du poisson combatif* (Paris: P.O.L., 1992).

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974); eponymous translation by John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Bennett and Mousli, *Charting* 137.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Zawacki reminds me (personal correspondence, 25 July, 2006) of another indecisively accentuated name in the case of Emmanuel Levinas (at times Lévinas), where the instance of the accent seems to announce an uncertainty or discomfort over the relation of religious and national identities; the accent as a line of suture or separation between the notion of the "Jewish" and the "French."

<sup>12</sup> Alferi, "Un accent de vérité" 169.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Alferi, *Guillaume d'Ockham: le singulier* (Paris: Minuit, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Alferi, "Un accent de vérité" 167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem* 170.