Language Mixture in a Macaronic Poem of Thomas Merton

Johan Seynnaeve

A common assumption, with which a reader approaches a literary text, is the expectation that the work is written in one and the same language.[1] This corresponds to the everyday experience of two or more people communicating with each other in spoken language. When we address someone we speak to him[2] in a language we suppose he knows[3], and if this assumption turns out to be right we continue the conversation using the same means of expression. It is in this very situation anyone who sits down to write a literary work finds herself: she addresses a reader who she assumes is capable of understanding what she is about to tell him in a language she has chosen. It would seem strange if a writer who knows several languages decides to use them in the same work as she likes it or even arbitrarily.

However, there are literary works in which more than one language is used as the means of expression, even though language mixture in literature remains the exception. This phenomenon, therefore, requires an explanation. Because of its marginal status it has received little attention either from linguists or from literary critics. The reason for this neglect seems to be the general opinion that a literary text can only be a real work of art if it is written in the native tongue of the author. This explains

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1. The term 'language' is used here is to refer to any kind of system that two or more people use for communication.

2. This essay adopts a solution to the problem of sexism in the use of English pronouns first proposed by Ralph Fasold: switching between feminine (*she/her*) and masculine pronouns (*he/him/his*) whenever a singular generic pronoun is needed. See Ralph Fasold, *The Sociolinguistics of Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 264.

3. Imagine a person who speaks two or more languages and has to choose which one to use.

the surprise of many students of European literature of the Middle Ages, for example, when they are confronted with the multilingualism of that period. It is easy to forget that there were entire periods during which it was not natural to express oneself in one's native tongue, and that this situation still exists among speakers of minority languages.[4] At the same time we need to take into account those situations, even in everyday circumstances, where the person we address might be fluent in two or more languages and, in case we are equally fluent in the languages he knows, we have the option of switching from one language to the other in the course of the conversation or use words from language A while speaking language B. In a multilingual society a writer has the same option when composing a literary work.

These preliminary remarks lead us to an important distinction. The term language mixture in literature can refer, on the one hand, to the use of more than one language in a text where passages in one language alternate with passages in another language and the choice of language is determined by the content matter (e.g. philosophy, theology, literature proper) or by literary genre (poetry, drama, prose). On the other hand, the term can also be used for texts which are written mainly in one language with frequent switches to words, phrases or sentences in another language or other languages. In this essay I will consider language mixture in this second sense and illustrate some of its mechanisms in the poem 'Mens sana in corpore sano', written by Merton when he was teaching English at Saint Bonaventure and appropriately subtitled 'Macaronic Lyric'. It is indeed customary to designate as macaronic[5] any text that includes words from one or more languages other than the basic language used as constituents of a text that is fundamentally in the basic language. Thus, notwithstanding its Latin title the basic language of the poem is English and material of variable length (a single word, a phrase, a clause) from Latin, French, Spanish, German and Italian is mixed in with the English of the poem. Why did Merton alternate these languages in this fashion? Why did he sometimes integrate them a word, a phrase or a clause at a time into his English? Why are some of these integrated phrases simply borrowed and other complexly realized within the con-

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4.   A case in point is that of the Tiwa Indian community of Taos, New Mexico. A pueblo-dwelling community of about 2000 speakers, its members grow up speaking Tiwa. For purposes of writing they resort to Spanish or English.

5.   For a recent and thorough discussion of the origin and the use of the term 'macaronic' see the introductory chapter of Siegfried Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons: Bilingualism and Preaching in Late-Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

straints of English grammar?[6] Why is the foreign language material in the poem 'readily translatable with minimal knowledge of the languages'?[7] These are some of the questions this contribution will attempt to answer.

Below Merton's macaronic poem as it appears in O'Connell, ' "And called it macaronic": an unpublished early poem of Thomas Merton' is reproduced.

Mens Sana in Corpore Sano: *Macaronic Lyric*[8]

Mens sana (nerfs de cafe)
Corpore sano (defense de fumer!)
'What are ces mots of advice you have sung us!
Mens feeble in corpore fungus?'

Mens grandma in corpore grandpa
Comes never to lovers of rhumba and samba:
La vie carries on plus heureuse, also longer
With mens sana in corpore conga!

These are palabras far besser to teach:
'Mens happy in corpo felice!'

No! Joys of the sense
Ruin corpus and mens!
Your corpus is drunk and your reason is dense!
So please to pensare some thoughts of demain:
Mente di coucou in corpo migraine!

Merton may have been familiar with some of the early examples of literary texts that mixed languages in one form or another, especially those of the author this poetic form is preeminently associated with, the Benedictine monk Teofilo Folengo, who mixed his Latin hexameters with Italian words and phrases.[9] Unfortunately, no references to the

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6.   It is, of course, impossible to determine to what extent Merton was conscious of the structural aspects which will be suggested in an attempt to answer these questions. Poets deal intuitively with words and do not consciously plot every resonance of the symbols and themes they play with. They know, either by a great inborn talent, or by a period of apprenticeship, what sounds good. In trying to determine patterns in a poem we should allow for the possibility that a poet can structure a poem far beyond explicit intent or knowledge.

7.   Patrick F. O'Connell, ' "And called it macaronic": An Unpublished Early Poem of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Seasonal* 21 (1996), pp. 7-8 (7).

8.   O'Connell, ' "And called it macaronic" ', pp. 7-8.

9.   Also known by his pseudonym Merlin Cocai, this Italian poet was born in Mantua in 1491 and died at the monastery of Santa Croce in Campese in 1544. His

Italian monk survive in Merton's published journals and letters. His 1939–41 journal, by contrast, is full of notes and comments on the most famous macaronic writer of the twentieth century, James Joyce. In fact, Merton's interest in writing in a mixture of languages is closely connected with his enthusiasm for Joyce in general and for Joyce's last and most problematic work, the macaronic masterpiece *Finnegans Wake,* in particular, the publication of which Merton lists as one of the three important things that happened in 1939.[10] The impact this work had on his writing Merton acknowledged in a journal passage from 25 January, 1941: 'Joyce language; that's what I like writing. I'd like to write that all the time'.[11]

In its simplest description, the language of *Finnegans Wake* is a combination of prose and poetry characterized by the inclusion of multitudinous fragments of foreign languages. This work undoubtedly provided the impetus for Merton to experiment with this literary form in his letters, journals, and poetry. On 5 May, 1941 Merton wrote: 'What is one recreation I am happy about, and the only one? Writing—not this, but a letter in a crazy new language to Gibney yesterday, and a macaronic poem'.[12]

The following day, 6 May, Merton also started working on a book-length macaronic project entitled *Journal of my Escape from the Nazis.*[13] Nearly a decade after his entrance in the monastery, on 3 March 1951, he would reflect on his macaronic journal and its language as '[a]n invented language which I still like'.[14] And when preparing the manuscript for publication in February 1968 he commented:

> [T]his *Journal of Escape* […] I have always thought of as one of my best. Not that it holds together perfectly as a book, but there is good writing and it comes from the center where I have really experienced myself and my self.

main macaronic work, *Baldus*, appeared in 1517. For an enlightening discussion of Folengo and his poetic language see: Bruno Migliorini, 'Sul linguaggio maccheronico del Folengo' *Avsonia* 23 (1968), pp. 7-26.

10.   Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939–41; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 88.

11.   Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 301.

12.   Merton, *Run to the Mountain* (rev. edn), p. 361.

13.   The manuscript would be revised several times and Merton periodically considered publishing it. It finally appeared, posthumously, in 1969 as *My Argument with the Gestapo* with the subtitle *A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday).

14.   Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer* (Journals, 2; 1941–1952; ed. Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 450.

> It represents a very vital and crucial—and fruitful—moment of my exis-
> tence.[15]

A typical passage in the book that serves to illustrate how profound the
impact of Joyce was can be found in ch. 19 in the final section of the letter
to Madame Gongora:[16]

> Refleji en su cor de tecnico
> Su tipo de poema favoritt
> Et es el tipo macaronico
> Lo mas hermoso jamais que se vitt!

If his favorite type of poem was one of the macaronic type the reader of
The Collected Poems ends up empty-handed after a search for a poem that
would merit this description. O'Connell, however, has pointed out that:

> There is a genuinely macaronic poem earlier in the journal itself [i.e. the
> journal Merton kept while at Saint Bonaventure's], the lovely lyric 'Silet
> mons/Silent arva' which concludes the description of a projected short
> story about a hermit in the December 19, 1939 entry (*Run*, pp. 114-117).[17]

He goes on to argue that the poem Merton referred to in the 5 May 1941
entry quoted earlier is not 'Silet mons / Silent arva' but almost certainly
an unpublished and uncollected poem '[i]ncluded in the collection of
material which Merton had given seminarian Richard Fitzgerald just
before leaving for Gethsemani in December, 1941',[18] a poem entitled
'Mens sana in corpore sano'.[19]

   The poem is essentially a set of variations on the theme stated in the
title. That theme, of course, is a well-known Latin epigram, a cleverly
worded statement that is most commonly translated in English as 'a
sound mind in a sound body'. It is one of the many pointed observations
that can be found in the work of the classical Roman satirical poet
Juvenal[20]. It figures among the many the pieces of advice Juvenal gives
his readers as to what they should pray for. Indeed the entire verse

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   15.   Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967–1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 51.

   16.   Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, p. 190. This is the second stanza of a three-stanza macaronic poem the narrator includes in a letter he is writing to Madame Gongora from the Hotel Rocamadour in Paris. Madame Gongora, herself, is a sibyl who prophesies in macaronic language.

   17.   O'Connell, ' "And called it macaronic" ', p. 7.

   18.   O'Connell, ' "And called it macaronic" ', p. 7.

   19.   I want to thank Paul Pearson for providing me with a xerox of the typewritten autograph of the poem.

   20.   Full name: Decimus Junius Juvenalis (c. 65–c. 128 CE)

reads: 'Orandum est, ut sit mens sana in corpore sano'[21] (One should pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body).

For a good understanding of this verse one needs to know that it is preceded by a section in which the poet gently mocks the whole process of prayer. The background against which this recommendation is given, in other words, detracts somewhat from the seriousness of the advice. This is entirely in line with a particularly striking feature of satirical writing, namely its tendency to inspire a reaction of ambivalence. Should we approve of the satirist or disapprove? Should we identify with him (and it generally is a 'him') or dissociate ourselves? The answer varies from audience to audience, from reader to reader. What is certain is that this ambivalence renders satire a challenging type of literature.

From a broad-brush structural point of view, the poem is almost wholly built on the repeated restatement of the title, which is varied in diverse ways and occurs in the last line of each stanza. In other words, Merton takes as his point of departure the familiar epigram stated in the title and then stanza by stanza goes through a playful distortion of that familiar theme:

> Mens Sana in Corpore Sano
> ……………
> Mens feeble in corpore fungus?'
> ……………
> With mens sana in corpore conga!
> ……………
> 'Mens happy in corpo felice!'
> ……………
> Mente di coucou in corpo migraine!

The first line of the second stanza breaks this pattern: 'Mens grandma in corpore grandpa', a restatement of the theme at the beginning of a stanza. I take it not to be by coincidence that the exception occurs at exactly this juncture in the poem. This line occupies an obviously transitional position and serves as a linking device between the first and second stanzas to highlight the close parallelism between them. The similar formal makeup of these two stanzas further underscores this parallelism: they are the only stanzas that consists of four lines; their rhyme scheme is of the same form (aabb, ccdd); and the language mixture index[22] in both is three (English, French and Latin).[23] Jointly with these

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21.   Verse 356 of the tenth *Satura*.

22.   I use the term 'language mixture index' as an indicator of the number of languages used in a stanza.

23.   The third stanza combines material from English, Spanish, German, Latin and

features, therefore, the stanza-initial restatement serves as a device that emphasizes the conspicuous symmetrical design in the first half of the poem. There is, however, another point to make in connection with this design. The title of the poem contains two noun phrases, 'mens sana' and 'corpore sano', each of which consists of a noun followed by an adjective. This twofold structure is projected in the first two lines by a simple repetition of the same noun phrases. In their similar formal make-up the first two stanzas can be seen as a further development of this structure.

The pattern that has been set up by the title and reinforced first by the first two lines and then by the first two stanzas is interrupted by the third stanza. With just two lines it is the shortest stanza of the poem. In addition, it also has the highest language mixture index. This is a very common compositional technique. In musical terms it is the bridge of the composition: whereas the first and second stanzas have the same melodic and harmonic structure, the third stanza presents a different structure. The fact that the second stanza repeats the music of the first sets up a pattern, which is 'disappointed' by the newness of the bridge, leaving a sort of unresolved situation, which is given resolution in the fourth stanza.

When we return to the questions raised earlier in this essay we find that subtle differences in language mixture help articulating the basic structural features of the poem outlined in the preceding paragraph. In the remainder of this essay I will suggest that the ways in which foreign language material is integrated in the English text can be correlated to the poem's overall pattern. Some of this material represents strict borrowing, a process by which a linguistic item from one language (the source language) is adopted in another (the recipient language) with varying degrees of adaptation but within the grammatical system of the recipient language, not that of the source language. Thus, a word like French 'vogue' can be borrowed into English with or without retention of the vowel (ɔ),[24] but in order to be classified as a borrowing it must conform to English syntactic patterns. In a sentence like 'Bell-bottoms were once in vogue', consequently, the French word represents borrowing since it conforms to the rules of English syntax. But in a sentence like 'Bell-bottoms were once *en vogue*', because the French word is realized in accordance with French syntax, it represents not borrowing but code-switching. Unlike borrowing, code-switching involves the alternation of

Italian and consequently has an index of five. The fourth stanza has an index of four (English, Latin, French and Italian).

   24. The French pronunciation is [vɔg]; in English it is pronounced [vog].

two or more grammatical systems: rather than adopting a word from another language, in other words a speaker switches languages entirely. In addition, while the switch may involve a single word, it is more likely to involve a phrase or clause. In the main, however, an instance of code-switching, in contradistinction to one of borrowing, is realized in accordance with the grammatical system of the source language. Thus the reason 'corpus' and 'mens' in the second line of the last stanza represent borrowing and not code-switching is the fact that its nominative inflectional ending would be ungrammatical in Latin, which would require the accusative 'corporem' and 'mentem'. Other examples of borrowing are the Spanish word 'palabras' and the German word 'besser' in the first line of stanza three.

We move on to more complex forms of language mixture, where the foreign language material is longer than a word. Among the easiest of these cases, since they in effect do not need to be syntactically integrated, are those that involve the noun phrases in the first two verses. The switches from the Latin noun phrase 'mens sana' to the French 'nerfs de café', and from Latin 'corpore sano' to French 'defense de fumer' are simple juxtapositions, where Latin syntax does not affect French syntax or vice versa.[25] On the other hand switches between subject noun phrase and the verb phrase do involve syntactical accommodations, as in the third line of the first and the second stanzas:

> "What are ces mots of advice
> ……………
> La vie carries on plus heureuse

In the first case a French noun phrase, 'ces mots' ('these words'), is integrated in a sentence according to English syntax and in the second an English verb phrase, 'carries on', is part of a grammatical French sentence ('Life carries on happier'). Syntactic accommodation also occurs in phrases where the grammatical category of an item changes. In the last line of the fourth stanza, for example, what originates as a noun ('migraine') is recuperated as an adjective following 'corpo'. By a different kind of syntactic accommodation an infinitive ('pensare') in line three of the same stanza is borrowed as an imperative.

One final instance of language mixture is illustrated in the rhyming pairs 'teach' / 'felice' and 'demain' / 'migraine'. In both cases a foreign word is phonologically accommodated to facilitate the correspondence with

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25.   Note that the lack of syntactic integration is reflected in the punctuation (the use of parentheses).

the sounds of the English words they are paired with. The Italian pro-
nunciation of the adjective 'felice', (feliče), is adapted to (felič) and the
French word 'demain' (dəmě̌), is changed to (dəmejn).

Let us now look at the way these different instances of language
mixture can be motivated in terms of the overall structure of the poem.
We have seen how there are a number of respects in which, on the one
hand, the first and second stanzas are structurally similar and, on the
other hand, the third stanza is clearly marked off. When we chart the
occurrences of borrowing and switches through the poem, an interest
pattern emerges.[26] In the first two lines of stanzas one and two we find
either simple borrowings or switches that do not involve syntactic
accommodation. The third line in each of these stanzas, however, involve
the two instances of code-switching with syntactic accommodations men-
tioned earlier. It is not by chance that we find such a pattern—that this
pattern points up an essential aspect of the parallelism that exists
between the first and the second stanza. In the third stanza, however, we
find only instances of borrowing, even though this is the stanza with the
highest language mixture index. This is entirely in line with the struc-
tural position of the clearly demarcated third stanza. What we find in the
last stanza, interestingly, are instances of every type of language mixture
mentioned: a borrowing in 'Your corpus is drunk', code-switching with-
out syntactic accommodation in 'Ruin corpus and mens', code-switching
with syntactic accommodation, as in 'to pensare' and 'migraine', and
phonological adaption in 'demain'. This is the stanza that gives closure
to the unresolved situation created by the third stanza.

It is thus evident that the language mixture in this poem is not arbi-
trary and that the switches do not occur randomly, but are motivated by
the overall structure and parallelisms created. Ultimately, switches moti-
vated in this way, like any number of other rhetorical strategies, demon-
strate and foreground Merton's linguistics competence. Borrowing alone
might have sustained this kind of stylistic motivation and would have
been considerably easier for Merton. The fact that he uses the whole
range of language mixture mechanisms ranging from simple borrowing
to complex code-switching clearly demonstrates his interest in languages
and also reveals him to be the most fluent kind of polyglot.

In 'Mens sana in corpore sano' Merton seems to tells us 'Life should be
taken as I take languages, with a blend of seriousness, attention, irony

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26. As pointed out earlier the last line in each stanza is the restatement of the
theme stated in the title. These lines can be viewed as the frame around which the
structure of the poem is developed.

and freedom'. The poem is, in a sense, and in the same spirit, a development of a sentence from *Finnegans Wake*: 'They lived and loved ant laughed end left'.[27]

It is worth mentioning, finally, that, while the existence of macaronic writing in poetry can be explained in terms of its function, a prose text like *My Argument with the Gestapo* is less amenable to such an analysis. This is not the place to attempt a detailed analysis of the novel. It is sufficient to draw attention to the following fragment from the novel to show how radically different it is from Merton's macaronic poem not only in its linguistic structure but even more in its rhetorical function:

> Yherezt nopitty ont dzhe steirs.
> Dzhere eitz nobbudy onz dhe stoirs.
> […]
> Jzhere ids nyubbodi omn dlhe shtairs.
> Tzere its noobodo uan we stairs, nope.
> […]
> Dear has nopretty in the stars?
> […]
> Dzhere ess know's doddy on these stairs, nope.[28]

In fact, it is doubtful whether the quoted passage really qualifies as macaronic language. It is certainly not a case of language mixture in any of the senses discussed earlier in this essay, but rather a seriously modified form of the writer's own language. The reader is presented with variations of the simple phrase 'There is nobody on the stairs' in an invented language that has more in common with the linguistic experiments of the Dada movement of the late 1910s and early 1920s than with the clearly identifiable cases of borrowing and code-switching of 'Mens sana in corpore sano'. One wonders if the linguistic technique Merton chooses here attempts to achieve an effect comparable to the multiple imagery of a dream and if the purpose of the passage is to penetrate beneath even the most inclusive recordings of a flow of consciousness, and to express in literary medium the flow of subconscious imagery in a dream state. That this appears to be the case becomes clear when the narrator subsequently declares that 'it was only a dream. […] I stand at the top of the stairs, and there is, indeed, nobody in the stairs'.[29] This and other such passages, easily found throughout the novel, are not exam-

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27. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1982; centennial edn), p. 18.

28. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, pp. 197-98.

29. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, pp. 200-201.

ples of macaronic language but rather of Merton's own invented language, his Esperanto, despite the novel's subtitle, *A Macaronic Journal.*[30]

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30.   It should also be pointed out that the bulk of the novel is written in English and that the passages containing instances of invented language are clearly marked and do not occur in every chapter of the novel. It is significant that in what has been identified as one of the strongest episodes in the novel (Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* [Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1979], p. 30), the penultimate chapter, which focuses on the war-inflicted schizophrenia of a French soldier, not a single instance of Merton's Esperanto is to be found.