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Francophone writers from Romania

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Isidore Isou’s Spirited Letters

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It is paradoxical to consider that today Isidore Isou, probably one of the least-known Romanian-born French writers and philosophers could have become the most famous and most highly regarded Romanian intellectual of the twentieth century. It was probably his insatiable desire for public fame and recognition that prevented him from achieving such a destiny that would have placed him at least on a par with Tristan Tzara or Eugène Ionesco.

Isou was an extremely well-read intellectual—an indefatigable writer and thinker; in fact, there are very few aspects of human knowledge, be they letters, arts, or sciences that, at one point or another did not attract his intellectual attention and his knowledgeable study. Totally convinced of his own worth and exceptional nature, he compares in several essays his nature and intellectual status to that of Leonardo da Vinci, estimating even that his own capacity to construct a unified system of organization of human knowledge placed him above da Vinci who could only systematize and understand fragmentary aspects of the same.¹ For many of his contemporaries, it is this hubris (megalomania) coupled with a sharp and relentless criticism (“chiseling” would be his word in its literal sense) of the mediocrity of the other intellectuals, writers, and thinkers of the immediate post-WW II period in France that explains Isou’s paradoxical status as a marginal intellectual generally at odds with the different intellectual and literary movements that span the period of 1945–1970 in France. Two terms are directly related to his early literary accomplishments and innovations: lettrisme [Letterism] and métagraphie [Metagraphy].

¹ “People have described Leonardo da Vinci’s work as an ideal of intellectual totality. However, he only left us paintings, in which his contribution is merely a great figurative capacity [...]. It was only after the death of this famous Renaissance artist that people discovered a trove of non-authenticated notes that were considered [...] as pertaining to medicine, physics, technology [...]. I believe I have [...] produced more original revelations in more fields than Leonardo da Vinci” (Isou, Créatique 1110).
Isou was born Ioan-Isidor Goldstein on January 31, 1925, into a Jewish family in Botoșani, the main capital of the Botoșani county of the current Bucovina region, the northeastern part of Romania, near the border with Ukraine. As a city, Botoșani was an important Jewish center as, according to statistics from 1930, half the population of thirty-two thousand was of the Jewish faith. Ioan-Isidor was the only son of an upper-middle-class family who owned several grocery stores in town, and he had one older and one younger sister. The complicated history of the Bucovina region during WW II and the fact that this was the Romanian geographic area in which the Jewish deportation was the most important during the dictatorship of Ion Antonescu (1940–1944) explain why little is known of the actual circumstances of the Goldstein family during the war years. In addition, it is only clear that Ioan-Isidor was able to study assiduously and to acquire an excellent education at school and with the help of independent tutors. Botoșani, the largest center of trade in Moldavia, always had a rich international cultural life with a multitude of theatres, libraries, and art centers. It is in this context that Ioan-Isidor was able to read Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Balzac, Flaubert, and, under the guidance of an academic friend of the family, he had his first experiences of French theatre, French novels, and French poetry. As he narrated it in the “Introduction en forme de système autonome” of Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre [Prolegomenon to the Complete Transformation of Theatre], Ioan-Isidor wrote and produced several plays while in high school. According to his recollections, he was working feverishly on a major new play when, in 1944, the police of the Antonescu regime became suspicious of his membership in the Zionist movement Haschomer Hatzair, which was considered a cover for the underground Young Communist group. As it was believed that Ioan-Isidor would be questioned and eventually arrested, his family asked him to give all his papers to a neighbor in case a few of his notes contained suspicious political sentiments. Ioan-Isidor’s mother, however, asked the neighbor to discreetly destroy the papers. Because of this destruction of his work, Ioan-Isidor broke violently with his family, and according to his memoirs, became the leader of the Zionist group right after King Michael’s coup on August 23, 1944, which put an end to Antonescu’s dictatorship and hastened the entry of the Red Army into Romania. Because by then the victory of the Allied Forces was a certainty, Ioan-Isidor, by personal ambition, in order to
be able to come to France, became a member of the Young Communists. Through his relationship with the members of the still illegal Romanian Communist Party, at the end of 1944 he met with Strul Herš Moscovici (Serge Moscovici) who would also later immigrate to France and become a famed French social psychologist and director of the European Laboratory of Social Psychology. Together, they founded an artistic and literary review Da, which was almost immediately censored by the police of King Michael’s new soviet regime. Ioan-Isidor immigrated to France during the summer of 1945 at age twenty through an international Zionist organization. By then, he had collected a large number of papers and documents. And, after publishing in 1946 “Appendice à la dictature lettriste” in which his new (1942) term “lettrism” appears, through his Zionist network he was able to meet with Jean Paulhan who by then had returned to Gallimard as the head of the Nouvelle Revue Française—a position of intellectual preeminence that he had left in 1940 at the beginning of WW II. It was nevertheless not with a book on theatre that Ioan-Isidor started his French career in 1947, but with a book on poetry: Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique, a collection of notes dated from February 1941 to March 1944. From then on, designating himself as a “lettrist,” he created a literary movement around this poetic system of sound poems based on a rhythmic and tonal system of combined phonemes represented by a transcription of Letterist graphics.

For this first Parisian publication, Ioan-Isidor had already adopted his newly naturalized French literary pseudonym: Isidore Isou. During his later years, he would reinstall Ioan as “Jean” and sign as Jean Isidore Isou. Yet, at this early stage of his French career, he only kept Isidore as a reference, in the French literary field, to the then still not well-known writer Isidore Ducasse, who, under the nom de plume, Comte de Lautréamont, was the author of the sulfurous Les Chants de Maldoror [The Songs of Maldoror] and who, prior to WW II, had been idolized by the Surrealist group.

Beyond the elementary idea that there was a need, in the immediate post-WW II world, to tone down his Jewish affiliation by abandoning the name Goldstein, there is no direct explanation for the choice of the pseudonym “Isou.” There is a constellation of connotations that all point to the same attachment to the idea of centrality or preeminence. “Iso-” designates the first element, and through its
Greek etymology it refers to a broad concept of equilibrium, equality, and similarity, all classical qualities related to a vision or order (of the world, of a hierarchy, etc.). The name may also have been chosen because, through its Hebraic associations, it refers to a mystic paradigm of biblical rulers or prophets. The explanation is not too far-fetched for a reader familiar with Isou’s constant proclamation of self-worth and affirmation of the exceptional quality of his creative powers: “Isidore Isou, with his mastery of the method of discovery, was becoming the master of innovators, and my system should have gained authority over all other forms of authority, as a never before seen agency of control and domination, justifying the reorganization of all rules of causes and effects” (Isou, Créatique 20). In Chapter II of La Créatique ou la novatique [Creationic or Novationic] devoted to a study of hyper-theology, Isou, often speaking of himself in the third person, elevates himself and his demiurgic work to a mystical level: “Isou believes that his writings will bring forth the reality of a felicitous world; they will transform the world into a state of ultimate happiness. They will reveal the meaning of the reigning Jew. They will help the realization of the Judaic messianic word. If Isou believes himself to be the Messiah, it is because in his Name by his work he will bring about in the human order the values that necessitate the third and last apparition. The most fundamental change in human perspective will lead to that universal divinity” (Isou, Créatique 296). This prophetic and pathetic rhetoric through which Isou elevates his literary pseudonym to a mystic and biblical level was already present in the fiction of his first hyper-graphic novel, Les Journaux des Dieux, published in 1950. The book is, in fact, a rewriting of the Bible by Isou and, while the original structure of the Old Testament is respected, the story is an epic chronicle, often burlesque, or trivial, or critical, of events that had affected Isou’s life or Paris literary life in recent years. The word “journal” (newspaper) plays on the ambiguity, being at the same time a “diary” (a daily biography) as well as a daily paper, on the tabloid side, including nudity and sexuality. Nevertheless, the mystical dimension of the main characters is respected. In the chapter “La Postérité de Téronch” [The Posterity of Thare], one can find an actual picture of Isou in the hyper-graphic text and he becomes himself part of a holy divine Trinity (Figure 9.1).

If one remembers that Romania takes its name from the strong historical attachment to the Roman Empire and to the Latin language,
it is philologically elementary to see the paradigm that unites the name “Jesus” to “Isou.” In addition, Isou being a Letterist and thus using phonemes as the materials for his sound poetry, the connection between the two names must have been easy to decipher. Since the original Latin alphabet does not have the letter “J,” it always appears under the form “I.” The sound [y] that exists in French and other contemporary languages did not exist in Latin, as that sound is a remnant of the Celtic linguistic substratum; thus, the letter “u” would have been pronounced [u] so as to give the compound phonemic unit [izu] (Isou). While this is just a hypothesis, the presence in many parts of Isou’s writing of an explicit mantic dimension attached to the name is, in my view, a clear indication of the mystagogic dimension that Isou wanted to give to his writing project. His writings are Holy Scriptures in the order of human knowledge; it is no leisurely activity. Writing has a purpose and a serious social and spiritual mission. In an interview with Roland Sabatier,2 Isou confides that “Isou” was the (nick)name that his mother had given him and thus he adopted it as his name. It is possible that his mother used Isou as a term of endearment based on Isidore; however, this does not explain how it became the “Name” that would become the crucial object of the aggregation with the Messiah (Isou, L’Agrégation).

When Isou arrived in France in August 1945, in the immediate post-war period, intellectual life in Paris was in turmoil. The intellectual powers that had survived the German occupation of France found themselves to be out of favor, and many were accused of “collaboration.” Those who had maintained a public presence under the Vichy regime, including popular newspapers, publishers, singers, and actors were put on trial; many were condemned to a self-imposed exile or they simply decided to abandon any form of public life. Paris’s intellectual landscape appeared ready for a clean slate, and certainly the intellectual and media movements issued from the Résistance (Gaullist or Communist) decidedly seized the day and with new newspapers such as Combat, new journals such as Les Temps modernes and Les Lettres Françaises, the time was favorable for a total renewal of the intellectual hierarchy that would dominate the Parisian intellectual world. Even pre-war intellectual movements such as Surrealism,

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whose principal members had been able to select exile (mostly in the US) were slow to reestablish themselves after four or five years of absence from Paris. The intellectuals, *issus de la Résistance*, progressively dominated on two fronts. The previously underground poetry of the Résistance (such as that of René Char) and the Existentialist philosophical group (around Sartre and de Beauvoir) rapidly dominated Paris’s landscape. They established their new area of influence around the Saint-Germain-des-prés neighborhood, as during the war, the Occupation years, the two main cafés, Le Flore and Les Deux Magots, were the main public places where Sartre and de Beauvoir spent the day writing and meeting with their followers.

![Figure 9.1. Isou, “Les Journaux des Dieux.”](image)

While these two groups were the central movers of the intellectual renaissance of post-war Paris, because of the brutal and systematic elimination of any past establishment, a large part of the intellectual Parisian universe was open to newcomers as long as they were un-
tainted by participation in the intellectual scene of occupied Paris. With his credentials, his Zionist network, and his direct connection to a reinvigorated Gallimard publishing house now again under the leadership of Paulhan at the helm of the NRF, Isou was immediately accepted as a new figure of the intellectual Paris scene. And, with his natural taste for showmanship and intellectualism as performance, he was able to maintain his position as a key figure in Paris’s new intellectual scene from 1946 to 1952. It was during this period that he established himself as the founder of Letterism, recruited disciples, and found the resources to develop theoretical interventions in the domains of poetry, fiction, theatre, and cinema. If one considers that his indisputable influence declined after 1953, it was because of his monomaniac desire to be recognized as the sole and uncontested leader of the true intellectual vanguard and his theoretical argumentative method that was almost exclusively polemical in nature. Once he had early assured his solid status as the founder of Letterism, it became a crusading mission for him to convince everyone that he was the only “novator,” the only one capable of proposing and formulating new and unexplored directions for the development of contemporary intellectual life. This insatiable desire to be recognized as the sole agent of intellectual permanent invention led him to issue challenges to two main groups, first the Résistance poets and then the Existentialists.

Encouraged by the immediate success of his Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique and the popularity of his Letterist Manifesto (a strategy of occupation of the prime local intellectual territory directly borrowed from a similar campaign conducted by Breton and his Surrealist group in the early 1920s), Isou insisted that in this era of new intellectual beginnings the main project for poetry and arts and letters in general was to conceive a new understanding of literary form; thus, he was abrupt in rejecting what he perceived as a misguided modish interest for the poetry elaborated by writers of the nationalist underground during the German occupation. For him, this interest in theme and its denotative connotations (to resist the enemy, freedom, democracy, human dignity, justice, etc.) was too often presented as the heavy content of a poetry that was archaic in its poetic versification, poorly written stylistically, embedded in the most traditional fixed poetic forms, and, worst, totally devoid of any attempt to even consider the need to investigate new formalist solutions that would echo the semantic content calling for a change in the political
status of a subjugated France. While these texts as content were clamoring for change, formally they were prototypical of the less desirable formal continuation of stale metrics and antiquated poetic models. This attack on the flag literature of the (by now heroic) Résistance years almost automatically created trouble for Isou with the Existentialist group with which many of the Résistance intellectuals were associated. According to his writings, Isou understood immediately how his status as an immigrant placed him in a position of inferiority in this debate with a group that had a special “untouchable” status in the post-war society of France. On the one hand, as a Jewish war refugee he appeared ungrateful to his benefactor country of asylum. Now, too, as his country of origin, Romania, was becoming perceived as a communist satellite country of the Soviet Union, he was perceived in certain circles of the former French Résistance as a subversive element with a political allegiance to the communist wing of the French Résistance. Yet, in fact, as a refugee who had actually lived under a communist regime, badly bruised by the brutality of its Soviet protector, he already had ambiguous feelings vis-à-vis the Soviet Russian communist regime while the position of the French Communist Party and its leader, Maurice Thorez, were still following a strict Stalinist line.

Nevertheless, true to what he perceived as his mission of intellectual truth as the only way to contribute to the creation and furthering of human knowledge, Isou found himself more and more involved in attacks against Sartre’s Existentialism. During Isou’s formative years in Romania, under the dictatorship of Antonescu, the philosophical teaching of Nietzsche and Heidegger (for Isou, unequivocally a “Nazi” philosopher) were encouraged; thus, Isou was able to define Sartre as an ersatz Heidegger and his Existentialism as a pale hybrid recombination of well-established philosophical theories: “The person whose main intellectual interest is in general existential metaphysics can only consider the French group that was formed after this war (Wahl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) as a mere secondary extension of the great German philosophical movement, as an effort of general vulgarization and an attempt to simply explore in detail limited aspects of the system whose masters and first class creators were, in Germany, Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers” (Isou, Pompiers du Nouveau 17). Isou also came to attack Sartre’s views on poetry and literature as misguided and elementary. The strongest criticism focuses on Sartre’s
“neo-naturalist” prescription that any novel be first and foremost a commitment to an “engagé” plot involving the place of man in his current social environment. (For the existential critic, the author is celebrated only if he is immersed in contemporaneity). Isou concluded his utter rejection of Sartre by indicating how irrelevant his views were in relation to Isou’s own intellectual passions: “Sartre only pursues and talks about matters for which I do not give a damn” (Isou, *Pompiers du Nouveau* 18).

The attacks against Existentialism whose influence on the arts, politics, and philosophy was becoming an overwhelming force in France and in the post-war world was certainly damaging to Isou’s own public and preeminent status. Almost immediately, his critical proclamations generated questions from these groups and their followers on the true “newness” of his invention of Letterism. It was suggested that movements such as Futurism with the typographic work of Iliazd and mostly early Dada, through the “phonetic” poems of Hausmann, Schwitters’s “Ur Sonata,” and the “poems to sing and dance” of Albert-Birot, had in fact “invented” what Isou had (falsely) presented as his innovative Letterism. To defend the integrity of his discovery, Isou had to show how Letterism was different from Dada’s phonetism; he had to directly attack older, still-respected figures of the Dada/Surrealist period, in particular André Breton, who still maintained a certain influence on the Paris intellectual scene even if his movement was no longer in a vanguard position. Several of Isou’s texts of the late 1940s and early 1950s were thus “distractions” not really devoted to the presentation of new developments but documents defending his invention and, often to the detriment of his reputation, describing the degradation of his relationship with previous supporters who were now attacking him. His *Réflexions sur M. André Breton* is certainly an example of this type of appalling polemic literature: “I know that all this is very petty, very low, but I had warned the reader that I would not elevate the debate higher than the level of the interlocutor, and that is very low” (Isou, *Réflexions* 21).

Isou’s fall from Parisian grace and (according to his own metaphor in *Les Journaux des Dieux*) expulsion from the Latin Quarter’s intellectual paradise came in 1952 when Paulhan refused to publish several of Isou’s pieces in the NRF where he had been previously welcome. Following this rupture came an acerbic polemic. Paulhan went directly for the jugular indicating that he
had “never learned anything new from Isou.” Because Isou felt that any intellectual legitimacy he had was the result of his own exceptional capacity to invent new models of human knowledge and understanding in a world replete with copyists, followers, and epigones, he lashed back and presented Paulhan as the ultimate “grammarian,” who could only repeat existing rules and principles and who could not recognize newness even if it were to hit him in the face: “Paulhan has never learned anything and he wants to offer the key of everything [...] The Rimbauds always terrorize the Paulhans” (Isou, Fondements 23).

The final marginalization of Isou can be considered the result of his Romanian origins and the specific political perspective that his historical background had given him. As indicated, at the fall of the Antonescu regime, Isou confessed that his desire for expatriation and travel to Paris had led him to become politically involved with the Young Communists movement as a way to be part of the new political order and to put himself in a position to court political favors, including, eventually, authorization to leave Romania. His departure for France did not happen under these political circumstances; nevertheless, his probable political zeal, as the rest of his life demonstrates, facilitated his reading of the necessary political literature required to excel in the highly ideological regime newly established with the entrance of the USSR troops to Romania. Isou claims that, as a result, he familiarized himself with the political, economic, and social writings of Smith, Ricardo, Rodbertus, Menger, Engels, Marx, etc. This fast education as a social scientist led him to become an active member of the National Democratic Front (FND), a political party formed in October 1944 that involved the regrouping of the Communist Party and a few secondary “democratic” parties favorable to the communists and the Soviet administrators; the appointment of Petru Groza as prime minister in February 1945 signaled the triumph of the FND and the de facto communist takeover of Romania. By then, according to Isou’s own work, he had become singularly disenchanted with the Marxist mentality and the limitations of “dialectical reasoning”: “My friend [...] who had been incarcerated was only liberated when the Red Army arrived. Indoctrinated by his fellow prisoners he had become a real communist. When he was liberated we worked together for a few days at the FND. I did not want to stay in Romania and I was highly disgusted by the formulaic manner in which the ‘dialecticians’ were
operating. My friend had become cynical and busy with menial daily activities like a grocer [Isou’s family trade n.a.]. Nothing looks more like a grocery clerk than a member of the Communist party” (Isou, *Fondements* 11).

Based on his own experience as a youth in Romania and his reading of Carl Menger’s theory of marginal utility, Isou proposed a system of early liberation of the youth in *Le Soulevement de la jeunesse*, a study written, apparently in a rudimentary form, when he was fifteen and sixteen in Romania. According to him, young people are outside the market system, but nevertheless reduced in slavery through the work conducted within the family economy and rejected outside of the creative sphere, as they are forced to produce efforts through a hierarchical frame (school, family) with no direct impact on society as a whole but simply in relation to their own chance to “advance,” “evolve,” “and “become.” It is remarkable that in the 1950s—before the baby boom of the next decade and the societal changes that would accompany it—Isou had come to understand the economic status of youth as an important political and social consideration. Isou had theorized the emancipation of a social category that, contrary to prior social analyses, was not (yet) fully recognized as an economic segment of production and consumption in Marx’s and Menger’s models. Isou sent an open letter to Jacques Duclos (then secretary general of the French Communist Party) and Florimond Bonté (a known pro-Soviet communist representative at the French National Assembly, mostly known for his opposition to the European construction debated at the time). The general topic of the letter was Isou’s criticism of the lack of creativity, on many issues, including the question of the status of youth, of the French intellectuals who belonged to the French Communist Party. At the time when Isou was progressively being rejected from the dominant intellectual Parisian “bourgeois” intelligentsia, he could have chosen to progressively move towards the Communist Party, which, until the late 1960s, had real power within intellectual institutions such as the print media and the university. Isou certainly had intellectual knowledge and political experience that could have helped him achieve a position of power within the cultural apparatus of the Communist Party. There again, his passion for creation and his disdain for intellectuals who simply relied on the rhetoric and grammar of the accepted discourse prevented him from joining the communist group to maintain a certain power and preserve his
intellectual status. Isou, in fact, did proclaim his contempt for Aragon: “I cannot be accused of liking Aragon very much” (Isou, Réflexions 13), certainly the most well-known and respected communist intellectual of the period; for Isou, Aragon was a “reactionary esthete” who published surrealist poetry and hid it under realistic declarations” (Isou, Pompers du Nouveau 34). In the late 1950s, Isou’s social, economic, and political views attracted new disciples to his Letterist group seminars and meetings.

It is always indicated in relation to Isou’s biography and the history of Letterism that Guy Debord, who was one of the founders of the International Situationist Movement and wrote La Société du spectacle [The Society of the Spectacle] started his political and intellectual career within Isou’s Letterist group of the early 1950s. (“The Internationale Situationniste was a small transnational group of artist-revolutionaries that came out of the neo-Dadaist Lettriste movement” (Hastings-King 26). If I have indicated that in the early 1950s Isou was indeed developing a social, political, and economic doctrine (“the future will recognize Isou as an economist even greater than Marx” [Lemaître, n.pag.]), it was, however, not the radical social aspect (which would become central for the Situationist Movement under the direct leadership of Debord during the 1962-1967 period) that brings Debord to Isou’s Letterist movement. Instead, it was a common interest in experimental cinema. In April 1951, Isou presented his film Traité de bave et d’éternité [Venom and Eternity] and his film theory at the Cannes Film Festival (where Debord was then living), and on this occasion Isou and Debord met. In October 1951, Debord officially became a member of the Letterist group and at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival, all the Letterists including Debord and Isou signed the anti-commercial pamphlet Fini le cinéma français [No More French Cinema]. Later that year, Debord and several other members of the group secretly decided that Letterism should have a more international ambition than simply limiting itself to Paris and French intellectualism; thus, a sub-group, the International Letterism, was created within the main group without Isou’s knowledge. Following the production and dissemination of Debord’s first film, Hurlements en faveur de Sade [Howls for Sade], in June 1952, Debord met with the Belgian group Revolutionary Surrealism in Brussels and with the members of the sub-group International Letterism disturbed the press conference at which Chaplin was presenting his new film, Limelight. The found-
ing Letterists, Isou, Pomerand, and Lemaître, who were not aware that this action had been planned, publicly dissociated themselves from the public disturbance of the sub-group. And, as a result, in a paradoxical reversal, the members of the sub-group “excluded” them from Letterism and proclaimed their own legitimacy as the main Letterist movement under the title of “International Letterism.” A mission document appeared in December 1952 (“Position de l’Internationale lettriste”) in the very first issue of the newly created journal L’Internationale Lettriste; a founding conference for the movement took place in December in Aubervilliers near Paris; and, in January 1953, a Manifesto signed by twelve members appeared in the second issue of L’Internationale Lettriste. Thus, a more international and more politically revolutionary leftist Letterism started to exist in 1953 under the leadership of Guy Debord, but none of the founders of Letterism were part of it. In 1957, through the regrouping of three different European radical groups, L’Internationale Lettriste officially became l’Internationale Situationniste, a move that would favor the ascendancy within the movement of the experimental social theorists to the detriment of the radical experimental artists. As a result, most of them left or were excluded from the new organization in the early 1960s. The social and economic activism of L’Internationale Situationniste is widely credited as the intellectual force that made the radical social upheaval of the student movement of May 1968 in France and Europe possible.

As can be deduced from this brief and somewhat reductive presentation, for a few years just after his arrival in Paris from Romania, Isou had become a star in the literary Parisian world of the then Saint-Germain-des-Prés. He was known and accepted as the founder of a new literary movement, Letterism. Within five years, though, his social and intellectual status had fallen considerably, and in 1953, he could only watch in humiliation, as the movement he had created was taken away from him to become something he could only condemn (Contre l’Internationale Situationniste 2001). It is ironic to consider that his fate is strangely similar to that of Tzara, another Romanian-born French intellectual who came to Paris in 1921: originally celebrated as the creator of Dada, Tzara found himself three years later upstaged by Breton, who had joined him as a Dada convert. The poetic similarity in destiny is even more striking if one considers that the first victim of Isou’s desire for Parisian fame was Tzara himself.
Right after his arrival in Paris, on January 21, 1946, as Pomerand narrates the story, Isou went to the Vieux-Colombier Theatre, where Tzara’s play *La Fuite*, directed by Lupovici and preceded with a presentation by Michel Leiris was being premiered in the presence of Tzara himself. In the purest provocative Dada fashion, the Letterists who were there interrupted Leiris by shouting “We know about Dada, M. Leiris—tell us about something new! For example—letterism! Dada is dead! Letterism has taken its place! Let’s hear the Letterists!” Paradoxically, Tzara’s lyrical play is about two themes that could not leave Isou indifferent: exile, as it is a departure, a severing of old ties, and the passing of generations, a new one always replacing the previous. Since Leiris did not know anything about Letterism, he finished his presentation and, after the play, Isou jumped on stage to present his ideas and read a few Letterist poems. The next day, *Combat* ran a story about the Letterist public disruption of the previous night and so, in early 1946, Letterism took center stage in Paris (Leiris, *Brisées* 96–100).

Even after being eclipsed in the public eye after 1953, Isou continued to pursue his *novatique* [innovative] and *créatique* [creative] work, investigating newness in many branches of knowledge all at once. During the fifty-four years until his death (2007), Isou endlessly tried to fulfill his goal of covering all the branches of human knowledge in order to discover the unique principle governing the general rules of the universe. According to him, the governing principle is that the universe does not like stagnation and thus the only responsibility of special beings is to invent and create. In 2003, the publishing house of Al Dante (Paris), known for its support of the most extreme contemporary vanguard publications, released Isou’s *La Créatique, ou la novatique: 1941–1976*, a 1,390-page book that can be considered the sum of his reflections on the question of the creation. The endeavor is exceptional, as publishers usually consider the publication of a book longer than five hundred pages to be a dangerous project. The situation was even more astonishing at the time because, on this very question, a serious quarrel between the publishing

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3 In his personal diary, Leiris, on March 10, wrote: “Plusieurs camouflés ces temps derniers: chahut ‘letttriste’ au Vieux-Colombier pendant que je lisais ma présentation de la pièce de Tzara (j’ai pu sauver la face, mais je sais bien qu’il s’en est fallu de fort peu pour que je ne tienne pas le coup) [...]” (Leiris, *Journal* 427).
house Le Seuil and one of its most well-known writers, Jacques Roubaud, had become public. Roubaud had proposed a six-hundred-page manuscript as the fifth installment of his autofiction “le grand incendie de Londres,” [The Great Fire of London], and it had been refused with the recommendation that the final published text (the “version mixte”) be around three hundred pages. The contrast between the two situations, especially considering the difference in social capital of the two writers in Parisian circles at the time, demonstrates Al Dante’s confidence in Isou’s book and its ability to find a proper readership despite its complexity and the idiosyncratic vocabulary and high conceptualization of its author. The magnitude of the publishing project revealed a high degree of respect for the integrity of his work and treats La Crétatique, ou la novatique as an important intellectual contribution to human knowledge at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when certain intellectuals of the preceding century, Schwitters, Hausmann, Etiemble, to cite only a few, with whom Isou had acrimonious polemical battles early in his career, were almost completely forgotten.

To conclude, it seems thus fitting, to go beyond the totalizing scope of Isou’s project and without necessarily accepting his positional principle that human knowledge should always be envisioned with a view to the globality of its branches (klandology) to consider some of the contributions that Isou’s work has made. That is, in some domains, Isou’s work has proven helpful and visionary. Further, it is still highly contemporary.

Three domains of art, literature, and society have been directly and durably impacted by Isou’s ideas: sound poetry (“Letterism” proper), experimental cinema, and the discourse of reality. This distinction between three domains exists only to facilitate the presentation of the arguments; in fact, today, in a theoretical approach there is a need to address these questions in a unified way. Isou himself would have considered that the unified way is the only way to approach any question of human knowledge, since no aspect of human knowledge is an “organism” in itself but simply a “branch” of a global system.

While I have no position vis-à-vis Isou’s central kladological doctrine, my claim that even if these three domains constitute separate intellectual entities they should be looked at in fine as fields related by an underlying common problematics about twenty-first-century collective expressiveness. Isou’s views in the early 1950s anticipated this
contemporary discussion because he was notably the first intellectual to insist on their connection and to insist that all three have something to do with what could be called "expression as plasticity." In his approach to each of these three domains, Isou attempted to modify the established linguistic frame of common communication and to invent new ways by which human communication could go beyond words, beyond established conventional signs, and construct a highly creative interpersonal understanding based on the de-semantization of human language and its functional transformation into an uncanny configuration of material shapes immediately capable of conveying the necessary significance in a non-verbal way.

**Letterism**

During their first year in Zürich, the members of the newly created Dada group had to find acts for their daily show at the Cabaret Voltaire. Early on, they resorted to the production of sound poems as the Futurists had started to do before WW I ("motlibrist" by Marinetti, etc.). Dada systematized the principle and invented at least four recognized ways to perform a sound poem (non-semantic): bruitist poem, phonic poem, simultan poem, and exotic poem. For this performed non-sensical poetry, the minimal unit was the phoneme. Several of these poems have been transcribed and several are well known, such as "Karawane" (1920) and "Poem Without a Title" (1919) by Raoul Hausmann; "L’amiral cherche une maison à louer" [The Admiral Is Looking for a House to Rent] (1916) by Huelsenbeck and Tzara; and "Ursone" (1926) by Schwitters. Any transcription of these sound poems would deliver an apparently haphazard collection of *letters*, apparently organized at random, as the sound poem (by principle an a-semantic construct) cannot be based on accepted words (Figure 9.2).

Isou’s 1942 Letterism certainly built on that existing legacy in order to establish his own theory and movement. Isou’s Letterist poems may appear, at first glance, very similar, as final printed products, to the sound poems of the Dadaists who had engaged in similar language exploration twenty years earlier; letters seem to be distributed

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4 For details regarding the poetic inventiveness of Dada in Zurich, Paris, New York, and Berlin, etc., see the chapter "Dada Means Nothing" in my book co-authored with Steven Winspur. Poeticized Language.
Lanke trr gl"l
PPP PPP
oka oka oka oka
Lanke trr gl"l
pi pi pi pi pi
"uka "uka "uka "uka
Lanke trr gl"l
rmp
rnf
Lanke trr gl"l

Figure 9.2. Schwitters, “Poème sans titre.” 1923.

9. — LARMES DE JEUNE FILLE
— POÈME CLOS —

M' dngoun, m diahl Qhna iou
hsn ioun inhlianhl Jhna iou
vgain set i ouf! saf iaf
fln plt c clouf! mglaf var
A'o là ini cmn vii
snoubidi i pnn mii
A'go hà ihhi gnn gi
klnbidi A'bliglilh
H'mamì chou a sprl
scamì Egou cla ctrl
gul el ihhi ni K"grin
Kholobidi Évvi bin ci crìn
cen ff vsch gln ié
gué rgn ss ouch cièn dé
chaig gna pca hi
Q'snca grd kr di

Figure 9.3. Isou, “Larmes de jeune fille—poème clos” (“L’Agrégation” 323).
at random to produce a phonetic ensemble that is not part of the graphic compound recognized by any given dictionary as an established word immediately interpretable by a linguistic community (Figure 9.3).

Looking uncritically at this graphic ensemble, as a “bag” of letters, it is thus easy to understand the severe criticism that Isou encountered in the early 1950s and the accusation of plagiarism that was voiced vis-à-vis his main poetic early work by former Dadaists and contemporary critics familiar with the Dada phonetic production of the 1920s. This graphic ensemble is nevertheless not the only “text” that was printed. Secondary symbols appear in the text, and a code is given that regulates other aspects of the phonetic performance: tone, accentuation, speed, pitch, vital sounds, etc. (Figure 9.4).

1) Ω, ο = soupir
2) η, η = gemissement
3) θ, θ = gargarisme
4) Ω, θ = aspiration
5) Δ, δ = râle
6) H, h = brame
7) K, κ = ronflement
8) Θ, θ = grognement

Figure 9.4. Isou, “Larmes de jeune fille-poème clos” (“L’Agrégation” 323).

Also, I have chosen a model of poem very similar in its free flow to the typography and disposicio of the Dada model provided by Schwitters’s model; however, other Letterist poems by Isou and the other Letterists show a constricted systematization based on repetitive paradigmatic patterns and highly constructed phonetic combinatorics (Figure 9.5).

Obviously, even in “Ur Sonate” by Schwitters, incontestably the most complex and sophisticated sound poem of the Dada period, one cannot find this degree of systematization (lasting many pages for each poem) and this type of multilevel composition that develops an expressive construct for the whole performance.

It is precisely these two characteristics, systematization or the organization of the sound system and complexity of the expressive composition, that allow Isou to make his case for originality. His argument is that when Dada was creating its sound poems based on the sound of the poem, the activity was its own end: for Dada the goal was to ensure the collapse of communication as it had led to the destruction of WW I. To reduce signs to their meaningless and empty sounds was akin to bringing humanity back to the level of the primal
cry. The act of destroying language was used as the allegory for the collapse of the "civilized" world. The production of sound poems outside of any context of interpersonal communication was fundamentally a nihilistic gesture. On the contrary, for Isou, Letterism is a positive and optimistic endeavor in the sense that it is an innovative process by which mankind can develop new means of communicating not necessarily based on the structure of the linguistic sign. Certainly, letters are used as units of sound production, but they are no more than the musical notes on a music score. The second argument used by Isou to establish his originality is the intellectually rigorous conception of the Letterist principle of systematization. While "chance encounter" was the principle mostly invoked by the Dadaists to validate their composition, Isou bases his Letterist composition on number and rhythm. Letterist poems become akin to composing music, and this is the reason for the title of Isou’s first book: *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*. For Isou, Letterism requires a fundamental competence to read expressively out loud: “Between the man who does not know how to vocalize correctly and the Letterist poem there is an impassable obstacle akin to a concrete wall!” (Isou,
Performing a Letterist poem is not "amateur night" as many of these Dada evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire seem to have been.

Because Letterist poetry accepts the principle of free verse, the poetic music of Letterist poetry is atonal in nature. The melodic aspect of traditional and well-established poetry ("amplic" in Isou’s vocabulary) is replaced by an emphasis on the rhythm that is articulated on the distribution of internal sound blocks similar to what the rhyme was in the old system. (This reuse under a different compositional principle of a component of "amplic" poetry outside its original context is recognized by Isou as a "chiseling" principle of the new Letterist composition; in terms of contemporary theory that would be a case of "deconstruction.") In order to elaborate the system of sound repetition in a way that will nevertheless favor diversity, variety, and different modes of expressivity, Isou proposes a set of constraining "rules" that will achieve the best possible composition: "Rules about internal rhymes," "Rules about rhythmic groups," "Rules regarding consonants and vowels," etc.

Because the final production of a Letterist poem is always a collection of letters organized in a certain order on a page, the text can be "read" in a simple graphic manner; thus, certain Letterist poems have achieved notoriety, not because they have been vocally performed, but because of the quality of their graphic design (Figure 9.6).

In recent years, public urban graffiti has often been considered a dominating form of social and collective Letterist expression and more and more the graphic aspect of Letterism is used as a stylistic system of abstract representation. Also, through the New Letterist International movement, Hurufism (the graphic art related to the Arabic alphabet) has been associated with contemporary Letterism.

**Experimental Cinema**

It is often considered that the Nouvelle Vague directors such as Godard, Truffaut, and Rohmer invented modern French cinema in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is thus astonishing, now that these "experimental" and confidential films by Isou and Debord are becoming more accessible, that in the early 1950s the revolution and experimentation had already started in French film. In *À bout de souffle* [Breathless] by Godard (1960), Belmondo walking the streets of Paris, alone
or with Jean Seberg, is a moment of film anthology as it shows the commitment of the French New Wave to shoot outside of the studio setting and its indisputable eagerness to capture the outside world (sounds and sights) in a light style that represents wandering in the city and participation in city life as a daily cinematographic event. It is thus stunning to discover that during the entire first part of Isou’s first long film, *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (1951), the camera follows Isou as he wanders through the familiar streets of the Parisian Latin Quarter and in particular the Bonaparte Street part of the Saint-Germain-des-prés area that was precisely, during these early years of the 1950s, the nervous system of post-war Parisian intellectualism (Figure 9.7).

In the first part of the movie, Isou expresses several of his innovative and creative ideas about cinema, photography, movement, images, and the development of a visual culture that he hopes to harness through his “méca-estheticism” to give his contemporaries “headaches” for thinking rather than simply falling victim to casual eye fatigue. And, certainly, Isou’s first film is the antinomy of an
escapist movie. The film constantly challenges the spectator and through theory and practice imposes a frustrating evaluation of what film and cinema could be as instruments of discovery, as means that would allow access to expressive newness since Isou insists that cinema is there to challenge our passéisme, our complacency.

Two concepts deserve particular attention as they are presented here for the first time, though they will become ordinary components of the vulgate of experimental films. First, Isou demands the realization of “discrepant” films, i.e., films in which there is a disconnect between the sound and the image. This way we will not simply follow the image but we will have to pay (separate—and he hopes more intense) attention to the discourse present on the sound track. In fact, the first sequence of the movie is a direct practice of that principle: while we follow Isou wandering the Paris streets, the soundtrack transports us to an unruly public meeting of the Letterist group during which Isou exposes a few of his ideas to a resisting audience that disrupts his speech, challenges his propositions, insults him, and treats his remarks on the vanguard of film and cinema with ridicule. The contrast is powerful because within the constructionist discrepancy between sound and image the film is actually performing what the speaker is advocating. The “discrepant” technique appears in many variations in “vanguard” films of the period including at the beginning of À bout de souffle when Belmondo is seen driving his “belle américaine” on the N7 road and abruptly stops watching the road to turn sideways ninety degrees toward the (not present in the film) camera and addresses a few comments directly to the spectators about the necessity of
choosing between sea, countryside, and mountains, as the best place to take a vacation. In this case, the dialogue has absolutely nothing to do with the action depicted by the images of the film. The second concept proposed by Isou is the necessity of including pre-existing materials in the film (clips of other films, images, etc.) and to simply offer them visually as gratuitous images totally decontextualized from their original source and integrated in an awkward fashion in the new film. This technique will be known as “détournement” (Figure 9.8). As in the case of discrepancy, this second recommendation is used extensively in the second part of the film, which contains sequences apparently borrowed mostly from newsreels: workers in factories, school, sports events, and several sequences about the French occupation of Indochina. In addition to these two techniques, throughout the film, Isou imposes Letterist recitation (accompanied by a white or black screen and the spectator can see the letters related to the poem appear in a fashion today reminiscent of texts readable on a large screen during public sessions of karaoke). Also, often, the images that come from a détournement effect have been physically modified as the film or the still images have been scratched or etched so that letters, numbers, and other symbols can appear as moving signs on the screen as the film is presented. These alterations are part of the necessary elevation to newness recommended by Isou as a chiseling of the old to create the new. At the same time, these are experiments
in visual graphism through which the conventional design of the socially accepted letters becomes something else, a sign in evolution.

Many of these cinematographic effects were to be copied by the other Letterists involved with cinema. In particular, after he joins the Letterist movement, Debord will experiment with them in his first film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952), which exaggerates the black screen of the first twelve minutes of Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (it will be extended to most of the duration of the film with the exception of a burst of white light). Debord also uses the principle of the détournement technique (as his next films include clips borrowed from films made by other directors), but, while Isou gives an aesthetic dimension to the process (he uses the existing amplic film copia, and deconstructs—chisels—it to produce something new), Debord gives the process a “revolutionary” economic and social dimension by “recycling” what exists without acknowledging previous ownership and rights; things are there to be used, copied, and integrated at will in new constructions without consideration for a possible capitalistic conflict of interest.

**Plasticity and Vision of the Upcoming Visual Turn**

Very early in his Parisian career Isou proclaimed that “In order to create, one has to be situated at the very vanguard of the vanguard of research and of the modern works” (Isou, Créatique 23). As an illustration of his own exceptionally advanced intellectual position in the domain of poetry, he proposed this schema of the evolution of French poetry (and thus of the world’s poetry, as he totally shared the view that Paris was the intellectual capital of the world) (Figure 9.9) for what was then for him the last century (Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* was first published in 1857).

In this schema, one can recognize Isou’s view that literary movements during the history of humanity start with an innovator (here Baudelaire is credited with that status) and then go through a phase of development (the amplic period) during which the ideas put forth by the innovator are exploited differently and amplified by followers, until the movement has exhausted its capacity to expand and it is necessary for a new innovator to intervene and to create the means of the development of a new amplic phase. In this case, Isou designates himself as the innovator acting in his capacity as the one placed by nature, fate, and destiny at “the vanguard of the vanguard.” With
the benefit of fifty more years to look at the subsequent evolution of French poetry and the evolution of the theory that has developed, it is appropriate to admit that Isou in his theoretical writings and in a few of his actual poetic works offered certain propositions that are in line with the current reflections of the extreme contemporary creative movement. It is also necessary to acknowledge that this convergence of views exists mostly with no direct influence of Isou on the field and in total ignorance of Isou’s theories given his marginal status vis-à-vis the French intelligentsia and the lack of recognition afforded him by the majority of influential intellectual institutions such as the publishing houses, the media, and the universities.

Isou was working in a very different world and if, today, there is the possibility of recognizing a visionary dimension to his ideas and work, it is entirely due to his analytical skills and his own individual capacity of understanding. Thus, while it is difficult to consider him the prophetic innovator of things to come in the formulation of poetry,
it is not far-fetched to include his vision as part of the collection of pertinent ideas that have led to the current thinking of the vanguard (under its present label of “extreme contemporary”) about the status of poetry and its necessary reformulation in this age of the “visual turn.”

Today with images as the ever-present representational surroundings of everyday life, social and aesthetic theoreticians consider that our contemporaneity can be defined as a mostly visual symbolic space. While articulated language is still present as a major source of information and knowledge, it is being increasingly replaced by plastic representations attached to realist or abstract images that become the primary blocks of memory and that complement each other, in a somewhat warehouse fashion, to organize our perception of the world and its hierarchy of values. We no longer rely on the assimilation of discourses, verbal definitions that include their own rhetorical and argumentative structures of understanding and ethical, social, and aesthetic commandments. Plasticity has become the organizational order of our understanding. With the pun intended, it should be recognized that Isou had long perceived the letter of that type of future, if not its spirit. The limited universe in which he lived with the daily restrictions imposed by the scarcity of goods at the end of WW II did not allow him to remotely imagine the image technology that is our daily environment. Also, while he was very much a man of the book, we live now, according to contemporary philosophers such as Derrida, in an era that can be defined as the “end of the book.”

The 1942 Letterist Manifesto offers as its primary concept the destruction of the word as the main unit of the poetic piece. The poem should no longer be understood as a collection of words, but it becomes a “lettrie,” a collection of letters assembled in a certain order in order to represent the sound patterns to be performed out loud. Isou was writing before the structuralist movement (he provided a few uncomplimentary comments on Barthes’s *Le Degré zero de l’écriture* (1953), but the general movement passed him by); therefore, he had a very non-technical use of the term “sign.” Thus, he could not propose that his Letterism was displacing the question of the expression of poetry from the plane of the “signified” to the “signifier,” be it graphic (letters) or phonic (the sound system of the performance). Today, it is easy to recognize that this systematized and theorized removal of poetry from the universe of signification to the more contemporary
world of significance was a decisive step into the future and in what is still our intellectual and aesthetic universe. Once Isou had advocated a universe of expression not based on semantics, he understood that it was his responsibility to explore how poetic significance should be produced. His book, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, probably under the influence of previous work by Mallarmé and the Symbolists, looked at solutions in the world of music. The day-to-day practice of composing Letterist poems, however, because it forced him to reflect on issues directly related to graphic expressivity, led Isou to the conviction of the importance of poetic graphic plasticity. In other words, poetry is no longer a question of linguistic or neo-rhetorical established forms (verses, rhymes, fixed forms, word choices, syntactic arrangements, etc.); instead, it becomes a question of physical and material shape. Once, as Isou does, letters are removed from the coercive structure of the word and from the functionality of language, they become graphical artifacts and simple iconographic motifs that can be shaped in many different ways and organized in a multi-dimensional space. They become commodities of a visual system under the rules governed by aesthetic plasticity. While Letterism was conceived as a new poetic movement in which poetry should be heard, its ultimate expansion, and its current contemporaneity, is its ability to take place in an overwhelming visual universe that is everywhere to be seen. Isou should be fully credited for understanding that potential visual dimension of poetry and for offering preliminary reflections on that dimension that time has proven insightful and still relevant to today’s poetics: “Today poetry, tired of the old format, invents new models (forms). Letterism, by creating a new plastic matter that cannot enter into the old poetic mold, will have, through trial and error, to develop a new mold. [...] Like the plastician who can rely on so many materials, like the music composer who relies on so many instruments and voices, poetry will collect a new material compound available for its new composition. After the words, letters will lead to new forms” (Isou, *L’Agrégation* 27).

Isou’s early understanding of the graphic and visual dimension of future poetic expression will lead, later in his life, to his proposal of a new graphic system that will encompass all forms of aesthetic expressiveness. The Metagraphy (métagraphie) first imagined as a phoneticco-pictographic way to go beyond the original graphic system solely conceived around the physical shape of the letter as a transcription of
a sound, will become, for Isou, a “global system of écriture” destined to trace and memorize the contours of human experience and knowledge. This last claim remains to be proven, but, as the recent publication of Isou’s intellectual works by the publisher Al Dante demonstrates, fifty years after Isou’s first Parisian appearance, his work still earns him a place at the very core of the most extreme contemporary Parisian reflections on poetry and symbolic representation.

Works Cited