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Portuguese Experimental Poetry – Revisited and Recreated

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Portuguese Experimental Poetry, claiming to be an avant-garde movement, arose in Lisbon in the mid 60's. It got its name from the title of a magazine, *Cadernos de Poesia Experimental*, which became the herald of the movement. Two issues were published, the first in 1964 and the second in 1966, organized by António Aragão and Herberto Helder. The first issue was presented as anthological, since it included texts not only of Portuguese poets and musicians but also Brazilian, French, Italian and English artists. It also had a section which included poets of several epochs and tendencies, such as Luis de Camões or Quirinus Kuhlmann, representing respectively the mannerist and baroque aesthetics of European poetry.

Therefore, its roots are founded in the mannerist and baroque tradition, but also in the European avant-garde from the beginning of the 20th century (with the parole in liberta of the futurists or the collage-poems of the dadaists, for example). We can also emphasize, among several initial influences of the movement, the Italian avant-garde, which António Aragão got in touch with¹, and the international movement of concrete poetry, which appeared simultaneously in Europe and Brazil in the mid 50's. This wide set of influences had different emphasis in the individual production of each member of the group.

Some of those members, initially attracted by creative innovation or by the transgressing character of the experience, diverged afterwards from the initial movement, but others would build a poetic work in the following decades that would allow us, not only to identify them as the main representatives of this tendency in Portugal, but also to place them among the international representatives of similar tendencies. This scenery explains the diversity of authors and proposals that can be found in the two issues of the Cadernos. This is a probable reason why there wasn't a Manifest, but in spite of this one can find some programmatic statements, such as these by Herberto Helder:

These writings of experimental poetry intend to assume the responsibility of stating that, before the human conscience (witness), things and events – charged with ambiguous energy – stimulate, to revelation, an experimental freedom which is accomplished obviously in a polygonal sense. (...) This ambiguity, uncertainty and the multivalent character of the real are witnessed, in the field of aesthetic representation, by experimentation determined by adjustments and maladjustments between imagination and reality.²

In the Portuguese context of the 60's, facing a government which stimulated conservatism, isolationism and stagnation, in an epoch affected by colonial war, censorship, repression and the persecution of dissidents, the experimentalists intended to denounce this political and cultural situation, rebelling against the dominant speech, which they accused of causing retrocession and alienation. Ana Hatherly (1987: 181-88) says:

In a country with more than eight centuries of lyrical tradition, the fact that [the experimentalists] made anti-lyrical statements and produced texts and objects as those that they produced, which were completely against the tendencies accepted by the establishment, was in itself an act of political subversion

If one tries to sum up the proposals developed in the texts that the experimentalists left us, which are documented in *Po.Ex: Textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa*, it is possible to conclude that PO.EX opposes the sentimentalism of traditional poetry in general and it rejects the rigidity of metrics and rhyme. On the other hand, it proposes the objectivity and collective work, in order to counterbalance a very much heavy heritage of psychological individualism that was typical of the Orfeu generation. It also suggests resistance and internationalism as a way of repudiating the nationalist Portuguese project, as well as it rejects the neo-realistic ideological speech and the surrealistic automatism, proposing in their place an approximation to a scientific approach.

The opposing vocation of the movement is then fulfilled, from an ideological point of view, by taking part in a world-wide tendency, thus contradicting isolationism and placing Portugal along with its contemporaneity and, from an aesthetical point of view, by being a subversive practice which dismantled the dominant syntactic speech.

In fact, notwithstanding the characteristics imposed by the specificity of the Portuguese social and historical situation at that moment, the Portuguese experimental poetry can be integrated in a world-wide context of experimentalism. Overcoming indeed the frontiers of the countries where it was born and the limits of the idioms it used, this poetry, which we can consider intermedia, according to Clüver (2002), Higgins (1989) or Vos (1997), given the fact that it made use of signs beyond the verbal ones, placed itself in a supranational level.

Besides this supra-nationality of language, these poets sought the impersonality of the poem/object and the selection of words was made not only according to their meanings but also to their significant. This allows Melo e Castro (1965: 24) to argue that we move from the artistic creation to the piece of art separated from its creator and with a universal validity.

All this allows us to understand that the theorists of concrete poetry, for instance, declared their desire of universalization, which was to be understood as the potentiality of their project to abolish all kinds of boundaries and constraints, so that it could spread all over the world. It is also important to stress here that critics also contributed, in their way, to confirm the international character of the movement, for example, elaborating international anthologies, mainly labelled Concrete Poetry³. A world-renowned scholar, Claus Clüver (1987a: 113), affirms on this subject:

Concrete poetry was the first literary movement to start spontaneously in several countries and to receive its name by intercontinental agreement; it must therefore be considered in relation to a mainstream defined in terms of continents, not individual cultures.

The emphasis put on the universalism seems to be inseparable from the intersemiotic nature of this poetical practice. The raw material of intermedia poetry is the language, or languages. Therefore, considering different national idioms is no longer relevant. In this sense, the polyglottism of the international anthologies can be placed in a similar level to those poems whose verbal material can not be associated with any particular idiom. When concrete poetry announces its intention of abolishing all barriers imposed to communication through the existence of several idioms, it idealizes to replace them by an approach of language that does not rely uniquely upon the semantic content of words, so that the problems which affect contemporary man world-wide can be communicated.

Therefore, in spite of the existence of local differentiations, it is important to emphasize the internationalization of this movement. In fact, we ascertain that not only Portuguese authors were invited to sign international manifests, as they also are included in several experimental, visual and concrete poetry anthologies.

The fact that this poetical project promotes the use of language in a reduced form makes the internationalization easier. Beyond the possibility of communicating with an objectivity identical to the scientific formula, it also reflects other uses of language, such as advertising and mass media which are also forms of expression settled in supranational codes.

Concrete poetry, for instance, – according to the “Pilot-plan” (1958) – intends to speak the language of a new era. Confronted with the technical scenery of industrial society, the new patterns of non-verbal communication, the advertising language and the billboards, the poem should get rid of the “metaphorical alienation”, in order to be projected as an object in itself, and not as an interpreter of exterior objects or feelings more or less subjective. In this context, the industrial poem/object intends to communicate its own structure, considering the relations between the words, in an optical and acoustic organization which leads to a visual syntax (cf. A. Campos, Pignatari e H. Campos, 1958; 1987: 156).

Practicing a poetry of brevity, of reduced construction, the constellational poetic configuration would become an harmonious combination, a logical disposition, a meaningful generating area, which can be seen as a strategy that stresses its tendency towards iconicity, in such a way that it leads to the dilution of the traditional structure of the verse. Consequently, the text displays mostly its visual features emphasizing the typographical spot of the text or, as Ana Hatherly (1979: 95) puts it, “the visual body of the text”.

We are then dealing with a poetics that promotes a distinct use of the word: at the morphological level, it is used as a sign, but refusing its usual meanings and assuming new ones motivated mostly from a sonorous or visual point of view, while, at a syntactic level, it questions the logical structure of traditional narrative language, creating a non-narrative linguistic area which shares its features with some non-verbal modalities of communication.

In this sense, experimentation can be seen as a contribution to overcome an eventual exhaustion of codes, reactivating them in order to create new mechanisms of meaning production, not yet depleted by the use. In this process of reinvention, the aim is to revitalize the verbal dimension of the word, as well as to enrich its capacity of producing meaning, by exploring the sonorous and visual dimension, but in a symbolic plan away from the mimetic representation.

Hence, the incidence upon this totality of the verbal material accentuates the intersemiotic character of this practice. The exploitation of the triple function (verbal, visual and sonorous) of the elements of language, together with the negation of traditional syntax, and consequently of the verse, implies a spatial syntax. In this context, reading can head for several directions, giving way to the irruption of multiple meanings, none of them prevailing over the others, so that the poems remain continuously open.

The influence of the civilizational context can be detected in this typographical writing, since it can be identified with the mechanical and industrial ways of writing. Considered this way, experimental texts would reflect the depersonalization of press typographical writing (Hatherly, 1979: 101).

In view of the prosecution of these goals, experimental poems reveal several composition methods and techniques, such as the atomization or pulverization of the verbal material, juxtaposition, agglutination, interpenetration, redistribution, cutout, among many others. By using many of the above methods, poets intended to assimilate poetry with the predominant communicational processes of their time, so that poems could be identified with quick, condensed and direct messages, which characterize those processes (ads, slogans, titles...) and media (telephone, radio, television, and so forth) ⁴. So, as the idea of communication was then, and nowadays it is even more, associated to speed and to the existence of effective media, experimental poetry aspired to accommodate itself to that model.

In agreement with this intention, it would show a tendency to adopt procedures similar to those employed in mass media, placing literature in tune with the communication methods that were emerging at that time and providing it with an expansion to visibility, sound and movement. This last intention was exploited mainly with the so called kinetic poems, although print was, in this particular case, more a limitation than a fertile field.

Meanwhile, nowadays, a new instrument, the computer, has ceased to be uniquely intended to the manipulation of numbers to evolve to an instrument suitable to multiple forms of communication. A certain literary creation already existing in electronic

environment emerges precisely from these new areas of application of the digital technologies, which begin to rival with the previous technology, interfering with the almost monopoly of the printed book. Considering these conditions, it began to be possible to fulfil the program that Mallarmé, Apollinaire and others delineated at the beginning of the 20th century, when they imagined that, if the potentialities of the typographic devices were audaciously exploited, not only a visual lyricism unknown until then could arise but also it could give way to a certain synthesis of the arts.

Experimental poetry can be seen as a step in that program, since it questions the primacy of writing by integrating extra-linguistic elements or even by creating without direct reference to verbal language. At the present time, the computer enlarges even more the field of possibilities, once that it allows the production of variable and dynamic texts. Furthermore, not only it really integrates time and movement as textual components but also, for the first time, through interactivity, it promotes a certain type of opening of the productive field itself, non-observed previously.

Given the introduction of inedited parameters in the general situation of writing, such as the management of time, the interactivity and the change of essential aspects of production, diffusion and reception, one might argue that there is a curious solidarity between experimental poetry and the possibilities the computer offers. However, we have to recognize that many of the operations that the machine provides could already be found in previous poetical practices: collages, automatic writing (such as the surrealist technique of the “cadavre exquis”), formal games, permutation, as well as the dream of a total poetry, synesthesical and multisensitive, that could become an endless collective text, a work-in-progress always eluding a final shape. Nonetheless, it seems undeniable that this horizon, determined by poetical experimentation, is in consonance with the universe of informatics, since the computer codifies quite easily this material composed by words, images and sounds.

In this context, concrete poets, for instance, who evoked Pound as one of their fundamental influences, accentuated this fragmentation to a point where they drove the printed page to its limits, when they tried, with their experiments, to establish new relations between the reading of a text and our perception of the organization and

control of its structures. Consequently, the topographical writing in the space provided by the computer represents a natural extension of their work. In this sense, one might say that a topographical writing mediated by the computer renews the innovative intentions of a certain creative writing. This allows us to sustain that some authors have already been writing in a topographical way, though still using print, a surface that is not the most appropriated to that kind of writing, which finds in the computer a more suitable support, as Bolter (1991: 132) suggests:

[T]he whole tradition of experimentation needs now to be reconsidered in the light of the electronic medium, since each previous experiment in print suggests ways in which writing may now break free of the influence of print.

In this sense, works developed in computer, like those of animated poetry may be understood as an extension of experimental poetry, as well as they contribute to confirm that the adoption of new technologies makes possible a progressive expansion of the literary supports. This is also Kostelanetz's opinion (1995: 45), to whom the small rectangular page does not have to be the only possible medium for poetic language. So, there should not be any restrictions regarding the media which can possibly incorporate literature. This is why other tangible materials, but also film, video, holography or computers can be supports equally valid to literature.

Considering this premise, we can sustain that today poets dispose of a large panoply of new resources for the poetic invention. It is possible, with the help of software, not only to choose the lettering, to select the colours, to copy, modify or paste images, but also to integrate shapes, sound components, perspective and animation. Specially with the new tools of virtual reality, it is possible to create dynamic audiovisual poems, so that the bi-dimensional and static page gives its way to the screen (virtually) tri-dimensional and dynamic. It is thus possible to go from the suggested movement of the illustrated words (the typogram) to the real movement of the computerized words (the videogram).

Making use of the new technological resources, experimental poetry found a space of potential renovation, but the same happened to most forms of experimental literature in general. So, it seems that we are witnessing a general “renovation of experimental literature” ⁵.

Donguy (1995: 221) and Balpe (apud Donguy, 1995: 226) also defend that computers accentuate even more the notion of experimentation in poetry, since we have to consider now also the exploitation of the potentialities of the machines in the literary creation. This leads us to believe that the digital resources nowadays allow poets to fulfil the dream of “textual machines”, formerly idealized in terms of intervention of chance (Mallarmé), automatic writing (surrealism) and strategies based on constraints (Oulipo, Cage). It was also the case of intermedia works, mixing texts, images and sounds, as dadaists, futurists and, later on, concrete poets used to do identifying their work as “verbivocovisual”.

This is why we defend that the effect of innovation brought to literature by computers is relative, because writing and computers were associated in the sequence of former experiences, which took place in the realm of printed literature and whose textual features were likely to be wider developed in the electronic environment. Moreover, those are to be found among the main features of electronic literature: the combinatory strategy, the use of space, the destruction of syntax, the depersonalization of the work, the expedient of chance and the relative absence of orientation in the poetic structure, so that it may be (re)discovered and (re)invented every time.

In this way, the technological evolution of the late 20th century comes out as a fertile field, not only for innovation but also for the adaptation and reinterpretation of principles formerly announced, seeking to unveil potentialities not yet revealed. Considering all this, we intend to reinforce the relation between experimental poetry and the digital medium, because it seems undeniable that it is suitable for electronic treatment. As a matter of fact, reflecting this emulation, some concrete poets, for instance, have been interested in computers, creating digital versions of several of their poems, namely those which presented some suggestion of movement, that is, the kinetic ones, that we have already mentioned above ⁶. This leads us, with Bolter (1991: 145), to point out the affinity between concrete poetry and the computers:

[C]oncrete poetry too was an expression of the growing dissatisfaction with the medium of print in the 20th century. Concrete poetry too belongs in the computer; indeed, the computer makes possible truly kinetic poetry, a poetry in which letters and words can dance across the screen before the reader’s eyes.

Summing up, we defended here the thesis that today the mediation of computers gets us closer to a more effective fulfilment of aesthetic goals that were already formerly pursued by experimental poets. In this background, a research team at Fernando Pessoa University (including my Colleagues Rui Torres and José Manuel Torres and myself) is idealizing and producing recreations of Portuguese experimental poems of the 60's. These proposals, which are still a work-in-progress, were essentially done, until the present moment, by Rui Torres. They are related to a research project approved and financed by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Foundation for Science and Technology)⁷.

Beyond the adequacy of experimental poetry to electronic treatment mentioned above, with this work we aim to approach and eventually enrich, for example, António Aragão's (1964: 37) programmatic statement about his "poesia encontrada" ("found poetry"), included in the first issue of *Cadernos de Poesia Experimental*:

the two examples of "found poetry" that we propose here came from newspapers. they were taken from im pro visation in the discovery of the look. the malleability of expression allows several readings, that is, several poems can appear within the same poem or a poem connected to another one or a different poetry reached by a different articulation. we provide a reading – one reading that we may find more adequate to a certain occasion and, in the manner of a transformable art, in collaboration with the receiver, we also leave to the reader the possibility of elaborating other readings, or of making, to a certain extent, his own poem. the reader will really be able to find another poem as long as he engenders other combinations, through a choice commanded by his spirit. for that he will use the process that he enjoys the most, manipulating the text in any sense or direction.

In the present digital version, the source which feeds the automatic generation of the words of different sizes is a list of words that belong to the original poems (in the future we may have small sentences). This software is based on a process of algorithmic distribution of elements in the screen. This leads to a visual display of words in the screen, which seems quite relevant dealing with the work of a poet who gave so much importance to the plasticity of the significant⁸. In the future, the texts can be fed, not by the words that appear in the original poems, but by fragments of news titles taken from on line newspapers. Each execution of a "found poem" is unique and unrepeatable in visual terms, that is, it is a poem with only one page which is initiated by an aleatory procedure of displaying words on the screen.



Figure 1 – António Aragão's "Poema encontrado" ("Found poem") (1964) (in Caderno de Poesia Experimental 1: 40)

In conclusion, experimentalism appears as one of the most fruitful areas when it comes to the overcoming of the limits imposed by the theory of genre that seemed to confine western literature. Moreover, the process of literary experimentation foregrounds the method of its own creation by searching originality in the composing methods. Given its intermedia nature, since it recurs to signs that are beyond the verbal dimension, we argue that it also seems very adequate to the new digital media, which gives us the opportunity to reinterpret and recreate experimental poems in electronic format.

Notes

¹ As Aragão explains to Ana Hatherly in a letter written on the 16th of September 1975, sent from Funchal: “Soon after my return from Italy, where I collaborated in avant-garde magazines and socialized with avant-garde Italian poets, I met up assiduously with Herberto Helder, and together we organized and directed graphically the first issue of Poesia Experimental.”

² After the two issues of Cadernos da Poesia Experimental, two issues of another magazine, Operação, were made public, both in 1967. Operação 1, with several collaborators, printed in thick paper and presented in an exhibition. Operação 2 is exclusively composed of Ana Hatherly’s texts. The presentation of these two issues of Operação took place in the gallery/bookshop Quadrante, complemented by a happening and involved in a huge controversy. It is important to stress here relevant differences between Cadernos 1 and 2 and Operação Visopoemas and the Concerto e Audição Pictórica which took place in the gallery/bookshop Divulgação. 1 and 2. While, in the first case, the participants were quite heterogeneous, in the second, only those who had really chosen the experimental approach collaborated. It is also important to evoke, as equally relevant marks, the collective exhibition

³ Claus Clüver (1987a: 114) elects four international anthologies, published in the United States between 1967 and 1970, as the most representative of the international movement of concrete poetry: Bory (ed.), 1968; Wildman (ed.), 1969; and particularly Solt (ed.), 1970; and Williams (ed.), 1967. Moreover, we can also mention the issue 21 of Rot, a magazine edited by Max Bense and Elisabeth Walther, in 1965, entitled “konkrete poesie international”, which also has an anthological character given the presence of concrete poems from several countries. We can still add the important catalogue klankteksten / ? konkrete poëzie / visuele teksten, edited by Liesbeth Crommelin for the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam, in 1971, which assembles works of 140 authors from several countries and it also includes a record, “Concrete Sound Poetry”, containing works of 9 poets/performers: Chopin, Dufrene, de Vree, Cobbing, Novák, Jandl, Heidsieck, Hanson and Johnson. Within a deeper approach, Clüver (2000: 33, 54n1) identifies eleven international anthologies of concrete poetry published between 1965 and 1970.

⁴ On this subject, Jon Tolman (1982: 161) says: “The modern urban consumer, accustomed by television and the newspaper to headlines and simplified syntax, has been conditioned to high speed communication. In the concrete aesthetic what functions, what communicates possesses artistic value”.

⁵ For further information on how computers may equally be used to renovate verbal

experimental literature, see Barbosa, 1998: 181-8.

⁶ For example, an electronic version of Décio Pignatari's "organismo" (1960), with animation of Elson Fróes (1997), can be found in: URL: <http://www.ubu.com/historical/pignatari/pignatari4.html>

⁷ From a pragmatic point of view, the aim of this project is to produce a CD-ROM for the divulgation of this poetry. Actually, some of the goals of the project include: to motivate new theoretical propositions and new didactic and research methodologies, by reuniting theoretical investigation to the development of a hypermedia product; to contribute to protect literary assets that are progressively disappearing, creating an electronic archive of the magazines and supplements of Portuguese Experimental Poetry of the 60s; to freely distribute the CD-ROM in schools, universities, libraries and cultural institutions, creating the conditions to form new politics and strategies for the use of new technologies in the divulgation of poetry; to attain new and diverse publics, through free access to the contents of the CD-ROM, and Internet divulgation (<http://po-ex.net>); to appeal to a younger public, proposing poetry readings by means of the new digital media which they understand and enjoy.

⁸ The recreation in digital environment of Aragão's poem uses the code entitled Emotion.Fractal, developed by Jared Tarbel, using the Actionscript programming language. It is an open source program, meaning that it is available to anyone who wants to change it, transform it and recreate it. It is available in <http://levitated.net/daily/levEmotionFractal.html>. Here we can read: "The Emotion Fractal is a recursive space filling algorithm using English words describing the human condition. Use the Right Mouse button to Zoom In to the fractal. Reload the page for an entirely new construct. Given a rectangular area defined by two points, that of the upper left and lower right corners, place an arbitrarily sized word anywhere within it. Further subdivide the remaining area into rectangles and repeat the process for each. The result is a region of space completely filled with increasingly smaller type. A limit on the depth of the recursive call exists in addition to reasonably limiting the size of the region to be filled (in this case, 8 square pixels or more). An exit strategy must always be formulated in recursive construction, or the algorithm will run endlessly until all available computational resources have been consumed. The actual word placed is randomly determined, taken from a predefined list of English words. I particularly enjoy this algorithm. One might say that the Emotion Fractal tells a winding tale human experience personal to each observer."

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