

Poetics and Politics of the Portuguese Experimental Poetry

Rui Torres
(Fernando Pessoa University)

Introduction

The Portuguese Experimental Poetry movement (henceforward abbreviated as PO.EX) engaged in an activity of translating daily experience into an aesthetic one. Aesthetics, taken not as a general theory of art, but rather as a theory of perception, provided the theoretical framework, and implied at the same time a generalization of aesthetic experience to phenomena of daily life. This transformation, which I will label as an aestheticizing of daily life, is closely related to the social upheaval that resulted in the Portuguese Revolution of 1974. However, I will argue, PO.EX also contests conventional critiques of the self-reflexive and self-representational stance of avant-garde poetries, proposing that a poem which is conscious about itself can also contemplate something else. As a result, one can locate in the poetics of experimental poetry not only theory, and theorization, but *praxis* as well. As iconoclasts, poets of the sixties and seventies in Portugal have uncovered the correlation of the political dictatorship with academic closure, and in doing so they have linked a project of social rehabilitation (politics) to a development of aesthetics (poetics).

The poetics of PO.EX

In truth, the ability of language to ponder itself in meta-linguistic function is tied, in this period of Structuralist ascendancy, to the subversion of the order of writing and speech, as well as its underlying logical and psychological structures. Experimentalist poets assumed that they could contribute to the abolition of a dominant ideological structure. For that reason, the study of the poetry of this time locates the

value of literature in the creation of *possible worlds*, and how these may perhaps motivate social awareness. This conception of literature as a sort of regenerating instrument by means of exploring possibilities and virtualities is indebted to critical theory; critical theory is thus important for literary studies precisely because it does not reduce reality to that which exists. Instead, reality is perceived as a field of possibilities, and critical theory evaluates the alternatives to the empirical real. On the other hand, by suggesting that the conception of order and inflexibility normally associated to literary canons is no longer appropriate, the experimental poetics of the sixties and thereafter has created the grounds for the discussion of Structuralist and informational approaches to text in Portugal.

Naturally, rejection of classification and taxonomy has effects. On the one hand, academia resists, opposing to the innovation; on the other hand, those who violently reject the canon are easily institutionalized: even though Melo e Castro and Ana Hatherly, two of the most prominent poets and critics of the PO.EX, prevented the movement from being a part of the *Museum* of Literature, it was not always an easy task. Additionally, besides writing poems about poetry (which we might call self-reflexive, self-referential, or simply meta-poems), the literary group sought to create a criticism of its own, hence subverting the function of both poetry and criticism. In its most radical form, this subversion is part of a larger project which involves the change, as well as a substitution, of the academic *apparatus*. In this perspective, experimental poets exposed the mechanisms and the institutions from which academicism emerged.

PO.EX also contests literary history (and historicism), proposing a new reflection about the function of poetry in a remediated new world. Urged by an impulse that comes from Formalism as well as from Dadaism, PO.EX makes a statement about the aestheticizing of the real, introducing in Portugal, to both the academy and the general public, concepts such as

structure, information, and open work, along with those of demystification, and epiphany. The latter refer back to Shklovsky's *deautomatization*, Jakobson's *estrangement*, or Mukarovsky's *ambiguity*, encompassing a redefinition of what was meant by aesthetic perception, and thus comprising a sort of enlightenment.

This innovative combination of self-reflexivity and deautomatization has originated a new word, which first appeared in a retrospective of the PO.EX movement in 1980, at the National Gallery of Modern Art, in Lisbon: *poeprática*. In the catalogue of the exposition one could read: "houve uma poeprática..."¹. At this point, one should bear in mind that several other exhibits, namely those at the Galeria Quadrum and Centro Cultural de Belém, in Lisbon, and Museu de Serralves, in Oporto, have literally *taken* PO.EX to the Museum it originally rejected.

In reality, the poetics of the movement still raises several controversial issues. Historically speaking, however, one should not forget that the dispute between the Movement and literary criticism of the time has its origins in the inadequacy of the latter to evaluate the former. Poetry in the sixties implicated the use of new media, as explored by poets Melo e Castro, Salette Tavares, or António Aragão, whereas literary theory and criticism did not. Literary criticism faced a methodological dilemma when interpreting Experimental poetry because it was not prepared to interpret novelty, and we need new methods to understand new processes. Comparing an experimental poem with other poems according to an old repertoire of judgments and knowledge necessarily encompasses the inscription of the experimental poem in a hierarchy of values which belongs to the established canon.

¹ There was once a poepraxis... (all translations are mine).

The politics of PO.EX

It should also be taken into account that, in the case of Portugal of the 60s, the hierarchy of values was framed by a generalized political and social repression of the Estado Novo. In reality, at this time Portugal breathes a very contradictory period, divided between the international openness, and the domestic political repression of a government ruled by António de Oliveira Salazar. This context is crucial in order to understand why poets and critics were so isolated, and it makes it easier for us to realize the ideological ambitions of the group. The sixties translate with enormous precision the erosion of a number of binary oppositions (left/right, center/periphery), and Portugal did not escape these contradictions. If, on the one hand, this decade opened ground for certain intellectual and critical agendas, such as structuralism, to be accepted by academy, on the other hand, it is also in this decade that we witness the evolution of the most brutal colonial wars being fought in Angola (in 1961), Guiné-Bissau (in 1962), and Mozambique (in 1964). Military campaigns multiplied by this time, and in this perspective, for PO.EX poets, attacking the political code was equivalent to confronting the established literary values. As they have insisted:

[a] Poesia Experimental Portuguesa atacou e ataca destrutivamente o código fossilizado da leitura sentimentalista e opressiva da língua portuguesa no momento preciso em que o sistema político fascista dele mais se reclama (no início da década de 60) para galvanizar o povo para as guerras do Ultramar.² (Melo e Castro and Hatherly 176)

² The Portuguese Experimental Poetry destructively attacked and attacks the fossilized code of the sentimentalist and oppressive reading of Portuguese language in the precise moment that the fascist political system was claiming this reading grid in order to galvanize the Portuguese people for the wars at the overseas territories.

Subsequently, discussing and reintroducing the avant-garde makes sense because, as Ana Hatherly has shown, what characterizes avant-garde currents is their level of interference with the real (“O espaço crítico” 114-15). Furthermore, hybrids of poetry and criticism can be foreseen in some manifestoes: the same integration of the poetic function in the form of the work of art that instructs these manifestoes seems to appear in the self-reflexive poem. And manifestoes do not need a referent, they do not need to lean on anything else. As Mary Ann Caws has suggested, “its rules are self-contained, included in its own body” (xxv).

We are coping with a situation in which what seems to matter is the use of poetry as the instrument that allows the shifting of political paradigms, and that may prove risky. In fact, the poetic realm appears contiguous to the political one because writing is a tool for the subversion of the logical and psychological structures of *phalo-* and *logocentrism*, therefore contributing to the overcoming of the dominant ideological structures. In short, the political and the ideological fit in on the project of the PO.EX.

It is fair to recognize, however, that the *poeprática* of these “poetas-teorizadores”³ (idem, 146) emerges from that same bourgeois society that they criticized, and it originates in the same academy that they tried to deconstruct. Certainly, their rebellion against literature represents an insurrection against naturalization, and normalization of the creative potential of literature, but the proposition that an integration in the canon somehow annihilates inventiveness must be contextualized. PO.EX informs us that literature often reflects the decadence of the dominant classes, which get hold of it, making it inoperative (idem 150).

³ Theoretician-poets.

In addition, as a result of the disarticulation of the roles traditionally ascribed to poetry and criticism, a confrontation with the representatives of the latter was inevitable, and the hostile reception of the first *Caderno de Poesia Experimental* (1964) seems to mirror the intellectual atmosphere settled in the Portugal of the sixties. Melo e Castro and Hatherly recognize, just like Padin did, that this perplexity represents the possible reaction to the “pura falta de adequação às matérias em questão...”⁴ (idem 169). Besides, Portuguese critics were interested in erstwhile arguments about poetry, precisely those ideas that the group wanted to abandon. These time-honored critics still studied poetry as an inalienable mystery, and based their readings in values that formalism and structuralism had made obsolete. These values were “a verdade, a autenticidade, a inspiração, a pureza do lirismo, o génio e o talento, ou outros conceitos mais ou menos metafísicos, que ele instituía arbitrariamente (impressionisticamente?) em critérios de apreciação literária”⁵ (idem 170-71).

The context of the *poeprática* emerges, then, from a larger context of a literary criticism that yields to a backward aesthetic theory, inadequate for the assessment of experimental and innovative poetry. As the poets themselves emphasized, “o nosso exercício teórico foi obrigado a ser muito mais uma pedagogia e uma informação principalmente dirigida aos leitores, uma vez que o problema da comunicação nos era prementemente posto pelo contexto português”⁶ (idem 174).

⁴ Pure lack of suitability to the subject matters at stake.

⁵ Truth, authenticity, inspiration, purity, lyricism, genius, and talent, as well as other more or less metaphysical concepts [...] which were arbitrarily established as criteria for literary appreciation.

⁶ Our theoretical exercise was forced to become a kind of pedagogy, an information directed at readers, because the problem of communication was required by the Portuguese context.

Poetics as politics

Moreover, the influence of Formalism and Structuralism in the poetics of PO.EX can be calculated by the quantity of allusions to Shklovsky and others, who have claimed that *literariness* exists in the quality of making something look strange, as if it were *new*. For Shklovsky, the *normal* use of the code automatizes perception, thus contrasting with art, where deautomatization takes place: the aesthetic use of the linguistic code liberates perception. *Ostraneniye* takes place when a word or a sentence is de-territorialized, de-contextualized from its literal, denotative sense, in order to renew and restore its level of complexity, its aesthetic information.

These two distinct forms of perception acknowledged by Shklovsky are basic because, in our daily lives, the *presence* of the world ends up neutralizing it. This process of automatic perception results in repeated alienation, and for Shklovsky it represents an “algebraic method of reasoning” (58). This process of “algebraization, the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (*ibidem*), and its range is enormous, since it crosses all human experience: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war” (*ibidem*).

However, automatized perception has its counterpart: there is an aesthetic experience which marks the way we perceive the world and which is entailed by art and poetry. In fact, “[A]rt exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (*ibidem*). Another lesson can be drawn from here: the emergence of critical theory in aesthetics indicates the establishment of an ideological territory that interprets the real as the *locus* of alienation and trivialization.

For Melo e Castro, Hatherly, and Tavares, as much as for Shklovsky or Eichenbaum, poetry offers a revitalization of language that is contrary, as much as contiguous, to a

standardized model which was reminiscent of the standardization enforced by the dictatorship. For Melo e Castro “[o] dizer do poético é o dizer do tudo.... [e o] ver do poético é o ver total”⁷ (qtd. in Aguiar and Pestana 138), and the function of poetry is to defend and to resist to this “nada padronizado que tende a suprimir o gesto e o risco da invenção do novo”⁸ (Melo e Castro and Hatherly 138). Moreover, poetry exposes its processes in its structure, as well as its devices in its machinery: poetry is “poesia fazendo-se e não poesia feita”⁹ (idem 176).

PO.EX poets have tried to put these theories into practice. The slogan “A poesia está na rua”,¹⁰ written by the painter Vieira da Silva on one of her paintings about April’74, expresses clearly what was happening on the walls and streets of Portugal. Ana Hatherly explains in her article “Voices of Reading”:

There were moments of real communion of feeling and thought, and this privileged state of unanimity burst out in the open in a most creative way with the participation of artists, poets, musicians, everybody who felt in unison with the Revolution and the liberation of the people. As a slogan of the time stated, “poetry was really in the streets.” Political posters, graffiti, and murals spread all over the country. Revolutionary speeches and songs proliferated. The voices of the Revolution filled the air. (idem 69)

In a similar manner, Salette Tavares has expressed that the democratization of art was an issue of the elites, not the masses,

⁷ The poetic naming is a naming of a totality, and the poetic seeing is a total seeing.

⁸ Padronized nothing [sic] that tends to suppress the gesture and the risk of innovation and the new.

⁹ Poetry being done and not poetry already done.

¹⁰ Poetry is in the streets.

because *anyone* could understand poetry. She cites a story about the making of the graphic poem “Os efes”, which translates with precision this interest for the aestheticizing of human experience. The poem is a 90 cm by 60 cm poster with 3 lowercase f’s (representing perhaps “fado”, “fátima” and “futebol”), without the outlines, and where the form of the letters is revealed by the text filling them. When it was sent to a typography for printing, Tavares tells the following story:

Deve saber do que me aconteceu com quem os compôs: mandaram-me três em representação de todos os colegas de trabalho para me dizer que nunca tinham feito uma composição tão bonita mas que me queriam perguntar se tinha, ou não, sentido político. – Claro que tem! respondi. E fiquei mais certa de uma coisa de que estou certa: é mais difícil fazer passar a inovação junto de intelectuais do que daqueles que sem fórmulas ensinadas aprendem a frescura. Julga-se que para eles é difícil. Tudo é difícil para todos mas é bom que se habituem a considerar que devem desconfiar do fácil. O difícil intransponível só o é para a estupidez da rotina magnificada em que a cultura hábito é só a incapacidade criativa, neste caso, a surdez e a cegueira.¹¹ (“Carta”, 18)

¹¹ Perhaps you know what has happened with the people who composed them: they have sent three of them in representation of all the colleagues of work in order to tell me that they had never done such a pretty composition but that they wanted to ask me if it had, or not, a political meaning. - Of course it does! I answered to them. And I was more certain of a thing of which I am sure: it is more difficult to introduce innovation to intellectuals than to people whom, without any fixed formulas, want to learn fresh things. People often think that it is difficult for these people. Everything is difficult for everyone, but it is better that we distrust what is easy. The insurmountable difficult is difficult only for the stupidity of the magnified routine, in which the cultural habit is in fact creative incompetence, in this case, deafness and blindness.

Tavares tells us another anecdote in the catalogue of the exhibit “Brincar”, which took place at Galeria Quadrum, that illustrates the interference of poetry in education and pedagogy:

aconteceu mostrar eu episodicamente uma exposição a crianças com cerca de seis anos. Fui várias vezes interrompida pelas duas professoras que as acompanhavam. Achavam tudo difícil para crianças daquela idade. Eu disse: – Isto é uma espiral e uma espiral é... Não me deixaram acabar de dizer, só acabei o gesto. Ora espiral é uma palavra linda, uma criança ainda mais pequenina do que aquelas pode saber o que é uma espiral porque já deve saber o que é um caracol. As crianças percebem muito bem a exposição do Alberto Carneiro. Quem não percebeu mesmo nada foram as professoras, era ri al mente [sic] muito difícil.¹² (“Brincar”, s.p.)

Performing the po(e)itical

Another interesting activity that displaced and de-centered the “place” of poetry was a gathering of the Poesia Experimental at Galeria Divulgação, entitled “Visopoemas.” This collective work demonstrated the open conflict that poets waged against academic and literary critics. The poets involved in this exhibit were the same that months before had participated with graphic and visual poems in the “Suplemento” of *Jornal do Fundão*, another of the *poepráticas* of the PO.EX: António Aragão, Melo e Castro, Heriberto Helder, Barahona da Fonseca, and Salette

¹² It happened that I showed episodically an exhibition to children who were around six years old. I was interrupted several times by two teachers who were accompanying them. They were finding everything difficult for children of that age. I said: - This is a spiral and a spiral is ... they did not let me finish, I only finished the gesture. Of course, spiral is a lovely word, a younger child than those could easily know what a spiral is because they already know what a snail is. The children understand very well the exhibition of Alberto Carneiro. The ones who did not understand anything were the teachers, it was really very difficult for them.

Tavares, among others. Visopoemas was a staging of new media for poetry: it integrated objects, paintings and outdoors that indicate a transition, in Portugal, from concrete to visual practices of poetry.

Just after the inauguration, a *happening* took place in which poetry and music merged, from autonomous languages to a symbiosis of mutual transformation. The *happening* had a title which was self-explanatory, “Concerto e Audição Pictórica.” This synaesthetic hybrid of sound and vision develops the manifesto for concrete poetry of the Brazilians, the Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry, which adapted James Joyce’s Finnegan’s *verbovocovisual* (text, sound, and image). Décio Pinatari, one of the Brazilian concretists, understands this *new* poetry in an interesting way: “o ôlhouido ouvê”¹³.

Ana Hatherly, whom by this time was not yet part of the group, had a section of musical criticism in the literary supplement of *Diário Popular*, and she wrote about this *Concerto* saying that “o concerto destinava-se a causar sensação, e agitar, e conseguiu plenamente os seus objectivos”¹⁴ (idem 98). In a similar way, Salette Tavares has said to have been a “escândalo para muito parvo”¹⁵ (idem 18).

Humor is a constant in the “Concerto.” This was probably the first time that John Cage’s toy-pianos were played and *seen* in Portugal, and several other things have happened which were meant to be a provocation to the public. Titles like “Zzzzzzzzzzz.....Rrrrrrrrrr!.....” were common. This one had a footnote attached saying that “a peça não será dada ao público por provocar sono,”¹⁶ and “Sonata ao Lu....ar livre,” mentioned that the piece would not be performed because

¹³ The eyeare listeners [free translation].

¹⁴ The concert was aimed at causing sensation, and agitation, and it fully reached its goal.

¹⁵ A scandal for a lot of fools...

¹⁶ This piece will not be performed because it will make the audience sleepy.

there was no *ar livre* [free air] in Portugal. These are fine examples of the quest for an aestheticizing of the *quotidiano* by means of a politicization of aesthetics.

Salette Tavares, providing, at the same time, the grounds for a critique of criticism, as well as a combination of self-reflexivity and deautomatization, offers in her “Ode à Crítica” another example of this *poeprática*. This “Ode à Cri... cri... cri... tica... da nossa terra” (as it was also known), which would only be performed if the public would ask for an encore, ironizes and criticizes the academic discourse in a humorous way.

Using the repetition of the first syllable of the word “crítica” (cri...cri...cri...), Tavares grasped an onomatopoeia alluding to the language of crickets. And still for Salette Tavares, it is the embodiment of cultural histories that matters:

No momento em que transportadores do piano com a sua técnica cuidadosa o inclinavam, rolou lá de dentro um ovo verdadeiro. Parecia uma história surrealista ao vivo. Um neto do proprietário usava o piano para esconder os ovos que roubava na cozinha.¹⁷ (idem 18-19)

Salette Tavares calls it a live, surrealist story.

Conclusion

Experimental poetry assists us in dealing not only with old and new media, but it also questions the form we perceive and construct texts. It is, therefore, subversive: it condemns the literary establishment, its assumptions and definitions of text, author(ity), and reader (the poetics), but it also proposes new

¹⁷ Just as people carrying the piano with their careful technique were tilting it, an egg rolled from the inside, a real one! It looked like a live, surrealist story. The grandson of the owner was using the piano to hide the eggs that he was stealing in the kitchen...

communicative regenerating social messages (the politics). In the context of the Portuguese 70s, that situation is even more significant, because a political state of censorship and control suppressed any possibility of literary engagement with innovative practices. As a result, the poetics of the PO.EX group appears intimately related to a political stance, but this political undertaking equally translates a poetics of novelty and originality.

Works Cited

- Aguiar, Fernando and Silvestre Pestana, (eds.) *Poemografias: Perspectivas da Poesia Visual Portuguesa*. Lisboa: Ulmeiro, 1985.
- Caws, Mary Ann. *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*. Lincoln: U. of Nebraska P, 2001.
- Hatherly, Ana. "Semana musical." *Diário Popular*, 28 Janeiro 1965.
- . "Estrutura, código, mensagem." *Diário Popular*, 25 Maio 1967.
- . "A função poética da mensagem." *Diário Popular*, 26 Outubro 1967.
- . *O espaço crítico: do Simbolismo à Vanguarda*. Lisboa: Caminho, 1979.
- Melo e Castro, E. M. and Ana Hatherly, eds. *PO.EX: Textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa*. Lisboa: Moraes, 1981.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York: Longman, 1989: 54-66.
- Tavares, Salette. "Os efes". *Antologia da Poesia Concreta em Portugal*. Ed. E. M. de Melo e Castro and José-Alberto Marques. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 1973. 122-124.
- . "Brincar." Catalogue of the exhibit *Brincar*, at Quadrum Gallery (Lisboa).

- . “Curriculum vitae.” *Poemografias. Perspectivas da Poesia Visual Portuguesa*. Org. Fernando Aguiar and Silvestre Pestana. Lisboa: Ulmeiro, 1985. 262-268.
- . “Carta de Salette Tavares para Ana Hatherly (9 de Janeiro de 1975).” *Poesia gráfica*. Salette Tavares. Lisboa: Casa Fernando Pessoa, 1995. 17-19.