

Digital Poetry and Collaborative *Wreadings* of Literary Texts

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1. The Discourse of Poetry

In order to provide a definition of digital poetry, it is important to clarify what is meant by poetic discourse. One promising approach is contrasting poetry with prose. In reality, the narrative structure of prose involves logical and chronological descriptions, whereas in poetry the verse evokes spatial formations which break with prose's linear arrangement, enabling not only the spatial form (which corresponds to the concept of constellation introduced by French poet Mallarmé, and later developed by concrete poets like Eugen Gomringer and Max Bense), but spatialisation of content as well. Where narrative informs, poetry suggests; where prose invokes the linearity and the arbitrariness of the written word, poetry promotes non-linear configurations. Furthermore, in poetry language is not transparent, but rather opaque, and it reveals the construction and the becoming of meaning itself, entailing the *wreader* in its own production.¹

As Todorov has pointed out, in poetry signs are intransitive symbols, i.e., they do not take anything as a direct object besides themselves.² In the lyrical text, symbols form an expressive system of correspondences, and unlike with communication, ambiguity is not a burden, but a rationale.

This sense of vagueness is the result of a blending of contrasts: in poetry, there is not a clear distinction between abstract and concrete, ideal and material, or general and particular.³ Instead, poetic words remain *in-between*: they are both redundant and ambiguous. Poetry is thus circumscribed only by indeterminacy, and it is this indeterminacy which makes of poetry an expressive medium to speak the unutterable.⁴

Poetry is then the expression of the ineffable, stimulating the reader to look for new semantic configurations, promoting unusual relationships between that which is represented as abstraction, and that which is represented by the concrete materiality of the media involved.

Nevertheless, one should not forget that this tension is inherent to language itself. However, these tensions can only be fully grasped within poetry, because in our daily use of language, they are neutralized, for the matter of communicative efficiency. Let us not forget that for numerous poets,

language *is* poetry, and Ralph W. Emerson has well suggested that languages were composed of *fossilized metaphors*:

We are symbols and inhabit symbols (...) and being infatuated with the economical use of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet (...) gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue in every dumb and inanimate object.⁵

That is why a definition of poetry may perhaps correspond to Viktor Shklovsky's definition of art, which "exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony (...), to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known."⁶

The distinction between poetry and prose is developed by several other literary theorists. Summarizing, the poetic sense privileges the affective and the obscure, and the prosaic favors the conceptual and the transparent.⁷ Contrasting with the prosaic use of language, poetry upholds the creation of innovative correspondences, opening up discourse for dynamic recreations of meaning.

This poetics is better accomplished by innovative (experimental) attitudes towards poetry. Essentially, experimental poetries of the twentieth century have pursued non-linear (re)presentations of both form and content. From futurists to concretists, many poets have gone beyond the conventions of line, page, and book. Print, as Walter Ong has suggested, brings closure to texts, as well as a commodification of the word.⁸ The book is bound to a fixed and permanent vehicle that ends up by closing down new possibilities of signification.

Contrastingly, experimental poetry is based on the notion of open work. In the definition provided by Umberto Eco, the "open work produces in the interpreter acts of conscious freedom, putting him at the center of a net of inexhaustible relations among which he inserts his own form."⁹ Eco contrasts the open work with the conventional closed work, which leads the reader to pre-defined interpretations, insinuating that the former rejects conventional views of the world, proposing instead an awareness of the fragmentation, the discontinuity, and the dissonance of our media-saturated environment.

Another important characteristic of experimental poetry that is relevant for the aesthetics of digital poetry is the convergence of text, image and sound. This aspect was materialized in a word introduced by James Joyce, and

frequently used by the Noigandres group of Brazilian concrete poetry: the *verbocovisual*. As Philadelpho Menezes has suggested, the use of the three basic matrixes (the verbal, the visual, and the sound) can be found in all languages, and poetry is assumed to be dependent on the verbal sign matrix only. However, with the birth of modern art in the late nineteenth century, this system started being dismantled.¹⁰

Digital media combine, in an articulate and intuitive manner, these three matrixes. Consequently, they epitomize the dismantling of any remaining conventions of the hierarchization of the Arts, and their suitable media.

2. The Poetics of Digital Media

Digital media offer exciting possibilities for experimentation and innovation in poetry, because they bring into play opacity, ambiguity, indeterminacy, and intermedia experiences in non-linear ways. However, when new media theorists declare that digital media are characterized as being non-linear, they are albeit forgetting that linearity is in the beholder's eyes. It is actually up to the reader to accept, or not, the scheme provided by the author. Hypertext and hypermedia do really unlock new possibilities for random access to information, but the reader can browse and interpret a linear narrative in a non-linear manner, and a non-linear poem can be read in a linear form. Bearing this in mind, I prefer to analyse the features of new media that stimulate non-linear approaches, shattering our preconceived notions of author (through collaboration), text (through convergence), and reader (through interactivity).

New media theorists agree that digital media result from the marriage of visual culture (photography, film, TV) with computing technologies.¹¹ As a matter of fact, film and photography, TV, telecommunications, and digital optical storage, all blend in the digital computer. I situate the interconnection of Art and Technology achieved by digital poetry in three key moments of the twentieth-century.

First, in the beginning of the century, film established the theory and the practice of editing and montage techniques, articulating both a cultural tendency for *bricolage*, as well as the artistic concept of collage, pioneered by the typographic experiments of futurists and dadaists. F. T. Marinetti, T. Tzara, and K. Schwitters, among others, have pursued montage and juxtaposition as a means for the production of new and expressive meanings.

Later, in the middle of the century, the development of TV and the digital computer accompanying the outbreak of experimental poetics: concrete, visual and sound poetry of the 60's contested new horizons for poetry, and groups like the PO-EX (Portugal), Noigandres (Brazil), and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (U.S.A.), as well as several experiments with combinatory and automatic texts generated by computers, such as Nanni Ballestrini in Italy, Pedro Barbosa in Portugal, and Alamo and L.A.I.R.E. in France, were particularly relevant at this moment. Urged by the arrival of the computer, art and theory unite, and experimental poets of many countries started recycling the culture made available by recording technologies, in postmodern parodies that become intertextual, *wreading* experiences.

Finally, and just as the Internet put an end to our lasting concepts of community and territory, culture became networked, evaluated with the metaphor of the rhizome.¹² And it is in particular this cyberculture (culture developing in the cyberspace), which shapes the emergence of digital poetry: p0es1s, UBU.com, The Electronic Poetry Center, or the E-Literature archives, they all responded to the establishment of hypermedia, congregating montage and *wreading* with collaboration, merging multimedia with programming.

What this chronological methodology discloses is the interconnectedness of the experimental poetics and the technological infrastructure. These poetics, whether they are futurist, concrete, or digital, all pointed to new ways of interpreting the world, but also to new forms of recreating it.

3. The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry

By bringing together the characteristics of innovative poetry with those of digital media, it is possible to provide a (provisional) definition of the aesthetics of digital poetry: just as with innovative poetry, what defines new media is bricolage and assembling. Actually, through the improvement of previous electronic media, which permitted information to be easily copied, digital media allow the modification of texts, decisively eroding any remaining notions of author(ity) and text as permanent and fixed entities. Digital poetry calls out for shared authorship, but also for shared (negotiated) interpretation: open work becomes open source, reader becomes author (*wreader*).

Many agree that digital poetry builds on the achievements of experimental poetics: visual, sound and concrete poetics are developed and renewed by e-poetics.¹³ But this is not the case of many so-called digital poems that populate the Net. As theorists have argued in relation to different fields of

study, it is possible to identify two main tendencies emerging.¹⁴ The first implies a *replication* of static text onto the medium of the Web, and the second, as Kenneth Goldsmith explains, “engages directly with technology to provide either a new type of online reading experience (...).”¹⁵

As Loss Pequeño Glazier claims, the digital poem must be seen by its author not as extension (digitisation, or remediation) of the printed form, but instead as a new way of thinking the digital media: “the idea of the digital poem as the process of thinking through this new medium, thinking through making.”¹⁶

What this entails is that poets will have to become familiar with computer programming languages. When Glazier says that “the web we read is the web we write on,” he points in two different directions: on the one hand, product becomes process, and on the other, poet becomes programmer.¹⁷

Just as the experimental poets forecasted in their manifestoes, writing is provisional and fluid, adjustable and flexible, and this is precisely what makes writing *for* the digital medium so critical. Re-writing Emerson’s expression, one may say that digital poetry “defossilises” the technological language, enlightening us about the medium itself. By avoiding transparency and linearity, digital poetry proposes a self-reflexive stance, calling our attention to the materiality and the ontology of the medium itself.

Like experimental poetry, digital poetry presents its intransitive symbols through self-reference, and its main features are those of experimental literature: processuality (incompleteness, open-work); interactivity (*wreading*, re-writing); hypermediality (integration, convergence); and networking (interaction, collaboration).

4. Collaborative Wreadings of Literary Texts

In the poems that I develop and program at CETIC, I use digital media in order to creatively perform collaborative, hypermedia *wreadings* of literary texts.¹⁸ In that sense, I turn texts into hypertexts. I should say that I am not using the concept of hypertext as the interconnected database envisioned by Ted Nelson, but rather following literary theorist Gérard Genette, who wrote about intertexts, metatexts, and other forms of paratextuality.¹⁹ For Genette, in the process of quoting, adapting, or re-writing a text, the antecedent, imitated literary text is a “hypotext.” On the other hand, a text imitating a hypotext is defined as a “hypertext.” In addition, a hypertext becomes “transvaluative” when it is the object of *aemulatio*, “when it not only articulates values

different from those of its targeted hypertext but also substitutes its values for those in its antecedent."²⁰

I am currently working on a poem that I wrote based on words, sentences, metaphors and images from the short-story "Amor," by Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. The poem is the hypertext, and Lispector's story is the hypotext. After writing the hypertext, which was originally published in a printed form, I imported it to Macromedia's Flash program, adding image, sound, animation, and interactivity. In the Flash movies, the hypotext is also present, as a multilayered, visually appealing, but static background: the hypotext is there, but it looks as if it isn't. Lispector's hypotext can also appear in the foreground, but only as a result of a search algorithm which has to be triggered by the reader, when s/he chooses to click on, or drag, any verse of the poem. As a consequence, Lispector's hypotext becomes a (new) hypertext, and the short-story is *mapped* by the poem.

On the other hand, the poem/hypertext is fully visible in the foreground of the Flash movies, as well as animated, moving around the screen and following the mouse/reader's trails. This text is draggable, has dynamic colors and several levels of transparency, and has also many sounds assigned. These sounds change the way the animation appears on stage, randomising the presentation, otherwise linear, of the verses. This way, sound affects the animation, and linearity is disturbed.

This project also represents an open work which build up on the notion of shared authorship. Music is not, and will not be, copyrighted, and the source code of the Flash movies was distributed to illustrators, with the intention of creating a vector-based database composed of small illustrations and animations that could be randomly chosen and triggered, according to choices made by the reader. These same *fla* files (source code extension of Flash movies) were delivered to a designer, who has showed interest in proposing different backgrounds. Anyone willing to participate in the project is welcome.

This is a project that promotes the creative writing and reading of literary texts. In the future, we are considering the integration of a computer program developed by members of CETIC, Sintext, which might dynamically generate endless possibilities of recreation of the hypotext, leaving it up to the *wreader* the task of selecting what makes sense for him/her, and hoping that in the process, symbols may unveil the ultimate untranslatability of all texts.

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Notes

¹ The word *wreading* is the result of the fusion of two different words: *writing* and *reading*, and it represents a response to the increasingly active role of the reader in modern literature. Interestingly, it appeared in different languages at around the same time. According to Arnaud Gillot, in *La notion d'«Ecrilecture» à travers les revues de poésie électronique alire et KAOS* (Artois: Hestia/Certel, 2000), Pedro Barbosa was the first to use the Portuguese word *escrileitura* (*escrita* and *leitura*), in his PhD Thesis in 1991, published in *A Ciberliteratura: Criação Literária e Computador* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 1996). However, at the same time, Joe Amato, in a review of J. David Bolter's *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), suggested the English word *wreader* to describe the "reader-cum-writer" concept introduced by Bolter in the book. The term was later used in the context of hypertext theory and digital literature by George P. Landow, Jim Rosenberg, Michael Allen, and Roberto Simanowski, as well as by poets Heiko Idensen, Jim Andrews and Mark Amerika referring to their own work. A project of collaborative writing on the Internet created by Johannes Auer has the suggestive name of "The Famous Sound of Absolute Wreaders."

² Tzvetan Todorov, "Teorias da poesia," *Poétique – Revue de Théorie et d'Analyse Littéraires* 28 (1982): 7-15.

³ Todorov, 10.

⁴ Todorov, 11.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 3, *Essays, second series* (Boston: Houghton, 1909), 24-25.

⁶ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. R. Davis and R. Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1989), 54-66.

⁷ Cohen, 54.

⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, New York: Methuen, 1982).

⁹ Umberto Eco, *The open work*. Translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 8.

¹⁰ Philadelpho Menezes, "From Visual to Sound Poetry: the Technologizing of the Word," in *Face* [online journal] (vol. 1, 1998 [cited 1 July 2004]); available from World Wide Web @ http://www.pucsp.br/pos/cos/face/s1_1998/poesia2.htm

¹¹ See Bob Cotton and Richard Oliver, *Understanding Hypermedia* (London: Phaidon, 1993), and Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

¹² For the concept of network, see Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), and for the notion of rhizome see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1980).

¹³ Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002).

¹⁴ See Kenneth Goldsmith, "Introduction," in *OBJECT 10, Cyberpoetics* [online journal] (vol. 1, Winter 2002 [cited 1 July 2004]), i-ii; available from World Wide Web @ <http://www.ubu.com/papers/object.html>. For the analysis of remediation as a general trend of new media, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Goldsmith, i.

¹⁶ Glazier, 6.

¹⁷ Glazier, 33.

¹⁸ CETIC – Centro de Estudos de Texto Informático e Ciberliteratura, founded in 1996 by Pedro Barbosa at Fernando Pessoa University, Oporto, Portugal. Website @ <http://cetic.ufp.pt>.

¹⁹ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.