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THE NEW PRESENCE OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: CRITICAL REREADING OF TRADITION¹⁸

ANA HATHERLY

A quite interesting doctoral thesis was recently presented in Brazil, addressing the issue of the past in the present in Portuguese poetry produced mainly since the second half of the twentieth century.

It is common knowledge that poetry has always been the most representative kind of Portuguese literary production, and even those who know little about Portuguese literature have certainly heard of Fernando Pessoa, one of the greatest figures of twentieth century European literature.

Actually, Fernando Pessoa may be deemed the shining tip of the huge iceberg that is twentieth century Portuguese poetry—an iceberg for being a sort of partially submerged mountain of eminent poets who, with rare exception, remain ignored, and therefore are important to expose.

As a matter of fact, no poet (or artist) is born in a void: each great figure inevitably rises upon countless others, either contemporaries or predecessors, whether deliberately chosen as models or not. Thus, there is always a heritage, a support, whether consciously assumed or not.

This aspect is the first we would like to address, and is particularly well-studied in the above mentioned thesis. That thesis, by Maria dos Prazeres Gomes, bears the significant title of *Outrora Agora* or *Once Now*, and as a subtitle: *Movimentos Plagiotrópicos da Poesia Portuguesa de Invenção* or *Plagiotropic Movements of Portuguese Poetry of Invention*.¹⁹

As may easily be apprehended from the title, the thesis discusses the issue of the presence of the past in the present, which implies a certain type of intertextuality, but the expressions “plagiotropic movements”²⁰ and “poetry of invention” need explanation.

18 Ana Hatherly, “A nova presença do passado no presente - Uma releitura crítica da tradição,” from *A Casa das Musas*, 1995, pp. 175-186. Translation by Isabel Basto.

19 It was presented in 1991 to the Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil, to obtain a Ph.D. in Communication and Semiotics (and in the interim was published by the press of the Catholic University of São Paulo [EDUC], Brazil, in 1993).

20 Original Portuguese: “movimentos plagiotrópicos.”

Firstly, what do we mean by plagiotropic movements?

Right at the beginning of the thesis, the author puts forth that her goal is to establish a “dialogue of the forms in trans-secular migration”²¹ and to rediscover “novelty in a centuries-old poetry.”²² What the author essentially intends is to demonstrate the connection between Portuguese Experimental Poetry (produced in the 1960’s) and Baroque poetry (from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), but in order to establish that connection she cannot elide the historic sequence, and therefore must also consider all Troubadouresque poetry from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as the Renaissance and Mannerist poetry from the sixteenth century.

From this historical perspective, the evolution of languages and creative methods emerges as a process of constant self-eating and self-fecundation in which there are clearly discernible influences, revivals, imitations, and repudiations. From this point of view, culture arises as a living continuum in constant dialogue with itself: poetic forms are in a permanent intertextual relationship because they are permanently available forms within literature’s trans-temporal space—yet, available in “plagiotropic movements.”

But what does “plagiotropy” stand for?

The term, from which derives the expression “plagiotropic movement,” was coined by the poet and essayist Haroldo de Campos (undisputed leader of Brazilian Concretism):

Plagiotropy—term deriving from the Greek, in an oblique way, not as a straight line—may be summed up as translation of tradition, not necessarily in a straightforward sense. It includes an attempt to semiotically describe the literary process, as a product of the endless replacement of interpreters of a “limitless” or “never-ending semiosis” that takes place within the cultural sphere.²³ (75)

21 O.P.: “diálogo das formas em migração trans-secular.”

22 O.P.: “a novidade de uma poesia velha de vários séculos.”

23 O.P.: “A plagiotropia (palavra que deriva do grego, significando oblíquo, o que não é em linha recta) se resolve em tradução da tradição, num sentido não necessariamente rectilíneo. Encerra uma tentativa de descrição semiótica do processo literário, como produto de revezamento contínuo de interpretantes de uma “semiose ilimitada” ou “infinita” que se desenrola no espaço cultural.”

Therefore, this notion of plagiotropism implies that tradition is not propagated in a straight line but rather obliquely, indirectly, or even intermittently, based on the use of such tradition by the succeeding interpreters or remakers.

On the other hand, the notion of translation, associated with the notion of tradition, is a point to highlight because in this context it corresponds to a concept deriving from its exact etymology: “translating” derives from “traducere,” meaning to bring across, and from “translatio,” in the sense of transferring meaning.

Therefore, this concept of plagiotropism implies a connection to the concept of parody, not in the sense of burlesque imitation, as it once was, but rather in the modern sense of parallel work, which highlights the non-linear movement, the movement of textual transformation across history.

Thus, the plagiotropic movement is not related to unlawful imitation, generally associated with the notion of plagiarism, but instead to a notion of translation operation which not only approaches Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality but also Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism.

Therefore, such a translation operation simply corresponds to a critical rereading of tradition. Yet, such rereading raises a number of issues, namely the historicity of the literary text and the interrogation of the textualities that would project the poem beyond its space-time, etc.

The author brings into consideration quotations from authors who have already reflected upon these extremely complex issues and who concluded, for instance, that the poem’s time does not exist except as “a space of relationships”²⁴ because “between poet and language, the poem points to atemporality.”²⁵ Yet, such atemporality does not indicate the poet’s atemporality: it plainly means “the presence in the poem of an intertextual itinerary, constantly available and usable.”²⁶

Let us recall Julia Kristeva’s famous sentence: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (39).

Let us now consider the meaning of the expression “poetry of invention” as understood by the author of the thesis.

The term “invention,” she states, implies the following:

24 O.P.: “um espaço de relações”.

25 O.P.: “entre o poeta e a linguagem, o poema acena para a intemporalidade.”

26 O.P.: “a presença no poema de um roteiro intertextual, constantemente disponível, utilizável.”

The idea of more or less systematic modification around a theme, the notion of a problematic set resulting from the methodological combination of a series of elements with each other.²⁷

In other words, invention does not only suggest “new formal and thematic solutions” but also “the transformation or ‘counterfeiting’ of ancient forms and experimentations.”²⁸

Having defined the concepts of “plagiotropism” as critical rereading of tradition and “poetry of invention” as one that implies new formal and thematic solutions, resulting from transformations and experiments, the author analyzes the traces of tradition in Portuguese poetry through its translation into new forms, in different ages and by different authors.

In order to illustrate this aspect, the author produces a small anthology in which some of those truly impressive plagiotropic transformations across the centuries can be verified.

Particularly interesting from our point of view are the examples of the projection of Baroque and Manneristic practices in Experimental Poetry produced in Portugal in the 1960’s, which is paradigmatic for a type of poetry of invention, both in the aspect of critical rereading of the past and in the aspect of experimentation, in the practical and subversive sense of the term.

The theoretical texts of Portuguese Experimentalism have already been published, but for those not acquainted with them I will briefly state that in its origin, Portuguese Experimentalism was connected to two very clear tendencies: on the one hand, it gave rise to the reappearance of certain structural values from Baroque poetry; and on the other hand, it was a part of the concrete poetry movement, which developed in Brazil and Europe in the 1950’s, associated with Structuralism, Semiotics, and Information Theory.

Portuguese Experimentalists had to specify their antifascist position by practicing a poetics of denial of a decaying past defended by the system. On the other hand, they combined state-of-the-art conceptions of poetic writing with research practices and with a poetry of invention which included advocating

27 O.P.: “A ideia de modificação mais ou menos sistemática em torno de um tema, a ideia de uma problemática resultante da combinação metódica de séries de elementos uns com os outros.”

28 O.P.: “a transformação ou a ‘contrafacção’ de formas antigas e a experimentação.”

an “experimental tradition,” involving rereading poetry from the past, mainly Baroque and Manneristic, in their different structural aspects.

In fact, in the most genuine Manneristic and Baroque poetry, along with figurative poetry, one may find visual poetry: a game of concepts and images, a prodigious verbal game associated with the transformation and metamorphosis achieved by an ingenious treatment of language.

Besides visual poetry, this transformation effect is also predominant in poetry by the Experimentalists, because it is through verbal games (sound, semantic, or visual) that the new text is created. When the starting point is an ancient text, the innovative transformation becomes even clearer, for it is possible to verify how the ancient text is translated into the new one, which appears as a real parallel work to its ancestor.

The Experimentalists were not seeking revivalism: what they intended and achieved was to explore systems of operating that proved to be as effective in the past as they are now.

My research in Portuguese Baroque visual poetry demonstrated what may be considered as the plagiotropism of certain forms, illustrating a nonstop chain of invention “translated” from century to century.

One way or the other, the cultural past of a people and even of a continent is always present: what is lacking is the awareness of this past. When such awareness takes place, the result is that it steps into our life and transforms it. One thing is to know that tradition exists; another one is to live with it. What the Experimentalists did was bring tradition into the everyday of their poetic creation. By translating it into new forms, they created *the new*.

The incorporation of the past in the present is a subversive action because one of the most surprising effects of the passing of time for cultural objects is to transform the usual into oddity, the common into uncommon, the current into exotic. Thus, any incorporation of ancient elements into a modern context disrupts continuity, scatters the continuity upon which habit is based, therefore creating a conflict or rather a contrast that cannot cease to draw our attention, that is, to allow our consciousness to rise up.

All culture is dialogue, and there is no dialogue without some confrontation. The following examples may be considered, the first two being thematic glosses and the third a procedural gloss.²⁹

Example 1 - Camões and Herberto Helder³⁰

CAMÕES

Transformed is the lover into the beloved
by virtue of endless imagining;
I should then have no other longing,
for in me I hold the part desired.

If in her is my soul transformed,
What else desires the body to reach?
In itself the body may solely rest,
For to it such a soul is tied.

But this beautiful and pure half-idea
as an accident to its subject
so too conforms with my soul

Lies in thought like an idea:
the living and pure love I'm made of,
just as simple matter, seeks out form.

HELDER

Transformed is the lover into the beloved with his
ferocious smile, his teeth,

²⁹ These are the first English translations to appear in print. For more on how classic authors (Camões and Câmara) were re-written, appropriated and quoted by contemporary experimental authors (Helder, Hatherly, Melo e Castro), see Appendix A.

³⁰ See Example 1 in Appendix for original Portuguese text.

his hands gleaming in the dark. Bringing noise
 and silence. Bringing the noise from cold waves
 and flaming rocks within himself.
 And covers such rudimentary noise with the haunted
 silence of his last life.
 The lover is transformed instant by instant
 and feels the immortal spirit of love
 creating flesh in extreme atmospheres, above
 all dead things.

Transformed is the lover. Running inside forms.
 And the beloved is a watertight bay.
 It is the space of a candle holder,
 the backbone and the spirit
 of sitting women.
 He is transformed into extinguishing night.
 Because the lover is everything, and the beloved
 is a curtain
 where the lover's wind knocks at the top of the window,
 open. The lover enters
 through all open windows. He knocks, knocks, knocks.
 The lover is a hammer crushing.
 Transforming the beloved.

She enters through ears and then the woman
 who listens
 holds that scream forever in her mind
 burning with the first summer day. She listens
 and is transformed, while she sleeps, into that
 scream of the lover.
 Then she awakes, and goes, and gives herself to the lover,
 gives him his own scream.
 And the lover and the beloved are a single scream
 anterior to love.

And they scream and knock. He knocks her with his spirit
of the lover. And she is knocked, and knocks him
with her spirit of the beloved.
Then the world transforms into this harsh noise
of love. While above
the silence of the lover and the beloved still fuel
the unforeseen silence of the world
and of love.

Example 2 - Camões and Ana Hatherly³¹

CAMÕES

Motto

Barefoot to the fountain goes
Lianor through the meadows;
fair and unsure she follows.

Retort

Carries on her head the pot,
the lid in the hands of silver,
waistline in fine scarlet,
attired in waves;
wears the customary vest;
whiter than pure snow;
fair and unsure she follows.

Discovers the cap the neck,
braided golden hair
ribbon in color red ...
So lovely the world bewilders!

31 See Example 2 in Appendix for original Portuguese text.

such grace sprinkles her
 that beauty she favors;
 fair and unsure she follows.

HATHERLY

Variation 7

barefoot went leonor. went to fountain gay and cold.
 went hasten going, to fountain flowing, leonor just went.
 in cold breeze, at dawn went. smiled & went.
 leonor went. leonoranna leonor went. anna went fair & went.
 farewell. smile & went. leonor went leonoranna.
 by dawnanna. bloomy went bloomy fair. anna bloom anna blossom.
 anna bloomeryanna. leonoranna. anna & fair and anna & anna.
 leonoranna.
 oh who loves thee. leonoranna. flowery. flower's she.
 floweryanna. oh leonoranna. leonoranna. leonor feast.
 leonor's at. leonor a far. leonor head. leonor master.
 master & anna. leonoranna. oh leonoranna. oh leonor lavender
 leonor odor.
 with me I bring thee. oh leonoranna, entangling me.
 oh in islandanna. leonor haven. my anna kin.
 arboreanna. leonoranna. oh lucibelle. oh lucipain.
 anna leonor. odoranna. oh leonoranna. anna lianna.
 leo & anna. lion of anna. oh who loves thee. leonor ama.
 loves says anna. anna tis anna. leonor west. leonoranna.
 miridianna. river of anna. leonor anna lee. oh who loves thee.
 leonor ama. leonor aisle. leonor rolla. anna corolla.
 anna coretta. leonor etta. roselianna. leonoranna.
 leonor fair. leonoranna. a la ventana. leonoranna.
 oh anna lilia. palid & anna. viridianna. anna lianor.
 anna bella nna. a la fontana. oh who loves thee. leonoranna.
 leonor ama. leo & anna. oh leonoranna.

Variation 8

bare leonor the greenness of her delicacy
 and with no usury, the spring sure of so greenness dusky
 and pure and in greenness, leonor's firm dresses the delicacy at the
 waist leonor's fair braiding burning firmly
 from delicacy healing the greenness of her fair display
 of dulcitude spring of firm acidity and such delicacy
 she bears the fair source and then shifty
 greenness runs leonor fair dressing dusky
 the sound profoundness in her standing fair beauty
 and so endures the mind obscure of impure source certainty
 of time mighty deep biting weaving
 drapery stiff and strives in the greenness hazy
 and then barricading the time-consuming leonuring beauty
 sure commissure of pure torture of greenness meshing
 and then leonuring bruising longing and ensuing
 mind pure seize hard the green uncertainty
 leonor purely jumps harshy from her bed purely

Example 3 - Jorge da Câmara and E. M. de Melo e Castro³²

TO TIME (AO TEMPO)

originally by Jorge da Câmara (dec. 1640)

From time to time, all is continuing,
 time without setting time is running,
 out of time times will not be seen,
 through time is time prophesied.

From time, time can only be missing,
 in time, may the time be rising,

³² See Example 3 in Appendix for original Portuguese text. This essay is from *House of the Muses*.

over time, will time be extending,
for time several times, will be showing.

Time wasted is never more charged,
than if time takes away what is present,
hardly can time give what is wasted:

The time spends well all prudence,
for if time passing is well used,
every time past is present.

MELO E CASTRO

a flame doesn't name the same flame
there is a flame calling another name
in each flame that calls for the flame
the flame that names bursts into flame

a name no name the same name
another name name that names
in each name the medium by the name
the name in the name bursts into flames

one flame, one name, the same flame
there is another name to be named
in each name, naming its name
that into flames bursts the flame, naming

one name, one flame, the same name
there is another flame that names
in each flame the naming name
the naming that bursts into flame

THE CRITICAL EXPERIENCE OF POETRY³³

ANA HATHERLY

The Critical Experience of Poetry—1

To conclude his essay “Comunicação na Poesia de Vanguarda,” Haroldo de Campos wrote that “the whole present of creation suggests a synchronic reading of culture’s past.”³⁴ He was stating an often overlooked fact regarding really contemporary poetry that Julia Kristeva had defined as the text’s intertextuality.

As for Portuguese Experimental Poetry, and not only concrete poetry, of which Ernesto Melo e Castro is a major representative, the intertwining of our present/past is one aspect that will receive its due credit as a cornerstone, a national and cultural phenomenon. In fact, in his response to the survey “Vanguarda Ideológica e Vanguarda Literária,”³⁵ Melo e Castro drew attention to the fact that “the notion of avant-garde can neither be absolute nor static,”³⁶ while he researched the historical-social framework of Portuguese Experimental Poetry and the process followed for its invention.

But the other aspect that must also be kept in mind when analyzing an avant-garde text is one Abraham Moles defined as “the process of experimentation.”³⁷ This experimentation—which is parallel to scientific experimentation and highlights the procedure by depersonalizing the work—is the benchmark of all avant-garde art, especially that produced during the 1950’s and 1960’s. Pedro Barbosa paraphrases Moles:

The creator is no longer surrounded by his works, he is only in their origin: in their execution intervene factors and operations that are

33 Ana Hatherly, “A experiência crítica da poesia I, II e III,” from *O espaço crítico - do simbolismo à vanguarda*, 1979, (originally published in *Colóquio/Letras*, 1975), pp. 113-128. Translation by Isabel Basto.

34 O.P.: “Todo o presente da criação propõe uma leitura sincrónica do passado da cultura.”

35 *Colóquio/Letras*, nr.23, January 1975.

36 O.P.: “a noção de vanguarda não pode ser nem absoluta nem estática.”

37 O.P.: “o processo da experimentação.”