
Concrete Poetry

A Brief Structural-Historical Guideline*

DÉCIO PIGNATARI

Ezra Pound, based on Fenollosa's studies of Chinese writing, gives us an elementary but clear idea of the ideogram. How do the Chinese define the color red without using red? With the abbreviated signs for

rose
rust

cherry
flamingo

"The Chinese 'word,' or ideogram, for red is based on things everyone KNOWS." (Pound 1960:22).

Concrete poetry, going beyond the application of ideogrammic process as practiced by Pound, introduces space into the ideogram as a substantive element of poetic structure. In that way a new rhythmic, spatial-temporal reality is created. Traditional linear rhythm is destroyed.

If we were to put this in Joycean terms (see Part I of *Ulysses*), we would say that concrete poetry results from the interaction of the verbal, from the ineluctable modality of the visible and the ineluctable modality of the audible, in a very short space of time through very short times of space.

Joyce, like Pound, does not use the blank space of the page as an element of composition. He achieves in each of his famous metaphor-words a small verbivocovisual ideogram, to use his own terminology: silvymoonlake.¹

This example also illustrates that "panaroma of all flores of speech," which Joyce began in *Ulysses*, and realized completely in his work of maximum complexity, *Finnegans Wake*.

With reference to spatial achievements, one must cite above all the last, impressive work of Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés* (1897). This is the first poetic work consciously and structurally organized according to space-

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1. Of interest here is the Joycean play on the Latin "silva" ("forest") and the orthographic-phonetic representation of the English word "silver-silva," a play quite obvious to the Portuguese-speaking reader, less so to the average English-speaking reader [JMT].

temporality. The problems advanced by Mallarmé's theory of "prismatic subdivisions of the Idea," cover, today, the main areas of concern to concrete poetry. This is so because the realization of those problems required that the space of a page be used as an element of structure, with words in different typefaces, in upper and lower case, and with different indications for reading, which make of the page a true verbivocovisual score. This poem represents for concrete poetry what Anton Webern represents for electronic music, a Malévitch or a Mondrian for concrete painting, and a Gropius, a Mies van der Rohe or a Le Corbusier would represent for modern architecture.

Visually oriented poetry can be found in Rabelais, Lewis Carroll, in the Dadaists and futurists, but the first attempt to systematize and to theorize on the visually figurative poem was made by Apollinaire with his calligrams, which demonstrate in their failure the insufficiency of his procedure. Nonetheless, under the pseudonym of Gabriel Arboin, Apollinaire approached the problem seriously. In his article, entitled "Devant l'ideogramme d'Apollinaire," with references to his calligram, "Lettre-Océan," he said: "I say ideogram because, after this production, there can be no doubt that certain modern writings tend toward ideography." Later Apollinaire declares that the above mentioned process is revolutionary "because it is necessary that our intelligence become accustomed to comprehending synthetico-ideographically instead of analytico-discursively" (1914).

This is an affirmation to which concrete poets can subscribe without reservation. However, Apollinaire was a victim of the figurative preconception. Without ever having attempted the possibilities of a physiognomic configuration, he wanted to achieve some kind or other of pure ideogram, or pure figurative design, and he fell into meaningless decorativeness: poems in the form of a mandolin, the Eiffel Tower, a machine gun. This of course made any rhythmic structure whatever impossible and hindered the view of the true problem, which in substance was that of movement.

Cummings, the American, saw Apollinaire's mistake. He escaped from the calligram and succeeded in achieving real ideograms, using the best of typographic resources, even though his typography betrays habits of artisanship. Cummings uses letters and punctuation marks. Beginning with a letter, isolated or placed into relief with the first word, Cummings weaves a story punctuated by lyric or satyric accidents, obliging the words to expressionistic gestures throughout the poem. Cummings exploits fully the physiognomic peculiarities of certain letters, which did not occur to Apollinaire:

mOOOn Over tOWns mOOOn

In the following example, the upper and lower case and punctuation marks are used to obtain the scintillations of the stars in Morse code:

bright
bRight s??? big
(soft)

In concrete poetry we have some examples of the utilization of physiognomic resources:

a) In the poem "si-lên-cio" ("si-len-ce"), by Haroldo de Campos, it is the material itself – black paper – which collaborates in the creation-re-creation of experience, eating away the edges of the words on the right side of the poem, descending and functioning structurally with the white letters and the word "silence," fragmented and in upper case, which permeates the whole block of lower case.

b) In "o formigueiro" ("anthill"), by Ferreira Gullar, the letter "g" is made to behave like an ant.²

c) In "ovonovelo" ("eggskein"), by Augusto de Campos, the gestation of the child-poem, in a slow multiplication of elements – similar cells ("ovo + novo + velo + novelo" – "novo no velho") ends by resolving itself in the purely visual and physiognomic plane with 4 oval sections.³

In Brazil, beyond rare, chance finds – by Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade (the latter having the advantage of a taste for using the word directly, whereupon it functions as an anti-metaphor) – only João Cabral de Melo Neto has stated some problems of interest with lucidity. In some of his poems, the word, naked and dry; the spare diction, the substantive choice of the word; the orthogonal, architectural, neoplastic structure of the stanzas; the play of equal elements, are placed at the service of a didactic will to a direct language. This lesson should not be forgotten:

Como não há noite	Since there is no night
cessa tôda fonte;	All fountains stop;
como não há fonte	Since there is no fountain
cessa tôda fuga.	All flights stop.

The engineer saw things clearly.⁴ "Antiode – Against So-Called Profound Poetry" marks the borderline of the dissociation of word-object ("flower is the word flower") – and would have announced the return to the object in the concrete sense, had the poet not preferred to orient himself in another direction, more humble and traditional, but not without attaining a work of interest. We owe to João Cabral the first lucid attack on the lyric jargon and the metaphoric-lyriphorous plague that devastates national and world poetry. But it would fall to concrete poetry to take up a tradition lost for 60 years. It would do so with critical foundations and with the resolution of continuity and amplitude.

"Concrete poetry begins by assuming a total responsibility before language," as Augusto de Campos has said. In this way we achieve the isomorphic, critical synthesis of the word-object relationship. "Pitcher" is the word "pitcher" and the pitcher itself as content, that is, as designated object. The word "pitcher" is the thing of the thing, the pitcher of the

2. A poem presented on small posters during the National Exposition of Concrete Art (at the Museum of Art in São Paulo in December, 1956 and at the Ministry of Education and Culture, Rio de Janeiro, February, 1957). It was never published [JMT].

3. Ovo = egg; novo = new; velo = fleece (by extension hair on skin, i.e., pubic hair); novelo = skein of yarn; novo no velho = the new in the old [JMT].

4. A play on the title of one of Cabral's books, *O Engenheiro* [JMT].

pitcher, like "the sea in the sea" of Baudelaire. Isomorphism. Why the tendency of concrete poetry to respect the integrity of the word? We abolish deformations and atomizations, to the point of considering outdated, in a stage of superior drasticity, the experiments of a Joyce and of a Cummings. Not to mention, naturally, the figurative arabesques of an Apollinaire, of the Futurists, Lettrists and Sonorists, with whom concrete poetry maintains only those contacts necessary for the judicious critical location of problems. Concrete poetry is the exact opposite of all Surrealism and Expressionism.

As an example of concrete poems, fully realized, we can cite "tension," by Augusto de Campos and "baum kind hund haus" of the Swiss-Bolivian, Eugen Gomringer. This poet, based in Ulm, parting from points in common with the Brazilian concrete group—or at least the group from São Paulo—arrived at similar results, which he called "constellations" (see *Un Coup de Dés*). He is now inclined to adopt the generic designation "concrete poetry," better suited to designate an international movement. Augusto de Campos's "Tension" demonstrates, once again, that concrete poetry can in no way relinquish the sonorous dimension of the word. As if the six poems in color, published in *Noigandres 2* (Feb. 1955), accompanied by Anton Webern's "Klangfarbenmelodie," were not enough proof. Some of these poems, adapted to voice were executed in the Teatro de Arena of São Paulo in November of 1955 by the "Ars Nova" musical group. The same group is preparing another recital of concrete poetry with new poems.⁵

In concrete poetry, as the above mentioned poems indicate, movement is no longer the mere illustration of a particular and real motion, as with the Futurists—poets, painters, and sculptors—and with Apollinaire himself. The problem is now that of the dynamic non-figurative structure itself, movement produced by and producing grapho-phonetic functions—relations informed by meaning and conferring on the space which separates and unites them a qualitative value, a relational spatial-temporal force, which is rhythm.

baum
 baum kind
 kind
 kind hund
 hund
 hund haus
 haus
 haus baum
 baum kind hund haus

(tree
 tree boy
 boy
 boy dog
 dog
 dog house

5. Presented on March 6, 1957 in the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia, with verbalized scores by Willy de Castro and directed by Diogo Pacheco.

house
 house tree
 tree boy dog house) [JMT]

REFERENCES

- Arboin, Gabriel [Apollinaire], 1914. "Devant l'ideogramme d'Apollinaire," *Les Soirées de Paris* (July-August).
 Pound, Ezra, 1960. *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions).

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