

From the Pictograph to the Metapoem: Realms of Concrete Literary Reference in Brazilian Concrete Poetry

No sin cierta razón la poesía concreta ha sido tachada de fetichista o de preocupada por lo obvio. No obstante es una poesía que ofrece una visión privilegiada de un concepto clave de la poética contemporánea, la referencia fática. La comunicación fática, que se define como "afirmación de un estado supremamente obvio de las cosas" dentro de la ya santificada visión jakobsoniana del mundo, es al contacto como la comunicación poética es al mensaje. Para representar la base material de la comunicación, la poesía concreta ha resultado ser una de las uniones más felices entre lo poético y lo fático. Ya sea en la obra de los poetas concretistas brasileños o en la del boliviano de origen suizo-alemán, Eugen Gomringer (cuyos primeros poemas concretos fueron escritos en español, su lengua materna, hecho que él considera significativo), el concretismo oscila entre el iconismo y el fatismo, entre el signo que se parece a otra cosa y el signo que deja de ser signo. Los poetas que responden al nombre de concretistas y aún otros de la poesía abierta, la poesía encontrada y algunos dadaístas, integran una comunidad literaria internacional que se enfrenta a una cultura multi-nacional común. Esta cultura que podría llamarse fática, quizás posee en la poesía concreta su más auténtica voz.

The polemical term *concrete* poetry implies, by one of those revealing turns of mind language steers us into, the existence of a phantom counterpart: *abstract* poetry. No actual abstract poetry movement has sprung up, at least not to the knowledge of this writer. But room for it is reserved within the system of literary theory and history. Were concrete poetry to have become a rigid orthodoxy and tradition of its own, the Young Turks of a conjectural avant-garde bearing the name abstract would have had a literary propaganda and polemic vehicle all waiting and prepared for them.

Used in Swedish in 1953 and in Portuguese in 1955, and traced by some back to a 1943 text by the Italian Carlo Belloli, "concrete," in the sense "concrete poetry," stresses the material aspects of certain experimental texts, as opposed to their referential, their abstract, properties.¹ The word implied that the text was tangible, in the words of the Brazilian *Noigandres*

group, *verbivocovisual*; the concrete poem was to be a thing in and for itself, a *tensão de palavras-coisas no espaço-tempo*.² Although many concretists have been leery of the expression, the well-organized multilingual community of those who answer to the name, as well as others among the Dadaists, "found," and some open form poets, do share a common endeavor.

There exists a plethora of theoretical descriptions of the concrete, and though it would be foolhardy to fix too singly on any of them,³ let us nonetheless begin with one particularly fecund remark. "As to the term concrete, it is to be understood positively, as in Hegel, as the opposite of the term abstract. The concrete is the non-abstract. Everything that is abstract is based on something from which certain characteristics have been abstracted. Everything concrete, on the other hand, is nothing but itself."⁴ Concrete poetry, according to Max Bense, is poetry which is simply itself before it means, before its connotations and even denotations are drawn or abstracted from it: an extreme case of the literary dictum that the poem should not mean, but be.

Yet despite the undeniably non-abstract and non-referential nature of concrete poetry, a major dimension of it remains its referential capacity. This special referential capacity, *concrete reference*, ranges from the extrinsic and iconic to the intrinsic and phatic. It is supplementary to the ordinary referential functions of poetry, usually said to be in abeyance and subordinated to the poetic function, but still quintessentially referential. Early twentieth century aesthetic experiment emphasized the material of meaning, not only physical but systemic. In doing so, it opened the door to realms of literary signification theretofore unexplored. One of these was the concrete poem.

Rhetoric, the study of persuasion and the taxonomy of the formal figures which make it possible, is a discipline with ancient roots. In modern times, however, some special rhetoric is necessary to accommodate and account for the innovations of concrete poets and, in general, of all who seek to persuade by manipulating not just material, but *matériel*. All persuasive arrangement of *matériel* is concretely rhetorical. This includes not only art forms, but the most diverse realms of cultural production and consumption, architecture, urban planning, engineering, communications design.

Yet the most common features of a hypothetical concrete rhetoric are nonetheless familiar to the scholar. Onomatopoeia, after all, is a concrete device. Figures are specifically concrete when not the signifier, but the signifier's own material existence is their object. Concrete aphaeresis or apocope is, for example, the material lopping-off of printed characters from the beginning or the end of a word or any other sequence of letters. In ordinary rhetoric these terms refer to the signifier and to the matter and material of the sign. Jacques Derrida has asserted that we will go on thinking in terms of the *signifiant/signifié* paradigm, and therefore remain confined

to a logocentric frame of reference, *épistémè*, as long as we pay obeisance to the notion of the binary sign.⁵ The concretists may be thought of as a poetic attempt to shatter that paradigm by focusing upon and foregrounding signifiers bereft of signification.

The aim of concrete poetry has been to model or shape the *matériel* of the sign as if it were a non-sign, and then to surprise the reader with the sign thereby created. The concrete poet exploits the tension between the signifying features of a sign and its non-signifying ones. Along this cleavage and tension between reference and non-reference, new forms of reference keep springing up. Non-abstract, in Bense's sense, they are not exclusively concrete in the naive sense of something which is "nothing but itself." The *pictograph* is one extreme of this new realm of concrete reference: the *matériel* of the pictographic poem is cast in the image of its subject matter. At the other intrinsic extreme of this range is the *metapoem*: a sort of theoretical figment whose isolated actualization is impossible but which is implied by the existence of the poetical system. *The metapoem refers phatically to itself as a literary object* and hence, for an instant, ceases to have literary meaning.

Since the wave of concrete anthologies published in the late sixties, little has broken the surface regarding concrete poetic experimentation. But literary history has strange ways of moving and evolving. A part of the ethos of late twentieth-century art in many ways – in its transnational simultaneity, its fascination with technology and its rejection of humanist learning – concrete poetry is an essential movement of our times. These prolegomena to its study would serve to establish a repertoire of its figures and devices. Future work will determine the confines of its social context and the inner dynamic of its persuasive functions.

No given concrete referential mode is exclusive to any one concrete poem and no poem is dominated by a single mode. Shape is never independent from the meaning of characters on the page (if indeed characters are used), and there is always a purely aesthetic element in their layout. Meaning and the characters which embody it have certain shapes.⁶ As one extreme form of concrete reference, the pictographic image is composed of textual elements arranged in "iconic" shapes. As the other extreme, the metapoem aims, ideally, to dispense with all trace of concrete and non-concrete rhetorical operations and become pure reference to reference itself.

It follows that the line between reference and non-reference, between meaning and form, is hard to draw, a quandary as familiar to students of rhetoric as to those of semantics. Though it is a truism that form cannot be separated from content, we still must distinguish between forms of expression and content expressed, as long, that is, as we remain within this *épistémè*. Paradoxes will ensue, we will have to make do with them. The very

idea that images might be permutable lays at the base of semiotics and of any digital, structural, or formal semantics. Semiotics has arisen in part because of the difficulty humanist culture has had in resolving the contradiction between form and content.

The reader should pay careful attention to our eccentric use of the word "reference." Concrete poets avail themselves of all of the usual referential functions in their poems, including the poetic one, the focus on the message for its own sake. Many concrete poems have a concise and explicit metaliterary message and are, however, radical in program, referential within the confines of the contemporary semantico-literary paradigm, e.g., Claus Bremer's "ist der text der text der ausbleibt" (ACP), or Edgard Braga's "limite do ôlho/ do eu/ do poema" (ACP); like all poetry, concrete poems "project the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." The lyricism of Eugen Gomringer's classical concrete poems "avenidas," "baum" (ACP) or Braga's "ihla" (CP) are ample evidence that the set towards the addresser, the emotive function of language, is at play. Décio Pignatari's "beba coca cola" (CP, 108) is imperative and subjunctive, as a polemic or "committed" poem, directed towards an addressee. It is conative. This is to say that concrete poetry, like all poetry, is semantically rich.

A term which harks back through Jakobson to Malinowsky's seminal article in Ogden and Richard's *The Meaning of Meaning*, phatic also has a special sense in our schema.⁷ All agree that we are phatic when we confirm that a linguistic channel of communication is open with the um-hum's and and-uh's which so punctuate our speech. *Sensu stricto*, the phatic function would then be absent from poetry since the latter demands, in the same school, a complete mobilization of the resources of language in texts all parts of which are interchangeable and comparable.

In our sense, phatic bears even broader definition. The prelude in early classical music had for example a slightly phatic function at the beginning of suites: it called the audience to its seats and signaled the advent of the serious music to come. Works or performances of oral literature usually have similar preparatory phases. Any act of virtuosity, to take another line of thought, is phatic: each reveals something the channel is capable of doing. Printed poems are phatic not necessarily when they focus on the message in and for itself (are poetic) or on the topic of poetry (are metapoetic), but when they draw attention to the very fact that they are poetry.

Concrete poems are phatic in a still stronger sense: they do refer to their own existence as poetry, a familiar modernist trait, but then also refer to the material existence of their components. This amounts to a de-reification of the text and its elements. The concretists reduce letters to shapes of print on the page, they foreground the channel and its characteristics, limits and

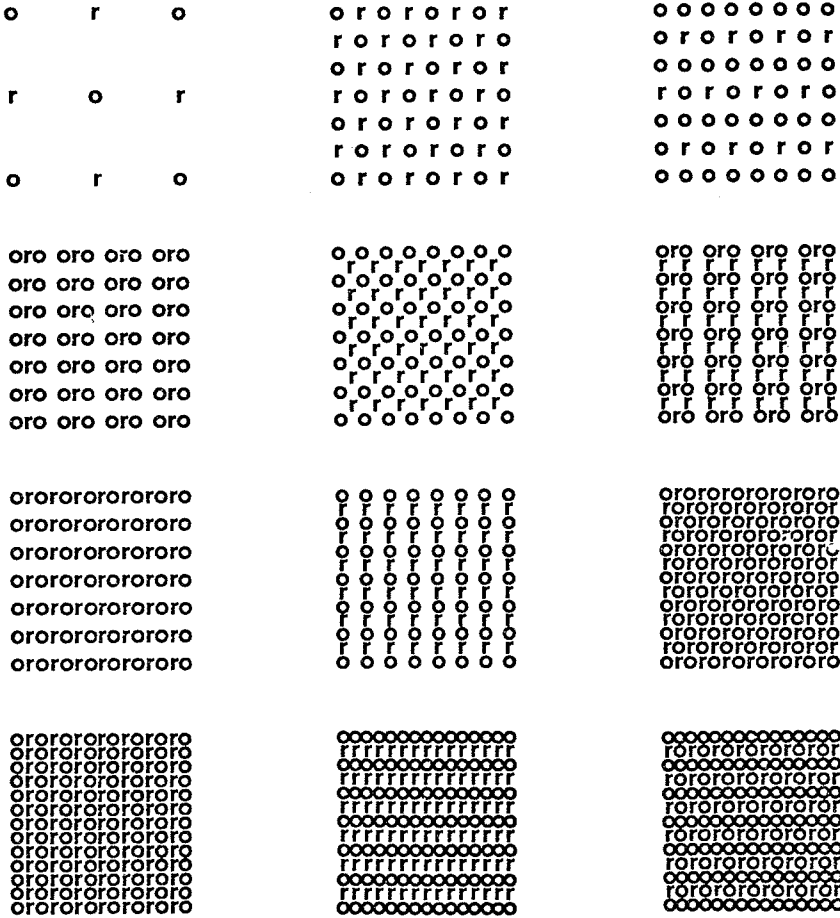


FIGURE 1 Mathias Goeritz

possibilities (see figure 1, Mathias Goeritz' *Oro*). Concrete poets are especially concerned with what makes contact between addresser and addressee possible, with the *matériel* of poetic composition, text and print, pictographic, ideographic or alphabetic characters – and now magnetic bits on tape and videograph. In this second important sense, concrete poetry is phatic.

The rectangular blocks which corrected print type represents on the page are usually taken for granted. The publisher rather than the poet handles mundane matters like their arrangement, and fine editions to which special care for and awareness of print shape and layout are devoted are the exception. The stanza was of course originally contrived according to oral, not

visual, criteria, but stanzaic shape now does tag a text as poetry and actually participate in and intensify the reader's appreciation. The informal stanzas found in many contemporary non-concrete poems, perhaps better understood as clusters or "constellations" of words, are determined, at least in part, by criteria of pure shape, as anyone who has experimented with their composition can ascertain. Concrete aspects are latent in all poetry, all texts. The poets of this century have acquired a feeling for the concrete while experimenting with these crypto-stanzaic shapes. Trakl, Apollinaire, in some texts even Stein, were, as much as Mallarmé, the precursors of concrete poetry. They all were fascinated by the meaninglessness of the text, by the moment when the text becomes merely a plane or perhaps concave surface covered with marks.

Generally still supported on this two-dimensional surface, the concrete poem often assumes the shape of its subject matter and is a form of pictograph. At the other end of the gamut of concrete reference, in the metapoem, the white space of the page is used as a two-dimensional matrix for print forms and the poet-composer acts as if print and its play against a white backdrop are interesting in their own right. The visual pattern, and not the linguistic function of print, is foregrounded. Some styles of concrete poetry suggest that shape itself has connotations in terms of some biological, pre-linguistic code. Pierre and Ilsa Garnier's "cinéma" (CP, 68) is first iconic insofar as its rows of black particles upon white spelling the word cinema do resemble a movie screen. But poems like this usually also capitalize upon optic effects pleasing in and of themselves, visual vibrations resulting when certain lines and colours are adjacent, connotative in terms of some cerebral optical code. Can we not speak about works of op poetry, on the model of op art? Or of minimalist poetry on the model of minimalism in the plastic arts? The artists of this latter movement bracket the minimal distinctive features they can reproduce. Up to the point of extreme minimalism, referential elements can still be discerned.⁸ The optical effects exploited in minimalism, the aesthetic effort implicit when we seize tenuous visual, audio, or oral distinctions, these both have a parallel in concrete conceptual experimentation, e.g., Pedro Xisto's "cheio vazio cheio/ cheio cheio" (ACP), or Eugen Gomringer's "silencio" (CP, see figure 2).

Formal permutation and combination in certain styles of concrete poetry do produce texts with no intelligible meaning. The vast majority of potential morphemes which make up Josef Hirsal's and Bobumila Grögervá's transposition of *svoboda* into freedom (ACP) are meaningless. But the eye, ranging up and down the column of letters, is affected by flickers of optical illusion. Certain letters repeated in rows create or reinforce certain lines of visual force. The concrete poet who has studied the *matériel* of his art knows that F, the tips of whose three extremities lie on an implicit diagonal line,

silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio

FIGURE 2 Eugen Gomringer

lends itself well to diagonal configurations. A, occupying and enclosing a triangle and hence less space than other letters (with the obvious exception of those letters like I or L), leaves the impression of openness, and, in rows, of a band of space traversing the poem.

These rhetorical possibilities of concrete poetry are predicated upon biological codes of perception and underlie concrete poems ranging from Stephan Bann's elegant monument to an eighteenth-century architect, "Dominicus Zimmerman" (*ACP*, its paronomastic messages, *immer mann* and *zimmer mann*, are at first secondary to its optical appeal), to Jiri Valach's "Homage to Ladislav Novák" (*CP*, which homes the reader in on the letter I, superimposing two incongruent grids of I's at a single point; a concentric ring of discordance appears to expand around a point of harmony).

When concrete poetry is partially iconic and partially phatic, shape is metaformal, form, that is, refers Platonically to ideal forms. The line between image and non-referential shapes blurs when poems are cast in geometrical shapes. A concept becomes an icon when it begins to resemble its referent; an icon, a shape when its referent becomes itself. Geometrical shapes refer to the Idea of their shape, the ideal triangle, circle or square. A continuum runs from ideal shape to shape which does not pre-figure idea.⁹

The evolution from the plane geometry of Mondrian to abstract expressionism in modern art has a counterpart in concrete poetry. Many concretists work with geometrical form, but others try to escape from all representation, including reference to the ideal forms of circles, rectangles and other predictable shapes, as well as to print characters themselves. Carlfriedrich Claus' squiggles and pseudoletters are one example (*ACP*); one musical parallel is in extended vocal techniques.¹⁰

Metaform can be distinguished from iconic form in a second way. The empty diamond of space in the center of Claus Bremer's "ist der text der text der ausbleibt" (*ACP*) in fact appears to be an omitted portion of the text. An exemplum, the poem is about its shape; and vice-versa. Décio Pignatari's diagonally cantered "terrara-terra" uses its central slash of space, differently, as a device around which to permute a sequence of words and letters (*CP*, 14, see figure 3). But its three main components are not really metaformal, for they denote, if anything, the angularity and dynamism of the plough,

ra terra ter
rat erra ter
rate rra ter
rater ra ter
raterr a ter
raterra terr
araterra ter
raraterra te
rraraterra f
erraraterra
terraraterra

FIGURE 3 Décio Pignatari

not triangularity. The process by which a shape can signify the abstract idea of a shape may not be fully distinguishable from our banal everyday process of reference. Indeed, as long as we hold that form cannot be separated from content, it follows that pure shape does have denotation. But sculpting shapes geometrically is nonetheless different from casting a shape iconically.

The dialectical relationship between graphic meaning and meaninglessness, like the problematic of shape and image, is at the core of concrete poetry and is also reminiscent of the principle paradox of semiotics, namely that couched in the couples digital-analog, discrete-indiscrete, secondary-primary texts.¹¹ At which point, for example, does a line suddenly represent a figure, say that of a man? How does a graphic line convey the meaning of an image, a letter or an ideogram? Or, since we must avoid ignoring completely what is perhaps the most important mode of literature: what are the concrete aspects of an oral "line"? If we progressively expose any representational line, e.g., the head, withers and back of a sketch of a horse, we can demonstrate that iconic meaning begins at a measurable point and can be (must be?) transcribed by a digital proliferation of points.

Unlike the conventional poet, the concretist, through modelling, stresses the purely plastic, analogic aspects of shape and form. Doing so, foregrounds the non-sign.

Eugen Gomringer has claimed that his most important contribution to concrete poetry is the technique of "inversion," as when he mirrors or reverses letters on the page: "mensch/hcsnem" (ACP) or "wind/dniw" (CP, 4). Normal, for English, order of a word from left to right is transgressed and, because of this instance of *ostranenie*, the words themselves are foregrounded and made more resonant than even if placed naked upon the page (though it is also the case that the second poem above resembles a windchime, that is, is iconic). When a poet reverses orthographic order to

compose a certain shape, he makes some rule of the written language explicit and is accordingly also metalinguistic. When we move from the concrete aspects of shape to those of sound and character, we encounter yet another paradox, one inscribed at the heart of morphophonemics: how can configurations of sound (in the case of oral texts), script, print, or bits mean and point at something beyond themselves?¹²

Formal operations upon sound and characters leave, like a skier's trace, figures of morphology. The line between a purely formal operation and a referential one is, here too, hard to discern. Concretists work through permutations of letters and sounds to new but related statements composed of rearranged phonetic or typographical elements of a preliminary message. This is old stuff in traditional poetry and rhetoric. The originality and interest of the seventeenth-century verse by Athanasius Kircher, "Tibi vero gratias agam que clamore? Amore more ore re," stems from such a self-conscious use of permutation, in this case serial aphaeresis.¹³ But permutation has a special concrete definition: it is the arrangement of characters and syllables in space-time, the basic unit of which is the *choreme* or "space-eme". Permutation and arrangement of sounds and characters implies a code or program, rules of transformation, rules like those of anamorphosis. In concrete poetry these rules specify the criteria of each paradigmatic selection: phonic or graphic similarity, semantic richness of paradox, and so on. Permutation cannot be sharply distinguished from combination. They are different sides of the same phenomenon, faces of Janus. Since traditional linear syntax has for the most part been abandoned or deemphasized in concrete poetry, two-dimensional paginal space acts as a syntactical matrix in which utterances can be positioned at will. When characters are deployed across the page (or sounds across acoustical space), the rules for deploying them are a kind of syntax. Traditional figures like ellipsis, zeugma, chiasmus and concatenation have concrete counterparts: omitted, split, crossed, or hyphenated space. Permutation is to combination as content is to form.

Décio Pignatari's 1957 Coca-Cola anti-advertisement is a classic example of concrete permutation of typographical material. "Beba Coca Cola" (CP, 15) is transformed into various dependent lexemes, *babe* (drool), *coca* (cocaine), *caco* (ruin or old person), and finally *cloaca*. This de-construction of a familiar phrase creates new and indelible connotations and, so to speak, defuses its persuasive power. Coca regains the denotation of the tropical shrub from whose dried leaves cocaine is derived; Coke is equated with "coke" as a kind of glue holding things together, except that rubble is what is being held together and the entire mass resembles a cesspool.¹⁴

In the fifties, the Brazilian concretists specialized in social commentary of this sort, e.g., Augusto de Campos' "luxo/lixo" or "sem un número", which has been interpreted as alluding to the Brazilian peasant.¹⁵ Yet permutation

sometimes yields only pun devoid of any political comment. Gomringer's 1955 "mist mountain butterfly" (*ACP*), a poem with the quality of a haiku, as they are translated into European languages anyway, is one example of paronomastic play in the concrete poem. Haroldo de Campos' "fome/forma" (*CP*, 10) is more metaliterary, but the concrete double-entendre is fundamentally permutational here too, and once again political. Perhaps like all poetry but explicitly so, concrete poems are founded upon specific sets of paradigmatic criteria. Their syntax, in the broad sense of the term, is bound by sound echo, by visual analogy, by anagram or by other principles of combination. Claus Bremer's "für dich und für mich" (*ACP*) simply rearranges the letters of that phrase alphabetically: ccd/dffh/hii/mnr/ruüü. Ronaldo Axerodo's "como o vento" (*ACP*) spells out phrases composed of phonetic echoes of "like the wind." Haroldo de Campos' "Se nasce" is a mandala on the theme of the wheel of existence, but is also a mere re-shuffling of syllables and letters (see figure 4).

Concrete permutation is largely anagrammatic. Defined as the rearrangement of letters of one phrase to form another, the anagram, according to the "anagrammatic" de Saussure, reinforces the overt poetic message with a subliminal, super-determined one.¹⁶ In concrete poetry the anagram is on occasion co-extensive or identical with the whole poem, the poem is entirely superdetermined. Whether it is advisable to speak of anagrammatism in these cases is unclear, but provided that permutation and combination of sounds and letters are considered to be formal operations upon *matériel*, as often appears to be the case in studies of anagrammatism, then anagrammatism itself may be considered a concrete technique capable of engendering varieties of concrete reference.

Permutations of print patterns reach their limit in poems like Dom Sylvester Houéard's "For Raoul Hausmann" or Haroldo de Campos' *Alea I* (*CP*, see figure 5), where the set of permutational and combinational instructions the poet has used accompanies the poem. The operational program the poet intends each reader to run is bracketed, foregrounded. Such poems are not puzzles: no one actually works out their "solutions" except perhaps the poets who compose them and a few concrete poeticsians who, in this way, are like their conventional literary counterparts, poeticsians *tout court*. When the program is printed alongside the poem, the point is not as much the ingenuity or originality of the specific program used as the fact that there is an explicit program.

The objection that this style of concrete poetry results in utter linguistic nonsense is a valid one perhaps, but the fact remains that such poems are literary. Literary structures need not be a vehicle solely for linguistic meaning, as shown by Augusto de Campos, whose "ôlho por ôlho" (*CP*, 9), a collage of photos, "conveys a message as if it were made of words."¹⁷

se
nasce
morre nasce
morre nasce morre
renasce remorre renasce
remorre renasce
remorre
re

re
desnasce
desmorre desnasce
desmorre desnasce desmorre

nascemorrenasce
morrenasce
morre
se

FIGURE 4 Haroldo de Campos

Kitasono Katué's "Plastic Poem," composed of wadded-up newspaper and other debris, is another instance of non-linguistic literary modelling. That Kitasono's work is both art object and concrete poem demonstrates that it is the appellation "poem" which instructs the reader to decode in terms of literary structures (in this case, a comment upon print itself in the form of wadded newspaper and upon the concrete technique of modelling). Pignatari pushed this logic far enough to proclaim, with Luiz Angelo Pinto, a new genre, the semiotic poem, in which all sign systems and their syntax, semantics and pragmatics are potential material (*CP*, see figure 6 for the former's example of this genre).

Kitasono and Pignatari's poems are perhaps border-line examples of poetry, but the very existence of that border should remind us that a concrete poetics must account for the full range of semiotic processes. Non-literary architectural and environmental forms (whose affinities with concrete poetry were repeatedly signaled by Gomringer, Max Bense and the Brazilian semiotic poets) have a rhetoric of their own, but we can easily detect the concrete poetical touch in the contemporary environment: on poster and billboard, as Mayakovsky foresaw, but now also on ticker, screen and tube.

In some works of concrete poetry, the rules of linear decoding are invalidated and laid aside (*cf.* Bense's "Cartesian" poem "ich/denke/ist/etwas," *ACP*). In pre-concrete poetry the discrete elements of the message are combined in a linear syntagma placed first in row, then in clusters on the

O ADMIRÁVEL o louvável o notável o adorável
 o grandioso o fabuloso o fenomenal o colossal
 o formidável o assombroso o miraculoso o maravilhoso
 o generoso o excelso o portentoso o espantoso
 o espetacular o suntuário o feerífico o feérico
 o meritíssimo o venerando o sacratíssimo o sereníssimo
 o impoluto o incorrupto o intemerato o intimorato

O ADMERDÁVEL o loucrável o nojável o adourável
 o ganglioso o flatuloso o fedormenal o culossádico
 o fornicaldo o ascumbroso o iraguloso o matravisgoso
 o degeneroso o incéstuo o pusdentoso o espasmventroso
 o espetacular o supurário o feezífero o pestífero
 o merdentíssimo o venalando o cacratíssimo o sifelíssimo
 o empaluto o encornupto o entumurado o intumorato

NE R U M
 DI V O L
 I V R E M
 L U N D O
 U N D O L
 MI V R E
 VO L U M
 NE R I D
 ME R U N
 VI L O D
 DO M U N
 V R E L I
 LU D O N
 RI M E V
 MO D U L
 VE R I N
 LO D U M
 V R E N I
 ID O L V
 RU E N M
 RE V I N
 DO L U M
 MI N D O
 LU V R E
 MU N D O
 LI V R E

*programa o leitor-operador é
 convidado a extrair outras
 variantes combinatórias
 dentro do parâmetro semântico
 dado
 as possibilidades de permutação
 entre dez letras diferentes
 duas palavras de cinco letras cada
 ascendem a 3.628.800*

FIGURE 5 Haroldo de Campos

page. When that bourgeois system (for it was assuredly bourgeois editors and scholars who established our texts) broke apart, a new spatial syntax took its place. It is the exploitation of spatial relations between *coisas-palavras* held in tension which is concrete. The physical presence or absence of marks on a field is foregrounded, their aspect as mere traces upon Mallarmé's *vide papier que la blancheur défend*. The reader, for an instant, ceases to read. Or perhaps, bearing in mind Sartre's observation that the reader is only reading when he forgets that he is, we should say that the reader of concrete poetry becomes conscious that he is reading marks on paper and then, suddenly, he is not reading.

Both the pictograph and the metaformal poem are iconic. But when concrete reference is not extrinsically, but intrinsically directed, the poem is phatic. Let us recall that the metaformal poem was ambiguous because it referred to an ideal, or what we have referred to as an ideal, its own shape. The phatic poem refers to itself, to its own presence, to its *matériel*. The phatic function reflects the material possibility of, in this case, literary meaning, its very channel or medium: concrete rhetoric, as we said, extends beyond the sphere of literature, figures like ellipsis, zeugma, chiasmus and concatenation apply to wide realms of culture. With the exception of the pictograph, of the metaform and of onomatopoeia (in which sounds rather than shapes are iconic), these effects and the concrete figures which produce them are phatic.

Now the pictograph is an image of another object. It is iconic: e.g. Bill Bissett's phallic yang embedded in a vaginal yin,¹⁸ Gomringer's "wind" or "ping-pong" (*ACP*). The phatic concrete reference of the metaphor is different; it instead momentarily interrupts the process of meaning itself. To some extent, fleeting cessation of meaning is necessary to any meaningful statement (assuming that meaning must be defined in contradistinction to non-meaning and that non-meaning marks the boundaries of meaning). De-reification of typography is commonplace in the concrete poem, as in Gomringer's "mensch hcsnem" (*ACP*) or Robert Lax's "quietteiuq" (*CP*, 119). It essentially consists of rendering a typographical convention evidently conventional for a brief moment. Simple inversion or reversal of letter shape reproduces the dyslexic effect of meaninglessness we have all experienced when accidentally holding Roman print upside-down. De-reification of this sort is concretely referential insofar as the momentary interruption of meaning itself carries meaning: it directs the reader's attention to the concrete, non-referential nature of textual *matériel*. The text itself suddenly becomes strange and alien. The reader recognizes the insignificant objectivity of the text. Concrete poems are simultaneously both sign and non-sign.

chave léxica



pelé



a pátria é a família
(com televisão) amplificada



no fim dá certo

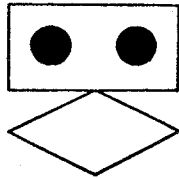
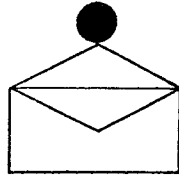
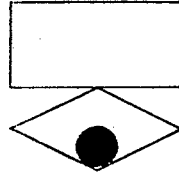


FIGURE 6 Décio Pignatari

The sorts of phatic reference are numerous. *Isoformalism*, the use of shapes in and of themselves, is the most familiar. Other forms, phonic and graphic de-reification, differ in the material of their object. Both result when permutation of characters or sounds momentarily deprives them of referential capacity and reveals them as objects in their own right, as scratches, engravings, brush-strokes, impressions, as sonic vibrations in the air. Programming lays bare the formal structure of the poem by referring explicitly to the program the author sets up for it. The metapoem, at the other pole of the pictograph, is phatic about poetry itself. The metapoem refers to the reader's concrete contact with a literary object and, ultimately, the reader's own thought processes.

But before orienting ourselves to the implications of the metapoem, we must first take up one remaining concrete aspect. Whether the specificity of the literary object is defined extrinsically or intrinsically, it not only is composed of sounds, characters, and a syntax for combining them, but also is marked or tagged as a literary object. We can never hope to settle once and for all what literature is. Nor is this even the place to pass in review theories of poeticity or literariness. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that the literariness of the literary object is at the moment of its perception an integral part of its perception. Either the literary object is in the channel through which literary objects are conveyed, and hence literary by definition and convention, or, a privileged type of formal or cognitive structure, it is a means of access to the channel itself and therefore literary *in intensio*. In either case, two distinct concrete formal operations deal with the medium of literature. The first is a venerable subject of comparative literature: the interpolation of media, the mixing of literature and other media. Kitasono Katu's "Plastic Poem," already mentioned, is a three-dimensional sculpture framed to be mounted on a wall. "Semiotic poems" include all possible sign structures. Ian Hamilton Findlay's paper art object "Earthship," his transparent blue slate "wave/rock" and his monument "Purse-Net Boat" (*CP*, 105–107) are closer to plastic art containing words than to poetry cast in the form of art objects. Augusto de Campos took inspiration from Anton Webern's *Klangfarbenmelodie* technique to compose "eis os amantes" and mused about using flashing neon lights to transmit alternating messages, as on a billboard.¹⁹ Concretists not only avail themselves of techniques drawn from other media, but also make metaliterary comment on the medium of poetry itself by demonstrating its vital connections with other forms of art.

The second formal exploitation of the medium in concrete poetry is what we could call media dubbing, the typical instance of which is the found poem. Derived from the *objet trouvé* of Dada practice, the found poem is a text not intended for literary consumption as such, but which is labeled as a poem and

thereafter functions as such. The poet attributes poeticity only once the object has been created for other purposes. Because of the tension between their objective, pre-literary structures and their "artificial" literary status, found poems are intrinsically concrete. They are often humorous as well. Alain Arias-Misson's 1966 "Sur La Beauté et la Variété des Erections" (ACP) consists of a schematic drawing of a pine tree and a surrounding constellation of Latin species names of pine, *pinus longifolia*, *pinus occidentalis*, *pinus ponderosa*, etc. Barbara Caruso's "Earth Song" consists of the seal on a jar of instant coffee which reads "fresh ground flavour fresh ground flavour" over and over.²⁰

This dubbing is a key piece of evidence in the argument about the nature of literary status. The mere attribution of literary status seems to render a text literary, media dubbing would seem to suggest: does it not then follow that texts receive their literary status by how or by whom they are used and not because of any specific inner structure? Nonetheless, though media dubbing can on occasion transmute dross into gold, not every text can become a poem. There must be some reason to dub a text a found poem. The found poet notices or uncovers something conforming to the formal criteria of poetry and he then and only then introduces it into the literary channel.

One way to conceive of the metapoem is as reverse media dubbing. A found poem does not work unless there is some tension between its dubbing and its concrete structures (a tension implicit in all titling). Dubbing initiates, precedes the actual phatic reflection back upon poetical *matériel* and, as a formal operation, has phatic reference as one of its effects. Metapoeticity, phatic reference to the medium of poetry itself, is dubbing's reverse. When the poem's *matériel* is foregrounded, the reader is left holding the wispy essence of what he imagines a poem to be. Literary meaning is de-reified; literary signs become, momentarily, things-in-themselves again, non-signs. The channel, be it the inherent structure of the poem (become opaque and meaningless), or the material social context which the reader, when he is reading, forgets – the channel surges into view in all its materiality.

The metapoem is an elusive quark which haunts all concrete modes of reference and is difficult to distinguish from other phatic forms of reference like de-reification. Yet it plays a fundamental role in concrete poetry and is the ghost in the rhetorical machine of concrete poetry. The metapoem reminds us that literature, whatever its definition, is self-reflective; that the concrete poem, however material and formal it may be, is animated by deep phatic reference to, and structured by the interruption of, reference itself.

To call concrete poetry polemical, as we did, is to acknowledge its committed nature. The concretist is, after all, implying that aspects of the text which we

have long taken for granted are the most important ones, those in greatest need of foregrounding (though such an undertaking is also reversible and provisional – what is raised once too often to the attention becomes sooner or later merely part of the background). At one point Gomringer did make sure to connect concrete poetry with the venerable main tradition of poetry. He defined concrete poetry as a “genus” of poetry and claimed repeatedly in issues of a series of concrete poetry booklets he published that “concrete poetry is the universal aesthetic of language in our times.”²¹ Most concretists share his confidence that concrete poetry is the most authentic poetic expression of this half-century.

Such an assertion, if true, is fraught with consequences both social and aesthetic. It does indeed appear that “com a revolução industrial, a palavra começa a desalar-se do objeto a que se referia.”²² Our culture, whatever the welter of its consumable articles and in spite of its prodigal proliferation of distinctions, differentiations and products, would be heading for a radical simplification of its mode of perceiving these commodities and categories.

It is as if, at the very moment analytical discourse reaches its most unbridled, albeit digital, phase, poets arise proclaiming the need to read *across* and not within or along each ramification of the semantic trees we always seem to perceive meaning in terms of.²³

That at least is one interpretation of why Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos quote Apollinaire so approvingly in their 1958 “Plano-pilôto para poesia concreta”: “Il faut que notre intelligence s’habitue à comprendre synthético-idéographiquement au lieu d’analytico-discursivement.” These same Brazilian concretists also, unwisely, make Pound’s emendations of Fenellosa their own, and assert that the composition of concrete poetry is predicated upon a syntax which is “analógica, não logico-discursivo,” one presumably comparable to the microaesthetics of Chinese writing. Both of these allusions (further evidence of the roots of concrete poetry in the tens of this century, a period of epochal dimensions), raise the possibility of a short-cut through signification, of meaning more direct and immediate than our usual articulated, mediated one. We have tried to suggest that, in this concrete poetry, this apparent short-cut is a matter of pointing to meaning itself rather than to what is meant.

Concrete poets themselves cannot avoid using the logical-discursive system of language but they suggest that, rather than reading along within the linear configurations and syntax of a text, we pause and contemplate textual meaning itself. They call for a radical simplification, first of all, a phenomenological bracketing and return *zu den Sachen selbst*, in this case print on a page, secondly, a more profound sounding of meaning as a pattern of presence against a ground of absence. The operational program of concrete poetry is first predicated upon the reader’s de-reification of the text, his

ilha brilha tranqüila

FIGURE 7 Edgard Braga

demystification of language, his awe before white space. Only afterwards does the concretist offer his reader references to an established rhetoric. Instead of using blank space to separate and to comment upon the relative importance of words, like for example Charles Olson, he isolates them against a backdrop of silence, emphasizing their non-silence.²⁴

Gomringer's spare constellations and poems like Edgard Braga's "ilha" (CP, see figure 7) offer perhaps the best opportunity of seizing the essence of the metapoem. Although traditional forms and patterns of *dispositio* like the triad and inversion and in the case of Braga's poem, a lyric impulse itself quite traditional are all present, text is reduced in these works to its barest minimum, to the minimal concrete presence which can cause a poem to be. The Brazilians trace this radical use of paginal emptiness back to Mallarmé: to his concept of non-text and to the manipulation of "espaço e recursos tipográficos como elementos substantivos da composição."²⁵ Sounds against silence, white space behind text: so many ways to speak of presence and absence. Yet it is the absence of anything other than the text, including, momentarily, the text's own meaning, which enables phatic reference and its ultimate mode, the metapoetic, to exist. Yet the metapoem is only one pole of concrete reference. Between self-contained phatic reference to poetry itself and iconic reference to other forms lie myriad types and special instances of reference.

This brief sketch of concrete literary rhetoric is therefore far from com-

plete. Much more exhaustive and precise inventory of its figures, as well as better definition of the theoretical problems raised at numerous junctures, plus some historical remarks on the context of concretism remain. These are only working points.

Université de Sherbrooke

NOTES

- 1 See Holgar A. Pausch, "Konkrete Dichtung, Notizen zur kritischem Rezeption," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, v, 1 (1978), 94-113, for a bibliographic review.
- 2 Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968) reproduces their *Plano-pilôto para poesia concreta*, pp. 70-71, and explains on page 12 their choice of this expression, drawn from Pound's *Cantos* and, in turn, from Arnaut Daniel. Cf. Hugh Kenner's version of its history, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), pp. 114-117.
- 3 These are most accessible and are thoroughly commented upon in Solt. To facilitate matters, we have confined most references to texts drawn from her anthology, hereafter *CP*, followed by illustration number, and from Emmett Williams (ed), *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), hereafter *ACP*, unpaginated but in alphabetical order.
- 4 From Max Bense's manifesto in *CP*, pp. 73-74. When quoting material from concrete poems, often in lieu of a title, we have not been able to reproduce all their concrete, spatial features. Our exempla should therefore be thought of as, precisely, abstract renditions of concrete work, something from which a feature has been abstracted.
- 5 *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 25.
- 6 We leave aside the question of the diverse kinds of characters possible, pictographs, ideographs, determinatives and syllabic signs, consonantal, diphthongal or vocal signs, all of which were present in what is presumably the first writing, ancient Sumerian. See René Etiemble, *L'écriture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 23. The story according to which Sumerian is the first human activity (and a business invention to boot!) is interesting here insofar as the invention of writing was the first instance of concrete reference. The wedge-marks in clay of proto-cuneiform were signs, but were so novel that a sense of arbitrariness must have remained attached to them. Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "The Earliest Precursor of Writing," *Scientific American*, 238, 6 (June 1978), 50-59.
- 7 Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin, *Essays on the Language of Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 298-304. Malinowsky, discoursing upon the now legendary Trobriand Islanders, defines the phatic as follows: "Language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought," rather as "affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things." ("The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," in C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 9th ed., 1953, pp. 313-315.)
- 8 Robert Lax has a poem "For Ad Reinhardt" in Ronald Gross and George Quasha, *Open Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968). It consists of *blue* and *black*. Some of Reinhardt's minimal features are marked with a tinge of blue, but Lax's translation of this pictorial opposition simplifies it and distorts a secondary distinction into a primary one.
- 9 Umberto Eco's critique of iconism notwithstanding, it is sufficient for our purposes to recall that whatever the nature of iconicity, the form of reference known by that name does exist.

- The concrete poem is iconic when it can be recognized as a representation of something else, falling leaves, an altar, waving in wind. Iconism as demonstrated by Alfred Liede in his encyclopaedic *Dichtung als Spiel* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), is one of the ludic resources of *technopaïgna*, play poems, and has been so since the Greeks.
- 10 E.g., the EVTE, the *Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble*, Center for Experimental Music, University of California at San Diego.
 - 11 Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), pp. 155–201, for digital/analog relations; Irene Portis Winner and Thomas G. Winner, "The Semiotics of Cultural Texts," *Semiotica*, 18 (1976), 101–154, for the notions of discrete and indiscrete, primary and secondary texts. The latter monograph is largely a résumé of Moscow and Tartu semioticians.
 - 12 But even the characters of Japanese and Chinese are affected by this paradox, e.g., the concrete poems by Hiro Kamimura and Kitasono Katué (*ACP*). The tradition in which the poet and calligrapher have equal importance is intimately related to concrete poetry. The calligraphic sign, especially as developed in the Sung and Ming Dynasties, not only refers to a meaning, but has an aesthetic quality of its own. Shen C. Y. Fu, *Traces of the Brush: Studies in Chinese Calligraphy* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1977).
 - 13 An example taken from Michael Riffaterre, "Semantic Overdetermination in Poetry," *PTL*, 2 (January 1977), 2.
 - 14 We have been talking as if this were a poem in English and not in Portuguese, but these connotations also exist in the original. For a comparative example of the techniques and difficulties of translating concrete poetry, see the following two translations of Augusto de Campos' "eis os amantes," *CP*, p. 2 and *ACP*.
 - 15 *CP*, p. 254.
 - 16 Ferdinand de Saussurè is credited with the first systematic study of Anagrammatism. Apart from Jean Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), see Anthony L. Johnson, "Anagrammatism in Poetry; Theoretical Preliminaries," *PTL*, 2 (January 1977), 89–118, and the entire issue of *Semiotext(e)*, II, 1 (Spring 1975) on "Saussure's Anagrams."
 - 17 *CP*, p. 15.
 - 18 *Ellipse*, 17 (1975), 123.
 - 19 *CP*, p. 8. The potential application of advertising technique to concrete poetry is only slightly explored as of this date, but would be of great importance to concrete rhetoric.
 - 20 *Ellipse*, 17 (1975), 99. Other found poems may be found in John Robert Colombo's "Found Anthology" in Gross and Quasha, *Open Poetry*.
 - 21 *CP*, p. 10.
 - 22 Augusto de Campos et al., *Teoria da Poesia Concreta* (São Paulo: Invenção, 1965).
 - 23 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the pervasive nature of these "trees" in their *Rhizome* (Paris: Minuit, 1976), pp. 12–19.
 - 24 Olson's desire to encode a rhetoric of breath into typographical space is intriguing, but not of the same nature as the concrete poets. See Donald Allen, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (New York: Grove, 1973).
 - 25 *CP*, p. 71.