

Two Poetics, Two Moments

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This essay will examine the emerging poetry of the Brazilian cultural and political scene at two specific moments, both identified as moments of collapse, or at least decline, in the freedom and quality of artistic production. This is the case of *marginal poetry*—produced in the 1970s during the toughest period of the military dictatorship—and of a *new aesthetics of rigor*, as the new poetry of the 1990s has been called. The latter is produced under the most recent form of dictatorship imposed by the logic of consumption and the processes of globalization. I will begin by discussing the so-called marginal poetry that, taking into account the negative reception of this generation of poets at their own time, paradoxically entered into the canon as the expression *par excellence* of 1970s poetics in Brazil.

What we now call marginal poetry was a kind of cultural event or, better yet, a poetic “outbreak” (to avoid the word *movement*, which implies a homogeneous and programmatic project) around 1972-73 that had a significant impact on the cultural environment dominated by silence, which had been dictated by censorship and by the violence of military repression in Brazil. This poetry was characterized by structural informality, not only in terms of a textual production marked by colloquial and witty expression, but also in terms of the manner in which these authors conceived an artisan’s production and the independent distribution of new and creative books of poetry.

The name marginal—ambiguous from the start—oscillated between an inexhaustible series of meanings: marginal to the canon, marginal to the

editorial market, marginal to the political life of the country. A first sign of the novelty of this production was the unexpected way that it succeeded in mobilizing a large young audience around poetry. This group, until then more linked to music, film, concerts, and cartoons, represented an audience very different from the traditional consumer of literature. This phenomenon of intense mobilization around poetry, as well as being quantitatively significant, introduced some innovations of style and *performance* to the Republic of Letters.

Marginal poetry showed signs of its ambivalence from the very beginning. It emerged as a “light” and unpretentious poetry, but one that brought a serious and relevant issue to the fore: the *ethos* of a generation traumatized by the limitations imposed upon its social experience and by the restriction of its access to information and freedom of expression by the violent pressure of censorship and the repressive mechanisms developed during the period of military dictatorship. This is certainly one of the most salient aspects of this poetry that became one of the most striking records of the testimony of the generation known as the AI5.¹

The telling of the story and of the experience of this generation, whose distinctive feature was precisely that of being restricted from narrating their own stories, emerges in each “poem-joke” (“*poema-piada*”), in each improvisation, in each rhyme contained in these texts. In this way, marginal poems reveal a sharp sensitivity in making reference to—with varying clarity and literary skill—the day-to-day of the political moment that these poets lived. These poems frequently experimented with the use of allegory as a tool to enable reference to the *status quo*, as Antônio Carlos de Brito does in “Aquarela” (“Watercolor”):

The body on the rack
 is an agonizing bird
 exhausted from its own shrieking.
 Ransacked entrails
 initiate the
 countdown.
 Blood on the floor
 dilutes into shades
 that the breeze kisses and shakes:
 the green—of our forests
 the yellow—of our gold
 the blue—of our sky

the white the black the black.

Or poems that convey the dry and unusual traits of Francisco Alvim, as in “Aquela Tarde” (“That Afternoon”):

They told me he had died the evening before.
That he had been taken prisoner, tortured.
That he had died in the Military Hospital. The
burial would be that afternoon.
(a priest chose the place for the tribune.
It seemed he was going to speak. He didn't.
Mother and sister cried.)

Among the youngest group, the most common approach was the description or account of apparently insignificant facts that denounced the feeling of paranoia permeating Brazilian daily life after 1968. Chacal describes this in a fragment of the “epic poem” *Orlando Takapau*:

Sitting and student-like, Orlando contemplated the
absurd and the teacher's ass. All of a sudden—
footsteps in the hall behind the closed door.
“were they police or late students?”
Taka passed the woman with chalk and opened the door.
The informer, ears glued to the door
took off. His swastika fell to
the floor. Orlando understood the incident and thought nothing
walked down the staircase and never went back.
For what?

Another expression of the “poetics of suffocation” (“*poética do sufoco*”)—as marginal poetry was also called—can be found in aggressive and performative poems such as those by Wally Salomão. He wrote a book of hybrid style—part poetry, part prose, part drama, part music—suggestively named *Me Segura que eu Vou Dar um Troço* (*Control Me, I'm Going to Freak Out*), which became a hit at the time.

These poets, determined not to allow “silence” to reign, defined a poetry with strong “anti-literary” characteristics that clashed with the erudite experimentalism of the avant-garde of the moment. A poetic style that, above

all, seemed determined to “play” with the prevailing norms of literary quality, the hermeneutic depth of the poetic text, as well as that of a reader qualified to fully appreciate the poem and its subtexts.

In this way, with only one gesture, the marginal poets questioned literary criticism and literary institutions by offering a colloquial, disposable, and biodegradable poetry that didn't seem concerned with the permanence of its production nor with the recognition of a criticism informed by the canonical standards of literary historiography. Conversely, they defined their position by not expressing any literary or political project and by presenting themselves as clearly non-programmatic, contradicting formal schools and approaches. Through the irreverent and ironic use of poetic language, the artifice created for its dissemination, and the assertion of a practice outside of the system, in reality, marginal poets seemed to be searching for a radical fusion of art and life. This behavior, along with the general climate of transgression that set the tone of this poetry, inevitably resulted in the questioning of the very notion of literary value. As a consequence, new frontiers opened into not only the experimentation with a variety of styles and new fields of expression unthinkable until then, but also into the no less significant plurality of projects as well as political and cultural perspectives in the understanding of poetry.

Without a doubt, along with the resistance that it offered to the cultural void generated by censorship and repression, the rupture of paradigms that happened at this time is the greatest literary contribution of marginal poetry, decisively reflecting upon poetry of the 1990s. The development of this new poetry—a poetry known for bearing the marks of a no less radical dictatorship, the dictatorship of the market—is very indebted to marginal poetry. If in the 1970s young poets confronted the limits imposed by censorship, today poets find themselves in a situation dominated by the logic of an extremely competitive cultural market guided by an accelerated process of massification, transnationalization, and specialization in the production and commercialization of its products. In other words, a new game of power has arisen that requires new strategies of production.

Nevertheless, the poet of the 1990s seeks to face the new challenges. His or her profile is one of a lettered poet that invests, above all, in the recovery of formal and technical expertise in literary work, clearly differentiating him or herself from the antiestablishment convictions of the generation of marginal poets. However, like every dictatorship, the dictatorship of

consumption has its own gaps. If, from a distance, contemporary poetic production seems fairly unoriginal, a little amorphous, with few apparent innovations, at the same time a surprising plurality of voices impresses the reader. This is the first significant difference of this poetry.

The presence of women on the literary scene, which had been one of the *pièces de resistance* of the last decade, now reflects definitive growth that translates into near equivalence between men and women on the poetry market. Black poetry can also be noticed more clearly in the current context. A new trait common to both groups, introduced decisively by the production of the 1990s, is a previously unprecedented experimental freedom that differs substantially from the previous generation's production. In this earlier poetry, the presence of a lyricism committed to and engaged with the affirmation of identity was the thematic and formal *leitmotif* of poetry written by women and black Brazilians. Recent examples, including the poets Cláudia Roquette-Pinto, Lu Menezes, Joseli Vianna, Vivian Kogut, and many others attest to the current work in women's poetry and the different and creative outcomes resulting from the broadening of movements attained through the political and poetic struggle of feminists during the previous period.

Most significantly, the pluralistic panorama of 1990s opened spaces definitively for some voices that had not found much possibility for expression in previous decades. Here I call attention to the emergence of an erudite and self-ironic sensitivity assumed as Jewish (a cultural assertion curiously rare in Brazil) and, very particularly, to the aggressive and original presence of "gay outing" in the poetry of the 1990s. In this case, these are some of our best and most representative new poets, including Nelson Ascher, Antonio Cicero, and Valdo Mota, among others.

However, in reality the greatest surprise in the Brazilian poetic panorama of the end of the millenium is the growing literary presence of poets emerging from peripheral and suburban low-income neighborhoods and the intensification of editorial activity in *favelas* and poorer residential communities. In other words, for the first time, the poor poet is somewhat attaining a chance and a voice. During the last decade, numerous collections were published in Rio de Janeiro, including the *Antologia de Poetas da Baixada Fluminense (Anthology of Poets from the Baixada Fluminense)* (RioArte), *Tem Poeta no Morro (There are Poets in the Favela)*, (Federação das Associações de Favelas do Estado do Rio de Janeiro), *Poetas do Vidigal (Poets from Vidigal)* and the book *Fora de Perigo (Out of Danger)*, by José Alberto

Moreira da Silva, which features multimedia poetry. In 1992, the anthology *Poetas do Araguaia* [*Poets from Araguaia*] and *Ausência em Falso* [*Mistaken Absence*] introduced alternatives for rethinking the Brazil of the landless (“*sem-terra*”).

The strategies of production chosen by the poetry of the 1990s also merit attention. Poetry has benefited from the establishment of small publishing houses using the tools offered by new technologies of digital reproduction, allowing the printing of editions with a small number of copies at reasonable prices. It has also taken advantage of the unexpected popularity of collections of poetry on CD, like the series *Poesia Falada* (*Spoken Poetry*) by the producer Paulinho Lima, *A Voz do Poeta* (*The Poet's Voice*) by the Drum label, and the production of poetry CDs by the larger recording companies including Som Livre and Leblon Records. Accompanying this success, live poetry readings also became common. For example, those by Maria Bethânia and Chico Buarque often fill theatres and cultural arenas. Interesting and odd cases remain, such as the Elisa Lucinda phenomenon, mixing poetry, theater, and “pocket-show”² in a format until recently unthinkable for literature, that of poetry as mass consumption, or poetry as show business.

It could be said that poetry is beginning to lean in the direction of a culturalization or an unprecedented amplification of its breadth of consumption—and even of its very social function—through the opening of non-formal cultural spaces and the emergence of new social and behavioral habits.

The decisive effect of the process of eroding borders between high (or elite) culture and low (or mass or popular) culture on the textuality of 1990s literature is also very important to and characteristic of this moment. These divisions were, *par excellence*, a sign of culture during the rise of modernity. In the case of 1990s poetry, the view of this process often becomes crystal clear. In fact, the formation of a hybrid texture can be seen in this poetic production in which it is no longer possible to distinguish a real imbalance between elite and mass forms of artistic expression or between cultures of different media. The poem-clip, tri-dimensional video-poetry, or other experiments such as the “*photonouvellevague*,” a genre created by Filipe Nepomuceno, are eloquent evidence of this development. The “*photonouvellevague*,” in addition to continuously slipping between Spanish and Portuguese, presents a mixed form of the comic strip, the printed

photographic soap opera, the fragmentation of contact prints, written words, and a soundtrack with instrumental sound and poetry reading.

It is also important to emphasize that this new experimental texture of 1990s poetry presents very unique characteristics of structural hybridization that can be confused with neither the *avant-garde's* programmatic procedures of rejecting the "purity" of literary language through the use of themes and techniques made available by new media nor the creativity of the graphic improvisations of the alternative poetry of the 1970s.

However, this is still not the most polemic point of this new poetry. The incontestable presence of a total heterogeneity in experimentation and an uncommitted and almost cynical adherence to any given style, ideology, or school, provokes a disconcerting reaction from traditional criticism, which is used to approaching poetic movements in search of a coherent aesthetic or political project. Meanwhile, the new poets diagnose this phenomenon with the utmost ease as the practice of a "literature of invention." They understand literature of invention as a "literature that seeks language in certain materials."³ *Material*, in this case, would be a repertoire that indiscriminately includes long verse and short verse, metaphor and metonymy, surrealistic language and realistic language; all are equivalent, available, and equally employable as a function of the poet's greater or lesser skill.

Instead of defining paths, the 1990s poet displays only two commitments: first, the expansion of his or her informational inventory and, second, the acquisition of a secure command of meter, prosody, and new technologies, or, in other words, of his or her expressional resources, making these commitments the stamp and the advance of the literature of the 1990s. The new is identified with the assertion of a competent performance, with originality in articulation, and with experimental and creative reinvention of literary tradition. Substantially different from previous logics, in this one it becomes difficult to identify a political or ideological trend, or at least a project that might serve as a parameter for establishing the values that inform the production.

In addition, the criteria for gauging the quality of a poem change axis: they slip from the consideration of the presence of a varying critical or innovative value towards the presence of the ability to articulate opposing processes and to expand the repertoire of references to be re-deployed or even "cloned" by the new poet. The logic of influences in an author's work becomes chaotic, and often, almost museological, revealing clear symptoms

of the emergence of new forms of recodification of the past in the present as an axis of a post-modern temporality. This recodification, in the case of 1990s poetry, is not limited to taking inventory of or even experimenting with the new links between literary schools and styles. Above all, it comprises a critical exercise of re-semanticization and of aesthetic creation. Gaps open for the new poets' invention and intervention precisely within this interstice.

In the midst of growing political and aesthetic neo-conservatism, today a literary production emerges, largely in the field of poetry, seeking to question, more than to explore, cultural codes, and to explore, more than to disguise, political and social affiliations. This poetry is less concerned with aesthetic rigor in itself and more invested in the search for strategies to enable critical and innovative positions in the face of the challenges of the new *Zeitgeist*. It is a poetry that begins to stake out its position in the small space that is available today for artistic creation and for the exercise of a conceivable political imagination.

Notes

¹ AI5: abbreviation for the Institutional Act 5 implemented in Brazil on December 13, 1968, eliminating freedom of speech and institutionalizing censorship.

² A sort of performance that has contributed to the dissemination of 1990s poetry, which includes presentations, and poetry readings in small theaters or halls. (Translator's note)

³ A definition proposed by Carlito Azevedo in a debate held at Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro. He is one of the most important poets of the 1990s. Currently, he is editor of the journal *Inimigo Rumor* (Sette Letras).

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