

PO-EX: The poetic as an event under the night of the Salazarist fascism in Portugal

PO-EX: a poética como acontecimento sob a noite que o fascismo salazarista impôs a Portugal¹

Edwar de Alencar Castelo Branco*

RESUMO

O ano de 2014 assinala o quadragésimo aniversário da Revolução dos Cravos, acontecimento que pôs fim ao Estado Novo Salazarista, uma das mais longevas ditaduras de toda a Europa Ocidental. A pretexto dessa efeméride, o artigo procura tomar o PO-EX – movimento literário experimental que renovou a poesia portuguesa entre as décadas de 1960 e 1970 – como signo de uma época em que a linguagem, não apenas em Portugal mas em boa parte do mundo, tornou-se um problema de ordem histórica. Teoricamente o artigo é suportado pela ideia de que a linguagem constitui um dos lugares de acontecimento da história, enquanto do ponto de vista empírico o trabalho se apropria, basicamente, de textos teóricos e de documentos da Poesia Experimental Portuguesa. Palavras-chave: Portugal; ditadura; poesia experimental.

ABSTRACT

The year 2014 marks the 40th anniversary of the *Carnation Revolution* an event that ends with the Salazarist dictatorship in Portugal, one of the more long-lasting ones in Western Europe. Having as a pretext this ephemeris, the article seeks to understand the “PO-EX” – a literary movement that renewed the Portuguese Poetry between the years 1960’s and 1970’s – as sign of a time in which the language, not only in Portugal but in a great part of the world, became a problem of historical order. From a theoretical point of view this work is supported by the idea that language is one of the places where history happens, while from an empirical point of view, this work draws, basically, on theoretical texts and documents from Portuguese Experimental Poetry. Keywords: Portugal; dictatorships; experimental poetry.

* Universidade Federal do Piauí. Productivity in Research Scholarship from CNPq. edwar2005@uol.com.br

INTRODUCTION – EVERY REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS REQUIRES A NEW SEMANTIC FIELD

Portuguese Experimental Poetry should be interpreted as a sign of a definitive, new path which people were trying to open in the cultural apathy of the night Salazar imposed on the country.

E. M. de Melo e Castro, 1981

The question is to think about the esthetics of Portuguese Experimental Poetry as an event. It is no longer about Salazar's dictatorship in Portugal and making a historiographic effort to appropriate political happenings and, through narrative, crystallize them into historical facts. It is rather to propose that, beyond this huge umbrella – the Portuguese *Estado Novo* dictatorship – under which the events that would ferment the economy of historical facts were accumulated, lie, still silenced, relevant micrological aspects of the history of this long night that hovered over Portugal.

Thus, at least three folds are proposed to approach the topic: the first of them concerns the relatively obvious fact that during the period between 1933 and 1974 Portugal underwent one of the longest dictatorships in Western Europe. During this time and within the scope of the political history of the country shone the figure of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, president of the Council of Ministers from 1932 to 1968. From this would result the term “salazarismo”. The second fold is situated in the heart of the historians' workshop, concerning the statute of historical knowledge. As I proposed in a previous study (Castelo Branco, 2007), the event – differently from the fact – is surprising, random, chaotic and indeterminate, and it can only be translated into an historical fact because of a necessary deficiency of its load as an event. This is because, in this opinion, the narrated fact does not correspond – and cannot correspond – to the event insofar as it only translates, in a narrative, a representation of what took place. Finally, concerning what constitutes most of the empirical resources appropriated by this work, it is a matter of taking the PO-EX – a literary movement that occurred in Portugal precisely under the “cultural apathy of the night Salazar imposed on the country” (Castro, 1981, p.10) – as a sign of an era when language in general and poetic language – for the specific case of this study – became a socio-historical problem.

It is from within this historical framework that I propose to study poetics as an event. On doing this based on a historical appropriation of Portuguese

Experimental Poetry, I am taking PO-EX as the *coming thought* of Lusitanian literature in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not to reduce the events of Portuguese literature during the period to Experimental Poetry, but simply to propose, based on a philosophy of difference (Deleuze, 1988), that PO-EX be situated as a *beginning*, a *vanishing point* in relation to a Portuguese literary tradition. In this essentially historical sense, Portuguese poetic experimentalism, despite Salazar's dictatorship, could be a *thought without image*, insofar as it emerged without any commitment to a possible evolutionary line of the Portuguese literary culture, which allowed it to establish itself as a rhizome that was out of tune in relation to an arborescent tradition that has flourished in literary criticism and affected the history of literature in Portugal and elsewhere.

Based on this assumption, Portuguese Experimental Poetry – and in a broader sense Experimental Poetry in general – has always considered itself a *poep Praxis*, essentially visual and deliberately destabilizing both the supports and the conventional signs of poetry. It is this aspect that, historically, has established it as a *thought without image*. In the sense in which it is being used by this work, the thought without image is, according to the previously quoted Deleuze, inopportune and timeless, but not eternal. It corresponds to the moment when, spreading rhizomatically, the thought problematizes a system of representation from the interior of which it emerges like a breach, a crack that destabilizes that system, not because it collides against it, but rather because it exists taking no notice of it, uncommitted to its assumptions. This rootless inopportune thinking, manumitted from an assumed *beginning*, may then be the thinking of difference.

Last – but not least – Portuguese Experimental Poetry, despite the historical specificities of Portugal, emerged as part of a broader historical process, international and intercontinental, which involves the historical emergence of the time when, in the already established saying of McLuhan & Fiore (1968, p.63), *we now live in a Global Village*. And this global village in which we all live now would see not only the establishment of the means of communication (*media*) as an extension of man, but also the popularization, according to the same authors, of the idea that *all new media are extensions of some human faculty*. If the new media – and experimental poetry in its different and multiple supports is one of these new media – are extensions of some human faculty, one might think about PO-EX both as an aspect of the *orgiastic fruition of instinct*, in the sense of Marcuse (1975), and as something that has its roots in the deepest layers of meaning and that touches the life of instincts, of passions and of people's aspirations. PO-EX, in this sense, shines as poetry – an

esthetic abstraction expressed through the signs of the spoken and/or written language – and as a practice – a methodical research through which the very signs of language are complicated in an effort to brush against other tongues – not necessarily other languages – in the language of Luís de Camões, converting the altruistic maxim “my homeland is my language” (Pessoa, 1982, vol. I, pp.16-17) into that other one, in tune with the *Global Village*, that invites us to let “the Portugals die of starvation” (Veloso, 1984).

In these introductory notes, however, it is important to highlight that when one does a historical appropriation of PO-EX and does it taking into account a marked aspect of the political history of Portugal – the long lasting dictatorship of Salazar – one is not thinking only or mainly about this grandiose argument of the dictatorship, but the idea that in the vicinity of marked facts such as Salazar’s dictatorship, whose interest, from the historical perspective, often overshadows other events, reducing everything to the logic of its explanation, other important events are fermenting which, when understood, can also refer to alternative aspects of the history of Portugal. On the other hand, if one takes Portuguese Experimental Poetry as a *beginning*, an effraction, viz. a *vanishing point* in relation to the Portuguese literary tradition, one is proposing that the literary movements during the period under study are part of the historical universe in which the word in itself has become a historical problem.

And by saying that the *word* has become a historical problem one is both bringing into the historians’ workshop the theoretical challenges that began to people the domains of History beginning with the *linguistic turn* and what resulted from it for our field, such as the *cultural turn*, for instance, and reflecting an empiria that confirms that, at least from the 1960s on and especially after the shocks provoked by events such as the *French barricades* – the famous student uprising in France in 1968 – it would no longer be possible to talk of politics and of power without adding to this talk the matter of language as something that configures desires, senses and objects. An example of this historical reference is the following fragment by Mustapha Khayati, a Moroccan student, and friend and collaborator of Guy Debord, who was one of the precursors of the aforementioned French barricades:

It is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects it, without laying bare its true nature. As the “social truth” of power is permanent falsification, language is its permanent guarantee and the Dictionary its universal reference. Every revolutionary praxis has felt the need for

a new semantic field and for expressing a new truth; from the Encyclopédistes to the Polish intellectuals' critique of Stalinist "wooden language" in 1956, this demand has continually been asserted. Because language is the house of power, the refuge of its police violence. Any dialogue with power is violence, whether passively suffered or actively provoked. When power wants to avoid resorting to its material arms, it relies on language to guard the oppressive order. This collaboration is in fact the most natural expression of all power (Khayati, 1966, p.32).

This is the key issue to understand and situate the PO-EX within the sphere of the history of Portuguese politics under Salazar: *every revolutionary praxis has felt the need for a new semantic field and for expressing a new truth*. Hence, within the historical context that substantiated the crisis and overcoming of the Salazar dictatorship, despite the importance and need to understand the actions of the International and State Defense Police [PIDE – Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado], Salazar's repression agency that was similar to the DOI-Codis in Brazil, and also the counter-actions of student effervescence, such as those of the Popular Action Front [FAP – Frente Ação Popular] of the Portuguese Marxist-Leninist Committee [CMLP – Comitê Marxista-Leninista Português] – both of them sub-apparatuses of the Portuguese Communist Party [PCP – Partido Comunista Português] – and of the PCP itself, besides, obviously, the events that marked the Ongoing Revolutionary Process [PREC – Processo Revolucionário em Curso] after April 25, it is also necessary to make an effort to understand historically this new semantics that, in Salazar's Portugal, sought to express a new truth, inopportune and uncommitted to tradition.

The empirical data that support this study were collected between September 2013 and February 2014 basically from four collections of documents in Portugal: the Lisbon University System of Libraries, the National Library of Portugal, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Institute of National Archives of the Tombo Tower, all of them in Lisbon. From the first collection, the works appropriated were specially those that would help support the work theoretically, reflecting both on how Portuguese researchers have approached the topic and the establishment, within Portuguese academic studies, of a theoretical field that could be called Sociology of Arts and Culture. At the Portuguese National Library it was possible to access work ranging from the first *Cadernos de Poesia Experimental* to the estate of Ana Hatherly, while at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation the research focused mainly on the journal *Colóquio Letras*, a major periodical that has circulated every four

months without interruption since 1971. The less systematic consultation was done at the Tombo Tower, where so far only the File on “Censura e suspensão do *Jornal Fundão*” [Censorship and Suspension of the *Fundão* Newspaper] from the Antonio Oliveira Salazar Archive (AOS) (AOS) was consulted.²

EITHER POETRY OR DEATH: USING LANGUAGE TO CHALLENGE
THE CURRENT IDEOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC SITUATION

*Its common denominator is yelling. Finally the poetry of
YELLING!*

António Aragão, 1980

The phrase “poetry or death”, which is the title of this section, appeared initially in a graffiti sprayed on the back of a traffic sign in Lisbon. Undated, the image was to become part of the collection with which Ana Hatherly, in the mid-1970s, performed the experiment “Descolagens da Cidade” [“Décollages of the City”]; Finally, already appropriated by the Portuguese experimentalists, the phrase – together with the image – constituted the opening text of the catalogue of the “Exposição de Poesia Experimental Portuguesa” [Exhibition of Portuguese Experimental Poetry] held in 1980 in the rooms of the National Gallery of Modern Art in Belém, a Lisbon area, famous both for its fold-over pies and for its Tower, and for being one of the places on which the large demonstration of Portuguese workers and students often converge in the city.



Figure 1 – Either poetry or death. In:
Catálogo PO.EX.80, 1980, pp.13-14.

A kind of “inventory” of Portuguese poetic experimentalism, the above-mentioned exhibition synthesized, in terms of PO-EX, the events of the two previous decades and consequently reflected the historical conditions from which emerged the movement: a moment in which the subjects, especially groups of youths living in big cities such as Lisbon and Porto, discovered the limits of language, the equivocity of meaning and the interval between the word and the thing. Ultimately one might say that PO-EX is part of a historical context in which a legitimation crisis – a crisis of representation, for cultural studies – was at the center of the forms through which the Portuguese had to know and recognize the world.

This is, from the historical point of view, a very relevant issue to understand PO-EX: the young poets who substantiated the movement had to deal on the one hand with a growing complexification of the world, which required excavating new modalities of artistic expression, while on the other hand they had to face the repressive fury of a fascist tradition that extrapolated the sphere of the Salazarist State and even included literary criticism, which was averse or indifferent to novelty. They then had to use the word as a weapon, since they already knew that the senses and meanings are not mere results of the ties between words and things, but social productions, insofar as words not only say things, but produce meanings and effects of truth. Discourse, as shown by Foucault (2008), is not only the record or reflection of objects that come before them, but a set of practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.

In circumstantial, i.e. contextual terms, concerning the Structure of Political Opportunity [EOP – Estrutura de Oportunidade Política], it is recorded that between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s the Salazarist New State was to undergo its greatest crisis before the military coup of April 25, 1974. Externally, the Colonial War for the liberation of Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique favored the rise, even within the regime itself, of a growing criticism of Salazar’s dictatorship, while internally the “Delgado Crisis”, as the oppositionist presidential candidacy of General Humberto Delgado in 1958 became known, was reconfiguring Portuguese politics. This candidacy, articulating around itself the support of student effervescence and part of the leftist militants, was to have a devastating effect on Salazar’s dictatorship, requiring a resurgence of the regime which throughout the 1960s tended to become increasingly harsh, more violent and more intransigent.

At this time of crisis – which is political but also a crisis of representation, i.e. of meaning – the Portuguese nation was becoming frayed, because it was no longer a matter of thinking about it in terms of itself, but of seeing it as Babel-like, inside a picture where language, experience and politics become twisted together. After all, what language is one talking about when referring to Portugal between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s? If I like to feel my tongue brush against the tongue of Luis de Camões in the already mentioned sense of Caetano Veloso, whither should I take this taste of mine? To the closed formula that institutes the normative – and in a sense coercive – rules of the Portuguese grammar or rather to that place where I can leave the Portugals to die of hunger while I devote myself orgiastically to the multiple creole dialects that invert the navigators’ route and, riding the Colonial War, invade from overseas, with shouts of freedom, the former unitary Portugal, which was identical to itself? This question, apparently irrelevant in terms of a classical approach to Portuguese politics, is relevant for this study, because it allows thinking historically about the fraying of the Portuguese nation when faced with the crisis of the old identities that articulated the Portuguese with reality, as much as it favors the classification of the PO-EX under the historical circumstances of its emergence: internal cultural apathy, resulting from the increased closing of Salazar’s dictatorship, in friction against exciting external events. Living in Babel and thus having to experience the multiplicity of the language, the Portuguese experimentalists proposed supplanting the finite of communication by offering the plurivalent infinite of forms. Instead of using poetics to, in a closed form, provide the already read text, they chose to “give to read” in the most literal sense, demolishing the assumptions of the sign, hollowing it out. Giving to read, in the sense that we want to obtain here, means “to give the words without at the same time giving what the words say...” (Larrosa, 2004, p.20). The visual poem “pró-Acto” by António Aragão, highlighting the soldier and the rifle, is a good example of the experimental effort to disrupt the relationship between signifier and signified based on an exercise of hollowing out the sign in poetic communication, liquefying and rendering imprecise, at the origin, the communication which is given to read:



Figure 2 – pró-ACTO. Visual poem by António Aragão.
In: Catálogo PO.EX.80, 1980, p.6.

This experimental effort to hollow out the sign and then “give to read” was to become another conspicuous mark of PO-EX. This mark, superposed on poetic creation, reveals a propos of Salazarist Portugal the approach of politics to art. Or, in other words, the expansion of the paths of politics and the amplification of the polyphony typical of moments such as the one Portugal was then going through, marked, as said, by a growing identity crisis that, in turn, posed questions such as the revival of the debate on the origin and margins of the nation, the state policies – or their absence – for culture, the country’s position in the context of the European and world politics, etc. – all of this was putting into context the historical picture within which PO-EX would lodge. For the experimental vanguards, art and existence should be superposed, and it is no longer possible to assume an esthetic man who would be the Other of the political man. This historical trait in turn would favor the emergence, among sectors of Portuguese society, of a continuous questioning of the dominant culture. When they proclaimed “either poetry or death”, these Portuguese social sectors involved in the doing of poetry would use the tensioning of language and the search for new modalities of communication as strategies to intervene in reality. And in performing this intervention “giving to read”, as Aragão’s transcript points out, in PO-EX, in terms of language as a mainstay of cultural creation, what prevailed was the wish to open all doors:

The pontificating message has ended. The form, closed in a definitive, univocally composed organization, has disappeared. There is an inconceivable wish to open all doors. Our eyes hear the sound of our steps. The logical order goes counter to

the disorder of imagination. Eurhythmia opposes symmetry. The baroque “open form” replaces classical centralism. The finite of communication is muted by the plurivalent infinite of the forms. And because of this ambiguity or unpredictability there is added information and this is directly proportional to the entropy itself, precisely because information is a function of the improbability of the message received. The game increases. It rises always. It grows. Its consequences are, so to say, unpredictable [because] *indeed the sacrifice of symbol itself occurs ...* This significant, reduced and formalistic side disappears, this side that makes life run like a river, a huge stone embody purity or a branch be transfigured into an arm. (Aragão, 1965; emphasis added)

In the strictly political field this effort at hollowing out the sign that tries to point to the “plurivalent infinite of forms” collided with the classical modalities of articulating the artistic-cultural field with the field of political activism in Portugal. As in other dictatorial contexts, in Salazarist Portugal the vanguard of antifascist activism did not actually pertain to the people – a word that, as one knows, is rather an abstract and idealistic representation of the political subjects – but to a left-wing nobiliarchy that tends to dominate and control the artistic-cultural production opposed to the regime. The fragment below, part of the memoirs of an ex-activist of the PCP, favors the understanding of the role and strategies of the Party in formatting an involved artistic field:

At the end of 1958 I went to the PCP to join the party as a continuation of contacts I had had with the “Socialist Action” group through painter Nikias Skapinakis, who had talked to me after General Delgado’s presidential campaign in which we had participated, spontaneously, because our homes were close to each other ... A short while after I talked with Mário Henrique Leiria, I was then contacted by Viriato Camilo, the brother-in-law of Pepe Blanco, all of them then already connected to the theater, mainly amateur theater. *From then on Viriato took care of me in the party.* A short while after this, possibly in 1959, I went from a “sympathizer” to a “militant” of the PCP and began to participate regularly in clandestine meetings, held at intervals and extremely compartmented for conspiratory reasons, where, however, the activities of the PCP were being coordinated in a large part of the so-called “intellectual sector”. *I began to be controlled by a comrade who presented himself as “Silva”, and I never got to know who he was.* (Cabral, 2013, p.40; emphasis added)

This is one of the issues that make PO-EX an effraction, a displacement in relation to macropolitics. The Portuguese experimentalists were not be

indifferent to the dictatorship nor failed to try to overcome it. But their combat strategies would not involve the more conventional forms of militancy, and, considering the already mentioned wish to open all doors, the idea of a controller – which, as seen, was dear to the Communist militancy – was inconceivable. The arena of the experimentalists, the venue of experimentation of an “experimenting and inopportune freedom”, always unfinished and always coming, would essentially be the language. This is because they already understood, it should be repeated, that “every revolutionary praxis has felt the need for a new semantic field and for expressing a new truth”, and also that “it is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects”. This understanding is what led the experimentalists to make an effort to displace the grandiose policy of the parties, elections, workers’ union assemblies, etc. to the micrology of poetic research turned towards finding new modalities of communication. Instead of a *political sociology* they preferred a *poetic semiology*. This was a choice that was not made without reactions nor made easy partly because of the authoritarian nature that is common to the left-wing nobiliarchies and partly because of the novelty of the gesture itself. As witnessed by one of the creators of PO-EX,

In the beginning of the 1960s we were still very far from supposing that our intentions could be carried out, and beyond a resolute NO to the sad “cultural broth” that was mandatorily served to us (sentimentalism, discursivism, narrow patriotism, mystical idealism, showing off, opportunism, brilliance, Sebastianism, parochialism, careerism , etc., etc.), besides this NO we only had the product of our hands and of our minds, in the isolated and silent condition that circumstances imposed on us. And it was then very easy to accuse Experimental Poetry of everything the practicing critics could remember, ranging from “distance from the Portuguese social realities”, on the one hand, to “gratuitous iconoclasm”, on the other. A contradictory situation is thus beneath the soil of Portuguese experimentation: ... the need to radically deny and destroy the prevailing ideological and linguistic situation and, at the same time, to propose the bases of a progressive constructivism to which we all aspired and that was and is our true motor. (Castro, 1981, p.11)

This progressive constructivism, which despised the “closed protocol” as well as the “prevailing ideological and linguistic situation” situated the micropolitics of Portuguese Experimental Poetry under Salazar. And when they situated themselves politically through language, the experimentalists did this

as passionate subjects who were prepared to “give to read” not as a sovereign historical subject – the intellectual vanguard – that puts its power at risk, but rather as an indigent subject who, when muting the finite of communication with the plurivalent infinite of forms, suspends any wish to dominate. After all, as proposed, this thinking was not committed to any assumptions. When experimenting based on an effort to hollow out the sign, under the shouts of “either poetry or death”, the Portuguese experimentalists were abdicating from militancy in macropolitics, but at the same time kept, simultaneously implicated and complicated, the passion for learning and the passion for teaching. At the same time they understood and committed themselves as a vanguard to an anti-movement, or rather, to the necessarily inexorable flow that marks the vanguard movements:

The depuration that vanguard movements have tried to practice in the field of literature and arts is the reflection of the change which is made and that one wants to implement in the society in which one is producing. By denying, rejecting the means of expression of prevailing society, one refuses the most significant thing that it has. The vanguard literature which appears in bourgeois society is anti-bourgeois. It rebels “against literature” insofar as the latter reflects, illustrates the decadence of the ruling class which has appropriated it, rendering it inoperative through its routine, institutionalized use which is that of the official culture. The extreme character of the combat positions that are necessarily taken on makes the attitudes and works of vanguardists have a character of exception and are always be considered “esoteric”, i.e. *illegible*, not immediately amenable to assimilation, not only for psychological reasons, but also because de facto the code on which they are based is no longer the common code, the one prevailing in this society against which they rise. The vanguard groups are thus identifiable with all those that have to perform a task that challenges the security of the Ruling Power in a society, be it political, religious or artistic. Like the militants of all rising ideologies, they begin as small groups that exert a subversive action calling upon themselves the difficult responsibility of disorder. But this disorder, insofar as it implies establishing a new order, brings in itself the germ of possibly being itself surpassed. That is how vanguard movements, like revolutions in general, necessarily follow each other. (Hatherly, 1975, p.150)

As can be seen, Hatherly, one of the most conceptually dense cadres of Portuguese Experimental Poetry, thinks that the vanguard groups are distinguished by “being identifiable with all those that have to perform a task that

challenges the security of the Ruling Power in a society”. For the case of the Portuguese society, if this Ruling Power materialized in Salazar’s dictatorship and in all that it represented, it was precisely around a “war of representation” , in the very sense used by Cultural Studies, that experimentalists went beyond the idea that it would be enough to combat the prevailing ideological situation. It was also necessary to place at risk and under suspicion the Portuguese reality itself and also to attack the prevailing situation of the language.

ABOUT THE INSIDIOUSNESS OF WHAT IS REAL AND FISHES
THAT CHANGE COLOR: WHAT CAN A LANGUAGE DO?

*There is a single reality, but then
Only one for each one.
Two are two realities
That pretend to be a single one
At the corners of chance,
Or of necessity, why not?*

Adolfo Casais Monteiro, 1954

In a retrospective view, already at the beginning of the 1980s, Ernesto Manuel Galdes de Melo e Castro, one of the sharpest participants in PO-EX, stated that Portuguese experimentalism was marked by heterogeneity and hybridism. For him, PO-EX, even under the weight of a fascist dictatorship that was expanding and reaching sectors of civil society, such as the media, conducted the Portuguese poetry from dramatic humanism to textual practice. In this sense, the movement corresponded to an ensemble of heterogeneous poetics that converged to radicalization in the systematic experimentation of the semantic and at the same time esthetic qualities of the linguistic material. For this it used all kinds of materials, supports and means. According to Castro,

with Experimental Poetry one could say that for the first time in Portugal an ethical position of rejection and at the same time of research was being proposed, in which the first principle, tacitly accepted and followed by all, was that this research is in itself a destruction of the obsolete, a demystification of lies, a methodological openness to creative production. The second principle is that this creative production projects itself into the future and will always find the right way to act, precisely at the time *the people and the language* need it. And this was indeed

what happened right after April 25 1974, with the visual explosion that invaded cities, towns, villages and roads of Portugal. (Castro, 1981, p.10; emphasis added)

As can be seen, even though he refers to April 25 1974, the milestone of the Carnation Revolution, Castro does not dwell on politics, in the classical sense, but seeks to articulate, in a confirmation of what has been argued throughout this text, the people and the language. For him the destruction of what is obsolete, the demystification of lies and the methodological openness to creative production are a path that does not need only the *people*, although it cannot do without the latter. But the people needed by the experimentalists must be implicated and complicated in the *language*. This aspect justifies, regarding the 40th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, a rereading of Portuguese Experimental Poetry. Not really to re-cognize its esthetic aspects, but to further the suggestion of Castro himself, for whom

the esthetic analysis and factual description of the events and the theories of these vanguards are performed in the books of that specialty. The documents and works are today accessible to whoever takes an interest in them. However, *there is interdisciplinary work to be done*, namely, the study of what one might call the semiology of the vanguards. Such a study would consist mainly of the consideration of the works/theories of the vanguards as indices and signs of socio-historical change and as a dialectical counterpoint to the economic/political process. (Castro, 1981, p.12; emphasis added)

Castro's challenge about the need to perform *interdisciplinary work* as a condition to do a *semiology of vanguards* could, save the anachronism, be equated with the motivations that recently led the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, also a propos of the anniversary of the four decades of democracy in Portugal, to hold a systematic event for the purpose of asking "what can a language do?". At the presentation of the Program of that event, the Director of the Gulbenkian Program for Portuguese Language and Culture mentioned several of the concerns that moved the experimentalists:

As a language, and even taking into account the multiplicity of its accents, Portuguese has a pallet of characteristic sounds, a play of harshness and sweetness that is all its own, a specific rhythm, and *one might say that all of these characteristics, as a linguistic vehicle, ultimately also shape the look at reality it mediates* and formats in a likewise idiosyncratic manner the messages in which this look is reified. Creating in Portuguese – in any of the particular uses contained in our language

– whether it be in a register that is erudite or popular, urban or rural, more local or more cosmopolitan, in Europe or on any other continent – could not but be a different gesture. (Nery, 2014, p.3; emphasis added)

But performing a semiology of the vanguards, done from inside the historians' workshop, needs to extrapolate the matter of language – although without losing sight of this matter – to go further and acknowledge that PO-EX is the contemporary of changes such as a reconfiguration of the resources and materials available for artistic activity – like the emergence of the domestic films with a Super- Eight millimeter gauge, which is essential for visual experiments in poetry – as much as the result of a theoretical re-elaboration of the parameters by which poets related to their product. This is an aspect that stands out to understand the movement. Hatherly, probably the participant who was most concerned with the theoretical margins of PO-EX, on more than one occasion mentioned the presence of the thinking of Michel Foucault in the artistic creation of her generation, referring also to Marshall McLuhan's theories on the media in general as a stimulus that was used by the Portuguese experimentalists:

In the 1960s, when Marshall McLuhan, an author who was then avidly read, advocated that artists should leave their ivory tower and head for the control tower, he was speaking of something that Mallarmé referred to when he declared that “reading”, like “poetry”, was an “operation”... But the vanguard literature also had another particular influence among us that distinguishes it. In Portugal, as Melo e Castro also writes, it was a way of proving not only the “resistance of words”, but also, implicitly, the “resistance through words”. This control and delimitation of the discourse to which Foucault refers, this interdict that weighed on the discourse – on speech, on writing, on the expression of the existence of the Portuguese people – an interdiction that the authors of the 1960s found installed since their birth, this interdiction finds its other face in the unsubordinated resistance of the text and of the act that gives rise to it. (Hatherly, 1979, p.79)

The presence of these conceptual references among the Portuguese experimentalists erects an important point to approach the PO-EX. On the one hand because it creates doubt about the idea that in the middle of last century Portugal was a country closed upon itself – a stereotype that can be found even in some texts of the movement itself. On the other hand, because the works of both Foucault and McLuhan are strong stimulants for a creative imagination, which explains why they are among the references of thought that the

Portuguese experimentalists used as a signal of the route they sought to open “in the cultural apathy of the night imposed by Salazar on the country”, according to the already mentioned words of Castro.

One of the marks of Foucault’s work that influenced the Portuguese experimentalists was his proposition that the critique of the present is an important foundation for a creative imagination, insofar as it allows revaluing the utopian thinking, restoring to it the right to adventure. An adventure that, for the Portuguese experimental poets, occurs, as pointed out by Hatherly, under an interdict that controls and limits the discourse, obliging them to learn not only the resistance of words, but also resistance through words. Under this interdict that weighed on the expression of the existence of the Portuguese and, at the same time, fed by a new social thinking, the experimental poets were to learn to distinguish the present – Salazar’s dictatorship – from the current – the becoming that was implicated in their time. They thus learned that the current “is not what we are, but rather what we are becoming, namely, the Other, our coming-to-be-another [while] the present, on the contrary, is what we are and therefore what we are already ceasing to be” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1992, p.14).

If the formulations of Michel Foucault about the interdicts that affect discourse were useful, as well as his critique of the present, from Marshall McLuhan certainly the Portuguese experimentalists were interested both in his theories according to which the media determined everything from the 1960s onward – from culture and civilization to the private life of each of us – and his notions of planetary man and global village. Thus one might say that the theoretical propositions of Foucault and McLuhan would favor a subversion, respectively, of the relationship between the word and the thing – for instance, reconfiguring the operationalization of the concept of power – as well as of the message with its content, thus blurring these two ends of the communication process to highlight the importance of the media. And it is there, in this fluttering of language, that the parameters of a semiology of the Portuguese vanguards should be situated: the historical conditions of the rise and maturity of PO-EX, as well as the conditions of its existence, must be looked at from a place whence one can demonstrate that Portuguese Experimental Poetry, despite the specificities of Portuguese history, results from a process – experienced world wide – of complexification of the sublunary which, in turn, would require an increasingly complex representation of reality. In this historical sense, the experimental would be the result of a world-scale effort to re-signify the world. Specifically as regards the history of Portugal, in some of the experimental works there is evidenced an effort for

“historical collection” as can be seen in the mural writing “Décollages of the city” by Ana Hatherly:

This series of collages, performed during 1977 in Lisbon, was made from authentic posters, mounted in a way that reproduced the way they looked when they were torn from the city walls for this effect. Although the dominant type in them is the political poster, characteristic of the time, sometimes circus posters also appear, either superposed or separately, as happens on the walls, since this is one of the most frequent types of poster in our country. This montage work, besides its esthetic purpose, acquires and is intended to acquire a facet that has distinguished it from the other types of collage and *décollage* which were done all over the world, since here it is an authentic historical collection: this is about using a certain form of mural writing to express an entire period of the life of the city and the country that already begins to appear long ago: April 25.



Figure 3 – *Décollages of the city*. Mural writing of Ana Hatherly. Exhibition Portuguese Art Since 1910. London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1978.

Thus, in terms of an economy of signs with which the experimental vanguards operated in Portugal and beyond, what shines through is the problematic relationship that these vanguards established with a poetic tradition based on questions about the role of the sign in the communication process. In a sense, on establishing morphological Radicalism, the object Word, the story Text, sensual Empiricism, Visualization, Combinatory Syntax and Another semantics as parameters of the experimental program, they assumed a break with a supposed *telos* on which the Portuguese poetry would evolve

and formatted a “Constructivist Project” that, presumptuously, went as far as raising itself to the status of what one might call a “poetic Enlightenment”, insofar as, from the point of view of this project, “an artist warns and makes people aware [acting as a] DETONATOR” (Castro, 1981, p.15).

When they took up this constructivist project, young Portuguese poets were raising a historical problem that likewise occupied authors from other regions of the world for whom the invention of new languages and new forms of communication was a constitutive dimension of reality. By establishing existential connections within the *Global Village* – for instance, there were intense articulations between PO-EX and the São Paulo Concretism – the Portuguese experimentalist vanguards were taking up again and bringing to the sphere of esthetic-creative activity an old reflection on the attributes of the word. For these vanguards this had to do with overcoming the segregation that since the Scholastics has distinguished and hierarchized things in terms of real definitions (*definitio regio*) and verbal definitions (*definitio nominis*), the former supposedly being more real than the latter, since they are “essential”.³ This issue, which is central for most experimental poets here and elsewhere, brought the word into the center of a battlefield, since after all, for poets such as Castro, Hatherly, Aragão, Helder, Pestana and so many others, this involved triggering a “semantic guerrilla” based on a “terrorism of the sign”.

Emphasizing a subversion of the symbol and syntax and having to experiment under “the night imposed by Salazar on the country”, the Portuguese experimental poets related their poetic doing to the problematic relationship between words and things, which reinforces the already raised argument that renewed theoretical foundations were at the base of the renewal of Portuguese poetry. On the basis of this premise, it is possible to think about how Portuguese Experimental Poetry helped institute a Portuguese reality, situating this reflection in a position in which it is possible to think problematically about the very notion of real, removing from this real possible aspects that naturalize it or favor its naturalization. These problems of the existence of a real that is a referent in itself, supposedly independent of language, was to be part of the discussion focusing on which the Portuguese experimentalists, with poets from other parts of the world, would seek, by their poetry, to re-signify the world and poetic activity. See about this the already classical “Texto-Introdução” [Introduction-Text] by Herberto Helder in *I Caderno de Poesia Experimental*, published in Lisbon in 1964:

Once upon a time there was a painter who had an aquarium and in the aquarium a red fish. The fish lived quietly with its red color, until at some point it began to

turn black ... Outside the aquarium, the surprised painter watched the arrival of the new fish. The artist's problem was the following: forced to interrupt the picture he was painting and where his fish was beginning to appear in red, he did not know what to do with the black color that the fish was teaching him. Thus the elements of the problem were the observation itself of the facts and were in a sequence, namely: (1) Fish, red, painter, in which the red color was the nexus between the fish and the picture, through the painter; (2) Fish, black, painter, in which the black color formed the insidiousness of reality and opened up an abyss in the primitive faithfulness of the painter. On meditating about the reason why the fish had changed color precisely when the painter was relying on its faithfulness, he thought that inside the aquarium, the fish ... intended to show that there is only one law that covers both the world of things and of imagination. This law is metamorphosis. *Once he understood the new type of faithfulness*, the artist painted a yellow fish in his picture ... These *Cadernos de Poesia Experimental* intend to take on the responsibility of stating that, in the conscience of man (witness), things and events ... awaken, for revelation, an experimenting freedom that is evidently implemented in a polygonal direction. *This ambiguity, undefinability and polyvalence of what is real are witnessed at a level of esthetic representation by experimentation* and successive encounter, determined by misadjustments and adjustments between imagination and reality. (Helder, 1964, p.3)

Although it does not refer explicitly to a “crisis of representation”, an expression that only became recurrent – and even then in theoretical texts – in the 1980s, in the transcribed texts one can see an idea of a crack, of instability, of uncertainty or even, in the words of the author himself, of the *ambiguity, undefinability and polyvalence of what is real*. This utterance, launched on the world in the first text of the first *Caderno de Poesia Experimental*, shows the critique of the present as one of the distinctive marks of Portuguese experimentalism. A theoretical problem inaugurated with the *linguistic turn* at the end of the 1950s thus became the focus of concerns and propositions of Portuguese experimental poetry: with small red fishes that are metamorphosed into small black fishes and astonished artists facing the *undefinability* of what is real, these young intellectuals sought to interfere in their time through a metaphoric argumentation that could place under suspicion the certainties that, without any bad surprises, until then had governed the hegemonic projects designed to dominate nature, world and society.

If the *linguistic turn* rendered the relationship between “real” and “reality” problematic by historicizing the forms through which “real” and “reality” are

made present to us by the way in which they are represented, the approach to this question by the experimentalists occurred initially through a systematic approach to structuralism. As one example, let us mention the effort of a group of young Portuguese, at the end of the 1960s, to translate and publish in Portugal texts, then recent, which proclaimed that “the way in which people reflect, write, judge, speak, and even the way their sensitivity reacts, is guided by a theoretical structure” (Foucault, 1968, pp.31-32).

It was in this spirit that in 1968 a group of young people made up of Antonio Ramos Rosa – one of the participants in the aforementioned *I Caderno de Poesia Experimental*, launched in 1964 –, Maria Eduarda Reis Colares and Eduardo Prado Coelho, used a painting by Paul Klee – not by chance one of the first artists who proposed the fusion between poetry and image – for the cover of *Estruturalismo: antologia de textos teóricos* (Coelho, 1968), with articles by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes and others, that the three friends, seeking to understand that theoretical structure, translated into Portuguese. By doing this they were trying to find in these new references the conceptual foundations through which they could face both the esthetics dominating the Portuguese literature and the official cultural codes that guaranteed the Salazarist culture. As a social group the experimentalists did not feel represented in these esthetics nor in these codes. And if both these esthetics and these codes are systems of signification whose claim consists of expressing what is human and social as a whole (Baudrillard, 1991), then the experimentalists, by challenging the closed protocol of signification and pointing metaphorically to a real that becomes frayed when it moves into the represented reality, were bound to shake the political foundations of those other social groups that, in the face of the domination of the state apparatus, were in a position to direct the historical process of social representation.

In this historical context, within which Portugal appears as a society that “has suffered trauma and is fraught with internal and external contradictions”, Experimental poetry took the strategy of chaos to an extreme, “proposing even further reinforcement of these contradictions and traumas through a deconstruction of the discourse that ideologically supported this society”.⁴

CONCLUSION – SO MUCH SEA!

*I know that there are leagues separating us
So much sea, so much sea
I also know that it is necessary, you know
To sail, to sail
There it is spring, you know
Here I am, ill
Hurry up and send me
Some scent of rosemary.*

Chico Buarque de Holanda, 1974

In a historical approach to PO-EX performed considering the context of Salazar's dictatorship, it would probably be necessary to take a broader approach if the objective were to provide a really esthetic reflection on Portuguese experimentalism, asking about its relationship with Portuguese poetics within the scope of a long historical duration, which would establish the Baroque, Neorealism, and even Surrealism, besides orphic Modernism as study parameters. However, this approach would require a space that cannot be obtained within the limits of an article.

Partly because of this limitation, the emphasis given here to the history of PO-EX deliberately chose to not approach specific aspects, in ideological terms, of the groups and subgroups that militated in what would result in the revolution of April 25, 1974, or even, in personalistic terms, to the political forces that sustained the Ongoing Revolutionary Process after April 25. Since it was a historical effort made in order to identify the "indices and signs of socio-historical change that would be a dialectical counterpoint to the economic/political process", according to the already mentioned prescription by Castro, it was decided to focus on the micrological aspects of the history of PO-EX, emphasizing the effort at re-founding poetic language as a historical index through which, from the point of view of this work, it would be possible to think alternatively about the process of corrosion of Salazar's dictatorship. Methodologically, the intention of this kind of approach was to return the events surrounding PO-EX to their event-like disorder. This methodological option blurs esthetics – as something identical to itself – and drags it into the surprises that come with the events.

With this theoretical-methodological option, we concluded that for those Portuguese who, even under a dictatorship, gave life to PO-EX, the experimental element was not only defined by experience or by experimenting. It should

be *experimenting* and *research* necessarily performed as a *team* and turned to an *articulation* between art and life. The experience should be flow and never territory. It should be poem rather than poetry. A poem is the straightforward act of doing. It is producing, it is *poesis* in the Greek sense. Poetry on the other hand is what is produced, what has been produced, it is the product of the poem. The experimental is only experimental as a process. Once the flow has ceased, it is necessary to perform new experimentations as a team to find new media, new objects, new structures, etc. Movement *ad infinitum*. For this reason, no matter how much they worked within a historical retribalization process – a process provoked by the emergence of the *Global Village*, in the aforementioned sense – and operated under the need to answer “what a language can do”, the vanguard groups in Portugal were never interested in restricting their action to the level of the text, because they always looked for an “interference in life, in reality, since *one does not consider life and art as separate*” (Hatherly, 1979, p.43; emphasis added).

What we attempted to demonstrate, when taking poetics as one of the multiple series of events that fermented within the Salazarist context, was that, from the historical perspective, the problematization of the attributes of the word acted for the Portuguese as a point of departure for a broader reflection on the possibilities and interdicts of the communication process in the “night that Salazar imposed on the country”. With an experimental counter-discourse, in metaphors, the experimental poets invaded, through signification, the interstices of power. Sometimes, as we saw, they did so by materializing this metaphor in apparently harmless little fishes that change color; at other times by erecting an imaginary country, a world inhabited by deaf people, to claim the right to a voice: “It is very dangerous to belong to the kingdom of the deaf when an April 25 occurs”, said Salete Tavares a few years after the revolution. And she concluded: “It is time: give us TV. We want to be jugglers and troubadours. This is another time” (Tavares, 1980, p.28).

Three years after the Carnation Revolution, at a round table that took place at the 14th São Paulo Biennale with poets António Aragão, Ana Hatherly, E. M. de Melo and Castroande Silvestre Pestana gathered to take stock of Portuguese Experimental Poetry, Melo e Castro said the following:

I insist on the break, and I insist on the NO that we are still saying, because Portuguese Experimental Poetry has not died ... Our restlessness is still the same, the difference is simply that at this time we are being restless in an atmosphere of

freedom. At this time our NO is NO to other things, our NO is NO to stagnation, it is NO to the conformism of freedom itself.⁵

It was 1977. In Portugal the apparent unity of the opposition forces that conducted the Carnation Revolution had already become frayed. A new coup, 2 years previously, had replaced the Ongoing Revolutionary Process, which had a socialist and left leaning tendency, by the Ongoing Constitutional Process, of a more liberal nature. In Brazil, growing yellow in some drawer of some censorship department, dozed “Tanto Mar” (So much Sea), the lyrics of a song made by Chico Buarque de Holanda in 1974 and only released in 1979, when, overseas, the feast of flowers had already wilted. The Portuguese experimentalists continued under the sign of NO, while Buarque, as though to confirm the poet’s inclination to become a juggler and troubadour of his time, a time that poetry can always render a different one, sang about the Revolution, in the lyrical manner of poetry: “They have already wilted your party, you know. But they certainly have forgotten a seed in some corner of the garden” (Buarque, 2004).

REFERENCES

- ARAGÃO, António. Intervenção e movimento. *Jornal do Fundão*, Lisboa, p.6, jun. 1965. Suplemento especial.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. *Simulacros e simulações*. Trad. Maria João da Costa Pereira. Lisboa: Relógio d’Água, 1991.
- BUARQUE, Chico. *Tanto Mar!* In: “Chico Buarque – Perfil” [Disco sonoro]. Som Livre, 2004, faixa 9.
- CABRAL, Manuel V. Apud ACCORNERO, Guya. Da militância política à investigação científica: história de uma vocação. In: SILVA, Pedro Alcântara da; SILVA, Felipe Carreira da. *Ciências Sociais: vocação e profissão*. Homenagem a Manuel Villaverde Cabral. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2013. pp.39-68.
- CASTELO BRANCO, Edwar de Alencar. Fazer ver o que vemos – Michel Foucault: por uma história diagnóstica do presente. *História Unisinos*, São Leopoldo, ano 11, v.3, pp.321-329, set.-dez. 2007.
- CASTRO, E. M. de Melo e. A poesia experimental portuguesa. In: HATHERLY, Ana; CASTRO, E. M. de Melo e. *PO-EX: textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa*. Lisboa: Moraes Ed., 1981. pp.9-15.
- _____. *As vanguardas na poesia portuguesa do século vinte*. Lisboa: Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa, 1980.

- CATÁLOGO PO.EX.80. (Catálogo da Exposição de Poesia Experimental Portuguesa). Lisboa: Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna, 1980.
- COELHO, Eduardo Prado (Sel. e Int.). *Estruturalismo*: antologia de textos teóricos. Lisboa: Portugalia, 1968.
- DELEUZE, Gilles. *Diferença e repetição*. Trad. Luiz Orlandi e Roberto Machado. Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1988.
- DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. *O que é a Filosofia?* Trad. Bento Prado Júnior e Alberto Alonso Muñoz. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. 34, 1992.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *A arqueologia do saber*. Trad. Luiz Felipe Baeta Neves. 7.ed. Rio de Janeiro: Forense-Universitária, 2008.
- _____. Entrevista a *La Quinzaine Littéraire* n.5, 15 maio 1966. In: COELHO, Eduardo Prado (Sel. e Int.) *Estruturalismo*: antologia de textos teóricos. Lisboa: Portugalia, 1968. pp.31-32.
- HATHERLY, Ana. *A reinvenção da leitura*: breve ensaio crítico seguido de 19 textos visuais. Lisboa: Ed. Futura, 1975.
- _____. *O espaço crítico*: do simbolismo à vanguarda. Lisboa: Caminho, 1979.
- HELDER, Herberto. Texto-introdução. *Cadernos de Poesia Experimental I*. Lisboa: Cadernos de hoje, 1964.
- KHAYATI, Mustapha. Captive Words: preface to a situationniste dictionary. *Internationale Situationniste*, Paris, ano 9, v.1, pp.32-37, mar. 1966.
- LARROSA, Jorge. *Linguagem e Educação depois de Babel*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2004.
- MARCUSE, Herbert. *Eros e civilização*: uma interpretação filosófica do pensamento de Freud. Trad. Álvaro Cabral. 6.ed. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1975.
- McLUHAN, Marshall; FIORE, Quentin. *War and Peace in the Global Village*: an inventory of some of the current spastic situations that could be eliminated by more feedforward. New York: Bantam Books, 1968. p.63.
- NERY, Rui Vieira. Texto de apresentação. In: *Criar em português*: o que pode uma língua? Colóquio, Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 27 e 28 jan. 2014.
- PAIS, José Machado. Introdução. In: PAIS, J. M; BLASS, L. M. da S. *Tribos urbanas*: produção artística e identidades. São Paulo: Annablume, 2004. pp.9-21.
- PESSOA, Fernando. *O livro do Desassossego*. fr. 259. Texto publicado originariamente em *Descobrimento*, revista de Cultura n.3, 1931, pp.409-410, transcrito do “Livro do Desassossego”, por Bernardo Soares (heterônimo de Fernando Pessoa), numa recolha de Maria Aliete Galhoz e Teresa Sobral Cunha; ed. de Jacinto do Prado Coelho. Lisboa: Ática, 1982. v.I, pp.16-17.
- TAVARES, Salete. *Voz (vós?)*. In: CATÁLOGO PO.EX.80. Lisboa: Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna, 1980. pp.28-30.
- VELOSO, Caetano. *Língua*. In “Velô” [1 CD]. Disco sonoro, 1984.

NOTES

¹ This text is a byproduct of the research “Guerrilha semântica: a arte experimental no Brasil e em Portugal entre as décadas de 1960 e 1980 – um estudo comparado”, which is being developed at the level of “Estágio Pós-Doutoral Sênior” at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais of the Universidade de Lisboa, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. José Machado Pais and with financial support from Capes.

² Due to Decree-Law nr. 77, of April 18, 1981, the AOS file was to be kept under restriction until 25 years after the death of Salazar. On July 27, 1995, once the required period was over, the file was opened to public consultation.

³ For a broader discussion on this issue, see PAIS, 2004, pp.9-21.

⁴ For passages between quotation marks see CASTRO, 1980, p.78.

⁵ Fragment of a speech by E. M. de Melo e Castro during a Round Table held at the 14th Biennale of São Paulo, in HATHERLY; CASTRO, 1981, p.23.