

BRAZILIAN CONTEMPORARY POETRY: AN OVERVIEW**POESIA BRASILEIRA CONTEMPORÂNEA: UM PANORAMA**Viviana Bosi¹

Resumo: Embora possa parecer uma tarefa impossível o oferecimento de um panorama da poesia brasileira contemporânea, discutiremos uma seleção de poetas que possivelmente exemplifica as correntes mais significativas. Começamos com uma breve apresentação de quatro autores bem conceituados cujos trabalhos representam as principais correntes poéticas: Augusto de Campos, Francisco Alvim, Armando Freitas Filho e Adélia Prado. Depois comentaremos passagens de alguns poetas importantes mais jovens, cujas obras abrangem diferentes tons e estilos, desde a mitologia simbólica indígena até testemunhos crus ou irônicos sobre a vida na cidade grande, desde a intimidade lírica melodiosa até uma perspectiva mais social. Para a segunda parte deste artigo, escolhemos Paulo Henriques Britto, Josely Vianna Baptista, Ricardo Aleixo, Carlito Azevedo, Eucanaã Ferraz and Ana Martins Marques. Esperamos que esta seleção preliminar possa despertar o interesse de futuros leitores para a enorme variedade e riqueza da poesia brasileira.

Palavras-chave: Brasil, poesia contemporânea, correntes relevantes.

Abstract: Although it may seem an impossible task to offer a panorama of contemporary Brazilian poetry, we will discuss a selection of poets who possibly epitomize the most significant current trends. We start with a brief presentation of four well-regarded authors whose works represent major poetic currents: Augusto de Campos, Francisco Alvim, Armando Freitas Filho and Adélia Prado. We then comment on excerpts from a few important younger poets, whose works embrace several different tones and styles, from indigenous symbolic mythology to crude or ironic testimonials of life in the big city, from melodious lyrical intimacy to a more social perspective. For the second part of this article, we have chosen Paulo Henriques Britto, Josely Vianna Baptista, Ricardo Aleixo, Carlito Azevedo, Eucanaã Ferraz and Ana Martins Marques. We hope this preliminary selection may awaken the interest of future readers to the enormous variety and richness of Brazilian poetry.

Keywords: Brazil, contemporary poetry, relevant trends.

It would be foolhardy to attempt to provide an overview of the enormous plurality of contemporary poetic creation in a continental country as racially, ethnically and culturally diverse as Brazil. We can't hope to cover even a barely generous portion of what is being printed today. While the best-known poets in urban centers are those published by the major houses, part of the poetic variety of Brazil derives from deeply embedded relationships with popular culture. Recent years saw the vigorous dissemination of oft-oral poetry emerging from quite different realities – of the outskirts of the country's largest cities, for instance, or of the veteran improvisers who traditionally ad-lib verses and songs in the hinterlands. The Internet has also helped to call attention to countless poets who are starting to publish on blogs and e-zines, exchanging their verses and establishing far-reaching contact networks.

Brazilian popular music is likewise acknowledged for the sophistication of its lyrics. Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso, now the elder generation, continue to compose songs

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notable for the richness of poetic nuances. Influenced by a tradition that goes back at least to Vinícius de Moraes, other artists move about between more bookish poetry and the wider universe of mass entertainment.

In addition to the impossibility of covering the production of the different regions of Brazil, which rarely ever reach the mainstream media or attract academic criticism, there are also restraints imposed by taste, a side effect of our upbringing. Therefore, rather insufficiently, we have modestly undertaken this brief presentation as no more than an appetizer for those interested in the subject.

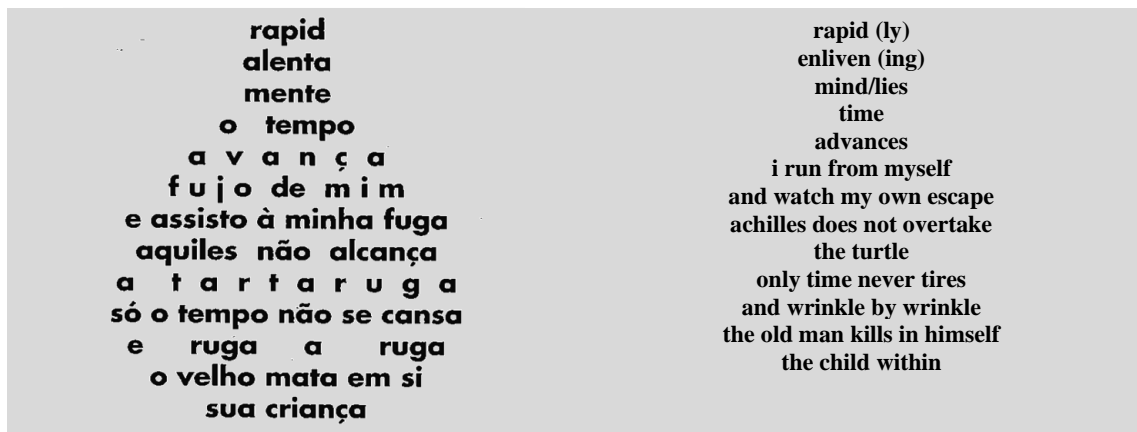
To avoid coming up with some sort of anodyne catalog, we will address only a handful of poets, preferring the injustice of silence to empty and exhausting name-dropping.

We will first mention four authors, four older poets with a consolidated body of work: Augusto de Campos, Francisco Alvim, Armando Freitas Filho and Adélia Prado. Each corresponds to a unique sphere of influence.

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Augusto de Campos (São Paulo, b.1931) is the greatest living representative of Concrete Poetry, the avant-garde movement of the mid-1950s with a large lineage both in literature and in popular music. Celebrated for visual experimentation, Augusto de Campos' poetic work is renowned for its nominal conciseness, wordplay, critical attitude. The formal innovations, which allude to constructivist aesthetics, give the poems a geometric aspect that resembles the grids of abstract painting.

Campos' more recent works, however, are reflections on the exhaustion or depletion of the cycle of progressive hopes that prevailed between the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of the Concrete movement. Thus, although partially retaining the formal procedures of what is known as "verbi-voco-visual poetry," the tone of his compositions today evokes another type of relationship with the present, as can be seen in the following poem:



Augusto de Campos. *Nãõ*, 2003.

True to the concept that a poem's structure should reveal its content, the passage of time is depicted here as a drop that reiterates the impossibility of progressing towards a positive outcome. The variable spacing between letters and words seeks to represent the rhythm of the futile escape that cannot evade the direction of death. This is, perhaps, the main change we detect in Augusto de Campos' work of recent decades: the optimistic belief in the future that energized the early manifestos of Concrete Poetry (published in the mid-1950s and early 1960s by the group to which the author belonged) changed into skepticism toward the possibility of

social evolution. The horizon of expectations withered. His worldview alternates between resignation and pessimism, which translates into circular-looking poems, denouncing the lack of a way out.

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A poet from a different strain, **Francisco Alvim** (Araxá, Minas Gerais, b.1938) descends from an atmosphere closer to another stream of Modernism. In him, we recognize vestiges of Oswald de Andrade and his “joke poems,” as well as a kindred spirit to Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s disenchanted sense of humor. Known for the poignancy with which he unveils social prejudice, he alternates lyricism and veiled criticism, lending his ironical voice to typical Brazilian characters. Sometimes his verses are elliptical, understandable only to those who know Brazilian society well, such as the emblematic:

Mas

é limpinha

But

she’s nice and clean

Francisco Alvim. *Elefante*, 2000.

A one-line poem, the title itself alludes obliquely to all sorts of prejudices against a poor, underling, possibly black woman. In Portuguese, the diminutive adjective *limpinha* both attenuates and reveals, in a single stroke, the nuances of patriarchal affection.

Here are some other minimalist samples:

Selas

*Experimentei
não reagiu*

Saddles

*I tried
No reaction*

Parque

*É bom
mas é muito misturado*

Park

*It’s pleasant
but very mixed*

Argumento

Mas se todos fazem

Argument

But if everyone does it

Francisco Alvim. *Elefante*, 2000.

The poet replicates everyday words that reflect the class contradictions and corrupt cynicism of part of Brazilian society. In the 1970s, many of his poems echoed sinister voices of power:

Autoridade

*Onde a lei não cria obstáculos
coloco labirintos*

Authority

*Where the law creates no obstacles
I place mazes*

Francisco Alvim. *Dia sim dia não*, 1978.

But this is not the only mood in Francisco Alvim's work. A considerable part of his poetry is intensely lyrical. Images of the permeability between the joyful individual and nature brightly invade his verses, as can be seen here:

A morte existe? A treva existe?

Não, não existe

*O que existe é a luz alucinada nas árvores e
na água*

na pele dela

dentro da qual ele já viaja

nas costas de uma prainha

rolado com um seixo de rio

verde como a encosta mole dos montes

azul como a névoa azul do céu azul

viaja

Does death exist? Does darkness exist?

No, it does not

*What exists is hallucinating light on trees and
in water*

on her skin

within which he already travels

on the slopes of a little beach

rolled up with a river pebble

green as the mellow hillsides

blue as the blue mist of the blue sky

travels

Francisco Alvim. Excerpt from "Coluna," *Lago, montanha*, 1981.

A blue and green idyll abides by the poet's loving desire, as a utopian counterpoint to the darkness of human society.

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The poet **Armando Freitas Filho** (Rio de Janeiro, b.1940) adds to the poetic lineage of the ubiquitous Drummond and João Cabral de Melo Neto (acknowledged by many as the greatest Brazilian poets of the 20th century), as an important inspiration, the works of Ferreira Gullar (recently deceased) as well as the production of the so-called marginal or underground poets (among whom we must underscore, as a recurring influence, the fleeting star of Ana Cristina Cesar). The inner vitals of existential experience, the raw accounts of everyday living, the challenges of exile (inner or even real, as in the case of Gullar and so many others, persecuted by the dictatorship from the early 1960s to the late 1970s), reappear vividly in his vast work. Freitas Filho is a poet obsessed with a harsh and rough relationship with writing, as evinced in the following poem:

16

Escrever é arriscar tigres

ou algo que arranhe, ralando

o peito na borda do limite

16

To write is to risk tigers

or something that scratches, grating

the breast on the edge of the limit

*com a mão estendida
até a cerca impossível e farpada
até o erro – é rezar com raiva.*

*with hands outstretched
to the barbed and impossible fence
to the error – to err is to pray with
anger.*

14 VIII 2001

14 VIII 2001

Armando Freitas Filho. *Numeral/ Nominal*, 2003.

In English, the guttural sound of the “r” that pervades the poem is lost, tapering therefore the sense of going against the grain and insurmountable obstacles that is characteristic of Freitas Filho’s verses. Hurling oneself against the wall of things, throwing oneself from a trampoline toward risk, are recurring images of his poetics. The insufficiency of words, coupled with an urgency to express himself, almost as a howl (albeit a calculated howl), recurs as unsolvable anguish in much of his work.

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Finally, to round off this quartet, we introduce **Adélia Prado** (Divinópolis, Minas Gerais, b.1935), who began publishing late in her life. By and large, she turns her eyes to portraits of the ordinary day-to-day in a small town, observing family life, the neighborhood, the church, taking a sharp look into what is seemingly banal, which in her poetry is pierced by rather unconventional religious questionings. Her poems about everyday life elevate the ordinary without removing its simplicity:

Ensino

*Minha mãe achava estudo
a coisa mais fina do mundo.
Não é.
A coisa mais fina do mundo é o sentimento.
Aquele dia de noite, o pai fazendo serão,
ela falou comigo:
'coitado, até essa hora no serviço pesado'.
Arrumou pão e café, deixou tacho no fogo
com água quente.
Não me falou em amor.
Essa palavra de luxo.*

Teaching

*My mother thought study was
the finest thing in the world.
It is not.
The finest thing in the world is feeling.
That day at night, father moonlighting,
she said to me:
“poor guy, so late and still working so hard.”
She laid out bread and coffee, left the pan on the
fire with hot water.
She didn’t speak to me about love.
That luxury word.*

Adélia Prado. *Bagagem*, 1976.

Her poems often evoke a prosaic atmosphere, as if they were unpretentious small talk. The transfiguration takes place through everyday objects and sensations:

Casamento

Há mulheres que dizem:

*Meu marido, se quiser pescar, pesque,
mas que limpe os peixes.*

*Eu não. A qualquer hora da noite me levanto,
ajudo a escamar, abrir, retalhar e salgar.*

*É tão bom, só a gente sozinhos na cozinha,
de vez em quando os cotovelos se esbarram
ele fala coisas como 'este foi difícil',*

*'prateou no ar dando rabanadas'
e faz o gesto com a mão.*

*O silêncio de quando nos vimos a primeira vez
atravessa a cozinha como um rio profundo.*

*Por fim, os peixes na travessa,
vamos dormir.*

*Coisas prateadas espocam:
somos noivo e noiva.*

Marriage

There are women who say:

*My husband, if you want to fish, fish,
but clean the fish.*

*Not me. At any time of night I'll get up,
help to scale, open up, shred and salt.*

*It's so nice, just us alone in the kitchen,
once in a while our elbows bump
he says things like "this was a tough one,"*

*"silvered in the air striking its tail"
and makes a gesture with his hands.*

*The silence of when we first met
flows through the kitchen like a deep river.*

*At last, the fishes on the platter,
we go to sleep.*

*Silver things pop and burst:
we are groom and bride.*

Adélia Prado. *Terra de Santa Cruz*, 1981.

In both poems, coincidentally perhaps, the lyrical subject contradicts what commonplaceness has taught her and silently asserts another truth. Both poems take place in a kitchen, a predominantly female environment, where love is confirmed in gestures more than words.

We would now like to highlight, in this brief overview, some poets from younger generations, and point out a few relevant trends. It cannot be said that there are cohesive poetic movements today. Each poet seems to establish multiple affiliations, spawned by their own questionings. Thus, more than the potential aesthetic orientations of groups, we will be mapping out irradiating singularities.

An important contemporary current reflects on the impossibility of expression in our time. The feeling of having arrived late is a constant in modern-day poetry. Paulo Henriques Britto (Rio de Janeiro, b.1951), poet and eminent translator, exquisitely cultivates various poetic forms, might well be a representative of this proclivity. His poetry is often self-ironic; avoiding any belief in authentic subjective expression, since, as he says, everything has already been said. In one poem, he compares himself to the panda, which has difficulty digesting bamboo, yet nevertheless insists on eating it as its favorite food. Even as Britto recognizes the uselessness of continuing to write, he cannot avoid the need to do so.

Toda palavra já foi dita. Isso é sabido. E há que ser dita outra vez. E outra. E cada vez é outra. E a mesma.	Every word has been said. That is known. And has to be said again. And again. And each time it is other. And the same.
Nenhum de nós vai reinventar a roda. E no entanto cada um a re-inventa, para si. E roda. E canta.	None of us will reinvent the wheel. And yet each one re-invents it, for oneself. And spins. And sings.
Chegamos muito tarde, e não provamos o doce absinto e ópio dos começos. E no entanto, chegada a nossa vez, recomeçamos. Palavras tardias, mas com vertiginosa lucidez – o ácido saber de nossos dias.	We arrived very late, and did not savor the sweet absinthe and opium of beginnings. And yet, on our turn, we start over. Belated words, but with vertiginous lucidity – the acid knowing of our days.

Paulo Henriques Britto. “Crepuscular,” 5, *Tarde*, 2007.

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Begotten under the influence of the visuality and conciseness of concrete poetry, the work of Josely Vianna Baptista (Curitiba, b.1957) created a truly diverse space for poetic expression. Her poems include images from the cosmology of the Guarani people, whose chants she also translated:

em busca de outro sol	in search of another sun
pode alguém se perder	may one get lost
abandonando o humano	abandoning the human
para encontrar seu deus	to find one’s god
– o mesmo que ao nascer	– the same who at birth
deu-lhe um nome secreto	gave a secret name
de sua divindade	of its divinity
perfeito e repleto.	perfect and replete.

Josely Vianna Baptista. Stanza of “guirá ñandu,” *Roça barroca*, 2011.

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There has been in recent years an intense movement of creative dialogue with both Amerindian mythologies and the diverse cultures of African origin, which fertilize Brazilian poetry with images and rhythms with perspectives discrepant from the so-called western modernity, and expand the way we see individuals and contemporary life. Afro-descendant poets, in particular, proclaim their identity, denouncing through poetry their historical awareness of discrimination. The poetic production of Ricardo Aleixo (Belo Horizonte, b.1960) is one of the most powerful in this context. Known for the performance-like quality of his presentations, his work varies in form and subject, ranging from political engagement, love lyricism, urban questionings and family backgrounds to metalanguage. Thus, it would be reductive to limit his work to a single theme. In the poem below, Aleixo seems to refer to both an African deity and a black artist, dancer or folk composer:

inteligência retinta elegância	true-black intelligence elegance
pelintra negrícia felina	guttersnipe feline blackitude
malícia de bicho totêmico	malice of totemic critter
novo antiquíssimo griô afro- futurista todo mandinga	new age-old Afro- futuristic griot all hoodoo
&ginga e o mundo	&knack and the world
inteiro guardado num passo ancestre	wholly kept in an ancestral step
mestressala maravilha	magnificent <i>mestressala</i>
contemporânea que vai desde o largo do Estácio	a contemporary who goes from Estácio square
até a mais alta estrela que brilha	to the highest star that shines
sobre o atlântico negro oceano	over the atlantic black ocean
quando um dos muitos nomes dele é ébano	when one of his many names is ebony

Ricardo Aleixo. "Um dos muitos nomes dele,"
Pesado demais para a ventania: antologia poética, 2018.

The use of terms sourced in Africa (and already embedded into Portuguese), together with the syncopated measure, generates a special sound effect, reminiscent of the beat of the samba steps.

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In another dimension, Carlito Azevedo (Rio de Janeiro, b.1961) has been experimenting with various timbres, oscillating from verse to prose, to meditate on the human condition from a global viewpoint (including immigrants, foreigners, travel situations). Some poems resemble dialogue sequences in which two characters meet for a walk and interweave their impressions on life, the landscape, the world situation. As they walk, they watch the passersby, reflect on existence, contemplate the sky and the city. The contrast between bright opening clouds and a dog trying to cross the avenue, whose eyes reflect the headlights of cars, leads the poet to pause to think about the possible relationships between things, even if he does not come up with an answer, except for a fleeting but powerful experience of beauty:

<p>“como não tenho mais questão alguma com a metafísica, eu não fico esperando por alguma presença para experimentar o que experimento, experimento, todos os dias.”</p>	<p>“as i no longer have issues with metaphysics, i don’t expect that some presence will experiment what i experiment, experiment, every day.”</p>
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Carlito Azevedo. “O tubo,” *Monodrama*, 2009.

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Another poet with a complex body of work is Eucanaã Ferraz (Rio de Janeiro, b.1961). We consider his poetry the most varied and comprehensive of all that has been published recently. Trying to summarize it in a few sentences, therefore, can only lead to failure. The difficulty of defining it stems from the ampleness of tones and themes that inhabit his books. I have chosen, from a series of poems that sing the affairs of the heart and lament their end, these excerpts with monosyllabic titles:

<p>Ao</p> <p>Livres irmãos apenas dos poemas em noites sem explicação ou limite nós nos deitávamos sobre uma única e mesma corda desdobrada sobre a morte e não morríamos porque na inocência éramos fortes.</p> <p>Mas as manhãs eram lobos transparentes que rentes ao osso vinham nos tingir de seu azul agourento.</p>	<p>To</p> <p>Free brothers only from poems on nights with no explanation or limit we would lay on a single and same rope unfolded over death and we didn’t die because in innocence we were strong.</p> <p>But mornings were transparent wolves that flush to the bone came to dye us with their ominous blue.</p>
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<p>[...]</p> <p>Sob</p> <p>Estamos bem assim, não acha? Entre nós um jardim de areia arde sob o sol isento. É o que está certo, reguemos a ardósia de nosso breve deserto. nenhuns amores nenhuma dores – as sementes lá no alto e nenhuma escada. Se um desejo voasse por perto, fazíamos bem de evitar os olhos e por a mão nos bolsos. O vento, escuta, é mais feliz nos cabelos das estátuas, assim sossegadas.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>À</p> <p>Legítima estupidez a minha (a dos que amam): deixar o mel à tona.</p> <p>Melancolia previsível que agora moscas o comam.</p>	<p>[...]</p> <p>Under</p> <p>We're fine now, don't you think? Between us a sand garden burns under the insouciant sun. This is what is right, let's water the slate of our brief desert. No loves no pains – the seeds up high and no stairs. If a wish flew nearby, we did well to avoid the eyes and pocket our hands. The wind, listen, is happier in the hairs of statues, thus quieted.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>To</p> <p>Legitimate stupidity of mine (of those who love): to leave the honey uncovered.</p> <p>Predictable melancholy that now flies would eat it.</p>
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Eucanaã Ferraz. “Memórias póstumas,” *Escuta*, 2015.

In the sequence of poems above, the lyrical subject equates failed love to sunken ships whose wreckages lodge in one's body – which sinks, injured, risking death. Happiness lasts but so briefly, it is almost illusory: “the two of us / under the sky of a starless hotel,” and soon fades away: “I couldn't save one single instant / of our skin breaking apart.” The pain of the beheaded, in the manner of St. John the Baptist and the soulless Salome, may take on a sarcastic tone: “But you / you did not even know the difference / between a heart and a meatball” – a heart, incidentally, “that fell upon our feet.” The destruction of love ultimately leads to dreariness and immobility. But this caustic disposition, when it concerns human relationships, mingles with exaltation to beauty in nature and in loved ones with highly intense imagery.

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One of the most trenchant drifts of current poetry is the one that scrutinizes everyday life in big cities, often addressing marginalized characters who roam degraded urban landscapes. Through the experience of shock, with sarcasm and horror, compassion and irony, the lyrical subject embodies the voice of the dispossessed. I turn now to Fabio Weintraub (b.1967), poet from São Paulo, who evokes in the verses below a pathetic homeless man, driven mad amidst the traffic:

<p><i>Até debaixo d'água!</i></p> <p><i>Sou homem até debaixo d'água!</i></p> <p>grita o vulto enrolado</p> <p>em feltro e revolta</p> <p>papelão e delírio</p>	<p><i>Even underwater!</i></p> <p><i>I'm a man even underwater!</i></p> <p>shouts the looming figure curled</p> <p>in felt and revolt</p> <p>cardboard and delirium</p>
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no canteiro central da avenida	on the avenue's median
A que água se referia?	What water was he referring to?
Quem o obrigara a andar sobre a prancha?	Who had made him walk over the plank?
Por quanto tempo já brigava com a onda de carro e fuligem?	For how long had he fought with the wave of car and soot?
O náufrago se aferra aos tesouros da hombridade sem arca, sem mapa nem garrafa que conduza até a ilha mais próxima sua palavra afogada	The castaway holds on to the treasures of manhood no coffer, no map no bottle that leads to the nearest island his drowned word

Fabio Weintraub. First stanzas of "Náufrago," *Novo endereço*, 2002.

A human being transformed into an excretion tries to assert himself amid the indifference of those who pass him by. He proclaims his indisputable virility while his voice is drowned out by the noise of traffic, like a shipwrecked navigator.

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Ana Martins Marques (Belo Horizonte, b.1977) often thematizes the role of poetry, questioning the relationship between word and world:

na cachoeira	in the waterfall
Quando o corpo finalmente encontra lugar	When the body finally finds a place
na pedra quente	upon the hot stone
abre	it opens
um livro mineral	a mineral book
com a atenção dividida entre o céu e as letras,	with attention divided between the sky and the letters,
que o sol ofusca,	that the sun obfuscates,
e a página torna-se branca	and the page turns white
como a água.	like water.

Ana Martins Marques. "6 posições para ler," *A vida submarina*, 2009.

In her poems, house objects (tables, chairs, beds, pots, cups) seem to retain the memory of the lonely home dwellers, awaiting love and its disillusionments. The lyrical subject lingers on them, as if they were metaphors of time:

Água estancada	Stagnant water
e exata	and exact
como um lago	like a lake
com quatro cantos.	with four corners.
Devolve-nos o rosto impensado.	Gives us back the unmindful face.
Nunca morre.	Never dies.
Mas repara: vai envelhecendo conosco.	But notice: it gets old with us.

Ana Martins Marques. “Espelho,” *A vida submarina*, 2009.

Might there be something in common between these poets – what one used to call the spirit of the times?

It would seem that all of them fiercely struggle between lyrical puissance (which, by conferring a certain porosity vis-à-vis the world, enables metaphorical correspondences) and critical sharpness (amidst irony, self-reflexivity, inquiry). This double movement, varying in degree and type of relationship in each poem, creates an impression of distrust in the possibility of a full encounter with one’s self, with others and with life itself. Having somehow relinquished their crucial role as seers, prophets and augurs, poets nonetheless urge us to see, feel, suffer and hear the sounds of submerged words stifled under a façade of reality, and adamantly insist on paying attention to what can barely be glimpsed, being essentially faithful to the true world.

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