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Régis Bonvicino**The Displacement of the “Scholastic”:
New Brazilian Poetry of Invention**

One of the characteristics of twentieth-century Brazilian poetry has been its organization in the “form” of literary movements, echoing European and later North American literary and visual art vanguards. “Form” here is understood in Wittgenstein’s sense, in the *Tractatus*: “The form is the possibility of the structure.” The first of these movements, Modernism, launched in 1922, by Mário and Oswald de Andrade, raised issues that remain alive even today. Oswald de Andrade’s “Brazil-wood Poetry Manifesto” (1924) received some affirmative response in Concretism in 1956, and in Tropicalism in 1967. Oswald advocated an international Brazilian poetry open to exchanging ideas with other poetries on an equal basis and was interested in the incorporation and reconstitution of foreign influences into an active and original Brazilian poetry. Up to the ’20s, the feeling was “never exportation of poetry,” reflecting the idea that Brazilian poetry did not have a sufficient identity to create dialogue.

Oswald: “Only Brazilians of our time. Only the necessary chemistry, mechanics, economy, and ballistics. All digested. Without cultural meetings. We are practical. Experimental. Poets. Without bookish reminiscences. Without comparisons for support. . . .” Concentrated here are the issues that every Brazilian poet of each movement—and even the independent poets—have sought to address. Exporting Brazilian poetry meant—and still means—putting Brazilian poetry in active dialogue with the poetry of other languages so that it ceases to be only the passive receptacle of influences. Exporting Brazilian poetry disrupts the condition of “being peripheral.” Still alive and essential, the challenges presented by Modernism, and not only by Oswald, found sound answers in the poetry of Raul Bopp, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira, Murilo Mendes, and later, in that of Vinicius de Moraes (creator of the Bossa Nova, a movement, from the musical viewpoint, richer than Tropicalism), and João Cabral de Melo Neto.

Later, these challenges were readdressed by Concretism, which restated the need for acting in an exploratory, experimental way as the main path for the creation of Brazilian poetry. Besides “inventing” a Brazilian form of quality literary translation, Concretism launched, and more or less bound together, even if only temporarily, good poets such as

Haroldo de Campos, Ferreira Gullar, Augusto de Campos, Afonso Ávila—not to mention Mário Faustino, up until his untimely death. The issue of a Brazilian exploratory art remained alive in the Tropicalism of Caetano Veloso and Torquato Neto, a movement that fused “high” and “low” cultures via pop music. As of the 1970s, Tropicalism’s significance began to fade as creativity waned; above all, its discourse lost the vital “movement” content of group interaction. Certainly, one of the causes was the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. The lack of hope for a socialist utopia—for solidarity—was a second cause. In any case, by the 1970s, the collective proposals of Concretism (such as parting with the “romantic” concept of authorship) and Tropicalism (such as the rethinking of local/universal, developed/underdeveloped) had become frozen in the work of their creators. Indeed, these movements seemed to transform themselves into literary-musical schools with their own “standards.” On the one hand, this allowed for a strong regrouping of the ever present conservative poetics that is opposed to social and aesthetic change (which nowadays is neo-Parnasian, late neo-Modernist, and a visual poetry of repetition). On the other hand, the dissolution of these movements allowed a space for creative individual responses—with the disadvantage that such responses had little visibility in terms of Brazilian poetry’s identity as an inventive art. However, the most consequential result of the lack of a collective and renewed “agenda” for innovation was the establishing of an authoritarianism in the public representation of the activity and thinking of poets, critics, scholars; that is, the spreading of the myth that there was but a “single model” for innovation (Concretism), a myth that enforces “conservativeness” without acknowledging it. The issue of what it means to be Brazilian at this particular time in our history was never—has never been—addressed. Almost everyone accepted this or that labeling under the umbrella of a poorly conceived and diffuse idea of “post-modernism.”

Torquato Neto (1944–1972) anticipated this crisis situation in the post-Tropicalist text “you call me up”:

you call me up / I wanna go to the movies / you bawl me
out / and my love doesn't please / you love me / but that
train's already moved on / how much time / that time's
been gone.¹

In this context, it is important to note the differing consciousness that enfolds in the poem: a consciousness that is at first naive (“I wanna go to

the movies”) and loving (“my love doesn’t please”), but then abruptly reveals, in language and content, the consciousness of an era (Concretist and “pop”) that is over: “how much time / that time’s been gone.” The perception that “that time’s been gone” and that now there is an emptiness echoes the sense of many younger poets in the ’70s and ’80s about the state of Brazilian poetry. (There are remarkable, coincident similarities between L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry—the language of the lung—and the texts of the dispersed Brazilian authors.)² The “certitude” that “that time’s been gone” reappears in the ’80s in “Traveling Theater” by Duda Machado (1944–), which reports, in a parody, the story of actors who performed for three years the same play and routinely and successfully became alienated from the original text. The poem “depicts” the uneasiness caused by the “loss of the original” and, ironically, the joy of recovering it, but now under the condition of its repetition or “school”: “In the dressing rooms, the actors could hardly look at each other. Only later, over dinner at the hotel restaurant, did they realize, with excitement, that they had followed every dialogue, every scene, from the original play.”³ Duda’s poetry, in another text from the 1980s entitled “Happening,” recovers the need for innovation, now with positive and complete inflection, different from the ones proposed by Concretist and Tropicalist movements:

anybody / some nobody / someone else / who / in turn /
mirage / of mirrored reflections / point / of intersection of
the real / it was / it is written.

The subject abandons the mirage form (impossibility) or the mirrored reflection (copyist) to affirm, arriving in the present time: “it is written.”

Resuming the innovation in tone—in a different way (in Brazil, more than the “anxiety of influence” there is the “anxiety of the influential”)—was a constant in the life and work of Paulo Leminski (1944–1989). Some of his lines, extremely critical and bitter, may be read in this direction:

let me vanish / let me melt / let me fall apart / until / after
me / after us / after all / nothing but charm / is left,

a poem from 1979 whose strength reflects, among other things, the emptying out of the vanguards, which have become consumer products.

There is, however, a poem published in Leminski’s second collected work, *Polonaises* (1980), that synthesizes the tensions that I seek to address here about innovation and contemporary spirit from a Brazilian perspective of independence and dialogue:

once / we were going to be homer / the work an iliad no
 less / later / things got tougher / we could maybe man-
 age rimbaud / an ungaretti some fernando pessoa / a
 lorca a ginsberg an éluard / finally / we ended up the
 minor provincial poet / we were always / hiding behind
 the many masks / time treated as flowers.

The poem foregrounds issues of imitation and provincialism, among other things, present in all Brazilian poetry of the twentieth century. (We continue, at last, “after all,” to have a strong poetry but with ineffectual worldwide dissemination.) I want to focus, however, on one aspect of Leminski’s poem: that of the rescue—through denial—of the capacity for innovation and diversity that characterizes contemporary Brazilian poetry, a capacity that goes beyond the militant discourse and rigidity of movements. Regarding this poem, I quote Wittgenstein: “It is essential that the thing be a constituent part of a state of things.” Literary movements, that is, movements that inaugurate new “standards” of perception (French Symbolism, Portuguese Futurism, Surrealism, Beat poetry, etc.) are represented (ironically) by their authors (is Pessoa more important than Portuguese Futurism?), only to be, in the last stanza of Leminski’s poem, reduced to masks, as fragile, as short-lived, as flowers. The awareness of the transitory nature of all “movements” is the touchstone of this poem—that constituting a new state of things displaces the “scholastic” and emphasizes the need for the permanent invention of an OTHER—anyone, no one—giving clues for a new poetry, not only Brazilian, but a poetry of the present:

El Cante Hondo

*This is the way the world ends
 Not with a bang but a whimper*
Eliot

More often than not *cante hondo*
 ignores this distinction:
 its most plaintive lament
 ends in an explosion.

So taut is its tension,
 so living flesh its repertoire
 that, unsheathing into song,
 it shatters the sheath and explodes.

—João Cabral de Melo Neto⁴

1. The poems discussed in this essay are in *Nothing the Sun Could Not Explain: New Brazilian Poetry*, ed. Michael Palmer, Régis Bonvicino, and Nelson Ascher (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1997): "you call me up," trans. Dana Stevens; "Traveling Theater," trans. Regina Alfarano and Dana Stevens; "happening," trans. Regina Alfarano; "Let me vanish," trans. Regina Alfarano; and "once," trans. Robert Creeley and Regina Alfarano.
2. For an approach to the concept of Language poetry, a movement that refused to become a school or the idea of movement, in the traditional sense, I quote a passage of the introduction by Douglas Messerli to the anthology *Language Poetries* (New York: New Directions, 1987): "For these poets, language is not something that explains or translates experience, but is the source of experience. Language is perception, thought itself; and in that context the poems of these writers do not function as 'frames' of experience of brief narrative summaries of ideas and emotions as they do for many current poets." Or still: "Language is not a movement in the traditional art sense, since the value of giving an aesthetic line such profile seems counterproductive to the inherent value of the work."
3. Notice the coincidence of the text *My Life*, by Lyn Hejinian, and "Traveling Theater," by Duda Machado. I quote here the beginning of Hejinian's poem: "Summers were spent in a fog that rains. I had claimed the radio nights for my own. There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original" (*Language Poetries*, 34).
4. João Cabral de Melo Neto, "El Cante Hondo," in *Museu de Tudo* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 1985), trans. from Portuguese by Guy Bennett and Régis Bonvicino.

Manuel Brito

Zasterling

I have coined the term *zasterling* to describe the process of exchange & publication of cultural texts on a small island. This process is evidence of the possibilities for almost instantaneous communication our contemporary situation offers. Living on an island as small as Grand Canary forces its inhabitants into constant transpositions. Ten million foreigners have visited the Canaries over the past twelve months & this leads the island's inhabitants not only to absorb other experiences but also "to read" what lies behind them. That is why academic terms like *intertextuality* (Kristeva), *pantextuality* (Derrida), or *transtextuality* are particularly meaningful in contexts such as this, since we are contrasting, taking, sharing, & transpositioning ourselves with others' experiences & subtexts on a daily basis. The tricontinental character of our geographical position also plays an important role. Historically our position between three continents has implied regular contacts with other countries. So the cosmopolitan nature of our immediate reality is a determining factor when it comes to taking part globally in the media & services available to us at the end of this millennium.