Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 3 (52) - 2010
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

TOWARDS A MULTIMEDIA POETRY

Romulus BUCUR*

Abstract: *Starting from a brief comparison in Lessing's* Laocoon *between poetry and visual arts, the paper succinctly examines their reciprocal relationship, from the point of view of representation. A characteristic of modern poetry being that of* crisis*, differently defined by different authors, a modality of alleviating it is proposed, under the form of* interactivity *between the poem and the reader.*

Keywords: *Lessing, Laocoon, mimesis, experimental poetry.*

A possible start for this paper would be a quotation from Lessing's *Laocoon*:

But as two equitable and friendly neighbors do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for their slight aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege: so also with painting and poetry (Lessing 567).

The first remark that can be made is that of, let's call it, a "conflict of interests"—poetry and visual arts, although each of them has its own specific (sequential vs. simultaneous, symbols vs. predominantly iconic signs, etc.), they both can entertain the ambition of representing the same object. And this because of the special status of the word, constituting, we know it from de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, the junction between a concept (in most of the cases associated with a definite, visible thing) and an acoustic image. Which leads us further, to another possible conflict, unforeseen by Lessing, that between music and poetry.

Or, in other terms, to the notion of *crisis*. There is an extremely rich literature dedicated to the association between the notion of crisis and that of modernity, as well as an ample inventory of its hypostases in modern poetry, in works from, let's say, Hugo Friedrich to Alexandru Muşina. We retain here just one of them, the crisis of language, which, according to Călinescu, turns towards an *absolute specificity*, becomes *autonomous*, *literal* (Călinescu 76-79), by substituting *mimesis* through *poesis*, under the guise of the distinction made by Romanticism between *primary* and *secondary imagination*, between *imagination*, a "truly creative faculty" and *fancy*, an "inferior faculty" (Călinescu 41-43), or, as Muşina states, manifests itself as the rupture between the siginifier and the signified, as the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign (Muşina 123-132).

For a classic of modern poetry, and its theory, Ezra Pound, this system of relationships gets the aspect of his threefold classification of poetry into *melopœia*, *phanopœia*, and *logopœia*, respectively, "wherein the words are charged over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property,

* *Transilvania* University of Braşov, Romania.

BDD-A20199 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-03 09:41:26 UTC)

which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning", "a casting of images upon the visual imagination" şi "'the dance of the intellect among words' [...] and cannot possibly contained in plastic or in music." (Pound 25) and which we may interpret as an attempt of verbal colonizing of the visual and auditory territories, more precisely, musical and pictorial, a constant temptation for modern poetry.

A recent work, by Jacques Donguy, dedicated to experimental poetry, performs a useful review of the domain, and, which is more important, traces the connections between Mallarmé and (typo)graphic poetry, referring too to concrete and auditory poetry. For our purpose, a useful reference would be the chapter etitled *Vidéo-poésie, Video Poetry*, from which we find out that the pioneering work in the field is that of the Portuguese Ernesto Melo e Castro, the author, in 1968, of a video-poem, in black and white, recorded, frame by frame, animated geometrical forms and letters, and, even more useful, the chapter *Poésie et ordinateur* [Poetry and Computer], in the first place because it connects this type of poetry to a tradition, that of concrete poetry, which communicates its own structure, or, in the words of Decio Pignatari, the "Content Structure".

Without entering into details about another important predecessor, the OuLiPo group, we could divide computer poetry into two main categories, namely, computer-generated poetry and computer-assisted poetry.

Briefly, in the first case, we have a simpler or more complex algorithm producing poetry; for those who would eventually object, we could propose a variation on the Turing test: if one does not realize, on reading, that a certain text is computer-generated, then we have poetry. Two hypothetical, perfectly feasible, examples would be simulating a DADA poem, by segmenting and randomly recombining a text introduced somehow (by keyboard, scanning, etc.) in the computer, and simulating the automatic writing of surrealism: the computer operates with a dictionary, having, eventually, implemented grammatical filters, from which it randomly selects elements, introducing, also randomly, the CR / LF character, and having a control structure to stop the process. Of course, more sophisticated programs, implementing different types of constraints, can be imagined, but our purpose was just to demonstrate the theoretical possibility of the approach.

The other modality envisaged, computer-assisted poetry, avoids in the first place certain difficulties of generating poetry—critical points, which, perhaps temporarily, cannot be caught in an algorithm, are circumvented; the computer generates certain sequences, which are further selected, altered, joined by the human operator.

One of the less discussed characteristics of literature, come to surface especially since its association with the computer (produced with the help of, generated by it, or just stored on it), is *interactivity*. In the first place, we have the interaction between the author and the material of writing, with language, structured by a series of norms, of conventions of different nature and of different degrees of strength, and which are accepted, rejected, reformulated, replaced by newly-invented ones, in the end resulting a quasi-immutable literary written text[1], with a *zero interactivity*. At the other end, we have the reader, reading / interpreting the text, and benefiting from a *virtual* interactivity: he / she 'translates' the vocabulary and the syntax into forms matching closest (according to his / her knowledge) contemporary language, finds equivalent aspects of mentality, recreates sensuous representations of images,

BDD-A20199 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-03 09:41:26 UTC)

completes, by imagination, the empty spaces in the work's structure (Ingarden 50-80). A special case of virtual interactivity is Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés…*, probably the first hypertextual poem in the history of modern poetry—the (typo)graphic marks leading to different reading paths can be considered as equivalent to today's familiar hyperlinks.

A separate discussion deserves what could be named *total* interactivity, the way Tristan Tzara proposes it in his well-known recipe of manufacturing a DADA poem. In fact, we have, on one hand, the interaction between the author and linguistic material, more obviously structured, because it is an already existing text, visible to anyone, and limited to the syntactic level, in the largest meaning of the term—it is never mentioned the cutting of the words into syllables or letters, so that (a certain) meaning is preserved, at the level of the words, at least. On the other hand, although we are not proposed cutting a poetic text, this, the text, ceases being immutable, intangible, 'sacred'.

Another form of interactivity, which we may call *pseudo-interactivity*, is the surrealist game of the *exquisite corpse*, this because each participant, by turns, interacts with the text, although not having knowledge of its contents before the end of the game.

We could add some more types of interactivity, namely, a *limited* or *partial* interactivity, in the case of texts composed with the help of the computer, and where the author allows certain elements to be modified by the reader, in the same time limiting / interdicting the access to other elements, and, also, a *theoretical* and *practical* interactivity—for instance, Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* [Hundred Thousand Billion Poems], where theoretical interactivity, although finite, is so great it can be practically considered infinite.

Ignoring, willingly or unwillingly, certain developments of poetry, a legitimate question can be asked: "What can bring this kind of poetry seen on the computer's display"? In the first place, words, letters, sounds, moving images. That is, a making up for the limited representing capacity of language. Or, in Plato's terms, "phantastic or the art of making appearances" (Plato 339-340), a convenient equivalent for virtual reality, with the correction that, instead of imagining it, we can perceive it, by deluding the senses.

It results a reality of *forms*, which are subject to "perpetual change, various, diverse, and seem to be able to overthrow any attempt towards a minimally precise modelling" (Boutout 18), are qualitative and unquantifiable (Boutout 19), and pose a challenge to our naïve perception of the world, based on the *continuum* / *discontinuum* opposition (Boutout 25-25).

This challenge of old, inherited, forms, similar to the revolution in scientific research[2], accompanied by the attempt of finding new forms, more adequate to our rapidly changing world, might eventually lead to a new poetics, a hope expressed throughout one and a half century, from Poe's *Philosophy of Composition* (1846), Charles Olson's *Projective Verse* (1950), up to our days.

Notes

[1] For the discussion of the relationship between written *vs.* oral literature, see (Marino 34-61).

[2] The demonstration in (Muşina) is based, among others, on the theory of changing scientific paradigms in Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

References

1. Boutout, Alain. *Inventarea formelor: revoluția morfologică*. Bucureşti: Nemira, 1997.

BDD-A20199 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-03 09:41:26 UTC)

2. Călinescu, Matei. *Conceptul modern de poezie. De la romantism la avangardă*. 2nd ed., Piteşti: Paralela 45, 2002.
3. Donguy, Jacques, *Poésies expérimentales de 1950 à nos jours*, http://www.costis.org/x/donguy/poesies.htm
4. Ingarden, Roman. *Studii de estetică*. Bucureşti: Univers, 1978.
5. Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. "Laocoon." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Vincent B. Leitch, Ed. New York—London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 554-570.
6. Marino, Adrian. *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură*. Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1987.
7. Muşina, Alexandru. *Eseu asupra poeziei moderne*. Chişinău: Cartier, 1997.
8. Platon. "Sofistul." *Opere VI*. Noica, Constantin & Creția, Petru Eds. Bucureşti: Editura Ştiințifică şi Enciclopedică, 1989. 313-385.
9. Pound, Ezra. "How to Read." *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. T. S. Eliot Ed. New York: New Directions, 1968. 15-40

BDD-A20199 © 2010 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-03 09:41:26 UTC)