



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CESÁRIO: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to observe how the poetry of Cesário Verde develops its own aesthetic *archeology*, forming poetic “lineages” (TS Eliot) marking the creative and innovative itinerary.

Key words:

Poetry, Modernity,
Aesthetic Innovation,
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INTRODUCTION

In every field, it is through *confrontation* that innovation is generated. This is the change shown by Biology, framing nineteenth century knowledge with its model: life created by generational succession and adaptation and death... life and death of the body and image, cycle, transformation. In 1676, Newton said: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants” (in a letter dated February 5, 1676, addressed to Robert Hooke). The image evoked the famous metaphor by Bernard of Chartres (according to John of Salisbury in his *Metalogicon*, 1159), in which Richard William Southern (12th century) compared his contemporary scholars to those of classical antiquity. The ancients and moderns. In his preface to the Portuguese translation of *On the Shoulders of Giants* (2002), by Stephen Hawking, Carlos Fiolhais says Newton was referring to Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler, preceded by Nicolaus Copernicus’s challenge of the long-standing geocentric tradition with the heliocentric theory. In the case of Portuguese Literature, one text by Cesário Verde (1855-86) reveals this process of literary innovation from the previous aesthetic paradigms: “Num Bairro Moderno” [In a Modern District] (1877). This text showcases the “artist’s vision” of Art, Poetry, and of the aesthetic modernity dominated by a transfiguring dimension (not expressive or representative, nor applying the same models). It is a vision that surprises us under the bright morning light, offering itself to exploration and reconfiguration for different aesthetic and

successive programs, and shaded and undecided by many. Let us quote the passage.

Ten in the morning; transparencies
colored a palatial house;
In the gardens the springs are stanchd,
And it hurts the view, with hot whiteness,
The broad macadam street.
[...]
[...] I went down,
With no hurry, to my job,
[...].

In the imagination of a contemporary reader, where we include ourselves, this imagery used by Cesário forms a diptych contrastive with the nocturnal and later “O Sentimento dum Ocidental” [The Feeling of a Westerner] (1880, the third centenary of Camões), for it enshrines Lisbon as a continuing expanding city, evoking this way the impressionist series in different times of the day, with landscapes transformed by the intensity and variation of light. And the surprising “artist’s vision” occurs under the brightest sun and in a setting that severs as a frame and duplicates the newness: the urban transfiguration of Lisbon through the Av. da Liberdade, which starts the “old dream of a modern boulevard that devours and provides a new meaning to the Public Street of the romantic city”, a metamorphosis accompanied by the euphoria of projects conceived and multiplied with an imagination running wild.

Civilization tearing up the space and transforming it. A double prodigy carrying the same meaning of a mutual intensification. For us contemporary readers, we have, in contrast, an old Portugal of an imaginary Lusitania, evoked, for example, by the subject of António Nobre moving through this Quartier Latin of artistic bohemia (“Lusitânia no Bairro Latino” [Lusitania in the Latin District], 1891-92). A compositional backlight forms a new imaginary polyptych of the 19th century between past and present, light and shadow, memory and observation. The *new* is being generated in its ancestors...

Here we are, therefore, in a *brave new world* where innovation strikes us, in a sudden, singular, prodigious fashion and under a light that “hurts”. Wounded by “hot whiteness,” the eye of the poet slides across the involving setting, offering us successive images, oscillating between the overall context and the detail, the stationary and its opposite, scenery and figures. In the first stanza, the description of everyday banality acquires its *presentation*: “In the gardens the springs are stanch’d” marks a progressive suspension of movement and the corresponding sound that seems to announce an *event*. Suspense ensues. This stanza is, therefore, established as a *pedestal* of artistic work: the poem, the *artist’s vision*, the imaginative process. Suddenly, before the vase, we find “pieces of a crowded garden”...

Suddenly, – what artist’s vision! -
If I transform the simple vegetables,
In sunlight, the intense colorist,
In a moving and existing human being
Full of beautiful body proportions?!

This rhetorical question, emphasizing the sociable tone of the poem, evokes famous dialogues between artists, the genesis of many works. *Frankenstein* (1817) is the most immediate example, but Cesário drags the experience of creation of life from the shadows of a laboratory to sunlight, releasing it from the stigma of the night, secrecy and lonely negativity, and legitimizes it in an aesthetic of daytime social sharing. After all, the 19th century is the century of Darwin and of *The Origin of Species* (1859). He combines it with the famous and previous Law of Lavoisier (18th century), founder of modern Chemistry and author of one of the first Russian grammars. Modern answers to the haunting question of life and its origins... In this image of the “modern district” energized by the movement of the subject, a *fracture* is “suddenly” generated where the “artist’s vision” gazes the Art in its *emergence*. The travelling gives way to zoom towards the detail, and the latter, in close up, gives way to a jump into the imaginary: the movement gives way to image, a kind of portal to another dimension, the aesthetics. In this new universe, we are offered the tools/criteria for our guidance, a GPS of innovative thinking. And, like in the old planispheres, references are also pointed out. I can not resist evoking the example of the planisphere by Martin Waldseemüller, *Universalis Cosmographia Secundum Ptholomaei Traditionem et Americi Vespuccii Aliorumque Lustrationes* (1507), which presents for the first time the world divided into two hemispheres, Eastern and Western, separately, with Ptolemy to the left and Amerigo Vespucci to the right, each of them with their cartographic instruments and accompanied by anthropomorphized and named winds, signaling the cycle of cartography since classical antiquity until the contemporary voyages of exploration. Let us look at the guiding factors of the “artist’s vision” of Cesário.

And let us watch him flip through Art History, but from a backstage perspective, of the alchemy of the verb clad in different and successive aesthetic programs. First, let us define the “artist’s vision” as a transfiguring *perception of reality*, able to provide it with a magical dimension, revealing other realities, which are qualitatively different, imaginary, surprising. Second, it betrays an *anthropocentric tendency* of the imaginary which leads irresistibly from “vegetables” to “human being”, reminding us both classical Western tradition and national popular tradition, closely relating them and linking to them: on the one hand, the Renaissance where antiquity is renewed, against 17th century authors like Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whose compositions with vegetables, fruits and flowers were configured in profiles, human faces, constituting anthropomorphic still life paintings.

Third, it recognizes that this transfiguration (and this term will also be strategic for my reflection below) is transcendent, for leading from the “simple” (a stationary plant) to the complex (“a moving and existing human being”), reactivating in us the memory of alchemy and esoteric attempts and myths of creation of man, the homunculus, claimed by Paracelsus and vividly depicted in Goethe’s Faust... Thus, Cesário Verde seems to remind us of a long and ancient mythical gallery of beings who challenged the divine forces by creating life, stimulating our imagination, fantasy and sensibility, similar to the conversation between Lord Byron and Percy Shelley about the nature of the origin of life and how inanimate things could move again, which inspired Mary Shelley, also with creative consequences.

Fourth, saying “recreated, in anatomy/A new organic body, piece by piece”, the poet has inevitably imposed the fantastic sensed in this strange and heterogeneous gigantic being, made giant by an invocation of Pantagruel (and through it, also the *giants* of classical mythology, travel literature and the fantastical popular short novels): Frankenstein’s monster rises before us since the beginning of the 19th century, dominating the scene, haunting it, deforming the rational geometric trace (“drawn by ruler and compass”) in a Gothic emotional curve, but also consolidating and updating the old myths in the scientific and technological revolution of the 19th century by turning combinatorial and experimental alchemical and cabbalistic practices into electricity. If we remember that the second part of the title of the work is *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), we suspect that this is an evocation of Art as Promethean fire and the Author as an old myth of Western knowledge with a magnitude we do not recognize in those who succeed him in the pursuit of knowledge...

Exoticism poured into strangeness, and strangeness pours into amazement. Through the composite figures of Arcimboldo and concepts of *beauty* and *proportionality*, we are taken back to the Renaissance period of the artist-scientist who combines geometric research, anatomical and mathematics, in particular, with art. Let us walk through this imaginary universe in which we entered through the portal offered by the “artist’s vision.” Let us stage a new *artificial perspective*, of *dizzying acronia*.

In the work of Arcimboldo, where surrealism is announced, memory takes me to meet two key works: *Summer* (1573) and *Vertumnus* (c. 1590). The first, a painting of the *Four Seasons* series, organized by symmetry and asymmetry, presents a profile of male bust composed of vegetables and fruits of the season in whose collar the painter inscribed “Giuseppe

Arcimboldo F.” (“G. A. did this”) and “1557”, authenticating and dating it. The latter, a painting in homage to the Austrian Emperor Rudolph II, portrays the ancient Roman god of vegetation and *transformation*, the latter being linked to existence itself, precisely the issue at stake here. Cesário Verde leads me to evoke these figures in the same emblematic and symbolic icon of *transformation*, represented in profile and from the front forming a single identity. Considered by some one of the forerunners of modern art, Arcimboldo is also strongly rooted in classical and humanistic culture: his figures portray the old system of correspondences that would affect Symbolism, in a formal and tonal harmony, their grotesque designs are directly inspired in German etchings and in Leonardo da Vinci’s caricatures, reflection relates him with the alchemist and magical tradition so strong in the literate imperial court, etc. Experiences of double reading by inversion are also interesting (*The Cook*, c. 1557, *Vegetables*, c. 1590). Being responsible for the Departments of Art and Prodigies of the imperial court and being its exceptional collaborator, his production developed a similar museology. In short, Arcimboldo signals important aspects of composition, in general, and the one that is generated in the discontinuity of a text by Cesário Verde, in particular: the correspondences, the symmetries or asymmetries, the potentiating ambiguity of double reading, the *prodigy*. A *prodigy* that, in his versions of *wonder* or *monstrous*, he was the great protagonist of the long tradition of travel literature, suspending the continuity of the fascinated gaze of the traveller and imbuing him with expectancy, the same expectancy that also invades us under the impact of the writing of Cesário Verde. A writing where ambulation also evokes the digressive *Viagens na Minha Terra*, in which threshold Garrett proposed and legitimizes the transformation of this model, preferring a reflective visit to the national territory.

Renaissance, Baroque, exoticism and travel literature follow one another because, in memory, they dilute each other’s borders, interpenetrating, mingling... In the fracture of the image of the modern district, the *prodigy* of an anthropomorphic still life “suddenly” erupts with the full range of listed characteristics (“like a fetus, that is thus dilated”, supreme prodigy of existence), a hypotyposis absorbing my attention to again surprising the way it becomes *historical*, either through a course in Art History, whether waving a chance to become a narrative. Then, contrasting the Renaissance with the reality being described in the present, it imperfectly describes this *transfiguration* of the real, conceived and inscribed in an original image, a prodigy to be investigated and to be revealed as it is formed. Revealing the criteria of this transformation (the anthropomorphization and the likeness), its elements (the colors, the shapes, their relative positions), their references (in Aesthetics, in Art History), its stages, etc.

Throughout this description, he *recalls and ponders with strict aesthetic models* subtly indicated by certain details, after all making an itinerary of Art History and revealing it inscribed on the composite image of the first moment, whose elements, being apparently contemporaries, are shown as successive (space *decompresses* or *turns* into time), *historicizing* the composition: Apollonian classicism of the “fine bodily proportions” (herein, the genre is still neutral), the romanticism of black “braids” (the female begins to take over), the naturalism of the “injected breasts” (and, at a later stage, the realism of the “tempting flesh”), the decadent-symbolism of “rosary eyes,” the expressionism of the “bare bones,” the

cubism of the combination of details of “necks, shoulders, mouths, one expression” (abandoning the paradigm of art as representation) and the surrealism of “one gargantuan belly” of “someone who dined everything,” finally hinting at the possibility of the narrative in the description hitherto dominant, but also underlining the imaginative delirium. Finally, *he shows the way and steps of the transfiguring process* in his perception. On the one hand, he highlights the growing reduction of the field of view from the street to the big picture of the large vegetable assortment, and inside this, the elements he uses in each case, metamorphosing them into signs, signs of different aesthetics, which are evoked, pondered and surpassed. On the other hand, it makes me follow the progressive loss of proprioceptive awareness in being absorbed by the imagined and by the imaginary: First, the awareness of subjectivity in “[I] thought” or “[I] discovered” gives way to the apparent objectivity of “there is” and “it appears”, a phase in which the objects are imposed to him by the dynamics of the process, and then this step is, in turn, closed in the recovery of lucidity implicated in the comparative procedure in “like this,” “it reminded me of,” etc., a lucidity that seems to lead us to an anatomy or slaughter table (places that popular imagination often puts side by side) combined of “flesh,” “blood,” “hearts” and “fingers.” If the Renaissance masters practiced anatomy to use that knowledge of the human body in art, Cesário Verde anatomically observes Art History to build this strange being he offers to us, an “organic body in pieces” or “human being,” which, after all, seems to be something else still...

The carnival of art for art’s sake is denounced by the gargantuan “belly” that at some point seems “to dine everything”, to swallow, to make disappear, as the monstrous Cronus that, incredibly, eats the “fetus” that was at its origin. Rabelais imposes us another *prodigy*: Pantagruel, the giant. Advancing towards the Renaissance vanishing point (or as it is approaching us itself), the picture transforms and becomes defined as a whole “human being.” Then, pulling away from him (or vice versa), I see it splinter in successive *details* (head, breasts, hair, eyes, necks, mouths, etc.), each of them, in turn, being referred in a way that reveals a sensibility, a canon, a aesthetic. Finally, these fragments are recombined and form a new composition, different from the original one, frustrating any expectations. In short, by manipulating *detail*, the poet turns a page in Art History, puts it into *perspective*, a *vertiginous perspective*, a medley, a *Midlin* that leads figuration into abstraction and myths of creation (of the inspired poet, inhabited by transcendence) to the representation (the poet who creates using something as basis, generally something he perceives) and the composition (of the poet which methodically analysis other compositions, many of them belonging to others, recombining these quoted fragments into a new composition). The latter two cases, representation and composition, are materialized and become related in the text: the image of the traversed space, that is outlined, split, cut by introducing discontinuity. In this meeting with the Renaissance that Arcimboldo has provided, I see the search for the time and birth of the Art and the Artist, for the origins. It is when the awareness of the vision as foundation of knowledge is crystallized in the *perspectiva artificialis*, which gives prominence to the Artist, knowledgeable of the laws of space and organizer of the composition according to his place, also selecting his recipient, directing it towards an expert in his field. *Perspective* organizes and plans, *proportionality* scales and confronts, and both exist according to this centralized and exposed humanity in an emblematic way in the drawings by

Leonardo da Vinci, as if to break free from the constrictions of a stratified medieval cosmos to impose itself in the center of the universe by his creative powers, starting a profane and ennobled history, with its Artists (see the “divine Miguel Angelo”, the noble Titian, etc.) and styles. At that time, the “secularization” of the vision, reducing the real to the perceived, pursued objectivity through geometry, mathematics and anatomy, but also had to recognize the centrality of the ambiguous subjectivity led by the observer. Hence the never fully eradicated *ambiguity*, the rhetoric source of *image*. Hence the almost contemporary onset of *landscaping*, of *portrait* and even the *self-portrait*: Jan van Eyck (c. 1390-1441) offers us a view of Liege in the background of the *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (1434-36) at the same time he makes us see the *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) in the domestic household, reflecting the figures behind the convex mirror (*mise en abyme*), representing himself in miniature as a painter and signing in Latin as a witness (“Jan van Eyck was present”).

In the text by Cesário Verde, the composition does not inscribe another in a window or mirror, interior or exterior, respectively, as in the referred paintings by Van Eyck: the “artist” is inscribed as an observer moving in the unstable *landscape*, inscribing in it a *detail* of the saleswoman *scene*, itself likely to invoke an entire pictorial lineage, also imaginary, the ghost of a *portrait* that ends up not existing, therefore revealing the *aesthetic itinerary* or *fragmented composition* able to, in turn, become dynamic as a narrative. The fixed, central and frontal classical perspective of the past gives way to the perspective in movement, in succession and cleaved by the imaginary of Cesário: between them, there is an Art History that goes from the representation to the crises of representation, an history whose traces the poet handles in his morning experience...

And if, on the ground, “an ignoble, oxidized copper” (IV, 4), while clashing with the apricots, caused the *fracture* in the image of the real, of the Modern District, the sun, with the previous light and the heat, reintroduces reality, continuing the scene of the interrupted transaction. A metal hinting at the alchemical work that art can be. And, in this *fracture*, another is implied: the one of reading, which subverts the linearity with the evocation, the association... as is now happening to me here. The emergence of Art then recedes to this missing vanishing point, obliterated by the banal everyday of the city. Fleeting and carnivalesque, the missing image leaves us suspended between perception, illusion, imagination and hallucination, but also between retrospective and prospective reflexion.

Dominated by suspicion due to the *undecidability* of the image glimpsed in the crevice of another...

On the street, the poet makes this image of his poetics succeed another that precedes it:

A little one watering the vine
From blue window; and the drain
Of the watering pot, it seems that he is winnowing
Or is sprinkling with stars; and the dust
That elevates high clouds incenses it

It is the *window*, a symbol of the aesthetic perspective, the threshold between the real and fictional with which Garrett stages and frames the story of this Joanhina, who ponders national identity, as I mentioned earlier. The window where Cesário replaces the corner and the image of the nightingales by the “childish cries” of a canary which is only heard. The “Janela Azul” [Blue Window] seems to anticipate that other window in the same color that Matisse will give us (*The Blue Window*, 1912). An unexpected product of the *prodigy* of the “artist’s vision” offered to our observation and to the quill of the Giants we now celebrate, *and in whose shoulders we stand...*

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