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ON THE ORIGIN AND FUTURE OF POETRY:
NOTES TOWARDS AN INVESTIGATION
BY CARLOS AGUASACO¹

What is the origin of poetry?

Poetry possibly preceded language, but a poem is an artifact that, like everything else in civilization, has a history. The first forms of acoustic communication may probably have emerged about 500,000 years ago. The first languages probably appeared about 50,000 years ago. The first poem in history must have been created around that same time. At first, words, like tools, were rudimentary and scarce. Migrations, new contexts and new needs of survival determined their process of sophistication and refinement. Living, or surviving, was not an easy task for the hairless hominids that we were that we are. Nevertheless, we have evidence of the creation of elaboration of complex cultural products (carvings, paintings, and tools) dating back 20,000 years. The Proto-Indo-European language existed some 6,000 years ago. Sumerian literature, the oldest we have material evidence of, emerged about 4,700 years ago.

Let us take a moment to analyze the conditions of production of the first poem in history. Is it possible to reconcile Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to the writing of poetry? Before attempting to answer this question it is worth discussing the neurological origins of language explained succinctly by Rodolfo R. Llinás (2001). Communication is not exclusive to humans. Animals manage to communicate by means of gestures, grunts and smells (among other things) information that is vital for their survival. A grunt can be an alarm signal, a gesture can convey submis-

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sion to the alpha male in a wolf pack, and pheromones signal reproductive readiness (225-32). Every attempt of an organism to communicate with another requires the establishment of a community of meaning represented in a form of 'consensus.' The ability to imitate each other allows animals to develop a sense of familiarity and belonging to the pack. At some point, that capacity is transformed into both a need and a desire to communicate. Llinás states that acoustic imitation is privileged over imitation of gestures because the former allows the emitting animal to hear itself while transmitting the message. Visual systems of communication require stricter material conditions than acoustic media. In the theory of evolution, adaptation is the result of constant processes of trial and error. When sensing danger or feeling pain, an animal victim of a predator can, naturally, emit a cry of such intensity and volume that the attacker feels deterred and decides to leave (238). When the screech, cry of pain, is 'understood' as a signal of danger by the predator the first metaphor is born, perhaps by accident (238). The first metaphor was both an accidental and collective creation; it would be actually more appropriate to call it a proto-metaphor because although it already contains a logical base, it still lacks the expressive will of the emitter. The survival of the prey and its kind will depend, among other things, on its capacity to transform this circumstance into an effective symbolic instrument. In practice, the animal will no longer wait to feel pain to emit the 'noise' that can guarantee its survival. The cry of pain is known in neuroscience as a Fixed Action Pattern or reflex action. To construct a system of communication based on corporal expressions such as gestures and sounds, the brain must develop the capacity to control, i.e., at will, the systems of mechanical reaction that produce the Fixed Action Patterns. The gap between emission and interpretation that generates the momentary rupture in the link between action and reaction is the 'Big Bang' of linguistic systems and, therefore, of poetry. At the beginning of language, the trope, the simile and the metaphor are undistinguishable; poetry, like a zygote, is in an embryonic state. Greg Urban identifies the first non-instinctive signals as metasignals constructed on top of previous instinctive actions such as grunts and cries ("Metasignaling and Language Origin," 2002.) However, as the system grows and gains stability, instinctive reactions stop supplying the necessary tools for more complex forms of communication among the community and its succeeding generations. Meanwhile, natural selection permitted hominids to develop neocortical control over the laryngeal muscles (235) enabling them to produce and manipulate sounds. This development vastly exceeds any previous capacity to share linguistic tools and acquired information. The community now needs to develop new ways of conserving and sharing the linguistic devel-

opments that will represent a selective advantage over other species. The channel is the air and the recording device is memory. From this moment on, rhythm and repetition would share room with the Fixed Action Patterns. Memory, music, and poetry are now a single entity and they sustain each other reciprocally.

In the beginning, discourses, like other tools, were not specialized. At the time, discursive products had to 'serve' to address a variety of needs. For example, biblical texts, served as religious manuals, treatises on history, science, politics, law, pedagogy, art, etc. In fact, even today some nations take their religious books as the basis of their legal and political systems.² The best illustration is Sharia law, with one of its sources in the Koran, which was written in verse and continues to serve as spiritual guide and basis of legal doctrines. The writing of poems, then, did not emerge as an independent form or specialized form of communication. Poetry, in the most abstract sense, precedes the poem in the same way that spoken language precedes writing. It is also possible to say that poetry was the Siamese twin of history, philosophy, law, religion, science and mathematics. In practice, poetry maintained a social communication function for a long time. The emergence of new technologies such as writing began what I would call the process of emancipation and specialization of poetry. The poem, poetry's main instrument, thus began a slow process of liberation from legal and scientific functions to focus on its own self. Every poem is in itself a theory of poetry, a poetics.

In its origins, poetry serve man 'to grasp' knowledge relevant for survival. Poems were instruments of teaching and learning. How did the primitive poetic mechanism function? Probably, after the so-called 'Big Bang' of linguistic systems, a boom in experimentation and interpretation with acoustic signals began. The more 'effective' signals would become popular while others were short lived and disposed of. Poetry since the beginning has been the quest for new and richer meanings without abandoning past achievements. The most appropriate comparison would be the surgical method of bone lengthening in which a bone is artificially elongated using the natural process of osteogenesis. In a surgical intervention called corticotomy, the doctor provokes an artificial fracture in the bone and installs a system of screws that controls the distance between the two fractured sections. The gap must be big enough to allow for elongation, yet short enough to not impede it. At that moment, the fracture is a new 'event' for the bone but, once it has been repaired by process of osteogenesis, it becomes a support for new elongations. Language grows

2 This is the case of the many countries that base their laws on the Koran.

and extends itself thanks to ‘fractures’ in meaning that are basically the fundamental instruments of poetry. In 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson correctly said “Every word was once a poem” (197). Poets were the makers of language or likewise, all makers of language have been poets. Following the same thought, Emerson said: “Poets made all the words and, therefore, language is the archive of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses” (199). Languages are built with what he calls “fossil poetry” (199).

Writing, as a form of technology, breaks into the history of poetry with multiple effects. The onomastic model, Houston informs us (2004), explains the development of writing as an extension of preceding systems of numeric notation (236). From this perspective, writing would be a sibling of accounting and early forms of administration. Writing is one the material forms of power. Although the development of different writing systems requires an independent study, we must concentrate here on its influence in poetry. The oldest ‘poetic’ text we know of is “Hymn to the Death of Tammuz” dating back 2500 to 3000 years BC³.

The equally ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* is preserved on written tablets dating back to about 1200 BC. Writing was a new technology that took at least two millennia to become hegemonic. When texts like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* begin to be ‘written’ in stable materials such as clay tablets and stone, poetry entered the endless era of litigation, of debate, over meaning. The written text would eventually impose its authority over oral tradition. Paul Zumthor made a detailed study of the relationship between oral expression and literature in the middle ages. Beyond the process, how did writing affect poetry? One of its consequences was the materialization of poetry in an object, the poem. From that moment on, poems could be alienated, accumulated and possessed without requiring any intellectual effort of its ‘owner.’ Property could be extended and transferred beyond the lifespan of the ‘proprietor.’ The text could now be ‘consumed’ simultaneously in more than one place. The reproduction of written texts is the new alternative to memory. The poem, as object, enters more and more into private spaces. Nowadays, orality seems almost exclusively something from the past. However, we must remember that lyric poetry derives its name from the interpretations done in ancient Greece with a lyre or a flute by antique rhapsodes. The couple formed by Mimnermo and Nanno (7th century BC) has become part of history as an example of the prevalence of orality over writing.

3 It has recently been said that the poem “Dünyanın en eski aşk şiiri” also known as Istanbul #2461 (Its reference number in the Museum of Istanbul) is the oldest known love poem.

With the arrival of the printing press (1450) and the subsequent expansion of reading, poetry began to serve increasingly more the needs of the 'user' or 'consumer' and less and less the social group in general. To this end, the themes cease to be 'collective' and become the 'revelation' of particular realities. Lyric poetry becomes the poetry of the inner self while epic poetry becomes the sister of history and ruler of the external world. The personal becomes lyric and the social becomes epic. The epic evolves, Georg Lukács says into the modern novel.

We must remember that, as Asa Briggs and Peter Burke have correctly pointed out, as new communication channels and media have appeared, the old ones have not disappeared but coexist with them. Writing did not end orality but rather released it from its mnemotechnic function. The printing press did not end manuscripts but instead displaced them to the personal sphere while it took over the public arena. Photography did not end painting but released it from its mimetic function and allowed it to explore abstract universes. Film did not end the theater but instead established a symbiotic relation with it. Television did not mean the end of radio but its transformation into new forms of debate and analysis. In the same way, the internet will not eliminate any of its predecessors but will coexist with them in a reciprocal causality that will transform them all.

When transferring the same logic to poetry and its representative forms throughout history, we can see how epic poetry survives in certain forms of committed poetry. We also see that with the arrival of modernity (16th century), lyric poetry found the ideal form for representing the most intimate voice of the subject in the sonnet. Based on this, we can say that as long as the pronouns 'I' and 'You' exist, there will be forms lyric poetry; and as long as the pronouns 'We' and 'They' exist, epic poetry will remain in different media and forms.

Has poetry had ontological crises?

Despite its permanence, we must recognize that throughout history poetry has had to confront ontological crises that provoked divisions, sub-specializations and changes. The first of these would be accepting that poetry was no longer the universal and almighty discourse of the 'Creator.' Some orthodox religions maintain this old idea in their prayers, rites and sacraments. However, the great majority of us read texts like the Bible not in a literal or scientific sense but as beautiful allegories with certain, although limited, historical truth. When Huidobro says that "The poet is a small God"⁴ (*Espejo de Agua*, 1916), what he actually recognizes is that in

4 In the original "El poeta es un pequeño Dios."

our times poetry does not represent the voice of an endless and almighty giant but the shriek of a bunch of midgets. Huidobro's verse comforts the modern poet but it undoubtedly declares the extinction of the evangelist poet.

Martin Heidegger devoted two of his works on Hölderlin and Rilke to the study of poetry: "What Are Poets For?" and "Why Poets?" (1946.) According to this German philosopher, the poet is a creator that emerges in a world without 'god' or 'deities.' According to him, the poet is willing to take up the space abandoned by the 'gods.' However, an oppositional reading would bring to light that Heidegger is trying to disguise and transfer his concept of "Being in the world" (*Dasein*) from the battleground to the territory of language, from the soldier's rifle to the poet's quill. Maybe without realizing it, Heidegger proposes a new teleology in which immortality can be achieved in the linguistic universe. His reading of poetry is an allegory of a world that has ceased to exist. -Where does his mistake lie?- When he presents Hölderlin and Rilke as 'precursors' who are unsurmountable by any poet of our era, Heidegger distorts the real figure of the poet that Huidobro clearly understood (*Poetry, Language...* 142). In this case, it seems the German philosopher were in need of 'supermen' or 'supernatural beings' to keep his ideological construct from falling apart.

Why didn't he think about the power of women who can give life to another being inside their own bodies and then give it to the world to allow it to be itself? Why didn't he mention the mothers of Hölderlin and Rilke as their own 'precursors'? The first ontological crisis of poetry was inscribed within Descartes' discourse. The emergence of modern logic and its scientific counterparts made it inevitable.

Poetry came out of this crisis renovated and liberated from functions that are now assumed by archeology, law, history, biology, and medicine (among other sciences.) In modernity, poetry, like painting, was now free to explore the interior universe in which everything is language. From a heretotelic voice (a voice for all) it moves to an autotelic song in which the poem is a new and small totality. The *isms* of the 19th century and the 20th century avant-garde testify to this process.

The second ontological crisis (I say this to organize the discourse but it should not be taken in a linear sense) is the arrival of writing as a new technology. Writing frees poetry from its mnemotechnic function and yet it simultaneously loses the flexibility of orality. Poetry, in its oral phase, i.e., before writing, was a living organism with the capacity to accommodate itself to new contexts and the ability to articulate new contents each time it was transmitted orally from one person to another. The written poem is inflexible both in content and form. As a result of the new stability gained

with writing, representative flexibility is transferred to hermeneutics. That is why today we have hundreds, perhaps thousands, of scholars attempting to ‘understand’ what Cesar Vallejo meant in his book *Trilce* (1922).

The third ontological crisis of poetry is the result of the consolidation of the market economy and capitalism. The concept of private property has invaded all spaces and spheres. The poem gains an exchange value represented in money or social acknowledgement. The so-called “Copy Rights” attach the poem to a historical subject with a legal ball and chain. I have discussed this topic in a previous article on the relationship between poetry and private property. In many cases, the historical author and his/her biography displace the content of the poem. In fact, not long ago, Peruvian author Alfredo Bryce Echenique received an award in the International Book Fair of Guadalajara amidst a scandal about alleged plagiarism on his part. This example, coming from narrative literature, reveals dramatic aspects of the role of literature as a cultural product with exchange value. Poetry contests, writing fellowships, and all sort of social events turn poems into merchandise in an ever-expanding market of cultural capital. In modernity, poetry was increasingly transformed into a battle ground of disputes and confrontation. The result has been an ethics based in an economic formation that favors inequality. This reality subjects lyric poetry to tension between representation of the subject’s ‘interiority’ and its social subsistence. Modern hermeneutics approaches poetry by asking in strict order: Who? Why? In exchange for what? and What for?

The fourth ontological crisis of poetry is the questioning of its authenticity. Technological progress and the significant advance in literacy, have facilitated the emergence of authors from every possible social sphere. This is undoubtedly a significant achievement of our civilization. Anyone, and everyone can be a poet. Furthermore, many have begun to think that ‘any’ discourse whatsoever can be read and presented as a poem.

This reflection that stems from the visual arts was initiated by Marcel Duchamp with his theory of the so-called ‘ready-made.’ According to which, any object can be re-contextualized and re-signified as a work of art. Today, anyone can proclaim himself/ herself as a poet; in doing so, they claim their inalienable right to present any discourse as a poem. Therefore, there are those who present a grocery list as a poem, while others may present a chemical formula or a mathematical equation for the same purpose. Please do not confuse this discussion with the concept of the Poem-Object proposed by André Bretón or with the concretist poetry developed in Brazil. The current ontological crisis of poetry results from the overloading of all channels of communication with discourses ‘declared’ or ‘presented’ as poems that claim an exchange value in our cultural economy. Let us think,

for a moment, what would happen if anyone could present herself / himself to an audience to play a musical instrument that he/she has never studied or learned to play. What would happen if all the spaces for music were invaded by characters claiming their right to play a musical instrument by pounding on it or scratching it? At this point, the snake bites its own tail because, as mentioned above, representative flexibility has now been displaced by hermeneutics. How will poetry emerge from this ontological crisis? There could be several outcomes, one would be that the new poet will be the reader and not the writer. In fact, I say this following Borges, each great poet is first a great reader.⁵ Another possible outcome would be rise of an anonymous poetry movement looking for a valuation of artistic achievement based solely on the text itself and not on any extra-literary factors involved in its production.

What is the future of poetry?

I would like to finish this text with a brief reflection on the future of poetry as a result of its interaction with new technologies such as smart phones, social networks, internet, video games, etc. It is no secret that science and technology have reached a high level of development amidst a constant state of change. This sort of technical inertia makes new machines become obsolete every six months, forcing us to replace them with new 'upgraded' versions. How many of us change our cellphone at least once or twice a year? How many of us read at least some documents on computer screens? Time becomes shorter and shorter, not in a material sense but in our perception of it. Therefore, the stability of the Metaphor is at risk. The arrival and popularization of the automobile made many of the old metaphors related to the horse simply obsolete or degraded to second level. Airplanes had the same effect with respect to birds in poetry. The cell or 'mobile' phone transformed a spatial metaphor into one of constant displacement. The internet took away the perfume from many letters that are no longer written with quill and paper, with careful calligraphy and composition, but that on the contrary, have become more telegraphic, codified by teenagers using their thumbs in a frenetic race to respond immediately without reflecting on what they have written or read. To survive, poetry will have to resort to the fundamental metaphors mentioned by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Another alternative would be for technology to provide an unlimited number of clarifying notes and hypertexts, as Severo Sarduy correctly envisioned. In conclusion, to survive, poetry will make reading precede writing and

5 The reader must be seen as decoder.

will also extend its presence throughout the entire process of communication. The future of poetry depends on the empowerment of the reader and the weakening of the link between poem and private property. In fact, the poetry of the future already exists but we have been incapable of reading it. It is a poetry that assumes the instability of metaphors and reacts against the preeminence of science as the hegemonic discourse on knowledge. The work of César Vallejo is the best example of this poetry of the future that demands empowerment and strengthening of the reader.

Finally, I invite the reader of this multilingual anthology to approach it in the light of these concepts and become involved in the current debate on the ontological definition of poetry. Today, more than ever before, poetry defines and constitutes humanity.

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