

Alejandra Pizarnik Read Against the Concretistas. Silence, Iconotextuality, and Negative Metapoetics

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Abstract

Silence is one of the main themes in the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik, as well as a concurrent aesthetic principle in texts that adhere to the Concretista poetry movement. A comparative reading of her works against a variety of poems by figures associated to this movement — Pedro Xisto, Eugen Gomringer, Anchieta Fernandes, and José Lino Grünewald— reveals analogous intermedial concerns, which despite different degrees of typographic play, denote a form of writing that alludes to iconotextuality through the pluri-medial representation of silence. Despite their different degrees of effacement of the lyrical subject, the poems present salient commonalities; amongst them, metaliterary and metaiconic concerns, as well as a turn to affect, a postmodernist trajectory that resonates with the reconfiguration of the promises of the avant-garde and the degradation of the ontological certainties of Modernity expressed through games of language and its materials.

Keywords

Alejandra Pizarnik, Silence, Iconotextuality, Concretistas

Formally and thematically, silence has been identified as an aesthetic and metaphysical concern in the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik. Likewise, the international concrete poetry movement was built upon the basis of a mode of writing based in overcoming the boundaries between the

different dimensions that compose the literary text, therefore proposing an intermedial, mobile, and visual poetics that attracted and reunited writers and visual artists from across the globe, from Brazil to Europe and Japan. While amongst these works there is an important difference in terms of tone and political connotations, throughout this paper I propose that a selection of works by Pizarnik shares thematic and formal affinities to coetaneous works of the Brazilian Concretistas, especially in their use of silence and negative composition, which ultimately renders them as iconotexts. An objective of this study is to demonstrate that this intermedial property evinces a sense of reconfiguration of the aesthetic towards affect as a form of anti-discursive literature. In this sense, they repurpose poetry to a proto-political *ethos* that leads it towards affect and reader response. All of these works appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of social turmoil, political division, and intellectual censorship and intervention in the Southern Cone. In this sense, they are, in varying degrees, poems that use silence to repurpose their medium against a background of rigid ideologies. On the one hand, the works by Alejandra Pizarnik selected for this study are *Los pequeños cantos* (1971) and “En esta noche en este mundo” (1971). On the other hand, the works from figures associated with Brazilian concretismo are *Silencio* (1954) by Eugen Gomringer, *Poesia Concreta* (1960) by José Lino Grünwald, *Espaço* (1960) by Pedro Xisto, and *Olho* (1968) by Anchieta Fernandes. The aesthetic correspondence amongst these works suggests an expansion of the literary object, in relation to the crises of normative literary traditions, the complexities of Latin American literature in the Cold War era, and the transformations in literature in parallel to the advent of other types of media.

Analogously to the dialogue between aesthetics and politics, the relationship between visual and textual media is historically complex. As determined by Jacques Rancière, changes in the Aesthetic Regime respond to political ones, as aesthetics also constitute a metapolitics, “its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics re-arrangements

of its space, re-configuring art as a political issue or asserting itself as true politics” (119). Likewise, the sensorium produced both by art and industry (Rancière 122) is also hierarchically layered, and as Mitchell has proposed, Image-Word relations have been defined more by a historical dialectic than by ontological differences (Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology* 43). In consequence, the elective use and the deliberate combination of different types of media, specially between images and words, has held a metonymic relation to power according to different contingencies. Since the decline of the nineteenth century and the appearance of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* (1897), the boundaries of Western literature have been continuously challenged, specially by the anti-realist strains of the avant-garde. Plastic experimentation with the written word and compositions that oppose the sequential logics of linguistic thought have thus sought to reconfigure and repurpose literature, despite its saliency as the quintessential medium of the Enlightened *logos*. A common element amongst these compositions is that they foreground and produce meaning not only through the linguistic elements of literature, but also through their visual disposition; for instance, through typographic play and the deliberate use of the blanks in the page as a means for caesura, ultimately evoking a sense of silence. Jeffrey Johnson defines these poetics as the “synesthetic mode of poetry”, while pointing to the dissemination of Japanese aesthetics in the literary arts—mostly through the genre of *hokku* (“haiku”) and *Japonisme* (visual analogy to *ukiyo-e* scenes)—and two of its thematic axes: *yugen*—suggestiveness—and *shikan* or contemplation (13). Considering the popularity of the *Japoniste* sensibility in the latter-half of the nineteenth century in Paris, as well as the influence of the Symbolist poets in the avant-garde, Johnson’s thesis resounds with the precepts embodied by Mallarmé’s seminal poem. Friedrich Kittler has affirmed that Mallarmé changed literature into a work of combinatorials (with twenty-six letters) and poetry into a form of “typographically optimized blackness on exorbitantly expensive white paper” (80). Klaus Meyer-Minneman

describes this form of literature as one of the dominant two strains in modern lyrical poetry, a poetry of immobilization, of the annulment of literality, which contrasts poetry as a form free-flowing *parole* (103). This point of encounter between Western and Eastern traditions in the first type of poetry is asserted through the aspiration of alphabetic writing to be able to signify through its graphic dimension as well, a tendency that was later embodied by the early poetry of Ezra Pound and the imagists and their affinity to Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919). Typography ambitions to turn to calligraphy. From this juncture of Occident and Orient sprouted a literature that tries to conceal itself in instants, almost denying its verbal fluidity. Such a literature produced poems that elude syntax and embrace juxtaposition as ideograms do. In this sense, it is a type of poetry that actively engages in cultural heterodoxy, directly renouncing the hegemonical uses of literature in the region. In the synesthetic mode of poetry—which paved its way transnationally across avant-garde groups in England, Spain, and Latin America throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Johnson 53)—there is a rhetorical play between a linguistic dimension and a graphic one. It surpasses the conventions of *écriture* as recorded speech and uses compositional devices on the *mise-en-page* as elements that are as semantically relevant to the poem as the words on the page themselves. This hybrid type of cultural expression, which willingly blurs the lines between a text and an image (and consequently the limits between the temporal and the spatial), can be understood as what Peter Wagner (following Michael Norlinder and Alan Montadon) defines critically as an *iconotext*: “the use of (by reference or allusion, in an implicit or explicit way) an image in a text or viceversa” (17). In works such as these, the barriers between texts and images become blurred. Instead, this intermedial texts establish themselves in a middle ground which may potentially unveil that representation is not an objective or univocal practice, but rather a multimodal one, whose elusive form ends up fixing itself into a mental image in its hermeneutical reception, as all

images, according to Mitchell, involve multisensory apprehension and interpretation (Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology* 13). As it will be demonstrated below, in the cases of Pizarnik and the Concretistas, these explorations appeal to an involvement of the reader in the production of textual or visual meaning, as they also bend towards the metaliterary and the metaiconic.

The tendency towards iconotextual writing in modern Latin American literature can be traced to two key figures: José Juan Tablada in Mexico, reportedly the first person to compose a *haiku* in a Western language and possibly the first Hispanophone poet to go on a pilgrimage to Japan, and Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina (Johnson 155). Both figures played somewhat ambiguous roles in each of their countries, nurturing both avant-garde tendencies and “lettered” nationalisms. Tablada, although somewhat marginal, spread the practice of *haiku* and the writing of calligrams in Mexico—even establishing a school of *haijines* in the 1920s—and the influx of Japanese aesthetics in his works was a major model for the writings of Octavio Paz, perhaps the most salient figure in the canon of twentieth-century Mexican literature. Borges played an analogue role: despite his creative association with the Spanish Ultraístas and the avant-garde, his literary works sedimented themselves as pivotal in their national literary tradition, and Borges’s stance as a public intellectual became tainted because of his controversial political associations with military governments. The radical poetics of visual writing, nonetheless, pervaded amongst the subsequent generations of the avant-garde. Moreover, the literary interest in Eastern and visual poetics—both Modernist and traditional—by authors from both continents (e.g. Vicente Huidobro, Antonio Machado, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Enrique Díez-Canedo), sedimented an option for poetic writing beyond the norms of the canon, that gained traction since the 1920s, for example, through the review *España* edited by Díez-Canedo (Rubio Jimenéz 83-100). Throughout the successive decades, composition of iconotexts continued to express its

subversive potential in literature produced in the margins of military dictatorships and the politics of high modernism in sporadic waves, mainly in the South cone, perhaps as an alternative to the divisive influx of censorship and partisanship in intellectual discourse in the region, or as a response to the growing skepticism towards discourse.

For Argentina and Brazil, the middle decades of the twentieth century were marked by the pursuit of an industrialized modernity, Cold War political polarization, and the constant intrusion of military forces in civil governments. On the one hand, Argentina went through six *coup d'états* in the twentieth century, three of which happened between the 50s and 60s. On the other hand, the government of army statesman Eurico Gaspar Dutra in Brazil (1946-1951) established a model for national industrialism backed by geopolitical intervention, which pervaded throughout the two following decades. This tendency culminated in the imposition of Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco's military dictatorship in 1964 who remained in power until 1967, establishing an army rule that lasted until 1985. In the interim, the progressive government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) and the construction of Brasília gave the illusion of synergy between art and industry, which inspired the formation of the most salient group of the Concretistas, which revolved around the journal *Noigandres*, formed mainly Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari. This conjunction of art and industry bolstered in the development of Latin American cities, in a way, paved a way for mass-advertisements, whose iconotextual properties would also engage in dialogue with literature; Jean Franco affirms that "in Brazil, advertisements influenced the layout of concrete poetry" (187). Yet, the initial consonance of this aesthetic project to the modernizing state would soon have to turn against it, and this form of writing instead soon was harnessed as a form for —though somewhat playful, and even rationalistic (Onetto Muñoz, n. p.)— dissensus. Adjacently, while Alejandra Pizarnik's poetic career ran in parallel to the first years of the Concretista movement,

her turn towards iconotextuality seems to take place in form of personal disillusionment with the power of the written word, the sole realm of her solace, despite the fact that Mallarmé's poetry stands out as a common influence between her works (Piña 8) and those of the Concretistas (cfr. *plano piloto para poesia concreta*). Either as a form of dissent or as subterfuge, these expressions of silence in poetry coincide with the adverse political backgrounds of Argentina and Brazil in the start of mid-century; the pursuit for modernity in both nations was tainted with the violent imposition of martial rule, justified under the ideological axiom that "order" is entwined with "progress". Suggestively, these forms of writing are drawn forth also in the pivotal point in which Jean Franco identifies the decline of the "lettered city":

In the posthumously published *The Lettered City*, the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama traced the history of the lettered and their relation to power from the colonial period to the near present. Describing the intellectual environment in the early years of the twentieth century, he wrote that in order to identify the homes of intellectuals during this period—their workplaces, the universities, cafes, brothels, and bookstores they frequented—one need only to cover a few blocks of the old city. Though this intimate environment did not altogether disappear with modernization, it was not long before literary cafes turned into historical landmarks or disappeared altogether. The intellectual's relation to power also changed after the 1960s when literary celebrities began to lose some of their influence to professional economists, educators, and image makers. (187)

Throughout the course of the sixties and seventies, several literary and artistic circles not only did not prosper politically but instead suffered the consequences of living under the shadow of repressive military governments. Nonetheless, the spirit of the avant-garde, its ceaseless exploration of the limits between media, and the

use of counter-traditional literary poetics pervaded through conduits as dissimilar as the plastically-driven Concretistas and the somber poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik, even if in a parodical or disenchanted manner.

Images and Words Make Hybrid Mirrors

Alejandra Pizarnik's *Los pequeños cantos* —which first appeared in 1971 in the Venezuelan literary magazine *Árbol de fuego*, edited by Jean Aristeguieta— comprises nineteen works in which the author weaves spaces of medial tension between the verbal, the visual, and the musical which make silence manifest in the act of its reception. All of the texts in the compilation can be understood as iconotextual writings that are encased under an extended metaphor of musicality that is established by the work's title. However, the relationship between the poems and the realm of the musical is notoriously elusive. Although the title labels them as “songs” or “chants”, the brevity of the texts and their stanzas —which only surpasses the extent of seven lines in one of the poems— almost evinces a reluctance to explore the acoustic dimension of language. This contrasts notoriously with the traditional and Modernist use of the “Chant” in Western poetry, from the maximality of Pound and Dante to Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (1950). In this aversion to discursivity, several of Pizarnik's works in this book do show an exuberant play with visual composition and the spacing of the lines over the whiteness of the page. In a way, the two strains of modern literature identified by Meyer-Minneman —that of free expression and the poetics of *stasis* (102)— engage in a conflict that concurrently coils into silence across Pizarnik's *oeuvre*. This is what Yumi Gabriela Uchisato recognizes as the word / silence binomial in Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry (106). These dialectics, this interplay between the chant and its caesuras, can be conceived of as an active search for muteness which is based upon a type of negative poetics:

the promise of an intonation of a voice that does not quite sing. It is Johnson's "synesthetic mode of poetry" expressed through subjectivity. This lyrical (in)action is not only made palpable with the reading of the overall text. Its construction is crafted in the weaving of several of its texts, as its careful analysis can demonstrate.

The first of the poems in *Los pequeños cantos* is constructed as four negative statements that deny the possibility of true communication through language. The poem is composed around an anaphora based on two sentences attached to each other without a conjunction: "nadie me conoce" and "yo hablo". They are finished with a third element that could function as the direct object or the predicative adjective that this verb demands when used transitively. The phrase "yo hablo" would normally be complemented with the name of a language (e.g. "yo hablo español", "I speak Spanish") or a qualifying adjective to describe certain features of the speaking voice (e.g. "yo hablo grave", "I have a low-pitched voice"), but Pizarnik finishes the sentence with rather estranging nouns: "la noche", "mi cuerpo", "la lluvia", "los muertos":

nadie me conoce yo hablo la noche
 nadie me conoce yo hablo mi cuerpo
 nadie me conoce yo hablo la lluvia
 nadie me conoce yo hablo los muertos
 (279)

Throughout this poem, the lyrical persona denies that they can be "known" through language. They instead identify with elements that go beyond the realms of the verbal, the linguistic, and the vocal. This cue can be read as a sort of instructional guideline to the reader, positing that the true utterance of the lyrical subject is not what it states but rather what it does not. Furthermore, the final word of this opening poem relates the speaker to the dead, underscoring the ineffability of their true discourse. This concluding invocation of "los muertos" can be read as a mark that not

only encodes the deliberate silencing that Pizarnik's persona is exerting in this poem, but also in the ones that follow. Such a mark resonates with how Werner Wolf alludes to the encoding of significant silences ('significance triggers') in James Joyce's short story "The Dead". In this case, the last two words of the text repeat its title, leading the receiver to decode the muteness of the blank page that concludes the narrative as a parallel of the silence of the dead (Wolf, "How Does Absence Become Significant in Literature and Music?" 11).

The futility of language is further addressed by Pizarnik in the second *canto*, which is headed by the phrase "sólo palabras". Subsequently, the lyrical voice elaborates a catalogue that enumerates the different speakers who utter them. Yet, this list of "speakers" is actually composed solely by silenced or ineffable subjects:

sólo palabras
 las de la infancia
 las de la muerte
 las de la noche de los cuerpos
 (Pizarnik 280)

This selection of elements underscores the silence of these subjects, therefore reproducing it in the text itself. Furthermore, the affinity between all of these concepts and the passing of time allows the interpretation that words—language itself—are as fleeting as bodily existence, clearly addressed through the use of a parallel between childhood and death. It should not go unnoticed that this impermanence is also emphasized by the brevity of the text. Hence, the poem itself can be read as a metatextual meditation on the constraints of poetry, which in spite of its transcendence through the written form, is also determined by its fleetingness and by its impossibility of giving presence to what it summons. Instead, it evokes absence—it addresses times beyond that of the utterance. By instrumentalizing the "metalingual

function” (Jakobson 357) of communication, the reflexivity of the lyrical voice replicates the forms of *yugen* and *shikan* that, as mentioned, are traditionally enveloped with the *hokku* genre. Pizarnik’s lyrical voice manages to mute itself by placing the mirror of language reflexivity in front of it. This poem repeats the self-obliterating paradoxes of Pizarnik’s texts that Uchisato identifies under a deconstructionist approach, as the texts ebb and flow in the frontiers between words and silence, in works such as “Anillos de ceniza” and “Verde paraíso” (89-92)

Furthermore, the syntactical construction of this canto eludes grammaticality. Its lack of a predicate —another potential “significance trigger”— underpins the lyrical subject’s disengagement with action, another deliberate non-element in the poem’s composition. Through the foregrounding of these absences, the poem allows for the reader to engage with the silence of its interstices. In this sense, Pizarnik’s texts evoke what Mallarmé in the preface of his seminal poem defined as “un espacement de la lecture” (205).

In the third poem of *Los pequeños cantos*, Pizarnik once again makes use of intermedial devices as a means for the representation of silence, once again conflating them with metalinguistic reflexivity. Nonetheless, specular play garners more importance within this text, because it not only evokes the absences in the text itself but also how there is an absence on its visual level. Despite its brevity, it is a poem that operates with the complexity of a mirrored labyrinth. In parallel to its manifestation of silence, it also reflects on the nature of images and words, which also allows for a theoretical reading of the specular mimetic practice that is encoded in all acts of representation:

el centro de un poema
 es otro poema el centro del centro
 es la ausencia
 en el centro de la ausencia mi sombra es el centro del centro del poema
 (Pizarnik 381)

A notorious difference between this third *canto* and the preceding poem, is that it not only displays metalingual writing, it also behaves as a *metapicture*. The latter is defined by W.J.T. Mitchell as a “picture that reflects on the nature of pictures” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* 36). Nonetheless, it achieves this through the use of language itself. It works in parallel as both a meta-text and a metapicture; it is a self-reflecting iconotext. This is achieved by the poem directing the reader to the “center” of the poem from its starting line, which emphasizes the relevance of the spatial disposition of the text. However, key elements that underscore the text’s linguistic and visual reflexivity are its fourth and fifth lines and the blank space that follows, which coincides with the center of the poem. By declaring that the center of the (previously referenced) poem’s reference is “la ausencia”, Pizarnik frames the subsequent “blank line” as a depiction of absence. This verse has a triple effect: it works as a mark that detonates the legibility of the white spaces in the text, and consequently grants it the quality of being a self-reflecting intermedial object both on visual and textual dimensions. The silence in the poem is therefore framed dually as the absence of verbal and graphic information; silence is a totality beyond mediation. In a sense, Pizarnik writes from an almost post-structuralist approach: as words re-present objects (Uchisato 70), they work upon absence—a theme that is further explored below in the interpretation of “En esta noche en este mundo”— and which here is displayed as a poem that reflects primarily of its core, its central structure. The closing tercet reaffirms the text’s meta-referentiality through the inscription of a shadow, constructing an optical metaphor on the act of representation. This occurs on the penultimate line, where the lyrical subject describes that her shadow is “el centro / del centro del poema”. Such a center, nonetheless, is but mere absence: an entity that, due to its lack of a body, is physically constrained to not being able to display a shadow. Thus, these closing lines also have an estranging reflexive quality: they address reflexivity itself. This justifies reading the poem as

a distillation of mimesis, an act of self-muting in which representation silences itself. It is but a frame over nothing; the annulment of the poem as an object, which despite its similarities, contrasts the constructivist elements of other post-avant-garde writings.

Swiss-Bolivian artist Eugen Gomringer was one of the founding figures of the Concrete Poetry movement, while probably being its most salient member writing in German, and used the term in correspondence to Max Bill's precepts on Concrete Art. *Silencio* (1954, fig. 1), one of his best-known works, holds important similarities to Pizarnik's third *canto* despite this text's reluctance to conceive the poem as a *thing*. Like it, it is also a self-reflecting intermedial object that alludes to the nature of images, words, and absences. Moreover, it is a text that reflects upon its structure. It is composed as a square of words in a rectangle-shaped sextet composed solely of the word "silencio". Each of the lines encloses three mentions of the word except the third one. On this line, the second mention of the word is replaced with a blank space: a legible absence that can naturally be interpreted as a framing of silence in the center of the poem. As in Pizarnik's *canto*, it is a piece that doubly comprises a representation of silence and a representation of mimesis. Yet again, it is because of this object's duality—its intermedial composition—that silence becomes manifest: the interaction between its textual and its visual significance grants it the possibility of achieving the representation of nothingness. This iconotext—in equal manner to the third poem in Pizarnik's pamphlet—expands the limits of language and visibility beyond its conventional boundaries. These hybrid representations of blankness are perhaps amongst the closest examples of a medium presenting its subject as it is. This form of negative poetics, based on intermediality, can therefore also be understood as one of the asymptotic boundaries of mimetic practice. From its origins, Concrete poetry was based upon the principle of working with language in its materiality, with a sense of finding an equivalence between their verbal, sonorous, and visual layers; a term

defined by the Noigandres group as “isomorfismo” (Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos, Pignatari, *Plano piloto para poesia concreta*), a quality that makes these poems, in a sense, univocal. In the case of *Silencio*, the resemblance between absolute nothingness and its image are elusive: the poetic use of absence is therefore often employed as a metaphor of representation itself; a perfectly translatable text that is as eloquent in Spanish as it is in German:

silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio

Fig. 1 Eugen Gomringer, *Silencio*, 1954, concrete poem. Reproduced under the kind temporal permission of the rightsholders (7 years), courtesy of the Gomringer family.

In a sense, all concrete poems raise a manifesto for concrete poetry. José Lino Grünwald’s *Poesia Concreta* (fig. 2) composed around 1960 presents a similar meditation on the nature of the medium to Gomringer’s *Silencio*, as it also achieves a representation of silence through its self-reflexiveness; its condition as a self-critical work. As in Pizarnik’s third canto and in Gomringer’s piece, this iconotext is defined by a conflation between metatextual and meta-iconic devices, as all of its components address specific attributes of the medium of the printed word and its conventions. Throughout it, it displays a certain awareness

upon the commonly overseen “mixed” nature of media by emphasizing the specific attributes of the channel of concrete poetry: the typed page. Therefore, one can find that in it there is an intermingling of the poetic, the phatic, and the metalingual functions of language. However, this entanglement allows for a disruption with the essentialist myth of the existence of “pure” media. Through multifaceted means, it represents its own hybrid composition; nonetheless, it metonymically addresses the arbitrariness of the boundaries between images and words. This is displayed in the first stanza (or upper rectangle) in the piece, in which through anaphora, Grünewald alternates the phrases “poesia só” and “poesia em” and grants them a prepositional complement that reflects on the performance of the *mise-en-page* itself. The parallel established by the first two lines in the iconotext (“poesia só espaço / poesia em tempos”) is not only a key for reading “Poesia Concreta”: it is an argument for the mixed nature of media. In a sense, the text underlines the potential for hybrid objects to subvert the allegorical power relationships that are traditionally encoded in the Aesthetic Regime of modernity and the exclusive binarism of Enlightened dialectics; concrete poetry is, like Pizarnik’s latter works, also a form of cultural critique. A salient difference is the apparent neutrality, and gamification, with which it is addressed in concrete poetry, while in Pizarnik’s *oeuvre* these paradoxes are shrouded in subjective tragedy. In Grünewald’s poem, every line of the iconotext is noteworthy. All of its fourteen statements are self-referential. Each of them can be read as marks, or “significance triggers”, to interpret the absences and blank spacings that appear within each word and between the stanzas. The last three lines of the text explicitly depict this with metonymic eloquence. The second-to-last of them (“poesia concreta”) addresses the genre (and the historical avant-garde movement) that the object actively inscribes to, evidently admitting that the hybrid devices that are present in this iconotext are also at play on almost every other concrete poem. Subsequently, the couplet that is placed on the bottom rectangle

of the layout addresses the poetic mechanisms of the composition, which do not only give it textual but also iconic sense: “quatorze letras / quatorze linhas”. Closing the hermeneutical circle by revealing its own mechanisms, this work of art opens a door for the receiver to engage in the intermedial reading of the piece: it stresses the concrete poem’s graphic composition by disclosing the numerical factor that allows for its visual balance to come through.

p o e s i a s ó e s p a ç o
 p o e s i a e m t e m p o s
 p o e s i a s ó p á g i n a
 p o e s i a e m r i t m o s
 p o e s i a s ó i m a g e m
 p o e s i a e m f o r m a s
 p o e s i a s ó s í l a b a
 p o e s i a e m f r a s e s

 p o e s i a p a l a v r a s
 p o e s i a e s t é t i c a
 p o e s i a i n v e n ç ã o
 p o e s i a c o n c r e t a

 q u a t o r z e l e t r a s
 q u a t o r z e l i n h a s

Fig. 2 José Lino Grünewald, *Poesia Concreta*, 1967, poem. Reproduced under the kind permission of the rightsholders, courtesy of the Grünewald family.

Pizarnik’s third canto, Gomringer’s *Silencio*, and Grünewald’s *Poesia Concreta* eloquently evoke the possibility of making absence

legible by underscoring the spatial component of the printed text. Johnson avers that this was the most relevant legacy of the Concretista movement to Western literature: “Concrete Poetry’s greatest contribution, and that of visual analogy in general, was to posit the dialectic, or more accurately, the nondual of grapheme-space in the empty semantic field of the page” (84). Moreover, the three texts appeal to a form of writing that is skeptical of representation; texts whose sole subject is their own existence. As expressed in the *plano piloto para poesia concreta*: “O poema concreto comunica a su própria estrutura: estrutura-conteúdo. O poema concreto é um objeto em e por si mesmo, não um intérprete de objetos exteriores e/ou sensações mais o menos subjetivas”. Likewise, Gomringer posits on his *Constelaciones* (as he defined his works originally): “[they] make a reality in and of themselves and not poems *about something*, and we may easily recognize that in a constellation there can be a linkage between an intuitive principle and a mechanical one, in the purest shapes” (qtd. in Onetto Muñoz, n.p.).

e s p a ç o
 e s p a ç o e s
 p a ç o e s
 p a ç o e s p a
 ç o e s p a
 ç o e s p a ç o
 e s p a ç o

Fig. 3 Pedro Xisto, *Espaço*, 1962, concrete poem. Reproduced under the kind permission of the rightsholders, courtesy of his daughter Maria Amélia de Carvalho.

Johnson asserts that perhaps the clearest instance of the grapheme-space dialectic of the Concretistas, is Pedro Xisto's piece *Espaço* (Fig. 3, 1960): an iconotext that *also* holds a clear resemblance with Pizarnik's third *canto*. As the other two, it is a text that embodies a poetics of silence, as a text against discursivity. In this case, the intermedial object is composed of the lettered components of the word "espaço" with selective blank spacing within them. The selective ordering of these elements allows the reader to find the word displayed on several instances across the x and y axes as well as the diagonals. Hence, it is perhaps the example *par excellence* of a mode of writing that manifests a reluctance for logocentric linguistic expression, manifesting absence for absence's sake, and averting the dominance of syntax. Modern visual writing encodes a political message, insofar as it implies a subversion of its medium. Thus, it can be argued that the synesthetic mode of poetry performs against normative boundaries and against the instrumentalization of the text; a struggle that is clearly shown also in Pizarnik's self-effacing latter works, as they evince an epiphany of the limits of verbal creation —perhaps the fall, or the impossibility of the sublime. In the same volume (1971) of *Árbol de fuego* in which Pizarnik's *Los pequeños cantos* were first published there appeared the poem "En esta noche en este mundo". Although much more lyrical than the nineteen pieces that accompany it, it is also an object with an abundance of visual elements that address silence, but it also states, in a metalinguistic manner, the work's own reluctance to be constrained by language. As Uchisato affirms, this poem has been often considered the quintessence of Pizarnik's poetics (93). Moreover, with utter solipsism, it is a text that denies all faculties of language. Instead of conceiving it as a means for communication, or self-construction, it is addressed as an instrument of maiming violence, a reminder of absence and the fragmentation of the self against the universe. Thus, the poem renders itself useless as early as the first stanza of the poem:

la lengua natal castra
 la lengua es un órgano de conocimiento
 del fracaso de todo poema
 castrado por su propia lengua
 que es el órgano de la re-creación
 del re-conocimiento
 pero no el de la resurrección
 (Pizarnik 398)

In this segment, Pizarnik's lyrical subject addresses, once again, the theme of mimesis and representation, stressing the illusory nature of media: they create an image of reality, but they cannot evoke presence (because they mediate). As she axiomatically affirms that language is the organ—the origin—of every poem's failure, she admits the limits of language as well as all means of representation: they are but a simulacrum of presence. They vicariously re-present, but they do not hold the inherent capacity of alchemically conveying presence, thus—in her conception—they are vessels of illusion. These lines can be read therefore as an expression of disenchantment with the Surrealist/Neoromantic conception of poetry as an erotic and transformative force—the fusion of life and poetry, a poetic project alluded to in the poem by the reference to Lautréamont's *Les chants de Maldoror* (Uchisato 103). Moreover, Pizarnik's text alludes to the negative Freudian conception of the feminine gender (a type of psychic castration), and instead focuses on a sort of "original" castration, presenting an almost poststructuralist—Lacanian—perspective that dwells on the "impossibility" to breach the barrier between signifier and the signified. As a matter of fact, in the following verse, Pizarnik's vocal subject even contradicts some of the statements in this first stanza. While firstly admitting that language is an organ of "re-creación / del re-reconocimiento", she now affirms that this medium cannot even recreate objects or actions. Instead, the

poem declares, critiquing the erotic surrealism of her forebears —such as André Breton and Paul Éluard—, that words convey absence:

no
 las palabras
 no hacen el amor
 hacen la ausencia

si digo agua ¿beberé?
 si digo pan ¿comeré?
 (Pizarnik 399)

This conception of language as a creator of absences, by metonymy can also be understood as a defining aspect of a *medium*. A representation of a thing does not reproduce it, it highlights its absence from a moment in space and time. This paradoxical nature of the mediatic is underscored by the poem's title, which is the sole line that appears recursively in the text: "en esta noche en este mundo". Therefore, situating both the lyrical voice and the reader at a moment in space and time, the text affirms that it is but an instrument that substitutes ideas and actions, but it cannot enact them itself. It displays the potential aporetic and ambiguous nature inherent to language, literature, and art. They represent, but in doing so, they admit their non-agency. They parallelly transmit presences and their absences. Furthermore, the ubiquity of this problem is addressed through the text's circular composition, as it ends with the same lines with which it begins. Through this circular form, the poem establishes itself as a theatre of light and shadow: a binary play of presence and absence. Yet, the most palpable presence in the text is that of silence itself. The lyrical subject negatively attains the purpose of elaborating an image that evokes its subject. Thus, the reader, in the *legere in silentio*, is left to think if there any differences between nothingness and its image.

The most distinguishable significance triggers in “En esta noche en este mundo” appear in the third strophe, as it repeats the title of the poem and afterwards evokes silence as the sole element that is present in that moment in time and space. Moreover, it also includes a meditation on the ineffability of Spirit, Mind, and Soul, fundamental categories of the project of Modernity that were put in crisis since the start of the twentieth century. Questioning the lack of an image of these entities, the lyrical subject thus posits a separation between perception, cognition, and the metaphysical, delineating their invisibility. Yet, this interrogation can also be interpreted as a hidden cue in the poem that seeks to actively question the receiver to decode what is absent in the poem:

en esta noche en este mundo
 extraordinario silencio el de esta noche
 lo que pasa en el alma es que no se ve
 lo que pasa con la mente es que no se ve
 lo que pasa en el espíritu es que no se ve
 ¿de dónde viene esta conspiración de invisibilidades?
 ninguna palabra es visible
 (Pizarnik 399)

The stanza—in a similar fashion to the third canto and the concrete poems—concludes with a line that alludes to a metalingual and the metaiconic function: “ninguna palabra es visible”. Although the phrase, to a certain extent, underscores the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, it is also an ironic statement. Words—although reliant on the communal consensus that they can represent an idea or a thing—can be made manifest visually. As a modern Western text, the poem itself is expressed through typed print, which is what gives functionality to this detonating object of silence—an object that is mainly decoded in silent reading. This ironic stance should not only be read as a contradictory statement, for it is also a declaration that foregrounds the iconotextual

elements of the poem. As a self-reflective work, it performs the abstract imprisonment that belies linguistic expression, instead framing absence. In the trajectory of Pizarnik's poetry, this text comes out as one of sheer disenchantment. While in previous texts, words and silence came out as a form of solace for the poet, in this poem—one of her final ones—the void seems desolate. What once was a subterfuge turns to the poet as a reminder of her own lack, of the ontological impossibilities of language. As Cristina Piña describes:

[A sense of] confidence in language runs through her work, but, in parallel an opposite certainty emerges, first in a covert manner, but it surfaces progressively from one book to the next. [This is the certainty] that language falls short of its object, because it fails to account for the subject. There is something in the subject and the world that escapes it radically. [Language] does not avoid the division of the subject, but actually reinforces it; it cannot replace love, and far from being a haven, it is a way towards death. [Such a] lethal dimension [...] is related to the fact that language—as Lacan also pointed out—is the naming of an absence, which ultimately separates us from the world and from ourselves.¹ (9)

The dialectic between words and silence thus turns tragic; as Pizarnik's subjective turn to silence echoes her own tragic death.

¹ “[La] confianza en el lenguaje atraviesa su obra, [y] paralelamente surge en ella —al principio de manera soterrada, pero haciéndose más clara de un libro a otro— la certidumbre contraria de que el lenguaje no alcanza pues no da cuenta del sujeto; que algo de éste y del mundo se le escapa de manera radical; que no sólo no ampara contra la división del sujeto sino que la favorece; que no reemplaza al amor y, por ende, lejos de salvar, lleva a la muerte. Esa dimensión letal [...] se relaciona con el hecho de que el lenguaje —como, por otra parte, lo señaló Lacan— es nominación de una ausencia, por lo cual nos termina separando del mundo y de nosotros mismos.” The translation is my own. Syntax modified to avoid run-ons.

The potency of her works, however, lies perhaps in the strength of their contradictions as forms of totalizing poetry, with an elevated modernist style, that are directed to their own obliteration. In “Verde paraíso”, she sings “atesoraba las palabras / para crear nuevos silencios” (175). Paradoxes flourish in Pizarnik’s works as consequences of her expanding skepticism towards the word, literature, and her own self; it is an epiphany of how her poetic project devolves into a vacuum. While this totalizing effort coincides with the *isomorfismos* of the Concrete poets, what ultimately differences Pizarnik’s latter works—despite their iconotextuality—is not solely lesser typographic play but rather the role of the lyrical subject in the poems. In Pizarnik’s texts, silences can encode from solace to grief, and even revelation—as studied by Zonana, “an epiphanic silence [...] the silence of one who calls and respects the flow of inspiration”² (n. p.). In concrete poetry, silence only comes forth as one of the defining elements of language; it blends with absence as a backdrop for univocal messages in which a conceptual object displaces the subject. Poems as Pizarnik’s “sólo un nombre” might suggest a similar concept of the arbitrariness of words and their meanings; nonetheless, their structure often appeals more to affect than to a concept, therefore establishing a performance of subjectivity that often confirms that which the poem elegiacally laments. Still, the use of metapoetic and metaiconic devices emphasizes the complexity of the hermeneutical process, sometimes evoking an encounter of subjectivities.

Iconotextual reflexivity, although mostly conveyed as a crossing between the use of the metalingual function and meta-iconic self-reference, is occupied too by both Pizarnik and the Concretistas not only in conceptual pieces but also through figurative means. In *Los pequeños cantos*, this is made evident in the eleventh and shortest

² “Silencio epifánico [...] el silencio de quien convoca y respeta el flujo de la inspiración” (n. p.).

poem of the collection. It consists solely of a description, yet it defies the immanence of the text by placing the object of its description outside of it. In the poem's first line, Pizarnik makes use of a vocative mode to summon the eyes of the reader, and in the following line she describes them as "fulgurantes". Through this use of the conative function, the poem introduces the receiver into the text. It avoids the dynamics of representation by turning itself solely into a speculum of the eyes that read it. Moreover, the poem allows for it to be conceived as the placing of a mirror in front of another. This imagistic play can also be understood as an addressing of the phatic function of communication. These two concise lines set a self-reflecting performance of the act of silent reading, the silence that changed literature ("Un jour vint ou l'on sut lire des yeux sans épeler, sans entendre, et la littérature en fut tout altérée"³, Paul Valéry, 549). It is a play of hermeneutics distilled to its core. Yet, despite its subtle intellectual complexity and the brevity of composition, there is a component of affect that the adjective "fulgurantes" grants the description. Besides managing to reflect the readers' own perception to themselves, the poem also manages to flatter them in the process, while also bringing forth a lyrical subjectivity. Can a communion with oneself—a sense of presence—actually be distilled from this self-negating poem?

oh los ojos tuyos fulgurantes ojos (Pizarnik 389)

In consonance, *Olho* (Fig. 4, 1968), a concrete poem deemed a *poemobile* by Anchieta Fernandes, achieves a similar framing of absences by transforming the medium into a mirror of the eyes of the reader. In

³ "A day came when people learned to read with their eyes without having to spell out, without having to listen, and literature was completely transformed by this."

contrast to Pizarnik's poem, it is composed as a polyptych on a blank page in which seven squares frame a series of lines and dots. There is a progression in the number of elements that are inscribed in each square in accordance with the Western reading convention (from left to right and from top to bottom). In all of the frames in the final row, the Portuguese word for eye — “olho”— is made discernible. Following the dynamics of the text, the third square of the third row displays the letters “l” “h” placed on the inside of a circle, evidencing the word that serves as the axis of the composition. As in Pizarnik's poem, this iconotext is configured to be read as an image of the beholding eye. Through this, it turns its blank spaces into legible absences, leaving the receiver as the sole spectator of his own presence. Moreover, as a *poemobile*, this iconotext was conceived as a sort of blueprint that could be reproduced across different types of media. Drawing on its latency for intermedial transposition, the text is conceived to be as mobile as the act of its reading, be it through a printed page or on its visual display.

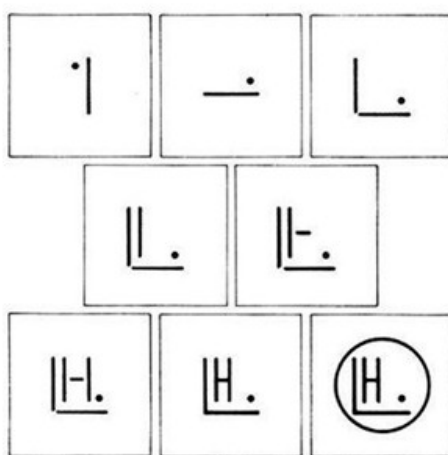


Fig. 4 José de Anchieta Fernandes, *Olho*, 1968, poem. Reproduced under the kind permission of the rightsholders, courtesy of the heirs of José de Anchieta Fernandes.

Alejandra Pizarnik's publications in the 1971 editions of *Árbol de fuego*, as well as these works by the Concretistas, achieve the encoding of legible absences through self-referential iconotexts. This summoning of the reader's presence through iconotextual means is not a modern device. In the ideogrammatic tradition of Japanese poetry, it is considered to be one of the traditional elements of the *hokku* genre, namely the mixture of *yugen*—suggestiveness—and the Buddhist principle that the “illusory veil of reality we are privy to, also allows entry via flashes of insight into the Buddhist truth that the transcendental is within the ephemeral” (Johnson 5). In a sense, all of the revised intermedial objects in these pages present a reflection on the illusory nature of media. I find that in these calls of illusoriness of these estranging mirages, these devices also have the potential to detonate—even if only through their process of reception—a facing of experience as it is, detached from the constraints of language and representation.

While representation is one of the key components of the Enlightened project of Modernity, it is a means for power to exert control through the rule of abstraction; in the case of these texts, the synesthetic mode of poetry appears as a tool that seems to resist or reconfigure the dialectics of language and modern thought; although in Pizarnik's case this way leads to a tragic, and not a gamified, self-obliteration of the text. Instead of synthezizing meaning, or using words for means beyond themselves, iconotexts are repurposed as renderers of absence in their objects. Subversively, these works invite the reader to engage into the tensions at play within them; through the reading of silences and absences, an experience of active presence is evoked. Through their self-silencing mechanisms, absence unveils the arbitrariness of abstraction and its limitations. For the Concretistas, turning poetry to the silence of design converted in a concrete tool able to materialize concepts. For Pizarnik, it became a conduit for the silence of the self, sometimes as solace, others as an expression of somber lacking and disillusionment, a metaphor of death.

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