READING THE CONTEMPORARY POEM: AN ILLUSTRATED METHOD

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Resumo: *Neste artigo, propõe-se um método para a leitura de poesia contemporânea que os alunos em aula de literatura muitas vezes consideram difícil, dada a ausência de marcadores tradicionais. A abordagem é feita em uma seqüência de etapas de estrutura flexível, nas quais o poema pode ser analisado como um construto escrito e como uma afirmação compacta. Na interpretação, as estruturas de ambigüidade sintática e semântica, a linguagem e as imagens do poema são analisados separada e conjuntamente. A discussão inicial do título e a leitura oral são também maneiras eficazes de maximizar as possíveis interpretações. Para ilustrar o método, é analisado um poema escrito pelo poeta norte-americano Gary Snyder, intitulado "Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco, 2".*

Palavras-chaves: *interpretação de poesia contemporânea; metodologia de interpretação; Gary Snyder*

In this article, I would like to delineate a method for teaching a contemporary poem, the kind of literary text that students often find difficult to "decipher." One problem seems to be the expectations aroused by confronting a problematic text that may lack the traditional guidelines for reading a poem: punctuation, capital letters, identifiable stanzas, regular spacing of phrases and line-breaks, and so on. Besides, or even because of, these formal obstacles, some contemporary poems do not seem to be clearly "about" a subject that is amenable to paraphrase. Faced with these difficulties, the student is often puzzled by a text that might not be so difficult if he/she had a few guidelines to go by and maintained a flexible response to the language.

To illustrate how a reading may systematically deal with these problems and illuminate a contemporary poetic text, I shall cite and comment on a poem of nine lines by the American poet Gary Snyder (b. 1930). The text of the poem is as follows:

Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco, 2

crystal towers gleam for a hundred miles

poison oak hedges, walled child garden

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and the ring mountains holding a cool

basin of pure evening fog

strained thru the bridge

gold and orange

beams of cars wiser than drivers

stream across promenades, causeways

incensed exhaust

A good place to begin in reading any poem is the title, since it often holds a clue to the content and meaning of the poem, even though the importance of the title will only be clarified after a careful reading of the entire poem. To begin their interpretation, therefore, students may be asked to name some of the things that the title suggests. The very title of Snyder's poem turns out to be problematic, for the words in it seem to invoke a religious context: a "hymn" is a kind of song that is sung in church or at a religious service. There is also the identification of the California city, San Francisco (birthplace of the poet), as a goddess. Calling a city a goddess is an example of the poetic figure of personification, and yet even this is problematic, for the city was named after a male saint, St. Francis (or his name in Spanish, since California was historically first colonized by the Spanish), but the saint´s name is coupled with the generic name of a pagan deity. The title, in short, couples a male Christian saint with a pagan female goddess. By this juxtaposition, the poet may be making an ecumenical statement about his native city, a place where most of the world's religions flourish in one corner or another (Snyder himself is sympathetic to Buddhism), or he may be suggesting the multi-cultural aspect of San Francisco, a notably cosmopolitan city. On the other hand, he may simply be expressing a modern irreverence toward religious denominations by jumbling categories, especially the established difference between the old polytheism and the new monotheistic Christianity, or even showing a recognition that nowadays poets may often depend on old systems of thought and belief for their metaphorical value, without necessarily believing in them.

The number 2, however, has also been added to the title, which invokes another dimension, that of the work of art, by suggesting that this is the second poem in a series, as a painting may be a the second visual study of the same subject. The poem in this view may be regarded as a verbal scene-painting of a specific place, a reading that is strengthened by the perspective of the observer, who seems to be viewing the city from a distant vantage-point. For the time being, we may hold all these possibilities in suspension and proceed to a reading of the poem itself.

Reading the poem aloud is a good way to begin, since such a reading

will often provide clues as to how the poem is to be interpreted; that is to say, the reading itself will to some extent guide one's understanding. Read aloud, the poem turns out not to have a traditional metrical pattern although we discover that it does have a certain rhythm that is somewhat controlled by the line-breaks and gaps in the text. Since the poem does not use any punctuation, which are the usual sign-posts for pauses, it appears that the way that the poem is printed on the page is the only guide as to how it should sound. The gaps between phrases thus seem to indicate the need for pauses. The line-breaks at the end of each line are rather more complicated, however, as at least one seems to be clearly end-stopped, and therefore read as a brief pause (line 1), while others (lines 2-5 and 7-8) seem to work better as run-on lines since this kind of overlap combines with the syntax. At two other points (lines 6 and 9), however, the syntax is ambiguous, so either making or not making a pause at these two particular points will have an effect on the interpretation. This circumstance may be pointed out as an illustration of how an oral performance may influence interpretation, as well as how the visual aspect of a poem may open up alternate possibilities between which an oral reading is forced to choose.

Taking any poem according to the meaning of the Greek word *poema* (i.e. something made), one may consider it first of all as a *written construct*. Approaching a poem with this concept in mind will help the student see it as an entity built out of words. As a verbal construction, it may be analyzed by considering its parts and how they are put together. Of course, poems are made out of sentences, like prose, and divided into stanzas, analogous to paragraphs, but an important difference is that poetic syntax may disobey grammatical rules for rhetorical effect. Usual word order (subject-verb-complement), for example, may be inverted, parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) may be substituted one for another, punctuation may be modified (dashes for commas or periods) or even omitted. There is, in other words, a certain flexibility allowed in the syntactical structure of any poem that may help account for its special effects.

If these modifications are the case in a traditional poem, one might expect them to be even more so in a contemporary one. And in Snyder's poem, structural confusion seems to reign: there are no stanzas, no punctuation (not even a final period to signify the end of the poem), and the line breaks seem rather arbitrary since they need obey neither punctuation nor meter. Given this absence of traditional guidelines in organizing the lines, one must take the poem as it is, on its own terms, and proceed accordingly. Since the lines are of unequal length and the first line is even broken in the middle, we may assume that this is probably a way that the poem visually controls our reading in lieu of more orthodox ways of ordering, which allows us to focus on particular images, with the run-on lines making possible greater ambiguity and multiple readings. The lack of punctuation and capital letters suggests that we give the words equal weight, without subordinating the various parts.

Structurally, the poem gives a superficial impression of randomness, but on more careful consideration, we may note that it forms, in fact, a complete grammatical sentence: subject – verb – compound subject – participial phrase – object with participial phrase – subject – verb. This grammatical structure is underplayed by the visual structure of the poem, but the poem does have this underlying unity at the same time that the structure allows for some interesting ambiguities. Which substantives, for example, do the two adjectives, "gold and orange," modify? And is the last word in the poem, "exhaust," a verb or a noun?

It may be asked why we see such ambiguity in poetry not as a problem, as it often is in speech exchanges, but as a positive value. One important feature of poetry is precisely that ambiguity is not avoided but cultivated. This allows the poem to pack more meaning into fewer words: in poetry, less is always more. With this point in mind, we may proceed to our second methodological step: reading the poem as a *compact statement*. Consider just the lines 4-8 of Snyder's poem:

pure evening fog

  strained thru the bridge

  gold and orange

beams of cars wiser than drivers

Given the syntactical and lexical ambiguities, the following statements may be derived from these lines: a) the evening fog is pure; b) the fog is purified by being strained (i.e. filtered) through the bridge; c) if the fog is purified, it was originally impure, or polluted; d) the fog strained (i.e. struggled = intransitive verb) through the passage in the bridge; e) the fog is orange and gold in color, as reflecting or refracting light from the bridge and the cars; f) the bridge is orange and gold (in fact, the bridge is called the Golden Gate and it is painted with an orange-colored, anti-rust paint); g) the beams of the headlights of the cars going across the bridge are orange and gold; h) the beams are "wiser" than the drivers; i) the cars are wiser than the drivers. These ambiguities do not necessarily cancel each other out. The colors of orange and gold, for example, may be equally attributed to bridge, fog, and headlights. All these sentences may be generated from only four lines, a total of sixteen words.

Note that ambiguity may be semantic (examples here are "strained" and "incensed") or syntactic (the colors may be attributed to bridge, fog, or headlights). Syntactically, is the last word in the poem, "exhaust," a verb parallel with "stream" (which itself may be either a verb or a noun), but a verb with no complement, or is it a predicate complement of "causeways"? Or is it a free-floating noun that refers to the exhaust fumes of the cars, the pollution of big-city traffic? This last meaning is suggestive, since the word "exhaust" would then serve as an impure analogue of the pure (i.e. natural) fog. That would

make it a kind of man-made "fog" that is poisonous, as well as another, polluted analogue of the sweet-smelling incense. Incense, in its turn, suggests church or religious offerings. The incense would then have the metaphorical sense of a polluted smoke emitted by the exhaust of cars, perhaps the only kind of incense burned in offering to the goddess-city. In such a reading, the apparent nature of the poem as a hymn of reverence or homage to the city may be qualified by a counter-interpretation, in which modern cities are places of pollution, both industrial and religious. This would suggest that the sacred in the contemporary world can only be experienced ironically, which returns us to the ambiguities of the title.

Another important aspect of any poem is the *diction*, or choice of words, the examination of which constitutes our next step in analysis. Why is the word "gleam" chosen rather than the synonymous "shine"? Perhaps because gleam suggests a steady light, which is reinforced by its long vowel, and the crystal towers gleam from a distance rather than sparkle, which would be a more appropriate for gemstones. Like "strained," commented on above, the word "stream" (which gives a distant echo-rhyme of "gleam") is ambiguous, suggesting, literally, the flow of water under the bridge and, metaphorically, the steady movement of a large number of cars crossing over the bridge. "Incensed" means, literally, scented with incense, but also, as applied to the drivers—or even to their personified cars—angry, furious, perhaps the anger aroused by the slow, chaotic traffic during the evening rush-hour, and more generally by the chaos and movement of big-city life.

A final step in analyzing the poem is to consider the poem as a *structure of imagery*. Imagery often works as a superposition upon the syntactical structure, or even in opposition to it, so that the poem may seem to be saying one thing while it is suggesting something else. On the other hand, the imagery may reinforce the sentence structure, which seems to be the case here. Consider lines 1-4. The towers, hedges, walled garden, ring of mountains, and basin all suggest a kind of wall or barrier, with the suggestion of height but also limitation or enclosure, with both positive and negative connotations. Mountains, towers (i.e. the tall glass skyscrapers of the city seen from a distance), and the gleaming quality of the crystal-like light that seems to be reflected from the towers all evoke a positive image, but the poison-oak, a plant that causes severe skin irritation, is negative, while the children in the walled-in garden may be either security or imprisonment. It may be concluded from these sets of images that the city itself is both spatially grandiose and confining, as is the bridge, which offers a vision of space but is at the same time confining to the cars stuck in heavy traffic. The perspective of the speaker seems to be distant, as if he/she is regarding the city from above the bridge or from a hillside. At the same time, other images—the word "basin" and the fog as strained through a strainer, both kitchen utensils—brings the city closer and makes it more familiar. Both views, the grand and the homely, are possible for an onlooker who feels pride and affection for his home town.

The imagery may also be read as related to the "goddess" in the poem's title. The crystal towers and the ring both suggest fairy tales, or even a literary fantasy like *Lord of the Rings*, in which both elements are prominent. In a more negative way, the walled garden and the poison-oak invoke the dangers and suffering that is often encountered in such fanciful tales. The personification of the city as a goddess and the suggestion of a magical or fantasy world are picked up in other personifications as well: the mountains "hold," the cars are "wise."

It is to be noted that these multiple possibilities are the result of the richness of the poem as a structure of language and a work of art, but that all of them need not combine into a single, coherent interpretation. The attitudes expressed by the speaker of the poem with respect to his object of observation all suggest an act of homage to a beloved place, which does not preclude a more critical attitude towards it as well. One of the great values of poetry is that a poem may press contradictory attitudes and feelings toward its subject without the need for explanation or apology. The poem is its own argument.

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Abstract: *This article offers an approach to interpreting contemporary poetry, which is often found difficult by students because of the absence of traditional markers. The approach proceeds through loosely structured steps, in which the poem is analyzed as written construct and compact statement. In interpretation, the layered structures of syntactical and semantic ambiguity, the diction, and the imagery of the poem are all examined in turn, with some necessary overlap between each part. Initial attention to the title and an oral reading of the poem are seen as ways to maximize potential readings. A poem by the American poet, Gary Snyder, "Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco, 2" is used as an illustration of the method.*

Keywords: *reading contemporary poetry; methodology of interpretation; Gary Snyder*

Referências bibliograficas

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