Teaching Poetry with New Media

Rui Torres

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1. Literature and New Media: Preliminary Theoretical Considerations

The potential of computers in the humanities and specifically in literary studies has been widely explored. In their often cited <u>Hypermedia and Literary Studies</u> (1991), Landow and Delany claimed that '[b]ecause hypertext breaks down our habitual way of understanding and experiencing texts, it radically challenges students, teachers, and theorists of literature' and identified the creative, as well as institutional and intellectual possibilities brought about by the 'new and powerful methods for organizing texts' (p. 4, 7, 44). Bootz (1996), Barbosa (1996) and Kress (1998) have also claimed the radical transformation of the field brought forward by the new media and made clear that the mingling of theory and practice enacted by digital texts requires new interdisciplinary approaches to both teaching and research in literary studies.

Clearly, computers, new media, and the Internet encourage students and teachers to adapt themselves to new cognitive modalities. As Landow has shown, '[o]ne chief effect of electronic hypertext has been the way it challenges non-conventional assumptions about teachers, learners, and the institutions they inhabit. It changes the roles of teacher and student in much the same way it changes those of writer and reader.' (1997, p. 219). This empowerment of the reader, and the corresponding change in the role of the author, has been widely discussed, from Wolfgang Iser to Michel

Foucault, from Roland Barthes to Umberto Eco. In the case of hypermedia, user/reader collaboration and participation are essential as defining features of the reading experience. In fact, the suggestive term <u>wreading</u> (resulting from the fusion of writing and reading), represents a response to the increasingly active role of the reader in modern literature and media.[i]

Indeed, as Peters and Lankshear have observed (1996), reading digital texts implies a type of critical literacy, as it offers new 'possibilities for enlarging and enhancing conceptions and practices of critical literacy through the reflective appropriation of electronic technologies.' (p. 52). The progressive complexity of texts, which present an unprecedented set of features such as mobility, temporality, multiplicity, and interactivity, thus entails new literacies that call for a new theoretical vocabulary and a new critical stance. Scholars such as Landow (1997) and Edward (1994) have identified possible epistemic and historical connections between post-structuralist theory and digital media.

Aarseth's influential contribution to this field (1997) presents and uses refreshing methodologies for the study of literature in electronic and participatory contexts. The transactions between poetry and criticism find in hypermedia a vigorous stimulus; in switching between distinct textual typologies and blurring the boundaries of genres of discourse, cybertext readers can be critical and creative at the same time. Aarseth's proposition of the cybertext as ergodic, i.e. as a feedback device machine articulating reader-response into the very architecture of texts, stands as the most relevant theoretical account of this stimulus.

Projecting these notions on literary pedagogy, Marcel Cornis-Pope and Ann Woodlief propose 'a re-creative pedagogical model of literary interpretation based on strategies of rereading/rewriting as part of a community of readers' (2002). This interactive critical pedagogy can provide students with 'ample opportunity to move

from reading to writing, and from understanding to reformulation, so as to experience a stronger mode of cultural construction.' (2002) Encouraged to engage in the multi-sequential processes of hypertextual criticism, students can benefit from the general advantages of hypertextuality: 'multilinear or networked organization, open-endedness, greater inclusion of nontextual information, interactive authorship.' (Cornis-Pope and Woodlief, 2002). These theoretical and pedagogical considerations formulate the basis of our approach towards the teaching of both digital and older experimental poetry with the new media. As we will demonstrate in more detail in the second part of this essay, interactivity as well as creativity are the cornerstones of a teaching that is attuned to this new type of textuality, the empowerment of the reader as <u>wreader</u> and the new critical literacy foregrounded by the new media.

On a different level, we must also acknowledge that digital media have enhanced our understanding of the importance of materials (and materiality as such) to writing. Marie-Laure Ryan recognizes that 'we are [now] better aware that the medium (…) is affected by its material support.' (2001, p. 10). More recently, Katherine Hayles has called for media-specific analysis in the study of code-based works. She understands materiality as 'existing in complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts.' (2004, p. 71) Hayles lists and discusses nine 'scores' that define electronic hypertexts, claiming that they: 1) are dynamic images; 2) include analogue resemblance and digital coding; 3) are generated through fragmentation and recombination; 4) have depth and operate in three dimensions; 5) are bilingual, written in code as well as natural language; 6) are mutable and transformable; 7) are spaces to navigate; 8) are written and read in distributed cognitive environments; and 9) initiate and demand cyborg reading practices. (Hayles, 2004, p. 74). Like many other authors, Hayles does not foresee 'the electronic age as heralding the end of books,' (p. 87) because '[b]ooks are far too robust,

reliable, long-lived, and versatile to be rendered obsolete by digital media.' On the contrary, she sees digital media as an opportunity: 'the chance to see print with new eyes and, with that chance, the possibility of understanding how deeply literary theory and criticism have been imbued with assumptions specific to print.' (p. 87)

Block (2002) on the other hand addresses digital poetry as an evolution of experimental media poetry. This seems to echo Barbosa's claim that literary experimentalism was renewed in computer-generated literature (1998). Both Barbosa and Block enunciate electronic textualities within the concept of a digital poesis, understanding the digital medium as particularly apposite for literary creativity and experimentation.

The historical importance of innovative poetry (futurist, experimental, concrete, visual, etc.), which first recognized the significance of the aesthetic function of language, is also a hot topic in recent publications, projects and conferences on digital literature. Experimental poetry contributed towards the development of new poetic practices based on electronic media, such as e-poetry, cyberpoetry, and digital poetry, leading scholars to consider the systemic affiliations of concrete poetics with digital media. As Lennon put it, 'poets and visual artists working from a tradition of typographic experimentation that reaches back to futurism and Dada, and includes twentieth-century visual and Concrete poetry, are using networked, heterogenetic writing spaces to create and distribute a new electronic visual poetry.' (2000, p. 64).

Glazier's Digital Poetics also stresses 'the lines of continuity between innovative practice in print and digital media.' (2002, p. 10). Admitting that 'there is a curious solidarity between experimental poetry and the possibilities the computer offers', Pedro Reis argues nonetheless that '[W]e have to recognize that many of the operations that the machine provides could already be found in previous poetical practices: collages, automatic writing (such as the surrealistic technique of the "cadavre exquis"), formal

games, permutation, as well as the dream of a total poetry, synesthesical and multisensitive, that could become an endless collective text, a work-in-progress always eluding a final shape.' (2007, p.3).

This understanding of the import of the texts' materiality, enhanced by the new media, is one of our cornerstone considerations in the teaching of poetry with new media. Digital poetry is a privileged object for the understanding of the necessity of media-specific analysis and one that enables us to expand this type of study also to its predecessor, older experimental poetry – and to do so, no less, by creatively transferring experimental poetry in the new media.

2. Teaching Poetry with New Media in Practice

2.1. Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity

As we have mentioned in the first part of this essay, the conception, development and evaluation of hypermedia projects in the field of literature can enhance critical understanding of digital expressiveness, as well as literary creativity. We have also addressed the interlacing, in hypertext, of theory and praxis, criticism and creativity, as well as the bearing of materiality in the understanding of the working of the literary text. Digital textuality, however, requires the involvement of both teachers and students in interdisciplinary activities. In order to fully comprehend the potential of media-based texts, cybertexts or virtual works, we need to create new learning conditions – and teachers and students, authors and readers, need to engage in new cognitive modalities.

Clearly, the interdisciplinarity required by new media is not based on juxtaposition or addition processes (Gusdorf, 1986, p. 51). In order to fully achieve the goal of teaching poetry (and more generally literature, or culture) with new media,

teachers will have to abandon a pedagogy based on specialization and the separation of knowledge. As Gusdorf also proposes, one should avoid the concentration on memory skills or memorization processes (1991, p. 22), seeking, instead, an open pedagogy, based on creativity, imagination and invention. Perceived as an area of interdisciplinary collaboration, digital writing may contribute towards the understanding of present and future states of writing and knowledge.

Starting from the presupposition that it is possible to learn and practice a poetic-and-critical discourse using new media tools, we will describe here two projects involving the creation of experimental digital texts in collaboration with research- and undergraduate students respectively. In these cases, as we hope to show, learning is inextricably connected to creativity, which allows students to critically reflect on literature and to enhance their writing through experimentation and research.

2.2. Working with Research Students: The PO.EX Project

In the last three years (2005-2008), we have been developing a digital archive for the Portuguese Experimental Poetry of the 1960s.[ii] Our aim was to gather, classify, digitalize, translate, reproduce, and recreate in electronic formats Portuguese concrete and visual poetry, associated with the movement of Experimental Poetry of the 1960s (known as PO.EX). This led to the production of a CD-ROM, which preserves and makes widely accessible the multiple aspects of PO.EX cultural production, which, apart from poetry, also includes -currently hard to find- magazines, catalogues, and pamphlets. The CD-ROM (freely distributed to schools, universities and cultural institutions), as well as the online platform (with sources, articles, poems, etc.) have

been accessed by many readers, and we have received praise from students around the world, who can now easily access these rare publications.

Research students actively participated in all activities of the project: from the gathering of relevant bibliographies and discussing the theoretical framework to participating in the study, classification, and digitalization of literary material. Students often had to cross research areas, for which their multifaceted backgrounds were an added value: students with backgrounds in comparative literature, multimedia design and computer science worked together, sharing their expertise and experiences.

Different media co-exist in experimental literature. The audio-visual capturing of images and sound-based texts were particularly important to our students, since they were able to assess and explore the sheer materiality of these texts, which they had previously studied only in theoretical terms. Video-recordings, envelopes, images of all sizes, collages, balloons and other objects, often combined with each other, were some of the forms that this poetry took. In order to fully comprehend intermediality in contemporary poetics, one must witness migration processes between different media. The digitalization of experimental poetries may well be one way to achieve this. The process of remediation of these texts into digital media offered us an opportunity to understand, in an interdisciplinary manner, the limits and borders of discourses and sign systems.

On the other hand, given the syntactic and semantic complexity of the poems we worked with, we found that common models for electronic publishing were not fully suitable for their reproduction, so we created an interactive interface with different reading options. Concepts such as page or frame, size or volume, no longer served us either: we were dealing with a different type of literary text. Faced with this situation, we decided to start distinguishing between digitalization, which consists of a literal copy of the work, i.e. a scan, record or photograph, and digital recreation, a process of

complex remediation and re-writing which implies an inter-semiotic translation of distinct languages and semiotic codes. Digitalization was important to help the students develop a relationship to the topic. Gathering texts and thinking about the best way to present them in a digital platform was certainly challenging; however, digital recreations were what incited the students' collective imagination the most and they were absorbed by the possibility of fostering their creativity through experimentation, re-reading and reflexive interpretation. We will briefly discuss one example of this process,[iii] focusing on our adaptation of collages developed by António Aragão (1924-2008) in the 1960s.[iv]

Aragão's collage-poems (1960s), which he considered cases of "found poetry," are taken entirely from newspapers of the time. He claims that the "malleability of the expression allows for several readings," further explaining that "[w]e supply one reading (…) [and] we leave also to the reader the possibility to build other readings, in other words, to make, to a certain extent, his/her poem."[v] This openness of the original text, as well as its projected fragmentation and accepted indeterminacy, can be developed in new ways in digital media.

[Image 1 – "Poema encontrado" ("Found poem") by António Aragão (1964) (first published in *Poesia Experimental: 1º caderno antológico*. Org. António Aragão and Herberto Helder (Lisboa, 1964). Reproduced with permission.]

Kathleen Vaughan's account of the collage as a method for interdisciplinary research is stimulating. The author, a visual artist, teacher and writer, defines collage as "a fine arts practice with a postmodern epistemology." (2004, p.2) She draws on Gray's concept of practice-led research (1996) as a method to initiate and carry out research through practice. She further quotes Picasso's "form of representation that enabled in the

viewer a trompe l'esprit—a kind of ontological strangeness—instead of the more familiar, painterly trompe l'oeil." (2004, p.5) Following this line of thinking, we concluded that a recreation of a work with the characteristics of a found-poem – impermanence, openness, indeterminacy – can be most fruitfully developed in the new forms of expression offered by the new media.

Researching the possibilities of a digital collage, we discovered, among many others, Jared Tarbel's Actionscript code of The Emotion Fractal.[vi] Tarbel calls this code a "recursive space-filling algorithm."[vii] It places an arbitrarily sized word anywhere within a given rectangular area. The effect is "a region of space completely filled with increasingly smaller type. (…) The actual word placed is randomly determined, taken from a predefined list of English words." (Tarbel). In our case, the list of words included in Tarbel's code were substituted by the text of Aragão's original collages.

[Image 2 – Digital recreation of Aragão's poem. Actionscript code by Jared Tarbel]

Later, however, we developed a new version of the code, still inspired by, but moving further away from Aragão's work. Adapting Tarbel's programming, we have created a version of the "found poem" in which the text was dynamically pulled from online newspapers, using their RSS feeds. The result is an ever-changing, dynamic collage, different every time it is accessed and distinct for every user or reader, in both visual and verbal terms.

[Image 3 – Digital recreation of Aragão's poem using RSS newsfeeds of The New York Times (22 November 2008). Actionscript code by Jared Tarbel and Nuno F. Ferreira; PHP by Nuno F. Ferreira]

Research students who participated in this digital recreation, as in many others, had an opportunity to understand, through practice, important aspects of the coding of visual expressiveness in the language of new media. They also had a chance to discuss concepts such as medial self-reference, process and openness in literature, and to observe the incomplete and indeterminate nature of texts. Furthermore, the potential of our proposition does not end here; as this procedural work is achieved through real-time networking, the live update from web servers can be transferred to other devices (such as cellular phones, iPods and PocketPCs) that can receive and display the collage-poem, thus enabling new functions and readings.

2.3. Working with Students: Creative Writing and Hypermedia

Operating since 2004 at Fernando Pessoa University, our second project involves workshops on <u>Creative Writing and Hypermedia</u>.[viii] These workshops are addressed to students, writers, engineers, computer programmers, musicians, teachers, and designers, and can be modified to fit all ages and levels of digital literacy. Participants are asked to write a poem or a short narrative by using new media, that is, communicating through multimedia and hypertext.

Workshops are frequently focused on questions of intertextuality. Selecting one text, or a set of texts by one or more authors, we concentrate on its reading, rewriting and adaptation. Then we explore how new poems can be written, based on words, sentences, and metaphors taken from short-stories; or how stories can evolve from keywords taken from poems. Using digital recording media, students can also create images, sounds (voices, <u>soundscapes</u> or music) and video to use with their texts. Hypertext and hypermedia tools are later used to make the integration of sound and video, as well as to animate the text and add interactivity and real-time processes.

Collaborative works of this type can foster the integration of criticism into the creative process. Students are able to establish insightful intertextual connections if they are allowed to become part of the authoring process, that is, if they are granted the freedom to interact with the writing and coding. But this process also involves a reflexive aspect. Using new media, students discover and enact for themselves the relationships between criticism and playfulness, theory and creativity. In this way, poems and narratives created in our workshops may contribute to a creative conception of the act of reading, as they involve activities both in programming (authoring) and navigating (reading) texts. In this manner, by means of an interdisciplinary methodological approach, teachers may involve their students in a creative and reflective process that contributes to the study of literature, its semiosis and poiesis.

It is interesting to note that the activities described above, even though connected to literary study, can also enhance new media literacy. Comparing the new skills proposed by the Project New Media Literacies (NML),[ix] which illustrate the shift of literacy from individual expression to community involvement, the affinities are clear (stressed words correspond to the skills mentioned by the authors: Jenkins et al.): students and readers play and participate in performance by means of simulation. They understand intertextual practices in texts by way of appropriation. Their capacity for multitasking derives from a new form of distributed cognition and in collective intelligence, which must be stimulated in order to produce critical judgment. Finally, they are easily engaged in activities involving transmedia navigation, networking, negotiation and visualization. As such, these new literacies involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking: they "build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom." (Jenkins et al., online) Teaching poetry with new media thus engages students in a reflexive stance, calling their (and our) attention to the materiality and the

ontology of the medium itself, and ultimately allowing them to perceive and experience poetry as the unveiling discourse of all languages.

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[i] Pedro Barbosa used it in Portuguese in 1991 (escrileitura = escrita and leitura), in his PhD Thesis, later published as A Ciberliteratura: Criação Literária e Computador (1996). At the same time, Joe Amato (1991), in a review of J. David Bolter's Writing Space (1991), suggested the English word wreader to describe the "reader-cum-writer" concept introduced by Bolter in the book. The term was later used in the context of hypertext theory and digital literature by George P. Landow, Jim Rosenberg, Michael Allen, and Roberto Simanowski, as well as many poets and writers.

[ii] The project PO.EX (Poesia Experimental Portuguesa, Cadernos e Catálogos), funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (MCTES, Portugal) and POCI2010 (EU), was conducted by a team at the University Fernando Pessoa between 2005 and 2008 (ref. POCI/ELT/57686/2004). The results of this project are available on the web – http://www.po-ex.net. The CD-ROM da PO.EX can be freely accessed at http://www.po-ex.net/evaluation

[iii] All of the digital recreations of experimental texts are available online (http://www.po-ex.net), with detailed references pertaining to author, type of technology used, as well as methodological propositions. There are also some articles which explain in detail these recreations (see Torres 2008).

[iv] Of course, collage-poetry is not an invention of Aragão, and he was certainly aware of relevant Futurist, Dadaist and Surrealist experiments.

[v] Our translation. The original was published in the first issue of Poesia Experimental: Cadernos Antológicos (Lisbon, 1964).

[vi] The author shares a license based on Creative Commons, which allows others to copy, distribute, display, and perform his work — and derivative works based upon it — but only if they give credit, and publish their own work under a license identical to the license that governs his work.

[vii] See http://levitated.net/daily/levEmotionFractal.html

[viii] We have also offered courses within these lines at Universities in Oporto and Lisbon (Portugal), São Paulo (Brazil), and Granada (Spain). These courses are sometimes delivered in a blended-learning mode.

[ix] Research initiative based within MIT's Comparative Media Studies program. See

http://newmedialiteracies.org/