
The Concrete Coin of Speech*

AUGUSTO de CAMPOS

Instigating question: What does a concrete poem communicate?

In the widest sense, one could answer that a concrete poem communicates the same things as any other kind of poem. That is, it does *not* communicate the same things as discourse, using this word in the sense given it by Susanne K. Langer as "language in its literal use" (1957:71). A large part of Langer's work has been devoted to the demonstration of the non-discursive, symbolic nature of art and poetry as opposed to the discursive symbolism of literal language. Susanne Langer prefers not to speak of *communication* with reference to poetry, in order to distinguish qualitatively the function and the effects peculiar to it. Poetry exercises what Langer calls a "formulative function of language, normally coincident with the communicative functions, but largely independent of them [. . .]" (p. 149). Some quotes from *Problems of Art* will clarify her theory:

We think of it [language] as a device for communication among the members of a society. But communication is only one, and perhaps not even the first of its functions (p. 70).

The structure of discourse expresses the forms of rational cogitation; that is why we call such thinking "discursive" (p. 124).

To express the forms of what might be called "unlogicized" mental life (a term we owe to Professor Henry M. Sheffer of Harvard), or what is usually called the "life of feeling," requires a different symbolic form (p. 124).

[. . .] An Art Symbol does not signify, but only articulate and present its emotive content [. . .] (p. 134).

[The] material [of poetry] is language, its motif, or model, usually discursive speech, but what is created is not actual discourse—what is created is a composed and shaped apparition of a new human experience (p. 148).

Poetry is not a beautified discourse, a particularly effective way of telling things, although poetic structures may occur in discourse with truly artistic effect (p. 151).

Poetic statements are no more actual statements than the peaches visible in a still life are actual dessert (p. 152).

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[Poetry] springs from the power of language to formulate the appearance of reality, a power fundamentally different from the communicative function, however involved with it in the evolution of speech. The pure product of the formulative use of language is verbal creation, compositions, art; not statement, but *poesis* (p. 160).

The crucial point of the question, only touched on by Susanne Langer, is the fact that poetry, whose nature is essentially non-discursive, uses a logical, discursive linguistic framework. As a philosopher of art, Langer is interested in verifying and in clarifying the verification without modifying the fact. In this case she limits herself to pointing out that the poem, although invested in linguistic forms and therefore subject to the rules of discourse, functions on a different linguistic level. This is why it is not legitimate to confuse the poetic and the discursive.

The poet, however, cannot assume a neutral posture before this linguistic peculiarity. He is directly implicated in the creative process. The duality of the poetic material which is the source of many misjudgements about the nature of poetry, carries within itself the dialectical seed of its resolution: Perhaps a whole history of the evolution of poetry could be laid out, beginning with the contradiction between its non-discursive propositions and the expressive means (logical and discursive syntax) it has used. Because of its non-utilitarian aspect, poetry, although essentially non-discursive, would have to bow to the impositions of practical language and to the logical framework specially molded for symbolic and discursive use. That is why the history of the evolution of poetry has always been one of revolutions, of attempt after attempt to force open the doors of the cloister, from rhyme and meter to the process of metaphoric alienation (the excess of which leads to Surrealism).

Let us now leave the debate on the plane of communication, or better, on the semantic level of concrete poetry. We have seen that the semantic level is basically the same for all poetry, that is, non-discursive symbolization, and the formulative use of language. Let us now consider the specific ethical and formalistic foundation of concrete poetry.

Poetry, non-discursive, non-practical, non-utilitarian, can claim for itself a liberty of expression which literal language use does not seek and does not possess. Symbolic and discursive language, whose ultimate goal is communication, is easily satisfied once it achieves that end. Whence its irresistible tendency to formalization, or better, formulization: functionalism taken over by functionaries.

Edward Sapir speaks with apprehension about the effects which the tyranny of usage has on language. He speculates on the possibility of the day arriving when nothing will be left in our hands but a system of forms, empty of all vital coloration, and persisting only through inertia.

Once we have made up our minds that all things are either definitely good or bad or definitely black or white, it is difficult to get into the frame of mind that recognizes that any particular thing may be both good and bad (in other words, gray), still more difficult to realize that the good-bad or black-white categories may not apply at all. Language is in many respects as unreasonable and stubborn about its classifications as is such a mind. It must have its perfectly exclusive pigeon-holes and will tolerate no flying vagrants. *Any*

concept that asks for expression must submit to the classificatory rules of the game, just as there are statistical surveys in which even the most convinced atheist must perform be labeled Catholic, Protestant, or Jew or get no hearing [Emphasis added] (1949:99).

"Poets are the antennae of the race" (Ezra Pound).

It is almost as though at some period in the past the unconscious mind of the race had made a hasty inventory of experience, committed itself to a premature classification that allowed of no revision, and saddled the inheritors of its language with a science that they no longer quite believed in nor had the strength to overthrow (Sapir 1949:100).

"Poetry is the foundation of being through the word" (Heidegger).

The true social mission of poetry should be the gathering of the latent energies of language in order to destroy its petrifying dogmas. In so doing it would vivify language, whence the extreme ethical and aesthetic urgency of poetry truly worthy of the name, which prefers to run the risk of "getting no hearing" to be categorized by the inquisitorial patterns of language. "*Donner un sens plus aux mots de la tribu*" (Mallarmé). "To keep the language efficient" (Pound).

Even when circumstantially divorced from the general public, as is the case today (in this case the social mission of poetry would be limited to a more allegorical than factive plane), it is to be believed that poetry can intervene to compensate at least partially for the atrophy of language relegated to a merely communicative function. This is true, even if its effect is only a posteriori to the extent that time allows for the absorption of new forms.

If, therefore, concrete poetry today, like creative poetry of other epochs, strays from the traditional linguistic canons to which the majority of the public is attached, it does not do so merely for sport or out of a hunger for originality. It does so out of a sense of responsibility. Total responsibility, accepted as the definitive mission of the poet before poetry itself, as well as before the life of the language.

Poetry does not intend to usurp from discursive language the communicative function peculiar to it. But the easily satisfiable linguistic system of communication somehow robs the word of its vitality, transforming it into a tabu-tomb, a dead cell in a living organism. The procedure of poetry is exactly the opposite.

Language is the main means of human communication. If the animal's system does not transmit sensations and stimuli, the animal atrophies (Pound 1960:32).

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree (Pound 1960:36).

The revolt of concrete poetry is not against language. It is against the non-functionality and formulization of language. And against the appropriation of poetry by discourse which converts it into formulas. It is evident that not everything in discursive language is non-functional. But not everything which is functional in discursive language continues to be so on the non-discursive level. In poetry, by definition, everything should be functional. But not everything which is functional in poetry should con-

tinue to be so in discursive usage. For these reasons, concrete poetry does not attempt to be a panacea which would take the place of discursive language. Concrete poetry circumscribes its own ambit and autonomous function within the realm of language. But it intends to influence discourse, to the extent of vivifying and making dynamic its dead cells, impeding the atrophy of the common organism: language.

On the other hand, there is no reason to suppose that the concrete poets have created a new language, that is, that their poetry escapes completely any formal category of language. Their structures may not coincide with a certain type of linguistic model (Occidental or Indo-European). That they refuse to align their expression with structures imposed by the tyranny of habit does not mean, however, that they do not use universally recognized conceptual and grammatical procedures.

What, then, are the absolutely essential concepts in speech, the concepts that must be expressed if language is to be a satisfactory means of communication? Clearly we must have, first of all, a large stock of basic or radical concepts, the concrete wherewithal of speech. We must have objects, actions, qualities to talk about, and these must have their corresponding symbols in independent words or in radical elements. No proposition, however abstract the intent, is humanly possible without a tying on at one or more points to the concrete world of sense. In every intelligible proposition at least two of these radical ideas must be expressed though in exceptional cases one or even both may be understood from the context. And secondly, such relational concepts must be expressed as moor the concrete concepts to each other and construct a definite, fundamental form of proposition (Sapir 1949:93).

Poetry (and we use the word broadly, including fictional prose) at the same time that it demands its autonomy from communicative language, should act on it as a dike against verbal degeneration. When the social importance of poetry in all its implications is understood (if some day that happens), the poet will cease being the eternal outcast and will come to exercise his true function in society, no longer in the shadows but openly.

ARTISTS: ANTENNAE.

From what has been said about the ethical and aesthetic urgency of poetry, it should not be concluded that it must move toward the creation of a vocabulary, a lexicon and a syntax completely "ab ovo." This would lead inexorably to a semantic isolation, undesirable from all points of view.

Joyce was able to achieve the feat of constructing *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* by developing a special, unusual language. Unusual but not intransitive, even if at times he overestimated the Champollionesque capacities of his readers. He succeeded because his "panorama of all flores of speech" does not abandon language, rather basing itself on a high-pressure compaction of borrowed words already existent in many languages through the use of basic processes of montage and word fusion. However, even recognizing the extraordinary importance of Joyce's experiment, concrete poets cannot admit the possibility of continuing the radicalism of his literary "esperanto," along with all the load of craftsmanship and other subjective elements with which it is equipped. It is true that for the novel Joyce

still represents the most consistent hope for a non-discursive structure and function. For poetry, however, a Joycean solution would not satisfy the needs of clarity and objectivity which concrete poets increasingly recognize as indispensable in order to make transitive and functional the new formal structures of the poem.

Concrete poetry does not evade that multiple common denominator of language. On the contrary, it is precisely in the CONCRETE COIN OF SPEECH, so worn out and falsified by discursive language, that concrete poetry seeks, at the source, the fundamentals of its expression.

In that sense concrete poetry cannot help but find affinities in those languages whose structure is of a type to place major emphasis on the essential elements of speech, as is the case with Chinese. It would not be demanding too much to ask that the West, so full of self-pride, look from time to time to the Orient, just as a "civilized" man looks to the primitive, in order to get a lesson in humility and verify in his own soul the exoticism and barbarity which he judges to be inherent in the other.

Fenollosa and Pound's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1968) puts into focus a whole world of poetic virtualities which exist in the structure of the Chinese ideogram.

Sapir observes the abundance of non-essential relational concepts in occidental languages. These do not occur at all in Chinese. Examining the Latin phrase "*illi albi homines qui veniunt*," he demonstrates that each of these words is the carrier of four concepts: one radical and three relational concepts, chosen among categories of case, number, gender, person and tense. From the logical point of view, only case demands expression:

The other relational concepts are either merely parasitic (gender throughout; number in the demonstrative, the adjective, the relative, and the verb) or irrelevant to the essential syntactic form of the sentence (number in the noun, person, tense). An intelligent and sensitive Chinaman, accustomed as he is to cut to the very bone of linguistic form, might well say of the Latin sentence, "How pedantically imaginative!" It must be difficult for him, when first confronted by the illogical complexities of our European languages, to feel at home in an attitude that so largely confounds the subject-matter of speech with its formal pattern or, to be more accurate, that turns certain fundamentally concrete concepts to such attenuated relational uses (1949:97).

THE CONCRETE COIN OF SPEECH.
THE VERY CORE OF THE LINGUISTIC FORM.

"Poesia = dichten = condensare" (Pound).

In the Chinese sentence "Man kill duck," which may be looked upon as the practical equivalent of "the Man kills the duck," there is by no means present for the Chinese consciousness that childish, halting, empty feeling which we experience in the literal English translation. The three concrete concepts – two objects and an action – are expressed solely by the position of the concrete words before and after the word of notion. And that is all. Definiteness or indefiniteness of reference, number, personality as an inherent aspect of the verb, tense, not to speak of gender – all these are given no expression in the Chinese sentence, provided, of course, there is that context, that back-

ground of mutual understanding that is essential to the complete intelligibility of all speech (Sapir 1949:92).

It is interesting to point out the coincidence of vision between Fenollosa and Sapir. If the latter sticks more closely to the general field of language, without going into details on the specific domain of the Chinese language and its writing, he nonetheless corroborates to some extent the conclusions of the former. Nor can it be said that Sapir was indifferent to the poetic dynamisms of the Chinese. In the chapter entitled "Language and Literature" of his famous book he says:

I believe that any English poet of to-day would be thankful for the concession that a Chinese poetaster attains without effort. Here is an example:

Wu-river stream mouth evening sun sink
 North look Liao-Tung, not see home.
 Steam whistle several noise, sky-earth boundless,
 Float float one reed out Middle-Kingdom.

These twenty-eight syllables may be clumsily interpreted:

"At the mouth of the Yangtze River, as the sun is about to sink, I look north toward Liao-Tung, but do not see my home. The steam-whistle shrills several times on the boundless expanse where meet sky and earth. The steamer, floating gently like a hollow reed, sails out of the Middle Kingdom" (1949:227-228).

That the major modern poet in English, Ezra Pound, has received marked influence of Chinese in all his work is not an accident. It is not just the comprehension of the *Cantos* which is helped by the understanding of the poetic potentialities of the ideogram. The translations of *Cathay* from various Confucian texts, including the feat of rendering the 305 odes into English, is a testimony which no later poet can ignore. Pound does more that revive Chinese. He incorporates Chinese linguistic structure, as a distinct value, into the problematics of modern poetry. In the process he activates Fenollosa's theories.

A Japanese student in America, on being asked the difference between prose and poetry, said: "*Poetry consists of GISTS and PITHS*" (Pound 1960:92, note 1).

In the sample of Chinese poetry cited by Sapir, the reader will certainly have remarked the absolute preponderance of nouns and verbs over all other parts of speech. A remarkably similar sensation will be experienced upon examination of some of the most typical texts of concrete poetry.

A swore at *b* vs. *a* raked *b* over the coals. The abstract and the concrete. The static and the dynamic in language.¹

Sapir demonstrates how one can "verbify" a qualitative idea in cases like that of "it is red," which could be substituted by "it reddens." "It reddens" should in turn be able to be substituted by "it reds," except for a peculiarity

1. The allusion is somewhat opaque in English, due to the metaphoric nature of "*a* raked *b* over the coals." In Portuguese, a person literally "speaks snakes and lizards," a much more concrete expression. [TN]

of the English language. He demonstrates as well how we can represent a quality or an action as a *thing*:

We speak of "the height of a building" or "the fall of an apple" quite as though these ideas were parallel to "the roof of a building" or "the skin of an apple," forgetting that the nouns (*height, fall*) have not ceased to indicate a quality and an act when we have made them speak with accent of mere objects. And just as there are languages that make verbs of the great mass of adjectives, so there are others that make nouns of them. In Chinook, as we have seen, "the big table" is "the-table its-bigness"; in Tibetan the same idea may be expressed by "the table of highness," very much as we might say "a man of wealth" instead of "a rich man" (1949:117-118).

Sapir's conclusion: "No language wholly fails to distinguish noun and verb, though in particular cases the nature of the distinction may be an elusive one. It is different with the other parts of speech. *Not one of them is imperatively required for the life of language* (1949:119, my emphasis).

Fenollosa goes further, showing that in Chinese, verbs are at the root of all words, whether they are adjectives or prepositions, conjunctions or pronouns, or even nouns: "The verb must be the primary fact of nature, since motion and change are all that we can recognize in her" (1968:19). Fenollosa again:

One of the most interesting facts about the Chinese language is that in it we can see, not only the forms of sentences, but literally the parts of speech growing up, budding forth one from another. Like nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated. The Chinese language naturally knows no grammar. It is only lately that foreigners, European and Japanese, have begun to torture this vital speech by forcing it to fit the bed of their definitions. We import into our reading of Chinese all the weakness of our own formalisms. This is especially sad in poetry, because the one necessity, even in our own poetry, is to keep words as flexible as possible, as full of the sap of nature (p. 17).

And still Fenollosa:

The Chinese have one word, *ming* or *mei*. Its ideograph is the sign of the sun together with the sign of the moon. It serves as verb, noun, adjective. Thus you write literally "the sun and moon of the cup" for "the cup's brightness." Placed as a verb, you write "the cup sun-and-moons," actually "cup sun-and-moon," or in a weakened thought, "is like sun," i.e., shines. "Sun-and-moon cup" is a naturally bright cup. There is no possible confusion of the real meaning, though a stupid scholar may spend a week trying to decide what "part of speech" he should use in translating a very simple and direct thought from Chinese to English (p. 18).

A children's song:

palma	pé	roda	caranguejo
palma	pé	roda	peixe
palma	pé	roda	é
palm	foot	turn	crab
palm	foot	turn	fish
palm	foot	turn	is

Nominalization and verbification, in concrete poetry, are a dominant but not exclusive characteristic, a vector, not a commandment. The adjective has a concrete function as long as it translates a substantial quality, essential and not decorative. We could give the example of the poem "mar azul" ("blue sea") by Ferreira Gullar, made up basically of the following words: mar azul (blue sea) – barco azul (blue boat) – arco azul (blue arch) – ar azul (blue air). Here the adjective blue is incorporated to such an extent with the noun that it ends by giving itself a noun-like vitality. In the poem "branco" (white) by Haroldo de Campos, the substantive function is definitively imposed on that of the adjective, since it is precisely of whiteness and of redness, of the color white and the color red, that the poet speaks:

branco	branco	branco	branco
vermelho			
estanco	vermelho		
	espelho	vermelho	
		estanco	branco

white	white	white	white
red			
stop	red		
	mirror	red	
		stop	white

As with Chinese, our tendency is to reject certain secondary relational concepts. This is why verbs are always used in vectors tending towards infinitization, or better, towards a totality of action. Thus, in the poem by Haroldo de Campos, the verb "estanco" ("I stop") appears psychologically infinitized. The relational concepts (tense, number, person) are dysfunctional. The subject is practically the poem itself. If one could ignore the phonetic structure, it would be possible to put the verb in another tense, number or person without damage to the idea-gestalt.

In many concrete poems the verb itself seems to be dispensable. The syntactical relationship is made between nouns. Even here the concrete

poet does not abandon the formal schemes of language. It is known that relationships between noun and noun are among the most productive in the formation of compound words, especially in certain languages, like Chinese, English, and German. It should not therefore be absurd to hope that a reader could relate two or more words, composing with them a more complex entity, a *Gestalt*. This is what happens with Gomringer's poem, constructed of the words *Baum-Kind-Hund-Haus* (tree, boy, dog, house).

It will be seen that the concepts of noun, verb, adjective are somewhat limited to be able to contain the dynamics of the concrete poem, which overflows these categories. At the same time it does not achieve the flexibility of Chinese, of which it can be said with Fenollosa:

The fact is that almost every written Chinese word is properly just such an underlying word, and yet *is not* abstract. It is not exclusive of parts of speech, but comprehensive; not something which is neither a noun, verb, nor adjective, but something which is all of them at once and at all times (1968:18).

hombre	hombre	hombre
hambre		hembra
	hambre	
hembra	hembra	hambre

man	man	man
famine		woman
	famine	
woman	woman	famine

Phonetic elements aid in the creation of relationships between words, functioning as if they were factors of proximity and likeness in the search for a visual totality. They establish a kind of electro-magnetic current which attracts or repels the words. In the poem "hombre" ("man") by Décio Pignatari, the vocalic shifts assimilate the nouns *hombre* (man)–*hembra* (woman)–*hambre* (famine) in a functioning gestalt-semantic totality. To say *man*–*woman*–*famine* would be sufficient from the point of view of content, but the force field of the assemblage would be lacking. Here it is necessary to remember with regard to the conceptual perception of the poem, that the process of vowel or consonant shifts, frequently linked to

reduplication, has profound roots in language. It is capable of relating words in order to express everything from a concept of size or number to other more complex ideas.

Not discursiveness. Synthesis. Circumscription to the absolutely indispensable concepts of speech: the basic concepts, things, actions, qualities: THE CONCRETE COIN OF SPEECH + essential relational concepts. Nominalization and verbification = VECTOR-INDEXES OF CONCRETE POETRY BEFORE LANGUAGE.

With all that has been said, still another important point should be made. Concrete poetry does not dissociate itself from language nor from communication. But it does strip off the formal armature of discursive syntax. In relation to discursive syntax it affirms its autonomy, eliminating the contradiction between non-discursive nature and discursive form. In a stage of major development, it no longer defines itself as a function of this syntax, but only as a function of language itself, just as the painter can no longer define himself as a function of the human figure or of perspective, but as a function of pure visuality. Here the adjective *pure* does not mean detachment from the reality of nature, since it is nature which furnishes the pure elements of that visuality. At this time, any definition of concrete poetry in relation to traditional syntax has no meaning. Just as concrete painting no longer defines itself anti-apple or anti-figure, since "it today is as real as an apple itself" (Waldemar Cordeiro). In this way the moment arrives in which poetry no longer must define itself in terms of anti-syntax, or anti-discourse. It comes to be governed by its own rules, by its own conditions, and these in turn are founded on the concrete roots of language.

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