

NEVER-ENDING BLACK AND WHITE: WORDPLAY AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE IN THE WORK OF JORGE EDUARDO EIELSON

INTRODUCTION

What can a word be, say or mean when poetic language seems to find itself at the end of its expressive possibilities? This question could roughly summarize one of the axes going through the work of Peruvian artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson. He was born in Lima in 1924 and he left for Paris in 1948, after being awarded a scholarship; he established himself between France and Italy and he died in Milan in 2006. Even though Eielson started his career as a poet, with the award winning collection *Reinos (Kingdoms)*, he stands out for his exploration of different artistic disciplines and styles, such as painting, sculpture, performance, theater, novel, essay and short stories; this wide exploration showed an inquisitive attitude that led him to cross the frontiers between genres and arts, thus becoming a prolific writer; as well as a recognized plastic artist, with expositions in European galleries, and performances that took place in France, Italy and Germany [Europe: known as a plastic artist. Front cover RTD magazine for European research].

The relation between his plastic work, his poetry and his narrative texts poses an important question when studying Eielson's work as a whole. When approaching the ensemble of Eielson's poetic work, it is possible to observe how language and image intermingle in a creative process that is more of a slalom than a straight path. At the beginning, the verbal compound dominated his poetry, which could be described as neo-symbolist. Then, his poems started to decompose, that is, to incorporate formal procedures of avant-gardist tradition that introduced a certain anti-poetical structure; also, this decomposition is accompanied by a poetic tone that becomes increasingly pessimistic about the power and the metaphysical reach of language [Caso nominative. Uncertainty]. Poetry finds itself devoid of its meaning, its power and its supposed beauty. It is at this point, around 1960, that the plastic nature of language slowly becomes a main character, which gives origin to visual poetry¹. The visual poems stand out from his work not only as an epitome of the dialogue between verbal and visual creations, but also because after its production in 1960, it seemed that a certain "silence" had invaded language and had closed the exploration of "traditional" or "verbal poetry", since Eielson stopped writing poetry for 25 years. However, the silence turned out to be nothing but a very long pause, because in 2000 and until 2005, a year before his death, Eielson published four new collections of poems and these texts showed almost nothing of the crisis that his previously written work had suffered in the 60's.

Therefore, when approaching the relation between Eielson's written and plastic work, this context has to be taken into account. First, it is necessary to analyze the decomposition of verbal language, its nature, causes and consequences, so it is possible to understand the artist's interest in visual poetry and the subsequent predominance of plastic works. Second, it is necessary to establish how the heterogeneous nature of Eielson's artistic expression can be understood as one "poetic language", taking into account that the artist himself was against the division of the arts and, in consequence, of artistic codes. Third, this decomposition of language and the mixture of codes must

¹ A group of "texts" that have been edited and published scarcely and that are not included in the editions of the anthologies of his poetic work, all of them named *Poesía escrita* (Written poetry).

be put under the perspective of the long pause in his written work, asking why and how verbal language comes back at the end of Eielson's artistic life, if it seemed that verbal poetry had come to an end.

Following these premises, today I want to center my presentation on the role that wordplay may have in understanding this transitions and transformations between text and image. I will briefly present the verbal decomposition of Eielson's poetry in the 50's and how the rhetorical figures used gave way to the arrival of his visual poetry in the 60's, all under the same exploration. These considerations could open an interpretation that allows connecting his final publications without them looking like a contradictory proposal with the apparent silence that seemed to have conquered the poetic word.

WORDPLAY

The perspective of wordplay arises as one way to analyze the graphic, phonetic and semantic movements of words in the process of decomposition of Eielson's poetry. After the more traditional neo-symbolistic poetry of the 40's, one finds *Tema y variaciones* (Theme and variations) a book of poems of 1950 that uses the musical principle of the variation to create different sets of repetitions, bringing out the physical nature of language, namely, sound and color or shape. This poetics of decomposition is inherited, along with a set of rhetorical tools, from the European and Latin-American avant-garde movements of the beginning of the 20th century². Eielson belongs to a group of Latin-American writers that came after and that has received the name of "posvanguardia" or "post-avant-garde". The prefix indicates the fact of "coming after", in other words, the fact that these writers inherited a revolutionary idea of literature but that also had to witness the unfulfilled promise of an almighty poetry that could break down the barriers of worn out language. They experienced the desolation of war, the collapse of the ideals of progress and the rise to power of the dictatorial regimes in some of their countries. The posvanguardia had to confront the task of building literary worlds with a language that was taken to its limits and, nevertheless, appeared insufficient to cope with the discouragement of a future that seemed bleak³.

Under these circumstances, Eielson's attitude in *Tema y variaciones* towards a decomposition of language brings out these tensions between the ludic anti-poetry of the avant-gardes, and the pessimism of his generation. This opposition translates into two ideas about language: First, poetic language, maybe even language in general, is void of meaning and it cannot be used to express subjective states or objective truths. Second, and simultaneously, poetic language is a plastic material that can be twisted and modified following user's will; one can play, paint or compose melodies with this code. The first idea is rather pessimistic; there is a level of distrust of language and its general capacity of expression, and more importantly, of poetry as an aesthetic mode of language. Before this decomposition, it seemed that although language was worn out and could not be trusted, poetry, in this neo-symbolistic style that is present in Eielson's early work, was able to cut across this deterioration of meaning, finding new ways to make words powerful. But in the 50's and 60's this

² Who introduced what was considered anti-poetic stylistic procedures, like the collage, the automatic writing, the exquisite corpse (these two classified by Guiraud as wordplay) or the use of portmanteaux

³ As Octavio Paz puts it, the posvanguardia "was somehow a return to the avant-garde. But to a silent avant-garde, secret and disillusioned. [...] The ground that attracted these poets was not inside or outside. It was this area where the outside and the inside converge: the area of language." (Paz, p. 210.)

“faith” became doubt, then disbelief and finally a deep pessimism that led to the idea that, citing the poem *Verbos*, “to write a poem/not to write a poem/to write another poem/to write nothing” is all the same. Words go from being the cornerstone of autonomous aesthetic universes to being nothing more than colored spots on paper.

The second idea, that is, the idea that poetic language can be a plastic material, has a ludic tone that opposes and, somehow, neutralizes the pessimism of the first way to understand language. This ludic tone no longer has the vehement drive it had with the avant-garde movements; it is more of a weak but active current, a force that runs underneath and that allows some creative possibilities. When poetry faces its limitations to construct meaning and, in this same perspective, when verbal language starts losing its referential capacity, the possibility to create other kinds of signs, visual or even musical, implies somehow regaining the lost power to construct meaning. But this Pyrrhic victory doesn’t compensate for the meaning that is lost and this causes language to remain at the edge: at the edge of gibberish, at the edge of nonsense, at the edge of silence [Zero. Repetition close to nonsense]. That is why these two ideas are in a constant tension, between the pessimism of what is lost and the playful view of what persists.

Now, focusing the attention on the formal dimension of this transformation of poetry, the reader faces different rhetorical procedures of decomposition used by Eielson⁴. A good number of these stylistic figures are figures of phonetic repetition or interchange [(Solo the sol: Paronomasia, alliteration, homonymic vertical WP (sol-G /solo/solitario) (delabastita)] [Nudos: Homophonic horizontal. Paronomasia]. But they also deal with the orthography or the graphic disposition of the texts [Poesía en A mayor: Alliteration, metagraph (Claude le Bigot), paronomasia] [Poesía en forma de pájaro: Calligram, pictograph (Guiraud)]. From the play with the sound and shape of words, within the limits of rhetorical figures and wordplay, new forms of ambiguity start to arise. From the modified orthography of the metagraph and from the graphic distribution of the calligram, Eielson’s poetry gets closer to the frontier between the image and the text, where printed letters become a contrast of black and white, creating a fracture between reading and seeing. [arte poética. Homophony (rime). Chromatic remark] [inventory. Mirror-like construction. Writing as a mirror-like medium between world and language] [azul ultramar. portmanteau, blanks, anaphora, epiphora, like an echo, blanks] [escultura. Repetition. Blanks. Never ending black and white].

⁴It does not seem clear if there is an exact and unique line between these rhetorical figures and wordplay; for example, Guiraud points out the similarities between these phenomena, stating that rhetorical figures could be set aside from wordplay because they look for a certain virtuosity, poetical novelty and creativity, but that they start losing their poetical function when they become gratuitous (p. 83). Vittoz Canuto presents a thin line separating wordplay and rhetorical figures when he specifies that literary forms are somehow regulated, they are supposed to follow a set of rules and guidelines that are expected to be incorporated in different literary texts, specially poetry (p. 125). Todorov refers to this rhetorical regulation and specifies that the line between rhetorical figures and wordplay is almost non-existent, stating that the only difference could be that literature does not follow one rule but a set of rules and that it is in its nature to permanently subvert these rules (p. 331). It does not seem clear if there is an exact and unique line between these rhetorical figures and wordplay; for example, Guiraud points out the similarities between these phenomena, stating that rhetorical figures could be set aside from wordplay because they look for a certain virtuosity, poetical novelty and creativity, but that they start losing their poetical function when they become gratuitous (p. 83). Vittoz Canuto presents a thin line separating wordplay and rhetorical figures when he specifies that literary forms are somehow regulated, they are supposed to follow a set of rules and guidelines that are expected to be incorporated in different literary texts, specially poetry (p. 125). Todorov refers to this rhetorical regulation and specifies that the line between rhetorical figures and wordplay is almost non-existent, stating that the only difference could be that literature does not follow one rule but a set of rules and that it is in its nature to permanently subvert these rules (p. 331).

This crack that opens in the solid wall that seemed to separate what is made to be read and what is made to be seen grows wider in Eielson's visual poetry. Consequently, the rhetorical procedures transform and glide towards a different relation between the signifier, the signified and the referent. The "poems" break out of the strictly verbal dimension to invade the realm of the image. The question now would be if these new procedures can still be understood under the perspective of wordplay.

VISUAL POETRY

In order to elaborate a hypothesis for this question, it is important to go back to the main characteristics that define wordplay. Reviewing the bibliography available, one can find three common traits in the different theoretical approaches⁵: first, wordplay is characterized by a certain ambiguity, a confrontation or abnormality in meaning, understood as the presence of a double or a multiple interpretation⁶ of a somehow similar linguistic structure. Second, wordplay follows a ludic intention⁷, it works as a communicative strategy to amuse as well as to persuade. Third, wordplay originates from the limitations and imperfections of language⁸, particularly the asymmetry between words and the extra-linguistic world. These general traits are later crystallized by each author into a series of definitions, typologies and textual analysis that specify what is being understood as wordplay. Once the different authors settle this theoretical framework, the general traits of wordplay become more restrictive of a concrete phenomenon that, taken rigorously, may not adjust to Eielson's movement between word and image.

One of the reasons that leads me to this conclusion is that these definitions and typologies address a phenomenon that is exclusively verbal or textual, and consequently, they focus on the contrast between signifier and signified in a verbal and situational context. Although this contrast can be seen in the examples I presented regarding the form and sound of the letters composing the word, it may not be of use when talking about images. Wordplay, as it is defined⁹, arises in a verbal statement and creates a phonetic, orthographic or semantic anomaly¹⁰, which is produced by the dual nature of the verbal sign, that is, the contrast between signifier and signified. However, Eielson's visual poetry is trying to search other ways to construct meaning, one that is not confined to the verbal dimension of language, because the exclusively verbal nature of the poetic quest seems to have arrived to the limit of what poetic language could achieve. Once poetry, as a textual expression, finds itself on the edge of nonsense and it starts diluting in uselessness, it is the opening towards the image that could offer a way out over the insurmountable wall that language had become, even in its poetical dimension.

Eielson's visual poetry could exemplify the critique that Foucault, in his analysis of Magritte's work, presents on alphabetical civilization, defined as the order that gives privilege to reading over seeing, in other words, that privileges meaning, concentrated in the abstract signified, over matter, that comes into existence in the concrete signifier. This critical process carried out by Eielson means questioning the alleged preponderance of meaning, locked inside a word to be read, over different physical forms and creations, made to be seen; this hierarchy is confronted by hybrid objects that

⁵ Cfr. Guiraud, Gervais, Vittoz Canuto, Todorov and Delabastita.

⁶ Guiraud 105; Ben Amor; Vittoz Canuto 27; De Foucault 8; Delabastita 1996:128, 1993:57; Alexieva 138.

⁷ Guiraud 82; Vittoz Canuto 25; Delabastita 1996: 130.

⁸ Gervais 61; Vittoz Canuto 27; Delabastita 1996: 129, 1993: 66; Alexieva 139.

⁹ Vittoz Canuto 27, Todorov 328, Delabastita 1993:57.

¹⁰ Vittoz Canuto 28

continue the exploration of the metaphysical reach of words, but now searching for other ways that could overcome the futility of verbal language. Therefore, the reader interacts with a text-image where something is happening; but whose inner work escapes the opposition between signifier and signified because this poetic objects are not only made to be read but also to be seen.

What can be observed in *Canto visible*¹¹ and *Papel*, both from 1960, are images accompanied by a text or a text with an “image-like” disposition. There is almost no ambiguity in the meanings of these words or in the organization of the sentences. Likewise, the “texts” also surpass the act of playing with typography or sounds. Some of these “poems” resemble a calligram, and thus adjust to what Guiraud called a pictographic wordplay; but when considered as an ensemble, the collections *Canto visible* and *Papel* are doing more than shaping the verses according to its referents. In *Canto visible*¹², the first two images [no.+estrellas] [ti amo] are closer to a calligram because what is offered is a disposition of the letters on the page that from afar creates some sort of shape: a tower, a tridimensional triangle, maybe a folded paper thanks to the inversion of the shape; only that there doesn’t seem to be an interior dimension to this visual disposition, the verbal world does not seem to contain “anything”. The third one would be by definition a calligram [stars], with the word displayed in a way that they draw what they refer to; only that they are not words or verses but letters that, with the use of color, achieve the calligramatic representation. There is a decomposition not only of poetical procedures, like it was in earlier texts, but the word itself is broken. There is no complex referent elaborated with verses and, thus, sentences; instead, the letters are like small, shiny, white dots that resemble a star. Letter start becoming objects.

The next “poems” of the collection have a more “ekphrastic” nature, since they are fully descriptive; they break out of the visual-textual relation of the calligram because they don’t work as a representation that evokes an object, instead they show with words or translate into words what is already being seen. [small dot] [statue of a thought]. The words that accompany the image, as a descriptor, bring life and action to the image. Without the text, the image shows almost nothing, mostly a black page or a grey sphere; but with the text, there is something that is brought to our attention and, as a result, comes into existence. The white dot grows bigger and shinier, and the dots inside the sphere come out as they are put under the perspective of a net of ideas. [yellow bird] In the case of the bird, the encounter of the words, specifically the deictic THIS, with the image brings the attention back to language and centers on the virtual existence of its referent. The tension here is not between signifier and signified, but between this pair and its referent, the bird. Neither the text nor the image can work separately; there is an anomaly in the “poem” that does not lie in the double meaning of its words or its image, but on the relation between the two of them. What gives the appearance of abnormality is that the deictic refers to something invisible, but that still has some existence because there is a word that designates it.

This poem shows an imperfection of language, one that was already present in the decomposed poetry of *Tema y variaciones*; an imperfection because the referent of a word is mostly virtual and it doesn’t imply a direct connection to the world around us. The yellow bird evinces the fragile nature of meaning, since it denounces that the bird only exists as a virtual reference of a word, which becomes the only prove of its reality; the referential capacity of language is brought to questioning

¹¹ The fact that the texts from *Canto visible* are written in different languages could already imply an interest that goes beyond verbal meaning.

¹² I altered the order of the poems. The number on top illustrates its original place on the collection.

as the “poem” plays with the relation between the deictic THIS and the image. This play allows “a reflection on the nature of language” (27), quoting Vittoz Canuto on the general traits of wordplay; but it also has a ludic intention, achieved through the awareness of the fragility of the referent of words and, in doing so, “shatter[ing] the illusion of language as an obedient reliable vehicle of meanings” (66), another characteristic of wordplay following Delabastita.

A similar procedure is also used with the wooden chair that is nothing but a paper chair [chair]. It is inevitable to mention the nod to Magritte’s pipe, who poses the same contradiction between the image, the text and reality. The description “this is a wooden chair” is true, in the representational sense, namely, it is true because what we see is an image of a wooden chair. But the photographed chair is made of paper, so “this chair is made of paper” is also true in the actual sense¹³. This poem confronts the reader with what is inside the text/image, what is represented there, and the outside of this text/image, what the reader sees and touches. Here, verbal language changes the way we ~~are~~ perceive the image and the image impacts the way we understand the statement. Quoting Jerome Game, “the text can say what it says because the image has made it readable/hearable; the image shows what it shows because the text has made it visible” (p.17). Eielson’s visual poetry, as an example of this encounter, works as a subversion of the established hierarchy between seeing and reading, with the predominance of what was verbal, to open new ways to signify through hybridization.

The yellow although invisible bird and the paper but wooden chair are the best examples of what could potentially be a pictographic wordplay outside the logic of the calligram or the rebus. They have the three general characteristics of wordplay: they present an ambiguity, they have a ludic intention and they make evident some imperfections of language. Nevertheless, they do so not by creating a tension between signifier and signified, but by blurring the boundary between what we see and what we read. To put it another way, the point here is not a paradigmatic or a syntagmatic choice, because the play is not just in the text; the play is generated by the contact of the text with the image, a sort of diagonal choice to follow the Cartesian analogy of vertical and horizontal, which activates the question for the concrete referent of words, always in the limit between the inside and the outside of the poem.

A similar strategy is used in *Papel*; a completely tautological approach to the confrontation of reading and seeing is at the base of this collection of 19 pages of paper, each one with a text that describes the kind of paper displayed on the page [papel]. The limit between the inside of the object seen or read and the outside where the reader is located is blurred by the image that underlies the text. Instead of an autonomous poetic universe, the author offers a tautological object, the sentence “burnt paper” describing a burnt paper¹⁴. Placed on the unclear border between the inside and the outside, the reader is confronted with the ambiguity of the referential connection; in other words, the question that arises is if he or she is reading a text or seeing an image. And in regard to the words that are read, the confrontation leads to the question about the place of the referent when facing the text, that is, if it is a description of an object in my hands, or an autonomous text accompanied by an image. There is a play with the relation sign-referent that doesn’t follow the rules of a strictly

¹³ Representational sense vs. Actual sense, cfr. Roques, 32.

¹⁴ It is useful to remember that Eielson did not give final approval to the edition of *Papel* because of the material restrictions it had; it wasn’t burnt paper, but the image of a burnt paper, which somehow undermined the effect of the play. There is no second edition of this collection.

textual wordplay; instead, as already stated, it works as a confrontation on the diagonal axe, the one that would connect with reality and the object designated by the word^{15 16}.

CONCLUSION

In this line of thought, I consider that Eielson's visual poetry creates a dynamic relation between words and images, one that could work as a mixed wordplay that breaks out of the verbal dimension to perform on a porous boundary of image/text, seeing/reading or outside/inside. This wordplay arises in the decomposition of poetry that resulted from the pessimistic acceptance of the loss of power of poetic language, a loss that comes as a main concern for the writers of the posvanguardia. At the beginning of this decomposition, wordplay is mostly verbal, with a graphic component that strengthens progressively until it fractures the verbal nature of the poem. As a result, the poem becomes gradually plastic, a "sculpture of words" to use the verses of *Habitación en Roma*, a "never-ending black and white". This intermittent chromatic nature of writing reminds the reader of the plastic nature of words, which when written are already placed outside as they gain a material face. Paraphrasing Marie Ropars, the act of writing imposes the experience of the outside; to write is to inscribe language in the realm of the image (151).

As a conclusion that opens the analysis of Eielson's work, one could state that, if there is a possibility for poetic language to surpass its insufficiency, it would be through a hybridization with images. The possibility of diagonal wordplay in these poetic objects allows ambiguity, accompanied by a ludic intention inherited from the avant-gardes, to generate a fertile ground for a new way to explore language and words outside the limits of verblity. [esplendor] [alfabeto] This exploration will take Eielson's work across this threshold of verblity facing the image until he finds the quipu, the knot used by precolumbian incas; a tridimensional sign that is not based on the dichotomy between form and meaning, or signifier and signified, because its plastic nature implies that a quipu is in itself a plastic code that can be "read" only because it can be "seen" and "touched". [quipu] Thus, the perspective of wordplay turns out to be productive not only to understand the decompositional procedures of Eielson's poetry in the verbal dimension, but to approach his hybrid work, because the general traits of this phenomenon could adapt to help explain the transformation of his "traditional" poetry into a visual poetry and, later, into a plastic work; the general framework of wordplay could offer a path for interpretation of the hybridization between image and text without abandoning the problem of meaning, but interpreting it as the same ludic exploration of language, only carried out with a wider set of codes.

¹⁵ The "poems" are dynamic, they act and do something in the encounter with the reader. They become "dispositifs".

¹⁶ These images act as dynamic poetic objects (Cfr. Delabastita 1993: 68) that have the functions that, according to Jakobson, are in action in wordplay, namely, the referential function (what we are writing about), the metalingual function (how does the code that we are using work) and the poetic function (the plasticity inherent to words).

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