

SECONDARY LITERATURE: ARTS OF REFERENCE IN THE
AMERICAS

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Secondary Literature examines a growing body of contemporary experimental hemispheric poetry that cites from dictionaries and encyclopedias and imitates their form. This poetry addresses an excess and an inaccessibility of fact; ultimately, I understand this poetry as a kind of craft that allows readers and writers to make a means to live, not in possession of truth, but in relationship to it. I define poetry broadly to include hybrid examples of photography, essay, and the book arts, as well as more traditional poetic forms. My consideration of dictionaries and encyclopedias includes formats like archives and notebooks that lead to the writing of reference books. The works examined mobilize these genres to reorder pathways between words and their referents. Through haptic reading practices and paradigms like translation, they urge readers to participate in the formation of meaning. In so doing, they decentralize communities of language and knowledge to disrupt the totalizing tendencies of history and the state. *Secondary Literature* traces an arc from illegibility to hyperlegibility, from resistance against dictatorship to the reconstruction of lives that leave little information in their wake. Objects studied include Brazilian visual poet Wladimir Dias-Pino's *Enciclopédia visual* (1970–2018), an unfinished, 1001-volume collection of images that responds to inequities in the distribution of information; the photographic series “Los archivos” (2001) by Argentine memorial artist Marcelo

Brodsky, depicting archives of the trials against the military dictators; the multivolume essay-poem *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* (2000–present) by Argentine writer Mario Ortiz, which studies the word as thing; and Canadian writer Anne Carson’s book *Nox*, which addresses history through a lexical translation of Catullus. While previous studies of encyclopedism emphasize its universalizing ambitions, I approach reference genres not as ideal forms but as media whose influence can be understood through histories of collective composition and popular use. This project integrates the study of peripheral literary movements, like the process poem in Brazil and the rise of small presses in Argentina, with that of perennial issues Latin American and hemispheric studies, such as the preservation of historical memory and relationships between politics and the avant-gardes.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Janet Hendrickson received a BA in English with a concentration in Spanish from the University of Dallas in 2003 and an MFA in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Iowa in 2010. She joined the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell in 2012, receiving her MA in 2015 and PhD in 2019. She was also a visiting researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro from 2015 to 2016. While at Cornell, Janet received research grants from the Latin American Studies Program, the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, the Graduate School, and the Society for the Humanities, as well as the Award for Outstanding Performance as a Graduate Teaching Assistant from the Department of Romance Studies. She also works as a literary translator from Spanish and Portuguese; her publications include *The Future Is Not Ours* (ed. Diego Trelles Paz, Open Letter, 2012) and an experimental translation of Sebastián de Covarrubias's *Treasure of the Castilian or Spanish Language* (New Directions, 2019). In fall 2019, Janet joined the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of Dallas as a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow of Spanish.

For my grandmother, Janet Marek—a reader, among many things

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INTRODUCTION

Among the most emblematic literary depictions of an encyclopedia is the one that appears in Jorge Luis Borges's short story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius." The story is a tale of two encyclopedias—or more precisely, multiple editions of two encyclopedias—that, rather than provide knowledge of the existing world, serve to construct an imagined one. As the reader learns by the end of the story, this imaginary world, Tlön, threatens to overtake material reality. Borges arrives at this fantastic conclusion, however, through a very homely starting point. The story opens as Bioy Casares goes to visit the narrator—who can also be called Borges—at a large old country house. As the two friends converse into the night, they discover a shared horror at mirrors, which leads Bioy to remember "a saying by one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar: *Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind*" (69). That saying, Bioy claims, appeared in "*The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, in its article on Uqbar" (68). However, when the two go to consult the copy of that encyclopedia in Borges's country house, the article on Uqbar is not there. Nor, it turns out, does it appear in any other copy of the encyclopedia except for the one belonging to Bioy. The two keep searching for Uqbar in other reference volumes and other bookish places. The article on Uqbar does not appear in a copy of the encyclopedia that a third friend spots in a bookshop on Avenida Corrientes in Buenos Aires; furthermore, the name of the place does not appear in the many sources—atlases, catalogs, travel memoirs—that Bioy and Borges pore over in the National Library. Bioy, it seems, owns the only copy of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*—

itself a “[reprint] of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*” (69)—that is not a reproduction of another, that adds to the encyclopedia something new.

In its novelty and creativity, in its making of something new, this volume of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* resembles the more memorable of the two encyclopedias in the story, that of the fictional planet Tlön. Like the rogue version of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, this other encyclopedia surfaces in a sort of homely place. In the second part of the story, the narrator happens on a 1001-page volume of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* at a hotel bar in Androgué, a small city in the Buenos Aires province, where it had been sent by post from Brazil to the now deceased Herbert Ashe, an Englishman friend of his father. This encyclopedia describes a world in which truth as we understand it, in which propositions can be verified by an external, independently existing reality. Psychology is the basis of all disciplines on Tlön; physical causality is impossible to comprehend: “space is not conceived as having duration in time” (73–74). This kind of thinking “renders science null” (74); the process of classifying mental states “introduces a distortion, a ‘slant’ or ‘bias’” (74). Systems of thought do not refer to past fact but rather aim to influence experience in the present: “The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound” (74). Such idealism influences material reality. For example, if one thing is lost, and two people are thinking of it, two such items may be found; archeologists on Tlön can go on intentional digs that allow them “not only to interrogate but even modify the past” (77). Thinking on Tlön creates real things, and also truth.

Thinking, likewise, is what created its encyclopedia. While the impersonal style and unsigned articles of a conventional, real-world encyclopedias seem to erase individual traces of authorship, Borges explains that this reference book is a very human creation. According to the records left in Borges's story, the encyclopedia of Tlön was produced largely at a remove from the centers of Western encyclopedic production—for example, the Britain that gives its name to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—by a secret and intergenerational collective of men. While the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* had its origins in the seventeenth century “in Lucerne or London” (78), the writing only really took off in 1824 at the instigation of a “reclusive millionaire” (79) in Memphis, Tennessee—a city that had only been founded five years before.¹ The encyclopedia of Tlön becomes troubling, however, when, rather than describe a fictional world, it begins to influence the real one. Objects from this world pop up in unexpected places—at one point the narrator picks up an unbearably heavy metal deity from Tlön that slipped from the belt of a drunkard at a country general-store-and-bar.

The most unsettling changes the encyclopedia makes to the world, however, have less to do with material objects than they do with systems of human knowledge. In a postscript to the story, dated 1947, Borges attributes the appeal and subsequent influence of Tlön to its ideological rigor, a rigor that speaks to the story's particular post-war moment. As people once fell into “any system with an appearance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism” (81), the narrator observes that so,

¹ The narrator learns this history from a letter to Ashe, written by a Norwegian and postmarked in Ouro Preto, Brazil.

now, too, “[c]ontact with Tlön, the *habit* of Tlön, has disintegrated this world” (81). Tlön has reformed the sciences and infiltrated schools, where its “primitive language” has seeped in: “already the teaching of Tlön’s harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplemented in men’s memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false” (81). The narrator predicts that in another hundred years, “someone will discover the hundred volumes of *The Second Encyclopedia of Tlön*,” at which point “French and English and mere Spanish will disappear from the earth. The world will be Tlön” (81). This encyclopedia, rather than collect all human knowledge, will overwrite that knowledge, the language that expresses it, and the reality it seeks to comprehend. The encyclopedia is an inventive one, to be sure, but it changes the world outside the page, not from any magical power inherent to the encyclopedia itself, but because of readerly desire and practice.

Faced with this devastation of history, language, and truth, one ushered in, less, it seems, than by a secret cabal of encyclopedia writers than by an overly or improperly receptive reading community, the narrator’s response seems at once puzzling and inadequate. After he predicts the end of French, English, and Spanish, after he declares, “The world will be Tlön,” he continues: “That makes very little difference to me; through my quiet days in this hotel in Adrogué, I go on revising (though I never intend to publish) an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne’s *Urne Buriall*” (81). The narrator does not seek to correct the encyclopedic fiction of Tlön that is overcoming fact. Rather, faced with world’s oblivion, he establishes himself in a temporary residence; he works on an absurd

project of editing a decidedly unliteral translation that, it seems, will never be finished or read by anyone but himself.

I begin this dissertation with this story by Borges because it brings up several paradigms about encyclopedism that are central to my study here of a different kind of encyclopedic literature: contemporary experimental poetry from South and North America that cites encyclopedias, dictionaries, and related reference genres and/or imitates their form. More specifically, I am interested in how readerly practice and material histories shape the kinds of knowledge these reference genres offer and how a growing body of hemispheric poetry invokes that practice and those histories to address an inaccessibility of fact. I ask how reference genres—and the poems that use them—are made, as well as how, where, when, why, and by whom they are read. I also examine how these poems use reference genres to revisit questions inherited from the twentieth-century avant-gardes about the relationship between language and reference, or the ways language communicates the real. I read this poetry against literary frameworks of encyclopedism that value the universal, the totalizing, the informative, the capacious. Instead, I study how this encyclopedic poetry approaches desires for those values from the vantage point of encyclopedic practice: through the domestic, the particular, the affective, the small.

Ultimately, I view this poetry as a kind of fabrication or craft, understanding craft both as method and object, which allows readers and writers to make a means to live, not in possession of truth, but in relationship to it. Like Borges's narrator, the artists I am studying respond to situations in which social and political circumstance obstructs public access to, and even the subverts the desirability of, truth, fact, and

information. Several of the artists I study here are responding to the legacy of the military dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina; all also confront, more generally, the opacity of language and the oblivion of history—that is, the ways that the passage of time, as well as public and private processes of forgetting, erase the specificities of fact and render the objects of one’s interests, even love, inaccessible. As with Borges’s narrator, these artists’ work with encyclopedic and other reference genres does not always yield the knowledge they seek or correspondence with a truth that exists outside these books. As the narrator shows, encyclopedias are not an abstract concept; rather, their use develops and relies on networks of interpersonal connection, institutional pedagogy, and methods and spaces of autodidactic practice, such as the home. However, like the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, and like the *Encyclopedia of Tlön*, this poetry inspires—and then diverts—traditional, trusting methods of consultation; it borrows, cites, lifts, copies, even steals from previous reference books and then alters their contents, sometimes in un signaled ways. This alteration, as well as the desire for a referential correspondence, often come together through the practice and paradigm of translation. Translation, in these poems, situates itself as a sometimes private, sometimes hidden space of resistance against the totalizing processes and ideologies that seek to silence language and erase lived knowledge of the past. This understanding also is prefigured by the narrator of Borges’s story and what seems to be his unsettling failure to respond to the incursion of Tlön in the world.

My commitments in studying this poetry in this way are several. First, I seek to trace a constellation in a growing body of reference-citing poetry and ask how it responds to contemporary problems of knowledge. This literature has emerged in a

climate in which there seems to be an excess of information, too much to apprehend, which at the same time is a climate in which access to that information is unstable or inconsistent and there exists a distrust of fact. I seek to recognize and valorize terms often viewed as secondary in the hierarchies of literature: craft over art, “nonfiction,” broadly speaking, over invention, translation over writing—or perhaps rather than “over,” I should say “other” but on the same plane, “with.” In this process I also aim to expand an understanding of the sphere of action of a poem, taking poetry broadly to include a range of objects made of words and objects made on pages, including visual poetry, photographs, artists’ books, and essay that claims to be poetry. In most of the cases I study, the artists, or sometimes, their publishers categorize this work as poetry. This categorization dialogues with these writers’ engagement with avant-garde traditions, particularly those of North American Objectivism, Brazilian Concretism, and a history in the Southern Cone of an engaged conceptual art. By accepting that categorization, I hope to build on their work to consider expansively what poetry is and does.

Just as my understanding of poetry is an expansive one, so, too, is my consideration of dictionaries and encyclopedias. My idea of what constitutes reference-citing poetry is informed by a history of the encyclopedic genre itself—one that, to be sure, includes the alphabetically arranged, large print volumes that seem to be falling into disuse the era of digital reference consultation, but also a history that includes the practices of glossing, archiving, note-taking, and pedagogy that ultimately led to the development of these books. Each chapter of this dissertation centers on a different poetic object. The first chapter discusses Brazilian visual poet Wladimir

Dias-Pino's *Enciclopedia Visual* (*Visual Encyclopedia*, 1970–2018), an unfinished, 1001-volume collection of images that responds to historic inequities in the distribution of information in Brazil, as well as the suppression of information under the military dictatorship of 1964–1985. The second chapter discusses a series of photographs, “Los archivos” (“The Archives,” 2001) by the Argentine memorial artist Marcelo Brodsky, photographs that I classify as conceptual poems because they appropriate text. These photographs depict archives from the 1985 trials against the Argentine military dictators in a closed state, in which none of the incriminatory or even potentially memorializing text they contain can be read. Chapter three examines two volumes of the ongoing series, *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* (*Language and Literature Notebooks*, 2000–present), by the Argentine writer Mario Ortiz. This series departs from a quasi-natural-science-type study of the word as thing in its natural habitat to confront the legacy of that dictatorship, as well as the neoliberal devastation of the local economy in Bahía Blanca, where Ortiz lives. The fourth and final chapter turns to Anne Carson's book *Nox*, an artist's book that simultaneously questions the possibilities of writing history, broadly speaking, and confronts personal grief through a translation of a poem by Catullus that consists of entries copied from the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

My theoretical frameworks are inspired in part by the theories that these poetic objects directly engage. Dias-Pino and Ortiz in particular engage a mid-twentieth-century history of semiotics and poststructuralist thought, viewing the word simultaneously as linguistic sign and image or material thing. Rather than consider language and its materiality in this poetry abstractly or as concept, I take a more

anthropological approach to the study of these works, from “the more modest position of feet on the ground,” as Daniel Miller writes (78). I contextualize theoretical questions about signification and materiality through book histories, understanding reference genres as media whose material form and social history helps determine the message they contain. I relate the works I study to contemporary discussions of avant-garde and conceptual poetics, and particularly those coming from Latin America that emphasize writing as communal or collaborative practice. I also understand these poems through literary fieldwork. Some, like Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopedia*, primarily exist in site-specific ways—in this case, as a collection of images for the encyclopedia archived in the artist’s studio and home. Others, like Brodsky’s archives, have, outside the photographs, a real, legal purpose that operates independently of any artistic use of them. Ortiz’s *Cuadernos* trace how literature can operate as part of a seemingly anti-literary, post-industrial environment. Carson’s *Nox* shows how the space of the page and the volume of a book can become sites of fieldwork in themselves.

The term “craft” mentioned above allows me to think of the materiality of these poems and the ways of knowing that they posit through the homely spaces where they are often found. Many contemporary poets—and critics—have expressed interest in refracting the materiality of poetry through the kinds of precision, solidity, consistency, and even rationality associated with material science. However, my emphasis is not, as Miller writes, “materiality made exotic by the wondrous achievements of science,” but rather “simply making stuff ordinary, as part and parcel of our existence in the world” (78). Craft is useful; craft involves skill. Often handmade, it at once reflects and anonymizes its maker; craft functions and intercedes

in its environment while often going unnoticed. Craft also is a term that helps me approach these poems' work through the theory and practice of translation.

Translation, as a kind of making that happens with words, often is viewed as a craft rather than an art because of its perceived lack of inventiveness, in that it always and necessarily refers to or corresponds with another set of words or text. In its referentiality it is also notoriously inequivalent to its referent: it remakes a text in a set of entirely different words. While the inequivalence of translation might be read as a betrayal, even a falsification, one that writes over the world of a prior text, it might also be understood as a clearly signaled alteration that, in turn, signals an absence: an object made of words that marks the place of an object that is no longer there.

Translation also shares ties with the defining function of dictionaries and encyclopedias: these reference genres might be read as intralingual translations, ones that put words into other words. The four objects studied here belong, as I have stated above, to a growing body of work that takes on an encyclopedic and lexicographic format. They may not necessarily constitute a movement—the conceit has its limits—but their numbers are high enough and their manifestations diverse enough to be worth noting. Latin American examples of this poetry I broadly call encyclopedic tend toward the dictionary form. Mexican poet Karen Villeda's *Tesouro* (*Thesaurus*, 2010) presents poems that borrow from the form of dictionary entries, ordered alphabetically and focusing on words beginning with the five vowels. A forthcoming hybrid genre collection, *Copia* (*Copy*), by another Mexican poet, Dolores Dorantes, includes poems written as definitions, essayistic passages, and photographs of entries from a 1956 edition of the *Diccionario Hispánico Universal: Enciclopedia Ilustrada de la Lengua*

Española, all of which start with the negative prefix *des-*. (A portion of this book was published in a bilingual edition with a Dutch translation in 2018.) In Argentina, the poet Sergio Raimondi has been working for several years on a project titled *Para un diccionario crítico de la lengua* (*Towards a Critical Dictionary of Language*), which Ben Bollig describes as “an encyclopaedic work that attempts to catalogue, in verse, the political life of a society” (“Sergio Raimondi”). An alphabetically ordered selection of this book was published in a bilingual German edition 2012, though a full version has yet to appear in Spanish. Like the poems in Raimondi’s previous book, *Poesía civil* (*Civil Poetry*, 2001), these poetic definitions have “a basis in detailed research; a distanced, even ironic voice; and great prosodic care” (“Sergio Raimondi”).²

This lexical poetry in Spanish falls into a larger spectrum of these writers’ concerns about the relationship between poetry and the knowledge and language of contemporary crises and events. *Poesía civil* investigates the industrial history of Bahía Blanca, the city where Raimondi lives, as does Mario Ortiz, the writer discussed in chapter three of this dissertation. Villeda’s 2013 book *Dodo* confronts environmental devastation through a rewriting of colonial travel discourse. Dorantes’s 2011 book *Estilo* (published in English as *Style*, translated by Jen Hofer, 2016), presents a series prose poems styled as direct quotes about violence at the US-Mexico border. These poetic works also belong to a longer tradition of Latin American literary

² Two examples of contemporary Latin American fiction using an encyclopedic format are Bolaño’s *Literatura nazi en América* (1996) and Rodrigo Fresán’s novel *Mantra* (2001).

writers' relationship to encyclopedic forms. Adolfo Bioy Casares is the author of *Breve diccionario del argentino exquisito* (*A Brief Dictionary of the Posh Argentine*, 1971), a satirical compendium of examples of verbal excess.³ A much earlier example is the extraordinary *Ensiqlopèdia ou seis mezes de huma enfermidade* (*Encyclopedia or Six Months of an Illness*, 1868–1873) by the Brazilian writer José Joaquim de Campos Leão, also known as Qorpo-Santo. Qorpo-Santo may be best known for his proto-absurdist plays, which were rediscovered in the 1960s, as well as his alleged madness, his tendency toward orthographic reform, and his prolific, perhaps compulsory writing. The nine volumes of his *Ensiqlopèdia*—only six survive today—gather together a seemingly infinite variety of topics, including, as Silvane Carozzi writes,

política, história-pátria e geral, administração pública, economia política e particular, instrução pública e doméstica, astronomia, retórica e filosofia, os mais diversos gêneros literários, como a poesia, o teatro, a crônica, a biografia e a prosa, um romance e uma tragédia em 74 atos..., esses dois últimos

³ Several interesting books (including artists' books) have also emerged involving encyclopedic genres in the Iberian context. *Diccionario personal de la lengua Española* (*Personal Dictionary of the Spanish Language*, 2016), by the Spanish conceptual artist Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, was made through a process of erasure and handwritten copy of the dictionary of the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española. An earlier book, *Libro de los venenos* (*Book of Poisons*, 1995), by Antonio Ganomeda, edits and comments on a proto-encyclopedic and multilayered work, Andrés de Laguna's sixteenth-century translation of a pharmacological text by Dioscorides. In the Lusophone context, Gonçalo Tavares has collected a series of aphoristic *Breves notas* (*Brief Notes*) on topics such as science, fear, and music under the heading *Enciclopédia* (2010). His nonfiction works also include a fascinating book combining essay and criticism with photography under the conceit of the cartographic reference, titled *Atlas do corpo e da imaginação* (*Atlas of the Body and the Imagination*, 2013).

desaparecidos, e magníficas explicações sobre ciências, “como das verdadeiras relações naturaes e suas consequencias entre o homem, Deos e a natureza; sobre a immortalidade da alma”; e “hum milhão de sublimidades sobre os mais significativos, momentosos e transcendentos assuntos.” . . . [E]m meio a essas sublimidades, sucedam-se pequenos verbetes, bilhetes, recados, anúncios pedindo empregadas domésticas, receitas culinárias, conselhos homeopáticos, fantasias, dúvidas e hesitações sexuais do escritor, separados apenas por uma curta barra transversal, impresso em colunas duplas ou triplas, como uma bíblia, sem qualquer critério de divisão.

[politics, general and national history, public administration, home and public economics, public and domestic education, astronomy, rhetoric and philosophy, the most diverse literary genres, like poetry, theater, the chronicle, biography, and prose, a novel and a tragedy in seventy-five acts . . . these last two missing, and magnificent explanations of science, “such as the true natural relations and their consequences for man, God, and nature, about the immortality of the soul” and “a million sublimities about the most meaningful, momentous, and transcendent matters.” . . . [I]n the middle of those sublimities can be found small dictionary entries, tickets, messages, advertisements for maids, recipes, homeopathic advice, the writer’s sexual fantasies, doubts, and hesitation, written in double or triple columns, like a bible, without any criteria for division.] (9)⁴

⁴ All translations, unless otherwise noted in the reference list, are mine.

Qorpo-Santo's preference for phonetic spelling, Carozzi adds, exposes "a impotência das palavras para representarem a realidade" ("the powerlessness of words to represent reality") (9).

As Qorpo-Santo's collage-like project, as well as the use of image in Dorantes's books might indicate, this lexical and encyclopedic poetry also has strong connections to the book arts. This is particularly evident in the Brazilian context, where experimental poetry has had strong historical connections with visual and conceptual art. Fabio Morais, an artist active in a thriving culture of small, independent publishers, includes among his works *Diccionario para Road Movie* (2010), an artist's book that assumes the form of a polyglot dictionary, with the word "border" translated into twenty languages. Nuno Ramos, a writer and artist whose installations often involve language and various forms of found printed matter—for example, newspapers—includes among his works *Caldas Aulete (Para Nelson 3)* (*Caldas Aulete (For Nelson 3)*, 2006), which cuts the lyrics to a line of a samba by Nelson Cavaquinho out of the five volumes of the *Caldas Aulete* dictionary.⁵ Encyclopedias and dictionaries are also used as objects in North American book arts: for example, Rochester, New York-based artist Scott McCarney has several projects made out of old editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and Diderot and D'Alambert's *Encyclopédie*.

In the North American context, and particularly the United States, which historically has had a robust dictionary culture (described in chapter four), one notable

⁵ Another contemporary Brazilian artist, Marilá Dardot, is the creator of many installations that use books as material, invoking libraries and conceits from Borges, though none use reference volumes specifically.

recent collection of lexicographically oriented poems is Harryette Mullen's alphabetically arranged *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), a book of lyric that engages both *Roget's Thesaurus* and *The American Heritage Dictionary*. (A book compiling several of her other collections, meanwhile, is titled *Recyclopedia*.) Earlier, drawing from similar sources, the performance, video, and installation artist Vito Acconci assembled what has recently been characterized a conceptual poem, *Contacts/Contexts (Frame of Reference)* (1969). Here he appropriates text from reference books, for example, transcribing paths between synonyms and headwords from *Roget's Thesaurus*. Another 1969 piece by Acconci copies entries from Webster's Third International Dictionary. A more recent publication is Solmaz Sharif's *Look* (2016), a collection of poems about personal loss and the costs of wars in the Middle East, stitched through with terms and definitions lifted from the *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. The dictionary format has a history in American literary prose: among its more famous manifestations is Ambrose Bierce's satirical *Devil's Dictionary* (1911). The dictionary also lends itself to more lighthearted appropriations, for example, Jez Burrows's *Dictionary Stories* (2018), a collection of flash fiction assembled out of example sentences copied from the *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

In terms of encyclopedias, Wikipedia seems more likely than print encyclopedias to surface in contemporary work. Dean Rader's poetry collection, *Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry* (2017), does not, as a rule, engage the format of a Wikipedia entry, but it does invoke the processes of revision and lack of finality inherent to this particular reference, which is always open to modification. Daniel

Borzutzky's chapbook, *Memories of My Overdevelopment* (2015) tackles issues of translation, Latinx identity, borders, and neoliberal policy through a combination of verse, essay, photographs, a screenshot of a YouTube video, and an apparently copied and pasted Wikipedia entry, on the El Encanto Fire in Havana, which retains textual markers that signal its internet source such as bolded section headings and what would be links to “[Edit]” and the article's footnotes in brackets (25–26). (The chapbook also takes its title citationally, responding to the landmark Cuban film *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968)).

The term “encyclopedic” in “encyclopedic poetry” may seem imprecise, given that most of the examples cited above imitate dictionaries in their form. Likewise, the term “poetry” may seem inaccurate or incomplete, given that some of those examples fall in the category of visual art. These works come, however, from two traditions—the tradition of the writing of actual reference genres, and tradition of the twentieth- to twenty-first century poetic avant-gardes—that justify those terms. Both traditions are united in their use of citation, their concerns with language, their concern with the form of the page and the book, their concern for the real, and the ways they invite nonlinear reading practices that encourage readers to take and even make knowledge that is useful for themselves. The poetic, like the encyclopedic, in both cases is also endless in that it is rooted in practice—practice not just as something opposed to the theoretical, but an activity carried out on a daily basis, at once a habit, an attempt, and a rehearsal.

The citational methods—or more precisely, the methods of copy—used in many of the works listed above, and in the works I am studying in this dissertation,

call to mind one recent experimental movement, conceptual writing or poetry, whose influence seems to have peaked in 2015, at least the US context, before undergoing a rapid and public fall.⁶ The phrase “conceptual writing” was coined by Craig Dworkin to express its affinities and intersections with conceptual art. Also known as “uncreative writing,” a term used by its most famous (or infamous) practitioner, Kenneth Goldsmith, this writing often appropriates language from nonliterary sources and recontextualizes it through placement in a literary (or gallery) context. An example is Goldsmith’s book *Day*, which transcribes every letter, number, and symbol printed in the September 1, 2000 edition of the *New York Times*. Goldsmith has framed this kind of writing as a way to confront the excess of language produced in “the new environment of textual abundance” produced by the internet (23). While the pervasiveness of mass media and advertising text had been a subject of investigation and a source of creative material for many twentieth-century theorists and artists, Goldsmith argues that contemporary digital conditions ask us to approach language differently than before: “Since the dawn of media, we’ve had more on our plates than we could ever consume, but something has radically changed: never before has language had so much *materiality*—fluidity, plasticity, malleability—begging to be actively managed by the writer” (31). Fragmented, citational poetry is central to the history of the European and hemispheric American avant-gardes: Marjorie Perloff begins her study *Unoriginal Genius*, which concludes with a chapter on Goldsmith,

⁶ This valence of citational writing, of course, is not limited to the US context, and its scandals vary. Argentine writer Pablo Katchadjian’s manipulations of Borges, specifically, his story, “El aleph engordado” (“The Fattened Aleph”) was met with legal challenges from Borges’s widow (Goñi).

with an analysis of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Perloff has described Goldsmith's practice as "moving information" ("Moving Information"), signaling both the material displacement of writing and the emotional valence this writing takes in its new location. Dworkin, however, emphasizes the impersonal distance that characterizes most of this work:

Through the repurposing or détournement of language that is not their own (whatever that might mean), [conceptual writers] allow arbitrary rules to determine the chance and unpredictable disposition of that language; they let artificial systems trump organic forms; and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and production with transcription. (xliv)⁷

Ken Chen, in a more critical analysis, describes this poetry's "chief affect [as] a snickering, joyless humor (the poems often read like punch lines with the laughter redacted)." Conceptual writers, in a sense, are not responsible for language; they play cool.

That assumption of impersonality—that language can be resituated, voiced by different people and moved between frameworks and places without consideration for the concerns of the original voice, purpose, location, and consequence—is precisely what led to the conceptualists' highly publicized downfall in the North American poetry scene. In 2015, Goldsmith, a white man, "remixed" the autopsy report of Michael Brown—the unarmed black teenager shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014—called it a poem, and read it in front of an audience at Brown University, with

⁷ Unlike Dworkin, I consider arrangement a kind of fabrication in itself.

Michael Brown's photograph projected behind him. This reading, this appropriation, provoked outrage online and among much of the literary establishment.⁸ In an essay for the online literary journal *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, P.E. Garcia writes, "For Kenneth Goldsmith to stand on stage, and not be aware that his body—his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies—is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the 'contextualization' of this work." The anonymous online collective Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo voiced its criticism of Goldsmith's performance more bluntly: "The Murdered Body of Mike Brown's Medical Report is not our poetry, it's the building blocks of white supremacy, a miscreant DNA infecting everyone in the world. We refuse to let it be made 'literary'" (qtd in King). This scandal of conceptualism brought to the public eye something long recognized by writers from communities of color and something emphasized, as I will explain below, within the context of Latin American theory: the material of language

⁸ The outrage over Goldsmith's reading came to be paired with a similar response to appropriations by Vanessa Place, the author, with Ron Fitterman, of *Notes on Conceptualisms* and a leader in the conceptual poetry movement. Beginning in 2009, Place had been tweeting the text of *Gone with the Wind* in its entirety, often pairing its racist text with racist imagery. In spring 2015, faced with widespread protest of her work, Place was expelled from the selection committee for participants in Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference; an event where she was programmed to speak at the Whitney was cancelled; and the 2015 Berkeley Poetry Conference, where she was scheduled to present, dissolved once many other participants cancelled their own participation in protest. For two excellent analyses of the events of spring 2015, see Ken Chen's essay, "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show," as well as Chris Chen and Tim Kreiner's essay, "Free Speech, Minstrelsy, and the Avant-Garde." CAConrad also collected responses from American poets to Goldsmith's reading at the Poetry Foundation blog. See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw>.

is not atomized, autonomous; rather, it belongs to structures made by people within larger social and political frameworks. The soundness of and spaces within those structures are unequal, and moving language and information has consequence for those who dwell within them.

The scandals that made public the racist and colonialist underpinnings of the ethics of appropriation in the dominant school of American—or United Statesian, to use Borzutzky’s preferred term—conceptual poetics connects to a larger history of exclusion of writers of color from the canons of the avant-garde. Borzutzky, in an essay on the long history of racism and exclusion in the avant-garde, observes that “white writers get to be considered conceptualists while writers of difference who use ‘conceptual’ approaches aren’t quite invited to join the club” (“Delusions”).⁹ North American experimental poets often cite the Brazilian Concrete poets of the 1950s in their genealogy, poets who located themselves within a North American and international poetic tradition whose figurehead was Ezra Pound. However, many of these North American poets have failed to recognize how conceptual and experimental procedures take on different meanings depending on where they come from.¹⁰

Procedures and paradigms of appropriation, in particular, have been used in Latin American artistic contexts as an anticolonial gesture—for example, in Brazil, where the paradigm of anthropophagy informed the “devouring” of European and North American cultural practices in art associated with the Modernist and Tropicália

⁹ For a collection of recent essays on race and the poetic avant-garde, see <http://bostonreview.net/blog/poetry-forum-race-avant-garde>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Hugo García Manríquez’s *Anti-Humboldt* (2015), a book-length poem made from an erasure of the English and Spanish versions of the NAFTA treaty.

movements. Roberto Schwarz addresses how traditional views of the copy matter for evaluations of cultures considered peripheral: “A commonplace idea suggests that the copy is secondary with regard to the original, depends on it, is worth less, and so on. Such a view attaches a negative sign to the totality of cultural forces in Latin America” (“Brazilian Culture” 6). In the historical Latin American context, however, a vindication of the citation or copy may not merely valorize the concept of the copy as such. It has the potential to subvert or equalize actual structures of power, to have a social impact—although, as Schwarz recognizes, the realization of this potential is not guaranteed: “It remains to be seen whether this conceptual break with the primacy of origins would enable us to balance out or combat relations of actual subordination” (“Brazilian Culture” 6). This question remains at stake in the theorization of contemporary encyclopedic poetics, which write against or at least in a space apart from the dominance of a so-called universal knowledge. It also is at stake in some of the historical processes of making and pedagogical purposes of dictionaries and encyclopedias as such.

The term “appropriation” calls to mind an individualistic, even capitalistic mode of ownership, of taking from others what is theirs. Pedro Neves Marques defines anthropophagy in art through the term “expropriation,” which calls to mind a taking of private property for public use, an action often proper to the state. A third way to frame ideas of possession is through Cristina Rivera Garza’s term “desapropiación,” which allows one to rethink citational and documentary writing practices as a kind of communal writing. *Desapropiación* does not have a cognate in standard English; the *Collins Spanish Dictionary* translates the reflexive verb *desapropiarse* as “to divest

[someone of something,] to surrender [something].” Disappropriation does not subsume the other into the self as much as it dissolves the self. According to Rivera Garza, identity—and language—are formed through situation and relationship: “Se trata de escrituras que exploran el adentro y el afuera del lenguaje, es decir, su acaecer social en comunidad, justo entre los discursos y los decires de los otros en los que nos convertimos todos cuando estamos relacionalmente con otros” (“It has to do with writing that explores the inside and outside of language, that is, its social occurrence in community, between the discourse and speech of the others that we become when we are with others relationally”) (25).¹¹ This form of writing, following Gayatri Spivak, rather than exploit the subaltern for the sake of an art, may provide a space for the subaltern to speak. In this, disappropriation differentiates itself, if not always procedurally, at least philosophically from the appropriation of its North American counterparts that Rivera Garza cites:

Si el apropiacionismo conceptualista contribuyó, de manera acaso paradójica, a la tachadura de autorías subalternas y al reencumbramiento del escritor profesional como sampleador de fragmentos de otros, las estrategias de desapropiación se mueven hacia lo propio y hacia lo ajeno en tanto ajeno, rechazando necesariamente el regreso a la circulación de la autoría y el capital, pero manteniendo las inscripciones del otro y de los otros en el proceso textual. (If conceptualist appropriation contributed, perhaps paradoxically, to the erasure of subaltern authorship and to the elevation of the professional writer

¹¹ All translations, unless otherwise indicated in the bibliography, are mine.

as a sampler of the fragments of others, the strategies of disappropriation move toward the self and toward the distant as distant, necessarily rejecting a return to the circulation of authorship and capital, but maintaining the inscription of the other and others in the textual process.) (24–25)¹²

Disappropriation rejects the idea of property precisely to avoid the erasure of any who dwell and work within a shared, communal space. It also moves from a paradigm of dependency—the paradigm to which Schwarz responds—to propose a complex form of interdependency, including an interdependency with language (21).¹³

Disappropriation responds, perhaps procedurally, to questions of authorial ownership, but, more deeply and thematically, to the horror, violence, and precarity that pervades contemporary life. Rivera Garza cites Bolaño's *2666*, a novel that falls under the category of “encyclopedic,” to situate contemporary writing in an environment of atrocity, one of femicides in Mexico, of the deaths of migrants, of “las necropolis contemporáneas. Palestina. África Central. Chernóbil” (“contemporary necropolises. Palestine. Central Africa. Chernobyl”). She asks, “¿Qué tipo de retos

¹² Rivera Garza's comparison of writer to sampler reflects an analogy prevalent in discussions of conceptual writing, which compares the writer's work to that of a DJ. This comparison tends to locate this kind of experimental writing in a male-dominated, generally urban, and sometimes exclusionary space.

¹³ Citational and communal writing also pertains to an aesthetics and ethics of care. Luciana di Leone observes, particularly in regard to contemporary poetry from the Southern Cone, “*o imperativo ético, de mostrar os contatos, as afecções e os afetos, de pensar para além das fronteiras genéricas e disciplinares, mas sem deixar de ouvir as singularidades que elas possam ter*” (“*the ethical imperative to show one's contacts, affections and affects, to think beyond generic and disciplinary borders, but without ceasing to listen to the singularities that they may have*”) (59). This idea of an expanded poetry resonates with the idea of a poetics extending beyond text that is central to this dissertation.

enfrenta el ejercicio de la escritura en un medio donde la precariedad del trabajo y la muerte horrisona constituyen la materia de todos los días? ¿Cuáles son los diálogos estéticos y éticos a los que nos avienta el hecho de escribir, literalmente, rodeado de muertos?” (“What does it mean to write today in this context? What kinds of challenges confront the exercise of writing in a medium where the precarity of work and horrifying deaths constitute the material of every day? What are the ethical and aesthetic dialogues that hit us through the act of writing, literally, surrounded by the dead?”) (19). Citational writing, the kind that includes many voices, faces an ethical responsibility before the unspeakable. How can a writing that erases, collects, and cites fight for life? How can it hold out against the oblivion of the dead?¹⁴

This question is central to the concerns of the encyclopedic poetry studied here: this poetry collects, copies, and cites information from other sources, as encyclopedias and dictionaries themselves have done historically, and it collects and assembles its material in specific political, historical, and personal contexts in which the unpoetic erasure and recontextualization of information has human consequence, in which one often must watch what one says and where. This dissertation moves chronologically from the 1970s through the present and thematically from illegible letter to overly legible word. Chapter one, as mentioned above, discusses Brazilian visual poet Wladimir Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia visual*. Dias-Pino led the process poem movement in Brazil, which emerged in the late 1960s as a response to the military dictatorship and rejected the alphabet as an instrument of state oppression,

¹⁴ For two other recent books on experimental and citational poetics from a Spanish-language context, see Mora and Pron.

instead creating poems out of abstract geometrical shapes. Chapter one centers on two published volumes of the *Enciclopédia* that reproduce images of archaic and non-Western scripts that would be illegible to most of its intended users, visual poets from the interior of Brazil. Through interviews with the author, observations in his studio, and theorizations of encyclopedism, I argue that the nondiscursive apprehension of the letter as image, effected through a material manipulation of the page, leads to an understanding of encyclopedias as generators, rather than records of knowledge, whose meaning relies on how the reader transforms them. Chapter two examines Argentine artist Marcelo Brodsky's photographic series "Los archivos" (2001), which, as mentioned above, is a series that depicts files from the once-halted trials against Argentina's military dictators. Rather than view the photographs of these files as a testimony to their erasure, I discuss instead how they hold and repurpose those closed files, even if not in a way that yields immediate results. I suggest that keeping these archives in a state of potential for use allows them to maintain force in the present, even if in altered form, and I consider the photograph, like the archive, as a space that a viewer, visitor, or reader might inhabit in order to repurpose its content, even as the old uses pass or fade away.

Chapter three continues to inhabit post-dictatorial Argentina and examine the impact of neoliberal reforms on cultural production through Mario Ortiz's ten-volume (as of this writing) essay-poem, *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura*. Ortiz studies words as material objects in a post-industrial environment, focusing particularly on commercial labels and text on machines to develop a poetics of the word as thing. While chapters one and two of this dissertation emphasize the spaces of physical

circulation—or stasis—of referential text, Ortiz’s *Cuadernos* promote a circulation of method, urging readers to engage in a poetic “science . . . done by all” that consists of conducting observations of language in one’s own environment. I discuss how personal notebook practices, from field notes to commonplace books, led historically to the creation of standardized encyclopedic genres. I also posit that knowledge is created through transformations of text whose meaning depends on its changing material environment. The concluding chapter centers on Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010), which, I argue, constructs a textual monument through a translation of a poem from Catullus that consists of entries copied from the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Here, meaning becomes inaccessible because the text is overly readable: the lexical translation provides too many English equivalents for each Latin word to make sense. This excess of linguistic information contrasts with the lack of information Carson has about her brother, whose death leads to a meditation in this book on the making of translation and the writing of history. I evaluate the construction of this artist’s book through the kinds of processes used to make and consult its dictionary source. Through *Nox*, I argue that a creative use of inequivalence allows literature to fabricate objects that allow one not to replace a loss, but rather work with it and around it.

Discussions of literary or theoretical encyclopedism tend to celebrate the inaccessibility—or illegibility—that results from the encyclopedia’s totalizing scope. As material objects, encyclopedias are voluminous; as concept, encyclopedias are infinite. Hilary A. Clark writes:

Part of the allure is the encyclopedia’s very *unreadability*, the sense that one will never have the time nor the stamina to read and digest all its contents. It is

not only its size that intimidates—the multiple volumes, their weight, the tissue-thin pages and dense columns of print and illustrations. Rather, it is the nature of the encyclopedic enterprise itself—the audacious project of encompassing *all that can be known* within the cover of a book or books—that challenges one’s imagination and will. (95)

However, actual encyclopedists do, in fact, want their encyclopedias to be readable, even if reading does not mean reading all of it. The aim of printed encyclopedias is practical, pedagogical, not just to collect knowledge, but to effectively disseminate it. William Smellie, editor of the first *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1768–71) wrote that “utility ought to be the principal intention of every publication. Wherever this intention does not plainly appear, neither the books nor their authors have the smallest claim to the approbation of mankind” (qtd in Rudy 505). The aim of real encyclopedias, to reframe Perloff’s term, is “moving information” for the edification of a reading public.

Contemporary encyclopedic poetry draws, as I show in chapters three and four of this dissertation, from the practices of copy, citation, and even plagiarism that were historically have been part of the writing of dictionaries, as well as a related genre, notebooks, including commonplace books, used for the purposes of individual and school study. However, even as this poetry borrows, deliberately or inadvertently, from these practices, its utility may differ from that of disseminating information in a graspable way. Oswald de Andrade promoted a kind of documentary aesthetic within his cannibalistic approach: “Poetry exists in the facts. The shacks of saffron and ochre in the green of the Favela, under cabralín blue, are aesthetic facts” (184). Even if the

facts, however, are the material of poems, and especially facts about a particular situation, one does not necessarily turn to poetry for knowledge about them. A poet might *write* with facts, but as Daniel Tiffany asserts, “Only a fool *reads* poetry for facts” (emphasis added, 11). He continues, “Precise observation contributes, of course, to the effects of poetry. . . . All the same, a modern reader does not generally consider poetry to be a reliable source of knowledge about the nature or substance of things” (11). Tiffany, like several other recent scholars, examines relationships between the lyric and material science, framing poetry in terms of a, if not *the*, dominant mode of knowledge and fabrication in the present, and perhaps one of the modes of discourse most recognized as possessing a truth. To rephrase Tiffany’s statement, though, we might ask not only what a person reads poetry for, but what should a person read the facts in poetry for? Poetry might both instruct and delight—but how, and in what, does it instruct?

One answer to this question—and the answers might vary by poem, but one answer presented generally through encyclopedic poetry studied here—lies in practice, and practice embedded in, and constructive of, place. Instruction might consist of a practice of making a poetic object out of pieces of knowledge, not authorially or appropriatively, but collaboratively, even communally with the “original” author. Knowledge involves practical work with the material of language, a material that is always historical and particular, one that is tactile, and not just visual or voiced.¹⁵ For Borges’s narrator, to return to the story of Tlön, that practice means making something out of, through, between particular materials of and in English and Spanish. The

¹⁵ See Tiffany, Olson, and Culler.

endless translation in the story gives the narrator, if not a purpose, at least a task through which to live. Its truthfulness lies in its lack of claim to universality. It is a knowledge of something to someone in some place—a knowledge, not *the* knowledge. It need not be everything, and thus need not collect everything or erase what does not fit.

This dissertation ultimately aims to promote forms of knowing through doing—knowing by hand and even by heart—and doing with language, even and especially when its communicative function is insufficient to what it seeks to express. The dissertation also seeks to push against autonomy as being a necessary condition for art, another reason I turn to the concept of craft. Craft, as a term, has often been secondary to art in the hierarchy between the two. I use this term, however, strategically and with care, arguing, with Glenn Adamson, that “craft’s inferiority might be the most productive thing about it” (3). Craft invites creativity from communities excluded from the realms of art; craft is something that anyone can do. A well-made craft both pleases and functions in everyday life; its form instructs people in how to use it. Craft invites repetition; its making is a kind of historical memory learned through practice across generations. While truth and knowledge in their dematerialized format might be possessed, craft offers a way of life.

CHAPTER 1

TOWARD A UNIVERSAL ILLITERACY: RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE WOR(L)D IN WLADEMIR DIAS-PINO'S *ENCICLOPÉDIA VISUAL*

The Brazilian visual poet Wladimir Dias-Pino has declared the alphabetic code to be “the cruelest instrument man ever invented” (*Wladimir Dias-Pino* n.p.), and his utopian project of the last five decades, the *Enciclopédia visual do Brasil*, stands as a monument against it. This encyclopedia consists of 1001 volumes of collages of images intended to provide (quoting the artist) “a survey of the total pictorial production since the invention of printing” (“Enciclopédia visual” 273). Dias-Pino literally cut many of these images out of often old and rare books before photocopiers existed or were easy to access. The original intention of the project, which Dias-Pino began in 1970 and worked on up to his death in 2018, was to provide visual poets from the interior of Brazil with access to images from books they could not afford to buy or simply would not have access to, living far from the metropolitan centers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Silveira 274). It also aimed to provide an education in visual literacy: in a presentation of the project for the Swedish journal *OEI*, Dias-Pino writes: “The intention of the *Visual Encyclopedia* is perhaps to offer a proposition as to what a graphical reading (essentially) signifies, i.e. what results from the invention of printing, the art that created Western visuality” (“Visual Encyclopedia” 273).

While the *Enciclopédia* has been exhibited occasionally in museums in Brazil, it has remained largely unpublished. Six volumes were published in the early 1990s, but they have a very limited circulation, thus impeding their ability to be used in

practice. However, even if the *Enciclopédia* were to attain wide circulation, the project's anti-textual and anti-referential premise also leads to questions about its possibilities for use as encyclopedia, a genre that Umberto Eco defines in its utopian or maximal form as registering, not reality, precisely, but knowledge about it: "*the encyclopedia does not claim to register what really exists but what people traditionally believe exists—and hence everything that an educated person should know, not simply to have knowledge of the world, but also to understand discourses about the world*" (italics original, *Tree to Labyrinth* 26). Rogério Camara, in an article on what he calls Dias-Pino's "enciclopédia branca" ("blank encyclopedia"), defines the genre of the encyclopedia not only in terms of the universality of its contents but through the ways in which it makes those contents accessible. He writes that the *Enciclopédia* seeks to be "simultaneamente legível e de referência" ("simultaneously legible and a reference") (67).¹⁶ The concept of legibility, which Camara defines as "leitura contínua e fluida, implica no ordenamento do discurso com sentido, clareza, medida e proporção de modo a torná-lo compreensível a um amplo espectro de leitores" ("a continuous and fluid reading, implies in the order of discourse a meaning, clarity, moderation, and proportion in order to make it comprehensible to a wide spectrum of readers") (67). The clarity of the encyclopedia's writing is what makes possible the understanding of discourses that Eco describes. The encyclopedia becomes a reference, meanwhile, through "uma organicidade, hoje orientada pela ordem alfabética. . . . Ela deve facilitar a consulta, disponibilizando qualquer dado a

¹⁶ Translation mine, as are all other translations not otherwise noted in the reference list.

partir de determinadas operações” (“an organization, today oriented through alphabetical order. . . . This organization should facilitate consultation, making any data available through certain operations”) (Camara 67). The encyclopedia’s organization, according to Camara, allows each item it contains to relate to the totality of its discourse.

The *Enciclopédia visual* serves as an encyclopedia insofar as it seeks to contain a totality of knowledge of the world and of the world’s visual, though not necessarily verbal, discourse. It collects a massive repository of images that other visual poets or artists, to return to Dias-Pino’s original intention for the project, might hypothetically reappropriate, further decontextualize, and recontextualize for their own work. However, returning to both Eco and Camara’s definitions of the encyclopedia, the structure of the *Enciclopédia visual* appears to facilitate neither understanding nor comprehension. It is neither moderate nor clear, to use two of Camara’s criteria for legibility. Most of the images in the *Enciclopédia visual* are unaccompanied by identifying captions, and while the volumes have often idiosyncratically descriptive titles—for example, 41. *O sentido inmutável do sagrado*/:/O fixar bizarro do documento e a retratação do velho (41. *The Immutable Sense of the Sacred*/:/The Bizarre Attachment of the Document and the Portrayal of the Old); 505. *Flash Gordon*/:/Tudo é Flash Gordon (Flash Gordon/:/Everything is Flash Gordon); 980. *Mover com a luz* (980. *Moving with the Light*)—the numbered, rather than alphabetized volumes contain no explanatory text. In terms of the referentiality of the *Enciclopédia*, the project as a whole does not facilitate consultation. Numerical order, unlike alphabetical order, does not allow a reader to

quickly look items up by association with their written name. Further, the images the *Enciclopédia* contains are not referential, in that they are cut off from their sources. Camara notes that the images Dias-Pino appropriates for this project, “isoladas de suas referências de origem, restam, em sua clausura, sem nome, sem passado, sem futuro no aguardo da execução de um novo contexto que lhe dê sentido” (“isolated from their original referents, remain, in their enclosure, without a name, without a past, without a future awaiting the execution of a new context to give them meaning”) (67). This reference book is difficult to refer to, that is, to consult, and it severs, or at the very least detours, ties to its referents. Under these conditions, how can the *Enciclopédia* function as encyclopedia, despite the enormity of knowledge it contains? How can it not just register knowledge of the world but also lead to an understanding of discourse about it?

In this chapter I will address these questions and attempt to outline how this project might function as an encyclopedia in more than name, and moreover, precisely through its anti-alphabetical stance. It is true, of course, that images serve and historically have served as sources of knowledge and repositories of information, including in encyclopedias. Roland Barthes, for example, comments extensively on the informative functions of illustration in Diderot and d’Alambert’s foundational encyclopedia in his essay, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” an essay I will discuss in the conclusions of this chapter. However, as Johanna Drucker observes in her study of visual epistemologies, “the bias against visual forms of knowledge production is longstanding in our culture. Logocentric and numero-centric attitudes prevail” (“Graphesis” 16). Encyclopedias, despite their use of image, demonstrate these

attitudes; encyclopedic illustrations, despite their potential for alternative poststructuralist readings, serve first to illustrate the text that dominates the encyclopedia, at least in terms of its quantity. Although some encyclopedias, like Diderot's, and, ultimately, Dias-Pino's, are organized taxonomically, the standard encyclopedia, as Camara notes (and at least in Western languages from the pre-Internet twentieth century, when Dias-Pino began his project), is organized through an alphabetical ordering of the names of its subjects (or objects).

In what follows, I will argue that Dias-Pino's project leads to an active knowledge of the world by encouraging its users to construct their own discourse about it. The *Enciclopédia* does so by creating conditions in which they become textually illiterate. Through its illegibility, the *Enciclopédia* frees language from its condition of record to become material for a reconfiguration and, in fact, creation of the semiotic world. In order to engage directly Dias-Pino's resistance to the Roman alphabet, I will focus my argument through a close reading of two of the six published volumes of the *Enciclopédia* in which text and image overlap, namely, *Escritas arcaicas* (*Archaic Scripts*), and *Naquele flutuar das escritas: caligramas* (*In that Fluctuation of Writing: Calligrams*). *Escritas arcaicas* collects a series of fragments written in mostly ancient, almost entirely non-Latin scripts; *Caligramas* features Western calligraphic poetry alongside examples of shaped Latin prose, Islamic calligraphy, and Chinese and Sanskrit patterned texts.

My approach to the *Enciclopédia* will involve a fair amount of historical contextualization, as I seek to read it in terms of its place Dias-Pino's larger body of work, as well as through Dias-Pino's relationship to the Brazilian and international

visual poetry movements from which his work emerged. Most studies of Dias-Pino's work locate it primarily in the history of the Brazilian avant-garde, although several also consider it in the tradition of the artist's book.¹⁷ Dias-Pino's work as a whole, and the *Enciclopédia* in particular, may have their closest affinities to those areas, especially since Dias-Pino was an active theoretical leader within Brazilian visual poetry movements. I use that Brazilian history to understand the project, and I also draw extensively from Dias-Pino's own theory and practice regarding the *Enciclopédia*. I also contextualize these volumes of the *Enciclopédia* in terms of what appear to be their sources. Two, the sources for *Caligramas*, are anthologies of figurative poetry and typographic art made by American and French artists—specifically, Dick Higgins's *Pattern Poetry* and Massin's *La lettre et l'image*. The source for *Escritas arcaicas*, meanwhile, appears to be a 1958 history of written scripts by a German philologist, Hans Jensen, titled *Die Schrift in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, or in its English translation, published in 1969, *Sign, Symbol and Script: An Account of Man's Efforts to Write*.

As I consider the two specific volumes under discussion here, I will use their sources to read the *Enciclopédia* wrongly, at least in terms of its original intention not to inform about the past in a traditional sense. I will consider what the scripts they contain would say to an audience literate in each script, and I will also consider what

¹⁷ See in particular, Priscila Martins's article, "A poesia concreta de Wladimir Dias-Pino: escritura e informação"; Amir Brito Cadôr's doctoral thesis, *Enciclopedismo em Livros de Artista: um manual de construção da Enciclopédia Visual*; and his 2016 book, *O livro de artista e a enciclopédia visual*. Also worth noting is *Wladimir Dias-Pino: poesia/poema*, a retrospective of Dias-Pino's work edited by Martins and Rogerio Câmara that includes pop-up reproductions of the sculptural version of Dias-Pino's poem *Solida*.

critical methods of and reasons for reading them might look like. These particular “wrong” readings of the *Enciclopédia*’s entries—that is, for their verbal or historical significance—will, I hope, throw into more specific relief the possibilities for their “right” decontextualized readings. My aim is to understand what specific kind of material for later reconstructions these scripts present, since, as Drucker notes, “the generic statement, ‘attention to materiality,’ is so vague that it loses any real value” (“Experimental, Visual, and Concrete” 47).¹⁸ After looking at the content of these books, I will conclude with proposals about the theoretical implications of the *Enciclopédia visual* for the creative act of reading, both of image and of script, drawing primarily from Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin—specifically, Barthes’s commentary on the plates of Diderot and d’Alambert’s *Encyclopédie*, as it might also apply to the plates that constitute Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia*, and Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” as I look to the techniques of copy and appropriation that go into the construction, as well as the intended reception, of Dias-Pino’s work.

Dias-Pino was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1927, and he first gained national attention in Brazil with the exhibition of his poem *Solida* at National Exhibition of

¹⁸ Drucker continues, in an overview of visual poetry from the 1960s onward:
[T]he strict rule of “form which is self-identical with meaning” (Concretism in the narrow sense defined by Noigandres and Gomringer) stretches only to include a very few writers and even then, only some of their poetry. Still, the fundamental concept of making use of visual elements to reinforce, extend, inflect, or subvert conventional linguistic meaning in a poem becomes the basis of a wide variety of work throughout recent decades—attesting to the viability of Visual poetry as a heterogeneous and diverse field and to its compatibility with a seemingly unlimited number of poetic propositions. (“Experimental, Visual, and Concrete” 47)

Concrete Art in São Paulo in 1956 and then in Rio de Janeiro in 1957 (“Entrevista”

10).¹⁹ One understanding of Concrete poetry is that it strove for a coincidence of

¹⁹ Dias-Pino’s poetic career did not begin with Concretism, though his Concrete phase remains among his most recognized. In 1951, he launched the “Intensivismo” avant-garde movement in the literary magazine *Sarã*, published in Mato Grosso. In a 1948 version of the movement’s founding manifesto, Dias-Pino describes the work of the Intensivist poem:

Em lugar de ritmos, procuramos eixos de leituras: verticais e horizontais (simultaneidade), o que possibilita a leitura de vértices. O cubismo fechou o triângulo (pintura), enquanto o intensivismo é a abertura dos vértices unidos pelos eixos, fazendo a leitura do poema. Os modernistas combaterem os adjetivos, substituindo-os pelos substantivos; nós, agora, tomamos como potencialidade das palavras os vértices dos espaços do poema e a sua área de inscrição.

[. . .]

As palavras superpostas até atingir o nível de imagem . . . De um só golpe, atravessar os significados . . . Nada é mais urgente do que o instante . . .

[. . .]

O poema intensivista não pertence ao autor, assim como a *bananinha* não pertence ao poema: camadas de significados.

(In place of rhythms, we seek axes of reading: vertical and horizontal (simultaneity), which makes the reading of vertices possible.

Cubism closed the triangle (painting), while Intensivism is the opening of vertices united by axes, making the reading of the poem. The Modernists attacked adjectives, substituting them with nouns; now, we take as the potentiality of words the vertices of the spaces of the poem and its area of inscription.

[. . .]

Words superimposed until they reach the level of image . . . Cross through meanings with a single blow . . . Nothing is more urgent than the instant . . .

The Intensivist poem does not belong to the author, just as the *bananinha* does not belong to the poem: layers of meaning) (“Trechos”)

Perhaps the most exemplary work from Dias-Pino’s Intensivist phase is the artist’s book/book-length poem *A Ave* (1953–56). In the numerous versions of this book-poem, Dias-Pino scatters the words of each line of the poem across the page—a text that begins, “A AVE VOA dEnTRO de sua COr” (“The bird flies in its color”). These words, eventually erased, become points scattered across the page that Dias-Pino treats in differently in different iterations of the poem. In one version, he connects with points with lines to create different paths of reading. Another version consists of holes punched in the different brightly colored pages (corresponding to each word) so that “reading” each page depends on looking through to the next. For a virtual edition, see:

verbal and nonverbal communication—a “verbivocovisual” expression—through a simultaneous use of words as communicative media and material objects. In a 1956 manifesto (and later in the “Plano-piloto para poesia concreta”) Augusto de Campos defined concrete poetry as “TENSÃO DE PALAVRAS-COISAS NO ESPAÇO-TEMPO” (“tension of word-things in space-time”) (43). Perhaps the ideal form of the *palavra-coisa*, the word-thing, for the core or orthodox group of Concretes—Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari—is the ideogram. As critic Gonzalo Aguilar notes, these poets applied the term *ideogram* to a variety of objects, including Concrete poems, Chinese characters, and Pound and Mallarmé’s general poetic sensibility (184). The “-gram” of the ideogram, that is, the drawn or written image, is neither mimetic nor referential. Rather, to quote Aguilar, “The image does not designate a thing, but rather designates *the word itself made image*” as the poem ‘hombre hambre hembra’, published in *Noigandres 4*, demonstrates” (emphasis original, 207) (see fig. 1). Note that this poem’s sense derives from the slippage between the letters o, a, and e, facilitated by the Concretes’ preferred font, Futura Bold.

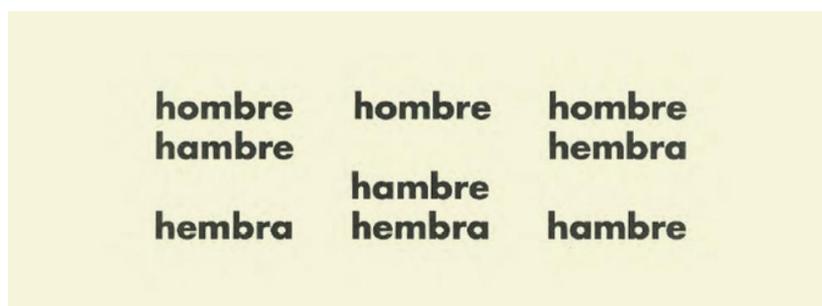


Fig. 1. Décio Pignatari, *hombre hambre hembra*, 1957 (image reproduced in Aguilar 207).

http://www.encyclopediavisual.com/poemas.detalhes.php?secao=1&subsecao=1&cont_eudo=8

Dias-Pino's Concretism, however, does something different than that of the "orthodox" Concretists: it does away with using letters as image to instead create meaning through a mathematical permutation of the alphabet. In *Solida*, the word is not *seen* differently as image; rather, it is *transfigured* into an abstract image that in turn transforms the syntactic possibilities of the alphabetic code that it stands in for. In Figure 2, the letters of *Solida* are replaced by commas, thus codifying the space of the page in a way that allows Dias-Pino (quoting him) "to write a poem no longer with letters, but with objects" ("Entrevista" 26). Rearranged and multiplied, the letters of *Solida* (with the diacritic that would belong over the "o" in "sólida" deliberately omitted) spell out the verse, "solidão só lida sol saído da lida do dia" ("solitude only read [or toils] sun left from the toil of the day"). This plastic translation of the alphabet allows for a range of permutations of the letters' arrangement. In Figure 3, a viewer at the National Exposition of Concrete Art in Rio de Janeiro traces connections between the dots that substitute for original letters. In Figure 4, the poem moves from the one-dimensional space of the line to a two-dimensional frame in which each letter is replaced with a geometric shape that the reader can move around and manipulate. In Figure 5, finally, the poem takes on a three-dimensional, sculptural form in a version that was published in 1962 as a number of loose, pre-cut sheets in a box that the "reader," so to speak, could fold into different significations. Reading, here, moves beyond decodification of the sign's correspondence with its original referent. Rather, according to Dias-Pino, "O manuseio é uma leitura sem sinalização—e eu cheguei a esse procedimento observando a atividade material do leitor" ("Manipulation is a

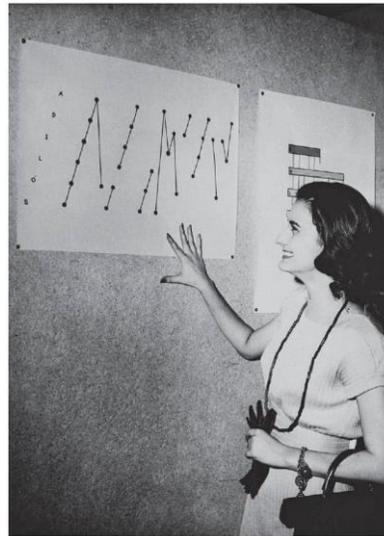


Fig. 2 (top left). Wladimir Dias-Pino, *Solida*, version displayed at National Exposition of Concrete Art in São Paulo (image from Padín, <http://www.geifco.org/actionart/actionart03/secciones/2signo/articulas/padin/indexcuarentaAnios.htm>.)

Fig. 3 (top right). Versions of *Solida* from the National Exposition of Concrete Art in Rio de Janeiro, 1957. (Image from “Entrevista” 14).

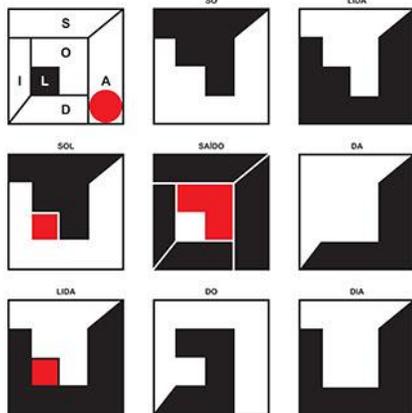


Fig. 4 (center). Version of *Solida* included in “O poema infinito de Wladimir Dias-Pino,” a 2016 retrospective of Dias-Pino’s work at the Museo de Arte do Rio (image from Freitas, <https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/livros/pioneiro-da-poesia-visual-wladimir-dias-pino-ganha-retrospectiva-no-mar-18775400>).



Fig. 5 (bottom). Sculptural version of *Solida*, 1962 (image from Freitas, <https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/livros/pioneiro-da-poesia-visual-wladimir-dias-pino-ganha-retrospectiva-no-mar-18775400>).

reading without signalization—and I arrived at this procedure observing the material activity of the reader”) (“Entrevista” 31). Reading is a creative process, a constructive process, and a process that foregrounds the material dimensions of the “text.” The text,

meanwhile, becomes non-referential, particularly in the final sculptural version of *Solida*. The geometric forms no longer stand for letters; each reading becomes instead a relatively solid object in itself.

Concrete poetry was perhaps the most famous Brazilian visual poetry movement to emerge—famous both inside and outside Brazil—however, it was only one of many avant-garde visual poetry movements in which Dias-Pino took part. Early versions of *Solida*, for instance, resemble semiotic poetry, which works through the substitution of visual codes for words or letters. Even more radical than semiotic poetry, however, is process poem, or *poema/processo*, the name given to an avant-garde movement from the late 1960s of which Dias-Pino was the de facto leader. The process-poem insists on its unfinished quality: it does away with referential codes altogether, presenting “forms that move as in photogram sequences . . . in a dynamic of signifiers deprived of signified, or signs without object: pure structures in uniform, rectilinear movement,” as critic Philadelpho Menezes describes it (Menezes 83). Process poems often consist of combinations of easily printable black and white geometric shapes, dots, and lines and are frequently presented in series (fig. 6). These abstract figures usually are not linked to letters or words; in a sense they mean nothing but themselves, or what the reader might make of them (taking the word *make* in a creative, constructive sense, according to the process/poem movement’s manifestos). As with *Solida*, the reader creates new and particular versions these wordless poems with each “act [of] apprehension,” discovering, not meanings, but new functional connections between each visual point.

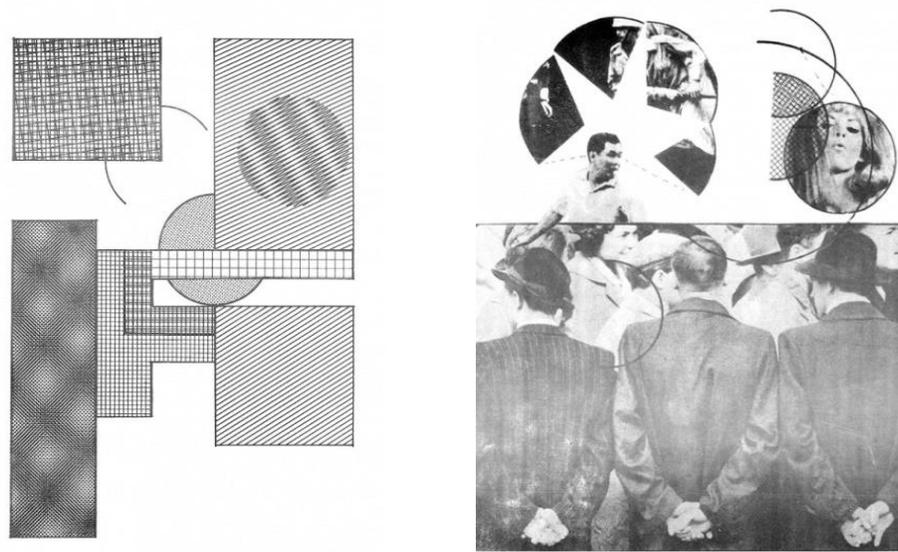


Fig. 6. Wladimir Dias-Pino, untitled/undated process poems. Note that some process poems use figurative collage techniques. (Images from *Poema Processo* website, <http://www.poemaprocesso.com.br/poetas.php?poeta=81&alfaini=r&alfafim=z>).

While the key term for the orthodox Concrete poem might be “word-thing,” whose condensed visual and verbal meaning allows little openness in interpretation, the corresponding terms for the process poem might be “object” and “process,” both of which indicate that the poem only functions insofar as the reader *works* on the multiple possibilities for reading that the poem presents. A defining anthology of process poems and largely unsigned manifestos for the movement, edited by Dias-Pino, titled *Processo: Linguagem e comunicação (Process: Language and Communication)*, provides several notes as to how those terms open the process poem up to action on the reader’s part. One of the initial manifesto-like texts lays out the equivalence between poem and workable object:

OBJETO — POEMA

*O público adquire um comportamento.

*Objeto = estrutura palpável

(OBJECT — POEM

*The audience acquires a behavior.

*Object = palpable structure) (n.p.)

The work that the reader should do on the poetic object is not only intellectual, but also material, tactile; it facilitates action more than contemplation. The element of process, meanwhile, consists in the “movimento ou participação criativa” (“movement or creative participation”) (“Processo” n.p.) on the reader’s part that the poem’s structure makes possible. The process poem is never a finished poetry (“Não há poesia/processo” (“There is no process/poetry”) (n.p.)); it only exists as a work in progress.

Despite its formal abstraction, process/poem was framed not necessarily as an aesthetic movement, devoid of content, but in terms of political protest. In 1968, for instance, a group of process poets, including Dias-Pino, tore up books by lyric poets in a public act in the Cinelândia plaza in Rio de Janeiro, carrying signs with such messages as “Verse is a Drummondicide” (Perrone 63) as well as “Down with the Dictatorship” (“Entrevista” 40). While this destruction of books might look like censorship, these artists framed their act in terms of radical liberation. The rejection of the alphabetic code signified a rejection of an instrument of oppression and dictatorship, and indeed, the *rasga-rasga*, as this act was called (*rasga* translates to rip or tear), might be read as a kind of creative cut-up on the same spectrum as the collage work that Dias-Pino applied to the *Enciclopédia visual* soon after, in the 1970s.

The manifestos in *Processo: Linguagem e comunicação* also suggest a utopian social project, tied in with its aesthetic project. The process poem is supposed to inspire a collective reading process, as opposed to the individual creative process of the solitary poet. The rejection of the word and the alphabet ultimately aims to create an alternative universal language, one not limited to the poet's regional context, and this rational poetic language seeks to replace particular human languages. One of several definitions given to the process poem replaces the work of the alphabet with a creative while still machine-like functionality:

a consciência diante de novas linguagens, criando-as, manipulando-as dinamicamente e fundando probabilidades criativas. Dando a máxima importância à leitura do projeto do poema (e não mais à leitura alfabética), a palavra passa a ser dispensada, atingido assim uma linguagem universal, embora seja de origem brasileira, desprendida de qualquer regionalismo, pretendendo ser universal não pelo sentido estritamente humanista, mas pelo sentido da funcionalidade.

[consciousness before new languages, creating them, manipulating them dynamically and founding creative probabilities. Giving maximum importance to the reading of the project of the poem (and no longer to alphabetical reading), the word is dispensed to thus arrive at a universal language shed of any regionalism, even if it has a Brazilian origin, a language that seeks to be

universal, not in the strictly humanistic sense, but rather in the sense of
functionality.] (n.p.)

The idea of functionality, as well as the movement's other aims to replace, for example, psychology in writing with technology (see fig. 7), recall a history of the twentieth-century avant-garde's dreams for a technological utopia, from the Italian Futurists' fascination with war machines to the Mexican Stridentists' glorification of urban modernity and the machine. Of course, it also connects to the attempt by the international Concretists, from the Noigandres trio in Brazil to their European counterparts like Eugene Gomringer, to apply to their poetry linguistic theories, based on communication studies and information science, that proposed "a noise-less mode of information transmission" ("Experimental, Visual, Concrete" 43).²⁰

²⁰ Dias-Pino's acquaintance with communication was more than theoretical: he worked for most of his professional life as a graphic designer, creating projects from advertisements to the first geometric design motif for Rio de Janeiro's carnival in 1958, which caused some controversy ("Cronobiografia"). In fact, the first volume of the *Enciclopédia visual*, which Dias-Pino created with João Felício dos Santos, *A marca e o logotipo brasileiros* (1974), is an idiosyncratic catalogue of Brazilian logos. Dias-Pino's father ran a print shop, first in Rio de Janeiro and later in Cuiabá, where he and the family were forced to move for political reasons. As a child, Dias-Pino played with the pieces of type in his father's print shop, and his mother taught him to read by cutting words out of the newspapers his father printed. Dias-Pino attributes his lifelong interest in the form of letters to that childhood experience ("Cronobiografia"). Perhaps not coincidentally, the process/poem's project of universal readability was linked to a utopian vision of mass media consumption:

SÓ O CONSUMO É LÓGICA
CONSUMO IMEDIATO COMO ANTINOBREZA
FIM DA CIVILIZAÇÃO ARTESANAL (INDIVIDUALISTA)
SÓ O REPRODUTÍVEL ATENDE, NO MOMENTO EXATO,
AS NECESSIDADES DE COMUNICAÇÃO E INFORMAÇÃO
DAS MASSAS



Fig. 7. The process/poem movement positioned itself in opposition to values conventionally associated with poetry. (Personal photograph of graphic from *Processo: Linguagem e comunicação*, reproduced for “O poema infinito de Wladimir Dias-Pino,” a 2016 retrospective of Dias-Pino’s work at the Museo de Arte do Rio.)

A MANIFESTAÇÃO SERIAL E INDUSTRIAL DA CIVILIZAÇÃO TÉCNICA DE HOJE.

[ONLY CONSUMPTION IS LOGICAL
IMMEDIATE CONSUMPTION AS ANTI-NOBILITY
END OF ARTISANAL (INDIVIDUALISTIC) CIVILIZATION
ONLY THE REPRODUCIBLE ATTENDS, AT THE EXACT MOMENT,
TO THE NEEDS FOR COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION
OF THE MASSES
THE SERIAL AND INDUSTRIAL MANIFESTATION OF THE
TECHNICAL CIVILIZATION OF TODAY] (“Processo,” n.p.)

The process/poem movement’s theoretical insistence on techniques of consumption and appropriation, despite the fact that the geometric nature of most process poems makes any specific appropriation hard to trace, creates an interesting synthesis between mediatic consumption and another Brazilian avant-garde history of “anthropophagous” cultural consumption, famously set forth by Oswald de Andrade in the context of Brazilian Modernism and revived by the Tropicália movement of the late 1960s, whose emergence was contemporaneous with the process/poem.

The *Enciclopédia visual* at first glance might appear to break from Dias-Pino's previous work. It is highly personal, not just from the standpoint of actual distribution: its unalphabetical organization of (returning to Eco) "everything that an educated person should know" reflects one individual consciousness, even though this also reflects the historical concerns of twentieth-century avant-gardes. In addition, despite Dias-Pino's interests in creating an impersonal poetry, the *Enciclopédia* centers on the human. In its focus on the human (or perhaps more accurately, man), its taxonomic project resembles Diderot and d'Alambert's. While their taxonomy, however, focuses on products of the mind (its three main divisions are memory, reason, and imagination), Dias-Pino's taxonomy focuses on the material, beginning with the human body, then moving to objects and eventually the objects and media man creates. According to one version of the *Enciclopédia's* projected plan, it begins with the parts of the human body and then woman and man; continues to topics like "Objects (A Free Participation in the Socially Useful)" and "Speed (Metallization of Movement)"; and concludes with volumes on "Cinema (The Light as Character)" and painters and engravers ("*Enciclopédia visual*" 273–275). In interviews and talks Dias-Pino highlights the numerical, rather than alphabetical, organization of his encyclopedia—each volume is numbered, and in a way that he considers cardinal rather than ordinal, reflecting a preoccupation with this categorization of numbers that runs throughout his work. *The Enciclopédia* does, however, maintain a taxonomic project in its overall structure. Meanwhile, on an important level, the collages that comprise each volume illustrate their titles, however much they might distort or erase

their sources. Despite a long history of the use of collage in visual poetry, from the early twentieth century work of the Futurists to Dias-Pino's Brazilian contemporaries, including Augusto de Campos, Dias-Pino's use of figurative, historically situated images in the *Enciclopédia* might seem a shift from the abstract, anti-codifying work of the process poem and the mathematical project of *Solida*.²¹

Illustration, however, still differs from explanation, as does drawing from discourse, and the *Enciclopédia*'s treatment of writing as image in its six published volumes severs or diverts writing from referential specificity. These volumes are largely concerned with text, but many turn text into image and obscure the connection between images of text and the sound and meaning that correspond to them. They are also concerned with a history of writing, but four out of the six volumes erase their textual and visual sources' specific historical referents. One volume, *Pré-história: uma leitura projetada* (*Prehistory: A Projected Reading*), features stylized versions of apparently primitive drawings, mostly hunting scenes, as well as a few pictograms and samples of archaic scripts. *Escritas arcaicas*, which I will discuss in detail below, collects fragments written in scripts that range from early forms of Greek to Indian alphabets that turn out to be contemporary. *Naquele flutuar das escritas: caligramas* includes a few calligrams in the strict sense, such as one from Apollinaire, as well as examples of shaped prose, Arabic calligraphy, and Sanskrit and Chinese pattern poems. *Ante a comunicação visual da astrologia* (*Before the Visual Communication of*

²¹ See in particular Augusto de Campos's *popcretos* poems, which are collages made of clippings from newspapers and magazines.

Astrology) gathers primarily medieval and early modern illustrations of the signs of the horoscope (some of which contain legible writing) that point to an idea of the legibility of the world and universe. The last two volumes focus more on a depiction of the feminine. *A lisa escolhida do carinho* (*The Smooth Choice of Affection*) pairs clearly typeset quotations from Brazilian poets with stylized, original images of women. The final volume, *Aubrey Beardsley: febres do capricho* (*Aubrey Beardsley: Fevers of Caprice*), meanwhile, reproduces illustrations by the British artist of the same name.

The construction of these published volumes indicates that the reading of them requires a different process than an ordinary book. At the same time, the design of their pages, which isolate images like plates, points to a more bookish reading than the collages that comprise the other unpublished volumes, and apparently unassembled, of the *Enciclopédia*. The published volumes consist of loose 20.8 by 20.8 centimeter sheets of brightly colored cardstock that the reader can arrange in any order she pleases or spread out to view multiple pages at once. Most volumes of the *Enciclopédia* consist of larger format collages (measurements, etc.) made through layers of cutouts and photocopies of figurative images, with occasional drawings, such as those in figure 8, which were displayed at a 2016 retrospective of Dias-Pino's work at the Museo de Arte do Rio de Janeiro (MAR). The pages of the published *Enciclopédia*, however, place usually one, although sometimes two or three, isolated images against the background of each brightly colored page (see figures 9 and 10). *Escritas arcaicas* incorporates different scripts in pages overlaid with often pixelated

splashes and brushstrokes as well as angular geometric shapes of different saturations and sometimes extending to the border of the page. These abstract elements appear in black, grey, or silver, or otherwise in colors generally in the same color family as the background.²² The scripts, for their part, are black or silver or the same color family as the background paper, as if cut out from the abstract overlays. *Caligramas*, meanwhile, centers single figurative poems, or occasionally two or three poems from the same style and language group, on plain monochrome pages.



Fig. 8. Pages of the *Enciclopédia* included in “O poema infinito de Wladimir Dias-Pino” (photograph courtesy of Regina Pouchain).

²² Dias-Pino’s use of color blocking in this volume of the encyclopedia is typical of his commercial design work. See, for instance, his work with the *Jornal Cuiabano de Medicina*, which he edited while working at the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso:
<http://www.encyclopediavisual.com/design.detalhes.php?secao=2&subsecao=42&conteudo=63>



Fig. 9. Assortment of pages from *Caligramas* (personal photograph).

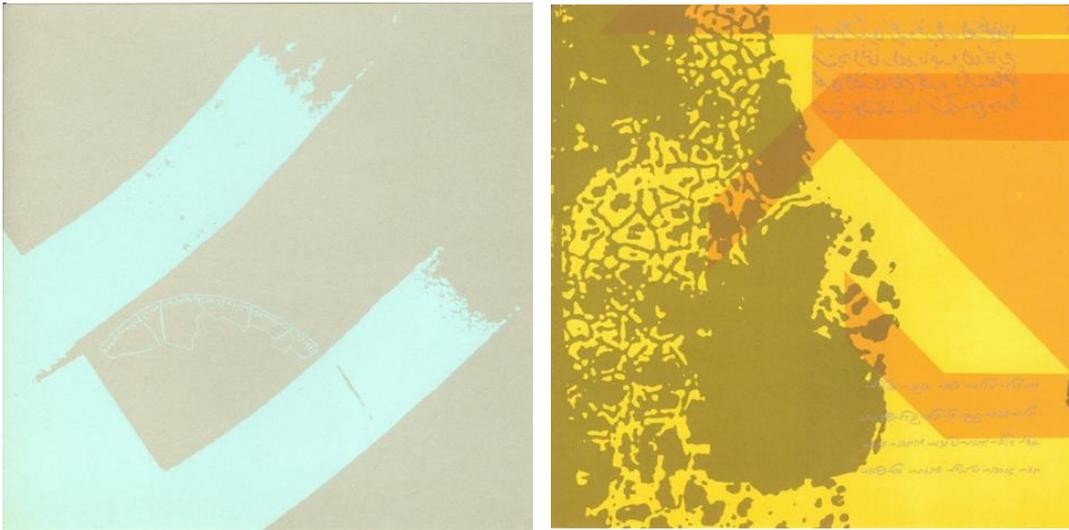


Fig. 10. Individual pages from *Caligramas* (image from *Enciclopédia visual*, <http://www.encyclopediavisual.com/poemas.detalhes.php?secao=1&subsecao=27&conteudo=14>).

The loose, unnumbered pages invite “uma leitura abstrata total” (“a totally abstract reading”), as Dias-Pino explained in an interview I had with him at his home and studio in Rio de Janeiro. I asked him how the published *Enciclopédia* might be used in practice, and he demonstrated how the pages can be arranged into nonlinear, even simultaneous readings that do not depend on the meaning of what is written on any page. Each of the published volumes is contained in a sort of glossy envelope or box, whose book-like cover opens to three flaps that encase the sheaf of loose illustrated pages. As Dias-Pino opened the flaps of one volume and spread a few pages on the table before him—one to the right, one to the left, one above the center of the opened book—he described his process as “leitura de manuseio. Ele narra visualmente o uso. Transforma o uso em leitura” (“reading through manipulation. It visually narrates the use. It transforms use into reading”).²³ He noted that the bright colors of

²³ The loose pages allow for a non-linear liberty of reading that can also be constructed as political. In one of the more surreal moments of our interview, Dias-Pino attributed the discovery of the liberty that the book format allows to Christopher Columbus:

Quando Colombo desubriu América (que já estava descoberta), ele na verdade descobriu o livro. O livro, a escrita era registrada no Oriente em rolos, e ele descobriu a praticidade, o lado prático, do livro em folhas. Então a folha, você pode manusear, e o rolo você tem que seguir a ordem fixa, do desenrolar. Então você pode ler a página quinze, e ler a página trinta, e isso dá uma liberdade de leitura tremenda, ensina o que é liberdade para o homem ocidental.

(When Columbus discovered America (which already had been discovered), he actually discovered the book. The book, writing, was registered in the Orient in scrolls, and he discovered the practicality, the practical side, of the book made of pages. So you can manipulate the page, and the scroll has to be followed in a fixed order, unrolling it. So you can read page fifteen, and read page thirty,

the pages communicate a readable message in themselves, even on the wordless cover, but that this reading does not require literacy in any script. Dias-Pino began to enumerate his psychological theory of colors—yellow repels, for example, while red persists—to conclude: “Você está lendo ele. Não tem nada escrito mas você está lendo” (“You’re reading it. It doesn’t have anything written, but you’re reading”). As he went through the pages of this volume of the *Enciclopédia*, the discussion of color and the arrangement of the pages moved from an organic to a mathematical understanding of the reading of the book. After he had taken two pages out, he noted, “Os cores começam a saltar do livro. Uma caixinha de cores que você vai desfolhando como uma flor. Quando você desfolha, o livro do formato, em vez de ser um, passa a ser duas informações na página” (“The colors begin to jump from the book, a little box of colors, like a flower whose petals you remove. When you remove them, the format of the book, instead of being one, comes to have two pieces of information on the page”). Once he placed a third page above the first two, the quantity of information the book communicated further increased: “Ele era um, só virou tres” (“It was one, but it became three”). In my view, the pages spread out on the table made a sort of variable collage between them, in which color was the dominant element. He concluded, echoing the language of the process poem, “A leitura para mim é uma função” (“For me, reading is a function”). Dias-Pino’s only explanation of the content of the *Enciclopédia* in this brief demonstration of how to read it was to note a few distortions

and this provides a tremendous freedom of reading; it teaches Western man what freedom is.)

he had made to a piece of Arabic calligraphy gracing the back cover of the book. His contribution to the inscription on the page was to affect its visual presentation, not its semantic content.

My visit to Dias-Pino's house allowed me to see something of the degree to which the totalizing nature of his encyclopedic and poetic projects extended into his daily life. As other visitors have noted, his two-story house in the Catete neighborhood is filled with pages and materials for the *Enciclopédia*.²⁴ The front room where Dias-Pino and I had most of our conversation was an active work space. He was preparing an exhibit of the *Enciclopédia* for the 2016 São Paulo Biennial, for which he was making a series of new plates, and cutouts and several pages in process littered the large work table, alongside materials to construct the collages—scissors, a ruler, a glue stick. Dias-Pino gave me a tour of the house: another room on the first floor was lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves with boxes containing images for the collages, organized by category, not necessarily tied to planned volumes (such as hair, mushrooms, toys, women, firearms, death) (see fig. 11) The rooms on the second floor, meanwhile, were given over to materials in a more chaotic state. (see fig. 12). On our way to a sunny back room, Dias-Pino had me pull out the drawer of a dresser filled with materials for the *Enciclopédia* so I could feel how heavy it was.²⁵ The salient feature of the

²⁴ See, for example, Gustavo Tanus and Gabrielle Francinne Tanus, “O poeta como arquivista: impressões da *Enciclopédia visual* de Wladimir Dias-Pino.”

²⁵ Similarly, at one point during the interview, he handed me a heavy plastic bag full of versions of *A Ave*, so that I could get a sense of the quantity of permutations of the poem by weight.

Enciclopédia in this presentation was its size, in its material manifestations of volume and weight. In the main upstairs workspace, several tables, shelves, and even a couple of bed frames were covered with stacks of paper all destined for this project—some pages had been cut out; some early stages of collages with the first photocopied images pasted on an otherwise blank sheet. Dias-Pino also took me out to the balcony, looking over the dozen or so pastel-painted row houses the *vila* where he lives, set off from the street, so that he could check on his potted tomatoes—which he also called a process poem.



Fig. 11 (left). Archived images for the *Enciclopédia* at Dias-Pino's home (personal photograph).

Fig. 12 (right). *Enciclopédia* pages under construction at Dias-Pino's home (personal photograph).

Dias-Pino's theoretical vocabulary extended to his charm, and despite the seriousness and consistency with which he applied rational and even numerical frameworks to written and formal presentations of his work, our conversation

reminded me that entwined with the programmatic aspects of his poetic output lies a strong element of play. Looking at his cutouts spread out over the work table, I remarked on how labor intensive the collage-making process seemed to be. He noted that in order to cut out images before the advent of computers, “as vezes eu tinha que usar tesourinha de manicure—fazer manicure na imagen. Eu fico com tanta piada para você” (“sometimes I had to use a nail scissors—to give the image a manicure. I have so many jokes to tell you”). I started to reply, “Mas isso faz parte da—” (“But that’s part of—”) and he finished my sentence, “—da comunicação” (“—of communication”). Communication, a term that might seem incidental in ordinary speech, both gives and takes on added weight in a conversation with an artist whose professional background was in the field of communications, and in reference to body of work that, at least since the process poem, sought to practice its own explicitly enumerated communication theory.²⁶ Dias-Pino reminded me that he had worked in the past as a humorist for TV Tupi, and at one point compared his role as a poet to that of a “bobo da corte” (“court fool”): “A coisa mais importante pra mim é ser humorista. Eu não sou poeta, coisa nenhuma, eu sou humorista” (“The most important thing for

²⁶ In addition to working as a professional graphic designer, in the late 1960s Dias-Pino served as professor of communications at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) as well as at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) at night. In 1972 he left Rio for Cuiabá, where he was invited to help found the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, specifically tasked with developing the new university’s visual identity. Dias-Pino remained there as a researcher, editor, and graphic designer for twenty-five years (“Cronobiografia” n.p.)

me is to be a humorist. I'm not a poet, not at all, I'm a humorist").²⁷ Perhaps his aim in making this statement was to make me laugh, a foreign student still learning to navigate *carioca* social norms. Yet this insistence on humor and play also seemed part of a larger intent to disrupt systems of knowledge production. As the interview continued, he kept digressing so that I might end up with “um rodapé maior do que o texto” (“a footnote bigger than the text”), a rupture of academic norms that he declared “bom porque desorganiza o sistema” (“good because it disorganizes the system”). Dias-Pino's entire body of work disorganizes knowledge systems in order to reorganize them, from the level of the alphabetic code to books like the encyclopedia that the alphabet would normally produce. However, his work does not provide a key to decoding those reorganized systems: it requires that a reader, perhaps playfully, reorganize it once again into her own system in ways that make sense to—or perhaps create new sense for—herself.

My own initial efforts as a reader to systematize the contents of the published volumes of the *Enciclopédia visual*, and in particular the two volumes under discussion in this chapters, were stymied by my instinct to apply the systems of alphabetic literacy that I know to a book that on many levels resists it. Although the loose pages could clearly be arranged in different orders, my initial inclination—perhaps biased by my background in literature—was to read them in linear fashion, as a variable series, rather than in the simultaneous, layered fashion that Dias-Pino

²⁷ Along these lines, in 1962, Dias-Pino published a box of serigraphed illustrations of chickens and human figures—in boxes the same size as the sculptural versions of *Solida*—titled *Humor da Linha* (*Line Humor*).

demonstrated. Similarly, the square shape of the pages disoriented my reading of the direction of some of the text. This is especially true of the *Escritas arcaicas* volume. I am not literate in any writing system besides the Roman alphabet—a level of illiteracy shared, I suspect, by many readers of the *Enciclopédia*, and particularly its original intended users in the interior of Brazil, which historically has been underserved in terms of educational and cultural resources.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, one reading I have given to these volumes is a wrong reading, one that understands them in terms of their semantic content. To read that content, however, in languages I didn't know, I first had to be able to identify those languages through their generally unlabeled alphabets. Not knowing where else to turn, I spent the better part of one afternoon poring over the plates of the *Enciclopédia* alongside the *Routledge Handbook of Scripts and Alphabets*, seeking to match the scripts in *Escritas arcaicas* with those in the handbook by shape alone, despite knowing that the book, in its limited sample of scripts, might not even contain them. Writing, in this stage of my process of becoming literate, was equivalent to drawing; letters served as abstract figures whose value lie not in their phonetic or semantic signification but in their correspondence to a particular shape. These preliminaries to reading were frustratingly ineffective and slow, and it occurred to me that I might do better to consider entire blocks of text as a single image, since Dias-Pino did not write them himself but rather copied them from elsewhere. The apparently archeological citations, I thought, might at least have been well-known or studied enough to have been reproduced in multiple books.

Serendipitously, I found a volume from the stack of books I pulled from the library shelves on the history of writing that contained every image of text found in *Escritas arcaicas*—the book mentioned above, Hans Jensen’s *Sign, Symbol and Script: An Account of Man’s Efforts to Write*. Still, it took me time to match a few of the plates of the *Enciclopédia* with the figures in that book because, as I found to my embarrassment, I was reading the square pages sideways or upside-down.²⁸

Jensen’s book elaborates a global history of writing that seeks to trace what he calls writing’s “evolutionary tendencies” (21). The book has fifteen chapters: after a few that discuss ancient forms of writing (pictographs, Egyptian scripts, cuneiform), most of these chapters describe writing systems following geographic and cultural divisions: Semitic, Indian, upper Asian, and so on, concluding with the Greek group, with each chapter further subdivided into particular regional or linguistic subgroups. Each script is presented in its historical context, which, with respect to many of the ancient scripts, includes information on its discovery and decipherment. Many scripts are illustrated by figures—the book has 588 in all—including alphabetical charts, writing copied from other linguistic studies, and photographs, facsimiles, or hand-drawn copies of scripts taken from their original, often archeological contexts.

²⁸ In a 2018 conversation, I showed Dias-Pino a few pages of Jensen’s book and asked if it had been the source for this volume of the *Enciclopédia*. He denied having ever seen the book. However, the fact that all images can be found in the book, as well as a few unique labels for the scripts, makes me wonder whether Dias-Pino had forgotten about this source, or perhaps more saliently, whether this denial was part of a performance of creativity that makes the *Enciclopédia* seem at once found and sourceless, or whether the source simply doesn’t matter to the final result. In a sense, through this lack of recognition, the erasure of the apparent referent becomes complete.

Jensen's overarching narrative about the evolution of writing systems is that they tend toward "increasing abstraction" (22) and simplification. The ultimate aim of their evolution is a more efficient transcription of sound. Jensen takes as a fundamental premise that writing serves as a graphic representation of speech, and his bias clearly lies toward glottic writing, which as linguist Roy Harris defines it, consists of "forms of writing related specifically to spoken language" (13). More specifically, Jensen sees the evolution of writing as culminating in phonetic alphabets. This bias is tempered by a Platonic mourning for written language's failure to contain the life-force of speech: as Jensen writes in the introduction to *Sign, Symbol and Script*, "It must be admitted . . . that the picture the script of a language conveys to us is always, and can only be, very relative in its accuracy as soon as we lack the control of the living, spoken language" (21). The bias toward a phonetically alphabetic code, however, is also reinforced by a qualification of the Platonic insistence that "[w]riting has unquestionably undermined the original power and vigor of memory" (20). Writing does this, Jensen concedes; however, writing also allows "modern man living in an extremely complicated civilization, to protect himself from overloading his memory with a thousand and one often very unimportant details. An endless number of matters that would distract the mind and dissipate the memory are confided to paper until their appropriate use" (20–21). Writing, in this understanding, serves both as a storage unit for signified material and material in itself. Jensen explains: "By such a storing of what is known . . . the mind remains freer for the real work of thinking, for which this transmitted matter [writing] constitutes the raw material" (21). Like other

raw materials, writing might be extracted, and writing's value does not lie in itself but in the potential it holds for transformation into a supposedly higher-order, more fabricated human product.

Jensen's narrative of progress ultimately points toward what might be viewed as a utopian project. The book concludes, somewhat unconventionally in comparison to other histories of writing from the era, with a study of different varieties of shorthand script. Jensen ultimately expresses hope for "a further development of the Roman script" along the lines of a shorthand that would "solve the problem of expressing through the simplest possible signs and combinations of signs the greatest amount of possible material," as other shorthand systems had attempted to do. Perhaps, he suggests, this would take place through a simplification of "the phonemic sound-script of the Association phonétique internationale" (the International Phonetic Alphabet), but one that, unlike shorthand scripts developed at the time of his writing, would still be clearly readable. This project of deliberately constructing what might serve as an Esperanto of scripts is one that belongs in part to the visual arts, as Jensen concludes in the final sentence of the 1969 English translation of his book: "This problem"—that is, the problem of readability—"can be solved only by the joint efforts of philologists and artists" (592). The ideal alphabet, whose development is the ultimate aim of the source for Dias-Pino's *Escritas arcaicas*, is one that codifies in visual form the aural aspect of language as efficiently and consistently as possible, and one whose reading is univocal.

This, of course, is not Dias-Pino's project in *Escritas arcaicas*, and it is unclear—perhaps deliberately so, because of the lack of citation—to what extent he even read the source for its figures.²⁹ This volume's aim, as part of a visual encyclopedia, is a purely visual communication, one that does not signify the aural. It withholds semantic signification and historical reference from readers illiterate in any of its scripts—and it is highly unlikely that any reader will be literate in all of them—and thus each inscription, which originally had a historically contextualized meaning, as well as an exemplary meaning in the context of Jensen's study, can be as open as the process poem. As Dias-Pino stated frequently throughout his career, his aim in replacing the alphabetic code was to establish “modos de inscrever e não de escrever” (“modes of inscribing, not of writing”) (Camara 69). Ultimately, what this volume shows are pictures of words, traces of acts of writing whose specific referential history is erased. What they might signify, outside themselves, is the category of human activity to which they belong. The summary Portuguese experimental poet Ana Hatherley makes of her own work might equally apply to Dias-Pino's project here: “Eu queria mostrar a escritura, não o escrito” (“I wanted to show writing, not what was written”) (65). While historical linguists might seek to decipher ancient codes, *Escritas arcaicas* presents a series of known codes that it essentially un-deciphers. At the same time, with few exceptions, it simultaneously withholds the contexts or equivalents that might make those codes legible in a traditional sense.

²⁹ See above footnote about Dias-Pino's disclaimer of knowledge about this text.

Regardless of Dias-Pino's project of erasure, it is interesting to note what kinds of meanings and contexts *Escritas arcaicas* sacrifices in its presentation of different varieties of writing. The Indian and Semitic groups of scripts are the most numerous, with fifteen and thirteen examples of each, respectively. The volume also includes four scripts from the Greek group, three Iranian, one east Asian, one upper Asian, one ancient Mediterranean, and one African script, Vai, which evolved from a series of ideograms. Some of the scripts are likely to be recognizable to most readers, who would be familiar with their forms, even if they could not read them—for example, Hebrew and several varieties of Arabic—while others appear obviously copied from archeological finds, thus signifying their archaic quality—for example, a hand-drawn copy of an Old Phoenician inscription from a fractured bronze plate with the outline of each fragment traced. Interestingly, for an encyclopedia that is supposed to be distinctly Brazilian, as Dias-Pino insists, this volume has no American scripts. Also, the book contains no Chinese ideograms, thus differentiating itself from the concerns of the orthodox Concretes. The single East Asian example is an undated (but presumably old) cursive Japanese script, Hizin.³⁰ In addition, not all of the scripts that Dias-Pino and Jensen's books contain are necessarily archaic. For example, a Singhalese script that is mislabeled in *Escritas arcaicas* as Brāhmī is categorized in Jensen's book as modern and containing the Bible text John 3:16 (398).

³⁰ Note that many of the names of scripts and languages and/or their spellings seem rare outside Jensen's book. For example, while Jensen cites his German source for the image of the Hizin script, I could not find reference to it elsewhere in my research.

Jensen and Dias-Pino share an interest in showing these scripts in order to examine their visual appearance, although the text that Jensen's figures illustrate ultimately makes these figures, to varying degrees, serve the meaningful, telic history described above. The reading that Jensen gives the figures of scripts is primarily historical, not semantic. He describes their material context—for example, the materials they were written on or with (such as tree bark or papyrus), and how and where they were found, whether through citation of their locations in other books or identification of where some of the more archaic scripts were unearthed in archeological digs. Sometimes Jensen describes the circumstances of a given script's use—for example, the Dōgrī script, an Indian script reproduced in *Escritas arcaicas*, was “prescribed for official documents by the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir” (378). Sometimes context about usage becomes interpretive and at times filtered through the Orientalizing ethnographic attitudes characteristic of the time of its writing. For example, regarding a group of examples of decorative Arabic calligraphy, Jensen writes, “From time immemorial the Arabs have taken hardly less pleasure in writing than the Egyptians and the Chinese, and since, with the ban on portrait-painting, the art of ornamentation acquired supreme significance, it was inevitable that writing, too, would be drawn into this sphere” (330). Sometimes he provides a translation of the scripts, sometimes a transcription, sometimes both, and sometimes neither. The semantic content of the figures is often anodyne and almost never glossed. Those reproduced in *Escritas arcaicas* include bureaucratic and commercial records, proverbs, and religious texts—the source, Jensen's book, seems to have a

predilection for reproducing John 3:16 in non-Western scripts. The reading Jensen gives to each of the hundreds of scripts in his book is inconsistent—some examples contain no explanation beyond a label with the name of the script. However, in general, the reading he applies, and one that Dias-Pino removes in his appropriation of the figures, is not one that requires a literacy in the scripts for semantic content. The material of writing in the context of this book is to be read as evidence in support of a historical argument, as containing a telic meaning embedded in its material form, to whose value the signification of the words themselves is incidental.

Escritas arcaicas, in its erasure of its source, deprives the reader of the tools she would need to develop a historical and semantic literacy in the writing codes it contains. Moreover, however, it deliberately frustrates the desire to read by providing a limited series of tools that allow for an equally limited decoding of its texts. The title sheet of the book contains six labeled examples of scripts that are repeated in the book itself (namely, Khāmti, Nemāra, Battak, Brāhmī, and Ğerī), and a reader can pull out the pages of the book to try to match them. While this volume offers the promise of a decipherable code, however, it reproduces many writing systems not depicted on the cover page, and the labels that name the scripts, in fact, mean little without further context. They become proper names, names that can be used to summon a script but that describe little about it. Literacy in the Roman alphabet used for these labels thus proves to be essentially meaningless in the absence of explanatory context; thus the reader must work with the scripts through illiteracy instead. Dias-Pino further reinforces that illiteracy, albeit in a way likely imperceptible to most users of *Escritas*

arcaicas, by printing several scripts in mirror image (specifically, Gujerātī, Nagpurī, and Ṭākrī, all Indian scripts; and Hutsari, a form of Georgian). This distortion both mocks the directional linearity of traditional reading and models the material manipulation of the contents of the *Enciclopédia* that the project seeks to inspire.

Dias-Pino's play with the layout and design of non-alphabetic archaic (and not-so-archaic) scripts echoes the work of the author of one apparent source for the *Caligramas* volume of the *Enciclopédia*, the French typographic artist Massin. In *Caligramas*, writing is no longer just a figurative image standing for different kinds of writing, but a component of figures that presumably encapsulate the writing's content. *Caligramas* includes shaped poems from several linguistic and historical traditions. Fifteen pages contain examples of Arabic calligraphy (seventeen, if one includes the images from the volume's outside box and inner sleeve). Eight contain Chinese patterned texts, and five are Sanskrit citrakāvya's other Indian shaped texts. Three pages (four including the cover of the outer box) are of medieval European origin: one page contains two figurative compositions from medieval Hebrew texts, and three pages (one of them being this volume's cover) present images from a ninth-century French manuscript of Cicero's *Aratea*, which consist of extracts from Hyginus's *Astronomica* written in figures shaped after the constellations. The inside cover reproduces a composition by a sixteenth-century German typographer, with words filling in the outline of a church with a bell tower and accompanying religious symbols. (I am taking my historical information about these figures from Massin.) The volume also contains two modern European calligrams: a version of "The Mouse's

Tale,” from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and Apollinaire’s poem “Il Pleut.” Finally, the volume also presents two commercial texts—a French menu shaped like a ship at sea from 1928, and German advertisement that shows a young woman in a coat walking through what looks like a rain of words, thus providing a visual echo of Apollinaire’s text. The images in this volume are presented more plainly than those in *Escritas arcaicas*: they are centered on the page or, if presented as a group, laid out symmetrically, printed either in black against bright colors or in color against a black background. None has extra adornment, with the exception of a silver bar crossing one of the reproductions of a constellation from Hyginus.

This diverse group of shaped texts appears to come primarily from two uncited sources: Massin’s landmark anthology of text as art, *La lettre et l’image* (*Letter and Image*, in its English translation), and Fluxus artist Dick Higgins’s global and historical survey of shaped verse, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. More specifically, the Sanskrit and Chinese texts come from Higgins, and the most of rest come from Massin, with the possible exception of the Lewis Carroll poem, which appears in both.³¹ Both of these sources confront what Higgins calls the “intermedial” nature, “between literature and visual art” (206), of the shaped texts that Dias-Pino ultimately classifies as visual poetry by dint of his grouping them under the rubric of

³¹ A few of the Arabic calligrams appear to come from a third source, Jérôme Peignot’s *Du calligramme*, which also contains many of the other illustrations found in the two above volumes (Higgins cites Peignot as a source). For reasons of space and relevance, I will not examine Peignot’s book here.

calligrams.³² *Letter and Image* is, as Laetitia Wolff writes in a monograph on Massin, “a major reference book for graphic artists throughout the world” (116), containing more than a thousand examples of textual art including ranging from decorative alphabets to comic strips to advertisements to avant-garde art, as well as shaped texts like those that Dias-Pino reproduces. The book seeks to demonstrate ways that text, historically and across different registers, has functioned as image, which Massin calls “the universal language of mankind” (7). Higgins’s book, meanwhile, limits its focus to a study of visual poetry prior to 1900 with the objective of unearthing what he considers to be a largely unknown, and, as he shows, somewhat discontinuous tradition behind twentieth-century visual poetry movements such as Futurism, *poesia visiva*, and Concrete poetry. Higgins’s book documents some two thousand examples of pattern poetry that he collected over a period of twenty years (including, in addition to shaped texts, other forms of patterned verse including sound poetry, rebuses, and medieval carmina cancellata, or gridded poems). His aim, through tracing a world literary history, is to establish a basis for future theoretical work on the different subgenres and historical instances of visual poetry.

Between these two sources, the theoretical underpinnings of Dias-Pino’s book may more closely resemble Massin’s, in terms of its prioritization of visual, rather than textual, communication. *Letter and Image* may also be the source of the title of *Caligramas*, since all of the images appropriated from Massin for this book come from

³² In this Higgins uses a term (intermedia) that he had first introduced in 1965 (“Intermedia”).

the chapter titled, “Figured Verse and Calligrams.” In this chapter, Massin, like Dias-Pino, places on the same continuum examples as diverse as medieval shaped texts, Arabic calligraphy, twentieth-century avant-garde poetry, and contemporary advertisements. Like Dias-Pino, he also prioritizes imagistic over textual communication, ultimately viewing the letter as an image in itself. The image, according to Massin, is universally and immediately legible: he writes, “The image annihilates time and space. It is read instantaneously, and presents an immediate impression of the world” (7). According to Massin, the image can be apprehended across culture and history and in a single glance, and as such, the imagistic quality of the calligram changes how one apprehends the written word it contains. He defines the calligram broadly as “a combination of script, design, thought” before theorizing on the work it does and its effect: “it represents the shortest route which can be taken for expressing a thought in material terms, and for forcing the eye to accept a global view of the written word” (157). Massin ties twentieth-century visual poetry to a more or less global tradition of figured writing, and more specifically, he traces the genealogy of twentieth-century visual poetry to the European Middle ages. He speculates, for example, that Apollinaire might have known the Carolignian version of Hyginus’s *Astronomica* described above (now kept in the British Museum). This manuscript was partially reproduced through a hand-drawn copy in an 1836 monograph by William Young Ottley, whose aim is more like Jenkins’s in that it has an archeological project, namely, to prove (in the words of its subtitle) “the Use of Miniscule Writing by the Ancient Romans.” Ultimately, though, Massin’s survey of the art of lettering serves

not only to narrate a high-culture history of poetry or the fine arts but to celebrate the prominent role lettering takes in twentieth-century popular visual culture. Massin proposes, for instance, that “[t]he first visual poems can no doubt be found in modern advertising” (235)—an assertion that connects his stance to the Brazilian visual poets’ interests in midcentury communications theory and Dias-Pino’s work in advertising itself.

Higgins’s history of pattern poetry has a more traditional scholarly bent than both Massin’s survey and Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia*; however, its theorizing on visual poetry as an intermedial art, and its appendices on Chinese and Sanskrit pattern poems, provide insights on non-linear forms of reading that apply to the *Enciclopédia*’s task. As mentioned above, Higgins’s book seeks to build a body of knowledge about pattern poetry prior to the twentieth century, whose major avant-garde visual poetry movements are and were fairly well known. In Western traditions, shaped poetry has often been associated with minor forms—occasional verse in surviving Greek and Latin examples (6); baroque experiments shunned by later neoclassicists (13); its reduction to “comic, folk, or popular verse” in the nineteenth century (13). However, Higgins observes that the visual element allows this poetry to transcend its linguistic content; it “somehow reduces the sense of datedness and triviality which occasional verse is apt to evoke” (6). Unlike Massin, who seeks to read letter as image, Higgins argues that figured poetry must be read simultaneously as image and text, as well as something else resulting from the collaboration between the two media: “The best of pattern poetry must be appreciated, then, with some

recognition of its intermedial nature. The poem is neither purely literary nor visual but a conceptual blend of both, and one must therefore balance social revelation against the literary one, or the visual against the text, and see how the one suits the other” (208). To Higgins, pattern poems require two kinds of literacy—textual and visual—as well as a third kind that the poems themselves teach, an intermedial literacy that results from the interplay between the other two. In fact, he criticizes Massin for conducting an inadequate reading of English poet George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” based on its visual aspect alone (208). Higgins, the scholar, does not advocate reading shaped verse through textual illiteracy, or through the superiority of visual literacy over textual literacy. Rather, he seeks another kind of “hermeneutic consideration of all the forms [of pattern poetry] and the processes of interrelation with them” (209) as well as an intermedial relation between their textual and visual aspect.

Dias-Pino’s anti-literate stance in the *Enciclopédia* seems to ignore Higgins’s call for a historically informed, intermedial reading—and indeed, given that the book is written in English, Dias-Pino may not have even read the book that from which he appropriated images, uncited. However, the appendix on Chinese patterned texts, from which Dias-Pino extracted several images for *Caligramas*, offers analogues as to how the *Enciclopédia* might be used.³³ Specifically, the poems included in this appendix, which were later appropriated for this volume of the *Enciclopédia*, are largely palindromes, which can be read in varying orders, and moreover, depend on

³³ The appendix on Sanskrit poems is too focused on their analogues with Western texts to provide much information on what those poems meant and how they could be read.

superimposition or simultaneity for their meaning. The reader must play with the text for it to make sense. Two circular (or more precisely, oblong) poems show how this works. Figure 13 (pictured here in Dias-Pino's reproduction), an anonymous poem originally found in a twelfth-century anthology of palindromes, titled the *Hui-wen-lei-chü* (211), consists of only sixteen characters. However, as the author of the appendix on Chinese texts, Herbert Franke, explains, "these characters can be used for a poem of twenty-eight words (four lines with seven words each). The trick consists, apart from finding out where to start reading, in repeating for each line the last three words of the preceding line" (215). The poem belongs to a series describing the four seasons, and Franke's rough translation is as follows:

Everywhere white snow dances around the veranda.

When snow dances around the veranda, its ornaments are adorned like jade.

The veranda ornaments like jade make the silver park pure.

The park with silver adornments is pure, and light is the fragrance of the plum trees. (215)

Read backwards or forwards, the poem's meaning remains generally the same. The poem, however, is about more than content, but also the invention or discovery of the reading process.



Fig. 13. Chinese circular poem, as reproduced in *Caligramas* (images from *Enciclopédia visual*, <http://www.encyclopediavisual.com/poemas.detalhes.php?secao=1&subsecao=27&conteudo=14>).

A more complicated example, a circular poem titled “Wandering in the Palace of Purple Mist” depends not only on a nonlinear reading of its words but also on “dissected characters” (215), a method that requires the reader to take apart, to some extent, the basic unit of written language itself. Franke explains the poem’s construction mathematically: “There are altogether 48 characters from which a poem of eight lines and with seven words each can be formed. The missing eight characters ($8 \times 7 = 56 - 48 = 8$) are supplied by the dissection of the last characters of each line; the lower part of this character is a character by itself and serves as the first word of

the following line” (215).³⁴ Other Chinese pattern poems that Franke describes take on the shapes of objects, some of them having a direct relationship to their content: flowers, fruits, a memorial stele (fig. 14).³⁵ The kind of reading the circular poems inspire, however, resembles more closely the method of reading that Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia* invites, even if his work does not directly signify semantic content. The reading of these poems is a cyclical, interminable process, one that requires the reader to actively work to chart paths through the different semantic points and cut and paste, however virtually, from line to line to construct a meaning. By appropriating the circular poems, and not just mimetically shaped poems, for the *Caligramas* volume of the *Enciclopédia*, Dias-Pino (even if inadvertently) appropriates the Chinese ideogram in a way that opposes the early Concretes’ understanding of ideogram as form that visually concentrates a word. Dias-Pino appropriates scripts as process: not a noiseless

³⁴ The text, “praising the quietness of a deserted palace garden and the absence of worldly ambitions and cares,” reads, in Franke’s translation:

After water has washed away dust and dirt
 I can sample the taste of the Tao.
 It is sweeter than fame and riches.
 These two are now forgotten.
 In my heart I think of the guests from the Six Caves and the Cinnabar Clouds
 (i.e., the Taoist paradise).
 I recite texts from the Purple Palace of the Three Pure Ones (Taoist gods).
 Over ten miles I gathered lotus, singing until dawn.
 One round wheel: the clear moon.
 A breeze from the cassia tree brings fragrance.
 When the sun rises again, noble gentlemen will return and look for me.
 They will find me in the middle of the hills
 With a drink of good wine.

³⁵ Franke also cites a famous second-century Chinese poem block, an arrangement of 841 characters in a square that can be read vertically, horizontally, in squares or whorls, supposedly up to forty thousand different ways (152, 212).

transmission of content but one whose meaning is transformed through different circuits of communication.

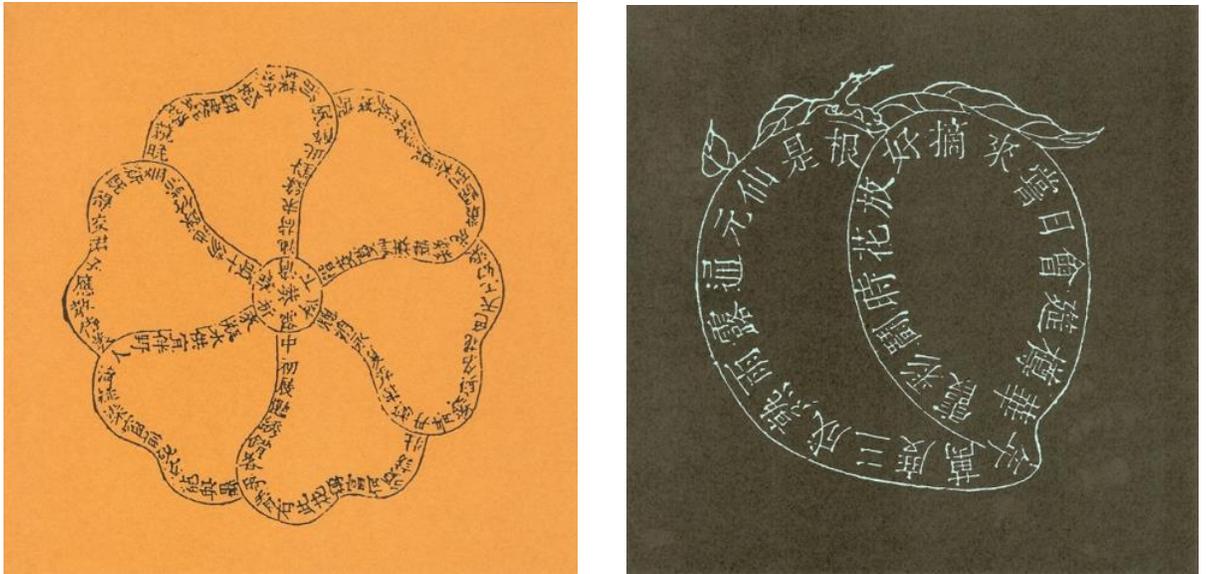


Fig. 14. More Chinese shaped verse, as presented in *Caligramas* (images from *Enciclopédia visual*, <http://www.encyclopediavisual.com/poemas.detalhes.php?secao=1&subsecao=27&conteudo=14>).

Like *Escritas arcaicas*, the *Caligramas* volume of the *Enciclopédia* encourages an active creation of an original, individualized knowledge by enforcing the user's illiteracy in at least some, if not all, of the scripts it contains. As with the previous volume, it is unlikely that any particular reader—especially among the original intended readers—will be literate in all of its non-Latin scripts: Chinese, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Hebrew. None of the texts it contains in the Roman alphabet is written in Portuguese, which adds at least a layer of distance to a Brazilian Portuguese speaker's reading, and the quality of the copy of some of these images—in particular, the texts from Hyginus and the German advertisement (fig. 15)—renders the text

difficult to decipher. As happens with *Escritas arcaicas*, these illegible texts represent the act of writing which the reader, at least at first encounter, has little power to comprehend. The writing does not necessarily point back to its original referent—whether that be the words written in each script, or the historical and literary context of the examples of writing, which Massin’s and Higgins’s books provide. Moreover, the interpretive possibilities promised by the poems’ simple figurative shapes do not necessarily correspond to their written content. The oblong Chinese poem is not about anything particularly oblong (for example, an egg), but rather winter. A pear-shaped example of Arabic calligraphy is not about pears, even as metaphor, but is an example of bismallah calligraphy, whose subject is God. The recognizable figures appear to offer a cipher to decode the poems, like the pseudo-table of contents on the cover page of *Escritas arcaicas*. The shapes, however, like the labels of those not entirely archaic scripts, describe only some apparently exterior quality of the poems, which often appear circumscribed by a drawn shape. Textual illiteracy prevents a fully intermedial reading of the work—or rather, perhaps, implies an intermedial illiteracy. A knowledge of some of the poems, attained from the sources from which they were appropriated, shows that when the text cannot be read, the image formed by that text may become illegible or incorrectly legible, despite an appearance to the contrary. Ultimately, the figurative images of the calligrams may serve as images of the act of another form of writing or inscription.



Fig. 15. German advertisement in *Caligramas*; image from Hyginus featured on this volume's cover (images from *Enciclopédia visual*, <http://www.encyclopediavisual.com/poemas.detalhes.php?secao=1&subsecao=27&conteudo=14>).

The Chinese calligrams in particular, however, point, even if inadvertently, to the active and creative process of reading that the *Enciclopédia* as a whole invites. By making this claim I seek to illustrate, by analogy, a strategy for the reading process of this particular work, rather than idealize (and simultaneously exoticize) what to this volume's intended audience is a foreign script.³⁶ First, according to Franke's reading, these poems' script is not linear—whether that line travels horizontally, vertically, in a circle, or turning at various angles—but rather is layered. Like the pages of the *Enciclopédia* when they are stacked or spread out like the petals of a flower, the characters of these poems hold meanings in multiple places at once. The reading in part has a linear temporality, moving from one point to the next, and in part has a nonlinear temporality, signifying multiple things simultaneously. The reading of at

³⁶ The Noigandres group may be interpreted as idealizing or exoticizing Chinese writing, following predecessors like Pound and Fenollosa.

least some of these poems depends on the deconstruction of one level of literacy—in the case of the calligrams, the unit of the character—to construct another text. The rational system of math plays a role in solving the puzzle that these poems present, as does taxonomy: whether writing about seasons, religious precepts, or the peach of the immortals (“a mythical fruit growing in the Taoist paradise which, when eaten, gives immortality” (Higgins 216)), these pattern poems, like their Western counterparts, tend to confirm a received aesthetic knowledge about a certain trope. Making meaning about this trope, however, depends not just on having knowledge of this world and understanding of the discourses already made about it, to return to Eco’s summary of the encyclopedia’s task. Rather, it depends also on the reader’s active creation of a discourse out of a partially illegible text.

While the above figures of text and the *Encyclopédie* as a whole work through a textual illiteracy, what informative function they have depends on a visual literacy: not just of what the images stand for paradigmatically but how they relate in a syntagmatic way. The *Encyclopédie* not only contains images of things but categories of images—copy, collage—that have their own generic codes. One such category, in addition to the copy and the collage, is the encyclopedic plate, which Roland Barthes theorizes in his study of Diderot’s foundational work, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*.” In Dias-Pino’s project as a whole, like Diderot’s, “[t]he objects presented are literally encyclopedic, i.e., they cover the entire sphere of substances shaped by man” (Barthes 24). As Barthes notes, however, Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* favors images that illustrate the technological production of objects, that show the

objects being used and the machines used to produce them, as well as the constituent parts of those machines. One such image that Barthes considers is that of the card maker (fig. 16). At the top of the plate is a vignette of the shop, with workers engaged in each stage of the card-making process, corresponding to the tools and stages of

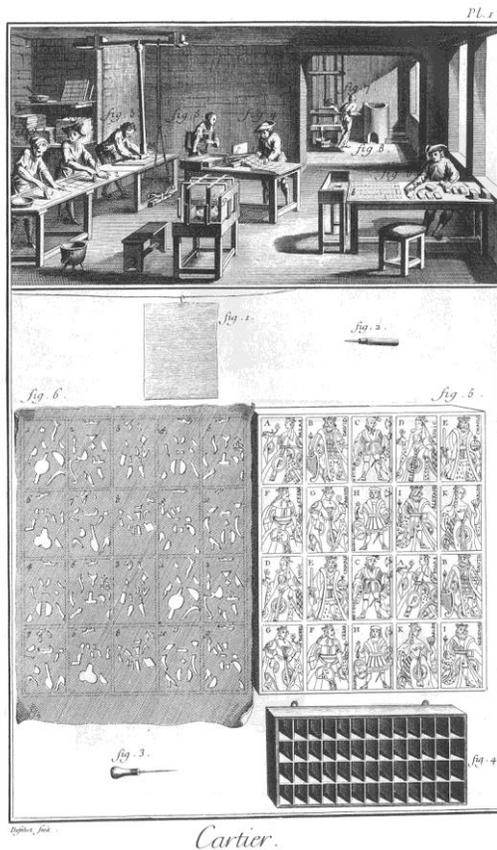


Fig. 15. Card-Maker, Plate 1, from Diderot's *Encyclopedia* (images from *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2010, <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.405>>. Accessed 22 April 2017. Translation of "Cartier," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 2 (plates, 1763.).

cardstock cut out below. Each part, individually, bears little resemblance to the final product. The gathering of many parts somewhat resembles Dias-Pino's collage style on some pages of his *Enciclopédia*, in that the images do not overlap but rather sit side by side across the page.

The encyclopedic image, as Barthes explains, informs differently than encyclopedic text, and its informative function changes with regard to historical vantage point. While Barthes does not define here how the encyclopedic text functions or informs, he argues that the plates of Diderot's *Encyclopedia* do not

merely illustrate a written referent, but contain an independent poetics: “by separating image from text, the *Encyclopedia* committed itself to an autonomous iconography of the object whose power we enjoy today, since we no longer look at these illustrations with mere information in mind” (Barthes 23). The didactic quality of many of the images in their original quality seems uninformative, given the knowledge the world a reader might bring to the book. Barthes observes that “it is apparent for a reader of the period the scene itself often involves very little new information: who had not seen a pastrycook’s shop, a tilled field, a river fishery?” (31). Later readers might glean originally unintended significance from the images: historical information about the eighteenth century, or oneiric information, given plates’ surreal quality (Barthes 34). The plates both represent and humanize objects, integrating images of hands and men and women at work into the scenes of the objects in the world. However, the plates provide this information not only through what they represent, but through their form of representation—the Encyclopedic plate constitutes “a structure of *information*,” as Barthes calls it (italics original, 29), which, “[a]t its demonstrative stage . . . constitutes a *radical language*, consisting of pure concepts, with neither word tools nor syntax; at the higher stage, this radical language becomes a human *langue*, it deliberately loses in intelligibility what it gains in experience” (31). The reading of this language requires different techniques than text does.

That radical visual language, at either the demonstrative or the higher level—as I argue with regard to Dias-Pino’s images—functions precisely through its refusal to submit to systems of textual legibility. Barthes first observes how the objects in

question in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* fit into the larger discursive structure (the term is mine, not his) of the plates:

This encyclopedic object is ordinarily apprehended by the image on three levels: anthological, since the object, isolated from any context, is presented *in itself*; anecdotic, when it is "naturalized" by its insertion into a large-scale *tableau vivant* (which is what we call a vignette); genetic, when the image offers us the trajectory from raw substance to finish object: genesis, essence, praxis, the object is thus accounted for in all its categories: sometimes it *is*, sometimes it is *made*, sometimes it even *makes*. (30)

In other words, the object can stand alone, within a system of use, or as part of a system of its own production, from which it may generate production of further objects. Anthologically, it signifies as a sign does a referent; anectodally, it belongs to a network of other objects, constructed through practice; genetically, it acts in a linear narrative about itself. In these ways, the image's system of signification or information resembles that of written text.

The encyclopedic image does more than *mean*, however. This image, whether Diderot's or Dias-Pino's, refers, but it is more than a reference. The visual language signifies through its illegibility, in the traditional, textual sense. Part of this derives from an indeterminacy of direction, as happens with Dias-Pino's images of archaic texts. According to Barthes, one can read Diderot's diagrammatic plates experientially, from the bottom to top, tracing the object's trajectory from its constituent parts to the whole to its operation in daily life, as depicted through the

upper vignette of the object in use. One can also read the plates analytically or deductively, from top to bottom, descending from the vignette “to causes, to substances, to primary elements” (33). However, the non-linear literacy that the image demands—one that can go in multiple directions, or work through simultaneity—allows its meaning to be indeterminate. Barthes writes, “The privilege of the image—opposed in this to writing, which is linear—is to compel our reading to have no specific meaning: an image is always deprived of a logical vector (as certain modern experiences tend to prove)” (33–34). The encyclopedic image can point to multiple meanings, but more than that, it exceeds rational, referential meaning. It lends itself to a poetics that cannot be reduced to explanation.

Thus, the knowledge of the world and understanding of discourses of the world that the encyclopedic image might offer is, in the end, nondiscursive. The encyclopedic plate appropriates and fragments the world, only to transcend it: “[B]y ‘entering’ into details, by displacing the levels of perception, by revealing the hidden, by isolating the elements from their practical context, by giving objects an abstract essence, in short by ‘opening up’ nature, the Encyclopedic image can only at a certain moment transcend nature, attaining to a supernature” (Barthes 38). The poetics of the plates of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*—poetics being “the sphere of the infinite vibrations of meaning, at the center of which is placed the literal object” (Barthes 34–35)—is revealed only through apprehension of the image as a whole: “The iconography of the *Encyclopedia* is poetic because its overflows of meaning always have a certain unity, suggest an ultimate meaning transcending all the *essays* of meaning” (Barthes 35).

While different processes of reading trace different itineraries through the image, ultimately, its meaning can only be apprehended in an extraintellectual way, through “a glance” (Barthes 39) that apprehends the whole.

The language that Barthes uses to describe how to read the image is like Dias-Pino’s. In my interview with him, Dias-Pino voiced his non-linear, non-narrative theories of numbers and the image that have informed his entire poetic output. Unlike the words and the alphabet, which depends on a meaningful order, he said,

[A] imagem é cardinal. Ela é o resultado total de parcelas . . . Então o um, o dois depende do um, o tres depende do dois e do um, então ele é ordinal, ele é narrativo, enquanto que a imagem é demonstração e não relação. Por exemplo, aonde começa um quadro? Tem mil entradas e mil saidas.

[The image is cardinal. It is the total sum of parts . . . So the one, the two depends on the one, the three depends on the two and the one, and so it is ordinal, it is narrative, while the image is demonstration and not relation. For example, where does a picture begin? It has a thousand entrances and a thousand exits.]

The often surreal results of the collages of the *Enciclopédia*—the surreality of decontextualized writing, the surreality of images like disembodied hands or eyes floating around two classical figures (fig.17)—invites a knowledge that analysis cannot contain. Through their quality as irreducible, inexplicable image, the plates of Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia* invoke the amazement that characterizes Barthes’s poetics of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*: “This singular vibration is above all an astonishment. Of

course, the Encyclopedic image is always clear; but in a deeper region of ourselves, beyond the intellect, or at least in its profile, certain questions are born and exceed us” (35). The opacity of the images catalogued in Dias-Pino’s work ensures that the images generate questions that exceed the answers offered by their referent.



Fig. 17. Unpublished plates of the *Enciclopédia*, from the series *Mãos (Hands)* and *Olhos (Eyes)* (personal photograph of images from Regina Pouchain’s archive of Dias-Pino’s work, Rio de Janeiro).

But what, then, allows these images, taken together, to comprise an encyclopedia, and not just another sort of process poem, one that takes the ready-made image rather than the abstract geometric shape as material for infinite reconstruction? When taken as a whole, encyclopedias as a genre, as well as Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia* in particular, ask for the nonlinear, multidirectional reading of the process poem. Returning to Eco, the encyclopedia functions as a labyrinth, in the sense of a rhizome

or a net, whose main feature “is that every point can be connected with every other point, and, where the connections are not yet designed, they are, however, conceivable and designable. A net is an unlimited territory” (*Semiotics* 81). The images of Dias-Pino’s *Enciclopédia* defy an overly simple notion of semiosis—one of a relationship between name and named, signifier and signified—to form, in their combination, a labyrinthine, encyclopedic structure that mimics “the universe of semiosis” as Eco defines it, which, he notes, is equivalent to “the universe of human culture” (*Semiotics* 83)—that is, what the maximal, utopian encyclopedia would register. This universe of semiosis—like the universe of the encyclopedia, as described above—is an infinite “network of interpretants” (emphasis original, *Semiotics* 83) that registers not only “truths” but also beliefs about truths and what has been said about them. Moreover, like Dias-Pino’s fundamentally incomplete project, “[s]uch a semantic encyclopedia is never accomplished and exists only as a *regulative idea*” (*Semiotics* 84). The encyclopedia—or *Enciclopédia*—must exist primarily as concept. The *Enciclopédia*, moreover, like other encyclopedias, is ultimately a local project, despite its totalizing scope. It enters the infinite network of interpretants from the particular point of entry of one artist in Brazil, and it refuses to submit to dominating systems of order like the alphabet. Eco writes:

Such a notion of encyclopedia does not deny the existence of structured knowledge; it only suggests that such a knowledge cannot be recognized and organized as a global system; it provides only ‘local’ and transitory systems of knowledge, which can be contradicted by alternative and equally ‘local’

cultural organizations; every attempt to recognize these local organizations as unique and global—ignoring their partiality—produces an *ideological* bias.

(*Semiotics* 84)

While I have only touched on this here, Dias-Pino frequently insists on the Brazilian quality of his *Enciclopédia* (sometimes called, as a fuller version of the title, *Enciclopédia visual do Brasil*), not only in terms of its intended audience, but in terms of the way it registers a system of knowledge production.³⁷

The entries or plates of Dias-Pino's *Enciclopédia*, like its volumes, serve as nodes or paths in its infinite labyrinth of interpretants, and their meaning exceeds that which they serve to interpret, following Barthes. Of course, that does not prevent them, in their layers of functioning, from serving as anthological referents as well, which belongs to their encyclopedia's social function and historicizing taxonomic project. In our interview, Dias-Pino joked, "Eu estou contra o passado. Mas eu compreendo a função da enciclopédia, a função dos conceitos da enciclopédia, né, é registrar, porque ela é um objeto referencial, de referências. Então ela é documental. Então o homem contemporâneo busca o passado documental" ("I'm against the past, but I understand the function of the encyclopedia, the function of the concept of the encyclopedia is to register, because it is a referential object. So it's documentary, and

³⁷ Dias-Pino suggests the dictionary's erasure of conventional knowledge is a particularly Brazilian form of knowledge production. In our conversation, he joked, "[E]u vou para a ignorância, né, brasileira. Eu adoro essa ignorância brasileira. Eu cultivo ela diariamente, né, porque se não, deixo de ser brasileiro." ("I go for a Brazilian ignorance, right? I love this Brazilian ignorance. I cultivate it daily, because if I didn't, I'd stop being Brazilian.")

contemporary man seeks a documentary past”). The erasure of the historical context for this document, like the illegible quality of the writing some of its volumes contain, defers its references. The images serve less as record or registry and more as metaphors, as Umberto Eco defines the term, glossing Aristotle’s *Poetics*: metaphors “put the thing before our eyes,” and in this relocation of things, “a metaphor is not a mere transfer . . . but [is] clearly unfamiliar, unexpected, thanks to which things are seen in action (1410b 34), or better, signified in action” (*Tree to Labyrinth* 64). Metaphors astonish, as do Diderot’s Encyclopedic plates, according to Barthes—and perhaps Dias-Pino’s, too—and they do so by allowing objects to act outside their proper place.

As Barthes notes, one level of apprehension of Diderot’s encyclopedic images is “genetic.” In the context of this *Encyclopedia*, this means the plates can show objects as tools that make things, for example, a loom making a rug. However, it also might mean, in Dias-Pino’s context, that the image itself can generate new images, which is part of Dias-Pino’s original intent. Other visual poets were intended to make new images based on the ones collected here, and Dias-Pino generates new images in the *Enciclopèdia*, based on others that he found. Revisiting Barthes’s terms, Dias-Pino does this, quite literally, through processes of appropriation and fragmentation of the world of other images, and the transfer of images takes place, in these printed volumes, through the photocopy—that is, through mechanical reproduction. This leads me to one last theoretical turn, to Walter Benjamin, who notes that in the age of mechanical reproduction, “*Instead of being founded on ritual, [art] is based on a*

different practice—politics” (italics original, 257). While the abstract images of Dias-Pino’s poems might at times beg a transcendent reading, he grounds his work in the anti-authoritarian political, and I would suggest that the politics of Dias-Pino’s art in the *Enciclopédia* lie in seizing control of the means of that mechanical reproduction and of the generation of images to come.

The quantity of images the *Enciclopédia* deals with can provoke what Eco calls “the Vertigo of the Labyrinth” (*Tree to Labyrinth* 74), that is, the vertigo provoked by the infinite variety of paths one might take through the network of human knowledge that the maximal encyclopedia contains—a condition exacerbated by the increase of visual knowledge produced by digital technologies. Reframing the *Enciclopédia visual* for the digital present, Dias-Pino told me that it seeks to “advertir que a facilidade de reprodução atual—todos fazemos imagens dia e noite—vai chegar a um congestionamento de imagens, não é? Muito difícil para o poder. E se o poder não controla a informação visual, não existe razão do poder, não haverá poder” (“warn that the facility of reproduction at present—we all make images, day and night—is going to reach a congestion of images, isn’t it? Which makes things very difficult for those in power. And if those in power don’t control visual information, there won’t be any reason for their power, they won’t have it”). The *Enciclopédia visual* proposes one form of regulation of a vast quantity of visual information, one that invites infinite action, because it will always be incomplete. It also redirects the semiotics of visual information in that by severing referentiality, it enforces a kind of visual illiteracy. It

forces its “readers” not just to read for a referent, but to use the image itself as a referent to write a new visual text.

On multiple levels of reading, the *Enciclopédia visual* is non-linear and anti-alphabetical, albeit in various ways. On the level of the plate, the *Enciclopédia* requires the totalizing apprehension of glance that Barthes attributes to the image. On the level of project, it requires weaving through the infinite labyrinth that the maximal encyclopedia creates. On the level of poem, it requires what Walter Benjamin terms “tactile reception.” The poem, for Dias-Pino, is a material object, one that might transcend referentiality, and might also precede it. He told me: “A maior conquista eu acho na minha teoria foi separar poema de poesia. O poema é físico, é cardinal. E a poesia é contínua, ela é subjetiva, abstrata. O poema é material, pode ser rasgado. A poesia não se rasga. Então o meu trabalho é com poema, não com poesia” (“I believe the greatest conquest in my theory was to separate poem from poetry. The poem is physical, it’s cardinal. And poetry is continuous; it is subjective, abstract. The poem is material; it can be torn. You can’t tear poetry. So my work is with the poem, not with poetry”). Ultimately, the poem generates meaning by generating further poems. This theoretical meaning is only realized through endless practice. Benjamin writes: “*For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit*” (italics original, 268). The quarter-million reproduced images that the 1001 volumes of this *Enciclopédia* contain make particular contemplation difficult through their

quantity. The images themselves might be individually contemplated, but cut off from their referents, they frustrate contemplative apprehension as well. They are semiotically excessive in their infinite number and, individually, in their transcendent meaning. They are also semiotically insufficient, in that they do not point to what they mean. Yet their quantity requires, not an idiosyncratic reading, but the development of habits of use. On counts both of their excess and their insufficiency, they generate forward, as much as they look back. The plates of Dias-Pino's *Enciclopédia* suspend legibility, but in doing so, they become more than intelligible. They generate a new knowledge, and through it, the possibility of a new semiotic world through material action on the visual discourse of history and the world at hand.

CHAPTER 2

READING AND MISUSE OF INFORMATION IN MARCELO BRODSKY'S "THE ARCHIVES"

Marcelo Brodsky's photographic projects are interpreted most frequently as a kind of memory art. This interpretation is one clearly invited by their subject matter and Brodsky's own framing of the works. His trilogy of photobooks about the Argentine dictatorship and its aftermath—*Buena memoria*, *Nexo*, and *Memoria en construcción: El debate sobre la ESMA*—create, as their titles suggest, connections, through different exercises in memory, between the present and a traumatic past; they “explore collective cultural memory in the context of recent Argentinean history” (Arruti 101). The books contain items such as found photographs of the disappeared (most notably Brodsky's brother), reproduction of historical records, and photographs of works made with a memorializing function, whether public projects, such as the Bosque de la Memoria in the province of Tucumán, where families of the disappeared planted memorial trees (*Nexo* 67–73), or conceptual projects made specifically for Brodsky's photographic work, such as a timeline engraved in Sicilian marble of the major events in Brodsky's biography (*Nexo* 22–23). The images found in these books tie together public and private memory of the past, and they invite questions such as those Andreas Huyssen raises in an essay at the beginning of *Nexo*, the book considered in this chapter: “What is the relationship between memory and justice? Can memory bring closure? Can forgetting bring about social reconciliation? Can trauma

be represented artistically? And what role can works of art play in the public processes of working through traumatic national memory?” (9). Brodsky’s photographs invite such questions by serving not only as testimony of those who disappeared and but also of the struggles to keep their memory present and observed through the exercise of justice. They also testify to the multiple possibilities of the forms aesthetic representation of history and memory may take.

Brodsky’s work, however, invokes issues of memory not only through its subject matter but also through the media it employs. Specifically, the works featured in his books include not only photographic images, but text—texts written by Brodsky about the images, critical texts written about Brodsky’s work, and moreover, photographs of text. Text has been integral to Brodsky’s work from the beginning of his career: as Florencia Larralde Armas observes, “From the beginnings of his career, Brodsky experimented as much with photography as with the written word. For this reason . . . in most of his works, these two tools complement each other” (my translation). Brodsky’s first published book was a volume of poetry, *Parábola*, much of it topical poetry about the disappeared; one of his first artistic projects and solo shows, *Palabras*, meanwhile, presents images of decontextualized words or parts of words printed on signs and objects in a more conceptual way. *Nexo* combines these committed and conceptual tendencies, tying photographs of text—and often partially legible or illegible text—to the memory of the dictatorship. Among the texts it photographs are slips of paper tied to the trees in the Memory Forest, written with the names and brief memorials of the disappeared, blurred and faded from exposure to the

weather, in a chapter titled “El Bosque de la Memoria/The Memory Forest” (66–73); deteriorated books buried during the dictatorship to spare their owners from incrimination, presented as a series named after one of the books’ titles, Franz’s Fanon’s *Los condenados de la tierra* (translated here as “The Condemned of the Earth” (74–85); and closed files of the trials against the military rulers, grouped in the specific series considered in this chapter, “Los Archivos/The Archives” (58–65).

Such series foreground the connections between photography and text. These two media share means of practice and concerns: as Eduardo Cadava observes, photography is itself a form of inscription, “nothing else than a writing of light, a script of light” (xvii), and Brodsky’s conceptual images of texts exemplify the scriptural tendency of photography’s referential quality. As Cadava writes, “Citation . . . is perhaps another name for photography” (xvii), and much of Brodsky’s work in *Nexo* simultaneously employs both photographic and textual citation. Brodsky’s photographs of text connect writing and photography’s relationships to a referent, and because photography always recalls a past moment, his photographs also make connections between both media’s relationship to memory. Both photography and writing seek to preserve, through representation, a referent that cannot be present in the work, and the photographs in *Nexo* and the text that they contain are concerned with a specific kind of recollection of that referent, that which seeks “the return of the dead” (Barthes 9), whether through a literal return of the disappeared, an imagined return in the realm of memory, or a justice that would respond to the deaths of the disappeared.

At the same time as Brodsky's work in *Nexo* seems to document and archive the work of memory, however, it also invokes processes of forgetting. This forgetting is embodied in the material state of the photographed texts. The forgetting in these photographs enters into tension with the work's avowed intention to combat an official state politics of forgetting: the dictatorship, of course, enforced silence about disappearance and torture, and the trials of the military government that the photographs in the series "The Archives" represent had been halted in 1987 under the law of "Punto Final" (final point) (Feitlowitz 16). These trials were not reopened until 2009 (Feitlowitz 307), eight years after *Nexo* was published. By depicting or visually citing text in states of abandonment or decay, *Nexo* represents yet another disappearance, this time from written memory, of that which and those whom these texts first sought to commemorate or represent. The tension between oblivion and memory in the art that *Nexo* archives parallels the tension that Jacques Derrida argues the word *archive* itself contains in relation to its Greek root *arkhē*, which, as Derrida notes, at once signifies commencement and commandment (1): "[The archive] also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying it forgets it" (2). In the case of Brodsky's work, the photographs of illegible text in *Nexo* hide the information that they recall. By hiding information, whether deliberately, in the case of the archives, or because of circumstance, in the case of the buried books, the photographs also withhold its intended use.

The photographs' work with forgetting or erasure can be read as another kind of witness, a witness that remembers a forgetting that takes place outside the

photographer's control. However, I will argue in what follows that the work the photographs do with forgetting and erasure serves more than a documentary function. Rather, it construes a deliberate sort of misuse. Many of the texts photographed in *Nexo* gain their affective power from the fact that they could be or could have been read and thus directed toward their originally intended use. The names on the slips of paper in the Memory Forest could have served a specific memorializing function, and they did serve that function when they were legible in the past; the buried books could have delivered a political education, and in fact, they still can in copies other than those that were unearthed; the closed archives from the military trials would be as legible, if they were opened, in the present of the photograph as they were when the trials were taking place. Rather than seek to restore the texts' intended use, however, Brodsky's photographs continue to obstruct it or keep it hidden. They hide it to maintain the texts in a state of potential for use—whether a past, present, or future use—and that state of potential allows the past to maintain force in the present, even if in altered form. That state of potentiality responds to the photographs' apparent erasure, because the photographs create a space in which new uses might come into being, even as they mark the ones that pass away.

In what follows I will develop this argument through a close analysis of one series of photographs in *Nexo*, "The Archives," because the photographs in that series most clearly render the potentiality of the text they represent. I will conduct this analysis in dialogue with two main theoretical frameworks. One is the conclusion Giorgio Agamben reaches in his essay "Art, Inactivity, Politics," which considers

inactivity as more than an inert non-activity, and instead as an operation that facilitates contemplation of the capacity to do. Agamben argues that “[a]rt is political in itself, because it is an operation which contemplates and renders non-operational man’s senses and usual actions, thus opening them to new possible uses” (140–141). I will use this conclusion ultimately to reach my own, that is, to identify a deliberately unrealized potential for use in Brodsky’s photographs of texts. To reach that conclusion, however, I will also conduct a close reading of the photographs’ use of text through Michel de Certeau’s discussion in *The Practice of Everyday Life* of the relationship between reading and writing, memory, and misuse of texts, as well as his likening of reading to the occupation of a space, an idea relevant to Brodsky’s photographic inhabitation of the space of archive. As I show below, these two theoretical frameworks are not only relevant to the photographs’ particular work with their texts but also to the particular context of use, text, and information from which they emerge.

Before entering into this theoretical discussion, however, it may be helpful to more precisely describe and locate the photographs under consideration. The chapter containing the series “The Archive” appears toward the middle of *Nexo*, followed by a chapter containing the photo series “The Memory Forest,” which in turn is followed by “The Condemned of the Earth.” The photographed text in both of those series is only partially legible, as mentioned above, because of exposure to natural elements. “The Archive” is preceded by a chapter titled “Entremanos/Hand to Hand,” whose subject is a file about the disappeared that the Province of Buenos Aires Intelligence

Department had kept hidden for twenty years. Only one visit to that file by heads of human rights organizations and the Commission for Memory was permitted before the file was closed to further consultation, and the title of the chapter refers to the way that photographs of the file taken during that visit were “passed around, ‘hand to hand’” (49). This chapter adopts a multi-genre approach: it opens with photographs of people looking at those photographs, holding them in their hands. It then features a reflection on those files written by the president of the Asociación Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, accompanied by three relatively abstract photographs depicting shadows reminiscent of jail bars, photos hanging on a wall, and a silhouette of a human figure, all in a dark, unidentified place. It concludes with a photograph Brodsky frequently uses in his work, a photograph of his brother, Fernando, taken when he was in detention at ESMA. Preceding that photograph is a reproduction of a Navy intelligence file on Fernando from August 1979, the year and month he was disappeared (54). This file, like the photographs that give the chapter its name, was passed between people, from hand to hand, until it reached Brodsky through a friend, coincidentally, as he was correcting the page proofs of *Nexo*. The chapter provides a clear copy of the file, which is typewritten and fully legible, and is made legible to readers who don’t know Spanish through an accompanying English translation. This report provides previously secret information about the surveillance and interrogation that his brother was subject to, and Brodsky states he reproduced images of this file because it “provided adequate closure” to the chapter, creating a “new intersection between my work and my family history” (54). The therapeutic sense of closure seems to be provided not only by this

point of intersection but also by the information the report reveals and that can be read.

The files pictured in the chapter “The Archives,” however, are not legible like this one. Rather, they are depicted unopened, like the files depicted in the photographs at the beginning of the chapter titled “Hand to Hand,” shown there as closed, organized, labeled, and stored on shelves. The files portrayed in “The Archives” were not kept secret, like those portrayed in the chapter before: Brodsky could request and receive permission to see them, and they emerge from a public and publicized context, being habeas corpus files from the trials against the military rulers (Juicio a las Juntas) in 1984. The archive appears to contain files that relate to cases in addition to those against the leaders of the juntas (and the chapter’s introduction also implies as much), and these files’ intended use was frustrated, because the trials of crimes committed under the military government ended before all perpetrators could be brought to justice. The files’ usability, even for different purposes, is also frustrated by obstacles to knowing how to read them correctly, as Brodsky explains in an introduction to the chapter. He describes the place of the archives in terms of its original, specialized intentions for use: “The small room contains—piled up in an order that only a few experts know to interpret—all the legal proceedings carried out in the courtrooms of the city of Buenos Aires that responded to claims of violations of liberty, individual rights and physical well-being suffered by thousands of Argentines at the hands of State terrorism” (59). The reference to a single proper expert interpretation of these

texts suggests there is only one proper mode of reading them, and this kind of reading exists to be directed toward its proper end of justice.

In the photographs, however, as well as in the introduction, Brodsky does not locate his own work among that of the experts who know how to properly interpret the files. Instead, he reads and interprets the limited text accessible on the labels placed on the outside of the files, the same labels depicted in the photographs, as he explains: “Trial investigations grouped by the names of sinister places: Banco, Olimpo, Vestubio, ESMA (Navy School of Mechanics). Names we recognize from an ad in *Página 12* (a newspaper), from a list, from a memorial or monument, names of friends, of brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, converted into files with a number and registration code, in trials that did not end the way they should have: with the guilty behind bars” (59). The names on these labels are indexical, and they should refer to the content of files. However, when those files cannot be read, those names remit to the other, less immediate referents that they also contain. The archive thus appears at once to open up to other places and to be a hiding place for its own content as the possibilities for use of its content change. Brodsky writes: “The simple sobriety of the Archive keeps its secrets as yet undivulged. Its rickety shelves and office binders watch as their contents pass little by little from the hands of lawyers to those of historians” (59). Brodsky’s photographs of the material conditions of the archive belong to the documentary work of the latter. However, as I argue below, they also create an improper reading of the text that retains a potential for undefined use.

It is important to note that the archive Brodsky photographs consists not only of the documents it contains but also the physical place that houses and is shaped by them. The idea of place relates to questions of reading as well as questions of memory on both a theoretical and a practical level, the latter taking on a particular charge in the Argentine context. Brodsky's following book, *Memoria en construcción*, is a collaborative project that discusses, through texts ranging from essays to a legal decree, and through visual art ranging from photograph to comics, the conversion of ESMA into a memorial site, the Espacio por la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (Space for Memory and Human Rights). Remo Bianchedi discusses the placement of memory in that book in an aphoristic essay titled with a declarative sentence, "La memoria es un lugar", or "Memory Is a Place." In this essay he discusses the problems of signification of monuments, specifically, whether they refer to a person or event from the past, or whether they remit instead only to other monuments. In this context of reference he asks: "What is memory? An action? A trace, persistence, memento? A happy, tenacious, exact memory? Is it an art? Is it saving from forgetting, gathering, ordering? An anthropological capacity? How to measure memory? Does memory have a place, limits? Is it a place?" (translation mine, 108). As the title of the essay indicates, for Bianchedi, the answer to that last question is yes; however, the place of memory is not the static object of a gaze. Rather, memory is an act of communication, one that can be located in every person, and one that can relate to physical places when such places evoke a dynamic response to the past. Bianchedi concludes: "The place is the monument and what happened in that space. Not a mausoleum, not an Arc

de Triomphe, but a space of creation, formation, construction, information” (109). In other words, the place of memory is one that does not contain a single reading, a single interpretation. Its informative function is constructive, creative, not only marking the past but creating something new. Memory and monuments may inform in unpredictable ways, diverging from what is proper to the idea of a marking or preservation of an immutable past.

Memory, then, and places of memory cannot merely be preserved in their past state. Rather, to be communicated, memory must be subject to readings which necessarily alter it and produce from it something new. Such readings are conducted in a place or space (passing over, for the moment, distinctions between those terms), whether a three-dimensional space like a monument or archive or the printed space of the page or photograph. Brodsky’s photographs of the archive in *Nexo* seem both to read the place of archive and to write a new space in which further meaning might be constructed. Here I would like to introduce Certeau’s discussion of reading as use, as mentioned above, to discuss how the photographs inhabit and navigate this place of record of the past. Later, in the conclusions, I will bring up Certeau’s complementary discussion of writing as construction of a space to argue that these photographs also inscribe a space where something new, made of memory, might come to be.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau proposes reading as a form of productive misuse, and moreover, productive misuse of a space. Reading is productive precisely because it misuses: it changes the text it reads through an imperfect or incomplete consumption of it. As Certeau observes, “In reality, the activity of reading

has . . . all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectations of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance” (xxi). Reading, in essence, makes something of a text, and it does so by making its way through a text in a different way than was originally intended. While a reader may not own another’s text, she may occupy it, and this occupation changes the space of the page through the added presence of another consciousness, with its interpretations of and additions to the space. Certeau likens this occupation to that of inhabiting a living space: “A different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories” (xxi). The reader not only takes away meaning from a text to be added to her own memory; she also adds something of her own past and present signification that was not already there. Through this inhabitation, she finds her own way of being inside the text. This metaphorical inhabitation of a text bears resemblance, of course, to Brodsky’s inhabitation of the space of the archive he photographs. His selective method of reading leaves the original referent intact, but it also makes a new way through its original order that allows him to occupy and demarcate a place inside of it.

Certeau, of course, is not the only critic to identify reading with misuse.

Ricardo Piglia, for instance, locates a legitimate reading practice in the person “who

reads poorly, distorts, perceives in a confused way. In the clinic of the art of reading, it is not always the person with the best vision who reads best” (19). Piglia’s misreaders include those who do not approach texts in full possession of their physical or mental capacities, such as Jorge Luis Borges, going blind, and those who read in a dream state. For Certeau, however, misreading is essentially a democratic task, one that most readers undertake by default and one that also makes texts and their contents available to a wider audience. He observes that most texts carry with them a prescribed or correct use, one that is accessible only to a few. This use, however, excludes other readers and consigns other readings to oblivion:

The use made of the book by privileged readers constitutes it as a secret of which they are the ‘true’ interpreters. It interposes a frontier between the text and its readers that can only be crossed if one has a passport delivered by these official interpreters (which is *also* a legitimate one), who transform their own reading into an orthodox ‘literality’ that makes other (equally legitimate) readings either heretical or insignificant (to be forgotten)” (171)

The exclusive community of true interpreters that Certeau describes calls to mind Brodsky’s photographed archives once again, whose order, to return to his introduction to “The Archives,” “only a few experts know to interpret” (59). In the case of this archive, the exclusivity of the interpretive community seems less unkind than it does in Certeau’s text: by circumstance, and perhaps by necessity, only a few lawyers familiar with the proceedings of these particular cases and, presumably, the

creation of this archive were intended to use it. However, as that use slips away, the only possible use is an unofficial use, a use that, if not opposed to the original's end of justice, seeks justice by necessarily unorthodox means. By carrying out this unofficial reading and making it public, Brodsky's photographs seem to seek that this remaining range of possible reading not be forgotten.

The alterations of an unorthodox reading of the archives—a reading that is archived in turn through the printing of photographs in Brodsky's book—also suggest the tension between memory and forgetting contained in this photo series's documentary work. The photographs of the archives are, in a sense, a kind of writing, not only because they inscribe text in the space of the frame that they determine but also preserve the text visible in them for a future reading, divulgation, and use. As Certeau writes, "Writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishing of a place and multiplies its production through the expansionism of reproduction" (174). However, the act of reading recorded in Brodsky's sort of act of writing has methods and effects opposite to those Certeau describes. Reading leads to the kind of erasure or forgetting that this series of works enacts because it does not reproduce the archive's vast and useful contents; it keeps them hiding. Certeau continues: "Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself *and* also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise" (174). Brodsky's photographs pass by file after file, showing multiple iterations of their yellowing outer labels. They do not preserve their referent—that is, the archives they only temporarily physically

inhabit—from the erosion of time, and their incomplete reading of the files seems to repeat that the limited paradise these photographs might imagine—the end of justice, at least as carried out in a court of law—appears to have been lost.

In Certeau's argument, however, memory, and not just forgetting, is an act of alteration that seems to resemble the act of reading (though he does not make this connection directly), insofar as memory does not preserve the remembered object in its original state. Memory also imitates reading insofar as it productively occupies another's place. Certeau writes: "Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other species' nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it" (86). The nest is like the rented apartment that the reader inhabits, or the site of creation and formation that Bianchedi refers to when discussing the creation of a specific monumental space, the human rights memorial at the site of ESMA, which literally occupies a space that belonged to others. The metaphor of the nest also resembles, of course, Brodsky's photographs' occupation of the archives. The occupation of memory, like the occupation of reading, necessarily enacts a change. Certeau writes: "There is a double alteration, both of memory, which works when something affects it, and of its object, which is remembered only when it has disappeared" (86). The alteration of memory both acknowledges a past change in state of the remembered object and the present change effected by remembering it, both of the subject who remembers and the imagined representation of the remembered object. This remembrance is often brought about metonymically or indexically, through an encounter, real or imagined, with a detail that recalls the lost whole. However, rather than mourn the loss of the original,

Certeau's argument affirms the constructiveness of memory's work. Alteration is the key to the functioning of memory, and rather than preserving the past as it was, memory, through alteration, opens it up to other possibilities. Certeau writes: "Memory is in decay when it is no longer capable of this alteration. It constructs itself from events that are independent of it, and it is linked to the expectation that something alien to the present will or must occur. Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, it sustains itself by *believing* in the existence of possibilities" (86). These possibilities are facilitated precisely by the alterations present in Brodsky's work, typically classified as memory art, with the archival texts.

To return the focus, then, to Brodsky's work, I will look both at how the photos of the archives read—that is, how they navigate and occupy the space of text—and what they read—that is, what text remains, and what and how it might signify. In regard to the first issue, the photographs' itinerary through the space of the text, that is, the physical building that houses the photographed archive, is disorienting: this itinerary provides the viewer with little guidance on how to order the texts. This disorder complements the state of deterioration that appears to characterize the physical paper on which the texts are printed, an appearance that is reinforced by the dark shadows and sepia light that lends the color photos a sense of age. The dozen photos included in the chapter differ from each other in terms of title and the content of the text they contain, but otherwise they very much look the same. They depict uneven stacks of paper on shelves, fraying at the edges, and tied together with string. Handwritten labels identifying the contents of the files are attached by that string, and

many of the labels are curling with age, suggesting they might detach from the files in a not-too-distant future. The string appears, too, to leave a physical impression in some of the paper files where it is tied too tight, as well as in scraps of crumpling paper escaping from the order of the stacks.

The photographs' perspective on the files provides a sense of itinerary or of movement through them. However, that itinerary is difficult to follow and provides little sense of ordered or purposeful direction. The unevenly balanced stacks files hang over the edges of the simple, adjustable metal shelves, and the camera's perspective on the files' physical placement provides a sense of those shelves' height and depth. Most of the files are photographed from an angle, either looking upwards or looking down a corridor of shelves. The upward angle gives the impression that the camera did not leave the photographer's eye level and that the photographer did not seek improve his access to the files through the use, for example, of a ladder, or by removing any files from the shelves to examine them more closely. The view instead is that of someone who might just be passing through. Some of the files, depicted from the angle looking upward, appear almost out of reach. Other photographs taken looking down a corridor of shelves, meanwhile, give a sense of the enormity of the files' quantity: the photographs show a large amount of paper but do not suggest where the shelves might begin or end. The angles provide a sense of depth to the archive, adding a dimension that would not be present in any single flat page that might be taken from any of the stacks of files. Such angles enact a sort of distant reading that acknowledges the material condition of sections of the archives. The photographs show that the archives

are in a condition in which they could be read, though that condition may be subject to deterioration through time, and they do not read the files here. Any close reading of the inside of the files remains in a potential state.

While the perspective on the files is not so close that it opens them and allows their contents to be read, it is still too close to permit a sense of orientation in their space. The photographs here do not include a view of the floor or ceiling; their angle is not wide enough to provide a sense of the dimensions of the room that the archives inhabit. The labels on the files serve an indexical function, pointing to what lies inside them. However, the photographs as a whole cannot serve as an index or map of the space. The photographs repeat the same gesture, with small variations, of looking at the files from the outside, yet despite the repetition of this gesture, they do not instruct the viewer on how she might recreate this itinerary and, if she were to enter the archive, conduct the same reading as the photographer of the whole. Their contents remain difficult to interpret, even from a perspective that promises a different mode of access to the files than that of legal experts. All that the viewer of the photographs can read is what the photographer has read.

The text that is available in the photographs also proves difficult to interpret: it consists almost entirely of labels that provide little detailed information about what their files contain, and these labels, as depicted here, likewise provide few clues as to how to navigate the order of the room of text. In the introduction to the chapter, Brodsky notes that the habeas corpus files are stacked in alphabetical order, and a photograph titled “Habeas Corpus S–T” seems to indicate that this is the case: files

labeled with an S in the photograph are stacked above those labeled with a T.

However, in both this and other photographs, the legible labels reinforce the sense of disorientation provided by the perspective on the space itself. In “Habeas Corpus S–T,” the files’ labels contain numbers in addition to the letters, but from the limited perspective of the photograph, their order is unclear: file S-6 is stacked above file S-3 (61). The photograph that opens the chapter, titled “Abecedario,” or “Alphabet,” also refers to alphabetical order in its title, and moreover, to the most basic level of knowledge that would be required to read the archives. However, the photograph seems to offer only a lesson in disorder and illegibility. The files in this photograph are labeled in different ways: while they all share a small print designation of “causa 450,” their primary titles consist of either last names, single letters, or combinations of letters and numbers, none of which are arranged in alphabetical order (58). Other photographs suggest a similar disorder, or an order that is difficult to interpret for those unfamiliar with the files. The files depicted in the photograph titled “Cuerpos,” or “Bodies,” all belong to one case, “causa 13/85,” and are all labeled with that number and the word “cuerpos.” However, each stack of files in this photograph is assigned a set of Roman numerals, and these are not arranged in numerical order. If these photographs provides a misreading of the files, or at least an unorthodox reading, this reading consists of a literal reading of an order that, as the photographs seem to document, is itself a kind of miswriting of the order that promises to arrange the place.

The limited possibilities for legibility in the photographs of the files allow the words that can be read to remit to meanings other than those they first intended. The

text that is legible consists not of sentences, but of words, letters, and numbers operating in their own system of meaning consisting of nouns. The labels with the clearest meaning are the names, which in this context clearly refer to specific people who were disappeared. However, in the context of this book, a deeply particular meaning of only one name is clear, that of “Brodsky, Fernando Rubén” (though even this text is partially obscured, the “o” of Fernando being covered by the string tying the file together), which appears in a photograph with a highly personalized title, “Expediente de Nando” (62). Fernando’s file is also labeled with “ESMA,” naming the camp in which he was detained. The attributes of the referent of Fernando’s name are made clear not only through his recurrence in Brodsky’s work as a whole but also through the discussion and clear reproduction of a different file pertaining to his case in the previous chapter in *Nexo*. The singular legibility of the significance of this name is emphasized by the fact that it is the only legible label in the photograph that contains it; the other labels pictured there are blurred, in soft focus. Still, while the photograph reads Fernando’s name, it nevertheless obscures the text inside the file pertaining to his case, thus misreading the intended system of reference for this label.

While the other names, letters, and numbers the chapter contains refer to specific people and cases, the particular attributes of these referents remain hidden to any viewer who does not bring a prior knowledge of these people’s cases to the photographs. For any viewer of the photographs unfamiliar with the particular people and cases the files detail, the names remit to other systems of naming, for instance, those that Brodsky refers to in the introduction to this chapter, including the lists of

names of the missing published in the newspaper *Página 12* or on memorials. The labels and letters translate other names of people into another, indexical system of naming cases. They refer to a hidden content, but because that content is obscured or not read, they also refer, more generically, to other numbers and letters and systems of organization. Misread, they appear to remember and inform very little. They border on the incommunicative state that Bianchedi decries in the traditional understanding of monuments in “Memoria es un lugar”: “[I]s the monument an effective means of communication? No. Not as the notion of monument is generically understood, this does not lead to the desired objective: remembering. A bust of General San Martín does not remember or provide instruction about the heroism of the liberator of South America. Thus, San Martín only evokes another bust of San Martín” (108). When monuments only remit to other monuments, they create a closed system of signification that does not communicate the historical referent that the monuments should. Likewise, the misreading enacted in Brodsky’s archive, effected through a limited legibility, alters the system of the files’ referentiality: its index refers to other indices, and it does not remember what it should. The intended object that this indexical memory points toward and even may seek to recall remains hidden in plain sight. While the original signification of the labels does not go away, the obscurity of the referent—an obscurity imposed by misreading—sends their signification in an additional direction.

The photographs of “The Archive” selected for *Nexo* do not represent the entirety of the series, and others included on Brodsky’s Web site break apart the

components of legibility even further, thus becoming even more unreadable. The Web site includes photographs of apparently more orderly files, including closed and labeled file boxes and card catalog-style drawers. It also includes a close-up of an unlabeled loose-leaf file, in which there is no text visible on the exposed edges of the blank pages. Two other photographs depict shallow piles of plastic letters, many broken and all detached from whatever surface they were stuck to once. One pile of letters sits on a blank white surface, suggesting a page; the other appears to be on the ground, and a few dry, crumbling leaves are scattered among these letters, calling to mind a process of natural decay. Such photographs suggest a future in which an unused archive will leave nothing to be read.

Other photographs contained in the book, however, suggest, rather than erasure, the possibility of integrating the archives' content into a complex narrative system of meaning, should they be opened and read. This meaning is emphasized by the photographs' titles. One, "Soleil de justice," pictures a book by the same title left on a stack of files otherwise unlabeled in this context. This book is a narrative about Alice Domon, a French nun disappeared by the Argentine regime, written by her sister, Arlette Welty-Domon. The other photograph, titled "Nunca Más," contains files labeled "CONADEP," making clear reference to the report, *Nunca más*, put together by CONADEP (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, or the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), as a testimony of torture and disappearance under the dictatorship. Reference to these two texts suggests a narrative form of meaning whose capacity for signification differs from that which can be read

in photographs. As Susan Sontag writes, “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (71). Such a haunting lacks the sense of beginning and end that narrative provides; it does not consign the past to the past tense. Finally, one photograph adds a verb to the labels’ and photographs’ collection of nouns. This photograph, titled “Los Campos III/The Camps III,” is labeled with the name of one of the clandestine detention centers, Banco Olimpo. This label also contains the handwritten and underlined imperative “ver,” meaning “see,” or “look at this” (65). This note suggests the presence of its writer, who was an active reading subject in the past, and also commands a reading—and the possibility of a reader—in the future.

Before moving on to the conclusions supporting my hypothesis—that the photographs of the archive misread the original text, deliberately rendering it inoperative, to preserve a potential for use—it may be helpful to summarize and draw together the theoretical discussion and close reading provided above. In brief, Brodsky’s photographs of the archives of the trials of the military juntas read those archives, in the sense that Certeau attributes to reading, which means that they misread them so that the reader can thus inhabit another’s textual space. Misreading involves alteration, and the alterations of reading often resemble those of forgetting: they erase text, and they navigate among the pieces of text that remain in an order that differs from that originally intended by a work. Brodsky’s photographs leave much of the archive in hiding; they keep an archive neglected by an official, judicial memory obscured or signaled, but not fully recalled. They establish an order by which to

navigate the text that differs from privileged (and originally, juridically useful) order; however, the order the photographs establish often resembles disorder. It is obscure, and it obscures the original text as much as does the closed state of the photographed files. The legibility of the unobscured text is also limited, insofar as the referents corresponding to the indexical words and names, letters and numbers, are unclear. The changes these photographs effect on their texts may suggest not just forgetting, however, but also the alterations that Certeau ascribes to memory and that may, in fact, keep memory alive. These changes either render inoperative the texts' original use or maintain it in the state of suspension to which that use has fallen: a move from use to disuse. However, to return to a passage from Certeau quoted above, the photographs still “*believe* in the existence of possibilities” (86) for future use, even if such possibilities work within the limited scope of readable text and image that the photographs offer through the reading they make.

While Brodsky frames his photography in terms of its political commitment, he—and the photographs in the series, “The Archives”—do not commit themselves to a single course of concrete political action, as the files in the archive did in their original conception. In an interview included in *Nexo*, Brodsky outlines the relationship between committed art such as his with the world outside the frame: “Fitting a message to reality, with the intention of changing that reality, seems to me to be an elaborate form of art that is, certainly, clearly tied to politics in its original sense” (121). This idea of political commitment seems to allow the photographs to not only read but also write in a sense that Certeau defines, when he designates “as

‘writing’ the concrete activity that consists in constructing, on its own, blank space (*un espace propre*)—the page—a text that has power over the exteriority from which it has been isolated” (134). The writing of the photographs of archive, which inscribes literal words of light in the blank space of the photographic frame, seeks to change the reality of oblivion of the archives from which the photographic content has been extracted. However, the concrete nature of the change that these photographs seek to enact in the external world remains unspecified. The designation of art means that the photographs cannot achieve the end their content was intended to seek, that is, legal justice. In the same interview referenced above, Brodsky acknowledges, “We cannot administer justice from the cultural sphere. For that we have judges” (124). The photographs of the archive cannot do the work of justice that the archive was supposed to do. For this reason, they are, in a sense, useless. But they might also be seen thus as being radically open to multiple possibilities for use.

That use, however, remains in a state of potentiality, much like the text in the photographs remains in a state of potential to be read, and this potentiality retains its power because it reveals what could be done. Here I would like to return to the argument from Agamben that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. To paraphrase Agamben, art is political because it refuses to be useful, because it “contemplates and renders non-operational man’s senses and usual actions” (140). However, this non-operational state is not necessarily permanent: rather, it is a state of suspension allows the reader or spectator to contemplate her capacity for sense and action. Agamben provides an example of this “inoperative operation” (140) through a

discussion of poetry's suspension of the functionality of language. He asks, "What in fact is a poem if not a linguistic operation which renders language inoperative by deactivating its communicative and informative functions in order to open it to a new possible use? Poetry is in other words . . . a contemplation of language, which brings it back to its capacity to speak" (140). Brodsky's photographs of text and erasures within a space of text may be read as a silent, visual, even conceptual poem that contemplates the function of language. The language they contain does not communicate or inform, or at least, its communication and information are diverted from their original direction, or bifurcated in their signalling. However, the photographs allow the viewer to contemplate what could have been and what could be said. They re-conceptualize the state of forgetfulness and forgotten-ness into which the archives had fallen without the administration of legal justice, when the archives' use was rendered inoperative by non-artistic circumstance. Through their own act of inoperation, the photographs both reveal and refuse to collude with the inoperativeness imposed upon the archives. By hiding something that the viewer may look for, these photographs reinstate the command "ver"—see, look—on one of the labels of the archives, and their invitation to look, and to look for what is hidden, establishes the possibility of a potential future subject.

The photographs' refusal to inform, or their withholding of information, constitutes a kind of power in itself. To conclude, I will recontextualize the consideration of these photographs in terms of the response to dictatorship from which they emerge, and in doing so, hope to open up avenues for further discussion. The

dictatorship, and the political responses in its aftermath, have lent multiple valences and urgencies to the revealing and obscuring of information and the questions of to whom such information might be useful. Marguerite Feitlowitz provides an excellent analysis of the operativity of language during and after the dictatorship in her study *Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*. This book examines the dictatorship's enforced silence about disappearance as well as the silence resulting from the politics of forgetting that emerged after the trials of the military government took place, the same trials whose archives Brodsky photographed. It also examines the silence resulting from trauma, and the trauma of the reassignment of meaning to words that took place through the particular "languages of terror" used under the dictatorship and in the camps "to confuse, disorient, and terrorize" (ix). The dictatorship rendered the original meanings of words inoperative, and in response to this, Feitlowitz's study records and examines the answers of those who lived under the dictatorship to questions about silence, asking, "What words can you no longer tolerate? What words do you no longer say?" (xi). Brodsky's work faces similar kinds of silence and erasure, and it provides a testimony to kinds of forced silence. Through a documentary testimony of silence, and through its inscription of legible text, it also speaks out against that silence.

Such silences invite a response through language, and moreover, through rendering operative a language that repression has rendered inoperative. This language can be useful both for the cause of justice and for the recording of history, whether personal or collective. Feitlowitz details the urgency of the desire for information and

the need, for reasons of justice, for language to be used to uncover the truth of what happened. In 1998 the families of the disappeared were granted the “right to truth and information” (301) about the missing. That same year, a series of “truth trials” ensued, which testified to crimes committed under the dictatorship. The response to these trials was mixed: they rendered a language publically operative that addressed survivors’ desire for information and recorded testimony for future judicial use; however, critics also saw the trials as “depressing, useless, and nothing more—or less—than political spectacles” (Feitlowitz 302). Still, language, rendered operative through evidence and testimony, might at least address the victims’ trauma, providing the sort of limited closure that Brodsky attributes to the reproduction of the intelligence file about his brother’s disappearance. Such language also might be used for the writing of history, a task that differs from judicial response but which is a response, regardless. Brodsky seems to anticipate that the language in his photographed files will assume this task when the files’ use is reassigned in the hands of historians.

However, just as speech might be a response in protest to repression, silence can also be made to serve that function. Information can be used, whether it is revealed or hidden, to reach different ends. Feitlowitz details the perverse use of information under the military regime, in which information was extracted under torture or through fear to find more “subversives” to punish. She narrates how General Rafeal Videla, president during the first junta, asked the Argentine public to provide the government with information in his first address to the nation: “Your information is always useful. Bring it to us” (26). Language and speech was also perversely

instrumentalized in the prisons, in which “a proper prisoner was one who was ‘useful’—that is, corrupt, treacherous, and/or violent with his peers” (Feitlowitz 75), including by providing information that could lead to the detention and disappearance of others. In such a context, silence can be read as protest, as a refusal to collude; under interrogation, silence may be the only power the subject of interrogation might reserve for herself.

Brodsky’s photographs of the archive clearly do not hide information under the threat of torture or repression; however, I would like to conclude that their obscurity still might be read as political protest. Their silent reading occupies a space; it asserts a seeing presence that could read all the archives contain. The power of that presence, of the occupying subject, might not be the same as the power of those who regulate the space that it occupies; it may only use and misuse the space that is properly another’s. Still, by maintaining the text in a potential state, it refuses to be used, and thus its power cannot be used up. The occupation resembles that of protestors who enter a space belonging to those in power and refuse to leave until their demands are met. However, the aesthetic occupation of these photographs is one that refuses to leave because it makes no specific demands; it refuses a unique or proper possibility for use. The occupation not only reads, but writes, and it constructs a new space through its misreading, and also through a writing of that reading that is a kind of miswriting, too: it leaves deliberate imperfections in its copy of the enormity of text that it encounters.

The photographs’ printing thus creates its own archive that is a place future readers might occupy in turn. That occupation, for its part, carries the potential for

infinite multiplication. The photographs' space is not proper to anyone: the photographs might be reproduced through reprinting, and readings of the photographs might multiply, not through replication of the paths they take, but through any number of unique uses that the photographs' potential reserves. That potentiality keeps the photographs' usefulness in a permanent state of futurity: they not only document what has passed, but through unspecified readings, they always offer something to come. Derrida suggests that this inoperative potentiality is a quality inherent to the archive, as a sort of genre in itself: "The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never" (36). This messianic reading suggests that even a forgotten or hidden archive can never truly pass away. Brodsky's photographed occupation of the archive, for its part, establishes those times to come on the level of practice. At the time of photographing, it seemed that the suspended pursuit of justice that the archives originally sought might never come, as much as the photographs might have hoped for it. However, by eschewing the revelation of meaning, the haunting photographs invite a contemplation of their capacity for meaning, a contemplation that is endless because it does not act. By establishing an endless potential for reading, the occupying presence thus refuses to disappear.

CHAPTER 3

“WORDS ARE THINGS”: TRANSLATION, MATERIALITY, AND THE NOTEBOOKS OF MARIO ORTIZ

Argentine writer Mario Ortiz opens volume six of his *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* (*Language and Literature Notebooks*) with a series of categorical propositions that grant words and things a semantic and ontological equivalence:

1. Existen las cosas.
 2. Existen las palabras.
 3. Las palabras son cosas.
 4. Las cosas son cosas.
-
- [1. Things exist.
 2. Words exist.
 3. Words are things.
 4. Things are things.] (135)

The book that opens with these propositions is central, both numerically and thematically, to Ortiz’s *Cuadernos*, an ongoing series published whose first volume was published in 2000 and had reached ten volumes as of 2017, which critics and reviewers have called an “unclassifiable” work. The first four volumes consist of book-length poems, while the remaining six fluctuate between essay, memoir, narrative, philosophy, and lyric and also include photographs and illustrations of the things that inspire the narrator to write—examples of typography, commercial signs, weeds growing in an abandoned lot. What unites all ten volumes, aside from their

shared title, is a concern about language—what things and processes generate human language, what actual materials make up the written word, how the material that constitutes spoken language takes on a signifying function.

In the *Cuadernos*, such questions about language invite questions about the generation of knowledge and how one might have access to things, including language, without the mediation of referential or metaphorical significance. This happens through certain volumes' disciplinary framing. Volume six, subtitled *Crítica de la imaginación pura (A Critique of Pure Imagination)*, poses as a philosophical work as it develops a semiotic theory based more on a notion of connection than reference. Volume seven, meanwhile, frames itself as pseudo-scientific work. Subtitled *Tratado de fitolingüística (Treatise on Phytolinguistics)*, the book centers on an encounter with an ordinary weed that generates language in the narrator's mind. Through that encounter, the narrator seeks to develop a methodology for what he calls a poetic "ciencia de lo particular" ("a science of the particular," 202), which, he concedes, may not seem to be a science, given that science is characterized by its universal applicability.

The disciplinary framing of questions about the generation of language and knowledge, however, is also embedded in the conceit of the project as a whole, that of the notebook. At various points throughout the project, Ortiz relates this conceit to that of a notebook used in school exercises, drawing from his real-life profession as a high school language and literature teacher: in volume five, for example, he calls them "ejercicios de un alumno: no el poema como algo acabado, sino un momento provisorio de lenguaje" (a student's exercises: not the poem as something finished, but

rather a provisional moment of language”) (23). However, his *Notebooks* also betray a larger history of this ambiguous genre, where public and private knowledge, empirical observation and personal introspection intersect. From the commonplace book to collections of field notes to the diaries one uses both to record life and, through writing, to discover one’s inner self, notebooks at once collect knowledge from other sources, facilitate its acquisition, and give transmissible, verbal form to a knowledge that previously was hidden or inchoate. In what follows, I will argue that by using the genre of the notebook, Ortiz’s project constructs a basis for knowledge that need not be universal to be true. To make this argument about the genre, however, I will first turn to the material that literally fills these *Cuadernos* and that is the subject of their study, namely, language. Furthermore, I will consider this language through a mode of thinking and working with language that might not seem directly attached to their concerns, which is that of translation.

I am turning to translation as a paradigm here for several reasons. Some are related to the concerns about language and reference central to this dissertation as a whole, as well as concerns about the ways that the particularities and limitations of practice challenge and modify a referential ideal. Translation allows one to conceptualize movement between languages without depending on a single signified referent to give meaning to any word. Moreover, translation, as with the generation of knowledge in Ortiz’s notebooks, establishes its possibility through practice. This practice, by its very existence, protests theoretical claims of its impossibility, or suggests grounds for its possibility that do not depend on perfect correspondence with an original source: as Paul Ricoeur writes, “[T]ranslation is part of a long litany of ‘in

spite of all that” (111). The practice of translation is always particular, one that, until very recently (with the advent of machine translation) is and has been carried out by individuals who, even if they share a source text and methodology, inevitably come up with different results. Still, translation also allows one to dialogue with that referential ideal because it is still haunted by the dream of a perfect correspondence between words and things, a past paradisiacal or future messianic state in which translation is no longer needed because there is only one name for each thing, a name existing in a “pure language,” citing Walter Benjamin’s fundamental term, that is uniquely proper to it.

I am also turning to the framework of translation to read Ortiz because of two images that recur in volumes six and seven that recall two key metaphors for translation studies, both of which derive from or are consolidated in Benjamin: that of the broken vessel and that of the paradisiacal garden, where all things have one proper name. The image of the broken vessel, of course, comes from Benjamin’s foundational essay “The Task of the Translator,” which Antoine Berman calls “*le texte central du XX siècle sur la traduction*” (*the central text about translation in the twentieth century*) (my translation, 11). There, Benjamin famously compares human languages to “fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (260). In this formulation, translation, and by extension, language itself, takes on thing-like qualities. Fidelity in translation consists of “fidelity in reproducing the form” (260). This term, form, refers on a basic level to physical shape, and it might allow us to compare works made of two different linguistic materials the way we might compare a glass and a porcelain vase, or, if we are to be more faithful to Benjamin, the way we

might compare the nonidentical, but matching edges of a broken vessel's fragments to see how they might fit together. In either case, the form of such an object determines what it can hold and how we use it.

The other image, which is that of the garden, comes from an earlier, 1916 essay from Benjamin, titled "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." Here, Benjamin attributes things with a language of their own, a mute language that communicates both living and inanimate beings' mental content. Examining the Genesis story, he posits that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve received this mute language of the animals and plants, and their naming of these served as a kind of translation of that language: "a translation of the mute into the sonic . . . the translation of the nameless into name" (69). As the essay continues, Benjamin differentiates between the paradisiacal language of this translational naming, which allows perfect knowledge of things in themselves, and the many fallen languages made up of the "externally communicating word" (71) that mediate a signified separate from themselves.

Ortiz's writing, admittedly, is explicitly secular, and he does not claim a desire to find a paradisiacal origin or messianic end. Likewise, the vessels and garden-like scenes he invokes lack the archetypal quality of Benjamin's examples. Ortiz does not use the words vessel or garden, and his objects exist in the realm of what might be overlooked. One might imagine Benjamin's vessel as a vase or jug found on an archeological dig, for example, while Ortiz's vessels generally consist of machine parts and mass-produced containers relegated to a junk pile. Likewise, the plants that generate language in Ortiz's mind consist of weeds growing in an abandoned lot.

The interest that the *Cuadernos* take in things—and things in their environment—ties to a second area of context, that of an Argentine poetry scene that, beginning in the 1990s, has emphasized the book as object in both metaphorical and material ways. Poets aligned with a movement called *objetivismo*, or objectivism, as critic Ben Bollig explains, “wrote in and promoted a style that stripped away metaphorical and descriptive excesses, instead using colloquial language and quasi-cinematic techniques . . . to create poems that presented objects and were themselves objects in language” (*Politics* 14). The translation of the name of the North American poetic movement is no accident: the Argentine poets reached back to a lineage that includes figures like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, whose image graced the cover of the second issue of the influential literary magazine *18 whiskys* in 1993, alongside his famous line, “No ideas but in things.” Argentine writer Matías Moscardi observes that the translation that appeared on this cover—“No ideas salvo en las cosas”—itself calls attention to the material and imagistic quality of the written word. The identical English opening to this line—“No ideas”—could be superimposed on the Spanish version with a perfect correspondence. Alternative translations—including one by poet Sergio Raimondi published inside that same issue of the magazine that reads, “*Ideas, sí, pero en las cosas*”—lose the correspondence of the words’ physical form (Moscardi 78–79).

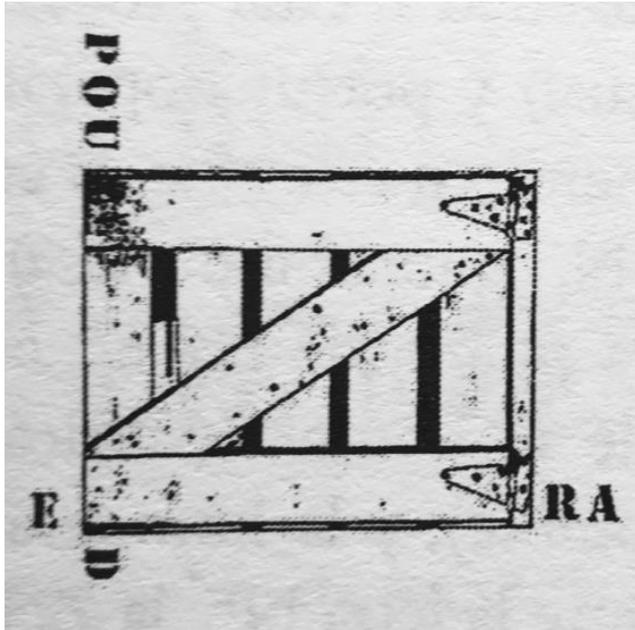


Fig. 2. “Noigandres,” by Clemente Padín (reprinted in Moscardi 217).

This implicit fusion of image and text has overt antecedents in the work of the mid-twentieth-century visual and concrete poets of the Southern Cone. For example, the visual poem depicted in figure 2, by the Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín, titled “Noigandres,” is a nod to both Ezra Pound and the Brazilian



Fig. 3. Mateísta mural, c. 1990 (image from Redacción EcoDías, <http://www.ecodias.com.ar/art/la-cultura-m%C3%A1s-all%C3%A1-de-lo-art%C3%ADstico>).

Concrete poets— Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, who identified themselves by the same name (Moscardi 217). The attention this poem draws to the formal qualities of the letter N

or Z—which allow each letter to be read as a simultaneous and plastic translation of the other—emphasizes the correspondence between the material composition of words

and their referential significance. This image was published in a 2005 book titled *Poesía visual* by a small press, Vox, which also published the first volumes of Ortiz's *Cuadernos*. This publisher, Vox, is located in Bahía Blanca, Argentina, an industrial port city that is also home to many contemporary poets, including Ortiz. As one more note on the relationship between poetry, image, and material object in Ortiz's milieu, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this city, Bahía Blanca was home to a group—that included Ortiz—called the *poetas mateístas*, or maté drinker poets, who published flyers, murals, and graffiti poetry that served as a way of writing on and writing from that physical environment and that, through public display, called into question traditional modes of poetic circulation (Bollig, *Politics* 103, Moscardi 207) (Fig. 3).³⁸

³⁸ Regarding the idea of place, fellow *mateísta* and *bahiense* poet Sergio Raimondi recalls:

Había algo en el mateísmo que tenía que ver con lo público, con ocupar espacios públicos. Ver la poesía no como un libro que se lee en un dormitorio o en un salón sublime de escuchas selectos, sino puesto en la pared por donde pasa todo el mundo. El mateísmo de algún modo conllevaba una intervención en el espacio público de la ciudad, y en ese lugar sí se puede pensar tal vez como parte de la genealogía por la cual estamos acá.

(There was something in *mateísmo* that had to do with the public, with occupying public spaces. Seeing poetry not like a book one reads in one's bedroom or in a sublime room filled with select listeners, but rather placed on the wall that everyone walks past. *Mateísmo* in some way carried with it an intervention in the public space of the city, and in that case one can think of it perhaps as part of the genealogy of why we are here.) (Redacción EcoDías.)



Fig. 4. Various volumes of the *Cuadernos*. Clockwise from top left: volumen one, published by Vox; volumes five, six, and seven, published in paperback by Eterna Cadencia; volume three and a half (back and front), published in an edition of fifty by miembro fantasma (personal photographs).

Interestingly, for all of their concern with the word as thing, only two volumes of Ortiz's *Cuadernos* call attention to the material quality of the book. One is the first volume, published in 2000 by Vox. The engraving printed on cardstock and failure of the flap to line up perfectly with the top of the front cover lend this small

volume the appearance of a handmade artist's book, one that asks to be considered as a unique, plastic object and that, through its unusual size and noticeable texture, reminds the reader that he or she must manipulate material in order to access the text (Moscardi 220). Subsequent volumes, published by Vox and other independent publishers (such as Gog y Magog and Eterna Cadencia), take the form of standard paperbacks in terms of size and the texture of their cover and the pages inside.

One volume, however, which does not figure into the official count of the *Cuadernos*, does take the physical form of a notebook. This volume, numbered 3 ½ and subtitled *La canción del poeta atrasado (Song of the Belated Poet)*, was published in an edition of fifty in 2015 by a small press in Córdoba called “miembro fantasma,” or “phantom limb.” The pages are long and narrow, and the binding is hand-stitched at the top edge, giving this volume of the *Cuadernos* the appearance of a spiral-bound steno pad or an artisanal blank book that one might purchase to keep a diary. The uniqueness and artisanal quality of this object is emphasized by the number of the edition (my copy is numbered 24/50), a signature, and a wax seal on the back cover. The content of this volume of the *Cuadernos* consists of a text Ortiz completed in 2004. Although some parts were reworked in later *Cuadernos*, this particular text had not been printed until, as Ortiz explains in the introduction, the publisher miembro fantasma wrote him to see if he had “algún miembro fantasma que haya quedado en los archivos físicos o digitales” (“any phantom limb that had remained in the physical or digital archives”). Ortiz associates this publication with making the abandoned text into a physical object: “los fantasmas siempre reaparecen y entonces hay que hacerles frente o ponerlos en palabras y imprimirlos. Así, deja de ser un fantasma y ingresa nuestro mundo 3D” (“phantoms always reappear and so one has to face them or put them into words and print them. Thus, it stops being a phantom and enters our 3D world”). Prior to this publication, the feeling of the text was something that only the writer could perceive. Now, the form of a physical book, it can be seen and touched by others, and the material and artisanal qualities of this particular book keep the reader aware of the reading process.

Most of the *Cuadernos*, however, establish themselves as notebooks, not through a physically formal imitation of a notebook but by presenting themselves as a work in progress by laying bare (or at least pretending to lay bare) the process of their composition. They are marked throughout by what Ortiz refers to as their provisional quality. The later volumes in particular make reference to earlier volumes and analyze the development of the narrator's thinking process; they sometimes cite text from unpublished, handwritten drafts. They also conduct seemingly scholastic exercises with language, as happens in volume one, published in 2000. This volume, written in verse, connects the difficulty of speaking the unspeakable with an exercise in conjugating verbs:

no poesía

no lengua

no digas nada

de lo que no se puede hablar

mejor

ni mover el aire

ni abrir o cerrar las manos

mejor no sufrir

[...]

no hubo, no habrá

y nunca jamás podría llegar a haber

palabra

(no poetry

no language

say nothing

of what cannot be spoken

better

not to move the air

not to open or close your hands

better not to suffer

[...]

there was not, there will not be,

never again would it be possible to arrive at there being

the word)

Here, speaking leads to suffering; play with language ends in wordlessness. Ortiz revisits and revises these conclusions in volume seven (published in 2013), where he confronts actual, rather than imagined, wordlessness in the form of his own writer's block and a high school friend's aphasia. Here, he posits the opposite: "De lo que no se puede hablar es mejor hablar" ("of what cannot be spoken it is better to speak" (295). The ultimately provisional quality of the initial conclusions in volume one point toward a need to keep speaking. The initial passage, paradoxically, discusses how

language breaks down through a series of verb conjugations that demonstrate the grammatical mechanisms by which language works.

The first four volumes of the project intersperse questions about language into larger poetic narratives that deal with topics such as a father-son relationship (volume one), the fate of a statue in a park (volume two), and a shipwreck (volume four, which is written in dramatic verse). Volumes five, six, and seven, which were published together as a single volume by one of Argentina's major independent publishers, Eterna Cadencia, in 2013, mark a turning point in Ortiz's project for several reasons. First, these volumes are written primarily in prose. Though some verse fragments are interspersed throughout them, in particular toward the end of each volume, this prose might best be described under the broad umbrella of the personal essay, in that they incorporate memoir, academic study, and observations of the first-person narrator's environment to interlace self-discovery with discovery of the world. Second, these volumes are the first in the series to use images, a device used in this group, as in the remaining volumes, primarily as illustration of the text. These images include photographs, maps, and examples of typography. In volume six, the only images are reproductions of labels on two different machines—a radio and a motor—not reproduced photographically, but approximated with fonts available on Microsoft Word. These volumes are also the first to put questions about language and its material qualities overtly at their center. Volume five analyzes the role of handwriting and typography in the formation of the written word. Volume six develops an idiosyncratic philosophy of language on the basis of the semiotic theory of Louis Hjelmslev. Volume seven, as mentioned above, poses as a pseudo-scientific study—a “treatise on

phytolinguistics”—that shows how objects generate words in the mind of person who sees them.

In contrast to the passage from volume one cited above, volume six examines how language works precisely when it does not work through its conventional sign-giving function. One level on which this takes place is by rethinking the word as referential, that is, pointing to a sign outside itself. Ortiz’s narrator here views language as part of a system of interconnected objects, in which that connection is not unidirectional, that is, extending from the word and, in the case of nouns, at least, to the thing it names. Ortiz borrows from the Danish semiotician Louis Hjelmslev, who, in his *Prologomena to a Theory of Language*, published in 1943, rejects “the common definition of a sign as an expression that points to a content outside the sign itself” (Nöth 70). Rather, as Winfried Nöth explains, “he defined the sign as an entity generated by the indissoluble connection between an expression and a content” (70). The form of expression and form of content are called functives, and the connection between them is called a function. The relationship between expression and content is interdependent, a relationship that Hjelmslev classifies as one of solidarity.

Ortiz reformulates Hjelmslev’s idea of functives to mean, not content and expression, but phenomena or things, and a function is a connection or dependency that exists between them. Words and things can serve as functives that enter into a dependency, or function, with each other, as can words with other words, or also things and things (setting aside for the moment that words can also be things). To give a concrete example, I’ll return to the opening lines of this volume. Ortiz follows the

first abstract propositions with a few others that at once invoke poetic tropes and relate words to concrete things:

5. Existen las flores que abren sus pétalos a la noche. Están cerca del gallinero.
6. Las flores son cosas y son palabras.
7. Abren sus pétalos. Se pronuncian.
8. Están bajo las estrellas, que también son cosas y son palabras, y brillan y se pronuncian.

[Proposition 9 consists of an extended discussion of Hjemlslev's theory.]

10. Las flores y las estrellas copulan en la misma oración. Luego del punto, se pueden cerrar los ojos y solo queda el aroma.

(5. The flowers that open their petals to the night exist. They are near the henhouse.

6. Flowers are things and are words.
7. They open their petals. They pronounce themselves.
8. They are beneath the stars, which are also things and words, and they shine and pronounce themselves.

[. . .]

10. Flowers and stars join in the same sentence. After the period, they can close their eyes, and only the fragrance remains.) (135–136)

The question of flowers in particular recurs in the following volume, the *Treatise on Phytolinguistics*. However, later in volume six, the narrator explains that flowers and stars can serve as the terminals, or functives, of a function. As the notebook

progresses, he provides examples of the idea of the function, or dependency, through the connection between his gaze and the circuits of a broken radio that he looks at, or, more abstractly at one point, “semillas y emociones” (“seeds and emotions”) (144). It is interesting to note that the narrator’s subjective or affective states share the same functionive status as objects in this interdependent relationship.

All of these functions, according to Ortiz, are interconnected in “una malla tupida que, de hecho, abarca al conjunto del universo” (“a tangled mesh that, in fact, embraces the entire universe” (151). These lines, while they are “invisibles” (“invisible”), are not detached from the material: they can be “temporales, espaciales, utilitarias, morales, políticas e imaginarias” (“temporal, spatial, utilitarian, moral, political, and imaginary”) (151). Words are things, but they also mark the path of these invisible lines: proposition 22 states, “Las palabras hacen visibles esas líneas vectoriales como el polvillo en suspensión que marca la trayectoria de un rayo solar al filtrarse por las rendijas de una persiana” (“Words mark these vectors like the dust suspended in the air that marks the path of a sunbeam filtering through the blinds”) (151). The poetic text that can result from this process is called a verbal-functional projection, or a PVF for its initials in Spanish (*proyección verbal-funcional*). These theoretical ideas, however, are proposed within the context of a literary or poetic work, so moving back to the poetic premise that there are “no ideas but in things”—understanding things specifically as physical objects—I will turn to how Ortiz develops these ideas through a study of material things—and more importantly, things that no longer function as they should—in a way that will lead back to the study of language through translation.

As mentioned earlier, Ortiz's narrator encounters a number of broken vessels that work on him, or enter into a functional dependency with him, precisely through their broken state. Here, I am understanding the term *vessel* in a broad sense, as something that holds something else, not limited to what I imagine in Benjamin as a sort of broken vase or jar. The narrator's field of study fuses the literal and metaphorical levels of the text in that it is an actual field, a plot of land his father-in-law owns in the countryside. More specifically, within this field, the narrator conducts his observations at a junk pile near the chicken coop.

The first object he studies is an enameled coffeepot, hanging on a chain-link fence. It has a small hole in the bottom, which causes the narrator to speculate on its material history. He imagines someone dropped the coffeepot while washing it. The enamel chipped, and rust ate away at the metal underneath, and now, in its brokenness, it acquires a new function. The narrator lifts it overhead, looks through, and sees "una estrella incandescente" ("an incandescent star") on the coffeepot's "fondo oscuro" ("dark bottom"): a bit of sun (139). The injury gives it a different function, understood as use: it becomes a "cafetera solar" ("solar coffeepot") (141). It also reveals a function, in the pseudo-Hjelmslevian sense, as summarized in proposition 16: "Una función se descubre mirando con insistencia un objeto hasta que el ojo segregue un líquido caliente y aromático" ("A function is discovered by looking insistently at an object until one's eye releases a hot and aromatic liquid") (140). The gaze and the sun are two functives; the function, the sunbeam that passes through the coffeepot, produces not only the text, the proposition whose words reveal its path, but also a physiological and possibly affective response.

Another kind of vessel the narrator encounters in the junk pile relates to language, not just by producing a “function,” but by the fact that these vessels are printed with words: namely, an old coffee can. The narrator is unable to read the entire label on the coffee can because it is rusted out. The label is banal and recounts the material history, not of the metallic vessel, per se, but what it once contained: the brand (Café Tres Ríos); ground with ten percent sugar, grown in Brazil, the weight (1 kg), the date it was packaged, the address of the former coffee company, its inspection number from by the Ministry of Health. The narrator is able to fill in the words (although not the variable date and number) made illegible by rust when he finds an intact example of the same coffee can inside his father-in-law’s house, in the kitchen cabinet. Turning momentarily to the logic of translation, these coffee cans represent two versions of the same text, although neither is original with relation to the other: both are copies, presumably, of a factory prototype, although a true original might not even exist, given the planned space for variability in the production date and inspection number. The coffee can found in the junk pile, divested of its function of holding coffee, fails also in its function of revealing a legible text because, deemed useless, it has been abandoned to decay, and rust has eaten some of the words away. Its failure, however, refunctionalizes the preserved coffee can, which is now not only legible in itself, but can be used to read—or better, rewrite—another.

The coffee cans’ text, while created to have the same form, differs in terms of its state of preservation and in terms of planned variations in production date and inspection number. The text on the two cans also differs in one other important way. Each was designed to be repurposed to hold other pantry items when the coffee ran

out. The narrator turns the can in the junk pile to the back side and sees the manufacturer had printed the word “rice” there. The coffee can in the pantry, meanwhile, is labeled “flour.” This marketing device, which would encourage consumers to buy more coffee until they had collected a complete set, would refunctionalize the vessel once it exhausted its original purpose of transmitting, as it were, the coffee it once contained. It is in this, the intersection of need and usability, or replication and redundancy, that the texts’ temporal order gains importance: once the consumer has accumulated one of each example of this variation of the labels’ text, she can throw the rest away. The narrator observes: “No necesariamente sobreviven los más fuertes, sino las primeras” (“It is not necessarily the fittest that survive, but the first”) (147). The first become the fittest and serve, in a kind of reverse translation, as a code to decipher later versions of the text.

The vessel of the intact coffee can, however, exists in a larger context that, if not a vessel, is at least a holding place—the kitchen cupboard—and it is here that another of its functions reveals itself: not as a vessel holding another thing, but as a thing held by a greater vessel. I am using function here in two senses: in terms of instrumental purpose or use, and in terms of dependency or connection. The encounter with the coffee can in the father-in-law’s pantry reminds the narrator of an identical can in his childhood home—identical except for the fact that this one held sugar—and that he still expects to find, stored in its proper place, every time he visits his father. The important thing about this vessel is not that it serves the function of holding sugar—if it runs out, it can always be refilled. Rather, this thing, this piece or fragment in the assemblage of items stored in the cupboard, serves to facilitate an affective and

material practice: “[e]l acto casi reflejo de manotear el recipiente cuando la azucarera se vacía devendrá rito sin sentido, además que no encuentra objeto” (“the almost reflexive act of reaching for container when the sugar dish runs low would become a senseless ritual, a gesture that wouldn’t find an object”) (147–148). The arrangement of these fragments, and the breaking of the order, affects how one goes about one’s daily tasks. The proper assemblage of these objects, these fragments, may not aspire toward an end on the order of Benjamin’s “pure language”; to quote Ortiz, “no afecta al desenvolvimiento del universe” (“it doesn’t affect the development of the universe”) (147). However, this order, this form, affects the one who organizes his or her daily practice around it: Ortiz writes, “Los ritos aprisionan la mente, pero al mismo tiempo la liberan del *terror vacui*, de los abismos de lo aleatorio y el azar” (“Rituals imprison the mind, but at the same time they liberate it from the *horror vacui*, of the abysses of randomness and chance”) (148). These fragments, in short, fill the vessel of one’s life.

In the universal web, the tangled mesh of functions, things do not stand alone: they exist only in states of dependence, which makes it logical that two of the vessels Ortiz encounters are built into larger objects, into machines, in such a way that their functionality—their ability to work—depends on them. These vessels are parts of a greater whole, even if the function of that whole is the same as the function of a vessel, whose purpose is to hold something else. One of the machines in the junk pile is an antique radio, which contains the label pictured in figure 5 (142). This label provides clues that can help one trace the radio’s material history: the brand, the model and series number, the name and location of the importers. The narrator does not read the text for this information, however. He first reads this text as a whole, and then he

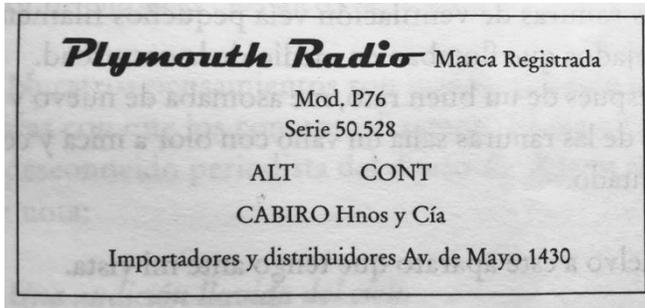


Fig. 5. Plymouth radio label, from *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura*, Vol. VI (141).

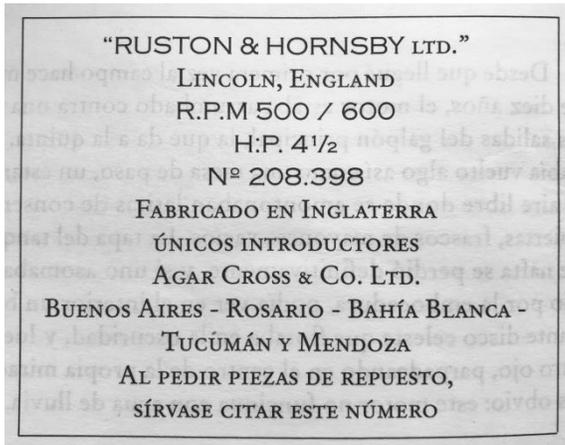


Fig. 6. Antique engine label, from *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* Vol. VI (152).

materially fragments it: he holds the “solar coffeepot” above the label and reads the label through the little hole, one letter at a time. Then he describes what remains of the radio itself. In one sense, it

is a fragment without a vessel—

the cabinet is lost, and only the chassis remains. Yet this chassis contains another vessel, a vacuum tube, the part of the machine that functions as a signal amplifier: that is, it amplifies the electrical signal so that it is strong enough to be played over a speaker, to be

converted into words and other sound.

The other machine the narrator finds near the chicken coop is an engine from an agricultural machine—what kind, Ortiz doesn’t specify, though he imagines it was used in the production of wheat. As with the radio, the only image Ortiz provides is a visually approximate reproduction of the label it contains (figure 6). This image reproduces the words of the original, but visually, it does not match: it seems to have been made with the one of the fonts preinstalled in Microsoft Word, which does not quite line up with his description of the original letters’ “líneas art-nouveau” (“art-nouveau lines”) (153). The narrator reads this label as he read the label on the radio,

letter by letter, the letters fragmented and “conjugados” (“conjugated”) (152) now by two devices—the lens of his glasses and the solar coffeepot. He considers the letters as objects: the “cuatro extremidades” (“four extremities”) of the H, the “orificio” (“orifice”) of the R, the “fusión de cuerpos en un solo cuerpo verbal” (“fusion of bodies in a single verbal body”) (153). The fact that the engine was, as the label indicates, “fabricado en Inglaterra” (“made in England”) might locate it in frameworks associated with a problematic translation—as a kind of transnational exchange in which the colonial economic power dominates. The narrator recognizes this context: he observes, “Leo sobre la superficie de estas cosas la sintaxis de un discurso mil veces repetido y denunciado” (“I read on the surface of these things the syntax of a discourse repeated and denounced a thousand times”) (153). As mentioned earlier, this engine doesn’t work. Although the narrator says the cylinders (themselves vessels) might retain compression, the moving parts have rusted together, and the gas tank (another vessel) now collects rain. The narrator tries to turn the gears by hand, but they won’t budge. So he goes to the toolbox, pulls out a wrench, and tries to remove the motor head—which is covered with the text pictured here—to see what of the original substances that filled the motor, like oil, might remain inside. Again, he has no luck.

If one thinks of this engine as a collection of vessels, it is broken in a way that is opposite of fragmentation: it is useless because it cannot come apart. The fragmentability of its individual components is what allows it to function, to move. So the narrator watches an ant crawl over the letters of the label for a while, and then he decides to leave. The image of the engine remains with him, however, and years later, he recalls how he placed his hand on the crank and traces in the air the gesture of

trying to turn it. This movement—this practice—calls to mind the movement of writing; the engine generates in the writer the form of text (161). The engine—the broken, though unfragmented vessel—is refunctionalized through a function that depends on the narrator’s hand, and it becomes *una máquina de escribir*—the term used in Spanish for a typewriter, which translates literally to a writing machine.

Typewriters, like other machines, produce a uniform product and/or perform a uniform process. The typewriter produces letters that, though they may be arranged in different configurations, always look the same. The engine, though it might power different machines with different levels of horsepower to different ends, functions through a standardized process of internal combustion using the same basic parts. But in this case, the material that the writing machine works on is the human body—or rather, one particular human body—through the medium of the writer’s memory. The uniform or universal process thus leads to a unique or particular result. Further, the interaction between two non-linguistic beings has language as its result. This language is not an abstract word, nor an inscription, nor is it made of sound waves vibrating through the air. Rather, this language consists of making the unrecorded form of the letters themselves. Language is made when the thing works on the person, and when the thing’s broken state makes the person do work.

This topic of language working on a person comes up again in volume seven, which centers on an encounter with a plant. Volume seven, like its predecessor, is framed as a kind of academic investigation, though this time situating itself not in the realm of philosophy, but somewhere between linguistics and cognitive science. The prefatory material summarizes its contents discursively: “A lo largo de este volumen

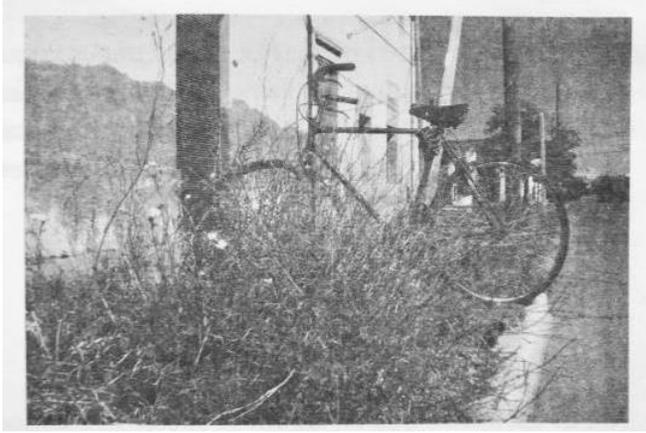


Fig. 7. Photograph of weeds that generate language in volume seven (273).

se desarrollará la problemática de los yuyos; más específicamente la de un yuyito determinado que crece en la esquina de Liniers y Castelar, y su relación con los aspectos morfosintácticos del lenguaje por un lado y con las alteraciones mentales por el otro”

(“This volume will develop the problematic of weeds, more specifically, that of a particular little weed that grows on the corner of Liniers and Castelar, and its relationship, on the one hand, with the morphosyntactic aspects of language, and on the other with that of mental alterations” (199)) (figure 7). In the previous volume, the language-generating quality of the engine emerged gradually, in the context of various other objects’ relationship to language and in a study of language as object in itself. Here, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the focus is on one particular object, one that moreover is a living being—a plant—something that often avoids the designation of object.

Although this book is introduced through the framework of scientific study, Ortiz emphasizes throughout the preface that the book does not seek to be a guide in any traditional sense. He spends some time in the first few pages studying a teakettle (this time a functioning one) and the local bus routes; however, the book is not, he tells the reader:

- a) Tratado universal de las pavas y malezas.

- b) Elogio de las plantas y/o yuyos en cuanto sustancias ilegales, estupefacientes o alucinógenas. [. . .]
 - c) Guía de recorridos de colectivos con plano adjunto de la ciudad de Bahía Blanca.
- (a) A universal treatise on teakettles and weeds.
 - b) A tribute to plants and/or weeds with regard to their illegal, mind-altering, or hallucinogenic substances.
 - c) A guide to the bus routes with an attached map of the city of Bahía Blanca. (206)

This book does not seek to make a grand philosophical contribution, even if about a frivolous subject; it is not concerned with plants' chemically induced physiological effects. Although it concerns itself with local geography, it does not intend to be a reference that gives a reader the unchanging information she or he needs to navigate the urban space. Rather, the book intends to instigate in its readers a method for conducting the "science of the particular," mentioned above, one of whose ends, the narrator tells us, is "[l]a felicidad" ("happiness") (207).

The methods the narrator employs to develop this "science," as well as his own happiness, include registering, in written form, close observations of both himself and his surroundings. He aims for this book to blur disciplinary boundaries: rather than being "un trabajo de botánica farmacológica" ("a work of pharmacological botany") (199), the narrator calls the work "un tratado de herboristería verbal, una exploración entre los límites de los diversos reinos en que acostumbramos a separar la naturaleza y la cultura" ("a treatise on verbal herbalism, an exploration of the limits of the different

realms in which we tend to separate nature and culture”) (199). On the literary level, the book blurs genre. After the prefatory material, this *Cuaderno* has three main parts. The first, the personal narrative mentioned above about a high school friend, is named after this friend and titled “Nelson (Camino rumbo a la entropía, pero no es una pava ni un molinito)” (“Nelson (Path toward entropy, but it is neither a kettle nor a little pinwheel”)) (the pinwheel refers to an image in the text not discussed in this chapter). The second part is ostensibly the heart of this volume and the part that lends its title to the notebook as a whole, that is, the “Tratado de fitolingüística,” or “Treatise on Phytolinguistics.” It combines personal narrative and essayistic speculation to describe the narrator’s encounter with the language-generating plant. The “Consideraciones finales: Hipótesis de avance”) (“Final considerations: Advance Hypothesis”), provides several postulates on the idea of the verbal-functional projection developed in volume six. Also in the final section, revisiting part of the earlier narrative with Nelson, as well as ideas developed in volume four of the series, the narrator addresses his lost friend by invoking a voyage in submarine to the bottom of the sea.

This idea of the voyage to the bottom of the sea has a concrete referent in the afternoons the narrator and Nelson used to spend at Nelson’s house, watching the 1960s American television science-fiction series titled “Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea” (or “Viaje al fondo del mar” in Spanish).³⁹ The show, the narrator explains, was about a Cold War era nuclear-powered submarine that battled underwater monsters under the command of a character named Admiral Nelson. Nelson’s (that is, the

³⁹ The question of the show’s original language or American origin is not discussed in the *Cuadernos*.

narrator's friend's) parents ran a small shop out of their house. After high school, Ortiz went on to study literature, while Nelson studied industrial engineering. However, he soon dropped out and began to spend his days in the reduced space of the house, working at the shop and doing crosswords and word searches, obsessed with words that fit in the quadrilateral space. Eventually he lost the ability to speak and was institutionalized. The narrator learns about Nelson's life after high school decades later, when he happens to visit Nelson's house, and his father explains what happened. Eventually the narrator visits Nelson in the mental hospital, where he observes that his now silent friend, rendered incapable of human interaction, "era un pez" ("was a fish") (252).

This encounter causes the narrator to revisit the idea posited in volume one that it is better not to speak of what cannot be spoken. Rather, in the act of giving words to this event, this book becomes a protest against silence itself. This protest gives the book another reason for its existence, and ordinary words, and the lack of them for medical rather than mystical causes, desacralize the notion of silence:

[L]a situación del propio Nelson [es] el motivo suficiente para que este libro se convierta en el último acto de resistencia frente a la mudez.

Los remolinos de viento agitan los tallos de la planta. Por eso su inmovilidad es aparente, pero el silencio es real.

Y la nada es silenciosa.

Y el avance de la nada no es el silencio místico: es la afasia.

(Nelson's situation is sufficient reason to turn this book into a final act of resistance against muteness.

The eddies of wind agitate the stalks of the plant. Because of this, their immobility is apparent, but the silence is real.

And the nothingness is silent.

And the advance of the nothingness is not the mystical silence: it is aphasia.) (238)

Words, in Ortiz's universe, may not have a messianic power, but they fill, and hence eliminate, the horror of the void aphasia leaves—both medically induced aphasia, and the general condition of being left speechless. The book, made up of the material of words, is something that stands against the nothing of wordlessness. In this volume of the *Cuadernos*, wordlessness does not appear as an aesthetic or ethical response to atrocity; rather, wordlessness is the atrocity itself. Nelson's aphasia, the narrator tells us, is also accompanied by a kind of blindness: though his eyes have not physically degenerated, he no longer seems to register anything he sees. The sadness his aphasia inspires in the narrator lies in his disconnection not only from words, but also from things in the world.

Nelson's situation parallels, to an extreme, a condition of wordlessness the narrator experienced for several years in which, rather than being unable to speak, he was unable to write. Borrowing from the clinical terminology used to describe Nelson's illness, the narrator tells us, "me había vuelto ágrafo" ("I had become agraphic") (261). He clarifies that his was not a case of writer's block that consists of a lack of inspiration; rather, he found himself literally incapable of writing, of moving a pen across paper, of putting together a grammatically coherent sentence. The narrator is not concerned, however, with explaining to the reader what caused this state. He

identifies its origin in a couple of “frustraciones” (“frustrations”) (260) from three years before, but he declines to describe them. He observes that his literary drought coincided with a period of literal, climactic drought, although he takes care to note that neither influenced the other. The nothingness existed, and he does not need to elaborate its cause. The narrator does not need to ask where nothingness comes from. Rather, he seeks to understand where words come from, since they are not created from this nothingness alone.

As mentioned already, the narrator regains his ability to write through passing observations of an ordinary plant. As he explains, during a particularly strong period of the drought, each time he passed a certain corner in his neighborhood, he noticed, almost involuntarily, a cluster of weeds. As time passed, he noticed their stems dry out, trash get caught up in them, the remainder of their leaves disappear. One day his gaze lingered for “unas fracciones de segundo” (“a few fractions of a second”) (263), a gaze that is “casi ingrávida” (“almost weightless”) and that, unlike the plant, “no existe como un objeto más. No es una cosa, ni un fenómeno, ni siquiera un acontecimiento, sino apenas rayos de luz que penetran por la pupila y se transforman en impulsos nerviosos” (“does not exist as one more object. It is not a thing, nor a phenomenon, nor even an event, but is rather mere rays of light that penetrate the eye and transform into nervous impulses”) (263). The gaze, like the function described in volume six, is a kind of invisible line connecting him and this other thing, and this gaze or function generates words. These words come in the specific form of writing in a notebook one morning sometime later, words that detail the relationship of a man with a weed—a man “que rápidamente puede ser identificado como YO” (“who

quickly can be identified as ME”) (264). The narrator transcribes this writing, this document, in volume seven of the *Cuadernos*, complete with its “errores y excesos” (“errors and excesses”) (266), as evidence of two things: a first draft of the ideas about verbal-functional projections that he would later develop further, and also evidence of the act of writing itself.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Benjamin, in “On Language as Such,” attributes to things a power, by which, even if not through words, they communicate their own mental being. Ortiz, for his part, gives plants, animals, and objects no such power. In his initial, written assessment of his encounter with the weed, he states that the function—that is, the connection between the man and the weed—is unidirectional, one extending from the man to the indifferent plant. Even this indifference, he notes, is another projection the man makes on the plant (265). In the case of his friend Nelson, he says, any words he might utter no longer have a connection with the world, with people and things. Weeds, for their part, don’t have a connection with people. They do not require human care: “El yuyo no necesita absolutamente nada. O si lo precisa, no le prestamos atención” (“The weed needs absolutely nothing. Or if it needs something, we don’t pay attention”) (269). Like language disconnected from an object, the weed itself is meaningless: “Es lo insignificante” (“It is the insignificant”) (269). Weeds do not depend on human action to exist: “Los yuyos aparecen sin que los hayamos sembrado. Aparecen sin que los hayamos nombrado” (Weeds appear without our planting them. They appear without our naming them”) (270). He contrasts the weed, whose name he does not know at first, with the rose, “el paradigma de toda flor” (“the paradigm of all flowers”) (278),

as well as the squash blossom, which could be said to be as beautiful as the rose, according to the narrator, but which is valued instead for the fruit it produces, as well as for being an edible product in itself (280). The weed is to these flowers as bugs are to bees and butterflies, he says: undesirable, but something that multiplies without human effort: “Los yuyos y los bichos están al lado del don” (“Weeds and bugs are on the side of the gift”) (270). In Benjamin’s essay, objects, plants, and animals find a recipient for their communication in the words of man, which translate their mute language. In this volume of Ortiz’s *Cuadernos*, plants (and by extension, other non-human beings) do not themselves communicate to the human mind; rather, through the human gaze, they leave an impression on the nervous system, which is what generates words. The naming of things in turn multiplies these things’ capacity to generate further language, as Ortiz observes when he discovers this particular weed’s name, *flor amarilla*, which translates literally to “yellow flower.”

This name, yellow flower, even if not one communicated directly to the mind of a particular man by the plant, seems that it might, if not escape, at least minimize the problem of arbitrariness that Benjamin attributes to the bourgeois sign. The name is “directo, referencial”; (“direct, referential”) (276). While the directness of the name might indicate this is the yellow flower par excellence, the narrator finds nothing to distinguish it from other yellow flowers. Unlike flowers whose names correspond to their behavior—*buenas noches*, or good night, a plant that blooms in the evening; a climbing plant called *enamorada del muro*, or lover of the wall; a thorny plant called *abrepuños*, or open fist—the name, *flor amarilla*, apparently lacks metaphor (276). Unlike the rose, which “está en constante peligro de transformarse en símbolo” (“in

constant danger of turning into a symbol”) (277) (or even of being cut for a bouquet), the yellow flower enjoys “una literalidad prosaica hasta el punto de la redundancia: esta flor amarilla es una flor amarilla” (“a prosaic literality to the point of redundancy: this yellow flower is a yellow flower”) (277). And as such, “[d]espojada de metáforas y de tradiciones simbólicas, la flor amarilla trabaja sobre el sistema nervioso desde su más absoluta y redundante literalidad, es decir, actúa literalmente” (“divested of metaphors and symbolic tradition, the yellow flower works on the nervous system from its most absolute and redundant literality, that is, it acts literally”) (286). Just as the bees leave with a literal yellow coating from the flowers’ pollen after the bees pass by them, so, too, does the narrator feel a literal effect in his nervous system as he passes by this weed every day on his bicycle and takes notes.

The proposition that the name, *flor amarilla*, is not metaphoric seems untenable when thinking of language as signifying a signified. However concrete the term might seem, it is not identical with the thing itself. Words might be things, per the *Cuadernos* volume six, but a particular word is not the same as a particular thing. The statement, “esta flor amarilla es una flor amarilla” (and its near repetition some ten pages later, “La flor amarilla es una flor amarilla” (“The yellow flower is a yellow flower”) (286)) invokes the law of identity (“A is A”), as well as its literary precedent in Gertrude Stein’s “A rose is a rose is a rose.” The difference in specifiers in Ortiz’s statements about the flower—the move from a demonstrative pronoun (“esta”) to an indefinite article (“una”), or from the definite (“la”) to the indefinite article (“una”)—might indicate a different kind of identity, in that it places “this” yellow flower in the category of yellow flowers more generally. Yet at the same time as this phrasing

establishes the notion of a universal classification or categorization, it also emphasizes the notion of the particular, which is the level on which Ortiz claims to conduct his science.

That particularity exists on the level of individual experience, as the narrator notes at the beginning of this volume, where he conducts a study of his own teakettle and invites readers to do the same. Even if objects are of a same type, he says they must be studied in their unique manifestations. When a reader does that—when he thinks about “su propia pava, cuyo temperamento exacto, textura, capacidad, colores, grado de quisquillosidad, horror por el abandono sobre las llamas, sensaciones de soledad y enfriamiento ante el mármol de la mesada solo él conoce y no yo” (“his own kettle, whose exact temperament, texture, capacity, colors, degree of fussiness, horror of abandonment over the flame, sensations of solitude and cooling on the marble the countertop are things that only he knows and not I” (202)—a possible connection between reader’s kettle and the narrator’s kettle will be revealed. The narrator says that perhaps the reader will then rush to pick up a pen and write about it, and he compares this connection to Hertz’s experiment that led to the production of radio waves, in which a spark crossed between two capacity spheres. In the case that such a connection is made with the reader, “la poesía será ciencia de lo general” (“poetry will be a science of the general”). Returning to the idea of the web of functions discussed in volume six, universality or generality consists not in the realm of identity between disparate things, but rather in connection between them, a connection whose path is marked through the written word.

Language, likewise, is to be used in its particularity, that is, in its everyday use. The “neurobotany” or “phytolinguistic” science that Ortiz conducts expressly rejects the scientific nomenclature in Latin that seeks to make knowledge of living creatures universally accessible. This scientific language, unlike Ortiz’s language—“this yellow flower is a yellow flower”—is in fact the kind that aspires to a law of identity, if not through a repeated word, through its repeated form. The Latin name, by ostensibly belonging to no culture or otherwise a universal culture, in part through its absence from everyday use, seeks to overcome the need for translation and may even seem to be untranslatable (once a scientific name is translated, it ceases to be scientific). The scientific name, the narrator writes, “aspira a la rigurosidad algebraica de una fórmula siempre idéntica a sí misma que, imaginariamente, se eleva por encima de las diferencias culturales, las contingencias históricas o las arbitrariedades personales” (“aspires to the algebraic rigor of a formula that is always identical to itself and that, in an imaginary way, rises above cultural differences, historical contingencies, or personal arbitrariness”) (288). Common names, by contrast, are laden with concrete connotations; moreover, more than one common name can exist for a single thing, even in the same language: the yellow flower, in Spanish, is also known as *mostacilla* or *yuyo hediondo* (287). One might work through a series of syllogisms to determine that these two names (we can call them B and C) in fact refer to the same thing as name A, *flor amarilla*; however, on the level of name itself, B and C are not A. Thinking of these names in terms of intralingual translation, they do not carry the same connotation (for example, *yuyo hediondo* translates to “stinking weed.”) Common names are multiple, overabundant, even, as are the proliferating yellow

flowers themselves. Scientific nomenclature might exist, the narrator says, on the same continuum as the logical languages of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that sought to eliminate “las imperfecciones del lenguaje cotidiano” (“the imperfections of everyday language”) (288). But the yellow flowers stand as proof, according to the narrator, that universality is a myth. The particular and concrete flowers, he claims, eliminate the need for philosophical arguments against universality. And so, perhaps, might the abundance of their particular common names.

The scope of linguistic transformation in this book tends to take place on the level of a single language—that is, Spanish—rather than between languages, the level on which translation is typically understood. Movement between languages here and elsewhere in the *Cuadernos* tends to happen on the level of etymology, usually in an attempt to understand words through their Greek and Latin roots. In volume seven, the narrator also looks at the indigenous (specifically Quechua) history of Argentine or Latin American Spanish words, such as *yuyo* or *zapallo*, the word for squash or pumpkin. The word *zapallo*, the narrator claims, enjoys the same lack of metaphoric association as the *flor amarilla*: unlike the Castilian *calabaza*, it cannot turn into a carriage or serve as a decoration on Halloween. The common name simply brings the color orange to mind, and the *zapallo*, like its blossoms, can be eaten. At one point in the description of the *flor amarilla*, the narrator appears to leave the Spanish language but in fact does not, noting that “[l]os italianos la llaman *rúcula*” (“[t]he Italians call it *arugula*”) (289), using the Spanish *rúcula* instead of the actual Italian *rucola*. Unlike in Italy, however, the plant is not eaten in Bahía Blanca, but is rather considered an invasive species—one that, according to a study Ortiz cites, could serve as cattle

fodder. And yet the transformation Ortiz seeks to explore is not one that happens between words or through the effect of magic words or human action on things: rather, it lies in things' (and in this volume, particularly plants') transformation into "proteínas, palabras y cadenas oracionales, bolas de estiércol" ("proteins, words, and chains of sentences, piles of manure") (290).

The transformation of the plant, whether into the products of physical or mental digestion, is one that presupposes a human-plant relation. In Ortiz's speculations, it connects to mythologies, both classical and indigenous, of people turning into plants (such as Daphne's transformation into a laurel). However, the plant also turns into the human by way of the words it produces. Here Ortiz's work with objects connects to a North American Objectivism, which he cites directly through a passage from Charles Olson's "Projective Verse": "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE" (Ortiz 305, Olson 43). In Ortiz, this bodily transformation takes place through the voice that speaks and the hand that writes, although not through the effect of the word on the body, but rather through the effect of the thing on the body that produces the word. The memory of the engine in volume six makes his hand move in imitation of the form of writing and of turning the crank; the vision of the ordinary weed in volume seven in turn affects his brain to make him write. The plant does not communicate to the human mind, as might happen in Benjamin's garden, but the mind projects onto the plant and is transformed in turn. In volume seven, functions or connections not only exist between words and things, but also between the "I" and other things. It also seems that this connection might happen between other people conducting this same

exercise, and that is how, according to Ortiz, the science of the particular comes about. This science does not depend upon exactitude: using the imperative, Ortiz invites the reader to do what he has done: “Mientras riega sus propias plantas—ellas siempre lo necesitan—, repase las categorías sintácticas y transforme una flor; diga en voz alta ‘sapallu’ con la pronunciación quechua o al menos tal como se imagina que es” (“While you water your own plants—they always need it—review the syntactic categories and transform a flower; say ‘sapallu’ out loud with a Quechua pronunciation or at least how you imagine that pronunciation to be”) (283). Repeating his refrain with slight variations, he says, “La ciencia de palabras vegetales debe ser hecha por todos” (“The science of vegetable words should be done by all”) (283). The method, in this case, is the science itself.

The image of the flower, as well as that of the bee collecting pollen, connects Ortiz’s project to a longer tradition of notebooks, specifically in the form medieval *florilegia*, or “flower collections” and early modern commonplace books. Both of these precursors to the notebook exist between the private and public: these collections of quotations from authority were compiled by individuals both for private reference and for public circulation (Moss 25).⁴⁰ The gathering of public information from disparate sources in these genres often was often organized under general headings by which the citations could be located and knowledge could thus be ordered, prefiguring later encyclopedias. However, more than just organize external information, these

⁴⁰ For an extensive study on the relationship between notes and commonplace books to the development of reference genres such as dictionaries and encyclopedias, see Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, Yale University Press, 2010.

early forms of notebooks also changed the person who arranged them in a way that might be likened to the physiological, and even digestive transformation that Ortiz attributes to the genre. Ann Moss observes that both medieval florilegia and early modern commonplace books recurred frequently to Seneca's metaphor, from the *Epistulae morales*, of the bee gathering pollen from different flowers. Moss quotes Seneca at length:

We should imitate bees and we should keep in separate compartments whatever we have collected from our diverse reading, for things conserved separately keep better. Then, diligently applying all the resources of our native talent, we should mingle all the various nectars we have tasted, and turn them into a single sweet substance, in such a way that, even if it is apparent where it originated, it appears quite different from what it is in its original state. (12)

In Seneca, as happens with Ortiz, the acquisition and even formation of knowledge is likened to digestion. The gathering of flowers from other sources serves to transform both the flowers and the self.

Another connection between Ortiz's *Notebooks* and their precedents lies in the fact that commonplace books were often used in pedagogical settings. In Renaissance school contexts, the collections of quotations ultimately served the student in the process of writing or composition, "retrieving, recycling, recomposing, and transposing the accumulated material in all its rich variety" (Moss 163). More than being mere copybooks or systems of classification of knowledge, Moss writes, "[t]he commonplace-book was the medium between analysis and genesis" (163). The learned notebook is a place where the practices of reading and writing visibly meet: in them is

written what has already been read, and these notebooks are read in turn to produce further writing. The medieval florilegia and renaissance commonplace books sought to transform the mind of the user by serving as aids to memory, organizing ideas under “common places” where they could be located and retrieved.

In their collections of citation from philosophical authority, Ortiz’s *Cuadernos* might pose as commonplace books. However, they might also pose as belonging to the natural sciences with their collections of amateur field notes, which include their observations of flowers in the natural world. The genre of field notes, like the form of the notebook itself, is a largely understudied subject. In an article on anthropologists’ field notes, Tom Belton observes that the study of personal note taking is a “huge and largely unmapped territory” (138). Likewise, looking at a more specific “genre of record keeping” in the context of the natural sciences, Michael R. Canfield notes that “the history of field notes has not been written” (6). Notebooks as they are understood in a contemporary sense need not fall under relatively codified genres such as florilegia and the commonplace book: Belton observes, “There is an ambiguity about the terms ‘note’ and ‘notebook’ that reflects their informality and flexibility as well as their ubiquity and banality” (138). Notes often serve as informal records; they can be references intended for the self or serve as a communication to others. They are based on “things read, thought, seen, or heard”; they “create texts out of thoughts, images, and sounds; even extracts that are combined in new ways to make new texts” (Belton 139). Personal notebooks, which sometimes overlap with “other forms of records, such as diaries or journals . . . [provide] evidence of an identity and a narrative of the self” (Belton 139). Regardless of whether their communication aims to be public or

private, notebooks seek to transmit knowledge into the future. They also always entail a “practice of selection” (139), from the first stage of choosing what to write down to later stages in which new notes might be rewritten, based on previous notes, in a more legible format.

The genre of the notebook in the natural sciences enjoys the openness of form that characterizes notetaking more generally, at the same time as best practices encourage scientists to write their notes in such a way that will be comprehensible for later users. Notebooks tend to mix facts, theory, data, and narrative (Canfield 13), often indiscriminately in their initial form. While some natural scientists advocate for a form of systemization of notes (such as the Grinnell system), field notes vary from writer to writer. Expert in botanical nomenclature and historian of botanical exploration James L. Reveal observes that “[b]otanical field books are a deeply personal creation. There is no model, standard, or requirement for creating or maintaining notes in these books” (187). Field notes are places where the personal experience of knowledge and interpersonal transmission of it intersect. The personal journals of pre-twentieth-century naturalists often provide information in the form of personal narrative that helps scientists today better understand their findings; the multiplicity of observations of natural phenomenon contributes knowledge, rather than repeats it. Joseph Grinnell, in 1908, prefigured Ortiz’s calls for a science to be done by all when he encouraged all observers to share in the practice of taking field notes: “Yes, you should take notes along with the rest. Yours would be exactly of as much value as anyone’s” (qtd in Perrine and Patton 244). The amateur field notebook might serve as a place to record personal experience in the natural world more than to

contribute to scientific community; still, its seemingly modest reach leads it to share in something of the affective reward of Ortiz's project. Biologist Erick Greene reminds note takers that "[A] well-kept field notebook will give you great pleasure" (258). This pleasure in the process of discovery and recording of it seems a part of Ortiz's professed end for his *Cuadernos* of happiness.

Ortiz's *Cuadernos* seem a site for production of knowledge through their recording of and speculation on observation of the self and the surrounding world. The study in these *Cuadernos*, which focuses both outward and inward, make the narrator a participant observer in the natural world, as well as in the history of philosophy that he invokes. Ultimately, however, not only in their self-proclaimed form but in the modesty of their intentions, they serve as a schoolboy's notebook: they are a place to gather and digest knowledge, a place to make errors and correct them. The narrator does not claim that his findings are exemplary in that they are universally applicable, and he promotes his method as a way, not to replicate his findings, but to encourage his readers to come up with what must be different results, given their different vantage points and objects of study. Ortiz's conclusions are hypotheses that may or may not be proven in other people's studies; each notebook is the site of an experiment that, as in one valence of the Spanish *experimental*, is also experiential. The notebook, unlike a book, is not a finished work, but rather a vessel for ongoing work.

This idea of ongoing work brings me back to the notion of translation, specifically through the Benjaminian notion of translation's task. Ortiz's reformulation of scientific observation also brings me back to translation through Benjamin,

particularly when considered broadly to include the social sciences. While Ortiz's study of plants in volume seven might imitate the practices of the natural sciences, his study of human objects in volume six resembles an archeology, a science one might also imagine in the context of Benjamin's broken vessel. If we allow ourselves to stray outside the framework of "The Task of the Translator," where the fragments of Benjamin's metaphorical vessel appear, we might ask questions related to its material history—for example, who made this vessel? How did it break? Where were its fragments found? And who might put them back together again? While considering the vessel in terms of its material history might seem to miss Benjamin's point, actual vessels, so to speak, matter if we are going to think of the ordinary and particular tasks a translator carries out to get her work done. Ordinary vessels are also the subject of Ortiz's work and, incidentally, are the only kind that offer the actual possibility of reassembly, whether or not that reassembly replicates the original, intact vessel's purpose and form.

Translation is a task that depends on the particularity of different languages, both in terms of their vocabulary and linguistic structure, as well as the necessarily unique contexts in which language is always found. Translation also varies according to the individual practice of the human translator. As Berman observes, this human actor is largely absent from Benjamin's essay, "Task of the Translator." He remarks that it might well be called the "Task of Translation," given the imperfect correspondence between the title of Benjamin's essay and what it actually discusses: "Wherever the word 'translator' appears, one could well change it for the word 'translation'" (my translation, 33). This emphasis on translation might arise from the

difficulties Benjamin found in carrying out actual translation: Emily Apter notes that “a profound sense of technical failure informs [Benjamin’s] theory of translation and grounds his notion of *Aufgabe*” (294). But a turn from translation to the translator allows us to misread, or even mistranslate, *Aufgabe*—translated to English as task—in ways that allow us to work on the vessel and recognize how the vessel works on us.

Berman does this through a sort of intralingual translation, by replacing *Aufgabe* with another term in German, *Auflösung*, whose cognate is “solution.” Using this term, Berman reformulates “task” as:

- the logical solution (of a problem)
- the chemical (dis)solution (of a substance)
- the mathematical (re)solution (of an equation)
- the musical (re)solution (of a chord) (36)

For the most part, these solutions result from human practice—the practice that consists of doing something, or the practice that forms one’s daily habit, or the practice of trying out a task until one does it right. Recalling Ortiz’s conceit of the notebook, one can imagine these “solutions” as student tasks: the high schooler working on her algebra homework (with the instructions “solve for x ”), or the child hitting the wrong note in piano practice until he finally plays the chord right.

One might also reread Benjamin through his Spanish translation, where “task of the translator” translates to “*la tarea del traductor*.” The Spanish word *tarea*, as a complement to *Auflösung*, carries with it the notion of daily practice, as is evidenced by the first three definitions of the word from the Dictionary of the Real Academia Española:

tarea

1. f. Obra o trabajo
2. f. Trabajo que debe hacerse en tiempo limitado
3. f. deber (ejercicio que se encarga al alumno)

Tarea in the first instance is defined as a task that results in a product, a “work,” like an artwork, as well as ongoing work like *trabajo*, a job. *Tarea*, in the second definition, is a task that has to be done in a limited time. *Tarea*, in definition three, is the word used for school homework, whose synonym, *deber*, can also function as a noun meaning “duty”; as an auxiliary verb, to say that one “should” do something; and as an action verb, meaning “to owe,” as in to owe a debt. Though not listed here, *tarea* also carries with it the implication of *tareas domésticas*, domestic tasks—that is, household chores.

All of these notions of the Spanish *tarea* or task have some correspondence to the actual work of translation: it can result in an aesthetic object, and it can be paid job. Translations tend to come with deadlines. Translation can be assigned as homework, for example, in a language class, and its ethics tend to be governed by a sense of duty or debt to another language. Also, as happens with household tasks like washing the dishes or sweeping the floor, translation tends to be less onerous and yield the best results if one works at it a little every day. These definitions of task also apply to Ortiz’s *Cuadernos*. While they are ultimately published as a literary work, they often pose as school homework, and they result from a demand or debt that the language and objects of the world impose on the narrator, which he discovers as he putters around his domestic environment.

Ortiz's *Cuadernos* not only examine the remains of twentieth-century technology and commercial production that he finds in those domestic surroundings. They also collect fragments of theory and aesthetics that belong to a century previous to the one in which he writes. Ortiz's fascination with subjects like semiotics and interwar typography (particularly in volume five; see figure 7) seem belated (to borrow from the title of volume three and a half), or even (borrowing from terminology related to technology) obsolete. His work largely ignores semiotic and literary theory beyond structuralism; the modernist aesthetic avant-garde obsessed with typography no longer marches at the forefront of art. The persona of the writer that the books provide seems anachronistic. Though citation of historical events and even the years of in which he writes places Ortiz in the twenty-first century, we rarely see a computer in his writing process. He writes by hand, he tells us; he looks up information, not on the internet, but in books. His study of objects like the yellow flower, which depend on observation and memory of previous experience with the plant, betrays a desire for information to be limited.

For all his dwelling in the past, however, Ortiz is not reactionary. He does not seek to restore broken objects' past glory, or indeed, to restore them to any past state. What these objects were is of interest primarily with respect to what they now are. Yet even as Ortiz imagines objects' material histories, he does not study their brokenness as brokenness, in the way that Paul de Man does when he observes that Benjamin's "fragments are the *broken* parts of a vessel" (my emphasis), in order to conclude that "there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there never was one" (91).

Ortiz passes over this poststructuralist history to show that of course the broken fragments of a vessel come from an actual and intact vessel, and even if something new is made from its fragments, that does not mean knowledge of the original cannot exist. Ortiz's constructive and participatory science addresses Bruno Latour's questions with regard to the frustrations of critique, when Latour asks, "Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm?" (225). Ortiz, rather than see ruin as an end, sees ruin as a process of transformation, and the multiplicity of perspectives on it serves to make connections between truths, to rearticulate the fragments of reality scattered about. The *Cuadernos*, fragmented into ten (or ten and a half) volumes, are at once vessels that hold parts of that reality and pieces of it that the reader might use to rearticulate something else.

Ortiz's *Cuadernos* replace the idea of a single universal with that of an abundance of particulars that need not contradict each other, but rather connect. The truth is not a rose that seeks to stand for what it is not; it is rather a yellow flower that replaces metaphor with abundance: "Su forma despojada de solo cuatro pétalos y el tamaño reducido que compensa con una sobreabundancia monótona ponen a salvo a esta florcita dentro de una literalidad prosaica hasta el punto de la redundancia: esta flor amarilla es una flor amarilla" ("Its stripped-down form of just four petals and a limited size, which it compensates for with a monotonous overabundance, saves this little flower through literalness that is prosaic to the point of redundancy: this yellow flower is a yellow flower") (277). Like the ever-provisional *Cuadernos*, which both revise and repeat the same series of questions, the yellow flower distinguishes itself

through its multiplication, through its reiteration of itself. The law of identity does not allow it to be anything else—or even if, in Ortiz's *Cuadernos*, the yellow flower stands for literality, it does so because it also can remain what it is. The image of the flower fills the book like flowers in a vase—or borrowing an image from the book, like a bunch of yellow flowers the narrator's daughters cut and put in a plastic water bottle, children who don't care yet to distinguish between cultivated flowers and weeds. Yet the flowers at the same time still remain in the ground where they are, or where they were when the narrator found them. The flowers belong at once to the past and the reading present; transformed in the mind of the writer and the reader, they remain unchanged in themselves.

The same thing happens with the objects in volume six: the solar coffeepot is at once an optical instrument and a rusting coffeepot; the old engine's transformation to a writing machine does not prevent it from still being junk. Transformation in the mind does not mean change in the object: objects in the world and other living beings communicate, but they communicate through the media of the retina, the hand, the brain, the body. Things point back to themselves and point forward to the observer, who becomes a user through observation. Reference is not static, but a state of transformation; significant communication depends on the receiver, as the narrator shows through the effect such transformations have had on his own self:

Cada objeto y cada letra nos reclamaron un acto de atención. Solo entonces revelaron su propia historia, sus condiciones de uso y las circunstancias de abandono final. Establecieron nuevas funciones, propiedades de una física inédita, y precisamente por eso se alzan como espacio de resistencia contra los

horrores de la aniquilación y el exterminio sin desviar, en ningún momento, su camino hacia la destrucción y el olvido.

Y ahora acabo de mostrarles lo que ocurrió en mi propio cuerpo: soy yo mismo, y al mismo tiempo soy otro.

Por eso, este libro es la conclusión eternamente provisoria.

(Each object and each letter demanded an act of attention from us. Only then did they reveal their own story, their conditions of use and the circumstances of their ultimate abandonment. They established new functions, the properties of an unpublished physics, and precisely because of this they arise as a space of resistance against the horrors of annihilation and extermination without straying at any moment from their path toward destruction and oblivion.

And now I have just shown you what occurred in my own body: I am myself, and at the same time I am another.

Thus, this book is the eternally provisional conclusion.) (306)

This conclusion, being “eternally provisional,” has no mythic origin, nor any end in sight. Things do not communicate to man without the action of man’s mind making them communicate; breaking Benjamin’s chain of communication, this book, for all its contemplative moments, does not direct itself to God. Letters, words, and name here need not stand for something else: a letter consists of its physical shape; a name need not extend beyond its homely and intimate ties with a plain thing.

As mentioned earlier, the professed goal for these *Cuadernos* is not necessarily knowledge, but happiness. At the end of volume seven, that happiness lies in making

interpersonal connections through words. The book aims to connect directly with reader, and also the narrator's old friend Nelson, submerged in his aphasia like a fish in the depths of the sea. The narrator is aware that his pursuit of happiness may seem foolish as a literary task. He states that he writes and therefore he exists; he sings and therefore both he and the reader exist; you—the reader he addresses directly with the informal *vos*—read and also exist. The letters on the page leave the world of two dimensions; they transform through their inverted reflection in the retina “en la sustancia inmaterial de tu consciencia” (“the immaterial substance of your consciousness”) (309), and Ortiz tells the reader not to be afraid: “Estas letras son inofensivas; solo quieren permanecer adentro de tu mente, a resguardo en un mundo tibio. Ahí van a ser felices” (“These letters are inoffensive; they only want to remain inside your mind, sheltered in a warm world. There they will be happy”) (310). Words and letters transform the reader's mind, and the mind transforms them in turn. With the reader's company, and moving into a style of text between prose and poetry, the narrator says he is ready to

ir hasta el final, hasta el límite donde ya no puede haber retorno.

El límite del ridículo.

Del fracaso, probablemente.

De la felicidad, sin dudas.

(go to the end, to the point where there can be no return.

The point of ridicule.

Of failure, probably.

Of happiness, without a doubt.) (310)

The task of fragmenting letters of a text through a hole at the bottom of a rusty coffee pot, of urging readers to note the properties of their teakettles, of watching a weed blossom after a drought seems inconsequential. It fails to meet the rigors of the disciplines that generate and systematize knowledge—literary criticism, the natural sciences. But it speaks to a purpose for the production of knowledge that saves one, not from mystical fulfillment, but the terror of what one does not know and what one cannot articulate.

The end of volume seven—that is, its final pages, not necessarily understanding “end” as its aim—consists of the narrator making an imagined connection with his friend, Nelson. He recounts a visit to Nelson in the institution where Nelson lives, in which he brings his friend a bouquet of yellow flowers. The flowers are nothing special, he tells Nelson, and he knows that Nelson seems to register nothing of what his eyes might see, but if you bring your nose to them, he tells Nelson, as the bees do, you can sense a soft perfume (307). Nelson, he says, is like a fish with whom he cannot communicate directly—“no sé qué idioma hablan los peces” (“I don’t know what language fish speak”) (307)—but he tells Nelson that in the book he is writing, both he and Nelson will be transformed into words. He imagines a submarine, powered by the devices he invoked in volume six: the solar coffeepot, the vacuum tubes from the radio, the engine turned writing machine. He passes by the underwater images from this volume and volume four—the sunken Titanic, the submarine called the Seaview from the television show. He imagines that one day he will recognize Nelson underwater and put him in the submarine, and, after recognizing one being, his friend, he will be able to recognize others. He does not

deceive himself about the imaginary quality of the reality of what he constructs: the coral reefs and pirate ships and “islas debajo de las islas” (“islands under islands”), like his ship, are only made of words. But this ship made of words, these beings made of words, can rise to the surface of the water, and then “a toda máquina” (“full speed ahead”) (314), he will be able to bring Nelson home. Yet in the final lines of the book he notes that his ship has no name; the name has yet to be invented: “Entre todos vamos a pensar algo. / Tenemos todo el tiempo por delante” (“Between all of us we’re going to think of something. / We have all the time in the world ahead of us”) (314). The naming of the ship created of words is not the task of a solitary Adam, nor is it a task to be completed in a day. It is a task that depends on meditation, observation, connection, and it is a task that is endless, eternally provisional, like the *Cuadernos*, and one that has no limits in time.

But what, then, does this naming have to do with a broken vessel? What use is a particular vessel, whether broken or intact, when faced with the enormity of the sea? And what does this singular naming, this desire for a literal correspondence of words with things in the particular language of Spanish, have to do with the task of translation, a task that does involve linguistic transformation? One level of correspondence is that of affect. When translators write about the practice of translation, they often speak about the affective dimension of the work, about the way the text can work on them as they also work on it. Gayatri Spivak, for example, speaks of the translator’s relationship to the text—a relationship that bears ethical and political responsibility—as one of love: “The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying” (370). Indeed,

given the typical lack of other reward—such as financial—for at least literary translation, one might wonder whether love of language and love of the original is justification enough for carrying out this laborious task. One might also ask whether love compensates for another emotion associated with the losses associated with translation, that is, grief.

One might also argue that nothing is lost in translation: the creation of a new text on the basis of the old does not mean that the old text does not cease to exist. The idea of creation as accumulation—not as replacement, but making something where there was nothing before—relates to the inverse of happiness in the *Cuadernos*, namely, existential dread. In volume six, Ortiz describes his—and by extension, his readers’—engagement with objects and texts affectively, if not as love, as happiness, and moreover, he locates that happiness as a way to confront a kind of existential dread. In the chapter titled “Provisional Balance” that officially closes the *Cuadernos* volume six, he asks what the purpose is—the Benjaminian task, as it were—of carrying out various tasks with the words and things he encounters around him. He asks, “For what? To what end?” has he done all the work of laboring on the language around him (187). He ultimately says it’s to address “the difficulty of the void” (187), including the emptiness of grief:

Those who say they feel empty inside should pick up an old can, raise it to eye level and devote all the attention they can to it. Think about what happened in these pages: objects fallen into disuse, condemned to slow destruction by the elements, have found an imaginary possibility of afterlife.

Imaginary because it is real: it is here, in the text, before your eyes. (188)

Here Ortiz, it seems, is focused more on the connection between the observer and things, rather than the observer and other people. He connects Hjelmslev's idea of linguistic function as dependency to "its conventional meaning of use, that is, what do our linguistic emissions *serve* in different communicative situations, to what end do we express ourselves" (186). At this point, at the end of this central volume of the notebooks, he brings up two of Roman Jakobson's ideas of the function: the poetic, which prioritizes "the message for its own sake" (Jakobson 356), and the phatic, or "messages serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works" (Jakobson 355). The last lines in volume six of Ortiz's *Cuadernos*, in the final appendix, consist of a quotation Ortiz finds in Jakobson's essay, "Linguistics and Poetics," which Ortiz interprets as an example of the phatic function. They consist of a (translated) North Russian incantation that also invoke the image of the sea: "Water, queen river, daybreak! Send grief beyond the blue sea, to the sea bottom, like a gray stone never to rise from the sea bottom, may grief never come to burden the light heart of God's servant, may grief be removed and sink away" (355). However, Ortiz's reading is in fact a misreading, a mistranslation, as it were; Jakobson actually gives this as an example of the conative function, or the one that directly engages the addressee, usually through vocatives or imperatives.

But what would it mean to read this incantation as an example of the phatic function, a message that seeks to establish a connection between two disparate parties; a message that serves not to communicate its content or to get another's attention but that allows two people to say, I hear you, this medium of communication confirms that you and I exist? In volume six, by citing Jakobson, Ortiz uses the image of the sea not

to bring up an interpersonal friendship. Rather, he refers, however obliquely, to the post-dictatorial context lying largely unspoken beneath this work. This context matters to the tasks of translation, and the *Cuadernos*, because translation is not only a creation, a functional workaround addressing a failure, but a response, perhaps on a different order than the original, to a loss that might be irreparable. The final image of the sixth volume of the *Cuadernos*, that of a stone being thrown into the sea, recalls a moment toward the middle of the text, when the narrator remembers a friend of his parents' who was an announcer on a radio station that was shut down by orders of Argentine dictatorship in the 1970s. The navy confiscated the radio equipment and threw it into the sea. No more words could be created, transmitted, or recorded through this medium; the silence of censorship expressly sought to limit what one could know. A recording of the last words broadcast remains, in which the announcer states, in a deeply melancholic voice, that station was shut down by executive orders. He thanks his listeners for accompanying him, and the background music fades into silence.

This recollection drives the narrator momentarily mad with grief: he picks up a stone he has kept on his desk, a stone that he found as a child in the neighborhood where the radio announcer lived, and gets up. And then the narrator mixes what could be fact with what must be imagination. He throws the rock up toward the sky, and he imagines himself standing on the surface of a lake, like a mosquito, he says, suspended on the surface, who with any movement would break the surface tension and sink. Without using the word, he recalls the disappeared, specifically, through one of the most emblematic and perhaps also most horrific methods used to disappear people

under the dictatorship, in which they were drugged and dropped into the sea from airplanes. The narrator protests: “No, the bottom of the sea is not your natural place, I’m telling you, it’s not your place, just as it’s not a place for radios, it’s not the place for men who also lie there, scattered all about, not as the result of a natural movement, but rather the result of a violent movement, the most violent of all imaginable movements, carried in the air beyond the air where they belonged” (165).

The vessel of the radio’s vacuum tube would not sink unless it was broken. This signal amplifier, this instrument of one-way communication, could only join the dead if it were fractured or punctured. Otherwise, it would either wash to shore and join the sand, the material that its glass came from, or, like an unmanned vessel of another kind, float away.

CHAPTER 4

“NEAR TO TRUTH”: ANNE CARSON’S *NOX*

Anne Carson’s *Nox* is a book about not knowing. At the heart of its narrative is the story of her brother, Michael, who died twenty-two years after he ran away from home and about whom she knew very little throughout his adult life. In 1978, in trouble with the law, “rather than go to jail,” he ran away and wandered across Europe and India (2.2).⁴¹ He sent only one letter and occasional postcards back home, and he called his sister only once, in 2000, from Copenhagen. She arranged to visit him there, but he died a week before she was going to leave, so instead she went to visit his widow. The book *Nox*, on one level, is about Carson’s effort to know her brother through the fragments of his life that he left behind—old photographs, his rare letters, recalled conversations, remarks from his widow—which Carson collected, cut up, wrote about, and pasted in the pages of a blank book to not only remember but construct him for herself. Yet on other levels this private exercise—eventually published, in 2010, in a Xeroxed version by New Directions—expands to raise questions about shared forms of knowing. Interspersed with Carson’s personal meditations on grief are essayistic passages discussing the problems of inexactitude or insufficiency in representing history, as well as inexactitude in translation, which purports to represent another’s language and work.

⁴¹ A note on citations: *Nox*’s pages are not numbered; however, its short, thematically-divided prose sections are. I am using those numbers to cite any reference from those sections and am also using the number corresponding to the closest prose section to cite any other non-prose reference from the book.

If the book's occasion arises from her brother's death, its most evident structuring element is an unconventional, lexical translation: a version of Catullus 101 that consists of entries copied—albeit with important, if unsignaled, alterations—from the *Oxford Latin Dictionary (OLD)*, appearing on the left-hand pages. The lexical translation of Catullus is not the only version of the poem to appear in *Nox*. The book also contains the poem in the original Latin, as well as a full translation that gives the feel of an overly literal translation through its convoluted syntax. The quantity of English substitutes available for each Latin lexeme in the dictionary complicates any simplified notion of a literal translation (i.e., a translation based on one-to-one lexical correspondence), and the failure of the conventional translation of Catullus to adhere to contemporary norms of readability in the target language signals the unknowability of the poem in English. The problem Carson finds with translation seems to be a problem of referential match: “Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction . . . I have never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101” (7.1). No translator can match Catullus's words, nor the articulation of those words—that is, the way Catullus puts them together. While Carson's confession and even demonstration of her insufficiencies seems to reinforce the conventional narrative of loss in translation, her revelation of insufficiency through use of the dictionary points to some betrayal in the promise of the reference itself.

The dictionary, as a genre, holds a place of authority in the contemporary cultural imagination and is also a source of popular fascination. The term “the dictionary”—a common designation for all dictionaries that, through use of the

definite article, washes out distinctions between particular dictionaries—grants dictionaries the authority of a received text not unlike the Bible. In the US context, for example, the dictionary’s authority is such that it is used to settle disputes from quarrels over Scrabble to legal cases. More broadly, however, in the Anglophone world, nonfictional narratives about the makers of dictionaries have found mass market appeal: see, for example, Simon Winchester’s bestselling book, *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*, or more recently, Kory Stamper’s memoir of her work as a lexicographer at Merriam-Webster, *Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries*. However, as historians of lexicography often observe, people pay little attention to the construction of dictionaries when it comes time to use them: rather than read the detailed instructions, purpose, and history explained in the front matter, users simply look things up.

Nox undermines the authority of its—and “the”—dictionary by signaling the limits of that dictionary’s use. The quantity of equivalents given for each entry in the lexical translation makes each equivalent seem inadequate on its own. The information that the lexical translation offers seems excessive, yet at the same time insufficient, in that it cannot construct a legible poem. The lexicon in *Nox* requires that a reader work to decipher it: it does not dictate which English word to choose for the Latin, but rather demands that the reader figure out which word works best in a context that the dictionary does not contain. At the same time, this lexicon is difficult to consult: its order is not alphabetical, but rather aligned with the order of words in the poem. Through its use of the dictionary, *Nox* shows that knowledge of words, like other

kinds of knowledge, might be impossible, slow to come by, or incomplete. And yet *Nox* does not deny or discount the desire for knowledge. It does not seek, to quote Latour, “to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins” (225). Rather, it makes something—a physical book, a lexical poem, a crib, a thick translation—out of a dictionary that is insufficient to and fundamentally different from Catullus.⁴²

In what follows, I will argue that *Nox* proposes this making of something as a mode of knowledge, albeit one that does not reveal or necessarily represent a truth. Rather, poetic making fabricates something “near to truth” that allows one to live *with* it, even when it is inaccessible. This phrase, “near to truth,” comes from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, a text cited in an entry in the *OLD*, which, in turn, is cited in *Nox* through a translation that takes significant liberties. I use the term “fabricate” deliberately and in multiple senses, alluding to physical manufacture, as well as fictionalizing, or making things up. This latter sense in particular helps me distinguish my notion of fabrication from recent work that establishes relationships between poetic making and scientific experimentation or industrial production.⁴³ I consider fabrication, rather, in terms of craft, a form of making whose pace is slow, whose sites of labor are often domestic, whose artisans’ identities can be communal or collective, traditional, and are often effaced, and whose products lend themselves to everyday use. This notion of craft also

⁴² For a definition of thick translation, see Appiah 817–819. For an example of thick translation in literary practice, see *Yoko Tawada’s Portrait of a Tongue: An Experimental Translation by Chantal Wright*, which places a translation from Yoko Tawada in a running dialogue with a series of translator’s notes.

⁴³ See, for example, Nathan Brown’s 2017 *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics*, which explores connections between fields such as nanotechnology, biotechnology, crystallography, and geodesic design and midcentury through contemporary poetry.

depends on its ongoing practice: its end lies not only in any particular fabricated product but also in its transmission as a teachable skill.

My emphasis on making, as refracted through the making of a lexical translation, also hinges on two images. One comes from *Nox*, in which, via Herodotus, Carson proposes making things as a way of marking history, albeit one that obscures its information. She defines history as a form of asking, citing the Greek etymology of the word (1.1), and she notes that humans desire “an account that makes sense” (3.3). However, Carson also warns that history is unlikely to provide the answers that its writers and readers seek: “[O]ften it produces no clear or helpful account, in fact people are satisfied with the most bizarre forms of answering” (1.3). One example of such forms, as Herodotus recounts, is a bowl that the Scythians used to measure the size of their population. The king demanded an arrowhead of each Scythian, and rather than count the arrowheads, he melted them into a large bowl, “a ‘memory’ . . . or ‘monument’ of the number” of people his kingdom contained (1.3). Like Herodotus, Carson, the historian, may not be able to extract the discrete components of a memory or monument, or the remainder of the past. The other image of making that I am invoking comes from the field of translation studies, and more precisely, from Kate Briggs’s book, *This Little Art*. Here, she describes the translator as a “maker of wholes” (223), finding analogies with another craft, carpentry, and more specifically, the making of a table. The Scythian bowl, like the table Briggs describes, reveals the specificity of its parts only to the one who makes it.

An emphasis on craft, however, requires a feel for the specificity of the craft’s materials. As such, I will turn in several ways to the *OLD*, which is as much a source

for Carson's translation as is Catullus's poem. I will first look at the dictionary itself—that is, the *OLD*, as well as the lexical histories and cultures that have surrounded it—to lay out precisely what kind of making and use this book entails. Then I will do a close reading of Carson's citations of it, with an emphasis on the particular alteration she makes to the text around the quotation from Horace. Finally, I will conclude by examining ideas of craft and fabrication to see what kind of object she makes from the dictionary's material and how it approaches truth.

Dictionaries—unlike encyclopedias, perhaps, at a time when writing practices surrounding Wikipedia in particular cast doubt on the reliability of the knowledge that encyclopedias offer—retain an authority in the popular sphere. As Sidney Landau observes, “*Dictionary* is a powerful word. Authors and publishers have found that if they call a reference book a dictionary, it tends to sell better than it would if called by another name because the word suggests authority, scholarship, and precision”—hence the existence of “dictionaries” on subjects as diverse as silk, poker, taxes, film (6). However, that authority, as lexicographers tend to point out, rests in part on a series of myths. Henri Béjoint identifies a series of false beliefs about dictionaries, particularly as they apply to Anglo-American contexts. First among them is a belief in the dictionary's singularity: “Dictionary myths are encapsulated in the use of the definite article and of the singular: people (present writer included) often speak of *the* dictionary, as if there was only one dictionary per language that would come in different formats and types of presentation but with the same contents” (231). Despite individual dictionaries' historical specificity and—whatever their size—limited scope, users tend to believe that “[t]he dictionary is eternal” (234); “[t]he dictionary is

infallible on the meanings of words”; “[t]he dictionary has all the words of the language” (235); and “[t]he dictionary has all the answers to all questions” (236). As Samuel Johnson wrote in his preliminary *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, “They that take a dictionary into their hands have been accustomed to expect from it a solution of almost every difficulty” (5). Such understandings—or misunderstandings—of the dictionary attribute to it a sort of encyclopedic aspiration, ambition, or hope.⁴⁴

Yet the authority of dictionaries extends beyond that of encyclopedias in terms of their moral weight. Another myth Béjoint identifies is that of the dictionary as “arbiter” (233), including in courts of law. This is particularly true in an American context, where dictionaries have served as the final word, so to speak, in determining what terms mean in legal contexts. Between 2000 and 2010, the US Supreme Court “used dictionaries in 225 opinions to define 295 words or phrases” (Kirchmeier and Thumma 85), which, as M. Lynne Murphy observes, “is to say in over 30 percent of the 735 cases heard. Some dictionary entries, however capriciously they are selected from the many competing dictionaries, thus essentially become law” (4). But the dictionary, as object, exerts an authority that goes beyond the legal: it seems to be imbued with “magical powers” (Béjoint 232): it serves as a “shibboleth” (Béjoint 232), a “good-luck charm” (Murphy 8), a “talisman” (Murphy 3). It serves as an

⁴⁴ The authority of the *OLD* is, ultimately, more than metaphorical. It was designed to be—and has succeeded in being—the definitive Latin dictionary in English and a replacement for its notoriously defective predecessor, Lewis and Short’s Latin-English Dictionary (the latter’s entries a “typically undigested and indigestible muddle” (Henderson 144)). It also sought to piggyback on, and augment, the authority and fame of the Oxford University Press brand of dictionaries, established by the *OED*.

escape from difficulty and uncertainty: it is “a locus where fantasies originate, a refuge for the imagination, a mythical bulwark against the hard realities of a world that is there to be conquered” (Gallison qtd in Béjoint 233). The dictionary “is often compared to the Bible” (Béjoint 232), a comparison facilitated by many hardcover dictionaries’ physical appearance, with their leather binding, gold lettering, tipped edges, and thumb tabs (Béjoint 232, Landau 393). This coincidence in design is not displeasing to dictionary makers (Landau 393), or, for that matter, dictionary users. In fact, as Jean Pruvost observes:

Some have seen the dictionary as the *new* Bible, as if there was a chronology in history. In 1934, Aristide Quillet wrote in the preface of his splendid *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique*, with characteristic faith in the progress of a society that moves from religious belief to scientific knowledge: “Today’s Bible is the dictionary. Ancient peoples looked to the Bible in search of a revelation; modern peoples look to the dictionary in search of knowledge.” (qtd in Béjoint 232)⁴⁵

Possession of the dictionary affords an opportunity for self-education, but it also marks the owner as belonging to an educated class.

⁴⁵ Even in religious homes, the dictionary has historically held a place of honor, at least in a US context:

The stereotyped early American home had two books: the Bible and “the dictionary,” and the relation between them is often noted. An 1845 Methodist review of Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* instructed that “[i]t should not stand on a higher shelf than the Bible, but it deserves to stand but a little below it, if not at the side of it” (*Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, Hartford, CT, 22 Jan. 1845) (Murphy 8).

Lexicographers write and design dictionaries—two interconnected processes—to structure and facilitate consultation. However, it is important to note that the dictionary’s material properties as an object, its cultural significance, and the richness of its content also allow it to be used in contexts beyond consultation. Béjoint’s survey of unintended uses of dictionaries deserves to be quoted at length:

Dictionaries can be used “in an infinite number of ways” (W. H. Auden, qtd in Brewer “Electronification” 10), some of which have little to do with what the lexicographers intended: as instruments for self-teaching; as thesauruses of literature; as first-class reading, because they are “full of suggestion,” “raw material of possible poems,” “inexhaustible,” etc. (Brewer “Electronification” 10); as Christmas gifts, to be cherished in proportion to the feelings one has for the person who offered it; as objects on living room tables to impress the visitors; as books that sit on shelves but are never consulted; as objects of pride: Emperor Maximilian II showed his copy of Estienne’s *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* to all his visitors . . . but forgot all about it after two months (Considine 580); as cushions to sit children on so that they can reach the dinner-table (Hall 1), or even adults, for example W. H. Auden (Brewer “Treasure-House” 193); as thick objects to steady an old wardrobe; as heavy objects to knock on the head of unruly pupils; as pillows to lay one’s head on, as in Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*: “Dry toast and warm tea offered him every night and morning when he couldn’t swallow anything—a candle in his bedroom on the very night he died—the best dictionary sent up for him to lay his head upon . . .” (Hitchings 229); as the only book to be taken on a

desert island; or as a “cuddly toy” to be treated “lovingly” and taken “to bed” (Leech and Nesi 305) like a lover, “a weighty one, but handleable” (Brewer “Treasure-House” 212).⁴⁶

Dictionaries invite literary, even linear reading, directed toward aesthetic enjoyment rather than the acquisition of information. Even (and perhaps especially) closed, they symbolize erudition. As material objects, they can function as a physical prop; as objects owned and transferred between people over time, they contain a sentimental history.

Despite the prevalence of popular belief that assigns or derives the dictionary’s value from a kind of singularity—one that depends on its unity as an object, on its uniqueness among books, on the appearance of its being somehow unauthored, as if it were divinely bestowed—narratives about their construction also exert a kind of fascination, particularly in the Anglophone world. This is perhaps most true in the case of the dictionary that is also the largest, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*—whose

⁴⁶ Works cited in this extended quotation from Béjoint are as follows:

Brewer, Charlotte. “The ‘Electronification’ of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.” *Dictionaries*, no. 25, 2004, pp. 1–43.

---. *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED*. Yale University Press, 2007.

Considine, John. “Why Do Large Historical Dictionaries Give So Much Pleasure to their Owners and Users?” *Actes Euralex '98*, edited to T. Fontenelle, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1998, pp.579–587.

Hall, Joan Houston. “Frederic Gomes Cassidy, October 10, 1907 – June 14, 2000.” *Dictionaries*, no. 22, 2001, pp.1 – 13.

Hitchings, Henry. *Defining the World: the Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

Leech, Geoffrey and Hilary Nesi. “Moving Towards Perfection: The Learners’ (Electronic) Dictionary of the Future.” *The Perfect Learners' Dictionary* (?). Edited by Thomas Herbst and Kerstin. Popp, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1999, pp. 295–306, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cornell/detail.action?docID=3041172>.

methodology served as a model for the making of the *OLD*.⁴⁷ The *OED* is a historical dictionary, one that traces the meaning of words over time, and it is also descriptive rather than prescriptive in its delineation of meaning through the historical record. The “raw material on which the Dictionary was based” (Gilliver 261) has consisted historically of quotation slips, which provide examples of words in context.⁴⁸ The slips contain an example of the word in use and a citation: they consist of “the text of the quotation itself together with a full bibliographical reference indicating exactly where the quotation was found, written on a slip of paper headed with a ‘catchword’ indicating the word being illustrated” (Gilliver 261). The final product, that is, the published dictionary entry, might seem to be the inverse of the lexical entries presented in *Nox*. In the entries to the *OED*, lists of selected quotations, organized chronologically, illustrate each definition of a word (the *OLD* also uses illustrative quotations, although they are not organized chronologically).⁴⁹ *Nox*, meanwhile, might be read as containing a single quotation—Catullus 101—with a list of definitions

⁴⁷ The project of the *OLD* started taking shape the late 1920s and early 1930s, after the publication of the first edition of the *OED* was complete. John Henderson notes, “Any storying of the production of *OLD*, historical or mythologizing, must reckon with ghostly influence from the ‘English’ saga on the players’ moves, even as they devised their ‘Latin’ counterpart conscious of upbeat analogies and corresponding pitfalls” (139).

⁴⁸ The slippage method is still used today, although it now exists largely in electronic form (“Researching the Language”).

⁴⁹ This slippage method allows for citation from popular sources. However, the *OED*, following the tradition of Samuel Johnson, gives “special attention to the uses of the established writers of the literary canon, even when they were eccentric. Robert Burchfield, editor of the *OED Supplements*, writes of his concern to cover the works of T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, W. H. Auden, and ‘even Dylan Thomas and James Joyce (except for most of *Finnegans Wake*)’” (Landau 203).

following accompanying it (although those definitions contain some quotations as well). Carson's collection of entries might also be read as a collection of quotation slips, albeit one whose source is not a newspaper, a poem, an advertisement, but rather a dictionary that in its own way has entered the literary canon.

Nox looks like—and in its original iteration *is*—a homemade object. Although Carson is a professional classicist, her work with both the dictionary and Catullus in the book has an amateur appearance. This amateurish quality recalls the way that the collection of slips—at least for the *OED*, the more famous predecessor to the *OLD*—has been a famously democratic practice, one dependent on popular participation that has invited examples of the English language from around the globe: “anyone who came across an instance of a word, in any context, which they considered worthy of the Dictionary’s attention could write out a quotation slip and submit it” (Gilliver 261).⁵⁰ The collaged, cut- or copy-and-paste method of constructing *Nox*, paired with the impression that it is made in a home environment, also invokes practices surrounding the collection and organization of slips for the first edition of the *OED*. While the typical slip was made by copying out quotations, the dictionary’s second editor, Frederick Furnivall, had the “alarming practice of inviting readers to cut up the pages of books into slip-sized pieces”—a practice that the later, iconic editor James Murray seems to have discontinued, “despite the saving of readerly effort and the

⁵⁰ Quotations in the first edition of the *OED* “include ones taken from an eighteenth-century inscription on a house in Harwick . . . and the label on a container of sweets” (Gilliver 261). Early volunteer contributors include Dr. W. C. Minor, the criminally insane murderer who is the “madman” subject of Winchester’s *The Professor and the Madman*. (The professor is Murray.) More recent contributors include an Australian reader who sent in more than 100,000 quotations from a single source—“Brisbane’s main newspaper, the *Courier Mail*”—“wrapped in old cornflake packets” (Ogilvie 5).

minimizing of copying errors which this of course represented” (Gilliver 261). The quantity of quotations submitted to the first edition of the *OED* was overwhelmingly abundant, perhaps even excessive: “five million quotations from works written between 1150 and the 1850s” (Brewer 8). Meanwhile, the setting for storing this public collection of information was, in a sense, domestic. The slips, when not sent out to sub-editors, were kept in pigeonholes and eventually in the Scriptorium, the name given first to a large corrugated iron building in the village of Mill Hill, where Murray and his family lived at the beginning of his editorship, and later, after they moved to Oxford, in a chilly shed sunk three feet below ground in Murray’s back garden at his Banbury Road house (Winchester “Meaning” 164–166). They were then sorted alphabetically and chronologically by volunteers and sub-editors, including Murray’s children, “all eleven whom were enlisted to help, mostly as soon as they had learned to read” (Gilliver 262). The making of the *OED* was, at least in a locational sense, a cottage industry.

Nox, of course, cites from the *OLD*, not the *OED*. However, the *OLD* was modeled after its predecessor, the *OED*, and it was written—and has been read—in a similar fashion to the *OED*. To turn to the latter point, the initial reading practices of each dictionary depended, quite literally, on assemblage. The first edition of the *OED* was originally published in 128 installments, or “fascicles,” between 1884 and 1928, available for purchase by subscription (“Editions”; Brewer 1–4), which were then in a bound ten-volume set in 1928. If the dictionary was written by collection and assembly and in alphabetical order, it was also acquired and read in its first edition through collection and assembly and in alphabetical order over time. Similarly, the

OLD was published in a series of eight fascicles at regular intervals, every two years, between 1968 and 1982. John Henderson, in one of the few published narratives of this dictionary's making, notes how this publication history gave him a haptic, material understanding of the dictionary's writing and functionality:

[M]y own sense of the utility of *OLD* has been formed as customer and user/abuser since the first fascicle appeared, just when I was starting out. So too with its futility. That my copy is still in floppy eighths must condition the experience; this 'motility' surely has underscored my version of the question of what consulting the dictionary is about, manually through hermeneutically.

(140)

The fascicles, he notes, ended mid-entry, in what he calls "'a bit of' biennial 'cliff-hanging,'" quoting a review that appeared in the *Glasgow Herald* in 1968, when the first fascicle came out (168).

Henderson's "manual" understanding of consultation might seem particular to this dictionary's publication history, but it also calls to mind the manual-plus-visual facility required to consult any dictionary, even one bound in a single volume. To find a word, a user first guesses where it falls relative to all words in alphabetical order. She looks at the fore-edge—marked or unmarked with thumb tabs—and estimates what volume of pages would fall on either side of it, and then opens the dictionary to that point. Visually, by reading, she consults the range of words included on that page, and if the word isn't there, repeats the process with a smaller set of pages until the word is found. The particulars of this haptic reading practice—one developed through many uses of the dictionary over time—may be different than the haptic particulars of

reading *Nox*. Indeed, as an accordion-folded single page, it suggests a linear reading more strongly than the fascicle version of the *OLD* and, indeed, many conventional books. However, because *Nox* is so difficult to hold steady—it has no spine or binding; it must rest on a hard surface to keep its shape—it foregrounds the fact that reading is not just a matter of decoding the alphabet, but skillfully handling a book.

The writing of the *OLD*, like the *OED*, depended on the labor of volunteer readers who, in this case, contributed quotation slips from Latin source texts. The editors of the *OLD*, however, attempted to avoid the disorder that characterized the enormous collection of quotations for the *OED* by regularizing the practice of making citation slips. The readers might be volunteers, but they would not be amateur. Editorial supervision aimed to ensure that. Any sort of paper could serve as a slip for the *OED* (one early editor had a propensity for writing on chocolate wrappers (Ogilvie 9)); citations could come from anywhere the reader might find them in the wilds of language—not so with the *OLD*. The original set of “Instructions to Voluntary Excerptors of Texts” for the *OLD* stipulate that the editor assign a text to excerpt to the volunteers, along with a supply of slips and a copy of the assigned text. There are instructions on how to read the book—the volunteer should first study the full text thoroughly, then underline with pencil the words he selects, with an emphasis on unusual words and usages. The instructions also specify what to write where on the slip, using handwriting that was “as clear as possible” (typewritten slips were also acceptable) (qtd in Henderson 141–142). The resulting slip would be easily legible.

Nox, by contrast, is not consistently legible—metaphorically, in that it can be difficult to make sense of its many fragments, and literally, in that it contains samples

of handwriting and type that are hard to decipher. But if we are to imagine the dictionary slippage instructions as a prototype for the citations *of* the dictionary in *Nox*, Carson's method also diverges from those instructions in that she makes alterations to her source, as I will discuss below. The instructions to excerptors of the *OLD* state, "No change must be made in the order or case, tense, mood, &c. of the Latin words." Moreover, excerptors alter the words' order: "No attempt should be made to arrange the slips. They should be kept in the order in which the words occur in the text" (qtd in Henderson 142). Carson, for her part, in following the order of Catullus, disrupts the alphabetical order of the *OLD*. She does, however, follow their model in that she declines to choose just one meaning for any word, deferring to a later reader, or perhaps more simply leaving the meaning open. The sample slip provided in the instructions—for the word "INSTABILIS," glossed as "not to be stood on," hints that contributors should not attempt to stabilize the meaning of the multivalent lemmata identified in the privileged originary text (Henderson 143).

Another thing Carson maintains in her excerpting of the *OLD* is its associative, citational poetics. Despite the literary love that many have declared for dictionaries, these books are not known for their clever turns of phrase, at least in their contemporary form. Stamper, in her memoir of her work with Merriam-Webster, states bluntly that "definitions are generally pretty boring." Example sentences—the equivalent of quotations—for their part, "should be less interesting than the definition" (127). The definitions in the *OLD* are likewise dry, but taken together, they suggest movement; they achieve a fragmented wholeness. Henderson writes that the entries in the *OLD* often suggest a kind of informational narrative, demonstrating a strategy of

“creative improvisation on unstated/unsayable intuitions or hunches, mixed in with rhetorical opportunism and, above all, implications of semantic development” (144). The German-British philologist Eduard Fraenkel suggests that the proliferation and openness of meaning in the definitions deepens the reader’s comprehension of the words. In a letter to R. W. Chapman, one of the initiators of the project of the *OLD*, Fraenkel praises a sample entry submitted in 1938 by James M. Wyllie, which became a model for all the dictionary’s entries.⁵¹ Wyllie, a member of team for the first Supplement to the *OED*, served from 1949 to 1954 as editor of the *OLD*.⁵² Fraenkel remarks about Wyllie’s entry:

Its greatest merits lie in the abundance of well-chosen quotations . . . The thirty-two lemmata follow one another in a dry matter-of-fact-like manner and, since the author seems to feel little, if any, qualms about refinements of semasiology, the unity of the word almost vanishes, and yet the whole is extremely workable, at any rate in the hand of a reader who knows that to translate is one thing and to understand another. (qtd in Henderson 162)

According to Fraenkel’s analysis, wholeness in the entries does not depend upon stability of terms or the exclusion of semantic possibilities; Wyllie provides enough

⁵¹ This sample entry, for *capio* (first definition: “To take into the hand, to take hold of; to take, receive; to pick up (one’s arms), or perh., to put on (one’s armour . . .)” (qtd. in Henderson 157)), hints at the manual dimension of consulting the dictionary.

⁵² Wyllie ultimately left (or was forced to leave) this position after a “severe mental breakdown” (“Examining the OED”).

material in the form of quotations for a skilled reader to make a meaning appropriate to each situation of use.⁵³

Fraenkel's analysis of Wyllie's *OLD* entry also points to the traditionally fraught relationship between translation and understanding. Critiques of particular translations often center on the translator's misunderstanding of the original—that is, what the translator gets wrong. Carson points to the limits of translation in relation to understanding in *Nox* through her refusal to settle on what might be a final draft of Catullus's poem. Her citation of the lexicon underscores that no single English equivalent captures all the meanings of a Latin word. However, in the study of the classics, translation is the primary method used to acquire an understanding of language.⁵⁴ Students in a second year class, for example, might read one text, such as the *Medea*, over the course of an entire semester. Before each class meeting, students are assigned certain lines to read as homework—with the assistance of a published commentary that the teacher selects—and in the classroom students review and correct their individual translations of the text, line by line. As one classicist, Emily Hulme-Kozey, explained to me, this kind of “slow” pedagogy creates an experience that feels exceptional, removed from the reading practices of everyday life: “You’ve spent so much time with it, picking over every word, that it feels like everything you’ve read in

⁵³ E. J. Kenney, in a 1970 review of the first fascicle of the *OLD*, writes, “A dictionary is not an authority but a classified directory of contexts; it is to the contexts themselves that the appeal lies” (qtd in Henderson 174).

⁵⁴ In this the study of the classics is different than that of modern languages, which tend to be taught under the rubric of communicative methods: students use class time to stage dialogues and activities that mimic ways the target language is used in everyday life. For the classics, that everyday use is translation. In recent years a few programs in spoken Latin and classical Greek have been developed, but they are the exception in classical language pedagogy.

that language is like a poem. It feels really close to you. You feel like you're having this dialogue or experience with the written word, like a close study of a sacred text, that's different than when you're halfway reading a novel, halfway waiting for your train stop" (Hulme-Kozey). Through translation, the student acquires an affective knowledge of the text. The experiences of Latin or Greek and English are not equivalent in this formulation. Rather, translation draws the student near to a language that once seemed distant.

Dictionaries, of course, especially at an early stage, are key to making that nearness and the understanding of a language possible. As the introduction to this dissertation discusses, the genre of the dictionary emerged from instructional contexts. Bilingual medieval glossaries helped readers through difficult words in Latin (Béjoint 52); the first monolingual wordbooks in English were directed toward children, women, and "other unskilfull persons," as the full title to Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* specifies, who needed a dictionary to understand not just other languages, but the hard words in their own.⁵⁵ Dictionaries are symbols of—and a means to—knowledge, often obtained through translation.⁵⁶ *Nox* uses its dictionary in

⁵⁵ The full title of this early dictionary expresses the book's instructional purpose: *A table alphabeticall conteyning and teaching the true writing, and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c. With the interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & helpe of ladies, gentlewomen, or any other vnskilfull persons. Whereby they may the more easilie and better vnderstand many hard English wordes, vvhich they shall heare or read in scriptures, sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made able to vse the same aptly themselues.*

⁵⁶ The process of interaction between dictionaries and translation can be seen through the use of cribs—collections of annotations, summaries, and glosses that language learners often make for themselves to help them understand a text. For example, Yopie

a context in which neither translation or understanding of the other language or text may be possible—but it also shows that knowledge and understanding may not be synonymous. One can take a hold of and work with an object, even if the resulting product is not identical with that object itself.

As mentioned above, the book meditates on three subjects where Carson finds her knowledge or understanding limited—her brother, Catullus’s poem, and history. Knowledge, or sense-making, of the poem seems to be impeded by the fact that Carson has too much information: the lexical entries provide an excess of equivalents for each word. With regard to the other subjects, however, Carson’s brother and history, her knowledge is limited because of a lack of information: her brother communicated little in the twenty-two years between the time he ran away from home and his death, and Carson characterizes him by his muteness, his lack of speech. He is, therefore, difficult to cite. She has not seen him and has hardly heard from him; she has not witnessed his life, and he has rarely put himself into words for her. As such, Carson writes, “Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them” (8.1). She has old photographs and the rare letters he sent to his mother, which she analyzes and cuts apart and pastes in the book; she mentions conversations with his widow and quotes from the elegy the widow delivered at his funeral. She also mentions the existence of a diary that his widow has; however, she does not appear to

Prins, in her book *Ladies’ Greek*, examines a “crib” translation that Virginia Woolf makes of Aeschylus—part manuscript, part collage, with the printed Greek text cut and pasted onto the right-hand pages of a notebook, and Woolf’s handwritten comments in the margins and handwritten translation on the left. The scrapbook-like format of Woolf’s crib bears similarities to Carson’s *Nox*.

cite any information from it. It seems that Carson not only had little contact with her brother, but also had few other accounts of his life to cite from. Words, or an understanding of his few words, she thinks, will help her understand him and help his life make sense.

However, knowledge in all three areas—of her brother, of the poem, of history itself—is revealed to be not just a collection of facts or accounts about a person, a people, or an event, but also the making of something from those accounts. History, in particular, and written history, although it represents the past, can look very different than the parts that make it up. History can neither change the past nor restore loss, as Carson notes in the opening section of essayistic prose in *Nox*, where she begins to address the idea that nothing, no words can change her brother's death. The unalterable fact of his death, on the one hand, means that nothing more can or should be given to—"expended on" (1.0)—that part of the past. The impossibility of changing the originary event thus leads her to think about history, which differs from that event. The idea of history, however, has multiple originals in this text: Carson looks not only toward her brother's personal history, but also toward the origins of the discipline of Western history through the ancient Greek figures of Hecateus and Herodotus.

Through Hecateus and Herodotus, Carson signals history as a mode of knowledge that can transmit and even create uncertainty at the points both of its source and its destination. History interpellates the historian; it emerges from and dialogues with her lived experience; and it has as much to do with everyday objects as it to do with grand events. The word "history," Carson notes,

comes from an ancient Greek verb . . . meaning “to ask.” One who asks about things—about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell—is a historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (1.1)

History, in this description, is a question rather than an answer; it functions more as a verb than a noun—history *does*; history moves; history acts. This asking need not settle on an answer: part of the historian’s task is to cite others’ words so that the reader can do with it what she may. Herodotus, Carson observes, “likes to introduce such information with a word like λέγεται: ‘it is said’” (1.2), particularly when he has not witnessed events himself. Eyewitnessing, Carson writes, is “a mode of authorial power. To withhold this authorization is also powerful” (1.2). Withholding authorization, establishing distance from the original, can diminish the credibility of the historian who cites these words. This withholding also puts responsibility on the reader to make sense of the citation.

Sense, in fact, is one of the things that history is asked to make. In *Nox*, this sense is linked to narrative and analysis and directed toward memory, or at least the endurance of a life: “We want other people to have a center, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here’s why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Does it?” (3.3). If history—like this passage—is a form of asking, it, however, is unlikely to provide answers in a way that makes sense to all of its readers and writers. The Scythian bowl that Carson cites from Herodotus is one such manifestation of a historical record that, while it holds the past, provides little

means to discern the statistical, differentiated, or even narrative information that one might ask of a record today. Like Herodotus, Carson, the historian, may not be able to extract the discrete constituents of a memory or monument, or the remainder of the past. What she might do instead is mimic “a certain fundamental opacity of the human being, which likes to show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding” (1.3), as the arrowheads hide in the Scythian bowl, or as her brother hid not only from the authorities but also from his family—including the historian herself—for most of his adult life.

The poem from Catullus, by contrast, may be knowable, but it seems unrepresentable, at least through translation. The translation exists in two versions in *Nox*: a full translation in section seven—which is conventional, even though it reads like a draft—and the lexical translation. As mentioned above, Carson considers the full, conventional translation she presents of Catullus to necessarily fail to fully reveal the original: English is incapable of capturing the Roman elegy; Catullus’s diction is unparalleled even in his original language, Latin; none of her efforts at translation have lived up to her hopes. Part of what her translation cannot contain, according to her own critical analysis, is the original’s absence of excess. In an interview Carson describes Catullus’s style as that of “economizing a situation and telling you exactly the bones of it and no more” (“Interview”). The information Catullus gives about his brother’s death in poem 101, like the poem’s style, is spare, much like the information Carson provides about her brother and his death. Catullus’s brother has died, and the poet travels to his grave to bid him farewell with a gift, though this action cannot alter what the poet sees as a meaningless death.

Carson's conventional translation of Catullus, contained in section seven of *Nox*, attempts to approximate that economy. It largely follows the original word order, which sometimes complicates the transference of sense into English. While it adds punctuation and words to the original (such as subject pronouns), it subtracts other words and at times reduces the lines' syllabic count. A comparison of the first four lines of the original and Carson's translation provide an example of these tendencies:

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advenio has miseris, frater, ad inferias
ut te postremo doarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem (*Nox* 1.0)

Many the people many the oceans I crossed –
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
so I could give you the last gift owed to death
and talk (why?) with mute ash. (*Nox* 7.2)

Carson's conventional translation of the poem minimizes interpretation; it generally opts for the plainest equivalents of the words in Latin, and as such, to use Carson's language, it gives the reader little more than the bones of Catullus's text. The syntax imitates and pays "attention to the chain of signifiers, to syntactic processes, to discursive structures" of the original, adhering to the foreignizing practice that Phillip E. Lewis advocates in "The Measure of Translation Effects" (262).

While Carson's version may not be as faithful to the "language texture" (Lewis 262) as, for example, Louis and Celia Zukofsky's 1969 homophonic translation of the

poem (Zukofsky 314),⁵⁷ in its spare, unfinished quality it appears to add less to the original than other relatively contemporary versions, such as Frank O. Copley's 1957 e. e. cummings-like rearrangement of the lines (114)⁵⁸ or even Peter Whigham's translation in a formal register from a Penguin edition:⁵⁹

Journeying over many seas & through many countries
I come dear brother to this pitiful leave-taking
the last gestures by your graveside
the futility of words over your quiet ashes. (246)

The nuance of Carson's diction appears less specific, and therefore less exclusive, than Whigham's, even as the dictionary entries she cites legitimate his choices in vocabulary. Still, even with its sparseness, her version adds sense not present in the original text, as translation is bound to do. Catullus may economize, in Carson's words, and as Lewis notes, "an *economy* of translation [is] a process of gain as well as loss" (emphasis original, 261). Her imitation of the original's word order creates a sort

⁵⁷ The Zukofskys' translation begins: "Mulled hosts their countries yet mulled there by a core of wake tossed / I've venturied these miseries, brother, our death offerings."

⁵⁸ The first half of Copley's translation reads:
many the peoples and many the seas
I travelled through
and here I come poor prayers for the dead,
brother, to say
to give you the last gifts of death
your speechless (and to what end) ashes to address
you are not here
fate took the You from me
o poor
it wasn't right

⁵⁹ For an extended discussion of the history of the translation of Catullus into English, see Venuti 68–82 and 186–194.

of stuttering effect in English, as if grief impeded the poet's (or translator's) ability to speak. Carson describes Catullus's elegy as passionate and slow, but the monosyllables of her translation, however immediate and passionate an effect they may create, speed its pace. Further, the translation itself results in the gain of a literary object: its very existence exceeds the existence of the original text.

Questions about translation's non-correspondence with its source tend to be critical, in a negative sense. Error and inadequacy lie on the opposite side of accuracy, and accuracy is on a spectrum with knowledge and even truth. Antoine Berman, in his book, *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*, observes:

This tendency to want to judge a translation . . . refers back to two fundamental traits of any translated text, one being that this 'secondary' text is supposed to correspond to the 'primary' text, is supposed to be truthful, true; the other trait being what I will call *defectivity*, a neologism attempting to gather all the possible forms of defects, failings, and errors that affect *any* translation. (Emphasis original, 29)

Carson observes that defectivity as she describes the dark room of the translating process: "Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch" (7.1). As this quotation from *Nox* suggests, the search for the right word in translation, the word that truthfully represents the multiplicity of meanings in the corresponding word in the primary text, resembles Carson's search for her brother, who is dead, like the language she translates from, Latin, and he can be only understood, like that language, through artifacts and words left behind, and through consultation with those who also knew

him. In *Nox* Carson pores over the text of his one letter, his one phone call, his widow's remembrance. However, despite her reproductions and interpretations of those texts in the book, what they reveal is his opacity, the hidden nature of his truth. Her brother's letters, calls, and old photographs, much like her aesthetic representations of them, point to what they cover up as much as they reveal it. In a dark room, every place can be a hiding place.

The lexical entries in *Nox*—the entries that comprise the dark room of translation—are one such a hiding place. These entries may pretend to a sort of transparency: they show the truth of a defectivity specific to Carson's translation of Catullus by laying out the range of meaning that her translation must omit. Yet the entries also hide truths—in plain sight—in several ways. Read as a standalone poem, the accumulation of entries seems incoherent: the pieces do not fit on Catullus's terms; they are not faithful to the way in which the words in the elegy make meaning together. They make meaning not in the linear direction of the narrative poem, but through the labyrinthine, rhizomatic net that Umberto Eco identifies as ultimately every dictionary's way of making meaning, in which “every point can be connected with every other point, and, where the connections are not yet designed, they are, however, conceivable and designable” (81). In the lexical net, like the room of translation, there are ways around, but no way out.

The entries also hide their own invention under the guise of being a copy. As I have mentioned, the lexical entries copy their source, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, but then they alter it. In an interview, Carson explains, “The lexical entries are drawn from the lexicon but a bit fiddled with, and I did want people to gradually notice that and

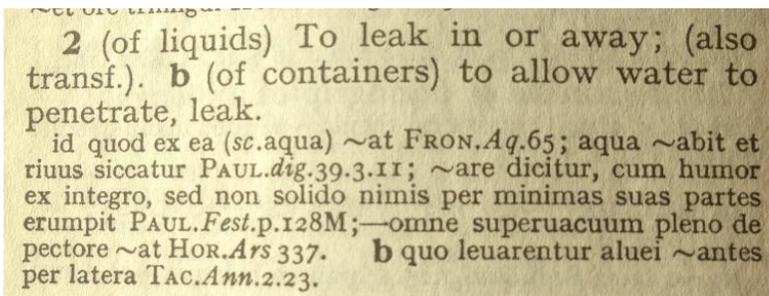
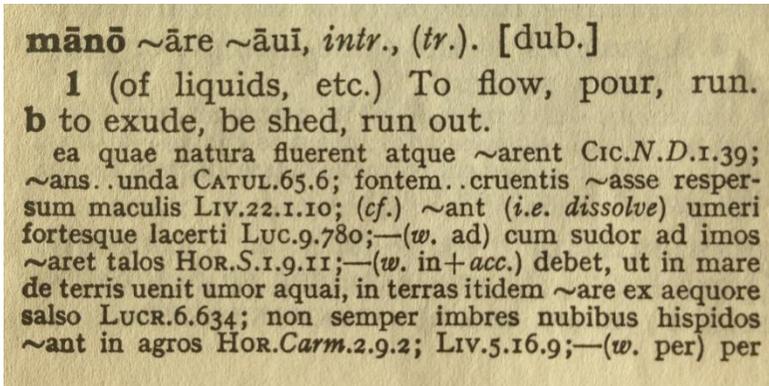


Fig. 1 (top). First part of *OLD* entry for *mano*.

Fig. 2 (bottom). Entry for *mano*, continued.

appear in Catullus’s poem, and it does not belong to the translation of it.

One entry that Carson that modifies is that for the Latin word *mano* (“to flow, pour, run; to exude,” etc.). Figure 1 depicts the first part of the entry as it appears in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. As the figure shows, the entries provide some English equivalents of each word and then follow them with quotations from Latin sources that illustrate the word’s use. If we compare the entries in *Nox* with their counterparts in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, we can find that some of the Latin phrases using *nox* in Carson’s entries do not appear in the original. What’s more, none of the translations of any of the phrases do. The word *nox*, meanwhile, does not get its own entry; however,

follow the clues of it;
 it’s a bit of a puzzle”
 (“Interview”). Carson’s
 “fiddling” often
 abridges the very long
 entries. It also adds to
 them. It adds
 translations, and it adds
 the word “nox,” which
 is a clearly signaled
 intruder. Like the
 entries, the very word is
 excessive: it does not

the reader can easily define it inductively. Within the entries, Carson nearly always translates *nox* and its variants (for example, *noctem*, *noctis*) as night.

One translation of a phrase, however, that does appear in its *Oxford Latin Dictionary* source entry adds the English word *night* where the Latin word *nox* is not originally present. In my reading, this particular translation, which deliberately adds to the original, provides a central clue as to how to read the excessive truth made in Carson's lexical translation. This phrase, which appears under term *manantia*, derived from *mano*, is line 337 from Horace's *Ars Poetica*: *omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manta*. In the *OLD*, it appears in the examples under the second definition (fig. 2). In the *Ars Poetica*, this line appears in the section of the text that sets out the relationship between poetry and utility, pleasure, fabrication, and truth. As the following translation by D. A. Russell shows, Horace advises against excess in poetry, since the memory cannot retain it for use. I have italicized the line that corresponds to the Latin that Carson (and the dictionary) cite:

Poets aim either to do good or to give pleasure—or, thirdly, to say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life.

Whatever advice you give, be brief, so that the teachable mind can take in your words quickly and retain them faithfully. *Anything superfluous overflows from the full mind.*

Whatever you invent for pleasure, let it be near to truth. (132)

The italicized line here refers to the reader. Poetry that seeks to instruct should contain only what is necessary to the purposeful content it seeks to convey. Carson's translation of this line, however, diverges from convention and apparently context to

describe a much more affective state than the original does, related to the web of meaning built through night and *nox* and her brother's death: she translates it as, "the whole pointless night seeps out of the heart" (10.1).

If we want to speak of the small, intimate places where translation takes place, another of these might be the heart. Gayatri Spivak seems to locate translation there when she speaks of the role of love in the translator's responsibility to the other's text: "The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying" (370). Certainly Carson teaches us throughout her book that the place of the frayed heart's grief is the space from which all of the book's work—its prose, poetry, visual art, and translation—emerges. The grief she writes about is too much and not enough: too much for her to bear, inadequate to her brother's death. There is no life now to which she can be "pleasing and serviceable," to borrow Horace's terms, and thus, perhaps, in her entries she has no need to be brief. The poet cannot and need not redact the totality of what the heart seeks, as if physically, to express.

The word "pointless" remits to the word "endless," which recalls another property of translation: its non-coincidence with its origin, its origin which is also, in a sense, its desired end. Two notions of endlessness—infinite accumulation and a lack of an end with which to coincide—stand out in the lexical translations. Carson devotes what might seem to be a disproportionate amount of space to the small, seemingly insignificant words of the original poem: for example, *ad*—which takes up three pages in its first appearance. The content of this entry can be read as an allegory for the work of translation: *ad* is defined as "up to, into . . . into contact with, against . . . towards . .

. to the presence . . . as far as . . . near, beside . . . in the direction of” and so on (3.3). The word implies a physical approach, as if toward the asymptote of the original text. While no single English equivalent coincides with the totality of the list that the original word occasions, each translated word adds something that wasn’t there before—a new word, to begin with, and new rhizomatic associations of meaning. Translation invents, and to quote Horace, it invents something “near to truth”—something that approaches it and comes to exist in close proximity.

Part of translation’s allure lies in the foreignness of the translated language to the translating language, the desire for difference that remains unassimilable, intransmissible, unrepeatably. Virginia Woolf, in her essay, “On Not Knowing Greek,” signals that the unknowable is what draws us to the foreign text: “We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English. We cannot hear it, now dissonant, now harmonious, tossing sound from line to line across a page . . . Nevertheless, it is the language that has us most in bondage; the desire for that which perpetually lures us back” (55). Woolf is pulled toward the lost sound of a language that is no longer spoken, no longer embodied in and used by a living person or people. She is also enthralled by the understanding she cannot have, a meaning she cannot translate: in short, what she cannot know. Woolf writes, “There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means. Take this from the *Agamemnon* for instance. . . . The meaning is just on the far side of language” (49). The quoted Greek text (elided here) is a “stuttering invocation to Apollo” (Prins 54) spoken by Cassandra, “hovering between sound and signification” (Prins 54). It is

the kind of use of language that might be signaled by dictionary excerpts, precisely because its meaning is not clear.

Making something from that language, however, does not depend on identifying with it, on bringing it, through translation, closer to the self. Its distance can also make one travel to it; its separation from the self allows one to hold it at arm's length and make something new from it. Dictionaries become a tool in developing the skill to make something with language. Yopie Prins, in her book, *Ladies' Greek*, notes that Woolf was enchanted not just by knowing the foreign language of Greek, but by learning it: "In a letter from 1916, she wrote, 'I am—or was—reading Greek! I can't make out what the fascination of Greek is, seeing that I have to look out every other word, and then fit them together like a puzzle'" (Prins 55). However, that making sense from the unknown—materially, haptically, as if assembling the pieces of a puzzle, or, to return to Walter Benjamin, articulating the fragments of a broken vessel, suggests that "[t]he meaning on the far side of language" is consubstantial with the material form of the language itself. Prins writes that "[f]or Woolf, the spell of Greek was not only an encounter with the literality of Greek letters . . . but a way to recognize the materiality of language before its meaning is understood" (53). Work with foreign language—like the work Carson does in *Nox*—involves not just interpreting that language, but picking up its pieces and moving them around.

This physical manipulation of language—like the scrapbooking practice of *Nox*—brings to mind the work of craft, a term applied both to lexicography and translation. The term craft, in lexicography, is used with reference to the fact that

dictionaries are textual objects made by people in a way that might be useful to their readers. Landau, in his landmark study, *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*, does not discuss theorists like Eco who identify for encyclopedic works—including dictionaries—an endless and utopian project. Dictionaries are books that are made to be applied. Landau writes:

Philosophers are not ignorant of the nature of linguistics or dictionary making, but it is remarkable how little attention they pay to the users of dictionaries. By contrast, lexicographers—all of them—pay a great deal of attention to the needs of their readers. *For lexicography is a craft, a way of doing something useful.* It is not a theoretical exercise to increase the sum of human knowledge but practical work to put together text that people can understand. (Emphasis added, 153–154)

For Landau, actual use is key to understanding—and making—the object that is the dictionary. Béjoint, for his part, goes further than to note the insufficiency of philosophical approaches to the actual practice of lexicography. Rather, with regard to dictionary making, he dismisses theory outright:

I simply do not believe that there exists a theory of lexicography, and I very much doubt that there can be one. Those who have proposed a general theory have not been found convincing by the community, and for good reasons. A theory is a system of ideas put forward to explain phenomena that are not otherwise explainable. A science has a theory, a craft does not. All natural phenomena need a theory, but how can there be a theory of the production of artefacts? There are theories of

language, there may be theories of lexicology, but there is no theory of lexicography. Lexicography is above all a craft, the craft of preparing dictionaries. (381)

While theories of artifacts do, in fact, exist, as do theories about humans' production of objects, Béjoint is right to suggest that craft is something often viewed as a pursuit that stands below or apart from theory, something inseparable from, and perhaps identifiable with, material practice.

Craft has a physical closeness to its makers and users; it also has an affective closeness. Craft is often relegated to the realm of amateur activity—that of the hobbyist, the unprofessional—and to the realm of domestic, the sphere of little labors of a homely love. That love can seem unprofessional in the realm of art: Glenn Adamson writes, “‘Amateur’ means, roughly, ‘lover,’ from the Latin *amare* (to love), and one of the hallmarks of amateur activity is a lack of critical distance from the object of desire” (139). Spivak advocates precisely for this lack of critical distance with regard to translation when she says that “it would be a practical help if one’s relationship with the language being translated was such that sometimes one preferred to speak in it about intimate things” (372). The translated language, that which is distant and longed-for in Woolf’s comments on the foreignness, must also be braided into the translator’s everyday life.

Spivak writes about love; Woolf about desire; Briggs, in her book-length essay on translation, *This Little Art*, examines how translation is amateur in multiple senses: it is done for love and often done at home; it is often unexpert; and like craft, it produces something in a seemingly unproductive way. Language and the source text

interpellate the translator, not from a distance, but in the intimate space of daily practice. Translation is a form of writing, Briggs acknowledges, that is different from the writing of the text being translated. Throughout her book she identifies the translator who exists in this in-between space, between writing and reading, art and craft, as a “maker of wholes.” She asks:

Translator as writer or maker? And what kind of whole?

[. . .]

Because there *are* deep pleasures in translating.

There is amateurishness, and not-knowing, improvisation and instruction, as well as the reach for specialist knowledge.

There is often a strong writing desire, great conscious audacity and difficult identification, somehow together with the more familiar humility and willing apprenticeship.

There is the making of a piece of writing: a new volume in a new context with very different materials. (91)

The “maker of wholes” makes something new precisely through her relationship, her closeness to the first text.

Translation’s form of making, in Briggs’s account, is one that produces knowledge through practice. Translation also is a form of manual labor, “as a means of writing the other’s work out with your own hands” (119). Translation requires taking pieces of the material of language and putting them together: “I think we owe translators, and perhaps also ourselves, some recognition of what it might have meant *to have handled every single word* (space and punctuation mark) of the writing-to-be

translated, *to have taken a decision in relation to* its every single word (space and punctuation mark), and indeed *to have written* every single one of its parts” (emphasis original, 268). The thing made is never a final product, partly because of the translator’s incomplete expertise. Translation involves not just knowing what is available to be known or employing a knowledge that has already been acquired, but discovering and correcting one’s ignorance in the process of making: “It seems to me that translators undertake to write translations not as a means to demonstrate their expertise but precisely because they know, without yet knowing exactly how or in what particular ways, doing so will be productive of *new* knowledge. As yet un-acquired, un-grounded knowledge of the world” (211). Through making, one faces the responsibility of encountering, of speaking with and for and listening to the other in the world.

Making, in the form of translation, also involves bringing that other into one’s private space. In Carson’s formulation, the time spent in the work of a loving translation, in fact, can even make that space. Briggs reflects on her own translation of Roland Barthes’s *Preparation for the Novel* to think about the value of the domestic, that is, the space of the home, while bringing a text into what, in another register, is often called the domestic language:

The emphasis on making—the verb *faire* opening up a space for making as well as writing, writing-as-technique, as craftsmanship—is a way of holding the project at a distance from the mythology of the writer: the published writer for whom the work is done (consecrated, the writer and his work monumentalized). . . The idea that the labor of writing is necessarily modest,

humble, might be to replace one myth with another. But it also speaks back to Barthes's investment in the amateur, in her own form of expending energy, the ways in which she chooses, repeatedly, and with investment, to spend her time For me, says Barthes, the place where this alliance occurs, where the aesthetic (as the vocation of the technical) meets the ethical, its privileged field—is precisely here: in what he calls the everyday detail of the domestic setting, the home. (273)

Translation is a form of homemaking; its craft-like aspects are precisely what make it a form of love and relationship, make it valuable.

Carson writes that translation “in one sense” is a room. It is the space—a space she domesticates—where translation takes place. But to return to the image of Catullus's poem, how does one arrive at that room, and arrive at other senses of it, and see the room from the outside? To conclude, I'll propose that one might arrive precisely through the making of a place at which to arrive, through the invention of an object “near to truth”—that is, through fabrication. I've chosen this word, fabrication, because of its material implications, but also because of its relationship to truth. In different context—specifically, in a discussion of insufficiency's potential in political contexts—Jacques Lezra notes that the term fabrication has two senses: “a mere fabrication, a fiction; and a substantive structure built firmly, fabricated, expressing the labor of truths produced and reconciled.” In terms of its defectivity, Carson's translation of Catullus is the former, a fictional invention. In another sense, though, it is the latter, a functional invention: it exists as a textual structure on a page, in a material book; it expresses the labor of the truths that it invents and the truths to which

it ultimately must reconcile itself. In an interview (“Carson and Currie”), Carson describes *Nox* as an epitaph, an epitaph that might be written on a physical structure like a monument—an image she employs in the text of the book, and an image invoked by the book’s gray box. The structure of a monument, unlike translation’s room, has no entries, but it is a place where translation might stop.

Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, defines fabrication precisely through its having an end: “To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication” (143). This predictable end might characterize the practical work of translation: while the task of translation might be unattainable, the work of translation gets done. For Arendt, the fabricated object also attains a permanence, especially in the case of the work of art, which testifies to the lives and the activity of men, long after they are gone. According to Arendt, fabricated art works, including monuments, are not translatable, in the broad sense, since they have no equivalent: “they are unique, are not exchangeable” (167). Thus, when nothing can be exchanged, one might imagine that translation not only fabricates a structure, but also a gift: like Catullus, Carson arrives at her brother’s death with a literary object, “the last gift owed to death.” She is in debt to the loss of him, a loss she cannot reach, and she will place the fabrication of her translation near it. The translation is a gift because death cannot return it. But the fabrication of translation forgives the debt that loss cannot pay. Forgiveness, admittedly, is not a term that *Nox* includes and is a term foreign to the classical world that *Nox* inhabits. But Arendt’s writing on the act of forgiveness seems to indicate what the gift of translation does. She writes: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act

would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever” (237). Carson, the poet-narrator, cannot neither be repaid nor forgiven by the dead. But her lexical translation seems to forgive the debts of truth that she and her sources owe to each other by producing something in excess of that debt. What the work gains, instead of endless repetition, is a productive kind of endlessness: one that allows her to draw near to truth, to stop by it, and like Catullus, who only visits his brother’s grave, after crossing many people, many oceans, to travel onward, or return home.

CONCLUSION

Dictionaries, encyclopedias, archives, notebooks: in an era of digital information storage and retrieval, when writing on paper is often supplanted by typing to a screen, the use of print reference genres and their handwritten counterparts by contemporary poets seems at once timely and nostalgic, obsolete. It is timely because, as many recent historical studies show, reference genres emerged as a way to confront what one might see as a contemporary problem, the existence of an excess of information—or as Ann M. Blair titles her study of early modern reference books, the problem of having *Too Much to Know*. As Blair writes, “We describe ourselves as living in an information age as if this were something completely new. In fact, many of our current ways of thinking about and handling information descend from patterns of thought and practices that extend back for centuries” (1). While the literature studied in this dissertation both confronts and enacts a restriction of access to information, it also presents information in excess: while Brodsky’s and Carson’s works present at least an appearance of endlessness, Ortiz’s *Cuadernos* have no end in sight—as of this writing, volumes eleven and twelve are in progress—and the production of an artist like Dias-Pino seems bound only by the arc of his life.

Yet while each of the objects in this dissertation manages information, none quite provides it, or at least not in ways that can be used in contexts that can be applied to achieve a knowledge that has a definitive status or universalizing aspirations—as happens in the writing of a standard encyclopedia, the writing of history, the discovery of the laws of science, the settling of a juridical truth. The poems studied here draw

attention to the importance of particularity, not in opposition to universality, but rather in a way that still expresses a longing for the general, the verifiable, a knowledge that exists but is unavailable. The particular in these poems or objects also offers a way of knowing that communicates something about the source from which it is made, as well as the danger of a claim to universality that is false, that imposes a particularity that denies other particularities. Dias-Pino's *Enciclopédia*, in a sense, inverts the anthropological gesture of a West that goes to places like Brazil and collects artifacts and information to analyze, classify, and understand. From the vantage point of Brazil, the *Enciclopédia* turns to Europe and its collections of knowledge from elsewhere and taxonomies of that knowledge. It disorders those collections and offers them up to haptic and visual methods of apprehension that might be more universally accessible than those of the encyclopedic model it remakes. Brodsky's photographic series "The Archives" emphasizes how the conditions and practices of storage and retrieval of a particular archive determine the kinds of knowledge archives offer. Ultimately, the archives he photographs, as well as the photographs themselves, emphasize the particular, inhabitable knowledge inherent to what Ariella Azoulay calls "*the material archive*," as opposed to the "the philosopher's archive" or "*the abstract archive*" (emphasis original) that has come to dominate theoretical discussions. The abstract archive, following Derrida, might at once reveal and hide a truth, and it might offer an infinite, and infinitely deferred, potentiality for knowledge and significance. However, the material archive can be occupied and altered, not potentially, but actually, by a human presence.

Dias-Pino's *Enciclopedia* and Brodsky's series "The Archives" create an indeterminacy or even truncation of meaning that signals the limitations to meaning imposed by authoritative sources on the subjects they depict. Ortiz's *Cuadernos* and Carson's *Nox* provide models of how to navigate and live with that indeterminacy, to hold the materiality of language together with its historical resonance and unpredictable ends, and those models are particular—not impersonal methods for reading but unique examples of how to deal with language given through deeply, openly affective personal narrative. All four works discussed in this dissertation deal with the materiality of the reference—the reference as genre, as well as the reference of language—through place, on both metaphorical and literal levels, and that place is often enclosed, often homely or domestic. Brodsky's photographs, rather than reveal the depicted archives' contents, mark an itinerary through the place where they are housed. The works of Dias-Pino, Carson, and Ortiz exist, in some sense, in the artists' homes. While parts of Dias-Pino's *Enciclopedia* have been published or exhibited, it exists (or existed) most fully in his house, its pages daily filling and altering his living space. Carson describes translation as a room; Ortiz's domesticity extends to his in-laws' property and the city where he lives; both also invoke their childhood home space. The affective concern in all four artists' works, while political to different degrees and with different measures of directness, is also familiar in the cases of Brodsky, Carson, and Ortiz. The first two memorialize their brothers; Ortiz, throughout the *Cuadernos*, discusses his children, his wife, and previous generations of his family, and his scope of concern extends to old friends and other members of the local Bahía Blanca community.

The domestic sphere—the home—might be framed as a private space, one secluded from and even opposed to the public square where, paradigmatically, politics gets made. Similarly, the employment of increasingly obsolete reference volumes might be interpreted as a nostalgic gesture, a longing for the bound authority and beauty of book forms of a recent past. However, the use that the literature and art studied in this dissertation makes of reference genres shows how the private can be an alternative space for making politics, one that slips away from the eye of surveillance, a smallness that escapes the general sweep of the large. The idiosyncratic use that the writers and artists here make of reference genres reflects not so much the universal promise of these genres but the ways they might inspire a radical practice. Dictionaries and encyclopedias, which in practice very often are domestic objects, can function pedagogically in autodidactic contexts. Included in a history of notetaking practices, these books lend themselves to citation, to being taken for notes; they enable people to teach themselves.

The home, too, is a craft-making space, and the home workshop is a place to craft objects slowly, thoughtfully, in ways that historically have purposefully opposed the uniformity of mass production, the violence of speed. Craft is particular, even as it follows patterns; craft organizes space and habits or ways of doing things. Craft also builds interpersonal networks in the ways it is taught; it develops care for objects and people both. John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, goes so far as to say that “[cr]aftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be ‘loving’; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised” (47–48). He also defines art there as “a process of doing or making” (47), a definition that evokes the relationship

between *poesis* and the Greek term meaning “to make.” As discussed with regard to *Nox*, craft is a term often used to describe translation—an act of making things with words that follows a pattern—but it is also used, in pedagogical contexts, to describe techniques that constitute good and effective writing, for example, in the creative—including poetry—writing workshop.

Questions about poetry as craft recall an overarching concern of this dissertation, namely, how all the highly varied objects here qualify as poems. None assumes the form of the traditional lyric. Dias-Pino and Ortiz connect their work overtly to an avant-garde poetic history; Brodsky’s photographs can be read in the tradition of an engaged Latin American conceptualism that involves text; Carson is identified as a translator and a poet. However, despite these artists’ connections to the category of poetry, their work clearly looks different from it. In the introduction I described my consideration of poetry as an expansive one, and in a sense, this dissertation, like these objects it studies, uses the term “poem” to denote a certain kind of verbal action, one that goes beyond a way of arranging words on a page with a certain set of rhetorical devices. I conclude by suggesting that the objects studied here ask that one recognize a poem, not through what it is, but by what it does. Jonathan Culler, in his *Theory of the Lyric*, reminds us that the purpose of reading poetry is not only “to produce a new interpretation” (5): poetry does more than *mean*. Historically, Culler explains, pedagogy surrounding poetry asked that students *do* something with poems:

In prior centuries readers expected poems to teach and delight. . . . They might parse, imitate, translate, memorize, evaluate, or identify allusions and

rhetorical or prosodic strategies, but interpretation in the modern sense was not part of literary engagement until the twentieth century, and writers and readers may not have been greatly the worse for it. (5)

Poetry can be enacted through ritual, through performance. Historically, it has been an object in the world that allows readers to make and do as much as to understand.

What people do with poetry is historically traceable. What poetry does with and to people and society, as well as through people and the material world, is less evident. As Culler writes, “Lyric can be a form of social action, which contributes to the construction of a world and works to resist other forms of world-making carried out by instrumental rationality and reified common sense, but the range of possibilities and the difficulty of determining what effects lyrics have is very great” (8–9). Perhaps action in poetry—and ultimately the action of the fact contained in the reference genres that the poetry in this dissertation cites—might be best understood in the Arendtian sense, through its unpredictability and endlessness. This endlessness and unpredictability, in part, depends on the particularity and situatedness of the reading encounter—any study of literature is a science of the particular, to return to Ortiz. Culler notes that poetry’s effects change through place and time:

One of the things that lyrics may do is project a distinction between the immediate historical, communicative situation and the level at which the work operates in its generality of address and its openness to being articulated by readers who will be differently situated (situated in part by the history of these works themselves). This means that the claims later ages can make about them will be multiple also and open to reversals, through recontextualizations and

changes of scale. What becomes evident in any discussion of sociopolitical implications of concrete literary works is the unpredictability of their historical efficacy. What at one level might seem contestation is complicity at another. A socially oriented criticism can treat the work as its recurrent coming into being in a social space, which is itself in part the effect of that work and always to be constructed by a reading of one's own relation to it. (301)

When the objects studied in this dissertation make poems out of reference genres, they read their sources through their historical openness, and through the ways that their registers of beauty, idiosyncrasy, information, and even instrumentality change over time.

These poems also ask, to what extent is it fair to separate books like encyclopedias and dictionaries—works known not only for their instructional quality but for being “(naturally) somewhat boring,” as Borges’s narrator in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” observes (69)—from the realm of poetry, which often seems more to delight, in the broadest sense, rather than instruct? As was discussed in the introduction, one does not go to poetry for facts, at least in an instrumental sense, but neither does one go to the poetry studied here to get away from them. Contemporary encyclopedic poetry might, rather, demonstrate the postautonomy of literature, to turn to a framework developed by Josefina Ludmer to describe fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century. Ludmer uses the term “la literatura posautónoma” (“postautonomous literature”) to describe writing that erases, blurs, or crosses the boundaries between genres of high and low literature, literature and informative text, as well as to describe a condition in which a separation between literature and life no

longer clearly exists: “La literatura misma es uno de los hilos de la imaginación pública y por lo tanto tiene su mismo régimen de realidad: la realidadficción” (“Literature itself is one of the threads of public imagination, and as such has its own regime of reality: realityfiction”) (12). Postautonomous literature changes reading practices: “No lee litarariamente (con categorías literarias como obra, autor, texto, estilo, escritura y sentido) sino a través de la literatura, en realidadficción y en ambivalencia. Usa la literatura para entrar en la fábrica de realidad” (“One does not read literally (with literary categories like work, author, text, style, writing, and meaning) but rather through literature, in realityfiction and ambivalence. One uses literature to enter into the fabrication of reality”) (12). In optimistic contexts, Ludmer’s categorization might seem playful; it might speak to an impulse of artistic invention that allows one to fashion new realities in which one wants to live. However, as the works in this dissertation suggest, “realityfiction,” and the postautonomy of these poems, might also speak to a weightier circumstance: that what we are asked to take for reality is sometimes a fabrication made by those who do not have the interests of fact in mind. We might only be able to access reality through the many representations we make of it; however, rather than being a liberation from reality, this condition means we must take those representations seriously as the tools by which we construct the means to live, both daily and over an arc of time.

The encyclopedic poetry studied in this dissertation asks that rather than see reality as literature, we might recognize that literature is a part of the real. The poetics of dictionaries and encyclopedias sets patterns for fabrication that their many and often anonymous authors can follow over time, and this poetics, in turn, helps shape

the patterns of these books' use. The postautonomy of the literature studied here might reveal the poem as one more brick in the edifice of reality, as if the books on a shelf formed part of the architecture of a library or a house, and their placement shaped our habits of living and the structural integrity of the places where we live. Fact has many functions, these poems seem to say, and our uses of it mark reality's art.

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