

BETWEEN POETRY AND PROSE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON PEDRO CABRITA REIS

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I. HE WAS IN A CITY HE DIDN'T KNOW. | He had just returned from an all-night bout of drinking. It had started with a dinner that quickly became a "menu de dégustation". There must have been at least twenty courses. Each time he thought the meal was winding down, another plate arrived, another bottle of wine, another element to taste, to savor. Despite the bloated feeling he had for about two hours, everything was too good to turn down. The timing was amazing. At the slightest appearance of hunger, the next plate arrived. ("Dégustation" is a strange word, after all.) Finally, after a few Armagnacs, they left the restaurant.

He was in a city he didn't know. His host suggested they go for a "last drink" at a nearby bar. Why not? He was so full, he didn't want to go back to his hotel just yet and try to sleep. A last drink would do the trick. They went into a very crowded bar, one that seemed to have opened in the mid-eighties and never closed. Some people were dancing (to New Order!), mostly men. P forced his way up to the bar and ordered a couple of whiskies. This was not England, so the servings were generous. They continued their conversation from the restaurant, even though neither one of them could hear a word that was being said. After a few more rounds, they left. It felt good to be out in the street, enveloped by the summer's evening heat, by the hundreds of people drinking and leaning against cars. Another venue was suggested, but he was starting to feel tired. He resisted, but was finally won over by the gentle insistence of his host. They hailed a cab. If the previous bar seemed lost in a time lag, this one felt like walking into a television set. In particular, like being in a bar just beyond the forest of Twin Peaks. It was nothing more than a small wooden bar facing a stage, bordered by red velvet. The floor was checkerboard, black and white. However, where David Lynch sent out a male midget who sang and danced backwards, this place featured female midgets (is "dwarf" a kinder, more politically-correct word?) who paraded out, one after another, and strip-teased the audience. (The "audience" consisted of the two of us, a family of four who could have been dropped in from a farm in Canada and two businessmen, definitely not locals.) We asked for double whiskies, which, of course, looked like quadruples. It was approaching 3:00 am. I couldn't take another sequined bra coming off at the level of my knees. And I was afraid that the lap dancing was about to commence. So we left. Another cab. This time I really wanted to go back to the hotel. It was at this point, however, that I realized that I was in a horrible fix. I didn't know the language and I had forgotten the name of my tiny hotel, which didn't even have any business cards. Only P remembered. And he was intent on getting to the next place. He turned around from the front seat of the cab and said, "Just one more place... I've never been there before, but I think it's the perfect place to round off our evening." It was curious: as I was feeling more drunk, more exhausted, P was gathering energy, becoming more lucid, craving the next stop on this never-ending tour. The cab pulls up outside a nondescript looking building with a group of about twenty people cueing to get in. P gets out of the cab, rushes up to the doorman, who greets him like a long-lost buddy, and motions for me to come in.

Curious behaviour for one who has never been in this place before. True to form, it's another jump in time as we pass through the heavy black curtains. This time, it's Saturday Night Fever. Flashing 60-watt light bulbs, men in white suits and vests, disco-dancing which made me wish the midget strippers were back.

And, seated at certain tables around the dance floor were drop-dead gorgeous

women, ranging from 18 to 70. I'm guessing at the latter's age, but, believe me, she was just as striking as any of her younger companions. And they all looked so cool, so distant. They would not make eye contact with any of the men in the club until a gesture had been made towards them. Everything was discrete. Only then would they look up and, eventually, make their way over to the table.

This ritual was never a possibility at our table, of course. P would have liked to, I suppose, but he was now playing the innocent, there just to watch, to impress me, the out-of-towner. Somehow, he missed the fact that I was nearly catatonic. So we watched the little cat and mouse game unfold, like a narcotic screen slowly passing over all that had gone before that evening.

Our waiter came over. (He had nothing to do with the décor, with the seventies. His time lag went even further back.

He looked like he had come from waiting on one table in 1945 to ours, without missing a beat, without acknowledging any change that might have taken place. He was inscrutable, impeccable.) I asked for a mineral water. He looked at me as if this was the most remarkable thing that had happened to him in five decades of waiting tables. Yet he didn't say a word. He took Pedro's order for a whiskey (what else?) and came back with two of them. No sign of water. I felt it was best not to argue. And I dutifully drank up.

As we lingered on towards 6:00 am, there was not the slightest pressure to do anything more than nurse our drinks.

Finally, a remarkable feeling came over me. The fatigue had vanished. I was not drunk. I was famished. I mentioned this to P and it was like he had been waiting for me to say something for the past two hours. "That's exactly what I was thinking." And off we went. We dined on steak-frites and Bordeaux. It was glorious. However, after the whiskey to finish it off, I was begging for the name of my hotel. P was obviously weakening. Perhaps the thought of dropping me off and continuing the night had occurred to him. But that thought only lasted for a second. Just as he was about to instruct the cabbie on how to reach my hopelessly obscure hotel, another thought came to him. "Just one more place... you've got to see this place. And then to bed."

The next thing I remember was looking out of the window of the cab. It was around 8:30 am. P was standing in front of a green door of another non-descript house. He was arguing with the person inside, who kept gesturing to his watch.

P's heart didn't seem to be in it. Finally, after shaking hands with his interlocutor, just to show that there were no hard feelings and that he would be back (maybe that night), he returned to the cab. (At this point, the thought occurred to me that we might have been too early.) In any event, back to the hotel.

Not even a slightly askance look greeted me when I walked into the lobby. People were coming down for breakfast.

The sun was rising. I took the steps and, as I started to climb the final steps to my room, which was in an alcove at the very top, I had a kind of mini-panic attack, in which I had no idea where I was. There were only the steps leading to my door. And, in front of that door was a pitcher of water. Had it been left there by the new inhabitants of the room, who had taken it over when I didn't show up last night or this morning? Was it left for me? Had it been there these last few days and I just hadn't noticed? Not wanting to ponder any of these possibilities, I took the jug and emptied it, drinking it all in one go. Suddenly, I remembered

every event of the preceding twelve hours. I remembered where I was and how I got there. I put the jug down, went into the room and went to bed.

At around noon, I woke up, having to piss terribly. The room was pitch dark, one of the "advantages" of staying in hotels in Spain or Portugal. You can close the shutters so tight that not a ray of sunlight enters the room, thus allowing you to go to sleep and wake up at any hour thinking it is the middle of the night. I stumbled towards the bathroom, took a wicked leak and stumbled back into the bed. I was still woozy from the night before. I awoke again six hours later, ready to turn over a new leaf. Never again. I slowly peeled open the shutters and basked in the rays of the sun. I felt better already.

Upon going into the bathroom to shower, I noticed something strange. I must have left my cosmetics case in the bidet when I checked in, as there wasn't much space on the shelves to lay things out. After showering and drying myself off, I reached into the case to get my hairbrush. The case was sopping wet. The shower? Unfortunately, no. Urine.

Tons of it. And there, in a yellow pool at the bottom of the bag, was my toothbrush. I felt like a fucking degenerate. Fucking P. But... I certainly knew Lisbon a lot better this morning than I did yesterday. First things first...I must get the address of this hotel.

II. LIVING IN THE HOUSE OF SILENCE | Ten steps lead upwards from the floor. They are white and look as if they have been put together from cardboard. In fact, they are made of plaster. Steps are made to support the weight of the people traversing them, to safely transport them from one place to another, above or below. But these steps look like they would collapse under the weight of a child. They are fragile, almost ethereal. They lead to a kind of claustrophobic balcony, barely extended from the wall. A wall extends from the right step to the wall in which this structure has been situated, immediately creating a "first floor", dividing one space from another. It is also white, although we can see, along one of its borders, the strip that marks where it has been cut. It too seems like a temporary cut in space, white on white.

There is only one element, which breaks (and, at the same time, reinforces) the symmetry of this construction. It is a jug of water, resting at the top of the last step. Half full or half empty. This space, this sculpture, this enigmatic, ghost-like structure is called The House of the White Silence. Even the title seems non-descriptive, puzzling. For, our first impression is that this is a part of a house, a detail from a larger reality, one which has been embellished through the reduction of its context (the rest of the house, the room, the surroundings) and the addition of a narrative-inducing object (the jug of water). If this is a house, it is one in which we must imagine 99 % of it, imagine what this tableau suggests.

The "white silence". What does it mean to designate one absence with another? For if white is the absence of colour, silence is the absence of sound. But an absence is also something to be filled, to be projected upon. For John Cage, silence was "music", whether composed artificially by a particular piece, or naturally by the sounds that constantly surround it. Silence was potential. Just as whiteness is. Think of the film screen before the projector is turned on, the canvas before the paint is applied, any surface before it is covered (with an image or another colour). So, a "white silence" seems to imply a double potential, a house in which anything is possible, in which thoughts, events, images and sounds are both apparent and non-existent. The house, as a stage where private & public activity combine, becomes the meeting point between poetry and prose. You can describe it all you want, but in the end, you just have to imagine it.

Look at another house, *The House on the Roof* (1970). In fact, this drawing is one of the earliest works of Cabrita Reis, yet its title, its subject and the way in which it is represented all point to an interest in a kind of visionary architecture, in which, like the white silence, anything is possible. In this case, the house on the roof, one house on top of another, represents another kind of doubling, of repetition. For, at first glance, one might say that this was merely a mansard, an atelier, an addition to a pre-existing house. The title, of course, precludes this type of speculation. This structure, complete with windows, curtains and chimney, is unique. It is a house. And it is on top of another one. Don't ask why or how. That would be beside the point. There are even a couple of plants in front of this house, resting on the roof of the other house, as if it were the ground. And for whoever lives here, with pants and scarf hanging from a line to dry, it probably is the ground. But where is the door?

III. IMPOSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS | "Portugal had aqueducts at Coimbra, Tomar, Vila do Conde and Elvas all functioning in the seventeenth century. The new Spring Water aqueduct built in Lisbon between 1729 and 1748 took water to the outlying square of the Rato. The water of this fountain was much sought after, and it was here that the water carriers came to fill the red casks with iron handles which they carried on the backs of their necks."¹ A work from 1990, entitled *Silence and Vertigo*. Cabrita describes the work: "A church on a river bank. On the other bank a seven hundred year old university. The river flooded the church and today, out of the waters inside it, there appear seven arches. "On these arches something 'false' (an installation which proposes the simulating of a system of water courses) takes on meaning through its impossible relationship (connecting it to the water is inoperable) to something 'real' (the water inside the church).

"There is a metaphorical connection between the passing of the river and the transforming and passing of knowledge.

"Silence (implosion of all sounds/Totality) and Vertigo (movement in direction to an origin) form the nature of the search for knowledge. The place – a place which is now emptied of its initial sense."² .

Like the house on the roof, Cabrita's combination of the "false" with the "real" produces a combination, which encourages the viewer to once again imagine the impossible. On a basic level, an aqueduct is a system that ensures that water goes from one place to another. These various sites of transport are often marked by cisterns or wells, which mark the presence (or absence) of this precious fluid. *Silence and Vertigo* (and all of the artist's works which utilize the same structures) mark, not only the objects, but the process, the energy. The aqueduct is but the physical manifestation of a process that is invisible to the naked eye. It is a link, a bridge, which enables us to connect disparate spaces. And disparate levels of reading. Again we find the word "silence" in the title, here defined by the artist as an "implosion of all sounds/Totality". The positive connotations of the term are stressed, the sense that a silence is a trace of something else, an evidence of what has gone before. It is a totality of emptiness, a void filled to the brim. Likewise, the definition of "vertigo" as a "movement in direction to an

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: Volume 1*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1981. Translated by Sian Reynolds. Page 228.

² Pedro Cabrita Reis, quoted in catalogue published by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Centro de Arte Moderna, Lisbon, 1992. Page 74.

origin" is much more ambiguous than just saying, "a fear of heights". For what is that fear if not a wish to fall, to hurl ourselves from a dizzying peak, to "return" to the place where we started, to die.

Silence is possibility. Vertigo is stasis, always poised between stasis and flight. And, as Cabrita's "impossible" structures rest on the arches beneath a church, we must imagine the balance, the juxtaposition, as another kind of poise: silently waiting to fall. Resting in place.

IV. DESIRING BEAUTY | "In fact it happens also in chemistry as in architecture that "beautiful" edifices, that is, symmetrical and simple, are also the most sturdy: in short, the same thing happens with molecules as with the cupolas of cathedrals or the arches of bridges. And it is also possible that the explanation is neither remote nor metaphysical: to say "beautiful" is to say "desirable," and ever since man has built he has wanted to build at the smallest expense and in the most durable fashion, and the aesthetic enjoyment he experiences when contemplating his work comes afterward. Certainly, it has not always been this way: there have been centuries in which "beauty" was identified with adornment, the superimposed, the frills; but it is probable that they were deviant epochs and that the true beauty, in which every century recognizes itself, is found in upright stones, ships' hulls, the blade of an axe, the wing of a plane."³

Look at the media employed in *Dans les Villes #2*: aluminum, plywood, wrapping tape, enamel, masonite & coloured plexiglas. An industrial structure (aluminum) has been scraped clean of colour, so that a milky, blue cloud seems to cover its surface. It is a collection of disparate rectangles and squares, curved in the centre. In fact, the different sections look like blank (one could even say silent) frames or canvasses. One area, however, is not blank. Fitted over the empty surface is a pair of sliding windows. One is painted black, the other red. The apparent chaos of materials is belied by the symmetry of the work. Its references are as varied as the means it uses to denote them: painting and sculpture are but the most apparent. And, just as Levi finds a bridge between chemistry and architecture through reflecting on the notion of a "simple beauty", so does this work combine opposites through its surprising combinations. It does not seem like a mass of incoherent materials. It is, like a view one could see on a stroll "in the city", an amalgam of different unities, which is both singular and part of a wider, coherent scheme. (The latter is evidenced in the way Cabrita works in series, developing an idea, a combination of elements, a form, a colour through a succession of stages, each work being a continuation and a rupture from what preceded it).

V. THE IMPOSSIBLE COLLECTION | "Works belonging to the genre of cabinets d'amateur were detailed pictorial descriptions of rooms filled with artworks and other precious objects. Often these paintings served as precise inventories of real collections, as is the case with David Teniers' *La Galerie d'Archiduc Leopold* (1651-53) or Hieronymus Francken II's *'La Boutique de Jean Snellinck'* (1621). At other times, the view was imaginary, bringing together well-known artworks to form an ideal collection. A work by Jan Breughel of 1615-18 is an example of this second type which used an art gallery as a setting for an allegory of the sense of sight."⁴

³ Primo Levi, "The Periodic Table", Abacus Books, London, 1986. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. Page 179.

⁴ Mary Vidal, "Watteau's Painted Conversations", Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1992. Pages 183 - 184.

The Breughel painting depicts the gallery filled, from floor to ceiling, with paintings. There are even some that are set on the floor itself, occupying every available space. A woman sits at a table, pondering what could be a miniature painting, what could be a mirror offering up her own reflection. A bouquet of flowers climbs up a pillar, as if mimicking the subject for a still life. A chandelier hangs above the corridor that separates the rows of paintings. And a stream of light enters from above, as if coming from one of the paintings itself, one of those we cannot see on the right corridor wall. At the end of the corridor is an open door, leading to the outside. Or is it another painting, leaning against the wall? In fact, the painting is entitled Sight and Smell. It is not just a catalogue of visual opulence, of the infinite possibilities of creating "views": it is a veritable "still life", in which all of the senses play a part: the paintings which direct the eye from one part of the canvas to another, the smell of must and flowers, the touch of the artist revealed in each work on the wall, the echoes produced by an enclosed space, etc. This is a space that is completely idealized and imagined, i.e. the perfect collection and, at the same time, teeming with the mundane experiences of life. The posture of the woman at the table reveals everything: a fashionable slump, as if one had had too much to drink, too much to see. Catalog #1 (red): six shelves on a white wall. On the left a set of three, one above another, extend to the corner. On the right, also extending to the corner, the shelves are shorter and do not join with those on the left, each being about ten centimeters higher. On each shelf are a series of red shapes. They are, broadly speaking, rectangles, squares and circles, of different sizes. There is no apparent order.

At first glance, Cabrita's Catalog may be compared to the Cabinet d'amateur. Both are collections of objects (paintings & forms). Both appeal to the sense of sight as unlimited in potential. And both represent a kind of ideal collection, the possibility of the next element miraculously appearing on the wall or the shelf. Both point to a greater volume, beyond what is pictured. (In the case of Catalog, one may also cite Allan McCollum's series of Surrogate Paintings, in which the process of repetition and variation pointed to a notion of excess, of painting reduced to ground zero.)

There is, however, a vital difference between Cabrita's catalogue and Breughel's collection. The former is a series of blank, abstract objects. Its "subject" is geometrical form and the colour red. Breughel, on the other hand, reproduces a series of figurative paintings, including recognizable artists such as Rubens, while adding his own figurative scene below. One artist seemingly rejects narrative and identification, while the other revels in it. Breughel's gallery may be an allegory for the sense of sight, but it is also an illustration of a kind of pictorial envy: the more images we consume, the more we want. The more perfect, the more erotic, the more colorful a painting or collection is, the more we want it to be. Each image engenders the next. And if we don't have it, we have to get it.

Cabrita's catalogue of forms is much more finite. If the Cabinet d'amateur is expansive, this is reductive. One colour. Three forms. One has the impression that these objects could easily constitute a unity, a complete set. One object, in fact, composed of multiple parts. It seems to be a "catalogue" of a moment in time, a thought, a suggestion. It seems to be, once again, between poetry and prose.

VI. GLASS | I was walking along a street, near the train station. Nearly every other window I passed featured a woman sitting on the other side. They were all "storefronts", huge panes of glass where, formerly, one might have found a cobbler, a butcher, a seamstress, etc. One could pass by, look in and see what was happening, what was for sale. Now, it's pretty much the same, only these

women are selling themselves. Once the "sale" is concluded, a curtain is drawn across the window and our vision is turned back upon the street. In this case, I had just gotten a view of a beautiful woman who looked very familiar. And yet, I couldn't place where I knew her from. However, just as I turned to look again (dangerous, these second looks), the curtain was drawn. A client. Conveniently, there was a bar across the street, where I took a table behind another storefront. These tables are always the most prized, as you are off the street, yet have a kind of invisible visual access to what is going on outside. I ordered a beer and waited.

After three of them, the curtain was still drawn across the window across the street. And yet, it kept moving, billowing, as if there was a figure inside it. Had someone requested sex in front of the window, with only the curtain separating the act from the passers-by? I remembered a scene in the film made from Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant*, where the young heroine has sex on the floor of her lover's flat in Saigon, with the noise of all the shopkeepers just outside the door dominating the scene. One could even see legs pass by outside, between the slats of the wall. Was some scene like that taking place across the street? I ordered my fourth beer. After another half an hour, a woman came out of the building, dressed in black leather, with sunglasses. I knew a lot of women who looked like this, but I couldn't place this one. Five minutes later, two men in overalls came out. The curtain remained where it was. I went home. The next morning, I was back in the same bar, at the same table. At around 10:00 am, a man went into the apartment. He pulled back the curtain. The window was painted black. All that one could see were the red letters,

ADULT FILMS. I paid for my coffee, crossed the street and went in. After all, no one could see me. Cabrita's paintings on glass refer to any number of media. Because they are simply paint applied onto a viewing surface, we may call them paintings. Because they are not applied to canvas, paper or the wall itself, but are applied to a surface that is thick and traditionally repels paint, we may call them sculptures. In addition, they may be suspended from the ceiling (Stockholm) or leaning against the wall (Venice), thus encouraging us to think of them as "more than painting". But these are not just works that are situated between painting and sculpture. The use of glass, and all of its inherent properties and associations, points to architecture as well, as a means of dividing public and private space. Which, of course, relates back to the houses and the representation of structures such as stairs, shelves and aqueducts. Each element, each reference, engenders another. The artist provides us with a starting point: an object, a title, a set of codes to borrow from. The rest is up to us.

Take another example: *Wrapping Tape Landscape #1* (1999). In this case, the title is brutally direct.

At least the part about the materials. The tape completely covers a rectangular structure that extends from the gallery wall. But the subject, while the word "landscape" leaves no room for doubt, is elusive. As it is meant to be. Yes, one can spot lines and patterns, which could be interpreted as a horizon or a clump of trees. What they are, of course, are clumps in the application of the tape, but they can still be read as details of a landscape. They can also be read as "paint", as a rough, textured covering of a surface, a monochromatic wash with tactile edges. Or a "combine" sculpture, in the way that one surface is juxtaposed with another. Or...

VII. COSA MENTALE | "Pereira declares he met him one summer's day. A fine fresh sunny summer's day and Lisbon was sparkling. It would seem that Pereira was in his office biting his pen, the editor-in-chief was away on holiday while he

himself was saddled with getting together the culture page, because the Lisboa was now to have a culture page and he had been given the job. But he, Pereira, was meditating on death. On that beautiful summer day, with the sun beaming away and the sea breeze off the Atlantic kissing the treetops, and the city glittering, literally glittering beneath his window, and a sky of such a blue as never was seen, declares Pereira, and of a clarity almost painful to the eyes, he started to think about death. Why so? Pereira cannot presume to say.”⁵

In this opening series of sentences from Antonio Tabucchi’s *Declares Pereira*, we find a set of paradoxes based on the notion of repetition. “Pereira declares that” is already a repetition, repeating, writing, what has already been said. And then the comparison between the beautiful weather in Lisbon and the dark secret that seems to be behind this figure, “biting his pen”, “meditating on death”. And then the repetition of physical and psychic pain, a “clarity almost painful to the eyes” precludes more thoughts of death. Why, indeed? That, of course, will be the central question of the narrative, the enigma of Pereira, the light, idyllic life of Lisbon contrasted with the secrets of this character we will never completely understand.

The phrase, “Pereira cannot presume to say” recalls Melville’s *Bartleby*, the clerk who responds to every question, every provocation with the phrase, “I would prefer not to.” Another enigma who is both the source and refutation of the narrative drive. Like “declares Pereira” or “Pereira cannot presume to say”, these statements seem to take us into the mind of the character, seem to be simple subjective statements that we can translate into objective signs. The repetition (the obsessiveness of *Bartleby*’s reply or the insistence on describing the Lisbon weather) seems to insure us that we are reading things properly. But narratives, and art, are based on disruption, on finding out what Pereira cannot presume to say, on exposing the space behind his declarations, on solving the enigma... even if the author creates other enigmas in its wake.

“He was not the perfect antagonist: but, as is known, perfection belongs to narrated events, not to those we live.”⁶

“For what Leonardo said of painting can equally be said of love, that is *cosa mentale*, something in the mind.”⁷

“There are moments that can be called crises, the only ones that count in a life. These are moments when abruptly the outside seems to respond to calls we send it from within, when the exterior world opens itself and a sudden communion forms between it and our heart. From my own experience, I have several memories like this, and they all relate to events that seem trifling, without symbolic value, and one might say gratuitous... poetry can emerge only from such ‘crises,’ and the only worthwhile works of art are those that provide their equivalents.”⁸

⁵ Antonio Tabucchi, “Declares Pereira”, The Harvill Press, London, 1995. Translated by Patrick Creagh. Page 1.

⁶ Levi, op. cit., p. 215.

⁷ Marcel Proust, “In Search of Lost Time: Volume IV”, Vintage Classics, London, 1996. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin. Page 629.

⁸ Michel Leiris, “Documents”, Volume I, Number 4, 1929. Published by “October”, Number 92, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Page 141.

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