

## **The thing about poetry (and poetry about things): Materiality and the Material World in the Poetry of Manoel de Barros**

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### **Resumo**

Este artigo explora a questão da relação entre humano, linguagem e objeto a partir da poesia de Manoel de Barros.

### **Palavras-chave**

Manoel de Barros, Teoria das Coisas

### **Abstract**

This article explores the question of the relationship between human, language and object in Manoel de Barros' poetry.

### **Keywords**

Manoel de Barros, Thing Theory

The dialogue with — or perhaps even incorporation of — things, objects and the material world is one of the most interesting aspects of Barros's poetry, and one which will necessarily be a cornerstone in discussions from any other angle. His poetry challenges commonly held perceptions of the natural and material world through this radical reassessment

of things and objects, and their relationship in turn to language. Barros tends to eschew traditional poetic subjects in favour of the abject things which are usually rejected or ignored by society — scrub-land spaces, insects, ruins — and in so doing elevates these things and objects to the realm of the artistic object. The impetus behind this poetic project is clear: to bring the unseen and unappreciated into sharp focus, and force a reassessment of the everyday objects of the material world.

Thanks to the fact that the philosophical problems and difficulties stemming from attempts to define things and objects are as broad as they are profound (see for example Heidegger; Brown, *Things*; Brown, *Other Things*; Candlin and Guins), some discussion of what precisely is meant by these terms is necessary here. From Plato through Kant, to Heidegger and beyond, attempts to define what can be considered a ‘thing’, and what characteristics such a thing must have, have come to various conclusions which, depending on whose interpretation you choose to support, each have their own shortcomings. Heidegger’s ontology of the thing is perhaps closest to the interpretation that I shall use in this paper, particularly with regards to the unknowability of things, the relation of physical objects to linguistic definition, his ideas of nearness and the thing’s juxtaposition to the object (Heidegger 163–5, 173–5). His arguments for the validity of knowledge generated outside of a scientific discourse are also compelling and highly relevant to Barros’s poetry (Heidegger 167–9), although Badiou (*Manifesto for Philosophy*; *Handbook of Inaesthetics*) is clearer and more thought-provoking in his development of this issue. However, Heidegger’s dense interpretation of the “fourfold” nature of things, and in particular a focus on “the divinities” (Heidegger 176) seems less relevant to Barros’s poetry, and his explanations of these concepts can border on impenetrable:

The unity of the fourfold is the fouring. But the fouring does not come about in such a way that it encompasses the four and only afterward is added to them as that compass. Nor does the fouring exhaust itself in this, that the four, once they are there, stand side by side singly. (Heidegger 178)

Such opaque explanations of what a thing entails are perhaps, as I shall argue, what Barros is able to avoid through the deployment of poetry — and its integral ambiguity — as a “producer of truths” (Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* xii).

For the sake of moving forward with an interpretation of poetry, rather than circumnavigating a philosophical discourse which is not my area of expertise, I will define the terms relatively simply: the word ‘thing’ will denote something that exists in and of itself, without any modification by social or cultural perception, use value or stigma; ‘object’ will denote a ‘thing’ plus all of the social and cultural baggage which is excluded from the previous definition. This broadly follows Bill Brown’s definition put forth in the article which opened a special edition of *Critical Inquiry* (“Thing Theory”), preceding his edited volume *Things* (Things). More eloquently, if less thoroughly, than Heidegger, Brown sets out several passable definitions of the thing:

The word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday [...] (“Thing Theory” 4)  
 [...] first, as the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject [...] second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence  
 [...] (“Thing Theory” 5)

It is in this sense, perhaps, that the ‘thing’ is most relevant to Barros’s poetic: it is not *not* the object, but it is also something before and after the object as we perceive it through the lens of social and cultural knowledge — the thing is what the object was without our human intervention, and simultaneously what it might be beyond our understanding.

In *Retrato do artista quando coisa*, Barros addresses the question of the relationship between human, language and object head on. In a pun on the title of Joyce’s famous novel (a notable example of the *Künstlerroman*, the fact of which is not unimportant, since this collection is perhaps Barros’s most clear exposition of his poetic philosophy), Barros declares himself, the artist, as a species of thing. This idea, which could justifiably be called artistic revelation in the context of Barros’s poetics, underpins the collection, and much of Barros’s work before and after it. The question of ‘being’ and of ways of being in the world is clearly at stake here, and if the subject matter does not make this obvious enough the epigraph makes it explicit. Barros immediately begins to abolish the distance between the material world (external) and the world of the mind (internal) by ascribing a state of being to those inanimate objects which are the constant subject matter of his poetry. Here, Barros insists — apparently with all

the authority encapsulated in the venerated canon of Portuguese literature — that the non-being which we traditionally require to set ourselves apart and thus categorize the world around us cannot logically exist: *Não ser é outro ser*. FERNANDO PESSOA (Barros, *Poesia completa* 365). It's worth noting that this supposed quote from Pessoa is, as far as I can tell, Barros's invention and false attribution — something which is not unusual in Barros's work. Both this and the playful reference to *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* hint at another slightly contradictory aspect of Barros's poetry: a profound knowledge of and respect for the canon, but also a willingness to subvert it to his own artistic ends.

In addition to this subtle subversion of literary tradition, Barros is more than willing to subvert the conventions of language — another thread which will run through the poet's entire oeuvre. Rarely is this more boldly stated than in the second part of the title poem of this collection: “*Bom é corromper o silêncio das palavras*” (*Poesia completa* 366). Silence is a recurrent motif in Barros's work — often portrayed as something which we might learn to understand, or something which lends agency to inanimate objects. But here, silence is read as stifling convention: unless language is corrupted, disrupted, subverted, if it continues to be used in a conventional and clichéd manner, then it is so meaningless as to become ‘silence’. Barros continues, listing some examples of this ‘corrupted’ language:

*Bom é corromper o silêncio das palavras.  
Como seja:*

1. *Uma rã me pedra.* (A rã me corrompeu para pedra. Retirou meus limites de ser humano e me ampliou para coisa. A rã se tornou o sujeito pessoal da frase e me largou no chão a criar musgos para tapete de insetos e de frades.)
2. *Um passarinho me árvore.* (O passarinho me transgrediu para árvore. Deixou-me aos ventos e às chuvas. Ele mesmo me bosteia de dia e me desperta nas manhãs.
3. *Os jardins se borboletam.* (Significa que os jardins se esvaziaram de suas sépalas e de suas pétalas? Significa que os jardins se abrem agora só para o buliço das borboletas?)

4. *Folhas secas me outonom.* (Folhas secas que forram o chão das tardes me transmudaram para outono? Eu sou meu outono.)

Gosto de viajar por palavras do que de trem. (Poesia completa 366)

In this list of examples there is a subtle transition from definition to ambiguity. The first example is very explicitly explained, even down to the grammatical shift which so ‘corrupts’ the language used. The idea of the amalgamation of human and object is re-stated very clearly (“Retirou meus limites de ser humano / e me ampliou para coisa.”) and the implication is that the state of thingness is greater (“me ampliou”) than humanity. In the second example, the transition (or in Barros’s words, more interestingly, ‘transgression’) is still clear, if less explicitly explained. By the third and fourth examples it is clear that the images and metaphors offered are just a handful of an infinite number of possibilities. Barros subtly acclimatizes the reader to the idea that in this corrupting and reinvention of language, meanings can never be singular. The dictionary-definition style of the examples steadily degrades throughout, until finally, after the last item on the list, Barros offers an alternative to ‘understanding’ this poetry: “viajar por palavras”. Even in this last line, though, there is a telling ambiguity, a play on words: “trem” does not only mean ‘train’ in Brazilian Portuguese — it is also another word for ‘thing’, in particular something useless or trivial (“Trem”). Even within this short section of Barros’s long poem, words, people and things have begun to interact in unusual ways, merging into and informing each other as closer readings reveal the inherent ambiguities of language.

From this jumping-off point, Barros’s ambition is beginning to become clearer. Here is a manifesto for artistic creation with language as its raw material. It is, though, more akin to the work of an abstract expressionist than the classical painters and sculptors who influenced the poets of the pre-modernist Parnassian period in Brazil. Barros envisages an artist who “vai ter que envesgar seu idioma ao ponto / de alcançar o murmúrio das águas nas folhas / das árvores.” (Barros, Poesia completa 367), that is, an artist who uses language in an unconventional and playful way, who de- and re-focuses it, makes it ‘cross-eyed’. He distances himself — and his idealized artist — from the descriptive practices of more traditional poetry in favour of an

(impossible) amalgamation with, and incorporation of, the material world and the world of things:

Não terá mais o condão de refletir sobre as  
coisas.  
Mas terá o condão de sê-las.  
Não terá mais ideias: terá chuvas, tardes, ventos,  
passarinhos... (Barros, Poesia completa 367)

These lines will be echoed in a later poem in which the possibility of valuing things over ideas, and the particular danger that ideas apparently devoid of any attachment to the material world, might pose to human, non-human and ecological well-being, but they also attempt to define a poetics in which the material thing, rather than ideas about the thing, is in the fore. The lines also hint at the creative possibilities of language, and the ways in which the language of poetry can be used to renew and revitalize the very reality of the material world, rather than just providing an abstraction of it. The imagery in this third section becomes almost violent as it describes the forceful awakening of the artist:

Será arrancado de dentro dele pelas palavras  
a torquês  
Sairá entorpecido de haver-se.  
Sairá entorpecido e escuro. (Barros, Poesia completa 367)

The repetition seems almost liturgical, and the trance-like nature of the poem continues as the final third of the poem hinges on free associations of the word ‘escuro’, relating it first to the blood of a horse which has been bitten by a horse-leech, and then relating this in a visceral simile to the manner in which an artist’s words must ‘flow’ from him: “Palavra de um artista tem que escorrer / substantivo escuro dele.” (Barros, Poesia completa 367) The final sentence brings together linguistic, natural and material elements in a synaesthetic statement of poetic intent:

Ele terá que envesgar seu idioma ao ponto de  
enxergar no olho de uma garça os perfumes do  
sol. (Barros, Poesia completa 367)

From here, through the rest of this collection, Barros continues to refine and reflect upon this poetics and poetic philosophy, with further examples of how this kind of poetic utterance can be carried out. He also repeatedly reflects on himself as a poet — a relatively unusual occurrence in

Barros's work, in which there is usually an intermediary character such as Bernardo da Mata.<sup>1</sup> But what are the implications of this poetics for Barros's works, and for poetry in general? And how do these problems and resolutions manifest?

To approach how Barros implements this 'thingly' poetics, it is perhaps best to return to the first poem of this collection. Before the second poem (examined above) in which Barros begins to explain his poetics more descriptively, the reader is confronted with a powerful example of such poetics in action:

Retrato do artista quando coisa: borboletas  
 Já trocam as árvores por mim.  
 Insetos me desempenham.  
 Já posso amar as moscas como a mim mesmo.  
 Os silêncios me praticam. (Barros, Poesia completa 365)

The opening line of the collection, with a forceful use of enjambment, demonstrates immediately the ambiguity of meaning which is alluded to in the later poem as the word 'butterflies' is given a double purpose through syntactic strain. The figure of the poet is portrayed as a space in which non-human agencies can come together and find a voice — and the poet is capable of understanding them without judgement. As the poet becomes a 'coisa' in this opening section, the normally passive things of the material world become active, even able to act upon the poet himself ("Os silêncios me praticam" (Barros, Poesia completa 365)). Through the rest of the short poem, the poet is both humbled and ennobled through interaction with the material world:

Plantas desejam a minha boca para crescer  
 por de cima.  
 Sou livre para o desfrute das aves.  
 [...]
 Sapos desejam ser-me. (Barros, Poesia completa 365)

In these final lines, Barros apparently allows the poet to become overgrown, an object to be used according to the whims of nature, but he also subtly alludes to the power of the poetic utterance, asserting that his mouth — his poetic voice — will become a source of growth and renewal.

This poetic power is firmly reasserted throughout the later poems in the collection: no longer is the poet always an apparently passive object incorporated into the material world at

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<sup>1</sup> Bernardo da Mata is Barros's recurrent poetic persona, part-naïf, part-prophet.

large, but is an active voice, one which has the power to shape the world around it. This becomes abundantly clear in the fourth poem of the collection:

Experimento o gozo de criar.  
Experimento o gozo de Deus.  
Faço vaginação com palavras até meu retrato  
aparecer. (Barros, Poesia completa 368)

After firmly rejecting conventional understandings and systems of knowledge (“Não sei de tudo quase sempre quanto nunca.” (Barros, Poesia completa 368)) Barros claims for the poet a creative power which is so great in its scope that it approximates “o gozo de Deus”. No sooner is this heretical, but poetically conventional, stance affirmed though, than it is brought back down to the level of a material and bodily reality with Barros’s neologism “vaginação”, reminding the reader of the vacilação, the ambiguity and instability so central to Barros’s poetry, whilst it simultaneously evokes the sensuality and corporeality of language.

This rejection of the ethereal, whilst maintaining the creative prerogatives normally associated with a higher power, is solidified in the collection’s sixth poem:

É um olhar para baixo que eu nasci tendo.  
É um olhar para o ser menor, para o  
insignificante que eu me criei tendo.  
[...]  
Fui criado no mato e aprendi a gostar das  
coisinhas do chão —  
Antes que das coisas celestiais. (Barros, Poesia completa 369)

The poet’s gaze, for Barros, ought not to be toward the heavens, but toward the earth, the “ser menor” and the “insignificante”. The ambiguity of the phrase “Fui criado no mato” is telling: within the sense of the poem this can be read as ‘brought up’, but as the pronominal form would normally be used for this, the reader is pushed to consider that the word’s other meanings — educated, invented, created — all lead to a narrative in which it is the figure of poet and the poetic consciousness, rather than necessarily the poet himself, that originated in the scrublands of the Pantanal. From here, the motive behind the rejection of “coisas celestiais” is clearer: as much as the poet might wield the creative power to reconfigure our perceptions of the world around us, for Barros it is the material world, the everyday object, which creates the possibility of poetry and thus the poet — without these subjects and objects there can be no poet(ry) at all.

The power of language necessarily lies at the core of a poetics which attempts to force a reassessment of the material world and bring about a change in perception — indeed language must lie at the core of any poetics. Whilst the issue of how language enables the poet and the reader to bring about this change is implicit in all of Barros’s poetry, there are moments in which it is specifically meditated upon, and there is a good example of such poetry in this collection:

O lugar onde a gente morava era uma *Ilha*  
*Linguística*, no jargão dos Dialetólogos (com  
 perdão de má palavra). (Barros, Poesia completa 369)

The authority to define how language is used is immediately stripped from the academy and the institutions by a humorous devaluing of the figure of the professional linguist. Literary authorities are also dismissed later in the poem: “Camões chamava a isso ‘Venéreo ajuntamento’.  
 / Mas a gente não sabia de Camões e nem de / venéreos.” (Barros, Poesia completa 370). Instead of these conventional authorities which seek to categorize and define, it is invention and creativity in all its forms which is credited with explaining and amplifying our experience of the world around us: “O resto ia no invento. / Pois que inventar aumenta o mundo.” (Barros, Poesia completa 370). In the spirit of the “despalavra” Barros declares the *Ilha Linguística* a “desnome”, freeing it from the constraints of conventional linguistic definition and practice.

Barros also goes on to enlist an obvious ally in this strategic disassembly of linguistic convention: “Levei o Rosa na beira dos pássaros que fica no / meio da Ilha Linguística.” (Barros, Poesia completa 370). Guimarães Rosa is as notable for his efforts to reinvent the language of prose as Barros is for his renewal of poetic discourse, and their aims in doing so are perhaps similar. At the very least, Barros counts Rosa as a writer who is pursuing a similar linguistic goal (Müller and Gismonti 111), and in this poem he imagines a dialogue between the great novelist and the poet. Here, the poetic invention surrounding the material world becomes the very source of Being:

A tarde está verde no olho das garças.  
 E completou com Job:  
 Sabedoria se tira das coisas que não existem.  
 A tarde verde no olho das garças não existia  
 mas era fonte do ser.  
 Era poesia.

Era o néctar do ser. (Barros, Poesia completa 371)

The importance of the poetic utterance is reiterated for emphasis, and within the philosophical context suggested by the phrase “fonte do ser” the word “poesia” takes on connotations of poïesis — strengthening the associations with creation and being-in-the-world. The image of the “tarde verde”, which Barros even goes as far to stress does not exist in reality, becomes an exemplar of what Barros considers to be the purpose of poetic language: to create new ways of being through invention and creativity. As such, conventional knowledge of the material world is of no use:

Para enxergar as coisas sem feito é preciso  
não saber nada.  
É preciso entrar em estado de árvore.  
É preciso entrar em estado de palavra.  
Só quem está em estado de palavra pode  
enxergar as coisas sem feito. (Barros, Poesia completa 371)

Only once we have discarded what we think we know, Barros suggests, is it possible to see the world anew. The repeated lines seem to equate nature and language as the poet is required to become both tree and word, revealing the proposed reciprocal relationship between language and the material world which is fundamental to Barros’s poetics, but also suggesting that it is possible for the human agent to acquire some understanding of non-human agency and experience through the language of poetry. It is only once within this “estado de palavra” that Barros believes that it is possible to “enxergar as coisas sem feito” — that is, to see things rather than objects.

In Barros’s late poem ‘Teologia do traste’, he lays out some of the reasons that objects, and in particular mundane and discarded objects, are more relevant to his poetics than a higher register of ‘thought’. Indeed, this poem is one of the few to lay out an apparently ethical stance in relation to how Barros chooses his poetic subjects, and how these subjects relate causally to the material world and the world of ideas; it might be better named ‘Teleologia do traste’. The poem’s opening is innocuous enough:

As coisas jogadas fora por motivo de traste  
são alvo da minha estima.  
Prediletamente latas. (Barros, Poesia completa 446)

This is nothing new, in as much as Barros's focus on the discarded and abject is a firmly embedded theme by this point in his poetic career. He even goes as far as to identify "latas" — which do indeed come up with great regularity — as amongst his favourite objects. In the next line ("Latas são pessoas léxicas pobres porém concretas." (Barros, Poesia completa 446)) Barros strings together several apparently disparate nouns and adjectives, but careful reading shows that the line is a near-perfect microcosm of his poetics: the 'thing' here becomes a person (agent) and is linked to language, marginalization and materiality. The poem continues to weaken the authority of ideas over things:

Se você jogar na terra uma lata por motivo de  
traste: mendigos, cozinheiras ou poetas podem pegar.  
Por isso eu acho as latas mais suficientes, por  
exemplo, do que as ideias.  
Porque as ideias, sendo objetos concebidos pelo  
espírito, elas são abstratas.  
E, se você jogar um objeto abstrato na terra por  
motivo de traste, ninguém quer pegar. (Barros, Poesia completa 446)

In a turn of the somewhat sophistic logic which is typical of Barros's poetry, ideas are dismissed as useless because they are not concrete — but there is more to the argument than this. It is the democratic nature of the *lata* which seems most important here, the fact that it is useful to the everyman (amongst whom Barros counts the poet). Until this point, the reader might be somewhat bemused by Barros's argument, but in the final lines, Barros turns to an uncomfortable truth to hammer his point home:

Por isso eu acho a lata mais suficiente.  
Ideias são a luz do espírito — a gente sabe.  
Há ideias luminosas — a gente sabe.  
Mas elas inventaram a bomba atômica, a bomba  
atômica, a bomba atôm.....  
..... Agora  
eu queria que os vermes iluminassem.  
Que os trastes iluminassem. (Barros, Poesia completa 446)

The 'luminous ideas' particularly cherished by modernism led to an ethical and ecological disaster in the form of the atom bomb. The shock of this final twist in the argument is deepened by the statements of the second and third lines of this quotation, which seem to suggest that Barros is admitting the prevalence of ideas, that it is common sense ("a gente sabe" (Barros, Poesia completa 446)), whilst the repetition which follows emphasizes the all-consuming nature of the

mistake. Furthermore, the ellipsis, consuming the end of the final repetition of “atômica” and nearly two whole lines of verse, demonstrates that the logical finale of nuclear proliferation is simply absence — nothing would remain. The final lines return to Barros’s assertion that the things and objects of the material world can enlighten us as much as ideas can, and perhaps in a less harmful way: we should listen to the worms and the detritus — after all, following the seemingly inevitable proliferation, use and fallout of nuclear weapons, they may well be all that is left.

In the context of Barros’s poetic and its relationship to materiality and the material world it is also useful to examine some formal poetic strategies which recur throughout Barros’s work. The use of repetition, appropriation and aphorism are just three examples of such strategies which Barros employs to great effect in a large part of his oeuvre. In the final part of this article I shall discuss these three strategies, and demonstrate how they are implemented to reinforce the philosophical and ethical message outlined above.

One of the most striking things about Barros’s poetry is his use of repetition, not only within individual poems, but throughout the whole scope of his published work. In many cases whole lines of poetry or titles of poems are lifted intact from earlier works; in others, words and phrases are modulated and rewritten with slight variation. It goes without saying that Barros is fully aware and in control of this repetition, but he even goes as far as referring to it in his poetry: “Repetir repetir — até ficar diferente. / Repetir é um dom do estilo.” (Barros, *Poesia completa* 308). To describe repetition as a formal innovation, as quite literally a talent to be mastered, goes to the heart of Barros’s poetic endeavour: through the exploration of the mundane, of the things which in our lives are so repeated and repetitive as to be frequently overlooked, Barros hopes to revitalize the readers’ perceptions of the material world.

Whether or not we might choose to agree, it is clear that for Barros repetition is a means of poetic and creative renewal. I would argue that in Barros’s work, it can indeed be seen as such: often, the repetition of a line of poetry builds upon its previous iterations and re-frames them. Two examples of this demonstrate the opposite ends of this strategy of repetition. In the collection *Matéria de poesia*, Barros repeats the title ‘Matéria’ for two short, haiku-like poems which are separated only by one other three-line stanza:

O osso da ostra  
A noite da ostra  
Eis um material de poesia (Barros, Poesia completa 170)

O pente e o vento  
Resíduos do mar  
Pétalas de peixes (Barros, Poesia completa 170)

In these two poems, the meaning of the title is subtly altered, and the reading evolved. The third line of the first poem, with its modulation of the title ‘*Matéria*’ to the more earthly “um material” sheds new light upon the second iteration of the title. The reader is compelled to read both the titles of the poem, and the title of the collection from which they are in turn repeated, as changed. What started as an apparent reference to the classical *Materia Poetica* can no longer be seen as such, but instead is a break with tradition and a return to the things and objects of the material world. The second poem, no longer required to explain itself after the previous didactic tercet, is a simple list of such “material” as the poet believes is not just appropriate for poetry, but which for Barros is poetry.

At the other extreme of repetition, nearly forty years after the publication of ‘*A menina avoadá*’ in *Compêndio para uso dos pássaros*, Barros published a second poem with the same title in his childrens’ book *Exercícios de ser criança*. The latter poem can, clearly, be read without reference to the former, but nonetheless there are themes and uses of language which are shared. What is notable here is the evolution of Barros’s poetics, which in the later poem — albeit written for a different audience — seems to have attained a greater level of simplicity of language and thought. Where in the earlier poem there are still vestiges of a more classical lyric style and lineation, in the later poem Barros has abandoned these for a more prosaic (indeed almost prose) style. Sections of the first poem which might have seemed mysterious or even fanciful (“*O boi / de pau / era tudo que a gente / quisesse que sêsse*” (Barros, *Poesia completa* 110)) are revealed as figments of a child’s imagination in the second, however fanciful that imagination might be. With this repetition of the title, Barros is not attempting to replace the former poem, nor does either poem explain the other; instead, we are presented with more than one perception of events, more than one way of seeing, all of which are valid and must be equally considered — an important tenet of Barros’s poetics.

The constant use of repetition and self-appropriation also contributes to the unity of Barros's poetry, not only reiterating constant themes, motifs and poetic philosophy, but also often repeating and iteratively modifying phrases and lines of verse. Barros asserts this poetic unity in a later collection, *Ensaíios Fotográficos*, claiming that his books "São todas repetições do primeiro." (Barros, *Poesia completa* 397) This claim is interesting enough in itself, but is made more confounding by a biographical detail: the first collection of poetry that Barros ever wrote, *Nossa Senhora da Minha Escuridão*, was destroyed by the police before it could be published (Müller and Gismonti 172). Thus, Barros constructs his entire oeuvre as a repetition of a lost collection, a life's poetry based upon an ephemeral, indeed non-existent, foundational work.

Along similar lines to Barros's use of repetition and self-appropriation, the poet often appropriates from other writers and artists. The most obvious form which this takes is in the use of epigraphs. These epigraphs seem, on face value, to be similar to epigraphs in other works of literature, but a closer examination shows that not only are many of these epigraphs quoted from sources which either don't exist or are known only to the poet, several of the epigraphs from well-known figures are either misattributed or invented. A further example of Barros's appropriation is his use of the figures of poets or artists and of their work as subjects for his poetry – an extensive topic which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this article.

Another extremely prevalent and important technique in Barros's poetry is the use of aphoristic constructions and verses. There are several collections of aphoristic verse in Barros's oeuvre, and outside of these specifically aphoristic collections, aphoristic phrases are common throughout his poetry. Perhaps the most important observation to make about this form is that it harnesses the power of a way of speaking that most people would intuitively accept as received wisdom. Clearly such aphorisms and sayings are not always, in fact, wise — indeed this is a point of view that Barros's aphorisms trouble deeply — but the form itself is one which is hard for the reader to digest in any other way at a first impression. This mode of reading is exploited to great effect in Barros's work: using a form which the reader expects to contain a common-sense statement or some nugget of received wisdom, Barros authoritatively delivers palatable snippets of apparently nonsensical verse. The effect is to force a double take. The initial reaction provoked by the form, one of acceptance and recognition, is immediately refuted by the

content of the statements, which, almost like haikus, each contain a dense, playful, philosophical statement of intent or complexity. Some examples of this way of writing from the collection *Livro sobre nada*:

Tudo que não invento é falso. (Barros, Poesia completa 353)

Há muitas maneiras sérias de não dizer nada, mas só a poesia é verdadeira. (Barros, Poesia completa 353)

O meu amanhecer vai ser de noite. (Barros, Poesia completa 354)

Sempre que desejo contar alguma coisa, não faço nada;  
mas quando não desejo contar nada, faço poesia. (Barros, Poesia completa 355)

These aphorisms tread the line between sense and nonsense, as do many or most of those in Barros's poetry. Crucially, the phrases perhaps do not make sense by conventional understanding, but in the context of Barros's poetics are eminently more understandable, and it should be noted that the most extensive collections of aphorisms are preceded by more conventional poetry which acclimatizes the reader to this way of thinking. Thus a conventionally cryptic phrase such as "A inércia é meu ato principal" (Barros, Poesia completa 354) becomes comprehensible when embedded in Barros's poetics as a statement of artistic intent: the poet must learn to be in the world as a thing so that he might reinvigorate the material world through poetic utterance and, as such, the poet's task is to create a kind of "inércia" which forces the reader to pause, to step aside from their conventional perceptions, and to learn to see the world differently. The effectiveness of this aphorism is redoubled by the fact that it is reflexive — the very aphorism itself creates the kind of "inércia" of which it speaks.

The use of this aphoristic form contributes to Barros's use of nonsensical language and syntax in his poetry to provoke imaginative readings. Whether it be in the form of invented words, neologistic uses of existing words which force a reassessment of the use of language, or of structure and syntax to impart a gloss of reason to an illogical or nonsensical phrase, the use of such constructions underlines Barros's commitment to the rehabilitation and reinvention of language and its relationship to the material world.

Through his close focus on the material world, and his use of poetic strategies which undermine conventional uses of language, Barros is able to create new meanings from the

everyday language and things which feature in his poetry. As the title of this paper suggests, Barros's poetry can be conceived of as 'Poetry About Things', verse which makes us reconsider our perceptions of the material world through its innovative uses of language, form and subject. But further to this emphasis on the power of language to shape the material world, his work makes us aware that the 'things' of the material world have an equally profound effect on how poetry is created: if, as Barros suggests, these things and objects of the material world have their own agency, then we must readjust our perceptions of poetry itself to encompass these new forms of agency and ways of being-in-the-world. In the closeness to the material which Barros fosters, it is not just the material world which is affected, but the material word — the living, evolving, and perhaps ultimately autonomous medium of language from which poetry is made.

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## **Bio**

David Smith's research interests include Modernism, Poetry, Gender Studies and Ecocriticism. After completing a Masters by Research on the depiction of masculinity in Galician literature, he began a study of the poetry of Manoel de Barros, and its relationship to the natural and material world and the visual arts receiving his doctorate from the University of Nottingham in 2016. Non academic interests in technology and design led to a career in the private sector, where he now works as a digital product analyst for the publisher Taylor and Francis.

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