

**Carlos Drummond de Andrade, “Procura da Poesia”  
From *A rosa do povo* (the rose of the people) (1945)**

I have been in touch with Régis Bonvincino about this poem and come up with a better tr. of the last stanza and also a deeper understanding of the poem.

Repara:

ermas de melodia e conceito  
elas se refugiaram na noite, as palavras.  
Ainda úmidas e impregnadas de sono,  
rolam num rio difícil e se transformam em desprezo.

Notice:

bereft of melody and conceit  
words, still humid, pregnant in sleep  
hide in the night, tumbling in a difficult river  
transformed to scorn

in other words: words alone, or the personal anecdotes one has, are insufficient for a poem. a poem needs to find its melody and its concept or else all you have are word tumbling in a difficult river.

Key here is Drummond's line:

*O que pensas e sentes, isso ainda não é poesia.*

**What you think and feel, this still is not poetry**

**Bonvincino writes (and he used Google tr. to make it easier to send this to me, even though he can write in English, but note that)**

ermo, ermas, ermo means an empty place, a dangerous place, physically empty of melody and concept;

Drummond is speaking also about a river and so necessarily ermas is physical place in his mind, maybe a small forest, without anybody, it is not an abstraction. The corporeal reality becomes the foundation again. The poem is a material object, written. Focus on space. Not evoked from an abstract system. The words ermas de melodia e conceito, he puts the words in a place, concrete place. But nobody says in Portuguese “ermas de melodia e conceito”, referring to the words. It is a bit archaic too.

"The search for poetry" is a fundamental poem in Drummond's work and in Brazilian Modernism. It is a metapoema, metalanguage, fundamental axis of the poet's questioning about poetry itself.

The poem presents a lyrical self that is directed, in a professorial tone, of those who have already reflected much on the subject, to a hypothetical interlocutor, who writes (or intends to write) poetry without reflecting on "poetic making" and always employing verbs in Imperative, in the second person singular ("do not do", "do not sing", "penetrate", "live", "wait", "do not force", "do not reap", "do not adules", "repair").

The interlocutor, however, has no voice, does not argue or accept.

The lyrical self defends the principle that poetry should be impersonal, indifferent to individual realities and the particular facts of life, because it is universal. Poetry should not be done in a naive, hasty way.

The lyrical I thus teaches us that literature is not just made by talking about events or subjectively rescuing childhood, ideas, feelings or idealizing: "What you think and feel, this is not poetry yet," but it may come to be. For this, one must penetrate "deeply into the realm of words": "there are the poems that hope to be written". They are not yet poems, because "they are paralyzed", "alone and dumb, in a dictionary state. So Drummond is not proposing a poetry that is foreign to the facts. He just reiterates the work with the word, the poet's raw material.

In this way, dictionary-state words, that is, out of context, have only denotative, cold and impersonal meaning. If we contemplate the words closely, we will perceive that each one has a thousand secret faces (connotation) under the neutral face (denotation).

The poem can be divided into two parts: the first, marked by negative imperatives, represents everything that should not be done by those who wish to write poetry. The second, marked by affirmative imperatives, highlights the work with the poet's raw material: the word.

In a text that exalts the word precisely, it is up to the reader to understand its meaning in the verse and the images used by the poet; Seek its etymology and the understanding of its connotative meaning. For it is precisely about the word and its significant charge that Drummond reflects on his poem, such as:

- "infantile to lyrical effusion": *infantile* means "adverse, contrary." Effusion means "clear and sincere demonstration of intimate feelings": the verse opposes body and feeling.

- "bile": it is the same as "bile" greenish and bitter liquid secreted by the liver; In a figurative sense, means "bad mood, sourness."

- "elide": form of the verb "elidir", which means "suppress, eliminate"; The verse states that poetry eliminates the relations between subject and object.

- "Your ivory yacht ... family skeletons": in these verses we have an enumeration of possessions (note the strength of the possessive pronouns), in a sequence that ranges from the most idealized object (ivory yacht) to the most material one (Family skeletons). "Mazurka" is a Polish ballroom dancing; "Abusion" is the same as "error, illusion" [superstition].

- "ermas": abandoned. On the reverse, means that words are without melody and concept.

"Poetry search" is a poetry that speaks of poetry. The poetic making is penetration in the ore of words, discovery of their secret faces, which hide under the neutral, apparent, usual face.

## **Search for Poetry** **Tr. Richard Zenith**

Don't write poems about what happened.  
Birth and death don't exist for poetry.  
Life, next to it, is a static sun

giving off no warmth or light.  
Affinities, birthdays, and personal incidents don't count.  
Don't write poetry with the body,  
the noble, complete, and comfortable body, inimical to lyrical effusions.  
Your drop of bile, your joyful grin, your frown of pain in the dark are irrelevant.  
Don't tell me your feelings,  
which exploit ambiguity and take the long way around.  
What you think and feel is not yet poetry.

Don't sing about your city, leave it in peace.  
Poetry's song is not the clacking of machines or the secrets of houses.  
It's not music heard in passing, not the rumble of ocean on streets near the breaking foam.  
Its song is not nature  
or humans in society.  
Rain and night, fatigue and hope, mean nothing to it.  
Poetry (don't extract poetry from things)  
elides subject and object.

Don't dramatize, don't invoke,  
don't inquire. Don't waste time lying.  
Don't get cross.  
Your ivory yacht, your diamond shoe,  
your mazurkas and superstitions, your family skeletons  
all vanish in the curve of time, they're worthless.

Don't reconstruct  
your gloomy, long-buried childhood  
Don't shift back and forth between  
the mirror and your fading memory.  
What faded wasn't poetry.  
What shattered wasn't crystal.

Soundlessly enter the kingdom of words.  
The poems are there, waiting to be written.  
Though paralyzed, they don't despair,  
their virgin surfaces are cool and calm.  
Look at them: tongue-tied, alone, in the dictionary state.  
Spend time with your poems before you write them.  
Be patient, if they're obscure. Calm, if they provoke you.  
Wait for each one to take shape and reach perfection  
with its power of language  
and its power of silence.  
Don't force the poem to break out of limbo.  
Don't pick up the poem that fell to the ground.

Don't fawn on the poem. Accept it

as it will accept its definitive, concentrated form  
in space.

Move closer and consider the words.  
Each one  
hides a thousand faces under its poker face  
and asks you, without caring how poor or formidable  
your answer might be:  
Did you bring the key?

Attention:  
destitute of melody and concept,  
words have taken refuge in the night.  
Still damp and heavy with sleep,  
they roll in a rough river and transform into disdain.

### **Search for Poetry** **JOHN NIST tr.**

Do not make verses about happenings.  
For poetry, there is no creation or death.  
In her eyes, life is an unmoving sun,  
Which neither warms nor lights.  
The attractions, the anniversaries, the personal incidents  
do not matter.

Do not make poetry with the body.  
This excellent, complete and comfortable body, so unfit for lyrical flow.  
Your drop of gall, your face-making of pleasure or of pain in the dark  
Are of no account.  
Do not tell me your feelings,  
Which capitalize on ambiguity and attempts the long journey.  
What you think and feel, that is not yet poetry.

Do not sing your city, leave it alone.  
The song is not the movement of the machines or the secret of the houses.  
It is not music heard in passing; nor the sound of the sea in the streets near the edge of spume.  
The song is not nature  
Or men in society.  
For it, rain and night, fatigue and hope mean nothing.  
Poetry (do not make poetry out of things)  
Eliminates subject and object.

Do not dramatizes, do no invoke,  
Do not investigate. Do not waste time telling lies.

Do not be anxious.  
Your ivory yacht, your diamond shoe,  
Your mazurkas and superstitions, your family skeletons  
Disappear in the curve of time, time are worthless.

Do not resurrect  
Your buried and melancholy childhood.  
Do not oscillate between the mirror  
And your fading memory.  
If it faded, it was not poetry.  
If it broke, it was not crystal.

Penetrate deftly the kingdom of words:  
Here lie the poems that wait to be written.  
They are paralyzed, but not in despair,  
All is calm and freshness on the untouched surface.  
Here they are alone and dumb, in the state of the dictionary.  
Before you write them, live with your poems.  
If they are obscure, be patient. If they provoke you, hold your temper.  
Wait for each one to actualize and to consume itself  
In the power of language  
And the power of silence.  
Do not force the poem to come out of Limbo.  
Do not pick from the ground the poem that was lost.  
Do not flatter the poem. Accept it  
As it will accept its own form, final and concentrated  
In space.

Come closer and contemplate the words.  
Each one  
Has a thousand secret faces under a neutral face  
And asks you, without interest in the answer,  
Poor or terrible, which you will give it:  
Have you brought the key?

Please note:  
Barren of melody and meaning,  
The words have taken refuge in the night.  
Still humid and saturated with sleep,  
They roll in a difficult river and turn themselves  
into despising.

**John Yau**  
**In the Kingdom of Poetry**

(after Carlos Drummond de Andrade)

[audio](#) of Yau reading the poem

Don't write poems  
about yourself.

Don't call attention  
to your revelations

or make confessions.  
Even if your intention

is to expiate pain,  
overcome guilt,

temper your  
understandable anger,

don't excavate  
your mother's grief,

brother's sexual torment,  
sister's thievery,

father's self-hatred,  
step-parent's fortuitous star chart.

Feelings are not poems.  
Relatives should be left

where they are found,  
in the gutter

or by a cash register.  
Don't write poems

about others.  
Leave out husbands,

divorcees, alcoholics,  
pimplly adolescents and nurses.

There is already a surplus  
of bad movie scripts.

Forget about friends  
and enemies,

anniversaries  
and special moments.

Someone in the greeting card business  
has already covered these topics.

Don't write about  
what is happening in the world,

the missing child  
and the human remains,

the burning beach  
and the swallowed page,

the president's  
fiftieth speech.

Whatever happened there  
isn't a poem.

Don't try and prove  
how sensitive you are.

Others have already  
claimed to be plants.

It isn't necessary to demonstrate  
how insensitive you are.

as this is already  
an indisputable fact.

Don't write poems  
linking

an ordinary event  
in your life

–shaving, adjusting your bra, riding subway  
admiring especially picturesque sunset–

to a significant moment in history  
–pogrom, starvation, exile, assassination–

or to a myth–rape, jealousy, or rejection–  
in fact to anything that has a theme.

Poems are not papers  
delivered at conferences.

Don't sing about the joys of the city  
or list the virtues of rural life.

Don't mention swans,  
bologna, eyeball dryness,

or one-eared philosophers.  
Picnics and paintings are not poems.

Don't resort to drama  
or telling lies.

Don't use your yearning  
as a starting point.

Secrets should be left  
where they are.

Don't stand up  
in a burning theater



and announce,  
“no one listens to poetry.”

Don't write poems  
about poets

being underpaid.  
Throw away

your memories,  
bury your mirrors.

from [John Yau's \*Paradiso Diaspora\*](#)  
Penguin Books, 2006

©2006 John Yau; used with the permission of the author.

---

## **Procura da Poesia** **Carlos Drummond de Andrade**

Não faças versos sobre acontecimentos.  
Não há criação nem morte perante a poesia.  
Diante dela, a vida é um sol estático,  
não aquece nem ilumina.  
As afinidades, os aniversários, os incidentes pessoais não contam.  
Não faças poesia com o corpo,  
esse excelente, completo e confortável corpo, tão infenso à efusão lírica.

Tua gota de bile, tua careta de gozo ou de dor no escuro  
são indiferentes.  
Nem me reveles teus sentimentos,  
que se prevalecem do equívoco e tentam a longa viagem.  
O que pensas e sentes, isso ainda não é poesia.

Não cantes tua cidade, deixa-a em paz.  
O canto não é o movimento das máquinas nem o segredo das casas.  
Não é música ouvida de passagem, rumor do mar nas ruas junto à linha de espuma.

O canto não é a natureza  
nem os homens em sociedade.  
Para ele, chuva e noite, fadiga e esperança nada significam.  
A poesia (não tires poesia das coisas)  
elide sujeito e objeto.

Não dramatizes, não invoques,  
não indagues. Não percas tempo em mentir.  
Não te aborreças.  
Teu iate de marfim, teu sapato de diamante,  
vossas mazurcas e abusões, vossos esqueletos de família  
desaparecem na curva do tempo, é algo imprestável.

Não recomponhas  
tua sepultada e merencória infância.  
Não osciles entre o espelho e a  
memória em dissipação.  
Que se dissipou, não era poesia.  
Que se partiu, cristal não era.

Penetra surdamente no reino das palavras.  
Lá estão os poemas que esperam ser escritos.  
Estão paralisados, mas não há desespero,  
há calma e frescura na superfície intata.  
Ei-los sós e mudos, em estado de dicionário.  
Convive com teus poemas, antes de escrevê-los.  
Tem paciência se obscuros. Calma, se te provocam.  
Espera que cada um se realize e consume  
com seu poder de palavra  
e seu poder de silêncio.  
Não forces o poema a desprender-se do limbo.  
Não colhas no chão o poema que se perdeu.  
Não adules o poema. Aceita-o  
como ele aceitará sua forma definitiva e concentrada  
no espaço.

Chega mais perto e contempla as palavras.  
Cada uma  
tem mil faces secretas sob a face neutra

e te pergunta, sem interesse pela resposta,  
pobre ou terrível, que lhe deres:  
Trouxeste a chave?

Repara:  
ermas de melodia e conceito  
elas se refugiaram na noite, as palavras.  
Ainda úmidas e impregnadas de sono,  
rolam num rio difícil e se transformam em desprezo.