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CAMÕES, PIMENTA AND THE IMPROBABLE
SONNET

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CAMÕES, PIMENTA AND THE IMPROBABLE SONNET

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Abstract: *This article tells the story of a Renaissance sonnet gaining new life, new form and new meaning during the 20th Century.*

During the Eighties of last century, the poet Alberto Pimenta took the sonnet Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada (The lover becomes the thing he loves) from Luís de Camões (16th Century), reorganized the letters of each verse of the poem and came up with a new sonnet, Ousa a forma cantor! Mas se da namorada (Dare the form, songster! But if the girlfriend). Who is the author of the second poem? We should say Pimenta, but, ironically, this author did not manage to organize a new verse from the last one of the original poem until he put aside the letters L and C, the initials of the author of the original sonnet. It seems that, in some mysterious and magical way, Luís de Camões came to reclaim the authorship of the second poem as well.

Recently, the designer Nuno Coelho challenged his Design and Multimedia students at the University of Coimbra with a new project: to produce a multimedia transformation of the sonnet of Camões into Pimenta's, and a new breath was given both to poems and their authors.

Key-words: Luís de Camões, Alberto Pimenta, mathematics, literature, multimedia, OULIPO.

1 Introduction

To make a long story short, we may say that the poet Luís de Camões (1524 -1579) is for the Portuguese as important as Shakespeare is for the British. He is

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most famous for his epic masterpiece, published for the first time in 1572, *Os Lusíadas* [1] (*The Lusíads* [2, 3]), but the subject of this article is his sonnet TRANSFORMA-SE O AMADOR NA COUSA AMADA [4].

During the Eighties of the 20th Century, the poet Alberto Pimenta (born in 1937) proposed himself a project: to create a new sonnet starting from TRANSFORMA-SE O AMADOR NA COUSA AMADA of Camões, using exactly the same letters, verse by verse, just by permutation of the characters in each verse of the original poem. What is the total number of permutations of this type? It seems a rather simple question to ask, just use combinatorial. But what is the probability of getting a new poem, with sense and literary value? And is there any solution at all? The fact is that Pimenta succeeded and the result is the poem OUSA A FORMA CANTOR! MAS SE DA NAMORADA. We may wonder how many more sonnets could we produce with this rule, but probably not much would make sense in any existing language.

Recently, during the second decade of the 21th Century, the designer Nuno Coelho challenged his Design and Multimedia students at the University of Coimbra with a new project: to produce a multimedia transformation of the sonnet of Camões into Pimenta's. There are some very interesting proposals, which we will show later in this text.

2 Combinatorial and poetry: Raymond Queneau and OULIPO

*The work you are holding in your hands presents, itself alone,
a quantity of text far greater than everything man has written since
the invention of writing.*

François Le Lionnais, (postface to Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes)

The book by Raymond Queneau *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* [6] (A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems or One Hundred Million Million Poems) was published in 1961. The book is a set of ten sonnets, each printed in a different card, each card cut in pieces such that each verse appears on a separated strip, which may be turned individually. It is possible for the reader to construct a sonnet using the first verse of any of the 10 sonnets, the same for the second verse, as well as for each of the 14 verses. In this way, the book contains not ten sonnets, but $10^{14} = 100\,000\,000\,000\,000 =$ one hundred million million = one hundred thousand billion (or in French *cent mille milliards*) different sonnets ¹.

This book was just one of many works produced by the group OULIPO - *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (workshop of potential literature), a gathering of writers and mathematicians who seek to create works with techniques that included self-imposed restrictions or, in OULIPO own words, “literature in unlimited quantities, potentially producible until the end of time, in huge quantities, infinite for all practical purposes”. Indeed, if someone decided to read the book

¹For an interactive version of this book, both in French and in English, see http://www.bevrowe.info/Queneau/QueneauRandom_v4.html

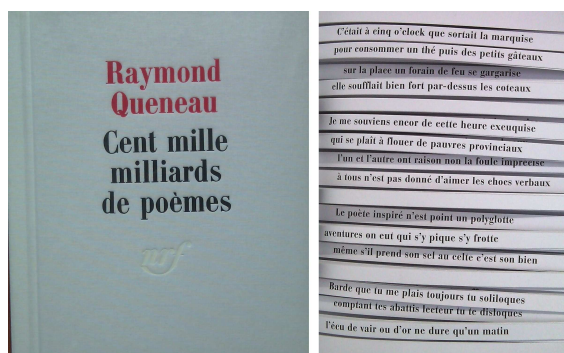


Figure 1: Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* and one of its 10^{14} sonnets.

taking one minute with each poem, he would spend 10^{14} minutes, which is about 190 million years, the amount of time from the beginning of Jurassic until today.

3 The Camões sonnet

TRANSFORMA-SE O AMADOR NA COUSA AMADA

Many details concerning the life of Luís de Camões (1524-1579) remain unknown. His date and place of birth are not officially known, but the study of one of his sonnets, with the help of astronomical ephemerides for the second decade of the 16th century, allowed Mário Saa to conclude that Camões was born on January 23, 1524 [8].

Camões is most famous for his epic masterpiece, published for the first time in 1572, *Os Lusíadas*² [1] (*The Lusiads* [2, 3]), but this text deals with his sonnet TRANSFORMA-SE O AMADOR NA COUSA AMADA [4].



Figure 2: Luís de Camões (1524-1579)

²The second edition, also from 1572, is available here:
http://purl.pt/1/4/cam-3-p_PDF/cam-3-p_PDF_24-C-R0150/cam-3-p_0000_capa-cap_a_t24-C-R0150.pdf

<i>Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada Por virtude do muito imaginar; Não tenho logo mais que desejar, Pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.</i>	<i>The lover becomes the thing he loves by virtue of much imagining; since what I long for is already in me, the act of longing should be enough.</i>
<i>Se nela está minha alma transformada, Que mais deseja o corpo de alcançar? Em si somente pode descansar, Pois consigo tal alma está liada.</i>	<i>If my soul becomes the beloved, what more can my body long for? Only in itself will it find peace, since my body and soul are linked.</i>
<i>Mas esta linda e pura semideia, Que, como o acidente em seu sujeito, Assim co'a alma minha se conforma,</i>	<i>But this pure, fair demigoddess, who with my soul is in accord like an accident with its subject,</i>
<i>Está no pensamento como ideia; [E] o vivo e puro amor de que sou feito, Como matéria simples busca a forma.</i> Luís de Camões, 16th Century	<i>exists in my mind as a mere idea; the pure and living love I'm made of seeks, like simple matter, form.</i> Luís de Camões, 16th Century Translation: Richard Zenith [5]

We may now wonder how many different “sonnets” we obtain by permutation of the letters in each verse. For that, take the first verse, “Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada”, which contains 31 letters. If all letters were different, there would be $31!$ different permutations. Since there are repeated characters, the total number of permutations will be smaller than that, but still rather large. Of the 31 letters, “A” appears 9 times, “O”: 4 times, “M”, “R”, “S”: 3 times, “D”, “N”: 2 times and “T”, “F”, “C”, “E”, “U” appear only once. This gives a total of $\frac{31!}{9!4!3!3!3!2!2!} = 1\,092\,782\,550\,735\,491\,616\,000\,000$ permutations, roughly 10^{24} , a much larger number than the complete amount of sonnets in Queneau’s book, and we are still with the first verse. Tedious similar calculations lead to the following table.

<i>Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada</i>	$\frac{31!}{9!4!3!3!3!2!2!}$	1092782550735491616000000
<i>Por virtude do muito imaginar;</i>	$\frac{25!}{4!3!3!2!2!2!2!}$	561024668812608000000
<i>Não tenho logo mais que desejar,</i>	$\frac{26!}{4!4!3!2!2!}$	29173282778255616000000
<i>Pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.</i>	$\frac{28!}{5!4!3!2!2!2!2!2!2!}$	275687522254515571200000
<i>Se nela está minha alma transformada,</i>	$\frac{31!}{8!3!3!3!3!2!2!2!}$	19670085913238849088000000
<i>Que mais deseja o corpo de alcançar?</i>	$\frac{29!}{5!4!3!3!2!2!2!}$	10659917527174602086400000
<i>Em si somente pode descansar,</i>	$\frac{24!}{5!4!2!2!2!2!2!}$	6732296025751296000
<i>Pois consigo tal alma está liada.</i>	$\frac{27!}{6!3!3!3!3!2!}$	5834656555651123200000
<i>Mas esta linda e pura semideia,</i>	$\frac{25!}{5!4!3!3!2!2!}$	37401644587507200000
<i>Que, como o acidente em seu sujeito,</i>	$\frac{28!}{6!4!3!2!2!2!2!2!}$	91895840751505190400000
<i>Assim co'a alma minha se conforma,</i>	$\frac{27!}{6!4!3!3!2!2!2!}$	2187996208369171200000
<i>Está no pensamento como ideia;</i>	$\frac{25!}{4!4!3!3!2!2!2!2!}$	46752055734384000000
<i>[E] o vivo e puro amor de que sou feito,</i>	$\frac{28!}{6!5!3!2!2!2!}$	73516672601204152320000
<i>Como matéria simples busca a forma</i>	$\frac{29!}{5!4!3!3!2!2!2!2!}$	5329958763587301043200000

A new “sonnet” can now be obtained by choosing, to each verse, one permutation of the original one. This means that the whole number of new sonnets is the product of all entries in the last column, giving the unbelievable value of $5,3 \times 10^{312}$. But the question remains: among all these possible new poems, is there any real sonnet, written in Portuguese?

4 Alberto Pimenta and the project METÁSTASE I

And what is an OULIPO author? It is “a rat who built himself the maze from which it proposes to come out.”

OULIPO group

During the Eighties of the 20th Century, the poet Alberto Pimenta (1937-) proposed himself a challenge: to create a new sonnet starting from TRANSFORMA-SE O AMADOR NA COUSA AMADA of Camões, using exactly the same letters, verse by verse, just by permutation of the characters in each verse of the original poem. The total number of permutations of this type is indeed very large. But what is the probability of getting a new poem, with sense and literary value? And is there any solution at all? The fact is that Pimenta succeeded and the result is the poem OUSA A FORMA CANTOR! MAS SE DA NAMORADA. The project METÁSTASE I [7] is the answer to this challenge. Who is the author of the second poem? We should say Pimenta, but, ironically, this author did not manage to organize a new verse from the last one of the original poem until he put aside the letters “L” and “C”, the initials of the author of the original sonnet. It seems that, in some mysterious and magical way, Luís de Camões came to reclaim the authorship of the second poem as well.

Alberto Pimenta is not a member of the OULIPO group, but by doing this, he built himself a maze to come out of it, just like a real OULIPO member.



Figure 3: Alberto Pimenta during the performance METÁSTASE I in Funchal, Madeira Island, Colloquium “Imaginário do Espaço”, April 1987.

METÁSTASE I

<p><i>Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada Por virtude do muito imaginar; Não tenho logo mais que desejar, Pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.</i></p> <p><i>Se nela está minha alma transformada, Que mais deseja o corpo de alcançar? Em si somente pode descansar, Pois consigo tal alma está liada.</i></p> <p><i>Mas esta linda e pura semideia, Que, como o acidente em seu sujeito, Assim co'a alma minha se conforma,</i></p> <p><i>Está no pensamento como ideia; [E] o vivo e puro amor de que sou feito, Como matéria simples busca a forma.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Luís de Camões, 16th Century</p>	<p><i>ousa a forma cantor! mas se da namorada nua d'imagem, tido rio por vir tu não tens, oh rola joga, sem que ideia e mente passem, admito, d'harpejo,</i></p> <p><i>nada, terno mar, falsamente ilhas. amas desejando amor que cale cio, parcas rimas e os desencantos pedem odi et amo, caos, sigla. ali plantas</i></p> <p><i>setas em ideia, ainda mel, puras, semente que caído sujeito como eu, a lama minha informa. com acessos</i></p> <p><i>te penso e cato o mínimo. se nada muda, vê que frio e pó e riso e voto ou ímpio amor mat'o ser e busca famas.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">L. C. (Alberto Pimenta, 1987)</p>
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The remaining challenge would be now to translate Pimenta's poem ending up with a permutation of the English version of the Camões sonnet.

5 Nuno Coelho and the multimedia version of METÁSTASE I

Recently, during the academic year 2011/2012, the designer Nuno Coelho challenged his undergraduate Design and Multimedia students at the Coimbra University with a new project: to produce a multimedia transformation of the sonnet of Camões into Pimenta's. There are some very interesting proposals.

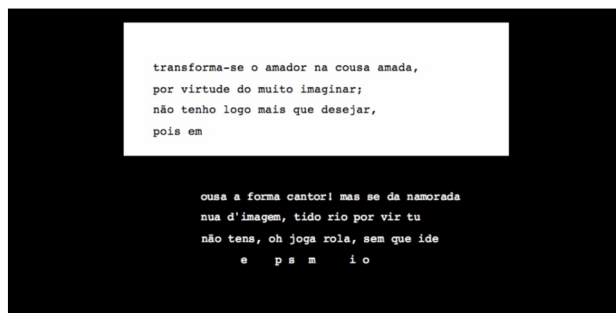


Figure 4: Joana Rodrigues's black and white screen.

Using a black and white screen, Joana Rodrigues types both poems simultaneously, with the sound of a typewriter, making clear the use of each character in

both poems³.

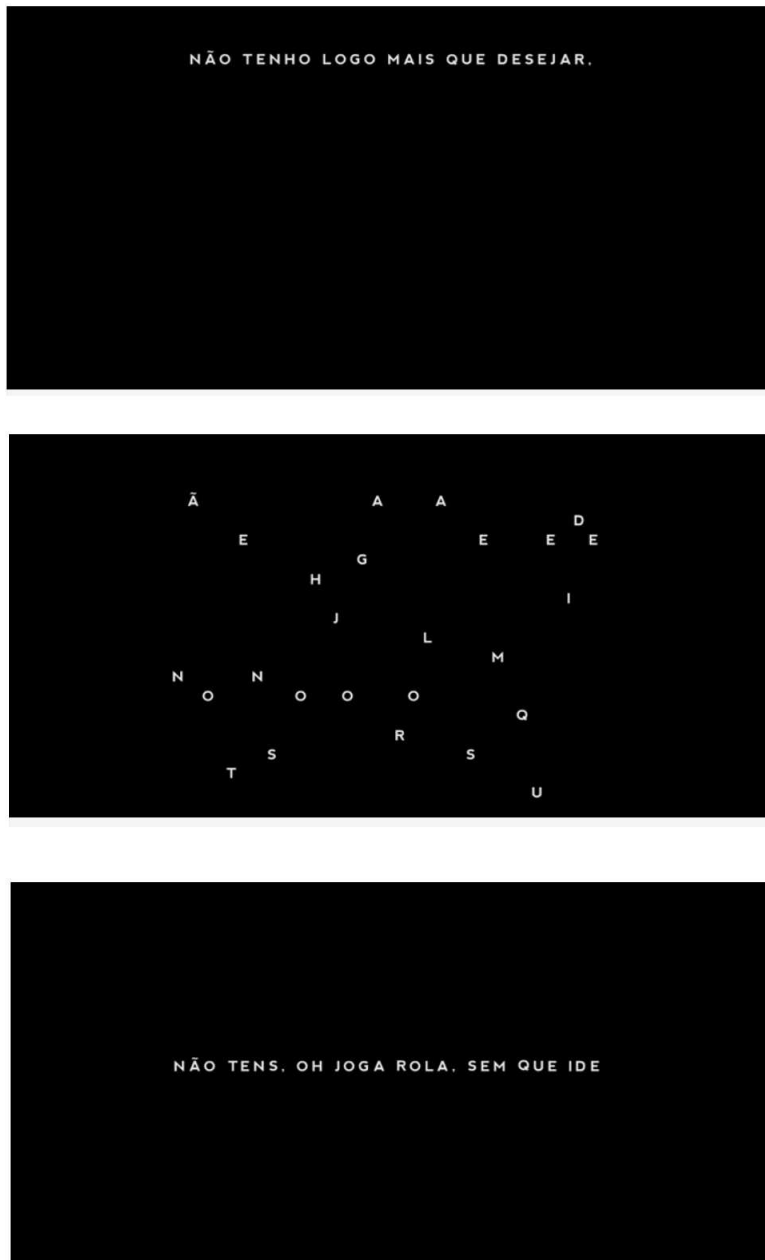
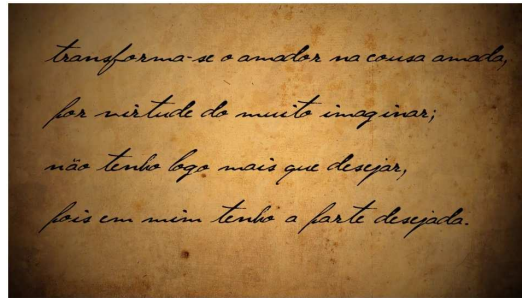


Figure 5: Bruno Santos's reorganization.

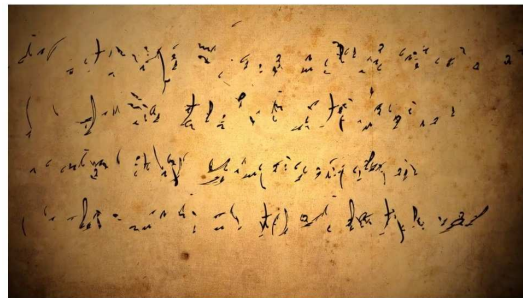
Bruno Santos picks each verse of the first poem and reorganizes it to the corresponding verse of the second poem, inspired on Jean Luc Godard's *Pierrot le*

³Joana Rodrigues: <http://vimeo.com/32167095>

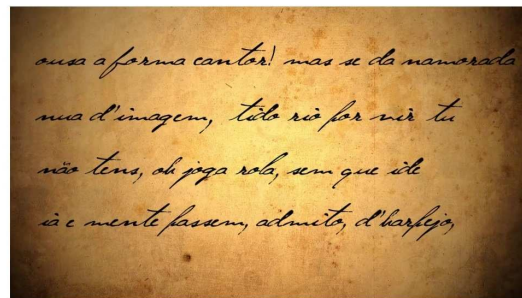
*Fou*⁴ opening titles⁵.



*transforma-se o amador na coisa amada,
por virtude do muito imaginar;
não tenho logo mais que desejar,
pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.*



*transforma-se o amador na coisa amada,
por virtude do muito imaginar;
não tenho logo mais que desejar,
pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.*



*ousa a forma cantar, mas se de manorada
mas d'imagem, tão não por ver tu
não tens, de jogar rola, sem que ile
sã e mente passem, admito, d'barfego,*

Figure 6: Mariana Seiça's proposal.

Mariana Seiça's proposal seems a palimpsest in which Pimenta's poem is revealed where we first saw the sonnet of Camões⁶.

The interested reader may be interested as well in the works of Filipe Amaro⁷, Ana Falé⁸, João Oliveira⁹ or Ernesto Cruz¹⁰.

⁴ *Pierrot le Fou* opening titles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-717PTVBCdw>

⁵ Bruno Santos: <http://vimeo.com/35222462>

⁶ Mariana Seiça: <http://vimeo.com/42437054>

⁷ Filipe Amaro: <http://vimeo.com/32106514>

⁸ Ana Falé: <http://vimeo.com/32207596>

⁹ João Oliveira: <http://vimeo.com/32545705>

¹⁰ Ernesto Cruz: <http://vimeo.com/32348937>

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