

The Poetics of Christophe Tarkos: the Word-Paste / *A poética de Christophe Tarkos: a pasta-palavra*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the work of Christophe Tarkos (1963-2004), one of the principal names of contemporary French poetry, with a focus on his formulations about language. The objective is to explain the linguistic theory that can be deduced from his work, both in the more essayistic writings and in interviews, and in the less conceptual realization in the actual poems. Our hypothesis is that Tarkos's poetics creates its own concept, that of the "word-paste" (*pâte-mot*), bringing with it a singular and poetic way of understanding the linguistic meaning.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Poetics; Christophe Tarkos; Repetition

RESUMO

*O artigo apresenta a produção de Christophe Tarkos (1963-2004), um dos principais nomes da poesia francesa contemporânea, com foco em suas formulações acerca da linguagem. O objetivo é explicitar a teoria linguística que se pode depreender de sua obra, tanto nos escritos mais ensaísticos e entrevistas, quanto em sua realização menos conceitual nos poemas propriamente ditos. Nossa hipótese é que a poética de Tarkos cria um conceito próprio, o de "pasta-palavra" (*pâte-mot*), trazendo com ele um modo singular e poético de se entender o sentido linguístico.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poéticas contemporâneas; Christophe Tarkos; Repetição

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Christophe Tarkos probably did not have a prepared theory about language and poetry when he began to write and publish his poems in several magazines in the 1990s. His first books would be launched only in 1995 and 1996: respectively *Morceaux choisis* and *Oui*, but Tarkos was already an active poet in the French poetry scene, participating in diverse public performances and publications like *Facial*, *Java*, *Action Poétique*, *Le Jardin Ouvrier*, among others, together with his friends and fellow poets Nathalie Quintane, Christiane Prigent, Philippe Beck, Charles Pennequin etc. In *Oui*, something of his theory about language, which is above all a poetic theory, was already sketched out with vigor, but it was perhaps with *Le signe* = (1999) that his theory became clearer, at least for us the readers. And only posthumously would we have more systematic access in *Écrits poétiques* (2008), which, besides reuniting previous books, includes transcripts of two interviews the poet conceded to radio programs. There we see clearly the extent of his reflection about poetry, which would become amplified to a consistent reflection about language and, still more, about life, existence – things that, for him, would never be separate or separable. The interviews confirm the density of a poetic thought permanently under construction – if we comprehend as poetic something that does not exclude concepts and images of philosophic thought nor that which we understand as theory.

There is in Tarkos's work, therefore, a poetics under construction that is on display, or an *autopoiesis* of a poetic, one that thinks in concepts and images at the same time, and that is constructed and takes form in the very same texts. Always hybrids, these texts are a mixture of poems, essays, stage directions, short stories, aphorisms, manifestos. And it is as if theory about the poem and the practice of the poem were retro-nourishing each other continually – therefore, the idea of *autopoiesis*, in an attempt to define this poetry-thought that seems to unfold in real-time before our eyes. In other words, before anything else, it is worth avoiding the idea of a preconceived theory that would have existed beforehand, pre-existing the poem, the text that embodies it. If there is a “theory of language that is disseminated in the work at the same time as it is manifested,”¹ in order to agree with the terms set out by Anne Renée Caillé (2000) (who at present is working on the thesis entitled “*Théorie du langage et esthétique totalisante dans l'œuvre poétique de Christophe Tarkos*”), we should

¹ Author's translation into Portuguese: “teoria da linguagem ao mesmo tempo manifesta e disseminada na obra” (CAILLÉ, 2000).

conceive of such a “theory” as a work in progress, which presents itself jointly with the writing of the poem, itself a continual work in progress. This *autopoiesis* between language and thought, practice and theory, will define the proper conception of language, world, poetry, and thought defended and tested by Tarkos in his work.

It is what Christian Prigent would say upon presenting the work of his friend and fellow poet as a *concretization* (the italics are his) of what Tarkos defined as a “pâte-mot” or, in an abbreviated fashion, creating a portmanteau “patmo”: the “word-paste.” For Prigent, such a manipulation of language would be at the same time rhetorical, heavily elaborated and erudite, and ludic (TARKOS, 2008, p.18). In the “word-paste,” perhaps we have the principal concept coined by the poet – not just a neologism he created, but a “concept” in fact, in terms of a philosophical concept and that, as we will see, can be comprehended as a concept of poetic nature.

When we say that Tarkos effectively created the concept, we understand that what he designates by the term “patmo” cannot be designated by any other term that existed before him. In other words, the word-paste is a new concept that confronts a necessity of thinking of something in a distinct way, in this case, to think in another way of language, the world, the voice, speech, the word. We understand even that such a term is taken in a larger network of relationships with other images and concepts with which it is co-determined and creates thought, in other words, creates new meanings.² Therefore, we can ask ourselves: “What did Tarkos seek to stitch together when he invented his “word-paste,” his “patmo?”

This concept still was not so explicit in his writings when the volume *Morceaux choisis*, from the poetry collection “Les Contemporaines favoris” directed by Didier Moulinier, united in its seventh edition texts by Tarkos for the first time in a book. This small volume, 11 cm by 17 cm and just over 100 pages, brought a selection of poems, some unpublished, others already presented, others already published in magazines, in which the variety of forms stood out as well as the dispositions on the page, font sizes, from the very visuality of the texts. But one factor already defined all the variation: the presence of eloquent repetition in diverse texts that, in their majority, approximate more

² I have in mind the term “concept” as elaborated by Deleuze, in a more explicit sense in *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (*What is Philosophy?*) with Guattari. If the concept is the product of philosophy, it can also be created in the field of the arts, because, as Deleuze says (in the article “Qu’es-ce que l’act de création?”, 2003, 291), art itself produces thought, creating or not concepts in the philosophical sense of the word. The concept, which is the result of a need of a real strength, is not just a neologism but implies a necessary creation of new words in order to define new ways of seeing, feeling, perceiving.

of what we understand as prose poems. This mark of a reiterative writing, circular, that plays with repetitions appears in many poems, an example of which we see in:^{3 4}

Tourner vite autour d'une chose, puis tourner plus lentement. Construire un monticule plus haut qu'un gars, tourner autour vite, puis plus doucement. Monter une chose assez grande, la mettre au milieu, et tourner à toute vitesse autour de la chose pendant plusieurs tours, et ralentir. Faire un tas de choses plus haut qu'un homme, au milieu, tourner autour de la chose en courant très vite, puis, en marchant. Construire, d'une façon ou d'une autre, une chose assez haute, avant de tourner autour très vite, puis tourner autour (TARKOS, 1995, p.30).⁵

This poem is very significant for describing the movement of the words around things, which spirals around the provisional axes that it chooses, always moving on shortly thereafter for new axes. A writing made of circles, which vary with size, design, and velocity: “To go quickly around a thing, and to go around slowly afterward again.” First a small hill, the size of a boy, is running all the way around it and then around again slowly. Next it is building something very large, very tall, running with great speed, going around many times in order to then decelerate. We can imagine the designs of these larger circles, necessary to orbit something very large, or something “taller than a man,” and the different designs traced with each pass, according to whether they were made with greater or lesser speed, in more or fewer rotations.

As is noted here, the text itself is composed of these rotations or repetitions, of the word that is repeated the most (“to go around”/ “tourner”) and of the other words taken up repeatedly, or of the expression most present (“to go around”/ “tourner autour”),

³ When I cite poems, I have opted to leave the original in the body of the text and include the translation in the footnotes. Only very few of Tarkos's poems have been published in English and none of the poems used in this article. Therefore, the author undertook to translate the poems herself.

⁴ TN. As the article author translated the poems into Portuguese, the English translation will come in brackets, after the Portuguese version.

⁵ Author's translation into Portuguese: “Girar veloz ao redor de uma coisa, depois girar mais lentamente. Construir um montículo mais alto do que um cara, girar ao redor veloz, depois mais calmamente. Erguer uma coisa muito grande, colocá-la o meio, e girar a toda velocidade ao redor da coisa durante muitas voltas, e desacelerar. Fazer um monte de coisas mais altas do que um homem, no meio, girar ao redor da coisa correndo muito veloz, depois, andando. Construir, de um modo ou de outro, uma coisa muito alta, antes de girar ao redor muito veloz, depois girar ao redor”. [To go quickly around a thing, and to go around slowly afterward again. To construct a hill taller than a man, to orbit around it quickly and afterward calmly. To erect a very big thing, to put it in the middle and afterwards with all deliberate speed to go around it over the course of many revolutions and to decelerate. To make a mountain of things higher than a man, in the middle, to revolve around a thing running very fast and then, later, walking. To build, in one way or another, something very tall, before spinning around it quickly, and afterwards to go around it.]

which can appear in permutations (“to go around quickly” or “to go quickly around”), and in the syntactic structure of the sentences that is repeated from the beginning to the end. All of the sentences begin with a verb in the imperative that varies throughout, and the sentences that follow, in each phrase, are linked practically always by coordination, creating a sequence of action, a simple structure that is repeated in the five sentences that comprise the text. It is also noted that there is a progression in their extent – the first with two sentences, the second with three, the third with four – then it regresses – the fourth and the fifth again with three sentences (the presence of the only subordinate clause: “before spinning around it quickly”). With what this movement of oscillating cycles is felt, in which words circle around something that, like here, shows itself as slightly undetermined. Words are knit together, grope things, spinning around themselves exhaustively.

Here is the presence of the movement that will continue to characterize Tarkos’s writing. Something like this “going quickly around something, then going around again more slowly” varies the speeds and the diameters of the circles that go around things, around images – that can be more or less clear and crisp, but many times refer to objects and scenes or issues and actions common to everyday life:

Je me peigne. J’ai mon peigne, je suis peigné maintenant, je me suis peigné, je n’étais pas bien peigné, je sais me peigner, j’ai bien peigné, je me suis peigné, j’ai bien fait de me peigner, je suis bien peigné maintenant je pense, je pense je me suis assez peigné maintenant. J’avais à me peigner. Peut-être devrais-je me peigner (TARKOS, 1995, p.42).⁶

Repetitive writing, which uses exhaustion and excess, ends up marking Tarkos’s style. An exaggerated repetition that, not rarely, brings humor with it; that sometimes sidles up to a gritty humor, scathing, closer to the critique, to the shout, and other times brings an almost infantile humor with puns and wordplay. Tarkos rejected the idea that there was irony in his procedures of language: “No, there is no practice of irony. It is very strange. That word discomforts me,” he says in an interview with Bertrand Verdier

⁶ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Eu me penteio. Eu tenho meu pente, eu estou penteado agora, eu me pentei, eu não estava bem penteado, eu sei me pentear, eu me pentei bem, eu me pentei, eu fiz bem de me pentear, eu estou bem penteado agora eu penso, eu penso eu estou um tanto penteado agora. Ei tinha de me pentear. Talvez eu deveria me pentear”. [I comb myself. I have my comb and I’m combed now and I combed myself, I wasn’t really well combed, I know how to comb myself and I combed myself well, I combed myself, I did well in so combing myself, I am well combed now I think, I think that I am somewhat rather combed now. I had to comb myself. Maybe I had better comb myself.]

(TARKOS, 2008, p.354),⁷ going on to add that when we “pay our taxes,” for example, there is no irony in it, just as when a guard greets us this may make us laugh but it is not an irony, he says. Perhaps he is trying to say that irony presupposes that we understand a second meaning behind the literal one, a second meaning fixed and pre-existing. And the very idea of irony would be therefore incompatible with his conception of language: before all else a non-rhetorical usage, a usage that has nothing to do with figures of speech, a denial of any metaphor. Irony is therefore unthinkable in an ever-literal use of language. But only humor, with a real effect interacting with a reading, without presupposing a previous message, would guarantee the meaning.

In some recordings, captured during public performances by Tarkos, we hear moments of laughter in the audience while he reads his poems. Many of the texts were oral improvisations; the poem was made right there, in public, in the moment in which it was proffered. In these improvisations, the puns, the series of words created by phonic proximity, for example, are frequent. And Tarkos’s voice can also be heard, emphatic, excessive, accelerated, as if it were wrapped in the stream of words that kept surging forth, that kept taking form in his voice. His performances were rarely silent or calm. This may be an interesting trace of holding back, in the direction of a certain poetic excess in Tarkos, made from an unbridle wordsmithery, obsessive, very energetic that many times was born in this impromptu done out loud.

The dynamic of the performances and improvisations of spoken poetry seems to infiltrate the very movement of the poems. It is common that readers, like Prigent, for example, refer to this vocal and corporal character as one of the principal marks of Tarkos. And, on this point, we will add that improvisation would be one of his singularities of his vocal poetic, not necessarily just in the poems that were born in a public situation, in an actual improvisation, but also in other texts that seem to incorporate in their movements the temporality of improvisation.

Even if we don’t hear the performances that have been recorded with Tarkos’s voice speaking the poems, if we simply open one of his books by chance, we will feel the pulsing vocality in the text. As if we heard in between the lines of the text a voice sounding in silence. This voice is not, therefore, exactly “sounding,” because we don’t actually hear it, but it possesses something of the movement of speech, as if its rhythm

⁷ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Não, não há prática da ironia. É muito estranho. Essa palavra que me incomoda”.

and gestures were spelled out. Such vocality is, therefore, a result of the linguistic procedures that are peculiar to speech and that run throughout Tarkos's style since his first poems. As we saw above, repetition is one of the privileged procedures since the beginning and, we can note, it is one of the most utilized vocal strategies by Tarkos in his performances and improvisations.

In a long poem, composed of justified blocks that alternate from the right to the left of the page, first published in 1996, Tarkos associates his poetic language with repetition and affirms that “my tongue repeats itself poetically” – as may be seen in this passage:

Ma langue est poétique, ma langue est absolument poétique, ma langue est immédiatement poétique, ma langue est poétique, ma langue est poétique est un leit-motiv poétique, ma langue est poétique est poétique, ma langue est poétiquement désirée, c'est un désir de langue, un désir de langue poétique, une langue poé-tique, une langue poétique, ma langue est une langue poétique, ma langue se répète poétiquement, ma langue est une répétition poétique, ma langue s'agence poéti-quement, ma langue est un désir de langue (TARKOS, 2008, pp.52-53).⁸

Based on the repetition of a simple motto, “ma langue est poétique,” the block of text unfurls itself by taking it up, sometimes adding to it a new element, generally just one word. It causes an insistent effect of something that has jammed, that does not go forward very far, that insists on speaking just for this gesture of speaking. Once that is effectively “said,” it is something very simple that does not need these repetitions to be learned. There is a greater emphasis on the gesture of repetition itself. It is this repetition that jumps out to our eyes and ears. Here, the repetition appears in Tarkos's poetry above all as a vocal gesture, a typical gesture of someone who talks and talks around an issue, circles about one object, some theme—much like in the poem

⁸ Author's translation into Portuguese: “Minha língua é poética, minha língua é absolutamente poética, minha língua é imediatamente poética, minha língua é poética, minha língua é poética é um leitmotiv poético, minha língua é poética é poética, minha língua é poeticamente desejada, é um desejo de língua, um desejo de língua poética, uma língua poética, uma língua poética, minha língua é uma língua poética, minha língua se repete poeticamente, minha língua é uma repetição poética, minha língua se agencia poeticamente, minha língua é um desejo de língua”. [My tongue is poetic, my tongue is absolutely poetic, my tongue is immediately poetic, my tongue is poetic, my tongue is poetic it is a poetic leitmotiv, my tongue is poetic is poetic my tongue is desired poetically, it is a desire of the tongue, a desire of poetic language, a poetic tongue, a poetic language, my tongue is a poetic language, my tongue repeats itself poetically, my tongue is a poetic repetition, my tongue is poetically brokered, my tongue is a desire of language.]

I have tried to maintain Tarkos's original typesetting, obeying the line breaks and the justified design of the block of text. This block is found shifted to the right side of the page in the book.

commented upon previously. A repetition of someone who resumes, insists, stutters, looking to create a small place with their speech.

We can think of stuttering as a typical gesture of speech. When we say that someone is a stutterer, we are referring to their way of speaking and not to their way of writing. How, in the end, would one stutter in their writing? It is this idea that Deleuze is going to play in his essay “Bégaya-t-il...” from *Critique et clinique* (in the English translation “He stuttered” in *Critical and Clinical*), upon searching forcefully for writings that are valuable for their repetition as a creative strategy of language. This is the case of the sound poet Gherasim Luca and also of the writer Samuel Beckett, both masters of poetics quite similar to that of Tarkos, and other writers like Charles Péguy and Raymond Roussel, the latter remembered by Tarkos (2008, p.355). In each one of them there is a type of infiltration of this effect of speech, of this typical gesture of orality, from the very source from which language springs. To say that a writer would “stutter” would be to say, in these cases, that he stutters through all language: he makes it tremor in its conventions, patterns, and laws. To stutter is in certain writers, therefore, a strategy of writing to unsettle the tower of language, to stutter with language, as Deleuze would say, and not just with speech. It is to create a new language, undoing the polarity of speech and writing, that Tarkos makes us think that at each moment a new language could be born, with a new function and a new logic.

In Tarkos this lack of distinction between the oral and the written is manifest, as if he denies this duality, which we also find in Deleuze’s philosophy. Tarkos’s writing is done in the movement of a proffered speech, conducted by a vocal rhythm. When he expounds more explicitly on the concept of “patmo” – this occurs in 1998, according to the “Biographic Notice” in *Écrits poétiques* (2008) – his writing was already that of someone who writes like he speaks. He already made of the voice that speaks the basic material of his writing and counted excessively on repetition and the crazy proliferation of words as resources. He seems, then, from his poetic practices, to be led to creating this concept of “pâte-mot” or “patmo,” the word-paste that will appear more explicitly and even conceptually described in *Le signe =*, which has as its subtitle *Manifeste*: “Word-paste is a substance, it is a substance of words sufficiently stuck together in order to have meaning” (TARKOS, 1999, p.32).⁹ But before, in *Oui*, it was already

⁹ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Pasta-palavra é a substância, é a substância de palavras suficientemente grudadas para querer dizer”.

present. On the very first page of this book from 1996, we read: “The sentence and its paste. Word paste. Word from without.”¹⁰ And, following that, the term emerges that surges from the contraction, creating a new word, therefore untranslatable: “patmo” (2008, p.163).¹¹

Giving a physical image to the flood of speech, Tarkos defines it as a paste, an elastic dough in which all words are stuck together, adhered. Speech does not articulate, or rather, there isn’t a double articulation of language, as there is for Saussure, because the word is not a sign that divides signifier and signified. Tarkos’s attempt with the image of paste would be to concretize the idea that there are no isolated words; they always appear in a group and, beyond this, are fused together: “there are no words alone, words are in a group, they mix in a group, what makes the element of meaning is no longer the word it is the group of words fused together” (1999, p.29).¹² To say something, to give meaning, is to shape this mass, making “clays,” kneading it, flipping it over, poking at it, stretching it out, because “it does not break,” as we read in:

The list of words that requires fusing, results in a pie. From where comes this fact that everything we say has the meaning of a paste, has a paste of sense. It takes the form of a paste. After the paste can be presented as not mattering which sense, of inverting itself, turning itself around, making a loop, making little loops, the paste always has meaning, it is not deformed, because it is a paste that can take all the forms and not become less sensible, full of meaning than that which we say, we can stretch it and stretch it again, elongating it significantly as it is elastic and does not break [...] (TARKOS, 1999, pp.31-32).¹³

There is only this viscous paste of words, this word-paste, and never any individual, separate, unstuck words among themselves or removed from the world and from their bodies. It is from this idea that the title of one of *Le signe* =’s manifesto-texts

¹⁰ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “A frase e sua pasta. Pasta palavra. Palavra de fora”.

¹¹ The full excerpt in the original: “La phrase et sa pâte. Pâte mot. Parole de dehors. [...] C’est bien *patmo* que cela s’évanouisse. C’est pâte à prendre la parole n’articule pas” (TARKOS, 2008, p.163).

¹² Author’s translation into Portuguese: “não há palavras sós, as palavras estão em grupo, elas se misturam em um grupo, o que faz o elemento do sentido não é mais a palavra é o grupo de palavras fundidas”.

¹³ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “A lista de palavras que é preciso fundir resulta em um pastel. Donde o fato de que tudo o que dizemos tem um sentido de pasta, tem uma pasta de sentido. Toma a forma de uma pasta. Depois a pasta pode se apresentar em não importa qual sentido, se inverter, se revirar, fazer uma argola, fazer argolinhas, ela tem sempre um sentido, ela não se deforma, pois ela é uma pasta ela pode tomar todas as formas ela não fica menos sensata cheia de sentido daquilo que dizemos, podemos esticá-la e esticá-la ainda, alongá-la bastante como ela é elástica ela não se quebra [...]”.

is drawn: “Words Don’t Exist” (1999, p.28). Words, says Tarkos, are shells or empty sacks, hollowed out by meaning. They do not say anything on their own; they do not possess meaning for themselves isolatedly. It is, on the contrary, meaning that takes them and makes of them something that meaning desires, that makes them signify something, as we can read above: “what makes the element of meaning is no longer the word it is the group of words fused together.” Our speech rarely obeys what “we want to say,” the signification extrapolates all the time, the effectively “said” is just an indication, a consequence of a much larger paste, of an uncontrollable jibber-jabber. The meaning cannot be controlled by the speaker, since the meaning itself is this effect, proceeding from the course of “patmo.” The meaning comes with a strike, like a shot, as a consequence of these word-pastes that construct and modify themselves in real time, to the measure in which we mold them, upon saying: “What is said gives the sense of what is said. All that stuff that is said. All of that paste that is said,”¹⁴ says Tarkos – and further on:

The meaning is given in speech by speech, it is upon conducting itself that speech conducted gains meaning, the meaning isn’t derived from that which is said but given by what is spoken as a whole, in a group, with heft, continuing in totality, repeating, curling in on itself [...] (1999, p.40).¹⁵

What is left to us is merely to talk and talk: “No, nothing is said, it is said without stop and everything that is said is that which gives meaning to its saying.” (1999, p.40).¹⁶ This is what Tarkos’s texts suggest, upon composing themselves from a paste of words, disposed, many times, in continuous lines, as if they were stitched together, amalgamated, and they seem to say little in terms of definitions, messages and content. The poems, or the manifesto-texts, from *Le signe =*, in their attempt to conceptually define the “word-paste,” are themselves a concretization of the concept. They are a type of outpouring of spliced together words that make innumerable, contorted meanderings around this image of a paste. The text is itself a viscous mass, in

¹⁴ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “O que se diz dá o sentido do que se diz. Tudo aquilo que se fala. Toda a massa do que é falado”.

¹⁵ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “O sentido é dado na fala pela fala, é ao se conduzir que a fala conduzida toma sentido, o sentido não se dá daquilo que é falado mas é dado por aquilo que é falado, em massa, em grupo, em espessura, continuando, em totalidade, repetindo, enrolando [...]”.

¹⁶ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Não, não se diz nada, fala-se sem parar, fala-se e tudo o que se fala é o que dará um sentido a tudo o que se fala”.

some moments it is denser and continuous – with compact blocks of text – and in others it is more spread out, rarified, distributed in short verses or spaces in a way that leaves plenty of white on the page. In still other situations, it creates smaller blocks or even stanzas. The paste dislocates, forms bigger or smaller blocks, forms smaller or bigger mountains, widens or disperse...according to Tarkos's descriptions of the word-paste. But it always searches to concretize the image of words that call to one another, in an endless chant, that proceeds in its continuous course – even if that course changes in speed or density.

Tarkos refers to this uninterrupted continuity without return, in which we are inevitably caught up, in an interview with the poet David Christoffel, made for a radio program in July 1998: “We are in a continuity of speech in a continuity of time. We have, then, continuous nostalgia” (TARKOS, 2008, p.366).¹⁷ And it is this continuity of the word-paste: the continuity of speech on the one hand and on the other (simultaneously) the continuity of time; the irreversible time of life, from which we have no way to escape. We are in a continual “go,” we live in a continuity from which a return is impossible. In the same way, or directly because of this continuity, we cannot flee from the word-paste, Tarkos says. It is from this impossibility of return that we experience the nostalgia of going back, because we do not in fact have a way to go back in time. We are in an irrevocable current of time – a current that is also the one of speech and that of the voice. Thus, we try to escape from the continuity, we try to break free from the word-paste, to tear ourselves from it, but the most that we can achieve, Tarkos tells us, are small undulations, tiny variations. Seen from afar, we see that they are negligible variations in the continuous current of the word.

There is, therefore, a continuous course that proceeds without our interference, according to Tarkos: the course of language in the world, of common sense, of common ticks, habits of speech, automatisms, clichés, the infinite discourses in which we are literally immersed every day. But, for the poet, who deals with words, this is an opportunity to create these undulations in the common current from which we cannot escape, even if this might be a very slow and difficult task, even if the poet only has that very material with which to work, the word-paste. And even if the result of his exertion

¹⁷ Author's translation into Portuguese: “Estamos na continuidade da fala, na continuidade do tempo. Então temos também a nostalgia contínua”.

is infinitesimal, this is not worthless for us that are immersed in the word-paste, Tarkos would say.

To become sensitive to this condition of immersion in the word-paste in which we find ourselves, Tarkos sometimes uses the image of a puree: we are immersed in this puree, this pasty substance, which is thought and language... and within it there is no laterality, we are immersed in it, taken from all sides (2008, p.363). And, sometimes, he avails himself of the image of a compote, which also can have the consistency of a puree – as *compote*, in French, denotes both a sweet or a salty dish, having in common the fact of its being cooked, which creates a viscous preparation of a certain density: “[...] we can free ourselves of the word-paste as we would a compote [...]” (1999, p.2).¹⁸

“Le compotier” is the title of one of the poems, or tracts (it is not entirely clear if the larger fonts that punctuate the text are titles or if they are part of the same text, in fragments, that comprises the work), of the book *Oui*, in which in a determined moment is read: “What can we do if not dive deeply into compotes. Off we go!” (2008, p.244).¹⁹ The poem is a continuous block of sentences knitted together, replete with exclamations in a rather humorous tone, with pinches of nonsense. It is interesting to remember Tarkos’s reading of this passage, or poem of the book – a recording that can be found on the CD *Expressif, le petit bidon*, the only CD with Tarkos’s recordings. In the performance, he reads a poem at the same time as he eats a compote, filling his mouth and pronouncing the words in an incomprehensible manner, making his voice leap from his throat, together with the liquid from the compote, in something like a gargle. In one passage of the poem, it reads: “He talks with a compote, he is not well understood, I do not understand it well, he can talk, the jar, he is not understood very well” (TARKOS, 2008, p.247).²⁰

We are “within a jar,” Tarkos says in the interview with David Christoffel, and it is inside the jar that we try to speak of the compote. Therein lies the entire problem of the condition of being within a text and at the same time trying to establish an impossible distance from it. We are within the word-paste, we move within it, within

¹⁸ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “[...] podemos nos deslocar na pasta-palavra como em uma compota [...]”.

¹⁹ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “O que podemos fazer senão mergulhar profundamente nas compotas. Partamos!”

²⁰ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Ele fala com a compota, não se compreende muito bem, não o compreendo muito bem, ele pode falar, a compoteira, não se compreende muito bem”.

Original text in French: “Il parle avec de la compote, on ne le comprend pas très bien, je ne le comprends pas très bien, il peut parler, le compotier, on ne le comprend pas bien”.

the jar. We wonder then, Tarkos says, if we are not totally imbued, if we are not ourselves the very compote we inhabit (2008, p.361). Where does language end and then we begin, where to separate the voice from the body that sends it forth? The dissolution of borders is placed there, a permeability between language, speech and body, the word of which and for which it speaks. The body of speech and of the text is mixed with our body; both partake of one concrete physicality.

In this way, what is expressed in the very concept of the word-paste, and in its experimentation in the writing and performances of Tarkos, is the physicality of language, a central aspect for him. In the image of the paste, the puree, or the compote, the incarnation of the flow of language, which would seem like something abstract and fluid, is something very tactile and concrete. The attempt, in excessive, overburdened, and insistent language, is one of an irrevocable corporal presence of this paste made of words. Language is body and not an abstraction; it is plastic. In *Oui* and in other early texts of Tarkos, we can note that this physicality is, on the whole, explored with the use of visuality, alongside the sound, vocal work. Beyond the variations in the blotches of text, the play of font sizes, boldface, caps, occupying entire pages, stands out. In *Morceaux choisis*, there are, for example, lists of words in all-caps, divided into columns, designs, tables, graphics, handwritten poems. Many modalities of experimentation with the visual level of the text, therefore. This would not be as frequent in later works, in which the plasticity ended up being found more in the work of sonority, as in the last book *Anachronisme* in 2001.

If words do not exist, if they are not signs, because they are not separable into signifier and signified, they would not possess referents. If therefore they are not articulable, dual, as linguistics presupposes, it is because for Tarkos, above all, language does not set up a system parallel to bodies, to object (such as is presupposed by the idea of the sign). It is above all against this separation that his poetics seems to put itself into combat. The flow of speech or – we might add – of the voice is, in this way, a mass of words, in which the images, the signified and the designations are as amalgamated, fused, and compacted as the sounds. In an interview with Bertrand Verdier, also transcribed in *Écrits poétiques*, Tarkos explains his position in this way:

But for me there are not any [words] ... What I find funny in this idea [of being a reference, the word a sign] is the fact that the language and the world are separated. For me language is not from another world, it

is as concrete as a bag of sand that falls on your head, it is completely real, completely effective, efficient, helpful (TARKOS, 2008, p.357).²¹

As real “as a sandbag,” the word weighs, it moves us, it possesses a form, a flow that is as physical as a flow of water, of mud, or oil, as viscous as compote. Language is not something that represents the world, standing apart from it – the mirror, in the end, presupposes a parallel plan in which something can be reflected. But language is something that inserts itself into the world as a concrete, palpable thing with an existence: “the verb is totally corporal, and, beyond being corporal, it is like a gunshot. We cannot say that language is separated from this moment and, beyond being a tool, a utensil, a shot in the head, beyond this, it is something concrete” (2008, p.358).²² The words have a “physical effect” on people, Tarkos says. And this proves that a corporal truth exists, and that it is the truth of the materiality of language and of the text. Even if content is untruthful, there is a real effect of this lie that affects the body of another; someone tells a boy a lie and, as a result, he passes his entire life sick. This is the example Tarkos gives to emphasize that there only exists “a palpable truth of the material existence of the text” (2008, p.359)²³ that is independent of any represented content, be it taken for truth or not in relation to the deeper meaning.

The motivation that exists alongside the concept of the word-paste is clear: the belief in a language that mixes with the rest of the world, being as real and physical as the world is. Upon thinking of the “physical effect” of words on us, and searching carefully for this while writing and performing his poems, it would be difficult to confuse the concept of Tarkos with a formalist position of language or a merely self-referential poetics, in the lineage of a pure poetry, of art for art’s sake, etc. However, by betting on an experimental character in writing, since the beginning, connected to a “vanguardist” spirit of the generation of French poets to which he belonged, Tarkos’s poetics gives boundaries to this association, which can be corroborated, for instance,

²¹ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Mas para mim não há [palavras]... O que acho engraçado nesta ideia [de haver um referente, da palavra ser um signo] é o fato de que a língua e o mundo sejam separados. Para mim a língua não está fora do mundo, ela é tão concreta quanto um saco de areia que lhe cai na cabeça, é completamente real, completamente eficaz, eficiente, útil”.

²² Author’s translation into Portuguese: “o verbo é totalmente corporal, e além de ser corporal, ele é como um tiro. Não podemos dizer que a língua seja separada nesse momento, e, além de ser uma ferramenta, um utensílio, um tiro na cabeça, além disso, é algo de concreto”.

²³ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “a verdade palpável da existência material do texto”.

with the defense of materiality of the text and with the denial of a referential character of the word.

However, as we saw in his affirmations, it is not a prevalence of the signifier in the place of the signified, of form to the detriment of content. What Tarkos defends is, rather, the sensitive and active character of the word, in which form and content, signifier and signified act in a reciprocal presupposition and are, what is more, inseparable, indistinguishable.²⁴ The participation of language in the creation of reality and its constant and unavoidable presence in our lives, thought and actions is an important fact for Tarkos, who distances himself from a formalist or self-referent posture. The fact is that we are immersed in the word-paste and we cannot become detached from it. We are within the jar. We have only a small margin to maneuver among the discourses and clichés. And they are buried within our very bodies, under our skin—therefore the image of diving in the compote, immersion in paste, in which and with which we move and mix ourselves. It is necessary to know that it is an elastic material, that we can mold it, stretch it, create new forms.

When Tarkos was asked by Bertrand Verdier whether, upon referring to the materiality of the text and denying that words have referents, he was not just opting for a self-referential poetry, Tarkos draws attention precisely to the evidence of sensibility: whatever word or, more precisely, according to his theory, whatever group of words that brings a sense with it, transmits a sense, which belongs to the sensitive. There is the material truth of the text, on one side and, together with it, the meaning that affects us, through sensibility, or the meaning as this physical effect:

But in this moment, another thing is forgotten – meaning. It is ridiculous, but a word is connected to a sensibility in relation to that which we call sense. Something a little exaggerated is that from one side it is said, “the text satisfies itself, it is just materiality,” but one always forgets that no matter what speech, no matter what word, it makes reference to a sensitive function of meaning. Then, on the one hand, it is not an absolute truth, it is material, but a materiality that

²⁴ It will not be possible in this discussion to treat the affinity that Tarkos’s theory entertains with the thinking of Gilles Deleuze about language, especially in *Logique du sens (Logic of sense)*, in which meaning, thought of as happening—the incorporeal effect taking place within bodies, on the border between words and things—appears as a dimension simultaneously transversal to the circle of the proposition and responsible for the actual separation that exists between signifier and signified: he is the articulator of this difference (cf. DELEUZE, 1969).

always originates in relation to a sensibility we have of meaning, which is also physical (TARKOS, 2008, p.359).²⁵

In other words, this materiality, or the material evidence of the text, written or spoken, is not separated from the effects – equally material – that it provokes in our bodies when we read it or hear it. There is no way for the text to be merely “within itself,” closed off and self-referencing; it is necessarily open to the world. As a body, it affects and is affected by it. It inevitably creates meaning. In *Le signe* =, we can see that the word-paste rests “on the elasticity of sensations” or “above the modification of apprehension” (1999, p.35).²⁶ In other words, sensation, perception, which impacts us each moment in every place, will exercise pressure on the word-paste, causing it to oscillate. In this way, the mold of the word-paste is crafted all the time, according to the oscillations in sensation that cause it to vary in every situation. In the same way, a text that is an alteration of the word-paste, born of an alteration, provokes modifications on the one that gets in touch with it. The text can be a trigger for the senses, exercising pressure over the word-paste in which the reader-listener is immersed. Or it can simply go unnoticed and in this case not jostle anyone, something that is also possible. But if it makes some sense, it is because in some way it creates a variation, however small, in the inertia of the word-paste. It achieved a fluctuation that altered the sensibility of the habitual course.

As we can see, this seems to be independent of the theme under discussion, of the objects called together by the writing. As it has been said, many of Tarkos’ poems are an opportunity of reflection and staging of his poetics, as if they stage the actual *mise-en-forme* of the poetics, of this thought-poem in real time. Thus, frequently, they thematize the writing itself. As Christian Prigent observes, they are primarily “meta-poetic” texts (TARKOS, 2008, p.19), which bring the staging of this self-constitution of a poetic, a simultaneous thinking and doing. Prigent repels the critiques that would say they are empty texts, merely formal. Tarkos’s texts, he says, are not about “nothing.” At

²⁵ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “Mas neste momento, esquece-se outra coisa, o sentido. É que, é ridículo, mas uma palavra é ligada a uma sensibilidade em relação àquilo que chamamos de sentido. Algo um pouco engraçado, é que de um lado diz-se “seu texto se basta em si mesmo, não passa de materialidade”, mas se esquece sempre que não importa que fala, não importa que palavra, faz referência à função sensível do sentido. Então, de um lado, não se trata de uma verdade absoluta, é material, mas uma materialidade que se dá sempre em relação à sensibilidade que temos do sentido, que é física também”.

²⁶ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “sobre a elasticidade das sensações [...] sobre uma modificação da apreensão”.

the same time in which they are texts that say what they do, being like allegories of their own movement. They also include subjective affirmations, many times of an autobiographic nature, and they show us a world, which is ours, in its triviality, says Prigent (cf. TARKOS, 2008, p.19).

Tarkos uses objects and everyday problems as starting point. The material of his word-paste is made of these fragments of meaning that refer to things that we recognize as being from our reality, Prigent observes. For example, when dealing with a book like *Anachrosime*, composed of continuous blocks of texts, of variable sizes, that seem to form a species of descriptive diary of everyday situations and thoughts, many times set in city streets, recognized as being those of Paris. The blocks describe very simple ideas or descriptions, later unfolding themselves into a rhythmic, reiterative writing in sieves and spirals. For Prigent, these descriptions would only be descriptive in appearance. According to him, Tarkos undoes the figurative function through an exaggeration of variations, echoes, gurgles, bizarre comments, rapid grammatical derivations... It would all be a form of titration, of mixing the material of language, liquefying and undoing it.

What stands out in the texts of *Anachronisme* is its auditory flux, a game of reiterations and variations that we feel many times in a particular velocity that is created by the text, not infrequently hurried and accelerated. As Prigent says, “the acceleration of the syntax carries it all toward an irresistible velocity” (TARKOS, 2008, p.15).²⁷ And this velocity ends by imposing and regulating the space and the object of the text. In this way, the text inverts the perspective, Prigent says, playing with the first level of the very act of writing, the exposition of its process of composition. The descriptive is merely a “pretext” here for the engendering and treatment of a “verbal material” (TARKOS, 2008, p.16). This would be the true material of this writing. The immersion in which the texts of this book put us, from the rhythm game in which we are conducted, is related with our immersion in the word-paste. We live immersed in voices, and it is this sensation that the poems make us experiment. Prigent would say that Tarkos brings the presence of the current of speech through his writing as if he made us dive into this movement:

At this point we become sensitive above all to the loquacious generosity of the flow. And we may appreciate this type of happiness

²⁷ Author’s translation into Portuguese: “A aceleração da sintaxe leva o todo a uma irresistível velocidade”.

that animates this generosity. Without a doubt it is there that we can sense the pure pleasure of speech, an almost childish pleasure of letting flow the riverbanks of babbling (TARKOS, 2008, p.16).²⁸

Innumerable are the number of moments in Tarkos's work in which the actual movement of the flux of speech is described, beyond being, at the same time, incarnated in the formal, syntactic movement of the text. These are the more explicitly metapoetic moments, as Prigent would say, in which the poem is said or says what it does at the same time in which it realizes it. In the book *Caisses*, made up of poems in the forms of "boxes," justified quadrants of various sizes, there is, for example, the image of smoke, that the smoker draws and sees scattered in the air, or rather, the description of the path of the flow of vapor (1998, p.32). And even in the same book, the flux can be sent to come in an indefinite meaning, flux of whatever material or consistency, named only by "flux." The poem thematizes then the dynamic of whatever continuous flow that would be the dynamic of cutting and of being cut by another flow, an obstacle that crosses its path, as we can see in this passage:

Quel est le flux, quel est le flux qui rencontre un obstacle, quel est ce flux, le flux rencontre un obstacle, quel est ce flux qui rencontre un obstacle le flux rencontre plus d'un obstacle, le flux a vu un obstacle par l'obstacle duquel le flux a vu l'obstacle, le flux a voulu aller vers l'obstacle qu'il a vu, voilà un flux qui vient à la rencontre d'un obstacle, les flux viennent à leur rencontre, l'obstacle allait vers les flux, des flux ont vu plus d'un obstacle, quel est le flux, le flux va rencontrer un obstacle qui rencontre des flux, des flux viennent à la rencontre d'un obstacle [...]
(TARKOS, 1998, p.25).²⁹

²⁸ Author's translation into Portuguese: "A partir daí tornamo-nos sensíveis sobretudo à generosidade elocutória do fluxo. E podemos apreciar a espécie de alegria que anima esta generosidade. Sem dúvida que aí provamos algo do puro prazer de falar, um prazer quase infantil de deixar correr o fluxo do balbucio".

²⁹ Author's translation into Portuguese: "Qual é o fluxo, qual é o fluxo que encontra um obstáculo, qual é esse fluxo, o fluxo encontra um obstáculo, qual é esse fluxo que encontra um obstáculo o fluxo encontra mais de um obstáculo, o fluxo viu um obstáculo pelo obstáculo do qual o fluxo viu o obstáculo, o fluxo quis ir em direção ao obstáculo que ele viu, eis um fluxo que vem ao encontro de um obstáculo, os fluxos vêm a seu encontro, o obstáculo ia em direção aos fluxos, os fluxos viram mais de um obstáculo, qual é o fluxo, o fluxo vai encontrar um obstáculo que encontra os fluxos, os fluxos vêm ao encontro de um obstáculo [...]". [Which is the flux, which is the flux that finds an obstacle, what is that flux, the flux encounters an obstacle, what is this flux that bumps into an obstacle finding one more obstacle, the flux saw an obstacle through an obstacle from which the flux spied another obstacle, the flux tried to go in that obstacle's direction that he saw, so here a flux that comes to the meeting of an obstacle, the fluxes that come to the meeting, the obstacle goes in the direction of the fluxes, the fluxes see still one more obstacle, which is a flux, the flux goes to meet the obstacle that encounters the fluxes, the fluxes go to the meeting of the obstacle [...].

The flux is continuous, until it encounters an obstacle that could be either another flow or proceed from within the flux (as the text continues later: “*de nombreux obstacles sont dans les flux, les obstacles arrivent dans le flux*”). And the descriptive dynamic of that in which two or more continuities meet, mutually interrupting one another and starting a new continuity – that could be itself interrupted by another and so forth in which a flow acts as an obstacle in relation to another flow. One more time the dynamic of the poem is one of an exaggerated loop, made by a rather diminished quantity of words that permute and create a new, extremely repetitive sieve. The meaning is very simple; one phrase would suffice to summarize it. But the poem consists in the course of accompanying the flow, in disjunctions and resurgences, being a reader immersed in a rhythm of images and sounds that are made there.

Even if Tarkos did not end up writing specifically theoretical texts, a similar conception of language can be found in his innumerable works. His poetics presents itself as a constitution of thought about language and about the world, or the language *in* the world; the engendering of a linguistic theory with a poetic origin – which, who knows, makes this so singular concept he created, that of the word-paste, never seems to constitute an actual “theory,” in the sense of being part of a discipline like linguistics. It is, however, a concept of an eminently poetic profile, because it is plastic, created in an *autopoiesis* between *what* and *how* that speaks of *itself* in the instant in which it makes *itself*. The poet, in his activity of writing-thinking, constitutes a thought *in* his own writing, *with* it, but without things, theory and practice, thought and world, becoming separable. After all, “*La poésie est une intelligence*” (Poetry is a form of intelligence) according to one of his manifestos taken up in *Écrits poétiques* (2008, pp.57-59).

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