

Where is a poem?

Haj Ross
Poetics and Linguistics
University of North Texas
haj@unt.edu

Our panel has met to examine the question of the “flatness” of the world within the broad conceptual architecture of the thought of Erich Voegelin. That the world is becoming (or has perhaps already become) flat is the thesis of Thomas Friedman’s recent book.¹ Friedman perceives many traditional distinctions between cultures around the world as being in a process of withering away, or perhaps as being suppressed. We might thus say that Friedman sees the world as being (increasingly) monocultural.

Our panel feels, to the contrary, that while there is a case to be made for the increasing undifferentiatedness of life in the material aspects of the so-called first world, due to such recent pressures as Macdonaldization and commodification, both of which being strongly impelled by the increasing power of corporations, on the subtler levels of cultures – such as the conceptual, ideational, or noetic levels – cultures continue to be robustly individual. We still live in a richly biodiverse noosphere.

A tip of the hat here to such linguists as Edward Sapir and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf, who framed what is often referred to as “the Sapir -Whorf hypothesis,” according to which we are constrained to think only in ways permitted by the rules of grammars of the languages that we have learned to speak. A particularly vivid prediction of such culturally relativistic thinking is that Aristotle would have developed different forms of logic if he had been born a Hopi. Another consequence of Sapir and Whorf’s thought would be the claim that translation is impossible.

I would not go so far as to claim that all translation is impossible. Rather, I would want to say that the more “poetic” a text is, the less any translation of it will be able to succeed. By *poetic*, I do not mean to suggest that only poems, novels, drama, etc. will be untranslatable. I think that many kinds of philosophical, metaphysical and religious texts will be equally untranslatable, in addition to many sentences from everyday life. Like: how would one translate things like “Oh grow up!” “Bingo!” “Get a life!” “Way to go!” “Gag me with a spoon,” etc. into Japanese or Farsi? A daunting prospect.

It is, in fact, extremely difficult to characterize the class of untranslatable kinds of language. Perhaps, one might propose that the degree to which a text involves affect will vary inversely with its translatability.

I want to consider a small example in some detail, precisely because for this case, it seems that on the face of it, my suggestion that affect precludes translatability must fail dismally. I will consider a Portuguese poem, one written by one of the greatest Brazilian poets of the twentieth century – Carlos Drummond de Andrade, referred to universally as “Drummond.” I will first cite the words of the poem, with a limping English “translation,” in addition to a word-for-word gloss, which I hope may help those readers with no experience of Portuguese to achieve an initial

impression of the structure of the work.

How much of the power of the poem is lost in these two Englishings of it will be the topic which will be our focus as we proceed.

SER	BEING	BEING
O filho que não fiz hoje seria homem. Ele corre na brisa, sem carne, sem nome.	The son that I didn't make today would be a man. He runs in the breeze, with no flesh, no name.	The son that not (I)made today would-be (a) man. (he)runs in-the breeze, without meat, without name.
Às vezes o encontro 5 num encontro de nuvem. Apóia em meu ombro seu ombro nenhum.	At times I meet him in a meeting of clouds. He rests on my shoulder his shoulder of nothingness.	At-the times him (I)meet in-a meeting of cloud. (he)supports on my shoulder his shoulder no.
Interrogo meu filho, objeto de ar: 10 em que gruta ou concha quedas abstrato?	I enquire of my son, an object of air: in what cave or seashell are you staying abstractly?	(I)ask my son, object of air: in what cave or seashell (you)stay abstract?
Lá onde eu jazia, responde-me o hálito, não me percebeste, 15 contudo chamava-te	There where I was lying, the breath answers me, you didn't perceive me, although I was calling you,	There where (I)was-lying, responds-me the breath, not me (you)perceived, although (I)was-calling-you,
como ainda te chamo (além, além do amor) onde nada, tudo aspira a criar-se. 20	as still I call you (beyond, far beyond love) where nothing, everything aspires to create itself.	as still you (I)call (beyond, beyond of-the love) where nothing, everything aspires to create-self.
O filho que não fiz faz-se por si mesmo.	The son that I did not make is making himself by himself.	The son that not (I)made makes-self by self same.

The poem is of course a lament, and at the same time, an evocation, a projection, of an alternate world, a non-material world, one without solidity. But those who exist in this vapor world, though they are nameless, can act: they can run (l. 4). And the poet can visit this world, his diaphanous son can *interact* and "cloudly meet" him (ll. 5-6). His son runs on fleshless legs, places his wraithlike shoulder on the poet's (ll. 7-8), and can hear, understand, and reply (l. 13 and ll. 15-20).

The everyday world we inhabit with the poet is a solid one – a world full of **nouns**. In the 15 lines in which the poet is speaking (ll. 1-2, l. 14, and ll. 21-22), we find the 17 nouns of (1). In stark contrast, in the son's 7 lines (l. 13, ll. 15-20), we find but one – *amor* (love), the abstract nominal form of a stative verb. A pretty non-material kind of noun it is, far removed from solidity.

(1) 1st stanza [5]: *filho* (son), *homem* (man), *brisa* (breeze), *carne* (meat), *nome* (name)

2nd stanza [5]: *vezes* (times), *encontro* (meeting), *nuvem* (cloud), *ombro* (shoulder),

ombro

3rd stanza [5]: *filho* (son), *objeto* (object), *ar* (air), *gruta* (cave), *concha* (shell)

4th stanza [1]: *hálito* (breath)

6th stanza [1]: *filho* (son)

Thus the very language of the wished-for son paints him as stuffless, insubstantial.

What now of verbs? We use verbs to refer to acts, processes, to that which changes, whose boundaries are fluid. We might expect that language of the vaporlike son would contain a disproportionate number of the poem's 15 verbs. This hunch finds confirmation: while there are 9 verbs in the poet's 15 lines, for an average of 0.60 verbs / line, there are 6 verbs in the son's 7 lines, for a strikingly higher average value: 0.87. And where does the son place his verbs? At line end, which is probably the most visually salient location in a poetic line. The poet only ends 3 of his lines (lines 1, 5, 21) with verbs (with no stanza having more than one verb-final line), while 5 of the son's 7 lines end in verbs, with his last line, line 20, being the poem's only two-verb line. So Drummond paints the father with plentiful nouns and with few verbs, while the son says only one noun, an abstraction, and a noticeably higher percentage of verbs.

Let us examine another grammatically significant distinction which distinguishes clearly the language of the poet from that of his ghostly son – that between main and subordinate clauses. The would-be father speaks in a highly predictable fashion. With the exception of the three-syllable relative clause, *que não fiz* (who I didn't make), which ends line 1 and is repeated in line 21, the father speaks only in main clauses, each two lines long, and each ending in a major mark of punctuation (five periods, one colon (in line 10) and one question mark (in line 12)). Note also that the way the father arranges his nouns though the first three verses is also highly regular. If we refer to the poem's six verses as A–F, we see the nouns arrayed as in (2):

(2)	Verse	Line number	Number of nouns	Total nouns
A:	1	1	1	2
		2	1	
	3	3	1	3
		4	2	
				<hr/> 5
B.	1	1	1	3
		2	2	
	3	3	1	2
		4	1	
				<hr/> 5
C:	1	1	1	3
	2	2	2	

	3	2	
	4	0	2
			<hr/>
			5
D:	1	0	
	2	1	
	3	0	
	4	0	1 (said by the poet)
E:	1	0	
	2	1	
	3	0	
	4	0	1 (said by the son)
F:	1	1	
	2	0	1 (said by the poet)

The fact that the first three stanzas of the poem, which contain only the words of the poet, each have two two-line half-verses, one of which containing 2 nouns, the other 3, is another way of saying, in Poetese, the language used by writers all around the world, that the poet's world is one of predictability, solidity, veracity.

By contrast, there are a number of things about the way the son talks which are far away from everydayness. The first verb, *jazia*, is a verb used only on tombstones. It has the same feel to it as does the English construction "here lies" His second verb, *percebeste*, while correctly formed, is bookish, formal, and would only be used in writing. The normal second-person past-tense form would be *percebeu*. The conjunction *contudo* is extremely infrequently used, and only in writing. The normal position for the second-person object clitic, *te*, is before the verb. *Contudo te chamava* would still be formal, but the way the son has placed the *te*, suffixed to the verb, sounds archaic. Finally, the last tensed verb, *aspirar*, "to desire, aspire to," is also very stilted. It is as if the son's world were in some kind of temporal dimension that was very distant from the normal, workaday world of the poet and the way he expresses his longing. The son's single sentence has 23 words in it, and what is more, it is opaque, hard to understand. The line (*além, além do amor*), which I have grossly undertranslated, can mean either that the son is calling to the poet **from** beyond love (i. e., that the son is "beyond love," whatever that might mean), or is calling **to** beyond love, to a place beyond love where the poet is. And our only clue as to what this mysterious place is, whether it is the son or the poet, or perhaps both, that is there, is that not only nothing is desirous of creating itself there, but also everything is. Isn't this self-contradictory? This vague, enigmatic, meandering, antiquated sentence, the only one in the poem whose subject is neither the poet nor the son, is, in any case, the only hint we have about what "life" is like in the son's realm. Love seems to be somehow important, to be some kind of limit, edge, His voice trails off, we do not know what to make of him.

Let us return for a look at the syntax of the son's reply. There are two direct quotes in the poem – the poet's question (ll. 11-12) and the son's reply (l. 13 and ll. 15-20). The seven lines of the reply are a nest of adverbial subordinate clauses, as we see in (3)

- (3) a. **onde** eu jazia [where I was lying]
 b. **contudo** chamava-te [although I was calling you]
 c. **como** ainda te chamo (além, além do amor) [as still I call you (beyond, far beyond love)]
 d. <**onde** nada, tudo aspira a criar-se> [where nothing, everything aspires to create itself]

As we see, each of these adverbial clauses starts with a subordinating conjunction (boldfaced in (3)); the four of them wrap around the son's only main clause *não me percebeste* (you did not see me [i. e., the poet did not **see** the son]), which bears a striking resemblance to the poet's only subordinate clause *que não fiz* (that I did not make [i. e., the poet did not **make** the son]). The main verbs of both clauses are transitive, and they are the poem's only past tense clauses. Moreover, these two verbs are the only negative clauses – both are preceded by *não*, the negative marker. Finally, the two clauses have the same subject and object: the poet says he did not make the son, the son says that his father did not perceive him, did not know that yes, he **did** make him.

It is necessary here to call attention to a striking fact about the poet's subordinate clause: the repeated verb *fiz*, "(I) made." It is as strange to say *fiz* in Portuguese, with an object of *o filho*, as it would be to say in English "I made a son." It takes two people to make a child; the normal way to say what the poet seems to be intending would be to say as a first line *o filho que não tive* – "the son which I didn't **have**." But we cannot accuse the poet of not realizing what he has said, of meaning to say something else. Poems are stitched together word by word, syllable by syllable, sound by sound. We will leave open for the moment the question as to what the repeated *fiz* might be there for, but it is an important point to return to.

Returning now to this "dispute" about what it was that the poet didn't do with respect to the son – whether it was that he didn't **make** him or that he didn't **perceive** him – we might believe that the poem's last line provided a resolution of this issue. For here, the poet presents us with a new reformulation: the poet says that the son who he didn't make is making himself alone, all *by himself*. However, when we ask ourselves who this "himself" might be, we see that while the grammar may insist that it must refer to the son, our knowledge of the world tells us that the poet has, through the force of his longing for a son, split himself into two. We can say in English that the poet is "beside himself." Our perplexity, which is of course also the poet's perplexity, does not end with the end of the poem. On the one hand, we realize the biological impossibility of a son being made without the participation of a mother, and on the other, even if we assume that this son is some kind of hermaphroditic creature, we know that poet and son are one.

I know of one other poem in which the poet, W. S. Merwin, uses the same poetic move, based on the English idiom "to be beside oneself," brilliantly, to suggest a titanic sorrow:

elegy

who would I show it to

Merwin's title says that these seven words are an elegy, but the counterfactuality implied in "would" says that writing a elegy is impossible, unthinkable – the one person to whom the poet always shows his work is no longer there. He cannot write without that special person to show it to. The poet is so overwhelmed by grief that he denies the possibility of his doing what he is *in fact* doing. And in Drummond's meditation upon the sorrow of a life "without" a son, we

see the truth that mind creates his son in all respects except the material, and through this truth, perhaps we glimpse an even deeper fact, the one captured so elegantly in Thomas Byrom's rendering of the first verse of the Buddha's deathless *Dhammapada*:

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.²

Let us return the Pound's dictum, and ask why writers might *want* to charge the words they write with meaning. To this question, Guy de Maupassant gives a particularly trenchant answer:

Les mots ont une âme. La plupart des lecteurs, et même des écrivains, ne leur demandent qu'un sens. Il faut trouver cette âme qui apparaît au contact d'autres mots, qui éclate et éclaire certains livres d'une lumière inconnue, bien difficile à faire jaillir.

Words have a soul. The majority of readers, and even of writers, demand only that they have a sense. It is necessary to find that soul, which appears in the contact with other words, which erupts from and illumines certain books with an unknown light, one not a little difficult to cause to gush forth.³

My answer to the question "why write?" will be one that I think is in no way new. Any artist, any scientist, any philosopher, any mystic, lives their life the best way they can because they have an unshakeable intuition that the everyday world (I may be wrong here, but isn't this what Voegelin would call "the thing reality"?) is not all there is – that beyond it, serving as the Ground of Being, is another dimension of reality (is it this that Voegelin called "the It-reality"?), and the person who leads an examined life cannot slake the thirst to know that reality through personal experience through doing anything else than writing, painting, dancing, singing, experimenting, meditating – whatever – their very best, in the hope that this will take them closer to their goal.

The great writer wishes to see into the souls of the words that she or he puts on paper. De Maupassant articulates this with magnificent clarity in his appreciation of Flaubert.⁴ So the great writer needs to, and somehow knows how to, put words "into contact." But what does this mean in practice? What kinds of contact can we find writers using? I will here assume that contact can range over any of an unbounded number of respects in which one word may resemble another. Clearly, semantic identity or similarity is a primary dimension of contact: one word will call up other words with which it shares meaning. Semantics creates families of words: *river, creek, stream, brook, rivulet, . . . ; fierce, savage, wild, ferocious, . . . ; waver, oscillate, shake, shiver, quaver, wiggle, . . . ; knife, sword, dagger, dirk, scimitar, . . .*, etc. And often there are antonymic sets of words⁵, such as those for colors, or temperatures: (*blazing*), *hot, warm, lukewarm, cool, cold, (freezing)*. Using one member of an antonymic set, or a set of synonyms calls the others to mind. And one word from a frame will likewise cause other frame-members to resonate: *dugout, bunt, triple, strikeout, homer*, etc.; *bunsen burner, retort, test tube, base, valence, . . .* etc.

Morphological similarity can also put words in contact: *unkind, insane, discontinuous, dysphasic* all start with a negative prefix; *convex, refer, transport, circumvent, . . .* are all Latinate, and on and on.

All of these kinds of contact can be found to play a role in literary works of

various sizes and genres. But for poetry in particular, one type of contact which is of the greatest moment is musical contact, contact in sound. Thus words which rhyme are in contact, as are words which start with the same sounds, or which have the same vowels, or the same number of syllables, or all of whose vowels are nasalized, etc., etc. Poets are endlessly inventive when it comes to devising new ways of making us perceive a set of words as sounding similar.

The greater a literary work is, the more ways its author will have found to put its words into contact with each other. Clearly, it is not enough to list a page of rhymes, or trisyllables. Nor a page of synonyms and antonyms. Somehow, the poet must get a number of balls in the air simultaneously: what must be communicated is some ineffable experience, one involving meaning, image, music, other kinds of form

Let us now examine *Ser* with an eye to seeing how its phonetic similarities evoke parallels in semantics. The transcription in (4) is a not too narrow phonetic transcription of the poem as Drummond would have pronounced it.

(4)

Ser		seh	
O filho que não fiz	u	fi l ^v u ki nãw̃	fis
ho je seria homem .		o ži se ri yə	õ mēỹ
ele corre na brisa ,	'e li	kə hi na	bri zə
sem carne , sem nome .	sēỹŋ	kah ni sēỹ	nõ mi
Às vezes o encontro	az	ve zis wĩŋ	kõ tru
num encontro de nuvem .	nwĩŋ	kõ tru ji	nũ vēỹ
Apóia em meu ombro	a	pə yēỹ mew	õ bru
seu ombro nenhum .	sew	õ bru nē	jyũ
Interrogo meu filho ,	ĩ te	hə gu mew	fi l ^v u
objeto de ar :	ob	žə tu ji	ah
em que gruta ou concha	ēỹŋ ki	gru tow	kõ šə
quedas abstrato?		kə də zabs	tra tu
Lá onde eu jazia,	la	õ j ^v ew ža	zi yə
responde-me o hálito ,	hes	põ ji mi	wa li tu
não me percebeste,		nãw mi pehse	beš či
contudo chamava-te	kõ	tu du ša	ma va či
como ainda te chamo	kõmwə	yĩ də či	šā mu
(além , além do amor)	a	lēỹ a lēỹ du	a moh
onde nada , tudo	õ ji	na də	tu du
aspira a criar-se .	as	pi ra kri	ah si
O filho que não fiz	u	fi l ^v u ki nãw̃	fis

In this transcription, each line has two metrically strong syllables. These syllables, which I have boldfaced in the Portuguese text, are aligned in such a way as to immediately follow the two vertical dotted lines in (4). The first line's two strong syllables – **filho** and **fiz** (which is pronounced [fis],) – are both alliterative (they start with [f]) and assonant – they have the same vowel. Portuguese has a very strong constraint on the number of sounds a word can end with – there are only two: [s] and [r]⁶. Thus the first line already calls phonetic attention to itself, especially so, as the title of the poem is a syllable closed by the other possible syllable-final sound, namely [h], the phonetic realization of the phoneme /r/ in syllable-initial or syllable-final position. (Linguists call syllables in which the vowel is followed by one or more consonants *closed*; if the syllable ends in a vowel, it is called *open*.)

Let us examine the question as to how Drummond is using rhyme in this poem. He is nothing but a careful versifier. When rhyme plays any role in a poem of his, we must try to study its inflections minutely, to see what else they may be connected to. In *Ser*, we see in A, a clear pattern of X-y-x-y rhyme – cf. (5), where the rhyme-vowels are boldfaced.

(5)	A	Phonetics	Part of speech (grammatical gender)	Masculine or feminine rhyme
	1. 1	[fɨs]	Verb	m
	1.2	[ˈõ mɛy]	Noun (masculine)	f
	1.3	[ˈbri zɔ]	Noun (feminine)	f
	1.4	[ˈnõ mi]	Noun (masculine)	f

We see even here that the even-line rhyme is more exact than is the odd-line rhyme. Phonetically, the even lines rhyme in their penultimate stressed vowels, and only differ in the vowels of their unstressed final syllables. They rhyme in part of speech: both of the even lines end in bisyllabic nouns, and since their main stresses are not on their final vowels, they are called “feminine” rhymes by prosodists. By contrast, while the stressed vowels of lines 1 and 3 are the same, they differ in that line 1 is a masculine rhyme, and a monosyllable to boot, and they do not constitute grammatical rhymes either, since one is a verb and one a noun.

B's rhyme scheme we could symbolize as follows: x-y-x-Y.

(6)	B	Phonetics	Part of speech (grammatical gender)	Masculine or feminine rhyme
	1. 1	[(w)ĩŋ'kõtru]	Verb	f
	1.2	[ˈnũ vɛỹ]	Noun (feminine)	f
	1.3	[ˈõ bru]	Noun (masculine)	f
	1.4	[nẽ ˈɲũ]	Article?(masculine)	m

Here, it is something of a tossup as to which pair of lines rhyme the most fully. Lines 5 and 7 both have penultimate stress, and their stressed vowels are the same (as a matter of fact, they are the same vowels as we find in lines 2 and 4.). Their unstressed syllables begin with slightly different stops, and they differ in the number of syllables they have, and in their parts of speech, but both are feminines. On the other hand, the even-line rhymes, though they have the same number of syllables,

differ in stress placement, and radically in terms of grammatical rhyme. The word *nenhum*, which I have glossed as “no” (thus *seu ombro nenhum* would gloss literally as something like “his no shoulder.”), has no exact equivalent in English grammar. But A and B are alike in that each possesses two pairs of rhyming lines.

Pressing on, we come to C, which we might symbolize as follows: x-Y-z-y'

(7)	C	Phonetics	Part of speech (grammatical gender)	Masculine or feminine rhyme
	1. 1	[f il ^Y u]	Noun (masculine)	f
	1.2	[ah]	Noun (masculine)	m
	1.3	[k õšə]	Noun (feminine)	f
	1.4	[(z)abs' tr atu]	Adjective(masculine)	f

In C, the only thing that the odd-line rhymes have in common is the fact that they are bisyllabic nouns having penultimate stress. There is no shred of resemblance in sound between them. However, note that the first rhyme-word of C is *filho*, which contains the first stressed vowel of the poem. And [õ], the vowel of *concha*, the third rhyme-word of C, is the same as the rhyme-vowel of the even lines of A (and of the odd lines of B). So the odd-line rhyme vowels of C connect this third verse to the first two of the poem, which makes conceptual sense, since the first three verses are all spoken by the poet.

The even line rhyme-vowel of C, [a], tells a different story. While C's odd lines do not rhyme, its even lines do, in the vowel [a]. We will see that having the even-line rhyme vowel be [a] is a property that links the middle two stanzas.

In D, whose rhyme scheme is the following: x-y-z-y, we see [a], the even-line rhyme vowel of C, repeated.

(8)	D	Phonetics	Part of speech (grammatical gender or verb tense)	Masculine or feminine rhyme
	1. 1	[ž'a'ziyə]	Verb (imperfect)	f
	1.2	[^l (w)alitu]	Noun (masculine)	f
	1.3	[pehse'bešči]	Verb (past)	f
	1.4	[ša'mavači]	Verb (imperfect)	f

The first rhyme-vowel of D is again the [i] of the odd lines of A and of line 1 of C. So it connects more strongly to the odd lines of A, more weakly to C. It is the pair of [a]'s in the even lines of D that connect it to the two [a]'s in the same lines of C. The rhyme-vowel of line 3 of D, the mid vowel [e] of the poem's longest rhyme-word, *percebeste*, has not appeared previously as a rhyme-vowel. We will find it only once more – in the poem's last line.

When we come to E, the last of the poem's quatrains, the structure we find there we might initially want to symbolize as x-Y-z-w, one of total rhymelessness.

(9)	E	Phonetics	Part of speech (grammatical gender or verb tense)	Masculine or feminine rhyme
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1. 1	[ʃãmu]	Verb	(present)	f
1.2	[a'moh]	Noun	(masculine)	m
1.3	[tudu]	Pronoun	(masculine)	f
1.4	[kri'ahsi]	Verb	(infinitive)	f

But I believe that perhaps Drummond wants us to hear that faintest of phonetic similarities remaining in this pair of even-line rhyme-words. To be sure, the stressed [o] of *amor* is not the same vowel as the stressed [a] of *criar-se*, but what of the fricative [h] that follows these differing vowels? Given the huge salience of the change from the poem's first stressed syllable, the open syllable [fi], to the poem's second stressed syllable, the closed syllable [fis], in a line that the poet will repeat 20 lines later, at the close of the poem, and the fact that the poem's title, *Ser*, begins *and* ends with the two consonants that can close syllables in Portuguese, I believe that the poet wishes us to extend the notion of permitted rhyme in Portuguese, *for this poem*, to allowing lines to rhyme which end in the same consonant.

What can we then say about the rhyming of this poem? In general, we must say that it starts out with a clear XYXY rhyme scheme, which is in evidence in the first two stanzas. But in the third stanza, we lose rhyme between the odd lines, though the even lines continue to maintain the Y . . . Y part of the rhyme scheme, a part which survives in D, and even, in the faintest way possible, through what we might call consonantal rhyme, in E. In short, viewed from the perspective of the whole poem, the rhyme scheme is reduced, attenuates, until it survives in the ghostliest of ways, in the phonetic [h] that ends the even lines of E.

And here we come to the crux of the matter. For this [h] which we find in Brasil, we do not find in Portugal. When Portuguese moved from the Continent to the New World, the way it was pronounced changed. In Brasil, the phoneme /r/ (which is represented by the letter <r>) changed the way it was pronounced in the home country, except in one environment: between vowels. So for the preposition *para*, "to, for," Portuguese speakers on both sides of the Atlantic agree in their pronunciation: [parə]. This [r]-sound is made with a single tap of the tongue on the roof of the mouth, near the roof of the mouth. It is like the intervocalic [r] in Spanish *toro*, "bull." Its closest English equivalent would be the flapped variant of the /t/ phoneme – the way Americans pronounce words like *Betty*, *city*, *kitty*, etc.

In the Portuguese of Portugal, this "tapped" r is used not only between vowels, but also word-initially, as in *rio* [rio], "river," and word-finally, as in *amor* [a'mor], "love." But in Brasil, in word-initial and in word-final position, the phoneme /r/ (i. e., the letter <r>) has changed from a tapped sound to a breathy voiceless continuant, similar to English [h].

What this means is that in Portugal, the title of Drummond's poem starts with a continuant sound, a *fricative* (so-called because of the friction produced when the airstream is channeled through a slit at the top of the tongue and crashes against the teeth, as it does in English words like *sing*). But it ends with a brief, non-continuant tapped [r]. The Continental Portuguese word *ser*, the word for "being," begins with a continuous hissing, and ends abruptly, with a light tap. The English word that comes closest to the Continental way of pronouncing *ser* is our word *said*.

But in Brasil, *ser*, the word for being, both starts and ends with a continuant sound – the closest we can come to it with an English word would be *says* [sez].

This word in English begins with a short hiss, and ends with a quieter, and longer, buzz. Phoneticians call the [s] and [z] sounds at the ends of this word *continuants*, because if we wanted to, we could extend the length of the initial hiss and of the final buzz. We could stretch the word, producing something like this: [s : εz :] (phoneticians use colons to mark sounds which are extra long). In Brasil too, since both the initial consonant and the final consonant of *ser* are continuants, one could pronounce *ser* with extra long continuant consonants: [s : εh :]. But for the Continental Portuguese pronunciation of *ser*, while the first consonant can be lengthened, the second, [r], cannot – it does not continue, and neither does the <d> in *said*. The musical impression that the Brazilian syllable *ser* [seh] makes is that of a loud hiss, followed by a short, musical vowel, and then a soft continuant, of lower tonality than the initial [s]. The general impression is not unlike that of English *says*, though the final [h] of *ser* is far longer than the [z] of *says*.

In short, the melody of the syllable *ser* is that of fading out, attenuation, weakening. This is the same attenuation that we have seen in our detailed look at the rhyme scheme of the poem. Furthermore, this attenuation is echoed in the formal structure of the poem's sentences: while the first three stanzas have two two-line clauses apiece, the fourth and fifth stanzas are one long sentence. Except for the one subordinate clause in line 1 (*que não fiz*), the six first clauses in stanzas A-C are all main clauses in the present tense, while the son's sentence in D and E has two imperfects, a past tense and a present tense, and even an infinitive verb (*criar-se*). The poet's stanzas all contain 5 nouns, similarly distributed in their clauses. This regularity is not found in the son's speech. The words of the first three stanzas are common, everyday, current words, while those in the son's speech call attention to themselves – they are archaic, antiquated.

Thus we could say that in its Brazilian pronunciation, the title of the poem **rhymes** with the formal structure (its distribution of tenses, nouns, main and subordinate clauses), and with the structure of its rhymes. In the Continental pronunciation of the poem, one can say that the parallels between the formal structure and the rhyme-structure persist, but that they have no connection with the sound of the word *ser* – the word which is arguably the most important one of the poem, for this poem, aside from being a lament, is also a meditation on the nature of existence itself, and on how it is constituted by mind, a stance which I believe can be said to be one which Erich Voegelin would have been in sympathy with.

We notice in the course of *Ser* that Drummond “proposes” a number of what we might call “phonetic games.” All poets do this, some more innovatively, some less so. The best-known of these games are rhyme and alliteration, but there is no limit to the number of such parallels in the verbal music of a poem that a poet can dream up. There are traditions of rhyming games, many of which would like to bend poets to their will. Poets, however, are an unruly lot (Plato would not allow them in the Republic); they are noted for not caring a fig as to whether something that they think sounds cool is within or out of bounds. Cats are far easier to herd than poets.

In rhyme, for example, a poet can decide that the then-current limits on what is metrically kosher, or on what can count as a “good rhyme,” are too confining, and need to be junked. Emily Dickinson was much castigated for her lack of respect for Victorian strictures on rhyme. A brief look at the following poem of hers will let us see how much she respected her (so-called) peers' notions of rhymability.

The Luxury to apprehend
 The Luxury 't would be
 To look at thee a single time
 An Epicure of me
 In whatsoever presence makes
 Till for a further food
 I scarcely recollect to starve
 So first am I supplied.

The Luxury to meditate
 The Luxury it was
 To banquet on thy Countenance
 A sumptuousness supplies
 To plainer Days whose Table, far
 As Certainty can see
 Is laden with a single Crumb -
 The Consciousness of thee -

While some of what she has decided, by poetic fiat, to count as rhyming, can be readily seen (for instance, she clearly means us to hear *supplies* as a rhyme for *was*, and *supplied* as a rhyme for *food*, but what about *time* and *Crumb*? Or worse yet, *starve* and *far*? Or worst of all, what of *apprehend/time*, and *meditate/Countenance*? We may not be able to figure out what she is “rhyming” without quite a bit of serious study of this gem, which this is not the place to undertake.

It is not merely that poets can instruct us as to what is a “valid” rhyme; poets also call the shots about what we are to hear as an “off rhyme.” For instance, in the famous Robert Frost poem,

The Road Not Taken

	Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both And be one <i>traveler</i> , long I stood And looked down one as far as I could
Third line	
First line	To where it bent in the <i>undergrowth</i> ;
	Then took the other, as just as fair, And having perhaps the better claim, Because it was <i>grassy</i> and wanted wear; Though as for that, the passing there Had worn them really about the same,
Third line	
First line	And both that morning <i>equally</i> lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for <i>another</i> day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.
	I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by,
Fourth line??	

And that has made all the *difference*.

Robert Frost
The Poetry of Robert Frost,
 Edward Connery Latham (ed.)
 Holt, Rinehart and Winston,
 New York (1969), p.105

a poem which he prints with four verses, is clearly also divisible into five four-line sections (let us call them “quatrains”). One motivation for this “cosectioning” is the fact that the poem’s five trisyllabic words are so positioned as to occur once per quatrain, the second and fifth of which, at line-ends, being abstract nominalizations, a distribution which “rhymes” with the second and fifth lines of the poem’s “official” four verses rhyming with each other. Another motivation for this cinquepartition is the fact that the first sentence is exactly coextensive with the first three quatrains.

Relevant for our discussion here is the almost totally regular distribution of the five trisyllables: they alternate between being on the third lines of the odd-numbered quatrains, and on the first lines of the even-numbered ones. There is one exception only: we would expect the last trisyllable to be found on the fifth quatrain’s third line, but instead it is on its fourth line. We find it hard to see as coincidental that this last trisyllable is the poem’s only “off” rhyme (while *hence* has the full mid front vowel [ɛ] ([hɛns]), the last syllable of *difference* has the reduced schwa [ə] –[ˈdɪfərəns]

Let us interrupt, for the moment, our dissecting of the many ways in which Drummond has made his seventy Portuguese words into literature, the art form which Ezra Pound defined as “language charged with meaning.” Rather, let us ask an unexpected question: if we did not know whether its author was from the Old World or the New, could we tell?

We enter, then, an investigation of the differences between Continental and South American Portuguese, which are greater than those between British and American. Just as there are words in British which are not used in American (like *loo* for “toilet” and *lorry* for “truck”) and *vice versa* (thus neither of the phrases *long distance call* and *the hood of a car* is used in the UK), so there are Continental Portuguese words (like *retrete* for “toilet”; *casa de banho* for “bathroom”; *tugúrio* for “rustic dwelling”; *aceder* for “consent to”; *baço* for “fogged up”; and plenty more) which are unknown in Brasil, and *vice versa*: *muvuca*, a Brazilian word for “confused mass of people”; *piriri* for “diarrhea”; *refestelado* for “sprawled out” and many more, are all unknown in Portugal. However, in Drummond’s poem, none of the words used, nor any of the constructions, are giveaways.

The case is quite different when we come to phonetic matters. There is no American or UK dialect which could be heard as being from the other country, and I believe that the same can be said for Brazilian and Continental Portuguese. There is one rule which concerns the pronunciation of the mid front vowel /e/ when in word-final position which creates this clear perceptual split. In Brasil, such vowels are raised to become [i], whereas in Portugal, they are lowered to the neutral schwa [ə]. Thus for *comemos*, the first-person plural form of *comer*, “to eat,” both dialects of Portuguese would agree on the pronunciation [kuˈmemus], while *come*, the third-

person singular form, would be pronounced ['kõmə] in Portugal, but ['kõmi] in Brasil.

This Word-final Vowel Raising rule in Brasil has another very important consequence: it feeds a rule which palatalizes /t/ and /d/ before the high front vowel [i], converting these stops into the affricates [tʃ] and [dʒ], respectively. Thus in Brasil, *bate*, the third-person singular form of *bater*, “to hit,” will be pronounced as [ˈbatʃi], while it will be pronounced as [ˈbatə] in Portugal. As it happens, there are

Katz, Jerrold J. 1972b. *Semantic theory*. New York: Harper & Row.

¹ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*. New York: Farrar, **Strauss** and Giroux. (2005)

² The Buddha – *Dhammapada*, rendered by Thomas Byrom, Shambhala Press, 1976

³ Quoted in Benny Shanon, “Metaphors: From fixedness and selection to differentiation and creation,” unpublished paper, Department of Psychology, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel (1993), p.3

⁴ De Maupassant’s text, “Flaubert vu par Maupassant”, appeared in *La Revue Bleue*. 19 et 26 janvier 1884. It can be found at the following link:

<http://perso.orange.fr/jb.guinot/pages/maupassant84d.html>

⁵ This term is due to Jerrold J. Katz. Cf e.g. Katz (1972)

⁶ Medial syllables are slightly less constrained: in addition to [s] and [r], they can be closed with the voiceless stops [p], [t], and [k] (as in *ellipse* [iˈlipsi] “ellipse”, *pizza* [ˈpitʃə], and *anexo* [aˈneksu] “attachment”), and with their voiced counterparts [b], [d], and [g], as in *abnegar* [abneˈgah], “to abnegate,” *admissão* [aʃmiˈsãw] “admission,” and *cognitivo* [kogniˈtʃivu], “cognitive”). In most parts of Brasil, syllable-final [d] will be changed by palatalization to [ʃ], as we see happening here with *admissão*.