

Abeceda, An Alphabet for Modern Life

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Among the countless “isms” that appeared in Central Europe coinciding with the main European avant-gardes of the interwar period, Czech “poetism,” founded in 1923 in Prague by the poet Vítězslav Nezval (1900-1958) and the artist, architect and art theorist Karel Teige (1900-1951), occupies a prominent place. Although relatively little known in the West—perhaps due to linguistic barriers—poetism and other Czech avant-garde movements have begun to be rediscovered in the last twenty years.

Poetism emerged as an heir to another eclectic avant-garde movement known as Devětsil, founded around 1920 by a group of Czech artists and writers, including Teige, the poet Jaroslav Seifert and the novelist Vladislav Vančura. The word “Devětsil,” which literally means “nine forces,” is also the name of a medicinal flower. This collective of artists, which at some point had up to 60 members, did not have a strictly defined program: instead, it fused a number of tendencies, such as French and Russian purism, constructivism, and Dadaism. Poetism emerged later, in part as a reaction to such eclecticism and to the social and proletarian imperative that certain members of Devětsil had embraced. *Poetism* distanced itself from such practical demands, and, as its name suggests, in a playful and epicurean fashion, it proclaimed as its goal the total “poetization of life.” In other words, in its initial phase, Devětsil emphasized a socially useful art and the need for the artist to join class struggle, while poetism focused on the sensual, exuberant, and playful aspects of life, claiming for them the same “seriousness” as that of social struggle. Among other things, poetism emphasized, the fusion of poetry and painting in the so-called picture-poems that Teige created—visual poems that in the form of a collage mixed words and images—as well as in a new visual focus in poetry, both in the creation of poetic images as well as in the graphic design of poetry books. This fusion was part of the larger goal of creating a poetry for the five senses (a visual, tactile, optophonetic, and olfactory poetry), as Teige indicated in his manifesto “Poetry for the Five Senses” (1925). The aim was also to fuse art with life. Art was thus no longer the exclusive domain of professional artists, but rather an activity in which all could participate democratically. Poetism was, thus, “an art of life, an art of living and enjoying,” as Teige declared in his manifesto “Poetism” (1924).

Among the projects that poetism inspired, there is perhaps none as characteristic and idiosyncratic as the book *Abeceda* (1926), a collaboration between Nezval and Teige with the dancer and choreographer Milada (Milča) Mayerová (1901-1977). The book is comprised of a 25-stanza poem by Nezval, where each 4-line stanza (with a few 2-line ones) is inspired by one of the letters of the alphabet. The book’s graphic design (the cover, page layout, and typography) was the work of Karel Teige, who created a photomontage using images of Mayerová’s choreographic reading of the poem, both of which I will discuss later on.

The poem itself had already been published in Nezval’s poetry collection *Pantomima* (1924), but its publication as an independent book in part was due to Mayerová, who had performed the poem choreographically during a recital devoted to Nezval in 1926. She was also the one who arranged for the

book to be published by J. Otto, a publishing house founded by her grandfather. This unique book, thus, practically became a symbol of the artistic ideals and devices of poetism.

The Czech title *Abeceda* could be translated in English as “Alphabet,” yet the Czech word has a certain ambiguity that the English does not possess. In Czech the word does not refer only to the set of letters of any particular language, but also to a “primer,” a book used for teaching reading to children. The choice of this word not only as title but also as poetic motif was not random and deserves a detailed analysis. In the preface to the book, Nezval revealed that in 1922, in the midst of a polemic in favor and against proletarian poetry, he decided to make use of new poetic content in order to react to ideological imperatives:

“I decided to reject any theme whatsoever, and chose the most abstract poetic object—the letter—as the pretext for the gymnastics of the mind. From the letter’s shape, sound or function I associatively created a subconstruct to serve as the base on which my fantasy embroidered. The result was twenty-four poems, which emerged from the marriage of this constructive base with reality and imagination. They were autonomous, not demonstrating content of any theme, and realistic, replacing the usual abstract ideology with the materiality of concrete images”.

This confession echoes the genesis not only of the book itself, but also of the entire poetist movement in relation to its historical context—the aforementioned debate on the social and ideological function of art among the *Devětsil* collective, which Nezval openly distanced himself from, leaning instead towards total creative freedom. The foundational impulse of all avant-gardes is also present here: the desire to renew poetry, to create a *tabula rasa* and start anew from basic or fundamental principles, in this case, the alphabet. A didactic will is also evident in the creation of a poem serving as “primer” with instructional purposes.

The creation of such a vocabulary attempts to integrate the material elements of language (sound, visual form, etc.) and, on such a basis, create lyric associations that prefigure tendencies such as concrete poetry. In particular, *Abeceda* creates iconic (i.e., visually similar) associations for every letter of the alphabet, but does not limit itself to that. As an example, we can quote the first stanza of the poem based on the letter A:

A
Let it be called simple hut
Oh palms bring your equator to Prague!
Snails stick out horns from simple homes
And one doesn’t know where to rest one’s head.

In his book *Modern Directions of Poetry*, Nezval comments on the poetic devices at work in the stanza:

“A fairly free comparison of the form of the letter A with a roof produces the first line. Via the association of huts with primitive dwellings, our imagination leaps to the equator hoping to bring its heat to our perpetually rainy regions. Rhymes (chatrčí-vystrčí) cement a connection between huts and snails sticking out horns from their mobile homes. And the rhyme Vltavu-hlavu (Vltava-head) suggests the image of poor people who have no roof over their heads”.

The poem exemplifies what the linguist Roman Jakobson, who at some point was also associated with the members of Devětsil, called the “poetic function” of language. This term designates the desire to call attention to the materiality of language (sounds and shapes) as opposed to the pragmatic “communicative function” of language, which emphasizes the message. Besides demonstrating such poetic techniques using as starting point the literal “pretext” of the alphabet, *Abeceda* is also a statement of the values of poetism—the poem mentions travel, the joy of life, an Epicurean attitude towards life, and the creative and utopian ambitions of the avant-gardes.

How the various forms of expression (verbal and visual) come together is also evident in Mayerová’s and Teige’s collaboration in the project, as Nezval pointed out in the preface quoted earlier:

“Milča Mayerová, whose understanding of dance is equally distant from ideological objectives, grasped this poetic cycle as an impulse whose general outline asserted the absence of limits in non-formalist dance. With poetic invention she organized autonomous dance compositions, drawing upon the thematic and formal intent of the poems. She was thus the poems’ poetic medium, just as Karel Teige was the author of pictorial compositions—not in the sense of themes, but in the sense of motifs rooted in the typographic symbols of the alphabet”.

Another one of the goals of poetism is evident here: the creation of intermedia art, so to speak, through the collaboration of artists working in different media and with different techniques.

Teige’s and Nezval’s collaboration in *Abeceda* has been discussed often by critics, but, as mentioned earlier, Mayerová’s crucial role should not be overlooked. This is the topic addressed by Matthew Witkovsky in his essay “*Staging Language: Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book Alphabet*,” where the author closely examines her participation in the project. As Witkovsky argues, a disciple of the choreographer Rudolf von Laban in Hamburg for years, Mayerová, upon returning to Prague, was eager to disseminate Laban’s ideas on a system he had created to transcribe bodily movements. The poses that the dancer adopts to “read” Nezval’s poem show the influence of Laban in their frontal position and also coincide

with the idea of such a system of notation as a kind of alphabet. Mayerová attempted to demonstrate such a method in order to found a dance school, thus opening a new space for modern women, their artistic and professional ambitions, while underscoring, besides their feminine allure, their power and liberation. Witkovsky also points out that Mayerová does not perform a “literal” reading of the poem that simply illustrates Nezval’s poem, but that, on the contrary, her reading displays a great amount of freedom. Her poses at times emphasize and at times contrast with the meaning of the poetry. Thus, Mayerová presents *Abeceda* as a language system, in the sense that it allows a certain degree of expressive freedom within the limitations of the system.

In the design of the “phototypography” (a typography that integrates photographs of Mayerová’s poses) Teige also works dialectically. Teige’s typographic design does not always correspond to Mayerová’s movements: at times they complement each other and at times they contrast, given Teige’s constructivist inclinations. According to Esther Levinger, for Teige, the autonomy of art and its goal of play and of providing pleasure did not exempt it from the rules of technique. Thus, the typographic design of *Abeceda* is based on constructivism’s strict geometry, which Teige theorized in his essay “*Modern Typography*.” There Teige articulated some of his ideas on the new typography, which included, among other things, “harmonious balancing of space and arrangement of type according to objective optical laws; clear, legible layout and geometrical organization” as well as “utilization of all possibilities offered by new technological discoveries (linotype, emulsion print, photo typesetting), combining image and print top ‘typefoto.’” In Teige’s design, words also function as an optical system—typography plays an iconic role—in which the symbol resembles the signified object. Thus, for example, as Witkovsky points out, Teige separates the vertical line of the letter **B** from the round parts, in such a way that they resemble a pair of breasts seen from above, to which Nezval’s text alludes. Here, Mayerová’s image, in turn, negates the erotic dimension of Teige’s design by presenting a pose that does not emphasize that aspect of her anatomy.

In sum, as an artistic collaboration, as a manifestation of the ideas of poetism, and as a document of the ideas of the avant-garde in general, *Abeceda* holds a distinct place. It demonstrates how the visions and particularities of each artist and their media, that is, the poetic, choreographic and typographic compositions, sometimes complement each other, sometimes contrast but always establish a dialogue with one another, creating an exemplary alphabet—a utopian blueprint and lesson for modern life.

A native of Mexico, Odile Cisneros earned a PhD in Hispanic languages and literature from New York University in 2003 with a dissertation on the avant-gardes in Latin America. A translator and critic, she has published essays and has translated the work of modern and contemporary poets, including Jaroslav Seifert, Vítězslav Nezval, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Haroldo de Campos and Régis Bonvicino, among others. Currently she teaches at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.