

Isabel F. Sargento - Diogo R. Ferreira

SEARCHING FOR THE POETIC IMAGERY OF CESÁRIO VERDE

Introduction

Cesário Verde (1855–1886) is often considered to be a precursor of Portuguese modernism, as he stands at the transition between romanticism and modernism in nineteenth century poetry and his poetry features bold and clear modernist traits¹. His poems are characterized by a perfected structure and powerful visual imagery. The strength of his images has been repeatedly (albeit posthumously) recognized as a decisive factor in the emergence of modernist poetry in Portuguese. In this work, we aim to demonstrate how the poetic works of Cesário Verde contain the power to awaken the visual imagination of the reader, thus fitting largely into the *phanopoeia* category, as established by Ezra Pound. For this purpose and using the poem *In the Afternoon* [*De Tarde*] as a starting point, we present two different approaches – namely, image search and image generation – to obtain visual representations from its verses. Through this process, we show that the poem is full of visual references that can be directly portrayed, either by real or synthetic images. The images capture the visual elements and the main scenes in the storyline. The fact that such imagery can be obtained in an automated way suggests that its aesthetic and visual appeal must come from the poem itself and not from the process

1 Óscar Lopes, “Cesário Verde ou do Romantismo ao Modernismo”, in *Entre Fialho e Nemésio II* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1987), 472-473.

of transforming poetry into images. Before delving deeper into these questions, we start with a brief biographical note on the poet, since several aspects of his life marked his entire poetic work. As Figueiredo pointed out: "His discreet existence as a downtown shopkeeper, as a suburban gentleman-farmer, is reflected in his poetry"².

Cesário Verde: a short biography

Cesário Verde was born in Lisbon, in 1855. His life alternated between Lisbon and its countryside, as his family had a hardware store downtown, and a farm in a rural location known as Linda-a-Pastora in the outskirts. His poetic activity developed in parallel with a daily job at his father's store, where he became a business correspondent at the age of seventeen³. With a great poetic originality, he developed an aesthetic sensibility when wandering through the city, while also nurturing a sense of wonder towards nature and the rural landscape he contemplated in the countryside. However, he distanced himself from the prevailing romantic standards at the time and shocked his contemporaries with a singular and avant-garde approach to poetry. This aroused the displeasure of several literary critics, often being misunderstood, derided, or simply ignored. Nevertheless, his work was set to open the doors to the modernism of twentieth century poets, such as Mário de Sá Carneiro, who called him "the futurist Cesário Verde"⁴, or Fernando Pessoa, who heralded him as

2 João Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde* pref. and poem sel. David Mourão-Ferreira (Lisboa: Presença, 1986), 11, our translation.

3 See Joel Serrão, "Tábua Biobibliográfica de Cesário Verde", *Colóquio Letras* 93 (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1986): 5-19, 8.

4 Pedro da Silveira, "Cesário Verde visto hoje por poetas portugueses", *Colóquio Letras* 93 (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste

one of his masters: “Oh Cesário Verde, oh Master / Oh of the ‘Feeling of a Westerner’!” [Ó Cesário Verde, ó Mestre | Ó do “Sentimento de um Ocidental”!]⁵ and as the one who taught him to “observe in verse”:

Only three poets in Portugal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be referred to as “master”. They are Antero de Quental, Cesário Verde, and Camilo Pessanha [...] The second taught to observe in verse.⁶

Lourenço highlighted Cesário Verde’s influence on Pessoa, in his two heteronyms Álvaro de Campos and Alberto Caeiro:

[...] the immediate influence of Cesário was experienced by Pessoa, and in fact this influence, or rather this *Wirkung*, has two component parts: on one hand, the spiritual attitude of Álvaro de Campos as a dandy and as an urban poet presupposes that of Cesário; and, on the other hand, the transition to pastoral poetry in the last phase of Cesário Verde’s production (1881-1886) was not only followed but reformulated by the pastoral poet of Modernism, Alberto Caeiro.⁷

Cesário Verde died in 1886, at the age of thirty-one, from tuberculosis.

Gulbenkian, 1986): 111-112, 112, our translation.

5 Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias de Álvaro de Campos* (Lisboa: Ática, 1993 [1944]), 160, our translation.

6 Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas sobre Literatura e Estética* (Mem-Martins: Publicações Europa-América, 1994), 126, our translation.

7 M. S. Lourenço, *Os Degraus do Parnaso* (Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 2002), 107, our translation.

The break with romantic aesthetics

There are several aspects of Cesário Verde's poetry that were crucial in creating a rupture with the romantic lyric, and these greatly contributed to his work being considered fundamental to the advent of modernism in Portuguese literature. Summarizing, these aspects are important to understand the full context surrounding his work, and the conditions that fostered the development of a strong imagery component in his poetry.

After his first poems, which were compiled by Cesário Verde's friend Silva Pinto in the group "Romantic Crisis" [Crise Romanesca]⁸ (Silva Pinto edited posthumously *The Book of Cesário Verde* [*O Livro de Cesário Verde*])⁹, Cesário Verde abandoned the subjectivity of romantic lyric in favour of a poetry based on 'concrete observation' and on giving visibility to countless aspects of social nature. This was seen as arising from the flourishing of urban life at the time – Walter Benjamin refers that "the literature concerned with the disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life was destined for a great future"¹⁰. Bringing to the lyric an "objectified expression of a functional self"¹¹, Verde opened the door to objective poetry. Although wandering through the city was not a common practice for poets of his time, Cesário Verde broke that tradition and 'brought poetry to the street'. As Helena Buescu noted:

8 See Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 172, our translation.

9 Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 171.

10 Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life – Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 71.

11 Helder Macedo, *Nós, uma leitura de Cesário Verde* (Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 1999), 20, our translation.

[...] wandering allows Cesário Verde to present, after all, a new attitude towards poetry: in fact, in the entire Western poetic tradition we can recognize as characteristic the fact that the poet is defined, usually, more by a certain fixity of position [...] than by wandering.¹²

While wandering through the city, he develops a refined *flâneur* spirit (Lourenço refers to him as an “end-of-century *flâneur*”)¹³ that was propelled by several factors, namely by his geographical whereabouts – residing in the capital and working downtown –, and by a certain Baudelairean influence absorbed from his attentive readings of the French poet and which was mainly reflected at thematic level. However, as Martelo points out:

[...] what really impresses is not so much the fact that Cesário has taken up with indisputable creativity some themes and images of the French poet; it is, above all, the way in which his poetry reveals an extremely acute and productive intuition of the paths opened by the publication of *The Flowers of Evil* [*Les Fleurs du Mal*] and *The Spleen of Paris* [*Le Spleen de Paris*].¹⁴

Another distinctive feature of Cesário Verde’s work, in comparison to the prevailing literary aesthetics at the time, and which indicates an undeniably modernist practice, is the adoption of Taine’s aesthetics for his poetry, the same as that adopted by realist novelists¹⁵. This was reflected in

12 Helena Carvalhão Buescu, “Pinceladas – A propósito de Cesário Verde”, *Colóquio Letras* 93 (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1986): 69-73, 70, our translation.

13 Lourenço, *Os Degraus do Parnaso*, 99, our translation.

14 Rosa Maria Martelo, “Metáfora e imagem perceptiva na poesia de Cesário Verde” in *O Cinema da Poesia* (Lisboa: Sistema Solar CRL / Documenta, 2017): 89, our translation.

15 See Macedo, *Nós, uma leitura de Cesário Verde*, 26.

the use of prosaic vocabulary and in the approach to everyday life themes, in the sense of a concrete and critical observation of reality. However, Cesário Verde “only knew how to conceive of life as a succession of instants, as a discontinuous series of *presents*”¹⁶. This is reflected in his inability to write in prose, to write in a succession/chain of ideas – ‘*durée*’. The poet himself expressed in two of his verses in the poem *Outrageous* [*Contrariedades*] that he did not like to write in prose: “But to me, nothing could be more outrageous | Than to write in prose” [E a mim, não há questão que mais me contrarie | Do que escrever em prosa]. According to Figueiredo, the poet only knew how to be a “snapshot photographer”¹⁷. But despite this formal issue, his adherence to Taine’s method is suggested when he alluded to it in the same poem, when claiming that it was being ignored by critics. This was following the rejection of some of his verses by a newspaper at the time: “Because a newspaper, some days ago, rejected | A pamphlet of my verse” [Por causa dum jornal me rejeitar, há dias | Um folhetim de versos] and “They are unversed in criticism following Taine’s | methodology” [A crítica segundo o método de Taine | Ignoram-na].

By bringing several everyday life themes into his poetic work, Cesário Verde innovates through the practice of that method, and by opting for the modern and innovative nature of the themes themselves, which, to a large extent, are associated with progress in a changing society. There are several signs indicating the flourishing urbanity in the last decades of the nineteenth century, which he incorporates in his work, as is the case of words like “sidewalk” [calçada], “railway” [via-férrea], “unloading coal” [descargas de carvão], “gaslight” [gás], among others.

16 Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 34, our translation.

17 Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 34, our translation.

According to Lind, Cesário Verde was the first to discover the poetry of commerce¹⁸. The poem *We [Nós]* has plenty of references to commercial activity, such as: “profit” [lucro], “quotation” [cotação], “export” [exportação] or “market” [mercado], and to industry, as in the case of: “workshops” [oficinas], “steam factories” [fábricas a vapor], “cutlery” [cutelarias], “mechanical spinning” [mecânicas fiações], and others. At the same time, together with these references, we find strong allusions to rural life, which not only arise as a way of counterposing commercial and agricultural activities – the city/country dichotomy pointed out by Macedo¹⁹ –, but also by expressing the connection/conciliation between both, specifically the introduction of commercial dynamics in family farming, which is also a sign of progress. Let us remember that Macedo points to a “search for the reconciliation of these antithetical coordinates”²⁰ and that the rural life addressed by Cesário was a rural life “without idealism, hard, practical, one might even say irrevocably prosaic”²¹. Still in thematic terms, we cannot fail to point out another aspect, in which Cesário Verde was quite bold, considering that the intellectual elites of the time still rested on the idealizations of romanticism. He brought ugly and shocking life realities to poetry, such as dirt (“sources of infection” [focos de infeção]), rot (“rotting fish” [peixe podre]), poverty (“begs me for alms” [pede-me sempre esmola]), illness

18 George Rudolf Lind, “‘O real e a análise’ – O mundo poético de Cesário Verde”, *Colóquio Letras* 93 (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1986): 29-40, 36.

19 Helder Macedo, “Cesário Verde, o bucolista do realismo”, *Colóquio Letras* 93 (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1986): 20-28, 24.

20 Macedo, *Nós, uma leitura de Cesário Verde*, 46, our translation.

21 Lopes, “Cesário Verde ou do Romantismo ao Modernismo”, 466, our translation.

("both sick lungs" [os dois pulmões doentes]), and death ("burial hearses" [seges dos enterros]).

In terms of syntax, Cesário Verde's poetry was also innovative. By making regular use of the figure of speech asyndeton, the poet deliberately suppresses coordinating conjunctions, thus broadening the range of perceptions of reality due to the semantic relationships that can be established between contiguous words. An example is the verse "That the shadows, the bustle, the Tagus, the salt air" [Que as sombras, o bulício, o Tejo, a maresia] from the poem *The Feeling of a Westerner* [*O Sentimento dum Ocidental*].

All these aspects, mainly the thematic context, favoured the poetization of outdoor scenes, opening up space for the refinement of sensory perception, particularly of vision – "once in the street, his visual sensations are more intense"²².

The power of the visual image

Cesário Verde's poetry is undoubtedly a constant appeal to the senses. He did not fail to highlight this, expressing them literally in the poem *Crystallizations* [*Cristalizações*], in the verse "Of touch, of sight, of sound, of taste, of smell!" [O tato, a vista, o ouvido, o gosto, o olfato!].

There are, therefore, numerous cases in which the sensory register appears in his poetry, in the form of impressions. Whether through color, luminance, saturation, or through other visual aspects, such as texture scintillation, value, shine or effulgence, etc., which appear in several of his poems, we constantly find images of a clearly sensory perception as illustrated in the following examples:

22 Lourenço, *Os Degraus do Parnaso*, 99, our translation.

- color (green): “And the sea a green, blooming plain” [E o mar um prado verde e fluorescente] in the poem *Summertime* [*De Verão*];
- luminance (sunlight): “There gleams a great, raw sunlight” [Vibra uma imensa claridade crua] in the poem *Crystallizations* [*Cristalizações*];
- saturation (yellowishly): “Yellowishly, dogs resemble wolves” [*Amareladamente, os cães parecem lobos*] in the poem *The Feeling of a Westerner* [*O Sentimento dum Ocidental*];
- texture scintillation (glassy): “And the puddles, like a glassy floor” [E as poças de água, como um chão vidrento] in the poem *Crystallizations* [*Cristalizações*];
- value (reflection): “Spread out their sheets of white reflection” [Alastram em lençol os seus reflexos brancos] in the poem *The Feeling of a Westerner* [*O Sentimento dum Ocidental*];
- shine (glints): “The breakfast china glints” [Reluzem, num almoço, as porcelanas] in the poem *In a Modern Neighborhood* [*Num Bairro Moderno*].

The incorporation of a wide range of visual sensations, coexisting and intersecting each other, gives Cesário Verde’s poetry a definite pictorial character. According to Martelo, most of Cesário Verde’s poetic images result from the intersection of perceptual images, whose dynamism grants them a transfiguring force. This energy gives to the images a very strong aesthesia ability, this process being a precursor of the Pessoaan sensationism²³ and leading the reader to the visual synesthetic experience.

23 See Martelo, “Metáfora e imagem perceptiva na poesia de Cesário Verde”, 92-94.

The connection between poetry and painting is, moreover, a theme that has been addressed since antiquity. In *Of the Fame of the Athenians* [*De gloria Atheniensium*] by Plutarch, Simonides “calls painting inarticulate poetry and poetry articulate painting”²⁴, and Horace, in *Art of Poetry*, again establishes the relationship between the two arts, by stating: “For poems are like pictures” [Ut pictura poesis]²⁵.

Therefore, we can easily associate Cesário Verde’s visual imagery with impressionist painting, whose aesthetics was in part a consequence of the evolution of philosophical thought since the late eighteenth century. This was evident especially after the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. This revolutionary work brought about a profound change in the understanding of our access to the phenomenal world. The act of understanding became subject to the experience of sensitivity, that is, to the way in which we are affected by that which is outside of us, precisely by our senses, in space and time²⁶. Since Cesário Verde’s poetry is largely a manifestation of sensations and/or impressions, it is not surprising that it presents several affinities with impressionist painting, seeing that the experience from which both result is based on similar stimuli.

The relationship with painting is suggested by the poet himself, when he uses a vocabulary that is allusive to concrete materials or practices typical of painting in some of the verses, as in the case of “It would do nonetheless for a watercolour” [Em todo o caso dava uma aguarela] from the poem *In the Afternoon* [*De Tarde*], “From the retouched

24 Plutarch, “De gloria Atheniensium” in *Plutarch, Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. IV: 501.

25 Horace, *Art of Poetry* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1892), 27.

26 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155-57.

canvasses of memory” [Das telas da memória retocadas], and “Portraits I paint out of letters, out of signs” [Pinto quadros por letras, por sinais] from the poem *We* [Nós].

Even the criticism of his contemporaries, by Fialho de Almeida’s words, used the term “*pochade*” when referring to his poem *In a Modern Neighbourhood* [*Num bairro moderno*]²⁷. Starting precisely from this term “*pochade*”, Figueiredo gives us a more well-founded idea of the strong relationship that exists between Cesário Verde’s poetry – “an impressionist vision of reality”²⁸ – and impressionist painting, even questioning whether Cesário Verde would have had access to it and whether it would have inspired him. His conclusion is however that it would have been very unlikely that Cesário Verde would have had contact with impressionist painting, and he attributes a more intuitive character to this aesthetic tendency.

Figueiredo also talked of an “apparently surrealist vision”²⁹ – just as Macedo referred to “grotesque” and “surreal”³⁰ elements as being part of Cesário Verde’s imagery. This emerged when considering the anthropomorphism of vegetables that takes place in the same poem, reminiscent of the painting by the sixteenth century artist Arcimboldo, and which is spelled out by the poet as stemming from his artist’s vision:

Suddenly – an artist’s vision! –
What if I transformed the simple vegetables,
By the light of that fierce colourist, the sun,
Into a living, moving human being,

27 See Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 100.

28 Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 100, our translation.

29 Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 102, our translation.

30 Macedo, *Nós, uma leitura de Cesário Verde*, 22, our translation.

Bodied in shapely proportions?!
 [Subitamente, – que visão de artista! –
 Se eu transformasse os simples vegetais,
 À luz do sol, o intenso colorista,
 Num ser humano que se mova e exista
 Cheio de belas proporções carnaís?!]

The multiplicity of perception in the reality reflected in his work, is the result of an extremely refined intuition that covers his “realism with a basically naturalistic intention”³¹. Among these precursor traits are his “transfiguring metaphors”, that would become Pessoa’s intersectionism in the twentieth century. As Óscar Lopes points out, Cesário Verde did in poetry what the Cubists would later do:

[...] what the poet obtains is (in a nutshell) the alternation and final fusion between an analytically drawn image (a blacksmith works a hammer, dogs resemble wolves) and another image, of a simple global, syncretic stain, of red or yellow colour, in a kind of impressionism that, instead of proceeding by juxtaposing simple colours, goes over to the incoincidence of design and colour, as the Cubists (and our literary “intersectionists” will later do).³²

We find, therefore, several affinities between his poetic creation and various pictorial languages, be they contemporary, past or future. In addition to these aesthetic affinities, we can also find a thematic influence that some paintings had on the poet. This is the case of Courbet’s work *The Stone Breakers* which, according to Figueiredo,

31 Lopes, “Cesário Verde ou do Romantismo ao Modernismo”, 466, our translation.

32 Lopes, “Cesário Verde ou do Romantismo ao Modernismo”, 467, our translation.

inspired the poem *Crystallizations* [*Cristalizações*]³³. Figueiredo also established a relationship between his poem *Resplendent* [*Esplêndida*] and the watercolours of the painter Constantin Guys, whom Baudelaire called “The painter of modern life” [*Le peintre de la vie moderne*]³⁴. However, we argue that his poetry is largely based on sensation and that he reproduces environments that are mostly bright and clear, which brings his work closer to impressionism.

Classification as phanopoeia

According to Ezra Pound, poetry is the most concentrated form of verbal expression, as poetic language is loaded with meanings that come not only from the roots or use of words, but also from associations³⁵. Pound thus defined a classification for poetic language, according to the form of inspiration that originated them, and which is reflected in the type of sensory perception triggered in the reader, as follows:

- *Phanopoeia* – Poetry that relies on the visual power of images. Pound describes this medium as “throwing the object (fixed or moving) into the visual imagination”, i.e. “a casting of images upon the visual imagination”.
- *Melopoeia* – Poetry based on the creation of sound effects inducing emotional correspondences through the sound and rhythm of speech.
- *Logopoeia* – Poetry that uses words beyond their direct meaning, inducing both effects above by stimulating associations (intellectual or emotional)

33 See Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 67.

34 Pinto de Figueiredo, *A vida de Cesário Verde*, 67, our translation.

35 See Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 36.

that remain in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the words employed³⁶.

Due to the considerable visual power of Cesário Verde's imagery discussed above, his poetry naturally fits into what Ezra Pound called *phanopoeia*. It is true that Cesário Verde's poetry also contains aspects of refined auditory perception ("And iron and stone – what a sonorous union! – / Ring loudly through space" [E o ferro e a pedra – que união Sonora! – / Retinem alto pelo espaço fora]). And as Lourenço points out³⁷, the form itself – the Alexandrian meter – which in the poet's case, is sometimes embodied in the use of the *staccato*. These elements prevent it from being exhausted in the *phanopoeia* classification. Hence, it can also be inserted in *melopoeia*. However, since the object of our study is visual imagery, we will not go ahead with the development of this last idea. It is, therefore, in this context that we advance to the next point, where we apply a more technologically oriented approach. We obtain a sequence of visual images whose aesthetic appeal and order of presentation, more than the pictorial accuracy, resemble the awe provoked by the original poem, thus confirming its classification as *phanopoeia*.

The visual imagery of a sample poem

In this work, we explore two options for generating visual representations of Cesário Verde's poetry: one is to search for images (in an image bank, database, or website) based on keywords extracted from verses; the other is to resort to the latest developments in artificial intelligence (specifically text-to-image synthesis) to generate synthetic

36 See Pound, *ABC of reading*, 63.

37 See Lourenço, *Os Degraus do Parnaso*, 121.

images from verses. For this purpose, we use a specific poem as an example.

Perhaps the simplest, shortest, and most direct example of a poem that can be visually portrayed or, in this case, re-imagined as an impressionist painting, is *In the Afternoon* [*De Tarde*]. A literal translation of the poem could read as follows³⁸:

At that bourgeois ladies' picnic,
there was something just beautiful,
and which, without history or grandeur,
in any case would do for a watercolour.

It was when you, getting off the donkey,
went to pick, without putting on silly airs,
from a blue field of chickpea
a red bunch of poppies.

Soon after, on top of some cliffs,
we camped, the sun was still out;
and there were slices of melon, apricots,
and sponge cake soaked in malmsey.

But, all purple, peeking out of the lace
of your two breasts like two turtledoves,
it was the supreme charm of the picnic
the red bouquet of poppies!

In the first stanza, the poem describes a bourgeois ladies' picnic that can be pictured as a watercolour. In the second stanza, there is a scene of a lady hopping off a donkey and picking red poppies from a blue field of chickpea.

38 This English translation of the original poem in Portuguese is the responsibility of the authors. A slightly different translation can be found in *The Book of Cesário Verde & Other Poems* (Lisbon Poets & Co., 2016), 170-171.

In the third stanza, they are camping under the sunset, and having a varied luncheon. In the fourth and final stanza, the climax is achieved as the bunch of red poppies rests over her breast, amid that countryside landscape.

The first approach that we explored to produce a visual representation of the elements in the poem is to select the keywords from each verse, and use them as search terms to look for related images on an image website, Unsplash³⁹. The choice of keywords can be done automatically by removing well-known stop words (such as “the”, “it”, “that”, “and”, “on”, etc.) and keeping the rest as candidate search terms. However, the results can often be improved by manually selecting a subset of those search terms.

From the poem shown above, we selected a minimalistic set of keywords from each verse, by keeping only those terms that seemed to be necessary to obtain relevant images:

At that *bourgeois* ladies’ *picnic*,
there was something just *beautiful*,
and which, without *history* or *grandeur*,
in any case would do for a *watercolour*.

It was when you, getting off the *donkey*,
went to *pick*, without putting on silly airs,
from a *blue field* of chickpea
a *red* bunch of *poppies*.

Soon after, on top of some *cliffs*,
we camped, the *sun* was still out;
and there were slices of *melon*, *apricots*,
and *sponge cake* soaked in malmsey.

39 In this work, we use Unsplash (unsplash.com) due to its permissive license in terms of image reuse (<https://unsplash.com/license>).

But, all purple, peeking out of the *lace*
 of your two breasts like two *turtledoves*,
 it was the supreme *charm* of the *picnic*
 the red *bouquet* of *poppies*!

When searching for images based on these sparse keywords, many different types of results may appear. While it would be possible, for the sake of simplicity, to take the first image retrieved from the website, it is often the case that a more interesting candidate can be found among the search results. This is a second instance (with the first being the choice of keywords) where manual selection can play a role in improving the quality of the results. Following this procedure, the images that were picked from the website, using the selected keywords for each verse, are shown in Figure 1.

In this figure, each image corresponds to an individual verse, and each row depicts the four verses in each stanza. It is important to distinguish between the aesthetics of each image and the aesthetics of the sequence of images: while each image, taken *per se*, depends on the source of images that we use, the sequence of images should have an apparent relationship to the poem. In fact, the photographic themes of these pictures might seem disparate at first, but the collation of four images in each row, when considered together with the sequence of rows, enables a view of the sixteen images as a whole that is reminiscent of the main ideas in the poem. A picnic portrayed as a watercolour; picking red poppies from a blue field; camping under the sunlight; and a feminine figure in a countryside landscape – these are some of the ideas that are present in the poem and can be recognized in the images of Figure 1. Perhaps a noticeable exception is the more suggestive content at the beginning of the fourth stanza, where we omitted some keywords to avoid inappropriate images.



Figure 1 | Images retrieved from Unsplash, using the selected search keywords. (Photos by: Svetlana Kuznetsova; Irina Iriser; Claudio Testa; Kseniya Lapteva; TS Sergey; Gigi; Aki Nakazawa; Vera De; Ruben Gutierrez; Jordan Wozniak; Ai Feng Hsiung; Portuguese Gravity; Nareeta Martin; Bruno Oliveira; Kate Hliznitsova; Gleb Albovsky).

In any case, the realization that the ideas in a nineteenth century poem can be illustrated by a sequence of contemporary photographs attests to the visual nature of such poetry, and it further suggests that the poem could possibly be illustrated with different pictures, as long as their content and sequence bear a relationship to those ideas. The visualization is not unique, but any visualization of such a sequence of ideas should be able to remind us of the elements in the poem. To demonstrate this point, we turn to

a different approach to generate the visual imagery for the poem, using artificial intelligence.

Image synthesis via artificial intelligence

In the last decade, there has been an explosion in the development of artificial intelligence techniques and their applications, with far-reaching implications in technology and in the arts, in science, and in society at large. It is by no means our goal to review the recent progress in that field, but we would like to focus on a particular topic that is of special interest for this study: image synthesis/generation.

During 2022, in the span of only a few months, three companies released artificial intelligence models that have revolutionized the possibilities of image generation. In April 2022, OpenAI announced DALL-E 2⁴⁰; in May 2022, Google Research announced Imagen;⁴¹ and in August 2022, Stability AI released Stable Diffusion⁴². All of these models incorporated the latest developments in artificial intelligence to produce photorealistic images from a given text input.

40 Aditya Ramesh, Prafulla Dhariwal, Alex Nichol, Casey Chu, Mark Chen, “Hierarchical Text-Conditional Image Generation with CLIP Latents”, *arXiv* 2204.06125 (2022).

41 Chitwan Saharia, William Chan, Saurabh Saxena, Lala Li, Jay Whang, Emily Denton, Seyed Kamyar Seyed Ghasemipour, Burcu Karagol Ayan, S. Sara Mahdavi, Rapha Gontijo Lopes, Tim Salimans, Jonathan Ho, David J. Fleet, Mohammad Norouzi, “Photorealistic Text-to-Image Diffusion Models with Deep Language Understanding”, *arXiv* 2205.11487 (2022).

42 Robin Rombach, Andreas Blattmann, Dominik Lorenz, Patrick Esser, Björn Ommer, “High-Resolution Image Synthesis with Latent Diffusion Models”, *arXiv* 2112.10752 (2022), and online at <https://stability.ai/stablediffusion>.

In most applications, the user provides a text prompt that the model then processes and synthesizes into an image. Typically, the text prompt describes the objects that should appear in the image, and may also include indications about how the image should be rendered in terms of lighting, colors, style, etc.

One aspect to bear in mind is that these models are trained on millions of images together with their corresponding captions collected from the Internet. It is by learning to associate captions with images that the model can generate a new image from a text prompt. Therefore, one should not expect anything too far beyond the concepts that can be seen pictured on the Internet. However, the results can still be surprising, because the possible combinations of those concepts are virtually limitless, and these models excel at putting things from seemingly disparate contexts together in a photorealistic image.

In this study, we use Stable Diffusion⁴³, not only because it is the most recent and provides the best results, but also because it is more openly accessible than other models. Specifically, we use this model to generate images from each verse, or from adaptations thereof. In contrast to the previous approach, where we reduced the number of search keywords to a bare minimum in order to have a larger set of images to choose from, here it becomes useful to use the full verse, or even expansions or adaptations of it, in order to produce an image that is more contextually related to the poem.

In this case, the text prompts that we used for image generation were the following:

a bourgeois ladies' picnic
something just beautiful

43 Rombach *et al.*, "High-Resolution Image Synthesis with Latent Diffusion Models".

without history or grandeur
a watercolour painting

a lady and a donkey in the countryside
picking flowers in the countryside
a blue field of chickpea
a red bunch of poppies

looking at countryside from cliff's
camping with sun on horizon
slices of melon and apricots
sponge cake soaked in malmsey

purple peeking out of lace
two breasts like two turtledoves
supreme charm of picnic
lady with red bouquet of poppies

A set of images selected among the results generated by the model, from each of these text prompts, is shown in Figure 2.

Again, the sequence of images in each row is reminiscent of the elements in each stanza, and there are some themes in common with in Figure 1 (namely, for history and grandeur; bunches of red poppies; camping by sunset; two turtledoves sitting next to each other; etc.). On the other hand, the results in Figure 2 suggest that the artificial intelligence model can generate precise visualizations, as illustrated, for example, by a sponge cake soaked in malmsey. Also, when generating an image for “purple peeking out of lace”, it so happened that the model generated a purple flower by mere coincidence.



Figure 2 | Images generated by Stable Diffusion from the provided text prompts.

As for the more sensually charged content of the fourth stanza, it has been passed to the model almost as it is, resulting in basically two types of images: one group which consists in depicting a pair of innocent looking turtle-doves, and another group where the model actually renders explicit body parts, but is quick to label those images as non-suitable, and obfuscates them. For the examples in Figure 2, we selected an image from the first group, with two turtledoves sitting next to each other, which looks similar to the one in Figure 1.

For the very last image in Figure 2, we introduced a human element in the text prompt to make it closer to the one in Figure 1 (no such effort has been done in other verses).

The potential for using these text-to-image models to generate visualizations is admittedly large, and here we touch only the surface by generating images for individual verses. An alternative approach would be to generate images from entire stanzas or sentences, depending on the poem structure. An illustration of what might come out as a result of this approach is shown in Figure 3, where we generated each image by feeding an entire stanza as a text prompt to the model.



Figure 3 | Images generated by Stable Diffusion from each stanza.

In this case, each image conveys a summary of the multiple elements in each stanza (see, for example, how cliffs, camping, sun, fruit slices and malmsey have been combined in a single image) and the sequence of images resembles the four main scenes in the poem. Nevertheless, our goal is not to explore the different possibilities of breaking up or reformulating a poem into a series of text prompts, but only to show that visual references abound in the poetry of Cesário Verde, to the point that it becomes possible to produce visualizations with relative ease, either by searching for existing images or by generating new ones via automated means.

Finally, it is worth noting that both approaches have glaring limitations. In particular, language understanding, in both cases, leaves much to be desired⁴⁴. A blatant example is the verse “without history or grandeur”, which ends up being depicted as an image with elements of history and grandeur. Other passages consist of non-visual cues, such as “without putting on silly airs”, or actions, such as “getting off the donkey”, which turn out to be difficult to visualize with static imagery. Despite these limitations, or precisely because of them, the poetry of Cesário Verde remains a rich source of material for our visual imagination.

Conclusion

While the visual character of Cesário Verde’s poetry is evident, the interpretation, visualization, and reimagination of a poem by the reader is always a personal and subjective experience. In this context, one could argue that any attempt to introduce a concrete visualization of a poem might risk limiting or conditioning the imaginative process that the reader must go through when reading and interpreting the poem.

On the contrary, what we realized when developing this work is that our critical judgment, far from being hampered, is actually exacerbated by any visualization that is different from our own. This creates an internal dialogue that ends up either reinforcing our own view or enriching it with elements from other visualizations. In any case, the reader is to gain by being exposed to different visualizations of the same poem, even if those are found lacking in certain respects.

There is no doubt about how concrete and vivid Cesário Verde wanted his poetry to be. With exceptional precision

44 This is expected to improve with recent developments in Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT (chat.openai.com).

in the use of language, and pristine clarity in terms of sensory and emotional perception, his descriptions are often photographic, sometimes even cinematic. This makes his poetry especially amenable to visualizations. The latest advances in technology and artificial intelligence, in particular text-to-image models, are making it possible to depict the ideas that he started transcribing into verses, one-hundred and fifty years ago.

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