

BRAZILIAN FLASHES PARADE IN BISHOP'S MANUSCRIPTS

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RESUMO

O processo de criação do poema "Under the window: Ouro Preto" reflete uma forte marca de visualidade, que se evidencia em seus manuscritos e que tão bem reflete os problemas socioeconômicos do Brasil.

RÉSUMÉ

Le procès de création de "Under the window: Ouro Preto" montre comment Bishop a travaillé sous l'influence de la sémiotique utilisant une variété de stratégies littéraires. Sa maîtrise de l'imaginaire lui a donné la possibilité de focaliser le monde d'une façon plastique et son approche de la réalité se soucie des problèmes socio-économiques du Brésil.

SUMMARY

The process of creation of "Under the window: Ouro Preto" reflects how Bishop used to deal with that semiotic web of influences, by putting into action a variety of literary strategies. Her mastery with imagery made her focus on the world in a plastic way, and in Bishop's approach to relity she seemed to be especially worried with the socio-ecomoc problems of Brazil.

THE IMPLICATION OF GENETIC STUDIES

the methodological framework of a relatively new science, called the *Genetic Criticism*, has given support to the present research. This science was born in France in the late sixties, got to Brazil in the eighties, and it is nowadays in full bloom, especially in S. Paulo. It supplies the critic who is interested in studying the creative process with the necessary tools to see through the third dimension of a work of art, by making it easier for him to dialogue with the manuscripts to be analysed.

This critical curiosity about the *process* itself seems to be inherent to the present time, especially if one takes into account that from the very outset of the so called post-modernistic period, the analysis of the *process*, rather than the product has been enhanced; and *fragmentation* rather than unification has been the word of the day. So genetic studies are up to date with the contemporary attitude toward life and art.

No matter the code to be considered, this science covers all sorts of artistic expressions, such as writing, painting, dancing... Any kind of language can be included in this wide range of intersemiotic options to be studied by the critic, who is interested in analysing the genesis of a certain artistic project.

In the case of the present work on Elizabeth Bishop, the main concern has been to identify the steps that the artist has

taken to fulfill her poetic project; or to consider all sorts of relevant traces Bishop has left behind, while her ideas were being shaped, or while she was formatting a particular work of art.

So, there is an effort to get as near as possible to the kernel of the aimed poetic project, by analysing the process documents the creator has left behind, or by trying to understand the way the creator articulates a special artistic work with the kind of reality in which it is contextualized.

Indeed, the genetic critic observes how a complex web formed by a series of drafts can keep in its entrails, actually in its countless corrections, traces of a sort of race for the best image to be attained. This enterprise promises to reveal through its indices surprising hints of the creator's mind as its counterpart: its mobility, its plasticity, in a word, the stirring of a privileged mind at work.

It is possible to see in this paper how the drafts of the poem "Under the window: Ouro Preto" articulate with each other in a game of entropy, in spite of the fact that there is an underlying order, which is present there from the very beginning. There is a track all the way down to be followed by the critic, a track which goes from an apparent chaos to the aimed order, and as long as the notes collected by the critic begin to form meaningful sets to be analysed, then he feels somewhat rewarded.

This research is centered on the poem "Under the window: Ouro Preto" in its *status nascendi*, and it is the process of writing rather than the published poem that proves to be the present main concern. It is an approach that privileges the work of art viewed in its dynamic process and organic contradictions, with an aim at rescuing the author's original intentions and impressions.

THE PROTOTEXT

The initial procedure of this research was to establish a *prototext*. The term, which was conceived by the French

researcher Jean Bellemin-Noel in 1972, defines a whole set of documents somewhat connected with a specific poetic project. So it suggests a critical reconstruction of the materials concerned with the production of a certain work of art, in such a way that this selection will somewhat reflect the logical mechanisms inherent to its elaboration.

According to Louis Hay, the interpretative work of the researcher will especially deal with the prototext in two different moments:

The first moment is analytic, since it aims at identifying and describing a combination of elements being shifted from one place to the other; it includes all kinds of substitutions, expansions, retractions that the manuscripts reveal so as to highlight and systematize a whole set of genetic operations [...]

The second one, which is inductive, seeks to understand the dynamics that sets these operations into motion; it points to affective desires, imaginary representations, language and rhythmical effects (HAY, 1990: 24).

As for the word *manuscript*, it is used in its modern sense. It means any kind of text produced by the author, no matter whether it is typed, in handwriting, even recorded, or if it is just a drawing or any kind of painting connected to the process. The important point to be considered is that it is a process document; in Bishop's case, a territory where the creator can test her hypotheses in a free way. To sum up, it is her laboratory of discourse interactions, where Bishop can take any risks and must not always censure herself.

In that sense, such documents lead to a very private kind of reality, that of the poet's inner self. An environment where works of art can breathe freely and nurture themselves with the idiosyncrasies of a special creator seen in privileged moments of perception. As for the indices unfolded by this

kind of reality, they can reveal themes, motifs, recurrent forms, registers, reports, impressions of all sorts, which may reveal the author's peculiar way to see the world. But it is interesting to observe that when many of these elements get to the final product, which is the work of art published by the author, they have often gone through so many changes that the motifs reappear in the "final" work in a new way, with a new glamour.

The word "final" appears in inverted commas because although it has been conventionally established as so, the real final product in art does not exist. In the case of Bishop, we hear from her private documents that there is often a point when she decides to give up making corrections and trying to improve her work; then there comes the "final" draft. Either because there is a deadline for publication, as in the case of the elegy she wrote when her friend Robert Lowell died; or as in the case of the long poem "Santarém", when time had actually become a mythical element and Bishop could not stand that endless process any longer.

THE INTERSEMIOTIC TRAJETORY OF
"UNDER THE WINDOW: OURO PRETO"

The intersemiotic trajectory of Bishop's drafts point to all sorts of stimuli being processed, especially the visual and auditive ones, which are transformed into verbal signs, and actually translated into poetic images. At such creative moments, it is highlighted the condensed, the synthetic aspect of poetry; since poetic images can register and store all kinds of impressions absorbed by the artist.

Then, those impressions are often translated into Bishop's poetry in terms of metaphors, similes, symbols and metonymies. Concerning the materialization of her artistic perceptions, it is worth mentioning her interests in transforming geographical places into poetry. Since she lived so many years in Brazil, the

scenes which were part of her every day life in this country would normally play an important part in her creation.

Among those flashes of local color, there are some vivid ones observed from a window in Ouro Preto. In the prototext of this poem, it is possible to observe the way unique visual and auditive impressions have touched the poet's sensibility and have worked as points of departure for the poetic images parading in "Under the window: Ouro Preto". Bishop's notes are packed with such registers, or even her letters, and that was her private space to talk about poetry, actually a mass of materials, which is quite relevant to the genetic critic.

In her letter of May 22, Bishop describes Ouro Preto to her Aunt Florence in the following way:

This week, Thursday, we are going away for a few days to Ouro Preto ("Black Gold") – a little old colonial mining-town a long day's drive from here. It is a perfect 18th century town and is all under the protection of the government so nothing can be changed. I went there once in 1952 but haven't been back (E. Bishop–Aunt Florence, 22 May, 1960, Box 98.6, V.C).

So Ouro Preto strongly impressed Bishop from the very moment she went there, in the fifties. However, she only started "Under the window: Ouro Preto" many years later, in 1965, and that poem was published in 1966. It registers scenes and conversations, which Bishop had seen and overheard by Lili Correia de Araújo's window, a friend to whom she dedicated that particular poem. She had stayed in Lili's house for a period of time, and as there was (and there is still) a drinking fountain by that house, city people usually stopped there for a while.

In a letter to May Swenson dated of 1965, Bishop includes some motifs, which will appear in the very first drafts of the poem: the drinking fountain under her window, where everybody used to stop to drink water and talk; the simple conversations,

especially about illnesses, funerals, babies and the cost of living; the cars and trucks passing by (Elizabeth Bishop–May Swenson, May 5th, 1965 apud PRZYBYCIEN, 1993: 162).

The conversations of the passers-by fictionalized in “Under the window: Ouro Preto”, in the sixties, are mentioned in the first line of the published poem, but also in the first typed draft, when Bishop had not even defined the title of her work:

*#1 The conversations are simple: about food,
[or] or “When mother combs my hair, it hurts.”
[or] or “She’s been in labor now two days” (BISHOP, 1966:
s.p. Box 58.8. V.C).*

In this poem Bishop shows her interest in the socio-economic difficulties of the region. This point becomes clear through the way she describes the truck bumpers passing by; such bumpers exhibit funny sayings written on them, and that’s the way those drivers laugh at the hardships of life.

From the very beginning, what immediately calls one’s attention is the huge size of the truck, but also its model and especially, its bumper. The truck seems to impose its outstanding presence on the whole scene because it is enormous, magnificent: *A huge new truck by Ford (#1)*. Its colors must have attracted Bishop’s attention and the author shows that especially when she jots down different colors in her drafts to describe the vehicle: *pink, blue, red, green*. The fact is that although the truck seems imposing, it is not new; and this idea is ironically introduced as a deflating element through the contrasting *but in but repainted*:

*#1 but repainted
the body work carriage work pink and blue rosebuds
[...]
joined by a red & green truck-*

Later on, in the same draft, Bishop continues to test the colours, the type of the vehicle she can see from her window in order to get a variety of visual effects; and in draft 2 the colors of the truck decoration again enhance that showy image. It is possible to see Bishop “painting” that incipient image she was creating:

#2 the body's painted with throbbing rosebuds

So here she is building up an important image in the poem, that of the truck. As for the type of vehicle, which will be in the published poem, *a Mercedes Benz*, it already appears in the very first draft. Bishop starts her poem by testing colors, models, motifs, which may survive or not till the published version.

#1 A big, new truck, [by Chevrolet, repainted] Mercedes Benz

But the imposing driver also plays an important part from the very beginning. He is referred to as one who belongs to a category, that of *the dashing truckdrivers*; so he is seen as a type of person, in the same way as the truck has been defined by its type, *a Mercedes*. In fact, the truck seems to be an extension of the driver and vice-versa, in such a way that one harmoniously complements the other.

That truck rather looks like a dream vehicle, which fascinates not only some people who live in the whereabouts, but everybody. In a later draft, one reads: *over-awe all*; so Bishop depicts passers-by turning their heads to stare at that moving wonder.

Then it is time for the bumper to speak and ironically herald that brilliant arrival, as if it were an attractive star appearing at a show ring for one more performance. And to give a final touch to that magical atmosphere, in draft two the driver becomes a *gallant driver*; he rather looks a character from a fairy tale, coming out of nothing from an unreal world. A place beyond the frontiers of that hard reality surrounding it, beyond social problems and financial hindrances.

The attitude of that dream merchant seems to be quite triumphant. That driver mocks reality through the sayings of his truck bumpers, that already appear in draft one and will persist till the published poem.

#1 NOT MUCH MONEY BUT IT IS AMUSING

So the driver, who is one of a kind, or belongs to a category of poor men who must fight for their survival, voices his ideas through his official mouthpiece: his truck bumper. He asserts that life is worthwhile; even if one is broke, if social condition is hard and adverse, life is always worthwhile.

In a word, that fascinating entrance in town symbolizes the attitude of man from the interior of Brazil in the sixties. Surrounded by all kinds of hindrances, but always trying to face and overcome his every day problems; to surpass his own limits, by daring to go beyond the frontier of his dreams.

Indeed, truck bumpers play an emblematic role in the poem. They stand for the voice of people that Bishop wanted to portray in this particular poem, and such powerful poetic images are used by the author to make inanimate objects talk. They are part of the Brazilian regional folklore, which has strongly appealed to Bishop.

In Vassar papers there are fragments, which reveal how deep Bishop had been impressed by that touch of local color she observed in truck bumpers. She even copied some popular sayings that the Brazilian magazine *Quatro Rodas*, november 1961, had selected and published; apart from that, Bishop kept her private documents some newspaper cuttings showing such sayings. Those were the ways Bishop had to absorb aspects of the Brazilian culture, and also the people, with whom she lived for almost twenty years.

To illustrate that newspaper selection on the topic:

MULHER* AINDA O MELHOR PRODUTO BRASILEIRO DO MERCADO
 (which in English would be read as: “Woman* still the best Brazilian
 product of the market”)

DEUS GUIA, EU DIRIJO (in English: “God guides, I drive”)
 (*Bishop’s Foreign Language Newspapers*, 1961, Box 91.2, V.C).

So as to transform the physical environment of Ouro Preto into art, Bishop resorts to plastic poetic images, by dealing not only with powerful symbols – as the truck which has already been discussed – but also with ingenious metonymies. She often picks up a significant, relevant part of the described object, and by highlighting it, she manages to impress strength to that particular image; that is a very powerful resource she uses “to paint” her own impressions of reality.

In order to illustrate one of those perceptive moments, it is interesting to transcribe how a typical Brazilian image from a peaceful Minas Gerais town would be absorbed by Bishop and find its way through her drafts.

Draft 1 presents the following version:

*#1 This little boy carries home [to his mother]
 a bundle of laundry tied up in a sheet
 as high as he is, several times as wide
 This little black boy carries on his head
 a bundly of [laundry tied up] in a sheet–*

The deitic *this*, which introduces the stanza transcribed above, makes the incipient image more concrete and more immediate not only to the narrator’s eyes, but also to the reader. In such a way, Bishop uses the contrast between the huge bundle of clothes (*as high as he is, several times as wide*) and the boy’s tiny size (*little boy*), to emphasize the prevailing social injustice. She goes against the *status quo*, the rules of that provincial society, which makes children work and even carry a burden much bigger than they can stand. In this case, the boy probably

carries the huge bundle in order to help his mother, a washer woman. But many of these details, which originally reflected the impact that scene had on the author, will not survive to the published version of the poem.

From the second version onwards, the black boy is not in a frontal position any more, as it happened in the first flash. Indeed, it is rather the huge bundle on the boy's head that dominates the scene. When the bundle gets to the frontal position, the impression conveyed is that of an enormous bundle walking about all by itself on the streets of Ouro Preto, and the author who is at the window has a privileged view of the whole scene.

It is the strength of the metonymies imposing themselves that really count when one part of an expressive image is highlighted for the benefit of the rest of the elements depicted. Then at such a moment, the reader receives the strong impact of Bishop's visuality, and by watching the way such an image is worked and reworked in the author's mind, the critic follows the thread of the author's perceptions through Bishop's drafts.

Alike the truck bumper that has gained voice and exhibited funny jokes or even social protests, the bundle will also speak by itself. Both are impressive examples of metonymies in the poem: on the one hand, the bumper has been highlighted from the rest of that huge truck to strengthen the poetic image of the dream merchant; on the other hand, a bundle walking on the streets of Ouro Preto almost by itself, practically overwhelms the black boy who is holding it. So they are both strong visual poetic images.

In fact, in the second draft the bundle is personified, it acquires feet *all on its own*. And Bishop even supplies the reader with the precise height of that register: *three feet above the ground*. Only later on, in the same second draft, the presence of the little boy will be referred to:

#2 *Here comes some laundry tied up in a sheet,
all on its own, three feet above the ground
Oh, no – a small black boy is underneath*

It is really a privilege for the critic to savor these drafts and see expressive poetic images under way, as the one that has just been analysed above. As a matter of fact, Bishop was also interested in analysing the magic moments of creation, and this becomes quite evident in her prose *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in his Poetry* (BISHOP, 1934, Box 70: 10), where the author praises the liveliness of the baroque writing.

In spite of the fact that the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins lived in the nineteenth century (1844-1889), Bishop identified him as an author who had been deeply influenced by the baroque style; alike the baroque artists, the liveness of his verses sought to imitate the movements of a mind working and Bishop was quite impressed by her skill.

She quoted M. W. Croll's text *The Baroque Style in Prose* in her essay:

*Their purpose {of the baroque artists} was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking... They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the same idea that we experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth (...) They deliberately chose as the moment of expression that in which the idea first clearly objectifies itself in the mind, in which, therefore, each of its parts still preserves its own peculiar emphasis and an independent vigor of its own- in brief, the moment in which truth is still **imagined***
(CROLL apud BISHOP, 1934: 9) (Box 54.18).

Indeed, it is this vividness of Bishop's mind that one subtly perceives through an attentive analysis of her manuscripts, and it becomes evident how she was interested in observing the process of creation of the artist. Bishop was fascinated by the baroque tendency to depict the plasticity of the artistic mind working; so she even seemed to share this concern

with the genetic critic, engaged in the intricacies of a wide number of manuscripts in order to find out about the laws that regulate that particular system. It turns out that Bishop was aware of the artistic mechanisms involved in the seeds of creation and actually reflected on the topic.

The strong images, which capture the artist's perception and trigger his creation are known as *generative images*: very strong and powerful images, which contain a thrill of excitement and hold the freshness of a special moment of perception by the artist. They are potentially "pregnant" with creation, since they can work as a fertile soil where future works of art will grow.

Actually, generative images appear as powerful and eloquent signs that may lead to a very special sign, a very powerful one, which is the work of art. Through contemplation of such images, the artist is seduced by a vague and potential promise of something he does not know exactly what it is: the work of art in its embryonic form. Still a vague, incipient, undefined and infinite promise represented by a bundle of ephemeral impressions, which sets the artist on the way of a unique semiotic adventure. A journey marked by continuity and tendency, since the semiotic circuit of creation is an infinite chain of different sorts of representation aiming at a specific goal (SALLES, 1997: 1039).

In a word, the white bundle of clothes on the black boy's back is a very powerful generative image in "Under the window: Ouro Preto". It has had a thrilling effect on Bishop's senses. Alike the truck bumper, its driver and all the other impressive motifs of the poem, these elements have in different ways or degrees touched the artist's sensibility.

In fact a parade of passers-by, animals and vehicles go under the attentive narrator's eye and ear. And according to the poem, on the same spot where one can see a water pipe nowadays, there used to be three faces carved in soapstone:

** The water used to run out of the mouths
of the green soapstone faces. (One face laughed
and one face cried; the middle one just looked.
Patched with plaster, they're in the museum).
It runs now from a single iron pipe (BISHOP, 1994: 153).*

When one reads the poem, one immediately realizes that content and form harmoniously match. So here Bishop resorts to the *enjambement*, which happens when an idea mentioned at the end of one stanza still flows to the first line of the next one, as it happens in the case of the lines transcribed above. The *enjambement* would be miming the fluidity of the water flowing from the old fountain by the narrator's window, the big generative image to which the narrative thread and a variety of local color images converged.

By the way, one of the literary tropes used by Bishop to bring reality into poetry is to assert she always tells the truth in her poems. She often stresses the verisimilitude of her narration and even recognizes that "one can use one's life as material – one does, anyway" (E. Bishop–Robert Lowell apud G. IROUX, 1994: 562). But as ironically as it may sound, she somewhat contradicts herself here in there, as when she writes to the poet Robert Lowell that one should not expose oneself too much, because *art just isn't worth that much* (Ibidem).

When one applies this matter of verisimilitude to the poem under consideration, "Under the window: Ouro Preto", it is interesting to mention that the reader will be surprised if he ever gets to Ouro Preto. The moment he asks about the soapstone faces mentioned by Bishop, the visitor will hear that they are not at the local museum because that information is a false truth introduced in the poem; a truth, which would only be possible in the fictional world of poetry.

In fact, although there is an interesting museum in Ouro Preto, the faces described in the poem are not there, have never been there, because they are mere fiction. And that is a

strategy, a trope used by the author to transform the surrounding reality into poetic images, the Brazilian poetic images, which would always be alive in Bishop's verse.

CODE OF ABBREVIATIONS IN THE WORK

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{researcher's comments}

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