

REFLECTIONS ON BISHOP'S BRAZIL

REFLEXÕES SOBRE O BRASIL DE BISHOP

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ABSTRACT

This work proposes to analyse some of Elizabeth Bishop's Brazilian poems. It investigates how the exploration of a new world, its geography, history, habits and customs is reflected on the chosen poems, thus leading us readers not to final and definite views of Brazil, but to observations and questions about the way we see the world and ourselves. Bishop's Brazil is a liminal space that opens up new possibilities for discoveries and for questioning cultural assumptions. Bishop's reflective and ambivalent poetic voice, with its digressions, ellipses, shifting perspectives and scales, not only resists to any closed interpretation, but also suggests the relativity of any point of view. Bishop's Brazilian poems bear witness to the way the American poet was acquainted with the Brazilian culture, and also show her critical power to explore a territory that was unknown and new to her. It is also important to notice the reticent and ambiguous quality of those poems that make the reader go on a trip to Bishop's Brazil. Bishop's Brazilian poems, like her poems in general, are committed to opening space for reflection, silence, the unexplained and the unexpected. In short, Bishop's Brazil is depicted through her subtle perception that investigates, examines and questions the way the world around her is translated into verbal language.

Keywords: Bishop. Brazil. Discovery. Observations. Perspective. Questions.

RESUMO

Este trabalho faz uma leitura de alguns poemas brasileiros de Elizabeth Bishop. Ele examina como esses poemas, ao explorarem um mundo novo, sua geografia, história, hábitos e costumes, levam nós leitores não a visões completas e definidas sobre o Brasil, mas a observações e questionamentos sobre a maneira como nós enxergamos o mundo e a nós mesmos. O Brasil de Bishop é um espaço liminar que abre possibilidades para descobertas e para questionar pressupostos culturais. A sua voz poética reflexiva e ambivalente, com suas digressões, elipses, mudanças de perspectiva e de escala, não só resiste a interpretações rígidas, mas também ressalta a relatividade de qualquer ponto de vista. Seus poemas brasileiros testemunham o quanto a poeta americana conhecia a cultura brasileira, e evidenciam o esforço crítico envolvido na sua exploração deste território novo e desconhecido. É importante ainda observar a natureza reticente e ambígua desses poemas que fazem o leitor empreender uma viagem pelo Brasil de Bishop. Estes poemas, assim como seus poemas em geral, são comprometidos em abrir espaço para a reflexão, o silêncio, o inexplicável e o inesperado. Em suma, o Brasil de Bishop é representado através de seu poder sutil de percepção, capaz de investigar, examinar e questionar a forma pela qual o mundo ao redor dela é traduzido em uma linguagem verbal.

Palavras-chave: Bishop. Brasil. Descoberta. Observações. Perspectiva. Questões.

1 INTRODUCTION

A film about the poet Elizabeth Bishop has just been released in Brazil. *Flores raras* (FLORES, 2013) by the Brazilian director Bruno Barreto, is based on Carmen Oliveira's biographical

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account of the lengthy relationship between Bishop and the Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares. Carmen Oliveira's book, *Flores Raras e Banalíssimas* (OLIVEIRA, 1995), was considered a bestseller when published in 1995, the same year that Bishop's letters became available in Brazil with the book *Uma Arte*¹ (BISHOP, 1995). Oliveira's fictionalised biography was clearly destined to appeal to a wide audience with its novelistic style and breadth of focus. Despite involving a thorough biographical research on both Bishop and Soares, Oliveira's depiction of Bishop is ultimately the product of the novelist's fictional creation.

Indeed, Bruno Barreto's film is the poet's third appearance as a fictional character in the Brazilian media, since Bishop's life in Brazil is also the theme of the monologue *Um Porto para Elizabeth Bishop* (GÓES, 2001) by the playwright Marta Góes. Following a path that is similar to Oliveira's book, Góes's play, which is also quite based on Bishop's letters, focuses on the created persona Bishop, rather than on the poetry or the poet. As a consequence, the character Bishop becomes famous in Brazil while the poet's work remains virtually unknown outside the academic circles.

However, in the academic sphere, Bishop's reputation has been building in Brazil, since 1990 when the first volume of her poetry was published in Portuguese². The poet has increasingly been the object of valuable works of literary criticism. Bishop's importance in the Brazilian literary scene is also notable through a number of articles published in literary journals, or as book chapters, theses and dissertations on the work of the poet.³ In November 2011 an international symposium was held at the Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto to celebrate the centennial of Bishop's birth, as well as the sixtieth anniversary of the poet's arrival in Brazil⁴.

The different paths traced by Brazilians to the work and life of Bishop usually share the belief that our country has fulfilled the poet's yearning for a sense of home. The foremost image of Bishop's

¹ BISHOP, Elizabeth. *Uma arte: as cartas de Elizabeth Bishop*. Trad. Paulo Henriques Britto. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1995 is the translation of Robert Giroux's edition *One Art* (1994) but it includes some letters concerning Brazil which are not in the American edition.

² BISHOP, Elizabeth. *Poemas/Elizabeth Bishop*. Seleção, tradução e introdução de Horácio Costa. São Paulo. Companhia das Letras, 1990. There are also 3 important volumes of poetry published in Brazil respectively in 1999, 2001 and 2012, translated by Paulo Henriques Britto, who is also the translator of Bishop's volume of prose, published in Brazil in 1996. All these volumes were published by Companhia das Letras.

³ In 1993, Regina Przybycien, professor at Universidade Federal do Paraná, defended the first thesis in Brazil about the poet's work, which is entitled "Feijão preto e diamante: O Brasil na obra de Elizabeth Bishop". Another important researcher of Bishop's work in Brazil is Sílvia Anastácio, who published the book ANASTÁCIO, Sílvia Maria Guerra. *O Jogo das Imagens no Universo da Criação de Elizabeth Bishop*. S. Paulo: Anna Blume, 1999. Anastácio is a professor at Universidade Federal da Bahia, where she has a research group whose focus is the genetic criticism of Bishop's work. For further information see <http://www.gtcriticagenetica.ufba.br/UFBA/Publicacoes%20UFBA.htm>. It is also worth mentioning the valuable work of Maria Lúcia Martins, professor at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, a comparative study between the works of Bishop and the Brazilian poet Drummond: MARTINS, Maria Lúcia Milléo. *Dois artes: Carlos Drummond de Andrade e Elizabeth Bishop*. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2006.

⁴ The symposium was entitled "Dazzling dialects: Brazil in the eyes of Elizabeth Bishop" ["Deslumbrante dialética: o Brasil no olhar de Elizabeth Bishop"].

Brazil for both Brazilian scholars and the general public is that of a “safe harbour”, a home, however critical they may be of the idea.

In this article, I intend to discuss the way Bishop's Brazilian poems posit the oppositions between home and foreignness, home and travel, Brazil and elsewhere, only to prove these absolute categories fallacious. I shall also examine the ways in which Bishop implicates herself in the world she observes, from the uninstructed tourist of “Arrival at Santos” to the middle-class speaker of “Manuelzinho”, by framing questions that are at the same time geographical/cultural and personal, questions of travel and questions about ourselves as human beings.

2 THE DISCOVERY OF BRAZIL

In “Arrival at Santos”, the first poem in the section “Brazil” in Elizabeth Bishop's *Questions of travel*⁵, the country appears as a kind of toy country in the tourist's imagination:

So that's the flag. I never saw it before.
I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag,

but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
and paper money; they remain to be seen. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 89)

The poetic persona is surprised by the pre-existing political and economic organisation of the country, which evidences her vision of Brazil as a primitive place yet to be conquered. Here, like in other poems by the author, the voice of a *faux-naïf* speaker illustrates Bishop's questioning style that is characteristic in her poems.

Moreover, the tourist's disappointment with the Brazilian topography at her arrival at the port of Santos suggests that she had also idealised Brazil as an exotic country of glamorous beauty. The speaker's frustration is indicated by the description of the scenery that greets her, especially by the negative connotation suggested by the adjectives and adverbs, such as in: “impractically shaped”, ‘self-pitying mountains’, “sad”, “frivolous greenery”, “feeble pink, or blue”, “uncertain palms”:

Here is a coast; here is a harbour;
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
impractically shaped and – who knows? – self-pitying mountains,
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
and some tall, uncertain palms. [...] (BISHOP, 2004, p. 89)

⁵ The book *Questions of travel* is incorporated in *Complete poems (1927 – 1979)*, the edition we are quoting from, which was published posthumously. The volume *Questions of travel* was published in 1965 and is divided into two sections “Brazil” and “Elsewhere”. “Brazil” has eleven poems, but not all of Bishop's Brazilian poems are grouped here.

The adjectives in the extract suggest that the landscape that the tourist encounters is a faint, grotesque and incomplete version of what she had pictured in her mind. As the poem unfolds, however, the focus shifts from the description of the landscape to the traveller, who blames herself for her “immodest demands”, and, thus, in a way it seems to acknowledge that the cause of her frustration has less to do with Brazil and more with her own expectations:

[...] Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, and immediately,
after eighteen days of suspension? (BISHOP, 2004, p. 89)

The speaker’s anxiety is also hinted by her wish to find the familiar language and creature comforts, such as “bourbon and cigarettes”, at her arrival in the new world. Perhaps in an attempt to restore her confidence, she blames the bad impression caused by ports for her disappointment with Brazil at her arrival, as indicated by the extract below. At this point, though, the traveller’s hope seems to have wasted away, like the soap, as suggested by the rhyme hope/soap:

The customs officials will speak English, we hope,
and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.
Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,
or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,
the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps –
wasting away like the former, slipping the way the later

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,
either because the glue here is inferior
or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once;
we are driving to the interior. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 90)

Besides, her lack of faith in finding in her destination the immediate answers for “a different world, / and a better life, and a complete comprehension / of both [...]” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 89) is revealed by the rhymes inferior/interior, when she finally announces that “we are driving to the interior”, the last line of the poem (BISHOP, 2004, p. 90). “Interior” here implies both the interior of Brazil, and the inner journeys charted by the poems in *Questions of travel*.

In capturing the tension and anxieties at the moment of the arrival at a dreamed destination, the poem “Arrival at Santos” leads the reader to reflect on the nature and functions of travelling, on the traveller’s motivations to go abroad, on different purposes and expectations travellers have, all these questions are more centrally explored by the title poem “Questions of Travel”.

“Arrival at Santos” also plays with the old motifs of the journey – home, departure, arrival, destination, the liminal space between. Moreover, the traveller’s search for a different world and a better life implies the notion that to travel is to lack a place, even if temporarily. In this way, Bishop’s questions of travel are also questions of home, of what the meaning of home is.

The second poem in “Brazil”, entitled “Brazil, January I, 1502,” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 91 – 92), repeats the theme of travellers entering a new land, but this time not as tourists but as invaders or colonisers. The poem is introduced by the epigraph “... *embroidered nature... tapestried landscape. - Landscape into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark,” thus linking the historical moment of the arrival of the Portuguese at Guanabara Bay in 1502 to the moment the speaker contemplates the tapestry referred in the poem.

The epigraph calls the reader’s attention to the fact that a work of art, seen as a representation of reality, is the focus of the “Brazil, January I, 1502.” In a letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop remarks that the poem was motivated by her intention “to do something with the cliché of the landscape looking like a tapestry” (BISHOP apud KALSTONE, 1989, p. 194). The tapestry in this poem illustrates the human effort to appropriate what is being represented, to make the unknown look familiar and life’s multiplicity look manageable. As the poem unfolds, though, the speaker dismantles not only the tapestry’s domesticated vision of the landscape represented in the tapestry, but also the constructed scene of the Portuguese arrival at Guanabara Bay in 1502.

It must be observed that in the first lines of the poem, “Nature” is capitalized and referred as “she”: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs”. Such quote alludes to the relationship between nature and woman, which is explored as the poem unravels. In the final stanza, we read that the Portuguese colonisers, ironically just after the mass, head to the jungle in order to catch hold of some Indian women. The act of “[ripping] away into the hanging fabric” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 92) can be interpreted as a metaphor for the violation of both land and women. The discovery of the new world brings with it not only the possibility to plunder and usurp the land but also “a brand-new pleasure” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 92), the rape of the female Indians. In this sense, Bishop’s poem dialogues with travel writing and the history of colonisation:

What travel literature really fabricates is the primitive as a *body of pleasure*.... At the same time that it creates a profit, the voyage creates a lost paradise relative to a body-object, to an erotic body. (CERTEAU apud CAMPBELL, 2002, p. 271)

In the detailed report of the discovery of Brazil by Pedro Álvares Cabral’s fleet, in the famous “Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha” (CAMINHA, 1999), the native women are described through the covetous gaze of Portuguese invaders. The official document includes various passages describing the naked women’s physical beauty. It is also highlighted the fact that they were not ashamed to insistently look at the naked women’s private parts (CAMINHA, 1999, p. 28). Bishop’s poem

denounces the irony of the Portuguese missionary enterprise, a combination of religiosity and violence. In the history of the discovery of Brazil, it is well known that the Jesuit missionary priests, inadvertently or not, paved the way for the slaving expeditions that brought Indians from the interior to the coastal sugar plantations. Even though the poem attenuates the rapacious behaviour of the Portuguese conquerors by framing it by the metaphors of embroidery, it also evokes the history of slavery, violence and cruelty that resulted in the genocide of the Brazilian indigenous population.

When we have finished reading the poem, the opening lines have new implications, shown in: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 91). The quote implies that both the Portuguese invaders and the speaker, or any contemporary traveller, share the desire to appropriate, in their own terms, the foreign land. The plural “Januaries” suggests the repetition and the continuity of a process that has been running since the Portuguese invasion in 1502. This notion is stressed by the fact that “Brazil, January I, 1502” amplifies our reading of “Arrival at Santos”.

The same way the Portuguese conquerors impose on the Brazilian landscape their Catholic philosophy and morality, when they regard as “Sin” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 91) the mating ritual of lizards (BISHOP, 2004, p. 92), the tourist of “Arrival at Santos” reads the Brazilian topography according to her own preconceived ideas. Moreover, the invader’s appropriation of the land finds its equivalent in the tourist’s vision of new world as a primitive blank slate on which she could project her own will and imagination. There are also possibilities of connections between the invaders’ ambition to fulfil their dream of “wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 92) and the “Arrival at Santos” tourist’s “immodest demands for a different world / and a better life” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 89).

As it is often the case, here Bishop implicates herself and the reader in the objects of her criticism and despite the intolerable behaviour of the Portuguese invaders, we cannot avoid feeling a kind of complicity with them. Their experience of launching themselves into the unknown in search of a different world and a better life is “not unfamiliar” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 92) to the speaker or to the reader, because it speaks to our own dreams of a different world and a better life.

3 DRIVING TO THE INTERIOR

In “Questions of Travel” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93 – 94), the third poem in the section “Brazil”, the tourist becomes a traveller who immerses herself in the observed scenery. Our country is seen through the traveller’s eye on a Brazilian road. Bishop’s model of perception is similar to that of the natural historian Charles Darwin, and, like him, her “eyes fixed on facts and minute detail, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown” (BISHOP *apud* STEVENSON, 2002, p. 39). The traveller’s method of observation applied here can also be identified with that of the anthropologist’s who tries to

trace, even if “blurr”dly and inconclusively” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 94), the human history behind the things observed, such as when the speaker ponders,

on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 94)

“Questions of Travel”, like “Arrival at Santos”, begins by a disappointed traveller. In the first stanza, the words “too many”, “crowded”, “too rapidly”, ‘so many” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93) reveal the speaker’s discomfort with the overwhelming scenery in which clouds “[turn] to waterfalls under our very eyes”:

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93)

The speaker’s resistance to connect with what she sees is evidenced by the fact that she freezes the motion of the streams and clouds when she compares the mountains to “the hulls of capsized ships: “But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling, / the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships, / slime-hung and barnacled” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93).

The traveller’s anxiety prompts the poem’s questions about the limits and ethics of travelling: “Is it right...?, “Should we have stayed at home...?”, “Where should we be...?”:

Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?
What childishness is it that while there is a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around? (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93)

Unlike the tourist in “Arrival at Santos”, this traveller is not looking for a “complete comprehension” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 89) of her travel experience. Rather, her journey leads her to questions and conflicts that are never resolved. The questions indicate the traveller’s attempt to position herself, not only physically but emotionally, spiritually.

The traveller’s attempt to locate herself ends up with the opposition between travel and home. The question “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93) is prompted by the traveller’s discomfort with the travelling experience, which failed to confirm what

she had thought about the place. Also, the lines “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too?” posit the opposition between mind and body, imagination and experience. On that basis, home appears as an alternative to the feeling of estrangement, to the disconnection between the life of the mind and one’s experience in the world. This view is endorsed by Costello’s definition of homesickness/home in Bishop’s poetry:

Homesickness, in her poetry, does not depend upon a prior sense of being at home. It depends upon an idea of home as place of origin and innocence, where there is no stretch between the mind’s ideas and experience, between desire and representation (COSTELLO, 1991, p. 132).

Seen under this light, the concept of home also points towards the capacity to sympathise with the world around you. This perspective is validated by the references to “watching strangers in a play” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93) and “pantomimists” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 94), which lead us to read the word “pity”, constantly repeated in the poem, also in the Aristotelian sense of sympathy:

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 93 – 94)

“Questions of Travel” is a good example of Bishop’s poetry’s focus on minute details and description, and also of its characteristic digressions, meditations and shifting perspectives. Here we see the poem’s focus shift from the minute description of the physical features of the place to the speaker’s questions of travel, which ultimately lead her to an exercise of self-examination. The speaker of “Questions of Travel” is engaged in acts of “interpretative seeing” (STEVENSON, 2002, p. 32), that is, what she sees “mirror her mind performing its perceptions” (STEVENSON, 2002, p. 34), and the object of her observation is never completely and finally seen. In this sense, Stevenson argues that “Bishop’s poems are almost infinitely reflective” (STEVENSON, 2002, p. 32).

In the poem “Questions of Travel”, Bishop’s acute and detailed observations do not render any definite picture of Brazil. The country is presented as a fragmented and provisional reality, constructed as the traveller catalogues random things seen and heard along the road and makes conjectures about them. The speaker reflects that [it would have been a pity]:

- Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.

(In another country the clogs would all be tested.
Each pair there would have identical pitch.) (BISHOP, 2004, p. 94)

In the passage above, there is an interesting observation about Brazil. When the traveller notices the “disparate wooden clogs / carelessly clacking over”, she remarks that in another country it would be different. The disparate clogs can be seen as a metaphor that endorses a dialectical vision of Brazil as a country in which multiple and conflicting possibilities interact with each other and a synthesis is not always possible. This vision is central in the poem “Santarém”⁶ (BISHOP, 2004, p. 185 – 187):

I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung
from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
and they'd diverged. Here only two
and coming together. Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations
such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
– such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
in that watery, dazzling dialectic. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 185)

The speaker in “Santarém” recalls the confusion and disorder of the city located in the “conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 185). It is a place where all hierarchies and boundaries seem to collapse, while different kinds of orders are established in the midst of chaos. The speaker seems to have “liked the idea of the place” because it resists to interpretations based on binary dualisms. The city’s unpredictable (dis)order, with its surprising reversals, complex imbrications and sudden shifting of polarities, makes it a metaphor for a “watery, dazzling dialect”, that is, a kind of open ended dialect that suggests a liberating, inventive potential.

On the one hand, the use of the metaphor of the disparate clogs in the poem “Questions of Travel”, like the city Santarém recalled by the memoirist, consecrates Brazil’s “dazzling dialect” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 185) as a potentially creative (dis)order, which challenges and opens up dominant orders and preconceived ideas to critique. On the other hand, the connection between the wooden clogs and the “wooden cages” (BISHOP, 2004, p. 94) in the poem “Questions of Travel” invites us to look at Brazil’s ambiguity by taking into account its complex history, since “cages” alludes to the history of slavery in Brazil:

- Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.

⁶ “Santarém” is not in the section “Brazil” in *Questions of travel*, it was published posthumously in the year Bishop died, 1979, in the book *New poems*.

- Never to have studied history
in the calligraphy of songbirds' cages. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 94)

Besides, the history of songbirds' cages inevitably evokes the history of colonisation referred to in the poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502". Seen under the light of its historical roots, Brazil's dialectic has intricate implications. Bishop hints at these implications in her commentary about Brazil in one of her letters, in which she remarks that she was: "enthralled [...] by the paradoxical, affectionate, spontaneous Brazilian people, and the complications of a world at once feudal, 19th century, and contemporary, [...]" (BISHOP apud KALSTONE, 1989, p. 149 – 150)

Another poem by Bishop, "Manuelzinho" (BISHOP, 2004, p. 96 – 99), in the section "Brazil", offers insights into the complexities of Brazilian society as it draws the attention to the class and economic tension between a landowner and her domestic servant:

[Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking.]

Half squatter, half tenant (no rent) –
a sort of inheritance; white,
in your thirties now, and supposed
to supply me with vegetables,
but you don't; or you won't; or you can't
get the idea through your brain –
the world's worst gardener since Cain. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 96)

Described as "Half squatter, half tenant (no rent) — / a sort of inheritance", Manuelzinho's position is probably similar to the reality of thousands of domestic servants in Brazil who live in the landowner's property because they do not have anywhere else to live, and cannot be evicted because they have an ambiguous relation to the landowner and to the land. The quote "a sort of inheritance" implies that Manuelzinho is the remaining member of a larger family who has historically lived and laboured in the property. This idea is endorsed by the fact that the landowner conjectures that the steep paths all over her property might have been made by Manuelzinho's father or grandfather in the passage below:

I watch you through the rain,
trotting, light, on bare feet,
up the steep paths you have made –
or your father and grandfather made –
all over my property, (BISHOP, 2004, p. 96)

Thus, seen as "[...] a sort of inheritance", Manuelzinho is not a squatter, not a tenant, and probably not a gardener, but he lives in the property with his own family and they all financially depend on the landowner. His life story illustrates the "complications" mentioned by Bishop in her letters when she speaks of a world whose feudal structure of the 19th century, with its history of

slavery, left its mark in the country.⁷ Ultimately, the poem bears testimony to the way in which the colonial history can crudely manifest itself within the social anachronisms of Brazil today.

Manuelzinho is considered an outlandish, almost surreal figure by the landowner. What probably makes him outlandish to his mistress is the distance between her and her servant's world. This is ironically increased not only because of their physical proximity but also by the fact that they are, in a way, doomed to be together due to their relation to the property. Moreover, they did not agree on the rights and obligations that bind them together, which are not clear either, since such rights and obligations have also been "inherited" by them.

The poem reads from the perspective of the landowner, whose mixed feelings towards her servant is revealed by her tone, that can be patronising, annoyed, frustrated, mocking, guilty, affectionate. The landowner's ambiguous relation to her servant is also evidenced in the following lines: "You helpless, foolish man, / I love you all I can, / I think. Or do I?" (BISHOP, 2004, p. 99).

The gap between their worlds appears to be unbridgeable, as evidenced by the speaker's comments about Manuelzinho's children:

With blue sugar bags on their heads,
carrying your lunch,
your children scuttle by me
like little moles aboveground,
or even crouch behind bushes
as if I were out to shoot them!
- Impossible to make friends,
though each will grab at once
for an orange or a piece of candy. (BISHOP, 2004, p. 98)

The landowner also seems outlandish to the children, she claims that they hide from her, and keep a distance, as if she were threatening. For them, she belongs to another, very different world. It is implied by "- Impossible to make friends" that the landowner attempts to approach Manuelzinho's children but her effort is frustrated. However, she also keeps her distance, as indicated by the way she speaks about them, like when she compares the children to "moles". The children "scuttle by [the landowner]" certainly looking for some treats that they "will grab at once" and probably run out of her sight. That is as far as they go, in their attempt to communicate.

The communication between the landowner and Manuelzinho does not go very far either. She thinks that the strangest things happen to him (BISHOP, 2004, p. 97). Manuelzinho's behaviour, his own peculiar logic is so incomprehensible to his mistress that she can only see him allegorically, she takes off her "figurative" hat for him, that is, a metaphorical hat, as if he were a fictional character (BISHOP, 2004, p. 99). Indeed, sometimes the landowner sees Manuelzinho as "a fairy prince" (BISHOP, 2004, p. 97). Some other times she depicts him as a distant, blurred, obscure figure, covered

⁷ Slavery was abolished in 1888 in Brazil. It was the last country in the Western world to abolish slavery.

with fog (BISHOP, 2004, p. 98 – 99), or even as an apparition, a ghostlike person illuminated by the light of the moon (BISHOP, 2004, p. 99). It seems that the only possible connection between them is a metaphorical bridge, made of a mist of fireflies:

Between us float a few
big, soft, pale-blue,
sluggish fireflies,
the jellyfish of the air... (BISHOP, 2004, p. 99)

Like Santarém's dazzling dialectics, Manuelzinho also represents liberating, creative forces. However, the landowner cannot help her ambiguous feelings towards him. On the one hand, there are his poverty and the fact that he together with his family financially depend on her, or might have some right over that land; this causes the landowner to feel annoyed and guilty at the same time, as revealed by her ironical comment:

Account books? They are Dream Books.
In the kitchen we dream together
how the meek shall inherit the earth –
or several acres of mine (BISHOP, 2004, p. 98).

It seems that the landowner's image of Manuelzinho as a mystical, magical character helps her to keep some distance and her middle-class stance. She prefers to be simplistic so as to call him "improvident as the dawn" (BISHOP, 2004, p. 98), and thus blame him for his own misfortunes, namely, for being desperately poor and uneducated. In most cases, what she regards as mystical, magical or picturesque is actually a consequence of Manuelzinho's ignorance, such as his confusing "account books" (BISHOP, 2004, p. 98), his failure as a gardener, his resistance to accept that his father was dead. Seen in the context of the Brazilian reality, where there are so many Manuelzinhos, it is impossible to consider him totally unreal. In fact, Manuelzinho seems more real than allegoric, more tragic than comic.

Although the note that introduces the poem, "A friend of the writer is speaking", seems to distance Bishop from the speaker, she is implicated in her poem, as usual. Bishop was undoubtedly aware of the risks of exposing herself with "Manuelzinho", especially when she chooses to write from the landowner's point of view. However, I can see in "Manuelzinho" a good dose of Bishop's self-criticism, as well as her own effort to respond to and to respond to such a complex and paradoxical society.

4 CONCLUSION

When I read Bishop's Brazilian poems I feel as if I were really "driving to the interior" of Brazil, in the sense of getting in contact with its local culture, popular festivals, humble people. Bishop's meditative poetic voice, her shifting perspectives and interrogations, besides her focus on descriptions and details, not only elude definite views of aspects of Brazil but also highlight the relativity of any view. The openness of Bishop's Brazilian poems allows readings that are dissociated from the Brazilian reality; the characters of the poem "Manuelzinho", for instance, may seem unreal for some readers. It is up to the reader what to make of Brazil, whether to find Brazil or "elsewhere" in these poems. I myself am glad to be able to identify Brazilian people, their way of speaking, their habits and customs in Bishop's poems.

Bishop's discovery of Brazil has certainly provided an extraordinary opportunity for her to reinvent herself. As evinced by the poems we examined, the discovery of a new world, through the exploration of the Brazilian geography, history, habits and costumes have led the author to question about herself and also the readers to questions about themselves. The critical and conscious effort in Bishop's Brazilian poetry reflects the author's attempt to locate herself in a world marked by so many social injustices. In this way, Bishop's Brazilian poems evidence her efforts at constantly adjusting her eye and sensibility to a reality that was not hers. I am not only referring to the fact that she was a foreigner in Brazil, but also to her privileged upper class position in such an unequal society.

Yet Bishop was never blind to Brazilian dazzling dialectics. On the contrary, her Brazilian poems reveal an acute critical eye towards such paradoxes that define the Brazilian society and at the same time shed light to a deep understanding of the subtle, complex issues behind them. In this regard, it is worth noting that, like "Manuelzinho", many of Bishop's Brazilian poems are about the marginal, poor people in Brazil. Ultimately, the fact that her poetry can speak, so subtly and powerfully, and with so much beauty, about Brazilian life, is an indication of how immersed Bishop was in the Brazilian culture.

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