

## INTERMEDIALITY IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S POETRY

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**ABSTRACT:** Starting from the preciseness and expressiveness of the descriptions in Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, the essay relies on the concepts of intermediality, iconotext and ekphrasis for the analysis of three of the poet's best known poems, "Arrival at Santos", "Brazil, January 1, 1502" and "The Burglar of Babylon". The three are read as evidence of the poet's changing attitudes towards Brazil as well as illustrations of the role played by intermediality – the relation between Literature and the other arts and media – as tools for social and historical criticism.

**KEY WORDS:** intermediality; ekphrasis and cinematographic references in Elizabeth Bishop's poetry; Elizabeth Bishop and Brazil; social and historical criticism.

**RESUMO:** A partir da precisão e expressividade da descrição na poesia de Elizabeth Bishop, o ensaio recorre aos conceitos de intermedialidade, iconotexto e éfrase para a análise de três dos poemas mais conhecidos da poeta, "Arrival at Santos", "Brazil, January 1, 1502" e "The Burglar of Babylon". Os três são lidos como manifestações das mudanças de atitude da poeta em relação ao Brasil bem como ilustrações do papel representado pela intermedialidade – a relação entre a Literatura e as outras artes e mídias – como instrumentos de crítica histórica e social.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** intermedialidade; éfrase e efeitos cinematográficos na poesia de Elizabeth Bishop; Elizabeth Bishop e o Brasil; crítica social e histórica.

Since the publication of Elizabeth Bishop's first books, *North and South* (1946) and *Poems* (1950), critics have insistently noted the preciseness and expressiveness of description in her poems, involving places, animals and objects of the outside world. These features, consistent with the emphasis on observation and description typical of North-American modernist poetry and with the general principles of high modernism – reticence, impersonality, objectivity – did not, however, exclude something less immediately evident, a psychologizing, interiorizing turn, which

distinguished Bishop from her contemporary fellow poets. The topographic description in many of her texts often looks like an excuse for self-expression. Under the guise of realist descriptions, her poems slide towards a subtle subjectivity, hinting at emotions and empathies absent, for instance, from the production of her friend, and, up to a point, mentor, Marianne Moore. As has already been commented (OLIVEIRA, 2002: 41-49), a lyrical persona lurks in seemingly “objective” descriptions – an aspect of Bishop’s poetry which in time came to be studied by critics, among whom David Kalstone and the Brazilian poet/critic/translator Paulo Henriques Britto.

Elizabeth Bishop’s poems about the Brazilian physical and human landscape can thus be taken as a special manifestation of her subjectivity. By that I mean the expression, in descriptive poems, of the poet’s changing attitudes towards the country which was hers for almost two decades, particularly her growing involvement with its physical and social landscape. An initially cool, detached description of touristic and exotic details gradually yields to an interest in Brazilian history, art and culture, an empathy with the sufferings brought by colonization to indigenous people and then – especially in her ballad “The Burglar of Babylon” – to a sensitive analysis of inequities still apparent in our social system.

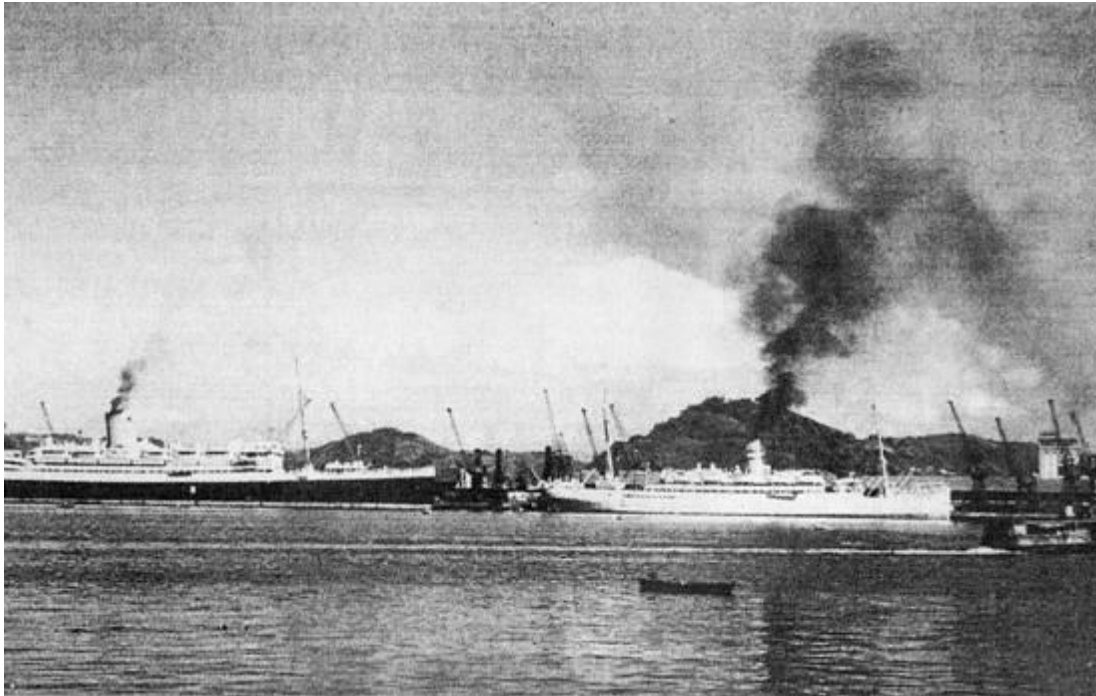
In this paper, I am initially interested in the poet’s attitude towards Brazil as illustrated by two of her best-known texts, “Arrival at Santos” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502”. Both can be read as examples of a literary phenomenon Liliane Louvel calls *iconotext*: a piece of writing saturated with plastic effects, a privileged space where visual and literary art cross (LOUVEL, 2006: 203). Working with linguistic signifiers, the writer emulates the painter’s brushstrokes. So much so that, offered to a painter, such texts could be transposed to the canvas. Iconotexts can exist in different scales, from the strongest pictorial impregnation – in which reference to a real or fictitious visual work is made explicit and developed – to the subtlest forms, in which painterly suggestions are,

so to speak, diluted in the literary text. Readers are led to represent to themselves the images embedded in the text and deduce their symbolic value or rhetorical intents.

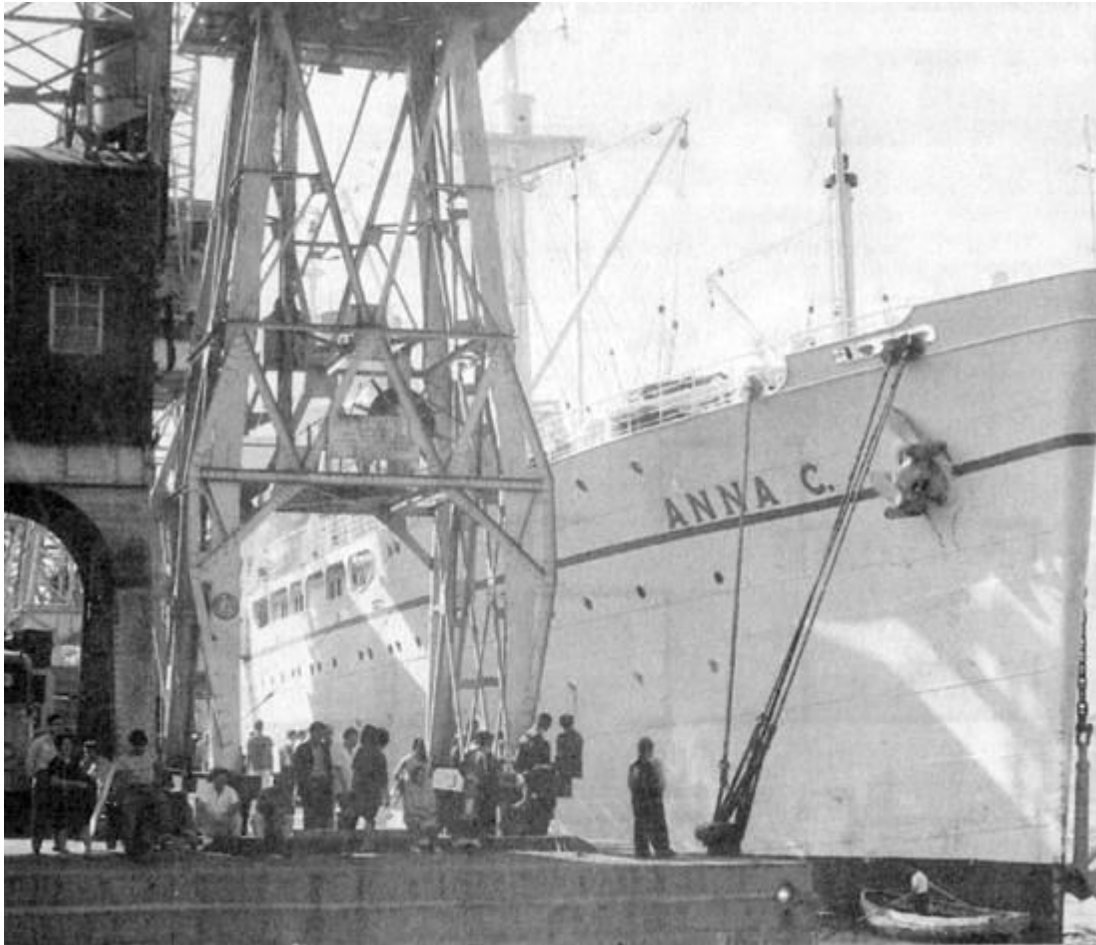
In a similar line, according to a better known terminology, both “Arrival at Santos” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” can be taken as ekphrastic poems, “verbal representations of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system”, according to Claus Clüver’s comprehensive definition (CLÜVER, 1997: 26). In fact, ekphrastic poems have long aroused critical interest, especially as literary transpositions of visual representations found in paintings, tapestries and photographs. These artworks may actually exist, even when not identified by a critic. Alternatively, they may be fictitious, or refer to no specific work, only to general aspects of an artist’s output. Not seldom, the allusion to the visual work consists of mere traces, or is restricted to a title, to a single reference, or then points to a generic model. To my purpose, the main interest of ekphrastic poems lies in the fact that they project the implied author’s response – an impression, a commentary, a meditation – to the intended visual work. They may also (and this is definitely true of Bishop’s texts) tackle extra-textual concerns, such as cultural, social and historical phenomena – precisely those aspects which, after the rise of cultural studies, have moved to the centre of critical attention. In such cases critics are invited to focus their attention on the way in which authors use the visual work to fulfill their rhetorical intent.

In both “Arrival at Santos” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the poetic persona comes out as the beholder of visual texts, revealing contrasting attitudes at different moments of Bishop’s Brazilian experience. The first poem, written in 1952, the year of the poet’s first arrival in Brazil, registers a tourist’s initial contact with the land. The poetic persona’s gaze is that of a curious, but cool, detached traveler. The eyes rest on dull, uninteresting details, as if taken by an absent-minded camera: “a coast”, “a harbor”, “some scenery”, “mountains” “a little church”, “warehouses”, “a tender”, passengers

leaving the ship... The casual description of the Brazilian coast evokes pictures of the port of Santos in the 1950's, like those reproduced in José Giraldo's book *Photografias e Fotografias do Porto de Santos* (1996). The black and white photos suggest what the poet may indeed have seen at her arrival, and may be taken as fitting metaphors for a newcomer's disappointment at the absence of the vivid colors associated with tropical scenery.



The port of Santos in the 1950's  
From *Photografias e Fotografias do Porto de Santos*



The *Anna C.*, Santos, in the 1950's.  
*Photografias e Fotografias do Porto de Santos*, 1996.

In this poem the factual description hardly disguises a muted disdain, as in the comments on the poor quality of Brazilian stamps and soap:

the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps--  
wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,  
either because the glue here is very inferior  
or because of the heat

So also the description of the Brazilian flag (“a strange and brilliant rag”) sounds anything but flattering. As it seems, the poetic voice did not even expect the country to have a flag at all.

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

Whatever interest is expressed seems limited to the hope of finding some English speaker at the customs, who will let the tourists keep the drinks and cigarettes smuggled in their luggage:

The customs officials will speak English, we hope,  
and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.

The condescending stance and the poem’s seeming simplicity do not exclude stylistic sophistication. Elegantly turned phrases invite readers to take the poetic attitude. Unusual adjectival usage betrays the voice of the poet tourist – “meager diet of horizon”, “self-pitying mountains (...) sad and harsh”, “frivolous greenery”, “uncertain palms”. Plants and lifeless objects are granted attributes properly used of humans. It is of course the poetic persona, not the palms or mountains that feel “self-pitying”, “sad”, “uncertain”. The revealing, anthropomorphizing tone, frequent in Bishop’s descriptive poems, is supported by the poetic voice, which finally acknowledges her half-suppressed emotions, her

immodest demands for a different world,  
and a better life, and complete comprehension  
of both at last.

“A better life”, it seems, the new country indeed brought the poet, or, at least, the possibility to yield to emotions suppressed in her native Puritan surroundings. “Complete comprehension” is always of course impossible. However, as time went on, Bishop’s poetry began to register a vision increasingly less incomplete of herself and of Brazil. Her personal life begins to be timidly used as material for her poetry, just as her descriptive poems more and more reveal changes in her attitude towards her new surroundings. “Arrival at Santos” typically ends with the line “We are driving to the interior”. In fact, the woman who lurks under the poetic mask leaves Santos and travels inland. But she also moves to her own inner self, and experiences a progressive understanding and assimilation of the country that welcomes her. The second poem analyzed in this paper, “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, turns out a particularly interesting illustration of this process as well as of ekphrastic poetry at the service of historical and ideological criticism.

As a matter of fact, “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, sounds totally different from “Arrival at Santos”. The gaze, no longer that of the disappointed tourist, is now that of the interested explorer, absorbed in the study of the landscape, the art and the history of the country. Besides, in the very first verse the plural “Januaries” makes clear that the poetic persona is concerned with more than the particular events which took place in Brazil during the Portuguese colonization. The poem first concentrates on what might have been the Portuguese invaders’ initial impressions of the land, but then moves on to the poetic self’s interpretation of ensuing events. In some verses, the description sounds like a recapitulation of sad occurrences common to all colonial practices, such as the enforcement of alien beliefs and the cruelty to natives, women in particular. For both purposes ekphrasis proves a most convenient tool.

To begin with, the poem may be taken as an intersemiotic transposition of a visual work of art, a tapestry whose precise identification has not been traced, but which can be clearly related to certain Gobelin tapestries based on cartoons reproducing paintings of

seventeenth-century Brazil. We may here remember that the Gobelins were a family of dyers who, in the middle of the 15th century, established themselves in the Faubourg Saint-Marcel, Paris. In 1602, Henry IV of France rented factory space for his Flemish tapestry makers on the current location of the Gobelins Manufactory adjoining the Bièvre river. In 1662 the works in the Faubourg Saint Marcel, with the adjoining grounds, were purchased by Jean-Baptiste Colbert on behalf of Louis XIV and made into a general upholstery factory, in which designs both in tapestry and in all kinds of furniture were executed under the superintendence of the royal painter, Charles Le Brun, who served as director and chief designer from 1663-1690. On account of Louis XIV's financial problems, the establishment was closed in 1694, but reopened in 1697 for the manufacture of tapestry, chiefly for royal use. <sup>1</sup>

As the Brazilian historian Carla Mary S. Oliveira (2001: 21, n. 52) reminds us, in the seventeenth century some drawings representing Brazilian landscape were taken to Europe and used decades later as a basis for two series of tapestries woven at the Gobelin factory. This fact explains the allusion to the art of tapestry in the epigraph of “Brazil, January 1, 1502”. The kind of artwork Elizabeth Bishop certainly had in mind when she used the reference to tapestry in the epigraph can be exemplified by “Les Pêcheurs” (“The Fishermen”) – a tapestry from the Manufacture Royale de Gobelins, probably after a design by Albert Eckhout and Frans Post. The reference to Eckhout is more than justified: as court painter to the colonial governor of Dutch Brazil, he created many works similar to “Les Pêcheurs, life-size paintings of Amerindians, Africans, and Brazilians of mixed race in support of the governor’s project to document the people and natural history of the colony. A lot of interesting information as well as images of this and other tapestries have been made available by the curator and art historian Esther

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<sup>1</sup> The explanations from this paragraph were drawn from several entries on Wikipedia.



Schreuder in her site <http://estherschreuder.wordpress.com/>. Here is one of these images, in fact of “Les Pêcheurs”:



“Les Pecheurs”. Available at <http://estherschreuder.wordpress.com/> accessed on March 13, 2012.

“Les Pêcheurs” is one of a series of eight named *Les Anciennes tentures des Indes*, which became a gift from one sovereign to another: only the richest people could afford tapestries, which were exceptionally expensive to produce on account of the materials, labor and time involved. Tapestries from the *Anciennes tentures des Indes* series decorated the palaces of Louis XIV, of the Knights of Saint John on Malta, of Peter the Great at Peterhof near St.Petersburg and many other royal residences. “*Les Pecheurs*” shows three Indians and an African woman with a basket of flowers. They are not ethnographic portraits but representations of people going about what Europeans imagined was their ordinary occupations, in a setting that looks like an exotic version of paradise. A number of elements in this composition, such as the large palm tree to the side of the scene, are based on Albert Eckhout’s painting *African woman*.



Unlike her counterpart in the painting, the woman in the tapestry does not wear European jewellery and her headgear is different. So also she has flowers and plants in her basket, whereas in the painting it contains fruit.

The cartoons for the *Les Anciennes tentures des Indes* series were probably drawn by Albert Eckhout himself or by the renowned tapestry weaver Maximiliaan van der Gucht. In her book *Visions of Savage Paradise* Rebecca Parker Brienen suggests that, as early as the 1640s, Prince Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, Governor-General of the Dutch colony in Brazil from 1637 to 1644, may have informed Eckhout and Frans Post of his plans to have tapestries made from the artworks painted for him by the two artists. But how did the tapestries come to be in Louis XIV's hands? The explanation has to do with the fact that in 1678 Prince Nassau-Siegen shipped a number of drawings, some 40 paintings, cartoons, animal skins, stuffed birds and other objects to Paris. He was in serious financial straits and hoped that Louis XIV would buy these items in order to commission the celebrated Gobelins factory to make tapestries based on them. The Prince

emphasized the value of the Brazilian collection as something novel and totally distinctive. In a letter to Louis' minister Simon Arnaul de Pomponne the Prince wrote:

...on peut former une tapisserie pour meubler une grande sale ou galerie, ce qui serait une chose tres rare, qui ne se trouve plus au monde [...] ce beau pays de Bresil lequel n'a pas son pareil dans le ciel [...] voyant la grande difference entre l'Europe et l'Afrique"...

The collection was accepted, even though the tapestries were not made until seven years after Prince Nassau-Sigen had died. A total of eight series were made, until the cartoons were worn out, when a new series, based on the old one, was designed by Alexandre-Francois Desportes.

This detour about tapestries made after Dutch drawings has been necessary to explain the allusion to tapestry in the epigraph of Bishop's poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502". The epigraph reads: "embroidered nature... tapestried landscape. --*Landscape Into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark". The reference can be traced to the art historian Kenneth Clark's book on the origin and development of landscape art, and gives witness to the knowledge of Brazilian art and culture that Elizabeth Bishop had been acquiring: she had certainly been reading about Brazilian art. In the poem itself, the description strongly suggests paintings by the artists mentioned above, who were brought to Brazil by Nassau-Sigen: Albert Eckhout and Frans Janszoon Post (the first European artist to paint South American landscapes.) Both Eckhout and Post registered the human and topographic Brazilian landscape during the Dutch occupation. In the poem, the poetic persona gazes on one of these landscape tapestries. Such as the Gobelin tapestry "Les Pecheurs", it represents the local flora and fauna, as well as the native inhabitants.

Bishop's text invites readers to imagine the Brazilian landscape such as it may have struck the invaders' eyes on the date announced in the title – "Brazil, January 1, 1502" – when the Portuguese arrived at Guanabara Bay, which they mistakenly took for the mouth of a great river in what was to become the city of Rio de Janeiro. The descriptive details take thirteen of the fifteen verses of the first stanza and twelve of the twenty-first of the second, which corresponds to fifty per cent of the 153 lines of the whole poem. The reader can hardly refuse the invitation to "enter" the "painting" offered by the vivid ekphrastic construction. I quote:

big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,  
blue, blue-green, and olive,  
with occasional lighter veins and edges,  
or a satin underleaf turned over;  
monster ferns  
in silver-gray relief,  
and flowers, too, like giant water lilies  
up in the air--up, rather, in the leaves--  
purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,  
rust red and greenish white;  
(...)  
A blue-white sky, a simple web,  
backing for feathery detail:  
brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,  
a few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;

The poetic voice seems intent on demonstrating how far the poet's pen can emulate the painter's brush. The silent poetry in the painting (or in the tapestry based on it) indeed becomes a speaking picture. The reader cannot help being taken by the painterly minutiae of the description, its careful attention to forms ("simple web", "feathery detail", "brief arcs"), textures ("silver gray relief", "satin underleaf"), size ("big

leaves, little leaves, giant leaves “,”giant water lilies”, “monster ferns”) movements (flowers that seem to rise in the air), spatial arrangements (plants in the lower plane, the sky higher up ), shades of color (“blue-green”, “two yellows”, “rust red”, “greenish white”, “blue white” “pale green”), subtle analogies (plants which suggest feathers, garlands which evoke wheels), chiaroscuro effects (the “swarthy” palms, in contrast with the “blue- white sky”).

In this static description – the first part of the poem – Literature, an art of time, seems to give up its temporal dimension, in order to emulate the two-dimensional tapestry, an art of space. In the “verbal tapestry” (Ashley Brown’s apt formulation,1991, p. 230) pictures spring up, “fresh as if just finished/ and taken off the frame”. No art lover reader can help placing this as an allusion to meticulous Dutch paintings of seventeenth-century Brazil, as in some landscapes by Frans Post. Several of them include illustrations of the Brazilian flora and fauna, as well as of its inhabitants, and might indeed have become a model for Gobelin tapestries.



Would it be possible to claim that in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the poetic persona’s interest lies only in the richness of the ekphrastic description, which would prove useful to botanists, as, for instance, nineteenth-century drawings of Brazilian flora and fauna by nineteenth-century artists/naturalists/botanists like Auguste de Saint-Hilaire (1779-1853). A careful reading of the poem suggests a decisively negative answer.

Let us go back to the first three verses. They inform the reader that the vision of nature offered in the “verbal tapestry” is that of the landscape the poetic persona imagines to have struck the Portuguese eyes when they took sight of the great tropical forest.

nature greets our eyes  
exactly as she must have greeted theirs:  
every square inch filling in with foliage

The ninth verse of the second stanza similarly evokes the world of the conquerors – a world merged in the Christian notion of sin, usually of a sexual nature. This becomes explicit when the attention is drawn to something in the foreground, precisely called “Sin:” five sooty dragons near some massy rocks”. Those dragons are, in fact, lizards in heat, about to pursue a female.

Still in the foreground there is Sin:  
five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.  
The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes  
are on the smaller, female one, back-to,

The female dragon seems to be receptive, as shown by  
her wicked tail straight up and over,  
red as a red-hot wire.

This description has its roots in Elizabeth Bishop's daily life in Brazil. In a letter to Marianne Moore, she tells her friend how she amused herself watching lizards' sexual play in the porch of the house she shared with Lota Soares in Petropolis. However, in the poem, the reference to the lizards chasing the female is not a mere picturesque detail: it acts as a sort of dramatic presage, anticipating something similar about to happen in the human world, the Portuguese invaders' persecution of native women. Having left behind their sophisticated European background, with its "lovers' walks", "bowers", "cherries to be picked", its "lute music", the invaders, described as "Christians, hard as nails", now long for a "brand-new pleasure". They are out to chase Indian women, like the black lizards in pursuit of the female. At this point the static description – suitable for the intersemiotic transposition of pictures in a two-dimensional tapestry – suddenly yields to narrative, with its necessary temporal element. Accordingly, the poetic persona implies that the tapestry she describes resorts to the device traditionally used by arts of space to emulate the temporal dimension – the suggestion of movement, which obviously supposes a previous and a posterior position. Thus, in their sexual sport, which ironically, they practice soon after Mass, the conquerors

ripped away into the hanging fabric,  
each out to catch an Indian for himself—

The transparent metaphor of "ripping into the hanging fabric" leaves no doubt about the Portuguese invaders' behavior: they "rip", that is, rape, defenseless Indian women. From the rapists' perspective, the resisting natives are "maddening little women", whose cries can hardly be distinguished from that of the tropical birds around.

That is clearly not the poetic persona's viewpoint. Ironically, she focuses on a detail: the brutal conquerors see no contradiction between humming songs associated with religious rites and their violence against Indian women. *L'homme armé*, which they

carelessly hum, a French secular song from the time of the Renaissance, was the most popular tune used for musical settings of the Ordinary of the Mass. This ironic juxtaposition of rape and Christian rituals points to a shift in perspective. From the Portuguese viewpoint, it moves to that of the poetic voice, attuned with the raped women's circumstances. Vainly trying to evade their persecutors, they are represented as figures "retreating", "retreating" behind the hanging fabric – that is, running away to try and find refuge in the forest.

The poem thus sums up a little drama, whose background is sketched in the initial static description, suitable for visual representations. The temporal dimension typical of Literature is recovered by the dramatic narrative of the invaders' sexual violence against Indian women. The poetic voice thus recapitulates a fact tiresomely repeated in the history of colonizations: the conquest of the land has always been coupled with the sacrifice of women. This gave us José de Alencar's *Iracema*. In French Literature, the "honey-lipped virgin" comes back to life as Chateaubriand's *Atala*. So also, as he formulates his "Malinche complex", Otávio Paz evokes the Mexicans' violated mother, symbolic of so many rapes in conquered lands. In the same line, a Moçambique poet, Noêmia de Souza, exclaims

Ó minha África misteriosa e natural / Oh my mysterious and  
natural Africa  
minha virgem violentada, / my violated virgin,  
minha mãe! /my mother!

If "Brazil, January 1, 1502" shows Elizabeth Bishop's increasing penetration into Brazilian art and history, it simultaneously underlines her sympathy for the victims of the historical process. As the poem implies, Europe's "dream of wealth and luxury" could only come true in the New World at the expense of the crushing of the weaker by the



stronger. The poem is also an apt illustration of how much ekphrastic poetry, a liminal creation between Literature and the visual arts, can serve historical and ideological criticism.

In her ever deeper plunge into Brazilian life and culture, Elizabeth Bishop will return to other aspects of the same theme – the pleasures of the few being paid for by the suffering of the many. Among other poems, “The Burglar of Babylon” – in fact a long ballad in the traditional format – turns on a similar question, only now the literal colonization focused in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is replaced by the symbolical colonization grounded on race and social group. In the ballad, the social inequities of contemporary Brazil take the centre of the stage, replacing the historical foundations of Brazilian life in “Brazil – January 1, 1502.”

The ballad of course does not belong to the ekphrastic genre featured in the two earlier poems. An intermedial approach to its analysis is supported by the concept of intermedial reference, proposed by Irina Rajevsky in her study about intermediality in Literature. As Rajevsky reminds us, a textual construction may remain purely literary, and yet evoke effects typical of another art, as in the musicalization of fiction or in ekphrastic poetry itself. According to this view, the intermedial reference in “The Burglar of Babylon” is to the cinema. As we shall eventually see, the implied author’s viewpoint moves from place to place or character to character, as in films.

The poem was Elizabeth’s response to actual facts published by newspapers in Rio de Janeiro where, in the mid 1960’s, she had come to share an apartment with Lotta Soares. From the window of the apartment the poet could watch events similar to those narrated in the poem: the spectacle of policemen going up the hill in order to hunt delinquents living in a slum called “Babylon”. The English text was first published in *The New Yorker*, in November 1964, and a translation by Flávio Macedo Soares appeared almost simultaneously in Rio de Janeiro, in *Cadernos Brasileiros* (BROWN, 1991: 235).

From the start, the poetic voice makes explicit the theme of the ballad: the “terrible stain” in Brazilian social life:

On the fair green hills of Rio  
There grows a fearful stain:  
The poor who come to Rio  
And can't go home again

There is little doubt about the nature of that stain: the yawning financial and educational gap between social groups, which tempts poor young men born in the slums to risk their lives in order to traffic drugs. Such is the object of the poem's criticism, rather than the crimes committed by the central character in the ballad, a young man called Micuçu. The sympathy for the criminal emerges in the moving description of the dogged persecution that ends in his death. The same applies to the ambivalence of the images used to portray both Micuçu (who has just escaped a maximum security prison) and the policemen who hunt him down. The poetic voice does not disguise her sympathy for the fugitive. He is indeed a “a burglar and killer”, but with redeeming humane traits. As a matter of fact he risks and finally forfeits his life because, instead of hurrying to a safe hiding place, he goes back to the slums in order to say goodbye to his foster mother, the aunt who brought him up.

He did go straight to his auntie,  
And he drank a final beer.  
He told her, "The soldiers are coming,  
And I've got to disappear."  
(...)  
"Don't tell anyone you saw me.  
I'll run as long as I can.  
You were good to me, and I love you,  
But I'm a doomed man."

Micuçu is thus a loving, grateful son. Besides, unlike the colonizers described in Brazil, “January 1, 1502”, he is no rapist. The poem explicitly says “he never raped”. The images of the policemen who persecute him prove just as ambivalent. In a way they represent law and order, society’s defense against crime. However, in the poem, they also recall death and corruption, as suggested by the buzzards that precede the helicopters full of policemen flying over the slum.

A buzzard flapped so near him  
He could see its naked neck.  
He waved his arms and shouted,  
"Not yet, my son, not yet!"

An army helicopter  
Came nosing around and in.  
He could see two men inside it,  
but they never spotted him.

The buzzards announce the arrival of the soldiers, just as in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, the lizards chasing the female prefigure the Portuguese raping Indian women. The sad irony is that Micuçu’s persecutors are in a way his brothers: they belong to the same social group as their prey. This is made clear by the death of the commanding officer, who is accidentally hit by a bullet shot “in a panic” by one of his own soldiers. The officer “was from Pernambuco”, a state in the poor Brazilian northeast, “the youngest of eleven” children. Like so many slum dwellers, he was “a Severino”, a general nickname for poor migrants. As a poorly paid policeman, he certainly also lived in the slums, dangerously close to the criminals he had to hunt.

But the soldiers were nervous, even  
with tommy guns in hand,  
And one of them, in a panic,  
Shot the officer in command.

He hit him in three places;  
The other shots went wild.  
The soldier had hysterics  
And sobbed like a little child.

The dying man said, "Finish  
The job we came here for."  
he committed his soul to God  
And his sons to the Governor.

They ran and got a priest,  
And he died in hope of Heaven  
--A man from Pernambuco,  
The youngest of eleven.

The reader is again reminded of the “terrible stain” in a society that throws its victims against one another. Micuçu and the policeman die almost simultaneously, like the brothers that they in fact are. The officer’s death thus merely anticipates that of the criminal, who vainly tries to escape. He had planned to hide in an abandoned fort dating back to the days of Villegaignon (the reference constitutes another evidence of Bishop’s interest in Brazilian history, her knowledge of the sixteenth-century’s French invasion). But the plan fails miserably. After a sleepless night, in the light of an ugly yellow sun, “like a raw egg on a plate”, Micuçu is at last mortally hit. His death, following close upon that of the policeman, seals the conflation of two complementary roles: the condemned man and his executioner, the persecutor and his prey, the hunter and the hunted one.

Micuçu's death leaves everybody relieved, except for his aunt. Desperate, she explains:

“I raised him to be honest,  
Even here, in Babylon slum.”

The woman's words may be read as an implicit comment on the virtual impossibility of educating children in the slums. In such surroundings, what can be expected from a young man “raised to be honest” by a well-meaning mother? Will he choose to work hard for a few coins, when consorting with a drug dealer will bring him something in his eyes close to opulence? No wonder many prefer the more attractive hypothesis: to make money by catering to the vice of rich people, the same who, from the safety of their apartment windows, point their binoculars to watch the soldiers swarming up the hills.

As mentioned above, from the perspective of interart or intermedial studies, the ballad offers an additional interest: the implied narrator's viewpoint changes boldly, as a filming camera. Horizontally, it focuses on events taking place among the slum dwellers, or in Micuçu's aunt's bar. The reader is told how

Children peeked out of windows,  
And men in the drink shop swore,  
And spat a little cachaça  
At the light cracks in the floor.

The viewpoint then shifts to a vertical direction, from the top of the hill to the goings on of people on the beach below:

Far, far below, the people  
Were little colored spots,  
And the heads of those in swimming  
Were floating coconuts.

The camera next focuses on the women on the streets below, who turn their eyes to the top of the hill, trying to follow the police hunt taking place up there:

Women with market baskets  
Stood on the corners and talked,  
Then went on their way to market,  
Gazing up as they walked.

So also other observers gaze up at the drama unraveling in the slum:

Rich people in apartments  
Watched through binoculars  
As long as the daylight lasted.  
And all night, under the stars

In “The Burglar of Babylon” Elizabeth Bishop’s growing empathy with the underprivileged reaches its climax. The poem, which has been called “the best and most human of modern ballads” (BROWN, 1991: 235), thus makes up a kind of final landmark in the journey undertaken in “Arrival at Santos”, and carried on in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”. Otherwise, the analysis of cinematic references in the ballad illustrates the kind of contribution that studies of intermediality may offer to the reading of literary texts.

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