

# BISHOP FICTIONALIZES CREATION IN A WATERCOLOR- LOOKING POEM

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## RESUMO

*Esta análise mostra como as imagens geradoras são capazes de influenciar o surgimento de uma obra de arte. Ocorre que o artista embarca numa aventura semiótica única, que é o processo de criação, impulsionado pela força dessas imagens poderosas. Elizabeth Bishop no poema "North Haven" ficcionaliza a criação poética, um processo marcado, ainda, por uma sensação de constante reajustar-se. A estrutura de "North Haven" reside no poder da analogia entre pintura/natureza, sendo que nesse poema, Bishop procura pintar com palavras.*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Cette analyse montre comment les images génératrices sont capables d'influencer l'éveil d'une oeuvre d'art. On constate que l'artiste s'embarque dans une aventure sémiotique unique ou dans le processus de création, poussé par la force de ces puissantes images.*

*Dans le poème "North Haven", Elizabeth Bishop met la création poétique en fiction, un processus marqué encore par une sensation de réarrangement constant. La structure de "North Haven" réside dans le pouvoir de l'analogie entre la peinture et la nature étant donné que dans ce poème, Bishop essaie de peindre avec des mots.*

#### ABSTRACT

*This paper shows how generative images can influence the emergence of a work of art. The artist embarks in a unique semiotic adventure, which is the process of creation, prompted by the power of these strong images. Elizabeth Bishop in the poem "North Haven" fictionalizes poetic creation, a process also marked by a sense of constant readjustment. The structure of "North Haven" lies on the power of analogy between painting/nature, and in this poem Bishop seeks to paint with words.*

#### INTRODUCTION

**O**ne of the most influential North American writers, Elizabeth Bishop was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1911. She spent her childhood in Nova Scotia, and years later, back to the United States, Bishop went to Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N. York, where she graduated in 1934. In 1951 she came to Brazil, where she intermittently spent almost 20 years; her first years in Brazil were the happiest in her life up to then, most of the time in a country house that belonged to her friend Lota Macedo Soares; the house still exists, located in Petrópolis, a town in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Later on, she lived for occasional periods of time in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and also in Ouro Preto, the latter known as a baroque historical town in the state of Minas Gerais, where she bought a colonial house.

On her definitive return to the United States, Bishop taught at Harvard University and worked there almost until her death. However, the vast majority of her manuscripts is not in Harvard, but in Vassar College. She died of a cerebral aneurysm at the age

of 68, in Boston, 1979. One year before she died, however, Bishop published the poem "North Haven", which immortalizes the movement of creation, the constant readjustment of images being formed in the poet's mind and registered in her drafts.

#### GENERATIVE IMAGES

Generative images are very strong, 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. So, when one takes into account the cage of semiotic representation, generative images appear as powerful and eloquent signs that may lead to a very special sign, very powerful sign, which is the work of art. Through contemplation of such images, the artist is seduced to 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 makes the artist embark in a unique semiotic adventure. A journey marked by continuity with tendency, and tendency for continuity, since the semiotic circuit of creation is an infinite chain of representations (Salles 1997: 1.039).

Regarding the generative images, which might have inspired Bishop to write her poem "North Haven", there is a great amount of private papers reporting the poet's stay on the island with the same name; then, she gives minute descriptions not only of the birds and flowers she saw there, but also of that quiet bay. In one of Bishop's letters to her doctor Anny Baumann, she comments:

*It's just 6 in the morning and perfectly beautiful – after two days of rain and thick fog yesterday, the sun has come up and everything is shining with drops of fog; there are hundreds of small silvery cobwebs all over the grass (...) I do hope someday you can get to this island – I call it North Heaven instead of North Haven. Fields*

*of flowers, thousands of birds, a view of the Camden Hills ten miles across Penobscot Bay and all the glories of nature keep us busy exclaiming with joy all the time*  
(E. Bishop – A. Baumann. July 14, 1977. V.C. Box 23.8.).

Dealing with Bishop's private notes written in 1977, it was also possible to find a trace of the poem, at the end of the following manuscript, ending like that: "[North Haven, Maine, 1978]":

*There are 2 or 3 sets of clouds at different heights  
The highest look like milk-weed silk  
Blown out, thin & sheer, vast-  
Did I say that, or did someone else?  
-after all, it doesn't really matter  
because that's what they do look like  
(& the truth can't be repeated too often)  
(Bishop, 1977 *apud* Millier, 1993: 531).*

In fact, singing birds, blooming flowers, a blue bay and a clear sky, with only a few milky clouds rising over a scene of extraordinary tranquillity, are motifs that appear in Bishop's private papers; that recur again and again in the "poem-picture" she intends to "paint" in "North Haven". Indeed, in these papers there are long lists of flowers and birds that appear on the island; but in the poem, only a few of these elements will survive to represent the flora and fauna of the place. According to Bishop, the lines that describe flowers and birds are her favourite ones, and she writes about that to her friend Frank Bidart: "The flowers & birds parts are actually the best" (E. Bishop – Frank Bidart. July 9, 1978 *apud* Giroux 1994: 625).

Throughout the whole poem, there is a pervasive impression of mobility and immobility under way. Even the flowers described by the author appear in draft one "still in bloom"; and from draft three on, some of these flowers will be focused on "still burning (...) the Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars" (Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C. Box 60.5). Anyway, this impression of mobility comes and goes throughout the drafts.

In fact, nature in "North Haven" often seems to be on the move, in a wave of constant transformation. And it keeps appealing to the reader's senses all the time, notably to his sight, but also to his smell and touch; to illustrate such a point, it is interesting to stress that the flower named "Fragrant Bedstraw", mentioned in the poem, is especially famous for its overpowering scent and big thorns.

Moreover, the choice of words associated with visual arts seems to draw the effects of the poem close to those of canvas. So, the combination of both arts, painting and writing, is unfolded from the very first draft; and step by step, the genesis of the poem suggests a watercolor being painted with words. With light, bright, varied and very delicate brush strokes. Indeed, it is possible to see Bishop adding, eliminating, lightening, darkening, or mixing colors together on her "palette"; or still, she keeps juxtaposing different shades, in order to get a variety of colored effects. And while nature is being transformed in such a way, those flowers seem to be humanized in the poetic lines, always ready to reappear again and again: "and more {flowers} returned, to paint the meadows with delight", as one can read in the published poem. It is interesting to observe how the scene is being built up, when one reads the transcriptions:

"#1( [all] paint[ing] the meadow <s> with delight

#4 and more returned, to paint the meadows with delight"

(Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C. Box 60.5).

The verb "paint" has changed from simple present to gerund, as an attempt from the part of the author to convey a sense of mobility to the picture. Finally, Bishop uses "paint" in the infinitive form, preceded by "returned", which stresses the idea of reiteration, renewal. So, this combination of elements intensify the notion of repetition; of a watercolor being painted. The idea of renewal is implied in the ever changing cycle of nature suggested in the poem; a change that is also present in the sequence of Bishop's poetic drafts.

Indeed, the structure of "North Haven" lies on the power of analogy between painting and nature. And Bishop even writes the

word "similes" on the left margin of draft one, probably hinting at some similes she would have in mind to build up the main images of the poem:

"#1 [the thing] <Nature> goes on and on, the same, the same or [like] <same> enough to make us think >>so the bird's songs that

<<similes<<

(...) revise

Repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise" (Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C. Box 60.5).

The renewal of nature can also be observed in the song of birds, which implies repetition and a certain amount of change, too. Moreover, when a flight of birds takes leave, many of these actually return to their place of origin, later on; but others don't. Meanwhile, some others keep joining the group, by adjusting themselves to the existing flying pattern, and thus reassuring the perpetuation of the group. In "North Haven", Bishop suggests that the phenomena of repetition and revision are present in poetic creation, as well as in nature, and the poem arises from this consideration; from this image of repetition, that also implies renewal.

So, such an idea appears in the published poem in the following way: "The Goldfinches are back, or others like them" (Bishop, 1994: 188), which is suggested in draft one as: "The swallows are back, or others just the same" (Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C. Box 60.5). It does not matter the type of bird, whether it is a goldfinch, a swallow, or any other; they are all birds, which depart from their habitat in groups, every single summer. The message conveyed through this image is that in terms of nature, as in creation, there is a cyclical movement to be revisited. In the case of poetic creation, each draft not only repeats some ideas of previous sketches, but also rewords these ideas, by adding new shades of meaning to them. In a word, why not learn with birds, that fly away and come back in a renewed form to their place of origin? In such a way, that continuity in the cycle of nature seems to perpetuate itself without end...

While Bishop adjusts the perspective and sharpness of the “picture” painted in “North Haven”, she keeps testing some adjectives to qualify the calm bay in the “canvas poem”:

“#1 [This morning is] <Today’s> so still  
 (...) the new cones on the spruce [trees  
 If they wd. Stay still, or stiller]- >> [here- calm or  
 not calm]??”

(Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C. Box 60.5).

Then, Bishop tests some more “brush strokes”, in order to get either the effect of mobility or immobility, that Arnheim (an expert in images) would define as “the picture dynamics”. According to him, “although the picture does not have dynamic properties, these are ascribed to it by the observer (...); by the observer’s visual tension, which is attracted to the picture” (Arnheim, 1992: 438). And this allure exerted by a picture on its observer seems to be the effect that Bishop tries to arouse in the “observer-reader” of her “watercolor poem”.

So, from the very first drafts, Bishop keeps guiding the “observer-reader’s” visual tension to the brightness and shade of her “canvas-page”, in such a way that the white and the blue dominate that heavenly scene. Little by little, a calm bay on the island of “North Haven” gradually appears. But since there is no rule without an exception, a stroke of white breaks the regularity of that blue sky, and hints at a very subtle mobility in the quiet scene; then, it is reported that there are “no clouds, except for one long, carded horse’s tail” (Bishop, 1994: 188). As far as this image is concerned, Bishop has chosen an English expression, and polished it like a poetic “jewel”; the English expression is “long straight streaks of cirrus clouds”, that refer to thin clouds, that look like scratches in the sky. But Bishop builds up her own poetic image by trimming this ready-made expression, and transforming it in such a way as to fulfill her own poetic purpose.

Then, Bishop keeps testing her “strokes” in the poem, in order to describe the only clouds in that bright sky of “North Haven”. In draft number one, those few clouds seem to be scratches made by

a cat, and the lightness of the poem is suggested by such gentle lines:

"#1 two <long> streaks, cats' paws" (Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C. Box 60.5).

Later on, this drawing takes to another form, as if a moody artist were playing with colors, lines and forms:

"#2 one thinning horse's tail" (Bishop, 1978: s.p. Drafts of Published Poetry. V.C.Box 60.5).

Indeed, Bishop translates the visual effects of "North Haven" into unforgettable poetic images, and the genetic critic takes delight in keeping an eye on the poet's "strokes", which are added draft after draft. The critic follows each move made by the author, sees each angle of the watercolor being sketched, modified, polished, till the poem gets to its published version.

*North Haven*

*In memoriam: Robert Lowell*

*I can make out the rigging of a schooner  
A mile off; I can count  
The new cones on the spruce. It is so still  
The pale bay wears a milky skin, the sky  
No clouds, except for one long, carded  
Horse's-tail.*

*The islands haven't shifted since last summer,  
Even if I like to pretend they have  
– drifting in a dreamy sort of way,  
a little north, a little south or sidewise,  
And that they're free within the blue frontiers  
Of bay.*

*This month, our favorite one is full of flowers:  
 Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch,  
 Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied,  
 Eyebright,  
 The Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars,  
 And more, returned, to paint the meadows with  
 Delight.*

*The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,  
 And the White-throated Sparrow's five-note  
 Song,  
 Pleading and pleading, brings tears to the  
 Eyes.*

*Nature repeats herself, or almst does:  
 Repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.*

*Years ago, you told me it was here  
 (in 1932?) you first "discovered girls"  
 and learned to sail, and learned to kiss.  
 You had 'such fun', you said, that classic  
 Summer.*

*("Fun" – it always seemed to leave you at a  
 loss...)*

*You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,  
 Afloat in my mystic blue...And now- you've  
 Left*

*For good. You can't derange, or re-arrange,  
 Your poems again. (But the Sparrows can  
 Their song.)*

*The words won't change again. Sad friend,  
 You cannot change.*

1978 (Bishop, 1994: 188-9).

## CONCLUSION

So, the poem "North Haven" fictionalizes the modus operandi of the writer's process of creation, and by analogy, the painter's process. Anyway, all kinds of artistic process could be included

here, but as “North Haven” is an elegy to the poet Robert Lowell, it directly alludes to his compulsion to keep reviewing his poetic lines. Just like nature used to repeat herself: “repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise”; the movement of the artist would be in the same direction. Unfortunately, “North Haven” admits that Lowell would not be able to “derange, or re-arrange [his] poems again”. As he is dead now, his “words won’t change again”.

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(“VC” is the abbreviation of “Vassar College”)

According to the code of abbreviation used in the transcription of manuscripts:

- # stands for “draft”
- [ ] stands for “elimination”
- < > stands for “addition”
- >> stands for “added elements on the right margin of the draft”
- << stands for “added elements on the left margin of the draft”
- { } stands for “added comments made by the author”