"TELLING IT SLANT": THE "HEALTHIER" SURREALISM OF ELIZABETH BISHOP AND JOSEPH CORNELL

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ABSTRACT

Although Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is often associated with surrealism, this aspect of her work has not received enough attention. An analysis of the use of child perspective in her poems shows remarkable similarities with the work of the American surrealist artist Joseph Cornell, whose shadowboxes portray —accurately as well as beautifully— the uneasiness produced by the theme of death in relation to childhood. The frailty of human life receives a similar treatment in both authors, and this can be related to the iconography of seventeenth-century painting, which is one of Bishop's acknowledged influences.

KEY WORDS: American poetry, Elizabeth Bishop, Surrealism, Joseph Cornell, painting

RESUMEN

Si bien suele asociarse a la poesía de Elizabeth Bishop con el surrealismo, es éste un aspecto de su obra que continúa sin recibir la atención adecuada. Analizando su uso de personajes infantiles en los poemas nos encontramos una serie de importantes paralelismos con el arte del surrealista norteamericano Joseph Cornell, cuyas cajas reproducen —con tanta exactitud como inquietante belleza— la sensación que experimentamos ante representaciones de la muerte en contacto con el mundo de la infancia. En ambos autores la fragilidad de la vida humana recibe un tratamiento similar, que parece tener origen en la iconografía pictórica del siglo diecisiete, una de las influencias reconocidas por Bishop.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Poesía norteamericana, Elizabeth Bishop, Surrealismo, Joseph Cornell, pintura

The surrealists established a middle stage in their pursuit of the unconscious in the figure of children, women, and mental patients, all in one group, shocking as it sounds. According to them, the role of muse played by woman was possible due to her proximity to the unconscious, so, in a way, women acted as mediators between the artist and his repressed psyche. Needless to say, this guidance is even more evident in the case of children, as they stood for the surrealists as models of unrepressed instinctual subjects. Child perspective applied to adult or abstract concepts benefits from a display of unrepressed, disarming sincerity, and when genuinely oriented toward the curious enjoyment of under-repressed imaginations, it can provide instances of not just fun but even sheer poetry.

While the surrealists did not resort to a sustained use of child perspective (but rather to specific imagery or inspirational sparks), its adoption has become an artistic technique of widespread use. The one surrealist closely associated to childhood is the American artist Joseph Cornell.

The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop is routinely and superficially associated with Surrealism —basically on account of their common interest in the world of dreams, children and primitive art. This affinity, however, is systematically understressed in current criticism, in spite of the strong evidence that supports it. Since Richard Mullen and Thomas Travisano convincingly established in the 1980s her rejection of automatic surrealism, only Bonnie Costello has provided a coherent analysis of Bishop as a visually oriented poet, with inevitable references to surrealist art. My exploration of the role of children in her work takes us —via the influence of the Italian surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico— to the poetics of defamiliarization defended by Arthur Schopenhauer, who held that memory was responsible for the irreversible prosification of our world. Bishop's adoption of child perspective enables her to re-see for the first time, eluding customary, prosifying experience. This links her again to Surrealism, since this movement intended a return to the original purity of the eye, to what André Breton called its "savage state" governed by uneducated (i.e.: unspoiled) vision: "The eye exists in a primitive state. The marvels of the earth a hundred feet high, the marvels of the sea a hundred feet deep, have for their witness only the wild eye [...]" (Breton 9).

Child perspective was a very successful device in the work of the avant-garde painters whom Bishop resembles most, namely de Chirico and René Magritte. Resorting to this strategy allows her poetic voice the privilege of children's compulsive, disarming sincerity, and to make apparently innocent questions exposing the absurd in the world of adults. Bishop's affinity with surrealist painters can be related only to the non-automatic section, represented mainly by Magritte and his precursor de Chirico (see Suárez-Toste, "Straight," and "*Machine*"). Bishop and Magritte developed de Chirico's influence in remarkably similar ways: both aimed primarily at defamiliarization through the use of distorted perspective and scales, and resorted to recurrent common imagery, but a specific mutual influence cannot be documented. However, among American surrealist artists, Bishop's affinities are indeed revealing, since she admired Joseph Cornell, who was in turn indebted to Magritte and de Chirico.

Bishop's own traumatic childhood, indelibly marked by the early loss of her father and her mother's subsequent confinement in a mental institution, continually —though not explicitly— surfaces in her work. Death and absence instead of love and care played an important role in Bishop's childhood, as she spent a great part of it in prolonged convalescence from different illnesses. While her limited activity surely sharpened her observation skills, it also defined from an early time her lifelong difficulties for personal relations. As a telling example from her childhood, Bishop admitted having told one of her classmates that her mother had died, in order to inspire the pity she felt she rightfully deserved, and to avoid being stigmatized by her mother's insanity (*Collected Prose* 31-32).

Regarding child characters in Bishop's poetry, there is a remarkable number of situations in which children appear in displacement, in the presence of death.

Death is here presented as if seen through the eyes of the child. Child perspective in these cases produces in the reader the notion of a "Nursery Gothic" very similar to the disquiet inspired by —for instance— Tim Burton's *Nightmare Before Christmas*. Within this group of poems there is a necessary distinction between implicit and explicit death or suffering. Among the former we should rank such poems as "Sestina" —where suffering comes from absence— and "Visits to St. Elizabeth's"—where insanity is presented in a *tour de force* in understatement. After establishing "the continuing vibration of her [Bishop's] work between two frequencies —the domestic and the strange," Helen Vendler refers specifically to "Sestina" and "First Death in Nova Scotia" as poems showing "the interpenetration of the domestic and the strange at their most inseparable" (97). In "Sestina" a child of unspecified gender is not fooled by the grandmother's attempts to repress her tears:

> But secretly, while the grandmother
> busies herself about the stove,
> the little moons fall down like tears
> from between the pages of the almanac
> into the flower bed the child
> has carefully placed in the front of the house
>
> Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
> The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove
> and the child draws another inscrutable house.

The absence of parents in the poem suggests that the cause of those tears is their death, as was more or less the case with Bishop's. The poem shows the fragile nature of the concept of family-as-protection, exposing domestic safety as a mere illusion. The violent realization that the parental figure is not omnipotent (and thus not only cannot it protect the child from everything, but is itself vulnerable) is a traumatic shock for the child. Bishop's poem dealing with insanity is "Visits to St. Elizabeth's," inspired by her visit to Ezra Pound while he was confined in that sanatorium. The poem builds on a nursery-rhyme pattern of construction, in this case the well-known nursery-rhyme "This Is the House That Jack Built." Each stanza grows with the addition of a new line, the rest not being merely repeated but slightly mutating, and so it evolves in a frenzy of maddening rhythm from the initial "This is the house of Bedlam. // This is the man / that lies in the house of Bedlam" to the final stanza:

> This is the soldier home from the war.
> These are the years and the walls and the door
> that shut on a boy that pats the floor
> to see if the world is round or flat.
> This is the Jew in a newspaper hat
> that dances carefully down the ward,
> walking the plank of a coffin board
> with the crazy sailor
> that shows his watch

that tells the time
of the wretched man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

The apparently playful adoption of this stanza can be seen as an attempt to disguise painful memories of her mother, who died after spending eighteen years in a mental institution, during which she did not see her daughter again. The ability of the nursery rhyme to absorb and accept the absurd as its own —in spite of the evident connotations of such words as time, walls, doors, crazy, or coffin— manages to diminish the impact for Bishop of being faced with insanity again, but the implicit regression to childhood, the source of her pain, produces in the reader a discomforting ambiguity.

Children are faced with explicit death and suffering in Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia" and "The Hanging of the Mouse." "First Death in Nova Scotia" describes in first person, through the eyes of another child of unspecified sex (although easily recognizable as Bishop), a last goodbye to her cousin Arthur. The initiatory connotations of the title (the "first" of a series) indeed help establish a solid identification. Focused by the corpse and the coffin, an otherwise familiar parlor becomes a totally fantastic and ominous setting. The presence of death is inescapable, but the frozen stillness of little Arthur contrasts with the imaginative girl's reviving of inanimate objects: the stuffed loon acquires a life of its own on the marble-topped table, and so do the members of the Royal Family in the chromographs. The implications for the child are clumsily camouflaged by the adult cover-up: "'Come,' said my mother, / 'Come and say goodbye / to your little cousin Arthur.' / I was lifted up and given / one lily of the valley / to put in Arthur's hand." The mother's pretension that she can still deal with Arthur as if he were alive does little to diminish the impact of this scene for the young girl, whose sight is monopolized by the silent "drama of objects" (a term coined by critics to refer to the relationship between unrelated objects in the paintings of de Chirico) taking place between the stuffed loon (shot by Arthur's father), the coffin, and the chromographs of the royal family.

Child perspective achieves its highest intensity of effect when these estranged objects are suddenly reconciled with the child's universe in a remarkable effort to denude them of their adult-induced, ominous connotations: "Arthur's coffin was / a little frosted cake, / and the red-eyed loon eyed it / from his white, frozen lake." It is important to emphasize that the child's uneasiness has nothing to do with the readers'. The child perceives the adults' reactions and knows there is something wrong, more so since they all try to hide it with an artificial behavior. The readers' discomfort comes both from concern for both children and recognition of the situation and its implications. The more "genuinely" innocent the imagery used by the child (snow here is not death but sugar on the frosted cake/coffin, or ice on the marble-topped table/lake), the more concerned we are about her shock at her first encounter with death.

In "The Hanging of the Mouse" there is a formal execution in a fablelike setting. It is an animal world, where animal stereotypes work on the basis of anthro-

pomorphism: the soldiers are beetles, the executioner is a raccoon, and the priest a praying mantis. The "Nursery Gothic" feeling is more intense here, because it is so easy to imagine the whole event in cartoon aesthetics, even though the scene described and the feelings displayed are unsuitable even for adults: "His whiskers rowed hopelessly round and round in the air a few times and his feet flew up and curled into little balls like young fern plants. [...] It was all so touching that a cat, who had brought her child in her mouth, shed several large tears. They rolled down on to the child's back and he began to squirm and shriek, so that the mother thought that the sight of the hanging had perhaps been too much for him [...]."

Children, applying their own —often better— logic, improvise rudimentary interpretations of our highly artificial social constructions, exposing the absurd in the world of adults. They are in a way outsiders in the process of absorption by society, for they have not yet completed the path toward our everyday absurdity. They fail to understand our logic (routine), but reach unexpected depths, nevertheless. This is what we find in two of the Bishop alter-egos described. In "Sestina" and "First Death" the children are "kitchenwise" (i.e.: they know the unwritten rules of the household, and instinctively detect any anomalies in the correct development of events): the child in "Sestina" draws "a man with buttons like tears" because she cannot help perceiving the presence of tears all over the house. In "First Death" Arthur's royal invitation to become "the smallest page at court" is probably some well-intentioned adult's idea, but in the last lines the child exposes the white lie by making the easiest objection of a practical nature: "But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?"

Equally, failure to understand the world in its most prosaic terms is used to characterize the creature in Bishop's poem "The Man-Moth." (This hybrid was suggested to her by a newspaper misprint for "mammoth"). The Man-Moth "thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky" and climbs the skyscrapers to reach it and peep through. When he returns to his home in the underground tunnels he has difficulties in boarding subway trains, and always sits back-to-front. His inability to follow a "normal" behavior makes us question to what extent these are important things. A hybrid creature, he embodies the principle that there is poetry in his awkwardness and inadequacy to urban life, for dexterity in such an artificial world need not be positive. Like children, the Man-Moth is used as the perfect outsider, unaware of our highly codified world, in order to introduce a systematic defamiliarization of everyday life. For Bishop it is clear that we need a complete outsider to bring a fresh vision of our world, in order for us to enjoy the poetry we have become insensitive to. The jump from the underground tunnels to the moon seems to echo Breton's already quoted marvels from "a hundred feet high" to "a hundred feet deep" in need of the wild eye to appreciate them.

There is not really much documentation on the relationship between Bishop and Cornell. What we know for sure is that she admired his shadowboxes, and even made some of her own. Her poetic tribute to Cornell was the translation into English of Octavio Paz's poem dedicated to him, "Objetos y Apariciones." Although this is just a translation, Bonnie Costello has studied to what extent Bishop's ekphrasis subscribes the original poem with relation to Cornell (224). The study of a selec-

tion of Cornell's works in the context of Bishop's poetry may bring some light to the question.

Cornell's collage upon Magritte's *Time Transfixed* is a perfect illustration of the artistic genealogy I proposed at the beginning; here Cornell used a painting by Magritte as the central image for his work. The well-known image of the train irrupting into the living room through the fireplace is greatly preserved, with only minor ornamental additions. The train, and the clock on the mantelpiece, are explicit references to de Chirico, and Magritte used them deliberately, to address issues of movement/stillness and the transit of time. Cornell was documented enough on both painters as to read through Magritte's homage with clarity. The collage is untitled but generally known as Memorial Collage for Robert Cornell, and it was composed right after Robert's death. Robert was Joseph's disabled brother, and he spent most of his days tied to a wheelchair in the living room, model trains being his main pastime. Cornell's devotion for his brother is known to have been immense, and his theme here seems clearly to be the desire to freeze time, in order to preserve things and persons dear to him. It is not difficult to imagine Bishop in the same situation, trying to preserve her lost parents by anchoring happiness in her memories of a Nova Scotia childhood. As for the ever-present time references, remember the almanac presiding the scene in "Sestina", very much like the clock in Cornell. There is also an unusual obsession with clocks in her poem "Paris 7 A.M.":

> I make a trip to each clock in the apartment:
> some hands point histrionically one way
> and some point others, from the ignorant faces.
> Time is an Etoile; the hours diverge
> so much that days are journeys round the suburbs,
> circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles.

Cornell was not a surrealist in the public sense of the word. He had an ordinary job pretentiously labeled as a "textile designer" for a wool business. This job was kept at his mother's insistence, a very possessive woman who wanted her son to take after her dead husband. Cornell had no high aspirations and this post enabled him to work on his art in the evenings. His temperament was as far from a superstar as Dalí as one could imagine. In fact he had a sort of temperamental inadequacy to Surrealism; he could easily be characterized in terms of restraint, reticence, small and modest formats. Against surrealist assertiveness he offered tentativeness; instead of surrealist scandal his attitude had more to do with prudery. A telling anecdote is recorded by Deborah Solomon: Cornell made the first American buy of a surrealist work of art (a typically scandalous Dalí), but he left it permanently at the Julien Levy Gallery for fear of his mother's reaction if he brought it home (70-71).

An astonishing parallelism can be established with Elizabeth Bishop, only that in her case reticence was immediately attributed to her female condition. Upon reception of the label "Surrealist" both reacted with decorum. Bishop refused the "honor" saying she had never been a surrealist, and in fact disliked most surrealist

art, especially that of Max Ernst, with whom she was being compared due to a specific —and only reluctantly admitted— influence (*One Art* 135). Cornell, while somewhat flattered, answered "I do not share in the subconscious and dream theories of the Surrealists. While fervently admiring much of their work I have never been an official surrealist, and I believe surrealism has *healthier* possibilities than have been developed" (Solomon 84, my emphasis).

Cornell lacked academic formation in the arts, and began rather late, at age twenty-seven. Collage was an ideal beginning to the extent that it demanded no specific or sophisticated artistic skills. For his discovery of collage he is admittedly indebted to Ernst's *La femme 100 têtes*, but only regarding technique, not themes: "Ernst disturbs me" (qtd. in Solomon 60). His art was therefore conceptual, and his raw materials readymade; very much, if incidentally so, in the spirit of surrealism (cf. Marcel Duchamp). His journey from collage to shadowboxes had two stops in bell jars and pillboxes. These were known as typical of Victorian kitsch-ish home ornamentations, so it could be said that by adopting these formats he deliberately inscribed his works in the vague pseudoartistic tradition of Victorian ladies' "parlour pastimes" (Solomon 82).

To the assignment of a cover design for the catalogue of the Julien Levy surrealist exhibition of 1932 he responded with a provocatively innocent collage. It presents a child as herald of surrealism, blowing a sort of horn out of which the letters S-u-r-r-é-a-l-i-s-m-e emerge, tracing an elaborate curve, as if they were musical notes in conventional graphic representation. This collage, made of old engravings, is not exempt of irony, at the same time as it expresses a clear statement on poetics. What the child is blowing is not a horn but a cake decorator's tube, thus dulcifying the rather strident note to be played by the imminent surrealist takeover of the New York art scene. The violent contrast produced by the cake decorator's tube in contact with surrealism is somehow similar to the disquieting vision of Arthur's coffin as a "little frosted cake." Understatement, as well as very conscious and deliberate innocence, seem to be the strategies followed to challenge expectations of surrealist excess.

Soap Bubble Set was his most ambitious work yet, carefully designed for the 1936 MoMA Show that would consecrate surrealism in the U.S. The background is covered with a "Carte geographique de la lune" where craters and other topographic accidents are clearly observable. On each side we find, in less-than-evident symmetry, a sphere on a cylinder: an egg inside a tall wineglass, and a small head on a pedestal. Above the moon there is a row of four shorter cylinders, the first and last ones decorated. Below the moon, a clay pipe rests on a glass shelf under which there are three glass discs. In Solomon's reading we are facing a sort of "Allegorical Family." Like Bishop, Cornell was very shy of introducing naked biographical data in his compositions; but both did codify it into their work. Here we can appreciate symbolic references to the members of the Cornell family: four cylinders standing for the four children, the egg inside the goblet representing fertility and thus the mother, the head on the column would stand for the artist himself, and the Dutch clay pipe —horizontally laid— recalls the dead father, of Dutch ancestry (80-82). This reading makes Cornell's vision of childhood really close to Bishop's, a source of

innocent joy as well as a period inescapably marked by the ominous presence of death, which in turn makes that innocent joy precarious and extremely fragile. The anxiety that arises as a consequence can be easily shared by an adult public.

Soap bubbles recall childhood even though the clay pipe is the only explicit element in direct connection; the bubbles themselves are echoed in the circular and oval shapes present in the box (the cylinders, the discs, the egg, the head, the moon). As Cornell hinted, "shadowboxes become poetic theatres or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime. The fragile, shimmering globules become the shimmering but more enduring planets [...]" (Ashton 64-65). But it is not only the —by definition— fragile nature of soap bubbles that adds a somber note to this otherwise innocent pastime. As Solomon very aptly recalls, art history —especially Dutch painting— tinges bubbles with the seventeenth-century theme of "Vanitas," representing the transitory nature of life. In Harmen Steenwijck's *Vanitas* still life (c. 1640), we have perhaps the most complete catalogue of symbols belonging to this genre: a skull, a consuming candle, a spilled over bottle, a sword, a snail shell, clay pipes, musical instruments, and books. Worldly riches, culture, and weapons prove useless to prevent the coming of death. The snail shell represents sin (coming from the mud), and the consumption of the candle is self-explanatory. The waste of wine implies its return to dust. Thus soap bubbles, nowadays symbolic of careless childhood, come with an in-built reminder of our inescapability from death. The presence of glass as a dominant material in the shadowbox emphasizes these connotations of fragility.

Given Bishop's predilection for cartography and Metaphysical poetry, hers is a particularly apt sensibility to be recalled at the sight of *Soap Bubble Set*. Indeed, after watching Cornell's 1976 exhibition in New York, she was terribly excited by the fact that he had used a book on soap bubbles she had long known and loved (Spires 120-21). Bishop's own shadowbox "is called *Anjinhos*, which means 'little angels.' That's what they [Brazilians] call the babies and small children who die" (qtd. in Spires 120). It is hard to avoid the feeling that in Bishop's mind Cornell and shadowboxes are inextricably linked to childhood and death. In *Soap Bubble Set* the family unit, the core of the domestic, is not erected as a symbol of protection against the world, but rather, as in Bishop's poetry, as that particularly vulnerable region where any damage is doubly severe. Bishop's "Sestina" takes place in the kitchen, the essence of domesticity, and, as Helen Vendler notices, "the strange can occur even in the bosom of the familiar, even, most unnervingly, at the domestic hearth" (97).

Borrowing Vendler's analysis of the pictorial arrangement of the scene in "Sestina," which she relates to medieval illumination, I would like to interpret this scene according to seventeenth-century "Vanitas" paintings, with the child representing youth, the grandmother representing age, and the almanac being a reference to the transit of time (like the hourglass in Baroque art), rather than the divinity principle Vendler proposes (98). In that sense there are in the poem other elements which fit the "Vanitas" tradition, such as the consuming flame of the Marvel Stove. In any case this genre evolved away from the rather lurid Calvinist example of Steenwijck and the Leiden school into more subtle reminders of the frailty of human life. It is not difficult to find later still-lifes showing age and decay through the

grouping of the plant, the flower, and the fruit; or, as in "Sestina," using group portraits where different generations are present.

In *Soap Bubble Set* the rhyming circles and the symmetry are noticeably disrupted by the horizontally laid clay pipe, symbolic of the broken family harmony after the traumatic death of the father. But a pipe in art history is more than a farfetched symbol for a father: the clay pipe was typical of the Parisian soirées of the 1910s, hence its recurrence in cubist art; the expression "pipe dream" can be applied to Cornell's longing to have his complete family together again; the pipe is somehow linked to Breton's communicating vessels; and above all a clay pipe *c'est une pipe!* After 1929 it is virtually impossible to deal with a pipe in a work of art without considering the Magritte connection, but in Cornell's case the reference is obligatory.[1] For the surrealists the convergence of contraries (and their poetic simultaneity) was the most attractive feature of Metaphysical poetry and Mannerist/Baroque art. Bishop was well aware of this affinity: "some of Herbert's poems strike me as almost surrealistic" (Brown 23). In Cornell's clay pipe converge childplay and death, water and fire. In fact all four natural elements converge: it is made of earth, it produces air bubbles from the mixture of soap and water, and smoke from the burning of tobacco.

Through the analysis of child perspective in the work of Elizabeth Bishop and Joseph Cornell we can observe how their use of this technique is remarkably similar, especially in those situations when they deal with death, insanity, and suffering in general. Death becomes doubly disquieting through the eyes of children, whom we would like to preserve from the unpleasant aspects of life. Conscious that this cannot always be possible, having themselves suffered a great deal, Bishop and Cornell exploit the enormous potential that these situations have, and the resulting atmosphere in their work often achieves a surrealist quality, whether deliberate or not. This intensely poetic surrealism is highly idiosyncratic and inscribed in the de Chirico-Magritte tradition of defamiliarization, though appreciated by the rest of the surrealists in the case of Cornell. Sharing a similar temperament (personal and artistic), modeled by several parallel biographical events, both Cornell and Bishop recreated a world where the deliberately subtle, the reticent, the restrained, could feel at home. A world where vision and memory would be appreciated qualities, where the revaluation of the so-called ordinary would constitute a major enterprise: "I'm very visually minded, and mooses or filling stations aren't necessarily commonplace to me. Observation is a great joy." (Bishop, qtd. in Johnson 100-101).

[1] See Schnapp for a full list of connotations attached to Magritte's pipe.

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