

Splendor in the Grass: Ruy Belo and the Poetry Lesson

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The poetry of Ruy Belo is the place of an impossible thanatology. His poetics, in this sense, is aware of not being able to objectify “death” as a *theme*. In his first book of poems, *Aquele Grande Rio Eufrates*, we read: “A morte é a grande palavra desse homem / não há outra que o diga a ele mesmo” (“Death is the great word of that man / there is no other that can utter him”) (*Obra Poética*, Belo 1:19). The development of Belo’s writing comes about by diluting the transcendence implied here, that of an existence with an entelechy, albeit nihilist. In his last book of poems, the same proposition is again recurrent, in the last verse of the poem “A fonte da Arte,” written in Madrid on 24 April 1977: “O receio da morte é a fonte da arte” (“Fear of death is the source of art”) (Belo 2: 297). “Death” is something as prosaic as “fear,” but without the *pathos* of an ultimate destiny. The trope of the “fount” returns exhausted, since, as I am going to argue throughout this essay, Ruy Belo’s poetry and poetics are located in the posterity of a Poetry whose too high level of consciousness signifies its dissolution as “fount.” This is perhaps a possible measure of the poetry of Ruy Belo, which situates in a modern way—and in it there is an echo of a Hegelian lesson—Art as something posthumous. By transporting its own corpse, this poetry is highly aware of the historicity of the poetic *form*.

I propose, therefore, to think about the poetry of Ruy Belo as a function of its assignment to “Romanticism,” a link which in its day was established by Joaquim Manuel Magalhães. To say that Ruy Belo’s writing has a Romantic

genealogy is to say that it is poetry. The notion of “Romanticism” displayed by the author of *Um Pouco da Morte* is highly indebted to the Romantic legacy—the Wordsworthian one, for example—read as a poetics of nature. Very specifically, that “Romanticism” is based on the idea of poetry as a fusion of consciousness and the world. In the notional decanting on which he bases his poetology—by adding the operators “Romanticism” and “Classicism,” in a gesture of broad syncretism of different aesthetic traditions—the strong tradition to which Joaquim Manuel Magalhães assigns Ruy Belo is that of a “Classical Romanticism” according to which, in a world of inalienable unbalances, the only canon of *decorum* is precisely poetry: “Herein resides the principle by which there is not, either in Ruy Belo or in the poets in whose work his poetry grows, a break with decorum, with the balance between sentiment and world and word. On the contrary, what is patent is the quest for a new equilibrium, where neither the world can be imposed on sentiment, nor sentiment on the world. It is a matter of a Romantic tradition in which the dynamics between the self and things is searching for a new pact through an initial breaking away: classical equilibrium becomes a superimposition on the path of excessive sabotage of sentiment. It was necessary to set up a renewed dialogue between the soul and the daily world, between the spirit and the materiality of the earth” (Magalhães, 148). The *happiness* of the “balance between sentiment and world and word” is Magalhães’ *organon*. According to the premises stated, *being* in the world is *to be* a poet, or rather, only poets can transcend a separate “existence.”

In my view, the “Romantic” reading of Ruy Belo must be reoriented. To think about Belian “Romanticism” in this sense is a good example of the validity of its importance as a “problem,” according to Paul De Man in “Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” an essay initially published in German in the journal *Schweizer Monatshefte* (1966) and later in English in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984). In this essay we read the following: “the problem of romanticism continues to dominate the other problems of historiography and literary criticism. The main points around which contemporary methodological and ideological arguments circle can almost always be traced directly back to the romantic heritage” (48). Thinking about the “Romanticism” of Ruy Belo thus presupposes not forgetting that his poetry, as a reverberation of the Romantic problem, also dominates “other problems of historiography and literary criticism.” This means that to think about the “Romanticism” of Ruy Belo’s poetry is also to think about the place it occupies in a history of contemporary Portuguese poetry, inseparable from the question of the situation of literary criticism in that same history. This

argument is sufficient, I believe, to serve as the foundation of a necessary *revision* of the “consensus” there is on the importance of Belian poetics during the eighties and nineties in Portuguese poetry. This “consensus” is not the figure of something resolved, it is the indication of the search for a trope—for example, “Ruy Belo”—of this “consensus.”

I shall return to Joaquim Manuel Magalhães as an example of what I seek to explain. I am focusing, quite specifically, on the reading of the poem “Esplendor na Relva” (“Splendour in the Grass”) made by the author of the major essays included in the first edition of the complete works of Ruy Belo (*Obra Poética*, vols. 1 and 2, Lisbon, Presença, 1981; vol. 3 Lisbon, Presença, 1984). This poem appeared published in *Homem de Palavra(s)*, a 1970 book of poems which followed *Aquele Grande Rio Eufrates* (1961), *O Problema da Habitação* (1962) and *Boca Bilingue* (1966). It is the following sonnet (in Portuguese and in English):

Eu sei que deanie loomis não existe
mas entre as mais essa mulher caminha
e a sua evolução segue uma linha
que à imaginação pura resiste

A vida passa e em passar consiste
e embora eu não tenha a que tinha
ao começar há pouco esta minha
evocação de deanie quem desiste

na flor que dentro em breve há-de murchar?
(e aquele que no auge a não olhar
que saiba que passou e que jamais

lhe será dado ver o que ela era)
Mas em deanie prossegue a primavera
e vejo que caminha entre as mais

I know that deanie loomis does not exist
but among other women that woman walks
and her evolution follows a line
that resists pure imagination

Life passes and in passing it consists
 and although I no longer have the one I had
 upon beginning not long ago this my
 evocation of deanie, who gives up

on the flower soon to fade?
 (and he who at the blooming does not look at her
 may know that she passed and that never

will it be given him to see what she was)
 But in deanie spring continues
 And I see that she walks among other women.

The cinematographic reference to Elia Kazan's well-known film is crossed, simultaneously, with Wordsworth's intertext. Let us now look at Joaquim Manuel Magalhães's reading, which starts exactly from the *quotational* nature of Belo's sonnet: "Wordsworth is directly invoked in the title of the poem 'Esplendor na Relva,' although that title refers to the film by Elia Kazan, who cites the ode by Wordsworth. The persistence, in memory, of life's past splendour, and the resistance, through creation, to the mortal flow of existence affirm the splendour of writing in the face of the defeat of the body and the natural visionary impulse. 'In deanie', i.e., in the creature of the imagination, in the artefact of art, 'spring persists', i.e., the mortality of the instant is fought against" (Magalhães 152).

In this paragraph the reverberation of the above mentioned *affirmative* poetology I have just summarized is evident—i.e., a poetry which signifies the *overcoming* of alterative time, of History—and which Joaquim Manuel Magalhães considers to be incarnated in Ruy Belo. Really, in any poet who is considered by the critic to be a poet: for Magalhães *being a poet* presupposes an anthropological sublimation, poetry is not really history but ontology. However, the passage invoked explicitly embodies a series of significant reading operations. Basically it extracts consequences from the "image" of Deanie Loomis as a "creature *of the* imagination" and, as such, a symbol of "art" itself, of an art that is precisely symbolic. Magalhães's poetology also distinguishes two time regimes: one which is "mortal flow," "defeat of the body" or "mortality of the instant" and another which is that of the products of the imagination—Art—as "persistence" of what has been lived, as "resistance" to mortality and, moreover, as persistence of "spring."

This second temporality is copied from “Nature,” which produces identicals and identities of ontology without *crisis*. The “past” persists in the euphoriant exercising of “memory”; the act of creation, copied from what is *natural*, is identical to itself. Thus, the “splendour of writing” is the univocal expression of the “splendour of the past,” commutable with the “splendour in the grass”, and can be translated as the splendour of the “world.” *Writing*, in this sense, is only one of the terms of the organic unit writing/world. The “image” of Deanie Loomis, following what is implied in Magalhães’s argument, has a “correlative object”: either the Wordsworthian quotation, or the film quotation, or else the “world” they symbolize. Be this as it may, they are the essential ontologized, which in relation to poetic diction is an inalienable *a priori*. In this poetology of Magalhães there is only nature, or naturalizations, which a poem can only represent naturally: poetic tradition—or the history of poetry—the poem or the poet, the latter modulated by a “natural visionary impulse,” as we have read before.

But let us return to “Esplendor na Relva.” The first verse of the sonnet refers us to the *negation* of what is named “deanie loomis,” both from the *intellective* point of view—“I know that deanie loomis does not exist”—and as regards the *imaginative* faculty—“her evolution follows a line / *that resists pure imagination*” (italics mine). The first quatrain suggests to us a non-mediatized being that would be precisely “deanie loomis.” However, what we also have is the sustaining of an imagistic tension, played in the otherness of Deanie Loomis with relation to the already mentioned *intellective* and *imaginative* faculties, and the “referential” imperative, represented by the second and third lines: “but among other women that woman walks / and her evolution follows a line,” The adversative introduces that way of not existing—non-mediatized by reason or by the imagination; and let us also focus on the fact that the deictic “that” and the verbs of movement “walks” and “follows,” as well as the word “woman,” establish an axis of redundancy that forces the (paradoxical) suggestion of a *sensitive* mediation of what is named “deanie loomis.” The effect is, moreover, intensified by an important segment of the second line: “among other women.” Thus, an ontological equivalence is suggested between “other women” and “woman,” something like a contiguity of *loci*: that of those “existing” and that of “deanie loomis [who] does not exist.”

Let us return to this second line, a truly important one since with it the poem comes to an end, although it introduces a revealing variant. Before, however, I would call attention to the fact that Joaquim Manuel Magalhães’s

reading disregards a great part of the poem. The second verse is not even involved in his exegesis. The same occurs with the first tercet and the first line of the second tercet. Actually, in my opinion, what is most interesting in the poem is completely overlooked. It is a “sonnet,” as I have been saying, a “classic” form, as we know, precisely based on *decorum*, on “harmony” according to the canon of its historical cultivators. The equation, thematically established by Magalhães, between “Deanie Loomis” and “artefact of art,” could be that of this very sonnet as a “natural” form which, as such, can be read as a place of the *decorous* reciprocity of the terms of that equation. For Magalhães, “Deanie Loomis” exists as a natural object, that is, as an artistic artefact or poem. Thus, “Deanie Loomis,” “artefact of art” or “poem” are *literally* such objects.

Rather than a “decorous” form, or the practice of formal decorum, what occurs in this sonnet—the same as in others by Ruy Belo, moreover—is the figure of what is “indecorous.” Does the balance between “sentiment,” “world,” and “word” appear in it, as we read implicitly in Magalhães? This appearance, let us say, would be something like its consideration as “object” that was not a made thing: it would be something perfect. Here, I avail myself of a proposition by Ruy Belo to counteract this *happiness*: “a perfeição [tamanho perfeição] é coisa de mortos” (“perfection [such perfection] is a thing of the dead”) (1: 18). In reality, it is actually Ruy Belo himself who contradicts this balance. The exercise of the sonnet, for the author of *Boca Bilingue*, can be assimilated to the repetitive nature of the forms of literary culture. In other words, the sonnet is, in Ruy Belo, one of his “incorrigible cultural allusions” (1: 11). In this sense I turn to a passage of the preface to the second edition of *Aquele Grande Rio Eufrates*: “If, for example, the sonnet only appeared in his third book, it was because he could no longer resist the inevitable temptation of that form which, for nothing less than fifteen long years, he practiced with the hidden and obstinate nature of a vice” (1:16). If this trope of *vice* refers us to anything at all, it is to the vicious circle of the return to the forms of cultural tradition, which strip the poetic *dictum* of a unitary expressive agency. This imperative of cultural allusion in Ruy Bello is concomitant with his broadening of the repository of canonized forms of the modernist *ethos*, in the posterity of which the poet is situated.

This idea of the imposition of a form such as the sonnet, apparently, would shape its de-historicization. However, reading *this* sonnet attentively, we see that what it does is precisely deny its naturalness and, by synecdoche,

the naturalness of the tradition of the forms. And this because it revokes different essential places of that lyrical tradition. One of these is, very significantly, the dogma of a “psychological” unity that would organize and unify the poem. Really, the lyrical subject introduces self-consciousness as (if it were) another, otherness as that consciousness, specifically in the second verse: “and although I no longer have the one [life] I had / upon beginning not long ago this my / evocation of deanie.” See, first, how Ruy Belo focuses the development of the poem on the very act of writing: the lyrical self is, in this sense, conditioned by the impossibility of making the moment of the writing of the poem coincide with its temporality as a subject. The subject affirms itself as not identical to itself precisely as the subject that is writing, that starts from the “singular” event which is “to begin” an evocation, or “to begin” to write a sonnet. However, it is precisely in this singular moment when the imposition of the “sonnet” as recurrence of the naturalized tradition is historicized: this sonnet does not repeat the sonnet as a commonplace of tradition (or tradition as a commonplace); it repeats the sonnet as difference, it launches it into difference precisely because it inscribes it in a metamorphic, subjective structure.

The overdetermination of the unstable subjective over the objective means that the “sonnet” of tradition does not appear *in this* sonnet. On the contrary, it denies this form as permanence or (poetic) foundation. Really, and if we return to Ruy Belo’s reflections on his hidden practice of the sonnet, what we can read in that place is the exhaustion of this form as a poetic essential. The irresistible “temptation” of the sonnet leads us not so much to the imposition of a poetic foundation as to a poetics whose exhausted forms can be *revised* as historical forms. Like Elia Kazan’s film or Wordsworth’s poem, the sonnet, in “Esplendor Na Relva,” is a reference that revokes its organicity. Furthermore, this revocation, in Ruy Belo’s poetic work, follows two roads 1) the commutation of the very form “poem” in favour of the form “book,” as Osvaldo Manuel Silvestre has proposed (10-11); 2) the commutation of a poetical canon dominated by the short poem in favour of the long poem.

All this, evidently, has consequences for the reading of the image of “Deanie Loomis.” I argued earlier that, following the interpretation of Joaquim Manuel Magalhães, “Deanie Loomis” would be a symbol: Art as Nature or identity with itself. This reading goes through the following passage stated by the critic: “In Deanie, that is, in the creature of the imagination, in the artefact of art.” See how he uses the preposition “in,” suggesting

both “Deanie” and the “artefact of art” as (ontologically) stable places. Whatever the “natural” object supposed by the image of Deanie Loomis as Magalhães conceives her—I am thinking above all of a poetic tradition as nature—what, as I have said, this way of reading implies is the priority of the natural object over this image.

Here I follow Paul de Man’s important essay entitled “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” also included in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1-17). Starting from the well-known place of Hölderlin’s poetry—“Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn” from “Brot und Wein”—De Man shows how the way in which nature “gives origin” does not coincide with the way in which the word does. Let us read the following passage, concerning, precisely, the images that seek to express this coincidence: “This type of imagery is grounded in the intrinsic ontological primacy of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination. We saw that this movement is essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure. There can be flowers that ‘are’ and poetic words that ‘originate,’ but no poetic words that ‘originate’ as if they ‘were’” (7).

For Magalhães, a Deanie Loomis as “creature of the imagination” presupposes, by its attributes of “persistence,” “resistance” and “per[sistence] of *spring*,” having been generated as a natural object. It presupposes an Art, a poetic word, which would give origin like Nature. A Poetry that would have given origin like Nature, however, *forgets* the following “[I]t is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object. Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again; it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness” (6). “Deanie Loomis,” for Magalhães, would be that identity with itself: the “artefact of art” as essence, or the “splendour of writing” indiscernible from the “splendour in the grass.”

Nature is called up by the poem in “but in deanie spring continues” and, even before this penultimate line in the second tercet, in the first line of the first tercet, which continues a sentence started in the second quatrain: “who gives up / on the flower soon to fade?” The immediate antecedent is the “evocation of deanie,” and this contiguity added to the later reference to “spring” contributes to the assimilation of “deanie” to the “flower” itself. This assimilation is further reinforced in the lines between brackets “(and he who at the

blooming does not look at her / may know that she passed and that never / will it be given him to see what *she* was)." This "she" that I have italicized can refer to "Deanie Loomis" as well as to "flower." The lack of deictic determination in these lines, moreover, also affects "he who at the blooming" in which "at the blooming" can be either an attribute of "he" or of "Deanie Loomis" or of "flower." This "blooming" is also an indeterminate reference; it can refer to the "moment" of the imminence of the end of the "flower" as well as to the changeable condition of the subject which we read in the second verse and, in my opinion, the "he" can refer to both the subject and, with some leeway, to a reader, for example, Joaquim Manuel Magalhães or myself.

And even to Ruy Belo himself as reader of his poem. Indeed, the poet has left us some very brief but fundamental considerations, which from here on will influence my reading of the sonnet. They are the following: "It must be noted that *Splendor in the Grass* shows the precise moment when Natalie Wood, a wonderful actress, who in the film plays the delicate and fresh figure of Deanie Loomis, brilliantly directed by Elia Kazan, attempts in vain to comment in class an extract from a poem by Wordsworth on the fleetingness of life and the need, as a condition for happiness, to pick the flower at the very instant when it blooms" (Belo 1: 137). First, it must be stressed that this reflection leads the reading back to another scenario of poetry: the class, the poetry lesson, the commentary on poetry, obviously without annulling the scene of the writing referred to before, given by the subject of the poem, aware of the evocative act and of the temporality that breaks the unity of the evocation. What is important in this new scenario of reading that Ruy Belo's commentary proposes is not so much the eudemonistic content of the Wordsworthian *carpe diem*, as the *vacuousness of commenting on an extract of a poem in class*.

It might be said that a negative dialectic determines this scenario. The "happiness" taught by the poem is contradicted by the inconsequential nature of its mediation by the commentary in class. In some way, Ruy Belo's sonnet places us before the repetition of that scene of a Deanie Loomis trying, in vain, to comment a poem by Wordsworth. Joaquim Manuel Magalhães seems to overcome this vacuousness. He would be, shall we say, a student situated "at the blooming" as the poem itself says. Magalhães *looked* and *saw*: the poem as the affirming of the "splendor of writing," of Art as negation, of alterative temporal negativity. The *splendore*, the intense brightness, the intense brilliance prevails over a *gaze* that would be sensitive. Allegedly outside of History—because it would deny it—this *looking* has no

place, nor time, nor enunciation, nor intertext. Art is no longer a trope of the posthumous, but an appearance, a presence, in the poem.

Magalhães not only seems to *see* “Deanie Loomis” but seems to *see* as “Deanie Loomis,” a “delicate a fresh figure.” However, my argument is that Magalhães says he sees that which the poem itself represents to us as not being visible. A poem on *seeing* is, in this sense, a poem on the end of *giving* poetry to be *seen*. It is Ruy Belo who says it to us: Deanie Loomis tries *in vain* to comment in class an extract from a poem by Wordsworth. Let us return again to the sonnet. The “blooming” that has to be “looked at”—and quite possibly the place from which it must be “looked at”—is the irrepresentable moment in which blossoming and fading are commutable, the “instant” which, and I follow Magalhães, has as attribute “mortality.” In the sonnet we have this “instant” given by the “flower soon to fade”; in Ruy Belo’s above mentioned reading, in turn, we have implied that “instant” in the passage “to pick the flower at the very instant it blooms.” The ontology of the “flower” here supposed has been denied any trait of stability. To postulate the “mortality” of the “flower”—or of Nature—is to understand it also as history, to denaturalize it. If, as a natural object, that “flower” is diluted as a stable form, then it cannot be represented or sustain any ontological priority over the “word.” It is like a word, that is, it is created from nothing, being deprived of permanence.

All this has very little to do with Nature structured as “balance between sentiment and world and word,” or with a poetics of something like the “natural visionary impulse” and it does have a lot to do with a poetology highly conscious of its “incorrigible cultural allusions.” The precedence is not that of Nature, but that of Art. In the preface of *Transporte no Tempo* Ruy Belo tells us: “I give words a little like how trees give fruit, although in a not very natural, and even anti-natural way, since poetry, being a form of culture, represents an alteration, a deviation and even violence exercised on nature” (2:11). The exhaustion of the “world” and that of “art” itself are in “*Esplendor na Relva*” in the first line of the second verse: “Life passes and in passing consists,” a line whose redundancy, aphoristic style and aporetic *literality* returns mortality to us as a metaphor of “life,” and “life” as a figure of the stagnant process of metaphorization.

One should not be surprised by a “golden key” whose *pathos* is subrogated by the fact of being the repetition of the second line of the first verse, although with a significant variant: “and I see that she walks among other women.” We have seen above how the irruption of a subject in the poem that does not pro-

ject on it a stable psychological unity is performed, precisely, by its self-assumption as a writing subject. This is not the only case of a break in the lyrical representation in Ruy Belo's poetry. The writing subject that is always the other—i.e., mortal—is a dimension of the temporality of the “poem,” an alterative process that never manages to coincide with itself. How, then, can this “golden key” be understood? It is not the place of the autotelic imperative that would make this final place serve as a closing place for the poem. What the “golden key” does is repeat as a difference an impossible originating beginning, bending to an impossible end. The line “and I see that she walks among other women” refers us to an “image”—Deanie Loomis—which has an *aesthetic* translation. It is *visible*, although it may not be referable nor have origin in the world of “life.” What he says he has seen is that the image—Deanie Loomis—exists without a correlative object, it is pure mediation. When all is said and done, he sees that the image is image, transport of the non-existence of the object. Deanie Loomis's spring is the (im)possible representation of mortality, this being the condition of all representation.

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Note: This essay was originally published in Portuguese as “‘Esplendor na Relva.’ Ruy Belo e a Lição da Poesia.” *Inimigo Rumor* 15 (2003): 115-128.

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