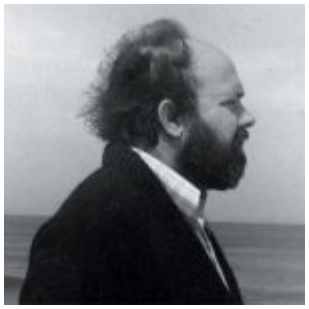
RUY BELO

(1933-1978)



Like the sea, the wind and the sun constitute themselves as metaphors for Ruy Belo's precepted existence, Europe, too, presents itself in this poet, as consistent and transtemporal summits to reveal a point of view over the experienced reality even if it appears more sporadic, diffuse, sometimes just circumstantially. The pronounced subjectivity of the poetic voice, which seeks the conciliation of a me in auto-vigilance and anguish mode, is countered by a frontal and lucid eye regarding an observable, experienced exterior, selected according to ideological and ethical beliefs, marked by an evident European cultural heritage.

The first two books published by Ruy Belo, *Aquele Grande Rio Eufrates* [That Great Euphrates River] (1961) and *O Problema da Habitação* [The Housing Problem] (1962), mostly address the poet's relation with God and religiosity, in a progressive questioning of faith. The stemming conflict is as much significative as it questions a whole life, up to then devoted to the Catholic Church, having the poet left *Opus Dei* only in the year when he published his first book. Thus, the successive biblical allusions are justified, transcending European borders to encompass a universe with Judeo-Christian roots. So, the spaces that are being summoned get lost in the anonymity: there are only bells in villages, maritime settlements, cities through which people circulate on the way to death. The apostrophe "oh chant, oh nation, oh dreamt city / Godly embracing the sea" (2014: 74) is just an example of that tragic common journey of mankind.

However, the third book, *Boca Bilingue* [Bilingual Mouth] (1966), deepens the interiorization

of places, be it a beach in Portugal, or a small French town like Saint-Malo. The time, anguished, unrestrained, for drifting evermore from an idealised childhood, or eternalised in suspended instants, merging with space, leading the poet to evading from an empirical real to argue about the foundations of existence. So, in “Guide bleu” [Blue Guide], for example, the stroll along the banks of the Seine, raises reflections such as “the night exists and life is worth this moment” (2014: 182), and “the hour is decisive as a sacrament” (*ibidem*).

But Ruy Belo’s work is not confined to an abstract and metaphysical incorporation of times and places. From *Boca Bilingue*, there is an intensified critical eye on an oppressing society through the creation of rules and routines that impose rhythms and conducts on everyday life, a fact that is particularly noted in the pendular movement of the great cities. Happening a little all over Europe, the feeling of oppression in Portugal is exacerbated by the life in the Estado Novo [New State]*. For that reason, in “Ácidos e óxidos” [Acids and Oxides], the poetic subject regrets his “lost country” (2014: 211), but, although it is, it is also a place of affections and emotions, even if they are scorned: “I am a son of this land and I grow older / as that is all I can do” (*ibidem*).

As the poet, himself, states in the preface to *Homem de Palavra[s]* [Man of His Word(s)] (1970), “intervention poetry has to derive from a great sense of justice or revolt that the poet internalises, like love in a love poem, and has to be discreet to avoid being demagogical” (2014: 246). Now, it is precisely in that discreet, but consistent way, that Ruy Belo’s vision of Europe insinuates itself in his work. According to Ida Alves, the maritime landscape, as an inevitable referential of the belian work, reveals an “articulation of senses that is fundamental for the very execution of the poem as an imageable discourse and textuality” (2015: 23). In the same way, the successive summoning of cities and figures of the European culture is an axis that defines an ethical and aesthetic perspective of the poet concerning the continent where he lives, so the evoked spaces tend to be mythicised to configurate a way of life that crosses physical borders. As written in “Madrid revisited”, a poem published in *Transporte no Tempo* [Time Transport] (1973), “more than this city it is just a certain city as it ever were” (Belo 2014: 460).

The affiliation in a cultural European linage goes back to Ancient Greece, stretching until contemporariness. Several poems include verses quoted, implicitly or explicitly, from different European authors, while, simultaneously, names of persons and places culturally associated with Europe are evoked. The Bible being of the most notorious hypo texts, the reference to Ovid and Virgil, Racine and Federico García Lorca, as well as to the Portuguese Camões, Pessoa or Raul Brandão, attest to the belonging, admiration and influence of all these European references. The poem "Do sono da desperta Grécia" [On the Slumber of Awoken Greece], included in *Transporte no Tempo* (1973), is exemplifying: Ruy Belo writes that "the goddess Athena still thins to us" (2014: 435), binding us to the Greek legacy of valuation of truth through which "man reaches / the notions of justice and freedom" (*ibidem*). The long poem "A sombra o sol" [The Shadow of the Sun] with which Ruy Belo concludes the book *Toda a Terra* [*All the Earth*] (1976), as the abridgement of this poet's *topics*, remembering the past, be it the personal and non-transferable of the poetic subject, the collective of a people – the Portuguese –, or the one who inhabits anywhere in Europe. If, on the one hand, it evokes the feminine figure – to whom the first stanza is directed–, referring the time that passes he remembers "your unwrinkled face / without the threat of time" (786), on the other hand, he recalls that "the peoples of the Lusitanian cities / armed with the Gaul two-handed sword or the Roman gladius / erected in the distance between the dispersed settlements / the solid strength of invincibility" (789).

But all that merging of peoples and cultures that made Europe, does not result in a euphoria for the feats that were achieved, not even these are the works of art that the poet contemplates in the museums or the gardens in Madrid, in Italy or anywhere else in Europe. On the contrary, common men still live in such misery "that they cannot even think amidst that misery that other men impose upon them" (792), as if Europe was in the process of forgetting another value: freedom of choice. That is so much more evident in that part of the European continent he is more familiar with, Portugal and Spain, which endured decades of oppression under dictatorial regimes that lasted almost all of the poet's life. Thus, it justifies the elegiac, and occasionally ironic, tone of, for example, "Morte ao meio-dia" [Death at Noon], of *Boca Bilingue*, where the "Portuguese home" (205) is witness to an atrophying and

futureless morass. So, he writes, “one dies in the West like the evening sun”, in a country in which “the body curves under the weight of a soul that does not feel” (*ibidem*).

The seashore (title of a poem of *Homem de Palavra[s]*, a book published in 1970) is a privileged space of Ruy Belo’s poetry, so, there are successive references to those who live of it conferring to the poet’s work a reiterated identification with his country of birth. However, the empathy with the inhabitants of cities and villages he visits is not reducible to the maritime people of Portugal. As it is referred by Gastão Cruz, the figure preferentially portrayed in the work of Ruy Belo is the common clerk, the “man of the public office, this anonymous figure who represents all the millions who are, every day, subject to the common place” (2015: 103). Thus, the poet portrays the Western civilisation worker, an outcome of society’s tertiarization. Also, through this prism, Fernando Pessoa’s influence in Ruy Belo is evident: there is a childhood nostalgia and a grief in thinking close to orthonym Pessoa, but also an empathetic eye before the common man that the semi-heteronymous Bernardo Soares contemplates, too. The process is as much of an identification with the tertiary sector clerk, as it is of an existential reflection about the vacuity of the incessant movement of the crowd in the city. One and the other aspects are found by Ruy Belo in Lisbon, as well as in Madrid, or at any other place where the Europeans circulate.

An estrangement regarding a shared existence in his contemporary Europe is thus noticed, given that the poetic voice feels as if it was part of that cultural universe, but, at the same time distancing itself from it, in a critic deferment that preserves a strong emotional charge. That is acutely detected in the poem “Sobre um simples significante” [On a Simple Significant], published in *Transporte no Tempo* (1973): at the airport, in Nepal, in January, some supposedly European citizens – according to the poetic subject everything happens in “European Nepal” (2014: 399) – they speak about Christmas, and suddenly, this word with so strong a significance for the European culture, withers to a mere signifier. As a result, the poetic subject distances himself from the other European: they are united by a single and the same word, “although everyone thinks in their respective mother tongue” (*ibidem*). The same word, however, becomes hollow in the poetic subject’s, mere sound reinforced by the rhyme

in “al” of all the verses, but also a signal of the isolation the Europeans co-habit.

It seems that a border is enunciated which cuts the poet from the involving reality, however, without Ruy Belo’s Europe being divided into distinct countries. There is an individual and analytical interiorization of a space covering times, forming a platform of transversal experiences. In the poem “No aniversário da libertação de Paris” [On the Anniversary of Paris’ Liberation], included in *Transporte no Tempo*, for example, the poet remits to the ideal of a collective fight against the “opposition of darkness” (437) which had in the anti-Nazi French Resistance a valorous and victorious enemy, to the point of “accomplishing the restitution of the country’s conscience” (438). The importance of this event is historically amplified to the point of being metamorphosed into a symbol. As the poem ends, “it has already been two or three decades ago, it was today” (439). The same tone is replicated in “A guerra começou há trinta e quatro anos” [The War Started Thirty-Four Years Ago], in *Toda a Terra* (1976), a poem that, from an indictment against immobilism and conformity in regard to the establishment, is converted into an exaltation of values like freedom. So, the euphoria when the end of the Second World War is announced in Rio Maior is relativised, as is perceived in the thought of someone who was still a child: “Almost everyone in town went out to the streets / without me understanding why, a man, by my side, was arrested for cheering Russia” (647). The relativisation remains at the end of the poem since, beyond the absence of freedom of speech, there is still, by parallelism, the reference to the war overseas. When he says “I feel sorry now that the war ended almost twenty-eight years ago / one more soldier has died by accident in Angola” (648), one can perceive the veiled and ironic criticism to the game of masks with which the dictatorship deceives the people it rules.

The theme of the war also serves as a pretext for a distinction between Europe and the United States, diluting a pretence homogenisation of the Western world. In the poem “No aeroporto de Barajas” [At Barajas Airport], in *Transporte no Tempo*, Ruy Belo criticises the Americans “who nearby kill the heroic Vietnamese people faraway / who pay here in Dollars the pain of the South-Americans” (483). The fact that the American war planes depart from a European airport (the reiterated use of the adverb “here” is significative) reveals the existing

connivance, but the description of the “merrymakers / who pass by wearing a hunter’s cap on the head” (*ibidem*) denotes the contempt for the American hubris. Accordingly, he states: “Here, us the servants, them, the lords” (484). Notwithstanding Ruy Belo’s solidarity goes to the American soldiers, themselves victims of war as in “Saudação a um yankee” [Salute to a Yankee], included in the same book, since a former soldier had lost a leg in the The Vietnam War in the name of American Dollars that will never belong to him. The repudiation for the power of money exhibited the Americans it is also noticeable in “Requiem por Salvador Allende” [Requiem for Salvador Allende], de *Toda a Terra*, where, beyond the indignation felt by the murder of this Chilean leader, Ruy Belo condemns the “American way of being in the world / of being in the world taking away the bread from the Third World men” (704). Thus, there is a clear demarcation between the European structuring values of truth and justice, in accordance with the Greek heritage, and behaviours based on a “venom probably called money” (703), identifiable with the United States.

On the other hand, Europe is not always seen as a beacon of virtues and a source progress. In “Óscar Niemeyer”, poem from *Toda a Terra*, Ruy Belo praises the Brazilian architect because “he wears the colourful plumage of the tropics / has large wings that exceed the rationed rationalised surface of Europe” (637). So, there lacks in his contemporary Europe the imagination that deconstrues a persistent “cracked soil”. By opposition, Niemeyer’s work resumes the European cultural heritage, exhibiting a trace “born of a missing gesture with the movement of hands of the Renaissance artists” (*ibidem*).

This last quote exposes the praise to the European cultural heritage, not to the way society is structured in the historic present of Ruy Belo, a poet who assumes the tragic fate of Greek streaks. After all, “the challenge of Antigone and Prometheus / it is, still today, our challenge” (435). This way, Ruy Belo values freedom of choice, truth and justice, with poetry as fate. In accordance with a chronicle he wrote in the newspaper *A Capital* in 1970, “the poet, through poetry, can get to know himself better and help others to know themselves. Poetry should serve an ideal of human communion” (2002: 287). Places, poets’ names and evoked artists suggest that this ideal is to be found in Europe, the basis upon which one can effectively

build.

*Information added by the translator: The New State was an authoritarian regime, that followed the collapse of the First Republic and was institutionalised in 1933 with the approval of a new Constitution.

Brief Anthology

Changing the Subject

We entered the Winter's long tunnel

The night grows like the tide in the waterfront

in a morning of sea and mist

I will never know who passed in the corridor

I extend my hand to you over the centuries, Agrippa d'Aubigné

If I could, Luther, do something for you

So, I only recall the multiple chairs where I sat

and those other things that I forgot

Once, someone through a café window

might have seen me and wanted to be me?

RUY BELO

Would Matisse paint Dance II

would anyone read the barges trilogy

«That is how I went back to France»

Where did you truly return to, Erasmus?

I am so much in my old age that one of these days

I will buy my sleep in pills at the chemist

I swear I never saw the invincible explosion of leaves

and I cry for everything past just because I was capable of doing so

I do not ditch death, I very much want to die

taking once and for all that that takes me

and just forgetting in my most pure amazement

Do not ask who I am

at this moment when I remember and write

Is there a part of me now bathing in

the Mediterranean in the Summer?

Will they ski in Sesimbra late in the afternoon

or in Vila do Conde in a given morning?

And a pair of blue eyes on the train to Versailles?

And what to do of these hands

Of the face that I show every even year?

We entered Winter. How many are there?

I have a vast work published

And I have death being prepared

in Homem de Palavra[s] (2014: 319-320)

Madrid revisited

I do not know, maybe in these fifty verses I will achieve my purpose

to give in that objective, even impersonal way, that is usual of me

the external ordination of this city I come back to

It rains on these streets desolated and thick like scrutinised rain

your liquid and wet absence multiplied by droplets

The sky saddened there is a solitude and a grey colour

in this city, months ago the sun capital, nucleus of clarity

It is another this city, this city today is your absence

an immense absence where the houses diverged in several streets

now so diverse that they make with such a diversity

of this city of mine another city

Your absence is of a preference for some specific places

such as the mail office or the Café Gijón on certain Sundays like this one

normal for everyone else only for us secretly ritual

if neutral for the others neutral for myself

before in you inheriting this particular meaning

Your absence weighs in these loca sacra [holy places] one by one

which more important than places as such

they are simple places that I only knew because of you

and now are erected stone by stone as a monument to your absence

I do not see here the geographic administrative nucleus of a country

capital of buildings, centre whence emanate decisions

complex of museums banks gardens professional life tourism

that I once knew but know no more

Here there is only the fact that I know I was happy

and today as much as I know what I know that I will not be so ever again

This is the capital but not capital of a certain country

capital of your face and of your eyes equal to none

or of a deep country and unique like you

Madrid is knowing stone by stone and step by step how I lost you

it is an alien city being mine

it is something strange and known

I open the window over the square and the theatre where we were

and where in the Desdemona I saw in you

It is not rain that falls after all it is only your absence that falls

rain much more real and pluvial than if it rained

More than this city it is only a certain city that ever were

in such a measure that only deeply where I went

and in her only my pain like a condensed stone

standing laying or in any other form that fit

It is a high city like the things I lost

and I promptly lost only knew

for more than her I knew you

It was from this high that I fell

higher than the hotel's own tower

by many suicides chosen for the end of life

This city is not that city where I lived

where I went to the movies and worked and strolled

and in my own body's flame I consumed myself mercilessly

Here was the city where I met you

and right when I met you more than ever I lost you

It must be almost one more year that seeing you I saw

that seeing you I did not see you and that I lost you by having you

But to this city many give the name Madrid

in Transporte no Tempo (2014: 459-460)

Do sono da desperta Grécia

No voice in Sparta nor in the East

had yet addressed the men of the future

when from the Acropolis of Athens Pericles hierocratic

spoke: «even if the decline the things

all human threatens beware oh forthcoming

that here we raise the most famous and happiest city»

These were new words under the same

celestial vault once open in stars

over the head of the Argos emissary

who waited for the sign of Troy’s rendition

and over the dramaturg Sophocles stealing

from the days of that time timeless conflicts

coming to our knowledge in the strength of theatre

Supported on his slender spear

Goddess Athena still thinks for us

For the first time man questions himself

without any sacred books on his intelligence

and the tragedy the art the thought

unveil the fate the divinity the universe

RUY BELO

In the search for truth the man arrives

at the notions of justice and freedom

After four millennia of a servile submission

the man looks at the gods in the eye

and challenges the strength of the tyrant

And today we still question ourselves

the interrogation defines our free condition

The challenge of Antigone and Prometheus

it is still today, our challenge

although like a river time has gone by

«Say in Lacedaemon oh foreigner

that here we die to serve the law»

«And if tonight is a night of fate

be it blessed as it is the condition for dawn»

Centuries-old liven words still today

A secret Greece sleeps in each heart

in the night that precedes the inevitable morning

in Transporte no Tempo (1973: 525-526)

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