

A convergence of media and the aesthetics of liquid culture: One Art by Elizabeth Bishop

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INTRODUCTION

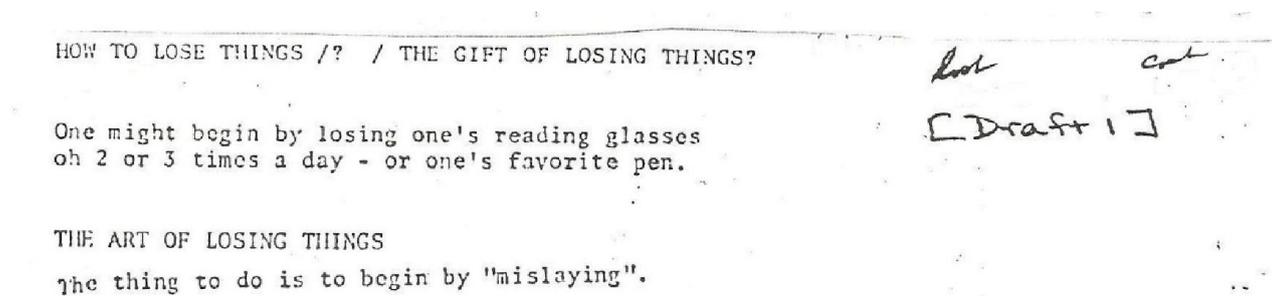
The proposal of this paper is to work with different modes of discourse or with a convergence of different media on the same theme, the poem *One Art* by the American writer Elizabeth Bishop. The starting point is a set of manuscripts of the poem leading to three representations: a video poem, the video of a theatre performance and a comic.

In order to deal with this network of relations and to make texts dialogue with each other, the present essay invites the reader to navigate in the liquid environment of internet where one can find these interconnected media related to the poem *One Art*. The aesthetics of liquid culture, with signs always moving in spaces where the fugacity of lines and readjusting perspectives give the tone in the virtual architecture, allows its user interaction with the texts.

2. GENETIC PATH

The poem *One Art* was published on December 28th, 1976, in *Geography III*. There are seventeen versions (BISHOP, 1976; 1978), most of them typed manuscripts with corrections in pen at the left and right margin, and also at the end of the page. So, partially typed, partially handwritten, such drafts had to be deciphered and transcribed, especially because the author's handwriting is sometimes almost illegible and demand a lot of comparison between drafts till the researcher can find some meaning out of them. Considering the handwritten interventions in the manuscripts, one can notice that Bishop was very much concerned with dating most of her papers, what makes it easier for the researcher to establish the chronological order of such documents. Bishop also used to organize her documents by writing on the top right corner of her manuscripts the word *Draft* followed by the corresponding order number:

Picture 1 – Manuscript 01



Source: BISHOP, 1976, Box 60.2

What calls the researcher's attention is the diagrammatic way of constructing that poem; one has the impressions that the author is dealing with pieces of a puzzle, leaving some blank spaces to be filled later on with the right words of the villanelle.

don't think I'll be able to go back to that beautiful island in Maine any more- this is too complicated to go into, but it really breaks my heart...

(Elizabeth Bishop to Anny Baumann, December 24th, 1975. In: BISHOP, 1994b, p. 602).

From the very first draft, the text sounds like a manual or a recipe given by an expert at losses. Then, the succession of losses is mentioned in a crescendo, draft after draft, from smaller to bigger losses:

#1 HOW TO LOSE THINGS?/THE GIFT OF LOSING THINGS ¹	One
might begin by losing one's reading glasses	Oh 2
or 3 times a day-or one's favorite pen	
THE ART OF LOSING THINGS	
by "mislaying" [...]	The thing to do is to begin
fountain pens	Keys, reading glasses,
	[...]
	This is by way of introduction. I
really want to introduce <u>myself</u> – I am such a fantastically good at losing things I think	
everyone shd profit from my experience	
You may find it hard to believe, but I have actually lost	I
mean <u>lost</u> , and forever two whole houses,	one a
very big one. A third house, also big, is	at
present, I think, "mislaid" –	
	[...]
	I have lost one [long] peninsula
	I've lost
and one island.	
[...]	a
splendid beach, and a good-sized bay.	Two
whole cities two of the	world's
biggest cities (two of the most beautiful)	
	[...]
	A piece of one continent –
	and one entire continent. All
gone, gone forever and ever.	
One might think this would have prepared me	for
losing one average-sized not [especially]	

¹ Consider # as manuscript version; [] delete; < > add; << add at the left margin.

Exceptionally
person

beautiful or dazzling intelligent
(except for blue eyes) [...]

10 [...] But if I lose you- (eyes) of azure aster [...].

14 [...] <<Even<< losing you (a joking voice, a gesture I love) [...]

9 [...] I lost my mother's watch [...].

5 [...] The art of losing isn't/not so hard to master (...) No- I'm lying

12 [...] And, vaster [,]

Two rivers, of my geography [...]

(BISHOP, 1976, Vassar College, Box 60.2).

Although the author is not explicit about the geographical points alluded to in her very first draft, reading the poem *Santarem*², one realizes the rivers that have fascinated Bishop were Tapajós and Amazon: “I wanted to stay awhile/in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon [...] liked the place, I liked the idea of the place” (BISHOP, 1994, p. 185a).

The bay alluded to, with the beautiful beach, is probably the bay of Maine, since there is a great amount of private papers reporting the poet's stay on the island of North Haven in Maine. She gives detailed descriptions not only of the birds and flowers she saw there, but also of the quiet bay. In one of Bishop's letters to her doctor Anny Baumann, she comments:

It's just 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 in 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. Vassar College Box 23.8).

So, it is interesting that her correspondence, as well as her drafts, or published texts shed light to the interpretation of Bishop's work as a whole. Access to drafts can either confirm or reject readings of her published text, thus generating a multiplicity of possible interpretations.

² The poem *Santarem* (1979) took Bishop almost twenty years to write, from 1960 to 1978.

FACSIMILIES AND TRANSCRIPTIONS

HOW TO LOSE THINGS /? / THE GIFT OF LOSING THINGS?

lost *cat*
[Draft 1]

One might begin by losing one's reading glasses
oh 2 or 3 times a day - or one's favorite pen.

THE ART OF LOSING THINGS

the thing to do is to begin by "mislaying".

Mostly, one begins by "mislaying":
keys, reading-glasses, fountain pens
- these are almost too easy to be mentioned,
and "mislaying" means that they usually turn up
in the most obvious place, although when one
is making progress, the places grow more unlikely.
- This is by way of introduction. I really
want to introduce myself - I am such a
fantastic lly good at losing things
I think everyone shd. profit from my experiences.

born
early
birth
metaphorically
with
ms

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You may find it hard to believe, but I have actually lost
I mean lost, and forever two whole houses,
one a very big one. A third house, also big, is
at present, I think, "mislaidd" - but
maybe it's lost, too. I won't know for sure for some time.
I have lost one ~~big~~ peninsula and one island.
I have lost - it can never be has never been found -
a small-sized town on that same island.
I've lost smaller bits of geography, like *and many smaller bits of geography or sea*

[Draft 9]

The art of losing isn't hard to master:
innumerable things seem really to be meant
to be lost, so their loss is no disaster.

so many things
that

Lose something everyday. Oh you can muster
the usual list: car-keys, keys, reading-glasses, packages unsent -
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

a list might muster

Then practice losing bigger, losing faster,
forgetting faster
Then practice losing big, forgetting faster
places and names and where it was you meant
to go - None of them spells disaster

Lose ~~something~~ something every day. Oh, you can muster
the usual list:

Lose something every day. Lose every day. Oh, you can muster
the packages unsent

mother's watch

Look! I have lost my ~~mother's~~ two hours watch and my last, or
next-to-last ~~of~~ my three houses. Where they went beloved houses.
isn't a problem, much less a disaster.

I've lost two cities, lovely ones,
Two cities vanished, lovely ones, and vast
losses a cape, a continent.
You won't believe the losses I can master.

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One

[Draft 17]

The art of losing isn't hard to master.
So many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Oh, you can muster
the usual list:
of lost down-keys, the hour bodily apart -
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing bigger, losing faster:
places and names, & where it was you meant
to go. None of these spells disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And, look, my last, or
next-to-last, of three lovely houses and:

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Note: Due to copyright laws, we don't have permission to publish the entire draft.

Transcriptions

[Transcriptions Draft 1](#)

[Transcriptions Draft 9](#)

[Transcriptions Draft 17](#)

4. MULTIMODALITY IN ONE ART

The manuscripts of *One Art* are relevant in this analysis since they can be seen as an anchorage in the chain of supplements that is central to the present study on multimodality: the first genre to be analyzed is a video poem, the second a theatre performance and then a comic. Considering that the main concern of this essay is to analyze different modes of realizing particular meanings in communication, the concept of multimodality must be highlighted and some of its implications. According to Kress, (2010, p. 79):

“Mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects are examples of modes used in representation and communication.”

So representation can resort to different ways of conveying meaning and when there is an orchestration of signs in different modes arranged in a particular configuration so as to form a coherent whole, it is possible to call it a multimodal text (KRESS, 2010a). The three representations of *One Art* to be analysed in this paper are multimodal texts. They can also be classified as intermedial works of art. As stated by Higgins, the term “intermedia” refers to works that [...] fall between media [...]” (HIGGINS, 1966, p. 18) or whose art forms are fused, in some way and there is “[...] a crossing of borders between” them (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p. 46-47).

The subcategories of intermediality (Rajewsky, 2005) that will be relevant to this analysis are: medial transposition, related to the way how a medial product comes into being, such as the transposition of a poem into a video, a play or any other form of realization; and intermediality or a media combination, which comprises at least two distinct medial forms, like theatre performance and video and so on.

The first supplement triggered by *One Art* manuscripts was a video poem, a transposition from the literary printed poem to a video. Entitled “Bishop in art”, it was produced as an experimental work by two postgraduate students from the Federal University of Bahia, Sandra

Corrêa and Sirlene Góes, who had access to the poetic drafts of *One Art* and to other facsimiles of Bishop's creative dossier in the Germanic Department at UFBA. The poem can be heard in the background, recited by a female voice, while images of losses related to the poem are shown on video. This is a multimodal text because it can be perceived through several modes: image, writing, speech and soundtrack. It can also be seen as an intermedial text because there is integration or combination of media in its construction, since then the viewer can perceive a succession of manuscripts and photos that appear on the screen, a sequence of objects in rapid flashes, synchronized by the cinematic devices of *fade in* and *fade out*. A geography of losses is exhibited: photos of houses, rivers, cities, a peninsula left behind... Everything comes and goes.

[Video Link](#)

In another transposition of the poem, this time into a theatre performance, the female voice that interpreted *One Art* was that of the Brazilian artist Regina Braga, the protagonist of the play *Um Porto para Elizabeth Bishop*, "A Port for Elizabeth Bishop", based on the book written by Marta Góes in 2001. Góes, a writer and journalist, was born in Michigan, United States, but spent her childhood in Petrópolis and her family house was near Samambaia, where Elizabeth Bishop lived with her companion Lota Macedo Soares. The play was staged in New York, 2006, as "A safe harbor for Elizabeth Bishop". In Brazil, it went to stage in 2001, 2004 and 2011. This paper discusses the last performance of the play in São Paulo, 2011, one of the events to celebrate the centenary of Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil.

In the play there is a two-minute interpretation of the poem *One Art* by the actor Regina Braga and the translation of the text into Portuguese was done by Paulo Henriques Britto. Signs such as words, gestures, music, voice, sound and lighting effect, make up, clothes, hair style, in sum, all these semiotic elements were orchestrated in the recitation of the poem. Words loaded with a voice full of emotion conveyed through a tense facial expression, a dismantled hair style, heavy clothes, a heavy make up, the stage almost in the dark, a sad music; almost frenetic gestures full of tension at the climax of *One Art* when the protagonist stands up to denounce the loss of a special person.

In the play, Regina Braga recites the poem immediately after the death of Lota, after the noise of an ambulance that has taken Lota to the hospital in New York. So the punctuation of the play has actually led the audience to relate the loss of the special person in the poem to Lota. Though *One Art* was published in 1976, after Lota's death, according to the drafts, the "special person" referred to in the poem did not coincide with the physical description of Lota. The person with blue eyes was Alice Methfessel, not Lota. This seems to be a very good example of punctuation as a means for making meaning, since the way events have been

framed in the play led the audience to an interpretation that did not coincided with the biography of Bishop.

According to Krass (2010a, p.122):

Punctuation [...] both fixes and frames elements, and framed elements can be units in larger structures: relations can be established between them, with larger-level frames making them in turn into elements. Without frames, no elements; without elements, no structures; and without structures, no meaning.

So the recitation of the poem has been framed by the playwright within a larger-level frame, the thematic vector directed to the theme of death, which implied the death of Lota. However, when questioned about this punctuation, the director of the play admitted that she had no compromise with true facts related to Bishop's life and that such sequence of events would not be changed because it was dramatically effective. Obviously, there is no way to contest that, since a work of art would rather be seen as a monument than a document.

Finally, the last supplement analyzed in this paper is a comic produced by the artist Chantal Herskovic. Unlike the other two representations or transpositions of the poem, which could be considered more iconic since they are more similar to *One Art*, this comic is more indexical. Its starting point is also the art of losing but it takes another direction. It is a freer recreation on the theme of losses and it is a story on the art of detachment.



The story is told in first person and all the perceptions are filtered through the protagonist's eyes, a boy who reflects about the author Elizabeth Bishop and her recipe to face losses in life. He actually ponders on the idea of attachment and detachment. For him, to master the art of losing means to accept the changes in life that cannot be controlled and also means not to be attached to ephemeral things, even to people. His streams of consciousness are in the balloons that reveal the boy's personal conflicts about change and suffering.

The main idea in the construction of this story seems to be that of the permanent transition of the sea also represented by the movement of the sand, or by the figures of trees and roots that had been drawn in the sand and are watered away by the sea. The element water may reflect change and movement because it can assume any form and the sea waves are in constant movement. So, the constant change of everything is recurrent in the story; everything is always moving, always changing, but there seems to be no real loss in nature, only permanent change.

The story has seven panels. Together with a series of drawings showing the protagonist alone or with another boy and also a sea view, there are photos of Bishop in her house in Petrópolis, or of Bishop's house in Ouro Preto, or of her passports, or a photo of her with the American poet Robert Lowell in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro. The impression of those plastic images is that of a collage of different modes of representation, similar to images in a kaleidoscope. The use of capital letters in the last panel seems to be intentional and shows the word MYself; this typographic play with letters calls the reader's attention and gives the impression that the loss of the ego or the question of the protagonist's identity should be stressed in the end of the story. The typographic style used in the text gives the impression of handwritten style, thus reminding the reader of Bishop's manuscripts.

Not only the plastic signs have been carefully handled, but sound signs are also present. Under a kind of transparent veil in the last panel, the reader can see an onomatopoeia effect that subtly mimics the sound of the waves: *VSHHHHHHH* at the feet of Bishop's photo and also near the boy who is looking at the sea. In a way, the boy and the poet Elizabeth Bishop seem to be connected by that same sound, they both try to cope with their inner conflicts.

It is important to stress that the tactile sensorial modality is very present in the panels since the comic strip shows effects of transparency and different textures, especially where figures are drawn in the sand, or in the juxtaposition of several elements in the collage: photos, manuscripts, drawings juxtaposed in different layers. So, the language of this comic is free and innovative, especially referring to the outline of the traditional balloons that has been substituted by transparencies. This aesthetics proposes an alternative, more contemporary language to comic that moves away from the traditional pattern of Walt Disney's genre in the 1940's.

Produced in a tablet, graphics paint programs were used to edit pictures and develop the story; in the panel construction, photos were painted and special textures applied to them. One of Bishop's manuscripts was used as the background of the pictures, thus integrating written text and image; the signature of Bishop and also of the author of this comic were included somewhere in one of the panels, together with all sorts of elements in the collage. Indeed, this seems to be a good example of multimodal text that articulates manuscripts with drawings and photos of many sorts.

5. CONCLUSION

So it has become evident that multimodal and also intermedial studies are rich fields of research to be explored, taking into consideration what the several media have in common but also their specificities. They share a wide spectrum of modalities, of aspects and all of them are related to a specific historical and cultural context. In fact, starting with what they share in common it is possible to move on to studying the specificities of each media and the way each one can be remedied by other kinds of technical media. In the virtual environment of liquid culture, medial interfaces assume other configurations and the interpreters can interact with such interfaces with more flexibility. Indeed, multimodality is everywhere and every medium is a complex of intermodal relations. In more or less degree, all media are multimodal.

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