

Research Project:
*Poetry's "Travel-Worthiness": South
America and Brazil Through the Eyes of
English Language Poets*

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Abstract: *This research project aims at analyzing how physical and mental travels has helped poets to envision a new form of art and produce intercultural knowledge. Through a historical approach, I show the act of imagining a new land, outside the local culture, can be characterized as a transnational hybridization, articulating real and symbolic locales.*

Keywords: *English language poetry, Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bishop, Paul Muldoon, travel-worthiness;*

Addressing the reliability of art in times of crisis, the poet Seamus Heaney tells the story of Saint Kevin of Glendalough. Heaney suggests the legend could be from anywhere, because “its trustworthiness and its travel-worthiness have to do with its local setting” (459). Drawing a parallel with a trip made to Sparta in 1995, Heaney writes that he remembered this story while admiring a statue of Orpheus. For him, this exchange of cultural references proves that local stories have a transformative power due to their humanistic values. A story’s “travel-worthiness” lies in its ability to engender an intercultural exchange, which “encourages us to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and the maintenance of a salubrious political space” (460). “Travel-worthiness” means local stories are important in the creation of an ethical intercultural art.

Heaney affirms power of poetry stems from its resistance to homogenizing discourses. However, when globalization produces artificial versions of local cultures, how can poetry generate transformation? How could its reading bring more than academic debates? I would begin by suggesting that poetry is a genre that has worked within this intercultural dialogue since its early production. From the moment of its conception, the poetic genre has been open to the influence of “translational and transnational” hybridization (Bhabha 1994). Cultures have always been involved in a translational process since cultural symbols help them to make sense of the world.

In addition to being “translational”, cultures became “transnational” with the interchange of values. This process was intensified with the discovery of the Americas. With the expansion of territories, arts became geographically bound (Said 1999). The search for new aesthetic paradigms thus, was coterminous to the search for new territories. The aim of this study is to examine literary form and see how it entails cultural exchange. Particularly, I examined how English language poetry has created a poetical representation of South America and Brazil.

With a view to bringing comparative literature and cultural criticism together, this research understands how hybridization has produced art and intercultural knowledge. The departure point is the pioneer sonnets and plays by William Shakespeare, which discuss the theme of great sea voyages. While, the idea of different lands is present topos in his poetry (Sonnet 116) and dramas (*The Tempest*), John Donne’s muse, in “To his coy mistress”, is compared to the Newfoundland of America. Donne’s comparison expands the poetic foot in longer lines. This formal change which is prompted by a cultural change leads to the question: were not these attempts to envision other cultures already part of a transcultural project? Was there also evidence of the imagining of South America? A second approach focuses on a later period of English language poetry: the early nineteenth-century, a moment for the conception of the modern ideas of utopia and social equality. A main focus of this second section is *Madoc* by Robert Southey. In his imaginary journey to America, the poet wished to establish a Pantisocracy. Although the poet could never fulfill his desire, the poem unravels the difficulties and prejudices typical of social utopias.

In a third section, I examined how more recent poets conceived both imaginary and real travels to Brazil and South America. Their poems were able to capture and transform the cultural symbols of the country. The first example is Elizabeth Bishop. Her poems created a whole sub-genre of poetry which is indebted to a sense of place that arises from her trips to and within Brazil. Bishop’s Brazilian poems create a new vocabulary for poetry, which is conceived within an intercultural dialogue.

Other more contemporary examples are the Irish and Northern Irish writers Paul Durcan and Paul Muldoon. Paul Durcan described Brazil in *Greetings to our friends in Brazil* (1999) which is based on an actual visit to Brazil. Paul Muldoon revisited Brazil’s mythical and imaginary settings in three sparse poems: “Immrama” (*Why Brownlee left*, 1980); “The Lass of Aughrim” (*Meeting the British*, 1987); and “Brazil” (*The Annals of Chile*, 1994), all of which produce a deeper cultural reflection based on experimentation with the poetic form. The respective approaches of Durcan and Muldoon invite interesting comparisons. First, Durcan’s poems tend towards a free association of poetical forms, while all of Muldoon’s poems about Brazil are narrative sonnets. Second, Durcan reproduces actual conversations he had with natives from Brazil, while Muldoon establishes a dialogue with his own poetic self and other poetical and historical representations of Brazil. And last, while Durcan is entrapped in an individual present, Muldoon recollects the portrayal of Brazil by the Irish nationalist and British consul in Brazil, Roger Casement.

Ultimately, with this research argues the act of imagining a new land, outside the local culture, can be characterized as a transnational hybridization. Writing poetry produces “travel- worthiness”, what articulates real and symbolic locales.