Title: Rules in the Land of Wizards - Time in Poetry from Rio de Janeiro

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In this dissertation, I aim to clarify how time appears in the work of four 20th century Brazilian poets who resided in Rio de Janeiro: Manuel Bandeira, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Vinícius de Moraes and Cecília Meireles. In the process, I will also describe related concepts found in modern Western thought, both in philosophy and literature.

In the first chapter, I discuss the theme of infancy in the poetry of Manuel Bandeira, who strongly influenced Modernism in Brazil. With regard to this theme, Proust was particularly significant in elaborating the concept of “involuntary memory” in In Search of Lost Time. While infancy had also been an important theme for modernist poets like Baudelaire and Rilke, Proust was new because he described infancy as something that emerges from oblivion. The word “infancy” derives from the Latin for word “unable to speak” and is described as such in Hölderlin or Fernando Pessoa's poems. Lyric poetry continuously tries to reach infancy, as a destination that can never be reached. Bandeira, too, in his poems attempted to magically summon an unrecoverable infancy (more precisely, something which looks very much like infancy), something which can never be returned to or described. As Novalis said, the greatest wizard of all is he who can deceive even himself with his own magic.

In the second chapter, I discuss the connection between the ephemeral and the eternal. These two categories, which in the literal sense of the terms represent opposites, often appear inseparable, as they do, for example, in the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson. The relationship between the two was already to be seen in the Classicist tradition, but it underwent a transformation after the advent of Romanticism. Keats began to doubt the ability of poetry to transform a moment into an eternity. Baudelaire, considering that beauty exists in the connection between the fugitive and the eternal, demonstrated this aesthetic in his sonnet “To a Passer-by.” Walter Benjamin discerned a sign of Modernity in this aesthetic, which he called “love at last sight.” Proust, even before this definition by Benjamin, had already fully described the aesthetic effect of the fugitive and the
eternal. Cecília Meireles’ poetry belongs to this lineage, representing the poetess almost as if she were a “passer-by.”

In the third chapter, I discuss the theme of carnival in the work of Vinicius de Moraes, a well-known poet of Bossa Nova lyrics. Carnival, often imagined as something full of joy, appears as something inseparable from sadness in Manuel Bandeira’s poetry, as it does in Vik Muniz’s work. One of the reasons is that, as the novels of Cesare Pavese and Proust suggest, you cannot speak about a festival while it is ongoing, and once it is over, you can not recall it without melancholy. The most significant genealogy of thought on festivals is probably the one that goes from Nietzsche to Bakhtin, as Bakhtin inherited the concept of the Dionysiac in his literary theory. Heidegger also inherited the concept of the festive from Nietzsche, and elaborated his own concepts of festivals: “the festival as a period before a festival” and “the festival as a source of both joy and sadness.” Vinicius, also conscious of Nietzsche’s philosophy, located the Brazilian carnival in the history of thought on festivals.

In the fourth chapter, I again discuss Manuel Bandeira’s poetry, examining the motif of the phantom in his work. Art work is, for Proust and Borges among others, a way in which an artist survives through the death of the self. To anticipate one’s death while still being alive is a mode of Dasein, as Heidegger described in detail in Being and Time. Through a critical reading of Heidegger’s work, Giorgio Agamben concluded that language is possible only when death is possible. Maurice Blachot also insisted that the possibility of death is a condition for the existence of language because words can have meaning only by annihilating existing things. Language is, then, from its beginning something phantasmic, and Bandeira’s poetry can be interpreted through the concept of phantom. The poet, in his later years, came to doubt the possibility of the survival of art. It is the critic’s task to save art from disappearing into oblivion.

In the fifth chapter, using debates over Auschwitz as a frame of reference, I examine the work of Carlos Drummond de Andrade, in addition to such concepts as “lost time,” history, and memory, particularly as they are found in Proust. When Moby Dick was published, a critic insisted that Melville should not have written a scene for which there could be no witness. The figure of a witness who survived a tragedy has been a symbol of the act itself of composing poems. Nonetheless, García-Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude describes the history of a village which perished leaving no survivors. Controversies surrounding Auschwitz have arisen precisely over this point. The Nazi’s strategy was to deprive the internees of voices with which to testify. And the poetry from the 20th century is tormented by the anxiety that something may be missing in memory. Memory of the forgotten was one of the main interests for Benjamin already in the 1920’s. He probably had in mind Proust’s “involuntary memory.” Drummond, who continuously payed attention to the forgotten, may have inherited the same critical mind from Proust, being also the translator of Proust’s work into Portuguese. What they both pursued in common was the unfound time that spreads behind the past which remains only as form.

In the sixth chapter, I again discuss Cecília Meireles’ poetry, focusing on the figure of mermaid (Siren). The most tragic thing about Andersen’s mermaid, who obtains legs in exchange for a voice and in the end loses the Prince’s love, is not this fact itself; rather, it is the consequence that she is unable to speak of her tragedy. We can see Homer’s Sirens, then, not as ancestors of Andersen’s mermaid, but as her descendants, who try to revenge themselves upon human beings. If so, Kafka’s Odysseus is even more cunning. When the Sirens, deprived of voice, exercise the more powerful weapon of silence, Kafka’s Odysseus defends himself, pretending to believe in the effects of the chains on his body and the wax in his ear. In one of Mallarmé’s sonnets, there is a description of the sea in which there is an indication of both a shipwreck’s having occurred and the presence of a mermaid, but the truth is hidden under the ocean foam. What this poem suggests is that the purer a tragedy is, the less chance it has to be testified about. Cecília’s mermaid, being conscious of this,
says “The sadness of this life is to be unable to speak. Words spoken and written are nothing but air on air...”