

CARLOS DRUMMOND DE ANDRADE

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987) is, for all Brazilians, “the poet of the century”. He was born in Itabira, Minas Gerais, and no Brazilian will disagree with the poet João Cabral de Melo Neto when he commented on Drummond’s “rough diction” which taught him to avoid overinflated oratory. For a Brazilian, this is the essential characteristic of a *mineiro* (a person born in Minas Gerais). As well as being modesty, *mineiros* are usually laconic, if not entirely silent, and very observant. They are the very antithesis of *cariocas* (people born in Rio de Janeiro) who are open, outspoken and extrovert. Yet, Drummond moved to Rio where he lived all his life, but he never changed his *mineiro* habits. Every day he would walk to the beach for all to see. Even in his last interview, this major poet of the Portuguese language insisted that he “didn’t have a literary project”.

And yet, in his absence of a “literary project”, there was not a single field of human experience that was left uninspected: Time, Beauty, Reality, Song, Pain, Life, Death, Rhythm, Artifice, History, the Word—the list of Drummond’s “raw materials” is infinite. One of his strengths is to be at once a poet of his time and his own century, and yet also express his themes through a language that always reflects and measures its own poetical resources. In this sense, Drummond is one of the greatest ironists of the language, a position he shares with the great prose ironist of Brazilian literature, the nineteenth-century writer Machado de Assis.

I chose “Babylon Hill” because Elizabeth Bishop also wrote a narrative poem about the same slum in the hills [*morros*] of Rio de Janeiro, “The Burglar of Babylon”. In the fifteen years she lived in Brazil (between the fifties and sixties) she translated much of the poetry of her friends, among them Manuel Bandeira, Cabral and Drummond and she probably had Drummond’s poem about the Babylon hill in her mind when she wrote hers. “An Ox sees Men” resumes, as I see it, much of Drummond’s best qualities as a poet: irony, distance, penetration and at the same time a deep compassion for mankind appearing by implication, in the interstices of silence. There is no illusions harboured about the nature of Man, but instead a humble acceptance of his difficult condition.

—ELIDE VALARINI OLIVER

Babylon Hill

At night, descend
 voices from the hill, creating terror
 (urban terror, fifty percent cinema,
 and the rest came from Luanda or were lost in the general
 tongue).

When the revolution came, the soldiers spread around the hill,

The quarters caught fire, they didn't come back.
 Some, with shots, died.
 The hill became more enchanted.

But the voices of the hill
 aren't properly lugubrious.
 Still there is a well tuned mandolin,
 that dominates the sounds of the stone and the leaves,
 and descends upon us, modest and leisurely,
 like a courtesy of the hill.

from *Sentimento do Mundo* (1940)

(Translated by Elide Valarini Oliver & Mac Oliver)

An Ox Sees Men

So delicate (more than a bush) and run
 and run hither and thither, always forgetting
 something. Certainly they lack
 some essential attribute, though they present themselves as
 noble
 and grave, sometimes. Ah, amazingly grave,
 even sinister. The poor things! One would say they don't listen to
 the song of the air or to the secrets of the hay,
 they seem not to see, as well, what is visible

and common to each one of us, in space. And they become sad
and in the tracks of their sadness come to cruelty.
All their expression dwells in their eyes—and is lost
when their eyelashes close, at a shadow.
Nothing in the hairs, in the extremes of inconceivable fragility,
and as there is little mountain in them,
what dryness, and what interstices, and what
impossibility for them to organize themselves in calm forms,
permanent, necessary. They have, perhaps,
a certain melancholic charm (for one minute) and with that
they get away with
a pardon for their fastidious agitation and the translucid
interior emptiness that makes them so poor and wanting
in emitting absurd and agonic sounds: desire, love, jealousy
(what do we know?), sounds that break and fall in the field
like afflicted stones and burn the grass and the water,
and difficult it is, after that, to ruminate our truth.

from *Claro Enigma* (1951)

(Translated by Elide Valarini Oliver)