

A BRAZIL OF HER OWN: HOW BRAZIL ALLOWED ELIZABETH BISHOP TO FIND HER FULL VOICE

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ABSTRACT: “A Brazil of her own” examines how her move to Brazil enabled Elizabeth Bishop to transform both herself and the I of her poems. Finding a freedom in being a traveler, Bishop's years in Brazil allowed her to explore both her sexuality and the possibilities of poetic voice, and allowing her to bring disparate aspects of her self into a non-dialectical whole. In this way Bishop was exploring Brazil, herself, and poetry in the poems of *Questions of Travel*, particularly.

RESUMO: Este artigo examina como a mudança para o Brasil permitiu à Elizabeth Bishop transformar a si mesma e ao sujeito (“I”) de seus poemas. Com a liberdade de ser viajante, os anos de Bishop no Brasil permitiram que ela explorasse sua sexualidade e as possibilidades da voz poética, e permitindo que ela trouxesse aspectos diferentes de si mesma para um todo não dialético. Desta forma, Bishop estava explorando o Brasil, ela mesma, e a poesia nos poemas de *Questions of Travel*, em particular.

The poem is an *expedition* in the world, an *exploration* in the total sense of the world.
—Edouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*

Much has been written about Elizabeth Bishop's life by now. A veritable orphan (her father died when she was 8 months old; her mother was institutionalized when Bishop was five and she never saw her mother again), Bishop was shuttled between different family members, splitting time between Nova Scotia and Worcester, MA. She then went to Vassar and lived in New York, then moved to France for several years, before moving on with Lousie Crane to Key West . This sense of being itinerant stayed with her most of her early life: she “remarked in an interview with Alexandra Johnson, ‘I’ve never felt particularly homeless, but then I’ve never felt particularly at home.’” (TRAVISANO, 1988, p.131) Bishop functioned as a veritable outsider—an orphan, a guest of wealthier friends, a lesbian at a time when being out was not an option. Her poems—particularly her early work—shows this sense of outsidership. Although immensely successful (some of her most anthologized work such as “The Fish” comes from this period), the

poems of her first two books (*North & South* and *A Cold Spring*) are often persona poems (and often in male voices), and she seems to be struggling with finding her own lyric voice. It is not until she comes to Brazil where Bishop finds a unified voice, where she bridges the chasm between outsider and insider. Although “almost all Bishop’s writing about Brazil is about the problematizing of being a permanent tourist in an adopted home” (LECKIE, 2003, p.187), the country allows her work and herself to exist non-dualistically. That is to say that she accepts the dynamic whole instead of choosing one half of the dichotomy.

What did Brazil afford her? Upon arriving in Santos in November, 1951, Bishop took ill and resided with her friend Lota de Macedo Soares, an architect, intellectual, and daughter of a prominent political family. Although the original plan was to stay in Brazil for only two weeks, Bishop stayed for over 15 years, dividing her time between Rio de Janeiro and Petropolis (another duality). Her relationship with Lota was a partnership in every sense of the word, and Lota built Bishop a studio in the mountains that literally became what Virginia Woolf declared every woman needs to write: “money and a room of her own...” (1957, p.4) Although not wealthy, money was less of a worry in Brazil, but the place to write—a place of *her* own—allowed Bishop to discover her voice. It was a place that in itself did away with dichotomies such as the notion of inside and outside (she wrote to Lowell about “clouds coming into the living room in the middle of conversation” (qtd in TRAVISANO, 1988, p.148)). It is in this space “High on her mountaintop. Or in the eleventh floor apartment in Rio, Bishop simultaneously launched both a systematic engagement with the colors of exile, and a detailed attempt to retrieve her Nova Scotia past” (GOLDENSOHN, 1992, p.194). Whether in Rio or in Petropolis, her past and present merged, and the book she would write during those years, *Questions of Travel*, would literally integrate the two into a cohesive whole.

Lyric poetry is the art of unifying dichotomy through the use of metaphor in the singular

utterance of the poet—that lyric I. Jacques MARITAIN writes: “[T]he primary requirement of poetry, which is the obscure knowing, by the poet, of his own subjectivity, is inseparable from, is one with another requirement—the grasping, by the poet, of the objective reality of the outer and inner world” (1961, p.83). The act of metaphor making inherently finds the similarities in unlike things—in breaking the barriers of dichotomy. The art of metaphor making is integration. ARISTOTLE says, “Far the most important thing to master is the use of metaphor ... for the ability to use metaphor well implies a perception of resemblances” (1985, p.65). Metaphor “makes the reader define the relationship between the object and image, and this (1) forces the reader to participate actively in the poem and (2) gives the reader knowledge about something unknown or only partly known by making it analogous to something he or she can imagine” (DOBYNS, 2003, p.17). This act asks the reader to engage the poem, to invest the poem, to make the poem as much his/her experience as it is the poet’s. As David Kalstone notes, “The Brazilian poems become a model of how, with difficulty and pleasure, pain and precision, we introduce ourselves into the world” (1983, p.19). It is important, therefore, that Bishop left “the thesis of her poems unstated [as] a strategy of the greatest importance—because the reader must share the process of observation and discovery” (TRAVISANO, 1988, p.13). By working in this way, the reader has the experience, and, more importantly, visits Brazil not as a tourist but as someone who lives there—thus breaking the duality of reader/writer of native/tourist.

It is important to understand the dynamic that is going on in her poetry. Although alien to the language, landscape, mores, and culture, Bishop also feels most at home in Brazil. She is stimulated by the unique, the strange, while simultaneously able to find her comfortable voice. For our poet, “Life in Brazil is nothing if not precarious, volatile, and constantly surprising. For awhile, Bishop accommodates herself to—even begins to revel in—that uncertainty” (SCHWARTZ, 1991, p.92). Perhaps that is why Travisano says about Brazil as described by

Bishop that it is “a tainted wonderland” (TRAVISANO, 1988, p.151). At the same time, she wrote to Lowell that she seemed “to have become a Brazilian homebody” (Qtd in TRAVISANO, 1988, p.132). Compare how she speaks of Brazil as opposed to her life in the United States in this passage to Lowell: “I didn’t feel ‘out of touch’ or ‘expatriated’ or anything like that, or suffer from lack of intellectual life, etc—I was always too shy to have much ‘intercommunication’ in New York, anyway and I was miserably lonely there most of the time—here I am extremely happy for the first time in my life” (Qtd in TRAVISANO, 1988, p.133).

In Brazil, Bishop was allowed to be herself: she did not feel pressured to have to suffer to fit the two stereotypes of what it meant to be a woman writer (they “either have to be COLD or HOT, obviously” (BISHOP and LOWELL, 2008, p.141)). There she developed the lyric self that would be the hallmark of her strongest poems. “Through the gradual invention of a personal style that kept her person peculiarly at bay, Elizabeth Bishop managed to elude the dominant focus of her era on a narrowing concern with the emotional business of the first person singular, and to develop a lyric poetry that remained faithful to the phenomenal world” (GOLDENSOHN 1992, p.62). The lyric self for Bishop is a part of the phenomenal world, not outside of it. And what a phenomenal world Brazil presents! “Brazil is a good place for the keen observer. It is teeming with particularities ... But Elizabeth seemed perfectly in harmony with this barrage of sights, sounds and smells” (BROWN, 1993, p.223). Pulitzer Prize winning poet Stephen Dunn claims that “[p]oetry is Adamic, plumbing the ineffable as it names the birds and the trees and the lives we endure behind closed doors. The poet, in order to be wonderful, needs to be full of wonder and a kind of scientific poise. Nothing, no matter how small, should be unworthy of his gaze” (2001, p.165). We see this clearly in Bishop’s Brazil poems in *Questions of Travel* which are the first group resolutely presenting a traveling self ... in a landscape deliberately chosen for its contextual value.... “the use of traveling is to regulate imagination be reality, and instead of

thinking how things may be, to see them as they are” (GOLDENSOHN, 1992, p.8). In Brazil, Bishop is both a tourist and at home; these poems alleviate the dichotomy by both having the stranger’s wondrous eye, and the native’s comfort, “the rooted necessity of the relation to the world” as Edouard Glissant puts it (1997, p.64). Or, as Gaston Bachelard decreed, “The *being-here* is maintained by being from elsewhere” (1994, p.208). The wondrous new world demands we pay attention.

Perhaps it is best to look at the first three poems that open *Questions of Travel*.

“Arrival at Santos” begins with the first sight of Brazil, but then relates back to the questioning self and the reader simultaneously:

Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you
and the immodest demands for a different world
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, and immediately...?
(BISHOP, 1984, p.89)

Here Bishop asks for nonduality from Brazil. It is a poem of observed details of what it means to be in a country (a flag, ports, coins, postage stamps), yet it does not end in the external but rather ends “we are driving into the interior.” The landscape of Brazil is externalized but also internalized. More importantly, as George Monteiro asserts that “Bishop’s use of the phrase [‘to the interior’] is entirely consonant with Brazilian usage When Americans travel away from the sea, they may say they are traveling inland, but Brazilians say, usually, that they are traveling into ‘the interior’” (MONTEIRO, 2012, p.37). By subsuming Brazilian usage, we can be sure that in this new world, the interior life of Bishop is changed. Here, then, the internal world and phenomenal world are the same thing.

Much has been written about “Brazil, January 1, 1502”—a poem which documents, in some ways, the arrival of the Portuguese to Brazil, focusing on a tapestry depiction of the arrival

in Brazil, and I do not want to repeat what so many other scholars have said; instead, I want to focus on how the poem presents another example of wholeness. The poem's opening word, "Januaries," implies an eternal returning of the same: the old year is the new year in some regards. This word is also used, Monteiro notes, in the Brazilian way—emphasizing how the foreigner (Bishop) has been acclimated. He points out her use of "one leaf yes and one leaf no" in the poem ("folha sim, folha não") is also representative of Bishop using Brazilian idiom (2012, p.35).

By avoiding the lyric I in "Brazil, January 1,1502," Bishop is able to write about history and write her story. "In the foreground there is sin" is both representative of the implicit (sexual) conquest of the native women by the Portuguese sailors but also refers back to her own taboo life with Lota. She is the foreigner arrived in Brazil, and just as the native lives will be changed, so too will the sailors and so, too, will she. Although a paradise where "Nature greets our eyes," where "every square inch [is] filling in with foliage," and where "flowers, too, like giant water lilies/up in the air—up, rather in the leaves— /purple, yellow, two yellows, pink...," the serpent is there, too, in the form of "five sooty dragons." The sexual conquest never happens in the tapestry, stuck in a frozen moment much like a lyric poem is.

The sailors,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each one out to catch an Indian for himself—
those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating always retreating behind it.
(BISHOP, 1984, p.92)

As an American, Bishop is represented by the Portuguese sailors, but she is also a woman, and therefore is represented by the Indian women who yet again retreat into the interior. As Lorrie Goldensohn notes, she is "neither those little armed men nor the bird women: somewhere between the steady unfolding of the tapestry and the advance of the Christians and the retreat of

*“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one’s room?”*

*Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there ... No. Should we have stated at home?
Wherever that may be?”*
(BISHOP, 1984, p.94)

First, it breaks down the wall between the notes for poems and the poems themselves. Further, it breaks down the wall between the free verse of the majority of the poem and brings in these rhymed quatrains, much as we saw in “Arrival at Santos.”

This formal harkening to the first of these three poems is important. The opening of the book *Questions of Travel* “imagines first the mere tourist, then the invader, and then, finally, in the title poem, faces what is actually available to the traveler” (as opposed to tourist) (KALSTONE, 1983, p.21). Of course, though, some travelers are neither conquerors nor tourists, and it might be said that never having had a home, Bishop was more an exile, someone who, as an orphan, was removed from her home. “The exigency for exile does not abdicate being ..., the poet, in the margins of the world recreates the world” (GLISSANT, 1997, p.108). Whatever the impetus for the travel is, in the recreated world the poet is no longer homeless. These poems then work in a kind of Hegelian way with synthesis as the end result.

Poems, though, are metaphors themselves—they are constructs in which we find common ground with the speaker, and in which through the experience of the poem we become like the lyric I. “What I assume, you, shall assume,” Whitman declares. Poems are formally also metaphoric. Poet and critic Stephen Dobyns believes that “Structure always reflects the writer’s view of the world and is tied to the writer’s psychology ... [T]he writer gives us a metaphor for his or her own emotional/psychological/intellectual/physical relationship with what he or she

imagines reality to be. (2003, p.39) Bishop's free verse/formal fusions are a metaphor for herself—dichotomous yet whole; a dweller in two worlds that she makes one in her poems. “The way a poem is created is a metaphor for the ordering of chaos, not only through the use of pattern, but also through structure, which is the presence of the beginning, middle, and end” (DOBYNS, 2003, p.140).

The structure of *Questions of Travel*, which was written over the course of Bishop's first nine years in Brazil, tells us much about how she ordered that personal chaos, and how, in doing so, she became “extremely happy for the first time in [her] life” (qtd in TRAVISANO, 1988, p.133). Divided into two sections—“Brazil” and “Elsewhere”—the book identifies itself as bringing together dichotomous places. Furthermore, a short story, “In the Village,” was placed “at the beginning of the ‘Elsewhere’ section of *Questions of Travel*. It's the only story she ever included in a volume of her poems, and it represents a kind of fulcrum between the poems about children and childlike figures in ‘Brazil’ and the poignant images of her own childhood in the ensuing Nova Scotia poems” (SCHWARTZ, 1991, p.92). Here the separations between poetry and prose, between adult identity and child identity, between there and here all are represented and bridged.

“Under the stimulus of life in Brazil, Bishop extended her range of writing, undertaking translation from Portuguese, including in the memoir published as *The Diary of Helena Morley*, several stories by Clarice Lispector, and work by Brazilian poets. More surprisingly, she agreed to write a book about Brazil for the Life World Library series” (PAGE, 1996, p.127). This latter work, which she disavowed, attempts at being encyclopedic, and covers the history, culture, language, economy, sociology and so much more of Brazil. Her unhappiness with the end result is in how the Time Life editors took liberties with both her text and her sense of Brazil. It is, though, a work of love—and a work of someone who is protective of *her* Brazil.

Although not Brazilian, Bishop adopts the country as a home; in her relationship with Lota she cannot marry into citizenship, but by translating *The Diary of Helena Morley*, she takes on the childhood of someone who was raised in Brazil, but more, she identifies with the events she is writing. As her introduction notes: “The more I read the book the better I liked it. The scenes and events it described were odd, remote, and long ago, and yet fresh, sad, funny, and eternally true. The longer I stayed on in Brazil, the more Brazilian the book seemed, yet much of it could have happened in any small provincial town or village and at almost any period of history” (BISHOP, 1984, p.82). Translating is literally subsuming someone else’s voice and experience. By identifying herself in its narrator, Bishop becomes “Brazilian.” She translates the book—writes it (literally) in English, and thus “writes a diary” itself. She becomes the experience.

Time and again, then, we see Bishop working to create a transformed self—a whole self— through her work on the page. I use the word *page* deliberately because it is the word for “water witch” in Charles Wagley’s *Amazon Town*, which was a source for Bishop’s poem “The Riverman” (GOLDENSOHN, 1992, p.211).

The poem features the transformation of the male speaker into a water spirit. “The spirit of the dolphin or the Boto calls to the riverman A border creature who lives in water and breathes in air, the Dolphin speaks no human language; he merely grunts beneath the riverman’s window, hid by a river mist, but still showing up in form as a double of the speaker” (GOLDENSOHN, 1992, p.211-212). This transformation into something more primitive, more primal, more spiritual, again emphasizes the importance of nonduality as a philosophy behind Bishop’s work, one that was achievable only by living in Brazil. About “The Riverman”, Goldensohn says: “stripped of his sheathing of human culture, naked, unaccommodated man goes to join a fluent world in which there is no discontinuity between the human and sacred, the living

and the dead, or the human and animal” (1992, p. 212). Furthermore, by writing in the voice of the Riverman, Bishop removes the discontinuity between male and female. Travisano reminds us that “The Riverman is a contemporary of the poet’s, and he has been touched by modern culture” (1988, p. 158); therefore, it might be said that the Riverman gives up to the primitive much the way Bishop “gives up” to Brazil and to the “page”—poetry— to engage Brazil. To write poems, after all, is to be shamanic, to be a “seer.” The seduction of the call of the page is what leads to breaking the borders between worlds.

The last poem I want to look at is an published poem that Lorrie Goldensohn brought to light in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*; an unpublished love poem to Lota, it shows Bishop’s willingness to be personal and the range of her lyric I, and how, in writing this poem—even if she did not try to publish it—we see the true level of how her poetry of Brazil lead to a sense of wholeness, of non duality. The poem opens thus:

It is marvellous to wake up together
At the same moment; marvellous to hear
The rain begin suddenly all over the roof,
To feel the air clear
As if electricity had passed through it
From a black mesh of wires in the sky.
All over the roof the rain hisses.
And below the light falling of kisses

An electrical storm is coming or moving away;
It is the prickling air that wakes us up...
(qtd in GOLDENSOHN, 1992, p 27-28)

Unmediated, very personal, this poem is like many of Bishop’s unpublished work, and it shares formal and imagistic concerns with many of her published poems. The poem begins in nonduality—the numinous space of waking, when dreams still linger, and where the couple’s individuality has not become consciously defined. They are “together”; the electrical storm “is coming or moving away”; “all over the roof the rain hisses/and below, the light falling of kisses.” Whatever change is coming, it is coming unmediated, naturally, as the storm. There is no

concern, here, for the taboo of lesbianism, or for being too revealed.

By using the first person plural, though, Bishop gets to have some linguistic play: yes it is marvellous to wake up together” with you, my beloved, but it also marvellous to wake up *together*, as in whole, unabashedly herself, which is what living in Brazil, living with Lota, allowed her to do.

There is no doubt, as William Boyd attests, that “Bishop...was made by her life in Brazil” (2010). According to Lloyd Schwartz, “Brazil encouraged Bishop to become less inhibited” (1991, p.86), but not just in how she lived her life, but more importantly, in how she approached the page. Robert Lowell saw in her work the underlying conflict between two forces—“*motion*, 'weary but persisting...stoically maintained' and *terminus*: 'rest, sleep, fulfillment or death....' While Lowell's terms have their advantages, [Travisano] prefer[s] to refer to these two poles by more precise names, *travel* and *enclosure*” (TRAVISANO, 1988, p. 31). Again, a binary held together in the work. While living in the U.S., Bishop felt particularly trapped in a way she did not feel when traveling. What we have then in her poems, particularly the poems of her first ten or twelve years in Brazil, are poems representative of wholeness/of happiness. Maritain contends that “All that [the poet] discerns and divines in things, he discerns and divines not as something other than himself ... but ... as inseparable from himself and his emotion, and in truth as identified with himself” (1961, p.83). Bishop, therefore, in writing these poems that present formally, metaphorically, imagistically and lyrically as wholes, must have divined a wholeness in herself unseen before. “The unity of the Whole has as its consequence the obsolescence of dualisms” (GLISSANT, 1997, p. 93); it also has as its consequence, in the case of Elizabeth Bishop’s career, some of her finest poems.

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