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**“Reified Bodies and Misplaced Identities in Elizabeth Bishop’s Narratives of Childhood Memories”**

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Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) starts exploring autobiographical material more consistently while living in Brazil, between 1951 and 1966, as if diaspora enabled her to deal with issues of personal identity. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of emotional stability for the author, due not only to the love shared with the Brazilian artist Lota Macedo de Soares (who dies in 1967 in tragic circumstances) but also to the “safe distance” that allowed her to re-examine some key events of her traumatic childhood. Indeed, in a letter dated 12 Oct. 1952, Bishop muses on the “mysterious” role played by geography in the awakening of early memories : “It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia—geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even.” (Harrison 220-221). During this period she writes two autobiographical short stories — “In the Village” (1953) and “The Country Mouse” (1961) — which deal with events from about 1915 to 1918, since her mother’s incarceration in a mental hospital, when she was being raised by her maternal grandparents in Canada, to her move to Boston, where she lives for some months with her paternal grandparents, becoming chronically ill.

Geographical dislocation leads the writer to consider the notions of the individual in relation to society, humankind, the nation-state and the international political system, the main legitimating concepts in the shared ideology of globalization (Robertson 27). This epistemological revision takes place in the above mentioned short stories and also in the anthology *Questions of Travel* (1965) where “In the Village” is included, being the first text of the second section of the book, entitled “Elsewhere.” The anthology’s structure has geopolitical implications and challenges the hierarchy of placement inherent to the imperialist ideology, since its first section, “Brazil,” serves as referent to the decontextualized deictic “Elsewhere,” remapping geography and questioning patriotic allegiances. Furthermore, as Roman so perceptively notes in *Elizabeth Bishop’s World War II—Cold War View*, the first three poems of the section

“Brazil” (“Arrival at Santos,” “Brazil,” and “Questions of Travel”) deconstruct the imperial gaze, the desire to domesticate the foreign, and possess alterity (146-147). This essay will consider the rhetorical strategies chosen by Bishop to exert formal control over her disturbing past memories, namely through the reification of some of the character’s bodies. Moreover, I will look into the author’s resistance to the socialization practices triggered by the Great War victory narratives, with their strict gender distinctions.

In both short stories the author establishes a double narratorial frame articulating the adult narrator’s perspective with the child protagonist’s vision. The distant stance of the adult onlooker allows room for irony and intellectual analysis; the child’s point of view is permeated with humour and marked by a synaesthetic approach to the world, especially in the first story. While in Nova Scotia the young Elizabeth enjoyed the freedom to walk in nature and interact with the local community when strolling around on errands which invariably led her to “examine” the novelties in the village’s store windows (108). “In the Village” depicts the child protagonist’s innocent joy in being alive, symbolized by the recurrent onomatopoeia *Clang*, representing the blacksmith’s shop and its connotations with pure physical energy. This safe male world where everyone feels “at home” (104) contrasts with the absent mother’s hideous scream of madness (unrepresentable in language) that distorts the landscape in the *incipit* of the story and haunts the enigmatic silences or fragmented sentences in the maternal grandparents’ house, a female world of unrest.

Nonetheless her maternal family also provides a nurturing emotional background, as several of the story’s episodes prove, such as the lyrically charged scene when young Elizabeth combs her distressed grandmother’s making her smile:

I say I want to help her brush her hair. So I do, standing on the lower rung of the back of her rocking chair. / (...) My grandmother’s hair is silver and in it she keeps a great many celluloid combs (...) The one at the back has longer teeth than the others (...) I pretend to play a tune on it; then I pretend to play a tune in each of the others before we stick them in, so my grandmother’s hair is full of music. She laughs. (105-106)

The tender empathy between the two figures and their cooperative interaction contrast deeply with the loveless rigidity of young Elizabeth's paternal house, as we will see.

The protagonist's imagination matches her inquisitive predisposition pointing at young children's curiosity and also at their potential for identifying with outer objects, blurring boundaries between traditionally static categories. The borderlines between animal and human hover constantly in the narrative, namely in the passage when the child contemplates the horse in the blacksmith's store; his body is minutely described and he is personified, "express[ing] his satisfaction" after being tended to (104). In this story the youngster interacts closely with another animal — Nelly, the Jersey cow that she takes to the pasture every morning. The liminal quality of the limits between the human and animal realms is foregrounded when the child "hold[s] her [Nelly] by one horn to admire her eyes again," adding "At such close quarters my feelings for her are mixed." (110). This uneasiness resurfaces moments later when the sudden plan to spend all day playing outdoors near the brook is shattered by "an immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness" (*idem*).

In "The Country Mouse" the protagonist's body is reified and identified with the animal realm too, but with none of the emphatic possibilities present in the other story. The narrator admits to being "on the same terms in the household" (416) as Beppo, the bull terrier cursed with a "peculiar Bostonian sense of guilt" (417). This dog is characterized through the semantic field of disease and physical decay that applies to the description of the child's body too. The dead father family's house is described in nightmarish tones, and the child rebels against the physical and psychological constraints she is subjected to by getting sick, a traditional female reaction to imprisonment in women's literature and history. The territory of her body becomes more and more oppressive, and the child's progressive abandonment to sickness and boredom is presented in quasi sentimental tones. In the train journey the narrator refers to her body as "my tiny bones" (410); after Agnes' departure, another broken connection with a mother surrogate figure, the protagonist enumerates the ailments that afflict her and concludes with the poignant remark "I felt myself ageing, even dying. I was *bored* and lonely" (425). This morbidity streak, that would accompany Bishop through the rest of her life, is underlined in the text with a direct tribute to Louise

Bogan, a fellow Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress (1945-1946), whose short and long titled poem “Solitary Observation Brought Back from a Sojourn in Hell” is cited: “At midnight tears / Run into your ears” (425).

Another strategy of reification found in the two stories under scrutiny is portraying the family characters through a detailed description of their clothes, particularly the mother figure in the first text (as several critics have remarked, *Periphery* 17 + *Art* 46, 66). The lack of stable affective centers to which the child protagonist might connect to is hyperbolized in the episode when the maternal grandmother and aunts unpack the young widow’s *trousseau*<sup>1</sup> (a foreign word that betrays the social etiquette and wealth of the Bostonian branch of the family). This scene simultaneously underscores the tension between silence and speech, the family’s reluctance to impart the truth to young Elizabeth, and the child’s intuition about the irrevocability of death (be it physical or psychic). The matriarchal context seems to sever the protagonist from language because the women speak in fragmented sentences, never referring to her mother’s condition, using words whose meaning the child ignores. This deprivation is humorously signalled by the pun between “mourning” and “morning” that reveals the tension between the young narrator’s comic naiveté and her growing awareness of her condition as orphan:

The clothes were black, or white, or black-and-white. / “Here’s a mourning hat,” says my grandmother (...) / “There’s that mourning coat she got the first winter,” says my aunt. / But always I think they are saying “morning.” Why, in the morning, did one put on black? How early in the morning did one begin? (101)

The child’s contacts with her mother are mediated by clothes, and this phantasmagorical figure is either hidden in the front bedroom or fitting the purple dress, rehearsing to become a Bostonian lady, as her frustration about being out of fashion denotes in a passage where her physical body is reduced to “thin white hands” (111) “twitching the purple skirt” (*idem*). Unfortunately the symbolic potential of this color is not fulfilled in the text: unable to transfigure her grief, the mother succumbs to madness, being reduced to the address of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis *Art* 90 suggests the trunk symbolizes the mother’s contaminated body (90).

sanatorium ironically written “in purple indelible pencil” (116) on the packages the grandmother faithfully sends out every week.

Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, the narrator’s experience in Nova Scotia is tinged by a lyrical tone associated with the redemptive connection to imagination and to the natural world. The national symbols that will become so oppressive in the Boston story are here associated to the fairy tale world of fish with magical rings, and the child seems to be gifted with the power of (physically and metaphorically) transfiguring such alien elements when she incorporates a coin with King George’s effigy: “I put my five-cent piece in my mouth for greater safety on the way home, and swallow it. Months later, as far as I know, it is still in me, transmuting all its precious metal into my growing teeth and hair.” (105).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in “The Country Mouse” innocence will be replaced by “three great truths” (425): the awareness “of falsity and the great power of sentimentality” (*idem*); “Social consciousness” (426); and knowledge about self identity. In the closing section of the story the protagonist becomes overwhelmed by the feeling of being an individual, separate from the organic and animal worlds and from other human beings (“You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are *you* and you are going to be *you* forever.’ (...) *Why* was a human being?” (*idem*). The poem “In the Waiting Room” (the opening text of *Geography III*, 1976) will amplify the scene narrated in the closure of the short story, further developing the problematics of identity in gender, racial and ethnographic terms. The child focalizer describes some photographs included in the magazine *National Geographic*: “Babies with pointed heads / wound round and round with string; / black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs. / Their breasts were horrifying.” (149).<sup>3</sup> The women’s and children’s malleable bodies betray the textual component of physical identity, since “anatomy itself loses the authority of any natural grounding [becoming] one more figure in the language of the [patriarchal] culture” (Edelman *Geography* 103).

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis comments on a similar episode of lost precious objects, when the narrator “abscond[s] with a little ivory stick with a sharp point. [And] To keep it forever [she] bury[s] it under the bleeding heart by the crab-apple tree, but it is never found again.” (103). Comparing the embroidery tool to a pen, Ellis argues that these maneuvers figure Bishop’s oblique approach to language, since in her writing “Intimate secrets become deliberately lost in endlessly deferred linguistic games” (91).

<sup>3</sup> In the short story “A Memory,” Eudora Welty also depicts the horror of an adolescent protagonist confronted with the female body, describing the breasts of a woman that seems about to dissolve into inorganic matter (97).

No wonder that in “The Country Mouse” young Elizabeth resists “being a little girl” (412) and playing with a proper, brand-new Anglo-Saxon doll, “totally uninteresting, with embossed yellow-brown hair (...), bright blue eyes, and pink cheeks” (*idem*), bought by her paternal grandmother to substitute the old dolls from Nova Scotia, “in no condition of travelling in Pullmans” (*idem*). As the title of the story implies (with its intertextual resonances with Aesop’s fable about rural contentment), Bishop downplays the American Dream, proving that upward mobility in the social scale and greater material abundance do not equal happiness. The fictional component of national history is underscored when Miss Woodhead, the school teacher, miniaturizes one of the US master identity narratives, making “a model of ‘The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers’ on a large tabletop” (419). The Rock was the only real thing. Miss Woodhead made the ocean in a spectacular way (...) There were some little ships, some doll people, and we also helped make log cabins. (Twenty years later I learned the Pilgrim Fathers had no log cabins when they landed.)” (*idem*). The last parenthetical remark ironizes the failure of a school system that procrastinates knowledge for “twenty years later” and denounces the falsity of its ideologically charged narratives.

Female figures appear to be especially prone to this game of make-believe: Aunt Jenny organizes “War Parties” decorated in the colors of the US flag (421) and is away most of the time in “War Work,” making her niece “[get] the idea [it] was some kind of full-time profession.” (422); the next door grandmother works “for the soldier boys. She had knitted ninety-two helmets and over two hundred ‘wristers’” (417). Bishop implies that the war victory ideology deprives women of political agency, reducing them to “paper doll[s]” (415), like her aunt, or to house bounded figures reduced to immobility, like the neighbour, “an old old lady who sat in a wheelchair all day, knitting” (417), unaware of the disastrous proportion of the war carnage.<sup>4</sup>

The child protagonist develops a set of negotiation strategies within the victory culture plot of the Great War, with its “promotion of visible signs of patriotism (...) and the use of demonizing propaganda about the enemy” (Roman 41).

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<sup>4</sup> The slippage of meaning that characterizes the child protagonist’s experience is thematized in “The Country Mouse” by the metaphor of vision, which calls attention to the discrepancy between intimacy and sociocultural expectations (Periphery 88).

Displaying her life-long interest in music, Bishop mentions some of the hymns learned at school, distinguishing the lighter tone of the British popular ballads she sang in Canada (such as “Tipperary,” and “Every nice girl loves a sailor”) from the more lugubrious accent of the “Worcester songs,” in particular “Joan of Arc, they are ca-alllll-ing you” (422). Written in 1915 by Frank Sturgis, the opening lines of this hymn appeal to national unity in the face of external menace in a global bellic scenario (which reminds us of the contemporary US rhetoric about homeland security): “There’s a tear in my eye for the soldier, / As he lies among the slain. / There’s a throb in my heart for this old world, / That sights for peace in vain.” Thus the above mentioned recognition of the “great power of sentimentality” (425) comments not only on the white lie the narrator tells her playmate to gain her sympathy but also evinces the child protagonist’s early consciousness of the manipulative effect of propaganda.

“The Country Mouse” emphasizes the omnipresent patriotic duties of the exemplary American citizen during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, strengthened by the coercive socialization practices exercised by Grandma (the name “little girls” (412) should use to address their grandmothers). The feeling of dislocation experienced by the protagonist when she was “kidnapped” (411), brought from Canada to Boston “unconsulted and against [her] wishes” (413), becomes accentuated with the clash between her Canadian upbringing and the US patriotic fervor. She first refers to the Canadian hymn to confess a “slight resentment” (413) when her paternal grandparents single out the maple trees lining the driveway to their estate in Worcester. Later, the protagonist will share her uneasiness about national identity: “[at school] I hated the songs, and most of all I hated saluting the flag. I would have refused if I had dared. In my Canadian schooling the year before, we had started every day with “God Sve the King” and “The Mapple Leaf Forver.” Now I felt like a traitor. *I wanted us to win the War, of course, but I didn’t want to be an American,*” (421, my italics). The excerpt’s ambiguity highlights the speaker’s misplaced identity, since the pronoun “us,” coupled with the qualifier “American” does not provide a stable referent being determined by an implied “other,” the enemy that provoked the war.

As we have seen, Bishop subtly reverts this dichotomy in the structure of *Questions of Travel*, placing Brazil as the geographical center that helps to

stabilize meanings while simultaneously rendering the concept of “America” unstable. The poet’s diction itself mirrors these dislocations, with its oblique approach and deeply ingrained irony, under an apparently transparent descriptive style. These reflections begin and end on Elizabeth Bishop’s biographic experience, an artist who travelled most of her life to ease her natural condition of exile, as an orphan prone to illness, a lesbian in a heterosexual world, and a woman poet.

I thank all the travellers here in the audience for having joined me in this journey through the author’s texts.

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