Elizabeth Bishop as Cultural Intermediary

Paulo Henriques Britto

Rien ne vous tue un homme comme d'être obligé de représenter un pays.
Jacques Vaché, letter to André Breton (qtd. in Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*)

Elizabeth Bishop was an intensely private person. The public role of the poet as prophet or social critic—the sort of role that came naturally to her friend Robert Lowell—was not for her. The podium of the cultural critic or literary scholar was not for her either. As the Brazilian critic Luiz Costa Lima has observed, Bishop was an artist, not an intellectual (Lima 5); she was never comfortable with abstractions and generalizations and felt out of place among academics. As a poet, one of her major assets was her sight ("My eyes bulge and hurt. They are my one great beauty, even so," says the Giant Toad in "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics," *Poems* 139), and most of the time what she cared to see were small, unimportant objects with a strictly personal meaning.

Yet the vagaries of circumstance—she met Lota de Macedo Soares in Brazil and they fell in love with each other—led her to spend the better part of two decades in a foreign country where she did not really feel at home, and whose language she never cared to learn properly. Necessarily, this made her a cultural intermediary of sorts, and in her abundant correspondence, her work in the Time-Life book *Brazil*, her translations of Helena Morley's diary, her anthology of modern Brazilian poetry (a project undertaken in collaboration with the late Emanuel Brasil) and, not least, her poems on Brazilian themes, she acted as an interpreter of Brazil for North Americans. On a smaller scale, among her associates in Petrópolis and Rio, she also played the role of an unofficial representative and interpreter of US culture—

and, particularly at the time of the 1964 military coup, of a defender of American foreign policy, including US support for the military dictatorship, roundly denounced at the time by the liberal press and intellectuals in the U.S. But the role of cultural ambassador suited her as little as that of interpreter of a foreign culture, and she always felt uneasy about her credentials for any such a position. As she worked on an introduction for an anthology of Brazilian poetry, Bishop wrote to Lowell in 1969: "It is awful to think I'll probably be regarded as some sort of authority on Brazil the rest of my life" (Millier 424).

When she first arrived in Brazil, Bishop knew little about the country. Like everyone else, however, she carried with her a number of stereotyped notions about the country, as soon became apparent. From the beginning she decided—to put it somewhat simplistically—that Brazil was basically "nature" whereas the U.S. stood for "culture." The early letters Bishop wrote in Brazil include enthusiastic descriptions of the natural beauties of the Petrópolis area;[1] and in some of the poems she began to work on at the time, most notably "Song for the Rainy Season," the physical environment around her—Lota's estate in Samambaia—is seen as protective, supportive, and life-assertive. For the rest of her life, Bishop was to extol Brazilian nature even as she decried Brazil's shortcomings as a country. In contrast, the U.S. seemed to her to be characterized by its "bright cleanness [, which] is what I always miss most at first" (*OA* 343); that is, it represented the values of material progress, civilization, culture. On the whole, Bishop saw herself as squarely on the side of culture—she made a point of saying that, even if she went on spending most of her time in Brazil, as she intended to do, she wanted to remain "a New Englander herring-choker bluenoser at the same time" (*OA* 384). But both nature and culture had good and bad points. Nature meant absence of culture, and therefore "underdevelopment" (to use the term current in the 1950s and 1960s), but it also implied spontaneity and warmth; and culture, for all its positive associations, meant artificiality and estrangement from basic human values, as we shall see.

Bishop's very first contact with Rio crystallized in a view of the city as a place inimical to work and civilization, an opinion that was never to change in the succeeding decades:

> ... it's such a mess—Mexico City and Miami combined is about the closest I can come to it; and men in bathing trunks kicking footballs all over the place. They

> begin on the beach at 7 every morning—and keep it up apparently at their places of business all over town, all day long. (*OA* 226-27)

This passage, from the earliest of her published letters containing a description of her impressions of Brazil, sets the pattern for much that is to follow. Bishop traveled widely in the country, but she saw mostly what she already expected to see: a luxuriant natural environment and a population divided between the poor, who were "primitives" with all the attendant virtues and vices, and sophisticated aristocrats like Lota, who spoke several languages and traveled abroad frequently. There was no such thing as a middle class in Brazil, she wrote in one of her letters (*OA* 271). In fact, at the time there was a sizable Brazilian middle class already; but in the small world of Samambaia where Bishop lived the social structure was indeed starkly dichotomous: there was Lota's circle and there were Lota's servants. That Bishop could take this protected corner of Petrópolis as a reasonably representative sample of Brazil is typical of her inability to grasp larger realities; that from such a narrow perspective she was able to write a handful of sharply insightful poems about Brazil is the mark of her genius.

As the quotation in the previous paragraph indicates, one preconceived notion Bishop seems to have brought to Brazil as part of her intellectual baggage was that of Latin Americans' alleged aversion to work. In a letter to a friend in 1954, regarding the photographs of the Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira writing in a hammock, she wrote that she believed the hammock aptly summarized "the Brazilian spirit in literature" (*OA* 289). A few days later, in another letter, she wrote: "I notice that literary people here often seem to have their pictures taken in [hammocks], and whether that's what wrong with Brazilian writing or not—perhaps I'll find out" (*OA* 291). This image was to reappear later in the Time-Life book *Brazil*: "A favorite way for Brazilian writers to have their pictures taken is pleasantly supine, in a fringed hammock. Too many genuine Brazilian talents seem to take to their beds too early—or to their hammocks" (Bishop, *Brazil* 104). Clearly, this passage reflects Bishop's opinion of Bandeira: in 1962 she wrote Robert Lowell that Bandeira seemed to her "very spoiled."[2] At the time, Bandeira was 75 and had published an impressive amount of poetry, journalism, and criticism; he also had taught literature, organized a multivolume anthology of Brazilian poetry and translated much poetry and drama from English, French, and German; he was already acknowledged as one of the greatest Brazilian poets of the

century. But the forcefulness of the image of the indolent poet in his hammock, which reinforced her preconceptions about Brazil (or Latin America), outweighed whatever information Bishop may have had about Bandeira's career.

Lota's attitude toward her own country seems to have influenced Bishop's perceptions of Brazil and reinforced her prejudices. As Bishop wrote, "Lota refuses to have anything to do with anything Brazilian or 'primitives'" (*OA* 416). She was "extremely pro-English," and at the time Bishop first met her, in New York, professed her admiration for "'well-made,' 'well-finished'" things (OA 258), so different from the objects that surrounded one in Brazil. Thus Bishop's love for precisely the "primitive" aspects of Brazil was combined with condescension; even before coming to Brazil she had expressed this same sort of patronizing affection for the elements of Cuban culture she had found in Key West, most notably in her 1939 prose piece on a primitive painter, "Gregorio Valdes."[4] Lota's steadfast rejection of "backwardness" and her admiration for all things foreign must have dramatized Bishop's own perception of "how everything [in Brazil] is wretchedly made, unfinished" (*OA* 258). And so she saw herself—and Lota, who like most educated people of her class was thoroughly Europeanized—as committed to introducing civilized habits into Brazil.

A good example of this is Bishop's attitude about childrearing. Her correspondence is filled with expressions of concern with the way Lota's servants raised their children. She encouraged Lota to translate Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*: "if she has a spark of patriotism in her bosom, she certainly should" (*OA* 343). When the cook in Samambaia had a baby, Bishop urged the parents to give her healthy food, such as spinach. "The diet here is unbelievable, for the rich as well as the poor, usually," she wrote (*OA* 307). When the child was 18 months old, Bishop commented:

> But she doesn't talk—just because her mother and young aunts are too stupid to talk *to* her, I think... Now I know why poor children cry more than rich ones. It isn't that they don't have enough to eat or anything like that; it's just because their parents are so dumb the way they treat them. (*OA* 321)

Primitivism is an important topic in her letters and poems, but it is always tempered by Bishop's precision of observation. In "Manuelzinho"—inspired by a real-life person, a "half squatter, half tenant" living on Lota's land—

Bishop presents the caricature of a Brazilian "primitive": Manuelzinho is a "helpless, foolish man," "the world's worst gardener since Cain" (*Poems* 96-99); he is ignorant, superstitious, and shamelessly abject. But the poem is "supposed to be Lota talking" (*OA* 315), and its effectiveness lies in the way it captures the exact mixture of helpless exasperation and condescending affection that characterizes the feelings of Brazilian patricians for their servants. And if, in "The Burglar of Babylon," primitivism and bumbling incompetence are traits shared by Micuçú and the policemen who finally manage to catch him, there is nothing reductionistic about this latter-day outlaw ballad: Micuçú, cruel but not devoid of affection, doomed but determined to survive as long as possible, is shown "in the round" and as a real person; he may be "primitive," but he is not stereotyped in the way Manuelzinho (as seen by Lota) is.

But the "dumb" primitivism of Brazilians also implied "naturalness." This was the quality that impressed Bishop so positively in her first few years in Samambaia, the idyllic period in her life that was immortalized by such splendid lyrics as "The Shampoo" and "Song for the Rainy Season." The letters she wrote in the early 1950s are full of passages like the following: "It is really a wonderful country in some ways. Where, when you arrive, the janitor and the porter and the cook all hug you tenderly and call you 'madame, my daughter'" (OA 244). Brazilians—particularly "in the small poor places"—were "so absolutely natural and so elegantly polite." They were "more realistic about, life, death, marriage, the sexes, etc."; and in their country "children are really loved more than anyplace else—except perhaps in Italy... With all its awfulness and stupidities—some of the Lost World hasn't quite been lost here yet" (*OA* 434). A year later, in Seattle, working as a teacher for the first time in her life, Bishop in her letters would often write nostalgically of Brazil, depicting it again as a place that preserved some of the simpler, basic human values that were necessarily lost as part of the price of civilization. Thus she observed about her students at the University of Washington:

> My 'students' are awfully nice, almost all of them—but I must say I am a bit concerned about American Youth. They are bright, almost all of them, but they don't seem to have much *fun*—so little *joie de vivre*, when I think of how much amusement Brazilian youths seem to get out of a guitar, or a dance, or just a cafézinho [sic] and some conversation... (*OA* 444)

This early perception of Brazilian primitivism was to give way to a strikingly different view in the latter half of the 1960s, when Bishop's relationship with Lota began to go sour; it was exacerbated after Lota's suicide and in the period in the early 1970s when Bishop attempted to live with her new companion in Ouro Preto. While in the early fifties she had seen Brazilians as a loving, accepting, if primitive people, who had a more "natural" view of life, by the end of her stay in Brazil they seemed to her irrational, greedy and devoid of human solidarity. Of course, the two contrasting evaluations reflect directly her personal situation in the two periods of her life in Brazil and correspond to the two typical views of the "backward" Other—noble savage and barbarian. But they are not as contradictory as they may seem at first sight, if one takes into account Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's notion of "cordiality," that is, Brazilians' inability to relate to each other on any but the most personal basis, our failure to fashion a model of "civil man." According to Holanda, "cordiality" is opposed to "civility," "good manners" or "politeness". To Brazilians, the sort of interpersonal relations that are established in family life remain "the inescapable model" for all other relationships (106). For this reason, Brazilians are unable to develop the ritualistic polish of "politeness," a "disguise that allows... one to preserve intact one's sensibility and feelings" (107). Holanda goes on to observe: "Brazilians' ignorance of any form of coexistence not dictated by an emotionally-based ethics is an aspect of Brazilian life that few foreigners find easy to understand in depth" (109). Bishop's opposite perceptions are in fact two aspects of a single characteristic of Brazilians, and one that Bishop never really understood.

Since Brazil for Bishop was "nature," the idea of a Brazilian high culture seemed almost self-contradictory to her: it was among the poor that "real Brazilian culture" was to be found—that is, popular culture. Her admiration for Brazilian art is always colored by the notion that whatever is good about it must be primitive; thus she describes Aleijadinho's famous statues of the prophets in Congonhas do Campo as "crude, but powerful and dramatic" (*Brazil* 100)—though "crude" is the last adjective any unprejudiced observer would associate with the work of an artist as sophisticated as Aleijadinho. To Bishop, there was something inherently suspect in all Brazilian high art; in spite of her respect for Drummond, Cabral and other writers, the Brazilian works that really engaged her emotion were all marked by artlessness: Helena Morley's *Minha Vida de Menina*, an actual diary written by a teenage girl in

the interior of Minas Gerais in the 1890s, which Bishop lovingly translated into English; the *cordel* poetry of Northeastern poet-singers; and Carnival songs, "some of the last folk poetry to be made in the world" (*OA* 382). The pristine quality of popular art was incompatible with the sophistication of high art, and any inroads made by the latter into the former could only be decried as impurity or inauthenticity. So Bishop tells Lowell that the lyrics to a samba for the Marcel Camus movie *Black Orpheus*, set in a Rio favela, are bad *because* they are "written by a *real* poet," Vinícius de Moraes: "they lack that surprise, the misused words, the big words, etc., that sambas always have" (*OA* 382).

Just as Bishop found it difficult to accept the idea of a Brazilian high culture, manifestations of primitive vigor in U.S. culture also made her uncomfortable. That is why she told "Brazilian intellectuals... that they really should read Edmund Wilson, say, instead of Henry Miller, to get an adequate idea of U.S. letters." She observed that authors like "Dreiser, Anderson, [and] Miller... correspond better to the mental picture [Brazilians] have of the USA" than a writer like Henry James. To her, it was James, the thoroughly Anglicized craftsman of polished prose and chronicler of a sophisticated transatlantic English-speaking society, that must represent the U.S. abroad, not the uncouth, barbaric Miller, who was "the new American Blake," or so Brazilians had been convinced by "some French mystic writers" (*OA* 336). This explains Bishop's mixed feelings about Whitman, whom in a 1938 letter she characterized as "dated and unpleasant" (*OA* 75), and about whom she had this to say in a 1970 interview:

> As to the greatest North American poet—I am reminded that once when Gide was asked who in his opinion was the greatest poet in the French language, he responded: 'Victor Hugo, alas!' I would say that, in my opinion, the greatest North American poet is Whitman, alas! (Monteiro 52)

While acknowledging Whitman's greatness, Bishop seems to have felt that his qualities were associated with precisely those aspects of American culture that were least refined and civilized, and from which she had been consciously trying to distance herself at least since she began to see herself as representing progressive American values in benighted Brazil.

But this role that she had taken on was sorely put to the test when, in 1964, a military coup overthrew President João Goulart and instituted a

dictatorial regime. Bishop now found herself in the impossible position of having to stand for American liberalism in Brazil and at the same time defend an antidemocratic regime to her American friends. When the liberal U.S. press criticized the Brazilian military, she wrote: "I'm in a RAGE about what the U.S. papers are quoted as saying." She justified "the suspension of rights, dismissing lots of Congress, etc.", saying that it "had to be done—sinister as it may sound." She denied rumors of military violence, always carefully qualifying her statements with phrases like "as far as I know"; and at one point she confessed: "It will be a relief to get away. This constant pressure of violently opposed feelings does not suit the 'artistic temperament' (all I lay claim to)."[5] Since at no point in the letter does she express any misgivings about the new military government itself, the "violently opposed feelings" Bishop alludes to here seem to be her approval of a dictatorial regime and her lifelong liberal tendencies.

The years immediately before and after 1964 were the period in which Bishop was most obviously miscast as a cultural intermediary. But the entire period of her direct or indirect involvement with Brazil, as an American expatriate in Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais or, in her final years, as a would-be "authority on Brazil," must be seen, on the whole, as a succession of misunderstandings large and small. Unable or unwilling to learn Portuguese properly, and incapable of seeing the forest for the trees, Elizabeth Bishop was a most ineffective (and reluctant) cultural intermediary; in fact, all she asked of Brazil was a home—a place where she would be loved and understood and where she could write in peace. This is indeed what she got, for about ten years; but in the turbulent period that began in the early 1960s—turbulent for Brazil in general and for Bishop in particular—her position became increasingly equivocal, and ultimately unbearable. It seems fitting, then, that in her late masterpiece "Crusoe in England" she should have identified with a solitary castaway on a tropical island with only one other inhabitant. For Bishop, the things that truly mattered in the country where she lived for almost twenty years were her lover and the magnificent natural environment around her. When, back in Massachusetts towards the end of her life, she felt *saudade do Brasil*, what she really missed was Lota and the magical, protected world of Samambaia, where for a time she found the home that had eluded her for so long.

Notes

[1] Here is a fairly typical example, from a 1953 letter: "It is the season of those pale blue butterflies... They are drifting along all over the place, sometimes in clusters of four or five, and when they come close or come *in*, they are semi-transparent. The 'Lent' trees... are purple all over the mountains, mixed with pink and yellow acacias." (Bishop, *One Art* [henceforward abbreviated *OA*] 255).

[2] This letter remains unpublished in English, but has appeared in the Brazilian edition of *OA*. See Bishop, *Uma Arte* 718.

[3] For a discussion of Lota's feelings about Brazilianness and modernity, see Jaguaribe.

[4] Included in Bishop, *Collected Prose.*

[5] Unpublished letter; translation included in *Uma Arte*, 741-5.

Works Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Collected Prose.* New York: Noonday-Farrar, 1984.

———. *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979.* New York: Noonday-Farrar, 1991.

———. *One Art.* New York: Farrar, 1994.

———. *Uma Arte.* Trans. Paulo Henriques Britto. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

Bishop, Elizabeth, and the eds. of *LIFE. Brazil.* New York: Time World Library, 1962.

Holanda, Sérgio Buarque de. *Raízes do Brasil.* 1936. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1982.

Jaguaribe, Beatriz. "Diamantes e Feijão Preto: Elizabeth Bishop e o Brasil." *Fins de Século: Cidade e Cultura no Rio de Janeiro.* Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1998. 77-118.

Lima, Luiz Costa. "Bishop: A Arte da Perda." *Idéias, Jornal do Brasil* 3 Feb. 1996. 5.

Millier, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

Monteiro, George, ed. *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996.