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# “Travelling in the Family”: Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazilian Autobiographical Voice

Myriam Bellehigue

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- 1 The story of Elizabeth Bishop’s arrival in Brazil in January 1952 is an anecdote well-known to all Bishop readers and scholars: because of some medical problem (a violent allergy to cashew nuts), what was originally supposed to be a short stop in Rio on a South American trip turned into a much longer stay. Bishop was eventually to spend fifteen years in Brazil with her Brazilian partner Lota de Macedo Soares. Such voluntary exile gave her the opportunity to discover the country’s geography (one of Bishop’s passions) but also its culture and language. Bishop early manifested a keen interest in Brazilian literature, going as far as translating and publishing several Brazilian works among which several autobiographical texts: *The Diary of Helena Morley* to begin with, which is the diary of a teenage girl who grew up in a small mining town at the end of the nineteenth century. Bishop wrote a long introduction to *The Diary* that was later included in her *Collected Prose*. She also translated several family poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade published in the 1969 edition of Bishop’s *Complete Poems* and later in an *Anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Brazilian Poetry* edited by Bishop in 1972.
- 2 Several scholars have paid critical attention to Bishop’s interest in Brazilian texts. While underlining that Bishop undertook to translate these works in part to learn the Portuguese language (Hicok 1586) and to “introduce modern Brazilian poetry to an American readership” (Machova 5), they also suggest that most of the texts she chose to translate deeply resonated with her own personal and literary interests. Bethany Hicok concludes her chapter on Bishop’s translations on this perceptive statement thus: “Bishop’s translations are important because they bring us closer to Brazil and its writers. They also bring us to Bishop” (Hicok 2140). Machova’s analysis strikes a very similar note:
 

The Brazilian poems she translated offer a kind of commentary on her own work, and can even serve as a way to approach her own texts. [...] The anthology can be placed among Bishop’s books, as a step between *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*,

a step in which the voices of other poets helped her to form and develop her own way of seeing some things and speaking about them. (Machova 73)

- 3 Following in these two scholars' path, this essay explores Bishop's relationship to these Brazilian works and analyzes how they resonate with her own autobiographical endeavors, especially as she erased the limit between these foreign texts and her own, deciding to include the translations among her own works. Bishop must have been confronted with distinct difficulties and pushed to develop distinct translating strategies when working on a non-fictional diary written by a teenager and family poems composed by an adult. My intention in this study is not so much to focus on these distinctions as to trace the converging influences these different texts may have had in the shaping of Bishop's narrative and poetic voice at the moment when she was trying to grapple with her own childhood memories. The fact that Bishop chose to translate from various genres is not surprising considering the absence of distinction she made between fiction and memoirs, prose and poetry. Bishop's interest in "border genres," especially diaries, travel sketches, letters and memoirs probably lay in her attraction to their uncertain status, between "literary and documentary, art and fact" (Machova 37). Several texts presented as "stories" in the *Collected Prose* edition clearly partake of the autobiographical vein and could have been inserted in the first part of the book entitled "Memory: Persons and Places."<sup>1</sup> Bishop also reworked several prose pieces into poems. Considering that Bishop herself circulated between genres and forms in her autobiographical pieces (both published and unpublished during her lifetime), this essay suggests that she invites us to read them conjointly and along with her autobiographical translations, however diverse these might be.

## Back to Nova Scotia "with a bang"

- 4 As soon as she settled in Brazil, Bishop was struck by a paradoxical parallel that she kept marveling at in her correspondence: her immersion in Brazilian life reminded her of her own childhood spent in Nova Scotia with her maternal family. In the rural house of Petropolis *Samambaia* that she shared with Lota, she faced material conditions that took her back to her early years; oil lamps, stoves, homemade bread and marmalade are part of her everyday routine and they conjure up her previous life:

The village was 50 years or so backwards. We made yeast from the hopvine on the barn; had no plumbing, oil lamps, etc. My grandmother was a famous buttermaker. Everything is quite changed now, of course. But when I came to live first in Samambaia and we had oil lamps for two or three years, etc., a lot came back to me. I helped design our sitting-room stove, for example [...] and without ever having done such things before I found myself baking bread, making marmalade, etc. When the need arises apparently the old Nova Scotian domestic arts come back to me! (Harrison 22)

As spatial and temporal boundaries are blurred, so are identities:

I also have a "cannon-ball" stove, I brought two—the other's a Franklin, for the *sala*—burning away, and I just realized last night as the lights failed in the kitchen and I fried myself an egg by the light of the oil lamp, that probably what I am really up to is re-creating a sort of deluxe Nova Scotia all over again, in Brazil. And now I'm my own grandmother. (Harrison 184)

- 5 Reading Helena Morley's prose seems to have led Bishop to experience the same kind of reenactment and identity confusion. Here is what she wrote to May Swenson and Marianne Moore about the *Diary*:

I do think you'll enjoy the rest of it. It will take you back to your early family life with a bang. (Bishop, 1994 354)

I was so afraid that "Helena" would go unappreciated [...]. All the effects seemed so slight to me that I was afraid they would be overlooked. But I've had so many nice letters noticing all the things I wanted noticed that I'm very cheered up about the book and of course you noticed best of all. [...] So many of those remarks took me right back to Nova Scotia; I'm sure I've heard most of them before. (357)

What Bishop enjoyed in Helena's *Diary* is the day-to-day recording of ordinary events and relationships from a child's perspective, that is to say a naïve and cheeky outlook that often strikes one as clear-minded and most relevant. Helena's childhood echoed her own, reactivating distant memories and distant emotions. As Harrison underlines, Helena "introduced Bishop to Brazilian culture and language and revived the memories and longings of her childhood"; however distant in time and place from her, the *Diary* was "entirely familiar in the pull of emotion" (Harrison 176-177). Reading the *Diary* and working on it as a translator encouraged the autobiographical turn in Bishop's works dating back to that period. Indeed Bishop wrote most of her childhood stories in the fifties and early sixties.<sup>2</sup> The collection of unpublished manuscripts contains several poetic and prose drafts centered on scenes drawn from her early childhood in Nova Scotia, all composed between 1951 and 1955.<sup>3</sup> She first published "Sestina," one of her most famous autobiographical poems, in 1956 in the *New Yorker* before it was finally included in her third collection *Questions of Travel* in 1965. The book is divided into two distinct sections entitled "Brazil" and "Elsewhere"—therefore two symmetrical parts that reflect each other. The structure of the book symbolizes the strong parallel between Brazil and Nova Scotia, between present and past. In the original edition, the story "In the Village" was included as a transition between the two parts, thus enhancing even more the role that the Brazilian experience played in the autobiographical return.

## Oblivion as Forgetfulness and Omission

- 6 In her introduction to *The Diary of Helena Morley*, Bishop insists on the universal dimension of the book: "The scenes and events it described were odd, remote, and long ago, and yet fresh, sad, funny, and eternally true" (Bishop, 1984 82). But what strikes her even more is the freshness of the recording, its authenticity. *The Diary* reminds her of other texts written in the voice of a child: "Wordsworth's poetical children and country people, or Dorothy Wordsworth's wandering beggars. Occasionally entries referring to slavery seemed like notes for an unwritten, Brazilian, feminine version of Tom Sawyer and Nigger Jim" (82). But, contrary to these texts, *The Diary* is not fictional: "This was a real, day-by-day diary, kept by a real girl, and anything resembling it that I could think of had been observed or made up, and written down, by adults" (82). This is a first-hand account that faithfully retraced experiences at the very moment when they took place, or soon after: "It really happened; everything did take place, day by day, minute by minute, once and only once, just the way Helena says it did" (100). Helena's "wonderful gift" consists in having "kept her childhood fresh as paint" (108). So that what Bishop seems to admire about the *Diary* is a form of immediacy and truth that she sought to retrieve in her own autobiographical approach. Machova contends that Helena's "unpretentious, spontaneous way of writing" served as a model for Bishop's efforts at finding her own voice, and translating the *Diary* gave her a chance "to examine Helena's style very closely, but also to 'reenact' it" (Machova 34). However,

Bishop never tried to write autobiographical pieces that strictly adopted a child's vision and a child's voice as in a diary; for she knew that the freshness she was so much attracted to in Helena's prose could not be recaptured in her own autobiographical works. Because these works came late in her career, they necessarily bore the traces of the passing of time. Remembering one's childhood decades later necessarily meant forgetting and therefore recomposing what time had erased or transformed. Bishop's interest in composing childhood pieces lay in the re-enactment of past events and emotions, but also in a reflection on the workings of memory that becomes an intrinsic part of this autobiographical material. "Life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other. Which is which?" (Bishop, 1983 177). The passing of time and the various disruptions it implies is a recurrent theme in Bishop's unpublished texts dating back to the early fifties. In "A Short, Slow Life" for instance, Time is allegorized as a monstrous giant who, through a mere gesture of the hand, produces disarray and dislocation:

We lived in a pocket of Time.  
 It was close, it was warm.  
 along the dark seam of the river  
 the houses, the barns, the two churches,  
 hid like white crumbs  
 in a fluff of gray willows and elms,  
 till Time made one of his gestures;  
 his nails scratched the shingled roof.  
 Roughly his hand reached in,  
 and tumbled us out. (Bishop, 2006 103)

Time's intrusion abruptly puts an end to the idyllic pastoral existence led so far by the speaker and her community in some kind of temporal suspension. The rural setting is clearly reminiscent of the Nova Scotia landscapes of Bishop's early years. This former life sounds like some Edenic garden from which the poetic voice has been expelled and which has turned into some irretrievable Paradise. The unusual transitive use of the verb "tumble" further conveys the helplessness of the subject. The first stanza of the short unfinished poem "Syllables" (alternatively titled "Autobiography") seems to lament the same kind of separation:

Whatever there was, or is, of love let it be obeyed:  
 —so that the grandfather mightn't have been blinded,  
 the river never dwindled to what it is now,  
 nor the leaning big willows above it been blighted,  
 nor its trout fished out;  
 nor, by the naked boys, the swimming hole been abandoned,  
 dissolved, abandoned, its terra cottas and gilt. (101)

Although time is never named, it is implicitly staged like the hidden force that "blinds" and "blights," "dwindles" and "dissolves." These alliterative pairs of verbs are opposed to negations ("not," "never," anaphoric "nor"); but "abandon," expressed through another repetition, finally prevails. Time is once again depicted as an unstoppable adversary, which forces anybody involved in any autobiographical attempt to work against and along with various forms of loss. There might lie what Jean-Bertrand Pontalis defines as the "secret" of all autobiographies:

Si c'était là le "secret" de toute autobiographie ? Si c'était dans cette apparente exception—l'autobiographie d'un autre et d'un proche, d'un autre devenu étranger à lui-même—qu'il fallait trouver le motif méconnu, y compris par ceux qui s'y engagent, du projet qu'on se propose ici d'interroger : faire de sa vie un livre ? S'il s'agissait dans tous les cas de restituer un Je à celui qui l'a perdu ? [...] De faire

entendre, au-delà des traces visibles mais à partir d'elles, la voix du disparu, de l'effacé, de l'incompris ? De faire parler le muet, de donner par l'écriture un langage à l'*infans* ? (Pontalis 338-339)

- 7 What many of Bishop's autobiographical texts show indeed is that writing about one's childhood consists in striving to revisit a long-lost territory and identity. It consists in trying to regain a form of familiarity with what has become foreign and trying to find words for what often remained silent in the past. In Bishop's case, this double challenge is made even more complex by her predilection for secrecy. Reminiscing is just as much about making some things resurface as it is about burying others—either unintentionally because things dissolve or get lost, or on purpose because there are things you do want to keep hidden and unsaid. Oblivion is to be heard as both forgetfulness and omission. When Bishop remembers Nova Scotia, she recollects landscapes and places, anecdotes involving various relatives. However, the shameful story of her mother's depression and internment that permanently upset the family balance and the child's life is never frontally tackled (neither is her father's early death). But the mother's absence from Bishop's texts is so glaring that it becomes a haunting and founding presence in most of her autobiographical pieces, the "absent sun"<sup>4</sup> around which all these texts seem to have been composed. The best example is of course "Sestina" whose spiraling structure draws and follows the contours of Bishop's family tragedy without ever naming it. The tragedy is perceptible in filigree, through the network of repetitions and metonymic associations that the poem weaves around a silent core whose gravity is thus enhanced. Although the mother's disease and absence are never referred to, they are refracted so to speak throughout all the other motifs of the sestina (the September rain, the grandmother's tears, the kettle's song, the child's drawing). Even if the trauma is never openly addressed, remaining partly "inscrutable," it is obliquely inscribed in the text. "Homesickness" is an unpublished story ruled by the same dynamics of reserve and indirectness. It narrates a family anecdote Bishop summarizes in her correspondence:

My mother went off to teach school at 16 [...] and her first school was in lower Cape Breton somewhere—and the pupils spoke nothing much but Gaelic so she had a hard time of it at that school, or maybe one nearer home—she was so homesick she was taken the family dog to cheer her up. (Bishop, 2006 294)

- 8 The prose piece reconstructs the trip undertaken by the father and two siblings (the absent daughter's younger sister and brother) to drive the family dog to her new place. The narrative focuses on the Cape Breton settings, the travelers' descriptions, the dog's and the horse's behaviors during the journey, but the object of the trip is not dwelt upon. A brief passage hints at the girl's situation without revealing anything about her vulnerability: "Mr. MacLaughlin was on his way to see another daughter, Georgie, who had left home for the first time that autumn, to teach school, and he was taking her some presents" (Bishop, 2006 189). We have to wait until the very final lines of the text to get a brief glimpse at the true depth of the daughter's ill-being:

There was something very settled and domestic in [the dog's] manner; if she could have talked one could imagine her conversation: cheerful, practical, and tedious,—but a character to turn to with confidence in life's darker moments. Indeed, although she didn't know it, that was exactly why she was being taken on this trip, and among the cloth-wrapped packages under the seat was a large leg-bone with some meat on it, to be given her when they reached their destination. (Bishop, 2006 190)

Rereading the story, we then understand that the travelers' silence, the overwhelming accuracy of most descriptions, the young boy's extreme concentration on the tip of his whip and the trace it leaves on the wheel-track, all express a form of intensity and gravity that can be accounted for only by an out of text element. The father and his two children know they are on a mission to try and relieve the exiled daughter's suffering. Yet these "darker moments" (premonitory of the mother's ulterior more serious depression) are merely mentioned in passing, almost impersonally, and this "homesickness," named only in the title, acquires another "ghost-like" dimension: it can be related to Bishop herself who always described her forced departure from Nova Scotia as some traumatic uprooting she never completely recovered from.<sup>5</sup> Once "exiled" to her paternal grandparents' New England house, Bishop became ill, first with eczema, then asthma. The situation deteriorated so much she finally had to go and live with her aunt Maud, her mother's eldest sister, and her husband, in Worcester, Massachusetts. In "Mrs. Sullivan Downstairs," an unpublished prose memoir, she recalls the years she spent with them. The text opens on the speaker's reminiscences about the apartment and the family's everyday domestic life, but it soon drifts towards external elements—the portraits of several members of the Italian or Irish communities who tried hard to start anew in America, or of a young neighbor, Barbara Hunt, "a bastard," who lived among "grim and cold" relatives. Without making the parallel too explicit,<sup>6</sup> Bishop composes her autobiographical piece focusing on other lives from which she indirectly borrows to tell something about her own existence—her homelessness and homesickness. In all the examples developed so far, her autobiographical strategy thus appears as a complex interaction between memory and *oblivion* understood as forgetfulness, omission or indirectness. It is striking that a very similar dynamics is precisely at the core of two of Drummond de Andrade's texts Bishop translated and included in her own collection. This is why they may help us shed light on her autobiographical approach and more precisely on the treatment of oblivion as previously defined in her own writings.

## Drummond de Andrade's Specters: "Family Portrait" and "Travelling in the Family"

- 9 Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987) was one of Bishop's favorite Brazilian poets. She translated all seven of his poems published in the anthology, four of which deal with childhood and memory. There is no doubt Bishop felt a strong "affinity of spirit"<sup>7</sup> with this poet whom she met only once but with whom she exchanged several letters. In "Family Portrait" (1945), a speaker comes across an old family photograph. The whole text relies on a paradoxical tension: the picture shows just as much as it hides. Presence and absence are staged in a variety of forms that participate in the haunting effect produced by the photograph on its observer. According to Roland Barthes, the haunting effect of a picture results first from the temporal blurring the observer experiences when faced with the photographs of dead persons:

The living and dead relations  
multiply in the glass.  
I don't distinguish those  
that went away from those  
that stay. I only perceive  
the strange idea of family



travelling through the flesh. (Bishop, 1983 261)

- 10 In de Andrade's family portrait, the dead relations that strike a pose ("And the sand, beneath dead feet, / is an ocean of fog") correspond to what Barthes calls "spectrum,"<sup>8</sup> that is to say specters who belong to an abolished past when they were still alive. Life and death are suddenly superimposed and this impossible co-presence produces a spectral effect. Besides, while the picture revives relatives bringing the observer back towards a long-gone past, it also conjures up in the observer's mind numerous associations with ulterior episodes or out of the frame depths that the picture cannot register:

The father's face doesn't show  
 How much money he earned.  
 The uncle's hands don't reveal  
 The voyages both of them made.  
 The children, how they've changed.  
 [...]  
 They could refine themselves  
 in the room's chiaroscuro,  
 live inside the furniture  
 or the pockets of old waistcoats.  
 The house has many drawers,  
 papers, long staircases. (Bishop, 1983 260-261)

In other words, the visible elements of the picture co-exist with invisible ones that the observer can perceive just as well. Finally, the speaker's description of the fixed portrait tells us about his way of remembering the past, and he confesses that his eyes are just as "dusty" as the photograph: "The portrait does not reply, / it stares; in my dusty eyes / it contemplates itself," acknowledging that reminiscing is a process that implies forgetting. At all levels, intermittence seems to define this family picture caught between past and present, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility. A striking run-on line in stanza 8 summarizes this central tension: "Family features remain / lost in the play of bodies." Something remains that is lost at the same time, so that even if the speaker fails to recognize his relatives ("All these seated strangers, / my relations?"), he still manages to perceive something familiar within their otherness: "I only perceive / the strange idea of family / travelling through the flesh."<sup>9</sup> Memory is intimately linked with loss, and what remains, de Andrade seems to suggest, can only be felt "through the flesh," that is to say through the body.

- 11 Such thematics are re-explored and developed in "Travelling in the Family." It is another autobiographical poem by de Andrade devoted to the crucial part played by oblivion in the shaping of memories. The poem tells the story of a son (the poetic voice, Carlos Drummond de Andrade himself) who meets the ghost of his dead father (Rodrigo M.F. de Andrade to whom the poem is dedicated). Together they revisit the land of the past (travelling is the central metaphor), described as "a lost kingdom" that has to be re-discovered since it has turned into an unknown territory. The son has to catch up on "lost time." He had a conflicting relationship with his father, full of resentment and unspoken issues:

I saw grief, misunderstanding  
 and more than one old revolt  
 dividing us in the dark.  
 The hand I wouldn't kiss,  
 the crumb that they denied me,

refusal to ask pardon.  
Pride. Terror at night. (247)

When he meets the old man again, he hopes for some kind of reunion:

The narrow space of life  
crowds me up against you,  
it's as if I were being burned  
completely, with poignant love.  
Only now do we know each other! (248)

But this apparent reconciliation is described as painful burning and the father's figure cannot be grasped: "I caught at his strict shadow / and the shadow released itself / with neither haste nor anger. But he remained silent" (248). The father *remains* silent throughout the whole journey; the line "But he didn't say anything" is the final refrain of the first seven stanzas. Even if the son wants to believe in some form of forgiving, the final image of the poem is an image of flooding by the waters of time and "blood." The ephemeral proximity with the father is over and distance now seems impossible to bridge<sup>10</sup>:

Eye-glasses, memories, portraits  
flow in the river of blood.  
Now the waters won't let me  
make out your distant face,  
distant by seventy years...  
I felt that he pardoned me  
but he didn't say anything.  
The waters cover his moustache,  
the family, Itabira, all. (248)

- 12 Throughout the whole text, the father's silences are echoed by the son's own reserve. When traumatic episodes are brought back to the surface, the syntax of the poem becomes irregular, with more pauses as if the poetic voice could no longer speak:

In the desert of Itabira  
things come back to life, stiflingly, suddenly.  
The market of desires  
displays its sad treasures;  
my urge to run away;  
naked women; remorse. (246-247)

The son's reluctance to evoke "forbidden time and forbidden places" is palpable. Twice in the poem he exhorts his father to speak: "I cried to him: Speak! My voice / shook in the air a moment" (247). But on line 47, the enjambment incites us to read and hear "speak my voice," as a form of self-encouragement. Similarly line 62 is made of four imperative forms "Speak speak speak speak," four stressed syllables with no mark of punctuation nor clear grammatical referent so that they may be addressed to the father or the son alike.

- 13 The lost time in this poem is also the time that has gone by and whose vivid details cannot be retrieved *a posteriori*. Time is said to have "gnawed" at places, beings and things:

We have come a long way.  
Here there was a house.  
The mountain used to be bigger.  
So many heaped-up dead,  
and time gnawing the dead.  
And in the ruined houses,  
cold disdain and damp. (246)

The poem sounds like an incomplete puzzle and the lost kingdom can be reconstituted only partially, through furtive images separated (and related) by numerous blanks. It draws several fragmentary portraits through synecdochic associations:

The street he used to cross  
 on horseback, at a gallop.  
 His watch. His clothes.  
 His legal documents.  
 His tales of love affairs.  
 Opening of tin trunks  
 and violent memories. (246)

Reminiscence is interrupted as soon as it reaches disturbing secrets. Other members of the family are evoked just as evasively:

Stepping on books and letters  
 we travel in the family.  
 Marriages; mortgages;  
 the consumptive cousins;  
 the mad aunt; my grandmother  
 betrayed among the slave-girls,  
 rustling silks in the bedroom. (247)

The nominal list seems to be governed by alliterations and metonymic associations that do not reveal anything about personalities or relationships.<sup>11</sup> The reader is simply left at the end of the stanza with the sound of rustling silks... Several questions remain unanswered: "A sigh? A passing bird?" (7); "what cruel hand..." (stanza 6). Several nouns have no clear syntactic referent ("remorse," "pride," "terror"). They seem to be suspended among other words, referring to either father or son or other relatives... so that it is impossible for the reader to establish any clear logical connection between people and events.

- 14 In other words, Drummond de Andrade's poem is a text that seems to have been written against oblivion and along with it, striving at the same time to recover some distant past and to skip painful or shameful memories. Whether it is imposed or chosen, oblivion strikes as the "vivid force" ("force vive") that confers to the text its images, its rhythm, its syntax... The expression "force vive" is taken from Marc Augé's book *Les Figures de l'oubli*, in which the anthropologist incites us to view oblivion not as a mere loss of memory but as a major component of memory itself, an active agent that shapes memory just as a seashore is shaped by seawater (Augé 21, 29). Drummond de Andrade revisits a past that has been blurred, amputated, distorted. His aim is not to reconstitute its chronology exhaustively but rather to recover a few moments whose emotional impact has been very strong and has left some kind of subconscious trace. He strives to recover diffuse sensations and emotions that were not put into words in the past and are barely more articulated in the present. The poetic voice focuses on places, objects, sounds, colors, textures (desert, house, mountain, street, cold, damp, tin, rustling silks, stones, clay, pallid hand, white eyes, painted birds...). Drummond de Andrade seems to explore what Nathalie Sarraute defines as childhood "tropisms." It is a concept she borrows from biology (acknowledging it might be inadequate to express what she means), and that she defines several times in her works.<sup>12</sup> Commenting on the character of the writer from *Entre la vie et la mort*, she gives a clear definition of the notion saying that he moves towards "obscure and silent zones which no word has entered yet, on which language has not yet exerted its drying and petrifying influence —zones characterized by micro-movements, virtual issues, vague sensations, all that is not named yet, that resists naming but that calls for it at the same time because its very

existence depends on language."<sup>13</sup> Tropisms correspond to "inner turbulences/disturbances," "tiny and intimate dramas" (Gosselin 16) taking place in one's subconscious. In Sarraute's texts (as in Drummond de Andrade's and Bishop's as we shall see), they are always related to something disturbing and kept secret such as fear, shame, and irrepressible urges. Years later, they can be grasped at only through uncertain language. The present reconstitution of these disturbances does not consist in explaining them, in disclosing what they hide or what they mean. If the poet or the writer used more elaborate and rigid syntax, they would turn these fleeting instants into fiction because they would betray or stifle the recovered sensations. "Travelling in the Family" is a poem shaped by silences; this enables Drummond de Andrade to resurrect a few sensory traces laying the emphasis on their frailty, their discontinuity and their opacity. It is a poem in which remembering consists in caressing the past without forcing resurgence but giving full attention to the emotional impact of the remembered situation, which is precisely the strategy that Bishop seems to adopt in her own autobiographical writings. So that translating somebody else's tropisms seems to be the closest Bishop gets to defining her own autobiographical approach.

## Bishop's Tropisms: "In the Village" and "Dickie and Sister"

- 15 "In the Village" is a text that Bishop described as a fragment of "poetic prose" that did not follow the pattern of a traditional autobiography either in its structure or its style.<sup>14</sup> It relates the mother's depression and absence but the events are not narrated in any clear temporal or causal chronology. The story progresses through ellipses, digressions, cyclical repetitions of situations or images that convey a specific tempo. It is structured around two spaces, each marked by strong metonymic connotations: the family house, on the one hand, perceived as a place of secrecy, fear and shame; the blacksmith's shop, on the other hand, associated with warmth and security. Bishop concentrates on a few scenes, narrated in the present tense as if they were reenacted through writing. The speaker is a silent observer who tries to resurrect intermittently her sensory experience (through sounds, smells, physical contacts). Let us compare two passages—the first one is extracted from preparatory notes and the second corresponds to the final published version:

The afternoon I tapped on my mother's door and went in. Easter [the mother] was standing in the middle of the room with Miss O'Neil [the dressmaker] kneeling at her left and Aunt Grace at her right. The tiny fan of shiny needles in Miss O'Neil's starved looking mouth might well have been a sacred host. She stared up at Easter [fictive name of the mother] with fear and wonder, and I thought to myself "Oh, she knows..." Miss O'Neil picked up a large pair of shears & took hold of the extra cloth, to cut it away. At once Easter fell to her knees and snatched the cloth away from her. "Oh, oh!" she cried, "You hurt me. You mustn't cut it... It's mine... so take the scissors away. Grace [fictive name of the aunt]! Make her stop. It will bleed. I shall bleed." ... She jumped up & ran to the other end of the room trailing the cloth in a wonderful swirl behind her. She stood there and screamed. (Manuscripts, Vassar College, "Reminiscences of Great Village," box 54, file 13)

In this extract, the narrator relates the scene of the mother's scream in a rather linear and clear way: the various characters are named and located in space. Their actions are interrelated. We have access to the child's thoughts and the mother's words. The final version contrasts a lot:

Unaccustomed to having her back, the child stood now in the doorway, watching. The dressmaker was crawling around and around on her knees eating pins as Nebuchadnezzar had crawled eating grass. The wall paper glinted and the elm trees outside hung heavy and green, and the straw matting smelled like the ghost of hay.

Clang.

Clang.

Oh, beautiful sounds, from the blacksmith's shop at the end of the garden! Its gray roof, with patches of moss, could be seen above the lilac bushes. Nate was there—Nate, wearing a long black leather apron over his trousers and bare chest, sweating hard, a black leather cap on top of dry, thick, black-and-gray curls, a black sooty face; iron filings, whiskers, and gold teeth, all together, and a smell of red-hot metal and horses' hoofs.

Clang.

The pure note: pure and angelic.

The dress was all wrong. She screamed. (Bishop, 1984 252-253)

Here the narrator speaks in the third person. The dressmaker is immediately introduced as a monstrous figure that is to say as the child perceived her at that moment. The narration focuses on visual and auditory perceptions and on smells. It is punctuated by onomatopoeia. The many alliterations and monosyllabic words also translate the sonorous dimension of the experience. The scream comes abruptly after a long ellipsis corresponding to the digression about Nate's place. It surprises the reader as it must have shocked the child. The passage does not give any psychological explanation. It simply makes us *feel* what the child experienced at the time. The child did not express her experience through words; and the words used years later to convey what she felt then seem to work like the "torn fishnets" she describes in "Cape Breton": they manage to recapture a few fleeting sensations and emotions while leaving part of the experience in the dark. What seems to matter is to retrieve, beyond facts but from them at the same time, the emotional impact some episodes had on the child, the traces they have left.

- 16 Two unpublished manuscripts Bishop started working on while composing "In the Village" provide another significant example. "Dickie and Sister" is a poetic draft derived from various elements already present in the prose memoir "Mrs. Sullivan Downstairs." Reworking her story into a poem, Bishop displays once more her predilection for tropisms. The first paragraphs of the story depict the childhood setting (the Worcester apartment) in a very organized way, detailing all the rooms in some exhaustive survey:

I could draw the floor plan now: you went up the long staircase that was always cool—in the winter freezing—made a sharp right turn and entered the narrow hallway. To the right the front bedroom where my aunt and uncle slept, to the right front the doorway to the tiny living room. [Straight in front] of [one] the doorway to the tiny dining room, and off it a small bedroom with one window. To the left the kitchen where we did so much of our living, taken up by a blackish green [stove] (its name was Magee Ideal) and two "set tubs" with a big hood with a great deal of brass pipe (my job to polish). Two windows, and hanging in them the canaries Dickie and Sweetie. Off that another small bedroom, mine. [Out from the end of the] kitchen another narrow dark hall, this one going onto the piazza and just having space enough for a small refrigerator. The narrow back staircase with two turns in it descended past Mrs. Sullivan's back door. (Bishop, 2006 197-198)

The house is also located in a specific neighborhood, enjoying a specific view. It is set in a particular perspective, related to spatial landmarks that have completely disappeared in the poetic version. The latter focuses solely on the kitchen (where the family did so much of their living) and the objects of their everyday routine. The poetic voice

undertakes another kind of mapping, a more intimate but incomplete one, based on a nominal list punctuated by dashes that both space out and link up all the items. We follow the voice's reminiscing logic that seems to be ruled by the way light, shapes, materials and textures were imprinted on her mind at the time, leaving disjointed but vivid traces:

In the kitchen  
of the old wooden  
"double decker", top floor—  
Winter Sunlight coming in  
[from the right] from afar—  
Two windows, two canaries  
Dickie and Sister.  
A stove : Magee Ideal

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The sink, the 'set-tub'—  
The pairs of faucets, staggered.  
The table, the sewing machine  
covered with an old red tablecloth  
the list of someone's peculiar (DIET) foods  
brass—  
& at right angles—  
the paired brass water pipes  
up to the ceiling—  
the linoleum—&  
a hooked rug—very worn—  
& towels behind the stove—  
over the table a calendar  
—a picture of a baby cut from "the Ladies Home Journal" cover & a list—someone's  
*diet* (170)

What the speaker seeks to recreate is not the exact unfolding of specific events but the sensory background in which the child was immersed. Bishop's choice to center the whole poem on the pair of canaries and their songs also participates in her wish to translate an ambience rather than facts:

Dickie and Sister sing & call,  
argue and quarrel  
He has the better disposition  
Dickie and Sister quarrel & sing  
The set tubs sit (or set),  
*Magee Ideal*  
Sends out a chuff of coal gas  
(the water tank is *full*)  
the brass pipes shine,  
the soup boils,  
the Jello jells  
& the alto voice  
sings hymns & hymns (168)

The bird's songs on which the draft opens are immediately associated with other domestic noises. Beyond the apparent sonorous fragmentation, a concert of "voices" seems to be orchestrated through lexical simplicity, syntactic parallels and alliterative sequences which reproduce the musical cadence of a nursery rhyme. The aunt's "alto voice" is all that remains of the beloved relative who cannot be identified if one has not read the prose piece. The two texts follow a shift from day to nighttime. In the prose memoir, this passage is clearly associated with terror:

There was a streetlamp that was still lit by a lamplighter every evening. [...] When I lay in bed at nights the light threw the shadows of the leaves uphill and greatly magnified on the tan painted walls [...] The leaves looked gigantic [...] and on nights of strong wind, in the late summer, [...] their shadows would move agitatedly, frantically, wagging, chop-chopping—I half consciously frightened myself watching them. I looked at them and saw a group in lively conversation or in an argument, threatening each other, [menacing], interrupting, insulting, roaring—and all in silence—Horrible wide open mouths, waving hands, gnashing jaws, thrown back heads, contemptuous laughs... [...] Used to violence in the neighbors and a certain amount threatened even in my own apartment. (203)

The voice analyzes her fears, revealing their causes, explaining how she distorted perceptions and projected fantasies that she related to the violent scenes she used to witness during the day. In the poem, night terrors are also expressed but in a sideways fashion:

At night who knows what happens?  
 The birds don't know—  
 Only perhaps the mice know  
 & the occasional (cock-) roach—?  
 Do the set tubs still set—  
 The brass pipes cling to the wall?  
 The faucets stay turned off?  
 At night what happens? Who knows?  
 [...]  
*Magee Ideal* dances  
 Jigs a (little) on her tiny black claw feet—  
 The Singer pedals furiously  
 Furious, trapped, the Singer pedals—  
 [...]The bread rises—  
 The brasses shine  
 The moon that bosses  
 Or Magee Ideal's oven door—  
 Her broken thermometer cyclop-eye  
 [...]  
 the towels dry at last  
 & the scuttles *scuttle*  
 [...]  
 The water tank—hisses with greenish tarnish  
 The Singer sings, everything sings  
 In its own way—  
 Silently—  
 Hum themselves to sleep  
 Sleep humming in the partial dark (171-172)

The poetic "I"—that never appears in the text as a grammatical form—articulates the questions that, in the past, crowded her mind at night. All the objects in the kitchen are personified: when no one looks at them, they become animated and start living their silent lives. The wonderful dimension of the passage clearly conveys a child's perspective, synonymous with wonder indeed (the whole scene sounds like a choreographed show reminiscent of the poem's opening concert) but also with disquiet (the invisible presence of mice and cockroaches, the fury of the Singer, the hissing of the water tank, the monstrous eye and the claws of the stove, the very cadence of this night life that seems to potentially get out of control through syntactic hammering). It is as if the social violence recalled in the prose piece had been partly transferred onto all those things working as contiguous extensions in the child's environment and indirectly reflecting the child's diffuse anguish. It sounds like fragments from a fairy-

tale through which the speaker gives shape to her unspoken fears. This draft (in which Bishop literally gives voice to mute things and a silent witness) exemplifies once again her strategy to verbalize muffled emotions, "tiny and intimate dramas" whose intensity and mystery she manages to preserve.

- 17 The various Brazilian texts Bishop chose to translate have played an important role in Bishop's career, echoing her own life and pushing her to travel in her own family history, to explore the opaque and turbulent zones of her own childhood. This corresponds to what Pontalis calls "l'épreuve de l'étranger," that is to say some kind of "round trip" during which one first explores an unknown territory to become more familiar with it before being led to discover unknown zones within one's own familiar environment<sup>15</sup>—as if a detour via otherness was a way to explore one's own strangeness—in this particular case, the *terra incognita* of one's childhood. Translating may still emphasize this double movement between familiarity and otherness,<sup>16</sup> for translating consists in turning foreign words into familiar ones. Nonetheless, in the process of translation, something is always lost—one's familiar language often proves unable to convey the exact nuances of the original text. Translating, Pontalis says, consists in discovering flaws or limits within one's own language, in perceiving one's language as "other" so to speak. That is why Pontalis defines translation as a form of "emigration within one's language."<sup>17</sup> In Bishop's Brazilian experience, translating could be seen as a linguistic migration that doubled the geographical one and that may have helped her give shape to her much commented upon "reticence," that is to say, not only a form of reserve that distinguishes her from the Confessional poets, but also another facet of "the art of losing" she celebrates in her villanelle "One Art." Oblivion is a form of loss that always leaves tangible traces in her autobiographical compositions. Sarraute explained about *Enfance* that her aim was not to write the whole story of her life but rather to assemble images pulled out of a sort of cotton wool<sup>18</sup> in which they were buried. What Bishop's and Drummond de Andrade's autobiographical texts often give us to perceive best is this layer of cotton wool which shrouds and clouds memories just as much as it protects them. *Remain / lost*.

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## NOTES

1. In his introduction to the 2011 edition of Bishop's prose, Lloyd Schwartz notices that "Bishop deliberately blurs the distinction between fiction and memoir" and that her definition of the genre of her prose was uncertain, "vacillating between 'stories' and 'essays' in her draft of the contents of a planned but never materialized book of her prose" (Machova 38).
2. "Gwendolyn" (June 1953), "In the Village" (December 1953), "Manners" (November 1955), "The Country Mouse" (1960), "Primer Class" (1961).
3. Among which six poems: "For M.B.S., buried in Nova Scotia...," "One afternoon my aunt and I...," "Syllables," "Where are the dolls who loved me so...," "A Short, Slow Life," "The Grandmothers," and two prose pieces: "Homesickness" and "Mrs. Sullivan Downstairs."
4. "Soleil absent" is the expression used by Lartigue to depict the formal mechanism of a sestina (Lartigue 38).
5. Several passages from "The County Mouse" are unequivocal: "I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father was born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, perhaps even from the inverted r's of my mother's family" (Bishop, 1984 17).
6. She simply hints at the parallel between Barbara and herself: "A horrible strange grim unlovely cold family—Barb'runt was obviously the brightest member of it but I didn't even feel the mystery or romance of her sad situation then—we were both orphans, that is, almost fairy princesses and living here just temporarily—that was our great bond although we took it so much for granted we never once referred to it as far as I remember" (Bishop, 2006 202).
7. The expression, taken from Milleo Martins's comparative study on Bishop and de Andrade published in 2006 but not translated into English yet, is quoted by Hicok who draws on this monograph in her own chapter. Milleo Martins also suggests that the two poets might have been simultaneously driven to revisit the "landscapes" of their childhood because they shared a

"coincidental displacement" to Rio de Janeiro. De Andrade came from his native Itabira and Bishop from the United States (Hicok 2006).

8. "*Spectrum*, parce que ce mot garde à travers sa racine un rapport au 'spectacle' et y ajoute cette chose un peu terrible qu'il y a dans toute photographie : le retour du mort" (Barthes 23).

9. So far, "Family Portrait" has mostly been analyzed in relationship with Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," the two poems being linked through the paradoxical trope of "family as estrangement" (Hicok 2016). Machova suggests it also bears resemblances with Bishop's story "Memories of Uncle Neddy" whose starting point is the observation of a portrait by a speaker who ponders on the relationship between the painted portrait and the relative as she remembers him (Machova 64).

10. Both Milleo Martins, quoted by Hicok (2050), and Harrison (178) draw a parallel between "Travelling in the Family" and one of Bishop's elegies, "For Grandfather," published posthumously (Bishop, 2006 154). The two poems describe "vast landscapes" (a desert for de Andrade, the frozen North for Bishop) and focus on a speaker's "overwhelming desire to communicate" with a dead relative. Bishop's last lines ("Grandfather, please stop! I haven't been this cold in years") clearly echo de Andrade's hailing ("I cried to him: Speak!").

11. Machova relates de Andrade's nominal and metonymic lines to Bishop's "The Moose" and the intermittent and enigmatic conversation of an old couple's conversation in the bus: "names being mentioned, / things cleared up finally; / what he said, what she said, / who got pensioned; deaths, deaths and sicknesses; / the year he remarried; / the year (something) happened" (Bishop, 1983 171-172).

12. She uses the notion for the first time in 1939, but it reappears in several works, especially her autobiographical book *Enfance*.

13. The exact quotation in French is: "ces régions silencieuses et obscures où aucun mot ne s'est encore introduit, sur lesquelles le langage n'a pas encore exercé son action asséchante et pétrifiante, vers ce qui n'est que mouvance, virtualités, sensations vagues et globales, vers ce non-nommé qui oppose aux mots une résistance et qui pourtant les appelle car il ne peut exister sans eux" (Gosselin 233).

14. "They [the *New Yorker*] find fault over and over with the story's being 'mysterious' while giving a perfectly lucid synopsis of it, so somebody around there must have understood it all right [...]. The idea underneath it all seems to be that the *New Yorker* reader must never have to pause to think for a single second, but be informed and reformed comfortably all the time, like newspaper writing a little" (Bishop, 1994 254).

15. "L'épreuve de l'étranger, c'est un aller et retour : je fais mien un pays inconnu, me le rends peu à peu familier, après quoi je découvre de l'inconnu dans mon pays familier" (Pontalis 70).

16. "Épreuve de l'étranger" (*Trials of the Foreign*) is an expression Pontalis borrows from Berman's study on translation.

17. "Qu'est-ce donc que traduire ? Émigrer, oui, cela est sûr, mais émigrer dans sa langue. Vivre à nouveau l'exil en elle, renoncer à l'illusion, qui a pu être la nôtre, que nous en étions propriétaires et maîtres, pouvions en disposer, comme d'un bien, à notre gré" (Pontalis 262).

18. Sarraute uses several times the image of "ouate." See for instance the final words of *Enfance*: "Je ne pourrais plus m'efforcer de faire surgir quelques moments, quelques mouvements qui me semblent encore intacts, assez forts pour se dégager de cette couche protectrice qui les conserve, de ces épaisseurs blanchâtres, molles, ouatées, qui se défont, qui disparaissent avec l'enfance..." (Sarraute, 1985 277).

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## ABSTRACTS

The aim of this paper is to analyze Bishop's interest in Brazilian autobiographical works especially *The Diary of Helena Morley* and poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade that she translated into English and included among her own poems. Of particular interest is the privileged dialogue established between these translations and Bishop's own autobiographical texts, either in verse or in prose, both published and unpublished during her lifetime. Particular attention is paid to the treatment of oblivion defined as both forgetfulness and omission. Oblivion strikes as the "vivid force" that shapes most of these autobiographical works and pushes both poets to explore their childhood "tropisms," that is to say, according to Sarraute's definition, micro-movements, intimate dramas that affect the child's subconscious and that the adult tries to grasp at years later through uncertain language. The aim of the autobiographical return is not to recreate a whole life but to retrieve the emotional traces left by a few episodes.

Cet article se penche sur l'intérêt d'Elizabeth Bishop pour plusieurs œuvres autobiographiques brésiliennes, notamment le journal d'Helena Morley et certains poèmes de Carlos Drummond de Andrade qu'elle a traduits en anglais puis inclus dans l'édition de ses *Collected Poems*. Il s'intéresse en particulier au dialogue intertextuel qui s'établit entre les traductions de Bishop et ses propres textes autobiographiques (poésie et prose), au traitement de l'oubli, notamment, dans ces textes. À la fois perte du souvenir et omission, l'oubli semble être la « force vive » qui façonne beaucoup de ces écrits autobiographiques, poussant les poètes à explorer leurs tropismes d'enfance, à savoir, ainsi que les définit Nathalie Sarraute, des « micro-mouvements » ou drames intimes qui affectent subconsciemment l'enfant et que l'adulte ne peut que reconstruire imparfaitement des années plus tard. Le retour autobiographique, pour Bishop comme pour de Andrade, ne consiste donc pas à recomposer l'intégralité d'un parcours mais à retrouver et mettre en mots quelques traces émotionnelles laissées par certains épisodes.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Elizabeth Bishop, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, translation, intertextuality, autobiography, childhood, tropisms, memory, oblivion

**Mots-clés:** Elizabeth Bishop, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, traduction, intertextualité, autobiographie, enfance, tropismes, mémoire

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