

THE ΞΕΝΙΤΙΑ OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

The Greek word ξενιτιά is a complex term, but it basically means “foreign lands”--those places Greek men and women have emigrated to, usually for economic survival and to find a better life. The experience of ξενιτιά is so deeply felt by Greeks that it has spawned over the centuries its own tradition of demotic songs and poetry. American poetry has no such tradition, though it certainly has its share of poets, especially in the twentieth century, who have fled their homeland, not for economic opportunities, but for psychological, emotional and spiritual survival. If America did have such a tradition, Elizabeth Bishop would no doubt be one of its foremost representatives. By first establishing the biographical context of one of her most important poems--“Brazil, January 1, 1502”--and then briefly examining specific aspects of that poem, this paper hopes to demonstrate how Bishop’s experience of ξενιτιά becomes in her poetry a means of considering the consequences of living in a foreign land, and a way of questioning systems of authority and how they influence our response to the strange new places we come to call home.

“From the icy regions of the frozen north to the waving palm trees of the burning south...” (Goldensohn xvii) is how the twelve-year-old Elizabeth Bishop began her first piece of writing to gain public acclaim, an essay that won an American Legion competition on the theme of “Americanism.” But Bishop six years earlier had made it clear: “...I didn’t want to be an American” (*Collected Prose* 27). By that age she had lost her father (who died of Bright’s

disease in 1911, when Elizabeth was eight-months-old), and her mother (diagnosed as permanently insane and committed to a mental institution, never to be seen by her daughter again) and had been “kidnapped” by her paternal grandparents from the one place in her childhood she would identify as home--the house of her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia. As a result of that abrupt uprooting, when she was, as she says, “brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in....” (*Collected Prose* 17), she would remain an exile in the country of her birth, only feeling at home when living abroad. The fact that six years later Bishop could win a contest by persuasively expressing her “Americanism” indicates how effectively authority figures in her life had pressured her, but not without a cost. From her childhood on, Bishop suffered from debilitating allergies, asthma and eczema, and as an adult was hospitalised numerous times for conditions related to her alcoholism. Small wonder then that the opening lines of that twelve-year-old’s essay suggest the contours of her lifelong search for a home, a search that involved not only moving back and forth between northern and southern landscapes, but also meditations on how we respond to and describe the places we would claim as home, concerns also suggested by the title of her first poetry collection--*North & South* .

By her late thirties, while steadily progressing as a poet, Bishop was rapidly disintegrating psychologically, emotionally and physically. Her life had become marked by illness, alcohol, loneliness and extreme self-doubt concerning her writing and her sexual orientation which, along with her feeling

of homelessness, prompted her to travel for extended periods of time. While intermittently moving back and forth between New York City and Florida, she traveled to Newfoundland, Europe, Morocco and the Florida Keys in her twenties; and to Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Prince Edward Island and Sable Island in Canada in her thirties. In spite of all these efforts, Bishop, by her fortieth birthday, was close to complete physical and mental collapse. At this point, she decided to leave America for an extended trip abroad.

On November 10 of that year, 1951, she boarded the *S.S. Bowplate* for a grant-funded trip around the world, but didn't manage to get past the first stop, Brazil. Here she had planned to stay briefly in Rio de Janeiro to visit a friend of a friend, a Brazilian woman she had met once in New York City. But, as fortune would have it, she sampled the exotic fruit of the Brazilian cashew tree and fell violently ill with an allergic reaction. From her sickbed, in the care of that Brazilian acquaintance, Lota Soarés, who would become her lover for 17 years, she wrote to her doctor: "Aside from my swelled head and the asthma I feel fine & although it is tempting Providence to say so I suppose, happier than I have felt in ten years" (*Letters* 232). Emigrating to Brazil, as Bishop biographer Brett Millier describes it, was her salvation:

She would not have to live alone; ...the income from her father's estate would keep her in Brazil as it could not in the United States; she would be out of reach of the dissipating influences...of the New York literary "scene"; and in the "timeless" Brazilian world she would be free at last from the pace of New York, which had seemed to her a dizzying lunge toward loss and death. The very impracticality and inefficiency of the Brazilian way of doing things

charmed her thoroughly and seemed to indicate that here, anyway, one could control the rate of one's decline (Millier 246).

Bishop herself described her decision to stay to Robert Lowell, a close friend, as follows:

...[H]ere I am extremely happy, for the first time in my life. I live in a spectacularly beautiful place; ...and I find the people frank, --startlingly so, until you get used to Portuguese vocabularies--[and] extremely affectionate--an atmosphere I just lap up--no I guess I mean I loll in... (Millier 250-251).

Finding a home at last in Brazil, Bishop in her poetry delved deep into the geographical polarities established in her earlier work. As critic David Kalstone notes concerning *Questions of Travel*, her third book, and first written from Brazil, "...Bishop had found the blend of description and self-presentation toward which her work had long tended..." (Kalstone 222). He goes on to note that in the first three poems of that collection Bishop was writing "...almost as a lone individual entering into and acquiring attachments, tentatively, but more completely than she ever had before, out of a need to gain a world rather than to lose one" (Kalstone 195). But as "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the second poem in *Questions of Travel*, shows, Bishop couldn't approach this newly acquired world, or the desires she had concerning that world, unambivalently.

This poem stands not only as perhaps Bishop's most thought provoking work concerning such large themes as history, culture, gender and power, questioning as it does systems of authority, perception and representation, but also serves as a means by which she considers the consequences of her own presence in a foreign land:

Brazil, January 1, 1502

The poem begins with a quote from Sir Kenneth Clark's *Landscape Into Art*

...embroidered nature...tapestry landscape.

--*Landscape into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
every square inch filling in with foliage--
big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
blue, blue-green, and olive,
with occasional lighter veins and edges,
or a satin underleaf turned over;
monster ferns
in silver-gray relief,
and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
up in the air--up, rather, in the leaves--
purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,

rust red and greenish white;
solid but airy; fresh as if just finished
and taken off the frame.

A blue-white sky, a simple web,
backing for feathery detail:
brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,
a few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;
and perching there in profile, beaks agape,
the big symbolic birds keep quiet,
each showing only half his puffed and padded,
pure-colored or spotted breast.

Still in the foreground there is Sin:
five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.

The rocks are worked with lichen, gray moonbursts
splattered and overlapping,
threatened from underneath by moss
in lovely hell-green flames,
attacked above
by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,
“one leaf yes and one leaf no” (in Portuguese).

The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes
are on the smaller, female one, back-to,
her wicked tail straight up and over,
red as a red-hot wire.

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
tiny as nails, and glinting,
in creaking armor, came and found it all,
not unfamiliar:
no lovers' walks, no bowers,
no cherries to be picked, no lute music,
but corresponding, nevertheless,
to an old dream of wealth and luxury
already out of style when they left home--
wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure.
Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L'Homme armé or some such tune,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself--
those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it.

As the opening, pluralized "Januaries" indicates, as well as the speaker's reference to "our eyes," the poem is not simply about an historical event that occurred on January 1, 1502--the date on which Portuguese explorers discovered and (mis)named the Rio de Janiero, which is actually a bay, not a river. Rather it is about a recurring event--all Januaries, all beginnings

marked by one's entry into a new territory. Thus the perception of a new territory by interlopers is both historical and cyclical, the latter being the way time is depicted in myth. Both history and myth are means of interpreting Nature, our means of naming what we have discovered, narratives through which the people of a culture identify themselves and represent their experience, past and present.

The speaker of the poem is a participant in that recurring story, knowing that she too is in the middle of making up a world for herself in Brazil, a "deluxe Nova Scotia" (Goldensohn 12), as she called it years later. Bishop, as the transparent speaker of the poem, is aware of our need to explore, to name or otherwise identify and represent that which we have discovered (in poetry as well as in geography), and to give the imagination free play in a world it can thrive in. But she is also acutely aware of the dangers of pursuing such needs. "Brazil, January 1," more precisely, considers what happens when imagination encounters a new place, and thus comes face-to-face with its own strangeness, and the strangeness of the Other.

"Brazil" begins by focusing, as the epigraph establishes, on the disjunction between the things we see and how we represent (i.e., interpret) them, in this case how we depict nature as if it were a tapestry. In *Reading & Writing Nature*, Guy Rotella describes Bishop's tendency to focus on such disjunctions as follows:

Such gaps between things and our versions of them, whether houses, poems, or paintings, histories or religions, have been Bishop's subject since "The

Map.” Sometimes, the rupture between the world and our representations of it is a source of distress in her work, and indication of essential homelessness, since our domesticating patterns are not discovered but imposed and always vulnerable to dissolution and loss. At other times, it is a source of liberation from structures that are confiningly rigid: the absence of absolutes can free us for expansive, if uneasy, exploration. Most often, Bishop sees the “untidy activity” of trying to know and shape the world as “awful but cheerful”: a human necessity, it results at best in uninsistent, self-decreating forms that “roughly but adequately...can shelter” (Rotella 224).

Positioned in both past and present, the speaker, in stanza one, sets about describing “Nature” in this new world, moving “our eyes” in a clear, linear manner from bottom to top, shifting scales, packing the lines with lush yet precise description of jungle foliage, making frequent corrections to show the human perceiver’s mind at work, then in the last two lines securing the connection between tapestry and landscape: “...fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame.” The second stanza reinforces that connection, moving steadily from background to foreground within the frame of the woven tapestry, intensifying the representational dimension (“big symbolic birds”), then shifting to a description of the Christian reading of the landscape that the Portuguese explorers would have brought with them, seeing in the jungle the emblems of “Sin”: devils as “dragons,” (i.e., lizards), “hell-green flames” of moss mingling with lichen on rocks and the evil sexual beckoning of a female lizard, “her wicked tail straight up and over, / red as a red-hot wire.” The

moral ambivalence of the Portuguese apprehenders is also woven into the scene: “ ‘one leaf yes and one leaf no’ (in Portuguese)....”

Early in stanza three, though, the poem makes it obvious that the cultural and religious assumptions of the Christians, “hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting, / in creaking armor...,” don’t fit. Nature is not a tapestry, and the scenes fixed in the explorers’ minds, of “lovers’ walks” and “lute music,” were not to be found, neither in historical Portugal nor in mythical Brazil. What the explorers see is what they are prompted by their desires to see, filtered through the mental constructs of culture and religion--a “dream of wealth and luxury / ...plus a brand-new pleasure,” that of unchecked lust, the promise of possessing the object of desire compelling them to rip “away into the hanging fabric, / each out to catch an Indian for himself....”

As has so often been the case in colonialism, the systems of representation of the interlopers serve mainly to reinforce their authority and give their imagination, freed of the restraints of home, uninhibited license to pursue and possess the object of their desire. Bishop, then, is explicitly acknowledging her collusion with others who have come to Brazil--skewed by their cultural preconceptions, free to pursue that which they couldn’t attain at home, and willing, even eager, to impose their own constructs of “reality” on Nature. But, as Rotella notes,

[t]here is a difference... between Bishop’s view and that of her predecessors. Bishop does not attempt to take possession of the scene.... She deliberately exposes the limits as well as the power of her strategies for apprehension.

Rather than excising errors in her description, she incorporates them in the text.... She includes contradictions: “solid but airy.” She uses the word “or” several times to indicate that her terms are but some among many possible ones, and she insists that the “tapestried landscape” she creates is not a matter of discovered identity but of provisional and invented likeness: the jungle is “fresh as *if* just finished / and taken off the frame” (emphasis added). Bishop rips the fabric of her poem, not the jungle” (Rotella 225).

This difference in representation soon becomes a difference in perspective, as the speaker makes clear where her deeper empathy lies. By identifying Nature as “she” in line two, and by depicting the women in the poem as elusive objects of desire that seem always to slip away just beyond our configuration of them, implying that they may not even exist beyond the imagination of those who would violate them, the speaker moves away from the intruders and identifies herself with the victims of those who would brutally exercise power and impose systems of belief. As a child who struggled against identities forced upon her by people in positions of authority and as a woman, lesbian and female poet in America of the ‘30s and 40’s, Bishop knew only too well the dangers of submitting to an identity ready made by others, and knew as both a woman and a poet the importance of “retreating, always retreating” behind the representations by others, of moving from signification to signification, positing, resolving and dissolving dialectics in order to maintain a provisional stance, the only means to stay true to the flux of reality. In other words, the only means to survive.

If America was a foreign land that Bishop as a child and young adult could never wholly assimilate into, and Brazil the closest to home she would ever feel as an adult, then reentry into America after losing Brazil was double-exile for her. That loss didn't occur instantly, but over the course of a decade, as her relationship with Lota Soarés gradually disintegrated. Their relationship ended in a final, bitter tragedy when, while visiting Bishop in New York City, where Elizabeth had come after being ordered by Lota's doctors not to have contact with her, Soarés committed suicide. Though Bishop tried to keep from losing her connection to Brazil, by 1971, after years of numerous struggles and increasing disenchantment, she would write to a friend that "[my] Brazilian world has really come to an end, and I must get out of it fast" (Millier 441).

Moving back to America in her late fifties, first to Seattle, to take over the teaching post vacated by the sudden death of Theodore Roethke, then to San Francisco, to the heart of the counter-culture revolution, and finally to Boston, to teach at Harvard University, she was even more alien than she had been in the past: "It might as well be China, as far as I'm concerned, everything strikes me as totally foreign" (Millier 376).

In 1979, the last year of her life, Bishop took one last trip abroad--to Greece, to visit her friend, another American poet who sought ξενιτιά--James Merrill. In his obituary to Bishop, Merrill described her as someone who carried on "instinctive, modest, life-long impersonations of an ordinary woman" (Millier

550). Underneath that seeming ordinariness, though, was a woman who had suffered from tyranny--not that brought about by poverty, political repression or ethnic and religious enmities, terrible as these most certainly are--but America's brand of tyranny--the loneliness and alienation resulting from torn families and relationships, the lack of solidity and groundedness endemic in American life, the superficiality and oversimplification that all too often negate complexity and diversity and (paradoxically) set the individual adrift to find her own way. For Bishop, afflicted by loss and displacement throughout her life, and by the need to constantly struggle against the subtle yet powerful forces of homogenization in American life, ξενιτιά was a sanctuary, but one she inhabited with extreme ambivalence. Ultimately her psychological and spiritual survival, precarious as they were, depended on the formation of an identity true to the complexity of her own experience, which in turn depended to a great extent on the powers of observation that the pursuit of poetry gave her: enough insight to acknowledge, at times even embrace, her own strangeness, and enough curiosity and wonder to establish an intimate bond with the strangeness of the world around her. As Kalstone puts it:

[In Bishop's poetry] one finds...the most precise psychological connections made between the needs of exact observation and the frail nightmare of the observer, between the strangeness of what is seen and the strangeness of the person seeing it." ("All Eye" 313).

Don Schofield
Presentation
English Language &
Literature Department
University of Athens
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