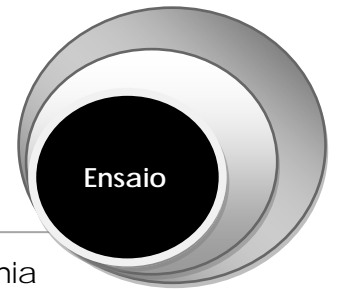


A Safe Haven for Elizabeth Bishop



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Invitation to an Encounter

*A meeting of two:
Eye to eye, face to face.
And when you are near,
I will tear your eyes out
and place them instead of mine,
and you will tear my eyes out
and will place them instead of yours,
then I will look at you with your eyes
and you will look at me with mine.*

Jacob Moreno

1. Brazil through Bishop's Eyes

Living in another country means seeing day-to-day experiences in a new light. One has to try to see the 'Other' from the point of view that the 'Other' sees himself. As stated in the poem by Jacob Moreno (1970), founder of psychodrama, one has to put oneself in the shoes of the other to understand the reasons for their behaviour, to immerse oneself in the culture, its values and customs.

The process of Elizabeth Bishop's immersion in Brazilian culture, fictionalized by Marta Goes in her monologue *A Port for Elizabeth Bishop*, played by Regina Braga and directed by José Possi Neto, is the subject of this paper. Bishop experienced a whole range of emotions as she came to know and love Brazil. She went through the cycle that expatriates generally experience when

living in another culture. This journey is reflected in her letters, as well as her work. To illustrate her experience, we refer to a diagram about culture shock, on which we will comment below.

2. Cultural Shock and Brazil through the Eyes of Bishop

A diagram from a publication about expatriation and culture shock, distributed by ICAS, *Independent Counselling & Advisory Services* (2008), is a part of this analysis. ICAS is an English company providing advisory services to expatriates. It has been in the business of relocating families within the international job market for over ten years.

Patricia Tomei (4) defines an expatriate as someone with the ability to adapt to different cultures, someone who “[...] is constantly travelling and living for periods in other countries. A citizen of the world.” Expatriates leave their comfort zone behind and venture into the unknown. The result of these bold adventures is an indisputable personal growth.

Bishop can be seen as an expatriate. Before coming to Brazil, she lived in Massachusetts, Nova Scotia, New York, Key West and Washington and several other places for shorter periods. She worked at the Library of Washington as a consultant on matters relating to poetry. On leaving New York, in 1951, on a ship that would bring her to the coast of Brazil, she wrote to her friend, the American poet Robert Lowell:

A Robert Lowell

Navio mercante Bowplate

Ao largo da costa do Brasil – 26 de novembro de 1951

. . . . Mandei-lhe um cartão-postal quando estava partindo de N.Y., . . . resolvi fazer esta viagem maluca . . . minha decisão de atravessar o estreito de Magalhães vai surpreender você. Pelo menos, é para lá que estou indo. No momento estamos chegando perto de Santos – vou passar uns dias no Rio . . . Espero chegar à costa

pacífica – talvez escrever um artigo sobre Punta Arenas ou coisa parecida no caminho – e ficar no Peru e no Equador até abril ou maio (Bishop, *Uma arte*, 228-229).

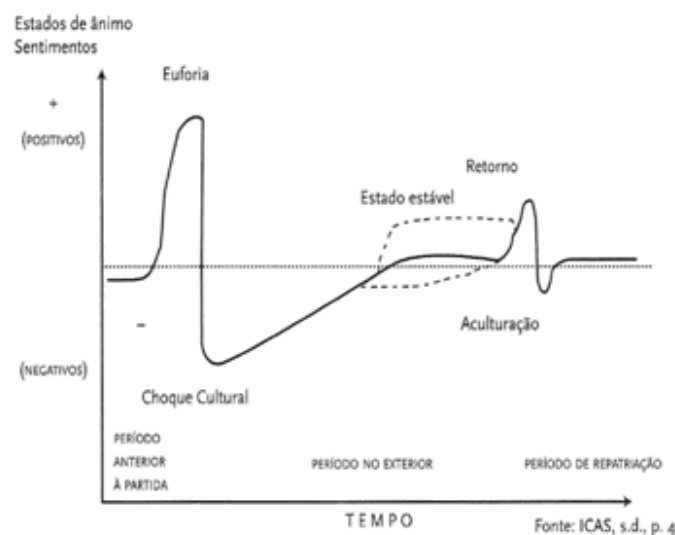
To Robert Lowell

Merchant Ship Bowplate

Somewhere off the coast of Brazil – November 26, 1951

I sent you a postcard just as I was leaving N. Y. . . . I had decided on this crazy trip . . . my decision to go through the Straits of Magellan will surprise you. At least that's where I'm bound for. At present we're approaching Santos . . . and first I'm going to visit in Rio for a while. . . . I hope to get around to the west coast – maybe write an article about Punta Arenas or something on the way – and stay in Peru and Ecuador until April or May, then come back (Bishop, *One Art*, 224).

It is clear that Brazil was not her main destination when she boarded the ship that would take her to that country. She only intended to spend some days there, as stated in her letter. Her mood was not exactly euphoric, as depicted in the following graph describing cultural shock and the feelings of the contemporary nomad.



The author, Oberg (1960), analyzes this cycle and starts by commenting on the period of initial euphoria that typically affects the traveller. At this stage, the traveller has idealized romantic expectations in relation to the new culture being visited. The new land is a promising place full of new discoveries and possibilities to explore.

Though excited about the trip, as might be expected, it was a somewhat dejected Bishop who arrived in Brazil. We need, therefore, to modify the graphic to fit the Bishop portrayed by Marta Goes. On boarding the ship she was depressed and had serious alcohol problems, which troubled her throughout her life; so, changing the adjective 'euphoric' to 'excited' about the trip, we observe some of Bishop's first impressions of Brazil, as fictionalized by Marta Goes:

They are all so loveable but I'm not enjoying this place. It's all so dirty, so disorganized. I don't know how they can live here. It's like a combination of Mexico City and Miami. There are men in shorts kicking footballs everywhere. They are already playing on the beach at seven in the morning and they continue all day. It seems as if they even play in the office. Everything is sloppy, everything, everything corrupt. Alas, Rio de Janeiro depresses me. The last thing I needed at this moment in my life was to come to a city that depresses me. I'm sorry to say that Rio de Janeiro is the setting for a wonderful city, but it is not a wonderful city (Goes 24-25, translated by Daniel Hahn).

Bishop realizes, at once, that coming to a city which depresses her was not the best thing she could have done at that moment in her life. Reading between the lines, it is obvious that she has a tendency to depression. In this excerpt, the first signs of culture shock in Marta Goes' representation of Elizabeth Bishop are apparent. Culture shock can be defined as a feeling of disorientation that provokes a continuous state of stress in the newcomer, whose points of reference are generally very different from those of the new country.

Bishop is struck most by the dirt, disorganization, corruption, and the work ethic of those who play soccer at all hours, even during office hours. She is somewhat shocked by certain aspects of Brazilian culture that she notices and these are the first impressions that the audience of the monologue has of the poet's relationship with Brazil. This caricature of the country is, however, Bishop's own caricature, for the source of this extract from the monologue is the poet's own correspondence. *One Art* reads:

A Alfred Kazin

. . . . *Samambaia*, Petrópolis – 10, 11 ou 12 de dezembro de 1951

. . . . Acho que ela [Pearl] não gosta muito do Rio. Acho que também não estou gostando muito, mas é difícil dizer – é tanta bagunça – uma mistura de cidade do México com Miami, mais ou menos; tem homens de calção chutando bolas de futebol por toda parte. Começam na praia às sete da manhã – e pelo visto continuam o dia todo nos lugares de trabalho. É uma cidade debilitante, totalmente relaxada (apesar do café excepcional), corrupta – passei uns três dias numa depressão horrível, mas depois me recuperei (Bishop, *Uma arte*, 227).

To Alfred Kazin

. . . . *Samambaia*, Petrópolis – December 10th or 11th or 12th [1951]

. . . . I don't think she {Pearl} likes Rio much. I don't think I do, either, but it's hard to say – 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. It is enervating, completely relaxed (in spite of the terrific coffee), corrupt – of about three days I felt depressed, but then recovered (Bishop, *One Art*, 226).

According to Marta Goes' manuscripts, kindly provided by her, and to interviews given by her, having access to Elizabeth Bishop's correspondence was a privilege that allowed her to explore the background to Bishop's work. Thus, the above

excerpt – and others mentioned throughout this work – appears as part of a mosaic in the monologue – each extract inserted expertly by Goes, often with a touch of humour and the necessary dramatic force required in each situation.

We find, however, that, with time, Bishop starts to be more positive about the new land she makes her “home”. She finds a new love, Lota de Macedo Soares, who makes her rethink her relationship with Brazil. With reference to the graph on which this analysis is based, it appears from the following extracts of the monologue that Bishop begins to adapt to the host culture, which she later comes to admire. To illustrate this point, we refer to the idyllic setting of Sítio da Samambaia in Petropolis, where Bishop lived with Lota during her early years in Brazil during the 1950s.

There is a vast number of waterfalls here . . . so many clouds on the mountain tops that they overflow, downhill, in slow motion, turning into waterfalls before our eyes (Goes 26, translated by Daniel Hahn).

I have not done anything other than housework, walking, messing about in the garden. I have written very little, practically only letters But I confess that I am delighted to have a home after so many hotel rooms, I thought I would never again have a place of my own (Goes 35-36, translated by Daniel Hahn).

Later on, the monologue introduces an imaginary letter from Bishop to her doctor, Dr. Anny, in which the solidarity of the Brazilians is commented on and portrayed by Regina Braga with humour:

Dear Dr. Anny,

The Brazilians are so good. They took care of me so warmly. I was afraid they would laugh at my red face and deformed ears, but, on the contrary, they seemed worried and everyone was most interested in my case, each one prescribing a cure. They came into my room all the time – on tiptoe, shaking their heads and saying “poor thing”. Oh,

and when I was having an injection, they even groaned. My goodness! Dr. Anny, I do not know if you can understand this, but getting sick in Brazil is something else (Goes 28, translated by Daniel Hahn).

The passage refers to the time Bishop was hospitalised in Rio de Janeiro, due to a severe allergic reaction she had to cashew – a tropical fruit that she had never tried before. As can be seen, the warm and tender manner of Brazilian people won her over and was in contrast to her culture of origin, in which, generally speaking, human contact is more distant and people involve themselves less in the problems of others.

As this multicultural experience progresses, the protagonist comes to view the host culture in a more objective manner, recognising both positive and negative aspects and, by doing so, finding greater stability. Bishop begins to adapt to the new culture, feeling loved and with a home. This must have been marvellous for Bishop, who always felt that she did not belong anywhere. From an early age, she was constantly moving from one place to another. First, she lost her father and, later, her mother was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. She went to live with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia, then to her paternal grandparents in Massachusetts, and later to the house of an aunt who lived nearby. She next lived at Vassar College, a woman's college in Poughkeepsie, New York, and so on throughout her life, with many periods spent in hotel rooms. So, for someone seemingly rootless, having a nest, a home, came as a surprise. In this way, Marta Goes portrays Bishop's adaptation to the new culture.

Acculturation is the adaptation and negotiation of differences between the culture of origin and the host culture. In order to function in the world, it is necessary to decode a vast number of signs. In the country of origin, these signs are familiar and often indicate how one should behave in different situations.

Conversely, in the host country, not having mastered the language and its meanings, it is not easy to assign meaning to everything, including routine things. Continuous negotiation is necessary to overcome cultural shock. One must learn to deal with verbal and non-verbal language, including gestures, facial expressions, customs, rituals and values. Ways to dress, eat, deal with others, schedule appointments and meetings, all vary from one culture to another and must be learned.

As the process of acculturation progresses, the feeling of not belonging diminishes and the individual gradually becomes accustomed to where he lives. The subject begins to adapt to the new culture with various degrees of integration. When the subject becomes more accustomed to the cultural differences and begins to develop routines in the new environment, it becomes important to understand the language better in order to assimilate norms and values. Acculturation is easier if the individual seeks to make contact with other people, either in social or work settings (Anastacio, Melo and Silva).

One of the resources Bishop used to learn about the new culture and language was *The Diary of Helena Morley*, which she translated into English. The diary was written by a girl called Alice Brandt, born in Minas Gerais. It describes the city of Diamantina in the 1890s. By the 1950s, Alice Brandt was a mature woman living in Rio de Janeiro. The diary reawakened Bishop's desire to write about her own childhood and inspired her to write *In the Village*, published in 1953. It took her five years to translate into English *The Diary of Helena Morley* (pseudonym of Alice Brandt), which was published in 1957 (Millier).

Bishop often commented on her difficulty in expressing herself in Portuguese, even though she could fully understand it. Whenever she found herself in situations where Portuguese was spoken, Bishop tended to be reclusive. She circulated in the social group of Lota Macedo Soares, who was a personal friend of the governor Carlos Lacerda, and one of the figures

responsible for the urbanization of Aterro do Flamengo. As a consequence, Bishop's social life centred on the elite of Rio and Brazilian artists and poets.

Running parallel to the processes of acculturation and assimilation of other cultures, there is a cycle of deterritorialization and reterritorialization which corresponds to Bishop's experience in Brazil. What often happens is that, as the subject uproots himself from his own culture, he feels the need to appropriate some space in the host culture:

. . . even greater than the uprooting experience of deterritorialization, is the process of re-territorialization (Haesbaert, "O mito da desterritorialização", 214).

. . . Territory . . . concerns power . . . just as much in the literal meaning of domination as in the symbolic sense of appropriation (Haesbaert, "Da desterritorialização à multiterritorialidade", 6774-6775).

Appropriation not only signifies domination in terms of owning property, but also conveys a symbolic sense of possession, which includes all the experiences lived in the property. At this point, we learn that in 1965 Elizabeth Bishop buys and restores an old colonial house in Ouro Preto, called Casa Mariana (Millier). On stage, Regina Braga talks about Elizabeth Bishop's acquisition of the house in Ouro Preto and then recites the beginning of the poem "Under the Window: Ouro Preto":

An old house on Mariana Way. A seventeenth-century house with stone walls. I'll fix every tile, every stone out of place, I will live here. It will be my house. I need this tranquillity. (Guitar chords accompany the recitation of the poem, which follows).
Sleeping in Ouro Preto.

The conversations are simple: about food, or, "When my mother combs my hair it hurts". "Women." "Women!" Women in red dresses and plastic sandals, carrying their almost invisible babies – muffled to the eyes in all the heat – unwrap them, lower

them, and give them drinks of water lovingly from dirty hands. (Goes 53-54, translated by Daniel Hahn)

The translation of the poem is by Paulo Henriques Britto and the book which Bishop refers to is *Questions of travel*, published in 1965, followed in the same year by the publication of *Poems* (Millier). With the money earned from the publication of *Questions of travel*, Bishop invested all the money she had in buying her own house in Brazil, despite Lota's disapproval of her buying the ruined house. In any case, the purchase of the house was more an expression of Bishop's immersion in Brazilian culture – having been seduced by the colonial style of the building.

But finally, as part of the cycle an expatriate usually goes through, the time comes to return to the country of origin, which in Bishop's case is in the northern hemisphere. As her relationship with Lota deteriorated, Bishop began to travel to feel less lonely, and in 1966 she accepted the post of Professor at the University of Seattle, Washington, for one semester (Bishop, *One art*). At this point, returning to her country of origin posed new challenges for Bishop, as she had assimilated, to varying degrees, customs and habits of Brazilian culture and she missed these new norms of behaviour in the United States. Strangely enough, she came to appreciate what she had once rejected, as can be seen in the monologue spoken by Regina Braga, and even missed Brazilian carnival, which she spent in Seattle:

What am I doing here in Seattle? Today is carnival Sunday in Brazil. It is the day of samba school parade in Rio de Janeiro. At this time, I would be on my way to the Avenue... Oh, my God, it's Sunday carnival. (The sound of a tambourine is heard, representing the sound of the samba school) (Goes 57-58 translated by Daniel Hahn).

Bishop wrote to James Merrill from George Washington University:

A James Merrill

22 de fevereiro de 1966

. . . Ah, meu Deus, é Carnaval no Rio. Domingo foi a noite das “escolas de samba,” a noite que eu sempre vou assistir, que eu passo toda em claro e depois subo de carro para Petrópolis ao amanhecer. Aqui em Seattle toquei uns *discos* [em português] de samba que trouxe comigo e fiquei sambando sozinha (Bishop, *Uma arte*, 488).

To James Merrill

February 22, 1966

. . . Oh dear, it is carnival now in Rio. Sunday night was the “samba schools”, the night I always attend, staying up all night and driving back to Petrópolis at dawn. Here I played a few samba *discos* I brought with me and samba-ed about all by myself (Bishop, *One art*, 445).

The dramatic force of the text by Marta Goes intensifies the sense of loss felt by Bishop being away from Rio de Janeiro at carnival time. It begins with a rhetorical question: “What am I doing here in Seattle?” Then the sound of a tambourine played fast brings life to the stage, the beat associated with the samba schools during the Rio carnival.

The semester comes to an end in Seattle and Bishop is happy that she has not succumbed to alcohol. Goes’ text alludes to this, ironically reproducing an excerpt from a letter Bishop wrote to Dr. Anny Baumann, in Rio de Janeiro, on September 1st 1966: “The secretary of the department, with whom I became very friendly, and who knew *everything*, said, ‘You’re the soberest poet we’ve ever had here’. I swear to God it's true” (Bishop, *One Art*, 493).

Marta Goes also highlights the process of acculturation in Bishop, when we hear the actress Regina Braga declaring:

Six months have passed. [...] (Orchestrated music, 'Rio de Janeiro, open arms over Guanabara'...) I never thought I could look so tenderly upon the airport of the Galleon. I was so shocked at the mess the first time I came here and today I am elated with this hot breath on my skin (Goes 58, translated by Daniel Hahn).

Thus, in this fictional representation of Bishop, the cycle of the expatriate is completed and many things that the character initially found difficult to accept in Brazil now seem to be part of her everyday life. The assimilation of the other culture suddenly takes centre stage, provoking a sense of loss at the time of repatriation. In fact, one can suppose that in all these comings and goings, the subject in transit will be deconstructing and reconstructing, in constant transformation. Canclini writes:

Imagine what it means to be subject not only to the culture in which we are born, but to a variety of symbolic repertoires and patterns of behaviour. . . . Living in transit, . . . with constant remodelling of the people and their social relations seems to lead to a deconstruction. (Canclini 30, my translation)

Thus, at the time of repatriation, new problems arise in adapting to the original culture, followed by another period of stability. Bishop's life and work was deeply influenced by Brazil. We hear actress Regina Braga thinking aloud about the pain that Bishop felt on the death of her companion Lota Macedo Soares:

Ten years ago, the other day. Of course, after ten years, the pain you used to keep on the first shelf and which could be felt in your chest every morning is accommodated on a higher shelf, and then an even higher one and after that in a corner that you cannot reach every day, but you know it is there, kept forever. I am no longer afraid that someone will discover that I am not a writer. Writing for me was more natural than not to write. And most importantly, I can still love. Compared to how I was when I went to Brazil, I consider myself much more serene nowadays. I have to recognise that Brazil

has something to do with it. The shock of so much loving, those huge doses of feeling that only exist there, helped me to survive. Why did that not save Lota? And Brazil, a country with all this feeling, is becoming increasingly harder, more truculent. Yes, sometimes I ask myself these questions, here, in front of my beautiful view of Boston Harbour, which cannot compare to the landscape of Rio de Janeiro (Goes 63-64, translated by Daniel Hahn).

At the end of the monologue, we hear the music of Joao Bosco, “This is my Brazil,” which begins with: “Oh, our beaches are so clear...” A feeling of nostalgia takes the stage, showing that, on repatriation, Bishop suffered a reverse cultural shock perhaps as challenging as the shock she faced on arriving in Brazil and having a first contact with the other culture. Rio de Janeiro, initially perceived as “the stage for a wonderful city, but not . . . a wonderful city” seems to have gone up in the estimation of Bishop (Goes 63-64, translated by Daniel Hahn).

3. Final Considerations

Despite a somewhat caricatured and reductionist view of Brazil portrayed in Marta Goes’ monologue (a view also perceptible in Bishop’s correspondence) and a tendency to oversimplify Bishop’s feelings and experiences of expatriation and repatriation, the monologue has dramatic power. There are moments when the audience is involved in the story. Regina Braga’s performance displays a refined humour that invites the audience to laugh, especially at the social criticism present in the monologue. The criticisms made by Bishop on her arrival in Brazil show how difficult it is to see oneself from the point of view of the ‘other’ culture.

With reference to Jacob Moreno’s poem “Invitation to an Encounter” and relating it to the experiences of Bishop, one can suppose that there was a meeting of cultures, at least in part. Little by little, over the fifteen years she spent in Brazil, Bishop managed to overcome the culture shock she faced as an

expatriate in our land. In order to overcome these obstacles, she tried to understand the values, behaviour, and finally, the everyday life of the culture that received and accepted her.

More than anything, Marta Goes' play is important because it increases awareness of the life and work of Elizabeth Bishop. It helps divulge the work of a writer for whom Brazil was a constant source of inspiration and the theme for a large part of her output. What one sees on stage, nevertheless, is a fictionalized account of the journey Bishop took through Brazil. As fiction, the playwright is not obliged to adhere to the facts or even be faithful to Bishop's own correspondence – although the playwright did use Bishop's letters as source for her monologue. In the end, the dramatic text needs only to be faithful to its own stage production.

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