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# Toward a Poetics of Dislocation: Elizabeth Bishop and P.K. Page Writing “Brazil”

KEVIN MCNEILLY

DURING A READING at the University of British Columbia in January 1996, P.K. Page introduced a *glosa* based on Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Sandpiper” by admitting that, while both she and Bishop lived in Brazil in the same period, they had never met. Page’s interstitial lyric “Poor Bird” is intended, as she works herself through Bishop’s lines, as both a tribute to Bishop and a demarcation of poetic kinship, a provisional map of their common poetic yearning:

a vocation  
year in, year out, morning to evening  
*looking for something, something, something.* (*Hologram* 26)

The *glosa* form itself, Page asserts in her introduction to *Hologram*, is a means of honouring her peers and predecessors: “it occurred to me that now, towards the end of my life, it would be appropriate to use this form as a way of paying homage to those poets whose work I fell in love with in my formative years” (9-10). It is affinity rather than influence that Page most wants to chart in these texts, and Bishop in particular stands out as the woman to whom Page looks to “find what [she] needed”: not a poet of Page’s youth, but a contemporary, a compatriot, a counterpart. Critics have suggested that the poetics of these writers — the physiographic historicism of Bishop and the crystalline ethereality of Page — are “fundamentally incompatible” (cf. Messenger 115), but a close examination of their encounters with Brazil reveals that Page’s kinship with Bishop is borne out in their writing. Bishop and Page, as both fellow travellers and self-styling formalists, seek in their common and uncommon experiences of the geography of Brazil a poetic of difference, which plays a decisive, formative role in their particular discourses. Each poet learns to articulate a crucial notion of cultural difference by addressing — separately, although with remarkable synonymy — the unstable foreignness of the Brazilian landscape and culture in which she is radically immersed.

### Arrivals and Anxieties

By their own accounts, both Bishop and Page arrive in Brazil with a mixture of tenuous trepidation and poetic idealism. They expect from the tropics a certain wildness, a sense of alluring climatic and cultural difference produced, paradoxically, by the clichés of “Brazil” circulating in the North American popular sphere. The opening passage of Page’s *Brazilian Journal*, for instance, encapsulates with mild irony the poet’s inexplicable dismay at having to follow her diplomat husband to Brazil, as she parenthetically inserts fragments of blasé, cocktail-party wit as her first, interior reaction to the news:

A. said, “We’re posted to Brazil.”

(Nuts. There’s an awful lot of coffee in.) “Brazil?” I said, unbelieving.

“Brazil,” A. repeated.

“Oh no,” I said. I wonder why it seemed so impossible. (1)

That she hesitates at all over Brazil is made more strange considering that she has just come from postings in Guinea and Australia. The posture of disbelief Page adopts at the prospect of yet another foreign existence is exposed, from the beginning, as a kind of contrived inversion of the attitudes of her “permanent tourist,” who here no longer yearns for the thrill of the foreign but to settle into a sense of home. Bishop’s “Arrival at Santos,” too, falls back on posturing. The clichéd language of tourist “babble,” as both Cynthia Messenger and Victoria Harrison note (Messenger 104), recycles the flat, reductive verbal gestures of a tired guidebook, tempered by Bishop’s characteristic self-ironizing: “Here is a coast; here is a harbour; / here, after a meagre diet of horizon, is some scenery” (*Poems* 89). Both poets locate themselves from the outset of their Brazilian experiences in a negatively negotiated discursive space. In an interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, published in the London *Times* on 26 July 1964, Bishop encourages a “program of exchange” between Brazil and the United States to “enhance mutual understanding...by undoing any false ‘clichés’ that one country might have about the other” (Monteiro 16). Both poets, on the one hand, articulate a tamed version of the Brazil they’re visiting, and, on the other hand, want to resist ironically the out-and-out bathos of their easily accessible clichés and imported tropes.

Both go on to attribute to Brazil a seductive exoticism. In a letter dated 3 March 1952, a few months after her arrival, Bishop praises “the really lofty vagueness of Brazil” (*One Art* 237). On 14 February of the same year, Bishop had already written from Rio de Janeiro to Marianne

Moore suggesting the poetic possibilities of the Brazilian landscape:

There are so many things here you would like; I have written you so many imaginary letters and bored you to death with descriptive conversation many times. . . . [Petrópolis] is a sort of dream-combination of plant and animal life. I really can't believe it all. Not only are there highly impractical mountains all around with clouds floating in & out of one's bedroom, but waterfalls, orchids, all the Key West flowers I know & Northern apples and pears as well. (*One Art* 236)

Her tropes and images are, notably, keyed to her North American experience of apples and pears. Bishop, in conjecturing what Moore might find poetically digestible, falls back on her own familiar images to mitigate the strange and uncapturable sense of the place. David Kalstone quotes from one of Bishop's letters, presumably from approximately the same period, in which she claims to be

enthralled by the Brazilian geography and landscape, by the paradoxical, affectionate, spontaneous Brazilian people, and the complications of a world at once feudal, 19th century, and contemporary. (149)

To be enthralled by the dream of "Brazil," in its diversity and ahistorical simultaneity, is to be lifted out of culture and out of time, and into the "lofty," rarefied realm of aesthetic fulfilment.

Page, along similar lines, notes in an early entry in her *Brazilian Journal* (for 3 February 1957) an attractive emptying of self, a purging of world-ly clutter — that is, of the baggage of the busy North American mind — and entering into an aesthetically completed realm (troped as surrealist artwork):

How could I have imagined so surrealist and seductive a world? One does not *like* the heat, yet its constancy, its all-surroundingness, is as fascinating as the smell of musk. Every moment is slow, as if under warm greenish water. . . . It is hard to get anything done. It is hard to focus. A thought is barely born before it melts, and in its place so lovely a void one could hardly have guessed emptiness so attractive. (9)

"Brazil" enthral Page with its sensuality, immersing her in a flood of poeticized description. In a blurb for the published version of her journal, Michael Ondaatje praises Page as a "breathless visitor on another planet," creating through her jeweled descriptive paragraphs of a "foreign" country a "fabulous and witty and compassionate *ars poetica*." Brazil, Page writes, "pelted me with images" (*Glass* 212). Brazil, in its exotic otherness, comes to stand as a source for imagistic rejuvenation, the reanimation of

language.

Kalstone asserts that Brazil provides Bishop with “an enabling distance” from her unsettled life-experiences in America (152); “her new home,” he writes, “allowed her to heal the deepest breaches in her life,” and it was only in the foreign context of her adopted geography that she was able to reflect on childhood and on her sense of the loss of place, and to produce many of her finest stories and poems (155). The first sentence of Brett Millier’s biography posits that only from the deliberately displaced perspective of Ouro Preto could Bishop “take objective account and make direct artistic use” of her own life experiences (1). Lorrie Goldensohn argues further that when Bishop

found herself in Lota de Macedo Soares’ house in a quasi-familial circumstance, she stretched her poems, against the vivid and emphatic backdrop of Brazil, to more concrete definitions of a national a historic self, intensifying even her early and consistent interest in landscape and geography. (195-96)

Bishop’s poetic objectivity and creative energy seem to emerge, by her own admission, from the experience of foreign travel, and she describes the round-the-world voyage that leads her to Brazil as a “shake-down” trip: “I know I am feeling, thinking, looking, sleeping, dreaming, eating & drinking better than in a long long time” (qtd. in Millier 239, Goldensohn 194-95). She lays claim to a renewed self-assurance which stimulates her poetic work.

Introducing Bishop in 1966, Tom Robbins claims her work is suffused with a seductive exoticism, intensified by her reactivated self-awareness and her fierce attention to sensual and worldly experience: “Like Gauguin, Miss Bishop has a keen, loving eye for the exotic: a born voyager’s fondness for the unfamiliar detail which escapes the jaded notice of ordinary tourist and permanent resident alike” (qtd. in Monteiro 35). Bishop herself, in a letter to Pearl Kazin nearly ten years after coming to Brazil, admits that the landscape offers her an impetus to write, not simply stories about the country, but stories of all kinds, her stories: “I’m learning a lot about Brazil all right, and feel a whole lot of stories developing in spite of me” (*One Art* 400). Page, too, casts herself as a student, in the process of self-transformation. Like Bishop, when she turns her poetic gaze toward her former “home” after the experience of Brazil’s exoticism, its foreignness, she finds herself changed and displaced into another sense of herself, but nonetheless reanimated, vivified:

The culture shock of homecoming after many years abroad is even

greater, I think, than the culture shock of entering a new country. One returns different, to a different place, misled by the belief that neither has changed. Yet I am grateful for the shocks. The conditioning process that turns live tissue into fossil is arrested by the earthquake. Even buried strata may be exposed. (*Glass* 215)

For both Page and Bishop, initially at least, Brazil acts as a poetic spur, redirecting their self-consciousness. Both writers share, as Cynthia Messenger notes, “a sense of displacement and a need to turn inward” that is coded textually in that foreign country’s name (110), but it is a positive displacement, which both provokes and fulfills a notion of aesthetic completion.

However, both poets are troubled by the appropriative mechanisms that any such use of the foreign to come to self-knowledge entails. They worry openly that using Brazil is tantamount to abusing it, and that by making it into an exotic other they are re-enacting a kind of colonial theft of an indigenous vitality for their own reanimation, a sense of life which is belied by their own lack of authentic bond to Brazilian land or culture. “Is it right,” Bishop’s persona asks in “Questions of Travel,” “to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?” (*Poems* 93). She writes to Robert Lowell on 22 April 1960 of her need to separate herself from that contrived exoticism:

But I worry about what to do with all this accumulation of exotic or picturesque or charming detail, and I don’t want to become a poet who can only write about South America. It is one of my greatest worries now — how to use everything and keep on living here, most of the time, probably — and yet be a New Englander herring-choker bluenoser at the same time. (383-84)

In an interview published in the Winter 1966 issue of *Shenandoah*, she presents egocentric American ideas about “other” places, but locates herself in an ambivalent cultural position, even as she avers her American style:

Living in the way I have happened to live here, knowing Brazilians, has made a great difference.... Most New York intellectuals’ ideas about “underdeveloped countries” are partly mistaken, and living among people of a completely different culture has changed a lot of my old stereotyped ideas.... To summarize: I just happened to come here, and I am influenced by Brazil certainly, but I am a completely American poet, nevertheless. (Monteiro 19)

Her goal is still self-discovery and self-renewal, but the displacements of

Brazil lead her at times to a kind of creative dead end; she is confronted with her unmitigated foreignness and by her inability to accept unproblematically her American origin, even as she declares her allegiances outright; she wants to resist filling in the gaps with pleasant description and “charming detail,” but still needs an appropriate style to embody that “great difference.”

Despite the images it offers her, Brazil also forces Page into a poetic stalemate, as she turns (with some notable exceptions) away from verbal description to the purely visual. Page describes writer’s block (which occurs, paradoxically, while she is keeping copious notes in her journal and painting or drawing obsessively) as her worst fear: “Blank page after blank page. The thing I had feared most of all had happened at last. This time I never *would* write again” (*Glass* 213). Of course, she returns quite soon to the poetic, and her silence would prove both partial and temporary, but the exotic spur Brazil offers is also a terrifying form of suppression, a writing which refuses itself, a failure of authentic expression which the writer must confront and overcome. In a terse journal entry for 9 June 1958, Page encapsulates her depression as she realizes the nature of this failure, the inability of her “polished surfaces” — both the housewares left un-rubbed by careless servants and the poorly-realized mirrors of painting or poem — to capture her sense of the Brazilian day: “In the doldrums, Nothing right. The day is beautiful but I have no polished surfaces to reflect it” (158). That failure of language, noted by Messenger in both Bishop and Page as *ekphrastic* or as a recognition of the inadequacies of their verbal arts (115), is also emblematic of a drive toward authenticity, a refusal of any expression that is for the poet impure or untrue to herself.

Neither writer wants to be a poetic tourist, in the sense of a mere visitor to these images. Rather, each sees as her goal the achievement of an authenticity, a naming of self and place which is not merely exotic but which bodies forth a coherent identity. “What is personality, identity?” Page asks as she reviews her Brazilian displacement from her own language (*Glass* 212). Bishop’s “Arrival at Santos” explicitly repudiates the appropriations and overwritings of the tourist’s mode of knowing, asking for strategies to cope with imported anxieties and preconceived “demands” for exotic difference:

Oh, tourist,

is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,  
and a better life, and complete comprehension  
of both at last, and immediately,

after eighteen days of suspension? (89)

The “complete comprehension” which the tourist demands of her new locale is both mastery and coherence, a colonization. But the tourist herself can never complete that task: it must be always already completed, as Bishop implies in the poem when her persona hopes that the “customs officials will speak English” (90). What one wants to meet most of all, travelling, is a mirror for oneself; the tourist’s dream is to have her self projected back, completed and confirmed, to her anxious eye. “Oh, must we dream our dreams,” asks Bishop’s traveller, “and have them too?” (93). The “interior” into which the newly arrived visitors drive at the poem’s close (90), seeking to penetrate, is their own uncertainty, which like “some inexplicable old stonework, / inexplicable and impenetrable” they want to explicate, to decrypt, but which enthrals them, reanimating their desires with its unappropriated differences, “instantly seen and always, always delightful,” as they aspire to colonize an unassimilable ground (93).

Anne Colwell argues for a similar suspension in the text: “The poem forecasts but does not explore the movement inward. Instead, it concentrates on the complex of paradoxical emotions surrounding entry and initiation” (136). Susan McCabe develops this indeterminacy more thoroughly in a reading of the poem informed by Jacques Derrida’s interrogations of arrival in *The Post Card*; arrival, she argues, connotes here a deconstructive movement of reaching “a culminating point where meaning and destiny are insured, and therefore suspicious and untenable” (152). Exposing the artifice of closure, the poem undoes its own centres and displaces a meaningful communion with landscape, a communion on decidedly imported standards, to an “interior” which the poem never attains. A cognizance of displacement substitutes for, defers, the placing toward which the poem aspires, creating an indeterminate condition of differential identification. By undoing its own topology of centres, which for the American tourist is worked out in the set of clichés of “developing countries” and exotic landscapes she imports, the poem interrogates the condition of poetic knowing itself. Harrison argues that Bishop is suspended “between the expectations of home and the details of here, the not-home that she cannot really see, except in the irrelevant terms of home” (147). That suspension, however, does not necessarily stymie her voice, but enables her to have “an open mind, letting things happen,” which Bishop asserts is crucial to all poetic making (Monteiro 13).

The traveller is, for Bishop, the figure of her own displaced self, and when at the centre of “Arrival at Santos” her persona lays claim to a kind of ground, a settlement (“There. We are settled.”), what she and her fellow tourists actually come to possess as place are their seats on an unstable



boat. Lorrie Goldensohn contends that Bishop's "new poems [of the mid-1950s] landed solidly in Brazil, making a vivid and broadly territorial commitment" (193). Yet this poem's thoroughly ironized claims of self-assuredness suggest that such a solidity is contingent at best: a projection of the need to ground oneself, a contrivance of desiring. The seemingly monolithic "There" of "Arrival at Santos" is, in "Questions of Travel," rewritten into a less stable locution: "And here, or there . . ." (94). The poet's sense of place, of being "there" in Brazil, is reshaped into a syntactically indeterminate displacement, an uncertainty phrased as interrogative rather than declarative: "Where should we be today?" (93). The Brazil which seduced her with its promise of sensual immediacy, and the seeming rootedness of the poetic experience of place, of the possibility of a literary dwelling "there," is quietly worried at by what James Clifford has called the "practices of displacement" that constitute travel; "when travel," he writes, "becomes a kind of norm," when "everyone's on the move," then we can no longer take for granted the ideas of order and the self-conceptions that emerge from localized and stable *ethoi*, but must confront the question, as the title of Bishop's poem suggests, of what it means to assert that we can be settled "there" or anywhere (2, 5). Or, as Clifford puts it, through travel "dwelling demands explication" (5). Bishop's poetic, in Clifford's sense, becomes "untethered" (3), which is not a condition that necessarily requires discursive or aesthetic resolution, but can instead be affirmed as dynamically constitutive of poetic consciousness.

"The Permanent Tourists," a poem produced by Page prior to her Brazilian sojourn, elaborates this sense of recurrent displacement as a necessary poetic act; the poem, for Page, is a form of temporary colonization, a cognitive taking hold of foreign artifacts, strange places — comparable to Bishop's inexplicable stone — in order to fulfil an unsatisfiable desire to possess that other, to come to terms with the tourists' perennially hollow selves:

Somnolent through landscapes and by trees  
 nondescript, almost anonymous,  
 they alter as they enter foreign cities —  
 the terrible tourists with their empty eyes  
 longing to be filled with monuments. (*Glass* 66)

The vivifying alterity which Page describes in her essay as an effect of culture-shock is in this poem exposed as an appropriative violence, a terrible longing driven by guide-book fables and exotic fictions of heroes and histories. The tourist craves stability, hungering for his or her own version of that monumental presence, for a satisfaction of "the entire event" which,

while “perfectly” accessible even to local “dogs,” he or she can never quite “enter” (66). The tourists’ desire yields only a restless anxiety, a passivity which condemns them to the status of outsiders and which will not admit anything of the authentic self-presence they want.

Nevertheless, Page offers a kind of ironic resolution, a partial assimilation of self to other, by offering her tourists an uncertain aesthetic force, by seeing them “somehow beautiful,” leaving their “stamp” on the foreign “plaza,” the permanence of their need, in its own ceaselessness, offering a backhanded version of those monumental presences. They adopt, ironically, their own peculiarly “classic” posture, preserving not so much a stable home as an unending homecoming:

Classic in their anxiety they call  
 all sculptured immemorial stone  
 into their passive eyes, as rivers  
 draw ruined columns to their placid glass.

The entropy here, the instability undermining the tourists’ contingent hold on themselves through photograph or café table, is converted into a Heraclitean movement, a flow about which the only thing changeless is change itself. This aestheticized instability can be read against Page’s *Brazilian Journal* to explain her duplicitous relationship to place; she notes on 1 May 1957, that she “Drove into the depths of the city yesterday alone for the first time. Took as my route the whole length of the beach. Beautiful, beautiful. I shall never get used to it” (41). Her penetration into a Brazilian interior, coming into contact with its “depths,” is mitigated by an unassimilable beauty, an overwhelming perception of locale that cannot be contained in any poetic *locus*. But it is not as if Page renounces the effort; rather, she embraces this incommensurability as the core of that beauty. Recognizing that she cannot wholly overcome her displacement as a visitor to this place, can never get used to living there even as the dogs of “The Permanent Tourists” do so naturally and effortlessly, she begins to take up that troubled desire itself as the source of her own poetic self-remaking.

### Translation: Almost Making Herself at Home

This Brazilian self-remaking has an analogue in both Page and Bishop in the discursive bridgework of translation. Both find themselves compelled, by social circumstance and by aesthetic need, to learn the “difficult language” of Portuguese (*One Art* 292; *Brazilian* 13). Page begins her forays into the decidedly non-English syntax of the language with the intention

of mastery: “Already I wondered if I would master the language” (2). Control over one’s language implies a measure of control over self and self-image. But from the outset, Page notes that her own position of mastery is challenged and undermined by her linguistic displacement, an attitude evident in her response to the concatenation of servants, of whom she can never completely take charge and to whom she cannot make herself understood: “I spend an enormous amount of time trying to communicate with the servants and an almost equal amount trying to disentangle the misunderstandings I have created” (13). The Portuguese-speaking Brazilians represent for her a chaotic presence which undoes her expectations of normative household order and proper conduct: “I fire and hire — write receipts in Portuguese for departing servants to sign. They come and go, an itinerant population, moving beautifully and dreamily through my house, my life, often leaving chaos behind them” (16). If learning Portuguese represents a kind of mastery, it also emblemizes the disruptions to her received North American notions of behaviour, and undermines her ability to position herself relative to any known or knowable world.

Bishop, too, finds herself adrift in an unstable semantic zone, as she notes in a letter of 9 December 1953, describing an interruption to her recent project of translating the *Diary of “Helena Morley”*:

now I guess I’ll stop working on [the translation] while I’m away — & I’ll probably be away just long enough to forget what Portuguese I have so painfully acquired. (It is a difficult language — much more so than Spanish — and here I don’t get much chance to speak it — except kitchen Portuguese. I can recite recipes, that’s about all....)

(*One Art* 282)

Bishop notes in a later letter to Marianne Moore that she is “managing the kitchen part of the housekeeping,” and so, like Page, must acquire a functional mastery of Portuguese to set servants to work and to keep the house in order (*One Art* 305). Translation is a necessity of daily existence in a foreign context, in order to maintain one’s life needs. Bishop deplores her Portuguese in the 1966 *Shenandoah* interview: “After all these years, I’m like a dog: I understand everything that’s said to me, but I don’t speak it very well” (Monteiro 19). But the insufficiencies of her uncertain cultural position — an American abroad — are emphasized by the slippages and losses of translation itself. Bishop writes jokingly under the 1 March 1961 date on a letter to Robert Lowell that spring comes “in like a lamb, if that / means anything here” (394). The provisional mastery of kitchen Portuguese also foregrounds the inappropriateness of culturally-bound clichés that cannot be made to mean across the borders

Bishop has travelled.

In an essay tracing the intimate confluences between travel and writing, Michel Butor argues that the difficulties inherent in the encounter with the foreign are closely tied to the practice of reading — conceived as both lexical and hermeneutic — and are also vivifying:

Upon arriving in a new place — and this is particularly true for the trip abroad, where another language is spoken — with the freedom of vacationing, I will need to begin learning to read once more. The gestures will not be the same: other manners, other laws, other traffic rules.... My temporary lodging, my adaptation, my rest, my interest all depend in large part upon my ability to read. My own tongue will find itself refreshed, I will discover unsuspected aspects of it and my behaviour as well; my departed home and country will soon become as seductive as the finally visited country of my dreams. (60-61)

Linguistic alienation defamiliarizes, and thereby provokes a renewal of voice and of language against the deadening effects of custom and home-bound habit. As uncomfortable as the experience may be, relearning to read in another language disturbs the false pretensions to mastery and self-centredness that an uninterrogated monolingualism can instil, while at the same time drawing the reader-writer back to reexamine the cultural norms and speech patterns of his or her own.

Bishop's provisional mastery of Portuguese, it becomes quickly apparent, is insufficient for her because it also fails to satisfy any aesthetic demands. What Bishop wants, in her own writing, is an ability to mesh with her Brazilian context, to gain access to fundamentals or universals through which her own language-experience and that of her Brazilian counterparts can find a common ground. In an essay published as the introduction to her translation of *Minha Vida de Menina*, "*The Diary of 'Helena Morley': The Book and Its Author*," Bishop suggests that through reading and translating, she discovers a potential for a convergence between her own provincial childhood (as David Kalstone repeatedly suggests) and the childhood recorded in this "foreign" diary:

The more I read the book the better I liked it. The scenes and events it described were odd, remote, and long ago, and yet fresh, sad, funny, and eternally true. The longer I stayed in Brazil the more Brazilian the book seemed, yet much of it could have happened in any small provincial town or village, and at almost any period in history — at least before the arrival of the automobile and the moving-picture theatre. (81)

Throughout her letters of the time, Bishop hints at her own rather common-sense theory of translation, which hinges on an attempt to reproduce a “natural,” universally accessible “sound” in the transference from Portuguese to English, to make the text seem as if it were an English text (*One Art* 313). She repeatedly expresses a need to achieve a transparency, to convey as closely as possible the “meaning” of the original; in a letter to Lowell, she worries over some of the intentional “mistakes” in his *Imitations* (395), just as earlier, writing to Pearl Kazin, she had given permission to make changes to her own translation “as long as it sticks to the meaning, which I do think I’ve got pretty accurately now” (313).

Bishop’s translation aims as closely as possible to be “correct,” and she even allows the “authoress’s husband” to go over her work “word by word,” much to her annoyance, although she publicly thanks him for his efforts to correct her on “customs and idioms” in the acknowledgement to the published diary (*One Art* 317; *Prose* 107). Translation, which she calls in a letter to Randall Jarrell “endlessly finicky work for very easy-sounding results” (325), must aim to convey the “life and vocabulary” of its subject, and ought thus to offer the illusion, at least, of a cultural bonding, a melding of self and other without obvious distension or jarringly unnatural idiom. Using the dialogic indeterminacy of language as a trope for the “double point of view” (a phrase from Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502”) of the translated word, Harrison argues that Bishop’s translations locate “the points of conversation between an outsider’s insight and a Brazilian familiarity” (147). McCabe asserts that Bishop’s translation of “*Helena Morley*” is inherently conflictual, setting “identity or... likeness” against “the inevitable difference that results from reading one word as another” (16). Translation itself, for Bishop, figures a cultural instability that throws the naturalness of her English into question: her finicky push for accuracy only tends to reveal that “accurate” semantic equations are unlikely, and what remains instead is, though masked in “easy-sounding” clarity, a difficult process of negotiation and exchange.

Bishop’s English style is sometimes affected by her continual immersion in Portuguese: “Portuguese is much purer, heavier, and more formal than English, and I am getting so used to it that sometimes I’m sure I’ve overlooked little things” (*One Art* 313). The “little things” she identifies are the shifts in idiom and form away from accepted American conventions, introducing subtly into her language an unfamiliar and unsettled shape. In her translations of poems from Portuguese, Bishop is forced at times to include explanatory footnotes about foreign words or peculiar, local turns of phrase. While this is a common enough practice for all translators who

want to convey to their readers something of the flavour of an original, at points where the connotations of Portuguese and English do not mesh, Bishop's poetic strategy involves, on occasion, attempts to make her English work as if it were "overlooked" Portuguese. In Carlos Drummond de Andrade's "The Table," for instance, some highly localized words for food — *tutu* and *cachaça*, for example — remain untranslated (*Poems* 251). At other points, however, Bishop doesn't hesitate to translate proper names to suit the demands of rhyme or metre; in Drummond de Andrade's "Seven-Sided Poem," for instance, "Raimundo" (which mirrors *mundo*, world or universe) becomes "Eugene" (to rhyme with "mean"), although the idea of rhyming is articulated only in the Portuguese original, and the meaning thus in translation: *rima* becomes merely "verse" in Bishop's version (243). It follows that keeping Portuguese words in these poems is not so much a matter of preserving local colour (which she doesn't hesitate to dispense with) or formality, but an intrusion of one language into the other, distending its limits slightly. In "The Table" a pun in Portuguese on *madeira de lei*, hardwood or literally "lawful wood," expands into a striking trope in Bishop's English, simply because it doesn't quite translate: "at this table / of wood more lawful than any / law of the republic" (257). Portuguese in effect poetically stretches the range of Bishop's language beyond the received conventions of American English speech.

At other times, however, Bishop resists the idea of an incipient polyglossia in her work, or of her struggles with Portuguese grammar somehow foregrounding the arbitrary, conventional aspects of her own native tongue: "I don't really think that my awareness of English has been increased. I felt much the same when I lived in France before the war. What I really like best is silence!" (Monteiro 19). But Bishop does not retreat into silence. She finds the difficulty of Portuguese challenging, but it is a welcome challenge, insofar as it defamiliarizes, provoking an inevitable displacement from the ordinariness of nation and place and encouraging a sense of being foreign even in one's homeland:

From *our* point of view, [Portuguese] seems cumbersome — you just can't use colloquial speech [poetically] in that way. Grammatically, it is a very difficult language. Even well-educated Brazilians worry about writing their own language; they don't speak their grammar, as it were. (Monteiro 19-20)

Translation, as a writing across established cultural boundaries, appears for Bishop to be inherent even in Portuguese itself, a language she describes in its Brazilian context as literally self-dislocating.

Page also notes her own need to find a point of entry and assimila-

tion to her Brazilian context. Invited to a luncheon given by the “senior executive . . . of the Brazilian Traction Company,” she notes in her journal on 14 April 1957 a kind of intercultural rudeness — the partygoers apparently lacking the courtesy to speak English — which she converts, upon reflection, into a demand that she locate herself on their terms:

Despite the fact that the party was for us, and that the guests could all speak perfectly good English, they spoke Portuguese at table. One man did stop speaking Portuguese long enough to tell me, in English, how important it was for me to learn Portuguese. Of course it is, I’m learning as fast as I can. (34)

Page clearly assumes that a transparency — such as that articulated by Bishop in her reflections on translation practices — is possible to achieve with hard work, and offers her, as she learns to accommodate the alternative “Portuguese” forms of social conduct at such parties, a kind of full diplomatic admission to that culture. Negotiations of language, difficult though they may be, are apparently to be rewarded by a somewhat unimpeded access to the Brazilian public and cultural spheres. And that access is achieved not, as in Bishop’s arrival poem, by expecting or hoping that the customs officials will speak English, but by reconfiguring one’s own modes of thought and speech to suit the immediate context; perfectly good English, in Brazil, can never be good enough.

Page, however, does not so simply or unproblematically shift contexts; she remains bound to her own mediated, imported cultural sphere — as Bishop admits she herself is to her Nova Scotian or New England “bluenoser” past. Instead of claiming after a laborious process of self-translation to have let go one language-context for another, a shift which Page at times recognizes as impossible to achieve as her own mistakes and un-Brazilian inflections contaminate language and conduct, she maps out a cultural hybridity in her writing. Coming to words again, for her, is a process of rethinking herself, and of learning to position herself, as an “adult” speaking subject, in a negotiated zone *between* languages:

My first foreign language — to live in, that is — and the personality changes that accompany it. One is a toy at first, a doll. Then a child. Gradually, as vocabulary increases, an adult again. But a different adult. Who am I, then, that language can so change me? What is personality, identity? And the deeper change, the profounder understanding — partial at least — of what man is, devoid of words. Where could wordlessness lead? Shocks, insights, astounding and sudden walls. Equally astounding and sudden dematerializations; points

of view shifting and vanishing. Attitudes recognized for what they are: attitudes. The Word behind the word...but when there *is* no word...? (*Glass* 212)

The transparency of meaning toward which Bishop gestures in her translations becomes problematic for Page because the effort to transfer oneself from one language-context to another, rather than erasing barriers, destabilizes the comfortable, constructed boundaries that seem to demarcate cultural or linguistic territories. She comes to occupy, liminally, what Homi Bhabha has called “the borders of culture’s insurgent and interstitial existence” (18). Hers is a form of poetic dwelling — of what James Clifford calls “dwelling-in-travel” (2) — which essentially calls into question the forms and parameters of habitation, of placement. The “little things” out of Portuguese which might inflect and bend Bishop’s English are, for Page, not so trivial, but remind her of the constructedness of “attitude,” and suggest that, if there is a universal semantic on which all languages depend, that “Word behind the word,” it is not to be articulated in a given language — that is, not by converting Portuguese into a version of English, or English into a version of Portuguese. Instead, those “common” denominators are to be located in the unresolved and destabilizing zone of the border itself, in the crossing-over of languages, in the resistances and “sudden walls” of unworded difference.

### Already a Past: Departures and Dislocations

Those “walls” and resistances, however, remain necessarily in tension with (as opposed to overwriting or replacing) the nostalgia for cultural absorption that both Page and Bishop import. Both writers define themselves in opposition to the blasé tourist, while nonetheless maintaining a desire to decode and penetrate the exotic other. This nostalgia is most clearly highlighted when both poets juxtapose themselves to other visitors; both see themselves in the position of the Brazilian other, not as mediators but as fully assimilated to landscape and language. In her journals, Page measures the “success” of a visit by Sidney Smith, Secretary of State for External Affairs, and his wife, by the degree to which cultures and languages mesh in plural circumstance: “Brazilians and Canadians, husbands and wives — we were in it together” (*Brazilian* 187). Finding herself, however, in the position of host rather than guest, as guide rather than tourist, as resident rather than itinerant, she allies herself not with Canadians but Brazilians, and thinks the Minister’s wife “baffling” for her lack of interest in place or culture:



She had no wish to do anything between official engagements — not even to walk around the garden. She retired to her room, by herself, resting. She can have learned nothing about Brazil. As we drove from house to engagement to house, I never saw her look out of the car window. (187)

In contrast to the attentions and aspirations of the official outsider who remains resolutely tied to Canadian origins to the point of wilfully blinding herself to the disturbing and unfamiliar otherness of Brazil, Page's own interest *places* her, gives her a sense of home and belonging. Those ties emerge most openly in a late entry describing a trip to the Amazon, during which the heat — an impediment Page never fails to remark in the previous 200 pages of the journal — now seems strangely comfortable: "The rest of the trip was hot and frantic. As to how hot, nobody knew, not even we — for we are Brazilians now and the temperature and the humidity are matters Brazilians ignore" (220). Page asserts that she has become Brazilian, bodily and spiritually.

Bishop, too, defines herself in opposition to American "foreigners." When she first arrives in Rio de Janeiro, she admits in her notebook to uncertainty and homesickness, calling Rio "the most confusing city I've ever been in, I think" (qtd. in Millier 241). Disoriented and unable to speak the language, to "read" as Butor says the traveller necessarily must, she impulsively latches on to whatever exported American "culture" she can find, no matter how crass or commercial, no matter whether she even likes it: "I *can't* order food & fainting with hunger lunched on a tiny roast beef sandwich & coca cola. Thank goodness for coca cola even if I don't like it much" (qtd. in Millier 241). Four years later, however, her attitude has dramatically shifted, and she is now able linguistically and culturally to position herself as fully, and proudly, assimilated. Writing on finding a sublet for Lota's apartment in Rio (on 5 February 1954), she disdains the cultural philistinism of her former compatriots: "An American couple finally took the apartment — a very sad, stupid couple — he is some kind of specialist for the government — lost, and loathing Brazil, of course, but glad to get a nice cool apartment at last" (286). Like Page, she sets herself out as a resident, who sees tourists' complaints about the heat as a kind of disrespectful affront, as sign of an unwillingness to experience the foreign world laid out before them. To her Aunt Grace (in a letter dated at New York on 12 December 1961), she voices her disgust with the naive Americanism of her editors at Time-Life, who had commissioned from her a text on Brazil for the *Life* World Library:

They are incredible people and what they know about Brazil would fit

on the head of a pin — and yet the gall, the arrogance, the general condescension! However — I've saved some of the book, and it does tell the truth, more or less — and some of the pictures are pretty — but not nearly enough. (403)

Bishop's compulsion to tell the truth more or less, to write "enough" against the wilful blindness and arrogant self-centredness of her American editors, positions her as an apologist for the Brazilian experience. Unlike Page, however, she remains hesitant to call herself a true Brazilian; against Ondaatje's reading of Page's foreign "renewal" of her *ars poetica*, we can set Bishop's open refusal to exploit the foreignness of Brazil for her own poetic or epistemic purposes, as she explains in a letter to Joseph and U.T. Summers, dated 9 December 1953:

I like living here more and more all the time, I think — but it isn't because it's Brazil, particularly, or even a foreign country — or at all a foreign country, I should say. It is just that where I am living and what I am doing seem to suit me perfectly for the first time in ages — and surely at this stage of history and airplanes *and the wireless* we don't have to brood too much about expatriation. (*One Art* 282)

These sentiments are echoed in a letter to Randall Jarrell three days later: "I like it here better and better — not because it's Brazil at all, but just a good place to live" (284). Having "a good place to live" amounts in this case to a cosmopolitanism that refuses the national as any kind of category; Brazil, in these letters, is not specifically Brazil at all, but a country without country, neither American nor other, simply a generic place.

That emptiness, however, is quickly exposed as an illusion, and an in-sidious Americanism appears even in Bishop's own writing as she recognizes the inevitability of her cultural situatedness, described with incisive irony in another letter to Joseph and U.T. Summers, written 26 November 1957:

As you say, "drabness" is what characterizes all countries except the rich, gleaming, deodorized U.S.A. — and I think that that bright cleanness is what I always miss most at first. Even here where Nature is so bright & fresh and the weather so brilliant, etc., and the buildings pink & white and the sidewalks black & white mosaic — all the crowds, buses, trolleys, shops, *kitchens*, look so dingy and dark and grease-stained. But one gets used to it quickly. (*One Art* 343)

But Bishop never does get "used to it"; rather, in her attempts to negotiate for herself a space outside her Americanized language and perspective, in

her attempt to be truthful about her own dislocation of self and culture, she returns to the very barriers she attempts to dismantle. To be “at home” in Brazil, for both Bishop and Page, is to confront one’s inability ever to settle, discursively, into a comfortable existence.

Page’s claim that she has become a Brazilian is echoed in the last pages of her journal, when she learns of her pending departure from the country because of A.’s reassignment: “It will be hard to turn my back on luxury, so much sun, so sweet a people. And to leave this house, which I have come to feel is mine” (238). The tourist’s dream of settlement, of penetration, of home-making has, for her, found a figurative realization, as she writes on 10 July 1959: “Am desolate that the dream is ending — this beautiful, tropical, golden dream” (238). The missing subject from that sentence, perhaps an effect of a cursory or hurried style, nevertheless suggests a shift in Page’s sense of subject-position and cultural alliance, as she soon makes explicit. She has found, after all, another self: “Sorry, too, to leave my Brazilian self, so different from my Canadian self — freer more demonstrative” (238). In an essay appended to *The Glass Air*, Page regards herself at a similar distance: “Looking back with my purely psychological eye through the long clear topaz of that day, I appear as a mute observer, an inarticulate listener, occupying another part of myself” (213). That occupation, that relocation of an otherness within the self, of a subject divided off from its own self-confident delimitations, is an effect of her exotic dream, certainly, but one which undoes the colonizing possessions of her tourist rhetoric.

Brazil is depicted in the last sentences of the journal as a golden realm promising through the bonding of visiting self and exotic other a transcendental wholeness:

Hard to believe that Brazil is gone.... Already it is part of a past which will blur more and more, until it is as pale as the aquamarines and topazes and beryls mined from Brazilian soil. Already the very special quality that was “Brazil” for us exists only in our memories and no words can recreate, for us or for anyone else, what was golden, perfect, complete. (241)

But even in the lapidary aestheticism of Page’s paragraph there is a failure of language to encode, to grasp that fulfilment. This inability can be read, certainly, as a summary gesture toward an ineffable sublime. It can also, however, point to a translational understanding of language and culture, one that values, despite the jargon of authenticity in which this passage is saturated, not fulfilment but differentiation, not oneness but alterity. In her last moments in Brazil, Page receives a note in Portuguese:

[Helena] has given me a prayer to the Holy Ghost, written out in her elegant hand: "*Divino Espírito Santo, Alma da minha alma, eu Vos adoro...*" How could I possibly say that in English? "Soul of my soul, I adore you." I couldn't. But in Portuguese...? (238)

Rather than translate, Page faces here an untranslatability, a rhythm and a tone that cannot be conveyed, a difference that will not be assimilated to her English. What the receding "dream" foregrounds for Page is a moment of intersection, a subject position not of so much of refusal or erasure as of cultural doubling, at which what cannot be said in one language is nevertheless held up to that language as adoration, as bond, as love.

In a letter to Kit and Ilse Barker dated "Good Friday, 1953," Bishop appears at first to indulge in a kind of Americanized aesthetic snobbery, finding little of the beautiful in the indigenous population of Brazil, and expressing confusion over her Brazilian companion's apparent lack of cultural nationalism:

Lota is extremely pro-English & I've at last begun to understand it better. I hadn't realized how England really ran Brazil all through the 19th century. When I knew Lota in N.Y. even, I noticed how she constantly spoke of things being "well-made," "well-finished" or "beautifully tailored," etc. — and now after living here I see how everything is wretchedly made, unfinished, and that for so long only the rich with good taste could have anything better, and of course it was always English. The same thing is true of looks. I think I take it for granted that my friends are handsome, their babies are pretty, etc. — but here there almost seems to be an obsession with looks — everyone describes children's eyes and noses and chins endlessly — and when I see them I'm often disappointed. But the general level of looks is rather low, I'm afraid — and the ugliness of the "poor people" — I don't know what else to call them — is *appalling*. *Nobody* seems "well-made," except some of the Negroes. (*One Art* 258)

The value judgments buried in Lota's adjectives, the standards determining what is "well-made" or not, are colonial importations, and appear to set out a refusal to accept what is given as "Brazilian," the indigenous standards of the beautiful or the true. But Bishop also realizes here that such colonial importations, such discourses, are not simply pretentious holdovers but aspects of Lota's Brazilian mindset. Bishop's being appalled is both an effect of her American judgment and a self-recrimination, a refusal to make pretty what must be faced as disturbing, uncivilized,

threatening. In a note to Houghton Mifflin editor Paul Brooks on her intention to translate the diary of “Helena Morley,” dated 28 July 1953, Bishop refuses the quaint prettiness of a cleaned-up exoticism, preferring the more compelling “beauty” of direct vision: “it is not ‘cute,’ but it gives a beautiful picture of a way of life that has vanished, etc.” (*One Art* 269). Bishop’s “Brazil” refuses to be dressed up in dream, and instead forces the poet, in her pursuit of a truth unclouded by precious effects of language or vision, to rethink her own position in the complex postcolonial web of discourses that come to constitute her Brazilian experience. She chooses to gaze directly at the “difference” — as she writes in her “Song for the Rainy Season” — “that kills / or intimidates, much / of all our small shadowy / life!” (*Poems* 102).

### “Brazil” and the Poetry of Displacement

These moments of dissociation in both Bishop and Page find analogues in their poetry of Brazil. In “The Armadillo,” Bishop traces an encounter between newcomer and indigene, between the tourist’s bafflement and a landscape which refuses to be read. Her description of the fire-balloons launched on St. John’s Eve begins with the same sort of guidebook phraseology as “Arrival at Santos,” explaining the festival to unfamiliar non-participants, herself included:

This is the time of year  
when almost every night  
the frail, illegal fire-balloons appear.  
Climbing the mountain height,  
  
rising toward a saint  
still honoured in these parts,  
the paper chambers flush and fill with light  
that comes and goes, like hearts. (*Poems* 103)

The persona notes with mock condescension the quaintness and naiveté of local religions, represented by the out-of-date “saint / still honoured in these parts.” She is, like Page with her visiting dignitaries, cast in a role between *them* and *us*, local enough to know the customs and laws of the country, but still conversant with her listeners’ cultural biases and prejudices. Tellingly, however, the guide is herself surprised; when a crashed balloon forces native wildlife into view, a “baby rabbit” jumps out, “short-eared, to our surprise” (104). The shape and species of the animal do not conform to expectation, and the claim to knowledge, to knowing land and place, is subtly undermined in the slippery italics of Bishop’s line. The

speaker can no longer claim with confidence a definitive (and condescending) possession of the Brazilian landscape, cannot simply overwrite it with her own wilful poetic apprehending, but must acknowledge the persistent otherness, the untranslatability, of that place. With the emergence of the sulking armadillo at the end of the poem, one comes up against a figure which, despite its apparent triviality, cannot be made poetically to mean by the visionary machinery of the observers. When in the final, oblique stanza of the text, Bishop notes the “weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky,” she suggests, with the abrupt intrusion into the poem’s fabric of an overt stylistic density signalled by italics, an inability to settle an interpretation, a troping which will not close, but remains indeterminate and uncertain, “ignorant” and defiant (*Poems* 104). The armadillo is, paradoxically, a figural representation of un-representability, the indigenous “truth” which exposes the insufficiency of Bishop’s own formal intelligence and which also encrypts the very difference she seeks poetically to embrace. In its refusal to settle, the armadillo occupies that in-between space of self-contention, the point at which culturally-shaped subject-positions, instead of resolving into some harmonious whole by writing one over the other, meet in uneasy tension.

Page’s retrospective Brazilian poems of the 1960s appear with deceptive simplicity as set-pieces, reworked descriptions of particular moments recorded in her journal. But when they are set critically in the contradictory drift, the gathering of semi-porous cultural barriers and avenues which she names “Brazil,” they come to articulate, like Bishop’s armadillo, sites of distension, where language-constructs meet and come to a differend. “Brazilian House,” for instance, positions the poet at a cultural threshold; it begins by locating her uncomfortably pacing the pristine, sanitized halls (“white,” she says ironically, “as a public urinal”) of her diplomatic home, but ends with the poet forced by heat and “yammering silence” into the living world around her, represented by the figures of the laundress and “Ricardo,” who break the façade of cool perfection that the house itself presents. Page is pulled bodily and poetically across the barriers set up by her intrusive, inappropriate culture and into contact with a strange and seductive foreign landscape.

“Brazilian Fazenda” positions Page closer to that landscape, suspended above it in a hammock on a hot day, filtering through her poetic eye the sensuous and extraordinary detail of her climate. The poem begins by looking back through local history (“That day all the slaves were freed”) and goes on to map out an assemblage of vivid detail and magical happening, when “all the coffee ripened” and “the cows all calved and the

calves all lived” (*Glass* 86). Page’s tone verges on a child-like preciousness (“such a moo”) as she recounts moments of illumination, suggestions of a presence beyond the ordinary, of a coming together of the quotidian and the strange, as she compresses objects into various *mythoi* (as in the allusion to Atalanta in the last line of this section):

And the chapel was lit by a child’s  
fistful of marigolds on the red velvet altar  
thrown like a golden ball.

Even local Marian legends — not imported or superimposed from Christian or Grecian sources, but grown up in the hybridized postcolonial climate of Brazil itself — play into Page’s textures of wonderment, as she recounts (simultaneously revising the parodic apocalypticism of Chicken Little) how “bits fell out of the sky near Nossa Senhora / who had walked all the way in bare feet from Bahia.” Myths and stories of all origins, those Page has brought with her and those she has learned since her arrival, meet via her shaping poetic intelligence. The intrusion of Portuguese into her text, indeterminately as both the place-name and the character of “Nossa Senhora” marks an unassimilable locus in the text; for to translate “Our Lady” is, as with Page’s note from Helena, to lose precisely what is poetically valuable to her here, that untranslatable otherness which nevertheless suffuses the day before her.

At the close of the poem, Page asks to participate in the ordinary day of this place, like the dogs of “The Permanent Tourists” who require no special historical or legendary or spectacular mediation, but are bound unreflectively to the immediate, to the here and now of the local present:

Oh let me come back on a day  
when nothing extraordinary happens  
so I can stare  
at the sugar white pillars  
and black lace grills  
of this pink house.

To stare here at the physical details of her own place, the porch on which she dozes, is to empty the eye of all associations and so to see truly. Yet even here, Page cannot resist troping, as metaphors of sugar and lace creep into her language. Despite the desire to meld into the *tabula rasa* of pure other, of the uncontaminated perception of “Brazil” itself, Page remains, unlike her permanent tourists, a proactive observer, a participant. The ground is never wholly purged of association or shaping force; rather, Page maps the subtle but necessary dissonances among perceptive construc-

tions of that landscape, as she attempts to inhabit the shifting barriers and dematerializations of her “different” adulthood.

“I wonder now,” Page asks in “Questions and Images,” “if ‘brazil’ [*sic*] would have happened wherever I was?” (*Glass* 213). To respond to this question, it is vitally important to recognize that “Brazil” cannot be made to stand in Page’s usage for a singular, identifiable, or culturally determinate space, but neither can it be said to delimit a cosmopolitan universal, transferable to any location. The “other,” in this case, is not cohesive, and every instance of othering demands, for Page, its own particular set of responses, its revisions to new aspects of self and understanding. Instead, “Brazil” names an intersection of the local, the geographically and culturally determinate other, with poetic intelligence, the self in the process of finding its articulation. As such, it stands as an irreducible multiplicity, a zone of contestation which challenges the processes of troping as it simultaneously calls those very processes into being. When, in the middle of her journals, Page describes making a speech on “my discovery of their Brazil” (149), she is articulating neither conquest nor assimilation, but an ongoing rethinking of self and other, of cosmopolitan and local, of culture and border, which “blurr’dly and inconclusively” (*Poems* 94), as Bishop writes, makes its connections.

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