
Elizabeth Bishop's Interior and Outer Border Crossings

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Abstract

Elizabeth Bishop crossed her first geographical borders between Massachusetts and Nova Scotia at an early age, then did the transatlantic crossing to Europe as a student-until her trip around South America, where she settled in Brazil, changed her life. The country, which she watched with her painter's eye, was exotic, utterly "foreign" to her. More than people, she claimed to be interested in geography, including that of the imagination. She liked traveling to the interior, also meaning a journey into the self. Her addiction to traveling nursed her sense of isolation. Virtually a born expatriate, she felt countryless, carrying her home with her, which did not exclude nostalgia for one or the other country. Her chosen exile helped her create. Her letters collected in *An Art* created a bond with the other side, while entertaining the ceaselessly crossed border between North and South. She blamed herself for not speaking more than kitchen Portuguese, yet translated from that tongue which fascinated her, another form of border-crossing. With Lota, and as with a later lover in her mature years, Elizabeth observed crossing the border of mental health, an experience already lived in her childhood with her mother's insanity. Those Sapphic loves also meant crossing the social rules of gender conformism, and propriety in a patriarchal society, a transgression her puritanical upbringing and engrained reticence prompted her to conceal. Her last, posthumous poem upset all taboos, revealing in the compressed form of a sonnet all that she had strived for a lifetime to hide. Elizabeth Bishop was a meticulous pioneer across territories, of the human soul, trespassing social borders. Her poetry, a model for prosody apprentices in its thorough exploration of the most challenging forms, is also entirely innovative in its original interpretation of tradition.

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