
‘Travelling in the Family’: Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazilian autobiographical voice

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Abstract

In 1951, Elizabeth Bishop planned to travel around the world by freighter but a severe allergic reaction to cashew nuts obliged her to stop in Rio de Janeiro. This delay finally stretched into a seventeen-year residence in Brazil during which Bishop explored new territories, discovered a new culture and learnt a new language. I would like to focus on Bishop’s translations into English of Brazilian autobiographical works (The Diary of Helena Morley and poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade) and to analyze how her appropriation of these texts helped her shape her own autobiographical voice. I would also like to show how a detour via Brazilian texts enabled her to explore her childhood ”tropisms”. The word was coined by French novelist Nathalie Sarraute in 1939 and refers to small emotional twinges (fear, longing, anger, shame) just as they come into the subject’s conscious awareness before they are fully formed and named. The writer’s work consists in expressing in words what is pre-verbal. In Bishop’s case, it led to the reconstruction of childhood memories, through poems and stories, between reality and fiction, recollection and oblivion, disclosure and secret.

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