

Reified Bodies and Misplaced Identities in Elizabeth Bishop's Narratives of Childhood Memories

Diana Almeida

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

Reified Bodies and Misplaced Identities in Elizabeth Bishop's Narratives of Childhood Memories

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) starts exploring autobiographical material more consistently whilst living in Brazil, between 1951 and 1966, as if diaspora enabled her to deal with issues of personal identity. The 1950s and early 1960s were a period of emotional stability for the author, due not only to the love shared with the Brazilian artist Lota Macedo de Soares (who dies in 1967 in tragic circumstances) but also to the “safe distance” that allowed her to reexamine some key events of her traumatic childhood. Indeed, in a letter dated 12 Oct. 1952, Bishop muses on the “mysterious” role played by geography in the awakening of her early memories: “It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia [in Canada] geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even” (Harrison, “Recording” 220-221).

During this period she writes two autobiographical short stories – “In the Village” (1953) and “The Country Mouse” (1961) – which deal with events from about 1915 to 1918, a time frame delimited by two major events in the writer's life. On the one hand, her mother's incarceration in a mental hospital where she would stay until her death in 1934, without having any further contact with her family (Harrison, *Poetics* 131), while Bishop was being raised by her Canadian maternal grandparents; on the other hand, her move to Boston, where she lived for some months with her paternal grandparents, becoming chronically ill.

Geographical dislocation leads the writer to consider the notions of the individual in relation to society, humankind, the nation-state and the international political system, the main legitimating concepts in the shared ideology of globalization (Robertson 27). This epistemological revision takes place in the above mentioned short stories and also in the anthology *Questions of Travel* (1965) where “In the Village” is included,

being the first text of the second section of the book, entitled “Elsewhere”. The anthology’s structure has geopolitical implications and challenges the hierarchy of placement inherent to the imperialist ideology, since its first section, “Brazil”, serves as referent to the decontextualized deictic “Elsewhere”, remapping geography and questioning patriotic allegiances. Furthermore, as Roman so perceptively notes in *Elizabeth Bishop’s World War II Cold War View*, the first three poems of the section “Brazil” (“Arrival at Santos”, “Brazil”, and “Questions of Travel”) deconstruct the imperial gaze, the desire to domesticate the foreign, and possess alterity (146-147). My essay will consider some of the rhetorical strategies used by Bishop to exert formal control over her disturbing past memories, namely the reification of the bodies of the main characters in these two narratives. Moreover, I will look into the author’s resistance to the socialization practices triggered by the Great War victory narratives, with their strict gender distinctions.

In both short stories there is a double narratorial frame that articulates the adult narrator’s perspective with the child protagonist’s vision. The distant stance of the adult onlooker allows room for irony and intellectual analysis; the child’s point of view is humorous and characterized by a synaesthetic approach to the world, especially in the first story. While in Nova Scotia young Elizabeth enjoyed the freedom to walk in nature and to interact with the local community when strolling around on errands that invariably led her to “examine” the novelties in the small town’s store windows (Bishop 108). “In the Village” depicts the child protagonist’s innocent joy in being alive, symbolized by the recurrent onomatopoeia *Clang*, representing the blacksmith’s shop and its connotations with pure physical energy. This safe male world where everyone feels “at home” (104) contrasts with the absent mother’s hideous scream of madness (unrepresentable in language) that distorts the landscape in the *incipit* of the story and haunts the enigmatic silences or the fragmented sentences in the maternal grandparents’ house, a female world of unrest.

Nonetheless, her maternal family also provides a nurturing emotional background, as several of the story’s episodes prove, such as the lyrically charged scene when the girl combs her distressed grandmother’s making her smile:

I say I want to help her brush her hair. So I do, standing on the lower rung of the back of her rocking chair ...
 My grandmother's hair is silver and in it she keeps a great many celluloid combs ...
 The one at the back has longer teeth than the others ...
 I pretend to play a tune on it; then I pretend to play a tune in each of the others before we stick them in, so my grandmother's hair is full of music. She laughs (106).

The tender empathy between the two figures and their cooperative interaction contrast deeply with the loveless rigidity of the paternal house, as we will see.

Furthermore, the protagonist's imagination matches her inquisitive predisposition, a peculiar trait of juvenile characters whose intrinsic curiosity and potential for identifying with external objects tend to blur the boundaries between traditionally static conceptual categories. Indeed, the borderlines between animal and human hover constantly in the narrative, namely in the passage when the girl contemplates a horse in the blacksmith's store: his body is minutely described and he is personified, "express[ing] his satisfaction" after being tended to (104). The youngster interacts closely with another animal – Nelly, the Jersey cow that she takes to pasture every morning.¹ The liminal quality of the borders between the human and the animal realms is foregrounded when the child "hold[s] her by one horn to admire her eyes again" adding "At such close quarters my feelings for her are mixed" (110). This uneasiness resurfaces moments later when the sudden plan to spend all day playing outdoors near the brook is shattered by "an immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness" (*idem*), as if the child intuits the existential chasm that separates her from nature and generates solitude.

¹ It is interesting to note that other post-war American women writers use similar imagery to describe the problematics of identity transcribed through bodily figurations. For instance, in the autobiographical short story "The Winds" (1943), Eudora Welty (1909-2001) also portrays the young protagonist in close association with animals, especially the Jersey cow with whom the child establishes a "richly compassionate" relationship that will help her to define her emerging subjectivity (262).

In “The Country Mouse” the protagonist’s body is reified and identified with the animal realm too, but with none of the emphatic possibilities present in the other story. The narrator admits to being “on the same terms in the household” (416) as Beppo, the bull terrier maimed by a “peculiar Bostonian sense of guilt” (417) and characterized through the semantic field of disease and physical decay, used to describe the child’s body as well. The dead father’s family house is described in nightmarish tones, and young Elizabeth rebels against the physical and psychological constraints she is subjected to by getting sick, a traditional female reaction to imprisonment in women’s literature and history, as feminist criticism has repeatedly pointed out.

The territory of her body becomes more and more oppressive, and the child’s progressive abandonment to sickness and boredom is presented in quasi-sentimental tones. In the train journey the narrator refers to her body as “my tiny bones” (410); after the maid Agnes’ departure, another broken connection with a mother surrogate figure, the protagonist enumerates the ailments that afflict her and concludes with the poignant remark “I felt myself ageing, even dying. I was *bored* and lonely” (425). This morbidity streak, that would accompany Bishop through the rest of her life, is underlined in the text with a direct tribute to Louise Bogan (1897-1970), a fellow Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress, whose short and long titled poem “Solitary Observation Brought Back from a Sojourn in Hell” is cited: “At midnight tears / Run into your ears” (425).

Still another strategy of reification found in the two stories under scrutiny is portraying the family characters through a detailed description of their clothes, particularly the mother figure in “In the Village” (Page 17; Ellis 46, 66). The lack of a stable affective center to which the child protagonist might connect to is hyperbolized in the episode when the maternal grandmother and aunts unpack the young widow’s *trousseau*² (a foreign word that betrays the social etiquette and wealth of the Bostonian branch of the family). Simultaneously the scene underscores the growing

² Ellis suggests that the trunk symbolizes the mother’s body contaminated by illness (90).

tension between silence and speech, resulting from the family's reluctance to impart the truth to young Elizabeth, and the child's intuition about the irrevocability of (physical and psychic) death. Here the matriarchal context seems to sever the protagonist from language because the women speak in fragmented sentences never referring to her mother's condition, using words whose meaning the child ignores. This deprivation is humorously emphasized by the pun between "mourning" and "morning" that contrasts the young narrator's comic naiveté with her growing awareness of her condition as orphan:

The clothes were black, or white, or black-and-white.
 "Here's a mourning hat," says my grandmother ...
 "There's that mourning coat she got the first winter," says my aunt.
 But always I think they are saying "morning." Why, in the morning,
 did one put on black? How early in the morning did one begin?
 (101)

The child's contacts with her mother are mediated by clothes, and this phantasmagorical figure is either hidden in the front bedroom or fitting the purple dress, rehearsing to become a Bostonian lady, as her frustration about being out of fashion denotes in a passage where her physical body is reduced to "thin white hands ... twitching the purple skirt" (111). Unfortunately the symbolic potential of this color, traditionally associated with resurrection in the Christian iconography, is not fulfilled in the text – unable to transfigure her grief, the mother succumbs to madness, being reduced to the address of the sanatorium, ironically written "in purple indelible pencil" (116) on the packages the grandmother faithfully sends out every week.

Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, the narrator's experience in Nova Scotia is tinged by a lyrical tone that signals her redemptive connection with imagination and the natural world. In fact, the national symbols that will become so oppressive in the Boston story are here associated with the fairy tale world of fish with magical rings, and the child seems to be gifted with the power to (physically and metaphorically) transfigure such alien elements, as when she incorporates a coin with King George's effigy: "I put my five-cent piece in my mouth for greater safety on the way home, and swallow it. Months later, as far as I know, it is still in me, transmuting

all its precious metal into my growing teeth and hair” (105).³

In “The Country Mouse”, the intertext of children literature connoting innocence will be replaced by “three great truths” (425): the awareness “of falsity and the great power of sentimentality” (*idem*), “social consciousness” (426), and knowledge about self-identity. As a corollary to the emergence of subjectivity, in the closing sentences of the story the protagonist becomes overwhelmed by the discovery that she is an individual, when she perceives herself separate from the vegetable and animal kingdoms and from other human beings – “You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are *you* and you are going to be *you* forever.’ ... *Why* was I a human being?” (*idem*).⁴

The poem “In the Waiting Room” (the opening text of the anthology *Geography III*, 1976) draws on and amplifies the incident narrated in the closure of this short story, but the child focalizer, still instrumental as a distanced autobiographical persona, will further develop the problematics of identity in gender, racial and ethnographic terms. The ekphrastic description of some photographs included in the *National Geographic* magazine lying in the dentist’s waiting room reveals the child’s perception of the ideological constraints that mould physicality: “Babies with pointed heads / wound round and round with string; / black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs. / Their breasts were horrifying” (149).⁵ The women’s and children’s malleable

³ Ellis comments on a similar episode of lost precious objects, when the narrator “abscond[s] with a little ivory stick with a sharp point. [And] To keep it forever [she] bury[s] it under the bleeding heart by the crab-apple tree, but it is never found again” (Bishop 103). Comparing the embroidery tool to a pen, Ellis argues that these maneuvers figure Bishop’s oblique approach to language, since in her writing “intimate secrets become deliberately lost in endlessly deferred linguistic games” (91).

⁴ Feaver argues that the slippage of meaning at the root of the child protagonist’s experience is thematized in the story by the metaphor of vision, which calls attention to the discrepancy between intimacy and socio-cultural expectations (88).

⁵ It is striking, once again, to remark a similarity between Bishop’s and Welty’s imagery, for the latter in “A Memory”, another autobiographical short story, also depicts the horror of an adolescent protagonist confronted with the female body, describing the breasts of a woman that seem about to dissolve into inorganic matter (97).

bodies betray the textual component of physical identity, since “anatomy itself loses the authority of any natural grounding [becoming] one more figure in the language of the [patriarchal] culture” (Edelman 103).

This might explain why in “The Country Mouse” young Elizabeth resists “being a little girl” (412) and playing with a proper, brand-new Anglo-Saxon doll, “totally uninteresting, with embossed yellow-brown hair ... bright blue eyes, and pink cheeks” (ibid.), bought by her paternal grandmother to substitute the old dolls from Nova Scotia, “in no condition of traveling in Pullmans [from Canada to the United States]” (ibid.). As the title of the story implies by its intertextual resonances with Aesop’s fable about rural contentment, Bishop downplays the American Dream, proving that upward mobility in the social scale and greater material abundance do not equal happiness.

Moreover the fictional component of national history is underscored when Miss Woodhead, the humorously named schoolteacher, miniaturizes one of the US master identity narratives, making “a model of ‘The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers’ on a large tabletop” (419). The child narrator’s enthusiasm and her focus on the supposedly realistic technique used to build the ocean inflates the parodic implications of the excerpt:

The Rock was the only real thing. Miss Woodhead made the ocean in a spectacular way: she took large sheets of bright blue paper, crumpled them up, and stretched them out over the table. Then, with the blackboard chalk, she made glaring whitecaps of all the points: an ocean grew right before our eyes. There were some little ships, some doll people, and we also helped make log cabins. (Twenty years later I learned the Pilgrim Fathers had no log cabins when they landed.) (ibid.).

The last parenthetical remark ironizes the failure of a school system that procrastinates knowledge for “twenty years later” and denounces the falsity of its ideologically charged narratives.

Female figures appear to be especially prone to this game of make-believe: Aunt Jenny organizes “War Parties” decorated in the colors of the US flag (421) and is away most of the time in “War Work”, making her niece “[get] the idea [it] was some kind of full-time profession” (422); the next door grandmother works “for the soldier boys. She had knitted ninety-two helmets and over two hundred ‘wristers’” (417). Bishop implies that

the war victory ideology deprives women of political agency, reducing them to “paper doll[s]” (415), like her aunt, or to house bounded figures trapped in immobility, like the neighbor, “an old old lady who sat in a wheelchair all day, knitting” (417), unaware of the disastrous proportion of the war carnage.

The child protagonist develops a set of negotiation strategies within the victory culture plot of the Great War, with its “promotion of visible signs of patriotism (...) and the use of demonizing propaganda about the enemy” (Roman 41). Displaying her life-long interest in music, Bishop mentions some of the hymns learned at school, distinguishing the lighter tone of the British popular ballads she sang in Canada (such as “Tipperary”, and “Every nice girl loves a sailor”) from the more lugubrious accent of the “Worcester songs”, in particular “Joan of Arc, they are ca-alllll-ing you” (422). Written in 1915 by Frank Sturgis, the opening lines of this hymn appeal to national unity in the face of external menace in a global bellic scenario (echoing contemporary Western rhetorics about homeland security): “There’s a tear in my eye for the soldier, / As he lies among the slain. / There’s a throb in my heart for this old world, / That sights for peace in vain”. Thus the above mentioned recognition of the “great power of sentimentality” (425) comments not only on the white lie the narrator tells her playmate Emma to gain her sympathy, but also evinces the child protagonist’s early consciousness of the manipulative effect of propaganda.

“The Country Mouse” emphasizes the omnipresent patriotic duties of the exemplary American citizen during the 1st World War, strengthened by the coercive socialization practices exercised by Grandma (the name “little girls” (412) should use to address their grandmothers). The feeling of dislocation experienced by the protagonist when she was “kidnapped” (411), brought from Canada to Boston “unconsulted and against [her] wishes” (413), becomes accentuated with the clash between her Canadian upbringing and the US patriotic fervor. She first refers to the Canadian hymn to confess a “slight resentment” (413) when her paternal grandparents single out the maple trees lining the driveway of their estate in Worcester, as if she were not familiar with that particular signifier. Later, she will voice out her uneasiness about national identity:

[at school] I hated the songs, and most of all I hated saluting the flag. I would have refused if I had dared. In my Canadian

schooling the year before, we had started every day with “God Save the King” and “The Maple Leaf Forever.” Now I felt like a traitor. *I wanted us to win the War, of course, but I didn't want to be an American* (421, my italics).

The excerpt's ambiguity highlights the speaker's misplaced identity, since the pronoun “us”, coupled with the qualifier “American” does not provide a stable referent and ends up being determined by an implied “other”, the enemy that provoked the war.

As we have seen, Bishop subtly reverts this dichotomy in the structure of *Questions of Travel*, placing Brazil as the geographical center that helps to stabilize meanings while simultaneously rendering the concept of “America” unstable, as if reverting the Pan American map implied by the Manifest Destiny expansionist myth. The poet's diction itself mirrors these dislocations, with its oblique approach and deeply ingrained irony, under an apparently transparent descriptive style. These reflections begin and end on Elizabeth Bishop's biographic experience, for she was an artist who traveled most of her life to ease her natural condition of exile, as an orphan prone to illness, a lesbian in a heterosexual world, and a woman poet.

Works Cited

- Bishop, Elizabeth. “In the Village”. *Poems, Prose and Letters*. Ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz. New York: Library of America, 2008.
- Colwell, Ann. *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1997.
- Edelman, Lee. “The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's ‘In the Waiting Room.’” *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993. 91-107.
- Ellis, Jonathan. *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop*. Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006.
- Feaver, Vicki. “Elizabeth Bishop: The Reclamation of Female Space”. *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*. Ed. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002. 87-102.
- Harrison, Victoria. “Recording a Life: Elizabeth Bishop's Letters to Ilse and Kit

- Barker". *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993. 215-232.
- . 1993. *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2008.
- Page, Barbara. "Elizabeth Bishop: Stops, Starts and Dreamy Divagations". *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*. Ed. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002. 12-30.
- Robertson, Roland. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage, 1992.
- Roman, Camille. *Elizabeth Bishop's World War II Cold War View*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Welty, Eudora. "A Memory". *Stories, Essays, & Memoir*. Ed. Richard Ford and Michael Kreyling. New York: Library of America, 1984. 92-98.
- . "The Winds". *Stories, Essays, & Memoir*. Ed. Richard Ford and Michael Kreyling. New York: Library of America, 1984. 252-267.

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) starts exploring autobiographical material in her writing while living in Brazil, during the 1950s and 60s, as if diaspora enabled her to deal with issues of personal identity more openly.

Focusing on the autobiographical short stories “In the Village” (1953) and “The Country Mouse” (1961), this essay looks at the representative strategies the writer chooses to portray the child protagonist’s body. Bishop’s traumatic childhood and her dislocation between borders and rural/urban landscapes (the Nova Scotia countryside and Boston) are inscribed in the protagonists’ bodily figurations, framed by a distanced narrator that highlights the tensions caused by the writer’s maternal and paternal families’ differentiated socialization practices. I will examine: i) the rhetorical strategies used by Bishop to exert formal control over her disturbing memories, namely through the reification of some of the characters’ bodies; ii) the deconstruction of the Great War victory narratives, with their strict gender distinctions.

Considered the main index of personal identity in these fictional universes, the body will thus be read as a textual configuration that reflects the official discourses of citizenship in North America (Canada and the U.S.), and simultaneously resists these hegemonic proposals of identity, reclaiming its subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

Elizabeth Bishop, Identity, Body, Diaspora, Autobiography

RESUMO

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) começa a explorar material autobiográfico na sua escrita quando vive no Brasil, nas décadas de 1950 e 60, como se a diáspora lhe tivesse permitido lidar mais abertamente com questões de identidade pessoal.

Centrado nos contos autobiográficos “In the Village” (1953) e “The Country Mouse” (1961), este ensaio analisa as estratégias representativas escolhidas pela autora para retratar o corpo da criança protagonista. A infância traumática

de Bishop e a sua deslocação entre fronteiras e espaços rurais/urbanos (o campo de Nova Scotia e Boston) encontram-se inscritas nas figurações corporais das protagonistas, enquadradas por um narrador distanciado que acentua as tensões causadas pelas diferentes práticas de socialização das famílias maternas e paternas da escritora. Pretendo examinar: i) as estratégias retóricas usadas por Bishop para exercer controlo formal sobre as suas perturbadoras memórias, nomeadamente através da reificação do corpo de algumas das personagens; ii) a desconstrução das narrativas de vitória da Grande Guerra, com as suas rígidas distinções de género.

Considerado o principal índice de identidade pessoal nestes universos ficcionais, o corpo será, pois, lido como uma configuração textual que reflecte os discursos oficiais sobre cidadania na América do Norte (Canadá e E.U.A.), e simultaneamente resiste estas propostas de identidade hegemónicas, reclamando subjectividade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Elizabeth Bishop, Identidade, Corpo, Diáspora, Autobiografia
