

## MY SIX YEARS WITH ELIZABETH BISHOP\*

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Translating a poet — that is, translating a large body of poetry written by a specific poet — is one of the riskiest things a translator can attempt to do. Translation, of course, is always risky business, particularly when poetry is involved; but translating, say, fifty percent of a poet's total output amounts to nearly an appropriation of that particular poet's work. When you edit an anthology of a poet — a process involving selection and translation, and some sort of critical text introducing the poet to readers in a foreign language, and inevitably proposing a specific view of her work — you must keep in mind that for many if not most of its readers your translation will at least for some time stand for this poet's oeuvre in that particular language. Until someone else comes along and offers his or her own alternative version, the poems you have selected will generally be considered the poet's most important, or most representative, or most accomplished ones; and it is the lines you actually wrote that will come to people's minds whenever they think about this poet. Quite a responsibility — or, then again, maybe not, considering that all in all only a few hundred people will read your translation and care for it much, this being Brazil, a country where sometimes you suspect there are more poets than readers of poetry. But if you take your work seriously, the thought that your particular choice and rendering of the poems of a foreign poet will pass for the real thing is both exciting and somewhat unnerving.

Until Elizabeth Bishop's correspondence was published in 1994, I knew very little about her. I had, of course, read four or five of her poems in anthologies, usually the same ones — certainly "The Fish" and "The Armadillo" — and knew that she had lived for years in Rio de Janeiro. But the few poems by her that I had read had never interested me much (I must confess I'm still not very fond of either "The Fish" or "The Armadillo"); so that my knowledge of Bishop at the time might be summed up more or less as "an American poet who lived in Brazil and wrote mostly about animals." Perhaps because I don't care much

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for animals myself, I never felt a desire to get to know more of her poetry. But when Bishop's correspondence was published I saw a couple of reviews and was immediately interested, mostly because — like many of us, I suppose — I love reading other people's mail, private diaries, that sort of thing; but also because the letters were highly praised by the reviewers. I began to read the letters, and by a happy coincidence it turned out that the publisher I work for was going to publish the book in Brazil, so soon I was translating them. Bishop's correspondence fascinated me so much that I immediately began to read her poetry seriously, and then her prose, which I was eventually to translate too. In fact, I began to work on some of her poems even before Companhia das Letras assigned me the job — I translated "The Shampoo" and "One Art" almost as soon as I had read them, for the simple reason that these two poems moved me to an exceptional degree.

Translating poetry involves a lot of homework, even more than prose. You must know the poet's work quite well, preferably have known it well for a long time, and this requires reading and rereading; also required is some knowledge of what has been written about the poet, as well as of the poet's life, her readings, her preferences in such diverse matters as sex, religion, politics, and so forth. This, of course, implies a position that some people might find somewhat old-fashioned these days: I am assuming that a body of poetry expresses a poetic persona that is to some extent a reflection of a conscious human subject. This is not the same thing as to say that the poetry is a direct expression of an actual person: the poetic persona is certainly not the same as the physical person, a point that is dramatically highlighted in Portuguese-language poetry by the case of Fernando Pessoa. But I must assume that behind the mask there is a real face, and that facts about the person are not entirely irrelevant to an understanding of the persona. In short, I have to admit that I find it necessary to buy the construct of the poet as a conscious human subject, not because I am unaware of all the criticism that has been directed against the notion in recent years, but precisely for the opposite reason. All the contemporary post-structuralist criticism I have read has had the effect of convincing me that the traditional notions of authorship, subjectivity and so forth, however flawed they may be, still remain valid, for the very simple reason that no creditable alternative has yet been presented, even by those who have explicitly set out to propose such alternatives.

Here's a good example of what I mean. In his influential work *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti proposes that we should avoid *simpatico* — that is, the tendency to choose a poet we can identify with, try to get to the man behind the poems and then recreate his poems in our own language so that they read as if they had been written in it. Venuti believes that the strategy of *simpatico* is founded on a number of traditional delusions, such as the belief in the uniqueness of individual consciousness and the idea that a literary work reflects such an individual consciousness; so he decides to use a different approach. What does Venuti do? He chooses a poet of his own generation, Milo de Angelis, who, like himself, questions the belief in the uniqueness of subjectivity, and whose work goes against the grain of canonical Italian poetry; he proceeds to read the philosophers this poet has a particular affinity with, then translates his poems in a way he believes is opposed to the canonical way of translating poetry. This is how Venuti thinks he avoids the pitfalls of *simpatico*. His translations of De Angelis are excellent — so good, in fact, that they read as if they had been originally written by an English-language poet in what I am tempted to call the new post-structuralist antitraditional tradition.

But to get back to Bishop: in what ways did I myself relate to her? We belonged to two widely separated generations and were differently gendered. But each had had the experience of living in the other's country, so that some of the cultural shock experienced by Bishop was familiar to me, though seen from the opposite end of the telescope, so to speak. Like Bishop, I had lived in Washington, D.C., and had been in San Francisco in the early '70s, when the counterculture was still going strong. In spite of our differences in age and background, as poets both of us had learned to write under the shadow of modernism. Even though to Bishop modernism was still a recent movement whereas to me it was something already enshrined in history books, Pessoa, Bandeira and Drummond were as immediate influences to me as Pound, Eliot and Moore were to Bishop. So there was a lot of ground for *simpatico* to build on. Most important of all, of course, Bishop had lived for more than a decade in Brazil, spending most of her time either in Petrópolis or in Rio, and in my own lifetime too. This made her a much more palpable presence to me than the two poets I had previously translated, Stevens and Byron. Wallace Stevens was an almost forbiddingly unapproachable figure. Although his poems fascinated me, I never warmed to the idea of Stevens as a person — in fact, he gave me the creeps; certainly no *simpatico* at

work there. Byron, my second poet, was a far more winning personality, and after reading his letters and diaries and biographies I felt almost as if I had known him personally; but the fact that he lived in early-nineteenth-century Europe naturally made him somewhat remote. Bishop was as accessible as Byron in her letters; in addition, she was an older contemporary of mine, and had lived in the same places as I. There were fascinating, though perfectly meaningless, coincidences: the first of her published letters written in Brazil is dated “December 10th or 11th or 12th [1951],” and December 12, 1951, happens to be the day when I was born; on the ground floor of the building in Copacabana where Bishop lived with Lota de Macedo Soares there is a restaurant where for years I used to go regularly. And Flamengo Park — which for some strange reason is always referred to as “Flamingo Park” throughout the published correspondence — Flamengo Park, which was created by Lota, was one of my favorite haunts when I was young. Translating Bishop’s letters, it was easy for me to identify most of the people and places she mentioned, and to correct the names she invariably misspelled. The fact that, except for her first few months here, Bishop had quite mixed feelings about Brazil did not dampen the *simpatico* at all — like most Brazilians of my generation, I myself have plenty of mixed feelings about Brazil. Besides, having lived in a foreign country I know quite well how utterly xenophobic you feel sometimes, particularly when you’re homesick. Bishop’s hatred of Rio was also easy to understand; to someone who had lived in New York, Rio in the 50’s must have seemed a terribly provincial place, not to mention the water shortages and power failures. I could even forgive Bishop for siding with the military in 1964 — after all, she had always seen Brazil through the eyes of Lota, who was very close to Carlos Lacerda.

There was only one thing about Bishop that nettled me: her almost complete lack of interest in the Portuguese language. Maybe this says more about myself than about Bishop; maybe the problem is that — to quote Caetano Veloso quoting Fernando Pessoa — my fatherland is my language, and I’m much more deeply attached to Portuguese than I am to the idea of Brazil or even Rio. But to be entirely fair to myself, the fact that Bishop — a poet, of all people! — should have lived for over a decade in a country and not bothered to learn the language properly seems to point to a serious limitation in her, an inability to connect with any world wider than her immediate surroundings. And when Bishop wrote, as she did in the introduction to her anthology of modern Brazilian poetry, that Portuguese

was a “primitive” language, and that it was impossible to use colloquial Portuguese poetically, she betrayed not only her general ignorance in linguistic matters but, what is worse, her lack of qualification to edit an anthology of modern Brazilian poetry. For the most important thing about modern Brazilian poetry is surely its affirmation of colloquial Portuguese as a proper medium for poetry. How could Bishop read *Bandeira* and *Drummond* and *Cabral* — how could she *translate* these poets — and fail to see that? The only explanation I can give to this is that Bishop (and in this she was encouraged by Lota) had long before convinced herself that Brazil was a primitive country; from this it followed that all things Brazilian — the art, the poetry, even the language — were necessarily primitive. This perhaps explains why she was so fond of *The diary of Helena Morley* but never really liked Machado de Assis much: Helena Morley was a simple, unlettered soul, just the way a Brazilian was supposed to be, whereas Machado de Assis had no business thinking and writing like a European, or a North American.

But let me talk about my actual experience of translating Bishop. This was a task that kept me busy for the better part of six years. Of course, there would be a lot more to say than I have time for, so I’m going to concentrate on a few points. One problem that cropped up pretty much regularly was the matter of backtranslation. In much of her work, Bishop describes Brazil to her friends back in the U.S. In some of these passages, which occur in the letters, in the prose and in the poetry, she often achieves striking effects by the simple resource of translating a Portuguese phrase or word, or even a proper name, quite literally. Let me give you one or two examples. In a 1953 letter Bishop writes: “Lota just told me that a little boy who is helping Paulo has a ‘very good old Portuguese name.’ It turns out to be *Magellan*.” To a Brazilian, of course, there is nothing particularly exciting about someone being called Magalhães, but to an imaginative English speaker this name, in its English form, evokes the romance of the great Portuguese navigators. So when I translated this passage I was forced to retain the English form “Magellan” and add in square brackets: “forma inglesa do sobrenome de Fernão de Magalhães.” If I had simply backtranslated “Magellan” as “Magalhães,” I’m sure I would have drawn a blank from Brazilian readers. A rather more complicated example, and one I was unable to find a solution for, is in the poem “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will.” This is a fine poem about Brazil that was included in the recent Library of America anthology of twentieth-

century American poetry, but you won't find it in my short anthology of Bishop's "Brazilian poems" or in the more comprehensive anthology I published earlier this year. The poem is set on a beach in Cabo Frio, and its protagonist is a black boy named Baltazar (Balthazar). The title already poses a problem, since the Shakespearean allusion would probably go unnoticed in Portuguese; but what finally defeated me was the closing couplet: "Today's my Anniversary," he sings, / "the Day of Kings." Now, the whole point of this is that the words of Baltazar — another of those simple, unlettered Brazilian souls — sound imposing and poetic in English; but when backtranslated into Portuguese — "Hoje é meu aniversário, dia de Reis" — they are just as unremarkable as they would have been in a straight English translation: "Today's my birthday, it's Twelfth Day." By rendering "*aniversário*" as "anniversary" and translating "*dia de Reis*" literally as "Day of Kings" — for in Portuguese the Magi are known as "the Holy Kings" — Bishop achieves an effect that I was unable to recreate in Portuguese. If I backtranslated the boy's words literally, the poem would end with a whimper. Of course, I could always put in a note explaining what was missing from the translation, as I did in the case of at least one other poem in the anthology; but in this particular case I felt that too much of the poem's effect depended on its ending. A joke with a footnote falls flat, and so would "Twelfth Morning" if its punch line lost its punch. Sometimes the best tribute a translator can pay to a poem is to refuse to translate it.

Another problem was to find the right tone in which to translate Bishop. Particularly in the case of the letters, it seemed obvious that the best course was to adopt a colloquial register that matched the original. This implied choosing a specific dialect to work with, and the obvious choice was the speech of Rio de Janeiro, for this is what Bishop heard most of the time of her stay in Brazil. Since this is my own native dialect, it was also the easiest solution for me. (Though it did have an unexpected consequence: a critic from Paraná, who obviously has no experience of Rio de Janeiro Portuguese, took me to task for translating "take a dip" as "*dar uma caída*," which is the phrase commonly used by Cariocas at the beach; the critic thought that "*dar uma caída*" meant "take a fall.") But the fact that the gap between living speech and the written language is so much wider in Brazilian Portuguese than in American English sometimes forced me to choose between two alternatives neither of which was entirely satisfactory. The toughest situations, as usual, were those involving

the second-person forms. In colloquial Brazilian Portuguese, particularly in its Southeastern dialects, there is considerably oscillation between the use of the standard second-person forms based on *tu* and the third-person forms with *você*. In writing, people tend to stick to the third-person forms, but this sometimes forces one to use rather artificial constructions, some of them almost unpronounceable (try pronouncing *Eu a amo*, with its awkward cluster of four vowels, and you will see what I mean). To simplify somewhat what is an extremely complicated situation, one might say that the *tu* constructions are more poetic than those with *você*: they are much older in the language, they are the forms used in nineteenth-century Romantic poetry and in translations of the Bible; but since *você* has come to predominate in modern times in the Southeast *tu* is often used unsystematically, flouting grammatical rules, in contexts where third-person forms already appear. In short: in the present speech of Rio de Janeiro *tu* constructions, depending on the context in which they appear, are either poetic, archaizing, *or* transgressive, racy, while *você* is unmarked, colorless, prosaic. In addition, a speaker will be more likely to use second-person or third-person forms depending on the syntactic environment. In colloquial speech, the second-person form tends to prevail as possessive pronoun and object pronoun, and it is practically the only imperative form of the verb in use for most verbs (with a few important exceptions). Now, because Bishop's letters are carefully written, however informal the tone, I used third-person forms almost everywhere. But when it came to translating the poems I soon realized that such a policy would not work in every case. As we have seen, third-person forms with *você* are not only more prosaic than second-person *tu* forms but sometimes they sound bad almost to the point of unpronounceability. On the other hand, any attempt to use *tu* forms throughout would result in a sort of fake nineteenth-century diction, and nothing could be less appropriate in a translation of Bishop than *that*. So in those poems when Bishop's diction comes closest to colloquial American English I sometimes had to mix second- and third-person forms — as people are likely to do in actual conversation in Rio.

A good example of this occurs in my translation of "The Shampoo." In the second stanza I had basically two alternatives: "*você há de convir*," the usual workaday form in Rio, and "*tu há de convir*," which would sound affectedly poetical. So I opted for the third-person form, since the general tone of the stanza is light-hearted, made humorous by

the somewhat pompous Latinate vocabulary — “precipitate and pragmatical.” But when it came to translating the third stanza I had a problem. To begin with, there was a possessive form, and when it comes to possessive forms the *tu* form usually sounds much more intimate and loving; so I used “*No teu cabelo*” rather than “*No seu cabelo*.” But it was the penultimate line that posed the biggest challenge. Here the proper, grammatically-correct third-person construction would be “*Venha, deixe-me lavá-lo,*” which sounds stilted, schoolmarmish, and is metrically impossible. So I used the second-person imperative forms, “*vem*” and “*deixa,*” which are both more natural in the spoken language and, being associated with *tu*, more poetical. Again, “*deixa eu*” is a colloquial construction, with a subject pronoun doubling as the object of “*deixa,*” whereas “*deixa-me,*” although grammatically “correct,” would sound somewhat affected. But if I tried to be consistently colloquial I would have to write “*lavar ele*” instead of “*lavá-lo;*” “*lavar ele,*” however, would be so slovenly as to destroy the delicacy of the moment. So I ended up with “*deixa eu lavá-lo,*” an evenly balanced phrase, containing both the colloquial construction “*deixa eu*” and a somewhat more careful and literary form, “*lavá-lo.*” The overall effect is, I believe (and hope), poised halfway between intimate, down-to-earth speech and the tense stylization of poetical language, which is pretty much how I read the original.

And then there was the general problem of translating English poetry into Portuguese. As all of us who work with these two languages know, English is a much more compressed language than Portuguese: English words tend to be shorter, and English syntax often dispenses with prepositions and other particles, so that it is possible to pack a lot more meaning into a given number of syllables in English than in Portuguese. Now, one of the things it didn’t take me long to realize about Bishop is that her choice of a specific poetic form often seems to be dictated by the meaning of the poem in question, so that a complex relationship between form and content emerges that the translator must respect. To stray too far from her chosen form would be to risk destroying some of her most carefully crafted effects. But in a closed-form poem the number of syllables is one of the elements that cannot be changed; so if you want to stick to the original form of a poem when translating it into Portuguese you often find you have to leave out some of the original. This means that the translator is often faced with painful choices.

Let us examine the translation of one poem that illustrates Bishop's masterly use of formal elements to convey meaning: "Cirque d'Hiver". Here Bishop adopts a curious invented form: each stanza consists of five lines, all in loose iambic pentameter, except for the fourth, which is in trimeter. The rhyming pattern for each stanza is *aBcbB*, where *B* indicates that the second and fifth line end with the same word or phrase, which also rhymes with the fourth line. (For simplicity's sake, I'm ignoring any rhymes across stanzas.) This repetitiousness underscores the conspicuous artificiality of the form, which is most appropriate in a poem that pivots on the image of a mechanical toy as a metaphor for a divided self, a poem that presents a mechanism as a being endowed with a soul. What is even more striking in this poem, however, is the way meaning is conveyed not only by the operation of the formal rules but also by those passages in which deviations from these rules occur.

One of the formal rules in "Cirque d'Hiver" is the repetition of the *B* element in the second and fifth lines of each stanza. This places extra emphasis on these words, which in most cases are related to the poem's key motifs. Thus *B*, in the second stanza, is the phrase "artificial roses"; this points to the artificiality of the toy and of the form of the poem itself. In the third stanza *B* is "soul," which stresses the contrasting and complementary point that the conspicuously artificial toy is also somehow animated — which, again, applies to the poem as well. But in the fourth stanza the *B* rule is violated, and "key" does not reappear on the last line: instead, what we get is "me." The effect of this deviation from the rule, however, is to make the word "me" all the more prominent, and thus to call our attention to the fact that this is the first occurrence of a first-person pronoun in the poem. It is here that the poet makes herself present in the text, as the toy horse's interlocutor — the poem ends with a dialogue between toy horse and poet — and this further contributes to the effect of humanization of the mechanical toy that had previously been achieved by the repetition of "soul," the *B* element in the third stanza. In this way, conformity to the rule and the single exception to it both achieve the same purpose, reinforcing each other.

In my translation I have tried to reproduce all of these features. Inevitably, the focus on these particular characteristics of the poem implies that other elements must be sacrificed. Bishop's famous eye for physical detail is not as apparent in my translation as it is in the original. For instance, the horse's "glossy black" eyes are reduced to "*olhos*

*negros*” in the first stanza, and the comparison with a star in the last stanza is missing. In the description of the dancer, the “slanting spray of artificial roses [...] stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice” is rendered simply as “*um ramo de flores artificiais / na saia e no corpete de ouropel*”. Other losses could be mentioned. But the rhyme pattern is carefully preserved, and the contrast between pentameter and trimeter is echoed by that between longer lines (mostly decasyllables) and shorter lines (mostly hexasyllables). In the fourth stanza my translation deviates from the pattern of the previous stanzas, as does the fourth stanza of the original, though not exactly in the same way. However, what I consider the most important feature is reproduced: instead of the repetition of “*patas*” we are unexpectedly given the first-person pronoun “*mim*” — rhyming not with the immediately preceding line, as in the original, but with the first line of the stanza.

In this way, I was able in my translation to reproduce most of the formal elements which struck me as of fundamental importance to the overall functioning of the poem. The price I paid was to lose much of the visual detail. This decision was not simply a matter of personal taste; it had to do with a particular point I wanted to make about Bishop. As I said in the beginning of my talk, until I began to read Bishop seriously, six years ago, I thought of her basically as a poet who wrote about animals, with a lot of physical description. Indeed, a good deal of Bishop criticism emphasizes her gift for visual observation. My own reading of Bishop, however, is quite different. Visual observation is one of the things English-language poetry tends to be good at, and it was particularly emphasized by the high-modernist generation — Ezra Pound’s early poetry and Imagism in general, as well as Marianne Moore. So what I find most remarkable about Bishop, what I believe makes her unique, is not her eye for visual detail, which was a point of departure for her, but rather her ability to put this gift for visual observation to use in the creation of highly subjective, tensely emotional poems that avoid all the usual pitfalls of subjectiveness — sentimentality, narcissism, sloppiness of form. Many poets of her generation turned away from the strictures of modernist impersonality only to fall into an exhibitionistic cult of the self; this was the case not only of Beat poetry but also of much of Robert Lowell’s later work. *This* was the point I wanted to make: Bishop made the transition from high-modernist objectivity to postmodernist subjectivity without compromising her artistic integrity, and for this, I think, she deserves the highest praise. This is, to me, the ultimate meaning of

“Cirque d’Hiver”: a poem can be a precise and calculated mechanism, down to its smallest detail, and have a soul nevertheless. Precision and formal rigor are not incompatible with psychological density; objectiveness and subjectiveness may coexist in the same poem — and when they do what you get is major poetry, like Bishop’s poetry at its best. So my leaving out the visual details in order to reproduce formal features was a calculated move. My intention was not only to make Bishop’s poetry available to Portuguese-speaking readers but also to emphasize one aspect of Bishop that, in my view, has sometimes been overlooked. At this time of day, no literary translator can afford to be as naive as to believe he is merely a colorless medium for the rewriting of a work of a literature in a different language; all translation is necessarily shaped by the translator’s expectations and prejudices. Of course, consciously the translator must aim for a reasonable degree of transparency — and the fact that absolute transparency is unattainable is no reason not to pursue it, just as the fact that immortality is unattainable is no reason why we should all go and commit suicide. But the translator should spell out what his biases are, to the extent that he is aware of them, in all fairness to the author of the original and to the readers of his translation. This is perhaps an additional meaning of transparency that has not received enough attention: transparency of the translator’s intentions. I believe it is just as important as the other kind.

Translating a poet is, in a way, a full-time occupation. Even when you’re not actually working on the poems — when you’re having a meal, or taking a shower, or trying to sleep at night — possible solutions to specific lines keep popping into your head. So even though I translated plenty of other things during my six years with Elizabeth Bishop, in a sense they were just that — six years reading and translating and writing about and thinking about Bishop and her work, which today, over two decades after her death, is more widely acclaimed than ever. Twenty years may not be much in literary history, but six years is a long time in terms of a translator’s working life. This talk of mine tonight is also a way for me to say good-bye to Elizabeth Bishop.