

Elizabeth Bishop, Modernist Revisionary

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The career of the late modernist American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) reveals a significant difference from the "typical" pattern of recognition accorded to poets in the United States, in which even poets of high reputation undergo a period of negative evaluation in the 20 years after their death. Elizabeth Bishop received recognition among her peers and acknowledgment as a second generation modernist poet with a highly acute "visual" sensibility, but her reputation has only grown since her death, and the previous criticisms of her work as being too detached and impersonal have given way to a richer awareness of the revisionary implications in her work regarding what the role of the poet and of poetry can be in today's world.

Elizabeth Bishop's modest public persona and limited involvement in the American poetry circuit gave her an "outsider" status, which is reflected in her avoidance of a strong, central lyric voice. Bishop's contemporaries tended to conflate her self-effacing persona with the 'depersonalization' advocated by Eliot and Pound. But one might argue that this concept fluctuates between an extinction and an apotheosis of the self. The "absence" that replaces the central lyrical "I" of Romanticism can achieve, in its apparent escape from the limits of a single consciousness, a power commensurate with the disappearance of self. The dispersal of the self in a polyvocal modernist text, while seeming to threaten identic integrity, can equally magnify the self by expanding its boundaries.

Bishop's self-effacement offers a far more radical disruption of authority than we find in the first-generation modernist critique of the Romantic poetic identity. She questions how poetic authority is constituted. Her intensity of focus shifts the emphasis from the seeing eye to the object, creating the impression of an almost invisible persona in many of her poems. Yet while Bishop's reticent persona and minute, precise descriptions work to make her presence "invisible," her poems resist the godlike implications of the modernist unseen seer.

Bishop's "modesty" belongs to the specifically female tradition of which Emily Dickinson

stands as the earliest exemplar. What makes Dickinson so important a model for Bishop is the self-consciousness and irony with which she employs a stance of self-effacement that contains an ironic handling of conventionally assigned gender roles, subversively embracing a pose of "modesty." This strategy moves from an acceptance of limitation to a redefinition of power.

Of all Bishop's early readers it is the first-generation American modernist poet Marianne Moore who quickly recognized how much of Bishop's power lay in a carefully chosen literary reticence. Moore met Bishop in 1934, at the very beginning of her literary career. Their enduring friendship began as a mentor-protégée relationship, in which Moore provided Bishop with detailed criticism, emotional support and invaluable professional advancement in the form of introductions and recommendations. Given the fact that she had "lost" her own mother to mental illness and institutionalization as a child, Bishop also must have taken some comfort from the extremely close relationship between Marianne Moore and her mother, with whom she lived until her mother's death when Marianne was 60. Bishop's poetic tribute "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" (1948), invokes Moore as a magical, good witch who might fly toward her "like a daytime comet/ with a long unnebulous train of words":

Mounting the sky with natural heroism,
above the accidents, above the malignant movies,
the taxicabs and injustices at large,
while horns are resounding in your beautiful ears
that simultaneously listen to
a soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer,
please come flying.

For whom the grim museum will behave
like courteous male bower-birds,
for whom the agreeable lions lie in wait
on the steps of the Public Library,
eager to rise and follow through the doors
up into the reading rooms,
please come flying.
We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,

or play at a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but please
please come flying.

The poem is a literal invitation to Marianne, asking her to come from Brooklyn, to Manhattan, and pay a visit. It is also a request to put aside grief, Marianne Moore's beloved mother having died only a short while before the poem was written. The poem is playful and affectionate, full of the important details of everyday life for Marianne Moore, who also could be counted on to catch the echo of Pablo Neruda's elegy "Alberto Rojas Jimenez Viene Volando" in the refrain.

This same sort of objective, formalized distancing via repetition is put to quite another use in her 1950 poem "Visits to St. Elizabeth's," in which she combines pathos at the situation of the poet Ezra Pound, incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital in Washington, D.C. from 1948-1957 after being found incompetent to stand trial for treason, with a savage criticism of Pound's anti-Semitism, effected by a slight variation in the description of one of the other patients she would meet during her visits to the hospital while she was Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1948-49. It had somehow become an informal and unstated part of the job to escort literary figures wishing to visit Pound at St. Elizabeth's. Bishop did not shirk this responsibility, although she found Pound's massive egocentricity and as yet unrenounced anti-Semitism extremely hard to bear. She held back the poem from publication for 7 years, out of her natural reticence and shyness, and to allow time for political passions to cool regarding Pound's wartime fascist radio broadcasts from Italy. The poem is based on the children's rhyme, "The House that Jack Built:"

This is the house of Bedlam.

This is the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the time
of the tragic man

that lies in the house of Bedlam.

.....

This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
over the creaking sea of board
beyond the sailor
winding his watch
that tells the time
of the cruel man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a world of books gone flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
over the creaking sea of board
of the batty sailor
that winds his watch
that tells the time
of the cruel man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is there, is flat,
for the widowed Jew in the newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
waltzing the length of a weaving board
by the silent sailor
that hears his watch
that ticks the time
of the tedious man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

These are the years and the walls and the door
that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to feel if the world is there and flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances joyfully down the ward
into the parting seas of board
past the staring sailor
that shakes his watch
that tells the time
of the poet, the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the soldier home from the war.
These are the years and the walls and the door
that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is round or flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances carefully down the ward,
walking the plank of a coffin board
with the crazy sailor
that shows his watch
that tells the time
of the wretched man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This confrontation with Ezra Pound is doubly significant, in that it immediately preceded a break with the American poetry scene, when Bishop left the U.S. to live for nearly 20 years in Brazil, and because it represented an act of self-definition for her poetic "voice," rejecting the epic-heroic tradition Pound embodied.

The shy, reclusive young Elizabeth Bishop must have been grateful for the inspiration of Marianne Moore's career, learning by her example that it was possible to be a poet without subjecting oneself totally to the politics and economics of the American poetic/academic scene. By nature a slow and meticulous writer, shy and extremely private, Bishop had no

inclination toward the public life. Marianne Moore only allowed herself to become a public figure and a presence in the popular culture of America only after the death of her mother, when she herself was over 60 years old. Bishop may have seized Moore's example as a justification for her own "withdrawal."

Marianne Moore was undoubtedly the most important single influence on Bishop's poetic practice and career. What really changed for Bishop when she began reading Moore was her idea of what, among the objects and emotions of the world, was suitable for poetry. Bishop's earliest book, North & South, reflects some fondness for Moore's mannerisms – for instance, the unattributed quotation, or the use of quotation marks not in the usual way, but as boundaries for units of association which cannot be expressed by grammar or syntax, but she never showed an inclination toward syllabics or strict metrical verse, which Moore showed, off and on, throughout her life.

Because of a great many similarities between the lives of Bishop and Moore, and because parts of Bishop's poems occasionally sound like parts of Moore's poems, reviewers tended for a long time to speak of the two under the same heading. Both women attended exclusive women's colleges (Moore, Bryn Mawr '09; Bishop, Vassar '34) where they arrived without literary ambitions. Both considered being scientists or painters instead of poets until each was encouraged by publication in her college's undergraduate literary magazine. Neither woman married, each published very few poems at long intervals and they were friends with each other for many years. Their poetry seems at first similarly unpretentious, precisely focused, finely crafted, "elegant."

Marianne Moore sponsored Elizabeth Bishop's inclusion in her first major publication, a 1935 anthology of young poets, and helped to choose the three poems included, "The Reprimand," "Three Valentines" and "The Map." Both "The Reprimand" and "Three Valentines" possess recognizable Bishop irony and a certain concreteness of imagery we know as hers, but both are self-indulgently romantic and dimly focused, and both were written before Bishop and Moore met.

If we compare "The Reprimand:"

If you taste tears too often, inquisitive tongue,
You'll find they something you'd not reckoned on;
Crept childish out to touch eye's own phenomenon,

Return, into your element. Tears belong
To only eyes; their deepest sorrow they wrung
From water. Where wept water's gone
That residue is sorrow, salt and wan,
Your bitter enemy, who leaves the face white-strung.

Tears, taster, have a dignity in display,
Carry an antidotal gift for drying.
Unsuited to a savoring by the way,
Salt puckers tear-drops up, ends crying.
Oh curious, cracked and chapped, now will you say,
Tongue, "Grief's not mine" and bend yourself to sighing?

with "The Map," we see an immense difference:

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shadows, at its edges
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under.
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging at the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom.
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
The names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
–the printer here experiencing the same excitement
as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger

like women feeling for the smoothness of yard goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,
lending the land their waves' own conformation:
and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,
profiles investigate the sea, where land is.
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?
-What suits the character or the native waters best.
Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

The example of meaning generated through contemplation of a single object, the reach of simile, the wisdom of tone, the naturalness of diction, the familiar object made strange and new by the poem—these are what Moore gave when she gave Bishop to herself, infinite subjects less hackneyed than "sorrow" and "love" and the ability to trust her own instincts in handling those subjects. Bishop found her own poetic voice, of course, but she never broke from this way of thinking about poetry—the function of careful observation, the uses of reticence, the focus on the object, the dangers of abstraction, and the benefits of hard work.

The store of poetic models Bishop kept in her head and notebooks was filled with Moore's poems, particularly those in *Observations*. Compare these lines from Moore's "A Grave" (1924):

Man looking into the sea,
taking the view from those who have as much right to it as
you have to yourself,
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.
The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-
foot at the top,
reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic
of the sea;

the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
There are others besides you who have worn that look—
whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish
no longer investigate them
for their bones have not lasted

with these from Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" (1947):

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water... Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.

It is as if the two poets stood looking at the same seashore, but the two poems diverge where the poets' sensibilities diverged. Moore is not present in her poem at all, and her fishermen lower their nets, "unconscious of the fact that they are / desecrating a grave" and in danger of finding their own. Her sea has "nothing to give but a well-excavated grave." Bishop's poem is intensely personal, her fisherman "a friend of my grandfather," and her sea yields a terrible, necessary sustenance to him and to her, an icy symbiosis which runs "up the long ramp / descending into the water." Moore's seascape is a populous, active, noisy place, but the activity she describes (rowboats, waves, birds, bell-buoys) one suspects might also have gone on in Bishop's scene had she not chosen to exclude it. Bishop concentrates instead

on the mesmerizing motion, the dangerous seductiveness of the sea's offerings, where Moore comments on the foolhardiness of those who would be seduced to their graves by that sea.

"At the Fishhouses" reveals a dreamlike, twilight landscape in which elements blend into a Wordsworthian silvery, luminous whole:

All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
among the wild jagged rocks,
is of an apparent translucence
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.
The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with small iridescent flies crawling on them.

The repetition of "s" sounds in "silver," "surface," "sea," "swelling," "slowly," "considering," "spilling," "silver," spills over line breaks, swells into a trance-inducing rhythm, but finally pulls back into the more rugged, clumped syllables of "lobster," "pots," "jagged," "rocks." The sea threatens to "spill over" the line between land and water, but never does: as we shall see, the maintenance of that boundary is central to the poem.

Though of dreamlike loveliness, this is a landscape of loss. The abandonment of the twilight scene, the pungent smell of decaying codfish, the "melancholy," bloodlike stains of the rusted capstan, prepare for the identification of the fisherman ("He was a friend of my grandfather") and of the poem's true elegiac nature: the mysterious loss of the landscape offers tribute to the poet's grandfather, who had died before her return to the family home. Bishop locates loss in the act of homecoming, returning to the "cold hard mouth / of the world" to confront a primal separation from sources. This separation expresses itself in the poem as an emphasis on uncrossable boundaries and on figuration, which is linked to the

condition of exile.

What the speaker finds upon return is not the beloved parent, but a substitution, a "figure" for the reality. The old fisherman, covered with the iridescent fish-scales that absorb him into the silvery landscape, serves as a figure of passage between two worlds, bringing the poet to the very edge of the shore, and preparing for the second encounter of the poem, between the speaker and an offshore seal, another liminal figure.

"At the Fishhouses" is divided into two sections, each presenting an encounter between the speaker and a local inhabitant, joined by a short hinge section organized by the transitional image of the ladder:

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

The ramp links two realms, the site of transfer marked by directional words: "down," "up," "descending," "across," "down," "down." The boundary that both separates and connects constitutes the geographic equivalent to metaphor, the carrying over or transfer between different elements. The "intervals of four or five feet" recall the poetic line, suggesting that language itself is situated on the boundary line.

Hovering at the water's edge, the speaker turns her attention to the sea:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.

I also sang "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water ... Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.

Each time the speaker begins to describe the sea, in a series of adjectives that, without punctuation, sweep toward the end of the line, she breaks off, first for the comic introduction of the seal, then, looking over her shoulder, for the Christmas trees. When the sea description is finally allowed to build, the swelling "s" sounds of the first section return ("seems," "suspended," "stones," "seen," "sea," same," "slightly," "swinging," "stones," "icily," "stones," "stones"), now with implications of an apocalyptic deluge. The repetition of sounds creates an incantory rhythm that marks the potential dissolving of boundaries.

The biblical image of the flood sets the context for the Pentecostal imagery of the imagined encounter with a powerful, otherworldly element:

If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,

then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Again, repetitions ("ache," "ache," "hand," "hand," "burn," "burns," "burn") signal a passage into another realm, a breaking down of the boundaries that define our lives, separating land from sea, water from fire, mortal from immortal, and language from silence. To cross over would be to burn one's tongue, not the Pentecostal "gift of tongues," the profusion of languages bestowed upon the Apostles in tongues of flame, but the loss of language, which Bishop hints at with the pun "utterly free" (free from utterance). The "cold hard mouth" does not speak but threatens to swallow, representing for the poet not a beginning but an end of language. Immersion would result in a silencing like that of the child retaken by the womb. The reference to the undersea "breasts" of the world confirm that the sea is our primal, maternal source, its "absolutely clear" waters indicating the presence of the absolute, the absolute transparency we yearn for (the poem moves us from "opaque" to "translucence" to "clear"), the transcendental knowledge which the poem's end firmly tells us will never be ours, except by analogy.

Bishop's rejection of literal immersion and embracing of the purely figurative value of the origin may be rooted in a specifically feminine literary concern. Literature by women often shows a pervasive anxiety about objectification, particularly in the form of a "merging with nature" that threatens their status as speaking subjects. There is a conflating of images of "rock" and "mother," portending silence or death for the poet, as with Bishop's undersea "rocky breasts" from which the fatally cold sea is drawn. Bishop avoids the dangerous objectification and hence silencing of the daughter-poet. Her homecoming poem resonates with implications of an eternal return, emphasizing the figural nature of a "maternal origin," a move that points to a deconstruction of the notion of origin itself.

Bishop invokes Romantic images of the terrible return in order to reject the quest. In doing so, she reaffirms her own ability to speak and accepts the losses and limitations of mortality. She emphasizes the limitations of our knowledge by twice removing us: the sea is not what we imagine knowledge to be; it is like what we imagine knowledge to be. This is "historical"

knowledge—the knowledge that can only summon images of eternity through repetition: "I have seen it over and over." The knowledge of history is, for Bishop, the knowledge of exile from sources. It is a figurative knowledge of substitutions and approximations.

The two moments in which Bishop breaks the mounting apocalyptic movement are keys to her understanding of historical knowledge as figuration. The comic story of the seal hinges upon the baptism pun:

He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.

The joke works because of the distance between literal and figurative meanings of the word "immersion." The seal is literally immersed; the baptismal candidate turns the literal immersion into a figurative emblem of the death and resurrection of Christ.

In "At the Fishhouses," the darker implications of the speaker's belief in "total immersion," dramatized by the image of the gray water swinging "above the stones and then the world," are fended off by a foregrounding of the figurative sense of words. The hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," given its alien audience, becomes heavily figurative of human vulnerability, the desire for protection, and the metaphorical, hence historical, operations of the mind. The hymn's title is itself a metaphor, an imaging of a divine presence otherwise unknowable. The fortress is an image of endurability, an imaginative approximation of eternity. We temporalize what lies beyond time, so that our historical predication is essentially figurative, and therefore derived forever. The turn to the Christmas trees, the second breaking of the apocalyptic rhythm, similarly works to emphasize figural substitutions. The fir trees wait not simply for their cutting but for "Christmas," a ritual and hence figurative celebration of the Incarnation.

Bishop returns in her poem of homecoming to confront inevitable exile and the metaphorical nature of knowledge. The condition of exile nevertheless affirms the poetic use of language. The return to an origin that figures in "At the Fishhouses," as in her other poems of travel, reveals Bishop's engagement with Romantic homecoming tropes. In poems from the first half of her career, Bishop attests to the power of the conception of an absolute origin. The sublime vision (the water becoming a "transmutation of fire") of "At the Fishhouses" is achieved by approaching the great maternal / primal source. The weight Bishop gives the figural sense of the return, however, demystifies the notion of origin and gives implicit value to

the condition of exile. Her emphasis falls on the need to resist our regressive quest, suggesting the self-destructive nature of this "homesickness." Bishop embraces her role as a poet of exile, claiming for herself a marginality that undermines the notion of a privileged center. In revising her Romantic inheritance, Bishop seeks to define a vision that resists appropriation and a poetic identity that, in being unhoused and decentered, attempts to move beyond hierarchical dualisms grounded by the myth of centrality or the quest for the absolute origin.

