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Bishop's Time

Elizabeth Bishop died in 1979 and immediately ascended to the heaven inhabited by dead poets—George Herbert, John Keats, and Emily Dickinson—whom everyone venerates. In a review of Alice Quinn's edition of Bishop's unfinished poems, William Logan put the following question apropos of Bishop's ascendancy: "Why has our age become so enamored of a poet who almost to the end of her life required a special taste?" Logan doesn't quite answer that question, though he does suggest what is probably undemonstrable—that readers "adore themselves for adoring her." Nor can I demonstrate that the poets listed above are indisputably ones whom everyone venerates; but they share a winning vulnerability to the assaults of life, a vulnerability that many sorts of readers find deeply appealing, indeed irresistible. By contrast, two poets who ascended to another part of heaven, John Donne and Robert Lowell, for all their dramatizing of vulnerability ("Batter my heart three-personed God"; "I hear my ill spirit sob in each blood cell") beat—in Lowell's words from a letter to Bishop—the "big drum" so forcefully that they seem scarcely in need of our sympathetic concern. At any rate, it's undeniable that Bishop's reputation has been untouched by anything like adverse criticism, and it is no surprise that she is the first twentieth-century woman poet to be included in *The Library of America*.¹

With the exception of Robert Lowell, it would be difficult to find a poet who, with her first book, *North & South*, got off to a more smashing start. She had met Randall Jarrell in January of 1947—he was spending a year as literary editor of *The Nation*—who introduced her to Lowell, with whom she would have a rich, sometimes troubled friendship that lasted until Lowell's death.

¹ ELIZABETH BISHOP: Poems, Prose, and Letters, ed. by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz. *The Library of America*. \$40.00.

(Her beautiful poem “North Haven” is dedicated to his memory.) Both Lowell and Jarrell reviewed *North & South* briefly but trenchantly. Lowell called her poems, in the tri-partite clusters of adjectives he was addicted to, “unrhetorical, cool, and beautifully thought out,” also praising her “large, controlled and elaborate common-sense.” Already in her first book, she is “one of the best craftsmen alive.” Jarrell said that all her poems had written under them, “*I have seen it*,” and called “Roosters” and “The Fish” “two of the most calmly beautiful, deeply sympathetic poems of our time.” There would follow over the years, and as future volumes were published, accolades from poet-contemporaries such as James Merrill, John Ashbery, Anthony Hecht, and Richard Wilbur, as well as from younger ones like Frank Bidart, Robert Pinsky, Mark Strand, and (one of the co-editors of this volume along with Robert Giroux), Lloyd Schwartz. David Kalstone’s 1989 book, published after his death, explored Bishop’s relation to Marianne Moore and to Lowell; there have also been a biography by Brett Millier and a number of useful critical studies, Thomas Travisano’s being the first comprehensive one.² Books and essays will continue to appear, with “readings” of individual poems proliferating until a weary reader returns gladly, once more, to the poems themselves.

Bishop’s poems and translations make up about a third of The Library of America’s thousand pages; the other two thirds consist partly of stories, most of them set in the Nova Scotia landscape where Bishop spent part of her childhood. There are also essays and reminiscences, including a memoir (“Efforts of Affection”) of Marianne Moore, and a very amusing piece titled “The U.S.A. School of Writing,” about a correspondence school in New York City where Bishop worked for a short time after graduating from Vassar. Some “Literary Statements and Reviews” in this collection are mostly brief, and the volume ends with a selection of her letters, the most interesting of them to Lowell. But it is the poems that count and that will be considered here.

The four volumes of them she published during her life are evenly spaced out in roughly ten-year periods: *North & South*

² Reviews of Bishop may be found in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estes (Ann Arbor, 1983). David Kalstone’s book is *Becoming a Poet* (New York, 1989). Brett Millier’s biography is *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley, 1995). Thomas Travisano’s book is *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1988).

(1947); *A Cold Spring* (1955); *Questions of Travel* (1965); and *Geography III* (1976). *The Complete Poems* (1983) appeared after her death, and the unfinished poems and fragments (*Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box*, 2006), welcomed by some, was strenuously condemned by Helen Vendler on the grounds that, considering Bishop's scrupulousness about what she published, she could not have looked favorably on resurrecting into print such unpublished items. In their questioning, exploratory, non-authoritarian way of proceeding, her poems are extremely hospitable to critics, who are unlikely to be "wrong" about some particular interpretive scheme to which they are inclined. Similarly, from my classroom experience with her poems, I can say that students don't feel intimidated by them and are relatively unworried that they have missed something big. This is all to the good, insofar as it encourages them to give plenty of time to the poem's surface; it presents a problem when, in writing, a critic substitutes, for Bishop's patient procedures, his or her own probably less delicate and qualified ones. In other words, professional academic criticism may be tempted to say too much, go on for too long, in the attempt to reach language adequate to Bishop's effects.

An example of such straining can be seen in the following commentary on a crucial sequence from her much-admired "In the Waiting Room," the first poem in *Geography III*. In this poem the almost seven-year-old girl accompanies her aunt to the dentist, and while the aunt is in the dentist's chair, the little girl sits in the waiting room full of grown-up people. She reads an article in *National Geographic* and looks at its pictures of a volcano erupting, of a dead man, of babies, and of black, naked African women whose breasts are "horrifying." Suddenly a cry of pain comes from inside the dentist's office, precipitating in the little girl a sensation of identifying with the voice and of "falling off the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space." Nothing stranger has ever, could ever happen to the child, who thinks

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*

and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How—I didn't know any
word for it—how “unlikely” . . .

Here are some words from a three-page commentary on the poem by a practiced critic of modern poetry:

A shocking experience of identification, as we have seen, creates a simultaneous loss of original identity, and this loss is never overcome. The inscrutable volcano, the inside of the child's mouth, the dentist's chamber, are all figures for the abyss the child has discovered, and as she peers into it she is full of questions, another and another—why? what? how?—until she is thrown back into the exclamatory “how ‘unlikely’” and it is clear that they will never be answered. But the transformation of question into exclamation does create a sense of recognition, even if it is the permanently strange that is recognized. We get only a “sidelong glance,” not fulfillment or total recognition. Yet, for a moment, this glance does begin to organize the dualities toward some unutterable simplicity. The questions mediate between absolute difference and undifferentiation, between stillness and total flux, and in this way, however fleetingly, accommodate the self most.³

It can't be said about these sentences of Bonnie Costello's that they fail to notice this or that about the poem's language, or misstate the dramatic situation of “In the Waiting Room.” At the same time, they feel overburdened and heavy-handed—not helping a reader make a more successful entry into the poem. What might be accepted as useful clarifications and identifications of a poem by Yeats or Pound or Stevens seem beside the point when the language is as free of difficulties to be puzzled out or extravagances to be described as Bishop's in these particular lines. She loved George Herbert but does not attempt his witty conceits and doublenesses. Admittedly, the poems in the late *Geography III* are different, in their achievement of a phrasing that is natural and breathlike (she used these adjectives about Lowell's *Life Studies*), from the complicated, “surrealist” wit of early ones like “The Man-Moth,” “The Weed,” or “The Monument,” which seem better candidates for explicative commentary.

³ Bonnie Costello, “The Impersonal and the Interrogative in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop,” in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, pp. 119–132.

But for most readers, I think, the later poems represent the summit of Bishop's poetic art, and they present a special and formidable challenge to the critic who aims at relevant notation.

When a precocious senior at Vassar, Bishop published (in *The Vassar Review*) a first-rate essay on the poet who, along with Herbert, ranked at the top of her "favorite" list. The essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins bears the subtitle "Notes on Timing in His Poetry," and its opening paragraph calls attention to what would be a central preoccupation in her own work. Since, she begins, poetry is motion, it is essential to consider "the releasing, checking, timing, and repeating of the movement of the mind according to ordered systems." For her at least,

an idea of *timing* in poetry helps to explain many of those aspects of poetry which are so inadequately expressed by most critics; why poets differ so much from each other; why using exactly the same meters and approximate vocabularies two poets produce such different effects; why some poetry seems at rest and other poetry in action.

Hopkins' poems need to be considered in such terms, and she mentions among other things, as central aspects of his technique, "abundant use of alliteration, repetition, and inside rhymes," as "characteristics which place firm seals upon his words, joining them, at the same time indicating the sound relationships in the same way that guide lines, or repeated forms might, in a drawing." Attention to such matters is crucial in responding properly to any poet but seems especially so when Bishop's work is the subject.⁴

One of her most motion-filled poems is "Sandpiper" (in *Questions of Travel*), a detached (compared to "In the Waiting Room") contemplation of a bird on a beach. "Sandpiper" features the alliteration, repetition, and inside rhymes she speaks about in her Hopkins essay as central in creating the "timing" of a poem. Here are the first three stanzas of the five-stanza poem:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake,
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

⁴ The best account of Bishop's poetic rhythm is Penelope Laurans, "Elizabeth Bishop, 'Old Correspondences': Prosodic Transformations in Elizabeth Bishop," in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, pp. 75–95.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The only allusion in these stanzas, indeed in the whole poem, is to the first line of Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" ("To see the world in a grain of sand"), since this is a Blakean sandpiper in its awkward but controlled panic. Robert Lowell once remarked sardonically that no one, except for St. Anthony or a catatonic, wants to see the world in a grain of sand, but this little sandpiper seems wholly committed to the project. A reader who listens to the poem and follows the curve of its developing voice will encounter pleasing surprises (Bishop thought that surprise was the *sine qua non* of any poem). The movement of its first line ("The roaring alongside he takes for granted") is extended in the thirteen-syllable second line, as the "r" sound builds up ("roaring," "granted," "every," "world"). We are given not just one "runs" but two, with its pause after the third line's first foot, both awkward and controlled. "Shake," "south," and "state" aren't exactly internal rhymes but perhaps close enough to count. The third line hiccups after "he runs," then pulls itself up (as the bird veers to the south) with the unobvious but perfect "finical," and with "awkward" pointing toward the "state of controlled panic" (that last word picking up "finical"). The stanza completes itself with the cool rhyming of "shake" and "Blake," and there will be more of the same in stanzas that follow.

Perceptions about a poem's "timing," such as the remarks above, don't make for sentences one takes great satisfaction in writing, or that a reader is likely to warm to. What they remind me of is how much more rewarding it is to deal with a Bishop poem in the classroom, by reading aloud, by rereading a line with a different emphasis on this word, that syllable. If this could be said about any poet, it seems especially to the point with someone

who continually and subtly exploits the resources of voice, the natural or breathlike sounds of a Herbert, a Hopkins, a Frost. (It may also help explain why previous to this I have never attempted to write about Bishop's poetry.)

From Randall Jarrell on down, every critic has praised her for regarding, like the sandpiper, "(no detail too small)." Jarrell's italicized *I have seen it* was taken as conferring upon her an unambiguous compliment. Yet a passion for detail may have its possible overkill. The critic James Wood, writing about prose fiction, notes that while he relishes and consumes "detail," he also chokes on it. "Overaesthetic appreciation of detail" (Wood's words) in a post-Flaubertian world can stifle as well as stimulate. So it is possible to have mixed responses to the plethora of detail in certain Bishop poems; for example, the very first one in *North & South*, "The Map," which begins

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
 Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
 showing the line of long sea-wedded 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?

Very delicate, scrupulous, fastidious—yes, but there is a part of me that says, in responding to "Shadows, or are they shallows," oh, *you* decide, *I* really don't care. "Is the land tugging at the sea from under?" Well, it could be, poet, please let me know. She wrote in 1964 to her first biographer and critic, Anne Stevenson, that so far she had produced "what I feel is a rather 'precious' kind of poetry, although I am very much opposed to the precious." This is well said, and it shows that she was aware of possibly sounding just too, too . . . finical. Another letter, to Lowell in 1960, wondered whether "I'm going to turn into solid cuteness in my poetry if I don't watch out—or if I do watch out." Again we see how clearly she was aware of her gift, also aware of its possible abuse, its manner becoming—as Jarrell said happened to Auden's in the 1930s—"bureaucratized," formulaic.

With hindsight, and doubtless some simplification, it appears to me that the “surreal” mode on display in many of the poems from *North & South* was something Bishop needed to develop out of; that is, out of the highly worked fantasies of such impressively built poems as “The Monument” and “The Man-Moth” that can also be charged with the inclination toward preciousness, even cuteness. (The final directive of “The Monument,” “Watch it closely,” has always seemed to me a shade cute.) Jarrell was right to single out “Roosters” and “The Fish” as the two “deeply sympathetic” poems in which a more resonant, not at all fussy, voice takes command. It is a voice that will emerge again in the final section of “At the Fishhouses,” as the narrator confronts the water (“Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / the clear gray icy water”) and imagines dipping her hand in and tasting it:

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.

What is “seen” here is something far beyond the visual, as it is at the end of “The Armadillo”—the Bishop poem that meant so much to Lowell—when in the italicized final stanza, after observing the fire balloon and its effects on the small animals it disturbs, the anonymous voice speaks for everyone:

*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!*

The too pretty, dreamlike mimicry at which the voice exclaims may well refer to the preceding un-italicized stanzas describing the emergence of the owls from their burned nest, the rabbit

“with fixed ignited eyes” and the “glistening” armadillo himself, “a weak mailed fist” against the sky. At any rate it is a visionary moment (the overused word still seems appropriate) created by the narrator’s rising to a pitch of statement, exclamatory in “The Armadillo” but correspondingly intense in “At the Fishhouses,” moving the utterance out of or beyond any particular tone. To the extent that Bishop moves, and moves us beyond “tone,” such exclamations resist paraphrase by making interpretive efforts feel somehow beside the point, crude or callow. She wrote May Swenson in 1955, “I think myself that my best poems seem rather distant, and sometimes I wish I could be as objective about everything else as I seem to be in and about them. I don’t think I’m very successful when I get personal,—rather, sound personal . . .” Such depersonalizing occurs in these sequences from “At the Fishhouses” and “The Armadillo,” but they would hardly be so effective—breathhtaking, even—without the breathed, nuanced, varied tone and tones in the earlier parts of each poem: without timing.

Bishop once provided Anne Stevenson with a capsule account of her own temperament. She said she had never liked Emily Dickinson much, but after reading through the collected edition found many poems to admire “though not the oh-the-pain-of-it-all” ones. She admits to snobbery about “the humorless Martha-Graham kind of person who does like Emily Dickinson”: “In fact I think snobbery governs a great deal of my taste. I have been very lucky in having had, most of my life, some witty friends—and I mean real wit, quickness, wild fancies, remarks that make one cry with laughing.” Most of her friends, such as the aunt she liked best, her partner Lota de Macedo Soares, Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings, were very “funny” people: “Perhaps I need such people to cheer me up.” A moment in her poetry that seems to me quintessential “real wit,” a truly wild and “funny” stroke, occurs in “Arrival at Santos,” the first poem in *Questions of Travel* (although she had printed it previously in *A Cold Spring*). Its ten quatrains with their rollicking, offbeat cadences and seemingly catch-as-can rhymes, present the speaker, about to debark into the port city of Santos, for customs inspection. She notes that despite this new environment, she will encounter familiar things, like a “flag,”

And coins, I presume,
and paper money; they remain to be seen.
And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward,
myself and a fellow passenger named Miss Breen,

descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters
waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans.
Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook!
Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's

skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression.
Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall

s, New York. There. We are settled.

An important, though not the only, reason why I find this sequence so satisfying—so satisfyingly *funny*, to use Bishop's word—is that I once heard James Merrill read the poem aloud. His wonderfully nuanced voice did an especially fine job with "Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's // skirt!"—exclamations he delivered in a mock-horrified, somewhat campy mode that Bishop herself would surely have loved. Merrill would speak, in a tribute written just after she died, of her poems as "wryly radiant, more touching, more unaffectedly intelligent than any written in her lifetime." That phrase "wryly radiant" is as good as any I've found to catch the mixture of wit and wonder that was hers in so many of the poems. To be wryly radiant is to be something quite distinct from what Frost liked to call, with a condescending twist in his voice, "poetical." In a rather unbuttoned conversation she had with an interviewer in 1966, when she had begun to teach writing at the University of Washington, Bishop said she had told her class that the poems they'd handed in contained "a disproportionate number of *haikus*," and were "not very well written either," "more like the sort of thing one might jot down when one is feeling vaguely poetic." She mused upon the students in that class,

with their trusting eyes and their clear complexions. Have you seen