

READING ELIZABETH BISHOP AS A RELIGIOUS POET

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Bishop is usually described as a modernist poet with a skeptical mind. This essay contests the critical tendency to dismiss religion as a serious concern in her poetry, by first challenging the widespread dismissal in the United States of all religious approaches to modern poetry and then challenging the tendency to disclaim attempts to read Elizabeth Bishop in religious terms. The essay includes a close reading of "The End of March" as a text which invites intertextual commentary from a Christian perspective.

This paper is part of a longer project I am engaged in which involves reading several secular modern women poets as writers addressing at a deep level an issue which it is considered distasteful to discuss in public. I mean the issue of religion. Whereas thirty years ago, during the heyday of devotion to T.S. Eliot, religion figured prominently in the discussion of the meanings of poems, in the contemporary conversation, it has replaced sexuality as the domain of the "obscene." Thirty years ago, when I was coming up through high school and then into college, it was the obscene that chilled and fascinated me, making the reading of poetry a potentially subversive act. Now, in middle age, I find I am again attracted to what remains "off-stage" in critical discourse, for what we must not speak about in public marks a boundary that invites transgression. Reading against the critical grain, I aspire to become, as Elizabeth Bishop might well have put it, "awful but cheerful."

It is commonly said that Elizabeth Bishop was not religious, a fact that I do not dispute if one means by religion an institutional affiliation, a perpetual other worldliness, a contempt for the flesh, a belief that one can get out of the quotidian into a world beyond loss. That these impulses have figured largely in the history of religion (and perhaps rightly so) cannot be denied. Still, these elements of religious practice

are part of what is “embarrassing” about religion today. My present belief, however, is that there are ways of understanding the domain of the spirit that have considerable relevance to the work of a poet such as Elizabeth Bishop.

I find here that I am tempted to hide behind an intellectual argument, which seems to me relatively easy to make, that there are many allusions to religion and much religious symbolism in Bishop’s poetry. In that case one might talk about reading Bishop’s poetry for the notice it takes of religious traditions, some of which have been overlooked in previous discussion. But the “awful” truth is my interest goes deeper than that. I actually want to talk about reading Bishop because of the interest a religious person might take in her work. It is not religious symbolism which is obscene, after all; it is faith.

Some of Bishop’s most impressive critics have insisted that this is not the way to read her. Helen Vendler, for instance, with her usual ability to cut right to the core, recently dismissed the impulse to read religion in Bishop’s writing by saying: “For Bishop, the charm and interest of life was that it was as it is; she believed in no religion, no afterlife, no external sanctions of morality” (NYRB, June 9, 1994, p. 40). In her essay “Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly,” Vendler finds “The Moose” a poem about “the inexhaustibility of being” (95), a concept that certainly seems to border on the religious to me, but Vendler sees “the presence approaching from the wood” (the moose) as a “role that a god would play in a pre-Wordsworthian poem,” not presumably thereafter.

As several critics have noted, Bishop wrote to Robert Lowell, “I believe now that complete agnosticism and straddling the fence on everything is my natural posture —although I wish I weren’t” (May 20, 1955; Costello 8). The title of Robert Dale Parker’s book —*The Unbeliever*— is echoed in a number of studies that insist upon Bishop’s skepticism which is certainly one of the poles of her mentality. Nevertheless, in a critical conversation which allows feminism to reclaim Bishop despite her deep skepticism about feminists, which allows poststructuralism to appropriate a poet who seems to insist upon “what really happened,” there surely must be room to explore a terrain that not so long ago was also believed to be of interest: that is, the domain of the spirit. Indeed, three critics —Joanne Feit Diehl, Tom Travisano and Bonnie Costello— have found cause to do so. Diehl, reading Bishop’s poetry in the context of the American Sublime, claims that a “voice of protest, emanating from an epistemological uncertainty, echoes through Bishop’s work.” She finds the poet repeatedly describing a loss of identity due to the intervention of “a power felt to be greater than and external to it” (106). In Diehl “the aura of cosmic power” comes into play. In *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* Tom Travisano links Bishop explicitly to a Christian heritage. He says: “Although Bishop was no churchgoer, Christian motifs appear throughout her poetry. She had a religious nature and education, and the foundations of her work are recognizably Christian” (33). To this we might add Bonnie Costello’s assertion, in *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* that “Religious rhetoric of the soul and of divinity haunts Bishop’s poems. Even in her most descriptive work, she searches for a supersensible meaning or authority to which she might submit” (91).

No one, not even I, wishes to claim that Bishop was religious in the same ways as two of her favorite poets —George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins— were. Yet

in writing about Herbert to Joseph Summers, she commented on “how really concerned Herbert was with all these insoluble problems of man’s relationship to God... It is *real*. —It was real and it has kept on being and it always will be, and Herbert just happened to be a person who managed to put a great deal of it into magnificent poetry” (Costello, 97). Though she referred to herself as “an ignorant pagan” in a letter about reading Flannery O’Connor’s letters, Bishop’s interests went far beyond admiration for the craft of devotional writers. We find her reading St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* at the beginning of her career and St. Augustine’s *City of God* at the end, two works of uncompromising Christian focus. Though she sometimes found Flannery O’Connor’s insistence upon dogma irritating, in her brief elegy for O’Connor she claimed that “they shared a certain turn of mind and an appreciation for earnest awfulness in the expression of religious belief” (Millier, 360). And after the death of Lota Soares, we must remember, the only poet she could bear reading was George Herbert.

Therefore, it may not be too much to say that though Elizabeth Bishop was not a pious poet, she might be read as a religious poet: that is, a poet centrally engaged with such themes as faith and doubt, temporality and eternity, the rational and what is beyond the rational, pride and humility. For it is not enough to say that she did not think of herself as a religious poet. No doubt, she didn’t. But let us not be too simple-minded about the religious impulse either. What we find in her work is not complacency and static certainty but something closer to what she quoted from *The Baroque Style in Poetry* in a passage about Hopkins: “Their purpose (the writers of Baroque prose) was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking... They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth” (One Art 12). She calls this “the sort of poetic convention I would like to make for myself (and which explains, I think, something of Hopkins).”

To read Bishop’s work from a religious perspective is to find not expressions of absolute faith but a mind engaged with the problems of faith. As she writes in “Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry”: “The target is a moving target and the marksman is also moving.”

Though Bonnie Costello claims that “there is no metaphysical counter to duration in Bishop” (7), I like what she says a little further on: “The rhetoric of religion—its mode of questioning, its expectations and desires, and especially its approach to visual experience as a sign of the invisible— remains basic to her view of the world” (7). We cannot explain this entirely by her early training in the Baptist and Presbyterian cultures of Boston and Nova Scotia, for many writers have grown up with religion and later abandoned all commitment to that heritage. For Bishop, religion, and specifically Christianity, continued to provide a vocabulary for experience, one she often finds amusing, or even absurd, but one she never really forswears.

All critical practices must take something as “the target.” Intimacy, lesbian identity, dismantling hierarchies, visual accuracy, poetic justice, these have been worthy targets in the readings of my fellow Bishop scholars. Here God will be the target. “The target is a moving target and the marksman is also moving.”

The sun is moving in “The End of March,” for instance, and the poet-speaker is also moving. But first, in its initial stanza, there is more sense of lack of progression

than of progress, as, when one walks in a vast landscape, the horizon endlessly recedes and one feels, often, lonely, embattled, without adequate means to advance, an isolate speck drawing no nearer to “what there is.”

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright steely mist.

It is the landscape of Robert Lowell’s “Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” a poem of which Bishop was very fond and which she taught in her poetry classes at Harvard. As for Lowell, musing on *Moby Dick* (a favorite work of Bishop’s as well), God may be there but He seems inaccessible. The tide is going out, and “we are poured out like water,” Lowell says, echoing Psalms 22:14, “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.” For Bishop in this stanza, as in so many places in her poetry, the sea is a realm of potentially transcendental meaning but here access to that realm is withdrawn, “indrawn.” The voice of the waves is “inaudible.” The winds frustrate effort, disrupting forward movement in the “lone flight” of the Canada geese, in the waves, in the lengths of the lines which are pulled in, becoming noticeably shorter as the stanza proceeds. The “upright, steely mist” produced by frustration is emotionally correlated to the figures who have steeled themselves for this walk against the wind where the small globes of water might also be seen as tears, or rather as the dispersal of tears across a broad landscape, not raining down in fertile expression but refined into a sense of steely display.

The sky was darker than the water
—it was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up over the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over.

The poem creates a pattern, in which the first two stanzas echo one another in loss of hope, in spiritual misery, to be followed in the long third stanza by a dissolving fantasy of escape. But then, miraculously, comes a resurgence of hope, of possibility in the midst of uncertainty at the end. Here in the second stanza it seems to be the stringing out of despondency with which Bishop is concerned. “Lengths and lengths,

endless,” we hear, almost like Hopkins’ “O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall,/ frightful” (“No Worst”). The dog prints repeat themselves; the water and the sky reflect one another though the sky is even darker. The tide line —with, perhaps, a hemline of foam?— and the wet white string seem bonded, both going down. It is a barren emotional world with one thing following another, “over and over” in “lengths and lengths, endless.” And when “finally, they did end,” even this ending is a recapitulation: “a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,/ rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,/ falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost...”

Again one is reminded of Hopkins in that wonderful word “sodden.” What is as sodden as the heart of misery, echoing the sod, the clods of earth to which we are bound? What is sodden, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, has “the appearance of that which has been steeped or soaked in water; rendered dull, stupid, or expressionless.” Our self-pitying souls are sodden like “the sodden-with-its-sorrowing heart” that “fathers that asking for ease” in Hopkins’ “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” We have given up the ghost, the *geist*, fallen, “falling back,” saturated with our sense of limits and loss. The “snarl” of white string, voicing the lion-like rasp of human confusion and hunger, is described as “man-size.” The stanza is deeply pessimistic about the size of our abidance. “A kite string?” Hope? “But no kite” to carry us aloft.

Isn’t the beginning of the next stanza —“I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream house”— perfectly prepared for? (“Time’s tasking, it is[,] fathers that asking for ease,” Hopkins writes. “The jading and jar of the cart.” We have all known it.) Like the speaker, “I’d like to retire there” myself sometimes, as to the sanctuary so many women poets write of longing for: “set up on pilings,” green with possibility, “protected from spring tides by a palisade.” But one wonders, what is the stuff of this palisade’s protection? “Are they railroad ties?” the poet asks, reminding us of her earlier poem “Chemin de Fer,” where the speaker walks along the railroad track and “The ties were too close together/ or maybe too far apart.” Here too the ties that might protect us, ties to other people, ties to God, may be too far apart. And the poet herself concludes: “(Many things about this place are dubious.)” The house she imagines is not only a vision produced as an escape from doubt; it is itself riddled with doubt.

I would like to hover over that long middle stanza with its imagined rituals of transfiguration enjoyed in conventual seclusion —the foggy droplets not steely here but “slipping, heavy with light,” the “grog à l’américaine” illuminated with “lovely, diaphanous blue flame” that offsets the dark night of the soul like St. John of the Cross’s “living flame of Love.” But there isn’t time, alas, to say more than a few brief things about it. Though this is a real house, it is also the house of the solipsistic imagination and as such its *possible* electricity is simply leashed “to something off behind the dunes,” nothing we can certify because the illumination is unfounded. “A light to read by —perfect! But— impossible.” We can feel the longing for perfection and the misery of knowing that longing alone, anchored only to empty rituals of self like the flame doubling itself in the mirroring window, is not enough.

And that day the wind was much too cold
 even to get that far,
 and of course the house was boarded up.

Why “of course,” we might ask? Of course because it is all of a piece with the day, with the mood, with the lack of a sense of grace that might have opened the house to the soul longing for entry. As we have seen, the house is not the house of faith but the house produced by doubt and despair. The “of course” recognizes that the house is not an alternative to the self but a projection of its own self-regarding desire, closed up to faith.

If there is any way out of this vicious circle of self-referentiality, it must come from elsewhere. But the speaker is lost in the labyrinth, following only a kite string with no kite at the end of it. It is the “end of March,” the end of the long march, or, as Bonnie Costello says, “the end of the road.”

In *Ordinarily Sacred*, a wonderful book about the making of meanings with a title perfectly appropriate to Bishop though she isn’t specifically mentioned, Linda Sexson suggests that labyrinths are often symbols of frustration, “a confounding of direction” such as we see everywhere in this poem, but also “a map of spirituality” (96). Sexson, in fact, conflates art and religion “as the notation of moments which discover or re-discover one’s worldview, create or re-create one’s philosophical depth. Art is the creation of an imaginative universe. Religion is the creation of an imaginative (or imaginal) universe —and the entering into the creation. Peculiar moments in ordinary lives, saturated by metaphor or personal symbol-making, are the stuff of religion” (3). For Sexson, “language is the labyrinth,” and it is only by our acceptance of our role as story-makers in the realm of language that we learn to delight in the labyrinth and to recognize (re-cognize) God.

In the final stanza of “The End of March,” we begin with an intervention from outside: “The sun came out for just a minute.” Though brief, the mystical release of grace allows for a moment of illumination in which “the drab, damp, scattered stones” become “multi-colored.” Suddenly, what has been a monochromatic landscape is stippled with light and shadow on the rocks: “and all those high enough threw out long shadows,/ individual shadows, then pulled them in again.” Must we say that if the shadows are “individual,” they are images of pride? Not necessarily, for in the presence of the Sun all things fulfill their purpose, as it is said in Isaiah 32: “Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment. And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” Again the landscape serves as an objective correlative for the poet-speaker’s mood but here it is one of surprise and delight. As Tennessee Williams put it, “Sometimes, there’s God so quickly.”

We know the poet’s imagination has been released into a different kind of story-making, one full of laughter and metaphor, because she tells us that it is not so much the outside world that has changed but rather her capacity to *read* its rocks differently. “They could have been teasing the lion sun,” she says, in a spirit different from her earlier despondency. And of course in this interpretation we cannot forget that the end of March is also the season of Easter and the resurrection. The lion and the sun are both images of Christ linked together in Christian symbolism of the sun as Son, “except that now he was behind them/ —a sun who’d walked the beach the last low tide” and brought redemption, “making those big, majestic paw-prints.” It is sometimes said that in Christianity the lion is a symbol of continual struggle, but if this is a god “who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with,” we are reminded too that

suffering can be not only the obstacle but the source of *enlightenment*. In many mystical traditions God is playful and the saint is also a fool.

If this seems a different Elizabeth Bishop than we are used to, let us not forget the other places where such moments of illumination occur, as in “The Fish” and “At the Fishhouses” to name but two. If faith is a moving target, the soul herself is also moving. “And since/ our knowledge is historical,” she says at the end of “At the Fishhouses,” it is must be, for us, not permanent but “flowing, and flown.” What we cannot grasp eludes us—faith is ever beset by doubt—but it is not for that reason insignificant to the life of the mind, the imagination, or the spirit. As Marianne Moore wrote at the end of “What Are Years?” the two realms of the spirit are sometimes synchronically conflated:

satisfaction is a lowly
thing, how pure a thing is joy.
This is mortality,
this is eternity.

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