

ANOTHER ART: ELIZABETH BISHOP'S LIFE AND WATERCOLORS*

Much to our surprise—and satisfaction—the last ten years have witnessed Elizabeth Bishop's unprecedented rise as an unavoidable celebrity in the American poetry canon. Except for canon-forging Harold Bloom, who always heralded her as a major poet, most critical attention to her work had been unfair. Still today, it is arguable that even "second-generation" Bishop studies may be appropriating her work for causes foreign to her. One abusive trend would be the kind of feminist criticism that relies mainly on intimate biographical detail to understand her poetry, which is rather like reading Bishop as one would approach Plath or Sexton. While this is often taken to irritating extremes, Bishop's sheltering of her private life does not prevent the apparition of many autobiographical references—more or less coded—in her work. Therefore a degree of biographical awareness seems to be desirable.

The two books reviewed here are apt examples of what Thomas Travisano has called the "Elizabeth Bishop phenomenon." Their very publication testifies to the enormous interest aroused by Bishop's shy figure. As it has turned out, the shyer the better, for this is surely what has triggered her public's voracity for "Bishop stuff." Apparently, these volumes are little more than a compilation of repetitive interviews, and a collection of her watercolors with a bonus anthology of Bishop's remarks about art. The scarcity of materials has obliged both editors to complement their projects with related miscellanea (amazing, in these days of inflated egos). Having said this, I must also say that both books are highly commendable; not only worth reading but even enjoyable from cover to cover. As often, her own words prove more illuminating than second-hand accounts, and reveal her as a very selective person: a deliberately dull interviewee and a wonderfully smart speaker in private conversation. The series of twenty-five interviews manage to (partly) redeem some critics of previous injustices against her. They were deceived by what James Merrill called Bishop's "lifelong impersonations of an ordinary woman" (Merrill 259). Her account of the allergic reaction suffered after the ingestion of cashew nuts in Brazil, and the reactions of local villagers to her literary success almost monopolize her Brazilian interviews, adding little information about her life there. Since these interviews are the genuine novelties in the book (most of them previously untranslated) one might feel entitled to complain that the volume is a collection of reprints, featuring even such classics as Starbuck and Brown (included in at least four other publications). In his introduction George Monteiro apologizes for the repetition of the same anecdotes in every inter-

view, but beyond his natural editorial concern he provides us with an insightful explanation for this. Bishop's international fame, foregrounded by her relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares (who held a public position in Brazil then), made her particularly vulnerable to the curiosity of local newspapers. Her deliberate lack of brilliance would be a defensive strategy both to avoid admission that her intoxication with cashew fruit had given her an excuse to stay in Brazil and develop her romantic affair with Lota, and to ensure a loss of interest in her figure—which her periodic literary awards would not allow. Again, as in her poetry, she managed to keep her private life private, at the expense of her public image.

One could only wish that Monteiro had elaborated on this theory, since the book is in that sense an invaluable tool for researchers and Bishop fans alike, who can only now afford to read all these pieces and see for themselves. Regarding the three memoirs by Bishop's former students, which evidently belong to another genre, we may discard the suspicion that they be tokens to give the volume weight. They are by far the most interesting pieces in the book, well-written and better focused, offering accounts of first-hand experience which help us polish our portrait of Bishop by adding anecdotes and illuminating details. Two of them (by Wehr and Gioia) are specially strong on Bishop as teacher, while Mildred Nash's description of Bishop's library is both a bit of a waste (of possibilities, that is) and a researcher's dream come true, including a list of her colorful bedside selection: the not-too-hard guesses like Herbert, Hopkins, Carroll and Lear, as well as a surprising number of dictionaries, wildlife manuals, and Beatrix Potter's works. Nash was also surprised by a significant number of books on psychology, philosophy and cooking.

Bishop used to describe her teaching experience as nothing short of traumatic (and financially-conditioned). But Wehr and Gioia, while corroborating this view, focus on the positive aspects of her far from conventional teaching. A number of life lessons—in the form of enigmatic, carelessly dropped-in remarks—suggests that they felt they were dealing with some Zen master, the moral of whose stories they would understand only with time. Gioia's first impression ("She seemed disappointingly normal") gradually gave way to a deeper knowledge and appreciation, which not all of his Harvard classmates could share. Her radically unconventional prizing of dictionaries above critics ("A poem—if it was any good—could speak for itself") was partly responsible for this. In Gioia's words she regarded criticism—except for the work of Vendler and Jarrell—as "a sort of fumbling conspiracy of well-meaning idiots with access to printing presses" (147), which is only slightly more disdainful than Bishop's own "talking the very life out of poetry."

Bishop's advice to Wehr was no less eccentric. While teaching at the University of Washington (she managed to elude teaching until she was 55), her first shock was actually meeting the younger generation, and finding them either Haiku fanatics or absurdly attracted to "alternative" poets without ever having read those in the canon. These rebels without a cause, most of them would-be Beatniks, were severely criticized by Bishop, who was evidently appalled by their empty romantization of suffering and madness (which she had witnessed from too close a distance):

Have you seen the expensive cars that some of them drive? . . . Most of them look quite well fed and rather well-off. And what do they write about in their

poems? *Suffering*, of all things! ... I finally told them that they should come to Brazil and see for themselves what *real* suffering is like. Then perhaps they wouldn't write so "poetically" about it. ... Going insane is very popular these days ... They think that going crazy will turn them into better poets. ... I've seen it first-hand in some of my friends, and it is not the "poetic" sort of thing that these young people seem to think it is. (41)

Naturally enough, this was just a symptom of the more or less general intoxication with confessional writing of those days. Wehr's piece is where the well-known Bishop statement on the subject comes from ("I hate confessional poetry ... Besides, they seldom have anything interesting to 'confess' anyway. Mostly they write about a lot of things which I should think were best left unsaid"). This came as Bishop's reaction to Wehr's reading these writers. Bishop's advice was to read the *National Geographic* instead.

Reading these memoirs by her students is very much like reading her own letters: they are so accurately and inspiredly written they manage to convey that univocal feeling of dealing with Bishop herself, and their choice of quotations is also extremely representative of her interests. For instance, Wehr recalls several statements, dropped in lighthearted conversation, where Bishop's lifelong concerns become manifest. Some of them are real jewels: "Some of our critics can find something in common between just about anything. Comparing me with Wittgenstein! I've never read him ... [Gombrich] says all art comes from art. My own favorite reading is Darwin" (43). While she also used the example of the British naturalist in her famous "Darwin" letter, where she formulated her own theory of inspiration by refusing to make a split between the conscious and the subconscious, in her own advice to poetry students she refers to this formula as a cocktail of hard work and good luck, implying that one should not wait for the muses but rather chase them: "I believe in the fortunate accident, but you don't sit down and try to have one. You have to be on the road before you can have an accident" (40-41). This strategy of permanent alertness was rewarded—for example—with the newspaper misprint that inspired her poem "The Man-Moth."

Despite all the attention Bishop has received in the past few years, there is an aspect (at least) that is still largely unexplored, namely her relationship with the visual arts. Richard Mullen established in 1982 the limits of her surrealist affinities, but only in 1991 did Bonnie Costello explore her poems from a properly visual point of view, linking her also to the Dutch school of the XVII century. Now this aspect can be studied with the aid of *Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop's Paintings*, which reproduces the totality (42) of her currently known watercolors and drawings. Hopefully this publication should mark a shift in emphasis from the morbidly biographic to a more inherently interartistic approach. In his introduction William Benton undertakes a not-too-deep analysis of her painterly skills, as well as a lengthy account of the maddening process of compiling the paintings, but his comments on the paintings are too brief to be of much help.

The odds are that Bishop readers will be familiar with three of them (used for the dustjackets of the FSG editions of her *Complete Poems*, *Collected Prose* and *Letters*), but the rest will prove totally new. Her subject matter, however, is far from surprising. There is a number of bourgeois interiors in the Bonnard/Vuillard tradition, including

several hotel rooms (very proper if we consider the nomadic life she led). They focus mainly on descriptions of furniture and flowers arranged in different dispositions, with a Matisse-like eye for patterns and textures. Stoves and clocks —so recurrent in her poems— are also favorite features here. Fans of her modern art manifesto “The Monument” (inspired by Max Ernst’s *frottage* on wood) will spot the special emphasis devoted to realistic woodgrain imitations. Perspective and point of view are often problematic, although maybe not so much as in her poetry, and some difficult framings are privileged: there are, for example, portraits of ceilings and chandeliers (as in “Sleeping on the Ceiling” or “Sleeping Standing Up”).

Houses and other singular buildings receive a great deal of attention, too. Locations are mainly New York, Key West, Brazil, Nova Scotia (including, of course, a farm), and Paris. Three paintings are devoted to a Key West cemetery; one of them (*Tombstones for Sale*) showing Bishop’s characteristic interest for the human anecdote beyond the merely descriptive approach. There is a surprising absence of animals, particularly if we consider the relevance they enjoy in her poetry. Several individual plants are approached, however, with a dissecting, botanic-like eye. It is no less surprising to see two human figures: a sketchy portrait of a female Florida friend, as well as a cartoon-like figure sleeping on a huge bed (tentatively identified by Benton as her lifelong friend Louise Crane). Scale is of course distorted in most paintings, as demanded by her particular sort of primitive realism, with an inevitable reference to her admired Gregorio Valdes. Her “quasi-moral commitment to accurate observation” (Hammer 136) is oddly compatible with a fairytale concept of scale.

A wide range of materials is used in these paintings, from the barest crayon, pastel or pen and ink to complex mixtures of watercolor, gouache and ink. Hardly ever do we find a pure example of any technique, which may be interpreted as a lack of skill (watercolor purists reject the use of gouache, or even Chinese white, as sacrilegious). But it may also be deliberate, in pursuit of that careless look of naïve art.

A selection of Bishop’s quotations on art (35 rather short pieces) shows to what extent she took her own painting seriously, offering a sharp contrast between her insistence on its not being art, and the exquisite care behind that recklessness. From them we learn that Bishop wanted her poetry to be compared to Vermeer’s painting, or that her aesthetic sensibility (and wit) could be deeply marked by a strong artistic experience: “I studied a huge book on Bosch I have for several days —and the world looked like Bosches for a month afterwards— not that it really doesn’t anyway these days” (97). Unfortunately, she was not given to lecturing, and thus Benton had to work mostly with already published material, particularly her letters, some of which will sound familiar to Bishop fans.

Both books are evidently published with the aim of filling a gap in the ever-growing Bishop market, and this they certainly do. For overseas researchers in particular they constitute invaluable tools, even if their sure success has afforded their editors to relax slightly more than would be desirable.

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* Monteiro, George, ed. *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996. xix, 164 pgs.

Benton, William, ed. *Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop's Paintings*. New York: Farrar, 1996. xx, 106 pgs.

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