Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 121

Volume 121

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Janet Witalec
Project Editor

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* (*CLC*) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

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A *TCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined,* ed. Victor A. Kramer (AMS, 1987), 65- 91; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 94-105.

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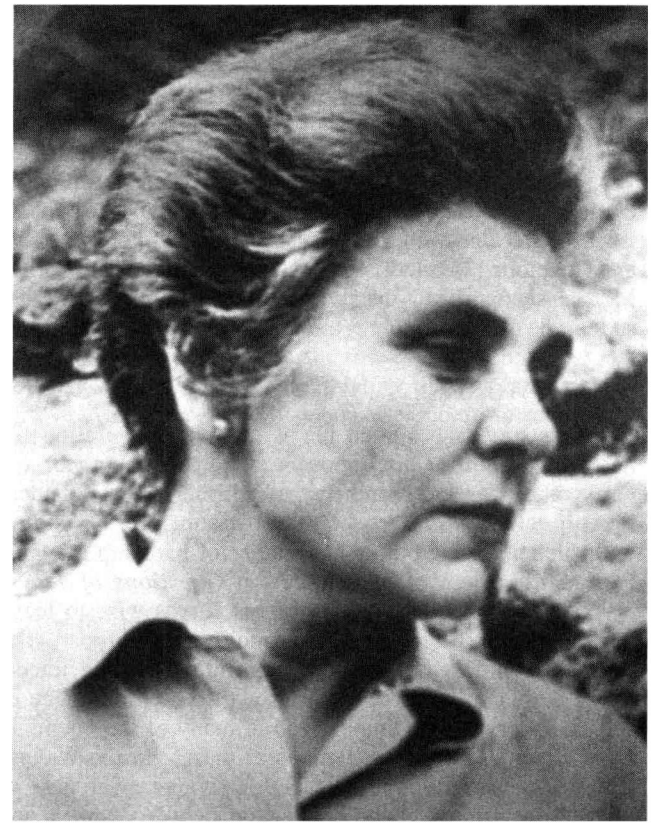
Contents

Elizabeth Bishop
1911-1979

American poet, short story writer, editor, and translator.

INTRODUCTION

Bishop's reputation as an accomplished poet rests on a small but significant body of highly crafted verse. Describing nature and experience with meticulous detail, Bishop often employed unusual metaphors and surreal images to portray an unsettling world. Bishop received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* (1955), a reprint of her first poetry book *North & South* (1946), with additions. She won the National Book Award for *The Complete Poems* (1969) and the National Book Critics' Award for *Geography III* (1976). In addition, in 1976 she became the first American to receive the Neustadt International Prize for literature. Since her death in 1979, Bishop's poetry, which was highly praised by her peers in her lifetime, has gained respect and popularity with a general audience as well.



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bishop was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1911 to Gertrude Boomer and William Bishop. Her father died during her infancy, and her mother, who suffered from mental illness, was permanently committed to an asylum when Bishop was five years old. Consequently, Bishop spent her early childhood with her mother's relatives in Great Village, Nova Scotia. Her paternal grandparents expressed concern about the limited resources available for Bishop's education in Nova Scotia. Bishop went to live with them in Massachusetts and was sent to Walnut Hills School for Girls and later to Vassar College in 1930. Her relationship with her father's family was not warm, however, and during her college years she usually spent vacations and summers with friends. Her years at Vassar were important for Bishop both intellectually and socially. There she became familiar with the work of poets who would influence her own writing, and she began to send her own poems to small magazines and writing competitions. She also befriended the poet Marianne Moore, who became Bishop's mentor and lifelong friend. After graduating from Vassar, Bishop lived in New York City, traveled extensively through France, and eventually settled in Key West, Florida, where she lived from 1938 to 1944. The years 1947 to 1951 were miserable for Bishop as she suffered from asthma, depression, and alcoholism and was involved in several unhappy relationships. In 1947 Bishop met the poet Robert Lowell, who introduced her into his literary circle. Thereafter she received grants and awards and began to experience real success with her writing. She continued to battle her illnesses and addiction. In the fall of 1951 she embarked on what was supposed to be a trip around the world, beginning in Brazil. Bishop was to stay with Lota de Macedo Soares and Mary Morse, two women she had met in New York in 1942. A severe allergic reaction kept her in Brazil for weeks. In the ensuing months Bishop, claiming she was happier than she had been in years, decided to move permanently to Brazil to live with Soares. The two women lived together happily at Soares's home in rural Samambaia until 1961, when Soares took a job in Rio de Janeiro, leaving Bishop alone in their city apartment most of the time. In 1966 Bishop took a job teaching poetry and creative writing at the University of Washington in Seattle. Early in her stay in Seattle, she fell in love with a young woman, an event that signaled the end of her life in Brazil. She returned to Brazil in June 1966 and found Soares in a state of mental collapse. Both women were sent to separate hospitals for mental exhaustion until March 1967, when they moved back to Samam-

baia to try to remake their peaceful life. Their attempt failed, and Bishop went to stay with friends in New York. Soares joined her when she felt stronger, but shortly after her arrival she committed suicide. Devastated, Bishop moved briefly to San Francisco and lived with the young woman she had been involved with in Seattle. Bishop then convinced the woman and her child to move with her to her house in Ouro Prêto, Brazil. The move was a disaster as Bishop's drinking was out of control again and her lover was hospitalized for a mild breakdown; the woman was subsequently flown back to the United States with her child. Robert Lowell again interceded on Bishop's behalf, arranging for her to fill his teaching post at Harvard University while he took a sabbatical. Bishop's years at Harvard were relatively happy. Although she continued to battle physical and emotional illnesses, as well as alcoholism, she became well-known in the Harvard literary circle and developed a relationship with a woman named Alice Methfessel, with whom she lived and traveled until her sudden death of a cerebral aneurysm in 1979.

MAJOR WORKS

Bishop's travels provided her with much inspiration for her poetry, and traveling appears as a major metaphor, often symbolizing the search for self. In her poetry, dislocation, loneliness, and constant self-doubt are associated with such a search, but an acceptance of hardship prevails. In the title poem of her collection *Questions of Travel* (1965) she wondered whether or not it was wise to leave the stability and familiarity of home to travel abroad. The poem concludes that without continual risk and uncertainty there can be no spiritual growth. The importance of self-discovery is also emphasized in many of the poems in *Geography III.* The most famous of these, "In the Waiting Room," concerns young Elizabeth's sudden awareness of both the division and the connection between herself and the world. The nature of reality is a prominent theme in the Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring.* In "The Map," a land map symbolizes the difference between objective reality and reproductions of it. The poem suggests that because works of art are slanted by the creator's subjective perceptions, they are as much guides to that individual's imagination as to the objects or ideas being imitated. Similarly, in "At the Fishhouses" and "Cape Breton," both based on Bishop's experiences living and traveling in Nova Scotia, Bishop explored the elusiveness of ultimate reality. Many of Bishop's poems about Brazil, which she found exceedingly difficult to write, reflect her ambivalent feelings about the country's extremes of great beauty and massive poverty, as well as the periods of elation and misery she experienced while living there. Bishop's short stories often contain autobiographical elements, particularly those regarding the death of her father, the absence of her mother, and growing up with relatives in a small town in Nova Scotia.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bishop is considered a master of descriptive verse. Her calm, understated tone and the ease with which she gradually shifted from observations of ordinary objects to philosophical insights are also highly regarded. In his poem "For Elizabeth Bishop," Robert Lowell referred to Bishop as an "unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect." Although her poetry is often deeply personal and expressive of her lifelong struggles with illness and alcoholism, critics note that Bishop avoided self-pity and egoism and extended her themes from the specific to the universal. Published posthumously, *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (1983) and *The Collected Prose* (1984) have elicited retrospective analyses of her works and have reinforced the widespread critical opinion that Bishop's opus is an important contribution to twentieth-century literature.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

North & South (poetry) 1946
**Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* (poetry) 1955
Poems (poetry) 1956
Brazil (travel essays) 1962
Questions of Travel (poetry) 1965
Selected Poems (poetry) 1967
The Ballad of the Burglar of Babylon (juvenilia) 1968
The Complete Poems (poetry) 1969
Poem (poetry) 1973
Geography III (poetry) 1976
The Complete Poems: 1927-1979 (poetry) 1983
The Collected Prose (fiction and essays) 1984
One Art: Letters [selected and edited by Robert Giroux] (letters) 1994

*Reprint of 1946 edition with additional poems added.

CRITICISM

Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (essay date spring 1984)

SOURCE: Scott, Nathan A., Jr. "Elizabeth Bishop: Poet without Myth." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 60, no. 2 (spring 1984): 255-75.

[*In the following essay, Scott discusses Bishop as a poet who deals exclusively with the material world without a systematic metaphysical or philosophical worldview.*]

The English critic John Bayley is, I believe, quite wrong when in his book, *The Characters of Love,* he says of Conrad: "He has no myth with a view to insight: he has scenes and he has people." But no more apt a formula could be devised for such a poet as Elizabeth Bishop: she is, indeed, a poet without myth, without metaphysic, with-

out commitment to any systematic vision of the world, perhaps the most thoroughly secular poet of her generation—and it makes an impressive attestation to her extraordinary record of successes in her dealings simply with the world of eye and ear that, even so, she was well-nigh universally regarded at the time of her death in October 1979 as one who had *added* something to our literature in the ways that only genius can.

Since by some quirk of misfortune she won no "myth with a view to insight" such as a Yeats or a Stevens or an Auden was granted, it was no doubt inevitable that her poetry should always be (as one of her critics has remarked) a kind of *expedition,* just as her own life was that of the constant voyager to Brittany and Paris, to North Africa and Spain, to Mexico and Scandinavia and Brazil. When she accepted the Neustadt International Prize for Literature at the University of Oklahoma in the spring of 1976, she spoke about how all her life she had "lived and behaved very much like . . . [a] sandpiper—just running along the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something.'" Which is not unlike what her poetry is doing, what indeed it *has* to be doing, since there is no controlling myth to chart and guide its motions: it is forever turning to this and that and something else and saying (as does the final line in the great poem **"The Monument"**), "Watch it closely." "I require of you only to *look,*" says St. Theresa—which might be thought to be the imperative in which the morality of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is grounded. For, since her poetry is unregulated by any metaphysic wherewith the things and creatures of earth might be ordered into a system of total meaning, it must be continually searching for significances, looking here and looking there till (in the final phrase of **"Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"**) it has "looked and looked our infant sight away." We dwell, as she sees it, in a world whose variousness is beyond all calculation, a world of continents and cities and mountains, of oceans and mangrove swamps, of buzzards and alligators and fireflies, of dews and frosts, of light and darkness, of stars and clouds, of birth and death, and of all the thousands of other things that make up the daily round of experience. And, amidst "the bewilderingly proliferating data of the universe," a poet of her stamp must take it for granted, as John Ashbery says, that "not until the senses have all but eroded themselves to nothing in the process of doing the work assigned to them can anything approaching a moment of understanding take place." The attention bestowed upon whatever comes one's way must be so pure, so absolute, so intransitive, as to allow us to hear (as she phrases it in her story **"In the Village"**) "the elements speaking: earth, air, fire, water." And, in this way, even without myth or metaphysic, we may win through to knowledge, fundamental knowledge—

> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world. . . .
>
> **("At the Fishhouses")**

What one ought to want in art, said the poet in a letter to Anne Stevenson, "is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration"—on all the various particulars that surround us and that are freighted with meanings so abundant that we may find the consolations of systematic philosophy to be quite inessential.

Indeed, the posthumously issued ***Complete Poems*** might well have been given the title that Bishop chose for her book of 1965, ***Questions of Travel,*** for, in its search for significant particulars, the poetry is constantly moving from Wellfleet, Massachusetts, to Paris, from Florida to Nova Scotia, from New York to Brazil, and on to still other scenes and regions. "There are in her poems," says David Kalstone, "no final visions—only the saving, continuing, precise pursuits of the travelling eye." Which may well be why, as one moves through her work from her first book ***North & South*** (1946) to ***A Cold Spring*** (1955), ***Questions of Travel*** (1965), ***Geography III*** (1976), and on to the last poems, one has no sense of any progress or growth, as one does in contemplating the whole career of Eliot or Auden or Lowell: poem after poem is recording utterly discrete perceptions, and though, taken poem by poem, her work is powerfully unified and cogent, the poems altogether seem to be an affair of "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'" (**"Over 2,000 Illustrations . . ."**).

So, for the reader tackling Elizabeth Bishop's poetry for the first time, it makes little difference where one begins, since, in whatever one turns to, one finds oneself in the hands of a poet who is saying, "But surely it would have been a pity / not to have seen" this or "not to have pondered" that—as she does in the beautiful poem called **"Questions of Travel"** which invites us to contemplate a luxuriant Brazilian landscape which is all an *affaire de trop*: "too many waterfalls," "streams [that] / hurry too rapidly down to the sea," and "so many clouds on the mountaintops." "But," says the poem,

> surely it would have been a pity
> not to have seen the trees along this road,
> really exaggerated in their beauty,
> not to have seen them gesturing
> like noble pantomimists robed in pink,
> —Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
> the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
> of disparate wooden clogs
> carelessly clacking over
> a grease-stained filling-station floor.
> (In another country the clogs would all be tested.
> Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
> —A pity not to have heard
> the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
> who sings above the broken gasoline pump
> in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque. . . .
> —Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
> blurr'dly and inconclusively,
> on what connection can exist for centuries
> between the crudest wooden footwear
> and, careful and finicky,

the whittled fantasies of wooden cages. . . .
—And never to have had to listen to rain
so much like politicians' speeches:
two hours of unrelenting oratory
and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at
home,
wherever that may be?"

And the tone in which the closing question of the poem is asked clearly indicates that this poet wants it to be answered in the negative. For she takes a skeptical view of Pascal's injunction that we forswear the temptations of *divertissement* and remain quietly in our own chamber. So she rarely situates her poetic *topos* "at home, / wherever that may be": she wants to be in *other* places; as Wallace Stevens says (in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"):

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

The world that Elizabeth Bishop looks out upon, for all its blazoned days, often appears to be hard indeed. Hers was, of course, a sensibility too chaste for her ever to have moaned about falling on the thorns of life, and she had nothing but impatience with "the tendency . . . to overdo the morbidity" in much recent "confessional" poetry: "You just wish," she said, "they'd keep some of these things to themselves." Yet she reserved a certain mistrust for what in the poem called **"Roosters"** she speaks of as the "vulgar beauty of iridescence." In **"Florida,"** for example, she remarks the irony that "the state with the prettiest name"

floats in brackish water,
held together by mangrove roots
that bear while living oysters in clusters,
and when dead strew white swamps with skeletons,
dotted as if bombarded, with green hummocks
like ancient cannon-balls sprouting grass.

Or, in the strange poem called **"The Unbeliever,"** we are told that he—whoever he is—"sleeps on the top of his mast / with his eyes closed tight" and that, when a "gull inquired into his dream," it turned out to be

"I must not fall.
The spangled sea below wants me to fall.
It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all."

Or, again, in **"Questions of Travel,"** she speaks of how, as one peers up at the Brazilian highlands, "the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships, / slime-hung and barnacled." And in the great poem **"Crusoe in England"** in ***Geography III,*** she has the solitary back at home on his native isle remembering his former place of exile which—unlike the rough, craggily grand landscape that Defoe's protagonist subdued—was "a sort of cloud-dump" over which "all the hemisphere's left-over clouds" appeared to hang. The volcanoes were "miserable, small . . .—volcanoes dead as ash heaps." Everywhere there was aridness and desiccation: the waterspouts would "come and go, advancing and retreating," and they offered "not much company." Even the little volcano that he christened "*Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*" seemed never to confirm either designation. And the goats and the gulls as they went "*Baa, baa, baa,* and *shriek, shriek, shriek,*" offered only "equivocal replies" to his tacit questions. It was a mute world which held forth not the merest promise of any kind of reciprocity, an "island [that] had one kind of everything" ("one tree snail," "one variety of tree," "one kind of berry"), but with nothing seeming inclined to become for this *isolé* (as Martin Buber would say) a *thou.*

II

It is, in other words, with an unblinking clarity that Elizabeth Bishop views the world, and she has no recourse to any kind of sentimental pastoralism. Her way of rendering the natural order would have made it wholly appropriate for her to say, with the French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Man looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him." Yet, hard as it is, for all its blazoned days, she bestows upon it and all its creatures an attention so passionate that very often the distinction between the self and the not-self seems nearly altogether to have been dissolved, so much so that the confession of Byron's Childe Harold could be hers:

I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me . . .
. . . . . I can see
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain. . . .

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies
a part
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?

Indeed, Elizabeth Bishop's meditation, for all its secularity, cannot but paradoxically put one in mind of the meditative methods underlying the religious poetry of the English 17th century which Louis Martz has scanned so profoundly in his book *The Poetry of Meditation.* Professor Martz has shown how greatly the sensibilities and poetic procedures of those writers whom we speak of as "metaphysical" (such as Donne and Herbert) were formed by all the various Counter-Reformation treatises on meditation that drifted into England from the Continent during the 16th and 17th centuries. It began, this art of applying the understanding to things for the sake of exciting holy affections, with what Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* called the "composition of place, seeing the spot": that is to say, the scene or object (or, more preferably, as Ignatius specifies, "Christ our Lord") prompting

the meditation needed to be *seen* by "the eyes of the imagination" with the greatest possible intensity. Then the meditant needed most strenuously to reflect on the import of what was beheld for the ultimate profit of the "whole soul." And, finally, for the empowerment of the affections, there needed to be a "colloquy," preferably with God, though permissibly also with ourselves, or even, as St. Francis de Sales allowed, with "insensible creatures." The great fascination of Professor Martz' book grows out of its various disclosures of how deeply English meditative poems of the 17th century were affected by this discipline, even when they departed in one particular or another from the prescriptions laid down by devotional manuals of the period.

Now Elizabeth Bishop did, to be sure, have a great admiration for George Herbert, but her own idioms would suggest that she was perhaps far more immediately influenced by Hopkins and Stevens and Marianne Moore than by the Metaphysicals in general. Certainly she was most insistent on her neutrality in regard to any form of religion. Yet, again and again, her own style of thought moves from a "composition of place" or object to reflection on its anagogical import and on to a "colloquy" either with herself or with her reader. The central masterpiece in ***A Cold Spring,*** **"At the Fishhouses,"** presents a case in point. The setting of the poem is a town in Nova Scotia, in the district of the local fishhouses. And the "composition" of the scene, for all its apparent casualness, is wrought with the utmost care:

> Although it is a cold evening,
> down by one of the fishhouses
> an old man sits netting,
> his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
> a dark purple-brown,
> and his shuttle worn and polished.
> The air smells so strong of codfish
> it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
> The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
> and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
> to storerooms in the gables
> for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
> 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.

Thus it is that, with a most deliberate and meticulous kind of literality, the scene is "composed" with such an exactness as will lock us up within the closet of that which is to be meditated. At a later point in the poem the speaker declares herself to be "a believer in total immersion," and this is what she wants for us: total immersion in the tableau presented by this old fisherman weaving his net on a bleak, cold evening down at the waterfront where everything seems to have been either iridized by the sun or plastered and rusted over by the erosive power of the sea. Indeed, it is not until we have been fully drawn into this scene that the poem allows it to quiver into life: the speaker offers the old man a cigarette, and they begin to "talk of the decline in the population / and of codfish and herring," as "he waits for a herring boat to come in."

So, then, we are

> Down at the water's edge, at the place
> where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
> descending into the water. . . .

And having been made to contemplate the "cold dark deep and absolutely clear" waters of the sea, waters "bearable . . . to fish and to seals" but "to no mortal," the scene is at last fully composed, and thus the meditation begins, issuing finally into a colloquy with the reader who is directly addressed as "you":

> 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.
> 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.

By this point the lone fisherman and his shuttle and net have quite faded into the background, and the speaker has realized that what most urgently asks to be pondered is the sea itself, "dark, salt, clear." And the rippling sibilance with which it is described—"slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, / icily free above the stones"—does, as it echoes the rising and falling of the waters, make for a very intense realization of the briny, inscrutable abysm beyond the land's edge. But the *result* of this meditation is the grave recognition that the sea is much like something in the affairs of human life with which we must reckon, and thus the poem is ready to eventuate in the final colloquy which the speaker addresses at once to herself and to her reader. "If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately, / your bones would begin to ache. . . ." "If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue." And then, with what is for her an uncharacteristic explicitness, Bishop

specifies the referent of which the sea is a symbol: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be. . . ." Here it is that the poem at its end formulates the idea to which it would have the "whole soul" give heed, that a truly unillusioned awareness of our place and prospect is won only by facing into the cold, hard, bedrock realities of our mortal condition and that, however circumspect and sober it may be, even at its best it remains something "historical," something needing to be revised over and again, flowing and flown—like the sea. So to render Bishop's final lines is, of course, to betray them, but it is, one feels, to something like such a conclusion that she is brought on that cold evening in a Nova Scotia town, down by one of the fish-houses where an old man sits netting, as he waits for a herring boat to come in.

Now it is undoubtedly her deep formation by the kind of meditative discipline underlying this poem that accounts for the extraordinary sympathy with which Elizabeth Bishop approached a world which, however intently it is scanned, seems not to look back at us. In this connection one will think of such poems as **"The Weed"** and **"Quai d'Orléans"** and **"Roosters"** in *North & South,* **"The Riverman"** and **"Sandpiper"** in *Questions of Travel,* and **"The Moose"** in *Geography III.* And certainly one will think of the beautiful prose poems, **"Giant Toad"** and **"Strayed Crab"** and **"Giant Snail,"** that make up the sequence called **"Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics."** The Giant Snail, for example, gives this account of his situation:

> The rain has stopped. The waterfall will roar like that all night. I have come out to take a walk and feed. My body—foot, that is—is wet and cold and covered with sharp gravel. . . . I have set myself a goal, a certain rock, but it may well be dawn before I get there. Although I move ghostlike and my floating edges barely graze the ground, I am heavy, heavy, heavy. My white muscles are already tired. I give the impression of mysterious ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks. And I must not let myself be distracted by those rough spears of grass. Don't touch them. Draw back. Withdrawal is always best. . . .
>
> Rest a minute; relax. Flattened to the ground, my body is like a pallid, decomposing leaf. What's that tapping on my shell? Nothing. Let's go on.
>
> My sides move in rhythmic waves, just off the ground, from front to back. . . . I am cold, cold, cold as ice. . . . Ah, but I know my shell is beautiful, and high, and glazed, and shining. I know it well, although I have not seen it. . . .
>
> But O! I am too big. I feel it. Pity me.

Here, like Wordsworth, she is looking steadily at her subject, but—again, like Wordsworth—not from a merely analytical, matter-of-fact perspective: on the contrary, she is facing a wordless creature with so much of affectionate responsiveness that not only (in Coleridge's phrase) does "nature [become] thought and thought nature" but there occurs even an interchange of roles, the snail becoming a speaking *I* as the poet becomes a listening *thou.* And the result is a well-nigh preternatural commingling of love and awe before the sheer otherness of the things of earth.

Perhaps the most notable instance in Bishop's poetry of this genius for empathy is the great poem in ***North & South*** that has been so frequently anthologized, **"The Fish."** The poet has caught "a tremendous fish" and is looking at him, as she holds him, "battered and venerable / and homely," half out of water beside her boat. She watches his gills "breathing in the terrible oxygen," and she notices his eyes which shift a little, "but not / to return my stare." Then, as she admires "his sullen face" and "the mechanism of his jaw," she sees

> that from his lower lip
> —if you could call it a lip—
> grim, wet, and weaponlike,
> hung five old pieces of fish-line,
> or four and a wire leader
> with the swivel still attached,
> with all their five big hooks
> grown firmly in his mouth.
> A green line, frayed at the end
> where he broke it, two heavier lines,
> and a fine black thread
> still crimped from the strain and snap
> when it broke and he got away.

Like Hemingway's old Santiago, who, after he hooks his great marlin, yet pities him in his wounded, massive dignity and pain, this poet, too, is deeply moved by the pathos that belongs to this scarred survivor of man's predatoriness:

> I stared and stared
> and victory filled up
> the little rented boat,
> from the pool of bilge
> where oil had spread a rainbow
> around the rusted engine
> to the bailer rusted orange,
> the sun-cracked thwarts,
> the oarlocks on their strings,
> the gunnels—until everything
> was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
> And I let the fish go.

And the victory that fills up the little rented boat? To whom does it belong? It is a question by no means simple. It belongs in part, of course, to the fish who in the end manages to escape "the terrible oxygen" and to return to his watery home. But the greater victory surely belongs to the poet herself who, despite her first satisfaction in winning her prey, yet succeeds in quelling the sportswoman's aggressiveness to the point of being able to respond to that in this creature which asks to be saluted and admired. And thus, the fish being allowed (in Coleridge's phrase) "its moment of self-exposition," everything becomes "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"

III

Elizabeth Bishop's remarkable powers of sympathy are not, however, reserved merely for fish and snails, for birds

and weeds, for rocks and mountains, for the insensible or subhuman things of earth: they also extend far into the realm of what Martin Buber called "the interhuman," and she presents many poignantly drawn and memorable personages. Her readers will tend perhaps most especially to recall the Brazilian portraits in ***Questions of Travel*** which focus not on people of importance but on the humble and the lowly, on those who perch ever so lightly on some narrow and incommodious ledge of the world. One thinks, for example, of **"Squatter's Children,"** with its picture of "a specklike girl and boy" playing "on the unbreathing sides of hills / . . . near a specklike house" and of how, as clouds pile up and a great storm gathers, "their laughter spreads / effulgence in the thunderheads." And there is **"Manuelzinho,"** with its account of a young man—"half squatter, half tenant (no rent)"—who is supposed to supply the poet with vegetables but who is "the world's worst gardener since Cain":

> The strangest things happen, to you.
> Your cow eats a "poison grass"
> and drops dead on the spot.
> Nobody else's does.
> And then your father dies. . . .
> I give you money for the funeral
> and you go and hire a *bus*
> for the delighted mourners,
> so I have to hand over some more
> and then have to hear you tell me
> you pray for me every night!

Manuelzinho is shiftless and improvident and unreliable, but, with his "wistful face," this "helpless, foolish man" is irresistible: so Bishop says: "I love you all I can, / I think."

Affectionate sarcasm and lenity give way, however, to a tone of unqualified solicitude and pity in the moving ballad called **"The Burglar of Babylon."** The setting of its narrative is "the fair green hills of Rio" that are fearfully stained by the hordes of the displaced and the impoverished who build their little shacks there "out of nothing at all" and who on these uplands that rise above the city cling and spread "like lichen." The hills all bear names—"the hill of Kerosene, / And the hill of the Skeleton, / The hill of Astonishment"—and the poem is devoted to a young man of "the hill of Babylon" named Micuçú, "a burglar and killer, / An enemy of society," who "had escaped three times / From the worst penitentiary." In his last escape he wounded three policemen: so the soldiers are after him. "Ninety years they gave me," he says. "Who wants to live that long? / I'll settle for ninety hours, / On the hill of Babylon." The rich people in their apartments watch the whole drama of the search through binoculars, as the soldiers, nervous with their tommy guns, swarm all over the area. Meanwhile, Micuçú hides in the grasses and stares down at "the long white beaches / And people going to swim, / With towels and beach umbrellas." Through a long night he remains hidden in the hills. The next morning he can hear the soldiers panting in their pursuit, and, while the morning is still young, as they open fire, one gets him behind the ear—and he is dead. Soon after his burial

> the little soldiers
> Are on Babylon hill again;
> Their gun barrels and helmets
> Shine in a gentle rain.
>
> Micuçú is buried already.
> They're after another two,
> But they say they aren't as dangerous
> As the poor Micuçú.

The poem, like so many of Elizabeth Bishop's finest statements, asks for no "explication": its plea is unmistakable, that, whatever the particular legalities may be, we give our sympathy to this poor devil who has never had any large chance at life or liberty or the pursuit of happiness and for whom the world has always been like a wilderness. And it is a similar triumph of moral imagination and fellow feeling that one encounters again and again in such poems as **"Cootchie"** and **"Faustina, or Rock Roses"** and the beautiful poem in ***Geography III,*** **"In the Waiting Room."**

IV

The immaculate precision of her language has led many of the commentators on her work to speak of Elizabeth Bishop as a "poet's poet"—which is a bit of fanciness that, prompted by however much of appropriate admiration and respect, may be more than a little questionable. For the tag "poet's poet" tends to suggest an imagination sufficient unto itself, taking its own aseity for granted and, with a royal kind of disdain for the world, making poetry out of nothing more than the idea of poetry itself. But nothing could be further from the sort of métier to which Bishop kept an absolute commitment, for she was a poet without myth—even about the poetic vocation itself. And, as she makes us feel, when she in the act of composition crossed out a word and replaced it with another, she did so not for the sake merely of the particular mosaic of language being fashioned but because the stricken word did not adequately render this or that detail of something she had *observed.* Which is to say that her primary fidelity was to the Real and to Things. And though there are numerous poems—like **"The Burglar of Babylon"** and **"Visits to St. Elizabeths"** and **"In the Waiting Room"**—that find their space in the realm of "the interhuman," she was most principally a poet of the subject-object relationship.

So it is something like **"Cape Breton"**—one of the most perfect poems of our time—that presents her characteristic manner and method. The setting of the poem, again, is Nova Scotia, and the poet is standing somewhere on the Cape one quiet Sunday morning, looking out on "the high 'bird islands,' Ciboux and Hertford":

> the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand
> with their backs to the mainland
> in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff's brown grass-
> frayed edge,
> while the few sheep pastured there go "Baaa, baaa."
> (Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede
> and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)
> The silken water is weaving and weaving,