

A Distant Inheritance: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and the American Transcendentalism

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Abstract: Among post-modern American poets, Elizabeth Bishop stands as a unique poetic voice. In the poetry produced in the second half of the twentieth century, the Bishop style, which is characterized by precision, objectivity and delicacy, represented a tradition. The present essay, however, intends to explore the relationship between Elizabeth Bishop and the American Transcendentalism. A close reading of Bishop's poetry with association to the basic ideas and doctrines of the New England Transcendentalism reveals that Bishop's deep concern with herself as an individual at all costs, her constant preoccupation with and sympathy for nature, and the haunting mysterious temperament of her poetry actually make her a distant descendent from the transcendentalist tradition, an acknowledgement made by Miss Bishop herself.

Key Words: post-modern American poetry, Elizabeth Bishop, the American Transcendentalism

Among post-modern American poets, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) stands as a unique poetic voice. As has been widely noted, Bishop is not as prolific as her contemporaries, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, etc. However, she has not only won many prestigious prizes, but also won the admiration of many fellow poets. Among those are Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, to name just a few. Elizabeth Bishop is now recognized as one of the best poets of her time, whose influence has been felt among poets of subsequent generations. Not surprisingly, John Ashbery has called her 'a writer's writer's writer' (1977, p. 8), and James Fenton has regarded her as the 'poet's poet' (1977, p. 12). To some extent, in the poetry produced in the second half of the twentieth century, the Bishop style, which is characterized by precision, objectivity and delicacy, represented a tradition. This present essay, however, intends to explore the relationship between Elizabeth Bishop and the early literary traditions, and American Transcendentalism in particular. By associating Miss Bishop's poetry with the basic ideas and doctrines of the New England Transcendentalism, the paper explicates how

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Elizabeth Bishop has made herself a descendent from that great tradition, an acknowledgement given by Miss Bishop herself.

As perhaps America's first "counter-culture" movement, American Transcendentalism, was a cultural movement in the early to middle 19th century. Dissatisfied with conservative Unitarianism, it went further to revolt against the established rationalism and predestination of New England's Calvinism. Drawing freely upon German Idealism (Immanuel Kant), British Romanticism (Samuel Taylor Coleridge), and oriental mysticism, the transcendentalists found a new religious expression and a revolutionary mind in social reforms (abolitionism, feminism, etc.). As the main exponents of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) have become the leading "Men Thinking" whose voices have never gone out of fashion. Emerson's 1836 book *Nature* is usually considered the watershed moment at which transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. But his other well-known addresses, such as "The American Scholar" (1837), "The Divinity School Address" (1838), and several of his classic *Essays*—"Self-Reliance", "The Over-Soul", "Experience", etc., are also important in shaping the direction of the movement.

Henry David Thoreau was a follower of Emerson, whose importance has not been fully realized until most recently. His *Walden* (1854), an account of his experiment in simple living, has now become an important intellectual source of the emerging eco-criticism; his famous essay "Resistance to Civil Government" (1848), an expression of his idea of "Civil Disobedience" derived from his opposition to the Mexican-American War and slavery, has considerably influenced Mahatma Gandhi and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.. Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) was one of the editors of *The Dial* and the most important woman transcendentalists. Now she has been regarded as one of the three most important transcendentalists, the other two being Emerson and Thoreau. She was and remains best known for her "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" (1845), America's first significant feminist manifesto.

In American literary history, 'the transcendental movement yet remains the most important influence that has affected American literature' (Cooke 1903, p. 7). Some contemporary writers are still being inspired and shaped by the ideas and works of those spiritual élites, others may deliberately take their directions away from the transcendentalists. But few are completely free from the transcendental influence, either in assimilation or rejection. In poetry, Emily Dickenson and Walt Whitman were poets whose name could not separate completely from the New England Transcendentalism. While at first sight, Elizabeth Bishop may not fall exactly into the category of the New England transcendentalists, her deep concern with herself as an individual at all costs, her constant preoccupation with and sympathy for nature, and the somewhat mysterious and metaphysical temperament of her poetry make her actually a descendent from the transcendentalist tradition.

I. Individualism

Scholars have pointed out that 'Transcendentalism was first and foremost a religious enthusiasm and revolution' (Myerson 2000, p. xxvii). Enthusiastically and even radically, the orthodox and stern Calvinism of the Puritan past was replaced by less fearful, more humanized religious practices. And empirical philosophy was challenged by the role of intuition, and 'the proper role of the individual—and the individual's role in a democratic society—was of the greatest concern' (Myerson 2000, p. xxvii). Through the painstaking and significant shift from church-oriented religious practice to the belief that there is a divinity latent within each individual, the transcendentalists have given the top

priority to individual and “self-reliance”. Emerson famously wrote in his essay “*The American Scholar*”:

We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds ... A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men. (qtd. in Myerson 2000, p.211)

This call for individualism and independence received an echo from Bishop. A careful reading of Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry and her biography reveals that actually she was much concerned about being herself as an individual, both within and outside her poetic world.

Not surprisingly, Elizabeth Bishop’s poems seem to register quite faithfully her cherished preference of individual over group. For example, “In the Waiting Room”, the very first poem in *Geography III*, tells the seven-year-old narrator’s moment of awakening as an individual while waiting for her aunt’s dental treatment. She presents her inner resistance as she experiences the identification herself with the other women in the waiting room. By confessing her attitude towards her aunt— ‘even then I knew she was / a foolish, timid woman’ (Bishop 2008, p. 150), and her explicit disgust for ‘those awful hanging breasts—’ (Bishop 2008, p. 151), the narrator expresses her recognition of herself among relations and in the world: ‘But I felt: you are an I, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are on the them. / *Why* should you be one, too?’ (Bishop 2008, p. 150), an intense rebellion against the assigned social and gender role, pretty much in the way that the volcano erupted on the photograph of the *National Geographic* magazine. Besides, there is also an obvious aspiration for independence embedded here. After hearing her aunt’s cry of pain from inside, the narrator is engaged in a revelation about her identity as an independent individual—‘What took me/ completely by surprise/ was that it was me:/ my voice, in my mouth. / Without thinking at all/ I was my foolish aunt’ (Bishop 2008, p. 150). These lines bear a strong resemblance to Emerson’s poem “Fate”, in which he teaches that each man must be himself, live his own life, and think his own thought.

Outside the poetic world, Miss Bishop remained a quite individual figure too. Literary historians often find it hard to place Elizabeth Bishop in post-modern American poetry, for ‘in a sense she runs along one of the faultlines of twentieth-century poetry, between the Modernists (Eliot, Stevens, Moore) on the one hand and the confessionals (Berryman, Lowell, Sexton) on the other’ (Ellis 2001, p. 457). Obviously, she never wrote nor like confessional poetry (her lifelong friendship with Robert Lowell has been a personal one), and she also kept a distance from the historical and political poetry. She has even refused to be included in a feminist anthology of poetry, though in many ways she qualified as a feminist. In a word, she has remained a private, rebellious and reticent poet throughout her life.

II. Divinity of Both Humans and Nature

To many scholars, ‘perhaps the single most important question raised by the Transcendentalists is: How do we see the world?’ (Myerson 2000, p. xxvi) In his 1836 book *Nature*, Emerson expressed a grand retreat from natural egotism to a reconciliation of himself with objective nature. As a participant observer, Emerson advocates a non-traditional appreciation of nature:

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and

earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. (qtd. in 2000, Myerson, p. 127)

To Emerson, “nature” is the gigantic shadow of God. Thus the beneficence, the beauty, the mystery of nature is like the beauty, the beneficence, and the mystery of God. And the ultimate function of nature, as the answer of Emerson’s question ‘to what end is nature’, is to serve, and free the spirit. That is why there will come ‘a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows’. Additionally, in some poems of his, such as “Each and All”, “The Rhodora”, and the “The Snow-Storm”, etc., Emerson expressed his different understanding of the relationship between man and nature: man and nature all come from the same power. “Each and All” has been usually regarded as one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s best nature poems. In the poem, Emerson used the engaged “sparrow” and the “graceful maid” as metaphors of the beauty of nature, to reveal that the beauty of nature can be best enjoyed by “yielding to the perfect whole” without uprooting it from its original surroundings, otherwise that will only result in damage— ‘he [the sparrow] sings the song, but it pleases not now” and “a gentle wife, but fairy none’ (Cooke 1903, p. 14).

Emerson also described the feeling of unity with all beings. In “The Rhodora”, Emerson begins with the compliment of the beauty of the shrub in detail, and then he raises the question “Rhodora! If the sages ask thee why/ This charm is wasted on the earth and sky” (Cooke 1903, p. 14). The answer that he gives at the end of the poem is that ‘the Self-same Power that brought me there brought you’ (Cooke 1903, p. 14). Obviously, here “Rhodora” is a symbol of “nature,” and “I” can be extended to be understood as “man” in general. So Emerson seems to tell us that it is the same power that gave life both to nature and to man. Therefore, nature is less a spectacle to be seen than it was a text to be read, and the ideal reader was one whose emotions are fully in sympathy with the natural world.

Elizabeth Bishop is not an activist poet, like Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, or Adrienne Rich. In fact, she has remained a private and reclusive poet who ‘distrusts history, with its melodramatic blacks and whites, and prefers geography, with its subtle gradations of color’ (Stepanchev 1965, p. 69). Her preference for landscape poetry rather than historical poetry, or political poetry is apparently due to her constant travelling experiences, but also derived from her deep concern for nature. Noticeably, three of her books of poetry have geographical names: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, *Geography III*. In her poetry, she constantly depicted the natural landscape, monument, fish, and animals, and there is always an ethical or moral stance involved in the presentation. In so doing, she demonstrated her exceptional imagination and her deep preoccupation with nature as well. Like the New England transcendentalists, she also felt so keenly the organic connection between man and nature.

“The Fish” is probably the best known poem from *North & South*. Written in the first person, it describes how humans (as represented by the narrator) confront with and adjust into a new relationship with nature (as represented by the big fish) through an intuitive moment of illumination. In the transcendentalist tradition, Emerson in particular, the poem usually begins by describing a scene or an event in nature, and then moves to assert a discovered truth, or other revelation. Actually Miss Bishop wrote in a quite similar way. The narrator (probably Miss Bishop herself) caught ‘a tremendous fish’ and ‘held him beside the boat’ with the ‘hook fast in a corner of his mouth’ (Bishop 2008, p. 33). Surprisingly, the fish ‘didn’t fight’ at all. This roused the narrator’s curiosity, and she began to examine the fish closely. She compared the fish to ‘wall-paper’, ‘roses’, ‘feathers’, ‘peony’, and ‘isinglass, (Bishop 2008, p. 33). But when she looked at his eyes, only to found that

they were ‘shallower’, ‘yellowed’, and ‘packed with tarnished tinfoil’ (Bishop 2008, p. 34). Despite of these, she still ‘admired his sullen face’ (Bishop 2008, p. 34). This is an ironical moment between humans and nature, for it is a confrontation between a battle-worn fish and an inexperienced fisher. There are five old pieces of fish-line hung on his low lip, which implies that he has been caught for at least five times. The narrator sees the fish so clearly that it becomes transparent to her eye, yet his eyes remained incomprehensive to her—‘they shifted a little, but not/ return to my stare’ (Bishop 2008, p. 34). The real confrontation of the narrator/fisher is that whether to keep the fish or to throw him back. After a moment of illumination as she ‘stared and stared’, she ‘let the fish go’ (Bishop 2008, p. 34). It is worth noting that Elizabeth Bishop called the fish ‘he’ not ‘it’. Personification this surely is, but it shows that the poet treated the fish as a sentient being, whose feelings were not unlike those of a human being.

“The Imaginary Iceberg” has often considered a more direct treatment of the division between man and nature. The poet put the manmade ship and naturally formed ship into contrast. Here, she once again expresses her preference for nature, as she claims from the first line ‘we’d rather have the iceberg than the ship, / although it meant the end of travel’ (Bishop 2008, p.3). She was so impressed by the majesty and dignity of the iceberg that she ignored the ship where she should stand. She even went far to interrogate the floating field: ‘are you aware an iceberg takes repose/ with you, and when it wakes may pasture on your snows?’ (Bishop 2008, p.4) The beauty of the imaginary iceberg made the ship ‘artlessly rhetorical’(Bishop 2008,p. 4) and itself necessary for the soul—‘icebergs behoove the soul’(Bishop 2008, p. 4). Thus the “soul” is formed through the contact with nature, the imaginary iceberg.

Similarly, in “The Moose”, a long poem in *Geography III*, portrays a sweet and intimate encounter between human and natural realms. Written in a sort of ballad, the poem records the autobiographical experience of Miss Bishop’s journey on a bus from Nova Scotia to Boston in 1946. As in “The Fish” and elsewhere, the poem begins with a scene in nature. The beautiful landscape and local color of the countryside from which she departed was described in detail and at length, to such an extent that can be called indulgence. While entering ‘the New Brunswick woods’ at night (Bishop 2008, p. 160), suddenly ‘the bus driver/ stops with a jolt,/ turns off his lights’ (Bishop 2008, p. 161), because ‘a moose has come out of/ the impenetrable wood/ and stands there, loom, rather/ in the middle of the road’ (Bishop 2008, p. 162). The lonely female traveler began to look at the intruder. She found that the moose was ‘high as a church, / homely as a horse/ (or, safe as houses)’ (Bishop 2008, p. 162). Most important, someone on the bus discovered that the moose was female—‘Look! It’s a she!’(Bishop 2008, p. 162) Thus the distance between human and nature suddenly was shortened, the boundary dissolved. And everybody on the bus (probably the moose also) felt a ‘sweet sensation of joy’ (Bishop 2008, p. 162). The unexpected encounter with the moose, certainly, has added their tiring and tedious journey some excitement and joy. Here, a temporary community of harmony and peace seemed built based on the acknowledgment of the equality and divinity of both humans and nature. Emerson wrote in his essay *Nature* that: ‘The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we—through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?’(Myerson 2000, p.125) Here Miss Bishop seemed to harbor the same attitude to nature and the universe, consciously or unconsciously.

III. Mysticism

As scholars have pointed out, 'Emerson's Transcendentalism derived from oriental mysticism, from Neoplatonic idealism, and from a diluted form of Kant's philosophy as interpreted by Coleridge, Carlyle, and other amateur philosophers. It included some religious and philosophical elements of mysticism, which were largely lacking in Kant' (Carpenter 1973, p. 24). Some concepts put forward or coined then by Emerson, such as 'over-soul', 'transparent eyeball', 'intuition', 'man thinking', etc., sound mysterious even today. Actually, the idea that he regarded the whole universe as an organic whole and nature as the manifestation of God coincide with the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu's pantheism and what he called the 'Primal Unity' between man and nature. He encouraged people to return to nature, so as to achieve a calm state of 'wu wei', or 'non-action', meaning free from desires. Indeed, Thoreau's retreat in the Walden woods, where he had easy access to communicate with nature in a direct and intimate fashion, is the ideal way of life that Lao-Tzu advocated.

Although Elizabeth Bishop had no intention to become a philosopher nor ever claimed to have a philosophy guiding her writing, she was a 'mind thinking' in every sense that the words meant. It is not difficult to notice that Miss Bishop has frequent used miracles, revelations, dreams, visions, and hymns in her work. She is fond of meditation and abstraction, and her perception of the universe and her work, like her predecessor Emerson, apparently has some metaphysical, mysterious temperament. And at some times, Miss Bishop, to the readers, is apparently a strange, even mysterious poet.

"One Art" is a poem by Bishop many readers find puzzling. The poem is written in a traditional form, the villanelle, concerning the issue about losing objects in life. 'The art of losing isn't hard to master' (Bishop 2008, p.166), the narrator declares light-heartedly from the beginning. In the second stanza, when the personae claims 'lose something every day' (Bishop 2008, p.166), she seems to command people to lose things. 'Then practice losing farther, losing faster' (Bishop 2008, p.166), she urges soon after. Those readers who are familiar with the life story of Miss Bishop will find the incidents of losing listed here almost all happened upon the poet: 'two cities', 'lovely ones', and 'even losing you'(Bishop 2008, p.167). In the last stanza, however, the narrator finally ironically confesses 'the art of losing's not too hard to master/ though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster'(Bishop 2008, p. 167). The shift in attitude towards losing shows that she tries to convince herself that losing is not too hard to face. But, for general readers, who fortunately or unfortunately, have not experienced so many incidents of losing in their lives, the poem sounds mysterious and remote.

The main purpose of maps should be to provide guidance and clarity for the travelers. However, "The Map", the very first poem in *North & South* offers the reader bewilderment rather clarity. 'Land lies in water' or 'does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, / drawing it unperturbed around itself?'(Bishop 2008, p. 3) This is her first question, and also her meditation of relationship between map-making and poetry writing. She seemed to tell us that the way that she conceived of her poetry was like the way of mapmaking, the painstaking representation of the known world. Poetry, like a map, should also provide a description of the earth's surface. The land and sea may refer to the factual and the imaginary, because how to look at them from an artist's perspective was one of her major concerns. 'Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?' the narrator asks (Bishop 2008, p. 3). An ordinary artist-examiner will not think of and raise this question which transcends the small artistic world. Political concern it certainly had, the question also touches upon the ontological consideration. She writes, 'Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West. / More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors'(Bishop 2008, p. 3). Here,

Miss Bishop expressed her preference for the artistic treatment of the world to the historical way. Written in simple words on an everyday subject, the poem bears geographical, artistic, political, historical, and possibly ecological concern with a mysterious temperament.

Likewise, in 'A Miracle for Breakfast' the narrator tells another mysterious story in the form of sestina. The narrator sits 'in the sun at breakfast time,' and 'licked up the crumb', 'waiting for the miracle' (Bishop 2008, p. 15). She also caught 'a window across the river caught the sun/ as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony'(Bishop 2008, p. 15). At the end of the poem, there are two miracles at work: one is the private miracle made by 'my crumb' and 'my mansion'(Bishop 2008, p. 15), the other is the universal miracle made by the sun. Here, Miss Bishop wrote much in the same way that Emily Dickinson wrote about her inverted small world. The surrealistic vision ('it was not a miracle') here and in some other poems, has made some obscurity to Bishop's poetry as a whole.

In terms of technique, Bishop was greatly influenced by symbolist and surrealist poetry and thought. This relatively freer mode of writing allowed her to confront the necessities of life philosophically. Her poems seem deceptively simple. And like Robert Frost, this gave rise to some mysticism in her poems. "At the Fishhouses" is a well-known poem from *A Cold Spring*, described the encounter with an old fisherman in a Nova Scotia fishing village on a cold evening. To some extent, Miss Bishop tried to intertwine the world known and the world unknown in the poem.

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.(Bishop 2008, p. 50-51)

The quality of being 'opaque' and 'translucence' seems to represent the unfathomable nature of ocean, a metaphor of knowing which addressed by the narrator at the end of the poem. The old man, 'a friend of my grandfather' (Bishop 2008, p.51), whose shuttle was worn and polished, whose black old knife was almost worn away, is another incarnation of knowledge. Like the 'ancient wooden capstan' with its 'melancholy stains, like dried blood' (Bishop 2008, p. 51), his presence speaks of a past beyond recovery. The 'seal' which was curious about the narrator, serves as another representative of the unknown world. Mysteriously, 'he was interested in music...he stood up in the water and regarded me/ steadily, moving his head a little./ Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge/ almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug/ as if it were against his better judgment'(Bishop 2008, p.51-52).

Finally, the speaker came close to the sea water, and found 'it is like what we imagine knowledge to be: dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free' (Bishop 2008, p.52). This wonderful comparison demonstrates Miss Bishop's intuitive apperception, but also her mysticism. The last line 'our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown' (Bishop 2008, p.52), is an open ending which allows manifold interpretations. On the one hand, our knowledge is certainly historical for it is what we obtained in a particular time and place, and is therefore subject to the transience of all temporal things, 'flowing and flown'; on the other, it can also refer to the knowledge of history, of the lives and events that preceded our own. Thus the history of this particular Nova Scotia fishing village proves to be closely bound up with Bishop's own painful childhood and the formation of her present self.

Sometimes, it is almost impossible to find a definite meaning to her poetry. But this obscurity and ambiguity do not drive readers away from Bishop. On the contrary, it is this mysticism that has made Elizabeth Bishop's more fascinating and profound.

Conclusion

Throughout her life, Elizabeth Bishop wrote slowly and sparingly. Her first volume of poetry, *North & South*, was published in 1946; the second, *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring*, appeared in 1955; the third, *Questions of Travel*, in 1965; the fourth, *Completed Poems*, in 1969; and the last, *Geography III*, in 1976. For some period of time, she remained a minor poet, though many fellow poets admired her. As an orphan, a lesbian, a feminist, Miss Bishop has survived numerous hard times in her own life as well as in the shifts of critical paradigm. Rarely, her reputation has grown steadily even after her death, and her position in American literary history as an important poet is now secure.

It has often been remarked that Bishop's poetry is particular original and sophisticated. But this originality, as McNally pointed out, 'lies not in large innovations or form or language—the proper domain of the major poet—but in more subtle mutations of tradition' (1966, p.189). Coincidentally, in this regard Harold Bloom also put it, 'Bishop stands, then, securely in a tradition of American poetry that began with Emerson, Very, and Dickinson, and culminated in aspects of Frost as well as of Stevens and Moore' (1985, p.1). Considerable work has been done concerning the relationship between Elizabeth Bishop, and Marianne Moore, her mentor, and her relationship with Robert Lowell, her lifetime friend, as well as the relationship between Bishop and some of her contemporaries. But little has been said about her inheritance of the earlier literary tradition, especially American Transcendentalism.

Of course, any endeavor of tracing aspects of that influence will necessarily subject to personal prejudice or preference. Perhaps the most convincing comes from the poet's voice. In a 1963 letter to Anne Stevenson, her first biographer, Elizabeth Bishop confessed: 'But I also feel that Cal (Lowell) and I in our very different ways are both descendents from the Transcendentalists—but you may not agree' (2008, p.846).

In aforementioned analysis, however, emphasis has been mainly placed on Elizabeth Bishop's inheritance of Emerson's, and for a while Thoreau's, transcendentalist doctrines and poetics. Apparently, there is certainly an affinity between Bishop and Margaret Fuller, who the name transcendentalists should definitely include, in as far as the shared feminist aspiration.

Throughout Elizabeth Bishop's career, her serious concern for being herself, persistent turning to nature, and the haunting mysticism in her poetry has made her a distant inheritor of New England Transcendentalism, though the word 'inheritor' by no means suggests that there are no differences or even conflicts between them.

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