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Other Presences : Elizabeth Bishops Poetics of Hospitality

Kultura Popularna nr 1 (55), 122-131

2018

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Anna Warso

Other Presences. Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Hospitality

Letters exchanged between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell in spring 1962 include, among others, a conversation about his use of one of her short stories as a source material for “The Scream”, a poem published later in the winter edition of *The Kenyon Review*. “In the Village”, the story in question, deals with the subject of formative trauma and is directly related to the events of Bishop’s childhood: her widowed mother suffered from a series of nervous collapses and became institutionalized. The narrator recalls: “First she had come home with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again” but “in spite of the doctors, in spite of the frightening expenses, she had not got any better.” (*Prose*, 63) Left in the care of her maternal grandparents until the age of six, Bishop was then relocated – “unconsulted and against my wishes” – from Great Village to her father’s wealthier relatives in Massachusetts “to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet . . . perhaps even from the inverted r’s of my mother’s family”, as revealed by the narrator of “The Country Mouse” (*Prose*, 89). The landscapes and memories of Nova Scotia will echo in the work written during the decades of the poet’s displacement in Florida and Brazil. On 10 March 1962 Lowell sent Bishop a few of his poem drafts, adding warily:

I tried versing your “In the Village”. The lines about the heart are Harriet’s on her kindergarten society, the rest is merely your prose put into three-beat lines and probably a travesty, making something small and literary out [of] something much larger . . . I send it with misgivings. Maybe you could use it for raw material for a really great poem. (*WIA*, 390)

To which she replies:

I don’t know why I bother to write “Uncle Artie” really. I shd. just send you my first notes and you can turn him into a wonderful poem. He is even more your style than the Village story was. “The Scream” really works well, doesn’t it. The story is far enough behind me so I can see it as a poem now. The first few stanzas I saw only my story -- then the poem took over -- and the last stanza is wonderful. It builds up beautifully, and everything of importance is there. But I was very surprised. (*WIA*, 401–402)

Despite the praise, there is a degree of ambiguity in Bishop’s reply, which probably unsettled Lowell and may have prompted the following confession: “I was rather on tiptoe that my poems had been intrusive, and read your letter with great relief. . . Glad this and my tampering with ‘In the Village’ didn’t annoy you. When ‘The Scream’ is published I’ll explain, it’s just a footnote to your marvelous story.” (*WIA*, 405) This is met with the following reassurance: “No – I was very pleased with ‘The Scream’. I find it very touching you were worried for fear I might be annoyed – I thought it was only I who went around imagining people were cross with me when I didn’t hear from them” (*WIA*, 412). Lowell’s poem is indeed furnished with a bracketed annotation reading: “Derived from Elizabeth Bishop’s story, ‘In the Village’” (Lowell, 8).

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Although the literary and personal connections between Bishop and Lowell have been analyzed rather extensively over the last decades (Paulin, Travisano and others), and David Kalstone's 1989 study of her poetic development and friendships has remained a crucial reference work for those curious about the intersections of Bishop's writing and life, the 2008 publication of *Words in Air. The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* allows for fresh insights into the relationship of the poets and their work.

Letter writing itself constitutes a special form art and of being together, an awareness of which will resonate throughout Bishop's own voluminous correspondence as well as her writing. They are a form of self-presentation and an offering to another, but also a physical manifestation of the reciprocity upon which the epistolary hinges, a mediation between two distant points, a bridge: "correspondence" means a "harmony, agreement", from the assimilated form of *com*, meaning "together, with (each other)", and *respondere*, "to answer". The exchange of personal letters is dependent on the economy of goodwill and trust between the writer and the addressee as the missive from the former becomes the property of the latter. But correspondence is also, as Franz Kafka observes in *Letters to Milena*, "a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one own's phantom which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness (cited in Altman, 2)". In her classical *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Altman notes that letters extend also across presence and absence as the sender and the receiver who "meet" through the letter "are neither totally separated nor totally united" (43). Discussing what she calls the ethics of correspondence (since the space of the encounter is inevitably an ethical space), Siobhan Phillips posits, in fact, the possibility of an epistolary kind of inter-subjectivity, which she traces in Bishop: a form of selfhood developed by the poet practicing "self-connection rather than self-expression" through letters "not necessarily autobiographical and yet . . . undeniably personal" (Phillips, 348).

By their constitutive properties and their inherent in-betweenness, letters problematize the boundary between presence and absence, the private and the non-private, the literary and the non-literary in ways which become salient for the discussion of Bishop's attitude to the issues of representation, property and, generally, the presence of others in one's writing. Her reaction to Lowell's use of his ex-wife's letters in *The Dolphin* is particularly interesting in this regard, as are the several instances of her and Lowell's poetic reciprocity and their declared willingness to share: "By the way, the mermaid wasn't your Millay parody, but something in one of your letters, inspired by Wiscasset probably" – Lowell remarks about his poem "Water" (*WIA*, 405). Referring to their paired lyrics – Bishop dedicated "The Armadillo" to Lowell, who responded with "Skunk Hour", modeled upon the former – Lowell writes in April 1958: "I used your 'Armadillo' in class as a parallel to my 'Skunks' and ended up feeling a petty plagiarist" (*WIA*, 258). Five years later Bishop still insists: "You shouldn't, however, say that 'The Armadillo' is 'better' than the skunk. I am not being modest – how I wish it were!" (*WIA*, 466). The "image of a blue china knob" which – as Lowell confesses – "somehow started the current of images in [the] opening stanzas" of his "Skunk Hour" (*Collected Prose*, 228) recalls the white china doorknob topping the flag pole in Bishop's "Cape Breton" and was, in fact, white in the first draft of his notes on "Skunk Hour", David Kalstone notes (186).

Her letters are scattered with bits of self-reflective commentary: in November 1955 she writes to Lowell: "I just noticed the other day that I must have got my pig's feet in 'The Prodigal' from your spiders in 'Mr. Edwards'... And here, I'm afraid, 'improvident as the dawn' is out of Yeats" (*WIA*, 171), even though the phrase is probably rather Yeatsian than Yeats's. At the same time, Anderson mentions her discomfort caused by Marianne Moore reusing some of her observations:

Significantly, both poets reacted in different ways to evidence that their writing had imitated, or had depended on, an already existing text of the other. Whilst Bishop excoriated herself for unconscious borrowings from Moore's poem 'The Frigate Pelican' (*OA*, 54) Moore, on the other hand, seems to have been calmly insouciant about assimilating images from Bishop into her writing, a fact Bishop was still registering as a "slight grudge" years later. (Anderson, 26)

It was also, inevitably, through a letter that Bishop expressed her objections to Lowell's creative use of Elizabeth Hardwick's correspondence. Having reassured him that *The Dolphin* contains "magnificent poetry" and that "every 14 lines have some marvels of image or expression" (*WIA*, 707) Bishops kindly but steadfastly advises against the publication of the sonnets, unless major revisions are to be introduced: "there is a 'mixture of fact and fiction' and you have *changed* her letters. That is 'infinite mischief' I think... One can use one's life as material – one does anyway – but these letters – aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission – IF you hadn't changed them... etc. But *art just isn't worth that much*." (*WIA*, 708) She references a letter from Thomas Hardy to James Douglas about another instance of "abuse" which she describes as "Not exactly the same situation as *DOLPHIN*, but fairly close" (*WIA*, 707). Returning to *The Dolphin* in April 1972 Bishop stresses again "What I have objected to in your use of the letters is that I think you've changed them – & you had no right to do that" (*WIA*, 716) and in the earlier exchange she revokes the notion of gentleness from the letter by Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, where the idea of being a "gentleman" is conceived as "higher than being a 'Christian' even, certainly than a poet". She explains: "It is not being 'gentle' to use personal, tragic, anguished letters that way – it's cruel... I also think that the thing *could* be done, somehow – the letters used and the conflict presented as forcefully, or almost, without *changing* them... ." (*WIA*, 708).

Bishop's references to Hopkins may strike as impossibly Victorian today and there is perhaps a degree of despaired awkwardness in her attempt at explaining that it is the "changing" which rendered Lowell's maneuver wrong. After all, she knows well enough that one is destined to report only one's own, domesticated perceptions; she knows that the world will slip away from even the most disciplined attempts to translate it accurately to the words on the page – as the carefully captured fish does in one of her frequently anthologized poems, where the eye of the speaker zooms in and focuses on the animal's eyes "far larger than mine,/ but shallower, and yellowed,/ the irises backed and packed/ with tarnished tinfoil/ seen through the lenses/ of old scratched isinglass." (*Complete Poems*, 43) In "Cape Breton" the concentration on language and description is both intense and exhilaratingly futile: the ancient writing "made on stones by stones" remains undecipherable as "these regions now have

little to say for themselves/ except in the thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward/ freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing/ in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets." (*Complete Poems*, 68). In "Santarem" the speaker confesses "Of course I may be remembering it all wrong" (*Complete Poems*, 185) and questions her own writerly authority "hadn't two rivers sprung/ from the garden of Eden? No, that was four" (*Complete Poems*, 185) – "imagine T.S. Eliot or Marianne Moore misremembering their carefully documented sources" Thomas Travisano observes (190). Bishop's attentive descriptions are indeed often read as an echo of Moore's fondness for focus, accuracy and precision and while the importance of Moore for Bishop's poetic development is undeniable, I propose to view the attentiveness exhibited by the latter poet not as a sign of her eagerness to document and re-present but as a result of her specific sensitivity shaped by the principles of reciprocity and trust inherent in correspondence and tied to the more general laws of hospitality.

Importantly, Bishop was also keen reader of letters (Chekhov, Coleridge, Fitzgerald, Hardy, Hopkins, Henry James, Yeats and others). In *Art and Memory* Ellis aptly demonstrates how the "anecdotes [she] chooses to repeat themselves suggest aspects of each writer's characteristic tone of voice" and, recalling Bishop's difficulties with writing the foreword for Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*, discusses the extent to which the poet tended to apply literary standards to correspondence (143–145). In 1971–1972 at Harvard, she taught a class on "Letters: Readings in Personal Correspondence, Famous and Infamous, from the 16th to 20th Centuries" the plans for which she described to Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale as "Just letters – as an art form or something" hoping to select a "nicely incongruous assortment of people – Mrs. Carlyle, Chekhov, my Aunt Grace, Keats, a letter found in the street, etc. etc." (*OA*, 544). In May 1970 she revealed to Lowell: "I've been reading Carlyle's life – I have a poem about him I've had around for years" (*WIA*, 674) – it was published posthumously in *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke Box* as "Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle" and, in fact, is not as much "about him" (Carlyle) as it is about an event described in one of Jane Carlyle's letters: Mr. Carlyle misses Mrs. Carlyle at "Swan With Two Necks" and in Bishop's versed rendering of the anecdote the image on the signboard becomes the emblem of their marriage, and "the epistolary dynamics of that relationship in particular" (Phillips, 343). Also her own correspondence contains kernels of future poems: in 1946 she traveled back from Great Village to the United States by bus and, as she reports to Marianne Moore: "Early the next morning, just as it was getting light, the driver had to stop suddenly for a big cow moose who was wandering down the road . . . The driver said that one foggy night he had to stop while a huge bull moose came right up and smelled the engine. 'Very curious beasts' he said" (*OA*, 141). It took over twenty five years for the episode to materialize in "The Moose", published in *Geography III* (see also Kalstone, 119). Tóibín reports:

In 1956 Bishop wrote to her Aunt Grace: "I've written a long poem about Nova Scotia. It's dedicated to you. When it's published, I'll send you a copy." Sixteen years later, the poem was finished. She wrote to Aunt Grace: "It is called 'The Moose.' (You are not the moose.)" (Tóibín, 19)

In "The Bight" the water is the "color of the gas flame turned as low as possible" (*Complete Poems*, 60) – echoing a description of the coastline from

a January 15, 1948 Key West letter to Lowell, where “the water looks like blue gas – the harbor is always a mess” (*WIA*, 23). There are “junky little boats all piled up with sponges and always a few half sunk or splintered up from the most recent hurricane. It reminds me a little of my desk” (*WIA*, 23). In “The Bight” she writes:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up
 against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
 and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last
 bad storm,
 like torn open, unanswered letters.
 (*Complete Poems* 60)

In the context of the Hopkins reference and Bishop’s insistence on the importance being “gentle” – Pickard notes her praise for Chekhov, who is “good as well as [a] good artist” (Bishop in Pickard, 46) – her objection to Lowell’s manipulation of Hardwick’s voice seems to point to the ethical dimension – in terms of the obligation and the practical (im)possibility of opening up the space of one’s poem to other presences. Doing that in the case of *The Dolphin* “would mean a great deal of work, of course – and perhaps you feel it is impossible” Bishop continues (*WIA*, 708). Indeed, to make possible a just presence of (the voice of) another in a poem seems to require a lyrical equivalent of what Jacques Derrida refers to as genuine hospitality. But being hospitable hinges upon having the power to host: it is always tied to one’s dwelling place, identity, space and limits as well as a degree of control over the guests, all of which predetermine the possibility of hospitality (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 149). If poetry is tied to the development and mastery over one’s “own” voice, hosting other presences in a poem becomes a tremendously difficult balancing act. An analogous predicament may be found in the act translation where the strangeness of another is always at a risk of becoming violently domesticated as it is inevitably rewritten: Bishops alludes to that difficulty suggesting improvements to what was, in fact, Lowell’s rather careless translations of Rimbaud: “You have been careful to call them ‘free translations’ and of course you are free to change the line order, interpolate, point up . . . I just *can’t* decide how ‘free’ one has the right to be” (*WIA*, 356–357).

This is not to say that Lowell is unaware or unfazed by the effects and consequences of his free translations. In a letter from 21 August 1947 he writes about “The Fish”: “I’m glad you wrote me, because it gives me an excuse to tell you how much I liked your *New Yorker* fish poem. Perhaps, it’s your best. Anyway, I felt very envious reading it – I’m a fisherman myself but all my fish became symbols, alas!” – and in November 1954, remarking on the difficulties of writing prose, he notes: “– a hell of a job. It starts naked, ends as fake velvet.” (*WIA*, 153) Bishop is similarly confused by prose: “it’s almost impossible not to tell the truth in poetry, I think, but in prose, it keeps eluding me in the funniest way.” (*WIA*, 161) She is also well aware of the degree to which the writing of others inspires and influences one’s own (“Perhaps we are all magpies” she confesses reminiscing Moore, admitting to that “very slight grudge” against the older poet (*Prose*, 130)), but she consistent and adamant in her objection to what she views as a violation of trust. As early as 1948 she gently rebukes Lowell for his failing to comment on William’s use of another person’s letters in *Paterson*: “I read your Williams review on the train . . . I still felt he shouldn’t have used the letters from that woman. To

me it seems mean & they're much too overpowering emotionally for the rest of it so that the whole poem suffers" (in Ellis, 154) To go back to her praise of Chekhov, Williams is a good artist but he is not *good*.

One of her essays, "Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore" (an allusion to Moore's "Efforts and Affection" whose title in Bishop's copy was changed by Moore crossing out "and" and writing "of" above the poem) includes a reflection which may shed more light on her reference to the Hopkins letter, the remark on "gentleness" and the issues in question. Trying to summarize her reminiscences of Moore, Bishop becomes "foolishly bemused":

Marianne's monogram; mother; manners; morals; and
I catch myself murmuring, "Manners and morals; man-
ners *as* morals" Or is it "morals *as* manners?" Since like
Alice, "in a dreamy sort of way," I can't answer either
question, it does not much matter which way I put it; it
seems to be making sense. (*Prose*, 140)

The connection is obviously risky and Bishop remained troubled by the situations where Moore's insistence on protocol lead to outcomes which could be viewed as morally questionable: a young writer "was never invited to Cumberland Street although his friends were. Once, I asked innocently why I never saw him there and Marianne gave me her serious, severe look and said, 'he *contradicted* Mother'" (*Prose*, 127). While little is known about the exact incident and the reply itself may have been simply a manifestation of Moore's eccentricity, Bishop's tone and the choice of events recalled in the memoir suggest that she was somewhat puzzled by the arbitrariness of the system of manners practiced by her mentor. Nonetheless, in a letter to Anne Stevenson, she writes: "[John Dewey] and Marianne are the most truly 'democratic' people I've known I think. -- He had almost the best manners I have ever encountered, always had *time*, took an interest in everything, -- no detail, no word or stone or cat or old woman was unimportant to him" (*Prose*, 396). Bishop's discomfort with the anachronism and the problematic nature of certain codes of behavior, accompanied by a sense of gravitas with regard to what is at stake, result in the tension of "Manners", a retrospective poem written "For a Child of 1918".

The tone of simple, balladic "Manners" vacillates between elegiac, deferential and patronizing when Bishop's speaker recalls the instruction received while riding a wagon in Nova Scotia with her "Pa", William Bulmer. His words of wisdom seem almost embarrassingly clichéd to the adult speaker who tries to distance herself from the pastoral world of childhood recreated in verse and even the formal simplicity of the poem could be viewed as a gesture of irony. From the perspective of the adult, the grandfather's teachings were impractical already in 1918:

When the automobiles went by,
the dust hid the people's faces
but we shouted "Good day! Good day!
Fine day!" at the top of our voices.
(*Complete Poems*, 121)

And yet, the lessons in kindness received in (or attributed to) Great Village, towards "a stranger on foot", a passing child, a crow, "man or beast",

culminating in the last stanza where they “all got down” from the wagon and walked beside it because “the mare was tired”, inform Bishop’s writing and manifest in the attentive treatment of her objects. In the long poem about a bus journey from Nova Scotia to Boston, the encountered moose

. . . stands there, looms, rather
in the middle of the road.
It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus’s hot hood.

Towering, antlerless;
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man’s voice assures us
“Perfectly harmless. . . .”

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.

. . .

“Curious creatures,”
says our quiet driver,
rolling his *r*’s.
“Look at that, would you.”
Then he shifts gears.
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there’s a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.
(*Complete Poems*, 173)

The language and form of the poem emphasize relations of affinity and mutuality. “Towering, antlerless” obviously refers to the “grand” animal but if the stop at the end of the previous line is omitted, those adjectives may also describe the vehicle from the perspective of the moose, who approaches the alien to sniff at its warm hood. Bishop repeats this poetic gesture in another stanza, this time more forcefully and openly: the driver’s remark (“Curious creatures”), referred to the moose, presents the curious beast as both strange, “otherworldly” and interested in the visitors who suddenly appeared on the road. However, the driver’s observation may refer also the passengers who, curious about the animal, “exclaim in whispers/childishly, softly” and later keep looking back (“craning backward”) while the windows let in the “smell of moose.” The speaker asks:

Why, why do we feel
 (we all feel) this sweet
 sensation of joy?
 (*Complete Poems*, 173)

It is curious indeed: “Look at that, would you.” – says the busman invitingly.

In that moment of encounter both the passengers and the wild animal turn into intrigued “creatures”, including the “quiet driver” who “shifts gears./ For a moment longer,/ by craning backward” (in Bishop’s letter from 1946 it was the moose who “walked away very slowly into the woods, looking at us over her shoulder” [OA, 141]). The driver is “rolling his r’s”, like people back home in Nova Scotia and unlike those in Boston, and the moose seems “homely as a house/(or safe as houses)” – like the fish from another poem, who is “battered, venerable and homely” (*Complete Poems*, 43) and whose lower lip (“if you could call it a lip”) shows several signs of the animal’s long experience in combating anglers. In instances such as these, likeness and difference become recognized, resulting in one’s sense of kinship with the other as well as a separateness from it, confirming the relation between the self and the world. In “The Moose”, the “sweet sensation of joy”, born from that recognition, confronts the speaker also with her past self: child-like, inquisitive and excitable, and takes her back to the half recalled, half imagined family home: the poem is dedicated to Grace Bulmer Bowers and during the long, tedious journey “a dreamy divagation/ begins in the night,/ a gentle, auditory,/ slow hallucination. . . / In the creakings and noises,/ an old conversation/ --not concerning us,/ but recognizable, somewhere,/ back in the bus:/ Grandparents’ voices” (*Collected Poems*, 171) – the reminiscences which follow are interrupted by the jolt of the bus.

Bishop’s work is scattered with affinities and correspondences. The coastline in “The Bight” reminds the poet of her desk, the boats are “piled up . . . like torn unanswered letters” (*Collected Poems*, 60) and the text itself extends between two parallel dimensions, of the bight and of Bishop’s workplace:

The bight is littered with old correspondences.
 Click. Click. Goes the dredge
 and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
 All the untidy activity continues,
 awful but cheerful.

(*Collected Poems*, 60–61)

The clicking accompanies the work of both the dredge and the typewriter bringing up a “jawful of marl” – or a mouthful of words. The writing and reading (of poems, correspondences), “awful but cheerful,” continues because “The Bight”, self-dedicated parenthetically under the title: [*On my birthday*], is about the Key West landscape, whose description had been offered to Lowell in a letter, but also about Bishop’s internal landscape, her attitude to poetic work and her fearful desire to communicate, just as “Manners” is a poem about the possibility of togetherness engendered by speaking and being spoken to. Bishop’s famously reticent speakers are, in fact, on a constant lookout for potential connections and it is their distance which helps to create a space for other presences to be heard and resound. In all of this “untidy activity” – the last two verses of “The Bight” are engraved on the poet’s gravestone – Bishop’s was the principle of kindness and reciprocity, nourished

by her fondness of the epistolary; her manner is that of hospitality towards the strange, curious creatures and objects given residence in the writing which Bishop considered home.

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