Elizabeth Bishop (1984)

Elizabeth Hardwick

Over the years, Elizabeth Bishop, the poet, wrote a number of short stories, several portraits (one of Marianne Moore and another of a primitive painter living in Key West), several descriptive pieces set in Brazil, and an introduction to her translation from the Portuguese of *The Diary of Helena Morley*. All are now in *The Collected Prose*, edited and introduced by her publisher, Robert Giroux. Herein one will find Elizabeth Bishop's mastery of a moderate tone, even in the most searing fictions based upon painful recollections of her early life. One will note the characteristic curiosity, in her case often a curiosity about the curious, and it will be muted, as in her poems, by a respect and tolerance for what the curiosity discovers. There is also, here and there, the unusual visual sharpness that prompts her to challenge, as in a duel, the expected adjectives of description. She finds the words to make her victory convincing.

I remember when "In Prison" appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1938. This story, or prose reflection, was immediately famous, if such a claim is possible for a single short work appearing in a small magazine. But those were smaller times, the skyline was not so tall, and fame did not demand the most intensive exploitation of available space. So you were not likely to forget "In Prison" and the chain-gang men sometimes at home for the weekend and *their striped trousers hanging on the wash line.*

Poets can, of course, write prose. They can write it as well as or ill as they write verse, although I think certain slothful and not very intelligent poets are more daring in mediocrity when they write prose, the prose of a review for instance. Sometimes these items on the passing scene show a distraction about word and idea more suitable to the shooing away of the family dog than to a compositional task. Still, when the habit of poetry exists, it will usually invade the poet's prose with a natural suffusion of its peculiar ways. Some have the two talents in a sort of separation. D. H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy write novels, it seems to me, as novelists--that is, not as poets. Their great production, their themes and ideas, their stories chosen to dramatize a particular history and at the same time to speak of the general fate of human beings. All of this attests to a primary gift for fiction, a conquest of the form so abundant as to seem predestined. They could not refuse to be fiction writers any more than they could refuse to be poets. In their novels we will notice that the thorn of a rose will draw blood at the moment of first love, that the howl of a vicious, virile rabbit will ignite the emotions of a man and woman hesitating in the field. The metaphorical concentrations of poetry quietly seep into the rush and flow of the narration. And yet, neither Hardy nor Lawrence lingered long enough to summon the vast "poetic effects" of Joyce and Proust.

Nothing is more striking to me than the casual prose of poets, with in quick and dashing informality, its mastery of the sudden and offhand, the free and thrown away. "The wretched, fishing jealousies of Leontes. "*Fishing?* Yes. That is Coleridge. Corbiere's "mild waterfront sensuality"--the words are Laforgue's. Thinking about Mayakovsky's working-class dress, Pasternak saw it not as an affront to the respectable but as a warning to the "black velvet" of Mayakovsky's talent. Protesting the Russian Symbolist's use of images and sets of images as if they were so many handy kitchen utensils, Mandelstam cried out (or so it seems on the page) that an image was inappropriate for everyday use, "just as an icon lamp would be inappropriate for lighting a cigarette."

Elizabeth Bishop's prose, as we read it collected and whole, gives me the idea that she set about the writing as an enterprise, something she would do from time to time with the prose part of her mind. It was the same mind that wrote the poems, but that does not alter the fact that certain of her stories were composed in the generally acceptable manner of the time. I think particularly of "The Baptism," "The Farmer's Children," "Gwendolyn," and "The Housekeeper." I notice that each appeared in due course in such places as *Harper's Bizarre* and *The New Yorker*, and were reprinted in the "Best" collections of the year.

These stories are a skillful blending of the parts; they know how to give information, how to dramatize a scene, and how to reach the popular drift of "epiphany" at the end. (Perhaps only a poet could have loved Gwendolyn for her beautiful name: "Its dactyl trisyllables could have gone on forever so far as I was

concerned.") The stories are genuine. You learn from them, and your emotions are solicited by the fate of the characters and the construction of the scene. They are fine examples of the kind of fiction still offered weekly and monthly by the more thoughtful magazines and indicate to me that Elizabeth Bishop certainly could have been a fiction writer had she wished it.

Little in that to amaze. What is startling, on the other hand, is that her best prose fictions ("The Sea and Its Shore," "In Prison," "In the Village") are aesthetically radical, rich, and new in conception and tone. They are "experimental" as we used to say. In the late 1930s, the fiction in the little magazines often struggled with the challenge of Kafka. It was possible to come up with an abstract and fixed situation of interest, but to uncover the mobility of the abstract is a rare gift. The static must move the mind, the invention, in a swirl of significance both intellectual and emotional. Much must happen from the point of stasis, otherwise there is a nullity, and with so much stripped away there is boredom.

"The Sea and Its Shore" is a magical instance of creative invention. A Man, with no biography, is hired to keep the beach free of paper. For this purpose, he is given a stick with a nail set in the end, a wire basket in which to burn the day's trash, and a little house, a primitive beach shelter. Gradually, he begins to read the scraps of paper, to be knowledgeable about what the different kinds look like, the quality of the sheets wet and dry and, of course, the garbled messages on the crumpled sheets. He watches the paper blown about by the wind: "The papers had no discernible goal, no brain, no feeling of race or group. They soared up, fell down, could not decide, hesitated, subsided." As he read the "insect armies of type" everything seemed to become print, the whole world. A sandpiper, rushing here and there, looked like a "point of punctuation." Finally, everything must be burned since "burning paper was his occupation." This little treatise and speculation on floating print, wind-tossed paper, fragments of literature, printed letters, nonsense, mysterious truncations, arrives from the wonderfully resonant center of the given idea. The contemplation of the prodigality and expendability of print by way of the man on the beach and his stick with the nail in it is a pure and serene fiction exemplifying what we mean by inspiration.

Two stories are of great autobiographical interest and one, "In the Village," is a brilliant modern short story. The first, "The Country Mouse," was left unpublished, although it is a finished work. It is not more revealing and heartbreaking than the other, one might wonder why it was withheld.

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her father died less than a year after her birth. Her mother, from Nova Scotia, suffered a mental collapse, which finally became permanent when the child was only five years old. From the death of her father up until the age of seven, Elizabeth Bishop lived with her mother's family in Nova Scotia. At the age of seven, she was suddenly removed to Worcester, to the father's family, taken from a simple farm and small maritime village to the well-to-do manufacturing Bishops of Massachusetts.

"The Country Mouse" tells of this removal. "I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates." In her new home, she was miserable and felt much like the nervous, troublesome family dog, Beppo. The last paragraph of the story underlines the year 1918, the recognition that she at seven years was doomed to her identity, to her "I,I,I," as the poem has it. The story ends: "Why was I a human being?"

"In the Village" tells of the mother's return from the mental hospital when the girl is five years old. A seamstress is brought in to make a new dress that will signify the end of the black-and-white mourning clothes. In the midst of the fitting, the mother screams, the scream of a new collapse and the destruction of hope. "A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it, it hangs there forever, a slight strain in those pure blue skies." The story then becomes something else, a brilliant rendering and ordering of certain fresh fictional possibilities. It becomes a sort of sonata of sounds filled with emotions for the child. The scream is balanced by the sound of Nate, the blacksmith, at his anvil. "*Clang*. The pure note: pure and angelic." Another sound enters like a patch of color on a canvas. *Whack*. The little girl is taking the family cow through the village to a grazing space. *Whack* goes the child's directing stick when the cow meanders about and must be gently brought into line.

The child passes by the village houses, one of them the house of Mr. McLean. (I note that is the name of the Boston hospital where the mother of "the scream" is confined until her death, but no significance attaches since Mr. McLean is a wholesome figure in the village scene.) His old dog, Jock, is, in italics, *deaf as a post*. The sweet sounds of a pastoral life and the sound of lost hope in the scream are elements smoothly woven into an original fictional tapestry. The degree of composition is great--the pauses, the contrasts, the simplicity of it so very complicated. The story is true, but it cannot be accurate because of the artfulness.

"The Country Mouse" is finely written but written in a spirit much closer to the documentary, to the statement. "My mother was not dead. She was in a sanitorium, in another prolonged 'nervous breakdown'." And "I had been brought back unconsulted." For a sensitive and reserved nature, autobiographical accuracy is a greater deterrence to publication than the deeper and more disturbing transformations of experience by art. So "The Country Mouse" lay in the drawer, and "In the Village" was published.

The portrait of Marianne Moore was also found unpublished and somewhat unsettled among the poet's papers. As we have it now, it is one of the best of its kind in our literature, a literature more barren than most in significant memoirs. It is kindly, even adoring. The Moore household in Brooklyn, the cadence of the speech, the remembered odd scene, the visit to the circus are treasures of eccentricity and authenticity. Above all, the portrait is illuminated by the equity that prevails between the remembered Marianne Moore and the remembering Elizabeth Bishop. Still, I think perhaps it was withheld not from dissatisfaction but because of a squeamishness about the process of documentation, a hesitation about imposition, about *using*.

Reading over the portrait of Marianne Moore, it occurs to me that Elizabeth Bishop appears to us to have been more like the older poet than she was in life. The friendship leaves things somewhat askew. Both were discreet, brilliant, original, unmarried, quirky, and refined in taste and manners. But Elizabeth Bishop's life was far more complicated--or showed more stress and volatility, since we never know about the inner life. She was less spectacular in wholeness of being, more contemporary indeed as a soul living out the years.

Many things--her orphanage only one of them--weighed on her spirit. She knew also the weight of drinking and the weight of the years of not drinking. She had asthma attacks, allergies, and love affairs that did not always end happily, far from it. She was as open to experience in space as Marianne Moore was pleased to be confined. She went far out to sea in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Like some figure in Thomas Mann, the cold north and the treacherous passions of the south met in her nature. She loved houses and objects, and she had an eye for them, for shells and feathered necklaces made by the Indians of Brazil, for treasures carefully chosen and looked after. And for larger acquisitions also: handsome pieces of furniture, chests and bureaus made from Brazilian woods in various shades and decorated with the diamond patterns of Minas. There was the modern house in Petropolis, in the hills where the emperor used to have his summer palace. The house was thoughtful and careful, set near a waterfall, and everything in it was standing in its place, arranged just so. There was the ancient house in hard-to-get-to, historic, beautiful Ouro Preto, a folly perhaps, but who could travel to Ouro Preto and not put a hand to a fine, falling down treasure of bygone days in a Brazil nearly out of its mind with love for modernity?

As I remember, there was very little money. What had passed on to Elizabeth came from one of those faded family businesses and from investments that seemed to wither in the box. To go here and there, to have the things and the houses, required an awful prudence and watchfulness, and yet the span was daring and profligate. She *would* go up the Amazon, even if she was quite uncomfortable doing so. Strange things happened in her presence, emanations, a sudden efflorescence that might have come from the rubbing of a lamp. Once, we were in a museum in Rio where there were many Indian artifacts, when Elizabeth suddenly stopped and said, "Look." We turned around, and there was a group of naked Indians looking at Indian artifacts.

And then she left Brazil after so many years and returned home to take up the life of our kind in order to make a living. That is, she began to teach, even though for such a long time she had been afraid or shy of it, even shy about giving readings. Her last post was at Harvard. There she found an apartment, not in

Cambridge or on Beacon Hill but down on the waterfront, as a sort of pioneer in the development of that part of the city, a modern and very handsome development but a bit out of the way.

Many look forward to the publication of Elizabeth Bishop's letters, look forward to knowing in full the incomparable glow, the luster of the thoughts and sights written in her small, curling, rather crooked script. Someone is weeding the garden, another has just come up the road in the inconvenient tropics. Elizabeth Bishop was indeed a perfectionist. She was also a natural writer with an unusual patience, nothing appears to have been excavated with visible sweat and aching muscle. And yet perhaps it was that the great natural gifts seemed too easy, and she must wait to make everything absolutely right in tone and rhythm, without insistence. She didn't want to leave too much paper on the beach.

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American Fictions
(Modern Library 1999) 218-24