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Conceal/Reveal: Passion and Restraint in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop

OR: WHY WE CARE ABOUT
ELIZABETH BISHOP'S POETRY

CONCEAL/REVEAL. Although these words can be used to describe the special relationship that Elizabeth Bishop had to her work, they can also more importantly describe the relationship of a poet, any poet, to the events in his or her life. It is a stance that must be taken consciously. For poetry is a kind of code, meant to conceal as much as it reveals, and then giving up its secrets—not easily—only to the persistent (and delicately prying) reader. Poetry can be seen as Betrayal, for, in its own sidewise secret way, it dares to speak in a meta-language about those things which cannot—and in some cases *must not*—be said straight on.

In this essay I shall follow the idea of “The Cry” as it is expressed and/or suppressed in the work of Elizabeth Bishop.

Elizabeth Bishop might be considered Emily Dickinson’s descendant. A “northerner” with roots in Puritan New England, her poetry is deliberately reticent and elliptical. Historically she falls between the “impersonality” so admired in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and others of her early education; and the “confessional” movement of her contemporary, Robert Lowell, and his group, who wrote directly about their personal lives. Bishop chose the “middle way.” I think it is important to place her work in context.

As a young woman, I came to Boston in December 1959 on a fellowship to study with Robert Lowell. I came directly from the Midwest, from Oberlin College, at that time a missionary school. In those days, “modern poetry” ended with the work of Thomas

Hardy. In most American universities, “American Literature” was hardly considered; it was seen the bastard child of all-important British Literature.

Lowell invited me to join his famous workshop at Boston University. There he introduced me to Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and others. I also came to his house two or three times a week for long afternoons of poetry study. I became a close friend of Robert Lowell; it was to be, I would realize later, the formative poetic friendship of my life.

Boston was a cold, lonely sort of place. It was winter, the light was bluish, depressing. Lowell was half mad—I didn’t quite understand what was going on—and Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were half mad too. Lowell taught by spending hours on one poem or another, not student poems, but contemporary American poems that we had never heard of (including, often obsessively, his own). Through Lowell, we walked into a new landscape of modern and contemporary poetry in English that carried perceptions we had never dreamed could be expressed. A class originally scheduled to last two hours could go for six, the room getting darker and darker, thick as Lowell’s thick glasses and desperate frown. It was thrilling. I lived, breathed, dreamt, befriended poetry. And I came awake, as all of Lowell’s students did.

One day Lowell introduced the poem “The Man-Moth” to the class.¹ The Man-Moth is that strange, shy creature, as is the observer writing her precise, almost frozen description. Lowell read the poem haltingly in his strange New England/Southern accent as the room got darker and the dusk took over the prison-like building. The heat clanked and shut off, and the class got more and more frozen, huddled into itself.

But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

What does the Man-Moth fear most that he must do? He must face light, live, if only for a brief time exposed, and he must show himself, unwillingly, among a crowd, among people.

The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once its full, terrible speed....

It's interesting to note here that the word "full" is immediately followed by the word "terrible." There is something menacing, frightening, and forbidden in living this sense of the word "full." "Full" is for other people, *whole* people, and not for the strange invention, this cloaked half-person. The Man-Moth is a hidden hurt fluttering night-creature; like the poet; like each of us in Lowell's class, a creature desperate to escape scrutiny. But just the same he is seeking contact, light, the outside of things, in a weird backwards way. We understood this immediately. The secret essence of the poet was so nakedly revealed that one trembled for her vulnerability. "Don't come too close," Bishop seemed to be saying, "I have something to hide, and I shall die of it."

Here is the last stanza, which describes the phenomenon of trying to know the Man-Moth, of trying to get close to him/ her/it:

If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.

The Man-Moth is cornered; he is trapped in his self-immolation. His "only possession" is the "tear," the secret he is desperate not to share but which, despite himself, betrays his human side. To shine a flashlight into his eye is to commit an aggression. He suffers then, he shrinks back and closes his eye, but the tear "slips" out anyway. This sadness is the truth of his existence he reluctantly "reveals."

if you're not paying attention/he'll swallow it....'

But, if you sit quietly enough, if you do not move quickly, if you do not threaten the Man-Moth, he may, finally, of his own volition, hand you his tear; his most precious sign, his true emotion.

cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

Now, who is the “you” in this poem? The “you” is the trusted one, the confidant, perhaps the psychoanalyst, perhaps the awaited lover; someone who will be patient enough to gain the trust of the Man-Moth. Perhaps the “you” is the longed-for friend, the one you wish would come along when you are a child and too lonely to bear it, the one who will simply be there for you, wait, bear witness, and understand.

And finally the “you” is *us*—readers waiting quietly for the meaning to reveal itself, like the tear “cool as from underground springs, and pure enough to drink.” You will put out your hand (“he’ll hand it over”) to receive the gift of trust. But this poem stands without interpretation; in fact, Lowell never encouraged interpretation (except for his own). He just stared at the poems, obsessively repeating words and lines (What does it mean? This is wonderful. . . what does this mean?) until the poor poem, like the Man-Moth himself, without even a squeak of protest, handed over its precious “tear,” its pearl, its secret meaning. After this first reading of “The Man-Moth,” we—the older famous poets, myself, everyone there—all left the classroom shattered! Later, we were to talk about that moment, it was so profound. We were each of us, we realized, the Man-Moth. We had become so in that reading of the poem.

That was my first introduction to Elizabeth Bishop. That night I still had to travel two streetcars and the subway before I reached my cold gloomy little furnished room. The underside. . . .

This poem, an early one, turned out to be prophetic. Written after Bishop’s first trip to New York and included in her first collection, “The Man-Moth” might be read as foreshadowing her life. Bishop herself would always “nervously” climb toward “light,” always “ride backwards,” as it were. And she would—only to trusted friends—or only to the page and then in a side-wise reluctant fashion—reveal, if you waited long enough, the sadness within. It would not do to shine a flashlight, ever. One must (praise ye, New England) wait.

Elizabeth Bishop, like Emily Dickinson, wrote delicately and elliptically. Much was unsaid, left out, alluded to. What is most important is what is *not* said. Line breaks, form, slant rhyme, all

convey a breathless quality to the small precise observation. The reader is left to draw his/her own conclusion. She did not, like Walt Whitman, like Ginsberg, or even like Lowell, thump the incessant drum of “myself.” The “I,” when it comes into her poems, is a little surprise, and usually comes in as a comment on humanity and the human condition, either distanced from (the “I,” the observer, precisely detailing) or merging with and therefore taking its place within a larger cosmic world view (“until everything/was rainbow rainbow rainbow/and I let the fish go.”)—a larger fusion-with-world (as we shall see in the poem “In the Waiting Room”) in which the self is allowed—briefly—to partake.² This reticence, which might be said to be Anglo-Saxon, this northern reserve, as well as this transcendental vision of the self-in-world, is something Bishop shares with Dickinson. Poetry as code.

Interestingly enough, or perhaps predictably, Bishop, when questioned about women’s writing said scornfully,

Women’s experiences are much more limited, but that does not really matter—there is Emily Dickinson, as one always says. You just have to make do with what you have, after all.... Some women can write like Emily Dickinson, the kind of poetry with no common experience to speak of at all, where there may be some women dying to get out and climb Mt. Everest.... A lot of nonsense.³

I first read “The Man-Moth” in 1960. But it wasn’t until 1972 that I met the author Elizabeth Bishop, again through Robert Lowell. Bishop had taken a job at Harvard and had moved to Cambridge. She didn’t know people there, and so Lowell introduced me to her because he thought we would like each other, because she had just come to teach at Harvard, because she had a ping-pong table in her living room, since she thought playing would help her arthritis—and because I was, at that time, very good at racquet sports. I visited her at several times a week. My then-husband was an “urbanist” who designed public parks, as was Bishop’s close friend in Brazil. So we were often there in the evenings as well. She loved architecture, painting, poetry, food, and conversation.

Bishop was asthmatic, had been since childhood. This will turn out to be significant. She wheezed and chain-smoked—and always had trouble breathing. Asthma has a strong psychological component, it is considered to be the body's way of expressing suppressed crying; grief comes out in that fashion. It is of course triggered by allergies, but it is one of those illnesses most frequently considered “psychosomatic.” It is often thought to be triggered by abandonment, especially when a small baby is abandoned by its mother. The cry is suppressed, the despair is too great to bear, the baby gives up a part of its will to live, and the sadness goes underground, expressing itself in an inability to breathe freely.

But of course Elizabeth Bishop was charming and funny and delicate and warm in her daily (aboveground) life. I would stop over to visit her in the late morning; we would play ping-pong for an hour or so, and afterwards she would prepare a Brazilian lunch—she was a wonderful cook—and then we would settle in and talk about all sorts of topics. It was always cold and dreary in Cambridge, those long winter afternoons, and dusk came early. Miss Bishop was desperately lonely. She hated and feared teaching, and she was having trouble writing. Nevertheless, she *was* writing and revising, and showed me drafts of her later poems.

Her apartment was furnished with art she had collected on her travels, brightly colored paintings from Brazil, artifacts and books, books, lots of books, many on architecture and painting. She had on her mantle a photo of herself as a baby. That photograph was amazing, for the baby looks out directly, already bruised, but facing the world in a resolute way.

After several months of spending time together, one late afternoon Miss Bishop told me she wanted to read something aloud. It was cold and snowy; she didn't want me to leave. It was as always a winter evening, and the heat hissed; she didn't have enough lamps for my taste. It was gloomy and cozy at the same time. She poured us drinks, and we settled in. She made me sit in her big armchair, while she sort of perched on a footstool. So I listened, and she read in a very understated, matter-of-fact way. What she wanted, deliberately chose, to read to me was her story

“In the Village.”⁴ I didn’t know it, had not read it. I was familiar only with her first book of poems. I didn’t know she wrote short stories. But this was not a story, it was practically a diary entry. The raw emotion of this story is unmistakable, less disguised than in the poems.

The story begins:

A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village.⁵

This is the scream, the naked overt cry that haunted Elizabeth Bishop all her life. It is the scream of her mother, who is mad, and who has come home from the mental hospital, “the asylum” to which she will return, to commit suicide later, when the child Elizabeth is five years old.

The dress was all wrong. She screamed.
The child vanishes....

She read quietly, deliberately, wanting me to understand. The reading was direct and shockingly intimate; a personal side of herself that she never showed in her “public” readings. Miss Bishop was not presenting the story to me as “art” or “artifact,” but as something meant to allow me to understand her better, autobiography that she could not say directly; that she had not been able to say in her poems.

In “The Village,” the cry, the scream, is dominant. It is uttered, it is heard—and the consequences are disastrous. It is not concealed at all; panic and madness are revealed in one terrible formative moment. It echoes in the moment of the mother’s insane scream (“She screamed....The child vanishes.”) Note the shift in tense (as cause and effect). Although the scream happens in the past, the girl will be forever haunted by it and by her mother’s almost immediate disappearance from her world (brought back to the insane asylum) for the rest of her life. When the mother disappears, childhood is shattered, the child disappears and another being inhabits her body, someone who knows horror and deprivation and loss, someone who must live in present tense. The past has somehow been erased.

Not only does the story express biography; it allows the open

sound of the “Scream/cry” to dominate a story full of other sounds. In an almost sleep-walking precision as if after an accident, everything that happens around the mother’s scream, everything else that might have seemed irrelevant, stands out in bold detail. Sound becomes the major mode of feeling. The story ends with the child listening to other sounds of the village, as the blacksmith shapes a horseshoe.

Now there is no scream.... Oh beautiful sound, (the blacksmith striking the iron) strike again!⁶

Bishop read other prose to me. Sometimes at night she would telephone me and read parts of “Helena Morley,” but the reading of “In the Village” was a significant one.

In the poem “In The Waiting Room,” “the cry” both separates and unifies.⁷ The child is in the waiting room of a dentist’s office, looking at old copies of *National Geographic* while her aunt has an appointment. As usual in New England,

It was winter. It got dark
early.

(Note that little breath-catch, the line break before the word/ “early.” It gives sense that always there is a little catch, a little hurt, already associated with the idea of “early” darkness.) The child looks at the people in the magazine:

Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.

When

Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
—Aunt Consulo’s voice...
 What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth....
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—were falling, falling....

The terror of that overheard cry shatters the poet's sense of childhood a second time. Suddenly her relationship to everything in the universe comes into question, for she has felt distant and outside of what is happening up until now. She tries to understand how this fusion might come about, what it means. She fuses/merges with the women portrayed in the magazine, with her aunt, with the feminine she despises ("my foolish aunt"), the woman-ness, the human-ness, but mostly the implied sexuality. Just a whisper, just a hint, but enough to horrify her: "those awful hanging breasts—.../made us all just one?"

It is a moment of overwhelming revulsion. She is dizzy, feels she will faint. The fusional effect of the Aunt's slight cry overwhelms the child. At the same time, she is aware of her own sense of self. Someone else's cry delimits and defines her. As she continues to stare at the magazine cover, she tells us:

But I felt: you are an I,
 you are an Elizabeth,
 you are one of them.

as if she were trying to tell herself to stay calm.

As we can see, the cry of the aunt reaches deep into memory and terror. The child is aware of the physicality of others in the waiting room, their knees and feet: "How had I come to be here...?" And then the world rights itself. That momentary horror is veiled for the time being, and the date, place, and slushy winter night are unchanged. But *she* has been irrevocably changed by this moment. In overhearing "the cry" again, she has fallen through present reality, out of the protected child-self into a world of fusion with what is both terrible and actual, with hints of a woman's future. That electrifying cry shocks the child in another space entirely. She falls from one world—that of safety, which she is exterior to, which she is looking at—into a momentary loss of self.

"What similarities—/... held us all together/or made us all just one?" She has become a part of the globe that up until now, through *National Geographic*, has been solely a safe subject of study. Now she is forced to identify with people, and especially

with *women* of the globe whose “breasts were horrifying,” those “awful hanging breasts.” It is a repugnant realization. She is going to faint: “The waiting room... was sliding/beneath a big black wave...” After this momentary lapse, things steady themselves, but the moment of “cosmic consciousness,” with its hints of gender-as-destiny, has changed her forever. It’s no accident the poem appears in the collection *Geography III*. This is the Advanced Course.

The poem’s last stanza begins with:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside...

Note the placement of the word “Outside.” It both ends the line and starts the next thought. It is ambiguous, all by itself with its little comma, hesitating just before it leads into the next and final firm thought in which everything comes down to that thud of reality, “in Worcester, Massachusetts/. . . night and slush and cold...” (Place. Weather. Date. Reportage.) And we are back where the poem started: “In Worcester, Massachusetts.” But in the meantime we have lived through a transformative experience. What we think is real—ourselves, looking at a magazine, peacefully, waiting for someone, in the blissful childhood period called “latency,” living our individual carefully defined “lives” — or so we think—all this can be shattered by the overheard sound of “... an oh! of pain...” Everything can be cast into doubt, fragmented in a moment.

I want to point out a bit of Bishop’s rewriting. I would often see drafts of poems. Her handwriting was tiny, and pages in teeny handwriting lay crumpled on the windowsills, or in the ashtray, or crumpled near the wastebasket. Often she would gather them up and hand them to me when I walked in. Bishop was a master at the use of line breaks as well as punctuation to indicate a little suspense, a held breath, a little pause/rest before the next idea. Her use of line breaks, and poetic spacing and punctuation, is impeccable; and her rewrites, like Lowell’s, focused a great deal on different constructions of the line breaks. Both Bishop and Lowell talked openly about their writing processes, and their

frustrations and difficulties Bishop often said she was “blocked,” but both she and Lowell revised and revised. It was not unusual to do a hundred revisions of a poem.

Now I am going to turn to the poem I consider Elizabeth Bishop’s masterpiece, “One Art,” a poem so lovely that is almost sacrilege to talk about it.⁸ A villanelle, it is constructed around two rhymes only: “intent” and “master,” laid out in the first two lines. What is not said, or half-said, is so deeply felt and understood, that the final grief does not even have to be addressed directly. The rhymes are brilliant, simple, with the off-rhymes casually done, used only when needed, e.g. “fluster” and “master” (stanza 2). And then, most daringly, breaking our expectations with the rhyme of “gesture” and “master/disaster” in the final stanza.

There are seventeen collected drafts of this poem in a library collection at Vassar College.⁹ Probably at least forty drafts were torn up and thrown away and never made it from Elizabeth Bishop’s apartment into a library. Some of these drafts—I saw a few of them—had maybe two lines on them, scribbled, put aside. Some just a few words. Lists/Despair....

“One Art” is all about loss, loss lived and loss expected. The attitude it seems to take toward loss is casual. Loss is nothing, you learn it, it’s not difficult to learn “the art of losing.” “Lose something every day,” says the poet philosophically. That’s how you learn this “art”—by doing. The poet repeats “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” Gradually the losses pile up, described by their “thing-ness,” depersonalized. Mother’s watch is “lost”; houses, and the love that existed within them; rivers, the continent.... All this foreshadows the possible, unbearable loss of her lover. “It was nothing,” the poet seems to say, in her bravado. But suddenly, in last stanza, she falters. She can no longer continue to conceal the real situation: faced with yet another loss, her ironic distance shatters, shatters so purely, so quietly that you hardly notice. The impeccable control exemplified by the conventional grammar and punctuation breaks down.

“One Art” is a villanelle, yes. A traditional villanelle in English has this prescribed rhyme scheme, the couplet bringing the poem

together at the end. It has a strict form, and Bishop seems at first glance to follow it. But then you realize that unlike other villanelles “One Art” is not in iambic pentameter. The important lines seem to end with trochees. There is at least an extra syllable, like a dropped stitch: “master,” “faster.” The light brushing of the line with the unaccented syllable is said to be a “feminine ending,” as opposed to the “masculine ending” of the iamb. Of course there are often many ways to scan a poem, and one could debate which syllable is the extra one. Nevertheless, no matter how you scan it, the delicacy of “One Art” is especially moving because of this surprising irregularity. It is like the deliberate irregularity configured into the finest Japanese pottery—it serves by relief to reveal the beauty and control of the form. In “One Art,” Bishop, a perfectionist, chose the breaking of metric—and, as we shall see later—grammatical expectations. For Bishop, who was fastidious about form, this extra syllable, the dropped stitch/extra catch-of-breath, is significant and deliberate. Why is it there in this poem?

As we look more closely at the poem, we see that the rhythm driving the poem alters, breaks off, reappears; has, behind it, a catching of breath—a strange breath pattern—asthmatic like Bishop herself—and the rhythm of suppressed sobs. The trochee, as in “Uh oh,” or “Watch out,” or the French “Ooh la,” is an utterance of warning: something’s wrong, be careful. The emotion behind the poem threatens to break out of the strict confines of form, and it does. The poet cannot/does not totally rein it in. The mounting sobbing lies just beneath the poem, while on the surface the poet pretends not to care. It is that tension between suppressing and expressing that make this poem so heartbreaking at the end. The last stanza is preceded by a dash, as if it were adding an afterthought to the list of losses. That dash suggests time, reflection, a choked-back sadness, and then, obsessively, the making of a list....

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love)

This is the first time the poet permits herself to think of the actual beloved person she is losing, rather than a material possession—the first time she speaks openly—the only time she permits herself to admit that she loves, and it is the only time Elizabeth Bishop dares to use the words “I love” in her poetry. Even in Bishop’s poem, “The Shampoo,” the lover is addressed—only once—as “dear friend,” with no indication, to the outsider, that this is a love poem. It’s all about water and stars and a bowl. Or so it seems.

In “One Art,” written near the end of Bishop’s life, despite the assumed distance and coolness which form the conceit of the poem, grief threatens to break through. But displays of naked emotion are unthinkable, the cry of grief is “mastered,” subdued, suppressed, and denied. Nevertheless, it finds its expression in the breath-catches of the last two lines. The assumed irony is revealed for what it is: a mask.

It’s evident

The art of losing’s not too hard to master
Though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Note the use of the word “too.” The art of losing is perhaps hard, but still, protests the poet, not *too* hard. It’s not until the final line that the reserve breaks down completely. The punctuation lets go its terrible control. “*Write it!*” the poet urges herself.

Writing as betrayal, writing as revealing, drop the mask, the reserve, writing as truth, write down the pain, don’t reveal the pain of loss, cry, hold it in, have a breakdown, don’t show anything. This tension, between “say/don’t say/half-say,” “feel/ half-feel/deny”—this tension is brilliantly suggested by that dash that starts stanza six: it suddenly indicates a longer, unexpected pause. The space of the dash continues with the parenthesis (“the joking voice”). All of that is expressed in that parenthetical, then the “*Write it!*” with its exclamation point (!). (Oh just say it for Christ’s sake!)

So much is implied in that impatient parenthetical, that injunction to the self. The power of writing, the magical power of words: If I “*Write it!*” will that make loss happen? Will that

make “you” leave me? Will “you” disappear/die, as have so many others I love? Will my words make it come true? And how can I live with this question, no matter how carefully I try to write? The deliberately jaunty tone is meant to whistle away the fear: writing as prophecy....

The negatives: the “isn’ts” and “wasn’ts” that precede the words “hard to master,” and “a disaster” as the poem gathers momentum towards its final lines are meant to convey just the opposite. We of course read them as the affirmatives (is, was) they really are, which the poet conceals/reveals. This delicately tensile structure underlies that carefully polished surface that the poet is going to demonstrate, by the end of the poem, to be just that—the surface. And that surface is going to crack. Here is Bishop writing, as I knew her.

The in-held breath, the struggle with oneself, gasping, where is the asthma inhaler? Putting out the cigarette, crumpling yet another page, trying it again, the act of writing, the act of putting the words down, getting it right this time, no, it’s no good, the ruffled hair, the small black cramped letters, another cigarette, the inhaler, where did I put it? The awful white page, the tyranny of that page, another go, wheezing, trying to breathe, the word “like” written twice, a double simile, ungrammatical, juddering catch of breath in the last line, a poet never does that, reckless, nothing left to lose... “though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.” The faltering voice, unbearable thought, stab to the heart at the possibility of—choked back sob—unuttered grief (“I shan’t have lied”), my “losing you” (“though it may look like”)—cannot bear to actually face it—asthma. (*Write it!*) IS disaster”—the losses one cannot survive.



NOTES

¹Elizabeth Bishop, “The Man-Moth,” *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1990).

²“The Fish,” *Complete Poems*.

³In answer to the question about the difference between women’s perceptions of life as an observer and those of men. Eileen MacMahon, “Elizabeth Bishop Speaks About her Poetry,” in George Montiero, ed., *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

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⁴Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Village," *The Collected Prose* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1984).

⁵From "In the Village," *Collected Prose*.

⁶"In the Waiting Room." *Complete Poems*.

⁷"One Art," *Complete Poems*.

⁸For an illuminating essay on the drafts of the poem "One Art," I refer the reader to Brett Candlish Millier, "Elusive Mastery: The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's One Art," *New England Review*" (Winter 1990). Collected in Elizabeth Bishop, *The Geographies of Gender*, ed. M. Lombardi. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993).

⁹Also of course the lovely book, *Becoming a Poet*, by David Kalstone. (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1989).

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