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Elizabeth Bishop and a Grammar for the Underclass? Response to Jonathan Ausubel's "Subjected People" in the Poetry of Elizbeth Bishop*

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When Elizabeth Bishop concludes her well-known poem, "At the Fishhouses," with the genuinely *re-markable* line that since "our knowledge is historical," it is also "flowing, and flown" (*CP* 66), she extends a venerable poetic tradition in which the poet, or at least the poet's perceptions, simultaneously sound two notes: one, critical—poised at one remove from social and/or natural constructs—and the other, transcendent or redemptive—that is, pointing toward the possibility of alternative future constructs, even if those constructs are only aesthetically conceived.[1] It is to the socially critical Bishop (as well as to the implicit possibility for social transformation or redemption which social criticism might open) that Jonathan Ausubel addresses himself in his article. One corollary of Ausubel's stance, at least as I read his essay (which is also implied by his use of the word "for" in the subtitle), is that it assumes on Bishop's part a commitment to writing socially activist verse or, at the very least, verse that repeatedly and intentionally exposes what he calls the "cycle of domination" from "childhood to adulthood," from "personal to societal levels" (83).

My calling attention to the assumption of political activism in Bishop's "grammar for the underclass" is especially critical to understanding both Bishop's poetry and her poetics. As Adrienne Rich has recently pointed out, just what is the nature of politically activist verse is open to debate, especially in this century, with ramifications that extend into Bishop's poetry itself.[2] While I concur with both Rich and Ausubel that Bishop's

*Reference: Jonathan Ausubel, "Subjected People: Towards a Grammar for the Underclass in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 83-97.

poetry is far more political than has been traditionally conceived, I finally find the case for reading Bishop's grammatical structures in terms of sympathy for the "underclass" more socially-pointed than I think her corpus can bear. This is not to say that Bishop is *not* concerned with the "underclass" (variously described by Ausubel as referring to women, children, and people of minority races, as well as those of economic deprivation), nor even to say that it is not politically activist, at least in the way Rich brings to bear on contemporary poetry. I have, myself, organized a panel at a recent American Literature Association Conference entitled "The Radical Bishop," with the express purpose of bringing the subtly inscribed political concerns of her verse to light. It is quite to the point here, however, that as a member of that panel, Eric Cheyfitz convincingly argued that in comparison to the overtly activist verse of Brazilian poets with whom Bishop was quite familiar, Bishop's poetry seems at a far remove from socially concerned verse.[3] Rather than dismissing the social import of her poetry, what I am trying to suggest is that Bishop's poetry argues—to twist Emerson's famous line one turn—that we are all not only "jailed by consciousness" but jailed by language itself (and, of course, by the actual political structures that language inevitably gives rise to). It is a literal *con-scription* that, at least in Bishop's poetry, imprisons men as well as women, the wealthy as well as the poor, the "dominant" as well as the more obviously "subjected."

Put differently, I wish to ask in relation to Ausubel's provocative argument, if there were a "grammar for the underclass" in Bishop's verse, wouldn't it exclude or not speak for the supposedly dominant class? If, as Ausubel argues, Bishop employs such devices as prepositional phrases (as in the poem itself entitled "In the Waiting Room") in order to point to the literal objectification (as in the "objective case") of the victimized underclass, or co-ordinate conjunctions (as in his reading of certain words in "Sestina") to point to the lack of conjunctival equality, then Bishop's "grammar for the underclass" would not only describe what he calls the "cycle of domination" (largely a patriarchal construct in both Ausubel's argument and much of contemporary criticism) but demand a new grammatical construct—and potentially new social construct—which would give voice to those dominated. However, despite

the fact that Bishop's poetry *does* make us aware of the literal and figurative silence of those victimized in various cultural constructs, such an "either/or" sense of the dominant versus the suppressed does not fit Bishop's work at all. In fact, from the relatively early "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" to the late "Santarém" (the latter of which explicitly rejects "either/or" constructions such as "life/death, right/wrong" and "male/female" [*CP* 185]), Bishop makes it clear that the victimization she has in mind is equally applicable to men as well as women, to adults as well as children, to the wealthy as well as the economically deprived by virtue of the apparently inescapable and conscripting power of not merely consciousness (or self-consciousness) but of language itself. Such an ironically dis-quieting and uni-versal effect of language seems to me to be precisely the point of Bishop's exquisitely self-referential line in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" which announces, "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'" (*CP* 58).

In such a nearly inexplicable line, Bishop is not advocating an inversion of some Jakobsen sense of the primacy of metaphor (conceived on vertical lines) over metonymy (conceived on horizontal lines), but is rather describing the levelling effect of such linguistic play and constraints as being itself *metonymic* for a whole world of politically-realized *conscriptions*. It is precisely this sense of the seemingly inescapable power of linguistic *con-scription* that led me, in an article that Ausubel cites, to ask whether or not the obvious victimization of "women and babies" in the poem "In the Waiting Room" is not itself metonymic for a whole world at war—including men—and the various political and linguistic constructs that give rise to such instances of domination.[4] I am not here disavowing a certain feminist reading of Bishop's verse that I clearly wished to support in that article. I am clarifying that as I see it Bishop's feminist awareness and politics embraces *men as well as women*—or, in relation to Ausubel's essay—the dominant class as well as the underclass—precisely because of her awareness of unavoidable conscriptions of language itself. Such an awareness seems to me more nearly the import of Bishop's "grammar"—and poetics—than the socially-activist verse Ausubel's argument implies. The lack of the copulative "is" in the line just cited from "Over 2,000 Illustrations" *is* impor-

tant—and in this sense Ausubel is completely right: grammar proves critical in Bishop's verse. But the lack of the copulative, the word for "being," signals in that poem an ironically universal objectification, from the "squatting Arab" to the "Christian Empire" to the "dead Mexican" and "the English woman"—even "the Nativity" itself (*CP* 57-58). Elsewhere, as in "Roosters," the obviously macho and militaristic roosters, one of whom "lies in dung / with his dead wives" (*CP* 37), suffer a culturally inscribed fate as much as the supposedly "subjected." Bishop makes this point again and again—notably in the symbolic "weak mailed fist" of "Armadillo" (*CP* 104), in the dying soldier (as well as Micuçu) from "The Burglar of Babylon," in the soldier, the Jew, the sailor, the poet, all in "the house of Bedlam" ("Visit to St. Elizabeth's," a poem which deftly uses the repetition of a child's nursery rhyme to embody repeated abuse and victimization, including those of the supposedly dominant class as well as the obviously suppressed). In this regard, a letter written to May Swenson in 1971 proves quite revealing:

> I don't like things compartmentalized like that [i.e., separating women's from men's literature]. . . . I like black & white, yellow & red, young & old, *rich & poor, and male & female,* all mixed up, socially—and see no reason for segregating them, for any reason at all, artistically, either [emphasis mine].[5]

To clarify my disagreement with Ausubel's premise in "Towards a Grammar for the Underclass," I wish to examine "Sestina," a poem which Ausubel himself examines at length toward the end of his essay. Put succinctly, Ausubel argues that "the child" (notably unnamed and ungendered) and, to some extent, the grandmother of the poem are rendered voiceless by the socio-economic constructs implied in the poem, but given voice by the poet herself. To some extent, such a reading of "Sestina" rings true. The child's and grandmother's pain are rendered as absolute and unending, governed by an "almanac" that inscribes such debilitating (although witty) clichés as "*I know what I know*" and "*It's time to plant tears.*" As he goes on to argue, the co-ordinate conjunction "but" in the poem (a word which for me *semantically* announces separation, not union) which appears between the grandmother and child points to extreme isolation between the two characters of the poem

rather than conjunction or communion of any sort. He then announces that the "child steps in as maker, drawing a house, populating it with the poem's only man and displaying the work for the grandmother" (95) who, he says, will not regard the work, thus completing yet "another poem in which avenues of powerlessness themselves remain 'inscrutable'" (96).

Such a reading implies that the main paradigm of power, however inscrutable, lies along the axis of some empowered being (presumably that of the almanac *representing* the actual socio-economic power of the "only man" in the poem) versus the unempowered grandmother and child. However, there are at least four paradigms for the literal conscription at work in this poem—the almanac, the drawing, the people (grandmother, child, and absent man), and the poetic structure of the sestina itself, all inter-locking as it were. So overwhelming are these series of interlocutures that the "grammar" of "Sestina" becomes a series of *ligatures* effectively erasing the possibility of ethical ob-ligation or religious consolation.[6]

Put briefly, the almanac, which utters various insidious clichés, is described as hovering over the grandmother and child in a "birdlike" manner. While Bishop may well have had in mind the overtly sexist prescriptions about male and female behavior that punctuate pages in the past century's almanac, the "bird-like" hovering of the almanac both recalls and then dismisses the authorative presence of holy-spirit-as-dove conferring the scene below. The bird-like almanac is, in the poem, entirely secular, born of human and of linguistic constructs. While it may be tempting in our particular critical moment to regard such an image as an exposure on Bishop's part of the alignment of religious and economic constructs as being that of precisely patriarchal dominance, the other paradigms of the poem point to a more unsettling insight on the poet's part—that is, that we are *all* equally subjected by the language constructing and conscripting our world. In this sense, Ausubel's main title is far more accurate than the subtitle singling out the "underclass"—that is, Bishop's poetry suggests we are *all* "subjected people."

Thus, the child's drawing, far from being an instance of creative measure, serves by its very pre-dictability to remind us of the cultural (and linguistically-derived) codes informing its production:

> With crayons the child draws a rigid house
> and a winding pathway. Then the child
> puts in a man with buttons like tears
> and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

While the mark of the poet (however ironically) appears in the unusual simile of "buttons like tears," the "child" clearly does not partake of such creative originality. Despite the "winding" pathway—which seems to me quite predictable as well—the import of the drawing is on the rigidity—a rigidity which in fact impacts *all* the characters of the poem, including the man, as well as the form of the poem itself.

Which brings us to the characters of the poem. "The grandmother" is obviously dictated to by powers of dominance, and specifically gendered powers of dominance. Cooking at the stove, cutting bread, making tea, she seems to have little life beyond that which the house as female domain will support for her. So too "the child," who is specifically non-gendered—with the implication that whatever gendered conscriptions may impose on "the grandmother" may equally apply, whether male or female, to "the child" learning the lesson of life and language from grandmother, almanac, or drawings alike. It is, I admit, not a difficult interpretive move to regard this man as being at the center of this picture (although the poem does not say that he is in the center of the drawing), thus representing the centered or dominant avenue of power, displacing and subjecting the grandmother and the child through socially-inherited "lines." However, if we are to look seriously at the grammar of the poem, what may be remarkable is that while "grandmother" and "child" are preceded by the *definite* article "the," the man in the poem is in fact inscribed by the indefinite article "a." Perhaps by introducing "a man," Bishop is in fact suggesting that any man serves as well as any other to represent the patriarchal line of dominance subjecting the grandmother and child. But I find the overall impact of the poem thus far to be suggesting that, like the absent aunt in the poem "In the Waiting Room," this indefinite man is precisely an empty cypher, a "zero," a "void," a mere "figure in some predetermined social text."[7]

To this extent, "Sestina" then emerges as a tour de force of poetic expression of universal oppression. A notoriously "rigid" poetic form,

in which from the first stanza, the end-position of every line is literally predicted, the sestina enacts the interlocuture of its structure as erasing every personal presence in the poem. All—grandmother, child, and man—emerge as absences erased by the linguistic con-scriptions entrapping them in what is now perhaps *not* such an "inscrutable house."[8] If, in fact, the repeated words of the sestina—"tea," "stove," "almanac," "house," "grandmother," "child," and "tears"—are mundanely normal, what they disturbingly suggest, through the rigid form of the poem, is how precisely normative such conscription as described in the poem is for everyone—whether male or female, adult or child, supposedly dominant or oppressed. This, I believe, is a more accurate move towards reading "a grammar" of Bishop's poetry. In this regard, it is not without significance that the poem is written entirely in the present (and present perfect) tense, suggesting (quite ironically) that such absenting of personal or autonomous presence is an on-going consequence of cultural scripts predetermining our world.

I would like, however, to conclude with one aside—or rather two asides, one in appreciation of Jonathan Ausubel's insights and the other in appreciation of Bishop's craft itself. While I may have noted certain disagreements or, more accurately, qualifications about Ausubel's interpretation of Bishop's grammar, I am persuaded that he is absolutely right in calling attention to this largely neglected fact of her verse and in suggesting that her grammar has far more ethical import than has been imagined both in the earliest criticism, which called attention to her exquisite and realistic details, and subsequent criticism, which (including my own) has emphasized the feminist dynamics in her work. Bishop's grammar—like her deft use of prosodic forms—bears much further enquiry. Second, as I noted above, the mark of the *poet*, as opposed to the subject of the poem, announces itself in "Sestina" with the unlikely simile of "buttons like tears." This particular simile is only one of many in which Bishop transcends the historical scene she is critiquing, and only one of many grammatic forms with which she achieves such aesthetic, albeit momentary, transcendence. From the early "A Cold Spring," where the fireflies (and then the evening stars) rise "exactly like the bubbles in champagne" (*CP* 56) to her posthumously-published "Sonnet," where she escapes (both semantically and

structurally) the constructs which would bind her, we find in the carefully crafted grammar and form of Bishop's verse a clue for understanding how her poetry, so frequently grave in what it records, is also so full of a levity that makes it (and perhaps us) endure. In her hands, it becomes increasingly clear and true that all "our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown." If not politically activist, as such, her verse is aesthetically activist in ways that do impinge, as Ausubel rightly notes, on the political understanding of our world. As she says in a well-known poem, in lines that could well summarize the relation of her poetics to politics,

> The world seldom changes,
> but the wet foot dangles
> until a bird arranges
> two notes at right angles. (*CP* 130)

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NOTES

[1]Throughout this essay I shall use the abbreviation *CP* for *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984).

[2]Adrienne Rich, "The Hermit's Scream," *PMLA* (October 1983): 1157-64. It is worth noting that in addition to such obviously political poets as June Jordan and Audre Lourde, Rich includes Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop in her discussion of what politically activist poetry means or can mean.

[3]The preceding is a summary of Eric Cheyfitz' talk for the panel, "The Radical Bishop," at the American Literature Association Conference, Baltimore, May 1993.

[4]In "Elizabeth Bishop: *Perversity* as Lyric Voice," *AmerP* 7.2 (1990): 31-49, I suggest that "Bishop manages to imply that the feminine experience [in 'In the Waiting Room'] may be equally metonymic and synecdochic for the whole violated human condition." In relation to her "Quai d'Orléans" I suggest in the same article that Bishop "at least implies that the prison of consciousness is metonymic for the cultural position of women. Or that the cultural conscription of women is metonymic for the conscription of all human consciousness." In a pointedly feminist essay, "The Moral of the Story: Naming the Thief in Elizabeth Bishop's 'Babylon,'" *Ellipsis* 1 (1991): 277-86, I have subsequently made it clear that such conscription, especially as it is realized in politically encoded terms, occurs by way of language.

[5]*Elizabeth Bishop: One Art*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984) 549.

[6]The etymological relation between "obligation," "religion," and "ligatures" of various sorts has been pointed out in several recent works by John Caputo.

[7]I am citing Lee Edelman, with whom I concur in reading both the aunt and the child in "In the Waiting Room" as empty cyphers rather than as autonomous beings: "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room,'" *ConL* 26 (1985): 196.

[8]While the preceding interpretation of "Sestina" (especially the sense that the "conscription" it inscribes is equally applicable to men as well as women and children) is mine, I am indebted to Marie Kramb for her insight into how the poem's prosodic structure re-enacts the highly sexist codes being inscribed by the overhanging almanac. See, for example, any number of Poor Richards' sayings (author, Benjamin Franklin) which became household words through *Poor Richards' Almanac* two centuries before: "After three days men grow weary of a wench, a guest, and rainy weather"; "Three things are men most likely to be cheated in, a horse, a wig, and a wife."