

## Is it a Boy or a Girl? Gender as the Ever-Present Authority and Anxiety in Bishop Studies\*

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In the last issue of *Connotations*, an article by Jonathan Ausubel entitled "Subjected People: Towards a Grammar for the Underclass in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry" appeared with a response written by Jacqueline Vaught Brogan. Ausubel's close grammatical analysis substantiates the claims of the more content-driven observances of Bishop criticism by convincingly pinpointing for readers more evidence of her increasingly famous ear and intellect. Although little in the essay's central argument seems disputable, Brogan's response takes issue with Ausubel's, albeit loose, formulation of an underclass in Bishop's work. For, as Brogan sees it, Bishop's poetry suggests that "we are *all* equally subjected by the language constructing and conscripting our world" (176). While Ausubel takes a critical stance outside of a feminism which he finds too narrow, Brogan reads Bishop's poetry as leveling difference under the subjection of language. Thus, both arguments trigger the question: Where exactly can we place Bishop in relation to feminist criticism? Given the recent proliferation of feminist work on Bishop, gender seems a topic with which no criticism on Bishop can wholly dispense.<sup>1</sup> Yet, when we contextualize these two articles within the past few decades that have produced Bishop criticism, we discover that the emphasis on authenticity in poetry—especially when confronted with Bishop's indeterminate relationship to feminism—created a peculiar critical anxiety about gender that still continues in Bishop studies.

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\*Reference: Jonathan Ausubel, "Subjected People: Towards a Grammar for the Underclass in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 83-97, and Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, "Elizabeth Bishop and a Grammar for the Underclass? Response to Jonathan Ausubel's 'Subjected People' in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 172-80.

Brogan's earlier feminist essay on Bishop, "Perversity as Voice," praised and critiqued by Ausubel, begins by defining authenticity as a patriarchal coin in the exchange of the lyric voice.<sup>2</sup> Arguing convincingly that "we have largely retained some notion of authenticity in the lyric voice as an unchallenged assumption that has continued to be disseminated until the most recent of critical discussions," Brogan draws primarily on Wordsworth and Northrop Frye in order to establish "an authentic voice" as a patriarchal concern, and on Jonathan Culler and Paul de Man to question it (178-79). Brogan does not explore, however, how this interest in authenticity continues to develop during the decades between Frye and Culler, a period during which feminism concurrently negotiated for a critical foothold. I believe that this historical relationship, primarily evolving in the 1960s and 1970s, is vital to understanding critical developments and how they affect our critical placements of Bishop.

In an essay that provides a general historical survey of American poetry in the 1960s, Leslie Ullman describes the publication of two major anthologies, first, *New Poets of England and America* containing the "formal, detached and ironic poetry favored by New Criticism," and, second, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* that rejects "the aesthetic associated with academic poetry in favor of freer interaction between the poet's sensibilities and the content of the poem, allowing that content to create itself in adherence to its own laws" (190-91).<sup>3</sup> Constructing her written history, Ullman narrates a poetic liberation from formalism that leads to a more authentic, less mediated product that ultimately reflects the "self." This interpretation of poetic form as a social form in the sense that both keep readers and writers from an authentic content does not originate with Ullman; in fact, her history reiterates what has become a critical paradigm for literary histories, especially of the last several decades.<sup>4</sup> In a general critical climate that favored representations of an authentic self, then, feminist critics also claimed this rejection of formalism in favor of a more personal verse-style.

In feminism, as Betsy Erkkila notes, ". . . the critical emphasis on woman's literature as a record of women's personal experience tended to privilege certain kinds of women writers" (7).<sup>5</sup> This increasing interest in literature that reflected "real" or "authentic" women came not just from a critical but also a political climate in which the validating feminist

slogan, "The personal is political," circulated. Part of a larger argument about women's lives, this privileging of women writers whose poetry could be read as personal experience still works to combat negative stereotypes in a sexist canon. For many critics, however, the issue is no longer that they choose to write on autobiographical poetry, but that women's poetry is already inherently personal.<sup>6</sup> This focus on "the self," particularly the authentic self, as a rule of definition, also set a precedent of linking "authentic" poetry to women in a way that excluded several women poets, including Bishop, from the feminist canon.<sup>7</sup> Thus, what Brogan sees as perversion in Bishop's voice because it challenges patriarchal assumptions about the "authenticity, originality, and authority" of the lyric voice, also challenges previous feminist assumptions about aesthetic and political authenticity in poetry (176).

The most striking example of Bishop's exclusion occurs in a very strategic place: Maxine Kumin's widely available foreword to Anne Sexton's *The Complete Poems* in 1981.<sup>8</sup> After a largely biographical essay, Kumin places Sexton in her sense of literary history:

Freed . . . from their clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom, women began to write openly out of their own experiences. Before there was a Women's Movement, the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, Sexton. (xxxiii)

After these two sentences, an asterisk leads readers to a footnote: "I have omitted from this list Elizabeth Bishop, who chose not to have her work included in anthologies of women poets." Historically placed by Kumin "before the women's movement," the poems of Bishop are excluded because the poet chose not to participate in the movement of a metaphorical underground river. Kumin makes it clear that this exclusion has little to do with the poetry, but only where the poet published. In these last words of Kumin's introduction to Sexton, then, many readers of poetry see a condemnation of Bishop, but unless already familiar with her work, they would not necessarily know of Bishop's rationale for her decision and might dismiss her as traitorous, even irrelevant.

Nearly all Bishop critics, however, are aware of her rationale as expressed in her interview with George Starbuck, published in 1977,

four years before Kumin's foreword: "I didn't think about it very seriously, but I felt it was a lot of nonsense, separating the sexes. I suppose this feeling came from feminist principles stronger than I was aware of" (56).<sup>9</sup> In fact, citing this very passage in reference to Bishop's feminism has become a rite of passage used to clarify critical stances on Bishop's resistance to marginalization. Why must we repeatedly rehearse this scene? We must, at least partially, because the scandal is not so much Bishop's decision, but the critical treatment of Bishop that followed.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, her decision proves a convenient diversion from the poetry, which as Brogan aptly points out, refuses to supply a stable, authentic lyric voice. While this element can create anxiety for any reader, a political movement looking for political truths to sustain a position would be sorely disappointed in Bishop, even in poems that tempt with a lure of authenticity as does "In the Waiting Room." As many critics including Ausubel and Brogan have shown, the indeterminacies in this poem provide its most compelling center. What has changed in criticism, however, is that indeterminacy is now understood as a political stance.<sup>11</sup> And this acceptance of indeterminacy needs to inform, also, what we expect to ascertain about a poet's political position and how that might influence our readings of the poems.

One of Ausubel's points is that gender provides too narrow a perspective to account for the intricacies of Bishop's work. Instead of eliminating gender as a viable inquiry, I propose expanding our notions of what that inquiry entails. Bishop's poems may not always specify the narrator's gender, but the question of gender is still at play. In fact, its very indeterminacy would have many readers searching for tell-tale clues. This unavoidable cultural obsession that has us immediately ask new parents, "Is it a boy or a girl?" does not drop out merely because Bishop sidesteps the question. On the contrary, the fact that Bishop deliberately creates non-gendered narrators makes an issue of gender: gender may not be everything, but it is worth leaving out.

While, like Ausubel, I also find a narrowness in some feminist criticism, I link it to a more mainstream way of thinking about authenticity in poetry. Although it is reductive to look for evidence from the poet's life to support a critical reading, a cultural context cannot be ignored. At

a time when career poets were nearly always men, and when feminism operated primarily on a heterosexual model—or the occasional “radical” lesbian stereotype—Bishop’s public persona didn’t exactly fit. In fact, “fitting in” might have been the more dangerous possibility.

Perhaps a perfect fit, though it makes a fine essay, is not what critics should want. We need to keep gender in play without falling into mere biography or essentialism, without falling into an expectation of authenticity in the lyric voice, without subsuming the difference of gender under a universal subjection of language. As Ausubel’s article investigates class, not gender, with an eye to how that plays out in grammar, we see by his own definition of the underclass that class and gender are not discreet categories. Indeed, like Bishop’s refusal to publish in women’s only publications, Ausubel’s suggestion of a grammar for the underclass is useful for feminist considerations of Bishop, despite his preclusion of gender as a prevailing issue in Bishop’s work.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Just a few recently published book-length studies on Bishop include Victoria Harrison’s *Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993); Susan McCabe’s *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994); Marilyn May Lombardi’s *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995) and a collection of essays also edited by Lombardi, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>This essay first appeared in *Poetry* (see Ausubel) and was later collected in *The Geography of Gender* (see n1 above). My page numbers refer to the reprinted version.

<sup>3</sup>*A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, edited by Jack Myers and David Wojahn (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>For a thorough discussion of how critical history is already structured by our senses of narrative as a liberation through an encounter with truth as well as a resolution through pairing and reproduction, see Judith Roof’s “How to Satisfy a Woman *Every Time*” in *Feminism Beside Itself*, ed. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Routledge, 1995). The conventional critical history of the confessional movement identified with the work of poets such as Berryman, Lowell, Sexton, and Snodgrass, for instance, follows the critical paradigm that Ullman presents.

<sup>5</sup>Erkkila also notes, not surprisingly, that Bishop was not one of those writers. See her astute *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History and Discord* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>See groundbreaking feminist critics in women's poetry, Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms* (New York: Octagon, 1976) and Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* (Boston: Beacon P, 1986). Juhasz writes "There is no rule for feminine form, precisely because it needs to be an articulation of the person, an extension of the person" (178). Although there is no rule, a "need" for form "to be an articulation of the person" translates practically into a rule of the person. A decade later, Ostriker argues, "When a woman poet today says 'I,' she is likely to mean herself, as intensely as her imagination and her verbal skills permit . . ." (12). What if a "woman poet today" doesn't mean herself when she says "I"?

<sup>7</sup>In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's pioneering *Shakespeare's Sisters* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979) for example, the introductory notes list modern and contemporary women poets left out of the canon. This list includes Marianne Moore, Bishop's friend and mentor as well as Maxine Kumin but not Bishop (xxiv). Juhasz does not mention Bishop in her 1976 study. Ostriker briefly mentions or discusses Bishop several times in her 1986 survey of women's poetry but finds her "apolitical" and suggests that Bishop, darling of the poetry world's male establishment, was insultingly held up for other women, especially in the 40s and 50s, to emulate (7, 56).

<sup>8</sup>(Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

<sup>9</sup>See reprint in *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1984).

<sup>10</sup>Consider, for instance, Kate Daniels' analysis: "Given the abhorrence with which Bishop viewed the description . . . so often bestowed upon her by reverential male critics, 'the best woman poet of her generation,' her assessment of her own feminism seems somewhat unexamined at best, and disingenuous at worst" (242). Actually, in Bishop's logic, it makes sense because it rejects the label "woman poet." Daniels does not discuss Bishop's "assessment of her own feminism" as much as she compares Bishop's feminism unfavorably with Adrienne Rich's and suggests that the range between the two poets makes her unsure of whether there is a 'movement' per se in women's poetry (242). Although Daniels won't confirm a woman's movement in poetry, like Kumin, she does imply a political movement to which Bishop does not belong. See *A Profile*, n3 above.

<sup>11</sup>See Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," in *Diacritics*, spring 1986.