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Elizabeth Bishop: The Map of Her Life and Work
Elizabeth Bishop: Obraz života a díla Elizabeth Bishop

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Prague, 21 December 2018)

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Abstrakt

Bakalářská práce si klade zdánlivě jednoduchý cíl, a tím je čtení vybraných básní Elizabeth Bishopové skrze optiku dvou vztahů, které byly v jejím životě nejvíce formativní. Jedná se o vztah s modernistickou básnířkou Marianne Moorovou a Bishopovým současníkem Robertem Lowelllem.

První část práce je věnovaná vztahu s Marianne Mooreovou, kterou Bishopová potkala při svých studiích na Vassar College a která ji provázela životem až do své smrti v roce 1972. Od statusu učitelka-žačka se básnířky posunuly na rovinu vzájemně se respektujících přítelkyň. Bakalářská práce představuje jejich vztah pomocí vybraných pasáží z dopisů a rozhovorů a pro lepší ilustraci si na pomoc bere dvě básně: „Roosters“ a „Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore“. První báseň ukazuje, jakým způsobem se Bishopová vymanila z vlivu Moore a také předkládá tento důležitý krok jako spojnicí k druhé části bakalářské práce. Druhá báseň představuje jakési usmíření a urovnání jejich přátelství a také milník, který značí konec paradigmatu učitelka – žačka a který nastoluje novou fázi jejich vztahu.

Ve druhé části se seznamujeme s Robertem Lowelllem, který je tou již zmíněnou spojnicí mezi první a druhou kapitolou, jelikož to byl právě on, který pomohl Bishopové přijmout nový způsob její tvorby, a který tak svým způsobem umožnil napsání „Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore“. Nicméně jeho vliv byl mnohem hlubší a pro ilustraci, jakým způsobem se setkání s ním promítlo do tvorby Bishopové, byla vybrána báseň „In the Waiting Room“, ve které se střetává vliv Moorové i jeho. Do této básně se promítl jak deskriptivní, tak i konfesionální aspekt, jež jsou klíčové k porozumění toho, co je dnes známo pod pojmem „Elizabeth Bishopová“.

Nicméně vliv, který měla Bishopová na Lowella, je viditelnější než ten, který nepochybně měla na Moorovou, proto je zde prostor věnován i druhé straně mince, a tím jsou básně „The Armadillo“ a „Skunk Hour“. „Pásovec“ Bishopové sloužil jako vzor pro Lowellova

„Skunka“ a stejně tak způsob, jakým Bishopová pracuje s rytmem a verši. Lowell sám přiznal, že to byl právě „Pásovec“, který ho přiměl se odklonit od zkosnatělých vzorců a začít psát poezii, která je dnes známá pod pojmem „konfesionální“. Nicméně jejich vztah byl vždy vyvážený, a proto se práce zabývá i aspektem válečného protestu, který Lowellovi nebyl cizí a který možná inspiroval Bishopovou k tomu, aby i ona vyjádřila svůj nesouhlas svým vlastním způsobem. Celou kapitolou se vinou úryvky z jejich korespondence, která představuje umění sama o sobě a která by si rozhodně zasloužila větší prostor, než jí tato práce umožňuje.

Na závěr je představená elegie „North Haven“, kterou se Bishopová rozloučila se svým zesnulým „smutným přítelem“ a která, dá se říci, představuje pomyslnou tečku za jejich vřelým a formativním vztahem. Ten si prošel vzestupy a pády, ale nepochybně po něm zůstala pouze pachut' smutku z Lowellovy smrti bez pocitů hořkosti či zášti a který, doufejme, vyvolával po dva zbývající roky života Bishopové úsměv na její tváři.

Abstract

The aim of the thesis is straightforward: to provide readers with a glimpse into the life of Elizabeth Bishop but not to put emphasis on biographical details. The focus lies on her two most formative relationships with her fellow poets, namely Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell. The thesis aims to present five selected poems and to read them with acknowledging the mutual influences and, at the same time, it strives to provide specific instances of such influences.

The first part of the thesis is dedicated to the relationship with Marianne Moore. The two poets met during Bishop's Vassar years and their friendship lasted until Moore's death in 1972. From the teacher – mentored paradigm, their friendship evolved into an affectionate companionship. The thesis introduces their relationship while using selected letters, interviews and, to illustrate the matters more clearly, two of Bishop's poems, "The Roosters" and "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore." The first poem captures the breaking free from Moore's direct influence and additionally serves as a link to the second part of the thesis. The later poem is used to illustrate their reconciliation and to present the milestone that marks the shift of paradigms.

The second part of the thesis presents Robert Lowell, who is the already mentioned link between these two chapters; it was him who helped Bishop to embrace her new poetic style and who might have inspired Bishop to write "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore." Notwithstanding, his influence on Bishop's poetry was more profound and in order to illustrate how meeting him and reading him shaped Bishop herself, the poem "In the Waiting Room" was selected for closer analysis. The poem bears visible traces of both Moore's and Lowell's style, descriptivism and confessionalism, both of which are key aspects to understanding what constitutes what we see under the name "Elizabeth Bishop."

Nevertheless, Bishop's influence on Lowell was more pronounced than hers on Moore, hence one must pay attention to the reciprocity visible in "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour." Lowell's "Skunk Hour" was modelled on Bishop's "The Armadillo" and it drew from Bishop's use of rhythm and verse. Lowell himself confessed that it was "The Armadillo" that made him avert his focus from rigid poetry, hence he started to focus on what will later be known as "confessional poetry." As their debts were always two-way, the thesis deals with the aspect of protest. Robert Lowell was a conscientious objector and perhaps it was his principles that made Bishop more vocal about her stances. The chapter is held together by selected excerpts from their letters that have great artistic value and that would deserve more attention.

In the elegy called "North Haven," Bishop is bidding farewell to her "sad friend" and at the same time the homage serves as a closing line after the years of their warm and formative friendship. Undoubtedly, there were many ups and downs, but no feelings of malice remained, only the bitter aftertaste of outliving your best friend. One can only hope that the memories of the discussed relationship put a smile on Bishop's face in the two remaining years she lived.

*Marianne, loan me a noun!
Cal, please cable a verb!
Or simply propulse through the ether
some more powerful meter*

– Elizabeth Bishop,
Unfinished “Letter to Two Friends”¹

*To begin to understand Bishop’s unique style,
which is the source of the two apparently
opposing interpretations of her work
and the subsequent critical controversy,
one must really start with Moore and Lowell,
who influenced her throughout her career.*

– Laura Ebberson²

¹ Robert Dale Parker, *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 9.

² Laura Ebberson, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetic Voice: Reconciling Influences,” *Valpo.edu*, Valparaiso Poetry Review, <<https://www.valpo.edu/vpr/ebbersonessaybishop.html>> 10 Dec 2018.

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1 Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop is not a poet of many words. Her precisely constructed verses, rhymes and lines often took years to finish and her incessant revisions made it impossible to publish more than a modest number of poems. Nevertheless, when she did finish a poem, she hardly ever rewrote it; she let the poems reflect the time during which they were written, and she did not attempt to change the past. Besides poetry, she wrote short stories and greatly contributed to the canon of translations. Her writing poetry or prose was a laborious process, but it was a labour of love.

Whenever a new study or an article focusing on Bishop is published, it hardly ever fails to mention her tragic childhood, mentally unstable mother or her absent father, which in many cases turns Bishop into a tragic orphaned hero and paints a vivid picture of a life-lasting impact. Sixty-eight years is a long time and only naturally there was a period when her writing was not only influenced by her experience, but also served as a means of dealing with it. No wonder she needed literature to overcome all the obstacles; there were indeed many.

The year is 1911 and an only child is born to a Nova Scotian mother and a half Canadian, half old England father on February 8 in Worcester.³ At the age of eight months, Elizabeth Bishop lost her father to Bright's disease; thus began a period during which she started to slowly lose her mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, to an onset of strange bouts that later turned out to be permanent bouts of insanity.⁴ However, they did not fully manifest until 1915, when she had to be hospitalized at McLean; her daughter was left in the care of her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia.⁵ Bishop's early childhood was a source of memories so painful that she resolved to writing about them, but hardly ever publishing them.⁶ One of the exceptions is a short story

³ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) Biographical information provided by Elizabeth Bishop; page not stated.

⁴ Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 107.

⁵ Harrison, 107.

⁶ Harrison, 107.

“In the Village” from which one can connect bits and pieces of the struggle she had been going through. Set in an unnamed Nova Scotian village, the story also captures the end of her short-lived childhood: “Clang. The pure note: pure and angelic. The dress was all wrong. She screamed. The child vanishes.”⁷ With the first remembered scream of her mother, the child is torn away from what is supposed to be a safe capsule and is thrown into chaos and the unknown; despite the child being “unaccustomed to having her [mother] back,” the child feels deeply the loss and from the retrospect is aware of the impact it had on her.

Andre Furnali claims that

Bishop acknowledged the sense of transgression that her mother's inexplicable condition aroused in her as a child; in a letter to Dorothee Bowie of June 14, 1970, she writes: “My life has been darkened always by guilt feelings, I think, about my mother – somehow children get the idea it's their fault – or I did. And I could do nothing about that, and she lived on for twenty years more and it has been a nightmare to me always.”⁸

The following excerpt, taken from “In the Village,” confirms that her early years did, in fact, had an ongoing influence on her life and work:

The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory – in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever – not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village.⁹

The following years were spent living, according to Bishop's words, “alternately with Nova Scotian and New England sets of grandparents; later with an aunt.”¹⁰ It is of interest that this is the only information about her childhood that was provided in her “Autobiographical Sketch” in 1961.¹¹

⁷ Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Village,” p.63. Taken from <https://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/books/excerpt-prose-elizabeth-bishop.pdf> 16 Dec 2018. Adapted from Elizabeth Bishop, *Prose* ed. By Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

⁸ Andre Furnali, “‘Wince and Sing’: Suffering, Song, and Smith in Elizabeth Bishop's ‘In the Village,’” Literature Resource Center

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1420105196/LitRC?u=karlova&sid=LitRC&xid=d91ad84f>, 16 Dec 2018.

⁹ Bishop, “In the Village” 62.

¹⁰ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Biographical information provided by Elizabeth Bishop; page not stated.

¹¹ Goldensohn, page not stated.

After graduating from Vassar College in 1934, Bishop started to travel and for some time lived in New York City.¹² Later on, she moved to the artists' colony in upstate New York, Yaddo, and then to Washington, but eventually settled in Key West, Florida, where she found inspiration for many of her influential poems including her famous ode to Florida itself.¹³ Nevertheless, after it was turned into a military command centre, she packed her suitcase again and set off to what was meant to be a voyage around the world.¹⁴ It did not turn out to be what she had expected as an allergic reaction to the fruit of cashew prevented her from travelling any further; she had to stay in Rio de Janeiro and it was Maria Carlota de Macedo Soares who nursed her back to health.¹⁵ The bout of misfortune brought them closer together and, eventually, they fell in love and began their life together in Brazil.¹⁶ 17 years later, Lota committed suicide and Bishop decided to return to the U.S. and became poet-in-residence at Harvard University in 1969.¹⁷ Her work won many awards, including Pulitzer Prize for her collection *A Cold Spring* in 1956 and the National Book Award for *Complete Poems* in 1970.¹⁸

After her death on October 6, 1979, Lloyd Schwartz wrote:

Elizabeth Bishop's sudden death, last week, meant a profound loss to the local and international literary community. But her wonderful poems, stories, and translations, her impressive catalogue of awards, honours, and reviews never made her famous outside those walls.¹⁹

She was a private person who did not enjoy attention, be it from the media or an audience – something she seemed to overcome only a short time prior to her passing away – and she craved

¹² "Guide to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers," *Special Collections Vassar.edu*, Vassar, <https://specialcollections.vassar.edu/collections/manuscripts/findingaids/bishop_elizabeth.html#d0e57> 26 Dec 2018.

¹³ "Guide to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers," *Special Collections Vassar.edu*, Vassar.

¹⁴ "Guide to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers," *Special Collections Vassar.edu*, Vassar.

¹⁵ "Guide to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers," *Special Collections Vassar.edu*, Vassar.

¹⁶ "Guide to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers," *Special Collections Vassar.edu*, Vassar.

¹⁷ George S. Lensing, "About Elizabeth Bishop," *English Illinois.edu*, Modern American Poetry, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bishop/about.htm> 26 Dec 2018.

¹⁸ Lensing, "About Elizabeth Bishop."

¹⁹ Schwartz and Estess, eds., *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983) 252.

the peace she needed to painstakingly finish her poems; she published only 101 of them.²⁰ John Ashbery called her “a poet of strange, even mysterious, but undeniable and great gifts,”²¹ James Merrill said in an interview that she “merely write[s] like angels”²² and compared her to “a Dream Boat.”²³ The praise she received during her life only escalated in recent years and, as Mariana Machová puts it, “in the past three decades, few twentieth-century poets have received as much attention and critical acclaim as Elizabeth Bishop.”²⁴ Undeniably, it is thanks to her craft and ability to paint vivid pictures of things; not of their form, but of their state of mind. In twenty years, one dares to say, her poems will have been read differently because, as Randall Jarrell notes, “the more you read her poems, the better and fresher, the more nearly perfect they seem; at least half of them are completely realized works of art.”²⁵

To do Bishop’s work justice, stereotypes must be avoided as they are used to characterize others without further thought, and because they assume a summative fixed image. The thesis does not claim that her gender predestined her to become a spokesperson for women’s rights; also, it does not completely dismiss her past and her life in general as a feature that should only interest biographers; on the contrary. It does take into account her life and ascribes it some importance, yet it tries to provide a more comprehensive picture – it puts emphasis on the two relationships that significantly shaped her poetry. The relationships in question are those with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, respectively. Both successful poets and generally accepted as parts of the literary canon, they provided Bishop not only with the necessary inspiration and possibility of literary growth, but also with formative friendships. By defying the stereotypical reading of Bishop’s poetry through the lenses of Moore’s and Lowell’s

²⁰ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 252.

²¹ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 201.

²² Schwartz and Estess, eds., 200.

²³ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 241

²⁴ Mariana Machová, *Elizabeth Bishop and Translation* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017) ix., Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=vG13DQAAQBAJ&lpg=PR5&ots=kWECpUpL7e&dq=Elizabeth%20Bishop%20and%20Translation%20machov%C3%A1&lr&hl=cs&pg=PR5#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 26 Dec 2018.

²⁵ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 198.

poetry, the thesis argues for the same importance of Bishop's reciprocal influence on them. The selected poems are read bearing this claim in mind, and the readings strive to provide a more complex picture.

However, when focusing on such a prominent and well-researched figure, one must make necessary omissions in order to follow the subject and not to venture outside set boundaries. For that reason, this thesis does not focus on Bishop's other friends, her lovers, or her own protégées, Ilse Barker and May Swenson.²⁶ The focus lies neither on exploring her Brazilian period, nor on her sexual orientation or political stance. It focuses solely on analysing her work and mapping her life in relation to the two most significant influences, Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell. The thesis argues for their unquestionable prominence and importance, as is demonstrated by selected poems.

"Roosters," "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," "In the Waiting Room," "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour" all bear visible traces of Moore's and Lowell's influence, but they also show what Bishop managed to do with such influence and how she created her own pastiche of styles and approaches. Starting with the period during which Bishop was largely influenced by Moore, the thesis presents necessary biographical information and focuses on two poems: "Roosters" and "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore." The poems try to illustrate Bishop's "growing up" as a poet, the reconciliation with her newly gained independence and paying homage to her mentor, respectively. The second chapter is dedicated to Robert Lowell's influence on Elizabeth Bishop and maps the turn in Bishop's poetry. "In the Waiting Room" is approached from two points of view. One follows the bread crumbs left by Moore's schooling, the other maps the debt to Lowell's poetry and his confessional mannerism. "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour" were chosen to show how one can become the central inspiration for the work of the other without even realizing it and to demonstrate that two very similar opinions

²⁶ Marilyn May Lombardi, et al., *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 11.

can be presented in a very dissimilar manner. Just as Bishop's "thank-you note" to Marianne Moore was presented, her "love note" to the friendship with Robert Lowell is mentioned and used as a conclusion.

2 “From the Country to the City”: From “Miss Moore” to “Marianne”

Come with the pointed toe of each black shoe
trailing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat,
please come flying.²⁷

– Elizabeth Bishop, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”

Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore are poets not close in age but in style; at least they were in the early years. Both are praised for their keen observing eye and the ability to see the world around them in realistic terms. This chapter serves as a humble insight into the intricate history of their mutual influence and friendship. It provides a brief autobiographical summary and hence allows the reader to comprehend and approach the topic in a complex manner. The thesis aims to present two poems, “Roosters” and “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” in a way that would allow the reader to understand the nature of their relationship and to spot some common features.

2.1 Autobiographical Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop’s turbulent childhood left her without a maternal figure, a fact that probably only strengthened her affection towards her literary hero, Marianne Moore. A modernist poet for many, a close friend and inspiration for Elizabeth Bishop. This was openly admitted by the poet herself. Bishop seemed to be grateful for Moore’s impact on her work:

[...] I think it [your poetry] immediately opened up my eyes to the possibility of the subject-matter I could use and might never have thought of using if it hadn’t been for you. — (I might not have written any poems at all, I suppose.)²⁸

²⁷ Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) 82. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

²⁸ David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989) 4.

To fully understand the scope of importance, it is necessary to go where it all began; the spring of 1934 when Bishop was a senior at Vassar College and where the Vassar librarian arranged their meeting.²⁹ Later it turned out that Bishop was not the first to be introduced to Moore through Borden, a fact that resulted in the odd nature of their first encounter.³⁰ According to David Kalstone,

it was arranged that the two would meet one Saturday afternoon in March outside the third-floor reading room of the New York Public Library, at the right-hand bench. (Evidently not all Miss Borden's protégées were given the same treatment; Moore met some of them at the information booth in Grand Central Station, from which she could, if she were bored, easily scuttle away "to catch a train."³¹

Thus began their affectionate friendship that lasted until Moore's death in 1972.³² Despite the age difference, both women found immediate liking in each other's company and started to spend their time together.

One might come to a hasty conclusion that Bishop was only taking advantage of Moore and her influence in literary circles. It was she, as Kalstone puts it, who "led or prodded Bishop toward a number of editors and journals."³³ While emphasizing Moore's influence on Bishop's poetry, praising her for offering guidance when needed and being the one that was directly involved in the decision making, people tend to overlook Bishop's contribution. It is not to say that Moore's involvement was not of crucial importance, far from it. Rather it is to point out that despite her young age, Bishop was more than capable to meet Moore's expectations and was her equal in many ways. Becoming Marianne's friend inherently meant becoming if not friends than at least acquaintances with her mother, Mary Warner Moore, who was a very peculiar figure.³⁴ Bishop's thorough observations led her to a very salient conclusion: "Her

²⁹ Kalstone, 6

³⁰ Kalstone, 6.

³¹ Kalstone, 6.

³² Bonnie Costello, "Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence," *Twentieth Century Literature* Summer – Autumn (1984): 134, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/441108>>, 25 Nov 2018.

³³ Kalstone, 42.

³⁴ Dan Chiasson, "All About My Mother," *Newyorker.com*, The New Yorker, 11 Nov 2013 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/11/11/all-about-my-mother>> 25 Nov 2018.

manner toward Marianne was that of a kindly, self-controlled parent who felt that she had to take a firm line, that her daughter might be given to flightiness or – an equal sin, in her eyes – mistakes in grammar.”³⁵

The inseparable duo had direct influence on Bishop’s work as they corrected many of her poems between 1934 and 1940, including, famously, “Roosters.”³⁶ Nevertheless, it was Moore who contributed to Bishop’s growth as a poet. Her sharp eye and matter-of-fact observations were determining factors in Bishop’s life. It is not to say that Bishop was not interested in observing and describing the world before she had met Moore; quite the opposite. It was the learning that such way of living can be identified with a way of writing that turned her into who she was as a poet.³⁷

Mariana Machová focuses on the similarities and differences between the two prominent figures and adds that when

comparing the poetry of Bishop and Moore, it is clear that their similarities lie in their keen observations and detailed descriptions, whereas their language, form and the overall tone of their poetry is vastly different. Unlike sophisticated and even cryptic poetry of Moore, Bishop’s poetry appears to be more down to earth, personal and less experimental. Bishop took inspiration from Moore’s descriptive poetry which is defined by certain distance of poetic voice from the scene that is being described. While the older poet keeps her distance and often intellectual superiority and her descriptions tend to moralize, Bishop’s distance is fragile, and the descriptions are more personal.³⁸

It follows that they both shared focus on detail and descriptively captured the world around them. Bishop often insisted on the “fundamental meaning” when discussing her poetry and interpreted her own work as “truthful,” a faithful representation of what really happened.³⁹ Her

³⁵ Kalstone, 9.

³⁶ Kalstone, 9.

³⁷ Kalstone, 9.

³⁸ Mariana Machová, *Místa mezi místy: Pomezí americké poezie* (Praha: Lidové noviny, 2015) 45. My translation. Original quotation: Srovnáme-li poezii Bishopové a Moorové, je zjevné, že obě básníčky spojuje především pozorovací taent a smysl pro detail, kdežto jazyk, forma a celkový ton jejich poezie se dost liší. Oproti sofistikované, až kryptické poezii Marianne Moorové se básně Elizabeth Bishopové jeví civilnější, osobnější, méně experimentální. Bishopová se inspirovala u Moorové deskriptivní poezií, pro niž je přízračný určitý odstup popisujícího hlasu od popisované scény. Zatímco však starší básníčka si zachovává odtažitost, někdy až intelektuální nadřazenost, a její popisy mívají spíše obecný morální přesah, u Bishopové je odstup křehčí a význam popisovaných scén osobnější.

³⁹ Machová, 46.

approach to any poetry was rather shocking to some of her Vassar classmates. Mary McCarthy recounts a literary discussion in 1957:

[...] Elizabeth finally joined the conversation – she was the last to speak up – and in this quiet, little voice said, “Well, I would think it was literally true.” Then she put forward her conviction that anything in a poem was true, that it was there because it had happened. The other reasons could be added. I was absolutely struck all in a heap by this. I had never seen poetry in that light.⁴⁰

Any analysis of Bishop’s early poetry would be far from complete without mentioning the name “Marianne Moore,” yet many critics blindly link them together, a fact which both flattered and irritated the women. The poets were aware of their differences and discussed such comparisons and their shallowness. The apparent misunderstanding of their work became a recurrent topic in their conversations. Bishop commented on their differences in the following manner:

I think my approach is so much vaguer and less defined and certainly more old-fashioned – sometimes I’m amazed at people’s comparing me to you when all I’m doing is some kind of blank verse – can’t they *see* how different it is? But they can’t apparently.⁴¹

Moore also did not understand the comparison that to them seemed juvenile and superficial and, in reaction to a conversation she had with a critic, she wrote to Bishop:

You have sometimes asked what I thought, Elizabeth; but even if you ever took my advice, did you ever get to sound like me? or I like you? You sound like Lope de Vega and I sound like Jacob Abbot or Peter Rabbit.⁴²

Such remarks should somehow tame the efforts of proving their elaborate interconnection but, as Bonnie Costello puts it, “this was one of the most abiding and significant literary friendships in either woman's career, so that the nature and evolution of that friendship should be of interest to readers of their poetry.”⁴³

⁴⁰ G. Fountain and P. Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) 152-153, Google Books
<<https://books.google.cz/books?id=MYLDXbj10oAC&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 25 Nov 2018.

⁴¹ Kalstone, 3-4. Author’s note: In the thesis, I use neither italicised, nor underlined words. Should they occur, they were always quoted as such in their source and hence in the thesis as well.

⁴² Costello, “Friendship and Influence” 130.

⁴³ Costello, “Friendship and Influence” 130.

On the surface, their relationship appears to be straightforward and clear – mentor and mentored, teacher and learner. Yet with the time passing, their differences became more pronounced and both started to realize that they could no longer carry on their “educational” relationship and if they wanted to remain friends, things would have to change. This was a continuous process that culminated in the debate over Bishop’s breakthrough poem, “Roosters.” According to Betsy Erkkila,

in the context of Bishop’s poetic career, “Roosters” represents a decisive move away from the “imaginary Islands” of such early poems as “The Map,” “The Imaginary Iceberg,” and “The Man-Moth” toward the personal and historical subject matter that would become the focus of her later poems.⁴⁴

2.1.1 Breaking Free: “Roosters”

When Elizabeth Bishop reached to Moore for the customary critique, she got more than she asked for: a phone call and a complete rewriting of “the most ambitious [poem] [she] had up to then attempted.”⁴⁵ This event in 1940 was preceded by a strenuous time in which Bishop started to feel “abjectly dependent.”⁴⁶ The ongoing flurry with the publishers had left her somehow indebted to Moore as she was the one making inquiries on her behalf and tried to persuade the publishers of Bishop’s worth: “Her idiosyncrasy is too special to be combined... She has worked patiently and privately for some time and has besides the talent of which you speak, a clarified understanding of forms and effects that I long to see accessible and attested.”⁴⁷ Those and many more kind words represented the much needed support, yet when she wrote to Moore from Carolina Mountains, one detects a hint of shame, as if she failed to please her respectable teacher: “I should just like to let myself go, Marianne, and give you masses and

⁴⁴ Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 126, Google Books
<<https://books.google.cz/books?id=z3M8DwAAQBAJ&lpg=PA129&dq=the%20cock%20and%20roosters%20comparison%20bishop&hl=cs&pg=PA129#v=onepage&q=roosters&f=false>>, 1 Dec 2018.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984) 145. Cited in Marilyn May Lombardi et al., *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 119.

⁴⁶ Kalstone, 78.

⁴⁷ Kalstone, 77-78.

masses of Nature Description – but I am so afraid that you may be displeased with me because of my recent laziness and miscalculations.”⁴⁸ By sending the draft of “Roosters,” Bishop hoped to amend their relationship she felt was somewhat “fraud” at that time.⁴⁹ Moore’s reaction was not what she had hoped for.

Instead of constructive criticism, Bishop’s “war” poem was met with cutting out, reshaping and general remaking.⁵⁰ Despite Moore’s encouragement to discover her “private defiance of the significantly detestable,” Moore, together with her mother, was largely dissatisfied with the outcome and for the younger poet, Moore’s rewriting represented a deep misunderstanding of her intentions.⁵¹ For one, “Roosters” is as close as Bishop ever came to meeting her friend’s continuous demand and she realized that Moore did not recognize her attempt at what she had been asking all these years.⁵² David Bromwich suggests one possible reading of Moore’s “intentional” misunderstanding without simplifying or undermining her response. He argues that during the 1930s and 1940s Moore “was withdrawing from a style of polemical irony which had been vital to her early poems”; for that reason, as Kristin Hotelling Zona puts it, “Moore was unable or unwilling to appreciate Bishop’s defiance.”⁵³ All of that because, according to Bromwich, “‘Roosters’ was calculated to remind her of a part of her imagination that she wanted to be finished with.”⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Kalstone, 78-79.

⁴⁹ Kalstone, 78.

⁵⁰ Kalstone, 81.

⁵¹ Kirstin Hotelling Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) 61, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=oTBOOzzdr6cC&lpg=PA60&dq=moore%20and%20bishop%20on%20roosters&hl=cs&pg=PA60#v=onepage&q=moore%20and%20bishop%20on%20roosters&f=false>>, 30 Nov 2018.

⁵² Zona, 61.

⁵³ Zona, 61.

⁵⁴ David Bromwich, cited in Kirstin Hotelling Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson the Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) 61, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=oTBOOzzdr6cC&lpg=PA60&dq=moore%20and%20bishop%20on%20roosters&hl=cs&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 30 Nov 2018.

Even though contemporary audience might label her response as “prudish,” it would be somewhat exaggerated to dismiss her argument completely. Zona is one of the few critics who recognized the other side of the coin and without arguing for Moore’s version she states that:

Fearing that Bishop’s “sordidities” will carry tropes too burdensome for the poetic “picture” to overcome, Moore worries that the poem’s meaning will be marred or mistaken as a result. People are not “depersonalized” enough. They are too immersed within their own perspective – to step outside of their conditioned associations in the face of such laden phrasing. [...] For Moore, rewriting the uncertainty out of Bishop’s poem goes hand in hand with excising the “sordidities” because both are means by which the temptation to withdrawal, or “interiorizing,” is checked. Moore was not avoiding the internalized atmosphere of Bishop’s work; she was contesting it in the manner she had been for years.⁵⁵

By writing “Roosters,” Bishop moved closer to the “overt subject matter” that was essential and characteristic to Moore’s poetry.⁵⁶ Moore’s response was only a reaction to what has been already mentioned, that is her changing view of her own poetry and “Roosters” only brought to her mind ideas that she wanted to be finished with.⁵⁷

2.1.1.1 Skirmishes Over Words

The usual small amends were significantly more prominent this time and were delivered with the utmost certainty wrapped in a thick blanket of compliments and carefulness:

I think it is to your credit, Elizabeth, that when I say you are not to say “water-closet,” you go on saying it a little [...], and it is calculated to make me wonder if I haven’t mistaken a cosmetic patch for a touch of lamp-black, but I think not.⁵⁸

Moore then goes on explaining her mind about inappropriateness of such carnal vocabulary:

If I tell Mother there is a feather on her dress and she says, “On my back?” I am likely to say, “No. On your rump,” [...]. But in my work, I daren’t risk saying, “My Mother had a feather on her rump.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Zona, 62.

⁵⁶ David Bromwich, *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 111, Google Books
<<https://books.google.cz/books?id=BOi9i1CnR6sC&lpg=PT129&dq=the%20cock%20and%20roosters%20comparison%20bishop&hl=cs&pg=PT121#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 1 Dec 2018.

⁵⁷ Bromwich, 111.

⁵⁸ Kalstone, 80.

⁵⁹ Harrison, 94.

To this rather conservative opinion, Bishop replies with skittishness and irritation: “I cherish my ‘water-closet’ and the other sordidities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism.”⁶⁰

It follows that it should not surprise us that Moore’s amends involved replacing more “carnal” words with the ones she found more suitable to the image she had of Bishop for quite some time⁶¹ – “raw throats” became “strained throats,” nearly every violent image was cut out, including the rooster’s “cruel feet,” “stupid eyes” and “torn-out, bloodied feathers”; but most importantly, she removed the sarcasm, the “rattle-tap rhythm” with surgical precision.⁶² Bishop’s poem reads like a fluid set of movements one could compare to the action of firing a gun: load, trigger-pull, discharge. The first two actions are still relatively harmless and do not necessarily need to result in anything, yet when taking the bigger picture into account, without them the act of discharging would not be possible. The same goes for the poem itself: the first two lines in every stanza could be seen as preparing for the firing itself: “Deep from protruding chests/ in green-gold medals dressed” only hints at what is to come and one could naively hope that it will not follow its nature, nevertheless, the final shot is fired and we learn that they “planned to command and terrorize the rest” (35).

One might overlook the changes made on the level of morphology – scratching out words and replacing them with different ones is a justifiable action as long as it does not change the essence of the poem and the feeling it evokes in the reader. Sadly, Moore did exactly that – she cut out the pieces of Bishop’s new persona and inserted her own images in a way she knew

⁶⁰ Harrison, 95.

⁶¹ In his essay “‘The Flicker of Impudence’: Delicacy and Indelicacy in the Art of Elizabeth Bishop,” Thomas Travisano notes that “if Bishop’s aura as a merely delicate master lingers, it is in part because she remains closely identified for many readers with her mentor, that genius of delicacy, Marianne Moore.” Cited in Marilyn May Lombardi et al., *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 119.

⁶² Harrison, 94.

well and that had always worked in her, and sometimes even in Bishop's, favour. She was reluctant to embrace Bishop's newly evolved style and she took her disdain on the poem.

Moore changed Bishop's rhythm, rhyme and even the layout of the poem. Bishop's stanzas are always three-line and "descending" – the first line is generally the shortest, the last one the longest – and hence dosing the reader with shocking revelations not at once but gradually, giving one the time to process and to believe what the poet is describing, whereas Moore's version is jagged as she sometimes eliminated a line and left a solitary two-line stanza hanging in the air, lacking the climax. Moore got rid of "redundancies" and thus disrupted the "rattle-trap rhythm" that Bishop found appropriate.⁶³ Bishop admitted that the form of the poem was important because of the "'violence' of tone – which [she] feel[s] to be helped by what *you* [Moore] must feel to be just a bad case of the *Threes*."⁶⁴ In Miller's words, Moore even eliminated "three increasing-beat lines and one-rhymed stanza form."⁶⁵ The whole stanza

Cries galore
come from the water-closet door,
from the dropping-plastered henhouse floor (37)

was mercilessly taken out. By leaving it out, Moore managed to get rid of not only "sordidities," but also of the basic human need for privacy as "water-closets" are often used as a refuge by those seeking solitude. Moore removed the parable of the poem and left only skilfully crafted text that lacks any realness or emotion.

Perhaps, to illustrate the matters more clearly, one should take a closer look at the last stanza. In Moore's version it is as follows:

And climbing in to see the end,
The faithful sin [*sic*] is here,

⁶³ Harrison, 95.

⁶⁴ Harold Bloom, *Elizabeth Bishop* (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002) 35, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=bbXXEnYvBSIC&lpg=PA34&dq=marianne%20moore%20cocks%20roosters&hl=cs&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 27 Dec 2018.

⁶⁵ Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 159, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=SWdngGZv3cYC&lpg=PP1&hl=cs&pg=PA277#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 27 Dec 2018.

as enemy, or friend.⁶⁶

In contrast, Bishop's version concludes:

The sun climbs in,
following "to see the end,"
faithful as enemy, or friend. (39)

One might see that Moore, perhaps deliberately, misunderstood the final stanza, changed the subject and "opened" the allusion that Bishop chose to hide. By rewriting the stanza, she chose to draw readers' attention to the Christ-Peter parable.⁶⁷ Moreover, according to Kent, "the 'sun' becomes 'sin,' which connects back to the sin of Magdalene, one of the flesh, as well as to Peter's sin of the spirit."⁶⁸ The Christ-Peter parable is of crucial importance. Despite Peter's "betrayal" and "disowning" of Christ, it was him who went "'to see the end,' / faithful as enemy, or friend" (39) and this ambiguity, this "instability" of Peter's character is directly linked to the sun in the poem. One cannot be sure whether the sun, and Peter, will prove to be friendly and protect the "saviour," or whether they will choose to remain in a safe distance and leave him to his fate, only waiting for the outcome, not taking a stance, not even praying. One cannot be sure what a new day will bring – it can be either peace, or destruction; new friends, or enemies.

Harrison states that

the lack of comment about the St. Peter section, which was accompanied nonetheless by an absence of revision in response to Moore's changes there, reveal only that she would not challenge Moore over Christ. But by insisting that she keep the quotation from Matthew 26:58 intact, she does challenge Moore's vision of the end.⁶⁹

Moore's version is weaker in style, less percussive, and very clearly brings morality to focus, which one might argue was not Bishop's intention, nor her desire. Harrison develops her argument and adds:

⁶⁶ Kalstone, 269.

⁶⁷ Bloom, *Elizabeth Bishop* 114.

⁶⁸ Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls Into Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 197, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=2mqr5ozizrUC&lpg=PP1&hl=cs&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 28 Dec 2018.

⁶⁹ Harrison, 96.

For Bishop, who quotes the “poignant” biblical lines, Peter’s crime is still wholly unsettled, as are the “rattle-trap rhythms,” the “sordidities,” and the uncriminal violences of “unwanted love” [...]. Bishop’s close returns the poem to these daily betrayals, which are not erased by a Christian forgiving or the rise of a new beginning and which cannot be overlooked even while the poem gives its attention to the more urgent violence of war or the more hopeful vision of a sunrise.”⁷⁰

For many, “Roosters” represents the anti-war stance that Bishop adapted and her reluctance to engage in the discussion that might have threatened her own anti-militarist opinions.⁷¹ However, for Bishop, their quarrel represented the end of the mentor-protégée relationship, something that she had never found again during her life. Surprisingly enough, Thomas Travisano sees their dispute as a representation of Moore being afraid of the new “Elizabeth” or, to put it more precisely, of the one she knew better than anyone, yet she wished her away as it is this new voice that made her feel “distinctly uncomfortable.”⁷²

With the military subtext in mind, we should perceive the poem as a subtle challenge, but a challenge nevertheless, to the intense strategic preparations in Key West in 1940 that made her acutely aware of the war’s approach.⁷³ By publishing “Roosters” in its original form, she also set herself against Moore’s demand to define herself against the excess and vulgarity of the male modernists, the same way she did. In other words, she asked her to uphold “moral, decorous, and ladylike aesthetic posture.”⁷⁴ For the first time, Bishop did not succumb to Moore’s “better” judgement. Betsy Erkkila concludes that “with the composition of ‘Roosters,’ Bishop had acquired a poetic maturity that enabled her to turn down Moore’s suggestions and in doing so to define clearly her own poetic priorities,” because in this case, Elizabeth “did know best.”⁷⁵ Or, to use Lynn Keller’s words,

Moore's rewriting of “Roosters” did not noticeably affect the quality of Bishop and Moore's friendship, but it did mark a decisive shift in their literary relationship. From

⁷⁰ Harrison, 96.

⁷¹ Goldensohn, 156.

⁷² Lombardi, et al., 120-121.

⁷³ Harrison, 89. Bishop moved to Key West in 1939 and lived there for several years, hence witnessed this gearing up first-hand.

⁷⁴ Erkkila, 125.

⁷⁵ Erkkila, 125.

then on Bishop rarely sent unpublished work to Moore: “after that I decided to write entirely on my own, because I realized how very different we were.”⁷⁶

As was already hinted, “Roosters” signals the end of the period during which Bishop sent her work for closer inspection and during which she usually accepted Moore’s alternations. The act of defiance was completed by publishing “Roosters” without the suggested emendations and ever since, Bishop stopped sending her work to anyone. It took nearly eight years for them to start expressing their cordial feelings again. The closure of this strenuous time was manifested in Bishop’s poem “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” published in 1948; it directly alludes to the final line from the letter in which she decisively rejected Moore’s suggested emendations and asked her to come with her to an exhibition in Manhattan where Klee’s *The Man of Confusion* was on display: “I wonder if you could be mesmerized across the bridge to see it again with me?”⁷⁷

2.2 Kindred Spirits: “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”

One possible way of reading the poem is that of a farewell to Moore’s advisory; by publishing the poem Bishop is sending a clear message: Affectionate and grateful she would be, obedient she would not. It was written a year after she met Lowell and he had helped her to accept her own poetic and personal difference and hence made it easier to say goodbye to the cherished and comfortable paradigm.⁷⁸ Another reading might be interpreted as a friendly teasing and Bishop proving Moore that she is in a way indebted to her. For that reason, she is throwing in her personal observations of Moore’s style, deliberately using them to underline the understanding and appreciation she has for her as a person and as an artist. Thus, the poem was chosen for a close reading as it illustrates both tendencies and the evolution from a young woman seeking approval to an older and bolder version of that woman.

⁷⁶ Lynn Keller, “Words Worth a Thousand Postcards: The Bishop / Moore Correspondence,” *American Literature* Oct (1983): 423-424, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2925682>>, 2 Dec 2018.

⁷⁷ Goldensohn, 139.

⁷⁸ Harrison, 57.

2.2.1 Analysis

The previously discussed relationship was in the late 40's a far cry from the mentor-protégée one of the early 30's. Still, Bishop was very fond of Moore even years later and made it abundantly clear:

By all means say I'm a friend of Marianne's! I met her in 1934 through the college Librarian, an old friend of hers, and it was one of the greatest pieces of good fortune in my life!⁷⁹

Hence by the late 1940s, when Bishop was asked to submit something for a Marianne Moore special issue of the *Quarterly Review Literature*, she could write without a grudge or malice and convey her gratitude and affection, albeit in a very "Bishopian" way.⁸⁰ She submitted a short essay and a poem, titled "As We Like It" and "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," respectively.⁸¹ Modelled on Pablo Neruda's "Alberto Rojas Jimenez Viene Volando," the poem, according to Erkkila, enacts "the major dimensions of their relationship and [it] is finally an attempt on Bishop's part to honour Moore without allowing herself to be destroyed by her."⁸²

The poem captures Bishop's feelings that on the first read appear to be full of pathos and clichés. Moore is depicted as a Mary Poppins-esque figure on a mission that only she can complete; the only thing that is missing is a giant umbrella. She is being invoked by the speaker to "please come flying" and to "come like a light in the white mackerel sky/ come like daytime comet" (82). The images bring to life a person that is partly from this world and partly from an unknown one. Her pointy black shoes are "trailing a sapphire highlight,/ with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots" (82). To her otherworldly appearance contributes the image of "heaven knows how many angels all riding/ on the broad black brim of [her] hat"; an image poignantly on a borderline with pathos (82). The overall intent of such phrasing is to present

⁷⁹ Costello, "Friendship and Influence" 134.

⁸⁰ Harrison, 55.

⁸¹ Harrison, 55.

⁸² Erkkila, 132.

Moore as a dualistic creature: on one hand, Bishop calls upon her real, life living close friend: “a slight censorious frown and blue ribbons,” “pointed toe of each black shoe,” “broad black brim of your hat” and “a black cape[ful]” are all well-known characteristics of Moore’s appearance and personality (82).⁸³ On the other, Bishop is invoking someone that does not exist and is only a metaphor for her friend.

To this creature Bishop ascribes the same treatment of a language and the power Moore holds over reality. “Moorian” figure can change the order of things solely by her presence as she knows how to bend reality to her liking: she does that by being in control of words. Even the nature bows before her abilities: “The waves are running in verses this fine morning” (82). On the other hand, Bishop underlines her vulnerability and paints her as a fragile phenomenon that needs her passage secured: “The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged” (82). The duality of the attributes ascribed to Moore only enhances the mock-heroic portrayal of the poet as she is

Mounting the sky with natural heroism,
Above the accidents, above the malignant movies,
The taxicabs and injustices at large, (83)

The “heroic” side of her character possesses enough power and respect that even “the grim museums will behave” together with the statues of lions who “lie in wait/ on the steps of the Public Library,/ eager to rise and follow through the doors” (82). Mentioning the Public Library is a subtle allusion dedicated solely to Moore, as it was there where they met for the first time.⁸⁴

The poem itself begins with an invitation, just like their friendship did. However, it did not begin by crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, but with a trip to a circus.⁸⁵ It is as if Bishop was trying to reassure Moore that she does indeed remember the beginning of their friendship and

⁸³ Linda Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) xii, Google Books
<<https://books.google.cz/books?id=LGnt35ShHewC&lpg=PR1&ots=nNvVJHQmPo&dq=marianne%20moore%20hat&lr&hl=cs&pg=PR12#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 22 Dec 2018.

⁸⁴ Kalstone, 6.

⁸⁵ Leavell, 279.

that she cherishes it, despite all their differences and contradictions.⁸⁶ On the other hand, read with the circumstances of their first encounter in mind, it could also serve as a jab, a little reminder of what a trial their first meeting was for Bishop herself. The peculiar conditions laid by Moore were meant for her own protection, as she had expected to dislike this young student based on her previous experience.⁸⁷

In a way, Bishop is in her homage reversing their roles: at the beginning, it was she who wore a cloak of invisibility, an unknown and inexperienced school girl, approaching her literary hero; however, the tables had turned and now it is Moore whose brilliance is on the verge of invisible. “Daytime comet,” “light in the white mackerel sky” and “a cloud of fiery pale chemicals” would all prevent the bystanders from seeing this picturesque figure appear, as the comet in a daylight would indeed serve as a cloak of invisibility (82-83). In the end, it is only Bishop expecting her arrival and seeing her brilliance. As Diehl nicely summarizes, “while invoking Moore’s meteoric brilliance, Bishop simultaneously renders that brilliance invisible.”⁸⁸ Despite the poem being an homage, there is a hidden message claiming that it is only Bishop herself who is able to fully appreciate Moore’s poetry.

Upon reading, the poem evokes longing and wishful thinking. Bishop uses the image of the Brooklyn Bridge as something that might help Moore to get closer to her in physical terms, but also in a metaphorical sense, for she uses words to overcome the distance created between them by age, varying experiences and perhaps even by their disagreement over “Roosters.” For obvious reasons, she sets it in a familiar environment, knowing that Moore regarded vacationing abroad “as a kind of sacrosanctity” and rarely travelled anywhere.⁸⁹ Quoting Erkkila, “Moore, the poem implies, chooses to stay at home, both literally and figuratively, within the safety of

⁸⁶ Erkkila, 132.

⁸⁷ Joanne Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 17, Proquest Ebook Central <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/reader.action?docID=483540>>, 19 Dec 2018.

⁸⁸ Diehl, 84.

⁸⁹ Goldensohn, 146.

her own domestic, moral, and imaginative orders.”⁹⁰ Bishop had made a different choice and now is ready to make peace with it. Despite that, there is a lingering feeling of sadness and partial disappointment because the speaker is pleading to this heavenly figure to overcome only a short distance and to leave the safe space into which Moore had confined herself. Sadly, the poem does not give us any hope for their reunion; rather, it ends with a plea that keeps reoccurring not only in the poem itself, but also in the real life: “please come flying” (82).

“Invitations” were by no means unusual; it was Bishop who throughout the years kept inviting Moore to do things with her, be it travelling or socializing.⁹¹ Varying from “Will you come to Florida” to “Have you seen the film *Son of Mongolia*?” the invitations were frequent and coaxing.⁹² Perhaps, this was Bishop’s way of trying to establish a friendship that would be “pure gift and pure exchange.”⁹³ The poem pays tribute to the years they had spent playing “at a game of constantly being wrong/ with a priceless set of vocabularies” and “sit[ting] down and weep[ing]” (82). It is acknowledging a real friendship that to the speaker is more valuable than debates over “morals” (82). By writing the poem, Bishop is smoothing over any remnants left after the breach that “Roosters” had caused. Moreover, the poem employs various approaches characteristic for Moore’s style of writing and therefore invokes deeper allusions than meet the eye.

In “Efforts of Affection,” Bishop explicitly connects “dynasties of negative constructions” (83) to Moore’s style: “the use of double or triple negatives, the lighter and wittier ironies.”⁹⁴ She acknowledges their importance, but lets them “dark[en] and die[...]” nevertheless (83). Also, as Erkkila states, Moore’s “fastidious attention to syllable count, her

⁹⁰ Betsy Erkkila, 132.

⁹¹ Goldensohn, 139.

⁹² Goldensohn, 139.

⁹³ Goldensohn, 141.

⁹⁴ R. Giroux and L. Schwartz, eds., *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose and Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2008) 477.

ensorious critical eye, and her exacting moral vision”⁹⁵ are the sources of allusions in the poem and are used to illustrate the primal differences between the friends: “Bearing a musical inaudible abacus,/ a slight censorious frown” (82) were not to be found in Bishop’s repertoire⁹⁶ and neither were Moore’s “metrics, facts, morals, heroism” and “awareness of injustices”; all of which are swept by “the words, sounds and fast-moving rhythm” of Bishop’s poem.⁹⁷

Staying true to her nature and putting her characteristic wit to use in the poem, Bishop affectionately teases Moore about her “morals”: “Manhattan/ is all awash with morals this fine morning,” knowing if it had been true, Moore would have been ecstatic (82). In her own way, she teases the speaker as well and alludes to the fact that once upon a time, there was a young poet who used to ponder: “Manners and morals; manners *as* morals? Or is it morals *as* manners?”⁹⁸ A question that is unlikely to be answered and a brilliant imitation of Moore herself.

After having read the oeuvre, Moore professed her gratitude and deep emotion because Bishop managed to compose a poem that “dazzles with Moore-descriptive detail” and “meets Moore on her own ground.”⁹⁹ Moore’s response is overflowing with praise:

Words fail me, Elizabeth:

Your magic poem – every word a living wonder – with an unfoldment that does never go back itself, and the colors! beyond compare in the small blue drums and the mackerel sky and the jelly-colored epergnes. What of your unabashed “awash with morals”! [...] Alarmingly accurate, Elizabeth, in what you say of the logarithms of apology and the incredible effort of justifying an initial pattern.¹⁰⁰

In the end, the publication of “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” marks not only the end of one period, but also the beginning of a new one; one that marks the birth of the new nature of their friendship. Moore finally acknowledged Bishop as a fellow poet and critic.¹⁰¹ Harrison

⁹⁵ Erkkilä, 134.

⁹⁶ Erkkilä, 134.

⁹⁷ Harrison, 54.

⁹⁸ Kent, 171.

⁹⁹ Harrison, 56.

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, 56-57.

¹⁰¹ Harrison, 57.

summarizes that “the poem has somehow become [Moore], as if she has indeed been revised by her protégée. [...] [T]he heroics have shifted: her protégée and her favourite ballplayer give her life its standing.”¹⁰²

¹⁰² Harrison, 58.

3 Monstrous Gratitude: On the Relationship Between “The Bishop” and “Cal”

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue...And now – you've left
for good. You can't derange, or rearrange,
your poems again. (But the sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

– Elizabeth Bishop, “North Haven” (189)

This chapter aims to present the relationship between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell; particularly, how they shaped each other and how it was reflected in their poetry. However, as the nature of their friendship was very different from the one with Moore, a new approach had to be taken. Instead of following the bread crumbs in Bishop’s poetry to show how Moore shaped it, it deals with the way Bishop influenced Lowell, as her doing is much more visible. However, the debts were always two-way in their friendship, hence it is necessary to also acknowledge Lowell’s legacy and the way his confessional poetry made Bishop to open up to new challenges. For that reason, poems “In the Waiting Room,” “The Armadillo” and “Skunk Hour” were chosen for close reading. The first one will illustrate Bishop’s turn to more personal matters; the remaining two will be read alongside each other to illustrate their mutual indebtedness that was mapped by numerous scholars. In their research a common ground was established and conclusions were reached: their poetry and their lives would have been vastly different were it not for their meeting.¹⁰³ It had all started with a note.

3.1 Autobiographical Introduction

The first note was drawn on May 12th, 1947 and was addressed to Robert Lowell, congratulating him on two fellowships and Pulitzer Prize for *Lord Weary’s Castle*; it was written by Elizabeth Bishop herself.¹⁰⁴ The reply was dated eleven days after the initial one and

¹⁰³ T. Travisano and S. Hamilton, eds., *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) 28.

¹⁰⁴ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 3.

contained an intriguing sentence that foresaw the nature of the Bishop-Lowell friendship: “You are a marvellous writer, and your note was about the only one that meant anything to me.”¹⁰⁵ Lowell’s appraisal for Bishop’s poetry became a constant presence in her career and he, in a way, joined Moore in her role of Bishop’s fiercest advocate. She had been in dire need for them, as her own doubts concerning her abilities and talents often paralysed her into passivity and painstaking shyness.¹⁰⁶ When Bishop was travelling or living outside the USA, it was Lowell who took it upon himself to secure her grants through his extensive network of acquaintances and his growing reputation.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, it would be a shortcoming to read their friendship simply on the materialistic level or on the level of profit, because such reading would impoverish the richness of their characters.

In a way, it is not surprising that Bishop befriended Moore, as they shared some characteristic traits: both were drawn to the use of language in its purest form and truly seeing and consequently capturing the truest possible version of the surrounding environment. Despite their different approaches to what is considered an “appropriate” subject of art or what poets should occupy themselves with, the friendship did leave its mark and constituted a part of what is today known as “Elizabeth Bishop.” The other part constituting “Elizabeth Bishop” is Robert Lowell. Upon their first meeting, they found immediate liking in each other. Lowell remembered their meeting in idolizing terms, describing Bishop as “rather tall, long-brown haired, shy but full of [description] and anecdote as now” in his letter from 1974.¹⁰⁸ To which Bishop replied with her usual matter-of-factness and reminded him that “never, never was I ‘tall’ – as you wrote remembering me. [...] And I never had ‘long brown hair’ either!”¹⁰⁹ However, she did admit her immediate fondness: “What I remember [is] [...] how much I liked

¹⁰⁵ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 4.

¹⁰⁶ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., xxiv.

¹⁰⁷ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., xxiv.

¹⁰⁸ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 776.

¹⁰⁹ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 778.

you, after having been almost too scared to go...”¹¹⁰ Overcoming her fear, Bishop attended a dinner hosted by Randall Jarrell in 1947, during which the poets struck unusual lifelong friendship fuelled by mutual admiration, similar tragic lives and their need for a “confidant,” someone who they could fully trust with their art and who would always tell them the truth.¹¹¹

For them, it was very natural to engage in long conversations about poetry and later about their lives and shared sufferings; Bishop described the ease in domestic terms, stating:

I remember thinking it was the first time I had ever actually talked with someone about how one writes poetry – and thinking that it was, that it could be, strangely easy “Like exchanging recipes for making a cake.”¹¹²

Their cookbook did not contain the same formal elements of poetry, nor did they insist on filling it only with their strengths and familiar territories; on the contrary. Their exchanges led to profound changes in their poetry and undoubtedly made them better versions of themselves.

The name “Robert Lowell” is synonymous with the term “confessional poet,” as it was the publication of his *Life Studies* in 1959 that started the craze of admitting and sharing every detail of one’s personal life.¹¹³ And Lowell had plenty to share. Having suffered from what is now called bipolar disorder predestined him to bouts of insanity and mania followed by frequent hospitalizations.¹¹⁴ His writing is just as interwoven with his mental state as is Bishop’s. However, the difference lies in manifestation of their mental health issues. Lowell was prone to mania which manifested by a pattern he came to know too well: first, there were weeks of writing haze and total immersion in given subject, then came the height of mania during which he did unspeakable things, including the accident when he “supposedly dangled a friend out the

¹¹⁰ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 778.

¹¹¹ Meghan O’Rourke, “Turning Pain Into Art,” *The Atlantic.com*, The Atlantic, May 2007, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/tragic-muses/521418/>> 18 Dec 2018.

¹¹² Hugh McIntosh, “Conventions of Closeness: Realism and the Creative Friendship of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell,” *PMLA* (March 2012): 232, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41616813>>, 18 Dec 2018.

¹¹³ Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999) 32.

¹¹⁴ Kay Redfield Jamison, *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017) 4, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=7vUqDAAAQBAJ&lpg=PA307&ots=LMTi-udkbf&dq=lowell%20walking%20with%20fire&hl=cs&pg=PA4#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 18 Dec 2018.

window while shouting poetry; later, when he was screaming obscenities through the open window, it took four police officers to handcuff him.”¹¹⁵ Sadly, he was too aware of the power the illness had over him, as it was during his manic state that he produced his best work: “I write my best poetry when I’m manic.”¹¹⁶

In contrast, Elizabeth Bishop was never that publicly open about her condition. We get to learn about it from snippets in her writing, for instance in her famous villanelle “One Art” in which she tried to come to terms with all the losses she had suffered, or in “The Prodigal” that addresses her drinking problem, or from the accounts of her friends. Her friend from Key West recalls that “if you saw Lizzie over a long period of time, you knew it would be very difficult at times, because she would get so depressed. And one could never quite understand what you had done. Elizabeth would get blue quite often.”¹¹⁷ It was in Lowell that she had found another “kindred spirit” and with whom she could be openly herself and see things in a “better light.”¹¹⁸

Not to read their friendship in idealistic terms, one should mention their perhaps most dire quarrel and that is the one over *The Dolphin* which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1974.¹¹⁹ The years 1972 to 1977, ending with Lowell’s death, were eventful and sometimes troubled.¹²⁰ The strain originated in Bishop’s disapproval over Lowell’s use of Elizabeth Hardwick’s¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Patricia Bosworth, “A Poet’s Pathologies: Inside Robert Lowell’s Restless Mind,” *Nytimes.com*, The New York Times, 1 March 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/books/review/robert-lowell-biography-setting-the-river-on-fire-kay-redfield-jamison.html>> 18 Dec 2018.

¹¹⁶ Jamison, 299.

¹¹⁷ G. Fountain and P. Brazeau, 85.

¹¹⁸ Megan Marshall, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017) 103, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=5Q-ICwAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=elizabeth%20bishop%20a%20miracle%20for%20breakfast&lr&hl=cs&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 18 Dec 2018.

¹¹⁹ “The Dolphin,” *Britannica.com*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 8 Dec 2016 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Dolphin>> 18 Dec 2018.

¹²⁰ Travisano, 296.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Hardwick was Lowell’s second-to-last wife. Michelle Dean, “Love, Actually,” *New Republic.com*, The New Republic, 4 Feb 2016 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/128999/robert-lowells-tainted-love>> 18 Dec 2018.

letters to him; but without her consent.¹²² She strongly objected to this breach of trust and invasion of privacy; in the letter from March 1972, Bishop wrote:

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 change them...etc. But *art just isn't worth that much.*¹²³

She did think *The Dolphin* was “wonderful poetry,” “magnificent poetry” and as she said:

If you were any other poet I can think of I certainly wouldn't attempt to say anything at all; I wouldn't think it was worth it. But because it is you, and a great poem, [...] and I love you a lot – I feel I must tell you what I really think.¹²⁴

Despite their disagreement, which put considerable strain on their friendship, they remained close and as Travisano puts it, “while Lowell lived, the crucible of their love and friendship did not preclude humour, and exuberant dialogue was by no means impossible.”¹²⁵

3.2 From Reticence to “Confessional Nonsense”: “In the Waiting Room”

Even though Bishop's poetry had undeniably started to shift its focus under Lowell's influence, Moore's heritage is still very much present in it, even in Bishop's later poems. Bishop did not abandon the skills that she had acquired during the years spent under Moore's direct influence; she still drew from them. “In the Waiting Room” merges the two tendencies and represents the eclectic style characteristic for Bishop's writing. Quoting Ebberson:

Although she created a unique blend of these elements, a debate arose over which was the defining characteristic of her poetry: the precision learned from Moore or the personal revelation she learned from Lowell.¹²⁶

3.2.1 Analysis

“In the Waiting Room” is a poem evoking multiple readings, from a coming-of-age story to more elusive problematics of womanhood. To put it into rather simplistic and

¹²² Michelle Dean, “Love, Actually,” *New Republic.com*, The New Republic, 4 Feb 2016 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/128999/robert-lowells-tainted-love>> 18 Dec 2018.

¹²³ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 708.

¹²⁴ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 707.

¹²⁵ Travisano, 297.

¹²⁶ Laura Ebberson, “Elizabeth Bishop's Poetic Voice: Reconciling Influences,” *Valpo.edu*, Valparaiso Poetry Review, <<https://www.valpo.edu/vpr/ebbersonessaybishop.html>> 10 Dec 2018.

generalizing terms, it takes place during a cold early evening at the dentist's in Worcester, Massachusetts. A young girl, who is about to be seven years old, is keeping her aunt company and, in the meantime, occupies herself with reading the *National Geographic* because "[she] could read" (159). Here all the simple matters and explanations end and readers are forced to ask more burning questions and make peace with the fact that the answers are often to be evasive. For instance, the matter of the possible identity of the speaker seems confounding, as the poem features two speakers with the same name, birthdate and destiny.

The name is Elizabeth and the birthdate is 8th of February: "I said to myself: three days/ and you'll be seven years old," as we learn from the poem (160). Three days from "the fifth/ of February" (161) the speaker is to celebrate her birthday and supposedly experience "new age," yet the poem confutes the general presumption that everything changes on one's birthday and presents the reader with a revelation before the magical date. Young Elizabeth, for we know it is the speaker's name, "you are an *Elizabeth*" (160), is coming to terms with her identity, both as a woman and as part of society:

But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one *them*.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was. (160)

Interestingly, the indefinite article before "*I*" and "*Elizabeth*" presents her identity in unknown terms as something that has not been dealt with before and hence needs to be explored properly and in detail. Moreover, the indefinite article treats the noun and the proper name as concepts, inanimate objects or categories that are to be filled with meaning; something she has not done yet. The question of why she is even required to do such a thing, to identify with anyone, is hidden deep in her subconsciousness the same way it is hidden in the poem in italics: "*me*," "*I*," "*Elizabeth*," "*why*." And no answer is given.

Beginning with factual details, the poem illustrates the period during which she lived in Worcester with her aunt: “In Worcester, Massachusetts,/ I went with Aunt Consuelo/ to keep her dentist’s appointment” (159). “Of course,” Goldensohn states,

the “Elizabeth” who shares a February 1911 birthdate with the poet of “In the Waiting Room” and who also lived in Worcester, Massachusetts, sounds like the poet herself, although no, the poet’s actual aunt was not named Consuelo nor did the 1918 February issues of the *National Geographic* contain what the poet said it did.¹²⁷

On the other hand, Bishop said she “*always* tell[s] the truth in [her] poems”¹²⁸; however, sometimes she “[does] change *one* thing,”¹²⁹ so there is no reason to read the poem as non-credible. Then the observations carry on, a very “Moorian” trait, and we are getting a better picture of the whole scene:

It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines. (159)

The descriptions get more pronounced and suddenly we are looking at photographs in the *National Geographic* through the eyes of the soon-to-be seven years old speaker. We are observing a volcano which “black, and full of ashes” (159) inside is morphing into an image of “spilling over/ in rivulets of fire” (159). Staying true to the set tone, we are presented with more images, varying from “Osa and Martin Johnson,” “babies with pointed heads” or with “naked women with necks/ wound round and round with string” (159). All the images are described from a child’s perspective, including the part after the horrible realization regarding her identity where she

gave a sidelong glance
– [she] couldn’t look any higher –
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots (160).

¹²⁷ Goldensohn, 54.

¹²⁸ Lee Edelman, “Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘In the Waiting Room,’” *Contemporary Literature* (1985): 179, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1207932>>, 10 Dec 2018.

¹²⁹ Edelman, 179.

The images correspond to those a child of no great height would see. Experiencing events through young “Elizabeth’s” eyes leads to a shift in focus – Costello claims that “her attention seems more absorbed by the images in the magazine, though she still presents them without much commentary, as unrelated to herself.”¹³⁰ The matter-of-factness is continuing up until the end of the first stanza and we are presented with a turning point: “And then I looked at the cover:/ the yellow margins, the date” (159). From now on, we get to see the inner world of the speaker and not only her surroundings.

So far we have witnessed the trait so often praised by Marianne Moore: in the first stanza, Bishop employs, as Travisano puts it, “brilliant surfaces, keen observation, and formal perfection.”¹³¹ From her first mentor, she learned “the technical and linguistic precision” and heavily relied on it.¹³² The descriptions are quiet, not bombastic, and delicate – Bishop knows that the more the precise the words, the larger impact. Owing to Moore, Bishop carries the simplicity of words to a whole new level. Jeredith Merrin notes that she “carries simplicity of language to its extreme in an extremely unnerving situation.”¹³³ The first stanza, to use Moore’s words, is “spectacular in being unspectacular,” “accurate and modest.”¹³⁴ With Ebberson’s claim in mind that “Bishop’s poetry transcends the keen observations and lucid surfaces of Moore,” one must trace the other influence that helped her to “transcend” Moore and that is the one of Lowell.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 120-121.

¹³¹ Thomas Travisano, “The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon,” *New Literary History* Vol. 26, No. 4 (1995): 903, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057324>>, 11 Dec 2018.

¹³² Laura Ebberson, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetic Voice: Reconciling Influences,” *Valpo.edu*, Valparaiso Poetry Review, <<https://www.valpo.edu/vpr/ebbersonesaybishop.html>> 10 Dec 2018.

¹³³ Jeredith Merrin, “On ‘In the Waiting Room,’” *Modern American Poetry.org*, Modern American Poetry, <<http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/jeredith-merrin-waiting-room>>, 10 Dec 2018.

¹³⁴ Goldensohn, 54.

¹³⁵ Laura Ebberson, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetic Voice: Reconciling Influences,” *Valpo.edu*, Valparaiso Poetry Review, <<https://www.valpo.edu/vpr/ebbersonesaybishop.html>> 14 Dec 2018.

Their friendship forced Bishop out from a stylistic approach to her writing, more precisely of “closets, closets and more closets”¹³⁶ and her desire to “pile on the defences to protect her privacy.”¹³⁷ Inspired by his boldness in describing emotional states and personal experience, Bishop ventures into a land previously nearly forbidden to her. In “In the Waiting Room,” she opens closets’ doors and dives into a description of suffering. Goldensohn notes that Bishop “takes up the challenge of Lowell’s approach, to make a personal record, but sticks with her own sense of narrative positioning, pacing, and timing.”¹³⁸ Even before she turned to Lowell for help with the discussed poem, an echo of his work can be traced in its last stanza.¹³⁹

Bishop’s last stanza

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918. (161)

is clearly an allusion to “91 Revere Street” in which Lowell deals with his transformation of masculine identity and especially to the last sentence: “Outside on the streets of Beacon Hill, it was night, it was dismal, it was raining.”¹⁴⁰ In addition to the already mentioned similarities, Bishop also borrowed from Lowell on the level of syntax: the repeating pattern and the order of listed things. First, we are given the location and its specification – Worcester, Massachusetts/ streets of Beacon Hill; then the weather conditions – night, slush, cold/ night, dismal, rain. Of course, debts were always “two-way” in this relationship; perhaps Lowell’s treatment of sounds in his short story are drawn from Bishop’s autobiographical short story “In the Village,” specifically “women laughing,” “a sound of a bosun’s whistle” and “someone

¹³⁶ Travisano, 288.

¹³⁷ Travisano, 288.

¹³⁸ Goldensohn, 230.

¹³⁹ Goldensohn, 231.

¹⁴⁰ Goldensohn, 231.

repeatedly rang our doorbell.”¹⁴¹ In return, Bishop borrows the subject of gender anxieties, but explores them in relation to womanhood.¹⁴²

For a long time, Bishop was seen only in connection to Marianne Moore, constantly labelled as “delicate,” “reticent” or “impersonal” and was put into direct contrast with the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell.¹⁴³ This particular opinion chooses to overlook the fact that Lowell was her closest friend in the arts and that he never failed to acknowledge Bishop’s profound influence on his work; moreover, their mutual affections were keen and lasted up until Lowell’s death in 1977.¹⁴⁴ As the years passed and their artistic inspiration flourished, Bishop would create, in Travisano’s words, “the poems that quietly established narrative postmodernism as one of the most engaging, powerful, and influential contemporary modes of poetic discourse.”¹⁴⁵

3.3 Comparing Notes: “Skunk Hour” and “The Armadillo”

To say the least, Bishop’s influence on Lowell is more pronounced than hers on Moore. As was already mentioned in the introductory chapter, a different approach to analysis had to be taken in order to comply with the demands of the relationship’s nature. Over the course of thirty years, it saw them through the deaths of their beloved, divorces and mentally unstable times. By presenting the poems separately, the thesis hopes to achieve a simple goal: for the reader to see how different and yet similar Bishop and Lowell are. Moreover, it hopes to strengthen the argument that Bishop played a crucial role in Lowell’s development and to understand that, one must be familiar, at least to some degree, with the possible readings, meanings and interpretations of both poems.

¹⁴¹ Goldensohn, 232.

¹⁴² Goldensohn, 232.

¹⁴³ Travisano, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Travisano, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Travisano, 189.

Despite his “best efforts,” Lowell did not transform Bishop into a confessional poet. She valued her privacy too much for that. It was not only her privacy that concerned her but also her need to leave the past in silence and having it to speak only when she allowed it to. Being in control is crucial for Bishop and perhaps the time and care she took to write her poems only confirm this. It took numerous attempts and rewritings for her to be truly satisfied and if that is a word too strong, one might say just even willing to publish her work. No one can blame her for the reluctance to let the pain long gone and the one still present to fully manifest. For her, the manifestation of the “deep emotional wounds” is not professed through grand words and gestures but through discreet hints and cautious handling of the first-person speaker, which is sometimes put into disguise and referred to as “the child.”¹⁴⁶ Goldensohn remarks that “she is not willing to take Lowell’s step and reach more prominently into the narrative shaping that openly autobiographical material could offer.”¹⁴⁷ By keeping her distance, she remained “the master of her faith and the captain of her soul.”¹⁴⁸

In contrast, Lowell did not shy away from profound and deeply personal “confessions” and brought to life his “private humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems.”¹⁴⁹ Surprisingly, it was Bishop who helped him to find a new style that he was seeking during the late fifties; it was the style that came to prominence in his *Life Studies*.¹⁵⁰ Lowell described his transition in the following manner: “[...] gone the richly clotted poetic density, and in its place a greater openness and transparency, a more prose-like prosody, whose complexity arises out of startling juxtapositions.”¹⁵¹ He was ruthless in his criticism and tore down his previous work, including “Lord Weary’s Castle,” which won him his first Pulitzer Prize, as it “hid what [it was]

¹⁴⁶ Travisano, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Goldensohn, 191.

¹⁴⁸ A reference to William Ernest Henley’s “Invictus.”

¹⁴⁹ Travisano, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Travisano, 226.

¹⁵¹ Lloyd Schwartz, “Dedications: Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’ and Bishop’s ‘The Armadillo,’” *Salmagundi* (2004): 120, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40549548>>, 20 Dec 2018.

really about, and many times offered a stiff, humorless, and impenetrable surface.”¹⁵² Writing “Skunk Hour” and modelling it on Bishop’s “The Armadillo” gave him “the means for a breakthrough from [his] fortifications.”¹⁵³ Kalstone goes even beyond the formal aspects and is ascribing Bishop an immense importance because “Skunk Hour” was in part “nourished by Lowell’s confused feeling for Bishop as admired writer, rival poet, unattainable and renounced love, and fantasy Muse.”¹⁵⁴ “The dedication is to Elizabeth Bishop,” Lowell wrote,

because re-reading her suggested a way of breaking through the shell of my old manner. Her rhythms, idiom, images, and stanza structures seemed to belong to a later century. “Skunk Hour” is modeled on “The Armadillo,” a much better poem and one I had heard her read and later carried around with me. Both “Skunk Hour” and “The Armadillo” use short line stanzas, start with drifting description and end with a single animal. This was the main source.¹⁵⁵

However, the echoes of Bishop’s writing are even more visible than both acknowledged.

Quoting Parker:

“This is the time of year,” Bishop begins; “The season’s ill –” Lowell echoes. Bishop’s “Climbing the mountain height,” becomes Lowell’s “climbed the hill’s skull”; her “light/ that comes and goes, like hearts,” becomes his “love-cars. Lights turned down” and ““Love, O careless Love...”” [...] Her poem climaxes “behind the house” with an armadillo holding its “tail down,” a baby rabbit’s “ignited eyes” and a “*piercing cry/ and panic.*” His ends “on top/ of our back steps” with a skunk that “drops her ostrich tail” and leads its babies with “eyes’ re fire” amidst “my ill-spirit sob.”¹⁵⁶

To understand Bishop’s profound influence on the evolution of Lowell’s poetry, it is necessary to first introduce the paragon, “The Armadillo,” so the following comparison and mapping the effect it had on Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” would be more apparent. As the aim of the thesis is not to provide a deep analysis of both poems, but rather to present common and diverse features, certain omissions had to be made in order to comply with the aim. Starting chronologically, the first poem to be read closely is that of Elizabeth Bishop, “The Armadillo.”

¹⁵² Schwartz, “Dedications” 120.

¹⁵³ Kalstone, 174.

¹⁵⁴ Kalstone, 187.

¹⁵⁵ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 199.

¹⁵⁶ Parker, 101.

3.3.1 Analysis of “The Armadillo”

A cursory reading of the poem provides us with several key points. The poem is set in Brazil, during the St. John’s Day festival:

[It] is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear (103)

and they are “rising toward a saint/ still honored in these parts” (103). The idyllic images continue, painting the night sky full of “the paper chambers flush and fill with light/ that comes and goes, like hearts” and claiming it is “hard/ to tell them from the stars” (103). So far, nothing but the word “illegal” in the first stanza gave away any sense of danger. So far, we have only been spectators to a grand festivity. Only with the fifth stanza are we starting to get suspicious that the poem might not be, after all, only a pretty description of the Brazilian holiday. Now, the “fire balloons” are “steadily forsaking us” and are “suddenly turning dangerous” (103). The doom came upon the place and more importantly, on the vulnerable and defenceless inhabitants of the forest:

Last night another big one fell.
It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house. (103)

Surprisingly, Bishop chose not to have the “egg of fire” (103) hit the house or people. She chose to have it destroy what is a sanctuary for many creatures and haunted souls: a forest. “The flame ran down,” burned “the ancient owl’s nest” and singed “black-and-white” owls so they were “bright pink underneath” (103); it turned a “baby rabbit” into a “handful of intangible ash” (103-104). Even a “glistening armadillo left the scene” (104). By making the innocent bystanders suffer a great deal, Bishop managed to turn the poem that does not contain any “military” vocabulary into one of the most violent in her work. Travisano opposes Kalstone and

argues that “the imprint of history and culture on human behaviour is perhaps *the* key subtext of ‘The Armadillo.’”¹⁵⁷

The duality of human nature is captured even in the description of the “fire balloons” that are “frail,” yet “illegal,” lovely and dangerous at the same time (103). As the picturesque lanterns are turned deadly due to wind and not violent gale, so is human nature prone to sudden changes and what once was a peaceful celebration is turned into bedlam. According to Travisano, “[h]ere are echoes of human aspiration and feeling that suggest that these balloons are very much a product and expression of the culture that launches them.”¹⁵⁸ In its quiet and detailed way, the poem writes a cultural history of Brazil and captures the violent outcomes of human behaviour, as, in Travisano’s words, the images render similes to “the release of the balloons, balloons that carry liquid fire and that destroy rain forests with an effect suggestive of defoliants or napalm.”¹⁵⁹

Human nature, the double-edged sword, is also reflected in the treatment of the fire imagery and the uncertainty it inherently represents. As readers, we have no option but to believe what we are told, we have no means of verifying authors’ words. Bishop is cruel enough to let our nature manifest in our reading of the poem. For instance, she never states whether the images suggesting burning or suffering are true. We do not know whether the baby rabbit’s “ignited eyes” (104) are actually on fire or merely reflecting the annihilation of his shrine. We do not know whether the owls who are “stained bright pink underneath” (103) got their feather singed and hence their skin is showing, or if it is a representation of fleeing animals being illuminated by the fire.

Despite the poem’s ambiguity, one of its most puzzling features remains the final stanza written in italics. As was mentioned in the analysis of “In the Waiting Room,” words written in

¹⁵⁷ Travisano, 226.

¹⁵⁸ Travisano, 226.

¹⁵⁹ Travisano, 226.

italics sometimes create a new poem, as if Bishop was writing a poem within a poem. Hence with the whole stanza being italicized, we could perceive it as an individual piece of writing and treat it as such. Even though the poem is titled “The Armadillo,” it is not until the eighth stanza that this mysterious animal makes an appearance and it is not until the last, italicized stanza that we get to learn of its importance. For it is the poem’s only character that makes any attempt to fight against the injustice and who dares to defy the invisible enemy. By visually separating the last stanza, Bishop appeals to the readers and asks them to become the armadillo and to at least try to take a stand. In one, one might add optimistic, reading, Bishop appeals to the reader and asks him to become the armadillo and fight, no matter the futility. In another, shall we say pessimistic, it is a vision, a prophecy, a peek into the future that holds no hope for better times.

The crucial choice the reader must make is to decide on the armadillo’s fate. The result is up to our degree of naivety. On one hand, we could perceive him as a cartoon character who throws “a weak mailed fist” into the air and keeps it “clenched ignorant against the sky” in a threatening gesture (104). On the other, one could read the final stanza as the last account of the armadillo’s life as we get to witness

*Falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky! (104)*

The most heart-breaking image Bishop paints is that of a dead armadillo, on his back, with his paw raised against the sky in his last act of defiance.

3.3.2 Analysis of “Skunk Hour”

Unlike Bishop’s rhyme quatrains, Lowell used a six-line triple-rhymed stanza to “[draw] the reader into the poem’s landscape before driving into the heart of the matter.”¹⁶⁰ And it worked magnificently. In his essay “On Skunk Hour,” Lowell explains that

the first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect. [...] Then all comes alive in stanzas V and VI. This is the dark night. [...] My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An Existentialist night.¹⁶¹

In accordance with “The Armadillo,” Lowell, perhaps unconsciously, brings to life the scenery first and the havoc later. The poem opens with the description of the “Nautilus Island’s hermit/ heiress” who “lives through winter in her Spartan cottage” and “buys up all/ the eyesores facing her shore.”¹⁶² However, unlike Bishop’s, the introductory scene is far from beautiful or merry, despite its peaceful language. Axelrod remarks that “the amiability of his tone is a ruse. [...] [H]e is describing the rotting of a whole social structure.”¹⁶³ Just as Bishop was dealing with the cultural history of Brazil, so is Lowell describing a cultural history of New England.¹⁶⁴ What once used to be a cultural heritage is now seen as junk, only useful to seductively wink from the window displays and to attract wealthy tourists:

His fishnet’s filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler’s bench and awl;
there is no money in his work¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994) 256.

¹⁶¹ “On ‘Skunk Hour,’” *English Illinois.edu*, Modern American Poetry, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lowell/skunk.htm> 25 Dec 2018. Originally cited in Thomas Parkinson, ed., *Robert Lowell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968) 131-132.

¹⁶² Robert Lowell, “Skunk Hour,” *Poetry Foundation.org*, Poetry Foundation, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47694/skunk-hour>> 26 Dec 2018.

¹⁶³ Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 125, Ebsco <<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds>>, 25 Dec 2018.

¹⁶⁴ Travisano, 226.

¹⁶⁵ Lowell, “Skunk Hour.”

Lowell presents the gradual decline of what once was vibrant and prosperous culture and economy.¹⁶⁶

Bishop's poem transforms its tone with a movement downwards, when the fire balloons fall down, at the end of the fifth stanza, or in other words, in the middle, as the poem consists of ten stanzas in total. Mirroring Bishop's structure perfectly, Lowell had the tone shift occur also in the middle of the poem and, not surprisingly, this transformation is also marked by moving downwards but this time we find ourselves deep in the speaker's mind. Quoting Rudman:

The moment the car ascends, the mind of the poem begins its descent. The rhymes, abcbca, in this stanza come full circle, just as the "hill's skull" becomes the poet's *skull*; and from here on as he journeys into the interior, the drama is the drama of his own unconscious, psychic underworld.¹⁶⁷

Once we were made acquaintances with the "ill-season" of the society, we were thrown into a personal despair, learning that the speaker's "mind's not right," for which he supplies much evidence, from admitting "[his] Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull" – an obvious allusion to the place of Christ's crucifixion, Golgotha – to his voyeuristic hobby as "[he] watched for love-cars."¹⁶⁸ Unlike Bishop, who presents human actions as the source of evil, Lowell writes that it is the mind of an individual where all the devils dwell: "I myself am hell;/ nobody's here—"¹⁶⁹

Rudman reminds us "we can never forget that Lowell writes himself into every situation. It doesn't matter to what extent this is conscious or unconscious – it is what he does; it is how he chooses to reveal himself to the world."¹⁷⁰ In this context, it is necessary to add that this personal presence is what makes him so different from Bishop who is hardly ever present in her

¹⁶⁶ Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* 125.

¹⁶⁷ Mark Rudman, *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 89.

¹⁶⁸ Lowell, "Skunk Hour."

¹⁶⁹ Lowell, "Skunk Hour."

¹⁷⁰ Rudman, 86.

work as she prefers objects to speak for her. And when Bishop is present, it is in a sense of seeing and experiencing. In her poems, she described many places, objects and situations and yet, only several of them include the pronoun “I.”

Lowell started to write his “Skunk Hour” backwards, “beginning with the dark night of the soul, and closing with the writing of the first four stanzas.”¹⁷¹ By writing the final four stanzas first, Lowell explicitly linked human, personal decay to the one of society, saying that the decline of the society originates from the personal one. For Lowell, one is responsible for one’s suffering, as one has the power to conceive it and to abort it at the same time. Bishop, on the contrary, does not see the source of all evil in one’s mind. For her, the devil dwells among people and in their actions, for it was the man-made lanterns that caused the hell on Earth. Paradoxically, it was the celebration of a saint that gave rise to the “fire balloons” and the following chaos. Nevertheless, the saints are “still honored in these parts” (103) and hence are somewhat present in this world.

Another difference between “Skunk” and “Armadillo” is in their treatment of suffering – Bishop does not present personal suffering, nor does she link it with a general decay; she addresses the suffering of humanity in general and provides us with a near social critique – it is always those weaker ones that suffer the ill-fated consequences of society’s decisions.

3.3.3 The Question of Animals: Skunk and Armadillo

The question of the enigmatic armadillo and skunk has not yet been addressed for a simple reason: there is not a consensus on what the animals represent. However, one can take an educated guess and read the poems with it in mind. The thesis argues that both the poems were written, at least to some degree, with a war commentary subtext and hence the animals were chosen deliberately and not randomly. Again, to fully understand Lowell’s treatment of

¹⁷¹ Mariani, 255.

skunks, one must address Bishop's "The Armadillo" first. The word "armadillo" translates from Spanish as a "little armoured one."¹⁷²

Elizabeth Bishop equals war poet is not a sentence many would dare to utter, yet the images of war are detectable in some of her poems, including "Roosters," "In the Waiting Room" and "The Armadillo" She expressed her disapproval seemingly silently but incessantly and only those willing to pay attention and listen would hear how loud it really was. Bishop was "of two minds" about the fire balloons and the discrepancy is reflected in the poem itself. At first, the speaker is charmed by their beauty and only later does she realize their deadly potential. It is not until the last stanza that the speaker is awoken to the realization of animals' suffering and her shift in consciousness is emphasized by the poem's shift to italic type. The line "*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!*" (104), according to Millier, "is both the poem's attempt to render the animals and the fire balloons' imitation of the destructiveness of war."¹⁷³ Undoubtedly, the poem arose from the context of the Cold War era, being published in June 1957, with the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still present in people's minds, especially when in 1949 the Soviet Union had tested their first atomic bomb and the McCarthy Era was in full swing; the U. S. lived in constant fear of "fiery devastation."¹⁷⁴

Perhaps, Bishop chose the image of an armadillo not only because they inhabit Brazil and because she saw one "crossing the road in the headlights at night, with his head and tail down – very lonely and glisteny"¹⁷⁵ but because they have a leathery armour shell that can be noticeably likened to the knight's armour. The armadillo's personified fist is "mailed," equipped to hand-to-hand combat, but powerless against the new technology of mass

¹⁷² "Armadillos," *National Geographic.com*, National Geographic, <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/group/armadillos/>> 25 Dec 2018.

¹⁷³ Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 275, Google Books <<https://books.google.cz/books?id=SWdngGZv3cYC&lpg=PP1&hl=cs&pg=PA277#v=onepage&q&f=false>>, 27 Dec 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Julie Kane, "Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Armadillo', The Bomb and Robert Lowell," *Per Contra.net*, Per Contra, <<https://www.percontra.net/issues/23/nonfiction/elizabeth-bishop/elizabeth-bishop-the-armadillo-the-bomb-and-robert-lowell/>> 27 Dec 2018.

¹⁷⁵ Millier, 275.

destruction (104). Similarly, the “baby rabbit” is “*short-eared*,” which evokes possible connotations to genetic mutations associated with Hiroshima, where, as Kane puts it, “living things at the bomb’s epicenter had also been reduced to ‘a handful of intangible ash.’”¹⁷⁶

It is very likely that Bishop employed the war commentary with Lowell in mind, since he, according to Laurens, “became a conscientious objector when the Allied command began fire-bombing German cities.”¹⁷⁷ Parker provides us with a concluding note and states that “Bishop’s images fall with the relentless logic of the fire balloons crashing to gravity”; then he adds that the fire balloons “recall the Allies’ fire-bombing of Germany in World War II, which drove Robert Lowell [...] to refuse military service and go to jail.”¹⁷⁸ As Parker points out, not only the war imagery alludes to Lowell, also “‘the pale green one’ and ‘moon’ hints at Lowell’s chronic lunacy, which Bishop knew too well.”¹⁷⁹

Her later added dedication “*For Robert Lowell*” that was reprinted in *Questions of Travel* in 1965 perhaps also served as a means of support as Lowell was actively involved in the movement against the Vietnam War.¹⁸⁰ His response to such news was ecstatic:

Armadillo – how proud and swell-headed I am about the dedication, one of your absolute top poems, your greatest quatrain poem, I mean it has a wonderful informal grandeur – I see the bomb in it in a delicate way.¹⁸¹

To which she answered: “I love your expression ‘the bomb in a delicate way!’ That was my idea exactly, I suppose.”¹⁸²

Elizabeth Bishop’s resistance and protesting against military actions was never as outspoken as Lowell’s. He was vocal about his opinions, refusing to enlist and even wrote a

¹⁷⁶ Julie Kane, “Elizabeth Bishop, ‘The Armadillo’, The Bomb and Robert Lowell,” *Per Contra.net*, Per Contra, <<https://www.percontra.net/issues/23/nonfiction/elizabeth-bishop/elizabeth-bishop-the-armadillo-the-bomb-and-robert-lowell/>> 27 Dec 2018.

¹⁷⁷ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 81.

¹⁷⁸ Parker, 98.

¹⁷⁹ Parker, 98.

¹⁸⁰ Steven Gould Axelrod, “Robert Lowell and the Cold War,” *The New England Quarterly* September (1999): 356, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/366887>>, 29 Dec 2018.

¹⁸¹ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 591.

¹⁸² Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 594.

1943 letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in which he criticized the actions of Allied Forces, specifically the razing of Hamburg, which commenced a strategy that would destroy “any possibility of a European or Asiatic national autonomy”; moreover,

it [would] leave China and Europe, the two natural power centers of the future, to the mercy of the USSR, a totalitarian tyranny committed to a world revolution and total global domination through propaganda and violence.¹⁸³

For this act of defiance, he was sentenced to one year and one day in prison; this experience spawned “Memories of West Street and Lepke.”¹⁸⁴ A quarter of a century later, the history repeated itself and Lowell became an objector to the Vietnam War and another letter was written, this time to President Johnson.¹⁸⁵

His relentless reading of “The Armadillo” possibly made him identify with the animal to some degree. Perhaps he saw himself as only a piece in a grander machinery, a piece that is, in fact, powerless and left with no option but to raise “a weak mailed fist” that is “clenched ignorant against the sky!” (104). Even though Bishop is aware that her plea will remain unheard, Parker argues that “her resort to anthropomorphism gives its futility poignance, as does the sorry inevitability that even the impotent ‘fist’ relies on the violence that calls forth its protest.”¹⁸⁶ It is not to say that Lowell saw himself as a knight in a shining armour, ready to save the world, it is the opposite as he critically transformed himself into a “skunk,” an animal that has zero connotations with noble deeds.

In his 1957 letter to Bishop, Lowell wrote: “I am dedicating ‘Skunk Hour’ to you. A skunk isn’t much of a present for a Lady Poet, but I’m a skunk in the poem.”¹⁸⁷ This metamorphosis into an outcast animal can be read as his atonement for the pain he inflicted

¹⁸³ “Robert Lowell’s Letter to FDR,” *Dialog International.com*, Dialog International, 4 Aug 2008 <https://www.dialoginternational.com/dialog_international/2008/08/robert-lowells.html> 29 Dec 2018.

¹⁸⁴ “Robert Lowell’s Letter to FDR,” *Dialog International.com*, Dialog International.

¹⁸⁵ Axelrod, “Robert Lowell and the Cold War” 339.

¹⁸⁶ Dale, 99.

¹⁸⁷ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 239.

upon Bishop and his family due to his mental illness.¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, one can perceive this as an identification with Bishop's armadillo, with his silent raging against the oppressor and hence he critically projected himself into the skunks that are "march[ing] on their soles up Main Street"¹⁸⁹ and not paying attention to their surroundings, only caring about survival.

Just as Bishop's, Lowell's poem ends with the image of an animal, a skunk, that, like Bishop's armadillo, ventured into the poem in the last moment. The possible meaning of Bishop's armadillo has already been discussed and all there is left to do is to tie the imaginary loose ends and provide a conclusion. Rudman calls "Skunk Hour" "a mystery."¹⁹⁰ Elaborating on the probably most famous lines "I myself am hell;/ nobody's here," one gets to understand the sudden appearance of the skunk better.¹⁹¹ "Nobody's here" is a terrifying prospect and for Lowell, this form of "aloneness" represents his own personal Hell.¹⁹² Just as the dash propels us into the following stanza, we are told that there is, after all, somebody; "only skunks, that search/ in the moonlight for a bite to eat."¹⁹³ And because they are staying true to their nature and not doing anything out of ordinary, the speaker is able to "snap out of it" as they bring him back to his senses, literary to "his feet" as "[he] stands on top/ of our back steps and breathe[s] the rich air—"¹⁹⁴ It is the skunks that give him the courage to carry on and perhaps that is the reason why "Skunk Hour" is the final poem of his *Life Studies*. It does bring to the speaker, and to the reader as well, a flicker of hope that despite the martyrdom one went through, life goes on and survival is possible. If not very likely.

Travisano argues that "Bishop [...] anticipated in verse Lowell's absorption with the intersection of the cultural, the psychological, and the autobiographical."¹⁹⁵ In a letter to Bishop,

¹⁸⁸ Kalstone, 185.

¹⁸⁹ Lowell, "Skunk Hour."

¹⁹⁰ Rudman, 90.

¹⁹¹ Lowell, "Skunk Hour."

¹⁹² Rudman, 91.

¹⁹³ Lowell, "Skunk Hour."

¹⁹⁴ Lowell, "Skunk Hour."

¹⁹⁵ Travisano, 228.

Lowell wrote: “I used your Armadillo in class as a parallel to my Skunks and ended up feeling a petty plagiarist.”¹⁹⁶ It did not seem that Bishop ever minded him modelling his poem on “The Armadillo,” on the contrary. According to Travisano,

Dana Gioia says that Bishop claimed she couldn’t remember why the poem was dedicated to her, except that she was present during the actual arrival of the skunks. But then, Gioia remembers, Bishop gave the poem an uncharacteristically tight close reading. In an unfinished memoir, however, Bishop acknowledged that her role in the writing of “Skunk Hour” was one of the things in her entire life that made her proudest.¹⁹⁷

“Like most of their readers,” Lloyd states,

[Bishop and Lowell] were probably both more aware of their differences than of what they had in common – perhaps of their desire to become more like the other. Even during their periods of extended separation, or disapproval, what each of them thought of the other’s work remained among the most central concerns of their lives.¹⁹⁸

3.4 “With Much Love, Elizabeth”: In Memoriam of Robert Lowell

Nearly a year after Robert Lowell died of a heart attack in a New York taxi on 12 September 1972, Elizabeth Bishop published “North Haven” in memory of her “sad friend” (189). The elegy is poignantly placid and paints a picture of a memory long gone, a time lost and the yearning for it to come back. “North Haven” was fittingly completed on the island of North Haven, off the Maine coast, where Bishop and Lowell had spent their summers and to where Bishop had returned the spring following Lowell’s death.¹⁹⁹

Ilse Barker recalled her visiting Bishop in Maine, when Bishop was just finishing the elegy. She retold the story of Bishop walking about with it in her hand, putting it beside her plate; she could hardly bear to put it down, so important part of her it became.²⁰⁰ In it, one might recognize the blind dedication of Lowell who admitted to carrying Bishop’s “The Armadillo” everywhere, constantly unfolding its copy and re-reading it; it was his way of keeping his friend

¹⁹⁶ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 258.

¹⁹⁷ Travisano, 228.

¹⁹⁸ Schwartz, “Dedications” 120.

¹⁹⁹ Travisano, 297.

²⁰⁰ Travisano, 298.

with him, even more personal than these days habit of keeping a picture of our beloved ones in our wallets.²⁰¹ Bishop was reluctant to let him go and to never have a conversation with him again and the themes of loss, longing, reminiscence and coping are very much central to “North Haven.” It is her farewell, her last letter to her comrade in arms. And arts.

Looking at one of Lowell’s most beloved seascapes, the speaker observes her surroundings that are on the verge of spring, slowly blooming, full of joy and delight. Unlike the speaker, who is filled with sorrow and is mourning. “The islands haven’t shifted since last summer,/ even if [she] like[s] to pretend they have” (188) because the nature did not acknowledge the passing of her friend, it did not affect it one bit, and it puzzles the speaker as she was deeply hurt, and still is, by her friend’s departure, in a way not understanding how the world keeps on turning. Usually it is the nature that provides solitude for broken souls, yet now even the birds’ song is “pleading and pleading/ bring[ing] tears to the eyes” (188). The nature “repeats herself,” the speaker says, “or almost does” and still there is no comfort in it, for it will not repeat the summers when Lowell was still alive and looking at the seascape, it is the speaker that replaced him in his doing; the nature does not “*repeat, repeat, repeat,*” but it does “*revise, revise, revise*” (188).

Elegies are most often composed as a last dialogue with the one being remembered, and “North Haven” is no exception. Bishop starts with remembering Lowell’s own words when on an earlier visit to the island he “*marvelled at the clarity of the air.*”²⁰² As the poem continues it maintains the elusive dialogue with a voice that can no longer be heard, but still can be recollected and remembered. Bishop found a balance between a teary love letter and capturing the essence of their friendship and Lowell himself. She teases him for his incessant revisions, his constant “*rewriting everything.*”²⁰³ By acknowledging he can no longer “*derange, or re-*

²⁰¹ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 517.

²⁰² Travisano, 298.

²⁰³ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 304.

arrange,/ [his] poems again” the speaker accepts that he “left North Haven”: “and now – [he’s] left/ for good” (189). “The words won’t change again. Sad friend, you cannot change” (189).

With this last note, Bishop is, with no pathos or shuddering sentiment, bidding farewell to someone who once said: “I think I must write entirely for you.”²⁰⁴ After all the years of friendship, it was Bishop’s turn to write entirely for him. And she did so with “North Haven.” It is her final *pharmakon*²⁰⁵ to “*dying to see you & talk to you.*”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 502.

²⁰⁵ Author’s own emphasis.

²⁰⁶ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., 596.

4 Conclusion

At the beginning, there was a “painfully – no, excruciatingly – shy” young woman who wished to meet a poet she admired greatly and deeply.²⁰⁷ The wish came true and Elizabeth Bishop became a close and life-long friend with Marianne Moore. Their mutual desire and ability to observe and consequently to make use of such observations drew them together and began what would later become one of the most widely researched literary friendships.²⁰⁸ Bishop’s lack of a maternal figure and a role model perhaps predestined her to look up to someone who would embody both. In the early years, Marianne Moore had a significant influence on her and the reviews of Bishop’s first collection of poems *North & South* only confirm it: “[Bishop’s] slight addiction to the poetic methods of Marianne Moore” (Louise Bogan)²⁰⁹; “It is obvious that her most important model is Marianne Moore” (Robert Lowell)²¹⁰; “Miss Bishop makes her poems the same way Miss Moore makes hers” (Arthur Mizener).²¹¹ However, to read Bishop’s poetry only as a comparison with Moore’s would be a pity as her poetry goes beyond that and in a way exceeds it.

Marianne Moore left her mark on Bishop’s mannerism and her life as well. Despite the years Bishop was living outside the U.S., both poets kept close through correspondence that itself provides a rich source for understanding their relationship. Letters were an important medium in Bishop’s life as she wanted to keep in touch with her friends from all over the world, especially during the years she lived in Brazil. Perhaps the most interesting is her correspondence with Robert Lowell, a friend of hers. The word “friend” might be an understatement as their relationship went beyond a simple friendship; perhaps the word

²⁰⁷ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 427.

²⁰⁸ Costello, “Friendship and Influence” 130.

²⁰⁹ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 182.

²¹⁰ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 187.

²¹¹ Schwartz and Estess, eds., 191.

“companion” might be more suitable. Their meeting was arranged by Randall Jarrell and they kept in touch ever since.

Through the time they spent together and their letters, the shaping of their poetry took place and allowed them to reach their full potential. Bishop’s taciturnity was mitigated by Lowell’s openness and it was under his influence that she started to draw from the rich autobiographical material she possessed. Lowell, on the other hand, was inspired by her poetry to a great degree and hence started to shift from his rigid and religious poetry to one that would be later labelled as “confessional.” Lowell once wrote to Bishop: “you [have] always been my favourite poet and favourite friend.”²¹² The feeling was certainly mutual as Bishop replied: “please never stop writing me letters – they always manage to make me feel like my higher self.”²¹³ Both Lowell and Bishop found great comfort in their friendship and they are mutually indebted.

Elizabeth Bishop is not a poet of many words, but she is a poet of great ones. Her ability to move fluidly and effortlessly through the new worlds she built while using controlled, precise and on-point vocabulary makes her one of the major voices of the 20th century poetry.²¹⁴

²¹² Travisano and Hamilton, eds., ix.

²¹³ Travisano and Hamilton, eds., ix.

²¹⁴ Schwartz and Estess, eds., xvii.

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