



Review of Colm Tóibín, *On Elizabeth Bishop*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. 209 pp.

On Elizabeth Bishop is much more than a book about the accomplished North American poet whose mind was hailed by poet John Ashbery as “capable of inspiring and delighting minds of so different formations.” It also reveals much about its author, the acclaimed novelist Colm Tóibín, who belongs to the great tradition of Irish expatriates, having lived in Barcelona, Buenos Aires, and San Francisco and now resides in New York. *On Elizabeth Bishop* has been referred to by poet and critic Dan Chiasson as Tóibín’s Valentine to Bishop, and evinces that engagement and influence among writers may not necessarily produce only anxiety, as Harold Bloom has theorized, but may also be celebrated as a gladly received source of literary enrichment and artistic development.

This book will be read with pleasure and profit by specialists and non-specialists alike despite the fact that it contains no critical breakthrough; it provides a cross-section of Bishop’s work including published and unpublished texts, letters written by and to Bishop, biographical information, close readings, publication history, manuscript study, and reception history; as well it offers a lively and complex picture of friendship and mutual indebtedness among writers in the middle of the 20th century.

Context plays a major role in this book, and Tóibín’s emphasis on contextualizing Bishop’s poems and fiction with the places and times of their construction and in dialogue with her correspondence is a valuable contribution to those who are just beginning acquaint themselves with Bishop as an artist and a personality. As a devoted fan Tóibín has visited some of the places where Bishop lived, such as Great Village, Key West and Rio de Janeiro, and narrates facts and impressions of these places as he discusses the texts that are related to them. In Great Village he actually spent time at Bishop’s house, when it was an artist’s retreat. On December 4, 2015, it reverted to a private home.

Although it is a book of criticism where close reading techniques and objectivity are instrumental, there is no doubt that Tóibín has taken advantage of his narrative abilities to organize this book and to contextualize not only the poems he chooses to analyze but also Bishop’s writing process and his own personal reactions as a reader of her texts. As part of a Princeton series entitled “Writers on Writers,” the book is divided into thirteen chapters, which are organized according to a variety of topics that circle around important geographical or sentimental territories for Bishop and for Tóibín, such as, home, childhood, loss, wanderlust, memory, solitude and literary friendship. These topics pervade several chapters and are used as passwords that allow Tóibín free

access to multiple zones. In this way, a single poem or prose text by Bishop, and this is especially true of the most important ones, are examined repeatedly in more than one chapter but each time with a different focus or in a different context.

The most important features of style that Tóibín shares with Bishop are clarity and precision artfully combined with reticence and silence or suggestivity. He calls attention to Bishop's difficulty in making a statement in poetry because it is "either too simple or too loaded to mean a great deal." Given this belief, all that was left for her was to describe everything very carefully. Tóibín identifies himself with Bishop and ascribes their shared passion for careful description to the *modus vivendi* of the places where they were raised. Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, in southeast Ireland, where Tóibín was brought up, and Great Village in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, where Bishop spent a short but highly significant period of her early childhood, are described as places where "language was a way to restrain experience." He adds:

Language was neither ornament or exaltation; it was firm and austere in its purpose. Our time on the earth did not give us cause or need to say anything more than was necessary, language was thus a form of calm, modest knowledge or maybe even evasion. The poetry and the novels and stories written in the light of this knowledge or this evasion, or in their shadow, had to be led by clarity, by precise description, by briskness of feeling, by no open displays of anything, least of all easy feeling; the tone implied an acceptance of what was known. The music or the power was in what was often left out. The smallest word, or the holding of breath, could have a fierce, stony power.

The chapter entitled "In the Village" is a good example of the way Tóibín has constructed his book. He begins by describing Bishop's house in Great Village and ends with a quotation from "Song for the Rainy Season," a poem that makes reference to her house in Petrópolis, two of the houses the speaker of the poem "One Art" mentions as lost. To move around such an enormous and complex territory, he uses some of the topics or passwords mentioned earlier. In this particular chapter the passwords are home, childhood and loss – words that meant a lot to Bishop, who lost her father when she was 8 months old and whose mother was institutionalized in a mental hospital when the future poet was only 5 years old. Bishop, who would never see her mother again, was raised in various houses by different relatives. Several of the texts that Tóibín discusses in this chapter are connected to the places of her childhood: two prose texts, "In the Village" and "The Country Mouse" and the poem "The Moose," which was triggered by a bus trip Bishop took from Great Village to Boston in 1946 and which she finished only in 1972. Tóibín's description of Bishop's "system" of constructing a poem is worth mentioning as it can be widely applied:

The poem inhabits that space where Bishop is most comfortable; it begins almost cozily, using fact and statement with no comment. There is something

unsettling about this system, as though it were a camera moving in a place that had been the site of some catastrophe, but the camera instead picks up tiny details and leaves out any sense of menace, or instead succeeds in filming menace by filming absence of menace, and thus manages to capture menace all the more truly and effectively.

Bishop's Brazilian years and her life with Lota de Macedo Soares in Rio de Janeiro and Petrópolis are examined in more details in the chapter "The Escape from History." Tóibín contrasts her Brazilian life with the Key West period in which politics and war were very much present. His analysis of the rhyme scheme in the poem "Roosters" in "Order and Disorder in Key West," is one more example of Bishop's skillful use of reticence. It is impossible not to agree with him when he concludes that "She managed to write one of the great poems about power and cruelty by not doing so, by describing, suggesting, by working on her rhymes and cadences, her rhymes and her half-rhymes, by leaving it at that, by understanding what might be enough."

In "The Little That We Get for Free," Bishop's creative process in the villanelle "One Art" is carefully discussed. Tóibín reads this poem against previous interpretations such as those by Frank Bidart and Octavio Paz, who considered it a confessional poem, and one by Helen Vendler, who regarded it as "a personal poem of a poet who praised her aloneness." For Tóibín reads it is about "what cannot be said, about losses too large to be mentioned, about what is between the lines of the poem rather than in the poem, about what Bishop willfully almost playfully, left out of the poem." And what was left out, Tóibín argues, is something that was mentioned in a letter to Robert Lowell: "I lost my mother, and Lota and others too."

Consider now another password – wandering. Unlike Thoreau who famously said that he had traveled much in Concord, both Bishop and Tóibín needed to inhabit a much larger space. Like Tóibín, who left his country to live abroad, Bishop too was "fond of wandering," something she attributed to the maternal line of her family, as she mentioned in a letter to Anne Stevenson, dated March 18, 1963. Besides living in many cities in the United States, she also traveled to other countries taking up residence at various times in France, Mexico and Brazil, where she lived for almost twenty years.

Solitude is the password in the chapter "One of Me." Tóibín focuses on an early moment in Bishop's life in which she first realized she was a single and separate person. This incident happened in a dentist's waiting room a few days before her seventh birthday and is depicted in the 1961 essay "The Country Mouse" and in the poem "In the Waiting Room," included in *Geography III*, published in 1976. Another poem skillfully explored in this chapter is "Crusoe in England," which highlights "the solitary nature of the self." In this poem solitude is depicted in two distinct moments: when Crusoe is on his island and when he is taken back to England. Pointing out that this poem echoes Bishop's own experience, Tóibín concludes, "no longer captive on an island, no longer living in isolation, Crusoe is imprisoned within the self, within a place where other people intrude."

Friendship among writers is another key issue in *On Elizabeth Bishop*. Tóibín rightly observes that both Bishop's poetry and her development as a poet are associated with Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore. He regards them as "the surrogate family she could rebel against," or "as two places she visited, places she missed and avoided." People interested in Marianne Moore should read the chapter entitled "Efforts of Affection." Those who want to know about Bishop and Lowell should pay special attention to "Art Isn't Worth that Much." Thom Gunn, whose poetry was grounded in "an immense and powerful withholding" and who was a friend of both Bishop and Tóibín, receives a loving and careful regard in the chapter entitled "Grief and Reason," as well as in parts of "The Bartók Bird."

Someone with a Cartesian mind might find it difficult to extract the pith of *On Elizabeth Bishop* as it may seem, occasionally, redundant and somehow poorly structured. Like the snowman of Wallace Stevens's poem, who knows that "One needs a mind of winter / to regard the frost," we can say that one needs the mind of a Whitmanian loafer to appreciate the vast rolling hills that Tóibín has disclosed for our appreciation. Even so, he has assembled a great amount of informative and often entertaining material about Bishop's art and life. And, as a bonus, this amazing novelist, who stopped writing poetry at the age of 23, gives us some illuminating hints about the "dazzling dialectics" among different movements and generations of writers in the American literary scene of the middle of the twentieth century.

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