

Postmodernity in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry

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Abstract: Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) is a prominent representative of the middle-generation poets after modernism and before post-modernism in America. She is neither a modernist poet nor a confessional poet. Her reticent poetic style sometimes shows certain postmodern features. Open form, rich imagination, combined fragments, and free images, create the unique postmodernity in Bishop's poetry, which put forward a great challenge to readers' thinking habits. Analyzing the postmodern elements in her poetry can help to better understand its openness, inclusiveness, and heterogeneous pluralism which expect readers to participate.

1. Introduction

Bishop is considered as one of the finest poets in 20th century America literature. She published few poems in her life time, only four main collections, namely *North & South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1976). However, she has a considerable amount of posthumous poems, prose and letters. Bishop's limited poetic output does not hurt her status in American literature, she is called "the poet of poets" or "the writer of writers". She wins many awards such as the Pulitzer Prize (1956), National Book Award (1970) and National Book Critics Award (1977). In 1997, the critic and poet James Longenbach established Bishop as a central figure in the turning point of twentieth-century poetry in his book *Modern Poetry after Modernism*. In ephemeral terms, she is one of the few poets to have bridged the modern and the postmodern, primitive art and surrealism. "Postmodernism is neither a group of writers nor a critical group, and postmodern writers differ markedly from one another"^{[1](21)}. Bishop's distinctive style of poetry writing kept her away from the major American genres of her time, but her reticence and ambiguity embraced the pluralism and openness of the postmodern style.

2. Diversity of creative styles

Bishop's poetry is quite spontaneous, much like the Romantic poets' emphasis on inspiration and the spontaneous flow of emotion in their poetry. Many readers have categorized Bishop's poetry as lyrical expressions of their own experiences in the Romantic tradition. However, Bishop does not stop at Romanticism, but continues to break away from tradition, gradually developing her own unique style of silent and subtle, yet open and pluralistic, in a post-modern context of seeking differences rather than similarities. Bishop's love of words and her break with conventional syntax led her to favour the school of language poetry represented by Charles Bernstein. Born in a

postmodern context, the school of language poetry emphasized the ontological status of language, re-examining the place of language itself in poetry, using words to broaden the meaning of poetry and giving the reader a new reading experience. According to Martin Heidegger, language is the home of existence. Through language meaning enters the world and gains presence.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Mountain School, the Beat Generation, the Confessions, the New York School and the New Surrealists repeated the role of the pioneering poets of the 1920s, creating a stylistically diverse “postmodern” scene in the American poetry scene with their loosely broken or nakedly “confessional” voices. The “postmodern” scene was created in the American poetry scene. Each of these diverse postmodern genres has its own claims and sometimes confronts each other, but they all seek poetic forms that capture the experience of the moment and the present, and poetic language that returns to life. Although Bishop’s reticent and subtle style is different from those of the major American postmodern schools of the time, the use of the language of life and the breakthrough of aesthetic norms in a significant part of her poetry, as well as its plurality, openness, contradiction and change, are all clearly postmodern.

The inconsistency of Bishop’s poetic style often confuses readers, with many poems appearing to come from different poets. In particular, the postmodern nature of her poetry challenges the readers’ habits of thought and imagination. “The poem wrote itself. People will say that it corresponded to some part of me which I was unaware of at the time. This may be true”.^{[2](41)} It is therefore beneficial to understand Bishop’s poetry to know her life story. Haunted by traumatic childhood memories, Bishop has spent her life in uncertainty, and almost all of her poetry is related to her own life experiences. Bishop wants to construct a timeless, stable connection to the places and people in her life, and her poetic themes are dedicated to exploring the possibilities and limitations of this construction.

3. Doubts and imaginations of life

Bishop’s childhood was marked by gloom and misfortune, with her father dying eight months after her birth and her mother suffering a nervous breakdown and being treated in a psychiatric hospital for a long time. Bishop did not see her mother again from the age of five until her death at the age of 23. Bishop describes her “unhappy childhood” as a “prize so sad it could almost be in a textbook”, but she doesn’t dwell on it. Throughout her life, Bishop struggled between certainty and denial, between survival and death, and she was unable to trust most things, including religion. Bishop was not a religious person, she did not see the need for poets to use ‘mythology’ - Christian or otherwise - to support their work, and she was not interested in grand works on a large scale. She is not interested in grand works on a large scale. This is not unlike the postmodernist icon Jean-Francois Lyota’s view that “life is made up of small narratives, and that literature should start with small narratives and subvert ‘the grand narrative to reflect the grand narrative’”^{[3](126)}.

Free from the confines of religious consciousness, Bishop’s “First Death in Nova Scotia”^{[4](125-126)} begins with a small narrative of his traumatic childhood experiences, expressing doubt and helplessness about death, contemplation and reconstruction of life. The poem describes the death of his young cousin Arthur from a first-person narrative perspective, in a dialogue between ‘I’ and the reader. Arthur lies “beneath the chromographs: / Edward, Prince of Wales, with Princess Alexandra, / and King George with Queen Mary. / Below them on the table / stood a stuffed loon / shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur, Arthur’s father.” The poet imagines the diving bird from a child’s point of view: “His breast was deep and white” and “his eyes were red glass”, in contrast to Arthur’s white suit and his hair painted by Jack Frost, who had a lot of hair. Frost’s strokes of red are echoed in Arthur’s white suit and the strokes of red painted on his hair by Jack Frost. “White” and “red” become the colours of death in “my” eyes, making the otherwise horrific scene of death small and

peaceful. This child's fantasy leads the reader to feel the uncertainty of death, to experience the poet's sensitivity and caution, his confusion and doubt, his uncertainty about the world and himself. In the course of the objective description of death.

Bishop's skepticism and imagination about life are evident throughout his poetry. In his late poem "Santarém"^{[4](185-187)}, Bishop draws on the biblical story of Genesis to ask his own question: "Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung / from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four / and they'd diverged. Here only two / and coming together." This poem began in the middle of the poet's sixteen-year stay in Brazil, as a meditation on life and memory. As her life in Brazil brought her an unprecedented sense of joy and belonging, Bishop expresses her scepticism about the dichotomy of "life / death, right / wrong, male / female", bringing her painful memories and these concepts together to 'resolved, dissolved, straight off / in that watery, dazzling dialectic.' The poem was completed in 1978, during a period when Bishop experienced the breakdown of his relationship with his Brazilian lover Lotta and Lota's suicide, showing the uncertainty of joy and happiness in life. In the second half of the poem, "the Cathedral'd / been struck by lightning", the reader can feel the poet's doubt and helplessness. The reader is given a sense of choice to understand the true meaning of life, from expectation of goodness to the breakdown of hope.

4. Expectations and disintegration of the home

In her poems, Bishop constructs a variety of "houses", either dream homes or real dwellings. These "houses" not only reinforce Bishop's own expectations and aspirations for "home", but also allow the reader to experience the poet's various feelings of love and affection. In "Chemin de Fer"^{[4](8)}, "where the dirty hermit lives, / lie like an old tear / holding onto its injuries / lucidly year after year", for the old hermit the dwelling beside the small pond is just for the old hermit. The dwelling besides the small pond is just an existence outside of "home", and the old hermit becomes the embodiment of the poet himself as an onlooker. The homelessness of having lost his parents as a child is intertwined with the expectation of a beautiful love, and "Love should be put into action! / screamed the old hermit." After a quarrel or separation, we always hope for forgiveness or reconciliation, but only in the fantasy of "tried and tried to confirm it", with little chance of action. The reader follows the poet's varied imagination, experiencing the free shifts of imagery and the changing combinations of fragments, stepping into the poet's conflicted heart and experiencing the gradual disintegration of the expected home. This contradiction is also present in the poem "Filling Station"^{[4](127-128)}, a disgustingly dirty petrol station filled with images of clutter, decomposition and rupture: "oil-soaked, oil-permeated / to a disturbing, over-all / black translucency", "wicker sofa" and the "dirty dog" on the sofa. This dirty world appears to be populated only by greasy men, and the father, with the help of his sons, goes about his business to make ends meet. Just as we are trying to follow the poet's escape from this greasy male world, images such as decorative tablecloth, embroidered frames and hairy begonias appear in juxtaposition, containing a surprise. In literary composition, more important than the choice of the right words is the happy combination of words with each other to produce illuminating (rather than interpretative) associations. These ruptured images and juxtaposed imagery inspire the reader's reconstruction, creating meaningful images with visual art, allowing the reader to see the presence of invisible female figures and feel the warmth of family life and the power of good kinship.

Glen Macleod has said: "Since time immemorial, the seemingly parallel rivers of literature and visual art (painting, sculpture, architecture) have gradually begun to converge in the 1920s"^{[5](194)}. As a poet and a painter, Bishop is described by art critic Meyer Shapiro as writing poetry with a painter's eye, and in her poetry Bishop uses cubist painting techniques, juxtaposing and collaging flat imagery, inviting the reader to take in the otherwise fragmented elements. The reader is invited

to reassemble the otherwise fragmented elements, embodying the perfect interplay of poetry and painting. The reader follows the flow of imagery in the poem as it reconstructs a loving “home”, anticipating the warmth of “Somebody loves us all”. However, such a “home” is not eternal, but rather a “filling station” that provides some security for our journey, and the love and security that “home” can provide is greatly diminished. As Jonathan Ellis points out, “in Bishop’s poetry, the protagonist feels or becomes homeless more often than not, and this is her home”^{[6](85)}. The poet’s anticipation of home is a memory writing of childhood trauma, but the attempt to reconstruct it disintegrates into harsh reality and memory.

5. Conclusion

“Throughout her career she (Bishop) was so much the individualist, cultivating her own plot of ground, not becoming a member of a school”^{[7](81)}. From the time she wrote her first poem at the age of eight, her poetry creation has been a long journey throughout her life. In Bishop’s poetry, the reader can read both her inheritance of Romanticism and the influence of modernism on her. There is no denying that Bishop’s distinctive style is rich in postmodern elements. Her traumatic childhood memories provide a rich source for her poetry, from the doubts and imaginations of life, the expectations and disintegration of home, to diversity of creative styles. In the post-modern context, the poet is committed to constructing a connection with real life, but is helpless in the sense of disconnection and limitation of this construction.

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