

# *A Study of Elizabeth Bishop's Plant Writing from the Perspective of Speculative Realism*

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**Abstract:** The plants in Elizabeth Bishop poems exhibit qualities of anti-correlationism, withdrawal, independence and speculation. These characteristics are similar to the position of Speculative Realism in regard to its view of objects. The similarity is reflected in the respect for the independence of things; the rejection of the anthropocentric view which lead to the underestimation of relations between objects. To respect, and treat the relationship between objects and other objects equally and seriously. It can be found that the plants in Bishop's writing is not a slave to anthropocentrism, but it has its own reality. It is not passively manipulated by humans, but has its own independence.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the international humanities and social sciences have witnessed a wave of the "non-human turn", which has attracted the attention and involvement of many scholars. Looking back at the history of American literature, we can see that the long history of American literature has never been without its non-humans. These species have often provided a unique perspective for reflecting on nature, human nature, and human society and culture. In addition, a wave of Speculative Realism has emerged in philosophy, calling for a return to the world of things.

Studies over the past two decades have provided important information on non-human objects. While a variety of definitions of the term object have been suggested, this paper will use the definition suggested by Graham Harman. In the history of the literary criticism, the influence of philosophy cannot be ignored. Sometimes changes in the philosophical world also trigger reforms in the literary world, with positive and negative effects: while offering new perspectives for the appreciation of literature, the appreciation will risk to be so "philosophical" as to be less "literary". However, Speculative Realism calls for a return to the real world of objects, and the plants in Elizabeth Bishop's writing have the characteristics of Speculative Realism.

Therefore, digging into the plant writing of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry from the perspective of Speculative Realism is conducive to a better understanding of her interaction with objects and her thoughts about them.

## 2. The Trees and Weeds as Objects

In traditional natural philosophy, object is usually seen as a basic entity that constitutes the real world, which is passive, mechanical and inanimate which will obscure the richness of the object. Traditional philosophical understanding of matter ignores the dynamic nature of object itself.

Perhaps the dynamism of object does not necessarily derive from the projection of the human spiritual world onto nature, or perhaps thing has its own dynamism.

Based on Heidegger, Harman further explores the object. Harman explains that what Heidegger actually demonstrates is the complete disconnection of things from each other, never being able to fully touch each other, because they withdraw from all human access, even from all inanimate contact. <sup>[4]</sup> (Harman, *Bells and Whistles* 138).

In Bishop's poem, we can re-encounter the plant as an object. The poem "To a Tree" (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 212) is a good example. The whole poem consists of two stanzas. In the first stanza, the poet expresses that she and the tree are "kin", because the tree ask nothing of a friend but watch the friend move about. This kind of relationship makes the poet feel there is a sufficient bliss. Here the use of the tree, which has no claim on its friend, expresses the poet's respect for the independence of things.

Speculative Realism is a reflection on anthropocentrism and a critique of correlationism. The concept of correlationism is first put forward by Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude*. From the perspective of correlationism, thought is related to being. All the objects are confined by correlation. Beyond the correlation of thought and being, the object is unknown. Harman wants to break the correlation between objects and thought, to explore more possibilities and a wider space for the object itself. He defends the object itself and argues against people giving priority to the association of people with things.

We can see the characteristic of anti-correlationism in the second stanza. In this part, the poet describes her standing behind the tree's stout framework. Within this strong and thick frame is filled with her tiny tragedies and grotesque griefs. Comparing with "my tiny tragedies", the tree is stout. Even though the poet's heart is filled with endless grief, the tree is still independent and does not grieve because of her. In contrast to the poet's tiny grief is the tree's endlessly vibrant foliage. Here, instead of brutally overplaying her grief and making the tree an effort and emotional projection to express her grief, the poet respects the tree's independence as a friend. Her grief is allowed to coexist equally with the solid and vibrant tree. That is why we can see there is the characteristic of anti-correlationism in the poem.

In addition to its anti-correlationism a character, Bishop's plant writing is also characterized by withdrawing as object. The essence of Harman's philosophical thought is embodied in the concept of the object, which, in his view, is far more profound and complex than we think, and which is "withdraw" from us. The "withdraw" of the object comes from Heidegger's analysis of equipment. It means that the object is not fully open to us, and that we can never exhaust it. "When equipment is most equipment, it is concealed from view as something silently relied upon" <sup>[3]</sup> (*Towards Speculative Realism* 77).

In Bishop's poem "Little Exercise" (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 41), we meet the withdrawing palm trees and weeds. This poem consists of seven stanzas. In the first three stanzas of the poem, the poet portrays the uneasy, dark, uncertain atmosphere of a storm about to descend. In the fourth stanza, the palm trees that have been serving as a backdrop suddenly appear. The poet describes that "the boulevard and the little palm trees / all stuck in rows, suddenly revealed / as fistfuls of limp fish-skeletons" <sup>[1]</sup> (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 41). In fact, the palm tree as an object has always been there, but it is often overlooked, and it is only when the surroundings change that one notices the withdrawing palm tree. Meanwhile, as the raindrops fall, the withdrawing weeds in the crevices get people attention.

### 3. The Speculative Plants in “A Cold Spring” and “North Haven”

The task of Speculative Realism is to overcome the trap of correlationism: it is “real” because it believes in the autonomous existence of the object; it is “speculative” because it believes that the objects, though inaccessible to people’s reason, is conceivable.

The supporters of Speculative Realism believe that things are alive and active independently of humans, and that they are ontologically equal to humans. Human beings should go beyond reason and imagine things, for example through the path of aesthetics. Through aesthetics, we can imagine things.

In the poem “A Cold Spring” we can find the speculative features of the plants. The whole poem has three stanzas. In the first stanza of the poem, the poet shows that “the violet was flawed on the lawn” <sup>[1]</sup> (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 55-56) in a cold spring. In the poem, the leaves are not inanimate; they are not only alive but have their own autonomy. They can choose to wait, to observe their surroundings as they wait, and then carefully reveal their characteristics. C.k.Doreski regards Bishop “as a descendent of Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Frost, and an antecedent of Susan Howe’s New Englandly, noun-driven Language poetry, and thinks Bishop has been an (I)witness” in *Elizabeth Bishop: the restraints of language*. <sup>[2]</sup>(4).

In the second and third stanzas, the weather become warmer, “dogwood infiltrated the wood”.<sup>[1]</sup> (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 55). We can see by using imagination, the poet brings the reader to a world that the dogwood having its own power can “infiltrated the wood”. In the poet’s description, the dogwood’s petal burned “by a cigarette-butt”.<sup>[1]</sup> The redbud stood beside dogwood. The redbud looks motionless, yet more like movement than anything else of color. Here the poet uses her imagination to show the reader trees and flowers with a speculative quality. For each of them is a dependent object, each with its own inner hidden and inexhaustible character. Even though the plants are often silent in the background, they have the reality of their own, and although it is impossible to know them exhaustively, through speculative imagination the poet can take the reader closer to them. Those unique things transcend one’s everyday interpretation of the world. Yet they coexist so beautifully and equally with the poet.

Harman believes that there is always a wedge between objects and their qualities. And according to Harman’s Object-oriented Ontology, this world of non-human object-ontology is the world of real things to which humans have no direct access. In contrast to the scientific method as knowledge, art as wisdom gives us indirect access to the world of real things. Harman states that the most effective and vivid language generally succeeds in stating things without actually saying them. This isn’t because there is some innate passion for fuzziness, but rather because things that are hidden from human perspective are never immediately understood or known.<sup>[5]</sup> (Harman, *Object-oriented Ontology*) Obliquity and metaphor are more effective methods for uncovering something’s hidden nature than any arrogant, dismissive, or list of tangible characteristics.

We can find evidences in the poem “North Haven” (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 188-189). In the third stanza of the poem’s description, the island is “full of flowers: Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch” <sup>[1]</sup> (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 188). “Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright, / the Fragrant Bedstraw’s incandescent stars, / and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight” <sup>[1]</sup> (Bishop, *The Complete Poems* 188). The poet uses metaphor several times in this poem. The poet uses the metaphor of burning like fire to describe the state of the Hawkweed in bloom. The poet also uses the metaphor of stars to describe the state of flowering of Bedstraw, which shows the speculative features of the plants.

Borrowing from Harman’s Speculative Realism analysis of metaphor, the “Bedstraw” and stars are brought into proximity through the words of Bishop. This means that the “stars” as an object takes on the darkness-qualities of the Bedstraw. Now, we have SO (stars) and SQ (star-qualities).

As a result, though the stars' incandescent-qualities remain largely familiar as they have always been, the Bedstraw becomes a mysterious Bedstraw, capable of holding incandescent-qualities in its orbit. Another way of putting it is that SO (stars) is replaced by RO (Bedstraw). Thus, the metaphor should work to combine RO (Bedstraw) and SQ (star-qualities). But now we come to the final stage. RO (Bedstraw) cannot possibly participate in the metaphor, since every RO withdraws or is withheld from any access or relation whatsoever. This, in turn, should have the implication that SQ (star-qualities) is floating in space, attached to nothing. But the fact that there is no bundle of qualities that are separate from an object is the most significant lesson we took away from phenomenology. And RO (beholder) has taken the place of RO (Bedstraw), which is permanently unavailable. There can be no metaphor until "I", the reader of the poem, enact it by substituting myself for the missing Bedstraw. According to Harman, instead of digging deeper into the Bedstraw's reality, the metaphor raises a new theatrical Bedstraw's reality above the sensuous aspects of the stars. The reader follows the poet's varied metaphors, constantly intervening to perform metaphors by replacing RO. This will allow the reader to have a deeper involvement and immersion in the poem. It is clear from the poems that the poet writes in such a way that she leads the reader through the words to experience all things natural in different metaphors over and over again.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study finds that Bishop's plant writing presents the characteristics of anti-correlationism, withdrawal, allure, equal and speculative which contains the philosophical thoughts of Speculative Realism. The similarities between the view of things embodied in her plant writing and the view of Speculative Realism to objects is that they are all anti-correlationism, treat the objects equally, respect their withdrawal. And they all value the role of imagination and metaphor and take them as the speculative ways to approach the real objects. It can be found that the plants in Bishop's writing is not a slave to anthropocentrism, it has its own nature, its own receding part from humanity. It is not passively manipulated by humans, but has its own independence and can influence them.

The study of plant writing is related to the study of non-human things. It combines the philosophical thoughts of Speculative Realism having the interdisciplinary significance. It provides a new perspective on investigating the features in non-human objects and an additional perspective for the study of the plant writing of Bishop's poetry. Future research on Bishop's objects might be wider in the scope. And it is desirable for future work to find deeper explanation towards the objects and to clarify the possible reasons behind the plant writing.

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