

Sandra Barry

Review Article

Elizabeth Bishop: The Autobiography of a Poet

Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry. By Lorrie Goldensohn. New York: Columbia UP, 1992. Pp. ix, 306. \$29.95.

Lorrie Goldensohn concludes *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* with the following synopsis:

A woman virtually orphaned before the age of six, raised by successive grandparents and aunts, who at six horrified one grandmother by her staunch allegiance to the flag of the other grandmother, who spent a substantial part of her life on another continent, Bishop's strength in poetry, both early and late, defines itself as a revision of certain critical identities. (285)

This quotation embodies the strength and weakness of Goldensohn's study of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. The strength lies in the last statement. Elizabeth Bishop's life and work was a complex evolutionary process of identifying, defining and describing the world around her. Goldensohn accurately delineates steps that Bishop passed through en route to her understanding of the people and places in her life:

Yet long before Lowell's confessional poetry thrust the challenge of the historical and autobiographical as subject before Bishop, she moved toward that choice in three steps: first, toward the general structures inhabiting the world of her mind through poems that primarily take on the

inner and allegorical world of the sleeper, of dream and fantasy; second, by moving toward description of the objects and places comprising her external world; and third, by electing the world of memory. (101)

Although this process can be chronologically charted in Bishop's poetry, it was not strictly a linear development. Goldensohn is fully aware of the intricate weaving of past, present and future events, people and experiences in Bishop's growth as a poet. She blends Bishop's texts—poetry, prose, journals and letters—crossing

forward and back, between periods in one country and then another, between relations with a lover, and relations with one's poetic peers, between considerations of the formal manipulations that literary tradition offers, and the original devising of the alphabet of emotions that experience alone hands over to us. (xiv)

And she does all of this with a clear, direct prose that is at once scholarly and individual. Her treatment of Bishop's poetry is ever informed by an understanding of the force of subtle correspondences, the melding of the personal with the poetic, as Bishop sought to envision and re-vision the people and places she loved.

The weakness of Goldensohn's study lies in the quotation's opening statements. Conclusions are designed to condense detailed analysis into reasonably accurate generalities. However, Goldensohn's generalities about Bishop's life are not all preceded by the kind of analysis that would give them validity. Admitting that Goldensohn's focus is Elizabeth Bishop's life and work in Brazil, it is nevertheless worth noting that she conventionally devotes entire chapters to the influence of Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell; but gives only a few references to Nova Scotia and Bishop's maternal relatives. Great Village and, more importantly, Bishop's mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, receive no specific mention at all. Frustratingly, for example, Goldensohn includes an extraordinary photograph of Elizabeth Bishop and her mother (the first, as far as I know, ever to be published); but fails to mention in the text Gertrude's name. In the context of Goldensohn's arguments and analysis, this photograph is out of place, but its inclusion, however unelaborated, speaks volumes. Goldensohn is part of a tradition of Bishop scholarship which ignores or undervalues the poet's childhood, but this is no

justification, especially considering Goldensohn's efforts to "honor Bishop's entanglements in the real" (2).

When Elizabeth Bishop arrived in Brazil in 1951 she believed she had "died and gone to heaven" (9). Curiously, so many aspects of exotic Brazil reminded her of her childhood home that she set about "recreating a sort of deluxe Nova Scotia" (12). Her time partnering Lota Soares (at least until the last few years) was the happiest of her life. Their relationship was the first complete, fulfilling and secure one Bishop had known since her maternal grandmother and aunts in Nova Scotia. Traditionally, Marianne Moore has been designated Bishop's surrogate mother by scholars, but Moore was primarily friend and professional mentor, the quality of their relationship being somewhat different from her relationships with women both preceding and following. Goldensohn describes and analyses Bishop's life in Brazil with Lota with a keen sensitivity. The basis of her analysis is a previously unknown, unpublished love poem beginning "It is marvellous to wake up together," a significant discovery on which to base the archaeology of a poetry. Goldensohn's is the first full treatment of Bishop's lesbianism and of Brazil's profound influence on her life and work. No quarrel can be made with the need and value of such a focus. However, it was in Brazil where Bishop was able for the first time to confront and write directly about the deep pain of the loss of her mother. Brazil was the stimulus for, catalyst of and medium through which Bishop made a "detailed attempt to retrieve her Nova Scotian past" (194). Goldensohn recognizes that north and south are inextricably linked. She fully explores the topics of Lota, Brazil and lesbianism. Yet, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop and Great Village are the "certain critical identities" in Bishop's life that Goldensohn needed to develop in detail but virtually ignores.

What seems to have eluded Goldensohn is the fact that Elizabeth Bishop knew her mother. It is conventional wisdom repeated out of habit and grounded in inadequate research that Bishop was a "virtual orphan," the implication being that she had lost both her father *and* her mother while an infant. Bishop did nothing to dispel this idea. It appeared first in Anne Stevenson's study in 1966 and has been repeated in subsequent studies without much elaboration or revision. My article about Bishop, "The Art of Remembering: The Influence of Great Village, Nova Scotia, on the Life and Work of Elizabeth Bishop" (*Nova Scotia Historical*

Review 11.1 [1991]: 2-37), clarifies the early chronology of Bishop's life in Great Village and tentatively explores her relationship with her mother. However, there remains much more work to be done. While the statement that Elizabeth Bishop was a virtual orphan may be strictly and narrowly accurate, it is an oversimplification and fails to recognize the enduring and pervasive presence-absence of her mother in Bishop's life. In his posthumously published book *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (1989), David Kalstone does provide, in more detail than most critics, information about Gertrude Bulmer Bishop and the extent of Bishop's knowledge of her mother (see 22-25). He clearly shows that Elizabeth Bishop remained extremely reticent in talking about her mother throughout her life, not wanting to trade on her loss. That being said, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop nevertheless virtually disappears from his (and others') critical treatments of Bishop's poetry as if she had died in 1916 rather than 1934.

Goldensohn is aware of the "rooted sadness" of Bishop's childhood. It is unfortunate that she did not apply her sensitive analysis to a deeper exploration of the role of Bishop's mother. At one point, in analysing the affect on Bishop of Robert Lowell's poem "The Scream" (his version of Bishop's prose poem "In The Village," Goldensohn quotes a remarkable dream excerpt about her mother from Bishop's 1950 diary, observing only that "the fear of the mother never entirely disappears, a fear going beyond simple abandonment" (179). Goldensohn, like her colleagues, is standing on the verge of an essential current of Bishop's life. No one has yet taken the plunge.

This sin of omission, rather than commission, is a serious one. To have read the unpublished and hitherto neglected "Reminiscences of Great Village," written by Bishop in the early 1950s and held in the Bishop archive at Vassar College, her alma mater, and nevertheless conclude that this draft of "In The Village" is but "story scraps" (192-93), is an error by Goldensohn. Even a cursory glance at this forty-page document reveals its importance for understanding Bishop's relationship with her mother. It is also a repetition of the generally dismissive attitude scholars have taken towards Bishop's prose. In spite of the fact that the importance of her prose poem "In The Village" is universally recognized, her prose pieces have been viewed by and large as secondary creations,

"necessary developmental step[s] for her poetry" (96). Scholars have even failed to see the full evidential value of their autobiographical content.

Brazil opened a floodgate of memory for Bishop. Her work blossomed in Brazil, but the root had been planted long before in Great Village. Goldensohn recognizes this development. Much to her credit, she also recognizes the subtle, complex forces of memory and imagination that surface and resurface, that ebb and flow, in the creative processes of Bishop's poetry. But it is no longer acceptable for scholars and critics to relegate Great Village and Gertrude Bulmer Bishop to the periphery of a comprehensive analysis of the life and work of Elizabeth Bishop. Goldensohn writes: "In her last decade Bishop retrieved her first years for direct treatment in poetry" (52). These first years were in Great Village with her mother and her Bulmer relatives. What Brazil and Lota meant to her, what she was able to create with them, because of them, in her life and work emerged from the experiences of her early childhood filtered through the media of time, memory and imagination. Great Village and Gertrude Bulmer Bishop require more than brief references and relegation to an index. Goldensohn has given us an intuitive, intelligent and challenging treatment of Elizabeth Bishop's later life and poetry. Set beside recent major critical studies by Brett Candlish Millier (1986), Robert Dale Parker (1988), Thomas J. Travisano (1988), David Kalstone (1989) and Bonnie Costello (1991), Goldensohn's book explores some uncharted waters and combines the personal and poetic in a better analysis than any of her predecessors. However, she too falls short of according Bishop's complex childhood its proper place in the development of her art. The brilliant Brazilian blossoms cannot be severed from the long, tough roots buried in Great Village, where her greatest autobiographical poems are set.