Beyond Psychology

The disarray of a poetry like Elizabeth Bishop’s might be called instinctual, a matter of artistic sensibility deeply formed but not always consciously developed, and so not methodical. An artist does not have to be aware of her sensibility—she merely has to know when to let it run its course. A poet could find special advantage in being ignorant, or at least unconscious, of the workings of sensibility. Such an artist might be less likely to fall afoul of a theory of art, a preening self-regard, or an overestimation of intelligence. At the level of artistry Bishop offers an integrated sensibility, while at the level of personality she remains just idiosyncratic. Critics of her poetry must remember they are confronting an artist whose coherence cannot be reduced to coarse psychology.

In Bishop’s poetry the appearance of intimacy does not secure any intimate access to the poet’s condition. This was the common understanding of the relation between poetry and biography, before critics lost a skeptical distrust of the evidentiary value of poetic statement. To understand a poetry as reserved—as shy and full of indi-
rection—as Bishop’s requires a criticism of formal tact, and a will-
ingness to treat with unusual care the artist’s stray critical judgments, which may be less bound by those reserves and so less cautious (“these worries about . . . whether I’m going to turn into solid cute-
ness in my poetry if I don’t watch out—or if I do watch out”). The two critics considered here betray that trust—and the responsibili-
ties attached to it—without being immune to the texture and con-
text of the poems, their wayward and permissive charm.

The available clues to Bishop’s life are misleading to the degree they are seductive. As a child she was deprived of her parents by death and insanity, and she became a lesbian and an alcoholic: the authority of these circumstances is almost entirely absent from the poetry. Lorrie Goldensohn is a lover of gossip, and it is hard to adapt the solicitations of gossip to the drier torsions of criticism. Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry would be peculiar in its breathless piety if it were not simply another example of what among Bishop’s critics is a reverence nearly religious. Though not yet subject to miracle literature, among postwar poets she has become the object of (perhaps the irritant for) a devotional following almost larger than Larkin’s. An examination of the criticism of veneration might have provided an interrogative center to what is often a naive, rambling, unfocused personal essay and travel journal, though that would have required a critic more self-possessed. During her pil-
grimage to Bishop’s former home in Ouro Preto, Brazil, Golden-
sohn nearly succumbs to the temptation to steal one of the saint’s relics, an old magazine.

The critic seeks out the signs of Bishop’s presence in Brazil with a sublime haplessness. She wants to see some statues Bishop de-
scribes—but they’re half a day’s distance away. She goes instead to see the sculptor’s work at a local church—but it’s closed for restora-
tion. An inn-owner tells her “a few grumpy facts,” but apparently they’re not worth reporting. She meets the woman who now owns Bishop’s house, but the critic’s French can’t keep up with her infor-
mant. “Why hadn’t anyone else come to see this woman?” she asks,
ingenuously. To which the reader might reply, “Why hadn’t anyone thought to bring a translator?” The critic expands on the difficulty of eating Brazilian melon with knife and fork.

Among Bishop’s papers Goldensohn discovers a vaguely erotic unpublished poem (“All my signal systems are awash. I can’t quite take it all in”). Despite a longish chapter of nerve-by-nerve exposition, in which a rather openhearted poem comes to have Grail-like gravity, it doesn’t occur to her that Bishop failed to publish it not because of its lack of privacy, but because of its lack of character. The poem’s touching and slyly charged ending (“The world might change to something quite different, / As the air changes or the lightning comes without our blinking, / Change as our kisses are changing without our thinking”) cannot repair the thinness of expression elsewhere. The critic has stumbled onto a suggestive negative case, which begins to explain Bishop’s preference for the oblique (“I believe in the oblique, the indirect approach, and I keep my feelings to myself,” says her “Strayed Crab”): in an art essentially reactive and passive, she was incapable of absorbing the disruptive impulse of direct emotion. Emotion did not make her shallow; it made her inattentive, and her art thrived on the attentions plain emotion could not provide. The critic takes the wrong lesson: that Bishop was afraid of intimacy. Intimate emotion did not overcome her critical self-possession.

Goldensohn is alert and responsive to the underbrush of Bishop’s language, but she lacks sympathy for the neutrality of Bishop’s tone, its quiet sense of improbability, of the genial awkwardness of encounter. The critic wants meanings, and meanings she gets. Bishop’s “Going to the Bakery” might be called mocking and mordant, even mutely disheartened; but not, I think, a poem “where neither the foreign American resident nor the home government nor the helpless population is denied corrupt or unpleasant roles.” It is too full of the vitality of observed and rendered detail (Bishop’s present! present!) for such bleak or blatant politics (politics were usually beneath Bishop’s eye).
Now flour is adulterated
with cornmeal, the loaves of bread
lie like yellow-fever victims
laid out in a crowded ward.

The baker, sickly too, suggests
the “milk rolls,” since they still are warm
and made with milk, he says. They feel
like a baby on the arm.

These stanzas are not tortuous. Goldensohn believes that here Bishop “finds the freshness and whiteness of bread is fever pallor, fever brightness. Bread itself is the helpless flesh of infants, and the baker of it is sick.” Not exactly. The loaves aren’t white—they’re a jaundiced yellow, like yellow-fever patients, because the flour has been cut with cornmeal. The “milk rolls” (not the bread) are warm and soft, like a baby on the arm—the critic would have us think they are baked babies, an image out of Auschwitz.

Criticism is the poetry of false emphasis, of the inability to register the difference between simile and metaphor. Let Bishop write to a friend, in a fever of convention, “I’m afraid I do like Boston,” and the critic will mutter, “Bishop is ‘afraid’ . . . that she does like Boston.” Goldensohn is ungainly where her subject is subtle (she has no ear for metaphor: “Her only partly credulous readers rose to the bait on that hook, but in the end forebore to swallow”), and therefore most useful when dogged by fact. As a factual critic Goldensohn has surprising perseverance: she has added significantly to the context of a dozen or more poems. She has gone to the trouble to investigate minor circumstances and has made particular use of Bishop’s letters and notebooks. She is, however, attached to the version of psychological criticism by which the life becomes a lived myth: fraught with meaning, meanly suggestive, subject to allegorical reading and the displacement of literature, and always the unique subject of the literature.

In securing an argument about a supposed conflict between Bishop’s identities as poet and woman, the critic notes—with acu-
ity—that “particularly when troubling emotions are at issue,” Bishop’s protagonists are male. The problem isn’t that such a tendency doesn’t have psychological bearing, but that it may bear in many directions at once. Bishop might as easily be praised for not succumbing to a simple version of the feminine or not suggesting that to be female is to court trauma. It seems odd to criticize Bishop for choosing troubled male voices, and to criticize her again for writing a late poem (“In the Waiting Room”) in which “femininity is seen as problematic.” (The critic is alert to the poet’s least deviation from current pieties, and a little too confident in saying what Bishop must have decided or must have felt.)

Goldensohn as a biographical critic still believes in something called an “authentic self.” Poets are a mass of barely connected selves, working in concert and in opposition (barely speaking at times), and their most grossly inauthentic selves sometimes have custody of the poetry. A poet may exploit an inner violence without responding to it, may respond to it in hints and misses, may find irony in using what in life has been of little use. May use it cold-bloodedly. In a serious and severe sense great poetry is beyond psychology in a way that mediocre poetry never is. Mediocre poets are at the mercy of their psychological concerns, but great poetry requires a transfiguration that removes it from simple analysis. This is not to claim that psychology is irrelevant to poetry, only that such analysis tells us almost nothing about what makes a poem work as more than a mechanism. A poem may lie for reasons of construction, or symbolic use, or language, economy, or whim. For a critic of Goldensohn’s temper, who sees the right fractures but asks the wrong questions, every movement forward and backward from the petite facts of life has a psychological supplement. For the artist there are dreads more pressing and more pertinent than the psychological.

Bonnie Costello’s Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery avoids the conditions of the life in order to mark the inner carriage of an art that has often seemed deceptively simple, even deceitfully simple. Her “aim,” she says, “is not to discover what specific events and
places from the past determined Bishop’s vision, or how these events were transformed to poetry and narrative.” This is just as well, since her comprehensions of that life are sometimes comically crude (“It is not surprising that Bishop would find in travel a metaphor for consciousness. Her father, who died in Bishop’s infancy, was connected with the shipping industry”). She has a more acute and more detached intelligence than Goldensohn, and conducts her inquiry of Bishop’s poetry—sometimes her inquisition of it—on a more abstract plane.

The virtues of the abstract critic must be formed in particulars. The “questions of mastery” to which the study returns, increasingly vaguely and warily, are never reduced to a set of practices, but exist murkily as “modes and critiques” in the thematic realm. They determine, or are said to determine, the habits of seeing in this most visual of poets, both in the structures of sight (distortions of scale or perspective, symbolic horizontals and verticals) and in its application to travel, to painting, to memory, in which the poems find containing force. (Since in most poetry mastery may be a question of craft or of psychological adequacy—of fineness of vision or perhaps infirmity of memory—these “questions” may not seem specific to Bishop, however susceptible her poetry may be to their judgments.)

Reading a poet is a matter of getting not just the identities right, but the proportions. Bishop is a poet of unusual visual freshness (not only in her rakish sleight-of-hand descriptions) and moral form, and critics have tended to ascribe these qualities to the local influence of Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell. Costello has read Bishop against a richer spirit, a more comprehending anthology, and measured the poet’s alignments with and antagonisms to the Romantics, the surrealist artists, modernists like Eliot and Stevens, and religious poets like Hopkins and Herbert. These influences have been noted and articulated by other critics, but rarely with such subtle gestures or such sensitivity to the contradictions of influence, the pull of a particular voice and the poet’s push against it, like Odysseus binding himself to the mast.
These transverse angles of influence—to which the book might have been more devoted—calculate the resistance of a poetry predominantly private in its means but impersonal in its reference. A poetry as calm and matter-of-fact or as guileless as Bishop’s rarely has such a dark interior architecture, and it is difficult to remember that the charm is the poems’ and the dark architecture—like some scribble out of Piranesi—the poet’s. (Costello, like Goldensohn, rather artlessly takes the voice of the poem for the voice of the poet—I agree that poems start there, but they often end somewhere else.) Costello has extracted the unguarded statements of Bishop’s early notebooks, and found there informing glimpses of a spirit later more hedged and obscure, even as the poems became more open and transparent.

Here the limitation of the abstract method is laid bare. In her letters and interviews, Bishop was a witty and unsparing reader of her own temperament, and her phrases are sharply poised and weighted: “My outlook is pessimistic. I think we are still barbarians . . . But I think we should be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy,—to make life endurable and to keep ourselves ‘new, tender, quick.’” Even giddy. Much of Bishop’s poetry opens from that “in spite of,” that incautious “endurable.” But the critic is protected from such insight by the dull armor of her abstractions.

Certainly there is a subversive element in her violations of decorum, but most often it is tied to a representational aim. She emphasizes the betweenness of seeing form against conflicting form, the perceptual challenge of the world as process.

And so on, sentence after sentence, for paragraphs and pages. This does not compare favorably with Bishop’s “I am very fond of molds and mildews.”

The thematic and tactical categories into which the book is divided (a chapter on travel, a chapter on perspective) offer few advantages to an integrated reading of this poet. The individual readings of poems, however, are attractive and finely detailed, not organized
so much as tumbled forth. Costello is a subtle and finicky reader, and I wish—ungratefully, perhaps—to suggest where those readings go wrong. Do the five hooks grown into the lower lip of “The Fish” have more than a fragrant factuality? “Five wounds on a fish make him a Christ figure,” says the critic flatly, but they are not quite the same as stigmata (Bishop does not call them wounds), and if they were we would only have Christ of the Martyred Mouth. Such a far-fetched conceit is little help to the clumsy Freudian reading the critic offers, which misses the terrible moral weight of the poem, the approach of something near to sin.

Many of her readings are slightly off-center. The critic believes the speaker in “Love Lies Sleeping” has awoken from a nightmare, though bad dreams are never mentioned, and it seems more likely she has awoken with a hangover, and with the woozy, scattered anxiety common to the aftermath of drinking (“Hang-over moons, wane, wane!”). Such an opening would make sense of the ending, where a man lies on a bed, his head hung over the side, drunk or dead, seeing (“if he sees it at all”) the city “inverted and distorted. No. I mean / distorted and revealed.” Where Bishop has fragility, the critic sees fear and danger, and “the routine oppression of the industrial culture,” itself a description hardly less than routine. A writer on vision shouldn’t miss the vision here—the critic thinks the city is revealed as a place not clear but distorted, but the force of Bishop’s construction (a construction precisely pitched) is that, upside-down, the city is distorted and thereby revealed. Through the distortion you can glimpse its real nature. It is a revelation, perhaps only a rueful revelation (especially if granted to a man dead or drunk, or dead-drunk), and scarcely what the critic calls “inchoate darkness.”

This might seem a matter of critical disagreement, but much of criticism is a mere shifting of weight, the bearing of slight inflections. The critic claims that Crusoe’s fifty-two volcanoes in “Crusoe in England” represent “the weekly eruptions in a year of Bishop’s life,” though how a year of Bishop’s life is at issue is not clear, nor why these should be characterized as “eruptions,” when the volcanoes are described as “miserable, small,” and “dead as ash
heaps.” Her reading of “Pink Dog” smoothly deemphasizes, almost to the point of nonexistence, the terrible politics in the background—the death squads rounding up and drowning the beggars. She wants to read the poem against fashionable critical notions about the body, but the violence is hardly “impersonal violence wielded against [the body] by society”—it isn’t wielded by “society,” and it isn’t impersonal, at least not to the beggars. The poem is as much about ugliness in the body politic as in the body itself. The critic is often intimate with the staging of a poem, but distant from the sense.

Her readings are more effective when orphaned from critical practice. Describing “A Miracle for Breakfast,” she refers to the “grumbling, matter-of-fact, commonsense voice.” There, in a book where the world of sensibility and the world of intellect are so often mutually incomprehending, the critic actually hears the poet. Costello’s criticism is otherwise victim of its dotty formulations (“He has erased the belatedness of the figure and achieved a rhetorical mastery in which the fiction shows no sign of its invention,” “Indeed, war is a crisis of difference on a national scale”). Her impressions of form are ill-considered or cursory (she approves of a passage’s “alliterative g’s” when alliterative g’s are few and far between); she is not always comfortable with the vocabulary of vision; and her complaints against hierarchies and privileged beholders would be informing if she weren’t blithely setting up hierarchies and privileges for herself.

In remaking the poet in her own image—as a poet who “challenges norms” and “complacent or repressive thought”—the critic has lost Bishop’s messiness and scumbling, her delicacy, her emotional frailty, even her whimsicality. (The critic refers in one of her notes to the “intentions behind style,” in the confident belief that there are any intentions behind style.) She has no comprehension, and little suspicion, of why a poem invents, or fabricates, or alters, and why to the poet the differences between source and solution do not “merely compete.” To the poet it is incomprehensible to say, “This view from the midst of things is forfeited in favor of ironic detachment.” A poet does not live in the realm of such forfeits.