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Elizabeth Bishop and Howard Moss

A Question of Accuracy

By Daniel D'Arezzo

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Among poets writing in English in the mid-twentieth century, Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) has emerged as one of the most influential—an influence not only on later generations of poets but on her contemporaries as well. Her oeuvre was not large: she published only a handful of books in her lifetime, and the poems were usually short; a longish poem like "Manuelzinho" has only 145 lines. She often wrote in recognizable forms, and her poems are loosely formal, with meter and rhyme, although she was not a slave to rhyme schemes.

Many readers will be relieved to know that Bishop's poems make sense: she tells stories that are emotionally affecting; she doesn't lecture the reader; she is witty, shrewd and tender without being sentimental. Bishop's clear writing stands in opposition to popular notions of poetry as an abstruse art of vague, ambiguous language that invokes hazy ideas and inchoate feelings (which is actually a pretty good description of much consumer advertising). Poetry differs from prose in being more compressed; and when we read prose that is similarly compressed—dense with imagery, studded with active verbs and free of qualifiers, connectives and dependent clauses—we may feel that it is "poetic." But what makes any writing, whether poetry or prose, especially vivid is its ability to make the world appear to the reader freshly seen, and that is achieved through accuracy.

Howard Moss (1922–1987) was a poet and poetry editor of *The New Yorker* from 1950 until his death, so he worked very closely with Bishop, who had a first-reading agreement with *The New Yorker*. Moss was a great admirer of Bishop and championed her poems at the magazine, although not always successfully. Moss did not have the last word on

accepting poems, and for reasons peculiar to *The New Yorker*, the vote sometimes went against a particular Bishop poem, which she was then free to publish elsewhere.

Howard, whom I knew intimately for the last eight years of his life, loved good writing. He thought of poems as writing, not holy writ, and of poets as writers, not sacred monsters with a pipeline to the Godhead. What made poetry different, for Howard, was that the poet tells private truths that have a larger import; and he saw poetry as an antidote to a mendacious culture: he lived through the McCarthy era, observed the rise and fall of Richard Nixon and the murky escalation of the Vietnam War; witnessed, too, the growth of television (the boob tube) and of a vacuous culture of celebrity; and during his tenure as poetry editor, he also saw poetry marginalized, dropped from the pages of daily newspapers and from other general-interest magazines, until *The New Yorker* was, finally, the only magazine with a wide circulation that brought poems into American homes on a weekly basis.

And Howard was always thrilled to present a new poem by Elizabeth Bishop. Reviewing her book *Questions of Travel* in the March 1966 *Kenyon Review*, Howard wrote:

> Observation and temperament have become inseparable; telling the truth is a form of human sympathy, not a moral imperative or scientific curiosity. Since truth is variable and always suspect, how do we know we're being told it? The credibility of these poems derives from a shocking fact: Miss Bishop is completely sane.
>
> The power of these poems is the result of their clarity. By seeing so clearly, their author achieves effects more exciting often than those the unconscious can drag up by way of association and connection.

And later in the same review he writes:

> The author [Bishop] doesn't insist on being human, because she is, and what makes her so is unselfconsciousness and accuracy. Each demands a great deal of the other. To lie about the world or rant about it is not to cherish it.[1]

In writing about Bishop's poems, Moss was not promulgating a theory nor even setting criteria (he detested the notion of a "*New Yorker* poem" and was pleased with the variety of individual voices among the poets published in the magazine) but was merely pointing out the virtues of a poetry that went against the grain of much poetry of that period, neither intellectual nor lyrical but plain-spoken, imaginative, honest and accurate.

The working relationship between Bishop and her editors at *The New Yorker* is fully displayed in the poet's correspondence with those editors, compiled by Joelle Biele and

published last year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Bishop's longtime publisher. The book, *Elizabeth Bishop and* The New Yorker: *The Complete Correspondence*, was criticized in some reviews as uninteresting to the general reader—even to readers of poetry—and the criticism is valid: rejection letters and letters dealing with the minutia of getting words into print make tedious reading. But for scholars, there are sometimes gems to be found amid *The New Yorker*'s stuffy protocols and punctilio. In this essay, I am concerned mainly with the wording of the third line of "Sonnet," a fourteen-line poem by Bishop that was published posthumously in *The New Yorker* and was the occasion of a misunderstanding that has persisted more than thirty years. The first three lines, as they appear in Bishop's *Complete Poems*, run: "Caught—the bubble / in the spirit level, / a creature divided"; but that third line originally appeared in *The New Yorker* as "contrarily guided."

I vividly recall the day, in October 1979, when Howard told me that Alice Methfessel, Bishop's life partner and literary executor, had accused him of tampering with "Sonnet," which had just appeared in *The New Yorker* and, as it turned out, was the last poem to be published under the poet's auspices. We were in Howard's apartment on West Tenth Street, and he had had a rough day in the normally civilized environs of *The New Yorker*. "I can't believe that anyone could think that I would change a poem without the poet's consent," he lamented (or words to that effect; I can't recall his exact words at this remove in time)—and not just any poet's poem—"least of all, a poem by Elizabeth Bishop." I don't know what Alice Methfessel said; I didn't ask, and Howard was too discreet to say; but I think I understood from what Howard told me that she had found support for her view among her friends.

Howard told me about the contretemps with weariness, not rancor; and he excused Alice by saying she was upset because she was grieving for Elizabeth. But the accusation stung. First, it was a slur on the reputation of the magazine to which Howard had dedicated most of his working life. Second, it confirmed, once again, that his position as poetry editor continued to be a source of friction between him and the larger community of American poets.

Now this dispute has been brought to light through the diligence of Joelle Biele, who resolves it in favor of Howard—and of Bishop too, as it turns out. "Sonnet," as published in *The New Yorker*, clearly reflected Bishop's decision to change the third line from "a creature divided" to "contrarily guided."

And yet, for nearly three decades, first in *The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Bishop*, published by Farrar Straus & Giroux in 1983, and in every subsequent edition of her poems, notably the volume in the Library of America series, the unrevised version has been enshrined as Bishop's finished work. In her introduction, Biele describes the decision to do so in the context of the emotionally fraught circumstances:

> Elizabeth Bishop died of a cerebral aneurysm on October 6, 1979. Bishop's partner, Alice Methfessel, asked Bishop's mutual friend Lloyd Schwartz to read "Sonnet" at the memorial service on October twenty-first; they could not find a copy among her papers, however. Schwartz called Moss, who dictated the poem over the phone. When the poem appeared in *The New Yorker* the following week, Alice, Schwartz, and Frank Bidart were stunned. Moss [had] read the opening to Schwartz as "Caught—the bubble / in the spirit-level, / a creature divided," but it ran as "contrarily guided." No one had seen that line. Alice contacted Moss about the difference, and he explained that what he had read to Schwartz was the galley, the intra-office version, not the proof. He wrote a letter saying he was enclosing a photocopy of the proof with the change in Bishop's handwriting, but neither the copy nor the original appear to [have] survive[d]. Bishop had not shared the revised version of "Sonnet" with the group, as was her usual practice. Schwartz in particular felt that Moss was capable of talking Bishop into changes she did not want to make, as with removing the capital letters in "North Haven." When Alice, Schwartz, and Bidart met with Robert Giroux [Bishop's editor at FSG] about *The Complete Poems*, they made a unanimous decision that "a creature divided" was better than "contrarily guided" and published the poem that way.

(The changes to "North Haven," a poem by Bishop that *The New Yorker* had published a year earlier, are discussed by Biele in the paragraphs that immediately precede the one I have just quoted. The proofreaders of *The New Yorker* had corrected Bishop's punctuation [always a deficiency in her writing] and had made her spelling conform to house style, and Howard had defended these trivial changes, probably with his usual reassurance that Bishop could change them back when she published the poem in book form. In the broadside that Bishop had printed by Lord John Press, she wreaked havoc on the punctuation and restored the initial capital letters of the names of flowers, which she did, according to Biele, "in order to highlight her allusion to Spring's song at the end of Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*." A framed copy of the broadside hung in Howard's home in East Hampton. Howard loved the poem and only mildly regretted the lousy punctuation in the broadside.)

Two things, at least, are clear from Biele's research and the correspondence itself: *The New Yorker* had enormous respect for Bishop and for the way she wanted her poems to

appear in print; and, with regard to "Sonnet," the revision of the third line is entirely hers. The unasked question is, of course, What is to be done?

Of the four people who agreed that "a creature divided" was better than "contrarily guided," only two are still living: Frank Bidart and Lloyd Schwartz. I don't know whether, today, presented with the facts, they would think differently; but it seems to me that "a creature divided" is a commonplace while "contrarily guided" is completely original, newly seen and beautifully expressed—it has that quality of effortless compression that Howard so much admired in Bishop. (And given Howard's thorough ignorance of carpentry, I cannot believe for a second that he could or would have suggested such a phrase.) While "a creature divided" works in the context of the poem, it seems purely literary, rather like capitalizing the names of flowers to make an allusion to Shakespeare. "A creature divided" is, moreover, imprecise, since the bubble in a spirit level is never divided, whereas "contrarily guided" tells us something new and refreshes the metaphor. I can easily imagine a *New Yorker* proofreader, reading closely, writing in the margin of the galley beside the line "A creature divided," "How so?," or just that Bishop herself was dissatisfied by the imprecision of the phrase.

In 2000, Lloyd Schwartz wrote an introduction to "Sonnet" for the website of *The Atlantic* in which he sketched the history of its composition and publication. In Schwartz's interpretation, determinedly biographical, the third line, "a creature divided," is central to an understanding of the work. "Sonnet," according to Schwartz, "feels like a posthumous poem, with its images of release from illness, from emotional conflict, from being 'a creature divided.'" Later, he connects these images to the poet:

> The more you know about Bishop, the more directly autobiographical this poem begins to seem. She was, like the bubble in the spirit level, "a creature divided," both accepting [of] and nervous about her homosexuality (she said she wanted to restore the last word of the poem, "gay!," to what she called its "original" non-sexual meaning), needing to drink yet ashamed of her self-destructive compulsion (in the version of the poem published in *The New Yorker,* the line 'a creature divided' appears as "contrarily guided").

Bishop was surely a creature divided—who is not? The phrase more usually points to the war within us of our "higher" nature with our "baser" instincts. One thing that is *not* a creature divided, however, is a bubble: weightless, empty, passive, a bubble is not at war with itself. It seems a bit of a stretch, too, to suggest that "contrarily guided" refers to Bishop's

alcoholism (but Schwartz's parenthetical aside at least tacitly acknowledges that the phrase that appeared in *The New Yorker* was Bishop's and not Moss's). I am not sure if it modifies the bubble or the spirit level, but it could modify either one without harm to the metaphor: a carpenter guides the bubble or he guides the spirit level to the same end, to align objects. The image suggests to me a prisoner bullied by contradictory rules in a Kafkaesque prison or, less balefully, someone buffeted by adversity who yet fulfills his destiny—perhaps even a poet working within the confines of the sonnet form.

Schwartz concludes that the poem is about death: "In 'Sonnet'….[Bishop] finally confronts, though with characteristic indirectness, her death wish, her desire for the freedom death brings." I don't see it. I suppose one could argue that a "broken" thermometer has "died" and that the "mercury / running away" represents the lifeblood flowing out of it (a sentimental notion that Bishop might have entertained ironically); but all four of the images are of inanimate objects, so the notion that the two that are "caught"—the bubble and the compass needle—are "alive" and the two that are "freed"—the mercury and the rainbow-bird—are "dead" makes no sense. To me the poem is about imagination and the way human beings can identify psychological states with lifeless things; and it is not death but imagination that has liberating power in this poem. [2]

Naturally, I prefer my own formal critique of the poem to Schwartz's biographical interpretation; but they are not mutually exclusive. What *is* apparent to me is that Schwartz found "a creature divided" more congenial to his interpretation of "Sonnet" than the line that Bishop actually approved for publication. But is that sufficient justification for over-ruling the poet's choice?

I don't expect people to change their minds. But to do justice to the poet, the essential texts need to be revised by their next printing and an erratum should be inserted into every current copy. There need be no *mea culpa*s; the text can be emended silently or with a discreet footnote. Anyone who asks whether a couple of words can be weighty enough to warrant a reprinting is not worthy to publish poetry—at least, Howard might have added, not the poems of Elizabeth Bishop. Her intentions should be honored.

As for the damage done to Howard, what amends can be made? Dana Gioia and others have opined that Howard's reputation as a poet suffered from his eminence as a poetry editor, but I have always maintained the contrary: Howard got far more recognition in his lifetime than most poets get. His books (18, not including anthologies, chapbooks and

reissues) were reviewed in the press (mostly favorably); he was a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets; he was often interviewed about poetry and was in demand as a reader and teacher; and he was awarded the National Book Award for Poetry in 1972 (his *Selected Poems* shared the prize with Frank O'Hara's *Complete Poems*), a Brandeis University Creative Arts Citation in Poetry in 1983 and the Lenore Marshall/*Nation* Poetry Prize in 1986 for his *New Selected Poems*. It is a shame that his work is mostly out of print, but a few of his poems are published anew in anthologies from time to time. Instead of seeing a cabal against Howard, I prefer to focus on the many readers who genuinely admire his work.

Howard was also an essayist who wrote astutely about writing and about writers. John Brinnin, a friend of Howard's since his undergraduate days at the University of Michigan, once told me that he thought Howard would be remembered more for his criticism than for his poems. Of his contemporaries, many of whom he edited, Howard wrote sparingly; but he made an exception for Elizabeth Bishop, about whom he wrote reviews and essays that were openly admiring (the piece in *Kenyon Review* is even titled "All Praise"). It is possible that Howard did more to burnish Bishop's reputation during her lifetime than anyone else. Richard Wilbur told me that it was Howard who turned his attention to Bishop.

As a poet, Howard learned from Bishop and, without exactly emulating her, began to change the way he wrote. His early poems—rhythmic, lyrical, at times ecstatic—show the influence of Wallace Stevens and Edna St. Vincent Millay; his mastery of form came early; but as he matured, he aimed for a colloquy with readers unmediated by literary nicety: the legacy that Bishop left him and us.

Biele's book goes a long way toward restoring Howard's reputation, at least as a man of sense and sensibility, as a wit, and as a man of probity as well. Unfortunately, it may also promulgate a false idea of Howard, in part through its dissemination of an epigram written by Bishop at Howard's expense while she was impatient for "Sonnet" to appear in *The New Yorker*—an epigram that few reviewers can resist, so here it is:

> All our poems
> rest on the shelf
> while Howard publishes
> himself.

But, of course, Howard did not "publish" his own poems in *The New Yorker*; other editors voted on his poems, and sometimes the vote went against him, for all the same reasons votes sometimes went against other poets. Bishop's snide verse was an expression of her insecurity, much in evidence throughout the correspondence, and not an accurate representation of the facts. What I find funny about the poem is not its skewering of Howard but, rather, its unintended caricature of Bishop's (and all poets') sputtering self-importance. What is saddest about the epigram is that Lloyd Schwartz shoehorned it into his analysis of "Sonnet," as if he needed to lampoon Howard in order to justify, if only to himself, his editorial decision.

What would really make amends would be to have Howard's work in print again—permanently—so that he may become better known to posterity as a poet than as a poetry editor. A collection of Howard's poems is necessary for esthetic and historical reasons: (1) because a few of them are among the best to have been written by an American poet in the latter part of the twentieth century and (2) because Howard's development as a poet embodies one strand of post-modern culture—the strand that carries forward the Modernist tradition that T. S. Eliot commended: respectful, cultivated, intelligent, insightful, playful, introspective and, while alert to Rimbaud's "derangement of the senses" as one direction poetry could take, cognizant as well, owing to the enormity known as World War II, of the lethal consequences of romantic excess. It was a high-wire act, being respectful of tradition but not entombed by it, and it led to a lot of second-guessing on Howard's part; he possessed exuberant wit but did not always trust his own exuberance.

Soon it will be 33 years since Bishop died (a gray day I recall vividly as well, because Howard and I were staying with John Brinnin in Duxbury and expecting to see Elizabeth and Alice that evening for drinks—I never met either one—when the call came from Alice informing John that Elizabeth had died: both Howard and John were deeply affected) and 25 years since Howard died, so none of this matters to either one of them (I think). There is no sentimental duty to the dead to produce complete and accurate texts of their work; accuracy is due, rather, to the reader. A refrain in Biele's book is the alternating bemusement and annoyance of Bishop and her editors with the fastidiousness of *The New Yorker*'s fact-checkers and proofreaders; but finally they were grateful, as is right, to *The New Yorker* for its arduous struggle, in a world of a million moving parts, to get words into print accurately. Accuracy is a virtue Howard celebrated in Bishop's poems, and he saw poetic accuracy as a

necessary corrective to the general sloppiness of American culture. It seems appropriate, therefore, that we should demand accuracy, if not for Howard Moss and Elizabeth Bishop, then for and from ourselves.

Notes

[1] Moss's description of Bishop as "sane" and "unselfconscious" relate to her persona as poet; he was perfectly aware of her alcoholism and her neuroses, including shyness borne of intense self-consciousness. In her writing, he believed, she transcended her limitations.

[2] "North Haven," an elegy for her friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell, concludes with lines in which Bishop anticipated her own fate—indeed, the fate of every poet:

> You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
> afloat in mystic blue. . . . And now—you've left
> for good. You can't derange, or rearrange,
> your poems again. (But the sparrows can their song.)
> The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

Death could, I suppose, be understood here as liberating in the sense that the poet is freed from "all that fiddle," in the famous phrase of Marianne Moore, Bishop's friend and mentor; but it doesn't feel liberating, merely final—the antithesis of the freedom expressed in the last five lines of "Sonnet":

> . . . and the rainbow-bird
> from the narrow bevel
> of the empty mirror,
> flying wherever
> it feels like, gay!

Perhaps Bishop had a death wish; perhaps everyone has a death wish; perhaps entropy is the death wish of our universe; but it seems to me that Bishop is writing about death in "North Haven" and about something entirely different in "Sonnet."