

"AND LOOKED OUR INFANT SIGHT AWAY": NOSTALGIA FOR THE INNOCENT GAZE IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S POETRY

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While most critics would not agree on the extent and nature of Elizabeth Bishop's surrealist affinities, the visual character of her poetry is generally held in the highest regard. Three specific passages in her poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" will help explain her daring visual approach to literature and the arts, with specific parallelisms in the theoretical texts of naïf and surrealist painters. These three passages raise issues of visual culture, memory, and the relationship between words and images. I propose a new reading of Bishop's poem as an elegy for and revaluation of the innocent gaze, which the poem beautifully illustrates. Contemporary perception theory and analysis of visual culture help understand the radically innovative proposal that Bishop, in her typically self-deprecating mode, buried in scattered lines in one of her longer poems.

Elizabeth Bishop's contacts with surrealist art and literature are reported to be intense; she lived in France during the late 1930s and shared with the surrealists common interests in naïf art, the world of dreams, and children's experience (see Travisano 1988: 42; Costello 1991: 26; Goldensohn 1992: 120-21; Brown 1996: 25). Having read surrealist literature avidly, she has admitted surrealist sources for some of her poems, and even translated surrealist poetry from three different languages (Portuguese, French, and Spanish). On the other hand, it is a well-recorded fact that Bishop had no direct part in the activities of the Parisian movement, not even after its establishment in New York.¹ Previous critical incursions exploring this relationship have rightly established her rejection of automatic writing as the limit of any possible affinity. But that limit, drawn by Mullen in 1982 and Travisano in 1988, leaves ample margins that have been ignored so far. The chalk line drawn to mark the limit only says how far Bishop would not go, but it does not tell how far she actually went, nor does it map those territories. In this sense, Mullen's article is responsible for the perpetuation of the belief that Bishop was not a proper surrealist,

¹ Mullen quotes a 1976 letter from Bishop addressed to him saying "I didn't know any of the surrealist writers or painters—I just met 2 or 3 painters, that's all" (1982: 65).

which closes one door but certainly does not explore what other kind of surrealism Bishop did practice.

That Bishop herself rejected public association with surrealism says very little in this debate, since her reasons (as well as the context in which they were voiced) are likely to be foreign to strictly literary considerations. Suárez-Toste has already argued that they are biased by the prejudiced, reductionist concept of surrealism that reached the American public in the late 1930s and early 1940s (2000: 143-46). Moreover, I find unacceptable Mullen's statement that "in her poetry one does not find the grotesque oneiric distortion which may occur, for example, in paintings by Dalí or Magritte or poems by Breton or Aragon" (1982: 78). In fact, Magritte is—together with his forerunner Giorgio de Chirico—the surrealist painter Bishop resembles most (Suárez-Toste 1996; 2000). Travisano accurately established Bishop's pioneering contacts: "She studied surrealistic poetry quite deliberately, incorporating some aspects of the surrealist aesthetic into her style while rejecting others.... She came upon surrealism earlier than most American writers of her generation, but it would be a mistake to label her an orthodox surrealist. She had no interest in psychic automatism ..." (1988: 42). And he was especially insightful when he defined Bishop's early style as "a casual, very controlled revision of surrealism based on freshly seeing the unlikely features of ordinary things" (1988: 45). That freshness was precisely the goal of de Chirico and Magritte. Generally acknowledged, but seldom explored in depth, these surrealist affinities are of the greatest importance in understanding Bishop's complex visual approach to poetry.² With de Chirico and Magritte she shares not merely specific techniques or motifs, but a vision—a truly original way of seeing—and a systematic strategy of poetic defamiliarization.

"Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" ranks among Bishop's most emblematic poems. Finished in 1948, it was included in her 1956 collection *Questions of Travel*, which she had originally intended to title *Concordance*. The poem builds on travel observations, as often in her poetry, but in this case it combines descriptions of illustrations from the Bible and personal travel memories, ending with a barely hinted reflection on the different pictures of reality resulting from each exercise. This is at least the most successful critical approach so far, best represented by the readings of Bonnie Costello and Thomas Travisano, each with its own particular emphasis. Travisano reads the poem in terms of the opposition between vicarious travel and personal experience. For him the book illustrations order reality and give it meaning, whereas Bishop's remembered impressions are chaotic and lack transcendence (1988: 114-21). Costello's reading confronts archetypal images with excursive sight, and thus, for her, the images from the Bible are impersonal, archetypal and cold, in opposition to Bishop's own experience, which is fragmented, chaotic, and colorfully alive (1991: 132-36). These readings rely heavily on specific passages of the poem:

² More recently McCabe (1998) and Walker (2000) have revived the surrealist issue in Bishop's poetry, but strangely, neglecting the visual aspect.

Thus should have been our travels:
serious, engravable.

...

Often the squatting Arab,
or group of Arabs, plotting, probably,
against our Christian Empire,
while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand
points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher.

...

Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds
suspended on invisible threads above the Site,
or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by threads. (1-19)

The poem itself opens with a comparison between the book images and Bishop's travels, in which the book is serious and solemn, but also archetypal in its aim of universality, with that plotting Arab and those artificial birds and smoke clouds "pulled by threads". In general terms Travisano and Costello provide similar readings, concerned as they are with sight, meaning, and the difference between direct and mediated perception of the external world. What I want to propose here is a reflection on the act of perception itself, which is for Bishop part of a process of cannibalization of the sense of vision: the more we see the less capable we become of seeing, because as our visual database grows we move too quickly from perception to interpretation and suddenly we no longer *see* but merely recognize, we match the new images against those stored in our memory. Indeed, both the Bible and Bishop's travel memories (a sort of remembered photo album) add to her visual culture. Both are forms of learning, and this visual experience works necessarily against innocence. This takes us back to de Chirico's borrowing of Schopenhauer's ideas about madness and memory, intrinsically connected because "that which forms the logic of our normal acts and of our normal life is indeed a continuous string of memories of relationships between objects and ourselves and vice versa" (de Chirico 1971: 88). But, at the same time, memory provokes an inevitable prosification of our life, severely limiting our capacity for surprise. What today is new, will be tired tomorrow, and so de Chirico's appeal for the surrealists resided in his capacity to refresh the aspect of common things through the juxtaposition of unrelated objects—which in turn is the exact plastic equivalent of Lautréamont's poetic principle: "the fortuitous encounter upon a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella". In 1968 Bishop praised Lautréamont's dictum in the following terms, "[T]he marriage of an umbrella and a sewing machine—that's poetry—" (in Walker 2000: 146).

A good illustration of this principle, the body of Bishop's poem is constructed out of surrealist catalogues, in this case two opposed lists of observed and visited places. Such "lists" are instances of multiple juxtaposition, and they must be appreciated as such, bearing in mind Réverdy's definition of the image as "a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born out of a comparison but the juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more remote and true the relationship between

the two juxtaposed realities, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional strength and poetic reality" (in Breton 1966: 31). In Bishop's poem the list of remembered places is as varied as this:

Entering the Narrows at St. Johns
 the touching bleat of goats reached to the ship.
 ...
 And at St. Peter's the wind blew and the sun shone madly.
 Rapidly, purposefully, the Collegians marched in lines,
 crisscrossing the great square with black, like ants.
 In Mexico the dead man lay
 in a blue arcade; the dead volcanoes
 glistened like Easter lilies.
 The jukebox went on playing 'Ay, Jalisco!'
 ...
 The Englishwoman poured tea, informing us
 that the Duchess was going to have a baby.
 And in the brothels of Marrakesh
 the little pockmarked prostitutes
 balanced their tea-trays on their heads
 and did their belly-dances; flung themselves
 naked and giggling against our knees,
 asking for cigarettes. (32-54)

Whereas the book settings were more or less coherently related to Holy Land and religious themes, her remembered travels are full of jumps and truly juxtaposed without any real image syntax. From Newfoundland to the priests' procession in St. Peter's, and from there to Mexico and Morocco, only to return to England where tea makes her evoke—rather abruptly, and surely deliberately—the tea trays deftly handled by prostitutes in the brothels back in Marrakesh. Hurried prose entries for many of these episodes are scattered in Bishop's travel notebooks, though not necessarily in chronological order. Direct experience provides a vivid and colorful account of real scenes, in contrast with the stiff and artificial Bible illustrations. The illustrated book theme is developed with great accuracy, complementing the visual with tactile sensations. The book scenes are described as "engrivable", and the volume's weight and touch recur constantly, in a successful attempt to recreate sensorial experience: "Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges/ of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)/ Open the heavy book" (66-68). In fact, as she wrote both in her travel notebooks and in letters, she could not dissociate her trip to Italy from her previous learning about it through books: "I recognized many things that had served as illustrations in every one of my Latin Grammars"; "Slides from Baroque Course assail me at every turn, and if it isn't that it's an illustration out of all one's Latin Grammars" (Vassar College Elizabeth Bishop Special Collections, box 34, folder 6). The interactive experience is emphasized in both directions, with the book pollinating the fingers and the real scenes in Italy constantly reminding her of her academic education. At one point there is a particularly brilliant succession of

images that would make any surrealist proudly claim Bishop for the group, when she provides a violent close-up of "the lines/ the burin made", and very aptly and daringly sees them as "ripples above sand,/ dispersing storms, God's spreading fingerprint" (26-29), the equation resulting from this particular juxtaposition rising from the ground to the sky and then to heaven, and aligning the engraver with God, as creators.

Bishop is very conscious of the accumulative mechanics of her itinerary (and of her poem), and gladly gives them away in the now famous line "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'". This parataxis certainly supports readings that deal with Bishop's refusal to impose a hierarchy of meaning, a given order on the poem, but this very lack of guidance also offers a fine example of primitive or naïf poetics:

Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and.'
 Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
 of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
 Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
 this old Nativity while we were at it?
 —the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
 an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
 colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
 and, lulled within, a family with pets,
 —and looked and looked our infant sight away. (65-74)

The closing lines of "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" offer us yet another important reflection on visual culture: Bishop's sequential presentation of a scene as "this old Nativity" and immediately after as "a family with pets" is the epitome of defamiliarization, as well as of impossible visual innocence. These few lines are loaded with a highly subversive proposition that paradoxically brings the antidote with itself. This second description of the nativity is the sort of vision that the too cultivated Bishop feared she could no longer afford. One of the major implications would be that twenty centuries of art history can be ignored to focus on what is there, available to our eyes. It provides an example by offering no interpretation, but description; it does not *read* the image, just *sees* it—with the minimum inevitable amount of subjectivity implied by this act (it reads "family"). In any case it offers a description devoid of visual culture, equivalent to a hypothetical "man with beard nailed to wooden boards" (which is irreverent only if the reader actually interprets it). "A family with pets" is the description given by somebody who sees what the eyes see, not what the mind knows. It tells us of an act of visual perception, not recognition or identification. Identification of recurrent motifs would lead to immediate interpretation of the image as belonging to a tradition, a genre. In this sense Bishop and Magritte completely agree: "Symbols are my *bête noire*. They are supposed to represent reality, but in truth they don't represent anything. If one looks at a thing with the intention of trying to discover what it means, one ends up no longer seeing the thing itself, but thinking of the question that has been raised" (Magritte 2001: 645). Of course, Magritte was much more radically opposed to

interpretation and symbolism, especially of the psychoanalytic sort that insisted in seeing the man behind the work, and ignored the image except as a means of reaching the painter. Equally, he is famous for the cryptic, highly poetic titles he gave to his paintings:

Magritte resisted explanatory titles, and from a public that has been brought up in the tradition of titles that point the way for them this demands a mental effort in a new direction.... Magritte was opposed to hidden or symbolic content. To an extent, commentaries presuppose that there can be a substitute for the image in the form of interpretive texts—or at least that the image can be translated into words. (Hammacher 1995: 27)

To admit that convention and tradition work so fiercely that Nativity is a genre may not be too problematic for Bishop, a poet, but for Magritte it was this sort of fossilization that was killing art. Perhaps Bishop's line here, for all its subversive potential, is so carelessly dropped, so understated, that its radical appeal has been buried by praise of other virtues of the poem. This simplified nativity image is not necessarily a complaint about iconographic clichés—a necessary evil for a poet—but certainly a nostalgic evocation of visual innocence. There is no way of denying that Bishop evidently knows art history but chooses to ignore it, even though she knows far too much to afford sincere innocence. In fact, her advocacy of a return to innocence is a utopian sophistication, rather than a lack of skill, because the very word *return* implies an *ex post facto* formulation, a wonderful "as if", because there is no such thing as an authentic turning back; it can only be pretended. Her idealistic proposition in many ways recalls André Breton's famous return to the "savage eye" (1965: 1), but Bishop was always skeptical about its viability. Her treatment is understated, self-undermined, self-ironic, and unpretentious, in contrast with Breton's faith in the unconscious and in man's ability to dissociate creative output from previous knowledge in order to prevent the intrusion of our cultural baggage.

Naïf painting stands as the closest possible parallel to Bishop's barely hinted poetics of radical defamiliarization. If we regard perspective as the major order-imposing technique in the western pictorial tradition, Bishop's decision not to apply a hierarchy but parataxis in this "'and' and 'and'" poem achieves the same effect as the naïf painters' organization of the canvas as it was in pre-Renaissance times: without any ruling principle governing scale and field depth there is no sense of what is in the foreground and what in the background, and the sizes of objects do not correspond to the place they occupy in the painting. Equally, in a succession of scenes ruled by juxtaposition Bishop does not lead the reader by means of coordination and subordination toward a conventional sense of meaning. But perspective is much more problematic when the act of perception itself is being questioned. For the naïf painter fidelity to the original and exactness of detail are usually the major concern. However, since the Renaissance, we know that mimesis demands distortion to compensate for the representation of a three-dimensional reality on the flat surface of the canvas. Therefore we might reasonably say that

there is no effective recreation of reality without manipulation, and thus mimesis demands—paradoxically, in order to be faithful—some sort of cheating, especially regarding scale (objects look smaller as they recede from the viewer into the background) and field depth (parallel lines seem to converge at the vanishing point). The world for the naïf painter would seem to allow a plain transfer from perception to representation, but mimesis is only achieved by means of tricks and techniques that must be mastered, making perspective indeed some kind of forgery:

The convention of perspective, which is unique to European art and which was first established in the early Renaissance, centers everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse—only instead of light travelling outward, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances reality. Perspective makes the single eye the center of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God. (Berger 1972: 16)

The naïf painter —let us focus here on Henri Rousseau as a paradigmatic example— represents reality not as he sees it but as he knows it to be. This is of the greatest importance in this context, because it explains why he never missed the organizational principle of perspective. For him parallel lines cannot converge in the distant background, and size is often a matter of subjective emphasis: "Since Rousseau wants to adequate what he sees to his empirical knowledge of reality, he finds no reason to adopt an optical perspective around which to order things in a rational spatial model of linear perspective" (Stabenow 1992: 12). Toward the middle of Berger's analysis above, one sentence stands out as a revelation: "The conventions called those appearances reality". Indeed, perspective may have been the scientific principle followed since the Renaissance and unchallenged until the late nineteenth century, but it is little more than another conventional system of representation—far more successful in terms of mimesis than the Egyptian profile, to be sure, but no less conventional for it. A number of contemporary thinkers can be quoted in order to lift the veil from our eyes in both directions, exposing the illusory character of what we call realism, but also how its conventional nature has necessarily become transparent. Sol Worth arrived at the conclusion that, in representation, correspondence "is not correspondence to 'reality' but rather correspondence to conventions, rules, forms and structures for structuring the world around us. What we use as a standard for correspondence is our knowledge of how people make pictures" (in Steiner 1982: 29). This is taken further by Goodman, who holds that in painting "[R]ealism is a matter of habit.... Representational customs, which govern realism, also tend to generate resemblance. That a picture looks like nature often means only that it looks the way nature is usually painted" (1976: 38-39). Having said this, it is also true that we need to believe in one representational system that is not perceived to be so: "All sign systems are conventional. But once a system *is* conventional, its artificiality is largely invisible, and the system is perceived as a model, a diagram of reality. A work of art that imitates a model of reality thus seems to be imitating reality itself" (Steiner 1982: 31). And therefore a

time-honored system such as perspective is no longer suspect of artifice, at least for everyday purposes.

Equally, in 1961 Certigny proposed the theory that even Rousseau knew more than he pretended, and faked much of his ingenuity. At this stage that is hardly surprising, as we have seen how Bishop's return to innocence is ambiguously sincere:

A mystery remains in the fact that Rousseau must have painted copies such as one from Eugène Delacroix's *The Wolf and the Tiger*, a copy that was presented in the retrospective exhibition at the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1885. According to that mediocre copy—but not altogether exempt from the original's perspective and pictorial style—the autodidact painter ought to have been in a position to choose, within art history, his own form of expression. That step makes even more ambiguous the personality of the so-called *naïf* painter, but in any case it must have been taken in an intuitive rather than theoretical manner. (Stabenow 1992: 12)

The second passage in Bishop's poem that summarizes her poetics of defamiliarization is the enigmatic final line "and looked and looked our infant sight away". In the context established by the theorists quoted it is not so obscure and we can easily arrive at the conclusion that looking spoils our vision through memory. If we read the term "infant" in Lacan's sense of speechless, there is a clear line of interpretation for that unusual verb, "to look something away". On the one hand the very act of vision erodes our capacity for surprise, and, on the other, visual culture (or experience, memory) is a way of appropriation of images. The problem is that one cannot possess a (visual) image without processing it into something quite different (a mental image). The moment you "talk" it with words you no longer "see" it; you may "have" it, but it is no longer the original image (thus you lose it). Paradoxically as it may sound, at that stage the faculty of apprehending the image is no longer visual, but epistemological: "The ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images.... The link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization can be quite startling" (Gravelle and Rivlin 1984: 53). Or, retaking Magritte: "If one looks at a thing with the intention of trying to discover what it means, one ends up no longer seeing the thing itself, but thinking of the question that has been raised. The mind sees in two different senses: 1° sees, as with the eyes, and 2° sees a question (no eyes)" (2001: 645). This is exactly what Bishop meant: that we have lost our capacity to see "with the eyes" the family with pets because we now jump to (verbal) interpretation (and hence to a reduction) of the scene as a Nativity ("no eyes"). The loss —through the very exercise of looking— of our infant sight, comes invariably with our visual culture. But both Bishop and Magritte claim that its recovery is desirable, if not truly possible. In any case their work, in painting as in poetry, seems oriented toward specific brilliant moments of successful recreation of that visual innocence.

The third and final example from Bishop's poem comes in fact from the first few lines. I have deliberately reserved it for the end of the essay because it illustrates her argument beautifully, and also serves as a conclusion:

The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
innumerable, though equally sad and still,
are foreign. (3-6)

Habit and tradition have worked against these wonders and worn out their novelty and potential to amaze us. Impressive as they may be, they have become too familiar through incorporation in our everyday lives. No longer exotic, legendary, distant places, these are now commonplace images regularly found in magazines, cinema, television commercials, etc. And conversely, many other images whose status may not reach that of Wonders have acquired that capacity precisely because they have remained in the dark. Although Bishop traveled to Brazil and wrote about her experience there, Magritte's statement on this subject is ambiguously similar to Bishop's:

We, all of us, are distracted by so many practical things that we miss the mystery. We should stop at times and consider the mystery ... I would not go to a strange country to get new images. I need the familiar world about me to get a real sense of mystery. I cannot do this in a strange country. That would only be exotic and picturesque. (Magritte 2001: 610-11)

While he seems to be despising the exotic *per se*, what he is denouncing is just an aspect of our progressive immunity toward everyday scenes. Our hunger for new visual stimuli, new sights, is a direct consequence of this process. If we were able to preserve our visual innocence there would not exist such a clear-cut separation between the exotic and the ordinary. And it is here that de Chirico's strategies of renewal become crucial to understand the surrealist lineage from his work to Bishop and Magritte. If the old clichés are worn out the solution is to ignore the symbolism attached to these images and see them afresh, to dissolve the multi-layered crust of meaning that tradition has grown around images and exploit instead the visual impact of unexpected juxtaposition:

What is needed above all, is to rid art of all that has been its familiar content until now; all subject, all idea, all thought, all symbol must be put aside. (De Chirico 1992: 187)

No, my painting has no symbolism or allegory. It doesn't have that sort of sense. If I show an object it is that object and that's all. Symbolism and allegory are connected with classical painting.... My paintings show objects deprived of the sense they usually have. They are shown in unusual context. (Magritte 2001: 609)

Bishop, like Magritte and de Chirico, followed in her poetry a systematic strategy of defamiliarization, and like them she used a set of recurrent techniques in order to draw our attention to aspects of life we would otherwise overlook. Her poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance", more than a catalogue of assorted exotic vistas, is an elegy for our visual innocence and a reflection on the diverse processes that immunize our sight: saturation or overstimulation, memory, and verbalization into mental images later fossilized into clichés. These processes truly make us operative, especially in our highly codified urban societies, but Bishop here stops to reflect also at what cost. The return to innocence she proposes may be mere wishful thinking, but it is not altogether in dissonance with what she practiced in her own poetry. In her advocacy of this beautiful utopia, Bishop does not content herself with denouncing the prosification of the modern world or the process through which we look "our infant sight away", but also provides a constructive example of how images may be denuded of the load of tradition and symbolism, and therefore how this visual innocence can be at least recreated, in that "family with pets".

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