

## Introduction

*Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis*

In 1966, Elizabeth Bishop arrived in Seattle to teach for the first time. She was a month short of her fifty-fifth birthday. In a letter to Howard Moss, her editor at *The New Yorker*, Bishop explained her pay and conditions as follows:

*The Poet* can come for one, two (like me), or three “quarters” and the pay is \$7,000 a quarter—which seems very good by my humble standards. That is \$7,000 each ten weeks, more or less. There are only 2 small classes—15 to 20—and they meet for 50 minutes, supposedly 4 times a week but I have cut the writing class to 3 times a week. This part of the world, and the breezy western manner, and teaching, rather staggered me at first – but now I am beginning to enjoy most of it except the classes. (NYr 285)

A day later, writing to Robert Lowell, she complained about the students’ poetic influences, in particular the influence of the poet she replaced, Theodore Roethke: “They are so wrapped up in Roethke, still, and he also left an anti-Pound, anti-Eliot heritage, but I go blithely on giving them things they look blasé about – even Tennyson and Keats. The eastern influence! – only here it’s west. One boy gave me 100 haikus – or haikai, as I believe the plural is” (WIA 599). One of Bishop’s students, the artist Wesley Wehr, made notes he later published on what Bishop talked about in the classroom. In her very first class, as if to dispel Roethke’s influence directly, she read Eliot aloud and told them to look up e.e. cummings and the rain poems of Apollinaire. For their first assignment, they were given A. E. Housman to read. “Some of you have good ears,” she told them. “But your sense of rhyme and form is atrocious.”<sup>1</sup>

Contexts like these are drawn from various biographical and epistolary sources, all published after Bishop’s death. They give us a very vivid sense of what Bishop was like as a person, a poet, and a rookie teacher. We learn that she liked to give advice and had strong opinions; that she was funny, often hilariously so, particularly when drawing attention to people’s bad

writing habits. They also tell us which poets she valued, and what she thought of free verse and haikus. In reading this book, we presume you are more familiar with Elizabeth Bishop's writing than writing about her. The Library of America edition of Bishop's writing is sub-titled "Poems, Prose and Letters." In our estimation, that is the best order in which to first read Bishop, supplemented by a fourth category: her drawings and paintings. Bishop had little truck with what normally comes next on a reading list, literary criticism. In the same class in which she encouraged her students to read Housman, she also told them not to read any criticism: "I would suggest you read one poet – *all* of his poems, his letters, his biographies, everything *but* the criticisms on him."<sup>2</sup> There are several objections one might make to this statement. Is biography not a form of criticism? What about criticism *by* rather than *about* the particular poet? Surely not all criticism is bad? And why does Bishop gender the poet male?

Contexts do not provide all of the answers to the many questions her poems and stories ask. In some cases, it feels as if they make things messier. Are we hearing too many allusions in her work, or not enough? What happens when one context contradicts the other? Which context matters more? Why these contexts and not others?

The idea that context can be separated from text is, as Bishop would admit, false. As her career progressed, her employment of dedications, endnotes, and other italicized extra-textual information increased. The idea of a pure, unmediated poetic text disappears. The evidence is there in many of her poems. In "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," her famous statement – "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'" (P 58) – is in part a recognition that nothing we see or do, and certainly nothing we read, is ever really free of other people's interpretations, memories, or touch. "The gilt rubs off the edges / of the pages and pollinates the fingertips" (P 58). We are changed by other people's interpretations of what we have ourselves just read. We can't forget or unread somebody else's marginalia.

Context functions in a similar way. Like the gilt that rubs off on us as we read an old book, pollinating the fingertips, our reading experience is also mediated by somebody else's look, somebody else's politics. "Gilt" encompasses the homonym "guilt": the embarrassment of not having thought of that before, or of somebody else having written it down before you. At the same time, aligning text and context can be a giddy pleasure, even if the edges don't quite match.

\*

### Introduction

3

What does it mean to read an author in context? Primarily, it reveals the author's formative living environments – geographical, familial, historical, artistic, intellectual, social, cultural and political influences – and how those forces play out in creative literary transformation. Readerly reception then determines the ways in which a writer is perceived through time. Elizabeth Bishop's "famous eye" for earthly detail was the initial quality that sparked admiration from fellow poets and continues to amaze just about every person who reads one of her poems. From microscopic attention to patterned fish skin to conceptions of geological morphology over millennia, "that sense of constant re-adjustment" (*P* 12) enables readers to quickly observe the instant amidst the gradation of slow time. Bishop registers the flux of daily light, as well as the historical and cultural forces that change how we see light. Synchrony and diachrony reverberate in everyday perceptions through the voices of her poems, stories, and letters.

The collected contexts in this book provide points of entry, interest, and overview for readers and scholars at all levels. Whether it might be fundamental places such as Nova Scotia, New England, New York, Paris, Florida, or Brazil; the mind-shaping contexts of literary movements, twentieth-century history, music, psychoanalysis, religion, anthropology, and travel; or the way these vectors play out in Bishop's dreams, sense of humour, or her negotiation of gender, race, and sexuality, readers will find what they are looking for. This includes scholarly traces of Bishop studies, and the way her work has been received through time, and as an influence on contemporary poets.

Bishop's publishing history from her late teens to her death in 1979 at the age of sixty-eight demonstrates an early accomplished gift with words that evolves and simmers into seemingly effortless skill in her late, flowing, and sometimes prosaic language. And yet her vast archives, left behind for executors to manage, show that Bishop endlessly revised her seemingly natural work. The trickle of posthumous writing unearthed in the 1980s and 90s gained major attention and impact in 2006 with Alice Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box*, an edition of previously uncollected fragments and poems. Since then, more of Bishop's unpublished writings, especially her letters to psychoanalyst Dr. Ruth Foster have revealed personal history that enables better understanding of Bishop and her work. Newly acquired archival materials have given us crucial information about the final stages of her relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares in 1967 and allowed us to know more about her relationship with Alice Methfessel in the 1970s. Early friendships with Louise Bradley and Rhoda Wheeler Sheehan have also been fleshed out by letters. Quinn's

edition of Bishop's notebooks promises further revelations, as do future editions of her correspondence with Marianne Moore and May Swenson.

While last century's reputation of Bishop as a nearly perfect poet with a modest output has changed to that of a more experimental and prolific author working in and across various genres, this century's new knowledge about Bishop allows deeper insights into the contextual forces that inform her "untidy activity" (*P* 59) and the hard work an apparent genius undergoes to produce what her friend Robert Lowell in a poem memorably called her "casual perfection." The publication of three major volumes of Bishop's correspondence – her selected letters in 1994, an edition of her correspondence with Robert Lowell in 2008, and an edition of her correspondence with *The New Yorker* in 2011 – has enabled us to understand more about her views on cultural politics such as race, class, and gender, as well as her myriad tastes in poetry, visual art, and music. Bishop taught a class on correspondence and in a typically offhand manner, called letters "an art form or something" (*OA* 544). Langdon Hammer's chapter in this book asks what type of "something."

The ways in which Bishop transforms traditional literary musicality into contemporaneous rhythms and voices is perhaps her most subtle yet tremendous accomplishment. The colloquial utterances come to rest in our ears almost without our notice. Yet her words register diverse cultural tones that teach us about what it was like to live in her time and place. Her epigraph for Brazilian gardener "Manuelzinho" states "*A friend of the writer is speaking*" (*P* 94). But who is the writer and who is the writer's friend? Bishop's relationship to the speakers of her poems (and by implication her readers) changes throughout her career. The first person plural that begins the early poem "The Imaginary Iceberg" – "We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship" (*P* 6) – is gradually but not entirely replaced by the first person singular of her final collection, *Geography III* (1976). Successive generations of readers have felt befriended by her. As a welcoming, provocative, and insidious companion, Bishop ingratiates herself upon readers, and then seemingly casually gets us to reconsider just about every conception we ever learned.

In an unfinished talk Bishop titled "Writing poetry is an unnatural act . . .," she cited Coleridge's famous discussion of Wordsworth from *Biographia Literaria* approvingly: "the characteristic fault of our elder poets is the reverse of that which distinguishes too many of our recent versifiers; the one conveying the most fantastic thoughts in the most correct and natural language, the other in the most fantastic language conveying the most trivial thoughts" (*EAP* 207). Bishop, like Coleridge,

## Introduction

5

preferred the former method though she was not above including the odd “fantastic” word like “divagation” or “dialectic” (*P* 191, 207). In the same essay, she pinpointed “the three qualities” she admired in the poetry she liked best: “*Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery*. My three ‘favorite’ poets – not the best poets, whom we all admire, but favorite in the sense of one’s ‘best’ friends,’ etc. are Herbert, Hopkins, and Baudelaire” (*EAP* 208). Bishop’s choice of poetic friends is audacious. She doesn’t identify any of her actual poet friends such as Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, May Swenson, or James Merrill, or indeed any other twentieth-century poet. At Vassar, her English tutor Barbara Swain described her as “an enormously cagey girl who looked at authorities with a suspicious eye and was quite capable of attending to her own education anyway.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps her independence is one of the reasons why she was so respected among her peers? She didn’t take sides in any of the poetry wars, at least not publicly. Privately, though, she always had an opinion.

Across various forms, Bishop can make readers feel as if they are in on her jokes, often with a smirking sense of humour. This compelling and at times spiky companion is someone that is enjoyable to spend time with, an effect often owing to her many parenthetical remarks that undercut and revise her statements, showing multiple perspectives, often unfinished or in the formative process of becoming, as at the end of “The Monument.” Bishop’s love of questions is another factor in this; so too her use of ellipses. The speaker of her poems frequently knows more about animals or botany or geography than the reader does, but we are never made to feel ignorant or stupid for not possessing these facts. Her authority is expressed without ceremony. Indeed, the speaker sometimes knows less at the end of the poem than at the beginning. It is a process of unknowing. Such an experience can be positive. Readers feel they are completing a friend’s thoughts, as if we know her well enough to finish the next sentence. At other times, we are left frightened. A calm world is replaced by a spinning one and we have no idea if or when it will stop.

What about Bishop as a philosopher? Bishop does not go as transcendently far as her mentor Blake, but students of her work do gravitate to newfound understandings of where the finite and infinite overlap. Like Blake, she is not afraid to stare at grains of sand and wonder at their connection to our experience of scale, size, and time. A parenthetical phrase from her poem “Sandpiper” – “no detail too small” (*P* 129) – is a motto of her entire aesthetic. People growing up in the twenty-first century might rightly observe that the habits and practices of older generations largely lead to ruin, yet find themselves at the same time skeptical of

the limited knowledge capacity of peers who look up every fact rather than remembering anything in this age of information overload. So when contemporary students read a twentieth-century writer who can deconstruct the epistemologies of her era while also appreciating the world's natural beauty and diversity of life, young eyebrows may be raised. Bishop anticipates many of the concerns of twenty-first-century life, not least the anxiety that humans are making the planet uninhabitable for ourselves and others. She mourns the death of local cultures and customs and is sensitive to the effects of capitalism and globalization, particularly on countries she knew well like Brazil. She writes about animals as fellow creatures not as humans-in-disguise. Bishop offers such concepts undogmatically with casual rhetorical persuasion. Her questions of mastery, as Bonnie Costello terms them in her book title,<sup>4</sup> are not those of a pedantic parent or didact; yet she quietly provides an ecological model for an enduring planet. In "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the imperial tourist in the early 1950s is not much better than the rapacious Portuguese conquistadores who conquered the country and its indigenous people. In "Cape Breton" the mist that eternally flows through the landscape to unite sky, sea, fish, and birds exhibits more enduring power than the Christian missionaries dotting the landscape with churches on top of the arrowheads that could not adequately defend against them.

In this age of the Anthropocene, Bishop devotes significant energy to animal–human relations. She did her best to present foreign cultures and peoples as accurately as she wrote about Nova Scotia, Florida, or New York, even if she can be criticized for both appropriation and superiority at times, especially with regards to race. Yet her imaginative reach into animal existences such as fish, birds, moose, and insects without hierarchical reason (as one finds in the enlightenment's version of the great chain of being) impresses those of us who think that human dominance has nearly doomed us. Look, for example, at her prose poems, "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics," in which her creatures are used to reflect themselves, the author, and humanity in the first person. "*Giant Snail*" is fittingly "ghost-like" and thinks "Withdrawal is always best" (*P* 164), admiring the waterfalls over black rock that it cannot climb. A model of empathy in its environment, the snail nonetheless has a healthy ego with a beautiful shell it cannot see: "I fill it to perfection."

My wide wake shines, now it is growing dark. I leave a lovely opalescent ribbon: I know this.

But O! I am too big. I feel it. Pity me.

## Introduction

7

If and when I reach the rock, I shall go into a certain crack there for the night. The waterfall below will vibrate through my shell and body all night long. In that steady pulsing I can rest. All night I shall be like a sleeping ear. (*P* 165)

Rarely quoted, this prose poem is signature Bishop: snail slime is a glowing tribute of its perfect debased beauty. At once pushing its own bodily boundaries, the snail meanwhile hides peacefully so it will feel the waterfall's vibrations while it rests. Amazingly oxymoronic, the snail "like a sleeping ear" slumbers attentively. This type of "perfectly useless concentration" is what Bishop admired in the dreams of Darwin (*Pr* 414). Unconscious and conscious at once, this is the waking life we all experience; Bishop posits it in the body of a snail, or another time in the hybrid "Man-Moth." As with her mentor Marianne Moore, Bishop led humans out of themselves into the animal world to reflect back the foibles of human reason. From *North & South* on, Bishop often exposed "The Irrational Element of Poetry," the title of an essay by fellow twentieth-century poet Wallace Stevens.

Bishop's approach to genre continues this story of undoing master narratives. When Robert Giroux in 1994 chose one of her most accomplished poems as the title for her selected letters *One Art*, he suggested that the letter form bleeds into the poem and vice versa as it had with Emily Dickinson, a poet Bishop admired but never felt close to as she did with Herbert or Hopkins. As Bishop's career progressed, her lyric poetry increasingly drew on prose styles. In addition, she is perhaps one of the most painterly of poets. In *Exchanging Hats*, a book of her selected paintings, editor William Benton followed Giroux's example by employing a title from a gender-bending Bishop poem. Just as the letter, prose, lyric, and visual art contribute to Bishop's implosion of genres in her one art, so does her use of translation as a formative poetics enable her to register other languages, ethnicities, and cultures. Fluid and adaptive, these are skills admired and needed for survival today.

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The more one learns about Bishop's life and writing, the more contexts present themselves. Although the beginning and end of her life suggest a certain circularity, or return to origins — she was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, and died just fifty miles away in Boston — a map of her homes, residences and travels tells a different story. While we have represented the main points on her compass, a compass that always pointed



“north” to Nova Scotia as an unpublished poem has it (*P* 313), we could easily have commissioned a whole book on place.

Bishop is celebrated primarily as a poet. We are glad to include chapters on her prose and translations too. At the same time, we note and miss the genres and sub-genres of poetry and prose that might have been given chapters of their own. Our first draft of this book contained a chapter on Renaissance literature. Donne, Herbert, and Shakespeare were constant reference points in her writing. At the beginning of her career, influenced by Ben Jonson, she drafted a couple of masques, one intriguingly titled “The Proper Tears.” Peter Swaab adeptly condenses the contexts of Romantic and Victorian literature into just one chapter. A book double the length might have had space for individual chapters on her debt to Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. She knew Victorian poetry by heart, and not just Tennyson and Browning. We hope somebody is writing an article or thesis on Bishop and Clare, or Bishop and Rossetti. Her lifelong love of the blues was reflected in her teaching of the line, “I hate to see that evenin’ sun go down,” to creative writing students at Harvard. In Brazil she translated many sambas, drawing on the form in several poems, not least “The Burglar of Babylon” and “Pink Dog.” In terms of poetic form, Bishop’s innovative and influential employment of the sestina and villanelle are important turning points in mid-century poetics. For a while it seemed as if every new collection of poetry contained one or other or sometimes both of these forms. Bishop wrote relatively few dramatic monologues and just a few sonnets but when she chose these forms she made them her own. Rachel Trousdale provides a wonderful chapter on humour here. If we had considered humour as a poetic form, we might have included further chapters on her comic verse or her love of nonsense writing. At the other end of the tonal scale, Bishop’s elegies are increasingly praised by readers and scholars and not just for the elegies she finished. A cursory glance at the contents page of *Edgar Allan Poe* suggests Bishop had at least half a collection of unfinished or unpublished elegies. Charles Berger discussed “Bishop’s Buried Elegies” in *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century*.<sup>5</sup> May Swenson admired the love poems *The New Yorker* refused to publish, John Ashbery her triplets. Other critics have noted her employment of parentheses and question marks, or her use of pronouns. In the introduction to the *Companion*, we hoped somebody would write an article or book on Bishop’s prose poetry. We are glad Vidyan Ravinthiran, a contributor to this book, took up the challenge. Eleanor Cook’s *Elizabeth Bishop at Work* is particularly sharp on what she calls Bishop’s “ordinary diction.”<sup>6</sup> She also pinpoints Bishop’s mastery of poetic genre. About



## Introduction

9

*North & South*, she notes, “Bishop displays her virtuosity with forms by shaping every poem differently.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to being a painter herself, Bishop also wrote about visual art. Unlike many other twentieth-century poets, her ekphrastic poetry does not often depend upon our knowledge of a famous antecedent. Indeed, she often makes jokes out of forgetting or misremembering other artists. In the case of two poems, both inspired by paintings by a relatively unknown uncle, the magic of the poem depends on our not knowing the object she is looking at. When her prose was first collected in 1984, Robert Giroux divided it into two categories: “fiction” and “memoir.” As Lloyd Schwartz observes in his editor’s note to the 2011 edition of Bishop’s *Prose*, the distinction between “fiction and memoir” is often blurred:

In such pieces as “In the Village,” “Gwendolyn,” “The Country Mouse,” “The U.S.A. School of Writing,” and “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” she treats what are clearly autobiographical narratives as if they were fiction. Other stories, some bordering on the surrealistic, are more obviously “made up,” while such pieces as “Gregorio Valdes, 1979–1939” and her extended remembrance of her mentor and friend, Marianne Moore, “Efforts of Affection,” land more firmly on the memoir end of this polarity. (*Pr* vii)

When collecting her prose pieces for a possible collection, Bishop couldn’t decide on a title, hovering between *In the Village & Other Stories* and *In the Village: Stories & Essays*. Did she always write with more than one genre in mind?

Bishop’s reputation continues to evolve and grow. Her poetry has featured prominently in two Hollywood films, *In Her Shoes* in 2005 and *Still Alice* in 2014, and in the twelve-part TV series *Normal People* (2020), an acclaimed adaption of Sally Rooney’s novel. In 2013, *Flores Raras e Banalíssimas/Reaching for the Moon*, a feature film based on Bishop’s relationship with Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares, was released. Directed by Bruno Barreto and loosely based on the biography by Brazilian writer Carmen Oliveira (1995 in Portuguese; 2002 in English translation by Neil Besner), the film stars Miranda Otto as Bishop and Gloria Pires as Macedo Soares. In 2015, the feminist filmmaker Barbara Hammer created *Welcome to this House*, a documentary film on Bishop’s homes and travels. Whereas both Hollywood films emphasise Bishop’s status as poet, *Flores Raras* and *Welcome to this House* focus on Bishop as a queer icon. We have yet to see a film that does both.

We can observe Bishop’s changing reputation in other places too, not least in poetry anthologies. In Bishop’s lifetime, her most anthologized

poem was “The Fish.” Its repeated inclusion in similar-sounding anthologies eventually frustrated her. In a letter to Robert Lowell in 1970, she threatened “to turn that damned FISH into a sonnet, or something very short and quite different. (I seem to get requests for it every day for anthologies with titles like READING AS EXPERIENCE, or EXPERIENCE AS READING, each anthologizer insisting that he is doing something completely different from every other anthologizer . . . But I’m sure this is an old story to you.)” (*WIA* 663). What did anthologists like about the poem? If we are to believe Bishop’s account to Lowell, they liked its account of an experience. But what type of experience? Read in the context of Bishop’s career and eighty years of subsequent literary history, it does showcase many of Bishop’s most characteristic gestures and mannerisms, in particular a slow and remarkably tender examination of an animal that the poem’s speaker relates to but can never know or see completely. “Half out of water,” the fish looks a lot like some of the things she has seen on land. She compares his skin to wallpaper, the torn fishline in his jaw to military medals. For all her effort at comparison, at finding likeness, the fish never becomes fully human in the poem. He remains half out, half in the water, half seen but also half invisible. Half-looks and hybrid creatures are everywhere in Bishop’s first book, *North & South*. Do we ever see round or through any object fully in these poems? Can any body be known well, even one’s own reflection? Read in such terms, “The Fish” remains a strange and unusual poem about our being in the world, in particular animal–human relations. Bishop’s fish isn’t transformed, as in many animal poems, into a myth or symbol. It stays, one might say, fish-like. The poem acknowledges a debt to but marks a swerve away from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, replacing young William’s rowing through the water (“I struck and struck”) with an equally active but less transcendent focus on sight (“I stared and stared”). Whereas Wordsworth looks at things to see through them, Bishop looks and looks to see what’s actually there. He is on the move to translate present feelings and sights into future memories, future words; she is content to find a poem here, in the messy moment of the poem’s coming-into-being. At the same time, Bishop does include a Romantic-sounding epiphany in the poem (“everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!”), one based on the coming together of oil and water, before letting the fish go. Many poets would end on the miracle of that rainbow, celebrated three times and underlined with an exclamation mark. Bishop ends on a diminuendo (“And I let the fish go”), a release of the fish literally