

‘Eye of the Outsider’: The Confessional Mode and Elizabeth Bishop’s “In The Waiting Room”

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Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop’s current status and critical acclaim as the most highly regarded American poet of the mid-twentieth century is well known. She is easily the most widely taught American woman poet of the twentieth century. Invariably, Bishop is the most widely taught woman poet in English language after Emily Dickinson (especially in American universities).¹ What however is less well known is the consensually implausible attempt by some critics to smuggle and find room for Bishop within the seemingly overcrowded, highly elitist space of confessional poetry by default. This default inclusion of Bishop into the confessional poets’ class is as a result of some muddle readings of Bishop’s poetry.

Like her contemporaries, Bishop realises what was on offer as far as poetry is concerned in the wake of Modernism; but unlike other poets of her generation she does not consider nor attempt to turn the modern poet’s varied and contradictory values into a point of opposition. Her poetry subsequently shows no sign of a “breakthrough”: the so-called throwing off of the modernist shackles. But – and this is important – she strengthens some aspects of Modernism that other poets ignored. Bishop’s contemporaries (the poets in the confessional circle that she is often linked with) have the same attitude to autobiography and their immediate past – confessional poetry’s main ingredients. They also have the same regard towards lyric form: whether it is traditional or free. Form for the confessional poets as it is for Bishop represents their poetic expression, not something that could be waded through. Yet form and our sense of what constitutes a confessional poem cannot be restricted to a specific style of writing. The poetry of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop for instance are influenced by a realisation of what is “up for grabs” after Modernism; their differing styles constitute equally genuine reactions to Modernism. And as far as Lowell and Bishop are both seriously sceptical of the admission of social relevance to any specific style, they have a lot more in common. But much more than Lowell Bishop is aware that all types of poetry, as linguistic artefact, give one or more avenue via which the world is encountered or experienced. Yet a persistent doubt about conventional form lingers to remind us of her apotheosis, in spite of

the fact that she has become the most acclaimed poet among her contemporaries. Many critics and readers alike have tried to enhance her prestige by misreading her slow and surprising development as a triumph of freer style, direct confession, and more overt political concerns. To do this is to misrepresent Bishop through an old-fashioned idea of Modernism – just as that idea of modernism is in other perspectives outdated.² Therefore this essay sets out to explore Bishop's poem, "In the Waiting Room" within the paradigm of the confessional mode in order to show how flawed a reading would be to regard Bishop as a confessional poet.

Confessional Poetry

Certainly, there is no gainsaying that "confessional poetry" is contentious in terms of its definitions as to who really are its practitioners. To illustrate the contention two definitions will suffice: one is by Thomas Travisano, while the other is by Jed Rasula:

[t]hroughout the 1960s, 1970s, and well into the 1980s the confessional model remained influential with academic critics and literary historians across a wide spectrum, perhaps because it offered a humanly compelling and rather clear-cut way of evaluating poetry. Poems involving daring self-revelation could be assumed to be bold and sincere.³

[t]he antics and agonies of the celebrated confessional generation might be seen, in part, as a desperate flailing of mortals deceived by their predecessors into the divinity of the poetic calling.⁴

From the foregoing perhaps the most obvious question is whether or not confessionalism was/is a significant phase in American poetry, marking an important chasm between New Criticism and Modernism? Or is it merely an easy and essentially restricted label employed to explicate certain features in postwar American poetry? And does the label simply describe a set of poets who desperately attempted to lay bare their raw emotion in an ambitiously self-indulgent manner? Or, in the end does it portend a break from a seemingly all-encompassing dictatorship of lyrical decorum, indeed a tyranny of poetic finesse or fitness?

As many critics argue, Lowell's shift of style in the 1950s from a poetry modelled and moulded by the formalism of new criticism to a more opened, relaxed, demotic and trenchantly self-revelatory voice was indeed an important change; but no one can safely argue that Lowell's shift was unique and all-pervasive among the poets who are also writing at the time.

Conversely, there is no denying the obvious that confessionalism denoted a tremendous change in the way and manner so-called mainstream American poets regarded poetry after such a change. Confessional poems were written (mostly) in the first person narration with a blurred distance wedged between the speaker and the poet. They were often complexly emotional; heavily autobiographical and openly narrative in texture and structure. While the characteristic elements of a confessional poem include an uninhibited self-revelation of often painful private experience; dialectical mixture of private and public matter and what Gould Axelrod calls “an intimate, unornamented style”.⁵

Conventionally and no less historically it is assumed that the beginning of confessionalism was in the poems of Lowell in the 1950s. And the most potent period of the movement lasted till the middle of the 1960s. The phase included Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959), W. D. Snodgrass’ *Heart’s Needle* (1959), Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* (1965), Anne Sexton’s *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* (1964-72). Interestingly, this conflation of different poets to this phase is nothing spectacular; what however is surprising, if not entirely out of place, is that other poets of the period such as Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell and Theodore Roethke have also been linked with the confessionals.

Elizabeth Bishop and Confessionalism

Despite Bishop’s inclusion in the confessional movement, her poems, as it were, resist simple, reductive classification – but this is not tantamount to ruling out the plausibility that her work responds to, indeed often appears to demand autobiographical reading. And in spite of her well known, lifelong friendship with Robert Lowell and her generational ties with the confessional poets, Bishop’s poetry seems to exude a higher level of poetic reticence and is full of restraint that appears to be largely absent in such poets as Berryman, Sexton or even Lowell. According to Seamus Heaney, Bishop “was personally reticent, opposed to and incapable of self-aggrandizement, the very embodiment of good manners”.⁶ And for Joanne Feit Diehl “Bishop’s restraint has an ominous quality more suggestive than confession”.⁷ For Bishop, as it were, belongs to no formal school or group of poetry or poets: her poetry is devoid of any preferred theme; she is a poet who, it appears, eschews prejudices. The only time she comes close to outlining her poetic aesthetic is a mid 1930s notebook entry in which as Jonathan Ellis says she subtly seeks to explain the relationship, if any, between imagination and

reality:⁸

Reality [...] then is something like a huge circus tent, folding, adjustable, which we carry around with us and set up wherever we are. It possesses the magical property of being able to take on characteristics of whatever place we are in, in fact it can become identical with it.⁹

Opposing the way confessional poetry distorted the poet into no more than a diarist and the reader into an accomplice, or mere confessor, Bishop, as her fellow poet Adrienne Rich argues, believes that the bond between the poet and readers is identified not by any deep intimacy but by sheer distance and wanton impersonality.¹⁰ As such her poetry will easily refuse collapsing into the confessional mode by its own resistance to the more intimately personal voices of her contemporaries. As this essay hopes to show Bishop's poetry, particularly "In the Waiting Room" tests the strength of the so-called confessional mode as a means of reading and writing poetry that is both personal and autobiographical in its conception, linguistic and textual nature.

According to one vague, incongruous definition of the confessional poem by M. H. Abrams, it is "a type of narrative and lyric verse... which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experience of the poet's own life." If we accept this definition, many of Bishop's poems would be appropriate for the label.¹¹ Bishop's turbulent life would appear to have qualified her as one of the most suitable candidates for the confessional poet. Her father died just eight months after her birth, and her mother (seriously affected by her father's demise) spent many years in mental asylum. In 1916 her mother was diagnosed as insane as a result of which Bishop would never see her again. After living with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia for a year, she was taken back to live with some of her relatives in Massachusetts. As a child Bishop suffered many health problems, which scuttled her education, preventing her from regular attendance of school. Subsequently, she felt more at ease in company of books than in that of people. As a woman poet who is not known to be a member of any literary movement and nearly all of whose friends and contemporaries were men, she felt sidelined within the larger literary and cultural context.¹² Many of her poems treat, directly or more subtly, issues of alienation, loss or isolation; especially those poems written after the death (by suicide) of her lover and long time companion, Lota de Macedo Soares in 1967.¹³

Despite writing a clutch of poems in the first-person narrative voice Bishop's tone and approach appears more divorced, remotely distanced from

the confessional mode, even when such poems are personal or autobiographical, derived from her child or adulthood. Her style clearly deviates from that of her contemporaries like Sexton or Plath, who believed that the more intensely they searched their own lives in their poetry, the more confessional, the more apt and perfect the ensuing poems would be. Although Bishop goes all the way in her admiration of the poetry of her friend and confidante, Robert Lowell, she continues to express doubt about Lowell's ability to "confess" so much about himself and his private life in his poems. In fact Bishop deplors confessionalism outright, which she regards as nothing more than a flatfooted, thinly veiled, literally confessional art. Yet her rejection is somehow ambivalent. In a letter to Lowell she writes:

In general, I deplore the "confessional" – however, when you wrote *Life Studies* [Lowell's 1959 collection] perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now – ye gods – anything goes, and I am so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on. All that *can* be done – but at the same time one surely should have a feeling that one can trust the writer – not to distort, tell lies, etc.¹⁴

Elsewhere, in an interview she further makes known her aversion to the confessional mode: "I *hate* confessional poetry, and so many people are writing it these days. Besides, they seldom have anything interesting to "confess" anyway".¹⁵ And by 1976 when Bishop published her last volume, *Geography III*, the expedient question of how to transmute autobiography into confessional poetry was as Heather Cass White is at pains to show at the centre of American poetry: any number of poems it catalysed were horrendous to the distinctly private Bishop.¹⁶ Yet as much as she may have disliked the confessional mode, Bishop feels indisputably challenged by it at the same time, especially in the poetry of her close friend, contemporary and rival, Lowell and her co-competitor for literary prizes, Randall Jarrell.¹⁷

"In the Waiting Room": Paradox of Identity

Although Lee Edelman's influential essay on "In the Waiting Room" discusses the poem's literal references thoroughly, showing how Bishop undermines the supposedly stable distinction between inside and outside, male and female, literal and figurative, human and bestial, and indeed other critics have talked about the poem at length, none so far attempts to situate the poem within the context of whether it fulfils or not the expectation of the confessional mode (just as they may have claimed Bishop to be a confessional

poet, and just as it can also be demonstrated that her work can as well demand autobiographical readings).¹⁸ One can perhaps argue that in “In the Waiting Room”, Bishop lets in instances of private revelation, but even then it cannot be called a confessional poem.

First published in the *New Yorker* on 17 July 1971 on page 34 and later collected in her last collection, *Geography III* (1976) the poem best signifies the difficulty of reading Bishop poetry under the emblem of the confessional mode even though it is well known that at one time Bishop requested the help of Lowell with the poem in a letter:

Perhaps you can tell me what's the matter with this poem [...] I really mean it, and say what you think – I'll scrap it, if necessary. I like the idea – but know there's something very wrong and can't seem to tell what it is [...] Maybe it should be cut – maybe it should rhyme – maybe it's the fault of the damned METER.¹⁹

The poem is first and foremost a narrative poem in which Bishop not only reveals herself by her name but also attempts to deflect outwardly the very experience it sets out to narrate.²⁰ In the poem a seven-year old girl (seen by many as being some representation of Bishop herself) is in a dentist office, reading a magazine, (the *National Geographic*) while waiting for her aunt who is being attended to by the dentist.²¹ Pictures of African women's breasts in the magazine scare the girl precisely at the very moment when the girl assume she hears her aunt's agonizing cry of pain from the dentist's room; just then the girl realises that in fact it is her own voice she hears:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* Of pain
– Aunt Consuelo's voice –
not very loud or long,
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – we falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover

of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.²²

The significant moment of the poem happens when the girl, “Elizabeth” hears a cry of pain which disorients her since it appears to come from different places all at once: quite literally from people, herself and her aunt. And at this climatic juncture the poem changes course that, to a large extent, is atypical of the representative confessional progression towards self-declaration. Instead of establishing a more obvious, direct relationship with the reader by giving a reinforced vision (some would say “version”) of the self, Bishop deliberately distorts the idea of self by resisting to give any unified form of both the personal and poetic self for examination. Bishop not just chooses to merge Aunt Consuelo’s cry of pain with that of the persona – later in the poem identified as “Elizabeth” – but she involves them both in the wider socio-historical reality that the *National Geographic* represents. As many critics have argued the focal point of the poem is not solely the personal realisation that the persona’s cry of painful self-awareness suggested, it is also a wider awareness of a society as a whole. Elizabeth Dodd puts it succinctly: “the young Elizabeth is not really discovering her sexuality so much as her own participation in the human race”.²³ It can also be said that the persona realises her own place in the sexual and racial otherness of the African women she encounters when she reads the *National Geographic* and finds:

black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.

It is at this moment that the persona hears a cry of pain “from inside” the dentist’s office and even though she recognises Aunt Consuelo’s voice, the persona herself could be the one speaking: since the sounds comes “from inside” of her. In any case, the persona identifies another person’s voice as her own, (just as she also realises her otherness in relation to the women in *National Geographic*). Therefore any assumption of a world “inside” unproblematically different from other cultures’ sexual and racial dimensions fades away:

But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.
Why should you be one, too?

The persona is recognising that whichever kind of selfhood she has is, invariably, a transient social construct; that she has matter of factly never been “inside”, cut off from the horror of war, the disorientation of (adult) sexuality, or what she had been brought up to accept as the primitive culture of other people. And the poet’s repeated deployment of the word “inside” vindicates this assertion. For, if Aunt Consuelo is “inside” the dentist’s room at the beginning of the poem, if the “inside” of a volcano is filled up with fire and ash, then it cannot be any different from the world “outside”.

The poem ends, however, with a deliberate shift from the personal (awareness) towards a wider historical perspective: the waiting room has subsequently turned “too hot” and precarious. Yet the persona’s understanding of a world “outside” is at last nothing threatening but an accepted certainty:

The war was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

It ends rather calmly admitting that the racially and sexually symbolic metaphor of “those awful hanging breast” does not undermine the self, instead it shows the ways in which the self, no matter certain and precarious, is, indubitably, constructed – this is merely in the character of selfhood. In the last analysis, to assume, as Bishop does, that the contingency of the self is simultaneously its greatest significance is to imply that “In the Waiting Room” starts as a poem of “disappearance” and ends, at least suggestively, as a powerful poem of “affirmation”.

At the end, by particularising the specific date (“February 1918”), place (“Worcester, Massachusetts”), and historical context (First World War), Elizabeth Bishop turns against the trend of the typical confessional poem to dwell on the autobiographical at the expense of other things. She is, by this token, more attune to self-examination rather than to self-enactment. Her representative poetic tendency is not that which characterises the poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, who are more likely to employ symbols and images as metaphors of selfhood that is excessively mythologized in a performative narrative indicative of self-discovery and revelation. In contradistinction, we have an enactment of distance or rather self-analysis presupposed by the strategic switch from narration to direct

address to the self:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.

The persona is keenly self-aware in manner that it is invariably logical and self-reflexive rather than dramatic. And in an attempt to stop “the sensation of falling off / the...world...” – a metaphor that may suggest a fear of being trapped into a constructed identity like that of her aunt or literally of losing track of her life – the persona turns to the fact that she will be seven years old soon. This recognition is not unsettling in the manner in which the pictures in the *National Geographic* are. Yet it also shows her to be in a certain social milieu, which seems to indicate that who we are is defined by not just our age but also by our racial and sexual orientations.

The use of double pronouns in the end of the poem also catalyses some form of vertiginous self-awareness (“but I felt: you are an *I*”). And the swift switch from “*I*” to “you” brings about instability, as the voice (or the narrative self) changes from an “*I*” into a self being observed (“you); and then to a socially constructed self which is both an “*I*” and an “Elizabeth”. The persona *is* identified as “Elizabeth” and thus given a social responsibility and is then ironically labelled as one of “them”. Identifying with “them” (i.e. the people in the waiting room and her aunt with all their “shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boot”) is no less surprising to the persona who, prior to the identification has only been herself; she has not belong to any group which prompts her to ask:

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities...
held us together
or made us all just one?

Perhaps if a proper confessional poet writes “In the Waiting Room” such declaration might have been turned into a painful self-interrogation or

resistance towards conformity, but in her typical reticence Bishop reaches a controlled, speculative solution:

How – I didn't know any
word for it – how "unlikely"...
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The use of the word "unlikely" implies it may be a word the persona gets from grown-ups (like her aunt). Surprisingly the persona has to scrounge a word from "them" to enable her reveal her feelings about the transformation she undergoes. Nonetheless the experience of the persona in the waiting room is nothing exceptional or insightful as the scare quotes around the word "unlikely" appears to suggest.

Conclusion

What emerges from the foregoing is that Elizabeth Bishop's poetry does not dispense with the idea – attenuated, as it is – of poetry as deeply impersonal, uncompromisingly apolitical or completely closed. She does not, as "In the Waiting Room" shows, have to indulge in any mythologized, overblown gesture towards the autobiographical in order to express her qualities as a poet. Bishop's eccentricities – her desire to experiment with poetic forms without necessarily indulging in them – shows why some critics either mistake her for a confessional poet, or bemoan a lack of deeper frankness in her poetry. One can say then poetic that forms like confessionalism to Bishop are things that might be compulsory or irresistible to a poet at an earlier stage of poetic career, but which must eventually be cast aside for the *unequivocal* employment of more purposeful and instant experience. Indeed Bishop and her contemporaries, the confessionals, would not have come to terms on what the significance of experience is, but each of them would have easily agreed that poetic form like the confessional mode could be an inhibition to the important values: something that needs to be "pierced through".

Bishop is at ease with the idea – incongruous to the confessional mode – that a poem should not attempt to waft through its linguistic texture, just as the self should not be divorced from the social fabric out of which it is constituted. In the last analysis no matter how we choose to read the poem

one thing is certain though: "In the Waiting Room" represents the terrific reserve of a woman who simply declines to make her poetry a rendezvous for revealing her personal grief. Perhaps it may also read like the intention of a writer who so heroically suppresses her own feelings: she can only reveal in the most reticent and ambiguous manner.

¹ For more on the canonisation of Elizabeth Bishop and her influence in American poetry see Dana Gioia, "Elizabeth Bishop: From Coterie to Canon", *The New Criterion*, 22:8 (April 2004) available on <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/22/apr04/gioia.html>; and David G. Williams, "Responses to Elizabeth Bishop: Ann Stevenson, Eavan Boland and Jo Shapcott", *English*, 44, (1995), 229-45, and Christopher MacGowan, "Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)" in *Twentieth Century American Poetry*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 95-8.

² Charles Altieri discusses the use of over-simplified and old-fashioned sense of Modernism as a basis of reading poetry; for more see especially "Postmodern Poetics Unfair to Modernist Poetry" in *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 380-85.

³ Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 34.

⁴ Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1970*, (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 58.

⁵ Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 98.

⁶ Seamus Heaney, "From The Government of the Tongue" in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber, 2002), 184.

⁷ Joanne Feit Diehl, "Bishop's Sexual Politics" in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*, ed. Lombardi, Marilyn May, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 25.

⁸ Jonathan Ellis, "Elizabeth Bishop: North and South" in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Roberts, Neil, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 458.

⁹ Quoted in Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 129.

¹⁰ Rich suggests that the intimacy is completely absent in Bishop's (later) poetry where she seems to be interested, rather, in the way people are marked out from one another by differences of class and race. But the importance of the distance that Rich suggests could be Bishop's expression of her own experiences of intimacy. For more see Adrienne Rich, "The Eye of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop", *Boston Review* (April 1983), 15-17.

¹¹ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th edtn., (New Delhi: Harcourt India, 1999), 45.

¹² Apart from Bishop's well known refusal to be included in any women's only anthology or journal, she also detests being called "a woman poet"; for she believes as Brett C. Millier says in her *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 333, that poetry is an art no matter who writes, as such she never willingly takes up her position in the tradition of woman poets.

¹³ For an excellent account of Bishop's life see Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) and Brett C. Millier *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: The Selected Letters*, ed. Giroux, Robert, (London: Pimlico, 1996), 562, original emphasis.

¹⁵ Wesley Wehr, "Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes" in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed., Monteiro, George, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 45.

¹⁶ Heather Cass White, "Elizabeth Bishop's Calling", *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 48:2 (Summer 2002), 132.

¹⁷ In the case of Jarrell, her rivalry appears to be in the feeling of insecurity that even though she was and still is arguably the better poet, Jarrell was having far better themes. In 1956 when Bishop won the Pulitzer she wrote to Lowell, "I honestly feel from the bottom of my heart that it should have gone to Randall, for some of his war

poems... I really do seem on the frivolous side compared to him..." Bishop, *One Art*, 319.

¹⁸ Lee Edelman, "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room'", *Contemporary Literature*, 26 (Summer 1985), 179-96. Other notable essays and books that discuss the poem or background to it include: Michael Happy, "'The Round, Turning World': Place, Memory and Metaphor in 'In the Waiting Room'" in *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place*, ed., Barry, Sandra, et al. (Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau, 2001), 229-36, Marjorie Levinson, "Picturing Pleasure: Some Poems by Elizabeth Bishop" in *What's Left of Theory? New Works on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed., Butler, Judith, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 192-239, David Thoreen, "The Girl Whose Voice Was Her Aunt's: Heredity and Identity in Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room'" in *In Worcester, Massachusetts: Essays on Elizabeth Bishop*, ed., Laura, Jehn, et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 43-51, Jim Powell, "'In the Waiting Room'", *Triquarterly*, 81 (Spring-Summer 1991), 145-78, Marilyn May Lombardi, "The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art", *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 38:2 (Summer 1992), 152-75, Victoria Harrison, "The Dailiness of Her Center: Elizabeth Bishop's Late Poetry", *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 37:3 (Fall 1991), 253-72, Joanne Feit Diehl, "Aggression and Reparation: Bishop and the Matter-of-Fact" in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed., Kelly, Lionel, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 29-40 and Anderson, Linda and Jo Shapcott, *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, (Highgreen, Tarsset Bloodaxe/ University of Newcastle, 2002).

¹⁹ Quoted from Goldensohn, *The Biography of a Poetry*, 230. (This letter has not been collected in *One Art*). Interestingly, Goldensohn is of the view that Lowell's influence on the poem is evident even before Bishop asks him for help; Goldensohn compares a scene from Lowell's prose memoir, "91 Revere Street" (from *Life Studies*) where the young Lowell sees himself overhearing his mother's uncontrolled complaints to Admiral De Stahl (who forced Lowell's father to go back to duty at the Naval Base on Christmas eve). Goldensohn thinks this passage has a direct appeal to Bishop's poem particularly in the last few lines.

²⁰ According to Millier (*Life and the Memory of It*, 444) the poem is Bishop's first in three years; and in its openness and self-revelation it is indeed unique from all other poems she published: the three years hiatus makes the difference.

²¹ To critics like Tom Paulin in his essay, "Dwelling without Roots: Elizabeth Bishop" in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber, 1992), 197, Bishop's failure to imbibe an overtly obvious feminist position has been seen as a rejection of feminism, but Goldensohn (*The Biography of a Poetry*, 46) regards the speaker of the poem as "palpably feminine".

²² Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room" in *Complete Poems*, intr., Paulin, Tom, (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004), 159-61. All further references are to this.

²³ Elizabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 109.

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