

Alethia Erandi Ochoa Manrique

M. A. Julia Constantino Reyes

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### **On Elizabeth Bishop**

Since childhood Elizabeth Bishop experienced a nomadic lifestyle. Her travelling life began when she was born in February 8, 1911, in Worcester, Massachusetts and had to move with her grandparents in Nova Scotia after her parents died. Bishop had an unusual childhood due to her continual changes of houses from relative to relative provoking her to be a fragile and asthmatic girl. In 1918 she began to live with her mother's oldest sister in Cliftondale, Massachusetts, and decided that it would be her home for a certain long time. Her aunt Maud Boomer Shepherdson introduced Bishop to books, especially, those written by Victorian authors. In her youth she attended several schools and published her first poems in student magazines.

As a young poet Elizabeth Bishop was influenced by her closed friends the poets Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell. However, they only helped her at first to motivate her to write and find her own poetic style; then to publish some of her poems and to be known in the American literary context of the twentieth century. Eventually, Bishop would create and master her own poetic vision and language, which would be characterized by turning

ordinary images into great “description[s] of places through full, loving, naturalistic detail” (Goldensohn 101).

Taking into account the previous idea on the importance of space, most of Bishop’s poems highlight contrasting locations that are based on her multiple images of travels, and places she lived. Her poetic style focuses on the creation of a conscious spatial interpretation that considers surfaces and depths in order to achieve different dimensions and meanings. As the critic Lorrie Goldensohn comments on the importance of space in Bishop’s poems: “The urge to move and see around a thing in context, to place and measure through multiplying perspectives” (Goldensohn 104). In other words, Bishop’s poetic vision intends to emphasize the ordinary conception of the world through displaying the imperceptible characteristics of things by the multiplicity of perspectives. In this manner, by means of a close-up focalization Bishop creates in her poems different levels of space and understanding that guide the reader from a new inventive universe to the actual earthly perception or vice versa.

In her first collection of poems *North & South* (1946) Elizabeth Bishop manifests her poetical purpose of emphasizing the conception of place. “Bishop’s first collection of poems, curiously enough, [presents] the first appearance of place as subject [with an analytic style], an odd, pervasive blending of the fantastic and the schematic from which any figure of the poet as person is also absent” (Goldensohn 99). In this manner, in order to highlight space Bishop expresses in her poems different possible meanings of spatial metaphors that are used “as a means of recognizing both inner and outer dimensions, as [if] through them [Bishop] finds her way to both poetic and personal identity” (Goldensohn 101). Thus, in order to explain and exemplify Elizabeth Bishop’s spatial vision, the aim of this essay is to analyze the two main poems “The Map” and “The Imaginary Iceberg” from her first collection of poems *North & South* that portray external and internal close-up focalizations through the use of spatial metaphors, which present different surfaces in order to achieve and understand

contrasting depths of meaning that the poetic voices propose by means of different dimensions.

To begin with the analysis, “The Map” is the first poem of Bishop’s poetic collection *North & South* that introduces the importance of place throughout the following poems in the book. In this manner, “The Map” seems to represent a threshold of new spatial dimension to the poetic collection, “as if from the beginning Bishop has known that her interest in space and in geography is integral to her positioning herself in poetry and in the world” (Goldensohn 101). Thus in the first stanza the poetic voice creates an inherent interconnection between earth and water as a manner of establishing a place by means of the use of alliteration. In this fashion, through combining words by sound the poetic voice presents the binary of earth and water that suggests the idea of the external world and the importance of knowing its surface.

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.

Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges

showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges

where weeds hang to the simple blue from green. (1-4)

Once the coexistence of land and water is introduced the spatial vision acquires depth: “Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,” (5). This line announces a possible movement of the poem –from surface to depth– as suggesting the importance of knowing the exterior, and then the internal side. Likewise, the motion from surface to depth is parallel to the perception of the whole poem that also portrays a movement from a general perspective to a particular view. The former movement from general to particular will be emphasized and commented in the final stanza.

As the critic Mia L. McIver explains, “Bishop’s practice is one of poetic layering. Layers of images are connected through the metaphors around which they turn. They bear traces of one another and tip each other toward new linguistic formulations” (194). Therefore in the second stanza the poetic voice is more specific in the use of language as if it knows more about the spatial vision and now it is able to be more particular, and thus to provide names:

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.

Labrador’s yellow, where the moony Eskimo

has oiled it [...] (9-11)

Moreover the poetic voice states in the middle of the poem (lines 11-13) its aim of the spatial vision of the whole poem. This is to say, the poetic voice seems to observe the map “under a glass” in order to acquire a better and more delicate, profound perspective as through a close-up focalization. In this manner, by means of the use of comparison the poetic voice suggests the different perspectives of perceiving the spatial vision of the map “under a glass.” On the one hand, the first comparison “as if they were expected to blossom” might imply to have a finer perception of the exterior, and thus of knowledge of things. On the other hand, in the second comparison “as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish” the poetic voice might indicate the importance of sublime perception when one notices the minute things, which are almost invisible for the everyday eye, and recognizes their extraordinary pure genuineness.

[...] We can stroke these lovely bays,

under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,

or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.

In addition, as I mentioned before, the poetic voice's aim of spatial vision is situated in the middle of the poem. In this manner, taking into account the physical position of the lines 11-13 the poetic voice's idea of spatial vision is in the centre as holding and controlling the rest of lines. Therefore, once again, there is a metaphorical and structural emphasis on the relevance of place.

From the second stanza the poetic voice begins to make a close-up of the image of the map itself, leaving behind the extraordinary first visions of an imaginative universe. Now the poetic voice focuses on the tangible one dimension map when it mentions the printer who imprints maps. “-the printer here experiencing the same excitement” (16). Nevertheless, once again through the use of comparison –“ as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.” (17)– the poetic voice is not able to detach completely the ordinary vision of a map from the previous creative image explained in the first stanza of the coexistence between earth and water – which projects different depths and nuances– because it reminds a sublime experience through the word “emotion” and its various possible meanings of sensations. In fact, this idea is reinforced in the following lines: “These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger/ like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.” (18-19)

Through experiencing “confusion about the relation of foreground and background, about top and bottom, depth and solidity” (Goldensohn 105) in the poem, before the final close-up image of the map itself the poetic voice finishes to depict in the third stanza the aforementioned creative universe in the beginning of the poem. Thus, by means of paradox the poetic voice portrays the relation of earth and water with unusual characteristics as reminding the first spatial vision of an imaginative dimension of surface. For instance: “Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,/lending the land their waves’ own conformation” (20-21). In this fashion, in the last lines of the poem the poetic voice contrasts the previous imaginative dimension of surface with a conventional conception of maps with

political divisions and different colors to differentiate the countries. “Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?” (24). However, even though it seems to be a traditional description of an actual map, the poetic voice manifests a social connotation when it compares historians’ and map-makers’ works. In this manner, the poetic voice proposes that topography may portray equality because all countries are on a same drawing, this is either on the picture of a map with horizontal exterior or in its creative dimension of surface. “Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West” (26). Moreover, the idea of equality is reinforced through the delicacy of “map-makers’ colors” rather the historians’ because the former may be abrupt upon creating not only territorial boundaries, but also social, cultural, political and religious divisions.

Secondly, Bishop’s poem “The Imaginary Iceberg” presents an internal close-up, which contrasts with the external close-up focalization of “The Map” that only regards the importance of surface. Nevertheless, in the second poem to analyze, from the title itself there is a suggestion of an introspective creative close-up focalization, which will culminate until the last stanza, through the mention of the word “Imaginary.” Thus, in the first stanza, from the very beginning of the poem the poetic voice proposes a new atmosphere that portrays a struggle between stillness and movement through the image of the iceberg. “We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship,/although it meant the end of travel” (1-2). In these two first lines the stillness that may represent “the iceberg” seems to have a negative connotation because it implies “the end of travel” as if something is paralyzed without progress.

Nonetheless, in the following lines the reader notices that stillness and movement are not opposites that manifest a dichotomy, but they are a duality because both concepts establish coexistence through the figure of speech, the oxymoron. “Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock/and all the sea were moving marble” (3-4). In this manner, whilst the adjectives “cloudy” and “moving” imply motion, the nouns “rock” and “marble” suggest

stillness. Therefore, once the poetic voice combines the connotations of movement and stillness the reader appreciates that “the iceberg” and its meaning of immobility seems to be no longer negative. In fact, the fifth line repeats, “We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship;” (5) creating an echo of the first line of the poem, and emphasizes the new connotation of the duality. Moreover, the solemnity and exaltation of the first stanza resembles the poetic form the ode because the poetic voice venerates the magnanimity of the sea and iceberg by means of the coexistence of movement and stillness.

O solemn, floating field,  
 are you aware an iceberg takes repose  
 with you, and when it wakes may pasture on your snows? (9-11)

In the second stanza the spatial metaphor changes its perspective. This is to say, from now on the ship seems to be immobile, and the iceberg is moving.

This is a scene a sailor’d give his eyes for.  
 The ship’s ignored. The iceberg rises  
 and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles  
 correct ellipses in the sky. (12-15)

Moreover, the iceberg does not longer move in the sea, but in the immensity of the sky. Once again the poetic voice emphasizes the importance of duality contrasting in a mirror-like fashion the references to the sea portrayed in the first stanza, and to the sky in the second.

Another important aspect to consider is the image of the iceberg between the sea and the sky as a scene on a stage. One more time, the poetic voice establishes in the middle of the poem its main idea about the importance of spatial metaphors that consider different surfaces as well as their profundities. In this manner, the poetic voice not only suggests the image of the iceberg floating on the sea as a superficial scene: “This is a scene where he who treads the

boards/is artlessly rhetorical.” (16-17); but also it invites and challenges the reader to discover what it is behind that scene in order to know its depth: “The curtain/is light enough to rise on finest ropes/that airy twists of snow provide.” (17-19) Furthermore, in comparison with the first stanza that portrays the immensity of the sea, the second stanza now remarks the high and depth of the sky suggesting a more sublime, almost spiritual, connotation to the iceberg, which is between the sea and the sky. “The wits of these white peaks/spar with the sun.” (20-21) In fact, in the final lines of the second stanza the poetic voice concludes the duality of motion and stillness through considering the image of the iceberg in an airy and oceanic movable stage, which at the same time portrays its quietude. “Its weight the iceberg dares/upon a shifting stage and stands and stares.” (21-22)

The previous sublime characteristics of the landscape are the threshold to the internal close-up that presents the last stanza. In the final lines the poetic voice states both the external and internal relevant positions of the iceberg. In this manner, the image of the iceberg is “[b]oth transparent and impenetrable, an obstacle from within the sea that obstructs us from without, the splendid iceberg provides a parable for the untouchable and dangerous wealth of the mind’s interior” (Goldensohn 108). Thus the third stanza begins with a comparison between the inherent characteristics of “the iceberg” and “jewelry” that suggest the inner exquisiteness of things, and of course, of individuals.

The iceberg cuts its facets from within.

Like jewelry from a grave

it saves itself perpetually and adorns

only itself, perhaps the snows

which so surprise us lying on the sea. (23-27)



In this manner, the poetic voice manifests the perpetual and precious interior of self that “adorns only itself” and the inessential superficiality.

In the last stanza the poetic voice says good-bye as a way of conclusion of the poem and reminds the reader, at the same time, its initial idea of ending travels when one discovers the iceberg. This is to say, the image of the iceberg may imply the innermost self after struggling in airy, earthly, and oceanic immensities. In this fashion, the poetic voice combines harmoniously the sea and the sky upon the stillness of the iceberg.

Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off  
 where waves give in to one another’s waves  
 and clouds run in a warmer sky. (28-30)

As I mentioned before, “The Imaginary Iceberg” portrays an internal close-up. Thus, in the end of the poem, the poetic voice focuses on the inner nature of the iceberg and its representation of the soul. Once again, as in the formerly analyzed poem, the poetic voice reinforces the idea of the spatial metaphor as a sublime universe on and beneath the world. In fact, the last line remarks the importance of the soul, this is to say, the nature of the innermost self through providing with human characteristics the image of the iceberg.

Icebergs behoove the soul  
 (both being self-made from elements least visible)  
 to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible. (31-33)

To conclude, one of the Elizabeth Bishop’s poetical aims is to create spaces in order to project new dimensions through different perspectives. In other words, “Bishop ‘creates, as if *ex nihilo*, from the blank flatness of the page a mobile and welcoming world, where motion quickens, space opens, and liveliness flourishes’ (191)” (Samuels in McIver 196). In this manner, Bishop’s metaphorical spaces propose unconventional and quasi-sublime dimensions

and depths that differ from the ordinary earthly perspective. “Keeping the traditional focus on the relations of self and matter, of ordinary earth in relation to extraordinary heaven, the prosaic in relation to the sublime, she exercises her thematic legs while testing her own perceptions rigorously” (Goldensohn 114). Moreover, through creating new meanings by means of spatial metaphors, Bishop presents movement with internal and external close-ups as it is manifested in “The Map” and “The Imaginary Iceberg,” which both portray “[t]he general preoccupations of *North & South* with positioning and dissolving internal and external perspectives, with reversing foreground and background, with fluid heights and depths” (Goldensohn 111). Therefore, by presenting conscious spatial perspectives and movements the poetic voices explores different states and notions of the self. As the critic Lorrie Goldensohn explains: “the poet’s state of mind can be approached only by a concentration on structure; on position, balance, antithesis and parallelism; all placement gives way to this focus” (110). In this manner, both “The Map” and “The Imaginary Iceberg” manifest the importance of space that leads external and internal dimensions. This is to say, before acknowledging the inner self “and the consciousness lying at depth” (Goldensohn 109); it is important to perceive and understand the multiple surfaces and their spatial contexts.

## Appendix

### The Map

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.  
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges  
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges  
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.  
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,  
drawing it unperturbed around itself?  
Along the fine tan sandy shelf  
is the land tugging at the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.  
Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo  
has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,  
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,  
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.  
The names of seashore towns run out to sea,  
the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains  
-the printer here experiencing the same excitement  
as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.  
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger  
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,  
lending the land their waves' own conformation:  
and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,  
profiles investigate the sea, where land is.  
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?

-What suits the character or the native waters best.

Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.

More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

### **The Imaginary Iceberg**

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,  
although it meant the end of travel.

Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock  
and all the sea were moving marble.

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship;  
we'd rather own this breathing plain of snow  
though the ship's sails were laid upon the sea  
as the snow lies undissolved upon the water.

O solemn, floating field,  
are you aware an iceberg takes repose  
with you, and when it wakes may pasture on your snows?

This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for.

The ship's ignored. The iceberg rises  
and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles  
correct elliptics in the sky.

This is a scene where he who treads the boards  
is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain  
is light enough to rise on finest ropes  
that airy twists of snow provide.

The wits of these white peaks  
spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares  
upon a shifting stage and stands and stares.

The iceberg cuts its facets from within.  
Like jewelry from a grave  
it saves itself perpetually and adorns  
only itself, perhaps the snows  
which so surprise us lying on the sea.  
Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off  
where waves give in to one another's waves  
and clouds run in a warmer sky.  
Icebergs behoove the soul  
(both being self-made from elements least visible)  
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.

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