

The Refractory Universe of Elizabeth Bishop:
Voegelin's Theory of Consciousness and Poetic Vision

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In 2006 in the *New York Times* review of *Edgar Allen Poe and the Jukebox*, a collection of Elizabeth Bishop's unpublished poems and drafts, David Orr wrote: "You are living in a world created by Elizabeth Bishop◆ in the second half of the 20th century, no American artist in any medium was greater than Bishop." Twenty-seven years after her death in 1979, Bishop's poems speak with particular force to the literary institution of the American Northeast, its journalists and university professors. Bishop is eminently teachable, approachable from a number of popular perspectives. Books have been published about her in Canada, where she was born, in Brazil, where she lived for seventeen years, and in England, where she had several correspondents. In the United States, she has been a subject for literary historians who have traced the line of her friendships with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell and of lesbian critics who try to make a Bishop a strictly "woman" or "gay" poet, categorizations that Bishop herself always rejected.

Bishop was also a poet tormented by her place in a cold and disordered Reality. Her alienation speaks to the alienation of many, and her popularity stems in part from her obsessive effort to reformulate Christian symbols of transcendence that have lost their form and power. Eric Voegelin, albeit with a different attitude, shared in this reformulative effort and the vocabulary he developed in doing so creates a illuminating critical context for understanding Bishop's consciousness.

The beauty of Bishop's poems is partially a result of her compositional practice. It was a joke with Lowell and her other friends that Bishop would spend decades working on a text, waiting for the right word to come as a poem lay patiently in a drawer. With such a practice, inevitably many of her best poems were completed and published near the end of her life. "In the Waiting Room" comes from 1976's *Geography III*, a collection she published at the age of sixty-five, three years before her death.

"In the Waiting Room" is one Bishop's poems in which she remembers an event from her childhood. In a dentist's waiting room in Worcester, Massachusetts in the company of her Aunt Consuelo, six-year old Elizabeth reads an article on an African tribe in the *National Geographic*. She hears her aunt cry out in pain and has a vision:

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 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 the *them*.

Why should you be one, too?
-- I couldn't look any higher --
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.

I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?

What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?

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 waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

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

I ask that you think about the two occurrences of the pronoun "it" in the passage: "I didn't know any word for it" and "Then I was back in it." Is Bishop using the word in the same way that Voegelin does in his linguistic symbol "It-Reality"? Has Bishop's consciousness been illuminated by the comprehending "It-Reality":

which encompasses its tensional pole of thing-reality and is never to be split off from it, includes among the 'things' comprehended the bodily located consciousness that, reflecting on its own intentional and imaginative search within reality, becomes aware of itself as part of the greater, comprehending reality [that is not a 'thing' like the consciousness or the other 'things' consciousness intends, but is the 'All' of reality becoming luminous for its truth in the imaginative symbolizations of the consciousness in its reflective search.]

Or is Bishop escaping from the "All," from the "It" when she is "back in it" and is she confusing the "Thing-reality" for the "It-Reality" she has just been illuminated by?

The literary critic Northrop Frye in his private notebooks remarks after reading the introduction to Golpi Krishna's book *Kundalini* that Frederick Spiegelberg writes "we in the West are in need of a new vocabulary for spiritual reality, a thing I strongly felt in writing Chapter Four [of *Words With Power*]. the second volume of his magisterial study of the Bible.¹ [1] Voegelin's It-Reality comprehends the community of being, one of whose members is God. A contribution to the new Western spiritual vocabulary, the It-Reality is a symbol that has yet to be fleshed out. Bishop's 'It' is the "Reality" of a consciousness that wants to reject "transcendence" but discovers over a lifetime of poetic practice that transcendence cannot be willed out of existence. Voegelin developed the symbol "It-Reality" in part because of *his* dissatisfaction with the symbol "transcendence" as formulated in the dyad "transcendence-immanence" which had become a sterile symbol in an earlier cycle of terminological invention. Bishop and Voegelin share a dissatisfaction with "transcendence," and perhaps Bishop's poems

1 [1] *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982-1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World, Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, Volume 6, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2000).

can illuminate Voegelin's theory of consciousness as much as his theory of consciousness can illuminate her poems. In any case, the reformulation of the symbols by which we as Westerners understand God and the world, man and society is not an innocent undertaking, neither for Voeglin or Bishop nor for us.

The constitutive components of Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness are spatio-temporal: a Beyond and a Beginning. Northrop Frye's conception of the formative "architecture of the spiritual world" in Western literature, what he calls "a mythological universe," is also spatio-temporal: a vertical four level structure that passes from an Eden of artistic creation in the sky to Hell, what William Blake called Ulro, a state of sterile self-absorption placed traditionally in a demonic space below the surface of the earth and in time from Creation to Apocalypse. Bishop's "cold, blue-black space" is both in her and around her. It can be understood both in terms of Voegelin's Consciousness and of Frye's Mythological Universe.

Poets use images to describe the consciousness-universe. An important image in classic American poetry is the house. From the bathrobed woman eating her oranges in Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning" to the empty "Black Cottage" of Robert Frost in front of which a pastor tells the story of a widow and her children, the house has been a symbol of "Beginning," the place in which the voyage to self-knowledge is prepared. Elizabeth Bishop in "First Death in Nova Scotia" describes this house of preparation as an In-Between in which consciousness becomes present to itself.

As a little girl, Bishop assisted at the wake of a cousin who died at the age of two months. "First Death in Nova Scotia" is a symbolic examination of the experience, one of her first of the community of being. The living room of a house in Nova Scotia is "cold, cold."

Under a photo of the British royal family, a dead boy is exposed in a coffin; a "stuffed loon" gazes fixedly at the boy. Killed by a bullet from the gun of the dead boy's father, Uncle Arthur, the dead bird has ten lines of a fifty line poem devoted to him. Having said nothing since his supposed death, the loon is standing on a marble table, "a white, frozen lake." The bird's breast is equally white, "cold and caressable." His red eyes are his most remarkable quality, and from his "white, frozen lake," he watches the coffin of the boy named for his father.

Little Arthur, white like the loon's breast and the marble table, is "a doll that hadn't been painted yet." Jack Frost, the poet tells us, had started to paint him, but he had "dropped the brush," and Arthur was going to stay white forever. The royal couple also looks at little Arthur; they are gracious "in red and ermine." They had invited Arthur to be a page at the court, but how can he accept their offer with his eyes closed so tightly and "the roads deep in snow?"

The loon is responsible for Arthur's death. He is the Devil, and his red eyes are contrasted with the closed eyes of the boy. Arthur's father believed that he had killed the Devil, but the loon "kept his own counsel." The loon's opponent is Jack Frost, God, but this is a distracted God, a God-artist who also painted "the Maple Leaf (Forever)" of Canada. The dominant color of "First Death in Nova Scotia" is white, associated with the Devil, God, Arthur and the snow that surrounds the house. The girl who watches the wake knows that the Devil has killed little Arthur, but she is confused by the father's impotence, Jack Frost's incompetence, and by human royalty "the devil-gods of the earth" watching at a distance the tragedies of their subjects.

In "First Death in Nova Scotia," Bishop has described a moment of wonder (*thaumazon*), her entry into the metaxy. But this moment inspires a sort of failed *berith*, an unconcluded alliance, a Jack Frost who forgets to finalize a pact with his people. Jack Frost is the master of the cold, of the white, of Canada, and he has forgotten to struggle for his people against the Devil.

The Beyond has a formative parousia that announces its presence to consciousness. As a result, consciousness recognizes the Beyond as a constitutive element of history. The observing girl of "First Death in Nova Scotia" feels the parousia, but her consciousness begins its historical existence in *aporon* (doubt), inside a mythological universe in which the House is surrounded by a whiteness that blocks access to the world and thus to the self-knowledge acquired through, to cite the title of the collection from which this poem is taken, questions of travel. The life of the little girl of "First Death in Nova Scotia" is framed by the British Empire, Canada, Jack Frost-God, and the loon-Devil; this last character of the story is by far the most powerful, the most present to her consciousness.

Bishop attempted to give each line of her poetry a density of meaning. Why was the task so time consuming? She was trying to write a poetry that described Reality without a "philosophical adhesive." The poet Richard Wilbur described a conversation with Bishop in which she confessed her dilemma:

Then Elizabeth began mentioning points of Christian doctrine that she thought it intolerable to believe. She said, "No, no, no. You must be honest about this, Dick. You really don't believe all that stuff. You're just like me. Neither of us has any philosophy. It's all description, not philosophy." At that point Elizabeth shifted to talking about herself and lamenting the fact that she didn't have a philosophic adhesive to pull an individual poem and a group of

poems together, but she was really quite aggressive at that point. It surprised me because of her bringing up, [from which she] had many Christian associations, cared about many Christian things, and had got [them] in her poems here and there. I think that's what she was left with, the questions, if not the answers of a person with a religious temperament 2 [2] .

In place of philosophical coherence, Bishop tried to hold the consciousness-universe together through an intense concentration on the Thing-Reality and on her intellectual and affective response to that tensional pole. Her personal Consciousness-Reality-Language moves fitfully between luminosity and intentionality, aware that her reliance on description is at once her poetry's force and weakness.

Bishop was attached critically to the Bible. She was determined, however, to separate the biblically-inspired symbols of her poems from their mythic foundation. She works to transform them into personal symbols of the evolution of her own consciousness.

"The Unbeliever" is a poem from Bishop's first collection, *North and South*, published in 1946. Transported to the top of ship's mast, an unbeliever sleeps, and the sails of the boat beneath him are sheets of his bed. Curled up inside "a gilded ball" or is it "a gilded bird," the unbeliever speaks to a cloud who says to him: "I am founded on marble pillars" I never move. Introspective, the cloud "peers at the watery pillars of his reflection." Then, the bird, a gull, says to the unbeliever that the air is like marble, and the unbeliever replies: "Up here / I

2 [2] Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop : An Oral Biography* (Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) 348-349.

tower through the sky / for the marble wings on my tower-top fly.❖ The gull asks him of his dream which was:

"I must not fall.

The spangled sea below wants me to fall.
It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all.❖

The essential distinction in the "The Unbeliever❖ is between the sky associated with marble and sea associated with diamonds. The unbeliever is unconscious above what Blake calls "the sea of space and time.❖ Bishop adds the qualities of hardness and opulence to the legendary image of the sea as a primordial chaos. The air is made of the same matter, marble, as the wings of the golden bird. Think of the sea as the Thing-Reality and the air as the It-Reality. For Bishop, they are equally rich and hard. The It-Reality is a night that puts the unbeliever to sleep, while the Thing-Reality simply wants to destroy him.

The cloud, the gull and the unbeliever have inspired numerous interpretations. The critic Harold Bloom sees the text as a literary gloss. For him, the poem "exemplifies three rhetorical positions❖: the cloud is Wordsworth or Stevens, the gull is Shelley or Crane, and the unbeliever is Dickinson or Bishop. From my perspective, the poem is pneumopathologic commentary on the Christian Trinity. The vain cloud, a sort of God the Father, resembles the Jack Frost of "First Death in Nova Scotia.❖ Too comfortable in his introspection, a cloud who insists that he never moves is evidently incompetent or a liar. The title character is Jesus, sleepy and unbelieving, a deity hanging suspended in the marble air. The Son of God is transported to the top of his mat from the sky, but he never descends the *axis mundi*, the classic mythological symbol for the connection between God and Man, to change the hard sea of space and time into

the waters of life that Moses, for example, made spring from the rock of Horeb in Exodus 17.6.

In "The Unbeliever," a vain lying God sends a Son who doesn't believe in his spiritual vocation and instead hides inside a Holy Spirit with marble wings.

Bishop is not in rebellion against the tension of existence, she simply flees it and never enters into a dialectical quest to understand the ground of being. It would be difficult to make an Aristotelian analysis of Bishop's poetry because Aristotle did not have a word for anxiety, and Bishop is one of the most talented poets of Auden's Age of Anxiety. "The health or disease of existence," Voegelin wrote in "Reason: The Classic Experience," "makes itself felt in the very tonality of the unrest." Unlike the anxious tone of Bishop, classic Aristotelian unrest "is distinctly joyful because the questioning has direction; the unrest is experienced as the beginning of the theophanic event in which the *Nous* reveals itself as the divine ordering force in the psyche of the questioner and cosmos at large." The Stoics introduced the tonality of pathologic fear into philosophy through the adjective *ptoides*. This symbol has had a long career: from the Hobbes's fear of death to Hegel's alienation, from Freud's description of an opening to the *Nous* as a neurotic relic to Levi-Straus' prohibition on actualizing noetic consciousness and his argument that the scientist must be an atheist. Bishop is part of this stoic current of *agnoia ptoides* (fearful ignorance) of the ground of being.
