

**‘The unreality of our reality’: Elizabeth Bishop’s conflicting presentations
of objects in *Geography III*.**

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*I'd like to retire there and do nothing,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a grog à l'américaine.*

(Bishop, lines 32-38)

In 1977, one year after the publication of *Geography III*, fellow modern American poet John Ashbery assessed Elizabeth Bishop's poetry as possessing a 'continually renewed sense of discovering the strangeness, the unreality of our reality' (Ashbery, 10). Ashbery did not reference *Geography III* in his short essay, favouring Bishop's earlier collections *North & South* and *Questions of Travel*, but Ashbery's phrase is nonetheless applicable – and illuminating – to her final collection. This essay will explore where in *Geography III* Bishop demonstrates Ashbery's 'unreality of our reality' by presenting multiple views of one object on the same plane, such that the reader is forced to understand the object by various, often conflicting, viewpoints. More specifically, I will be examining 'Poem' and '12 O' Clock News' as these demonstrate the best examples of Bishop's 'unreality', though it is a theme throughout the collection (Bishop, *Geography III*, 36-39 and 32-35). I will also briefly explore Bishop's poetic debt to Marianne Moore, her poetic mentor with whom the younger Bishop was close until Moore's death in 1972 (Anderson). As Bishop's poetry is intent on examining objects from all angles and presenting its findings, I am terming this Bishop's 'scientific poetry', through which Moore's influence becomes clear.

Geography III is a semi-autobiographical collection highly concerned with categorising and positioning objects and people. Bishop's extraordinary imagery builds descriptions of entirely real things that are nonetheless removed from reality, appearing to sit somewhere outside of the material they represent; as Ashbery later writes, Bishop can present ordinary items as 'terrifyingly unlike anything human' (Ashbery, 11). After all, Bishop's speaker does not simply walk across a beach to an abandoned shack – they get 'as far as my proto-dream-house, / my crypto-dream-house' ('The End of March', lines 24-25), a building both real, 'set up on pilings' (line 26), and not at all real, so unreal that it is somehow 'proto' – before – dreams. Terms such as 'strange' and 'cryptic' recur in critical approaches to

Bishop's other works: this view is exemplified in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, where Susan Rosenbaum writes of Bishop's work as 'at once internal and external, human and nonhuman, familial and strange' (Rosenbaum, 70). The same critical difficulty has been expressed about Ashbery's own poetry: perhaps Ashbery takes interest in Bishop because he finds some similarity in their work (Ross, 11-16, and Gilbert). This essay attempts to explicate one aspect of Bishop's supposed strangeness by examining her conflicting presentations of objects.

Geography III was the last of Bishop's collections published before her death in 1979, and the poems are in rough chronological order from their dates of completion (Schwartz, 148). Though having published relatively little during her lifetime, Bishop was at this point considered a major American poet, serving as US Poet Laureate in 1949 and winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956. The first poem of interest falls in the latter half of the collection. Simply entitled 'Poem', Bishop describes a speaker looking at a painting of a farm in Nova Scotia (where Bishop herself grew up). The painting is a 'minor family relic' ('Poem', line 7) that has been passed down the family for seventy years. The poem is a kind of ekphrasis; as the speaker describes the painting in detail, they realise that they recognise it as a farm they saw often in youth, and feel a connection to its painter, their '*great-uncle*' (line 41) George, whom they have never met. This poem demonstrates Ashbery's 'unreality of our reality' in its insistence on never being absorbed into the painting; Bishop refuses to allow the reader to see the painting as a real scene, even though the speaker's memory of it informs us that it is indeed a real place. Bishop's speaker always relates the images in the painting to their artistic construction, their 'brushstrokes' (line 17), such that we are consistently reminded that the speaker is looking at a painting of a known place, not the place itself. This affords the poem a peculiar double-vision – the farm in the speaker's memory and the farm in

the painting that the speaker describes are one and the same, but Bishop maintains a tension between the two such that both appear unreal. For example, Bishop describes the ‘gabled wooden houses / painted that awful shade of brown’ (lines 11-12). The use of ‘painted’ reminds the reader that the farm scene is a constructed piece, rather than simply describing the houses. Bishop repeats this throughout the poem, her speaker musing that ‘some tiny cows’ are ‘two brushstrokes each’ (line 17), emphasising the small physical size of the painting. Later, the speaker describes a ‘wild iris, white and yellow’ (line 20) that is ‘fresh-squiggled from the tube’ (line 21), reminding the reader again that this is a construction of paint.

However, Bishop’s descriptions are not entirely rooted in the painting as a construction of art; she describes aspects of the scene that are tactile and sensory rather than objective. Bishop’s speaker notes ‘The air is fresh and cold’ (line 22) – two adjectives in the present tense that are only applicable if one is actually experiencing the freshness of the air and the coldness of the place. Suddenly, the speaker appears to be not looking at a painting at all, but at the farm itself, in the ‘cold early spring’ (line 22). However, just as quickly, the speaker is once again observing the painting, noting the ‘steel-gray storm clouds’ that are ‘the artist’s specialty’ (lines 24-25). This effectively demonstrates the tension in ‘Poem’ between the memory of a known place felt by the speaker and their description of its likeness in a painting, a tension that the speaker later describes as ‘life and the memory of it so compressed / they’ve turned into each other’ (lines 53-54). The tension between these two views of the farm – paint and memory – effectively demonstrate Ashbery’s ‘unreality of our reality’, as Bishop does not allow the reader to adjust to either view fully. This is particularly illustrated in Bishop’s antimetabole:

A specklike bird is flying to the left.

Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird? (lines 26-27)

Bishop here describes an aspect of the painting that cannot be determined as an intended part of it – the speaker is unsure if the mark on the painting is deliberate, or a ‘flyspeck’ – insect excrement – that looks like a ‘bird’, emphasising the painting as a material object affected by its environment. Bishop’s ekphrastic poem is not *only* of a painting, nor is it *only* of a remembered place; the farm is real in multiple senses. These independent realities become connected through the speaker, ultimately making up a kind of unreality – the farm is both real and imagined, both paint and memory, both the speaker’s and the artist’s.

This connection between the speaker and the artist further contributes to a productive reading of ‘Poem’ as demonstrating Ashbery’s ‘unreality of our reality’. ‘Life and memory’ being ‘so compressed / they’ve turned into each other’ (lines 53-54) indicates a further tension within the poem – the time of the artist and the time of the speaker. The painting is over ‘seventy years’ old (line 6). Though the painting shows the farm as they remember it, the speaker notes, ‘Those particular geese and cows / are naturally before my time’ (lines 35-36). The speaker becomes increasingly aware as the poem continues of the length of time separating their memory of the farm and George’s painting: they note parenthetically after ‘our years apart’ that ‘(it must have changed a lot)’ (lines 48-49). In the final long stanza, Bishop portrays the artist looking at the farm at the same time as the speaker, though of course this is logically impossible: ‘Our visions coincided’ (line 50) emphasises the disorientation of the same place represented at different times by different people but appearing the same, the tension of the live ‘memory’ of the place and the ‘art “copying from life”’ (line 52), all ultimately in conflict with the speaker’s knowledge that the real farm must look very different now. These conflicting presentations create Ashbery’s ‘unreality’ – they

are all perfectly real on their own, but Bishop both melts them into one another and puts them in conflict such that we cannot conceive of a single cohesive farm, but of multiple unreal farms. As Bishop writes, ‘Life and the memory of it’ are ‘cramped’ ‘on a piece of Bristol board’ (lines 55-56), and one cannot tell ‘Which is which?’ (line 54).

A further tension of perspective falls on the reader of the poem: where are we positioned in this scene? One of the primary concerns of *Geography III* is positioning – where things/people are in relation to other things/people. Before the title page, Bishop places an extract from ‘First Lessons in Geography’, a textbook from 1884 that asks, ‘What is in the East? In the West?’, listing cardinal directions and geographic phenomena. Interestingly, Bishop was gifted this textbook by Ashbery himself in 1976, who wrote: ‘it reminded me of your poetry’ (qtd. In Hollister, 411). Whilst this extract explains the eponymy of *Geography III*, Ashbery’s textbook further anticipates its major theme of location. ‘Crusoe in England’ (Bishop, 9-19) sees a Crusoe remembering his lost island, struggling and disillusioned in an ill-fitting England. ‘In the Waiting Room’ (Bishop, 3-8) immediately places the speaker clearly in ‘Worcester, Massachusetts’ in the first line of the poem (and of the collection as a whole). Bishop is determined to place her subjects just so: the end of the poem sees the speaker placed again in ‘Worcester, Massachusetts’, where it is ‘still the fifth / of February, 1918’ (‘In the Waiting Room’, lines 96 and 98-99). Clearly, Bishop is invested in placing speakers carefully; it is salient, therefore, to discuss the position of the reader. ‘Poem’ poses a difficulty in that Bishop deliberately prevents us from being able to enter the scene. Written in the first person, the reader is subject to the speaker’s internal musings on the painting: ‘Heavens, I recognize the place’ (‘Poem’, line 28). However, due to the aforementioned conflict between the differing presentations of the farm, the reader is prevented from truly accessing the farm in any of these permutations. Bishop’s insistence on the sensory nature of

the farm, it's 'cold early spring' (line 22) is unknowable to the reader who has neither the speaker's memory nor access to the actual farm in Nova Scotia. By placing all of these viewpoints in front of the reader, Bishop asks us to reconcile a place, painting and memory to which we have no access, visual and tactile media that we cannot see or feel, and as such we are prevented from forming a coherent idea of this farm at all. Susannah L. Hollister writes that the textbook extract that starts the collection does not allow the reader 'a sense of stable space', though I argue that Hollister does not go far enough: this essay demonstrates that unstable spaces are not merely confined to the beginning of the collection, but maintained throughout *Geography III* (Hollister, 413).

The poetic method of presenting one item from multiple, often conflicting angles can be traced back to the poetry of Wallace Stevens, particularly 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' (Stevens, 277-278). However, it is Stevens' contemporary, Marianne Moore, who has a far more prominent legacy in Bishop's work. Bishop and Moore maintained a close friendship until Moore's death – Linda Anderson offers a comprehensive explanation of their correspondence (Anderson, 22-23). However, I will trace Moore's influence on Bishop's work in what I am terming Bishop's 'scientific poetry' – whilst both women studied the sciences at various points in their careers, by this I refer to their poems that seek to understand an object from all angles, to analyse it microscopically, such that certain lines seem to be written in the style of a laboratory report. This will enable further discussion of Ashbery's 'unreality of our reality', as science grants understanding of the world beyond natural sight – microscopes allow us to see what the naked eye cannot, and as such demonstrate a reality that is indeed real but nonetheless removed.

Moore's influence is perhaps more obvious between her poem 'To a Snail' (Moore, 347-348) and Bishop's 'Giant Snail' in *The Complete Poems* (Bishop, 195-196), both of which focus on the construction of a snail's body. However, in *Geography III*, Bishop's '12 O' Clock News' (Bishop, 32-35) is the best demonstration of Moore's legacy of 'scientific poetry'. Bishop writes descriptions of the contents of her desktop from the perspective of tiny soldiers exploring its foreign and colossal environment in the style of a recording log. Ordinary objects like the 'ashtray' ('12 O' Clock News', line 56) become horrifying vestiges of war: Bishop's tiny scouts discover 'at least eight bodies' of soldiers in 'hideously contorted positions' (lines 61-62). What this description of the ashtray actually entails is likely eight cigarette stubs warped from being crushed, but Bishop transforms them into crushed human bodies such that if there were not the initial descriptor of 'ashtray' (line 56) next to the stanza, we would likely be unaware that Bishop is describing an ashtray at all. As the objects are colossal to Bishop's soldiers, the poem gravitates towards a microscopic detail that was not present in 'Poem', such as the texture of the ashes like 'winter' camouflage ('12 O' Clock News', line 61). This extreme detail is reminiscent of Moore's 'The Paper Nautilus', in which Moore investigates in detail the construction of a paper nautilus shell (Moore, 348). Interestingly, it is widely accepted that Bishop gifted Moore the shell that inspired the poem, demonstrating that this poetic influence was not purely one-sided (Anderson, 26).

Bishop's descriptions are far removed from their associated objects: a 'typed sheet' becomes a 'large rectangular "field"', 'dark-/ speckled' ('12 O' Clock News', lines 20 and 22-24). Whilst the speaker is clearly aware that the 'field' is 'man-made' (line 23), they do not distinguish that the speckles are typed words. Instead, the speaker muses the purpose of the 'field', positing an 'airstrip? A cemetery?' (line 24). Here, Bishop presents an interesting break with reality – these tiny soldiers are looking at a page of her typed work, a subtle irony

given that this poem, '12 O' Clock News', is a page of her typed work. The speaker is not aware that they are reporting the ordinary contents of a desktop, but the poem itself *is* – it lists next to the stanzas the object of interest, such as '*typewriter*' (line 8). Therefore, Bishop separates the reality of the desktop objects from the constructed scene of the soldiers both graphically – placement on the page and use of italics – and thematically, by offering the reader both presentations of the object on the same plane. Bishop places the ordinary object alongside its constructed and terrifying scene, thereby furthering Ashbery's ideas of 'the unreality of our reality': ashtrays become horrific scenes of death, typed sheets become cemeteries, ordinary objects becoming 'terrifyingly unlike anything human' (Ashbery, 11). In a similar manner to the emphasis on the painting's construction in 'Poem', Bishop presents realities that conflict with one another. Moore's poetic influence is clear in the 'scientific' nature of Bishop's '12 O' Clock News': descriptive, detached, possessing a veneer of the objective, yet deeply imaginative.

Bishop's multitudinous presentations of the same objects in *Geography III* are likely what led Ashbery to describe Bishop as a 'caustic observer' (Ashbery, 10). Her work challenges the reader by deliberately denying their understanding of objects as cohesive wholes. Instead, paintings must be understood from all angles: from the 'brushstrokes' ('Poem', line 17) that make up the paint to the memory and real scene that inspired it, all of which are known to the speaker but unknown to the reader, standing as obstacles to the latter's understanding. Ordinary desktop objects become terrifying, foreign and almost unrecognisable in their close descriptions, whilst simultaneously informing the reader of what is really being described – '*envelopes*' or '*ink-bottle*' ('12 O' Clock News', lines 25 and 31). Moore's 'scientific' poetic legacy is evident in these close descriptions that both illuminate the objects they describe yet render them irreconcilable as cohesive wholes – I am reminded

of Moore's 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' (Moore, 339). Therefore, Ashbery's description of 'the unreality of our reality' is apposite when applied to Bishop's poetry; in *Geography III*, as elsewhere in her oeuvre, Bishop's objects are presented through numerous viewpoints displayed alongside one another. 'Poem' and '12 O' Clock News' take similar approaches in their conflicting presentations of objects, but the latter involves the scaling of items to massive proportions, further conflicting the view of the objects as both large and small. For Bishop, certain objects are sites of conflict with multitudinous associated viewpoints that ultimately contribute to their 'unreality'.

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