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Re-Examining Recent Poets

Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero by Vereen M. Bell; Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art by Lloyd Schwartz; Sybil P. Estess

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## RE-EXAMINING RECENT POETS\*

Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell were close friends for more than thirty years; during several of his manic periods Lowell even fancied himself in love with her, once announcing to friends that they would marry. From the forties on, Bishop and Lowell admired each other's work and supported each other publicly with enthusiastic reviews and jacket blurbs. They also composed moving poetic tributes for and about each other. Neither *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* nor *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* attempts to account for this bond since neither is much concerned with biography. Instead, Vereen Bell's study traces the development of Lowell's philosophical stance in a dense and subtly argued analysis of eight of his volumes; Schwartz and Estess's collection assembles some of the best criticism written over the past forty years about Bishop's poetry, along with selections from her interviews and nonfictional prose. Even so, one of the rewards of considering together these very different studies is a greater appreciation of why Bishop and Lowell should have been drawn to one another: these two fine volumes bring alive the rich complexity of both poets' attitudes and ideas, suggesting how stimulating and various their exchange must have been. A further tangential reward is that each volume in its own way reinforces our faith that literary criticism advances as a communal endeavor in which understanding builds from the foundations of others' earlier labors.

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\*Vereen M. Bell, *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983. 251 pp. \$17.50.

Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, eds., *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, Under Discussion Series, edited by Donald Hall. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1983. xix + 341 pp. \$8.95.

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Vereen Bell differs respectfully and directly with previous critics of Lowell. His overall contention is that commentators have projected a spirit of affirmation onto Lowell when in fact his poetry is characterized by “chronic and eventually systematic pessimism” (p. 1). Yet the distinction between Bell’s view and that of earlier critics is acknowledged to be subtle: while he regards Lowell as never having been able to work his way beyond a nihilism of despair to a nihilism of affirmation, Bell also perceives an “ontological nostalgia,” a residual idealism that impels Lowell to try to extort from experience some unmediated value. Presumably because of the imbalance Bell perceives in Lowell criticism to date, his strategy is to emphasize nihilism rather than idealism.

Nearly a third of the study is devoted to a chapter on *Notebook*, but Bell moves chronologically up to and past the 1970 collection, devoting a chapter apiece to seven of Lowell’s other volumes. He first examines the “violently formal” poems of *Lord Weary’s Castle*, showing how syntax is used for the willful imposition of order—an order in conflict with the poems’ unsettled, surrealist perspective. He then traces the erosion of this formal posture through the “slightly deranged poems about helplessly deranged people” (p. 39) in *The Mills of the Kavanagh*s and on through *Life Studies*’ “downward curve into chaos.”

The *Life Studies* chapter is the only one in which Bell’s devotion to his thesis produces strained and distorting readings. Regarding this volume as one that “encourage[s] the projection upon it of positive, life-affirming values, if only the cold comfort of romantic, Sartrean existentialism” (p. 40), Bell resists such consoling projection. Countering those critics who regard the self Lowell discovers here as a center of value, Bell sees this self as “continuous with the world that [Lowell] is repeatedly compelled to reject” (p. 41) and believes *Life Studies* “comes close” to denying the value of human experience altogether. Bell’s interpretations of “Waking in the Blue,” “Skunk Hour,” and “Memories of West Street and Lepke”—in which he presents the lobotomized Lepke as the bearer of “fearsome, privileged knowledge” (p. 63)—push too hard to establish that sanity and normalcy are merely forms of self-deception, ways of “dwell[ing] epistemologically in a cruelly false paradise” (p. 58).

In all of his chapters, Bell develops his argument through careful readings; these are instructive even when one disagrees with them, for Bell’s painstaking attention often brings to light some overlooked detail or unregistered allusion. Bell is especially impressive in his use of tech-

nical and stylistic analysis to illuminate subject and theme. For instance, in the chapter on *For the Union Dead* that emphasizes Lowell's sense of consciousness as a prison, Bell shows how this subject is embodied in various methods of "radical subjectification" in the language and metaphors. Such formal grounding lends solidity to his readings. Far from being dry and mechanical, Bell's technical analyses often forcefully convey sympathy with Lowell. Thus Bell is persuasive when arguing, for example, that the often criticized stiffness of iambic phrasing in the characters of *Mills* is intended to sustain an impression of rigidity appropriate to the book's theme of desymbolization and decay.

Bell makes the most of his skill at formal analysis in the lengthy chapter on *Notebook*. Lowell's idealism is subdued in that collection by the persona's firm attachment to phenomenal reality in time and nature; as he declares in *Notebook's* poem "The Nihilist as Hero," "A nihilist has to live in the world as it is, gazing the impossible summit to rubble." Hence much of the volume, Bell argues, is written against poetry, art, imagination—a "gloomy transvaluation of the shaping spirit" (p. 132). Indeed, the volume has often been criticized for its shapelessness. Bell, however, defends its coherence, arguing that "its form is a contrived expression of a deliberated ontology" (p. 133). Bell demonstrates how Lowell's "scrupulously erratic idiom" is intended to express mental activity, and illuminates the logic of Lowell's seeking for an effect of improvisation and openness that will represent experience completely yet remain within the rigorous structure and defined tradition of the sonnet. Bell makes a strong case for what Yvor Winters labeled the "fallacy of imitative form."

My only reservation about Bell's discussion of *Notebook's* formal character is that, by ignoring comparable techniques and attitudes among Lowell's contemporaries, he exaggerates Lowell's originality. Throughout his study Bell commands a wide range of reference to Western literary and philosophic traditions, a range needed in explanation of so intellectual and allusive a poet. In discussing *Notebook's* idiom, Bell refers to Eliot's conception of the poet's mind "amalgamating disparate experience" to form new wholes and presents *Notebook* as pushing "at the outer limits" of this theory of language "as no volume before it has done" (p. 147). He claims too much for his subject here. Interest in random inclusiveness and spontaneity was widespread among American poets in the late fifties and the sixties, especially among the Black Mountain writers and those of the New York school. Thus Lowell certainly was not alone in enacting a trust in "technique as discovery" (p. 155). Without having to belittle Lowell's achievement, Bell should acknowledge that others also were radically

extending modernist principles and producing results as original as Lowell's.

Nonetheless, Bell's demonstration that there is a guiding intelligence shaping the paratactic construction of *Notebook's* individual poems is convincing. So is his exploration of the multiple structural and thematic links that lend coherence to the volume's groupings of poems. Bell devotes only a few pages to *History*—largely a remake of *Notebook*—which he regards as an inferior volume suffering from a discontinuity between style and point of view. The style of *Notebook*, he argues, was appropriate for interior monologue in an ongoing present, but ceases to be justified outside that context.

Bell is also critical of *The Dolphin*, to which he devotes a chapter, rightly identifying it as Lowell's most enervated and narcissistic work. Although Lowell, embarking on his marriage to Caroline Blackwood, wants a volume of resolution and new beginnings, he cannot produce it: "nihilism is held at bay but not transcended" (p. 195). Bell claims that Lowell's use of Elizabeth Hardwick's letters in *The Dolphin* was "necessary" and "inspired." I cannot agree, though I grant that the appropriation of "Lizzie's" distinctive voice works to the volume's artistic advantage. Lowell's own aesthetics invite my discomfort with his violation of Hardwick's privacy; Lowell's poetry pushes against exactly the sort of disengagement of art from life that underlies a judgment such as Bell's. Nor is this the only place in the volume where Bell's detachment of Lowell as philosophically questing artist from Lowell as violently unstable friend, husband, and father fosters an excessively dignifying perspective. The battle between Lowell's nihilistic and idealistic tendencies may, after all, relate to his manic-depressive cycles. While Lowell's poetry must and will stand on its own, the intensity of his engagement with personal history as well as political history complicates the critic's task, sometimes requiring involvement in ethical and biographical issues.

Bell's concluding chapter, an appreciative analysis of *Day by Day*, is one of the book's most satisfying. Here Bell perceives a shift in which idealism takes firmer hold as Lowell is "able at last to imagine a mode of being other than the thwarted human one" (p. 4). Noting that the volume's arrangement gets the worst of the life story out of the way early so that the ending can be open to possibility, Bell claims that this volume focuses away from personal history, turning in fact to self-renunciation. He finds in *Day by Day* an appealing humility and modesty, a defeat for the self that is also a release accounting for the volume's "peculiar richness of tone and its generically human resonance" (p. 222). Once again, Bell successfully links style with theme

and world view, arguing that the book's notational style expresses "a willing identification with a life that is not purposive" (p. 223), a new receptivity to the world. Bell is careful to avoid the impression that *Day by Day* involves any "spirit-lifting breakthrough," yet he unveils there a delicate affirmation of beauty and power that endure in the world apart from human lives, and apart from the agony of Lowell's own existence.

*Nihilist as Hero*, while stimulating and rewarding to read, is stylistically dense. At times Bell's diction is excessively formal and academic, and his syntax unnecessarily complicated. Most often, however, the complexity of the writing seems to derive from the intricacy of the ideas presented. Exegesis of Lowell's poetry demands patience, sophistication, broad learning, subtle and agile intelligence; Bell brings to his volume all these qualities.

While a number of book-length studies on Lowell had been produced before his death, preparing for such sophisticated work as Bell's, Elizabeth Bishop did not receive comparable critical attention during her lifetime. By and large, she was not written about often or well until the publication of her last volume in 1976, just three years before her death. *Geography III*—to my mind Bishop's finest collection—seems to have shed light on themes and strategies of earlier volumes, opening critics' eyes to the seriousness and ambitiousness of her achievement. It is not coincidental that all nine critical essays composing the first section of *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* were produced after *Geography III* appeared. These essays begin to compensate for previous condescension toward and neglect of Bishop's poetry.

A brief appreciative foreword by Harold Bloom, which places Bishop's poetry in an American tradition that extends back to Emerson, Very, and Dickinson, sets the loving tone of this collection. Again and again, whether or not those writing knew Bishop personally, they speak with deep affection, marvelling at the humor and courage evident in Bishop's poems and personality, envying her alertness and clear-sightedness—though not the pain it must have caused her—commending her unobtrusive craft and her distinctive voice, praising her integrity, her modesty, her compassion.

Schwartz and Estess have wisely opened the volume with David Kalstone's essay on Bishop from *Five Temperaments* (1977), the best overview of Bishop's work written to date. Rereading it for the first time in several years, I was amazed to see how many insights that others have since developed were first, and so sensitively, touched on here. Kalstone was among the first to recognize the intellectual component of Bishop's celebrated "eye," identifying her "sense of the encircling

and eroding powers in whose presence all minute observations are valuably made” (pp. 11–12). He was first to emphasize the centrality of loss in her work, to highlight her changes of scale, to show how the poems of *Geography III* revisit the territory of her earlier poems. This essay provides the keystone of the volume, just as it should be the starting point for anyone interested in reading about Bishop’s poetry.

The best criticism on Bishop seems as transparent as her poetry; through it we see what we never noticed, yet with such ease and naturalness that we feel we had perceived it all along. Helen Vendler’s and Robert Pinsky’s essays achieve this sort of lucidity, as do most of the essays included in the volume. Rather than summarizing and praising each piece, especially those by well-established voices, I will focus on the articles that seem to me to suggest interesting directions in which Bishop criticism might travel from here.

One of these directions, virtually unexplored, includes feminist analysis (if I may speak of such a heterogeneous enterprise as a single direction). Feminist critics have been slow to attend to Bishop partly because her work, like Marianne Moore’s, is seen — mistakenly, I think — as too thoroughly within the masculine tradition, and partly because of Bishop’s expressed wariness of being identified with a “movement” or of seeing her poems reduced to “tracts.” Still, feminist interpretations will no doubt prove fruitful, as Willard Spiegelman’s implicitly feminist essay on Bishop’s “natural heroism” demonstrates. With a range of examples from her poems, Spiegelman shows Bishop habitually debunking masculine notions of conquest and heroism. He argues that Bishop substituted for these values an acceptance of continuity and community. Her “natural heroism” — the phrase is Bishop’s — is embodied in one who embraces, rather than eliminates, the enemy.

Penelope Laurans’s essay (one of four not published previously), “‘Old Correspondences’: Prosodic Transformations in Elizabeth Bishop,” points in another new and productive direction, that of prosodic analysis. Since Bishop is unquestionably a master of poetic craft and since she often uses complicated verse forms, she deserves the attention to metrics this essay provides. Laurans argues that while Bishop tends toward romantic subject matter, she attains a modernist restraint largely through metrical variation that limits lyrical effusiveness. Laurans demonstrates Bishop’s reluctance to allow technical intensity and thematic passion to correspond; Bishop’s meter almost always circumscribes the intense feeling at the core of her poems. While Laurans’s readings are not as graceful and compelling as the other contributors’, her technical insights are valuable and worth pursuing.

Bishop’s oeuvre includes a number of remarkable short stories.

Yet only “In the Village”—because it was included in *Questions of Travel* and because of its obvious biographical import—has received much critical attention. David Lehman, in another new essay, makes elegant use of Bishop’s story “In Prison” to explore her concept of the imagination, particularly through the motif of the stationary traveller. In her story, the physical deprivation of imprisonment conduces imaginative and spiritual freedom, making possible a journey “to the interior.” A similar welcoming of limits in order to transcend them recurs throughout Bishop’s work. Lehman’s essay suggests that Bishop’s stories are well worth attending to, both in themselves and for their prefiguring of attitudes and motifs in Bishop’s poems.

My favorite of the previously unpublished essays is Alan Williamson’s “*A Cold Spring: The Poet of Feeling.*” Williamson’s interest in Bishop’s second volume is refreshing, since critics have recently focused so heavily on her late work. We should not forget that a number of her early poems are nearly as striking as “In the Waiting Room,” “The Moose,” and “Crusoe in England.” Moreover, as Williamson demonstrates, Bishop’s partial successes and even her occasional failures can teach us a great deal about her vision of life and about the strong feelings that underlie her reticence. It is this emotional aspect of her work that he so skillfully illuminates. Examining the love poems of *A Cold Spring*, Williamson discerns a disproportion which suggests that Bishop’s characteristic distancing of emotion resulted in part from her tendency to experience emotions as “immense and categorical, insusceptible to rational or, in poetry, to structural counter-argument” (p. 96). He finds in these poems immense anxieties about adjusting inner and outer worlds, as well as a disbelief in the possibility of reciprocal love. Only the best poems in this volume, he points out, achieve the successful balance between surface detachment and sublimated emotional intensity that Bishop attains again and again in later volumes.

The second section of *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* contains a chronological arrangement of shorter pieces—primarily reviews, tributes, and memorials. The longest selection included here is an informative article by Ashley Brown, “Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil,” which provides an approximate chronology and interesting biographical contexts for Bishop’s writing during her twenty years’ residence in Brazil. A number of the reviews are early ones by Bishop’s first supporters, including Marianne Moore, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell. While it is pleasant to have one’s sense of Bishop’s freshness, individuality, and lack of ostentation reinforced so often, the editors

have perhaps given too little space to less sympathetic voices. Since such early responses are of largely historical interest, it would have been worth representing a full range of views.

Most of the selections in this section are eloquent and insightful, often pointing to the pain and struggle beneath the perfection of the poems' surfaces. Most captivating are the anecdotal memorial tributes by Bishop's friends that give us a distinct vision of the extraordinary woman who wrote such extraordinary poems. While respecting Bishop's strong desire for personal privacy, they do convey her engaging, idiosyncratic spirit: James Merrill, for example, portrays her "playing was it poker? with Neruda in a Mexican hotel, or pingpong with Octavio Paz in Cambridge, or getting Robert Duncan high on grass – 'for the first time!' – in San Francisco, or teaching Frank Bidart the wildflowers in Maine" (p. 259), and Lloyd Schwartz recalls that her "favorite example of 'perfect' iambic pentameter was: "I hate to see that evenin' sun go down' " (p. 254).

In the book's final section Bishop speaks for herself in a variety of contexts. Her sparkling narrative gift and her precision appear even in the earliest of these brief selections, a piece on rhythm and timing that appeared in a 1933 Vassar publication. In this section Bishop emerges as a compassionate yet discerning literary critic, a self-effacing but penetrating thinker, a playful friend. Complete texts of two of Bishop's infrequent interviews provide information about her literary development and preferences, along with anecdotes so lively we hardly notice that she uses them as decoys, instruments of her famous reticence. Lowell has aptly characterized Bishop's poetic tone as one of "large, grave tenderness and sorrowing amusement" (p. 206); Bishop's prose, like her poetry, makes it clear that she strove bravely to keep the amusement on the surface and to hold the gravity or sorrow within.

With the publication of *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, those who have followed Bishop criticism in the past gain access to a handy compendium that will include most, if not all, of the pieces they treasure most. Those just discovering Bishop's wise and humane poetry – an oeuvre, as Merrill says, "on the scale of a human life" – have been saved innumerable hours of library research and can browse, delighted, in this responsible and appealing collection.

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