

Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop

T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, James Joyce declared, "ends [the] idea of poetry for ladies." Joyce's condescending swipe was his way of saying that the days of polite, sentimental versifying were over. In place of "women's" poesy, he believed, the literary artists of the 20th century would produce a new kind of poetry, objective, difficult, even esoteric. And the makers of "modern" verse—Pound, Yeats, and Eliot, among others—would constitute a kind of priesthood, almost exclusively male. But if few women were invited into the Temple of Modern Poetry, and fewer yet to the altar, there were striking exceptions. Two in America were Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. By dint of their friendship and their solitary labors, these two gifted women demonstrated that they could, as Ezra Pound enjoined, "make it new." Here, Susan Schultz describes their successful partnership in art.

by Susan Schultz

Literary friendships are often unwieldy things, awkwardly glued together by admiration, mutual sense of purpose—and a healthy dose of professional paranoia. Emerson, as Whitman put it, brought the younger man from a simmer to a boil, only to recoil from the "barbaric yawp" that found its voice in *Leaves of Grass*. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop—the partners in these literary couplings played sorcerer and apprentice to one another, straining to balance self-creation with companionship, the demands of influence with those of originality.

In the spring of 1934, Marianne Moore

was 47 years old and, if William Carlos Williams is to be believed, the "saint" of American poets, a respected scion of modernism, possessed of a refreshing disrespect for her own medium. "I, too, dislike it," she had written in "Poetry," meaning that she could not stomach any art which was not "genuine" or "useful." Between 1926 and 1929 she had served as editor of *The Dial*, writing no verse of her own but shaping the literary taste of the 1920s. She was, in 1935, all ready to publish her *Selected Poems*.

In that same spring, Elizabeth Bishop was a senior at Vassar College. The Vassar librarian, Fanny Borden (niece of the axe murderer), had known Marianne Moore

for many years, and occasionally arranged for her to meet promising Vassar students. Most of these meetings had gone awry, but that between Bishop and Moore would not. They met on a bench in front of the New York Public Library and, as Bishop wrote in her memoir of Moore, "It seems to me that Marianne talked to me steadily for the next 35 years."

During those years Moore's reputation was to climb steadily, even as the quality of her work diminished somewhat. And Bishop, whose first book was not published until 1945, was to become what fellow poet John Ashbery termed "a writer's writer's writer." Their names were to be linked, at times inextricably, almost as if their work were a single project, a single way of seeing the world that was inscribed in two bodies of work.

There are, to be sure, similarities of perception recorded in the two women's writing. Both were possessed of a "famous eye," unafraid to linger on surfaces. Both were obsessed with craft, as well as with the vision behind it. And both played out, in their own ways, a tension between what Professor Helen Vendler calls "domesticity and the otherworldly." This is to say that they both render the familiar strange, and the exotic as something with immediate, and human, significance.

Just as interesting, however, are the differences between the two women's poetry, and their lives—for they played out this fundamental tension in very different ways. John Ashbery has justly remarked upon their separate temperaments: "Miss Moore's synthesizing, collector's approach is far from Miss Bishop's linear, exploring one." Perhaps this quotation reveals as much about Ashbery's preferences as it does about Moore and Bishop—certainly Moore does explore, and Bishop does synthesize—but it points a way past a frequent



Poets and other writers assemble at the Gotham Book Mart in New York, in 1948, to honor Dame Edith Sitwell (seated on sofa at center). Marianne Moore (seated right), with Elizabeth Bishop at her shoulder, was by then a respected elder in a crowd that included, among others, W. H. Auden and Randall Jarrell.

critical blind spot, one that wishes them put under a single rubric.

Their similarities and differences bear delineating for several reasons. First, their similarities lead us to a question at once natural and problematic. That is, what role, if any, did their status as "women poets" play in their careers, and in the poems that they wrote? How well did they fit into the high priesthood of modernist, and even confessional, poets, those who thought of poetry as almost a substitute for religion? In other words, did they write a poetry appreciably different from that of their friends and contemporaries—W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, in Moore's case; Robert Lowell in Bishop's? And second, do their differences shed any light on the much bruted "anxiety of influence" (a term, and a theory, coined by the prominent critic, Harold Bloom) which poets feel toward their "precursors," those who write before them?

Marianne Moore, like Elizabeth Bishop, may have been wounded into poetry: Moore's father, and Bishop's mother,

succumbed to mental illness when their children were young. Moore's father, an inventor, suffered a nervous breakdown after his idea for a smokeless furnace failed. He left the family, never to return, at about the time his daughter was born. She was born November 15, 1887, in Kirkwood, Missouri, and lived there with her mother, her brother, and her grandfather until he died. They moved to Pennsylvania in 1894. The family was Presbyterian, and Moore's brother, Warner, was to become a chaplain in the Navy. She lived with her mother for the rest of her life, except for the years she attended Bryn Mawr College, 1905-09. After graduating from college she attended secretarial school, which led to a teaching job at the U.S. Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Her students there included the famous athlete, Jim Thorpe; characteristically she insisted on calling him "James." In 1916 Marianne and her mother moved to New Jersey to keep house with Warner, and from there they moved to Greenwich Village (because the battleship Warner served on was stationed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard). Her last change of address occurred in 1929, when she and her mother moved to Brooklyn. Her mother died in 1947, Moore in 1972, both of them at the age of 85.

Marianne Moore's life was, to some extent, that of a 20th-century Emily Dickinson, marked by asceticism and a certain reclusiveness, and yet also public, the disciplined life of a literary editor. She was eccentric, as if to compensate for her quotidian existence—although in an essay on Dickinson, published in 1933, she dismissed all talk of personal idiosyncrasies. The piece is penned with some surcharge of emotion: "One resents the cavil that makes idiosyncrasy out of individuality . . . and though to converse athwart a door [as Dickinson did] is not usual, it seems more un-useful to discuss such a preference than it would be to analyze the beam of light that brings personality, even in death, out of seclusion."

Yet Moore reveled in her own eccen-

tricitities, even cultivated them. She wore a tricorne hat and a black cape, and sometimes took pictures of herself in subway photo booths to make certain that her image was right. When Moore signed on with *The Dial*, she made sure that she would have time set aside for tango lessons. One of her later jobs took advantage of her penchant for verbal and visual style. After she had become what the English poet Charles Tomlinson has called "a national pet," Ford Motor Company hired her in 1955 to come up with names for a new car. She obliged, generating hundreds of names—of the "utopian Turtletop" variety—but Ford found none of them suitable.

Mrs. Moore was a strong taskmaster to her daughter and her daughter's friends. She was also a prude, or what Bishop called more kindly, "overfastidious"; she and her daughter once reprimanded Bishop for using the word "privy" (referred to in Moore's letter as "watercloset") in the poem "Roosters." Also suspect was the word "spit," which Bishop wrote into a short story. And Mrs. Moore occasionally put what she thought were indecent books—including Mary McCarthy's *Company She Keeps*—to the torch. She also exercised her talents as a censor on the human scale. When Elizabeth Bishop asked why one well-known writer was never to be seen at Moore's home, she was told, "He contradicted Mother." Her moralizing strain was to come increasingly to the fore in her daughter's work. One stanza of "What Are Years?" (1944) has made more than one reader twinge under the verbal equivalent of a ruler applied to the hand—"So he who strongly feels,/behaves."

Marianne Moore, as her friend the literary theorist Kenneth Burke wrote, "tried so hard to be ordinary that she became even more extraordinary." Her poetry behaves, but mainly on the formal surface; it says ordinary things perhaps, but always in extraordinary ways. She invented her own stanzaic forms, creating stanzas in which

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each line had a precise number of syllables. She often used hidden rhymes, burying the old ore of poetic form in her variations. Even her free-verse poems she wrote first in such disciplined stanzas.

Her ostensible subjects include the sea, a glacier, New York, a steam-roller, and always animals. Moore saw, as Blake advised, not with but through the eye. Beneath her pen the sea becomes "a grave," the glacier is "an octopus of ice," and the steam roller represents an attempt to make "impersonal judgment in aesthetic/matters."

In other words, the ordinary *is* extraordinary, and its genuineness lends it power. Moore—a great fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers and, after they moved to the West Coast, the New York Yankees—never tired "of a speedy ball from the catcher finding the glove of the pitcher, when half the time he isn't even looking at it." That is, she never tired of something most of us never notice, something extrinsic to the game itself, and yet still somehow fundamental to it. "Writing is exciting," she wrote in 1966, "and baseball is like writing."

She did not, however, consider either activity to be merely play. When the Yankees invited her one year to throw out their first pitch, she decided that she had to throw it from the pitcher's mound, and appeared at the Yankee offices one winter day, in the snow, to ask if she could practice. The excitement she found in writing was also hard-earned—she worked hours, for example, to perfect the simplest of thank-you notes. And she carried a clipboard with attached poems-in-progress around the apartment with her as she did housework.

The poet, she wrote in a passage of "Poetry" that she was later to cut away (her own poetry often seemed foremost among her dislikes), must present "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," not excluding real "business documents and/school-books" among the raw materials of her art. But in "When I Buy Pictures," she admits to liking "quite the opposite" to the ordinary: "the old thing, the medieval decorated hat-box, in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the hour-glass." Moore is deliberately disingenuous. Her hat-box is at once ordinary

and extraordinary. She reminds us that Keats's Grecian urn likely had a practical purpose.

In poetry, as she writes in another poem, "the past is the present." The past (of the hatbox, or of the Hebrew language that she revered) comes forward in art. But as the ordinary is rendered extraordinary, it loses presence, acquires a distance that permits the poet to succeed where the steam roller fails—in judgment and appreciation. The poet must not get too close to her subject, lest like the steamroller she destroy it.

The lines about restraint, in "What Are Years?," speak volumes, both about Moore and—strangely enough—about her relationship to modernism, as well as about her affinities with Bishop. Bishop remarked in an interview that, "I don't think [she] ever believed in talking about the emotions much." Moore's poetry—like Bishop's—is singularly reticent. It depends on occasion even less than Bishop's poetry, most often sublimating the poet's experience, as well as her emotion, in a language of abstract thought, or surfaces.

In a short poem called "Silence," Moore writes that her father (actually, someone else's, since she never knew her own) praised self-reliance to her, comparing "superior people" to cats that take their prey to privacy, and concluding, "The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;/not in silence, but restraint." There is much to note here: the poet's invented father; the understated current of violence in his sage words about cats and mice; his painful detachment.

More interesting, however, is the relation between the poet's silence and modernist tradition. One of the best short-form polemics on modernism is T. S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in 1919. In that essay he puts forward what he terms an "impersonal theory of poetry." "Poetry," he writes, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." His belated proviso to this harsh edict links him to the haughty father of "Silence": "But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what



Long a fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Marianne Moore transferred her loyalty to the Yankees when the "Bums" moved West. Here, the poet tosses out the first ball at the Yankee's 1968 opener.

it means to want to escape from those things."

What Eliot proposed in the place of a direct presentation of emotion was its indirect representation: emotion expressed not by way of immediate, but of mediated, experience. The poet is most effective, he argues, when he places himself within a tradition of other poets, when his words merge with the overtones of the dead. Or he simply takes the words of his predecessors and places them in his own poem. Thus Eliot takes from Spenser and Dante and Shakespeare and Goldsmith and Verlaine (among others) in making his poem, *The Waste Land*. Ezra Pound was more radical yet: he proposed that the modern poet adopt the "persona" of an older poet, and speak through him as through a mask. His sources were more obscure than Eliot's, less within the European Renaissance tradition.

Where Eliot steals, Moore cites, with all the machinery of quotation marks. To look at a page of Marianne Moore's poetry is often to see a flurry of such material, mediated but hardly dominated by the poet's commentary. The poet is, above all, an arranger of other writers' words, a democratic collector of voices, al-

though, like Whitman, she is a democrat who wields final authority over her material. (The oft-times blunt Walt Whitman was no hero, however. When Bishop once spoke his name to her friend, Moore snapped, "Elizabeth, don't speak to me about that man!")

Yet Moore's quotations come from a different storehouse than those of Eliot. If Eliot had been a collector, he might have frequented Sotheby's; Moore would have preferred garage sales and flea markets, for she made a tradition of seemingly random, and unliterary, quotations. From her college days on she kept a commonplace book of the quotations that caught her

eye as she read. In order to have the quotations at hand, she made an index at the back of the notebook. Her taste was always catholic. When she wrote to Ezra Pound in 1921, she brushed off classics as "common property." Her interests, she notes implicitly, are uncommon: "I have been interested most, in the last two years, in technical books such as Gilman's *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* . . . Harold Raynes' book on dogs, *The Earthenware Collector* by G. Woolliscroft Rhead. McGraw's and Matthewson's books on baseball and Tilden's book on tennis."

Sometimes in her verse the poet gets the final word; at other times, a quotation concludes the poem. Take "An Octopus," an extended exercise in describing a glacier (it is "an octopus of ice"). The poem ends in quotation, as the poet—through her verbal mask—takes a final look at it:

the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed,
its claw cut by the avalanche
"with a sound like the crack of a rifle,
in a curtain of powdered snow launched
like a waterfall."

The glacier, notably, is "like Henry James 'damned by the public for decorum,'" to which the poet appends, "not decorum, but restraint." The iceberg is, then,

impersonal—like the poet.

These voices come not from the Western tradition but from Moore's commonplace book. Moore's notes to the poem tell us that "with a sound like the crack of a rifle" comes from W. D. Wilcox's *Rockies of Canada*, published in 1903. The last line may come from the poem's main source, *The National Parks Portfolio*, published in 1922. Other sources for the poem range from the *Illustrated London News* of August 11, 1923, to John Ruskin, to something "overheard at the circus."

We see the problem. This is the impersonal poet's impersonal poet, one who cares not if her source comes of high culture or low, prose or poetry. Her poem more resembles Pound's work than Eliot's, and yet its very persona is ice, a voice not recognizably of any tradition. Eliot himself said as much, when he wrote that Moore was a poet of "no immediate derivations." To know the source of the quotation is not to clue us in on what the poet means—is she taking the Park Service at its word? Is she using their guidebook ironically? The answer to both questions is probably no. What is most interesting about the poem, after one gets over the initial hurdle of the quotation marks, is that it sounds of one piece. The voice throughout is best called that of Marianne Moore—something that cannot be said of *The Waste Land* and T. S. Eliot.

Is this the distinctive voice of a woman? Some critics, over the years, have heard it as one. Their high praise for her work is often a double-edged sword: awe, and the opposing blade of condescension. One of these is Roy Harvey Pearce, in his famous survey, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961). He notes that Moore does not comment on her materials. "We cannot but remark the poet's polite and lady-like presence . . . She tries neither to convince nor celebrate." Elsewhere he refers to her "quite feminine realism."

More subtle was R. P. Blackmur who, while he admired Moore's work, thought it a trifle unambitious: "the astonishing fact [is] that none of Miss Moore's poems attempts to be major poetry." He attacks her idiosyncrasies as incapable of communicating "major themes." More recent crit-

ics, notably Helen Vendler, Bonnie Costello, and John Slatin, have taken Moore to be the very ambitious poet of major poems that she was.

Her reticence, rather, is consistent with the tradition of modernism in which she took part. If anything, her almost immaculate control of her materials seems a reaction against the charge of "femininity" in writing.

There were important differences between her and her fellow modernists, however. And these differences are likely due to her unique position as a woman among many men. She differed from them in making art out of the raw materials of ordinary life: newspapers, magazines, National Park guides. She took the modernists' method, but refused their tradition, or what is today often referred to as the canon. Like Ireland, in her poem "Sojourn in the Whale" (1917), she felt "compelled by hags to spin/gold thread from straw," but made of such a spinning her particular strength. In that, she was very like James Joyce. But in other important ways she was not. James Joyce tried to rewrite nothing less than *The Odyssey* in his famous book, *Ulysses*, published in 1922, the same year that Eliot's *Waste Land* appeared.

There was much hubris in the modernists' systematizing; however playful (as Joyce's work most certainly is), it was less like baseball than like an elaborate chessgame. If Eliot's heroes were Dante and Donne, hers were (among others) Pee Wee Reese and Roy Campanella. She was less a high priestess of the imagination than its general practitioner—and in that she resembles William Carlos Williams, who also stayed at home and insisted that the imagination must be rooted in place rather than in metaphysics. But even Williams, whose talents lay primarily in the brief lyric poem, felt the need to earn his spurs by writing an epic. That Moore did not distinguish her work in the best sense; she knew and accepted personal and poetic limits, and made a virtue of what Pearce condescended to call her "quite feminine realism."

She also shared with Williams a love of, and respect for, common people. Bishop said in an interview that John Dewey and Marianne Moore "are the only people I

have ever known who would talk to everyone, on all social levels, without the slightest change in their manner of speaking. . . . [T]hey have the kind of instinctive respect for other people which we all wish we could have but can only aspire to." The woman who went to ball games with a janitor and his wife, and who played tennis with a young black man who yelled "Okay!" instead of "Serve!," did have certain affinities with the democratic bard, Walt Whitman. Whitman, too, one suspects, would have liked the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Nowhere in real life is the art of realism so evident as in friendship. And nowhere is it so put to the test as in friendships between artists, especially when one is a headstrong editor and the other an ambitious young writer. I refer, of course, to Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, whose friendship merits its own telling.

Moore, who stayed at home, was not so obsessed with the idea of home as was Bishop, who for so many years had none. Bishop conceived of home as a place of confinement and of freedom. In 1938 Bishop published a short story entitled "In Prison." The narrator, a Kafkaesque soul with a Puritan's heart, knows that "Freedom is knowledge of necessity," and "can hardly wait for the day of [his] imprisonment." Among the narrator's desires is to read "one very dull book . . . the duller the better." This desire for a prison/home re-surfaces in Bishop's last book, *Geography III*, published in 1976. In "The End or March," the speaker wants to walk on the beach until she reaches her "proto-dream-house" where she will "read boring books,/old, long, long books." This narrator has softened a bit, adding to her desires "a grog à l'américaine." But "home" remains a place of confinement, albeit beside the ocean.

Surely it is interesting, then, that when Bishop settled in Brazil, where she lived between 1951 and 1967 with her friend Lota de Macedo Soares, she named their home Casa Mariana, "after Marianne Moore and also because it is on the road to a town called Mariana." For their friendship, too, was one of imprisonment and freedom, comfort and restraint.

One visitor to Bishop's house noted that it sat next to a waterfall and that the windows looked onto bamboo; that the room was full of old quarterlies, photographs of Baudelaire, Moore, and Robert Lowell; and that two old cats shared a space with her typewriter. But when asked if the location inspired her to write, she answered: "I suppose any writer prefers a hotel room completely shut away from distractions." Or a kind of prison.

The agreeable clutter of Bishop's domicile resembled what she had noted in the Moore household. In "Efforts of Affection" she describes it this way: "The small living room and dining room were crowded with furniture that had obviously come from an older, larger home, and there were many pictures on the walls, a mixture of the old and the new, family possessions and presents from friends (these generally depicted birds or animals)."

After their initial meeting on the bench in front of the New York Public Library (in 1934, the year that Bishop's mother died), the ordinarily shy college student invited the older poet to go with her to the circus. The invitation was a propitious one, since Moore went to the circus every year, for pleasure and, no doubt, to do research on her favorite subjects. On this occasion, Moore pressed Bishop into service to help her collect a replacement elephant hair for a bracelet that her brother had given her. Bishop diverted the older elephants with stale bread, while Moore furtively snipped hairs off the head of a baby elephant with an old pair of nail scissors.

Moore also helped to launch Bishop's career—although it is safe to assume that it would have risen of its own strength. Early in their friendship (from 1934 on), she gave Bishop's name to interested publishers, pressed Bishop to send her poems to journals, and even offered to submit the poems herself (an offer that was declined). At the same time, she made copious suggestions for revision, and gave large doses of encouragement. In 1936, when Bishop was unsure of her ability as a poet and considered a career in medicine, Moore gently advised her against it. In later years she recommended the younger poet for honors and fellowships, often offering her

the highest of praise. Recommending her for the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Prize Fellowship in 1945, she wrote: "Were writing offered by her to be rejected, it would imply—for me—that imagination is without value." Bishop got the prize, and her first book, *North & South*, was published. The imagination won this battle, at least.

By 1938 what Bishop had called Moore's "protective apron" (image of domesticity and home) had begun to smother a bit. She pulled away, and sent manuscripts directly to publishers rather than clearing them first with Moore. But the real break between apprentice and master came over Bishop's poem, "Roosters," a bitter invective directed at male aggressiveness (the most acid poem in her oeuvre). Moore intervened, alluding to the "heroisms of abstinence." Revealing her own, perhaps, she strangely advised Bishop to change the title to "The Cock." Bishop's response was an angry one: "May I keep your poem?" she asks, "It is very interesting, what you have done." There was acid in the words "your poem."

Bishop was not alone in suffering under Moore's diligence; as editor of *The Dial* she cut Hart Crane's "Wine Menagerie" by two-thirds, rewrote some of the remaining lines, and then changed the title to "Again." Kenneth Burke noted that she had taken all the wine out of the menagerie. (That she left in the menagerie shows to what extent it became a Marianne Moore poem.)

Shortly after their exchange over "Roosters," Bishop wrote a poem entitled "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," which bids Moore "come flying" over the Brooklyn Bridge. Although it has superficial affinities to Moore's work in tone and texture, it is based rather on a poem by Pablo Neruda, as if to emphasize its otherness from Moore and her tradition. There are moments of disapprobation toward "Miss Moore": "Bearing a musical inau-

dible abacus,/a slight censorious frown." But the poem is a friendly one.

The invitation was, as Bishop wrote in a letter, to attend an exhibit of Paul Klee's work in New York. The invitation sounds almost an apologetic note: We cannot be, in effect, literary collaborators, but we can "sit down and weep; we can go shopping." And from this point on, until Moore died in 1972, their friendship remained more personal than literary. After 1940 Moore expressed her revisionist sentiments to Bishop with a polite hesitancy. She made some suggestions about "Large Bad Picture" in 1943, only to add: "But I have no confidence—truly none—in my present 'ideas'." Confidence Moore always had; this proviso probably expresses more tact than self-doubt.

But their friendship never weakened. One letter from Moore in 1946 testifies to its strength: "You have done so much for me, Elizabeth, I feel a sense of defeat in your not knowing this better." Bishop wrote from Brazil in 1959 to offer another invitation: "It would be a lovely week to have you as a visitor." And in 1970 she enclosed a handpainted drawing of a doorframe from her house with a letter: a sign reading "Casa Mariana" was nailed to



Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil, 1954. Living there from 1951 to 1967, she named her home Casa Mariana, "after Marianne Moore and also because it is on the road to a town called Mariana."

the frame.

Their literary friendship was perhaps typical, marked both by affection and by strong judgments that sometimes caused hard feelings. But it is hard to see where Bishop fell prey to anxieties about her major "influence." She shared Moore's belief in art's constraints, its incapacity radically to change life—they agreed with Auden when he wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen." But the substance of that belief, its working out in the poems, was so different that it seems wrong to say that Bishop depended on Moore for her models, her subjects. Bishop's poems, as John Ashbery noted, are more linear than Moore's. Despite their reticence they allow more psychology and more autobiography to intrude. They are more conversational than Moore's, which seem to belong first to the printed page.

Yet what we do take from both poets' work is a limited faith in art's restorative powers, a sense that, even if it cannot contain "visions," it can sustain us. This sense of limitation increases rather than decreases when we arrive at Elizabeth Bishop's work. Where Moore thought poetry ought to be "useful," Bishop advocated the "perfectly useless concentration" we find there. And where Moore was above all a moralist, Bishop almost never provides her reader with a lesson or a punch-line. The work, she seems to say, is the reader's to complete.

Like Moore, however, Bishop practiced hard at being ordinary, but seldom converted her friends to the idea that she was. Poet James Merrill told the story of how she had rented her house for a summer to the poet Charles Olson, but had to pay the bills herself because he complained that "a Poet mustn't be asked to do prosaic things like pay bills." Noting that Bishop took no unfair advantage of "the Poet" in her rendering of the anecdote, Merrill turned his attention to her: "[This was] another of her own instinctive, modest, life-long impersonations of an ordinary woman, someone who during the day did errands, went to the beach, would perhaps that evening jot a phrase or two inside the nightclub matchbook before returning to the dance floor."

Even this short passage serves to emphasize the differences between the two women. Moore was, above all, a mental traveler: She lived almost all her life in New York City, and praises its "accessibility to experience." Bishop, on the other hand, was peripatetic, physically as well as mentally a wanderer. Restlessness, and her record of it, became her vocation. The chronology of her life is written in the delighted syllables of a Rand McNally atlas: all parts of Europe, North Africa, Key West, Mexico, Brazil, Boston, and dozens of points between them. The titles of three of her four books headline the travels: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*.

Like Marianne Moore, who set aside time for baseball and the tango, Bishop had plenty of room in her character for playfulness. Merrill writes of "later glimpses of her playing was it poker? with Neruda in a Mexican hotel, or pingpong with Octavio Paz in Cambridge . . ." Bishop thought it a great compliment that Ernest Hemingway liked her poem, "The Fish," and once described herself as "a lady Hemingway." However confounding this self-description may seem, there is some justice in it—like Hemingway she loved to travel and fish, and was fascinated by Key West and points farther south. A lesbian—once rashly pronounced "the most important lesbian poet since Sappho," by Harold Bloom—Bishop even had an affair with one of Ernest's four wives, Pauline. The symmetry was complete.

Bishop's sense of drift had its origins in her childhood. She was born in 1911 in Massachusetts, but spent a good part of her early childhood in Nova Scotia. Her father's was a prominent Boston family, and her mother's a Baptist family from Nova Scotia. From the beginning, then, her sense of herself must have been divided, and it seems natural that geography became one of her consuming interests. After her father's death and her mother's institutionalization for mental illness, she was shuttled from one set of grandparents to the other and then back. An autobiographical short story, "In the Village," sets her mother's anguished scream against the redemptive clang of the village blacksmith's hammer. The strain of loss and dis-

placement aggravated her asthma and allergies, which forced her to stay out of school for long periods and to study at home. Only many years later, when she had settled in Brazil, was she able or willing to write the poems about her childhood found in her third book, *Questions of Travel*: "Manners," "Sestina," and "First Death in Nova Scotia." These and several of the pieces in her collected prose testify to the restraint that balances her own deepest feeling with modesty and a remarkable lack of self-pity.

The manner in which a poet reads his or her work out loud tells us something about the work. Wallace Stevens intoned like a lapsed clergyman; T. S. Eliot sounded like the converted Englishman he was and read dramatically, relishing the lower-class voices in *The Waste Land*. Both read in a grand—if impersonal—style. Not so Bishop. She stood before her audiences and read her poems in dull monotones, as if they were stories from the newspaper—as if they had very little to do with her. She very much refused to play the poet; and it was easy to imagine that she was ordinary.

Moore had made art one of her primary subjects. If we wish to find her opinion of poetry, we turn to the poem of that title. But if we turn with the same idea in mind to Bishop's "Poem," from her last book, we may at first be baffled—for the subject of the poem is a small painting, "About the size of an old-style dollar bill." (It joins her early poems, "Large Bad Picture" and "The Monument," as a meditation on mortal art.) But as we proceed, we find in it a "theory" of art that owes much to Moore: an unsystematic appreciation of art's modest power to explain our average moments and, conversely, to lend them a limited joy.

What the poet discovers gently, and without the violence of a Joycean epiphany, in "Poem," is that the painting shows the Nova Scotia she knew as a child, that the painter was her great-uncle. She realizes that her vision of the place matches his, and that both are likely lost. But she corrects herself at that lofty word, "vision" (a word that no Joyce or Eliot would so much as blink at):

Our visions coincided—"visions" is too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?

Many of Bishop's poems are quiet revelations of what is "feminine" in the world. She opens her last book with the remarkable poem, "In the Waiting Room." In it, six-year-old Bishop realizes that she is not only an individual but also "one of them." She is like her aunt whose scream she hears in the dentist's office (a displacement of her mother's scream, perhaps), and like the women with "those awful hanging breasts" whose picture she sees in a copy of the *National Geographic*.

In an earlier poem, "At the Fishhouses," Bishop sees the ocean as "what we imagine knowlege to be," "drawn from the cold hard mouth/of the world, from . . . rocky breasts," an historical—and impersonal—feminine. In "Filling Station" she notices, amid the grease and dirt, an embroidered doily, emblem of hard-won beauty, likely placed there by an (absent) woman.

Art, then, is not a glorified image of life, but also passes away, like an old painting and like "the yet-to-be-dismantled elms" of the last line of "Poem." The poet gains some consolation from it, but the gains are small, looks and not visions:

dim, but how live, how touching in detail
—the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthy trust. Not much.

Bishop, like Frost, is concerned with "what to make of a diminished thing," how to find meaning, and meaning's consolations, without a system. Like her "unbeliever," from her first book, *North & South*, she does not trust appearances, nor does she trust that there is anything behind them. The message in "Poem," insofar as there is one, is grim, but its exposition softens rather than exacerbates the impact.

Bishop's poetry explores the way in which art and life cannot be divorced: Their interrelation is what touches them both with meaning. This is what Bishop meant in 1936 when she thanked Moore

for commenting on her post-cards: "I'm afraid I won't really have made this trip at all until I have lured you into commenting on every bit of pictorial evidence I can produce." Moore's best answer to these kind words came in 1964, when she declared that her friend's travels provided an "OPTICAL HOLIDAY for me, hearing about it all."

One detects in Bishop's work a refusal to participate in—to correspond with—the literary vogue of her own time, or at least the one that dominated the 1950s and 1960s. That vogue was "confessional" poetry, whose most famous exponent was Robert Lowell, her friend and author of *Life Studies* and other stark, personal testaments. That book includes the poem "Skunk Hour," inspired by Lowell's reading of a Bishop poem "The Armadillo." According to Lowell's biographer, Ian Hamilton, Lowell was in love with Bishop. Her homosexuality, however, precluded anything but the strong friendship they shared for many years. However much Bishop cherished Lowell, she thought that "the tendency [in confessional poetry] is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves."

This places Bishop oddly before and after her time. She is even more restrained than the high modernists in her understatement, and more successful than William Carlos Williams and his fellow Imagists in weaving her images into a quiet story line.

Part of Bishop's strength, which she inherits from Moore even as she intensifies it, is her avoidance of system. She disliked dogma and was not drawn to "modern religiosity," which seemed to her "to lead to a tone of moral superiority." Much of the two poets' reticence, as poets, amounts to a pulling away from any demand made on a reader to read their poems a certain way. (As Moore's quotient of moralizing increased over the years, the quality of her poetry declined.)

Even if this non-dogmatic quality is not due to their being both women and poets, then another kind of reticence possibly was. That is the reticence of not writing more. As Bishop told one interviewer: "I wish I had written a great deal more. Sometimes I think if I had been born a man I probably would have written more. Dared more, or been able to spend more time at it."

This is the reticence of the invisible woman in "Filling Station," creating beauty and loving us all, but remaining behind the scenes. Or of the child in "The Waiting Room," who keeps to herself many decades, experiencing "the sensation of falling off/the round, turning world/into cold, blue-black space," as she discovers that she is a person, and will be a woman, like the others.

After Bishop's Brazilian friend of 15 years, Lota de Macedo Soares, died in 1967—a suicide—and after her *Complete Poems* (with their misleading title) were published in 1969 to adoring reviews and the National Book Award, she returned to the United States. Between 1970 and 1973 she alternated between a teaching position at Harvard and seasons in Brazil; after 1974 she settled permanently in Boston. Her last book, *Geography III*, was published in 1976. Bishop's death in 1979 was untimely; surely she had many more poems to write. Had she composed her own epitaph, it doubtless would have been a modest one. Perhaps it would have echoed the simple and eloquent sentences that she devoted to a primitivist painter she admired, Gregorio Valdes of Key West:

There are some people whom we envy not because they are rich or handsome or successful, although they may be any or all of these, but because everything they are and do seems to be all of a piece, so that even if they wanted to they could not be or do otherwise.