

The CEA Forum

Summer/Fall 2006: 35.2

BISHOP, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PACT, AND POETIC PEDAGOGY

[Ann K. Hoff](#)

The legacy of the New Critics, including its historically male-dominated canon of poets, continues to hold influence, in part because its methods of reading preside over many college classrooms. New Critical readings stress careful explications, based solely on the evidence offered in the lines of the poem. This way of reading encourages careful interpretations, and requires students to pay attention to details of syntax, diction, symbol, metaphor, and imagery. Because the method sets the student who is reading a poem for the first time on an equal footing with more experienced readers, it is an effective way of introducing students to poetry. However, it can become unduly restrictive, and its underlying biases — especially its assumption that the speaker is a universal one — limit students' ability to get all they can out of personal poems.

As an undergraduate, I remember attempting to explain that Elizabeth Bishop felt distressed by her own womanhood by remarking, 'Bishop said she was "horrified" by the sight of breasts' in 'In the Waiting Room.' My professor corrected me: 'the *speaker* says,' cautioning me not to conflate the poet with the speaker. When I pointed out that Bishop declares, 'I am an *Elizabeth*' in the poem, the professor countered (somewhat incongruously to my mind) by insisting, 'Bishop was *not* a Confessional poet.' Given Bishop's ambivalent relationship with the poets of the Confessional school, I suspect that my professor's goal was to distinguish her method of self-disclosure from theirs. However, there was an attendant bias in the insistence, betrayed by a two-semester 'Modern Poetry' syllabus that contained only two women poets — Moore and Bishop — and regular comments that women poets like H.D., Millay, and Sexton were 'not interesting.'

Although we did not read the Confessional poets together in this class, one of my peers made a comparative point about sexuality in the postmodern era, and suggested that Plath's poem 'Daddy' contained evidence of childhood abuse. The professor demanded, 'Where does it say that *in the poem*?' and advised her to 'read the poem, not read *into* it.' The professor was not wrong to ask my classmate to restrict her reading to the facts the poem offered, nor in asking me to differentiate between the poet and her creative construction of herself in poetry. After all, as Philippe Lejeune says of autobiographers, 'An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes.' Lejeune also points out that the reader 'does not know the real person' and so he 'imagines what [the author] is like from what he produces' (11). However, had we been able to rephrase our

observations through the lens of autobiography theory, the conversation might have proved more fruitful.

If I had had the vocabulary at the time, I might have argued that Bishop insistently establishes an autobiographical pact in "In the Waiting Room," and we could have explored the ways in which Bishop constructs a character out of her seven-year-old self. Likewise, we could have discussed Plath's ruthless demonizing of her father and husband, asking what kind of character she designed of herself in doing so. To my mind, then and now, it is more interesting to consider the artistic effect of poets' assertions about themselves than to question whether they are truthful ones. When poets create images that lead to false assumptions about their biographies, it often tells more about the personality of the poet than a simple declaration of the truth. Still, it is hard to sanction exploratory readings without giving way entirely to speculation, especially in a classroom of naïve readers. To locate and interpret personal artifacts in a poem without inappropriately reading into a text, it is essential to use a vocabulary informed by a clear understanding of the performative aspect of the autobiographical pact.

The autobiographical pact, which serves as an invaluable interpretive tool for readers of autobiography in both prose and verse, is a difficult concept to teach. In two classes, "20th Century American Poetry" and "Self-Representation in American Poetry," I observed students struggling to understand that a lie (or an error born of memory's fallibility) in an autobiography does not render the author's pact with the reader null and void. Further, I have noticed that Bishop's prediction to Lowell bears out: when readers face a mixture of truth and fiction, they most often believe or disbelieve the text as a whole, rather than assessing each assertion in the text individually. Students, and even many sophisticated readers, veer from one extreme to the other. They begin by believing what they read somewhat submissively. Upon uncovering a lie, they then suspect all they read of falsification. Either Sylvia Plath's father was a violent Nazi, or she was a frightful liar. Either Woolf's half-brother molested her, or she levies a false accusation. Because the stakes of these truths and lies are so high, it is often hard to help students realize the fruitfulness of considering, instead, the ways each author chooses to construct herself as an autobiographical subject. Discussions too often degenerate into a debate over the available biographical evidence.

The careful balance between truth and lie in "In the Waiting Room" makes the poem a perfect model for teaching the autobiographical pact. And, because Bishop's lie does not change the impact of her truth, it is easier for students to rally from their initial sense of betrayal. When my students first read the poem, they cataloged the bits that make the poem seem trustworthy: Elizabeth's name, the date, her age, the town, the magazine, her aunt's name. When confronted with the notion that Bishop had no Aunt Consuelo, and that the February 1918 *National Geographic* does not contain the pictures Bishop claims, students unflinchingly expressed frustration. Some headed immediately to whatever biographical data they had at hand to verify her age, and to see if she was really in Worcester at the age of seven. Finding most of the data true, the students in their irritation articulated the crucial question: why would Bishop bother to tell us these minute details if they were not true?

Instead of debating the truth, the discussion turned to a consideration of what Bishop gains through her revisions of the facts. One student observed that *consuelo* means consolation or comfort in Spanish and developed a theory about Bishop's relationship with her aunt. Another began to connect the fright inspired by the *National Geographic* pictures to Bishop's horror at discovering that she is "an I ...an Elizabeth" (*Poems* 160). One student even noticed the clothing Bishop observes as she takes in the details of the dentist's waiting room: "arctics and overcoats, trousers and skirts and boots" and explored the possibility that Bishop was uncomfortable with nudity in general. He began to search Bishop's other poems for evidence of his theory (*Poems* 159, 160).

While some hypotheses bear out and others meet dead ends, the students learn to question the information each poet offers, even when it sounds like a simple truth. When students think about Bishop's choice to call her aunt Consuelo, they are confronting the artistic intervention any author wields over her own autobiography, whether in prose or poetry. Students begin to grasp the full range of choices authors have at their disposal as they reconstruct their life's memories: will they portray themselves as strong, beleaguered, angry, forlorn, or

triumphant? Does the villainy of their mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives seem exaggerated, or create a more sympathetic main character? Do they hint at the sordid aspects of their lives, or lay them out in defiant detail before the reader? What do they ask us to believe about their personality, and do we believe it? Once Bishop has raised these kinds of questions with her rather benign lies in *In the Waiting Room*, readers at all levels find a method for confronting more dramatic and insidious mixtures of fact and fiction in unknown proportions. The mixture begins to make less mischief for them.

Bishop's poem, *Sestina* is an enigmatic poem that feels more like a fairy tale than a piece of autobiography. However, embedded in this inscrutable scene is a recapitulation of the morning after young Elizabeth's mother had been removed from the household and placed in an asylum. In a class that read *Sestina* before *In the Waiting Room*, students imagined and invented all sorts of possible biographical scenarios that could have produced the grandmother's tears, and they felt discouraged at not knowing the truth. In a class that began by considering the autobiographical pact in *In the Waiting Room*, students who then read *Sestina* remarked that Bishop cultivated the sound of a fairy tale. They observed that the mystical atmosphere prevents the reader from understanding what is really going on, as one student noted, just like the child. Another student observed a lack of gender pronouns in *Sestina* and concluded that Bishop wanted her reader to picture the child as a boy. She began to look at Bishop's other poems for further evidence of gender ambiguity.

The practice Bishop affords changes the way students read the personal poetry that historically follows. When they read Plath's *Ariel* they question what kind of self-portrait she achieves by depicting *Daddy* as *A man in black with a Meinkampf look*. They can more readily recognize and follow the quick shifts between an oppressive reality and violent fantasy that characterize the lines in *Lesbos*:

You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!

You say I should drown my girl.

She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.

The baby smiles, fat snail,

From the polished lozenges of orange linoleum.

You could eat him. He's a boy (*Ariel* 33).

And instead of being entirely put off by Plath's appropriation of holocaust imagery in *Lady Lazarus*, my students began to see the text as a description of the horror of living trapped in a suicidal mind. As one student observed, *It's a poem about what it was like inside the head of a woman [disturbed] enough to make a gas chamber of her own kitchen.*

They were still troubled that Plath compared her own suffering to that of the Holocaust victims, but most students found the offense to be less aggressively anti-Semitic and more to use Bishop's phrase an egregious example of *making things worse than they really are*. While my students (Jewish and otherwise) expressed similar disapproval and even anger with Plath, our previous discussions about how poetic autobiographies use imagery to represent the personality prepared them to confront Plath's metaphor as a troubling aspect of her personality rather than feeling its anti-Semitism aimed outward at them. In essence, they were able to come to the understanding that Plath herself articulates in her journals that she seeks to be *a god in [her] own small way* and that she gains agency and authority from *having wrenched a piece out of [her] life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed it to typewritten words on paper* justifying [her] keen emotion, [her] feeling,

by turning it into print (Journals 16).

Generally speaking, students who read the Confessional poets Plath, Sexton, and Lowell after coming to terms with the idea of autobiographical intervention through Bishop were able to grapple with the fearful problems: what's true, what isn't; how one can bear to witness such suffering and yet not know how much of it one *needn't* suffer with, how much has been 'made up,' and so on... (One Art 562). They read with more sophistication as Bishop herself could in assessing her peers. Bishop's example, in fact, prepares students to read poetic autobiographies of all eras with a more discerning eye for the ways in which the poet constructs memory and the self.

Bishop's demonstration of the autobiographical pact helps students read, not only Confessional poetry with more sophistication, but poetry from other schools and periods as well. One student, upon reading selections from Pound's *Cantos*, remarked that the difficulty he cultivates makes the reader feel helpless and trapped. The student argued that Pound wanted his poem to be so difficult because the experience of being in prison was so difficult. He noticed that the imagery that was accessible in Pound's text was about escape and in particular escape from dullness of mind. He suggested that Pound wanted his readers to feel dumb because it would give them the same feeling of wanting inspiration that he had. He likened Pound's method in the *Cantos* to Bishop's desire in *Sestina* to keep the reader confused about her grandmother's tears.

In reading Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, another of my students wondered whether Bishop's poems would have been more violent or all out if she, like Ginsberg, had witnessed the graphic scenes of her mother's breakdown. The student pointed out that while Bishop had heard a disembodied voice screaming, Ginsberg had seen:

convulsions and red vomit coming out of her mouth diarrhea water exploding from her behind on all fours in front of the toilet urine running between her legs left retching on the tile floor smeared with her black feces unfainted (22).

The student reflected that it was not simply a matter of Bishop not wanting to share such information, but that her trauma had been in not knowing. While Ginsberg had the ugly scene to purge through vivid description, Bishop had only the bodiless voice of her mother, the hushed whispers of her aunts, and her grandmother's inscrutable tears. The student was observing what Susan McCabe asserts in her book *Poetics of Loss*. McCabe notes that 'Throughout [In the Village], adults try to distract [young Bishop] from any possible scene.' But impending chaos and loss become more acutely sensed because of these measures (6). The student was able to observe this same phenomenon for herself, compare it to a correlative gesture in Ginsberg, and conclude that the mode of the autobiography is part of the expression of memory.

Another student used Bishop to help her understand Sharon Olds's use of sexual imagery in *The Father*. She had read the poem *My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead* and its imagery distressed her. In it, Olds imagines her father thinking about her:

I love your legs...

because they are yours and mine

both. I love your what can I call it,

between your legs, we never named it, the

glint and purity of its curls. I love
your rear end, I changed you once,
washed the detritus off your tiny
bottom... when I touched your little
anus I crossed wires with God for a moment (78).

The student admitted that her first impulse was to assume that Olds's father had molested her, but said she read the poem again. In her second reading, the lines "I love your legs...because they are yours and mine/both" reminded her of Bishop asking "Why should I be my aunt,/or me, or anyone?" (*Poems* 161). Prompted by her understanding of Bishop's calculated way of explaining her identity crisis, the student shifted her question. From the initial "did Olds's father molest her," her question became, "what does the sexual imagery in *The Father* do to express the poet's relationship with her father?" Thinking more about the poet's decisions in the rendering of her life, the student was able to write an analysis of how the sexual imagery "was Olds' way of showing how intimate the connection was between herself and her father after she helped him at his death."

Although Bishop was never able to convince Lowell of the merits of separating fact and fiction in autobiographical poetry, her own work mitigates the "infinite mischief" he sets in motion. She offers a body of poetry that demonstrates a method of self-disclosure that creates and verifies trust between author and reader. Further, her careful method of writing promotes a more watchful way of reading, one that permits us to acknowledge autobiography in verse without being naïve about the artist's manipulations of her own subjectivity.

Bishop's is perhaps the model of poetic autobiography most easily brought to the classroom, but reading a larger body of poetry through the lens of autobiography theory holds merit on a larger scope. Bishop's poems, and the verses of Plath, Lowell, Pound, Ginsberg, Olds, and others, suggest that we may find any number of autobiographies embedded in lyric productions awaiting recognition. It also removes an historically embedded stigma attached to personal poetry that goes as far back in the history of American poetry as Bradstreet. From a feminist perspective, it validates one of the dominant forms of women's writing, and removes it from the margins of the poetic and autobiographic genres. From a more global perspective, it cultivates sophisticated readers of poetry and creates a space in which poetic self-disclosure becomes permissible, enjoyable, and admirable.

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Ann K. Hoff, Ph.D., (akhoff@uab.edu) currently teaches Modern Poetry, Poetics, and Women's Literature at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Her most recent articles, "I Said Lifting Belly" (forthcoming in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*) and "How Love May Be Acquired': The Prescriptive Autobiography in Millay's *Fatal Interview*" (forthcoming in *The CEA Critic*), both examine the ways in which lyric forms serve as malleable, fluid modes of autobiography that modernist women poets have found more serviceable than the traditional narrative.

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