

Preliminary questions:

- Two separate collections, published at very different times: to what extent are they, or are they to be treated as, one work? Can a unified reading of them be achieved, should we even aim at one? Most of them had been published separately in magazines before. What's more, the order of the poems in the collections (as least in *Geography III*) was partly dictated by mere technical (typographical) considerations: can or should we take it into account?
- To what extent (if any) should we read and understand the poems in the light of Bishop's biography (her being an orphan, a Canadian-American, a lesbian, her being treated for asthma, depression, alcoholism)?

Biographical elements – chronology

Excerpts from *The Cambridge Companion*:

1911, February: Elizabeth Bishop born in Worcester, Massachusetts. **October:** Her father dies.

1915: Moves from Boston to Great Village, Nova Scotia.

1916: Bishop's mother admits herself to the Nova Scotia Hospital. Bishop stays with her maternal grandparents.

1917: Bishop is taken to live in Worcester by her paternal grandparents. Decades later, she recalls feeling as if she were being "kidnapped".

1918: Moves in with her aunt Maude and uncle George in Revere, MA. **1919:** Returns to Nova Scotia with her aunt Grace.

1926–27: Attends school in Swampscott, MA. **1927–30:** Attends school in Natick, MA.

1934, May: Her mother dies.

1946: Publication of Bishop's first book of poems, *North & South*.

1951: Travels to South America. While in Brazil, has an allergic reaction and is nursed back to health by her Brazilian friend, Lota de Macedo Soares. The two women fall in love.

1965: Publication of *Questions of Travel*.

1967: Bishop flies to New York. Against the advice of her doctor, Macedo Soares travels to New York to see Bishop. She takes an overdose of Valium and goes into a coma. Many of Macedo Soares's friends and family blame Bishop for her death.

1976: Publication of *Geography III*.

1979, October: Dies suddenly of a cerebral aneurysm in Boston.

Food for thought

- "I've never felt particularly homeless, but, then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess that's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it with him." **E.B. in 1978**

- “It is necessary that we read every Bishop poem at its literal level, because the literal is always and essentially one of the subjects of her poetry.” **Victoria Harrison**, *E.B.’s Poetics of Intimacy*, 1993
- “[E.B. was] initially celebrated for the minute detail of her descriptions, what John Ashbery memorably called her ‘thinginess.’” *Cambridge Companion*, p. i. “No detail is ever ‘too small’ for her various peripheral speakers, many of them animals and children.” **Cleghorn & Ellis**
- “Her poems (...) are full of outsiders for whom the idea of home is precisely that — only an idea.” **Id.**
- “Although B.’s poems avoid direct political statement, she continually keeps account of the practical consequences of historical events for individual people.” **Id.** “Although often understood as a poet of observation, introspection, or formal design, and therefore as largely ahistorical and apolitical, E.B. was deeply enmeshed in historical and political discourses. Her texts provide understated explorations of such charged zones of enquiry as colonialism, war, class, race, and sexual politics. (...) As a poet of movement across spaces, B. inevitably encountered issues of colonialism (...) If B.’s poems primarily evoke the anxiety of travel, they subvert notions of colonial control and foster imaginative identification with the colonized and displaced.” **Axelrod**
- “B.’s mind, equivalent to but not identical to an autobiographical voice, is somehow there and not there in her poems, the act of reading them akin to a game of hide-and-seek.” **Cleghorn & Ellis** “She continually alludes to, retells, or reexamines not just her quotidian observations, but her life’s recurring obsessions and preoccupations, particularly its experiences of childhood, exploration, love, dislocation, and loss. Many of B.’s [poems] deal more or less directly with important aspects of her life experience.” **Travisano** “Her writing, even at its most autobiographical, rarely if ever seems egocentric and when she represents painful experience, whether her own or that of others, these struggles are presented with restraint and seem ‘applicable to every reader.’” **Id.** “Poetry was used [by B.] for the distillation and compression that turned the personal and particular into the transcendent and universal.” **Barry**
- “Aware of her own complicity as a white, well-fed tourist of European descent making her home, and her art, in Brazil, B. is cognizant of the liminal position she occupies between native and tourist, self and stranger, and ultimately, as the liaison between us, the readers, and the subjects of her observations.” **Zona**
- “Nature comes into view in B.’s work as it is mediated by technology, art, and human history. (...) Culture is the central term — or artificial optical lens — through which nature comes into or out of focus in B.’s work.” **Rosenbaum**
- “B.’s poetry of the North often investigates various nativity scenes and childhood memory (...), whereas southern sites more often become a realm for erotic self-discovery.” **Hicok**
- “B. had long been preoccupied with borderlines between land and water, between waking and sleeping, between fantasy and everyday life.” **Page**
- “. . . the singular candor with which B. confronted her death, a quality both entirely new to her yet also in a very large way the subject underlying all of *Geography III*.” **Schwartz**

References:

A. Cleghorn & J. Ellis, “Introduction: North and South”; S. Gould Axelrod, “Bishop, History, and Politics”; T. Travisano, “Bishop and Biography”; S. Barry, “In the Village: Bishop and Nova Scotia”; K. Hotelling Zona, “Bishop: Race, Class, and Gender”; S. Rosenbaum, “Bishop and the Natural World”; B. Hicok, “Becoming a Poet: From North to South”; B. Page, “Home, Wherever That May Be: Poems and Prose of Brazil”; L. Schwartz, “Back to Boston: *Geography III* and Other Late Poems”; all in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, 2014.