Elizabeth Bishop As A Neutral Observer Of Other Places

The great American poet Robert Frost wrote in his poem ‘The Bear’ ‘Man acts more like the poor bear in a cage’ (Frost, 1928, Line 13) from this quite simple quote it is possible to fathom that he is suggesting man in his search for knowledge, acts like a trapped bear in a cage, and from this deduction he can't understand his place in the universe. A sense of location or place is considered important to most people and animals as it can often indicate a place of dwelling or origin. However, with the increased ability to travel, or migrate, this led to complications that Elizabeth Bishop’s body of work also tried to unravel. Which brought into question concerns about place and a heightened sense of unrest that she tried to seek answers to within her own lifetime through her poetry.

Bishop often started her poetry with her indicating a movement or journey that has to be undertaken in which to reach the desired location. In her poem ‘Arrival at Santos’, she seems to want to inform the reader of such a journey that was being undertaken by herself personalising her work ‘We leave Santos at once; we are driving to the interior’ (Bishop, 1965, line 39-40). The reader is able to get a feeling of cognition with the author and therefore receive a desire for her to get to the end of the journey safely. Bishop and Frost are comparable in their respective need to inquire about the scale of the undertaking of the journey requirements with Bishop travelling using modern transport over many miles as she herself travelled into the interior of the wilds of the Amazon basin. Frost’s ‘Bear’ has to rely on its own mode of transport as it is ‘peripatetic’ (Frost, 1928) continually moving slowly in its desire to reach the final destination.

What is evident from both of the writers is the apparent freedom of movement that they both express within their respective poems. Bishop clearly contemplates her first-person view from the harbour that she witnesses on her journey to Santos as seen through her own eyes. She also reports to the reader a sense of time that has passed since she started her journey ‘after eighteen days of suspension?’ (12). Her use of the word suspension indicates the ship that she and her fellow travellers arrived in but it is the duration of eighteen days that suggests this isn’t a trip that is concluded but the time taken just to reach the boat terminus at Santos. Frost also alludes to an indefinite amount of time in the bear’s travel schedule as he tells us ‘She's making her cross-country in the fall’ (6). This rather vague suggestion of time taken to travel an unknown distance is matched with the understanding ‘fall’ is a whole season, therefore the bear still possibly has three months in which to travel to reach its final destination.

Bishop and the Fuji born Welsh poet Owen Sheers both use strong natural imagery within their poetry to try to explain location and what it means to them while making their neutral observations. Sheers, in his poem ‘Swallows’ shows a pair of swallows who are traversing the sky above ‘cutting their sky-jive’ (Sheers, 2005, Line 2). This vivid description of movement shadows the movement of Bishops ‘Sandpiper’ as it moves along the shoreline with the tide lapping in lines across the beach. Sheers also refers to lines such as telephone lines in which the pair move around. Sheers’ reference to migration is simply implied by his using the swallow as a poetic device to explain the reason behind the vast journeys they undertake just to procreate away from human eyes ‘their annual regeneration’ (5) suggests the cycle of migration is a continual process that has been carried out over countless years, part of which he

is witnessing.

Just like a swallow, Bishop's Sandpiper is a migratory species that will fly incredible distances, however, both poets use allegorical examples of their respective birds to provide Anthropomorphism in the two different poems. The swallows indicate Sheers use of lexical words in relation to writing or creativity such as ‘script’, ‘ink’ and ‘signatures’ (10, 11) to show a sense of unending continuity as they commit to creating shapes and patterns in their movements, much like the poet who is writing and in the act of creation by adding words to a page. The sandpiper indicates that Bishop wants the reader to see how unsettled she was during her own life by stating ‘He runs, he runs, to the South, finical, awkward’ (Bishop, 1965, Line 3) just as she too travelled from Nova Scotia and in its rhythm we feel the darting movements of the bird. There are scattered stress patterns, dramatising the sandpiper’s condition, the poem also shows organised chaos reflecting the bird’s ‘controlled panic’ (4).

A writer of prose or poetry could use their work to show the reader why they are living in a new environment or in the case of the poet, Langston Hughes, a neighbourhood where mass groups of people were having to live together due to a change of circumstance. Hughes’ poetry unveils a glimpse of the New York Harlem district in which we, as readers, see all of the profound truths of life within the relatively new districts of the city. Hughes’s ‘Good Morning’ shows the reader snapshots of life as seen by the male narrator of the poem. He lists places of origin where huge groups of people chose to migrate away from unrest ‘until coloured folks spread’ (Hughes, 1959, P. 269). ‘Songs For A Coloured Singer’ by Elizabeth Bishop also mirrors the emotional connection that people place on location. Bishop writes about origins but also shows the reader an uncomfortable truth regarding the start of slavery ‘Adult and child sink to their rest’ (Bishop, 1969, III, Line 1, 2) she is telling the reader about the huge loss of life that often occurred as the boats that transported slaves often sank.

Bishop splits ‘Songs For A Coloured Singer’ into four sections, but it is in the third section which has the subtitle ‘Lullaby’ that Bishop uses repetitive rhymes to create the lyrical, song like, structure to her poem. The five stanzas have their second and fourth lines rhyming using assonance based on the repetition of similar vowels such as ‘rest/breast’ and ‘fall/wall’ (2-4, 6-8). This rhyming structure is cleverly designed by Bishop to be softly spoken or possibly sung just like a lullaby but hidden in its ‘lyrics’ contains a grim message about slavery. Her first and fifth stanzas are also repeated similar to most gospel/jazz tunes that were popular at that time. This theme of displacement is also alluded to in most of Hughes’s poetry but, it is in ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ that he shows the reader the sheer scale of his observation of other places by letting us look back historically with his first-person speaker to places of civilisation where mankind had its common ancestry that thrived along major rivers many of which, sadly, had links with slavery ‘Congo’ (6) and ‘Mississippi’ (8)

Hughes shows us via his poem that displacement or the moving of something from its place can reveal translational qualities that are carried by the voices of the speaker. Hughes’ ‘Good Morning’ uses a rhyming couplet that mimics Latino slang where he cleverly rhymes ‘Rico’ (9) with ‘Chico’ (10) that means a young person. In her poem ‘The Burglars of Babylon’ Bishop speaks as a storyteller who is taking the reader by the hand to show scenes of the various districts of Rio in Brazil. Again there is a reference to Anthropomorphism whereby people are replaced by swallows ‘On the hills a million people, A million sparrows, nest’ (1965, 5-6). Just as she too moved south from her place of origin, Nova Scotia, she might have felt that she too was one of the swallows personified.

Just as Bishops' often first person rather neutral confessional voice speaks to the reader to show links between migration and memory, then Hughes' lyrical musicality exposed racial inequality from within America. John Steinbeck used his novel The Grapes of Wrath to reveal an uncomfortable reality of the mass migration of ordinary Americans as they too travelled to their perception of a better life from economic hardship. Comparisons can be made with the Afro-Americans gravitating into New York, with the Joad family travelling west from Oklahoma to California during the pre-war dust bowl years. Steinbeck's protest novel shares many neutral similarities with Elizabeth Bishop's poetry they both speak realistically and relay underlying themes that include the struggle to find a sense of belonging.

'And your immodest demands for a different world' (line 9) in 'Arrival at Santos' relate to her questioning the demands for change when relocating from another place. She shows her mind in the process of perceiving a landscape and adjusting its views as it goes along the great journey ahead but also resonates back through the poem, reminding us that this has been a poem as much about the process of cognition. Steinbeck's Joad family had to constantly readjust and adapt to find their idea of a better life through travel 'the mother road, the road of flight' (Steinbeck, 1939, P. 100). His reference to flight or travel is reminiscent of Bishop's 'Sandpiper' and Sheers 'Swallows' but the symbolism that Route 66 carries shows that it goes in two directions only, the Joads were aware that they could either go forward in search of opportunity and possible hardship, or have gone backward and returned to the poverty and familiarity they came from.

The voices that are used by the writers to convey meaning help the reader make assumptions about the joys and hardships of peoples lives. While avoiding both sentimental idealisation and negative stereotypes by recording faithfully the nuances of working-class life and its frustrations through neutral observation. Steinbeck also highlighted the plight of fellow Americans by using a realistic immersive diction that also showed hardship through the physical movement across America 'the dust hung like fog' (P. 3) using the image of dust to show the reader the gradual erosion of the lives of his characters. Both Frost and Sheers are also skilled at representing a wide range of human experience in their poems. Both their voices are colloquial that use everyday language while speaking to the reader about common themes such as the impact of the changes to rural life through to major themes within their poetry about ageing, family life and the passage of time 'From my father a stammer' (Sheers, 2005, Line 3).

From the understanding that Bishop's descriptions of place help us to understand the object or location that she was writing about, it is through her adult reminiscence that she was aware of the need to make a choice about how her life was spent. Life is not totally pre-arranged but, by sheer determination to realise that change has to happen, either to complete a migratory journey like the Bear and the Swallows or to make a conscious life-changing journey in the search of a better life just as many real-life Americans did that Hughes and Steinbeck so eloquently wrote about, the reader is able to draw comparisons within their own lives and from this may be able to see that experience is everything. There was a sense of tradition and continual movement in her own life that she was able to retrospectively review in her poetry while looking forward and realising that tradition is just an accumulation of experience that can be shared with others.

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