

No. 5: The Map

Commentary

Despite numerous awards, accolades, and fellowships, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 for *Poems: North and South – A Cold Spring* that opened with the “The Map,” Elizabeth Bishop was not well known by the general public during her lifetime. Since her death in 1979, however, her poetry has received increasing critical attention and is praised for its precision, clarity of vision, and distinctive, personal voice. As is obvious from the titles of her best-known books—*North and South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*—geographic themes pervade Bishop’s work.

“The Map” initially appeared in Bishop’s first publication, *Trial Balances* (1935), when Bishop was 24, and has often been cited as prototypical of Bishop’s early style. Everyday, ordinary objects present an inner, imaginative world recalling Bishop’s isolated childhood in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts where she would “view the tropics romantically through the mediation of maps, nineteenth-century wood engravings, and books of discovery.”¹ Later, in *North and South*, Bishop would balance her “northern” inwardness with factual observations that occurred during her travels, especially through the South—to the Straits of Magellan, the Amazon estuary, and the town of Petrópolis outside Rio de Janeiro where she lived for more than ten years.

In “The Map,” we find that poetry, like cartography, reduces the world in scale and detail. Bishop reveals the gap between the world and its representation by allowing the environment within the poem to shift between the actual world and the mapmaker’s plane. Words like “lies,” “shadowed,” and “edges” confuse the reader and suggest that in poetry, as cartography, “every depiction of the world is a negotiation between description and interpretive invention.”²

The poem’s last line has often been cited as a key to Bishop’s writings. The map is poised between the spatial and historical, but Bishop’s preference seems to be for the map-makers’ colors over the historians’ facts. This, say her critics, underlies a feminine approach to history and has been used to argue that Bishop was a “delicate, ladylike abstractionist who preferred geography to history.”³ It is true that deliberately feminine adjectives and metaphors are used throughout the poem: “mooney,” “lovely,” and “like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods,” for example. But recent interpretations point out that these traditionally feminine and emotive words accentuate Bishop’s critique of the certainty and objectivity of representation. Just as map coloring has mistakenly gained the reputation as a feminine preoccupation, Bishop’s work has been misinterpreted as delicate and bloodless. Today, however, most scholars agree that Bishop’s poetics are lucid, subtle, and provocative.

¹Marilyn May Lombardi, *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 146.

²Guy Rotella, *Reading and Writing Nature: The Poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 204.

³Thomas Travisano, “‘The Flicker of Impudence’: Delicacy and Indelicacy in the Art of Elizabeth Bishop,” in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*, ed. Marilyn May Lombardi (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 111-25, esp. 112.

Printed on Rives Heavyweight with a Vandercook No. 4 at the Juniper Press, Madison, Wisconsin. The type is Walbaum, designed in the late 1930s, and set by Michael and Winifred Bixler, Skaneateles, New York. The map vignette is from *Atlante della Consociazione Turistica Italiana*, 15th ed., 1938. Block by Royal Graphics, La Crosse, Wisconsin. 209 copies have been numbered and dated.

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