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REVIEW

Colm Tóibín. 2015. *On Elizabeth Bishop*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Colm Tóibín's study is an attempt at providing us with a meticulously prepared volume in which he brings us Elizabeth Bishop as a reader, which is one rather novel perspective in the literary criticism dedicated to Bishop. Additionally, the author may be said to have produced a book in which he displayed his theoretically-coherent obsession with Bishop. Echoing his own life, Tóibín reaches the essence of disruptive and simultaneously mysterious aspects of her life and work. Yet, while changing his lenses for critical analysis, Tóibín never disregards her canonical practice, filling the lacuna in the current scholarship and contributing to a better understanding of Bishop's literary output.

The book is broken into following chapters: "No Detail Too Small" (1-8), "One of Me" (9-14), "In the Village" (15-29), "The Art of Losing" (30-40), "Nature Greets Our Eyes" (41-61), "Order and Disorder in Key West" (62-76), "The Escape from History" (77-95), "Grief and Reason" (96-114), "The Little That We Get for Free" (115-134), "Art Isn't Worth That Much" (135-161), "The Bartók Bird" (162-174), "Efforts of Affection" (174-192), "North Atlantic Light" (193-199). It ends with "Acknowledgments" (201-202) and "Bibliography" (203-205), which is rather comprehensive.

In Chapter 1, Tóibín explains that "it was essential for Bishop that the words in a statement be precise and exact", and that "in her poem 'The Sandpiper', the bird, a version of the poet herself, was 'a student of Blake', who celebrated seeing 'a world in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.'" (1). Nevertheless, Tóibín subscribes to an idea that "a word was a tentative form of control. Grammar was an enactment of how things stood" (1). He proposes that for Bishop, language was neither an ornament nor exaltation, but "it was firm and austere in its purpose" (2). It seems that Tóibín created a map of his own love toward Bishop's poetics thereby providing a reader with carefully prepared instructions. For example, in her poem "Map", "it was as though the world itself had to be studied as a recent invention" or something "[…] that would soon fade and might need to be remembered as precisely as possible by a single eye" (3-4). While analyzing Bishop's creativity, Tóibín highlights that it seems difficult to make a

statement. However, in her statements "[…] she created a hard-won aura, a strange sad acceptance that this statement was all that could be said" (4). In other words, something more existed for her, but this surplus ran away from her statement. Nevertheless, "this space between what there was and what could be made certain or held fast often made her tone playful, in the same way as a feather applied gently to the inner nostril makes you sneeze" (4), which causes sometimes even unbearable pain.

In the next chapter, the idea of lone self is raised as an important issues: the lone self and the solitude of being alive. Tóibín occasionally makes references to 'the single eye', 'the single voice', 'the single memory' as they appear in the broader context, while focusing on Bishop's contemplation in connection with her first 'single identity'. The second arena is posited within solitary space "filled with singleness", in which "the narrator remembers poems he has read" (12). Nevertheless, there is emptiness comprising the key word from Wordsworth's "Daffodils", when Bishop, in Tóibín's reading, cannot recall one word, and that word refers to loneliness.

Chapter 3 explores Bishop's recollection of the village in Nova Scotia that "[…] became a place for her of longing, of dreams" (16). The poem "The Moose" is such a fascinating one that it merits more space. However, Tóibín is well aware of this fact and dedicates enough text to describe "[…] that space where Bishop is most comfortable", that "[…] begins almost cozily, using fact and statement with no comment" (19). There is something unsettling within this system as, according to Tóibín, "the description in the poem is so calm and brisk (…) that something must happen to break all this up, but it is unclear what this breach of decorum can possibly be" (19-20).

In "The Art of Losing", traveling and calm austerity of Bishop's tone are included as well as narratives behind cameos of close relationship with silence bearing witness to Tóibín's ingenuity, while "Nature Greets Our Eyes" opens with Tóibín's personal recollection, in which he adds that in 1985, the year he stayed in Rio, he was not aware of many details surrounding Bishop. When he describes the poems from this period, he scrutinizes Bishop's poems "[…] full of unimaginable phrases" that contained "a calm austerity in her tone" (44). In Chapter 6, the position taken by Tóibín is based on three pillars: Bishop's poem "Rooster"; Bishop's condemnation of a world run by men; Bishop's preference for morning overnight, or as Tóibín puts it "[Bishop] was, as a poet, more comfortable with the arrival of morning than she was with the fall of night" (68). Chapter 7, "The Escape from History", focuses on part of her life spent in Brazil, where she "was interested in escaping history, or evoking it only as a way of allowing it to face, dissolve, or forming an ironic, almost amused response to it, minimizing its power and force" (78-79). In chapter 8, Tóibín compares Thom Gunn with Bishop, highlighting that grief and reason pervade their poetry, their use of formal but plain poetic diction, their creation of elaborate formal structures.

In chapter 9 Tóibín touches on Bishop's poem "One Art" in which, according to his reading, Bishop "[…] was playing a game between the deeply confessional and what remained ironic and withheld, refused, unmentionable, what she would not, in fact, write, despite her insistence, in the imperative, that she should" (119-120).

In "The Bartók Bird", Tóibín explores a period in Bishop's life dedicated to Robert Lowell, or more specifically, her writing an elegy for him. In what follows due attention is paid to Bishop's "coziness tinged with melancholy" (166), mixed with "[…] a slow, incantatory dramatization of the tentative and withholding nature of Bishop's process as a poet" (166).

Chapter 12 concedes that "what Bishop wrote is deeply personal" by accepting that her "poetry comes from a uniquely singular vision and set of imaginative systems" (174). Another relationship mentioned is that between Bishop, on the one hand, and Lowell and Moore, on the other. Tóibín does not deny that Lowell and Moore meant a lot to her. Likewise, Tóibín admits that Bishop had learned a great deal from them, but he adds that she "was not prepared to live under their shadow" (174). Even though Tóibín subscribes to the plausibility that "Moore and Lowell were the surrogate family she could rebel against" (175), he, nevertheless sheds light on many aspects of Bishop's style stemming from this specific relationship.

The last chapter focuses on the last years of Bishop's life as Tóibín clarifies that a loss may be accompanied by unexpected gains through Bishop's own comparison with the sandpiper, while concluding that the described feeling is something she shares with many people and continues to recollect his own return to Ireland.

In our review of Tóibín's *On Elizabeth Bishop*, the investigated issues have come full circle: loneliness was there at the start of Bishop's literary output, and loneliness is there at the end. But, so are Bishop's creativity, beauty and compassion. It goes without saying that Tóibín's study is essential to further developing critical discourse on Bishop. Even though the subject of the book falls within literary criticism studies, the rationale behind Tóibín's approach applies to studying Bishop's creativity in virtually all specialized aspects dedicated to Bishop and that period of literary history.

REFERENCES

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