

# Recollection and Location in Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the issue of recollection and location in the modern American poet Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*. Focusing on "In the Waiting Room," "Crusoe in England," "The Moose" and "One Art," it argues that Bishop's curiosity about the specificities of time and place manifests her interest in how the experiences are transformed through the process of describing them; in other words, how perspective of observation changes with time and place.

**Key words:** Elizabeth Bishop recollection location

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**标题:** 伊丽莎白·毕肖普《地理学 III》中的回忆与定位

**内容提要:** 现代美国诗人伊丽莎白·毕肖普的诗集《地理学 III》中体现了她对时间与空间的特质性的关注。通过对其中四首诗：“在候诊室”、“克鲁索在英格兰”、“麋鹿”和“一种艺术”的分析，本文探讨毕肖普如何借助对时间与空间的描述来揭示人生体验，换言之，她的观察视角随时空而改变。

**关键词:** 伊丽莎白·毕肖普 回忆 定位

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*Geography III* (1976) is the traveler poet Elizabeth Bishop's last book, published three years before her sudden death in New York. Time is a great dissolver wherein a number of early life pictures fade out, though on the other hand some do loom large through the lens of time. For the aging Bishop who suffered an unhappy childhood and repeated misfortunes in adulthood, the distance of time overcame her fear of uncertainty and insecurity while fostering a sense of nostalgia for issues like travel, which remains her constant and prevailing concern. This article addresses the issue of recollection and location in *Geography III*, focusing on "In the Waiting Room," "Crusoe in England," "The Moose" and "One Art."

As the title reveals, *Geography III* promises to engage itself in the discussion of the basic issues of geography, for which the epigraph serves as proof in its providing two lessons from "First Lesson in Geography." Bishop's interest in the cartographic

is a traveler's curiosity about the specificities of place and, more importantly, it is a manifestation of her interest in the way that experiences are transformed through the process of describing them, i. e. the way perspective changes with time and place. Time and space co-exist to make the world multi-dimensional, with man as the subject who observes the constant happenings and simultaneously participates in the happenings himself.

"In the Waiting Room" (Bishop, *Collected Poems* 159 – 161) describes the teenager girl's experience in a dentist's clinic while waiting for her aunt. She was three days to seven—awkward time for a girl to be vaguely conscious of her sexual and personal identity. The girl appeared to be precocious among the grown-ups; at least she feigned behaving that way. She saw her aunt as "a foolish, timid woman." In this she showed superiority to her aunt and in a way to all the adults inside and outside the waiting room. However, the scenes in the National Geographic of the female nudity terrified her and made her "too shy to stop." It would be demanding for a girl of seven to fully comprehend the scenes; she was virtually shocked by the female nudity and voyeurism associated with it. Her consciousness of her female identity was awakened in the resisting manner by the scenes in the journal, as well as by what she saw and heard (her aunt's cry because of pain) in the clinic. Yet the consciousness had long been with her, hence the "oh" of pain "from inside" was both from inside the clinic and inside the girl; it was her internal and natural response; she "wasn't at all surprised" and not even embarrassed, since she knew her aunt was "a foolish, timid woman." She seems to condescend over her adult aunt and in that to condescend over the adults in general.

The poem is hardly confessional not merely because Bishop detests the label, but also because the poem aims not to engage in the excavation of the poet's privacy and the gender/sexual consciousness of the female child. Elizabeth Dodd maintained that in the poem, "the young Elizabeth is not really discovering her sexuality so much as her own participation in the human race" (Beach 169). The poem's ending specifies the historical background; it was Feb. 5, 1918, World War I was going on. Thus the poem which seems to have engaged in the personal experience extends to cover the panorama of history and society.

"In the Waiting Room" was written as a recollection of Bishop's childhood memory, something she managed to gather the courage to address after the so many hard years; the autobiographical feature distinguishes itself in the poem, as reflected in "you are an Elizabeth." However, the narrator could not remain a seven-year girl, and the poet must interfuse into the childhood and thus deprive of the neutrality of the speaker. The girl's sense of personal and sexual identity was reinforced with the poet's many years speculating over the role of woman. The poem of recollection also concerns itself with reality and the present since the profundity and accumulated depth of history cannot hold without the flowing reality and constant presentness. Memory faces the present, and functions in the ever increasing tension between the past and the present. The fusion of memory and reality finds itself also in the interfusion of the seven-year-old girl and the renowned poet; the seemingly matter-of-fact recall of the past experience becomes the poet's rewriting of it. The child and the adult

are both separate and fused: the existence and comprehension of either one requires that of the other. Bishop in the poem conflates the adult poet with the "cautiously authorial" child (Doreski 58).

In "In the Waiting Room," the painstakingly analytical and reflective rather than dramatic tone (Beach 170) could hardly come from a child. The changes of tense and points of view in several occasions are also quite telling. In the lines "I felt; you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth, / you are one of them," the switch from the past tense to the present seems to indicate the fluidity and continuity of the past moving into the present. Besides, the arrangement of the past tense in the main clause and the historical present tense in the subordinate clause seems to denote the constant condition of the equality of "you," "I" and "Elizabeth." This could be seen as the merging of the past into the present.

The issues of identity and its comprehension at different times also prevail in "Crusoe of England" (*Collected Poems* 162–166). The poem begins with an event, "A new volcano has erupted, / the papers say," and the poet very casually mentioned "They named it. But my poor old island's still / un-rediscovered, unrenamable." Confrontation occurs in the opposition of "they" and "I," in the essential gesture of naming. The rivalry comes out of Crusoe's difference in judgment from the others, and this difference in judgment reminds us of that in the Gulliver's travels where the Lilliputians are the norm makers while the normal are alienated as the other. What accounts here is the scale or criteria of judgment. For Crusoe, "Mont d'Espoir" (Mount of Hope) and "Mount Despair" makes no difference; since he had "time enough to play with names," the duality and dichotomy no longer stands since the oppositions have overcome their feud and become friends. "The Man-Moth" and "12 O'Clock News," two other poems from *Geography III*, also lead to the ambiguity of the scale of judgment. Crusoe's loss of the criteria of judgment was owing to his long stay in the isolated island, when authority had lost its control on him. Earlier on, he began to lose belief in books as vehicle of authority, so upon returning England, one of the first things he did was to consult books. Unfortunately, the "bliss of solitude" in Wordsworth's "I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud" fails to fit into his understanding. Surely the illiterate Crusoe would not trouble himself to consider issues like different shades of meaning owing to the change of times (note that the deliberate anachronism), or the metaphorical quality of language, etc. Once in the isolated island, Crusoe's physical return to the community makes a bad match with his spiritual status, and he remains irretrievably isolated in the thinking. He found things he himself could not have found before his exile, which the others would fail to find too: "The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun / rose from the sea, / and there was one of it and one of me." The unconscious comparison of the past and present things intensifies the fact that Crusoe still engaged himself in the past "happy old days." And he had difficulties in adapting himself to the society he was in.

The Crusoe in "Crusoe in England" actually identifies Bishop who was speaking via the mouth of Crusoe; the Crusoe in England was simply the Bishop back to the U. S. from Brazil. In the poetic form, "Crusoe in England" inherits the form of dramatic monologue which saw its development and maturity in Tennyson and Robert Brown-

ing, where the speaker recollects things that happened in the past. However, Bishop's Crusoe differs much from Tennyson's *Ulysses* in that the later strives forward after repeated victories while the former drowned merely himself in the vain past. Of course Bishop's Crusoe had little in common with Defoe's. In a conversation, Bishop told the interviewer that Defoe's Crusoe was "so moral. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to re-see it with all that left out" (George Starbuck, "A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop," qtd. in Monteiro 89).

Defoe's Crusoe is lonely in the sense of being physically alone, yet his loneliness resides on the logistical instead of metaphysical level; his worries are no more than looking for means of survival in the isolated island. The social and moral hierarchies inherent in Crusoe's understanding of the world are manifested immediately on Friday's arrival on the scene. He gives the name "Friday" to the savage he saved, to indicate the day of his salvation; while on the other hand, he only allows Friday to call him Master.

The isolated life deprived Crusoe of a reference point to claim his own identity and integrity, hence his resorting to his memories in hopes of finding stability. His recollection of the "happy old days" and things in the past merely reassures him of the disjunction between his reinvented self and the person he once was. Back in England, Crusoe's recollections of his time in the island are meant to guard against the erosion of memory and the broader implications of that loss, and yet the implied loss of memory and loss of identity reinforces the one inherent in the poet Bishop since her childhood. "Crusoe in England" is rewriting of Defoe's Crusoe story because Bishop needs the rewriting; she shares with Crusoe the terror of the possible loss of memory and hence of personal identity and integrity.

"The Moose" (Bishop, *Collected Poems* 169 – 173) records the poet's recollection in 1972 of her visit to Nova Scotia in 1946. It begins with exterior description and gradually turns to the interior. Like other poems in *Geography III* and many in her poetic oeuvre, this poem starts with geographic survey but as if unconsciously moves to interior psychological space, and sinks deep into memory. Time the great magician keeps altering things; in memory many insignificant details expand to be endowed with special meanings, hence the voices of the "Grandparents" at the back of the bus turned into "Eternity." The capitalized words transcend the grandparents as individuals and color them with a sense of universality and eternity. The aging Bishop's recalling her grandparents in her early days works in one way to associate the old couple with herself, owing to their blood relations and their similar "location" in their lives; in another way, it contrasts the old couple to the young girl. Young people always feel frightened to talk of aging and death, but the old man could face aging and death casually, having experience a lot and having learned to be natural and to be part of nature.

*Geography III* adopts three strategies of self-inspection, with a fictional self (as in "Crusoe in England"), an earlier self (as in "In the Waiting Room" and "The Moose"), and the present adult self for which "One Art" (*Collected Poems* 178) is an example (Beach 171). "One Art" discusses "the art of losing" which is an expression of how to deal with memory. The poet mentions the loss of three houses in A-

merica and Brazil, the loss of South America as a continent which he felt he lost with the death of her companion Lota. The “losing you” in the last stanza could mean to lose Alice Methfessel, her new companion at this time or even to lose herself, i. e. , the loss or betrayal of her early self. “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” since losing happens too often and consequently it seems natural for its easy mastery. Yet actually this implies paradoxically the almost impossibility of mastering the art of losing, since the genuine mastery would mean not to lose at all. The poem could be approached as self-inspection of personal growth, or, as an inspection of Bishop’s relation with Alice who was much younger and who was thinking of giving of their relations. Elizabeth saw Alice almost as herself in her youth, therefore losing her may look like disaster, though she seemingly optimistically claimed once again “the art of losing’s not too hard to master,” this time adding a “too,” indicating actually the hardness of mastery. The would-be loss of this “you” is evidently a hard task, since it addresses the issue once again of self-identity. The loss of self-identity culminates after the losses of keys, places and names, houses and a continent; note that the losses of these things accumulate in significance. Whether to lose or not is based on the past experiences of losses, which means that the present judgment and decision work from recollection and location. Location here involves not merely one particular place; it implies to locate oneself in a specific life position.

With “your” “joking voice, a gesture / I love,” and probably more importantly, with our knowledge of the Bishop’s life track, we could read “One Art” as her hesitation on the relation with Alice. That does not mean her considering stopping relations with ladies (despite her confessing more than once her desire to marry and even to have a child), but merely with this lady. With this in mind, “In the Waiting Room” and even “Crusoe in England” could be approached in this light. “In the Waiting Room” shows clearly Elizabeth’s fall into gender consciousness, in its showing that her ambivalence about the value of femininity would affect her self-location and her eventual sexual orientation, as well as her complex handling of questions of gender (Miller 27). The waiting room experience greatly shocked the young Elizabeth and promoted her to speculate on issues like female’s value, social role, body feature and sexual orientation, etc. Friday is mentioned at the end of “Crusoe in England,” with Crusoe’s interest in him. This at least exhibits Crusoe’s “sexual uncertainty” (Parker 131) that parallels issues concerning about her sexual orientation.

Though “In the Waiting Room” is noted for its description of female sexual nudity, the issue of *The National Geographic* the girl was supposed to read actually contained no such pictures (Parker 163). It must be the poet’s sub-consciousness working at the details, having seen similar pictures before in *The National Geographic* or similar journals. The girl was just shocked at the pictures in the journal and the shocking all of a sudden broke open her internal sense of female sexual identity. Many years later the scenes were still vivid and fresh in her mind, and they emerge in the poem to be an exit of her emerging homoerotic curiosity.

In “The Moose,” while the bus was moving on suddenly a moose came out of the wood and stood in the middle of the road, “high as a church, / homely as a house / (or, safe as houses).” The church and the house are indications of totally

different qualities, one religious and transcendental, the other homely and secular. The combination of seemingly rival qualities prepares for the real appearance of the creature, which is made clear with someone crying “Look! It’s a she!” The opposite but equally essential qualities merge to present the totality of the she-moose, and the merged and hence enhanced qualities get echoed and reinforced in the end of the poem, by the juxtaposition of the “moonlit macadam,” as well as “a dim / smell of moose, an acid / smell of gasoline.” Macadam, moose and gasoline, with their modifiers denoting different qualities, combine to constitute a complete picture of the genuinely poetic life.

All the four poems recall things that passed long ago. The distance of time could paradoxically unveil many perplexities, with the poet gathering sufficient courage through the years to give to the full what happened in the other end of life. After Bishop settled in Brazil, the lyrical scenery reminded her of her Nova Scotia days which were the happiest in her youth. The description of the sexual orientations that came into being owes also to the relaxation of social atmosphere. The poems share a concern over the poet’s personal identity, which the precocious poet expressed in the prose work “The Country Mouse” that “I felt ... myself. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt I, I, I” (*The Collected Prose* 33). In *Geography III*, issues like identity and gender consciousness find superb expressions from the perspective of recollection and location. The poet Bishop was also a painter; her painting as well as her cartographic concern seemingly provides a static one-dimensional world where time seems not to exist at all. Some scholars maintain that Bishop’s cartographic concerns as shown in her poems reveal a discontinuous world where happenings at different times were put together, and scenes come out of this sort of description show man’s sense of fated homelessness (Breslin 36-37). However, time and space cannot be torn from one another, they together constitute the world in its totality, as exhibited in *Geography III* as well as all Bishop’s works, poetry and painting alike.

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