

Lee Edelman: On "In the Waiting Room"

Commentaries on "In the Waiting Room" tend to agree that the poem presents a young girl's moment of awakening to the separations and the bonds among human beings, to the forces that shape individual identity through the interrelated recognitions of community and isolation.

[. . .]

What, one might ask, is so strange about critical agreement on the literal events that take place within the poem?

One response to such a question might begin by observing that the text itself seems to undermine the stability of the literal. Certainly the poem appears to appropriate and to ground itself in the particulars of a literal reality or truth. Bishop takes pains, for instance, to describe the contents of the magazine read by the young girl in the waiting room. Not only does she evoke in detail its pictures of volcanoes and of "black, naked women," but she specifies the particular issue of the magazine, identifying it as the *National Geographic* of February, 1918. But Bishop, as Jerome Mazzaro puts it, "tampers with the actual contents." While that issue of the magazine does indeed contain an article on volcanoes lavishly titled "The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes: An Account of the Discovery and Exploration of the Most Wonderful Volcanic Region in the World" it offers no images of "Babies with pointed heads," no pictures of "black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire" (p. 159). In an interview with George Starbuck, Bishop, responding to the critics who noticed the factual "error" in her text, declared: "My memory had confused two 1918 issues of the *Geographic*. Not having seen them since then, I checked it out in the New York Public Library. In the February issue there was an article, 'The Valley of 10,000 Smokes,' about Alaska that I'd remembered, too. But the African things, it turned out, were in the next issue, in March." Bishop's clarification only underscores her insistence on literal origins and her wariness of her own imaginative powers. For the curious reader will discover what might have been suspected all along: the "African things" are not to be found in the March issue of the *National Geographic*, either. In fact, that issue has no essay about Africa at all.

With this in mind we are prepared for the warning that Alfred Corn offers the unsuspecting reader. He notes that, just as the picture essay Bishop describes "is not to be found in the February 1918 *National Geographic*," so "Anyone checking to see whether Miss Bishop's aunt was named Consuelo probably ought to be prepared for a similar thwarting of curiosity." In the face of this, one might well pose the question that Corn then frames: "If the facts are 'wrong,' why did Bishop make such a point of them in the poem?" Or, to put the question another way, toward what end does Bishop attempt to appropriate a literal grounding for her poem if that poem insists on fracturing the literality on which it positions itself? Whatever answer one might posit in response to such a question, the very fact that the poem invites us to ask it, the very fact that the poem revises simplistic conceptions of "fact" or literality may answer objections to my remark that there is something strange about the critics' agreement on the literal events that take place within the text.

But a new objection will surely be raised, accusing me of conflating two different senses of the

"literal," or even of using "literal" in a way that is itself not strictly literal. While there may be questions, the objectors will insist, about the text's fidelity to the facts outside of it?questions, that is, about the literal truth of the text?those questions do not prevent us from articulating literally what happens within that text. Whether or not Bishop had a real Aunt Consuelo, there can be no doubt, they will argue, that Vendler and Estess and Wood are correct in asserting that, literally, within the poem, and as one of its crucial events, Aunt Consuelo cries out in pain from inside the dentist?s office. And yet I intend not only to cast doubt upon that central event, but to suggest that the poem itself is less interested in the event than in the doubts about it, and that the critics? certainties distort the poem?s insistence on confusion.

[. . . .]

This, then, is "Elizabeth"s situation after her exercise in reading: sitting in the dentist's office while her aunt receives treatment inside, she looks at the cover of the National Geographic and tries to hold on to the solid ground of literality outside the abyss of textuality she has discovered within it. In doing so, she silences the voice of her own internal desire and conforms to the socially determined role that her shyness forces her to play. At the same time, however, she recognizes, as a result of her reading, the inadequacy of the inside/outside polarity that underlies each of her tensions?tensions that mount until they no longer admit of repression or constraint: "Suddenly, from inside, / came an oh! of pain."

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Criticism Target:

Elizabeth Bishop [2]

Author:

Lee Edelman [3]

Poem:

In the Waiting Room [4]

Tags:

Community [5]

isolation [6]

Individual [7]

National Geographic [8]

Africa [9]

Literal [10]

Literality [11]

Textuality [12]

Femininity [13]

Patriarchy [14]

Waiting [15]

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Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

- [2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/elizabeth-bishop>
- [3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/lee-edelman>
- [4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/waiting-room>
- [5] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/community>
- [6] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/isolation>
- [7] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/individual>
- [8] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/national-geographic>
- [9] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/africa>
- [10] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/literal>
- [11] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/literality>
- [12] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/textuality>
- [13] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/femininity>
- [14] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/patriarchy>
- [15] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/waiting>