

Lynn Keller: Bishop/Moore Correspondence on "The Fish"

Bishop seems to have recognized that she, like Moore, was far more observant than most people. Once she even assumes a tone of smug complicity, implying "you and I see what others carelessly overlook," when commenting on the obtuseness of those who label museum exhibits: "Some of their inscriptions baffle me — a perfectly sensible crystal fish, for example, something like a perch, labelled 'Porpoise.' And a young man on a Greek vase who is obviously cutting the ends of his hair with his sword, called 'Boy Washing Hair (?)'" (letter of 25 January 1935). Bishop seems also to have been always conscious that the women she was writing to was not only "the World's Greatest Living Observer" (a title Bishop used in her contribution to the Marianne Moore issue of *A Quarterly Review of Literature*, 1948) but one of its greatest describers as well — and therefore the most qualified judge of Bishop's own descriptive achievements. —

As early as 1935 Bishop demonstrates the knack for narrative, the interest in colorful human characters, and the playful humor that are distinctly hers. — The following vignette — contains surprising images and an understated, half-serious moral that bring to mind Moore's writing, but the casual, anecdotal manner could only be Bishop's:

I must tell you about the beautiful tree down the street — covered with fine yellow blossoms and the most delicate, wire-like, of green leaves — it scarcely looks like a tree at all, but some sort of transcendental lighting fixture. An old Negro with white hair was sitting underneath it reading the 'Congregational Record' and I asked him the name — Jerusalem Thorn. I said isn't it beautiful, and he answered me very severely, 'It's worth-while looking at.'" (letter of 5 March 1938)

Yet despite the obvious differences between their descriptive styles (and the temperaments determining them), Moore's writing clearly provides Bishop's standard for successful description, the standard against which she measures her own achievement.

[?.]

The care Bishop apparently took composing her early letters and the descriptions they contain reflects, then, not only her desire to share with Moore intriguing or delightful experiences, but also her awareness that this correspondence provided a unique opportunity for monitored practice in writing skills. After all, Moore was the ideal audience: well disposed and genuinely interested, possessing rigorous literary standards and reliable judgment; her praise, when earned, was significant. Without in any way diminishing the genuine affection binding these two women and the mutual rewards of their correspondence, it seems fair to regard Bishop's letters of the '30s as a format for literary exercise and experiment, as vehicles for locating her own voice and manner, for testing her audience's response in preparation for more public forays. The activity of composing them seems to have been part of Bishop's self-imposed training.

From Lynn Keller, "Words Worth a Thousand Postcards: The Bishop / Moore Correspondence," *American Literature* 55.3 (October 1983), 411, 413-414.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Elizabeth Bishop [2]

Author:

Lynn Keller [3]

Poem:

The Fish [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/lynn-keller-bishopmoore-correspondence-fish>

Links

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

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/elizabeth-bishop>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/lynn-keller>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/fish>