

## Mena Mitrano: "Bishop's 'Pink Dog'"

Scholarship on Elizabeth Bishop has traditionally praised her reticence, especially in matters of identity, the female body, and female sexuality.(1) Indeed, readers who aspire to more than just a superficial knowledge of Bishop's poetry must come to terms with her famed reticence. In one of her last poems, "Pink Dog" (1979), the rhetorical containment and modesty associated with her style border on self-censorship. In this poem, reticence becomes the speaker's protective response to the realization that as soon as female subjectivity appears on the avenue of representation, it automatically becomes something profoundly ruinous, viscerally antiaesthetic.

Accordingly, in "Pink Dog" animal allegory is chosen as a sort of rhetorical objective relative for a speaker caught in a bind. Unlike her mentor, Marianne Moore, Bishop does not use animal allegory to suggest the possibility of a gentler world;(2) rather she uses it to point to a self-censoring process, to intimate guarded, even muzzled, speech about the possibility of positing a female subjectivity against the grain of the page, so to speak. Bishop's female dog, clothed in nothing but the socially offensive pink bareness of its/her aging body, is not simply a dog but a signifier that keeps the poem (and us) oscillating between two semantic clusters: "woman" and "dog."

Like Stevens's anonymous "you" in the initial octave of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (Collected Poems 380), Bishop's naked "you" in the first movement of "Pink Dog" momentarily becomes a sort of privileged interior paramour, an anonymous term of address with whom the observer enters a quiet, intimate exchange as if in a flash of recognition: "The sun is blazing and the sky is blue. / Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue. / Naked, you trot across the avenue" (CP 190). In the second tercet referentiality is no longer suspended. The exclamation "Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!" - possibly interjected by a passerby - leaves no doubt as to what the observer's anonymous interlocutor was in the first tercet. But "Naked and pink, without a single hair" returns to "Naked, you trot across the avenue," that is, to the scene of the initial intimate address, where we did not yet know for sure that the naked "you" was a dog. Moreover, the poem increasingly conjures up the overlapping of two semantic clusters when, later on, stanzaic divisions are employed to create the expectation of an unmasked signifier "woman" in the place of "dog": "But no one will ever see a / / dog in mascara. . . ." and with the juxtaposition of "depilated" and "dog" in the last stanza (CP 191).

But the title already announced this oscillation between two intersecting semantic clusters. Visually, "pink dog" is a pastiche: it conjures a dog made up as a woman, that is, clothed in what popular culture has long viewed as the quintessential attribute of femininity ("pink") or, vice versa, a pink thing (popular space of femininity) dressed up as a dog. Bishop's poem begins with an observer who recognizes in the dog something she knows: that female subjectivity enters representation as a grotesque fact. As the poem unfolds, however, all traces of the observer's former identification with the naked "you" are dissolved into an alliance with a "they" who are "mortally afraid" of it. As in other Bishop poems, the progress of "Pink Dog" leads to that moment of epiphany when the observer falls into social constructions of the self.(3) This fall is bitterly celebrated by the rhyme scheme in the fourth tercet, which substitutes monotony for cruel mockery, exposing the imperfect, inadequate rhyme between

the shaved bitch's "hanging teats" and her "wits," respectively, her worn-out motherhood and her intelligence. The same observer who at poem's start had secretly recognized a signifier of femininity that otherwise exuded offense goes on to learn that it would be improper to say out loud what she realizes the minute her eye meets the pink dog and its horizon of meaning. The suspension of referentiality simultaneously speaks and represses this impropriety. Through a self-censoring observer caught between knowledge and silence, Bishop can thus deliver the hard lesson that in symbolic practice, female subjectivity exists under the sign of a technology of violence (in which the poem participates) whereby the appearance of the female subject automatically calls for its "expulsion or annihilation" (Costello 86).

In a poem such as "In the Waiting Room," protected by a child persona, the observer could rebel at the realization that she is "one of them" - of the community of adults in the waiting room, of a world at war, of the disturbing images of *The National Geographic* - with a scream (CP 159-61). In "Pink Dog" no such thing is possible. Here the overlapping of interiority and exteriority is accepted without protest as a rite of passage to the symbolic, as the very possibility of subjectivity; but in addition, Bishop goes on to expose her observer's self-censoring acts.

The suspended referentiality that in Bishop's poem attempts to clothe in modesty an outrageous, ruinous insight into female subjectivity may also be read as a figure for the dispersal of the self. The female self in "Pink Dog" appears, that is to say disappears, in the shape of an offensive pink nakedness. This second reading places the poem in a dialogue with an American tradition of writing that, as Richard Poirier shows, from Emerson to Stevens has attempted to "writ[e] off the self" (Poirier 1987, ch. 5). It may be said that similarly to Poirier's Emersonians, Bishop writes off the female self, dissolving it into a nonhuman image. But in "Pink Dog" this dispersal begins to show signs of anxiety; it becomes stained, so to speak, with ideology; that is, with an intention that Poirier's argument confines exclusively to the Europeans (Nietzsche and Foucault among them). The naked pinkness or the pink bareness that greets us in the heat of a Rio de Janeiro summer day, before even suggesting the shape of a dog, signifies a doubt: that under such a "blazing" sun one might not immediately be able to make out the shape of the pink mass in the horizon. Thus, with the complicity of a South American scenario, Bishop offers a pun on a North American trope for the self as "some bare rock" (Poirier 1992, 71). With an almost Chaplinesque tragic playfulness, Bishop revisits the Emersonian scene where we are asked "to submit to the poverty of subjectivity, the poverty of self" (Poirier 1992, 73). Her conceit of a pink firstness, of a pink, bare and barren, depilated self is the low-brow child in a series of eminent North American poverties such as Emerson's rock, Charles Peirce's Firstness, and Wallace Stevens's pallid candor of the First Idea. The pinkness of Bishop's female animal self declares that, for all the spectacular costuming and dancing it may spur, poverty of self cannot be an object of intellectual longing because it remains fundamentally embarrassing on the scene of signification.

## NOTES

1. For representative discussions of Bishop's reticence, see Anne Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Twayne, 1966) 126, and Octavio Paz, "Elizabeth Bishop, or the Power of Reticence," *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, eds. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1983) 211-13.

2. Stevenson praises the modesty and dignity of Bishop's non-epic poems, p. 126. 2. "The Pangolin" comes to mind, in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Viking, 1986).

3. I am thinking of "At the Fishhouses" and "In the Waiting Room." Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983) 64-6, 159-61.

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from *The Explicator* 54.1 (Fall 1995)

#### **Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

#### **Criticism Target:**

Elizabeth Bishop [2]

#### **Author:**

Mena Mitrano [3]

#### **Poem:**

Pink Dog [4]

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**Source URL:** <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/mena-mitrano-bishops-pink-dog>

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