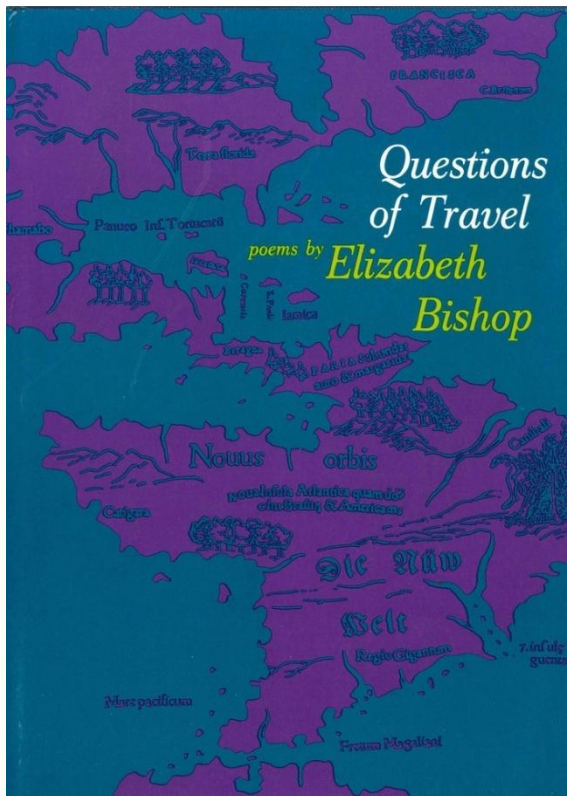




Questions of Travel by Elizabeth Bishop

Reviewed by *Pallavi Bhardwaj*



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Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), in an interview with Alexandra Johnson, explains *home* in the following terms, “I’ve never felt particularly homeless, but, then, I’ve never felt particularly at home. I guess that’s a pretty good description of a poet’s sense of home. He carries it within him...” This expression of home has a persisting presence in *Questions of Travel* (1965) – a collection of poetry written in and about her sojourn in Brazil where she oscillates between “home” and “not home,” between a foreigner’s insight and a native’s familiarity.

“*Questions of Travel*” comprises of twenty poems that follow the trajectory of Bishop’s travel to Brazil in 1951, the poet-speaker’s arrival in the new land, her exploration of interiority, and the consequent assimilation of the familiar and unfamiliar in her poetry. The journey of the speaker begins in the first poem, “Arrival at Santos,” on a note of disappointment as the disillusioned tourist effuses, “oh, tourist, / is this how this country is going to answer you and your immodest demands for a different world...” The doubtful imposition of the tourist ends on a note of quest as she sets off for the “interiority” in the last line of the poem.

Bishop’s ambivalent attitude towards home arises out of her own life experiences. She had to move away from her native place, Nova Scotia, to Worcester (to live with her paternal grandparents) after her mother was institutionalized at a mental asylum. Her struggle to define herself in a new setting is reflected in her quest for “interiority.” This quest is interrogated in the subsequent poems in the book. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” she points out the error of the Portuguese explorers then, and the tourist explorers now, in imposing their biased viewpoints on

the new landscape. They forcibly turn all the familiar aspects into exotic, describing leaves as “big,” “little,” “giant” or birds as “symbolic.”

This leads to the bigger question in the “Questions of Travel” when the poet-speaker asks, “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? Where should we be today?” These questions had a persisting presence in the poet’s life as the many journeys taken by her after finishing her college were sometimes forced and at other times self-imposed, made her realize that the quest for belongingness cannot be fulfilled. Thus, the questions asked in her poetry are a culmination of her life experiences as a traveller and an outsider.

In the tussle between “home” and “not home” the poet makes the usual look unusual and sometimes even uncanny; for instance, she illustrates the trees along the road in the poem “Questions of Travel” as “noble pantomimists,” a bird singing above an ill-attended gas station as exotic and the clatter of “wooden clogs” as if they were creating music of their own. All these elements strangely distance the readers from the diurnal things. The ellipsis in the final stanza bring the readers to a melancholic note as she repeats the question, “Should we have stayed at home... ” emphasizing her inscrutable dilemma of home and her self-imposed exile. She also revels into the degree of involvement of the traveller in a foreign place for he or she can “stain” the land both metaphorically and literally, making it appear like a “catacomb.”

A social conscience is apparent in her works and the act of talking about marginal “specklike girl and boy” and “half squatters” in her poems “Squatter’s Children” and “Manuelzinho” help her let go the inhibitions of class-consciousness and make her feel more at ease. These poems raise an altogether different issue of abandonment, capturing the isolation felt by the natives who are living on “unbreathing sides of hills.” The next few poems capture a deeper connection between the foreigner and the new land as the sense of “otherness” of the latter seems to be diluting bit by bit and she feels a singularity with the natives.

The traveller goes deeper into the cultural metaphors of the new land with “water spirits” and the floating “fire balloons.” An effort of blending comes into effect when the poems start getting closer to poet’s life as they reveal her own longing for a “home.” Her poetry seems to have outgrown her previous self as she becomes more fearless in representation of her inner struggles clearly steering away from confessional modes of poetry. One of the most self-revealing of her poems “First Death in Nova Scotia” talks about her mother and the anguish of a child on the first experience of death which reflects Bishop’s own pain of losing her father and later her mother.

She is also more involved in the political concerns of this new land as well as her native country America now, as is evident from her poems “From Trollope’s Journal” and “Visits to St. Elizabeths.” Her concerns range from the political conditions of her native country as she denounces President Eisenhower’s Washington D.C. in the former to the havocs of World War II that have reduced “honored” Ezra Pound to a wretched condition in a psychiatric hospital in the latter .

One thing that has a constant presence in her collection of poetry is nature in its various forms from “self-pitying mountains” and “frivolous greenery” to a more idyllic setting in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” where she describes landscape as “every square inch filling in with foliage.” In addition, the reader finds a way to a painter’s insight in her words when she

describes dawn in a shade of “unsympathetic yellow” or foliage in various colours like “purple, yellow, two yellows, pink, rust red and greenish white,” “hell-green” reflecting the transformation of nature from “sad” and “feeble” to “unbidden.” The imagery of the nature gets vividly visual as “the red ground” and “one pink flash” replace the “suspension” felt in “Arrival at Santos.”

Brazil remained a home for Bishop for about fifteen years and the reader can experience her isolation and abandonment as well as her solitariness on a safe harbour. She reflects the hesitations of a foreigner who does not want to answer the question, “Are you supposed/ to be inside the fence or out?” just like the white horse in the poem, “Twelfth Morning; Or What You Will.” However, the question of belonging remains unanswered at large, as she leaves the answer on the reader and does not subject them to her personal point of view. Just like her poetic interests, Bishop never stays with one particular style and moves from unrestricted stanzas to a classical form like ballad, from half-built rhythmic patterns to full-fledged parodies of nursery rhymes.

The poet confesses to have formed a double point of view comprising of her own and the native’s. On the contrary, the traveller in the poems lacks this double point of view because of his biases and prejudices. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar within her poems gives the readers an insight into their own biases. A reflective reading of Bishop’s works builds an affinity with the poet’s emotions as with each passing poem the reader is able to internalize his/her own sense of difference and isolation through poet’s experiences and ruminations.