Complicated Relationships: Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill and the New Criticism

Thanks to the FASS undergraduate research internship program, I have spent the past four months researching the ties between two twentieth-century American poets, Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill, and the New Criticism. My interest in Merrill and Bishop stems from their friendship and influence upon each other's poetry, as well as from their complicated relationships, due in part to their homosexuality, to the New Criticism, the dominant school of literary criticism in their time. Due to its Southern Agrarian roots, the New Criticism saw homosexuality, along with the subjectivity of romanticism, as threats to what it considered to be a well ordered, patriarchal society. The Southern Agrarians opposed commercialization, which they feared rendered members of society self-centred. Similarly, the New Critics rejected the Romantic emphasis placed on subjectivity. Prominent New Critic Allen Tate, for instance, "links romanticism to the atomized world of mass culture,"[1] and to the prioritizing of the individual over the community. Furthermore, to the Agrarians, homosexuality was also a threat to "properly" ordered societies, as it had the potential to transform the traditional family, which they saw to be the base unit of such societies. The New Critics, meanwhile, excluded works which addressed same-sex desire from their canon.[2] They "allied 'the right kind of modernism' with an embattled heterosexual masculinity,"[3] one threatened by "the wrong kind of modernism" which was open to Romantic subjectivity and to homosexuality. Primarily, however, the New Critics wished to see poems as self-contained and purely aesthetic artefacts. They limited possible interpretations of poems by relying solely on the words these poems contained in order to find meaning. Bishop and Merrill's contrasting usages of ekphrasis, particularly in Merrill's poem "Lost in Translation" and Bishop's "The Map," point to diverging attitudes towards the precepts of the New Criticism. Bishop abides by the new critical notion of a kind of pure aestheticism. Merrill, meanwhile, insists upon the subjectivity of his poetry.

Merrill expresses the fluidity of his identity in "Lost in Translation." In this poem, he describes the recovery and reinterpretation of memories from his childhood. At the same time, he superimposes the perceptions of his adult and child selves to show how he has changed with age. Furthermore, he explores the ways in which our identities can be shaped by different media. Merrill's child self projects his hopes and fears onto the images forming on, and abstract shapes of, the puzzle pieces he is gradually assembling. It is through his interpretation of the images before him that we learn of his identity crisis and of his feelings of being pulled in different directions by his recently divorced parents. Like the boy in the puzzle's image, Merrill "wonders whom to serve, and what his duties are." In these lines, Merrill's identity is confused with that of the figures in the image before him, and to express this confusion, the poet uses ekphrasis, the translation of the experience of perceiving a particular object into words. In an ekphrastic poem, though the poem itself and the object it describes have independent identities, these identities are confused as one work of art attempts to capture another.

Whereas Merrill's description of the puzzle in "Lost in Translation" relates something autobiographical, Bishop is removed from her ekphrastic poem "The Map," as she usually is from her poetry. Bishop does not compare herself, but poetry to the map. In so doing she "shows cartography to be a sister art to poetry."[4] Bishop interacts with the map as though it were a purely aesthetic object. She thus ignores the map's worldly function and context, along with her own, and writes a poem about abstract ideas in an attempt to compartmentalize and disconnect her poetry from its context in the tradition of the New Critics.

Thus, while Bishop and the New Critics saw ekphrasis as a tool to write in an abstract and aesthetic realm, disconnected from the real world, Merrill used ekphrasis to gain insight into himself. Whereas Bishop insisted upon compartmentalizing different aspects of her identity in order to affirm the New Criticism's "Right kind of Modernism," Merrill embraced different parts of himself as parts of a whole. In a striking act of resistance to the New Criticism, Merrill wore a replica of the Romantic poet John Keats' life mask in a photograph taken by his lover Kimon Friar.[5] This photo aligns Merrill with both Romanticism and homosexuality, thereby defying the New Critics. Furthermore, he does so through a kind of ekphrasis: in wearing the mask, Merrill gives it life, in the same way an ekphrastic poem gives a voice to its inanimate subject.

[1] Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993), 55.
[2] Gary Richards *Lovers and Beloveds* (Louisiana: Louisiana State UP, 2005),8-28.
[3] Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate*, xii.
[4] Jeff Thoss,"Cartographic Ekphrasis," *Word & Image* 32, no. 1 (2016): 72.
[5] Langdon Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art,* (New York: Knopf, 2015), 92.