

THE EXILE'S ACCENT



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Let's begin in a stereotypically American way. Let's talk about me. I'm an anglophone poet, a cultural exile of Irish Catholic immigrant parentage, born in the Bronx, and a resident of Britain these past 14 years. Never truly Irish nor American and no longer working class, I speak from a point beyond any conscious national or historical or class allegiance.

All this may imply an identity crisis. It started early and goes deep. I had my own version of the epiphany Bishop records in "In The Waiting Room" when I was 12 and queuing for confession in Holy Spirit Church in the Bronx. I too gave a "sidelong glance" at the adults about me and it struck me (though not in these words, exactly) that everyone in the queue was guilty of an original sin of arrogance, of assuming it was they and not the massed total of their experience that had transgressed. One way to cope with such moments of existential vertigo is to affect a self.

Years later, as a young poet sending my work about, I'd get "encouraging" rejections from American editors who found my work promising but "affected", who felt I hadn't "found my natural voice." This was the seventies, and the contents page of most school anthologies of twentieth century American poetry started (and in a sense ended) with William Carlos Williams. They tended to document the "natural" and confessional and downplay or reject the influence of Auden—that arch elegance, that courageous affectation—a tone I recognised in the work of two of the poets I most revered: James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop. Let's call it the exile's accent. It's a somewhat campy note of displacement resolved by conspicuous technique, a mode defined by wit—in the Renaissance sense—irony, seduction, and playfulness alloyed to reserve. I've heard it said that artists often emigrate as a strategy to disguise a chronic private exile. I thought of all those poets whose craft is driven not by a desire to express a confidently anchored "natural" self, but by a need to create a self through the work. I thought of Bishop.

Bishop's accent was forged by a very real exile. In "A Country Mouse" she tells of her childhood rejection of American identity after she'd been taken from her grandparents' home in Canada. (Contrast this with William Carlos Williams' childhood experience and subsequent literary

nationalism.) Perhaps this crisis helped her escape the two-party system of American poetry. It's hard to steer your own course when the river keeps channelling into Whitman's yawp or Dickinson's centripetal concision, especially if you're seeking a current that's "dark, salt, clear, moving and utterly free." And maybe it helped her access more freely the tradition of English poetry.

Once you escape literary nationalism, it's possible to see Whitman as another English language romantic, the heir of Wordsworth, Shelley and Blake—just as Dickinson belongs with the metaphysicals Herbert and Crashaw. But it's long been a commonplace of American literary fundamentalism that Walt and Emily are Adam and Eve. This teaching rejects utterly the evolutionary heresy that American poets are descended from the English. For the literary patriot, form, persona and irony are charged political signifiers. He rejects what he takes to be "English"—the high-brow, sophisticated, and genteel. He perceives metre as somehow East Coast, urban, a curtsy to the crown, whereas free verse is truly American, democratic, unaffected and hairy-chested—a literary decorum which can be traced back through the Beats and Confessionals of the fifties to seventies to Whitman and beyond, to the *Prelude*—an epic centred about the lyric "I".

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth famously announced his agenda to counter the "gaudiness" of his contemporaries with the voice of "a man speaking to men." Rural poets, he says, are less "under the influence of social vanity" and elsewhere he calls poetic diction "effeminate" and rejects what he perceives, in the mainstream poetry of his time, as urban, ironic, allusive, decorative or ornamented; and hence, he insinuates, not entirely manly. In 1964 Susan Sontag would identify this quality as "camp" but I hear it as that fierce tone of virtuoso performance—of the poem, of the self—in Bishop, Merrill, Auden, and in Irish poets like Mahon and MacNeice. American poetry at the end of this century seems less rigidly "fundamentalist" and more open to true poetic decorum, that continuous negotiation between subject and style. Looking back, though, I'm grateful to all those hostile editors and critics who rejected my poems and gave me time to develop my range of "unnatural" voices.