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## George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop

Joseph H. Summers

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Joseph H. Summers George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop Elizabeth Bishop had a dream about George Herbert which she recorded in her Notebook: "They discuss the difference between his work and Donne's [Elizabeth Squires gave the impression it was the metrics] and touch upon Miss Moore's, which is said in the dream to be at Donne's but not his. 'This may have been subconscious politeness on my part,' Bishop notes, 'He had curls and was wearing a beautiful dark red satin coat. He said he could be "useful" to me. Praise God.', n He was. I got to know Elizabeth Bishop because she wanted to meet someone who was working on Herbert. I think she probably knew Herbert's poem better than anyone else I have known. She used to travel everywhere (Nova Scotia, Key West, Paris) with a copy of *The Temple* in her suitcase. She remarked that she once had to quit reading Herbert because she caught herself trying to write seventeenth-century poems rather than twentieth-century ones. I think "The Weed" is an example. 2 When Elizabeth wrote me (October 4 and 5, 1954) about my book on Herbert, she remarked, "I'd been thinking that it was the hymn-singing Baptist backwards . . . village life that made me so susceptible to Herbert in the first place, and perhaps more or

less the same thing was true in your case." (She was certainly right.) But by the time she was in college she knew that she admired a number of modern secular poets and wanted to write something like them, and she found congenial their usual rejection of familiar public rhetoric and the consciously poetic for a language close to that of a fairly ordinary conversation between literate friends. Herbert fulfilled, often better than Pound did, Pound's dictum that poetry should be at least as well-written as prose. Bishop found Herbert helpful as she consistently sustained her own high vision of that standard: no Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop<sup>49</sup> inversions and no inflations, no rolling Ciceronian periods and no pontificating, no elevated "poetic diction." She had the keenest eye I've ever known — some times it seemed more like a nose — for the pretentious, the inaccurate, the derivative, and the dead. Occasionally Bishop quoted Herbert in a poem: "This morning's glitterings reveal / the sea is 'all a case of knives' " in "Wading at Wellfleet" is from one of Herbert's oddest metaphors in "Affliction" (TV): My thoughts are all a case of knives, Wounding my heart With scattered smart, As watering pots give flowers their lives. Nothing their fury can control, While they do wound and pink my soul. (H. 7-13)<sup>3</sup> Rarely, Bishop would unconsciously take an image or phrase from Herbert. "The Man-Moth" ends: Then from the lids One tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips. Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over, cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink. That "one tear" seems a direct descendant of the one "drop" which Christ "slipt" From thy right eye, (Which there did hang like streamers near the top Of some fair church to show the sore And bloody battle which thou once didst try) which filled the glass in which God had preserved the poet's tears (cf. Psalm 56:8) in the third poem which Herbert called "Praise." When I sent her the text of a lecture on her poetry I gave at Oxford that contained this observation, she wrote (October 19, 1967), "Of course I'm amazed at the obvious reflection of Herbert in the 'one tear' stanza — I'm sure you are quite right, but it had never occurred to <sup>50</sup> Joseph H. Summers me at all . . . I'm always delighted when people discover these things." Bishop found Herbert's devotion to monosyllables completely congenial. I've never tried to count, but I have the impression that there are more monosyllabic lines in Herbert and Bishop than in any other significant poets in English. Sometimes Bishop's monosyllables seem Herbertian even when there is no obvious...

JOSEPH H. SUMMERS

## George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop

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