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New Elizabeth Bishop Book Sparks a Controversy

By MOTOKO RICH Published: April 1, 2006

They may not be household names, but in the insular world of poetry, they could not be more powerful. And now, in a literary clash of titans, one has squared off against the other.



Rolie McKenna/From "Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It" (University of California Press)

Elizabeth Bishop published only about 90 poems in her lifetime.

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praises Ms. Quinn's work as "the devoted editing this material needed and deserved."

But some people believe that Bishop, who had a reputation for perfecting poems over many years and refusing to publish those that did not meet her exacting standards, never intended for this work to be published. Bringing it out now, more than 25 years after her death, is unfair to her legacy, they say.

That is exactly what Ms. Vendler argues in her review. "Had Bishop been asked whether her repudiated poems, and some drafts and fragments, should be published after her death, she would have replied, I believe, with a horrified 'No,'" she writes.

In a parenthetical remark, Ms. Vendler, who has written reviews for The New Yorker, says, "I am told that poets now, fearing an Alice Quinn in their future, are incinerating their drafts."

In some ways Ms. Vendler's argument reflects a long-running debate about what to do with the unpublished work — ranging from manuscripts and drafts to letters and diaries — of dead writers, from Keats to Kafka and beyond.

In the review, Ms. Vendler, who was traveling and could not be reached for comment, disputes the value of publishing work that she describes as the "maimed and stunted siblings" of Bishop's published poems. Her complaint extends beyond the book to include some of the poems recently published in The New Yorker and other journals under Bishop's name.

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Ms. Vendler writes of one such poem, "Washington as a Surveyor," that it is "a rhythmically awkward and semantically inert Petrarchan sonnet." Making its publication "reprehensible," Ms. Vendler says, is the fact that Bishop had crossed out the entire poem in her notebooks. "Maybe it should have been printed in *The New Yorker* entirely crossed out," she writes.

David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, said in other cases in which the magazine printed Ms. Bishop's unpublished work, it ran an author's note explaining that she died in 1979 and that the book of uncollected works was forthcoming. But in the case of "Washington as a Surveyor," there was no such note. "We should have been clearer," he said.

Ms. Quinn, in an e-mail message, said she wasn't entirely surprised by the reaction to the book: "I knew that this perspective on it would be registered and probably more than once, and I even felt that Helen would very likely be the one to express it first. I was surprised by the vehemence, but she clearly feels passionately, and that's her prerogative."

Robert Giroux, who was Bishop's longtime editor and asked Ms. Quinn to edit the book, said he had originally opposed suggestions that the unpublished works be brought to light. But then he started reading the material, which was in the archives of the Vassar College Libraries, and was riveted. "I told Alice Quinn to be prepared for attacks," he said. "Some people think that fragments and incomplete work should never be published, but that's ridiculous."

"No one's claiming it's finished work," he added.

Ms. Vendler's review, not surprisingly, has people in poetry circles buzzing. "Elizabeth Bishop is so beloved out there, so people are really excited about this volume," said Tree Swenson, executive director of the Academy of American Poets. "Who wouldn't want more poems from one of your favorite poets who is no longer alive? But a lot of people have thought that Elizabeth would be turning over in her grave because her poems are so crafted, so polished, so worked and reworked and reworked, and she was also an enormously private person."

Few poets are willing to go public with their complaints. *The New Yorker* is one of the few general-interest magazines that still publishes poetry, and appearing in it is a major coup. "Alice is a very important person in the literary world," said Ms. Swenson, who had a difficult time finding a poet willing to talk to a reporter about the contretemps. "I'm not surprised that some poets would not want to be critical of a book that she edited."

In the book's introduction, Ms. Quinn acknowledges Bishop's perfectionism. But she also points out that the material is all "work that for one reason or another she chose not to publish but did not destroy."

Frank Bidart, a poet and friend of Bishop's who is thanked in Ms. Quinn's acknowledgments, said: "Believe me, Elizabeth was perfectly capable of destroying things. If she had never wanted these to see the light of day, she would have destroyed them."

In [an interview](#) with *The Atlantic Online* (www.theatlantic.com) in January, Ms. Quinn said the book helped readers understand Bishop and her creative process. "Everything in the book is of interest either biographically — as it reveals terrain largely unexplored in her published work — or because it shows the kind of scene, image, or insight that provoked her to start a poem. And all of this material gives us more of what was filtered through her brain and heart, which is hugely valuable."

Even those who may oppose, in theory, the publication of such material may nevertheless find it irresistible. "Even people who may have disapproved will read with fascination what they might intellectually have second thoughts about," said J. D. McClatchy, a poet who has published five volumes of poetry.

Some working poets admit to being squeamish about the book's publication because they would not want their own first drafts and rejected manuscripts to appear in print.

Billy Collins, the former United States poet laureate, often destroys his drafts with the click of the delete button on his computer. "I don't save my drafts," he said. "I just press delete, so the early work just vanishes into cyber void. A motto I've adopted is, if at first you don't



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succeed, hide all evidence you ever tried."

While he admitted to being fascinated by the drafts of "One Art" — a poem that Bishop published, which Ms. Quinn included in an appendix to the book along with all of the remaining drafts — he questioned the validity of letting the public see the work behind the curtain. "I think, in a way, we have her collected poems, and that was Bishop at her very best. Maybe that should be enough."

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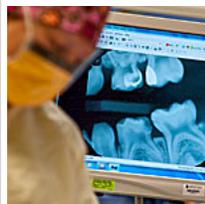
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