This is to certify that the

dissertation entitled

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S INQUIRIES ON HOME

presented by

Wendy VerHage Falb

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D degree in English

R K Meiner
Major professor

Date March 25, 2002

# ELIZABETH BISHOP'S INQUIRIES ON HOME ("WHEREVER THAT MIGHT BE")

By

Wendy VerHage Falb

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

2002

ABSTRACT
ELIZABETH BISHOP'S INQUIRIES ON HOME
("WHEREVER THAT MIGHT BE")

By

Wendy Ver Hage Falb

The concept of home figures centrally in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. This dissertation places these concerns within specific models of subjectivity and aesthetics in the twentieth century.

Subtitled "Bishop and Psychoanalysis," the first chapter demonstrates how Bishop, like Freud, understood that "home" or what is *hiemlich* is simultaneously the source of what is most strange and unsettling, or *unheimlich.* Freud, as a "psychoanalyst" and Bishop, as a 20th century lyric poet, both find in the experience and the concept of the uncanny an insight into what constitutes "I." An extensive reading of two childhood memory poems in conjunction with three pieces of psychoanalytic literature illustrates Bishop's brilliant re-visioning of the lyric in a post-Freudian culture.

As in chapter one, "home" in the second chapter is defined by an opposing term; this time it is travel. "Travel" is a concept on which Bishop ruminates throughout her oeuvre. My chapter—which borrows its title from her third book of poems "Questions of Travel"—is the first placement of these "questions" within the context of literary modernism. While my sense of this

period is drawn from various sources, it was the language in Beckett's book on Proust that provoked the reading of Bishop's poems presented in this chapter. In addition to delineating Bishop's position regarding aesthetic concepts such as "epiphany" and "autotelic art," chapter two proposes aesthetic as well as ethical grounds for her strong objection to Lowell's and Williams's use of personal letters in their poems—thereby clarifying her ambivalent relationship to "confessional poetry."

Chapter three offers an explanation for the "III" in the title of Bishop's last book, *Geography III*; (I have yet to come across another discussion or hypothesis regarding this title). Reading a very early poem in part one, "The Map," and a very late poem in part two, "Crusoe in England," this chapter argues that Bishop recognized a new kind of ordering of the world—a new kind of geography, different than the geographies that have preceded us—and that this early poem and late poem reveal her perceptive sense that poetry and geographies have mapped the world in similar ways. Both "disciplines" have been about making oneself at "home" or even "discovering" "home": by locating ourselves in relation to the rest of the world in the classical age and by locating ourselves in relation to the "Other" in the age of Darwin. Bishop self-consciously evokes these different versions of geography, I argue, in her final book of poems and in her masterpiece "Crusoe in England," recognizing that currently the poet/geographer finds herself in a new topography—a "Geography III"—a geography where self and home are "dis-located."

**in memory of my mother**

**Norma Ver Hage**

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to several people who have contributed to the completion of this dissertation. My first thanks goes to Lambert Zuidervaart, who generously shared his time and intellectual acuity, giving me a needed sense of purpose and importance; his respect for me gave me respect for myself. For his example as a scholar, teacher, community activist, and friend, I feel especially grateful. I also want to express my appreciation for Roger Meiners, my director. The eloquence, depth, and ethical commitment of his scholarship will remain a model towards which I will always strive. My thanks also goes to his wife, Lynn Meiners and to my committee members, James Hill, Clint Goodson, and Shelia Teahan for their continued support. To Michael Lopez, I owe my introduction to Emersonian wisdom.

I would also like to acknowledge two dear friends whose intellectual companionship and conversation were essential to embarking on and completing this project: Matthew Beaverson and Kathleen Ivkovich. I want to thank my father, Harold Ver Hage, for his love and his barely-concealed pride in my abilities and accomplishments.

My greatest debt is to David Falb, who after fifteen years of marriage is finally going to have a wife who isn't also a graduate student. His silent patience sustained me more than any words could have.

. . .And to Elizabeth Bishop, whose poetry has made it all worth it.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

— Introduction —

# Inquiries on Home

*"Where do you call home?"* What motivates this question? Usually raised during those awkward introductory conversations, it is a strategy for understanding the stranger in front of you. It is a way of asking "who are you?" for the question holds the implicit assumption that "location" — especially the one we identify as "home" — continually informs who we are.

Answering this question simply, at anytime in her life, would have been difficult for Elizabeth Bishop. Maybe she was always asking this question of herself and always trying to answer it. The transience of her residences are strangely at odds with her domestic impulses. Her letters and biographies are filled with descriptions of her domesticities: her cooking and entertaining, her decorating (including the careful and provocative placement of personal objects), as well as her acquaintances with the "locals;" these were part of all her tenancies, even the most temporary. It is as if she was at war with herself, continually needing to expatriate while at the same time continually needing to "plant her flag." This warring nature as well as the circumstances of her life (which, of course, are inextricably bound to each other) produced a lyric poet whose art challenges us again and again to make sense of Crusoe's exclamation: "Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?"

"Home" is a very old word in the English language. This sense that it

dates back to the origins of the language, as well as its familiarity and simplicity as a word, echo its significations. "Home" is unusual in that it can operate in many grammatical functions. It can serve as a noun referring to location, a verb conveying an action, an adjective describing a characteristic, and even an adverb—(one of its oldest usages)—signifying a peculiar direction or position (as in "home free"). When studied for any length of time this simple and familiar word starts to look strange and very complex.

This could also describe the experience of reading Bishop. Her literature is contemporary and American, the language conversational and unpretentious. The subjects of her poems and short stories are concrete, often taken from the quotidian, furthering their accessibility and comfortable familiarity. And yet, I can testify to the fact that the longer one spends with these "home-made" poems the more extraordinary they become, simultaneously locating and dislocating the one's sense of self and place in this world. This might explain why critical work on Bishop, which was only a trickle when I first read her in 1990, has become a deluge. Written between 1927 and 1979 her poems and short-stories now seem prophetic in their anticipation of current explorations of gender, domesticity, and geographies.

In their rush to claim Bishop for "post-modernism," however, many critics have missed how central the concerns of modernism are to her poetry, missing, as well, its historical self-consciousness, which broadens her writing

beyond the "confessional" concerns that limited many of her poetic contemporaries. By reading Bishop alongside writers such as Freud, Lacan, Beckett, and Foucault, this thesis places her poetry within specific theoretical and aesthetic concerns of the twentieth century. Far from giving something like a "Freudian Reading" or a "Foucauldian Reading" of her poems, my approach could be described as putting various theoretical and critical works in conversation with Bishop's poems. The illuminations resulting from such a "conversation" not only place her work historically and culturally, but champion her poetry's rich sensibility of the century in which it was produced. My method might be described as a "text-based contextual criticism" in that I read the poems quite "closely" retaining a sense of the encounter with them in their entirety and when read apart from critical commentary; while at the same time, I am juxtaposing my reading with readings of other texts, revealing some of the poems' dialogical context.

Subtitled "Bishop and Psychoanalysis," the first chapter demonstrates how Bishop, like Freud, understood that "home" or what is *heimlich* is simultaneously the source of what is most strange and unsettling, or *unheimlich.* Freud, as a "psychoanalyst" and Bishop, as a 20th century lyric poet, both find in the experience and the concept of the uncanny an insight into what constitutes "I." An extensive reading of two childhood memory poems in conjunction with three bits of psychoanalytic literature illustrates Bishop's brilliant re-visioning of

the lyric in a post-Freudian culture.

As in chapter one, "home" in the second chapter is defined by an opposing term; this time it is travel. "Travel" is a concept on which Bishop ruminates throughout her oeuvre. My chapter—which borrows its title from her third book of poems "Questions of Travel"—is the first placement of these "questions" within the context of literary modernism. While my sense of this period is drawn from various sources, it was the language in Beckett's book on Proust that provoked the reading of Bishop's poems presented in this chapter. In addition to delineating Bishop's position regarding aesthetic concepts such as "epiphany" and "autotelic art," chapter two proposes aesthetic as well as ethical grounds for her strong objection to Lowell's and Williams's use of personal letters in their poems—thereby clarifying her ambivalent relationship to "confessional poetry."

Chapter three offers an explanation for the "III" in the title of Bishop's last book, *Geography III*; (I have yet to come across another discussion or hypothesis regarding this title). Reading a very early poem in part one, "The Map," and a very late poem in part two, "Crusoe in England," this chapter argues that Bishop recognized a new kind of ordering of the world—a new kind of geography, different than the geographies that have preceded us—and that this early poem and late poem reveal her perceptive sense that poetry and geographies have mapped the world in similar ways. Both "disciplines" have been about making

oneself at "home" or even "discovering" "home": by locating ourselves in relation to the rest of the world in the classical age and by locating ourselves in relation to the "Other" in the age of Darwin. Bishop self-consciously evokes these different versions of geography, I argue, in her final book of poems and in her masterpiece "Crusoe in England," recognizing that currently the poet/geographer finds herself in a new topography—a "Geography III"—a geography where self and home are "dis-located."

The two "Bishop Critics" with whom I share the most affinity are C. K. Doreski and Bonnie Costello. Doreski's analysis of Bishop's rhetorical strategies in *The Restraints of Language* demonstrate, as I do, Bishop's self-conscious relationship to both Romanticism and Modernism. While historical placement is of only marginal interest to Costello, her attentive and sensitive readings of not only the entirety of major poems but of rarely read ones as well, remains unparalleled. I hope I have followed her example with my detailed reading of the four poems in chapters one and three and in my attention to under-read poems such as "2000 Illustrations" and "Twelfth Night" in chapter two. I am certainly indebted to so much of the critical and biographical work that has been accomplished in the last ten years, and have done my best, where appropriate, to acknowledge this scholarship.

# -1-

# A Waiting Room and an Inscrutable House

## Bishop and Psychoanalysis

## Part I.

### Revising the Lyric

I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.
—from "In the Waiting Room"

Written in the last decade of Bishop's life, "In the Waiting Room" recounts an inexplicable experience from her childhood. This type of experience, she discovered, was not unique to her. The poem seem to provoke previously unexamined memories of the same kind from its listeners, as she explains to a friend and fellow poet:

> . . .I did a rough translation aloud for a friend, in Portuguese. Her reaction was very nice, however: she got goose-flesh on her arms and told me her first experience of the same sort—when she looked in a mirror. (Other people have told me the same thing--5 years

old, brushing his teeth, etc.)[1] (*One Art*, 545).

The "nice, however" describing her friend's reaction echos the peculiar tension contained within "the uncanny," perhaps the best term for the childhood memory recounted in "In the Waiting Room." Usually associated with the gothic, the uncanny, both in life and in literature, is a "phenomenon" that one would expect to find in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, not in the poems and experiences of our contemporaries. It is this "goose-flesh" evoking poem, however, that Bishop chooses to open, and therefore introduce and even frame, the last collection of her poems, *Geography III*. I will follow Bishop's lead by giving "In the Waiting Room" an extensive reading, asking how this re-staging of an uncanny experience speaks to her calling as a lyric poet in the 20th century. While the first half of the chapter deals primarily with "In the Waiting Room," the second half takes up an earlier childhood memory poem of Bishop's,"Sestina." Here, she does not recall an explicitly uncanny experience, but through this tightly constructed poem, Bishop forcefully conveys the uncanny underpinnings of domesticity. While I am limited in this chapter to reading primarily two poems, many of Bishop's poems could be brought into fruitful conversation with the concept of the uncanny. My readings of these two poems will demonstrate, nevertheless, how Bishop's re-figuring of an old

---

[1]From a letter she wrote to Frank Bidart following the publication of the poem in *The New Yorker*.

Romantic concept rewrites the Romantic art-form in which she works, and in doing so, gives her lyric poems their increasing resonance with a post-modern audience.[2]

Bishop "works extraordinarily well within lyric conventions" C. K. Doreski correctly observes. This fact has often led to a lack of appreciation (although not on Doreski's part) for the ways in which Bishop criticizes and revises lyric conventions. Her use of traditional forms and her poetry's easy accessibility has led some to make the facile assumption that it is passé, comfortably and obliviously working in a problematic tradition. No one would

---

[2]Critics Helen McNeil and Susan McCabe both make explicit connections between the uncanny and Bishop's poetry. Intended as a general introduction to Bishop's poetry, Mc Neil's essay also posits the uncanny as a central "area of investigation " throughout the poet's oeuvre. She attributes to Bishop a "cast of mind" which identifies with the tension contained within the uncanny (407). Using Freud, as I will, for both a source and point of contrast for a definition of the uncanny, Mc Neil's essay is only able to suggest loose intersections between psychoanalysis and lyric poetry and their shared insights into what constitutes our subjectivity. My argument will give a clearer and more detailed account of the ways in which the lyric and psychoanalysis inform each other; I will offer a much more in-depth reading of the poems, and I will place Bishop's unique figuring of the uncanny within contemporary models of subjectivity and aesthetics.

McCabe briefly mentions Freud's essay on the uncanny in connection with "Sestina;" she also uses Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," as I will. While her general thesis shares some similarity to mine—"[for Bishop] writing becomes a means of mourning. . .for her, a poetics of loss imbricates a writing of a fluid and unfixed self"(2)—her attention to Freud's essay and the two poems on which I write are brief, and her entire approach insists on rejecting any placement of Bishop within literary modernism (xiii), a placement which this dissertation will argue for.

My initial reading of Bishop in connection with Freud's essay and Lacan came well before my encounter with these critics. Discovering them has reinforced my sense that the connection is significant and deserves the sustained attention that this chapter offers.

ever make this accusation about John Ashberry, whose poetic forms force the reader to immediately reflect upon expectations and conventions, and yet, he has always been a vocal admirer of Bishop's poetry. Although her approach bears little resemblance to Ashberry's, her subject does. The cogency of Ashberry's attempt to articulate this "subject" has resulted in almost a canonization of his statement. Readers of Bishop recognize and affirm what he is describing when he writes: "It is this continually renewed sense of discovering the strangeness, the unreality of our reality at the very moment of becoming conscious of it *as* reality, that is the great subject of Elizabeth Bishop." If we forget, for a moment, that Ashberry is the source of this statement, couldn't we read it and think: this "great subject" that he describes is no different from the traditional notion of lyric poetry; in fact, it sounds very similar to Shelley's:

> Poetry. . .reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. . .It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. It justifies the bold and true words of Tasso: '*Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il poeta.*'" (Adams, 528).

Shelley's Romantic credo from *A Defense of Poetry* continues to inform conceptions of the lyric despite the many repudiations and revisions of its

premises. But, perhaps it is not just Shelley's conception of the lyric but the lyric itself that should be anachronistic at this point in time, and the endurance of lyric poetry, despite the repudiation and revision of *its* premises, should surprise us. To read Ashberry's description of Bishop's poetry as a reiteration of Shelley's declaration that poetry "purges. . .the film of familiarity. . ." may not be a complete mistake. However, I would argue that it is mistaken for readers of Bishop to take the framework supporting Shelley's statement along with it, as many readers of Bishop seem to do unwittingly. Shelley declares his outrageous faith in the creative powers of the poet, powers exclusive to only the poet (and of course God). If one rejects the expressivist models informing Shelley's declaration, this faith is not only unsustainable but simply wrongheaded. And coinciding with recent rejection of expressivist models is a much darker mood concerning "the wonder of our being,"[3] even though, as I shall show, something

---

[3]Freud's essay pivots around W. F. Schelling's definition of the uncanny, and this, I would argue is significant. Friends with Hölderlin, Novalis, and Goethe, and extensively translated and coopted by Coleridge, Schelling has rightly been dubbed "the philosopher of Romanticism" but he has also, retrospectively, been claimed by both Existentialism and Psychoanalysis. There have been various arguments that Romanticism, Existentialism and Psychoanalysis intersect in Schelling's philosophy (e.g.: Žižek, Slavoj. *The Abyss of Freedom and Ages of the World.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); they also, I would like to suggest, intersect in the experience of the uncanny and in Bishop's poetry.

When confronted by "the wonder of our being," Schelling was not brought to an assurance, as was Descartes, but to a "desperate question": "Just as he, man, impelled me to the final desperate question: Why is there anything at all? Why not nothing?" Translating Schelling's statement as an expression of existential anxiety, Heidegger termed it "dreadful" rather than "desperate," extinguishing the pathos aroused by such a confrontation (Margoshes, 309). Schelling's insight into the concept of the uncanny might be attributed to his formulation of this "desperate" question, for an encounter with

of Shelley and of the lyric remains. An extended examination of the uncanny elements and experiences within two of Bishop's poems will establish how by "discovering the strangeness, the unreality of our reality at the very moment of becoming conscious of it *as* reality" her poetry is both a continuation *and* a revision of the lyric tradition.

The "uncanny" has made frequent appearances in critical arguments of the last twenty-five years, from sources as varied as Tzvetan Todorov's structuralist theory of Fantastic Literature to Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's philosophical skepticism.[4] Broadly speaking, this may be attributed to the concept's ability to straddle the divisions that have been—and continue to be—so problematic in our inherited tradition. What almost all these approaches share is a return to Freud's exploration of the subject in 1919, what one critic described as "the most influential essay that has ever been written on the uncanny."[5] I, too, will return to this "most influential essay" and to two

---

this peculiar sensation forces such a confrontation. The impact of Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room" comes from reader's identification with the child in the poem whose orientation into existential angst is brought about with her experience of the uncanny. Reading the poem recalls experiences from our own childhood that may have raised similar questions—although we may have later repressed them. As with Bishop's Brazilian friend, an encounter with this poem not only recalls the uncanny, it *is* uncanny.

[4]Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) and Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[5]Gordon C. F. Bearn, "Wittgenstein and the Uncanny," *Soundings* 76.1 (Spring, 1993): 32.

other pieces of psychoanalytic literature—Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage." Both of these writings amplify concepts introduced in *"Das Unheimliche." Beyond the Pleasure Principle* takes up the "compulsion to repeat," and Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage" is based upon Freud's narcissistic formulation of the ego (the one put forth in *"Das Unheimliche"*) and may also be used to understand the uncanny appearance of "the double." By reading these works alongside Bishop's poems, I am illuminating not only areas of intersection between them, but also between psychoanalytic discourse and the post-Romantic lyric.

The lyric distinguishes itself from other genres by its approximation of "pure subjectivity."[6] Perhaps this has never been anything more than a "hypothesis which the very process of expression inevitably dismantles" (Rajan, 198), but one can measure the distance between the Romantics and ourselves by the self-consciousness of it as a hypothesis, as well as the increasingly insurmountable obstacles to convincingly posit it. Both Freud and Bishop, this chapter argues, recognize that in the experience of the uncanny, one discovers

---

[6]The subject-centeredness of the lyric is what makes it primarily a modern genre. The turn inward, the promise of pure subjectivity free from the constraints and corruptions of socialization would have made no sense to a pre-modern poet. In his provocative essay on the lyric, Theodor Adorno makes this point, arguing that like the appearance of landscapes in the background of painting before the advent of "landscape painting," the earlier forms of lyric had elements that are precursors to the modern lyric, yet these earlier forms must be recognized as fundamentally different from our Romantic inheritance of lyric sensibility (40).

that "pure subjectivity" is composed of difference, division, and otherness, that "In the Waiting Room" and "Sestina" confirm critic Tilottama Rajan's suggestion that "the survival of the lyrical voice testifies to an understanding of the self that is not quite that of poststructuralism: an understanding of the self as constituted by and not deconstructed by its differences from itself" (207).

### *Das Unheimliche*

"...the most influential essay..."

Feeling that no sufficient examination of the uncanny had been undertaken by "the specialist literature of aesthetics," Sigmund Freud made his own analysis of this phenomenon, publishing "*Das Unheimliche*" at the close of the first World War. "It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics," Freud writes at the opening of his essay, "even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling" (219). Despite this disclaimer, Freud's foray into aesthetics here, as elsewhere, is central to his project of psychoanalysis. This is not surprising, given the fact that psychoanalysis can be seen as part of the tradition since Kant of attempts to lay bare the structures of consciousness.[7]

---

[7]Whatever one's perspective might be on the "dirty truths" of psychoanalysis, in our post-Freudian world, the sense that consciousness, like poetry, requires interpretation of its latent meanings has become almost "common sense." This modern hermeneutics, what Paul Ricoeur has termed "hermeneutics of suspicion," is a key player amongst those theories which have made the question of language central to all current philosophical

In this essay, Freud dons several "hats" while attempting to untangle the meaning and significance of what can only be described as "uncanny." In addition to "philosopher of consciousness" and "philosopher of aesthetics," he plays the roles of linguist, cultural critic, and literary critic. Taking the "reverse course" in the essay from the actual investigation,[8] Freud begins with a linguistic study, leading the reader through an extended examination of *unheimlich's* definitions and usages. What Freud's linguistic study reveals is that the opposition between *unheimlich* and its opposite, *heimlich,* can be sublated. The *heimlich* literally and linguistically becomes the *unheimlich.*[9]

---

investigations. This is "not due solely to its interpretation of culture," explains Ricouer, but by making the interpretation of dreams its model "of all the disguised, substitutive, and fictive expressions of human wishing or desire, Freud invites us to look to dreams themselves for the various relations between desire and language"(5). Central to my reading of both "In the Waiting Room" and "Sestina" is how "desire,"the great subject of psychoanalysis, has forever altered our understanding of the constitutive nature of language.

[8]Freud emphasizes that though his expositional essay is presented in a deductive manner, his actual investigation was much more inductive, beginning by examining cases in life and literature and only after that consulting the definitions (220).

[9]Although the English translation, canny and uncanny, does not share the rich etymological meanings of the German words, the various definitions provided in the OED suggest that the two words also possess a dialectical relationship. According to the OED, the use of "canny" and its negative "uncanny" appear at similar times around the turn of the 17th century. Originating in Scotland and, as a result, often used in reference to Scottish traits, many of the meanings of the two words are direct opposites–"knowing," "cautious," "agreeable," as opposed to "mischievous," "unreliable," and "uncomfortably strange." However, these oppositions begin to break down when the "knowing" becomes "cunning," "artful," and "wily" in a way that is associated with the supernatural and occult powers. And then the supernaturally wise become mysterious, frightening, and also untrustworthy. Another use of canny suggest that someone who is careful and cautious in action proceeds in a quiet and even sly

*Heimlich* refers to that which belongs to the home, that which is intimate, familiar, or not strange. A second meaning or understanding of *heimlich* proceeds from this first. That which belongs to the home becomes "something withdrawn from the eyes of strangers, something concealed, secret" (225). Used in this sense, *heimlich* can refer to genitals or private parts of the human body, and for this usage, Freud's source is the Bible (where God chooses to punish the Philistines with hemorrhoids): "'the men that did not die were smitten on their *heimlich* parts.' (I Sam v.12)" (225). This second, secretive meaning of *heimlich* can also refer to that which is hermetic, holy, or magical. Its association with magic and the occult can give his second meaning of *heimlich* an aura of evilness or something to be feared.

This last use of *heimlich* is very close to, if not the same as, the usage of *unheimlich*. However, as Freud points out, this definition needs qualification: for, all that causes fear does not fall under what has been termed the *unheimlich*. The conditions required for the frightening to also be experienced as *unheimlich* are set, strangely enough, by what is *heimlich*. To demonstrate this paradoxical relationship, Freud offers two intriguing citations:

> "*Heimlich*?. . .What do you understand by *heimlich*?"
> "Well, . . . they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One

---

manner which also leads to an uncanny or distrustful sense of someone's character. And even simply to proceed in a canny or "careful and warily" fashion immediately introduces what is uncanny or dangerous and unsafe.

> cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again."
> "Oh, we call it '*unheimlich*'" you call it '*heimlich*'. Well, what makes you think that there is something untrustworthy about this family?" (223).
>
> "*Unheimlich is that name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light*" (Schelling) (224).

Besides offering rich suggestions toward the understanding of the uncanny, these passages introduce one of the great themes of psychoanalysis: repression. He uses these passages and more supporting passages from Grimm's dictionary to conclude that:

> . . .the *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*. Let us bear this discovery in mind, though we cannot yet rightly understand it, alongside of Schelling's definition of the *Unheimlich* (226).

W. F. Schelling's definition "throws quite a new light on the concept of the *Unheimlich*," says Freud, "for which we were certainly not prepared" (225). Perhaps Freud's dramatic claim that Schelling's definition has taken him and his readers by surprise is purely a rhetorical strategy, or perhaps it really did take him by surprise, and he is simply restaging this experience within the essay.

Regardless, Freud adroitly recognizes and demonstrates that even in the pursuit of *unheimlich's* definition and its semantic relationship to its opposite term, *heimlich*, one confronts this strange sensation. Schelling's definition, "everything that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light,"[10] goes right to the heart of psychoanalysis itself, that most uncanny of all theories.[11] Perhaps this is why Freud has concerned himself with this "quality of feeling" or subject of aesthetics.

But why would a lyric poet concern herself with this "quality of feeling"? With Freud's linguistic study of *unheimlich* and its opposite term *heimlich* in mind, let's begin to read the poem in which Bishop re-stages an uncanny experience from her childhood.

## The Imperial Gaze

*Framed in the familiar yellow margins. . . .*

After looking through a *National Geographic* while waiting for her aunt in a dentist's office, the young girl in Bishop's poem is thrown into the most

---

[10]The editor and translator, Alix Strachey, informs the reader in a footnote that "In the original version of the paper (1919) only, the name 'Schleiermacher' was printed [in the place of one of the references to Schelling], evidently in error" (226). One is tempted to argue that perhaps this is a "Freudian slip" and that Freud would like to attribute this sense of the *unheimlich* as "everything that ought to remain hidden but has come to light" to one of the genitors not only of Romantic theory but also of hermeneutics.

[11]Freud himself makes this observation: "Indeed, I should not be surprised to hear that psychoanalysis, which is concerned with laying bare these hidden forces, has itself become uncanny to many people for that very reason" (243).

"unlikely" or uncanny sensations which, after disorienting her, bring her to a new or rediscovered identity: "How—I didn't know any/ word for it—how 'unlikely'. . ." What is it about those pictures in the *National Geographic* which trigger this experience?

> The inside of a volcano,
> black, and full of ashes;
> then it was spilling over
> in rivulets of fire
> [. . .]
> A dead man slung on a pole
> —"Long Pig,"the caption said.
> Babies with pointed heads
> wound round and round with string;
> black naked women with necks
> wound round and round with wire
> like the necks of light bulbs.
> Their breasts were horrifying. (159)

All are very exotic images, for a seven-year-old girl living in Worcester, Massachusetts, but all are framed in the familiar yellow margins on the cover of the magazine. Besides their exoticness, these images are tied together by their relation to the human body—a dead-man's body treated as an object or an

animal, the babies, and the women with their strange ornamentation which she likens to an "unlikely" object (light bulb) from her own world.

A corpse or a dead body, Freud points out, is where "many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree"(241). It is not simply the image of a corpse, however, that contributes to the child's sense of the uncanny but its non-human treatment; the body is divorced from its humanity. Inanimate and "slung on a pole," its irreverent handling distances and disrupts the viewer from her normal perception of the human body, and this is disturbing. The caption furthers the confusion as to the objects's status—"Long Pig." Is it a misprint? Is it the primitives' view of the body? Or the photographer's view of the primitive body? And yet it is a human body. The ambiguous and uncertain perspective is central to "Elizabeth's" experience of the uncanny. Reiterating an observation made by Jentsch,[12] Freud cites "intellectual uncertainty" as a source for the uncanny, especially when it concerns "whether the object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one"(233). In the second half of this chapter I will discuss how the objects in the poem "Sestina" take on this ambiguous animate/inanimate quality, thereby creating a sense of the uncanny. Here, I would like to suggest the uncanny arises from the confusion over the status of the body, "whether the

---

[12]Jentsch is the only other writer, according to Freud, who has attempted an examination of what causes the experience of the uncanny (219).

object is alive or not." Is it an object, like all other objects? Or is it what constitutes our existence, our "liveness," our very self? And how are these connected? Although this is not the question Freud raises in his essay on the uncanny, psychoanalysis's attempt to answer the question makes it unique amongst other theories.

The libidinal organization of the body, and therefore the self is psychoanalysis's (that "most uncanny of all theories") answer to the above questions. The young girl's experience captured in Bishop's poem pivots upon this "unlikely" answer. The two images that frame the passage, the erupting insides of the volcano and the "horrifying" breasts, remind the young girl of her own feminine sexuality. These sexual images are *heimlich* in the second sense of the word, "something withdrawn from the eyes of strangers"(225) or something which "good manners oblige us to keep hidden"(223). Open to the eyes of the readers of the *National Geographic* and to the eyes of the girl, however, they become *unheimlich*, "everything that ought to have remained. . .secret and hidden but has come to light." The "ought" in Schelling's definition of the *unheimlich* reflects the anxiety or "resistance" (to use a psychoanalytic term) to the uncovering of the repressed.[13] The "ought" expresses an obligation or duty

---

[13]Again, Freud's use of Schelling here is significant. Making the connection between aspects of Schelling's philosophy and Existentialism, Adam Margoshes argues that ". . .there is a striking formulation of the existential anxiety, which is also an anticipation of the psychoanalytic doctrine of resistance," and to support this, Margoshes offers this passage from Schelling: "'The philosopher who knows his calling is the

toward constraint, towards modesty. This is what causes Elizabeth to "read it straight through./ I was too shy to stop." She was too shy to stop and look at her leisure, yet too interested to close the magazine, apparently.

American readers of "In the Waiting Room" recognize the girl's encounter with *The National Geographic.* As a representative of anthropological and botanical erudition, it is a common presence in American homes, and it is also a common source for a child's encounter with the human body and sexuality. Prevalent and displayed openly upon coffee tables, the magazine holds within the secretive, prohibitive, strange, and yet familiar images. *The National Geographic* connects the experience of the uncanny with the imperialist perspective. The incomprehensible and alien, interesting to the reader because of this by contrast to the reader's own civilized culture, suddenly and shockingly becomes recognizable and familiar.[14] The comfortable distance maintained by the imperial gaze collapses, throwing her into a new and frightening human

---

physician who. . .seeks to heal with gentle, slow hand the deep wounds of human consciousness. The restoration is all the more difficult since most people do not *want* to be healed at all and, like unhappy patients, raise an unruly outcry if one even approaches their wounds'"(309). This dovetails nicely with Schelling's definition of the uncanny on which Freud focuses his exposition.

[14]Many of Bishop's poems examine the affiliation between writerly and imperialistic impulses. Their connection to the uncanny is made not only in this poem but in her earlier poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502" where the perspective of the Portuguese explorers, the tourist, and the writer are all compared: ". . .Nature greets our eyes/ exactly as she must have greeted theirs" (91). Like the girl peering at the exotic images in *The National Geographic*, the explorers in this poem "came and found it all,/ *not unfamiliar*"(92, italics mine).

identity:

> But I felt: you are an *I*,
>
> you are an *Elizabeth*,
>
> you are one of *them*.
>
> *Why* should you be one, too?
>
> I scarcely dared to look
>
> to see what it was I was. (160)

The yellow frame of *The National Geographic* has become almost an icon representing the perspective developed through three centuries of travel writing in the West. A perspective that is constructed through imperialistic impulses, it sought to place the self in hierarchical dominance over that which it encountered.[15] But, the tradition was to turn on itself, dislocating and dissolving the self when faced with the disorienting strangeness of the other. The seven-year-old "reader" in Bishop's poem was not alone in 1918 as she faced the "unlikely" fact of existence when confronted with images of a "primitive culture" or the primitivism of our own culture.[16] From Picasso's African-

---

[15]Much of my sense of this tradition comes from Mary Louise Pratt's book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (Routledge: New York, 1997). These issues will be discussed in greater depth in chapters two and three.

[16]World War I help to shatter belief in the superiority of "civilized" culture in the West. The context of the war figures in both Bishop's poem and Freud's essay. At the close of the poem, Elizabeth returns from her uncanny transformation to the present, reminding herself that "The War was on. . ." Freud also makes reference to World War I in the opening essay, explaining that it has made comparative cultural analysis of the

influenced *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* to the riots caused by the debut performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, this is a recurring theme throughout art and letters at the beginning of the 20th century. Drawn from his experience as a sailor, Joseph Conrad's novels challenge the constructs of self that the West had built through the imperialist perspective. In *Heart of Darkness*, his narrator comes to almost the same insight as the girl paging through the *National Geographic* in Bishop's poem:

> The earth seemed unearthly. . . and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it, —this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly on one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not?. . .What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valor, rage—who can tell?—but truth stripped of

---

uncanny impossible: ". . .I must confess that I have not made a very thorough examination of the literature, especially the foreign literature, relating to this present modest contribution of mine, for reasons which, as may easily be guessed, lie in the times in which we live" (220). Part of Freud's thesis is that the uncanny is a vestige of primitive superstitions not yet exorcized by the scientific reason available to the modern man. Perhaps "the times in which we live" make evident that there is much that "scientific reason" cannot exorcize or overcome.

its cloak of time. (70)

Time, for Conrad's narrator, can function as a "cloak" covering the nudity of existential reality. It functions for "Elizabeth" in the same way. She attempts to balance her immersion in the images of the magazine with a referential glance at the date on the cover, "February, 1918,"which she repeats as if to situate and stabilize herself in a fixed and identifiable space. She also reminds herself of her age, hoping that this fact will counter the bewildering forces in the dentist's waiting room:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space. (160)

In an attempt to stave off the disorienting effects of "the uncanny," "Elizabeth" makes an appeal to "time" as a discrete and stable moment in which she can posit her discrete and stable self, but this gives way to flux and to the disturbing realization that the self is constructed through others. In this contest that she wages with herself, one recognizes the struggle between the dominant conceptualization of time and self, time as separate homogenous instances which coexist and can be viewed from an immutable perspective (what Walter Benjamin described critically as "homogenous empty time") and the sense of

time which is central to Heidegger's philosophy, that the self can only be grasped within the ever-flowing forces of past-present-and-future.

## The Double

*". . .a doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self"*

Both Conrad's narrator and the reader of *The National Geographic* seek initially in their encounter with the other to differentiate themselves in a manner that firmly establishes their superiority to the other. However, when the strangeness of the other melts (under the heat of the tropics) into identity, the self is dislodged from its place and thrown into an indeterminate space (Abyss). After the young girl pulls her eyes from the images in the magazine to "look at the cover:/the yellow margins, the date" in an attempt to steady herself, she hears "an *oh!* of pain/ —Aunt Consuelo's voice—". This cry marks the moment when Elizabeth's relationship with her aunt undergoes an uncanny transformation. The dynamic she experiences between herself and the strange images in the magazine is repeated in another spiraling dialectic between self and other. The child's initial need to differentiate herself from her aunt turns into complete identification with her aunt but also a dizzying dislocation of the self. Earlier in the poem she had made sure to inform the reader, "(I could read)," she now makes sure that the reader is aware that her young age didn't prevent her from knowing that her aunt's need to cry out in pain, while sitting in

the dentist's chair, was silly and lacking in dignity: "even then I knew she was/a foolish, timid woman./I might have been embarrassed, /but wasn't." This judgement is lost, however, when she finds that the cry originates, not from the foolish mouth of Aunt Consuelo, but her own mouth. The pain is hers as well:

> Suddenly, from inside,
>
> came an *oh!* of pain
>
> —Aunt Consuelo's voice—
>
> not very loud or long
>
> [. . .] What took me
>
> completely by surprise
>
> was that it was me:
>
> my voice, in my mouth.
>
> Without thinking at all
>
> I was my foolish aunt.
>
> I—we—were falling, falling,
>
> our eyes glued to the cover
>
> of the *National Geographic,*
>
> February 1918. (160)

Freud could almost be describing this poem when he explains how a "doubling effect " seems to be a central component of the encounter with "the uncanny," so similar is it to "Elizabeth's" experience in the dentist's waiting

room. He writes that a kind of "telepathy" occurs where:

> one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. (234).

Along with the Oedipal Complex and the Phallus, "the double" is one of the set pieces of Freudian psychoanalysis, and its inextricable association with the experience of the uncanny is perhaps yet another motivation behind Freud's examination of this phenomenon. In his opening remarks Freud "modestly" confesses his personal difficulty in experiencing the uncanny. Later when we learn that Freud relates the experience of the uncanny to a residual animism associated both with primitive beliefs and with the narcissism of early childhood, we recognize his early remarks as Freud's insistence on his own empirical and psychological maturity.[17] Despite this importunity, however, Freud does end

---

[17]In offering this confession of "obtuseness," he makes a curious rhetorical shift, addressing himself in the third person, further contributing a sense that this admission is highly self-conscious and even defensive: "The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter, where extreme delicacy of perception would be more in place. It is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression, and he must start by translating himself into that state of feeling, by awakening in himself the possibility of experiencing it" (220).

up relaying two striking examples of his own encounter with "the uncanny." And one of these involves "The Double." Like Bishop's Brazilian friend and the "others" that she mentions in her letter, Freud encounters his "own image unbidden and unexpected" in a mirror. In a lengthy footnote, he relays the following incident:

> I was sitting alone in my *wagon-lit* compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a travelling [sic] cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet,[18] which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. (248)

---

[18]Although Freud does not make the connection, the inclusion in this incident of the "washing-cabinet" seems significant since in his etymological examination, the privy or "the *heimlich* chamber" or "*Heimlichkeiten*" is included as examples of the second sense of *heimlich* "concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it. . ." (223) It is also worthwhile to mention here the battle that Bishop had with her mentor, Marianne Moore, over the inclusion of "water closet" in her poem "Roosters." She writes to Moore: "What I'm about to say, I'm afraid, will sound like ELIZABETH KNOWS BEST. However [. . . .] I cherish my "water-closet" and the other sordidities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. . ."(*One Art*, 96). This letter is often cited as her "declaration of independence" from the influential Moore. I don't think it is insignificant that Bishop feels her "water closet" to be more than a gratuitous "sordidity." The shit-house (along with the "dropping-plastered hen house") in this early poem should be included as one of the many houses throughout Bishop's oeuvre that enact the threatening ambivalence of strange and familiar.

Now, although Freud does find the image of this "intruder," his double, distasteful, he insists that he was not frightened by it. Whether it is frightening, disturbing, or merely distasteful, one is left wondering why this is so? Why does it occur in the first place? The power of Bishop's poem lies not only in our recognition of the experience but its significance, how this experience informs our understanding of what it means to be human, to be an "I." And by doing this, "In the Waiting Room" could also be read as Bishop's credo or testimony to her calling as a lyric poet.

Among the various hypotheses that Freud offers for the uncanny experience of the double, his final suggestion that it is "a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people"(236) comes closest to what Bishop presents in her poem. Some would view Bishop's use of childhood memories in this poem and elsewhere as her participation in the Wordsworthian tradition of using autobiography to narrate "the growth of a poet's mind" (as the subtitle of *The Prelude* states it). She differs from her Romantic forebears and from some of her poetic contemporaries in that, while she retains the significance of the experiences to becoming a poet, they are not unique to this, but instead, speak to everyone's experience of what it means to be human.[19] Helen Mc Neil also

---

[19]In contrast to many other theories of consciousness, psychoanalysis bases its theories upon a developmental model. This is yet another reason why it is relevant to a discussion of "In the Waiting Room" or any other poem that continues in the Romantic

makes this observation, suggesting a contrast to Lowell whose "re-created youth, like Wordsworth's, is about preparation for the sacred role of prophetic poet; it is a life defined backwards from a present of a major poet's midcareer impasse. Bishop's child speakers awake to the more general, but horrifying, recognition that they are, like other people, merely human"(422). While I agree, I would argue that Bishop is doing both, that the childhood experiences recounted in "In the Waiting Room" and elsewhere address the present questions of human existence, but that they also recount a recognition of lyric poetry's singular expression of what it means to be human. In other words, while she refuses to elevate the poet by casting her childhood experiences as "preparation for the sacred role of a prophetic poet," she retains a sense that these formative experiences speak to the sustaining and distinctive role of poetry in her life and in our culture.

## The Mirror Stage

*"I need a virgin mirror"*

How then does the uncanny doubling of herself as a child in the dentist's waiting room, "a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people," speak not only to what it means to be human but also to poetry's singular expression of this? Jacques

---

tradition of using childhood memories as a source for poetic calling.

Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud offers some provocative suggestions towards answering these questions.

In contrast to (and in contest with) the neo-Freudians, Lacan's insistence upon Freud's "narcissistic" formulation of the ego as a basis for psychoanalysis versus the "realist" formulation allows for non-biological (i.e. cultural/familial) forces in the ego's development.[20] For many (including those who seek emancipatory change such as feminists or Marxists) this version of psychoanalysis is much more viable than the "realist" version whose parameters are defined by the individual in the western bourgeois family.[21] The "realist" ego is natural and pre-given; it is a demarcated entity which must balance and filter the conflicting demands of the id (anti-social and sexual impulses) on the one hand and reality or social law on the other. (Lacan's pejorative label for this individualistic version is "the psychology of free-enterprise.")(Grosz, 26).

The "narcissistic" version is much more fluid and inter-subjective in its

---

[20] Although I have been informed by many sources, including a prolonged struggle with the first essay in Lacan's *Écrits*, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," the bulk of my discussion and understanding of these concepts comes from Frederic Jameson's consideration of Lacan in a special edition of *Yale French Studies* (reprinted later in the collection *Literature and Psychoanalysis*) and from Elizabeth Grosz's introduction to Lacan—see works cited.

[21] Citing two other examples that "free the psychoanalytic model from its dependency on the classical Western family"(*Psychocritique du genre comique* by Charles Mouron and *Œdipe africain* by Edmond Ortigues), Jameson as a Marxist looking to go beyond "ideologies of individualism" values Lacan's re-interpretation of Freud as another fertile possibility. (346-349).

conception of what constitutes the ego. Primarily developed in Freud's essay on narcissism, but also in his examination of "Mourning and Melancholia,"[22] this ego "cannot be readily separated from its own internal processes (e.g. the flow of the libido) or from external objects (with which it identifies and on which it may model itself)." Understood as kind of libidinal reservoir, its energies flow out "into external objects (including its own body), or are absorbed back from external objects" (Grosz, 29). This ego is founded upon relationality and upon libidinal flow—which, when Lacan introduces the elemental role of language into this model, is translated as *désir*.

Clearly this formulation of the ego is what Freud has in mind when he proposes that the appearance of "the double" in the experience of the uncanny is rooted in the narcissism of early childhood. Calling it "The Mirror Stage" (*stade du mirror)*, Lacan posits that when the subject does, as Freud puts it, "mark itself off sharply from the external world and from other people," it is a necessary but "imaginary"(*imaginaire)* construction. One of Lacan's early and pivotal contributions to psychoanalysis, "The Mirror Stage" refers both to a specific phase in the development of the infant and to a fundamental aspect of human

---

[22]Freud's formulation of this version of the ego after an examination of mourning furthers the connection between it and Bishop's poetry. As I will discuss later in this chapter and in the following chapters, grief figures prominently in Bishop's poetry. I would argue that this is not simply a "confessional" aspect of her poetry, but a cognizance that our very existence is constituted through loss. If I had time I would explore the elegiac aspect to Bishop's poetry as a post-modern, rather than Romantic, re-writing of the lyric. Some of this will be addressed in my reading of "Sestina" below.

subjectivity; "It is an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*"(Lacan, 1).

In contrast to animals, the human infant, somewhere between six and eighteen months, takes special delight in "re-cognizing" his/her own image in the mirror. Previous to this, the infant experiences only scattered energies, uncoordination, and the "body-in-bits-and pieces." There is no demarcation between the child and its surroundings, including the mother. The "specular image" in the mirror allows the child to organize this, to form a whole (*Gestalt)* and to distinguish herself from the outside world as a separate object, but it also provides the capacity to take one's own body or oneself as an object.

Lacan insists that contrary to the claims of the neo-Freudians his theoretical constructs are not a new version of psychoanalysis but "a return to Freud." A comparison between this aspect of the "mirror stage" (the capacity to take oneself as an object) and Freud's speculation in "*Das Unheimliche*" on the significance of "the double" certainly supports Lacan's claim. Freud writes:

> The fact that an agency of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object—the fact, that is, that man is capable of self-observation—renders it possible to invest the old idea of a 'double' with a new meaning and to ascribe a number of things to it—above all, those things which seem to self-criticism to belong to

the old surmounted narcissism of earliest times. (235)[23]

To grasp the radical move that Lacan is making here, one must be careful to not place this reflexivity within any kind of unitary understanding of the ego. As Jameson warns: "It is important not to deduce too hastily from this very early experience some ultimate ontological possibility of an ego or an identity in the psychological sense, or even in the sense of some Hegelian self-conscious reflexivity. Whatever else the mirror stage is, indeed, for Lacan it marks a fundamental gap between the subject and its own self or *imago* which can never be bridged"(353). The moment of possession or the possibility of mastery offered by the image of wholeness in the mirror (or in the other), is at the same time an acknowledgment of loss. As Grosz explains:

> Only when the child recognizes or understands the concept of

---

[23]In a footnote to this passage Freud suggests that this is what poets are referring to when they "complain that two souls dwell in the human breast." This famous quote from Goethe's *Faust* has been connected to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* "in which knowledge and even consciousness itself are defined as the result of a reciprocal oppositions in the mind between a polarity of impulses, or 'drives'(*Triebe*)" but also to Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* where "a dichotomy of forces in the self is defined between what is called the 'material drive' and the 'formal drive'" united by a third drive, "the play drive" "corresponding essentially to the poetic imagination" (Goethe, 358). Freud re-writes these associations with Goethe's famous passage *not* with the conflicting drives of ego and id but with the narcissistic formation of the ego and also that it is in his examination of the uncanny that inspires this interpretive approach to Goethe. I would argue that Freud is rejecting Schiller's idealist formulation of poetic imagination, and is instead attributing poetic imagination to "the old surmounted narcissism of earliest times"(235). If "In the Waiting Room" is read as Bishop's testimony to her calling as a poet, then like Freud, she sees the source for "poetic imagination"—in part—as a recovery of the divided self. Jameson makes a similar argument when he connects Gadamer's notion of "play" to the phenomenon of transitivism (354).

> absence does it see that it is not 'one', complete in itself, merged with the world as a whole and the (m)other. In other words, its recognition of itself as a (potential) totality is correlative with its recognition that the world as a whole is *not* its own. (35).

And since this specular image is "only" a *Gestalt,* "an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted,"explains Lacan, it "situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone"(2). Thus, it is both a recognition and a mis-recogniton (*méconnaissance*)—a necessary but "imaginary"construction.[24]

Freud insists that he was not frightened by his double encountered in the washing-cabinet mirror; the "dislike" he describes suggests a more "ambivalent" relationship with his mirrored-self. "Ambivalence" is the word Freud uses to describe the dissolving of difference between *heimlich* and *unheimlich.*[25] Perhaps the most striking accomplishment of Freud's essay is his demonstration of how this semantic relationship enacts the experience itself. The continual fluctuation of ambivalence strains any capacity for focus. Suddenly, what seemed natural

---

[24] The French term *méconnaissance*, is important here because of its relationship with *connaissance* (knowledge). Self-knowledge (*me-connaissance*), or the formation of the ego, is synonymous with *méconnaissance* (misunderstanding).

[25]"The *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*"(226).

and given in its demarcated reality now appears illusory as the forces that kept it separate dissolve as well. It can unmoor one to such an extent that even the force of gravity no longer exists, and one is left with "the sensation of falling off/ the round, turning world/into cold, blue-black space"(161). Or (just as Dante cannot decide which bodily discomfort is hell), it can make the world (or "the waiting room"):

> [. . .]bright
>
> and too hot. It was sliding
>
> beneath a big black wave,
>
> another, and another. (161)

The French have a phrase for these "sensations" that Bishop describes in "In the Waiting Room": *mise en abîme*. Literally translated as "setting into the abyss" the concept is most often captured by analogy to mirrors reflecting each other. René Magritte's depiction of this,[26] where an image within an image within an image etc. conveys the infinite regression of light as it bounces between the mirrors, engulfs the viewer of the work into the same dynamic with the painting itself.

---

[26]Although he does not discuss the same painting that I refer to, Silvano Levy views the uncanny as an important concept for understanding Magritte's contribution to surrealism. Arguing for an expansion of Breton's understanding of the image ( "a correlation between elements that are apparently unrelated or even irreconcilable"(15), so as to accommodate Magritte's paintings, Levy uses Freud's concept of the uncanny ("where related phenomena which, in everyday reality, are not normally associated become interwoven") to characterize Magritte's juxtaposition of images and to revise Breton's definition. "Magritte: The Uncanny and The Image," *French Studies Bulletin* 46 (Spring, 1993): 15-17.

Both within the work and within the experience of the work, a kind of circular mimesis occurs where the thread of origin or point of perspective is lost; all is reflection. Like being trapped in a "House of Mirrors"[27] the *mise en abîme* can cause waves of anxiety, but the humbling confusion can also break loose the rational rigidity delimiting our former sense of self.

*Mise en abîme* illustrates our irreducibly inter-subjective existence; there is no foundational nor transcendent "I." With dismay, the young girl in "In the Waiting Room" realizes that "I was my foolish aunt,/ I—we—were falling, falling." The frustration that "I" cannot escape the banality of the "foolish"

---

[27]As mentioned earlier, Freud offers two personal anecdotes that recount an experience of the uncanny. Several pages before his admission of being unsettled by his own image in the mirror, Freud describes another experience of the uncanny also related to the eternal circularity of *mise en abîme*. Like someone wandering through the "House of Mirrors," Freud struggles to regain control and sustain his dignity while being lost in a red-light district:

> As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way [typical male], I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place yet a third time. Now however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery. (237)

(There is something comical about the great psychoanalyst, the man who boldly proposed that it was all about "sex," scuttling about in a panic as he tries to find his way out of the red-light district. If I were Freud's analyst I might suggest that it is a metaphor for his intellectual life). Freud relates this experience to the "compulsion to repeat" which he treats more extensively in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I will be discussing "the compulsion to repeat" as it relates to the uncanny below in my reading of Bishop's poem "Sestina."

other—that a desire for transcendent vision can become a source of aggression—is depicted by Bishop in her poem "The Riverman." We recognize the aspirations of the writer in the misanthropic *sacaca* (witchdoctor) whose desire for a "virgin mirror. . .to flash up the spirit's eyes" echos Wordsworth's memory of daffodils that "flash upon that inward eye/ which is the bliss of solitude" (294).[28] Almost sounding if he is conversant with Lacan's formulation of "the mirror stage" as an extension of Freud's narcissistc version of the ego, the Riverman is disgusted by his inability to experience either the "bliss of solitude" or the transcendent recollections constituting "that inward eye." In the complaints of the Riverman, Bishop is both identifying with the desires of the Romantic poet while at the same time recognizing them as problematic:

> I need a virgin mirror
> no one's ever looked at,
> that's never looked back at anyone,
> to flash up the spirit's eyes
> and help me recognize them.
> The storekeeper offered me
> a box of little mirrors,
> but each time I picked one up

[28]Bishop also alludes to this famous line in "Crusoe in England," which will be discussed in much greater detail in chapter four.

a neighbor looked over my shoulder

and then that one was spoiled—

spoiled, that is, for anything

but the girls to look at their mouths in,

to examine their teeth and smiles.

Why shouldn't I be ambitious?

I sincerely desire to be

a serious *sacaca* (107)

Several of Bishop's poems use mirrors to play with concepts of mimesis, art, narcissism, and subjectivity.[29] An unpublished epigram dated 1937 anticipates the themes of "In the Waiting Room." The girl's dismay at her divided self (as well as Freud's dislike of the "elderly gentleman" he encounters in the mirror) are already present in this early verse where "who is the *I* ?" "what is the *I*?" and "where is the *I*?" is a subject "To Be Written on the Mirror in Whitewash" as the title of this poem instructs:

I live only here, between your eyes and you,

But I live in your world. What do I do?

—Collect no interest—otherwise what I can;

---

[29]Bonnie Costello examines Bishop's use of mirrors in the first chapter of *Questions of Mastery*, 28-31.

Above all I am not that staring man. (205)

The mirror serves in the *Imaginary Order* as both an actual and metaphorical vehicle for establishing the *Gestalt* which will equal *I*. While Lacan draws upon comparative psychological studies involving animals and mirrors and infants and mirrors, his formulation of the mirror stage is forged upon the infant's relationship with the mother. Within the Imaginary order, the mother serves as the primary source for the infant's visual perception of "wholeness;" identification with the mother establishes the (first) "imaginary" construction of the ego. When the child in "In the Waiting Room" realizes that "Without thinking at all/ I was my foolish aunt"(a mother figure?) we sense the uncanny recovery of the divided and imaginary construction of the "I."[30] The "foolish aunt" is the primary (m)other through which the "I" establishes itself. The concept of *mise en abîme*, then, applies not only to the eternal circularity between self and other in the establishment of the ego, but to the sense in which the "other" has also been, in turn, established through this same dialectic. Thus, *mise en abîme* captures the inter-subjective nature of reality but also its trans-generational axis; the child's *imago* established through the mother who was

---

[30]While both Freud and Bishop's Brazilian friend experience the uncanny doubling of themselves visually, the uncanny experience in "In the Waiting Room" centers around a cry. How the mother functions not only as (m)other in the imaginary realm but also as (m)Other—as the one who sanctions the infant's cries as signs and therefore introduces the child to the symbolic and to radical alterity—will be discussed below.

established through her mother ad infinitum. Summarizing the formation of the *I* in the mirror stage, Grosz writes:

> It is by identifying with and incorporating the image of the mother that it gains an identity as an ego. The image is always the image of another. Yet the otherness of the other is not entirely alien. The subject, to be a subject at all, internalizes otherness as its condition of possibility. It is thus radically *split*, unconscious of the process of its own production, divided by lack and rupture. The ego illusorily sees itself as autonomous and self-determined, independent of otherness. It feels itself to be its own origin, unified and developed *in/by nature*. There is thus a form of fixity built upon misrecognized dependencies. It is an attempt to arrest rigidly the tensions of the opposition between the fragmented perceived body and the unified, specular body. (43).

Among the many "things, persons, impressions, events and situations" recounted by Freud "which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in a particularly forcible and definite form" are the macabre images of "dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist [or]. . .feet which dance by themselves. . ." (244). While Bishop's poem only mildly invokes the macabre with the laboratory image of "knees. . . .and different pairs of hands /lying under the lamps," the disintegration of the "unified" body does trigger and establish

the experience of the uncanny for the child in Bishop's poem.[31] The bodily images including the "horrifying" breasts in the magazine inaugurate the episode, and when the girl summons the courage to lift her eyes from the magazine to see the others in the room, what she sees are "bits-and-pieces" (*corps morcelé*):

> I scarcely dared to look
>
> to see what it was I was.
>
> I gave a sidelong glance
>
> —I couldn't look any higher—
>
> at shadowy gray knees,
>
> trousers and skirts and boots
>
> and different pairs of hands
>
> lying under the lamps.
>
> [. . . .]
>
> Why should I be my aunt,

---

[31]In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the analysand's experience of *corps morcelé* is the first sign that the analysis is "succeeding"; the rigid unity of the ego is beginning to dissolve. "This fragmented body. . . usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual," writes Lacan (4). Recovering the pre-unified self is a common objective throughout Modernism; Lacan, however, reserves analysis as *the* provocateur for the disintegration of the individual; yet, by comparing the dreams that result from the work of analysis to the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch—which "fixed for all time. . .[the] ascent [of these dreams] from the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man"(4-5) he implicitly suggests that art may both represent and recreate this same "aggressive disintegration."

or me, or anyone?

What similarities—

boots, hands, the family voice

I felt in my throat, or even

the *National Geographic*

and those awful hanging breasts—

held us all together

or made us just one?

How—I didn't know any

word for it—how "unlikely"... (161)

The body (and the self) suddenly seem arbitrarily unified. Seeing the dismembered parts "lying under the lamps" shifts the girl's perspective from the solidity of the self to *whatever it is* that holds the parts together; the *what* is now the focus: "what...held us all together...?" This is not only a global question—what makes us all human, but a "local" question, literally: what unifies the scattered energies and body parts into an "I"; what keeps each of us as individuals from "falling apart?"[32]

---

[32]Is there a relationship between the concept and possibility of a "nation" (since this has come about only in "the imaginary zenith of modern man") and this imaginary construction of the body? I am reading Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children,* and in it he narrates the erotic courtship between a young Muslim doctor (and of course, as Foucault has helped us see, it would be a doctor, trained in the West) and his patient. She is presented to him by her father through a hole in a sheet. He is only able to see one part of her body at a time and in this way he must construct her totality. The woman he is in

## A Modern Sublime

*"What similarities. . . .held us all together/or made us all just one?. . . those awful hanging breasts."*

The catalog of exotic magazine images which open the poem and the young girl's experience with the uncanny are recalled once again as she considers the questions of existence that they have raised. At this point in the poem she recalls them with a metonymic shorthand. The long list has been reduced to "the *National Geographic*/ and those awful hanging breasts." This is the third mention of the title—*The National Geographic*—in the poem. By now, the reader has a definite sense that it is what the magazine represents *as a whole*—i.e. the tradition of "travel writing" and the imperial gaze—that is central to her uncanny experience. By equally weighting the image of the breasts to the magazine, she highlights their prominence in the experience as well.

"Prominence" is probably a poor word choice for "hanging breasts." But this oxymoronic tension echos both the quality of affect that the image creates as well as Bishop's use of the word "awful." This word has an immediate

---

love with is imaginary. Just as the nation of India in its bits and pieces is also an imaginary but necessary construction, a body-*gestalt*, as it were. The concept of nationality is usually associated with Herder's Romantic recognition of the unique expressiveness of language; since a multitude of languages makes up the nation of India this modern construct does not apply. Like the Herderian concept of nation, the lyric's power lies in expressive individuation. Are Bishop's thematic concerns with the visual disciplines which are associated with nation building (which I explore in depth in chapter three) connected to the fragmentation of the *I* in the lyric poem?

association with Bishop for any reader familiar with her work. In addition to this poem, she describes "that awful shade of brown" used in the primitive painting by her great-uncle which like "The Poem" offers "the little of our earthly trust. Not much"(176). She uses "awful" to describe the "home brew" Crusoe drinks in a failed attempt to transcend his island experience (164). "It's awful plain" is the bus passenger's comment regarding the female moose—whose sudden towering emergence from the woods in her poem "The Moose" creates another uncanny moment (173). And, as I will discuss in the following chapter, she uses it to close the reflections offered in the poem "The Bight, [*On my birthday*]." "All the untidy activity continues" she writes, "awful but cheerful." With the exception of this phrase from "The Bight" (which is inscribed on her tombstone in Worcester, Massachusetts), all these uses are from her last book of poems, *Geography III*, suggesting the increasing significance of "awful" to Bishop as she writes her late, and, I would argue, her strongest poetry. [33]

---

[33]I have found another use of "awful" in a piece of juvenilia "Three Sonnets for the Eyes": "Soon it all the awful socket'll flesh to health. . ." Critic Bonnie Costello gives this helpful commentary on this early difficult poem:

> As a young poet Bishop took up almost obsessively the metaphysical conceit of the eyes as expressions of the heart and windows of the soul. The fascinating though awkwardly baroque "Three Sonnets for the Eyes" is representative of her early insular treatment of the eyes as the center of an inwardly defined, timeless identity. As Bishop left behind her metaphysical style and took up a symbolist rhetoric, the eyes increasingly became symbols of problematic or elusive identity. She abandons the conceit altogether after *North & South* except when Crusoe encounters the inexpressive, horizontal eyes of the billy-goat, which refuse altogether to fit the idea of a transcendent or profound (vertical) identity. What Bishop continues and develops, to displace the essentialist conceit of the eyes gazing inward or heavenward, is a narrative of looking, staring, glimpsing. (250-

The language in Bishop's poems usually suggests a "plain spoken" American or Canadian. James Merrill made the observation that Bishop was carrying on a "life-long impersonation of an ordinary woman."[34] This quality which is carried over into the voice of the poems allows, in its lack of intimidation, for an easy initial accessibility. Once one is engaged with these seemingly "simple" and "straightforward" poems, however, their complexity and subtlety begin to emerge. This dynamic is captured in the word "awful." Its appearance in each of the poems, including "In the Waiting Room," initially evokes the colloquial usage of either "unpleasant/distasteful" or "extremely." But, upon further consideration of each of these uses it is clear that there is an evocation of "awful's" earlier definition: causing terror, profound respect, or reverential fear. Residually present in the word itself ("awful"="causing awe"), this earlier use of the word is directly connected with the experience of the sublime. The etymology of "awful" follows the same fate as the concept of the sublime. Both have been dethroned from their elevated position, and yet the effect of their earlier sense lingers. In each of the poems in which Bishop employs the word "awful" she elicits a scaled-down version of the Burkean

---

1, n6)
We see this followed out in "In the Waiting Room" with "I gave a sidelong glance/—I couldn't look any higher—"(160).

[34]From his eulogy for Bishop published in *The New York Review of Books* (December 6, 1979), p. 6. (Reprinted in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*).

sublime. The vast and desolate natural landscapes that typified the sublime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been replaced by the colloquial and the banal, the "homely" or the "homemade." But it is these everyday objects that occasion the questions of existence.[35] As in the experience of the uncanny (*unheimlich),* the overwhelming sensations of terror and astonishment are brought about by an encounter with the familiar (*hiemlich*). [36]

In the concept of the sublime, Burke (and Kant) developed an explanation

---

[35]Although she does not make the explicit connection between a contemporary sublime and Bishop's use of the uncanny, Helen Mc Neil implies it with the perceptive observation that: "Far from being a minor psychological phenomenon, the uncanny can provide a nontranscendent way of accounting for our sense of the peculiar otherness of the everyday world"(411).

[36]In the opening of his essay on the uncanny, Freud mentions the sublime. This makes sense since, as Freud puts it, the uncanny "is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror"(219). Strangely enough, Freud doesn't seem to know that these are also the emotions aroused by the sublime. In his eagerness to highlight his pioneering spirit demonstrated by his examination of this phenomenon, Freud displays his ignorance (or repression?) of both Kant and Burke, and the concept of the sublime:

> As good as nothing is to be found upon this subject in comprehensive treatises on aesthetics, which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime—that is, with feelings of a positive nature—and with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress. (219)

One cannot help wondering what kind of a concept of the sublime Freud might have developed if he had engaged the theories of Kant and Burke. In addition to the terror and sense of powerlessness caused by both the uncanny and the sublime there is a similarity between the "manifestation of the instinct for self-preservation, the response of terror that 'anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force"(*Princeton*, 1231) as described by Burke, and the uncanny appearance of the double which is according to Freud (and Otto Rank) "an energetic denial of the power of death" and "originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego" which can reverse to being "the uncanny harbinger of death"(235).

for the pleasure engendered by what was *not* beautiful. The "pleasure" that one experiences is a secondary sensation after the initial struggle with debilitating pain and powerlessness brought about by an encounter with the sublime. Paradoxically, it is this temporary sense of one's limitedness and powerlessness that spurs one toward exertion and thus a use and strengthening of one's powers. This is the same sequence of sensations experienced by the girl in Bishop's poem. Her encounter with the uncanny—the images in *The National Geographic* and the doubling of herself in her aunt—break down her former sense of self, but they empower her with a new sense of what it means to be human. Might "In the Waiting Room" be disassociating the lyric with its traditional connection to the beautiful and, instead, identifying it as a contemporary sublime, an "awful" rather than "delightful" poetry?[37]

---

[37]In placing the power of the lyric with this contemporary experience of the sublime, the connection of the sublime with the devastating power of nature (and of the divine) is severed; there is, in a sense, a return to the earlier, classical association of the sublime with rhetoric. In mapping Bishop's use of the uncanny, I am exploring the sublime and the lyric as it relates to psychoanalytic models of subjectivity, specifically those versions which understand the "I" not only to be primarily inter-subjective, but to be constituted through language. In a reading of Baudelaire, Jameson offers this useful description of a post-modern "sublime":

> . . .the notion of a sublime as a relationship of the individual subject to some fitfully or only intermittently visible force which, enormous and systematized, reduces the individual to helplessness or to that ontological marginalization which structuralism and poststructuralism have described as a "decentering" where the ego becomes little more than an "effect of structure." But it is no longer necessary to evoke the deity to grasp what such a transindividual system might be. (262)

**Human Utterance: The Promise of Presence and the Realization of Loss**

*"a cry of pain that could have/ got loud and worse but hadn't?"*

Like the other "awful" objects in Bishop's poetry, the hanging breasts belong to the non-transcendent and the quotidian, *heimlich* in the first sense of the word, but their "exposure" in the magazine and their blackness make them *unheimlich.* This uncanny effect is intensified by their relationship to the girl's sexuality. The nearly seven-year-old's realization of her own femininity—the sexual inscription of her own body—connects her to her "foolish aunt" but also to the entire human race. "What similarities. . . .held us all together/or made us all just one?" The answer: "those awful hanging breasts." The first source of sustenance outside the womb, breasts are also the first object of desire, their absence causing our first cries. These cries are a kind of "pre-language." They are the child's attempts to bridge the gap between herself and the absent mother. They are a cry for the mother as well as for milk, a cry for love as well as for sustenance.[38] Lacan labels these infant cries as "demand," the intermediate term

---

[38]Like the "awful" breasts in this poem, the breasts at the close of "At the Fishhouses" are hardly a comforting source of human sustenance. The idea of the eternal deferment of desire that constitutes our existence and that is signaled by the child's first cries for the breast, is echoed in this poem by Bishop's description of knowledge:

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown. (66)

between the purely biological "need" and "desire," which is the articulation of the speaking child. As Jameson explains: "sexual desire is then that qualitatively new and more complex realm opened up by the lateness of human maturation in comparison with the other animal species, in which a previously biological instinct must undergo an alienation to a fundamentally communicational or linguistic relationship—that of the demand for recognition by the Other—in order to find satisfaction." And it is a satisfaction which, "in the very nature of things (in the very nature of language?) can never be fulfilled"(267).

Is this the cry that Elizabeth and the others waiting at the dentist's office overhear? "a cry of pain that could have/ got loud and worse but hadn't?" This disembodied cry originating "from inside" is first attributed to her aunt, and then felt in her own throat, and finally just "overheard" by all those present. Is this also the same cry that permeates Bishop's memory of her mother and of her childhood town recounted in her powerful short story "In the Village"?

> A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, skies that travelers compare to those of Switzerland, too dark, too blue so that they seem to keep on darkening a little more around the horizon—or is it around the rims of the eyes?—the color of the cloud of bloom on the elm trees, the violet on the fields of oats; something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years

> between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever—not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it. (*Collected Prose*, 251)

Bishop emphasizes in both the poem and the story that the significance of the scream or cry was not its loudness. A scream could be deafening or dramatic, but these cries were neither. In "In the Waiting Room" it was "overheard"; in "In the Village" it was "unheard." The underlying tension of the short story is the silence, the pause, a holding of breath waiting for the scream. While ostensibly both sounds came from concrete but insignificant sources: a "foolish" "timid" aunt having dental work done and a mother upset by the dress a seamstress is trying to fit on her, it is soon clear that the sounds have no origin, no speaker. (In the story the scream is introduced first as its own pre-existing entity. "*Later*, it was she [the mother] who gave the scream"(italics mine, 251).) No speaker and no definite receiver, these not-loud cries resonate the "pitch" of existence.

As the darkening around the horizon of the Nova Scotian sky foreshadows, this sensually vivid, autobiographical story tells of a child's entrance into loss and grief as simultaneous with her entrance into the richness of life. ( For example: the child is confused by the homonym "mourning" and "morning," and the beauty of the red morning sky seems no different to her than

the danger of the fire lit sky from the night before.) Like the disembodied scream, loss and grief pass from person to person, hang over the village (and over the story), and are unspoken and unheard but eternally present, nevertheless. The mother, we learn, is emotionally ill from prolonged mourning; the scream is her resistance to the purple dress that would signify a "moving on" that she cannot seem to do. The child narrator of the story maintains a distance from her (and from the other humans in the story), referring to her not as mother but as "she." The tension comes from this distance. The mother is inaccessible to the child because of her illness. And the unspoken grief of the story is the unbridgeable gap between the child and the mother she longs for but hardly knows. After the scream is introduced, the reader shares the child's tension which is like a suspension of breath waiting for the scream to express itself. It never does. But its phantom remains.

Like the hopeful perspective in which the child in "In the Waiting Room" places the cry—"that could have/ got loud and worse but hadn't"—, the scream in "In the Village" is balanced by another sound, the "clang" from the blacksmiths's shop. At the close of the story, this "sound" is contrasted with the sound of the scream, the former as permanent, pure and elemental, the latter as frail and transitory. Could this be Bishop's conflicting perspective on speech? The pleasure in the sounds of language because it offers a possibility toward mastering loss. The infant cries, and the mother comes. But, just as the passage

at one point confuses the two sounds (the pronoun "it" referring to both at the same time), both the promise of presence and the realization of loss are inseparably bound in every human utterance:

> Clang.
>
> *Clang.*
>
> Nate is shaping a horseshoe.
>
> Oh, beautiful pure sound!
>
> It turns everything to silence.
>
> But still, once in a while, the river gives an unexpected gurgle. "*Slp*," it says, out of glassy-ridged brown knots sliding along the surface.
>
> *Clang.*
>
> And every thing but the river holds its breath.
>
> Now there is not a scream. Once there was one and it settled slowly down to earth one hot summer afternoon; or did it float up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky? But surely it has gone away, forever.
>
> It sounds like a bell buoy out at sea.
>
> It is the elements speaking: earth, air, fire, water.
>
> All those other things—clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream—are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?
>
> Nate!
>
> Oh, beautiful sound, strike again! (*Collected Prose*, 274).

Usually, especially in her initial reception, Bishop is identified as a "visual" poet. And certainly the visual is central to both "In the Village" and "In

the Waiting Room," but the visual elements in them pivot around a cry. This also marks the uncanny experience of "In the Waiting Room" as different from that of her Brazilian friend and Freud whose doubles appeared in a mirror. By tying the uncanny effect of the magazine images and the "sidelong glance" of the fragmented parts of people in the room to the doubling of herself through the cry, "In the Waiting Room" establishes the centrality of spoken language to "what it was I was."

## Inside and Outside

*"Inward goes the way full of mystery"*

This poem, its title, and the title of the short story discussed above all begin with the preposition "in" just as the cry, in the poem, originates "suddenly, from inside" (160). Like a camera shot that begins with a satellite picture of the earth and zooms to the inside of a body, the perspective of the poem narrows progressively inward. It opens "*In* Worcester, Massachusetts" to "*in* the dentist's waiting room" where "I waited and read" while "my aunt was *inside*/what seemed like a long time." Then the perspective travels even further inward to the pages of *The National Geographic* and to the bodily intimate photograph of "the *inside* of a volcano"(159, italics mine). "Inward goes the way full of mystery" penned the Romantic poet Frederick Novalis capturing the *Zeitgeist* of his era. Charles Taylor, in his extensive survey *Sources of the Self: The*

*Making of the Modern Identity,* returns to this quote many times to mark the radical shift in the modern west towards interiority – that beginning, loosely, with the Romantics and continuing to the present, there is sense that "an indispensable route of access to the world or nature or being" is inward. The girl in Bishop's poem discovers with bewilderment that while Novalis's statement still holds true, the "mystery" has become uncanny. "In the Waiting Room" can be placed alongside other modernist works where "the turn inward [takes] us beyond the self as usually understood, to a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question. . .or to a new way of inhabiting time" (Taylor, 462).

A sensation of extreme interiority is attributed, by Freud, to the "phantasy. . .of intra-uterine existence"(244). This is most often experienced as the terrifying "idea of being buried alive by mistake," which is to some "the most uncanny thing of all." This gothic scenario which pivots upon the confusion over what is alive and what is dead, (like the "dead man slung on a pole"in *The National Geographic*), is experienced as uncanny, according to Freud, because it is a return of the familiar which has been repressed; our earliest experiences and sensations – when *all* was interior – raise the frightening question of when did we begin? and then, of course, the next question is, when will we end?. [39] The

---

[39]While he doesn't draw this conclusion here, he does in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. There, while discussing significance of the unconscious thoughts "relating to life in the womb" he describes "the dread, felt by so many people, of being buried alive,

repressed memory of intra-uterine existence is also the reason why "neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs." Freud explains why this is a "beautiful confirmation of our theory of the uncanny":

> This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that 'Love is home-sickness'; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'this place is familiar to me, I've been here before',[40] we may interpret the place as his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix *'un'* is the token of repression. (245)

Peering into "the inside of a volcano,/ black, and full of ashes;/ then it was spilling over in rivulets of fire" may have recalled for the child in Bishop's poem "the first experience attended by anxiety," namely "the act of birth" (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 272), and with it the strange memory of *"heim."*

It is in relationship to the maternal body – this original home – that the

---

as well as the profoundest unconscious reason for belief in a life after death, which represents only the projection into the future of this mysterious life before birth" (ft. 74, 272).

[40]In Bishop's poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502" the explorers' pursuit of the virgin landscape is described as sexual aggression where they "came and found it all,/ not unfamiliar"(92). Bishop's implication of the writer within this imperialist framework is similar to Hélène Cixous's provocative reading of Freud: "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche.*" *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976): 525-548.

categories of inside and outside are established. Central to the childhood memory re-counted in "In the Waiting Room" is this predominant sensation of the "inside" which is heightened by its contrast to what is "outside." Bishop forcefully conveys the *heimlich* atmosphere of the waiting room by contrasting its warm, enclosed, well-lit, and peopled space to the cold dark wintery "outside" where the abstract and ominous, capital "W" – "War was on." This "outside" is placed at the opening and the close of the poem like bookends encasing and containing the central experience of the poem. The form of the poem and thus the reader's experience of the poem recreates this same feeling of the *heimlich* demarcated by what is not *heimlich.* Bishop sets the scene of the poem by telling the reader:

> It was winter. It got dark
> early. The waiting room
> was full of grown-up people,
> arctics and overcoats,
> lamps and magazines. (159).

And after the intense inward and vertiginous experience which makes up most of the poem she returns, returning the reader as well, first to the waiting room and then to "outside"and to the "normal" structuring of time. There is no access to "outside" when one is buried alive or in the womb. The blurring of life and death and also the blurring of where I begin and where an(other) begins is

unbearable. The child (and the reader) must eventually reinstate her earlier demarcations:

> Then I was back in it.
> The War was on. Outside,
> in Worcester, Massachusetts,
> were night and slush and cold,
> and it was still the fifth
> of February, 1918. (161).

**The Lyric: A "Waiting Room"**

Like Vladimir and Estragon, the subject in Bishop's poem is *waiting*. The "room" in which "Elizabeth" experiences "the uncanny" is an interiorized space in which, as in the two acts of Beckett's play, nothing—(and yet everything)—happens. Could this be Bishop's depiction of the lyric—a kind of "waiting room"?

Putting "In the Waiting Room" in conversation with Freud's essay on the uncanny, recognizes how a seemingly simple recollection of a strange childhood experience evokes (and provokes) contemporary contestations over models of subjectivity and aesthetics. Bishop's genius lay in her instinctive sense that this "unlikely" memory held the seeds to a brilliant re-envisioning of the lyric poem. In his essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" Theodor Adorno characterizes the

achievements of the lyric in this way:

> It is commonly said that a perfect lyric poem must possess totality or universality, must provide the whole within the bounds of the poem and the infinite within the poem's finitude. If that is to be more than a platitude of an aesthetics that is always ready to use the concept of the symbolic as a panacea, it indicates that in every lyric poem the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must have found its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself. (42)

A modern successor for Wordsworth's *The Prelude: Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" brings us "the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society" in the medium of "a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself." How uncanny.

# Part II.

## An Eight-Hundred-Year-Old-Verse Form

*". . .it was just called Sestina."*

Robert Lowell took the liberty of re-making Bishop's short story "In the Village" into a poem. Entitled "The Scream" it is part of his collection *For the Union Dead* which he sent to Bishop while she was living in Brazil. In a letter to Lowell, she comments on the poem indicating that it is her first awareness of it. While she is ostensibly kind and complimentary in her remarks, one can sense a resistance and maybe even an annoyance at Lowell's versifying not only everything in his own life but in others' lives as well:

> I don't know why I bother to write "uncle Artie," really. I should just send you my first notes and you can turn him into a wonderful poem. He is even more your style than the "Village" story was. "The Scream" really works well, doesn't it? The story is far enough behind me so I can see it as a poem now. In the first few stanzas I saw only my story—then the poem took over—and the last stanza is wonderful. It builds up beautifully, and everything of importance is there. But I was very surprised. (*One Art*, 408).

This is Lowell's last stanza:

> A scream! But they are all gone,
>
> those aunts and aunts, a grandfather,

a grandmother, my mother –

even her scream – too frail

for us to hear their voices long. (9)

Bishop's comment "and everything of importance is there" might be understood as a backhanded compliment; for what sustains the tension of "In the Village" is the fact that everything of importance is *not* there. While in Bishop's story "she" is understood to be the child-speaker's mother, "she" is never named as such. "The Scream" seems to miss the significance of this refusal to name "the mother," for "mother" appears four times in this very short poem of Lowell's.[41] In "In the Village," the absence of the comforting and familiar word "mother" contributes to the story's palpable sense of loss and grief. Lowell's poem also seems insensitive to Bishop's story, as Bishop's biographer Bret Miller points out (330), in that there is no acknowledgment that she has already written a poetic version of "In the Village."[42]

---

[41]As Brett Miller points out, in all of Bishop's oeuvre the only mention of her mother as "mother" is in the poem about Uncle Artie that Bishop mentions in this letter ("First Death in Nova Scotia") and in "One Art" (329). I would argue that it is no coincidence that the subject of both of these poems is loss. In "First Death in Nova Scotia" the child's mother is the one who "laid out Arthur" and instructed the child to "Come and say good-bye/ to your little cousin Arthur." The poem makes a direct connection between the mother and the child's "first" encounter with death—or the concept of permanent loss. In "One Art" listed among the important "things" lost by the speaker is "my mother's watch"—clearly a metonymic short hand that lightly but powerfully points to the speaker's first and most profound loss, the loss of her mother.

[42]It is ironic that Lowell fails to remember "Sestina" and its relationship to "In the Village" because, as Bishop's letter suggests, her creation of this kind of poem is directly influenced by his own work. As C. K. Doreski points out: "Much of *Questions of Travel*

First published in *The New Yorker* in 1956 (six years before Lowell sent the typescript copy of *For the Union Dead* to Bishop), "Sestina" is one of three childhood memory poems in *Questions of Travel*. Like "In the Village" grief and the absence of the mother create the central tension of the poem. While no mention of or reference to a mother is made, the generational gap between "the child" and "the old grandmother" as they struggle to control the uncontrollable "tears" points to this unnameable absence.

Unlike Lowell's incorporation of the narrative elements of "In the Village" into impressionistic snippets of verse, "Sestina" takes the same setting and emotional/existential underpinnings of "In the Village" and *translates* them *through* poetic form. Originally titled "Early Sorrow" (Miller, 267), the poem's published title ensures that the reader will not miss the essential correspondence between its form and its subject. After "Sestina's" publication in *The New Yorker* but before the publication of *Questions of Travel*, Bishop responds to Lloyd Frankenberg's inquiry concerning the poem. He apparently had referred to it by its earlier title. Bishop's response offers a subtle comment regarding the poem's published title. She writes: "DO I have a poem called 'Early Sorrow ?' I thought it was just called 'Sestina,' if it's the one I think it might be. . ."(*One Art*, 380). Rhetorically, Bishop separates herself from her own authorial agency in choosing

---

consists of a midcareer return to childhood modeled on Lowell's *Life Studies*. The prose story, 'In the Village,' prompts and to some degree empowers the poems of the 'Elsewhere' section" (9).

the poem's title: first, by not acknowledging that "Early Sorrow" was her initial working title; second, by expressing uncertainty: "I thought; " and third, by using the passive voice: "it was just called." It is as if she wants to distance herself from the delineation that the former title "Early Sorrow" would entail, but also give the sense that the current title was inherent rather than chosen. But even more remarkable is her use of the adverb "just." This suggests not only that "Early Sorrow" is perhaps superfluous, but that her published title, "Sestina," is simpler and more basic. Once again, Bishop is carrying on that "life-long impersonation of an ordinary woman," for there is nothing "just" about entitling the poem "Sestina" unless by inferring that such a title is basic she is making clear that it is elemental.

This eight-hundred-year old verse-form builds its complex structure from a repetition of six end-words in six stanzas with six lines each, followed by an *envoi* of three lines. "The same six end-words occur in each stanza, but in a shifting order which follows a fixed pattern: each successive stanza takes its pattern from a reversed (bottom up) pairing of the lines of the preceding stanza (i.e. last and first, then next-to-last and second, then third-from -last and third). . . .The envoy is further complicated by the fact that the remaining three end-words, must also occur in the course of its three lines, so that it gathers up all six

together" (*The New Princeton*, 1146).[43]

"Sestina's" intricate dance of six words: house, grandmother, child, stove, almanac, and tears, weaves through the stanzas creating a scene which is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. The tight control of the form belies itself by defensively implying a continual threat of chaos. And the elements themselves fluctuate in ambiguity between those two poles of "domesticity" and "otherwordliness."[44] While the poem doesn't recount an explicitly uncanny experience as did "In the Waiting Room," its components and its form follow Freud's outline of what constitutes the phenomenon of the uncanny. As in "In the Waiting Room" Bishop's engagement with "the uncanny" in "Sestina" informs not just the subject of the particular poem, or even the subject of "poetry" (although it does that as well), but her sensibility regarding how it is we *are* in the world.

---

[43]The sestina's schema is as follows:

stanza 1: 123456
stanza 2: 615243
stanza 3: 364125
stanza 4: 532614
stanza 5: 451362
stanza 6: 246531
envoy : 531 or 135.

[44]Helen Vendler's terminology.

## *Heimlich*

*". . .arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house."*

Just as "the night and slush and cold" outside make the waiting room inside a very *heimlich* place in "In the Waiting Room," the "September rain" that "falls on the house" in the opening line of "Sestina" immediately sets the scene of a very cozy, intimate, and *heimlich* place. Domesticity is, at its most basic, a shelter from the inclemencies of weather—as the child's delight in the nursery rhyme reminds us: "Rain on the green grass, rain on the trees, rain on the house top, but not on me!" This is the sense of protection and enclosure that Bishop's nursery rhyme-like poem invokes. *Heimlich* conveys a sense of the "intimate, friendlily [sic] comfortable; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house," according to the dictionary that Freud quotes (222). This first understanding of *heimlich* pervades the opening stanza until the last line:

> September rain falls on the house.
> In the failing light, the old grandmother
> sits in the kitchen with the child
> beside the Little Marvel Stove,
> reading jokes from the almanac,
> laughing and talking to hide her tears. (123)

The tears are the first of the six repeating elements that begin to move in the direction of the *unheimlich*; they are *heimlich* in the second sense of the word: "Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others"(Freud, 223). Their introduction undercuts the *heimlich* atmosphere of kitchen, stove, child and laughter, making them now appear as merely a facade constructed to cover the tears.

The poem struggles back and forth between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. Every time that loss or chaos threatens to dominate, the poem shifts toward a delicate control and reestablishment of the security found in the *heimlich*. But alternately every single instance of the *heimlich* almost immediately slides into its difficult and sometimes sinister opposite, *unheimlich*.

The second stanza begins with the grandmother managing her grief by understanding it as part of being human, seasonal and predictable, and perhaps even necessary just like the September rain. Although in the poem, Bishop attributes the grandmother's faith in providence or "prediction" to the almanac, the language throughout the poem alludes to the book of Ecclesiastes, to that familiar passage which seeks to console the disillusioned with the exhortation that:

> To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted. . . .A time to weep, and a

> time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;. . . .A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away. . . .a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. . . .(Ecclessiastes. 3.1)[45]

With this sense of the seasons and the rhythms of life the grandmother "tidies up," slices bread, and establishes the domestic ritual of tea: "*It's time for tea now.*" But her inability to either contain or predict her tears is made evident by their metonymic jumping from her to the kettle, from the kettle to the rain on the roof, and then to the tea cup, and finally to the almanac and the child's drawing. Like the scream in "In the Village" and the cry in "In the Waiting Room," they originate with no one or no thing; they manifest themselves almost magically within every object. While the tears proliferate, the tear-like rain which initially "fell" on the house intensifies in the second stanza "beating" on the roof until it is frenetically "dancing." "A time to mourn and a time to dance": the Ecclesiastes passage uses opposition to suggest that although life currently may seem unbearable, it will balance itself. Bishop collapses these oppositions. They bleed into one another. It is the tears and tear-like rain that are dancing, and it is not a dance of joy, but a dance of "madness," one which invades the house and causes a "chill" which the grandmother quickly tries to dispel by another act of

---

[45]The writer of Ecclesiastes concludes his dissertation on the precariousness of human life by asserting the omniscience and omnipotence of God, and in this, we are to take comfort. Freud quotes a similar statement to demonstrate one of the various usages of *heimlich*: "'When a man feels in his heart that he is so small and the Lord so great–that is what is truly *heimelig*'"(223).

domesticity: putting more wood in the stove. *Heimlich* and *unheimlich,* one engenders the other:

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

*Its time for tea now;* but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string, Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house

feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove. (123)

An almanac, by itself, occupies that indeterminate position between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. As a source of prediction and therefore control, it may assuage the inherent insecurity of an agrarian culture whose fortunes are tied to the erratic shifts in weather. It is comforting and seeks to make life more comfortable. In this way it is *heimlich*. Yet, its roots lie in the dubious discipline of astrology. Astrology falls under the second definition of *heimlich*, knowledge associated with the occult, secretive ("only known to a grandmother").[46] And this secretive and magical knowledge, while it may begin as a source of comfort (or protection-from a grandchild), usually becomes threatening because it possesses power beyond our control or understanding. It is uncanny in that it is "other," and yet it may know more about us that we know ourselves. The *heimlich* has become *unheimlich*.

This transformation by degrees occurs in the poem as well. In the first stanza, the almanac is a source of jokes. In the second it is a source of prediction. Coming at the very end of the third stanza it has become "clever" – only slightly threatening (like a leprechaun). But in the fourth stanza, the "Birdlike" almanac

---

[46]The association with the occult or with magic is extended to the stove as well. In the concluding stanza of the poem "the Little Marvel Stove" has become "the marvellous stove." Like the other uncanny elements in the poem, the stove is simultaneously a source of warmth and comfort (*hiemlich*) and "marvellous" (*unhiemlich)*—associated with the supernatural and a source of "intense surprise, interest, and astonishment" (*Websters*).

"hovers half open above the child,/hovers above the old grandmother"(123). As Alfred Hitchcock knew so well, the fluttering agitation of "birdlike" within a domestic space can be quite unsettling. The verb "hovers" intensifies its menacing presence. "Hovering" suggests that as with a bird, bat, or helicopter, the near contact and the threat of contact may actually be more troubling than contact itself would be.[47] As discussed earlier in the chapter, part of what can arouse a feeling of the *unheimlich*, according to Freud, is "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (226). Both the "clever almanac" and the "Marvel Stove" become, by the fifth stanza, not only animated but ominous as they speak with secret authority about the fate of those in the house:

> *It was to be,* says the Marvel Stove.
>
> *I know what I know,* says the almanac.

Both statements allude to the lack of control one has over fate. They *could* be words of comfort; one might be assured by the omniscience of the almanac

---

[47]In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud makes what he sees as an important distinction between "anxiety, fear, and fright": "'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid. 'Fright', however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise"(6). Fright is the only source, according to Freud, for "traumatic neuroses." The element of surprise and the inability to prepare is central to both the experience of the uncanny as well as this sensation of "hovering." Especially distressing is the combination, in both these instances, of the known with the element of surprise.

and repeat "It was to be" in an effort at acceptance and letting go. But, spoken by these animate/inanimate objects at this point in the poem, these *heimlich* sentiments are experienced as *unheimlich* in their rigid determination. Even the "four walls of the house," which is in the first definition of *heimlich* that Freud quotes, becomes a source of constraint rather than enclosure:

> *It was to be*, says the Marvel Stove.
> *I know what I know*, says the almanac.
> With crayons the child draws a rigid house
> and a winding pathway. Then the child
> puts in a man with buttons like tears
> and shows it proudly to the grandmother. (123)

**Culture: a Verb**

With the introduction of the child's drawing, the poem presents not only a house within a house, but an act of artistic creation (drawing) within an act of artistic creation (the sestina/the poem itself). The child's impulse to draw, in the wake of the stove and the almanac's fateful pronouncements, seems motivated by the desire to regain some kind of control. Like the grandmother's instinctual "tidying up" and tea making, the child is compelled to create when faced with unmanageable loss. As Helen Vendler's essay argues, Bishop's poetry recognizes the human compulsion toward domesticity "as a demonstration of

meaningfulness, as a proof of 'love'"(99). By giving domesticity thematic attention in much of her poetry, and specifically in this poem by comparing the grandmother's acts of domesticity to the impetus motivating the child to draw (and, as I will discuss below, to the impetus behind the writing of the poem) perhaps Bishop is returning "culture" to its etymological roots and by doing so recognizing that poetry, as Robert Lowell observed "is not a record of an event. It is an event." In other words, activities and artifacts categorized as "cultural" are not extraneous or even desirable enhancements; they are inherent to our existence as social beings.

Raymond Williams reminds us of these roots in order to suggest a critical reconsideration of current conceptions of "culture." The original usage of "culture" shares more with "domesticate" than our contemporary understanding of these terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* places the first use of "culture" in 1420 where it refers to "the action or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage, husbandry." Coming out of a primarily agrarian context, this early definition of "culture" clearly overlaps with "domesticate;" its meaning included not only the tending and cultivation of crops but also of animals, and "husbandry" refers not only to this activity but to "the administration and management of a household"(*OED*). It is from these roots that it later came to mean "the growth and tending of human faculties"(Williams, 11). Originally, then, "culture" was used either as a verb or, as Williams points out, a noun of

process: always the culture *of* [something](13). Unearthing this earlier sense of culture as verb or as process-noun works toward dismantling the concept as either a "received state"—connected with notions of historical progress—or as an "essence"—related to the purely "spiritual" or "inner" realm. It serves to re-conceive "culture" as intricately bound with the material.

It would be a mistake to read Bishop's emphasis on the domestic and domesticity in her poetry as a reiteration of the nineteenth century's "cult of domesticity."[48] In this context "domesticity" as well as "culture" (as an inner spiritual essence) possessed virtue because of their separation from the demoralizing forces in the public sphere. Bishop radically reformulates these concepts by situating them as both before and beyond the division of public and private. "Sestina's" nursery rhyme-like, agrarian setting evokes the pre-capitalist origin of these terms where the economic and the domestic were inextricably bound. Like Williams's essay, this shatters any sense that the current understanding of these terms has been the *only* understanding and it thereby undermines any theorizing built upon the foundation of "culture" or "domesticity" as stable and demarcated terms.[49] But of course, the setting alone

---

[48]This phrase was introduced by Aileen S. Kraditor in her introduction to *Up from the Pedastal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism*, (Chicago: Quandrangle Books, 1968).

[49]"When the most basic concepts—the concepts, as it is said, from which we begin—are suddenly seen to be not concepts but problems, not analytic problems either but historical movements that are still unresolved, there is no sense in listening to their

couldn't accomplish all this. It is only in conjunction with the poem's situating of "culture" and "domesticity" as *beyond* the division of public and private, its breaking down of this dualism (as well as other dualisms), that the mother-goose world of the poem becomes historically pertinent.

By preceding the public sphere in the formation of the individual, the private sphere has been understood as being able to inform the public sphere without being "sullied" by it. The experience of the uncanny reveals the defects of this model. How can the private precede the public as well as be separate from it, Bishop's poetry asks, when what we consider to be domestic or interior has become, upon closer scrutiny, alien and exterior?

Vendler's thesis on domesticity in Bishop's poetry makes a parallel observation. Although she does not explicitly make reference to Shelley's claim that the poet "strips the film of familiarity," her "foundational" essay on Bishop[50] places her poetry in a paradoxical relationship to this Romantic tradition. "Her work," writes Vendler, "vibrates between two frequencies—the domestic and the strange. In another poet the alternation might seem a debate, but Bishop drifts rather than divides, gazes rather than chooses" (97). The verbs that Vendler

---

sonorous summons or their resounding clashes. We have only, if we can, to recover the substance from which their forms were cast" (Williams, 11).

[50]Last month I received a "call for papers" from the American Literature Association: "Foundational studies of Elizabeth Bishop's work have led us to analyze her domesticating imagination. . ." This is a direct reference to Vendler's essay "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly."

chooses capture not only Bishop's poetry but the "ambivalent" relationship of *hiemlich* and *unheimlich.* Like these concepts, the "domesticating complusion" that Vendler has established as central to Bishop's poetry should be recognized as having a dialectical relationship with the poet's "defamiliarizing" imagination.

**An Uncanny Paradox**

*"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy"*

As mentioned above, the child's drawing, as an aesthetic presentation, can be seen as a replica of the poem in which it appears. Or, if "Sestina" is viewed as a memory poem, the drawing could be seen as a juvenile progenitor of the mature work—"Sestina." In other words, the drawing informs the poem and vice versa. So much of the accomplishment of the poem is how its complexity appears as simplicity. Bishop takes a difficult and intricate form and manages somehow to cast it into a child-like chant. As discussed earlier, the title of the poem forces the reader to recognize the inextricable relationship between its form and subject. The poem is about its form. But how? How does a sestina, this unyielding pattern of repetition, pertain to the scene that it depicts?

Freud moves us toward an answer by noting the connection between what is experienced as uncanny and the human compulsion to repeat:

> . . .it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual

> impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children; a compulsion, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients. All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny. (238)

This point furthers Freud's hypothesis that the uncanny is "something repressed which *recurs*" (241), and many of these repressions originate in our earliest development. Several factors leave the reader with the impression that "Sestina" originates from a child-like mind: the simplicity of the language, the fairy-tale-like setting, the sense that it is a childhood memory as well as the sense that it is a replica of the child's drawing. Even the form of the poem, as intricate as it is when analyzed, seems on first reading child-like because of its obsessive repetition. Anyone who has spent any amount of time with small children immediately concurs with Freud's observation of children's "very clearly expressed" "impulse" to repeat compulsively. As to why children demonstrate this "daemonic character" of the mind, the reader must look to "another work,

already completed,[51] in which [the instinctual 'compulsion to repeat'] has been gone into in detail." Freud is referring to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Self-admittedly one of the most speculative of his published works,[52] this small text continues to provoke far-reaching hypotheses, especially that passage where Freud recounts the game invented and "constantly repeated" by his eighteen-month-old grandson.

Like "Sestina," the game of *fort-da* arises out of a child's separation from his mother. "While he was greatly attached to his mother," Freud observes of his grandson "he was a good boy" and "never cried when his mother left him for a few hours"(8). Like the un-cried tears in Bishop's poem, this child's tears are displaced. Freud surmises, after watching the boy "for some weeks," that when the child tossed a wooden reel with a string on it yelling a long drawn out "o-o-o-o"[the German word *'fort'*('gone')] and retrieved it "hail[ing] its reappearance with a joyful *'da'* ('there')," he was "compensating himself" for the renunciation of his mother "by staging the disappearance and return of objects within his reach"(9). What baffles Freud is the pleasure that his grandson takes from "his repetition of this distressing experience."

---

[51]*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was published one year before his essay on the uncanny.

[52]"What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection. It is further an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead" (18).

Freud initially reasons that the child (as well as the adult who has suffered a "traumatic neurosis"[53]) who compulsively re-visits the scene of his trauma is exercising his "instinct for mastery." "At the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part"(10).[54] An integral element in Freud's story is his grandson's age. At a year and a half, he is typical, as Freud points out, in his ability to use only a few words. He is on the cusp of speaking. Mastery over loss and absence is accomplished by Freud's grandson through his ability to use language as a substitute for the presence and absence of his mother. The pleasure of this mastery—this passage into language—is necessitated by loss. Freud has described psychoanalysis's version

---

[53]Clearly some of the catalyst behind the speculations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* lies in the post-WWI context in which Freud is practicing, for many of the patients he was attempting to treat were suffering from "traumatic neurosis": "The terrible war which has just ended gave rise to a great number of illnesses of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force" (6). This gives an important historical context for his speculations but also an ethical one. My sense from reading Freud is that often his intellectual inquiry is fueled by compassion for his patients.

[54]Freud's final conclusion is his controversial hypothesis of a "death instinct"—the "beyond" in the title: ". . .*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*. . ."(30). While time does not allow for a exploration of the relationship between Freud's controversial death instinct—"the sublime necessity"—and Bishop's poetry, Vendler offers this provocative idea: "The definition of death in certain of Bishop's poems is to have given up on domesticating the world and reestablishing yet once more some form of intimacy. Conversely, the definition of life is the conversion of the strange to the familial, of the unexplored to the knowable, of the alien to the beloved" (101). I might argue that Bishop's definitions of life and death, like Freud's, can also be the reverse of what Vendler posits.

of *felix culpa!*

Bishop's poem reiterate's Augustine's sentiment[55] as well. [56] The sestina's three-line *envoi* which "gathers all six elements" and offers "a concise summation of the poem" (*The New Princeton*, 361) opens with the almanac speaking its authoritative wisdom:

*Time to plant tears,* says the almanac.

The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove

and the child draws another inscrutable house. (124)

The italicized exhortation recapitulates the uncanny paradox realized in the body of the poem. In the stanza preceding this one, moon-like tears have fallen from

---

[55]"*O certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quot Christi morte deletum est! O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemption*!" (O truly necessary sin of Adam, which by the death of Christ is done away! O happy fault, which merited such and so great a redeemer). (*Harper*, 127).

[56]Bishop's much loved and well-read villanelle "One Art," whose confessional tone and subject initially surprised those who knew her disdain for such poems, presents this same *felix culpa*. After a self-consciously nonchalant cataloging of a lifetime of losses which culminates in a shockingly personal address in the second person: "–Even losing you. . .", the poem closes by acknowledging the only antidote for such continual and debilitating loss:

. . .It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster. (178)

This is a *felix culpa* both for her and for her readers. Her personal loss engenders the "pleasure" shared in the creation and reception of her poetry. But, as even this highly "confessional" poem points out, ("so many things seem filled with the intent/ to be lost. . ."), loss extends beyond the trivialities of the personal; it is an inherent condition of existence. And "(*Write* it!)" is more than a catharsis accomplished through "confession"; it is a formal manipulation of language, dialogically created and received, making us feel at home while simultaneously exploding the walls of that "home."

the almanac "into the flower bed the child/ has carefully placed in the front of the house." The tears that have been disseminating throughout the house finally settle into the soil, nourishing the flowers in the child's drawing. Like the cry in "In the Waiting Room," that could have/ got loud and worse but hadn't "(161), the tears in this poem are an underlying condition of life but they provide the "nourishment" for language and art. Rewriting the oppositions in Ecclesiastes ("a time to plant. . .a time to weep") into this strange instruction—*Time to plant tears*—Bishop's "Sestina" acknowledges the same irony embraced by Brahms whose grief for the loss of *his* mother moved him to put to music the words of the Psalmist: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."

## Sestina: a Genesis of Signs

*"another inscrutable house"*

Many theorists have highlighted the *fort-da* passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a "genesis of signs."[57] It could be argued that "Sestina" is a genesis of signs as well. By revising her earlier title ("Early Sorrow"), Bishop makes clear

---

[57]This is Ricouer's term. According to him "Phenomenologists have a special fondness" for Freud's account of his grandson's game (385). The "fort da" passage supports Ricouer's ongoing demonstration of how phenomenology and psychoanalysis intersect and illuminate each other through their fundamental grounding in language. Lacan also uses this passage to formulate the third "order" of human existence; following the "real" and "the imaginary" (associated with the mirror phase) comes "the symbolic" when the signifying function of language structures our social existence as well as the unconscious. This according to Lacan is Freud's central insight.

that the poem is about more than a child's loss of its mother, or even *every* child's loss of its mother. The poem extends its scope to the inescapable lack inherent in every child's (and every grandmother's) life (and home), but, "happily" (to use Augustine's sentiment), it also depicts and demonstrates the richness and intentionality brought to human existence by language and art; the prostheses we thankfully all receive. Repeating the binary oppositions of "gone" and "there" moves the child in Freud's anecdote from being passively swamped by absence (but also by presence) to an intending of presence and absence. This is language at its most elemental. "Sestina" uses repetition and language to accomplish much the same thing, but its highly cultivated historical form not only enriches the ambiguity and interpretive possibilities inherent in all signs, it beautifully reflects on this process, making it available to anyone who takes the time to read it.

In our post-Freudian context, the child's crayon-drawing in the poem is immediately perceived as a sign to be interpreted. A commonly recognized tool of the psychological profession, children's drawings are used as an avenue for interpreting their psychological underpinnings, but they may, at the same time, serve a therapeutic function in their ability to express and communicate. This is an extension of Freud's "talking cure" where the "cure" originates with neither the analyst nor the analysand but is produced through the inter-subjective process that lies between them and circumscribes them. When the child, in

"Sestina" "shows" her drawing of the "rigid house" and "a man with buttons like tears" "proudly to the grandmother," the reader revisits the bittersweet condition of our social existence. For the poem poignantly portrays the child and grandmother as neither autonomous nor completed by each other. Sharing the drawing alleviates the gap between them; it makes present the "secret" tears, and yet it is, like all signs, a stand-in and full of as much ambiguity as the elements that make up their home.

Bishop leaves the reader with the final image of an "inscrutable house." Initially "inscrutable" seems much too profound to describe something as prosaic as a house (especially one drawn by a child). But as her poetry demonstrates in myriad ways, it may be the perfect adjective to describe a house. Associated with theological mysteries but also natural ones,[58] "inscrutable" describes something unknowable which at the same time begs to be known. (Isn't this the nature of all signs? For interpretation is born out of a domesticating impulse but it results only in another interpretation.) As both the most familiar and the most mysterious source of who we are, the domestic drama of childhood was the site of Freud's inquiries. Bishop begins with the domestic as well. It is in the *hiemlich*, her poetry shows us, where we will re-discover—and "marvel"—at the *unheimlich*– "the unreality of our reality."

---

[58]Such as the trinity or, in the nineteenth century, the origin of man.

# -2-

# Questions of Travel

## Bishop and Modernism

### "O Breath"

> Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness (an objectivation of the individual's will, Schopenhauer would say), the pact must be continually renewed, the letter of safe-conduct brought up to date. The creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day. Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations (because by no expedient of macabre transubstantiation can the grave-sheets serve as swaddling-clothes) represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being.
>
> —Samuel Beckett, *Proust*

"Breathing is habit," for most of us most of the time; it is not habit, however, for an asthmatic. Beckett does not make this explicit connection, but it is *à propos* to point out that for Proust, breathing out, something that is usually the unconscious automatic action that follows breathing in—the second beat in the rhythm that sustains and underlies life–was labored, conscious, and could not be counted on. While most would consider this a debilitating handicap, in

Beckett's scheme of things (or a "Proustian" scheme of things), a physical condition such as asthma might offer an escape from the secure but deadening house of habit. "Habit is the ballast that chains a dog to his vomit" writes Beckett in an allusion to the proverb "as a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly"(Pr 26:11). It may be vomit that it is chaining the dog to, but habit is a "ballast" nevertheless. It stabilizes one; it is the necessary companion who protects us from "reality" by reducing everything before us to a comfortable and familiar concept. Preconception gives us our perception. Most of our lives we are under the control of this companion "Habit" and are, according to Beckett, "in the position of the tourist whose aesthetic experience consists in a series of identifications." But, occasionally and without warning or summons the "real" breaks through; "(t)he creature of habit turns aside from the object that cannot be made to correspond with one or other of his intellectual prejudices, that resists the propositions of his team of syntheses, organised by Habit on labour-saving principles" (12), and a period of transition and suffering temporarily allows us a window to the "real" before habit once again organizes our perception and guides us safely back to the familiar. This is the quintessential *Proustian Moment*, and although it is liberating and "enchanting," filled with mystery and beauty, it is always accompanied by suffering. "If Habit" writes Proust, "is second nature, it keeps us in ignorance of the first, and is free of its cruelties and its enchantments" (quoted in Beckett, 11).

Perhaps it is "stretching it " a bit to point out that Proust was asthmatic, yet if biography is to play any part in understanding an author's work and imaginative sources, a physical condition as acute and chronic as severe asthma cannot be ignored. Elizabeth Bishop also suffered from asthma. Affecting her from early childhood on, asthma and its related illnesses mark moments of extreme personal difficulty, crises even, as well as moments of transition. (An allergic reaction to the fruit of the cashew precipitated an extended stay in Brazil which resulted in her relationship with Lota de Macedo Sores and two decades of residence in this country.)[59] Although always figuring significantly into her biographies and memoirs, this disease has not been directly connected to her art until recently.[60]

Bishop's poem "O Breath" suggests that she felt a consanguinity between the conscious labor of exhaling and the difficulties of both artistic expression and the intersubjectivities of human experience:

---

[59]There are many sources for this biographical information. Perhaps the most detailed account of Bishop's struggles with asthma are in Brett Miller's biography *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* and the published volume of her letters *One Art*.

[60]Brett C. Miller gave a paper at the International Conference in Brazil on Bishop in June 1999 entitled "'O Breath': Asthma, Alcohol, and Geography in Elizabeth Bishop's Life," a version of which will be included in a critical work on women writers and alcoholism. In the first chapter of *The Body and the Song*, Marilyn May Lombardi traces what she calls Bishop's "somatic imagination," and while this deals explicitly with the impact of asthma on Bishop's work, Lombardi's connection of asthma to metaphors of claustrophobia in several of the poems is a very different connection from the one I am making here. This chapter was first published as "The Closet of Breath" in the collection of essays *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* edited by Lombardi.

Beneath that loved and celebrated breast,

silent, bored really blindly veined,

grieves, maybe lives and lets

live, passes bets,

something moving but invisibly,

and with what clamor why restrained

I cannot fathom even a ripple.

(See the thin flying of nine black hairs

four around one five the other nipple,

flying almost intolerably on your own breath.)

Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound to be there,

whatever we must own equivalents for,

something that maybe I could bargain with

and make a separate peace beneath

within if never with. (79)

This is the last poem in a series of four agonizing and enigmatic love poems. Evoking Dickinson in their abstractions, tone, and diction ("The tumult of the heart. . ."), the poems bemoan the solipsism of both love obsessions and failed attempts at poetry making while at the same time holding out a precarious but possible liberation from these "cages."

"O Breath" approaches these themes with the formal rhetorical framing

of an apostrophe. The poem's use of this trope is complex in that the object of address is left ambiguous. The title and form of the poem suggest that it is the speaker's breath, but the subject of the poem indicates that it is addressed to a lover or a lover's breast/breath removed from or unaware of the speaker's attention ("silent, bored really"). Both of these are "classic" objects for an apostrophe: "A figure of speech which consists of addressing an absent or dead person, a thing, or an abstract idea as if it were alive or present." This definition from *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* continues by explaining that "originally [apostrophe] referred to any abrupt 'turning away' from the normal audience, to address a different or more specific audience, whether present or absent" and that "critics have seen it as a metapoetic device by means of which a speaker 'addresses' his own utterance" ( 82). The mercurial nature of the apostrophe in this short poem creates a metonymic chain between the asthmatic breath of the speaker, the absent or distant lover (lover's breath, body, or consciousness), and the poet's "own utterance," all of which are labored, conscious, and finally resistant to the speaker's complete control as the shifting substitution of prepositions indicate at the close of the poem—"something that maybe I could/ bargain with and make a separate peace beneath/ within if never with."

I categorize the breath as "asthmatic" because, as other critics have also

observed,[61] the dramatic caesurae enact both visually and aurally the interruptive rhythm of an asthmatic's breath. The line breaks also contribute to this feeling by disrupting a cliche or a saying ("lives and lets/ live" "make a separate peace[. . .]/with") and often ending on a stressed syllable giving the sense of false finality only to be followed by a continuation or revision of the thought in the following line . We also know from anecdotal accounts of the poem's conception that Bishop explicitly intended to capture the sense of asthmatic breathing. Created while she was at the writer's retreat Yaddo in 1949—a residence which by proximity and community with other writers as well as remove from the normal distractions of everyday life was supposed to cultivate creative energies but, perhaps because of these expectations, had the opposite effect on Bishop. Her struggle with alcoholism and asthma were exacerbated by this situation, and her "writer's block" worked in reciprocal symptomatic relationship to these diseases (see Miller 191-253, and section three in the collection of Bishop's published letters, *One Art*). Like poetic form or utterance, the strain and restraint of asthmatic breath breaks the comfortable unconscious action that Beckett labels "habit." The poet, and most especially the "Modernist" poet, embraces the "suffering" that accompanies such a break in habit and turns it into an asset, into

---

[61] This poem seems to have gotten only infrequent notice in Bishop criticism. Some of those critics that have addressed it are Lombardi and Anne Colwell (*Inscrutable Houses*), both interested in metaphors of the body, but also the biographers/critics Lorrie Goldensohn (*Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poet*) and Brett C. Miller ( *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*).

grace, or into manna that cannot be counted on and cannot be kept, but is, perhaps, the only source of sustenance in the desert of post-romantic culture.

### *Voyageurs*

*". . .but only those who leave for leaving's sake/ are travelers. . ."*

Wandering, as the Israelites did in the desert, is not necessarily an indication of being lost, as J.R.R. Tolkien once suggested. Baudelaire makes aimless wandering the criterion of a true traveler:

> Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent
> Pour partir; cœurs légers, semblables aux ballons,
> De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s'écartent,
> Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!
>
> (But only those who leave for leaving's sake
> are *travelers*; hearts tugging like balloons,
> they never balk at what they call their fate
> and, not knowing why, keep muttering 'away!'. . .) (152).

Not all tourists are "travelers" (*voyageurs*); Beckett makes this distinction in his examination of Proust, likening our "habitual" life to that of the "tourist whose aesthetic experience consists in a series of identifications." Occasionally, however, our "travels" refuse to be subsumed by our mind's desire for the

familiar. Habit has not caught up with us and with the place we find ourselves. In *Á la rechere du temps perdu*, Marcel is overwhelmed and disoriented by the strangeness of his hotel room on his first visit to Balbec, and despite the comforting visits from his grandmother who is in the room next to him, he desires to die. ("Having no world, no room, no body now that was not menaced by the enemies thronging round me, penetrated to the very bones by fever, I was alone, and longed to die" (334).) This suffering he interprets (in Beckett's words) as "the part of those elements that represented all that was best in his life to accept the possibility of a formula in which they would have no part" (13). We colloquially refer to this experience of alienation from ourselves as "culture shock." Shocked into a recognition of the arbitrariness and particularity of our own place in the world, we are "dislocated" by our confrontation with a alien culture and landscape. What was once solid now appears to be a fabrication and with new eyes we see the fluidity—moving particles, indivisible time—underlying our seemingly stable reality. While the disturbing nature of this experience may be distasteful to some, to the "Modernist," as Beckett's discussion of Proust demonstrates, dislocation, shock, and temporary alienation from one's self may offer the only escape from the calcifications of a culture dominated by instrumental reason, the spatialization of time, and the fictions of a coherent and knowable self.

Dislocation or homelessness is thematically central to literary Modernism,

as many critics have pointed out including J.P. Riquelme who, in a move to compare post-colonial situations to the themes of Modernist writers, sees "home and the experience of being homeless, or not at home" as central to both as well as "the opportunity through dislocations, of imagining something new and bringing it into being" (542). Riquelme opens his essay, which juxtaposes the "dislocative" style of Beckett's "poetry," the existential ruminations of Heidegger in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," and the themes of post-colonialism as outlined by Homi Bhabba in *The Location of Culture*, with an epigraph from Bishop's poem "Questions of Travel." Although he makes only passing reference to Bishop, I would argue that his instinct in placing her poetry within the Modernist emphasis on dislocation is accurate. "Questions of Travel" is not only the title of a poem of Bishop's, or the title of her third book of poems, it could also be the title of her life's work. As David Kalstone observed: "No wonder then that Bishop was drawn again and again to her Northern and tropical landscapes whose scale and temperature are so different from our own. Exile and travel are at the heart of her poems from the very start—and sometimes as if they could reconstitute the vision of 'In the Village,'[62] as if they led somewhere, a true counter to loss" (26).

Exile and travel are not only at the heart of her poems, they are at the

---

[62]Bishop's autobiographical story recounting her childhood loss of her mother to insanity.

heart of her life, most notably those twenty some years she lived in Brazil. A New Englander/ Nova Scotian by birth and temperament, Bishop spent a significant portion of her adult life in tropical, Latin, Catholic, Brazil. As mentioned above, her expatriation was not planned in advance. The involuntary nature of an allergic reaction and of falling in love, the causes for Bishop's residence in the southern hemisphere, is not unlike the involuntary nature of culture shock, of any shock that breaks habit and momentarily replaces "the boredom of living" with "the suffering of being." "If the predictable rules too rigorously then that which is unexpected, not willed or predetermined, assumes value. Surprise carries the imprint of authenticity" for the modernist writer, according to one critic (Quinones, 89).

The *voyageur* in search of this "shock" lives in uneasy tension between the desire for it, the elusiveness of it, and the fear of it. The opening poem in the collection entitled *Questions of Travel* recounts Bishop's arrival at the South American continent (the port city of São Paulo) after days at sea, and it dramatizes these complex tensions plaguing the tourist. "Arrival at Santos" struggles with the differences between the desires and unconscious expectations of the tourist and the actual experience of the tourist. It begins with the dry observation of a generic scene, chanting like an worn-out child's rhyme: "Here is a coast; here is a harbor;" The banality of the scene before the speaker's eyes as she approaches the much anticipated country disappoints and perhaps makes

conscious for the first time the heavy agenda of the tourist:

> Oh, tourist
>
> is this how this country is going to answer you
>
> and your immodest demands for a different world,
>
> and a better life, and complete comprehension
>
> of both at last, and immediately,
>
> after eighteen days of suspension? (89)

The poem's use of the word "immediately" indicates how time seems to always thwart the fulfillment of the subject's desires, and the tourist's hope is that somehow another country will allow for a temporary cessation in the ever-flowing forces of time . But is doesn't; it offers a prosaic scene filled with particulars such as a flag, ("So that's the flag. I never saw it before./ I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag") and other details like "coins" and "paper money" that "remain to be seen," and that will be doled out over a length of time. Experience of the *real* ("complete comprehension") calls for a spontaneous momentary suspension of lived time, an evanescence that escapes us as soon as we reach for it. Beckett writes: ". . .whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable. At the best, all that is realised in Time (all Time produces), whether in Art or in Life, can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations—and never integrally and at once"(7).

While "Arrival at Santos" demonstrates how the "immodest demand" of

the tourist for "a different world,/ and a better life" is continually frustrated, the poem also makes clear that the tourist experiences anxiety over possible fulfillment, a fear of the "suffering" that such a dislocation would necessarily entail. The initial boredom that the passengers experience after their first view of land is replaced by a feeling of danger and precariousness. "Miss Breen" who embodies familiarity, solidity, and security—she is "seventy, a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall," and her home is "Glenns Fall/ s NewYork"—is climbing down a ladder "backwards" and "gingerly" onto the tender, and her skirt ("Watch out! Oh!") has been caught with a boat hook. It doesn't take much for the demanding tourist who is disappointed with what she initially sees on the horizon to retreat back to the comfort of habit and familiarity. The stress of climbing onto the tender allows anxiety about the anticipated strangeness of the country to surface. "The customs officials will speak English, we hope,/ and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes"—booze and nicotine, habits that help numb the pain and the agitation we experience when what is before us is cannot be comfortably incorporated.

The poem returns to a contemplation of the evanescent character of the experience, but closes with a reassertion of the tourist's pursuit of something deeper—something "interior" :

Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,
or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,
the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps–
wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,
either because the glue here is very inferior
or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once;
we are driving to the interior.

*January, 1952* (90)

The abcb rhyme in "Arrival in Santos" creates only a loose relationship between the rhymed pair of words until this final stanza. Closing rhymes, as in the closing couplets of a sonnet, have more "authority," and in this poem, the power and impact of "inferior" and "interior" allude to "colonial" agenda of the traveler. And in case merely rhyming these words makes the point too subtle, Bishop follows this poem with one that recounts the Portuguese arrival in January, 550 years before her own. The poem depicts the explorers' exploitation and their containment of difference within the order of their European cultural frameworks. By comparing the tourists' perspective to the explorers' ("Nature greets our eyes/ exactly as she must have greeted theirs") Bishop recognizes that traveling has always had a complex and culpable history. But perhaps it is also a

recognition of the possibility of a redemption from, rather than a repetition of, the imperialism which characterized so much of travel in the past.

Part of the vast difference between 1) the traveler who seeks to place the rest of the world in relationship to herself and 2) the traveler who seeks to displace herself by experiencing the rest of the world has to do with very disparate notions of both time and space. Time and space, the components of travel, are also the dimensions of existence, and they are concepts of central importance and reconfiguration in Modernist art and letters, including Bishop's poems. While on board the ship bound for Brazil, she makes the connection in her journal between the rejuvenating effects of travel and the different perspectives it allows on time and space:

> This trip is a "shake-down" trip for me, all right. I know I am feeling, thinking, looking, sleeping, dreaming, eating & drinking better than in a long long time, & when I read something like "The question about time is how change is related to the changeless" —& look around—it doesn't seem so hard or far off. The nearer clouds seem to be moving quite rapidly; those in back of them are motionless—Watching the ship's wake we seem to be going fast, but watching the sky or the horizon, we are just living here with the engines pulsing, forever. (Miller, 239)

Unconnected from land or her former life, Bishop as traveler is liberated from

time structured in terms of continuity and causality.[63]

Critic Ricardo Quinones describes the fundamental shift in Modernist conceptions of time by comparing it to the Renaissance ordering of time that culminates in the nineteenth century: "The nineteenth century witnessed the triumph of the values of history and continuity that had emerged from the Renaissance. One of its great faiths held that man could save himself or was in the process of saving himself by being part of a collectivity, a system, a stream of continuity" (31). This historical sense of time in its connectedness, its continuities, and its implied collectivities has been labeled "ethical" because it involves choice, decision, and commitment. Using this terminology Quinones describes how the "history" plays of Shakespeare demonstrate a shift from the "metaphysical" to the "ethical" ("Richard relies on metaphysical being, while Henry and Hal enter into time and history.") Whereas "in Modernism the reverse is true, and for considerable reason":

> This shift is not toward the 'ethical' but away from it. One feels cast out of the world and its connections. . . Across this wide range of human allegiances—perhaps most aptly summarized as "historical values"—the Modernists experience a sense of

---

[63]This is also the case with Hans Castorp as he stays in the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. The separation from his former life and the seasons bring him into a different relationship with time, and this is exactly what upsets his mentor, Settembrini, whose "humanism" finds such a relationship to time threatening to all that is good and worth defending.

> disruption. Their values no longer satisfy: something has happened to the historical momentum and sense of coherence. And this is the Modernists' point of departure. Hovering above the line of human experience and yawning beneath it is empty space. (33)

Once one distinguishes this different non-developmental conception of time, one recognizes its use and thematic figuring throughout Modernist literature, from the very title of Proust's life's work to the eclectic and mythic uses of history in the poetry of Pound and Eliot. The implications for Bishop's poetry are rich and varied, as I shall demonstrate. In Bishop's journal entry aboard ship one recognizes the "empty space" of the sea and the clouds "hovering above" and "yawning beneath" "the line of human experience" as well as the familiar Modernist move toward expatriation. As Quinones puts it "successful liberation from historical values seems to require spatial removal" (94).

## Correspondences

*". . .The bight is littered with old correspondences. . ."*

In an unfinished poem written around the same time as this journal entry and provisionally called "Crossing the Equator: P.H.," Bishop defends her choice of travel and its adequacies in contrast to the promises and failures of love. P.H., speculates Bishop's biographer, refers to Pauline Hemingway who had died

shortly before Bishop's embarkation for South America, so in some ways the poem is about loss and grief as it relates to space, time, and travel:

> Do not blame me if
>
> I choose geography,
>
> perhaps just because it's easy—. . .
>
> We imagine an horizon, and it hardens
>
> into faultless definition: the horizon.
>
> It begins to illustrate imagination.
>
> Dear, other things that we imagined
>
> were not often so obliging.
>
> Still the horizon is unbroken. (Miller, 237)

Written in conversation to a loved one who is permanently removed from the speaker, this unfinished poem connects grief, the ever receding horizon, and the attempts of the traveler to break imaginative boundaries; this parallels the dissatisfactory impression of ports in "Arrival at Santos" and also the "slipping away" that "postage stamps" "do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat." *Correspondences*, our attempts at connections—human and otherwise—slip away and dissolve like inferior glue in the heat of the tropics.

One cannot help but think of Baudelaire, here, and Bishop's evocation of him and his "correspondences" in her poem "The Bight":

Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,

the water in the bight doesn't wet anything,

the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.

One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire

one could probably hear it turning to marimba music. (60)

Rather than stimulating and feeding the poet's imaginative powers, the natural scene before her is dry and sponge-like. Like the "low-burnt fire"in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," the gas-flame in Bishop's poem marks a moment when poetic powers are feeble. Bishop, as Modernist poet, cannot recognize the "correspondence" between the different arts, the different senses, and the spiritual realm. Such connections appear contrived and arbitrary. She is distrustful of art's ability to transcend the incoherence of observable nature. Baudelaire's neo-Platonic recasting of Swedenborg's theory elevates the artist and her capabilities in a way that Bishop finds comically depressing. Her own similes have a farcical and forced quality, her artistic activity mirroring the activities of the bight:

The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash

into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,

it seems to me, like pickaxes,

rarely coming up with anything to show for it,

and going off with humourous elbowings.

Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar

on impalpable drafts

and open their tails like scissors on the curves

or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble. (60)

The comparison between the scene and her writing continue as she plays on the earlier evocation of "correspondences" by comparing the bight to the surface of her writer's desk:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up

against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,

like torn-open, unanswered letters.

The bight is littered with old correspondences. (60)

The tenor of her attitude toward both her life (underneath the poem's title is the inscription "On my birthday") and her vocation is summed up in the closing lines: "All the untidy activity continues,/awful but cheerful."[64]

As in the end of "Arrival at Santos," attempts at correspondence continue but often end in a dissipated failure. Bishop's playful recognition in "The Bight" that "correspondence" refers to letter-writing as well as a theory of aesthetics is more than just a dalliance with words. This identification of poetry with epistle becomes more consequential when one considers that Bishop's relatively small

---

[64]These lines are inscribed on her tombstone in Worcester, MA. Talk about an authoritative summation!

oeuvre of poetry is as modest as the number of her letters is extravagant. In the last decade, a collection of her letters has been published, and although it is a volume nearly 700 pages long, it represents only a small selection. The book jacket of this hefty volume quotes Robert Lowell as saying: "When Elizabeth Bishop's letters are published (as they will be), she will be recognized as not only the best, but one of the most prolific writers of our century." A great fan of other writers' letters herself, Bishop even taught a class at Harvard on the subject. A lover of letters, of letter-writing, and of poetry and poetry-writing, she is also cautiously aware of their limitations, of their false sense of completeness or triumph over the fragmentation experienced in life. Correspondence may refer to the connection between the natural and the spiritual world, or it may refer to the connection made between two people separated by space and by time. A bridge is made between the gaps caused by these distances, as in a "correspondent" whose job it is to make what is happening somewhere else immediate and accessible in our own time and place. The demand for this connection, the demand to write, to correspond, continues, but is it compulsion—habit that covers pain—or does it accomplish more? Does this activity bring us further into life or does it cover it with a false sense of wholeness? Bishop cannot help but ask these questions, like Philip Larkin who in examining his own practice of letter-writing says:

Why write them, then? Are they in fact

Just compromise,

Amiable residue when each denies

The other's want? Or are they not so nice,

Stand-ins in each case simply for an act?

Mushrooms of virtue? or, toadstools of vice? (70)

Bishop's caution toward elevating art above life is also evident in her strong stance toward what she considered the "mis-use" of correspondence in the poetry of her contemporaries William Carlos Williams and Robert Lowell. About *Patterson* and Williams's now notorious use of the Nardi letters, Bishop, an early critic of their inclusion, writes in a letter to Lowell in 1948:

> I read your Williams review [of *Patterson, Book Two*] on the train with great interest but not absolute agreement, having just worked over the book again a day or two before. At least, I agree all right with what you do say and think you've done an awfully good job in the first part, of presenting the poem. But really when I re-read it all (the poem) I still felt he shouldn't have used the letters from that woman. To me it seems mean & they're much too overpowering emotionally for the rest of it so that the whole poem suffers. I noticed in Eberhart's review in the *Times* he said the prose parts were made up, but I don't think they are, are they? However, it has wonderful sections, and I think Williams has always had a streak of

insensitivity. (*One Art*, 159)

Instinctively, Bishop finds Williams's artistic use of another's correspondence incongruent, emotionally manipulative, and insensitive. Something rings false about this kind of art.

Twenty-four years later this criticism falls on Lowell himself. In uncharacteristically emotional language, Bishop writes to Lowell about his use of Elizabeth Hardwick's letters in *The Dolphin*. Her concern is that in his devotion to art, he had raided and degraded his own life which has entailed a loss of stature and dignity—to his public and to his wives, former and current—and as the level of emotional pain in her language reveals, he has lost dignity in her eyes, and out of respect for his own sensibilities, she fears this may be how he comes to regard himself:

> One can use one's life as material—one does, anyway—but these letters—aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF you hadn't changed them. . .etc. But *art just isn't worth that much.* I keep remembering Hopkins's marvelous letter to Bridges about the idea of being a "gentleman" being the highest thing ever conceived—higher than a "Christian," even, certainly than a poet. It is not being "gentle" to use personal, tragic, anguished letters that way-it's cruel[. . . .]It makes me feel perfectly awful to tell the truth—I feel sick for *you*. I don't want you to

> appear in that light to anyone—Elizabeth, Caroline—me—your public! And most of all, not to yourself. (562)

Although later in the letter Bishop claims that despite how much thought she has given to the subject she "can't reach more lucid conclusions," she is articulating very different artistic values than she sees being embraced by Lowell.

Her evocation of "the gentleman" "being the highest thing ever conceived" should not be mistaken as simply an appeal to bourgeois politeness, as part of Victorian mores whose disregard will liberate us as individuals and as a culture. I would argue that the concept of "the gentleman," to which Hopkins and Bishop appeal, comes out of a tradition which defines the role of the artist or poet and what constitutes his authenticity in contrast to the compromises of the culture in which he finds himself. This discipline and reserve is not unlike the stoicism embodied in Baudelaire's "dandy." As Baudelaire explains:

> Dandyism is the last gleam of heroism in times of decadence. . .But alas! The rising tide of democracy, overwhelming and leveling everything, is day by day drowning these last champions of human pride, washing the waves of oblivion over the traces of these prodigious myrimidons. . .The characteristic beauty of the dandy consists, above all, in his air of reserve, which in turn, arises from his unshakable resolve not to feel any emotion. It might be likened to a hidden fire whose presence can be guessed at; a fire that could

blaze up, but does not wish to do so. (*My heart*, 57-58)

So while "the bohemians" of the 1960s might find Bishop's values "prudish" or "repressed," "the bohemians" of Paris in the 1860s might recognize it as a kind of "heroism" in the face of leveling baseness.[65] As Baudelaire's statement suggests, there is an anti-democratic element to such an aristocratic value. Perhaps this is some of what the contemporary bohemians are reacting to. But the anti-democratic nature of such reserve might also be another way in which a Modernist poet, such as Bishop, differentiates herself from the Romantic. Among the grandchildren of the Romantic poets could be the confessional poets of mid-century US. But from Bishop's perspective, they are the bastards of the family. The tradition that Wordsworth's "The Prelude" inaugurated, of reconstituting the memories of one's life into one's poetry, is one which Bishop not only respects but also participates in (think of such autobiographical poems

---

[65]The dandy, according to Baudelaire, "does not wish to have money for its own sake; he would be content to be allowed to live indefinitely on credit; he leaves the coarse desire for money to baser mortals"(55). I can't help noting that in Bishop's letter admonishing Lowell for his use of Hardwick's letters, the only other subject she brings up is money—apologizing for the subject, calling it absurd "Forgive my sordidness (as Marianne would call it)." Unlike Lowell, who is independently wealthy, Bishop must lower herself to ask specifics about the pay for teaching at Harvard and what kind of health insurance would be included. Her invocation of Moore is also significant, in that Moore, perhaps more than anyone, embodies the emotional restraint characteristic of a certain aspect of Modernism. In a well noted incident, where Bishop is differentiating herself from Moore and Moore's mother, Bishop refused to censor the use of "water-closet" in the poem "Roosters." What is as stake is more than trivial; she takes Moore's objection quite seriously, but it is perhaps significant that the poem is a critique against the blind masculine heroism battled with fury and with sordidness in the henhouse and in the country during WWII.

as "In the Waiting Room" or the story "In the Village"). Her admiration for Lowell's taking this tradition in a new direction in *Life Studies* is perhaps what encouraged her to write the less cryptic, more personal poems of her last collection; however, her sensibilities about truth in art and truth in life create a strong aversion to some of the poetry that Lowell's *Life Studies* might have inspired as well as the poetry of Lowell himself, when it shamelessly incorporates the anguished private correspondence of another person—especially a loved one. Part of what she objects to in Lowell's and Williams's use of the women's letters is also related to her now famous statement regarding the confessional poets of the 60s and 70s "You wish they'd just keep some of those things to themselves." I would argue that from Bishop's perspective the "confessional" or "tell all" school of poetry gave a false sense of coherence and thus of truth. She didn't need Foucault to strongly question the value of "depth" that the revelations in these poems created (or to question the illusory concept of self to which the tradition of "confession" in the West contributed). Emotionally charged, these outpourings use the grit and gossip of life in an attempt at authenticity. Baudelaire's dandy lives in resistance to "leveling baseness," opposing it with emotional reserve and dignity; this is not dissimilar from Bishop's admiration for the "gentleman" and for her impatience with the now monotonous exposures of private lives in contemporary American poetry. In a letter to Lowell following up her discussion in the above letter,

Bishop writes:

> I wish I had *another* quotation. [Henry] James wrote a marvelous letter to someone about a *roman à clef* by Vernon Lee—but I can't find it without going to the bowels of Widener, I suppose. His feelings on the subject were much stronger than mine, even. In general, I deplore the "confessional"—however, when you wrote *Life Studies* perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now—ye gods—anything goes, and I am so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on. All that *can* be done—but at the same time one surely should have a feeling that one can trust the writer—not to distort, tell lies, etc.
>
> The letters, as you have used them, present fearful problems: what's true, what isn't; how one can bear to witness such suffering and yet not know how much of it one *needn't* suffer with, how much has been "made up," and so on. (562)

As in Williams's poetry, it is the emotional manipulation and its ability to distort the truth of the life and the truth of the poem that troubles Bishop. Authenticity, what Lowell's inclusion of Hardwick's letters are perhaps trying to achieve, is just what Bishop fears will be lost. Her italicized statement that "*Art just isn't worth that much*"—might also be read as "that kind of art just isn't worth that

much."

The differing uses and mis-uses of autobiography as it relates to art go unquestioned in much of contemporary American literary criticism, which often assumes an uncomplicated relationship between the details of an author's identity and art. Currently, the trend in Bishop criticism is to unearth the private details and struggles of her life as a "key" to unlocking the secrets of her poetry. Along with the assumptions about depth, self, and interpretation that Bishop, I would argue, would not share, there is also the danger that the "story of her life" and the emotions that it evokes will smother the truth of her poetry with false claims to greater, more honest truth. At the conference celebrating the "Art of Elizabeth Bishop" in Ouro Preto, Brazil in June 1999, biographical anecdotes dominated the discussion of her poetry. Many participants felt uneasy about this. Emanuel Brasil, a friend a Bishop, began his memoir by expressing his discomfort, reserve, and hesitation about discussing the personal details of her life because of the strict code of privacy and honor that she had insisted upon amongst her friends while she was living, and even though she had been dead over twenty years, respecting this code of privacy could not be separated from respect of her art. Many of her friends in attendance said that they couldn't decide whether Bishop would be horrified or thrilled at the idea of the conference. The most uncomfortable moment came when Lloyd Schwartz brought out several "unpublished" poems of Bishop's that were very personal

and explicitly sexual in nature. What made this uncomfortable was not simply how uncharacteristic these poems were for Bishop, but how they had been acquired. One poem Schwartz himself had stolen from her steno pad in her hospital room while she was having x-rays taken. The "outing " of these poems at this conference and their impending publication in a volume of unpublished poems similar in content makes necessary a discussion of Bishop's sensibilities of what constituted "art" in the public sphere versus a private correspondence in verse to a lover. I am not suggesting that these works should be supressed from the public's view, but that those critics, such as Schwartz, who truly believe that they are liberating Bishop posthumously, might consider that her choices of what to publish and what she didn't consider publishable to be reflective not just of her personal reserve but of her profound beliefs about what is art, what is truth in art.

**Parataxis**

*". . .Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'. . ."*

"One can use one's life as material—one does, anyway. . ." writes Bishop to Lowell, but *how* one does is crucial. *Á la Recherche du temps perdu* takes seven volumes in an attempt to answer this question. Far from indicating confidence in art's ability to transcend, heal, or recapture life, Proust's outpouring is an expression of the very tentativeness of the artistic endeavor. The restorative power of a Proustian art is bittersweet for it comes, as Walter Benjamin put it, in

an "elegiac form," or it is a "paradise lost," according to Beckett (14). The present can be lived fully, but only as an experience of the past, a re-reliving of a fragment of lost time. It is the capricious flooding of an un-summoned memory in the face of the continual passage of time. As the genius of *Á la Recherche du temps perdu* demonstrates, this kind of Proustian or Modernist epiphany is grounded in the least significant details and moments of life, and it is a memory, an experience, that is completely involuntary in nature. Benjamin identifies it as a type of correspondence, a correspondence which is very un-Platonic in nature, however. Proust's world, writes Benjamin "is the world in a state of resemblances, the domain of the *correspondance*; the Romantics were the first to comprehend them and Baudelaire embraced them most fervently, but Proust was the only one who managed to reveal them in our lived life. This is the work of the *mémoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging" (211). Benjamin's observation could just as well be applied to Bishop's poem "The Bight" whose observations fail to find Baudelairian correspondence, but instead describe the continuations of "all the untidy activity" "awful but cheerful" observed "on my birthday." The essence of this Modernist epiphany, this Proustian Moment, is conveyed by Benjamin in this same essay:[66]

---

[66]C. K. Doreski uses this same passage from Benjamin's essay to discuss the effect that Bishop's impending death has on the writing of her last collection of poems in relation to the rest of her oeuvre. Of course when I came across the title and subject of

> What was it Proust sought so frenetically? What was at the bottom of these infinite efforts? Can we say that all our lives, works, and deeds that matter were never anything but the undisturbed unfolding of the most banal, most fleeting, most sentimental, weakest hour in the life of the one to whom they pertain? When Proust in a well-known passage described the hour that was most his own, he did it in such a way that everyone can find it in his own existence. We might almost call it an everyday hour; it comes with the night, a lost twittering of birds, or a breath of dawn at the sill of an open window. (203)

Discovering and revealing this kind of "correspondence" is an elusive task for the artist for it is the work of *mémoire involontaire*—not to be confused with the common retrieval of life's experiences—the work of voluntary memory which is produced under the auspices of our necessary but smothering companion, "Habit." As Beckett writes: "Strictly speaking, we can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key" (18). Like the difference between the tourist who suffers from the acute

---

this essay I was very intrigued by her juxtaposition of Proust and Bishop. But the argument she is making is much different than the one I am making here. "Proustian Closure in Wallace Stevens's 'The Rock' and Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*." In *Twentieth Century Literature*. 44.1, 34-52.

heightening of awareness that comes from culture shock and the tourist "whose experience consists in a series of identifications" involuntary memory and voluntary memory are of completely different character and substance. Beckett explains further the nature of the more common form of memory which isn't memory at all but an imposter:

> The memory that is not memory, but the application of a concordance to the Old Testament of the individual, [Proust] calls 'voluntary memory.' This is the uniform memory of intelligence; and it can be relied on to reproduce for our gratified inspection those impressions of the past that were consciously and intelligently formed. It has no interest in the mysterious element of inattention that colours our most commonplace experiences. It presents the past in monochrome. The images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagination, and are equally remote from reality. Its action has been compared by Proust to that of turning the leaves of an album of photographs. (19-20).

To convey the nature of voluntary memory, Beckett compares it to a concordance, and Proust compares it to turning the leaves in a photo-album; both comparisons convey how canned, forced, and flat this resource is. Bishop makes almost the same analogy with an early poem published in her second collection *A Cold Spring*, the same collection in which "The Bight" was

published. The title, "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" refers to the subtitle or descriptive blurb on a large Bible.[67] The first half of the poem wanders through the "illustrations" in the Bible while the second half wanders through the globe recounting various scenes of the speaker's travels. Placing the scenes of travel—travel recounted in memory—underneath this title presents the experience of travel as analogous to the two dimensional illustrations and formulaic guide to what is supposed to be the "Word of God," the mystery and truth of the Christian world. Once again, travel—spatial and cultural removal—becomes emblematic for the search for depth, for possession, for the real, or, as this poem understands it, for a kind of newborn innocence.

The poem opens with the wish: "Thus should have been our travels:/serious, engravable." The permanence and substance that the large, ornate, illustrated Bible portends is soon dispelled, however, by the flat and dry experience of viewing the pictures depicting various scenes. Although the "concordance" appears only on the title of the poem, what it represents—an

---

[67]According to Bonnie Costello the Bible had belonged to Bishop's grandfather. After writing on this infrequently discussed poem, I went back to Costello's very thorough and convincing reading of it, a reading that I had encountered years ago and am clearly indebted to. She also picks up on the themes of travel in this poem as related to Bishop's third book of poems: "That middle state of excursive vision becomes her focus in *Questions of Travel*, which is about the 'folding adjustable' traveler's reality and the problems and questions that arise in that condition." Costello argues that the poem presents three different kinds of vision in the three different stanzas: monumental (mind over particulars), excursive (particulars over mind's forms), and domestic (the mind outdistances the monumental with its idea of home). *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* by Bonnie Costello, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). 128-138.

index to access the location and use of different words—the facile and formulaic nature of such a reference tool—is evoked in both the description of the Bible and the description of the travels. The poem doesn't express the immediate disparaging for "2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" that Beckett does in his description of voluntary memory as "the application of a concordance to the Old Testament of the individual," but frustration at its limitedness is evident right from the start:

> The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
> and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
> innumerable, though equally sad and still,
> are foreign. Often the squatting Arab,
> or group of Arabs, plotting probably,
> against our Christian Empire,
> while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand
> points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher. (57)

"Foreign" in this context is not exotic, fertile with the possibilities that strangeness can offer the imagination, but simply not familiar—the most flat and stereotypical sense of otherness. The bigotry that usually accompanies such stereotyping is evident in the "Arabs, plotting probably," "probably" capturing the speaker's disdainfulness toward the hegemony of this cultural attitude.

The pictures are devoid of the messiness and richness of life as a

concordance strips the verbal messiness and richness of the narratives of the Bible:

> The cobbled courtyard, where the Well is dry,
> is like a diagram, the brickwork conduits
> are vast and obvious, the human figure
> far gone in history or theology, (57)

"Vast and obvious"—there is no mystery in these scenes, and like the "seven wonders of the world" the symbols of the resurrection of life are "tired and a touch familiar," as the capitalized references to "the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher" and later "the Site" suggest. Even the birds are "suspended on invisible threads" and the smoke "rises solemnly, pulled by threads" exposing the lack of mystery and the puppet-show like quality to the picture, and any trace of humanity has faded long ago into abstraction.

The poem then shifts the focus of its lens from within the scenes to the graphic layout of them within the Bible:

> Granted a page alone or a page made up
> of several scenes arranged in cattycornered rectangles
> or circles set on stippled gray, (57)

The text as text becomes the object of examination, and it is there through labor both of the eye examining the text and of the engraver who created the text, as well as the labor of the letters and lines themselves that there is a kind of blurred

resolution and a glimpse of God's presence:

> granted a grim lunette,
>
> caught in the toils of an initial letter,
>
> when dwelt upon, they all resolve themselves.
>
> The eye drops, weighted, through the lines
>
> the burin made, the lines that move apart
>
> like ripples above sand,
>
> dispersing storms, God's spreading fingerprint,
>
> and painfully, finally, that ignite
>
> in watery prismatic white-and-blue. (57)

"Granted" suggests that the text, as text, does offer something even if it is only a "grim lunette."

A stanza break and change from present to past tense indicates a shift of attention from the illustrated Bible to the speaker's memories of travels, although the fact that this shift is not immediately obvious keeps the reader comparing and connecting the snapshots of travel memories to the pictures and images in the Bible. Unlike the Biblical illustrations, these scenes are filled with sensual particulars, yet like the illustrations "arranged in cattycornered rectangles" there is a division between each memory, for the relationship between each is a non-sequitur, making the adjustment from one global location—with its own sights, smells, and sounds—to another, chaotic, intense, and somewhat overwhelming.

So much so that when the speaker toward the end of the stanza announces that "It was somewhere near there/ I saw what frightened me most of all," the recasting by the reader of all that came before in terms of fear makes perfect sense.

The distinction between the scenes and images in the illustrated Bible and the scenes from travel memories is also blurred by the many allusions in the second section to Biblical places, objects, names, or events. But again the connections seem arbitrary, the allusions nonsensical. Goats are heard from the ship in the narrows of St. Johns; Collegeians march in a diagramatic fashion across the square at St. Peter's like the diagramed cobbled courtyard in the illustrated Bible; "dead volcanos glisten like Easter lilies" in Mexico; the Annunciation is "that the Duchess was going to have a baby" told by an Englishwoman pouring tea, and in "the brothels of Marrakesh" there is a scene reminiscent of Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet and drying it with her hair:

> the little pockmarked prostitutes
> balanced their tea-trays on their heads
> and did their belly-dances; flung themselves
> naked and giggling against our knees,
> asking for cigarettes. (58)

Although in comparison to the illustrations in the Bible, the memories of travel experiences are sensual and rich; like the illustrations, however, there

continually lurks the presence of death and decay and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. And when the speaker comes to what "frightened [her] most of all," the menacing Arab desert echoes the images found in the Bible:

> A holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
> one of a group under a keyhole-arched baldaquin
> open to every wind from the pink desert.
> An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
> with exhortation, yellowed
> as scattered cattle-teeth;
> half-filled with dust, not even the dust
> of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.
> In a smart burnose Khadour looked on amused. (58)

The speaker's detachment in the first stanza from the orientalism depicted in the Biblical illustrations ( "Arabs, plotting, probably") cannot be maintained as she succumbs to her fear of the other by projecting her sense of her own foolishness onto the hooded Arab guide, for his cynical amusement suggests that he takes pleasure in watching the Western tourist's search for origins, for spirituality or "holiness," or something other than the insignificant dust in the marble trough.

Placed in this poem these memories of travel become another version of "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," thus failing to bring the traveler any closer to the depth, the possession, the epiphany she is searching for.

The images and experiences refuse any relationship other than parataxis, and the text and the labored effort we put forth in engaging it, rather than enlightening us, corrupts us in its artificiality:

> Everything only connected by "and" and "and."
>
> Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
>
> of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.) (58)

The epiphany, the final stanza of the poem suggests, is to be found not in the exotic world of travel, but in the domestic world of home; it is a home, however, that cannot be possessed or seen in the present. It is lost the very moment it is recognized. The epiphany is found in homesickness:

> Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
>
> this old Nativity while we were at it?
>
> —the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
>
> an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
>
> colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
>
> and, lulled within, a family with pets,
>
> —and looked and looked our infant sight away. (58-9)

The paradox of a poet's existence, especially a poet noted for her "visual capabilities," is that the very act of "looking," of attempting to come closer, to see better, is the act, in its self-consciousness and its forced nature, that drives what she is searching for "away," and "away" is in polar opposition to the very scene

of domesticity the observer is trying to "see." "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing their errors" (487). This quote from Emerson's essay "Experience" links "Over 2,000 Illustrations" with search for epiphany in art from the Romantics through the Modernists. "The Fall" is no longer understood in terms of sin and disconnection from God—but the disconnection from meaning and spirit in our experience of the world. Both Emerson and Bishop pose the artistic vision as an attempt to recapture, with faulty instruments, an elemental innocence that is lost in the very moment we recognize it, a permanent and temporal split between the experience in its immediacy and the articulation or the comprehension of it, after it has past. "Why couldn't we have seen/ this Old Nativity while we were at it?"

## Epiphanies

*" – and looked and looked our infant sight away."*

In this poem, Bishop presents the epiphany as a voyeuristic ("the dark ajar") glimpse into the elemental world of domesticity. One of the definitions in *Webster's* of epiphany is: "a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something: an intuitive grasp of reality through something

(as an event) usually simple and striking." This definition applies quite well to the final moment of the poem, but, of course, the origin of the term and its first definition fits even better: "January 6 observed as a church festival in commemoration of the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles." In "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" the poet as seeker and traveler becomes a kind of Modernist Magi attempting a "coup d'oeil" at that "old Nativity." A generation before Bishop, W. B. Yeats wrote of this Modernist continuation in the search for epiphany:

*The Magi*

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. (126)

Presented as a perennial human quest ("Now as at all times"), the search of Yeats's Magi bears striking resemblance to Bishop's traveler in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance." With "their stiff, painted clothes" like the stiff painted illustrations in the Bible and "their ancient faces like rain-

beaten stones" these men are "serious and engravable." This description suggests that Yeats sees pathos and dignity in these seekers—ancient and contemporary—whereas Bishop can only wish it ("Thus should have been our travels"). The "mind's eye" in Yeats's poem follows the Magi until they blur into the "blue depth of the sky" just as in Bishop's poem the "eye drops weighted" through the old Bible, "the heavy book," and ignites into a "watery prismatic white-and-blue." And like Bishop's traveler at the empty "holy grave not looking particularly holy" these Magi find themselves at the end of the Christian era "being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied."

The most striking resemblance between the two poems, however, comes in their evocation and insistence that the epiphany will still be found in "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" where the poet's/magi's eyes are fixed, still hoping. Richard Quinones describes the Modernist epiphany as having two consistent elements "the ordinary, even trivial, context from which it emerges, and its sudden, involuntary nature" (287).[68] Quinones uses several passages in Modernist literature to demonstrate, like Beckett and Benjamin writing on Proust, that the extraordinary arises from the ordinary, and that within the stringent scepticism of Modernist letters there remains a search for wonder and naivete ("infant sight"?) often found in what Quinones describes as

---

[68]Quinones's reference to Yeats's poem in this footnote on the Modernist sense of epiphany is what led me to make the connection between "The Magi" and "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance."

"untouched memories" (166-169).

Bishop's reservations regarding epiphany and the implications of its long tradition comes through in her rarely discussed poem "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will." A somewhat political poem, it presents a cynical and harsh view of life in a Brazilian coastal town where Bishop often vacationed. The speaker of the poem takes the position of uncertain observer of the exploitation and wreckage of the poor by a wealthy developing firm "(The Company passes off these white but shopworn dunes as lawns)." The uncertainty of the speaker's observations is evident not only in the shifting and tentatively offered perspective but also in the position she occupies between the classes—between her patronizing pity for the poor boy in the poem and her un-suppressible sympathy and even admiration? of him. Her sympathy suggests an identification. The boy's bravado and its association with the epiphany—his poverty, his Whitmanesque declarations, as well as his foolishness—all belong to "the poet." I would argue then that in addition to being a descriptive poem about the plight of the poor as most have read it, (and criticized it for this),[69] it is

---

[69]This poem has received very little attention except in passing (with the exception of Costello 39-41). Lorrie Godensohn places it among those other Brazilian poems which speak from "distance or occlusion," a technique which she notes has drawn much criticism from those more politically attuned such as Charles Tomilson who remarked "the better off have always preferred their poor processed by style," and David Bromwich who refers to "poems about squatters and other half-cherished neighbors—efforts of self-conscious whimsy. . .or of awkward condescension." (*Elizabeth Bishop: A Biography of a Poetry.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. 207-208). Goldenson's worthy defense of these poems drew criticism most

also a poem about Bishop's ambivalent sense of the poet's position in contemporary culture.

The borrowed Shakespearean title of the poem draws an immediate association and comparison between the play and the poem and allows the reader further insight into this sparse riddle-like verse. *Twelfth Night or What You Will* is the only play for which Shakespeare provided an alternative title. Anne Barton informs the reader in her introduction to the *Riverside* edition of the play that "the word *will* possessed for Elizabethans its modern sense of 'wish' or 'inclination,' and this is its primary significance here: an airy invitation to reader or audience to re-christen the comedy according to individual taste and reaction. . . .Elizabethans, however, also used the noun *will* for irrational desire, passion uncontrolled by judgement" (403). Both of these connotations of "the alternative title" apply well to Bishop's poem, for the perspective in the poem is left unclear, continually questioned. The observation of the sandpipers' heart-broken cries is undercut by the uncertain question "(or are you hearing things)," and the strange disproportion observed between the house and the "bigger" "big white horse" is suggested as possibly "perspective dozing?" Even the "thin grey mist" through which the town is seen suggests an altered perspective which is open to various

---

recently, and provocatively, at the conference in Ouro Preto Brazil. During the question and answer session following Silviano Santiago's lecture, Silviano attacked these "Brazilian" poems of Bishop's and Goldensohn's defense of them. (She was present and participated in the lively debate.)

interpretations.

The twelfth day after Christmas traditionally commemorates the coming of the Magi to the Christ Child—the epiphany. Bishop's only direct reference to this outside of the title is her choice of names for the boy in the poem, Balthazár, and his celebratory declaration at the end of the poem that "Today's my Anniversary. . .the Day of Kings!" There is no direct reference to the feast of the epiphany in Shakespeare's comedy, and there has been much speculation as to why he gave it this title. Barton suggests that it relates to the character of this holiday celebration during this period in Christian history. Originally more important that Christmas, Epiphany celebrated both the coming of the Magi as well as Christ's baptism and his first miracle—turning the water into wine. The feast of the Epiphany had become "The Feast of the Fool"; the celebration had evolved from a pious observance to a drunken orgy incorporating the pagan rites of Saturnalia—celebration of the world ritually turned upside down (Barton, 404-405), not unlike the most famous of all Brazilian celebrations: Carnival, where the poor, like Balthazár in "Twelfth Morning" (as well as the scabbie-ridden stray dog in "Pink Dog"), dress up and play king or queen for the day. The "irrational desire" "uncontrolled by judgment" that "what you will" and "The Feast of the Fool" suggests is clearly the poor black boy of the poem. His foolishness, naivete, and self-deception is pity evoking—but is it? The shifting and uncertain perspective of "what you will" makes the final judgment unclear. Is the four-

gallon can crowned king whose demeanor proclaims: ". . .that the world's a pearl, *and I,/ I am/ its highlight!*" any more foolish than the perspective from which we (or the poem) views him? Is it any more foolish than the poet who declares: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," the same poet who discovers divinity in himself and the common faces of those around him:

> Magnifying and applying come I,
> Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
> Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
> Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his
> grandson,
> Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
> . . . . .
> Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself,
> bestowing them freely on each man and woman I see,
> (From Walt Whitman "Song of Myself," 233).

By parodying the expressivism of the Romantic poet as a poor boy in a Brazilian slum celebrating himself, the world, and his/its divinity, Bishop displays her diffidence in poetic powers and the position of the poet, yet she doesn't relinquish all her faith. With the final lines of the poem "'Today's my Anniversary,' he sings,/ 'the day of Kings'" the Christian celebration of Epiphany as well as "the traditional Christian inversion in which the meek shall

inherit the earth and a poor infant become[s] the King of the Jews" (Costello, 39) is evoked. We are left feeling ambivalent about whether the epiphany or the beatitude (and its reversal of the world's roles—"the meek shall inherit the earth" or "blessed are the poor for they shall see God") is either deception or a miracle. Is the boy's singing which drowns out the sound of Bishop's indifferent sea's "slap-slapping" something to pity or something to celebrate? The divisions and sympathies in the poem are unclear and even incognizant:

> Don't ask the big white horse, *Are you supposed*
> *to be inside the fence or out?* He's still
> asleep. Even awake, he probably
> remains in doubt. (110)

Costello wonders whether the final perspective of the poem lies in a Blakean irony, innocence juxtaposed to experience (41). That ironic juxtaposition also lies in the Elizabethean play from which the poem takes its title. Like many of Shakespeare's other comedies *Twelfth Night* takes place in an imaginary magical world, free from the imperfection, death, human limitation and Time that exist in the realistic world to which the characters must return. But that is not to "write-off" the world of innocence—it offers a needed perspective, a needed antidote that we as poetry readers and theater goers are searching for. Feste the "wise fool" in *Twelfth Night* is watchful, observant, and detached from either of the warring parties in this comedy, and it is he who continually reminds

the revelers that the future is uncertain, laughter momentary, and youth are of "a stuff that will not endure" (II. iii. 52). Feste's closing song, one which Barton tells us draws upon an old didactic tradition and most recently was put to music by British composer John Harle, gives an account of humankind's "inexorable progress from a child's holiday realm of irresponsibility and joy into age, vice, disillusionment, and death. . . .There is nothing that can be done about those harsh facts of existence to which Feste points, any more than about the wind and the rain. They must simply be endured. Like childhood happiness, all comedies come to an end. The great and consoling difference lies in the fact that one can, after all, as Feste points out, return to the theatre: and there 'we'll strive to please you every day'"( Barton, 407).

**Elsewhere**

*". . .Longest way around is the shortest way home."*

"Twelfth Morning or What You Will" was published as part of the "Brazil" section of Bishop's third book of poems *Questions of Travel*, a book divided between those that take up the scenes of her newly adopted country and those she puts under the category "Elsewhere." These two divisions, "Brazil" and "Elsewhere," underneath "Questions of Travel," are meaningful, for it was through the experience of Brazil and the questions it raised that Bishop found herself writing of early childhood memories—"untouched memories" flooding

back to her in vivid ways. How strange, yet how significant, that remove to another hemisphere is what allows her to "recover" her childhood, recover herself. I am reminded of Bloom's observation toward the end of *Ulysses*: "So it returns. Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way around is the shortest way home." It was during this period of Bishop's life that she found herself writing of her loss of her mother at the age of four, to insanity, in the powerful short story "In the Village" and in the poem "Sestina." The other Nova Scotian poems included in the "Elsewhere" section of *Questions of Travel*, "Manners"[70] and "First Death in Nova Scotia," also recount irrecoverable loss. Grief, the emotional realization of loss, is bound up with travel; we can only be homesick; we can only have a grasp of what is/was close to us when time and space have brought us "elsewhere." Thus, the placement of these poems in the book entitled "Questions of Travel" and the writing of these poems while at the cultural and temporal remove of Brazil.[71]

Sorrow, resulting from loss experienced by the unstoppable fluidity of

---

[70]In "Manners: For a Child of 1918" the dust of a passing automobile suggests the change of values in the coming century. It covers the futile attempts at greeting by the child and her nineteenth century grandfather and of his attempt to maintain and pass on the "manners" or traditions of a more socially minded culture. In this poem, Bishop places herself firmly within the modernist values of her contemporaries and her mentors by mourning the loss of community and bemoaning this century's vulgarization of social decorum, a symptom of the new mass society.

[71]The complexities of grief as it relates to aesthetic experience and life will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

time, is embedded in the opening images of the poem entitled "Questions of Travel." The dramatic landscape suggests both agelessness as well as the pressure and pain of the constant movement of time. As in travel, time is realized through space, and the emotional evocation of such a scene is sorrow, as evidenced by the tear stained cliffs and the wreckage and decay of the "capsized mountains":

> There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
> hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
> and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
> makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
> turning to waterfalls under our eyes.
> —For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tear stains,
> aren't waterfalls yet,
> in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
> they probably will be.
> But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
> the mountains look like the hulls of the capsized ships,
> slime-hung and barnacled. (93)

The anxiety that the speaker feels toward the overabundance of scenery is what opens this reflection on the "Questions of Travel." Like the passenger disembarking in "Arrival at Santos" the experience here seems too much, and the

pain that the beauty and the inexorable passage of time that this ageless/aging scene elicits is pain understood by the traveler whose consciousness has been altered by such a contemplation. The final image in this opening stanza of the capsized ship recalls one of Bishop's early poems "The Imaginary Iceberg," reminding the reader that "Questions of Travel" have always been circulating through her poetry.

## Autotelic Art

*". . .the end of travel"*

Published in her first book of poems *North and South* in 1946 "The Imaginary Iceberg" takes up the tensions of a poet who belongs to the generation following the poetic revolutions of the Modernists. While ostensibly embracing the ideals of her mentors in this poem, Bishop, in her characteristic way, weaves a subtle but clear ambivalence toward such ideals, suggesting also the limitations of such poetic values.[72] Opening with the pronoun "we" Bishop makes the values of the poem corporate rather than individual, asking the reader to recognize the values as his or her own, or as universal, at least for contemporaries. This is an effective strategy for pulling the reader through the abstract imaginations in this difficult poem. The first line makes the startling

---

[72]No critic as yet has placed the themes and concepts in "The Imaginary Iceberg" historically or culturally in relation to Modernism or other poetic theories.

announcement that "We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,/ although it meant the end of travel" (startling for a poet who makes travel a central theme in even these early poems). While it is given up reluctantly, travel *is* relinquished, in this poem, in favor of the icy mountain of snow latent with power but also with danger ("are you aware that an iceberg takes repose/ with you and may pasture on your snow?") In a post-Titanic culture, an iceberg can only conjure up images of nature as force—capable of destroying the best that human culture has imagined and crafted. We are a long way from a Romantic celebration of nature's restorative powers and much closer to a Schopenhauerian vison of nature as a-moral force. With this opening line the opposition is set up between stasis and motion, between the idealized icy perfection of the iceberg and the less desirable warmer skies in which a ship would travel ("The ship steers off/ where waves give into one another's waves/ and clouds run in a warmer sky.") Like the Modernist rejection of Romantic sensibilities, the anti-vital is favored over that of the organic. We'd rather have the iceberg than the time-bound flux and imperfection of life.

The second stanza identifies the iceberg with a kind of idealized and interiorized art, resembling the Symbolism of Baudelaire's heirs. It is an art which is flawless, corrective (of both nature and language—"its glassy pinnacles/ correct elliptics in the sky"), and ethereal ("The wits of these white peaks/ spar with the sun.") It is also a concept that a poet/sailor as observer of

phenomena, a Darwin traveling on the Beagle, would give her powers of sight for and maybe even herself as speaking subject (eye/(I))—(Emerson's vegetative eye/I is easily discarded), disregarding the only means for sustaining ordinary life and travel (the ship):

> This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for.
> The ship's ignored. The iceberg rises
> and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles
> correct elliptics in the sky.
> This is a scene where he who treads the boards
> is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain
> is light enough to rise on finest ropes
> that airy twists of snow provide.
> The wits of these white peaks
> spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares
> upon a shifting stage and stands and stares. (4)

The speaker imagines something that would carry a weight and an imposing vision that she, herself, could never presume, an authoritative "artless art" constructed with modernist principles.

The beauty of this anti-vital art/abstraction is created by complete interiorization. It is detached from anything outside itself; it is utterly self-contained and self-sufficient; one could even label it autotelic The autotelic has

its limitations, however, as the poem suggests, and these limitations lie literally in its "cryptic" nature:

> This iceberg cuts its facets from within.
>
> Like jewelry from a grave
>
> it saves itself perpetually and adorns
>
> only itself, perhaps the snows
>
> which so surprise us lying on the sea. (4)[73]

This pure beauty of the iceberg is only imagined however, and eventually the traveler must leave these icy regions and return to the world of loss and goodbyes, to the motion and commotion of the warmer world of travel and time:

> Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off
>
> where waves give in to one another's waves

---

[73]This provocative image of "jewelry from a grave" and its accompanying critique of idealized principles has always reminded me of Dickinson's version of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

> I died for Beauty—but was scarce
> Adjusted in the Tomb
> When One who died for Truth, was lain
> In an adjoining Room—
>
> He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
> "For Beauty", I replied—
> "And I—for Truth—Themself are One—
> We Bretheren, are", He said—
>
> And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
> We talked between the Rooms—
> Until the Moss had reached our lips—
>
> (from Emily Dickinson. *Final Harvest*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1961, 107)

and clouds run in a warmer sky. (4)

Bishop is not the first to depict modernist ideals as snow and ice. Thomas Mann created a similar landscape on the top of the Alps in his novel *The Magic Mountain* to stage his protagonist's escape from the prison of linear time and family/humanist ties and connections.

In "Imaginary Iceberg" Bishop uses an arctic scene to depict the desirability and even necessity of an anti-vital, autotelic art, but also the limitations and finally the impossibility of such an art. It is "imagined," not realized, after all. I say "necessary" art, because the poem suggests that such imaginations are essential at this point in time. The poem closes with diction that gives the reader the sense that these imaginations function like religion, like the concept of a god incarnate—but a peculiarly "modernist" god incarnate:

Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible. (4)

Even in this celebratory close, however, there can be discerned an underlying ambivalence. The tone is too bright, too happy for something as forbidding as an iceberg. The final image, almost phallic, displays strength and authority, but inseparable from this strength of an image or a language which is "erected indivisible," is sterility and even violence.

## Questions of Travel

*"Should we have stayed at home,/ wherever that might be?"*

Travel, the "south" in *North and South,* is the less desirable, more imperfect of the two options ("We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship"); it is, however, the more fertile (and more feminine?) But it too has its limitations and its defects. It is these tensions between the false potentialities of travel and the genuine fecundity of travel that Bishop takes up while residing in the southern hemisphere. And this is the theme of the poem "Questions of Travel." The anxiety and sorrow that the overabundance of the landscape elicits in the first stanza of this poem leads to the question in the second "Think of the long trip home./ Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?/ Where should we be today?" Such a question highlights the vast distance between what has transpired and now, what would have to be traversed to retrace our steps back to what is understood as "home." By asking "where should we be today?" rather than "where would we be today?" Bishop indicates the ethical dimension of these questions. "Is it right" she follows "to be watching strangers in a play/ in this strangest of theatres?" The ethics of travel are related once again to the ethics of art. Is it perversity or redemption that art/travel offers? Bishop cannot decide. And while recounting the delights of travel in this stanza she undercuts her genuine celebration of them with the suggestion that such travels might be motivated by immaturity, by greed, or by a blatant consumerism:

What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life

in our bodies, we are determined to rush

to see the sun the other way around?

The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?

To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,

inexplicable and impenetrable,

at any view,

instantly seen and always, always delightful?

Oh, must we dream our dreams

and have them, too?

And have we room

for one more folded sunset, still quite warm? (93)

The anxiety that the geographic vista produces in the first stanza and the self-questioning uncertainty of the second is replaced in the third stanza with a catalog of particulars, images, and sounds, recounted and relished and all prefaced with "But surely it would have been a pity/ not to have seen. . . ./ not to have heard. . . ./ not to have pondered. . . ./never to have studied. . . ./And never to have had to listen. . . ." These experiences are cherished, and a life lived without them would be a much poorer one. Unlike the particulars of travels recounted in "Over 2,000 Illustrations"whose non sequiturs are chaotic and overwhelming, these sights and sounds in their richness evoke metaphoric

comparisons and create a feeling of contentment and satisfaction. The trees along the road become gesturing noble pantomimists "robed in pink." Bird cages become "weak calligraphy" to be studied. These details are rich but they are not symbolic; they do not point to something else but only suggest something else; the calligraphy is weak; the "connections" that are made are "pondered" only "blurredly and inconclusively," the old stonework is "inexplicable and impenetrable,/ at any view," and yet in the strangeness and in the surprise of these travel experiences there *is* something: "instantly seen and always, always delightful." And that something is perhaps everything.

The poem closes with an italicized quote taken from the "traveller's notebook," notes written in the "golden silence" following a "rain/ so much like politicians' speeches:/ two hours of unrelenting oratory." In these thoughts recollected in tranquility,[74] the traveler/poet who is the inheritor of a tradition that produced Emily Dickinson and is a student and protégée of the Modernist Marianne Moore cannot help asking:

> *"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come*
>
> *to imagined places, not just stay at home?*

---

[74]By raising questions concerning the "use" of travel memories, Bishop is also examining the tradition established by Wordsworth in "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abby" where sensual memories of nature provide:

> In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
> And passing even into my purer mind,
> With tranquil restoration.

*Or could Pascal have been not entirely right*

*about just sitting quietly in one's room? (94)*

Bishop is paraphrasing *Pensées #136* "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" (67). But the essential argument of this Pensée may not be in contradiction to the necessary sustenance that Bishop finds in travel. Pascal, here, is condemning "diversion" as way for humans to escape ourselves, to escape really thinking about "our feeble moral condition"(68). Like Beckett's conception of "Habit," Pascal recognizes diversion as a way to keep us happy, to prevent suffering, a way to organize life into comfortable hobbies. Beckett writes: "The fundamental duty of Habit, about which it describes the futile and stupefying arabesques of its supererogations, consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty. . . " (16).

In the silence following the rain, the traveler in Bishop's poem does not take issue with Pascal's valuing of introspection and "staying quietly." This is the inevitable place the traveler finds herself. It is the notion of "his room" that has become problematic. What we understood to be home and to be self proves to be a false construct, a fading mirage, recognized from the distance of travel as impossible to reach, return to, or recover. The traveler also understands that the consciousness gained from travels, unlike habit, are not directed by will and by

choice. Like the flooding memory in *Á la recherche du temps perdu* the experience is involuntary and entails a cost, a certain amount of suffering—"[s]uffering-that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience" (Beckett, 16). Travel and artistic experience are transforming for their ability to disturb and displace our very notion of ourselves and of home:

> *Continent, city, county, society:*
>
> *the choice is never wide and never free.*
>
> *And here, or there. . .No. Should we have stayed at home*
>
> *wherever that may be?"*

# -3-

# Geography III:

## "a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration"

## Bishop and Post-Modernism

### Part I.

***"What is Geography?"***

*"A description of the earth's surface."*

"Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?" exclaims Crusoe in Bishop's poem about this archetypal tourist. Bishop's last book of poems continues to take up the questions of travel or tourism as they relate to memory, self-conception, and aesthetic experience. "Crusoe in England" is included in this collection entitled *Geography III*. This title, the verses that follow it taken from a nineteenth century school primer's lessons on geography, and the poem spoken through DeFoe's eighteenth century character, invoke the tradition begun in the days of exploration. Bishop's re-figuring of this mode of study and knowledge should not be mistaken for an argument of continuity between De Foe and ourselves, for it marks the discontinuity between De Foe and the Romantic tradition and most importantly, between Modernists' ways of experiencing the world and poetry's place and function within this world and

those of their nineteenth-century predecessors.

Bishop's inclusion of the seemingly dry and straightforward "Lesson VI" and "Lesson X" at the opening of her last book of poems deserves careful attention. Taken directly from "First Lessons in Geography" published in 1884, the exercises are presented like a catechism—with two voices, the authoritative questioner and the dutiful respondent. The reprinting of these nineteenth century voices gives the impression that this catechism has been echoing through her head all her life; this reverberating effect is heightened by the break of the question and answer rhythm at the end of "Lesson X" as the questions follow in close succession.

> *In what direction is the Volcano? The*
>
> *Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait?*
>
> *The Mountains? The Isthmus?*
>
> *What is in the East? In the West? In the*
>
> *South? In the North? In the Northwest?*
>
> *In the Southeast? In the Northeast?*
>
> *In the Southwest?* (157)

The tumbling together of these questions gives the feeling of insistence and urgency. But what do these questions or questions like *"What is Geography?" "Of what is the Earth's surface composed?"* and *"What is a Map?"* have to do with poetry or with life? Wondering about the title of this last book of poems, the reader

might also ask "What is Geography?" The answer "A description of the earth's surface" offers some clue as to the role of the contemporary poet, for perhaps the poet is a twentieth century geographer practicing a new discipline that Bishop entitles *Geography III*.

Like Bishop, French theorist Michel Foucault recognizes a discontinuity between the classical age and the nineteenth century and between the traditions begun in the nineteenth century and current signs of rupture. In *Les Mots et les Choses* (translated *The Order of Things*) Foucault uses what he terms "an archaeology" to unearth those conditions that have allowed for new ways of ordering and understanding the world. Enthusiastic about the conceptual innovations of other structural theorists, Foucault is seeking in this work to examine the historical a priori which allowed for the rise of particular discourses and disciplines. "[B]etween the use of what one might call the ordering codes and the reflections upon order itself," Foucault argues, "there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being" (xxi). Between our perceptions/language—our "empirical orders with which [we] will be dealing and within which [we] will be at home"—and "the scientific theories and the philosophical interpretations which explain why order exists in general. . .lies a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental: it is more confused, more obscure, and probably less easy to analyze" (xx). It is this "in-between-place" or more "pure experience of order"

that eventually criticizes and breaks down the codes and the philosophies within which it exists. Foucault's archaeology is an attempt to uncover and examine this place as it arose in "the classical age" and again in the nineteenth century, which Foucault describes as "the age of history." It is in this most recent age, according to Foucault, that "Man" was invented [an invention that he is comforted to realize is relatively recent one, "a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in knowledge" and "he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form" (xxiii)]. Clearly, Foucault sees his archaeological method as possessing a liberating function, for in addition to making us question our own objectivity and empirical perceptions, it also releases us (or at least gives us hope for release) from their seemingly permanent structures, from the cul de sac of the human sciences.

Part of Foucault's strategy for working his method is to show the discontinuity between our own ways of ordering the world and former ways. Foucault refuses to see the present in relation to the past as progression, which is the typical way in which we view history in the modern west. Archaeology recognizes the disruption between different "episteme"[75] and demonstrates the

---

[75]"By *episteme*, we mean. . .the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems. . . . . The *episteme* is not a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities." Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M.

fallacy of a perceived continuity or advancement between the past and present.

By invoking what feels now to be a kind of outmoded school subject,"geography," Bishop is also drawing attention to the different ways in which we have ordered the world, and the different ways in which we have located home. With the concept of geography she is once again working through her dialectic of home and travel. Geography is a kind of travel or traversing of the globe, first, literally, by explorers and map makers recording their perceptions, and later, literarily, by those students of geography whose imaginations are expanded and organized by such a study. Yet, geography is very much about making oneself at home. It is about working within those "empirical orders with which [we] will be dealing and within which [we] will be at home." It is about locating ourselves in relation to the rest of the world; this was its function when the study of geography began in "the classical age," the age of De Foe. And, in "the age of history," the age of Darwin, geography is about working within those "empirical orders" to locate ourselves in relation to the Other. Geography since its inception has been about the discovery of home.

"*What is Geography?*/ A description of the earth's surface." It was the sudden tearing of this map brought on by reading a passage from Borges that inspired Foucault to write *The Order of Things*. He opens the Preface with a description of that moment:

---

Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972), 191.

> This book first arose. . .out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and Other. (xv)

Laughter is not incidental to this moment. Ever present in Bishop's poetry as well, humor not only eschews depth and pathos, it also indicates a multiplicity of perspectives. Often accompanied by some kind of irony, humor celebrates incongruities and rifts in common perception. It is laughter that shattered our geography when Foucault read Borges. And it is ruptures in order such as these that he is attempting to register from different periods, ruptures that have too often been sutured by historian's narratives. Foucault's motivation lies, he suggests, in the current rumblings felt by him and others: "In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is this same ground that is once more stirring under our feet" (xxiv). Foucault believes that we are experiencing a time when new rumblings, new modes of order "anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures" are being felt and are beginning to render

current codes and their accompanying philosophical foundations invalid and insufficient.

This chapter argues that central to what some have suggested to be Bishop's most complete poem,[76] "Crusoe in England," is this sense of rupture, of discontinuity between De Foe's age and Wordsworth's and between Wordsworth's and our own. The poem conveys a painful sense of inadequacy in the current ways of ordering and understanding. Crusoe finds himself in a new type of geography—a *Geography III.*

### *"What is a Map?"*

*Geography III* begins with the lesson asking *"What is Geography?"* The second "lesson" included at the opening of this last book of poems asks *"What is a Map?"* This question brings us full circle in Bishop's oeuvre, for the poem "The Map" opens *The Complete Poems* and is often the first poem of hers that many read (myself included). The positioning of this poem by Bishop is significant, as Bonnie Costello argues: "By placing 'The Map' at the beginning of *North and*

---

[76]Helen Vendler writes about "Crusoe in England": "A poet who has written this poem really needs to write nothing else: it seems to me a perfect reproduction of the self in words." In *Part of Nature Part of Us* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 349. C. K. Doreski suggests that Bishop's late poem "Crusoe in England" comes closest to being the poem which ". . .embodies the entire complexity of her experience and vision . .", the one that ". . .achieve[s] a language powerful and variable enough to reconcile a whole world of regrets and compensations, one that resolves the dichotomies of exterior and interior experience, perception and desire. . ." *Elizabeth Bishop:The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 126.

*South* [her first book of poems], and subsequently of *The Complete Poems*, Bishop tempts readers to approach it cartographically, as a diagram for reading her work" (234). Bishop's account of the poem's inception, in an interview with Alexandra Johnson in 1978, portrays the poet as the innocent yet intuitive recorder of the zeitgeist, the poet as the Richter scale or the lightning rod for the invisible currents of the time:

> My first poem in my first book was inspired when I was sitting on the floor, one New Year's Eve in Greenwich Village, after I graduated from college. I was staring at a map. The poem wrote itself. People will say that it corresponded to some part of me which I was unaware of at the time. This may be true. (Monteiro, 101)

Bishop could include herself among the "people" or critics that have read the poem as emblematic to her and to her poetry, for, as mentioned above, three times she choose to place it at the opening of her collections, and this, coupled with the question "what is a map" prefacing her last book of poems (nearly forty years after writing "The Map"), suggests her own re-reading of this early poem that "wrote itself." In what ways, then, does Bishop suggest that a map is like a poem? a map maker like a poet? As the answer to the question in "Lesson X" tells us, a map is, like geography (and like a poem), yet another ordering structure, "a picture of the whole, or part of the/ Earth's surface."

Discussing Bishop's late poetry, poet and critic Robert Pinsky offers a definition of a "map" that places himself and Bishop in a very nineteenth-century paradigm: "When we assimilate the idea that the earth is a globe immensely larger than the ground we can see around us, we are potentially lost in its vague enormity; as we map its parts, we restore ourselves by defining what we are not. In a world of life the map is what we can say in our language" (52-3). Pinsky sees a map as a tool for locating ourselves in relation to the other; he sees language not as a transparent medium of representation, as it was in the classical age, but as the defining aspect of our subjectivity. Pinsky's perspective is not surprising in an essay that compares Elizabeth Bishop to Wordsworth. I would argue, however, that Bishop does not share Pinsky's (or Wordsworth's) confidence in the restorative power of language, even in as early a poem as "The Map." Bishop, who belonged to the generation of poets between the "modernists" and the "post-modernists," begins by recognizing the limitations and complexities of a post-Kantian subjectivity. Pinsky himself describes the relationship between "the individual, the single consciousness, and the world itself" in Bishop's poetry as a "contest" or a "struggle" (56). In "The Map" Bishop sees this struggle emblematized not only in the tensions between the symbol (the map) and the real but also among the poet's perception of the symbol, her language or her articulation of her perception of the symbol, and the symbol itself. Far from locating the observer in relation to the other, "the map" makes problematic the

location of the self and "the world itself."

Like her story of its inception, "The Map" gives the initial impression that it is a record of simple observation. But equivocality of the map and of her perceptions soon becomes apparent as she qualifies and questions what she observes:

> Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
> Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
> showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
> where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
> Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
> drawing it unperturbed around itself?
> Along the fine tan sandy shelf
> is the land tugging at the sea from under? (3).

Although mapping is the attempt to secure accurate perception through description, neither perception nor description proves to be stable. The focus slides from the symbol, to an imagined areal view and then to a submerged view of the real that is being represented, and from this to an anthropomorphized geography. By anthropomorphizing the land, giving the verbs to it rather than the map-maker or map-reader, by describing it as if it were a chilled person pulling a blanket around himself, Bishop multiplies the location of the subject. Subject and object lose their stability along with perception and description.

Stored memories and associations, like the view of land and sea from an airplane or the aquatic beauty of blue-green seaweed, continue to infect the observer's perception of the symbol in the second and third stanza. "Labrador's yellow" evokes a child's text book image of animal skin oiled by a "moony Eskimo." And Norway, like an ink blot in a Rorschach test, becomes a "hare" running "south in agitation." Perception is built through the acculturated senses and sensibilities of each consciousness. Sometimes it is the very idiosyncratic nature of perception that raise its expressions to the level of art. The particularity of the imaginative sources in "The Map"that see the "peninsulas" taking "the water between thumb and finger/ like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods" works like a metaphysical conceit. Its unlikely comparison makes it both provocative and memorable. Yet, by employing such a far-fetched analogy as well as writing it as a simile rather than a metaphor, Bishop draws attention to the rhetorical nature of such comparisons. If she had raised her perceptions to the level of metaphor she would be, in a way, affirming the power and function of symbol as the Romantics understood it; her connections rather than being idiosyncratic and self-conscious would be, through their synthesis, giving expression to something new or otherwise beyond our reach. The poem occupies a place between the transcendent power of language and perception and the stable representation intended for a graphic symbol such as a map, for the graphic symbol also refuses to remain flat, two dimensional, inert, or simply a

vehicle to the real—as demonstrated by the sensuality of taking "the water between thumb and finger" like "feeling the smoothness of yard-goods" as well as the earlier observation that "We can stroke these lovely bays,/ under a glass as if they were expected to blossom." And as Costello points out "this female image of sensuous and intuitive judgement contrasts with the map's traditionally rational and imperial posture" (236).

## The Adamic Function of Naming

*". . .and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that* ***was*** *the name thereof."*

The pleasures and excesses of this symbol, the map, are paralleled by the pleasures and excesses of language when it is no longer recognized as transparent medium of representation:

> The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
> the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
> —the printer here experiencing the same excitement
> as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.

Bishop's printer/map-maker (as well as the poet) do not participate in the God-ordained naming that Adam in Eden enacted. Mapping, as it arose during the navigational and exploration period in European history, aspired to the Adamic function of naming. This was an extension, explains cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt, of the naturalist project represented by the disciples of Carl Linnaeus. In

her examination of the ideological implications of European travel writings in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, entitled *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt explains how the botany or natural history movement standardized by Linnaeus would "have a deep and lasting impact not just on travel and travel writing, but on the overall ways European citizenries made, and made sense of, their place on the planet"(24). Linnaeus's *Systema Natura* was the elaborate Latin taxonomy for plants and eventually animals and even humans that established the natural or God-ordained order by "naming." She compares this to the missionizing of Christianity. As Christianity had "set in motion the global labor of religious conversion that asserted itself at every point of contact with other societies," so did natural history, with Linnaeus's followers calling themselves disciples and moving throughout the globe collecting, examining, recording , and classifying what they "discovered." Navigational mapping, adds Pratt, exerted this same power of naming:

> Indeed, it was in naming that the religious and geographical projects came together, as emissaries claimed the world by baptizing landmarks and geographical formations with Euro-Christian names. But again, natural history's naming is more directly transformative. It extracts all the things of the world and redeploys them into a new knowledge formation whose value lies precisely in its difference from the chaotic original. Here the

> naming, the representing, and the claiming are all one; the naming brings the reality of order into being. (33)

Not surprisingly, the Linnaean project is continually figured in the image of Adam in the Garden of Eden giving names to things for the first time.

While giving a mandate to these naming projects, the analogy with Adam also raised a uncomfortable implication. As Pratt points out, ". . .one can see from the very beginning [that] human beings, especially European ones, posed a problem to the systematizers: could Adam name and classify himself? If so, was the naturalist supplanting God?" Once human beings were recognized as no longer just God's agents recording what they objectively observed, but as subjects as well—originators of these observations—their special status could no longer be ignored. This is what Foucault means by the "Invention of Man." It is as if a second fall from Eden occurred. Humans were suddenly self-conscious; they realized their nakedness.

Bonnie Costello is perhaps the only critic who approaches "The Map" with any sensibility about the historical differences in understanding the function of representation. She does this by contrasting the poem with Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*:

> Vermeer's painting absorbs a complex world into a form of spatial knowledge. Bishop's "The Map," and her poetry generally, continually intercept that knowledge with the sense of

> unmasterable flux and plurality. . . . If the map is pictorial in Bishop (as it is in Vermeer), it is not in order to bring knowledge into visual immediacy but to subject knowledge to human contingency. (238-239)

Vermeer's seventeenth-century painting clearly makes issues surrounding representation a central theme. The painter is shown with his back to the viewer, the direction of his gaze uncertain—whether it is upon the map in front of him or the model dressed as Clio, muse of history. Costello's juxtaposition of Bishop's poem with this painting is striking because of the parallel yet fundamentally different approaches to history and to mapping. I disagree, however, with how Costello reads the significance of the painter and his gaze. She writes: "Representing himself within the scene, Vermeer is at once observer, interpreter, and maker of this scene, participating in its contingent, experiential reality but also moving out from it into various forms of contemplation" (239). Costello sees the focus of the painting on the painter as subject. But, although she mentions it, she seems to miss the significance of the fact that the painter has his back to us, that his gaze is not directly represented. Here lies the tension and significance of the painting, for while the scene of representation or of painting is being depicted, the actual gaze or act of the painter as subject cannot be. The title of Vermeer's work is *The Art of Painting* not "The Art of the Painter." Vermeer lived and created within different ordering structures than our own. He lived

before "the Invention of Man," before this peculiar sense of man as originator or creator, before humans as subject became the subject of inquiry. My sensibilities about *The Art of Painting* and the significance that the painter's gaze is not represented comes directly out of Foucault's reading of Velásquez's *Las Meninas*. This exhaustive and very convincing reading of another seventeenth-century painting sets the stage for Foucault's thesis in *The Order of Things*. "In this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing—despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, and portraits" (16). Foucault effectively demonstrates through *Las Meninas* how the classical age contrasts sharply with that of modernity. Like Costello, I see Bishop primarily concerned with the ways in which she as a poet participates in current ways of ordering the world. And like Foucault, I think that her contrast of this with former ways of ordering emphasizes how historically contingent these current and former ways are.

When in "The Map" she observes that "the names" do not correspond directly with their object she is drawing attention to the break from the former Adamic function of naming and of language. Along with the inescapable realization that Adam as namer in some ways is replacing God as creator and originator also came a conceptual shift in the nature and function of language. Language in the "Age of Man" is no longer understood to have a mimetic

correspondence with reality but is now seen as a dense network with a history all its own. It is also inseparable from our very understanding. And thus lies its paradox: language is our limit as well as our liberation. This shift in the nature and function of language gave a new role to the poet. Beginning with the Romantics, faith was put in the poet's imaginative powers as they worked within this paradox of language to connect us to something beyond our own limits.[77]

By reviewing this tradition in a poem that also calls attention to the very different tradition that proceeded it, Bishop, I would argue, is marking the threshold of this Romantic sensibility in which we are still operating. Perhaps one way to understand the tenor and argument of "The Map" is to say that in the paradox of language and perception—that it is both our limit and liberation—the Romantic poetic tradition sees the glass half full, sees the liberation triumphing and defining our limits; whereas Bishop in as early a poem as "The Map" sees the glass half empty, but not completely empty. The limits temper the liberation. There is pleasure but also "excess": "the printer here experiencing the same excitement/ as when emotion too far exceeds its cause." In this line we hear a sober voice judging immoderation. The names (or the language) spill over and

---

[77]Coleridge's concept of creative imagination versus merely reproductive imagination (fancy) is central to this new role of the poet within the paradox of language:

> The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. *Biographia Literaria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 1202.

past what they are trying to describe.

The poem is structured into three stanzas; the first and the third contain aabbacddc rhyme while the middle stanza is unrhymed. The "b's" and the "d's" are standard rhymes; the "a's" and the "c's", however, are merely repetitions of the same word. This difference as well as the unrhymed, unstructured middle stanza create a tension that reflects the sensibilities of a poet struggling within the limits and liberation of language. Anne Colwell makes this point in her reading of the poem:

> . . .the first and final lines of the abba quatrain rhyme exactly, repeating the same word. While this repetition enriches and deepens the resonance of the repeated words, there is a curious way in which it hides the structure, the music. Rhyming words are drawn together as much by their differences as by their similarities; somehow "edges" and "ledges" call attention to rhyme, while "green" and "green" do not. The rigidity of the repetition ironically overreaches its purpose, "as when emotion too far exceeds its cause," and illustrates the tension between freedom and enclosure that pervades the poem. (34)

## Diachronic and Synchronic

*"More delicate than the historians' are the map-maker's colors."*

The tension between enclosure and freedom continues in the third stanza when the observer asks "Are they assigned or can the countries pick their colors?" There is enclosure and freedom, limit and liberation, in both these options. The obvious reading would place the freedom with the choice of color, and yet "Are they assigned" could be a longing for the days when mapping was done with a certainty of an ordained order in which one could locate oneself accurately and permanently, thus, a certain freedom from the burden of choice or the work of the subject having to define itself in relation to the other. The kind of work that this would entail is suggested in the following line: "—What suits the character or the native waters best." There is no ordained color, yet the color the countries choose or don is not arbitrary. The search for identity in this context entails a search for origins, what is fundamental to each. The difference between the assigned colors and finding the color that "suits the character of native waters best" is the difference between Linnaeus and Darwin. As Foucault points out, one should not make the mistake of seeing Darwin's geographical explorations as a simple continuation of the Linnaean project. Linnaeus saw an ordained order which he and his disciples were simply mapping or recording. Darwin belongs to the "age of history" as Foucault terms it. The placement of self is not in a table or a taxonomy but within a development, a history; it is a

search for origins.

It is a search, however, that is paradoxically always promising, always possible, yet always elusive. The self is simultaneously located and dislocated within this search, this analytic:[78] "We now find the effort to conceive of an ever-elusive *origin*, to advance toward that place where man's being is always maintained, in relation to man himself, in a remoteness and a distance that constitute him" (Foucault, 336). Language, no longer understood as a transparent medium of representation, is also embedded with this paradox of simultaneous remoteness and presence. We are, in Heidegger's now familiar term "always already" in language yet the attempts to ground it, to connect it to its origin continually retreat behind our search. As Foucault puts it, "Man is cut off from the origin that would make him contemporaneous with his own existence: amid all the things that are born in time and no doubt die in time, he, cut off from all origin, is already there" (332). Yet the hope of finding and placing oneself lies in one's "always already" existence within language. Ingrained in the knowledge and use of language is also a key to its source and its complete comprehension. Foucault writes: "without knowing it, and yet it must be known, in a certain way, since it is by this means that men enter into

---

[78]A dramatic shift occurs at the end of the classical age where an *analysis* of representations is replaced by an *analytic*—an examination of what grounds make representation possible: "The pre-critical analysis of what man is in his essence becomes the analytic of everything that can, in general, be presented to man's experience"(341).

communication and find themselves in the already constructed network of comprehension" (331). This is the kind of mapping and sense of language that Pinsky embraces when he writes: "When we assimilate the idea that the earth is a globe immensely larger than the ground we can see around us, we are potentially lost in its vague enormity; as we map its parts, we restore ourselves by defining what we are not. In a world of life the map is what we can say in our language" (52-3). Bishop, although she recognizes that this is the hope and the task of the poet, finds in "The Map" more dislocation than location:

> Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.
>
> More delicate than the historians' are the map-maker's colors.

Rather than securing accurate perception and the location of the self on the globe, "The Map" disturbs any notions of stability and location. The crucial delineations between self and other break down. Even the sense of oppositions is lost, for the speaker of the poem observes *not* the collapse between North & South or East & West, but "North's as near as West."

After all the questions and qualifications, the observer of the map comes to the cold conclusion that "Topography displays no favorites." If we are to understand that Bishop is drawing some comparison between maps and poems or map-makers and poets, what does this conclusion suggest? Webster's Dictionary defines "Topography" as "the art or practice of graphic delineation" or "the physical or natural features of an object or entity and their structural

relationships" (1244). Is she longing for days *when* "Topography displays no favorites;" is there an implied "should" in this statement? Is she longing for a time when topography was not tainted by perspective, when it was simply a matter of "graphic delineation"? Or is she considering the current ideal or hope, like "structuralism," of bypassing the corruptions of the subject? Either way, the statement seems like a reminder or a reprimand to the wandering perspective and impressions proceeding it.

In contrast to the sense of casual and spontaneous description that the bulk of the poem conveys, these final declarative lines suggest a thesis or a conclusion that not only should guide a reading of the poem, but also tempt one to read Bishop's entire oeuvre in light of this statement on the first page of her *Complete Poems*. Thomas Travisanio warns against such a move:

> The suggestive conclusion. . .has retained its fascination for Bishop's readers over five decades. Many critics incautiously regard it as the key to all of Bishop's writing, treating an ambiguous line from a tensely balanced early poem as if it were a bold sign pointing down a straight road. These critics tend to understress Bishop as "historian." (40)

To read this final line as favoring "map-making" over history would be ill-considered not only for the reasons that Travisano mentions, but for lack of attention to the actual line itself. "More delicate" is both a positive as well as a

negative attribute. It could mean "more subtle," "more sensitive," "flexible," or "artful." But it also suggests "more fragile," "flimsy," or even "anemic." It is with these strengths and weakness in mind that "map-making" should be seen in relation to the work of historians. Although I agree with the ambivalence that Travisano sees expressed in "The Map" between these two disciplines, his understanding of "map-making" as "abstracting, fiction-making" and historians as making "matter-of-fact observation(s) and judgement(s)"(40) is much too facile, both for the traditions that Bishop is evoking in this poem and for her sense of these two disciplines throughout her poetry. Perhaps her most provocative evocation of history comes at the close of "At the Fishhouses":

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown. (66)

Bishop recognizes with many of her contemporary theorists, artists, and poets that "time" is inescapably fundamental to human consciousness within the bounds of modernity.[79] This is yet another aspect to what Foucault terms "the

---

[79]This understanding of the centrality of "time" in human consciousness is perhaps the underlying sensibility in the concluding poem of *Geography III*, "Five Flights Up." An aubade, the poem contrasts the grief and heaviness that the speaker feels

Age of History." "More delicate than the historians' are the map-maker's colors" might be read then, not as a preference, but a careful balance between two intertwined aspects of current meaning making, between the heavier but more grounded diachronic and the subtle but effervescent synchronic.

The intertwining of these two is one of the insights and emphases of Modernism. "The Map," written in the thirties, clearly echoes these perceptions. While most critics who have commented on the poem have agreed that it centers upon the inescapable effects of perspective, none have recognized this theme as it relates to space (map-making, graphic delineation) and time (history). One could make reference to any number of theorists, artists, or poets—from Picasso to

---

on waking to the consciousness of the bird and the dog that she hears, for they "know everything is answered,/ all taken care of / no need to ask again" The bird's "Questions—if that is what they are—/ answered directly, simply,/ by day itself." Whereas the speaker finds the morning "enormous, ponderous, meticulous," and observes in the concluding lines that "—Yesterday brought to today so lightly!/ (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)" (181). This poem was brought immediately to mind when reading Samuel Beckett's essay on Proust. There he describes Proust's characters, and by extension all of us, as prisoners and victims of "Time." The self as a coherent being from birth to death is only a fiction—a "personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis"as Beckett puts it (4). Yesterday's ego or subject is a stranger to the person we find today as are yesterday's desires, thus we are "disappointed by the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment" (3). The desire for a timeless consciousness such the bird or dog in Bishop's poem will be, explains Beckett, thwarted–there is no escape:

> There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from to-morrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has already taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.
>
> *Proust.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1931. 3-4.

Einstein—who have explored this issue. In an attempt to give a fuller picture of reality, Modernism exposed what it saw to be the fictions of an absolute observer ( a "Topography" who "displays no favorites"). And if there is no absolute observer then there can be no absolute space as well as no simultaneous instant, no immediate "now" that is the same in all places. The presuppositions of an immediate now, so essential to scientific materialism, include the spatialization of time, the breaking up of the "flowing, flown" of time and history into discrete separate entities. Perhaps the closing line of "The Map" suggests the "delicacy" of an approach which recognizes the role of perspective in the make-up of reality as opposed to a traditional "historical" approach which requires the break up of time into static moments. Which is static? Which is fluid? Map-making or the study of history? Bishop plays with our notions of these disciplines, and by implication, poetry-making. Does it locate or does it dislocate the self? And how does it do either? Somewhere between the time-bound logic of music and narrative and the exploration of space in the visual arts lies poetry.

## A "Geography III"

Once the "absolute observer" has been repudiated, the foregrounding of perspective and its multiplicity breaks up the fixed opposition between subject and object. This traditional dualistic view of reality is now understood as

constructed after the initial situations of relatedness existing between what is later separated into subject and object, Heidegger's "Being-in-the-World." Robert Pinsky is correct, I would argue, in recognizing the poems in *Geography III* as enacting the struggle between "the individual, the single consciousness, and the world itself" (56), but he misses the deeper significance of this by comparing it to a similar struggle in Wordsworth. Bishop is proposing a third version of Geography. The first version, when this discipline of geography was established, understood the world as an ordained order, and geographers or poets, such as Pope, described nature by placing all within this ordained order. The second geography, the one in which Darwin sailed the world, had its geographers or poets, such as Wordsworth, search nature and use language to "discover" or make manifest something new but also something already there, albeit hidden and at the origin. In the third geography, geographers or poets map their reality, not through description of the natural world, but through the juxtaposition or relatedness of things, through the "struggle" between words and images, between "the single consciousness and the world itself." Geography III seeks a dislocation of the self.

Bishop loved reading Darwin, especially his letters and journals [to James Merrill in 1971 she wrote that "I've stopped reading about Greece, alas, and now read only Darwin (again, he is one of the people I like best in the world)"(*One Art*, 543)]. She even re-traced part of the Beagle's route on what she described as

one of her favorite trips. But what she loved about Darwin was the incipient presence of a "Geography III" in the midst of his nineteenth century "case building." She explains this in a letter to Anne Stevenson:

> There is no "split"[between the role of consciousness and subconsciousness in art]. Dreams, works of art, (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can't believe we are wholly irrational—and I do admire Darwin—But reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (Stevenson, 66).

This "self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration," this "sliding giddily off into the unknown" that Bishop relishes, this is the "dis-locating" accomplished by a "Geography III." Seeing this "geography" as something fundamentally

different from the mappings that came in earlier geographies is crucial to understanding and placing Bishop's poetry and poetic vision.

## Part II.

### "Crusoe in England"

*"A poet who has written this poem really needs to write nothing else."*

The historical self-consciousness of Bishop's poetry has often been ignored. With the publication of her fourth and last book of poems, this oversight becomes especially grievous, for in addition to the title and the lessons in geography that open the book, she included a poem in which she draws the personal, the historical, the theoretical, and the poetical inextricably together. Helen Vendler's reception of the poem "Crusoe in England" and her statement that "A poet who has written this poem really needs to write nothing else: it seems to me a perfect reproduction of the self in words"(97)[80] recast the traditional notion of autobiography or self-portraiture. For, if it is "a perfect reproduction of the self in words," it is a self that is not limited to the personal but is configured and dispersed through a shared linguistic and historical locus. By using an eighteenth-century character as her vehicle and, along the way, evoking Melville and Wordsworth[81] and others, Bishop's poetic "reproduction of

---

[80]Vendler's reading of "Crusoe in England" initially appeared in an essay entitled "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly" in *World Literature Today* in the Winter 1977 issue, only a few months after the publication of *Geography III*.

[81]Interviewing Bishop in 1977 after the publication of *Geography III*, George Starbuck notes with appreciation Bishop's deliberate use of anachronisms, especially the allusion from Wordsworth's poem to the daffodils. Bishop, laughingly recalls how "The *New Yorker* sent the proofs back and beside that line was the word 'anachronism,' and also at another place in the poem, I think. But I told them it was on purpose"

the self" drags us through the traditions that have defined and deformed selves but have eventually fallen away to new definitions and deformations. Bishop's Crusoe is decidedly twentieth century. C. K. Doreski also makes this argument: "The meanderings of the individual mind, a twentieth-century idea of a literary model, lends a degree of authenticity that owes more to Joyce and Freud than to De Foe or Melville" (127).

At the outset of the poem, the reader is thrown "in medias res" amid the meanderings of this mind. The voice wades tiredly through its casual observations, its tone tinged with the bitterness of someone whose life experience lies in the past and has taught him that life and death provide only banality and anonymity:

> A new volcano has erupted,
> the papers say, and last week I was reading
> where some ship saw an island being born:
> at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
> and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—
> rose in the mate's binoculars
> and caught on the horizon like a fly.
> They named it. But my poor old island's still
> un-rediscovered, un-renamable.

---

(*Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, 86).

None of the books has ever got it right. (162)

The "miracle of birth" is reduced to a fly-like spot on the "explorer's" binoculars. The naming of this fleck of basalt gives it, in the Western mind, its existence. Creation and naming coincide. Bishop is once again invoking the Adamic function of naming performed by the explorer (and poet) and yet suggesting its limitations, its inability to incorporate all of reality.

Crusoe's automatic gloss that the fleck was "basalt, probably" is the residual reflex of a mind trained as a naturalist, trained like Linnaeus's disciples or perhaps Darwin to name and locate all phenomena. It is only a residual reflex, however, for this mission or purpose that once lay behind such training is now felt to be inadequate. What is nearest and dearest to his heart remains outside the scope of this kind of mapping. His "poor old island's still/ un-rediscovered, un-renamable./ None of the books has ever got it right."

The reference to books and also to the "arm-chair exploration" experience of the newspaper reader denotes the central role that literacy played in the discipline of geography. As Defoe himself pointed out, one need not ever leave home to transverse the globe, in fact literacy may indeed be more essential to geographic knowledge than travel experience itself:

> [One may] make a tour of the world in books, he may make himself master of geography of the universe in the maps, atlasses and measurements of our mathematicians. He may travell by land with

> the historians, by sea with the navigators. He may go round the globe with Dampier and Rogers, and kno' a thousand times more doing it than all those illiterate sailors.
>
> (*The Compleat English Gentleman* (1730) quoted in Pratt, 15).

Defoe's championing of books is not surprising given the fact that he is a writer. *Robinson Crusoe* is a fictional version of what was, in the early eighteenth century, an already familiar genre of travel writing or survival literature. European explorations of the Americas and Africa were translated into the cultural imagination through the proliferation of such writings. In the opening stanza of Bishop's poem, however, the scholar of geography and travel literature is reduced to the twentieth-century consumer of anecdotes and trivia in the evening newspaper. And this twentieth-century Crusoe laments that "None of the books has ever got it right."

While ostensibly the poem is about Crusoe the ex-explorer reviewing his life and his attempts to make sense of his life through his memories and through the traditions that he has inherited, we recognize immediately the tired voice of an older poet doing the same. The role of explorer/creator/namer has been played by the poet as well. The parallels between poetry and geography and their historical incarnations broaden the scope of the subject to include not only considerations of art but also of all meaning-making in the late twentieth century.

Crusoe's sad affection for his "poor old island" does not come out of sentimentalism for a perfect paradise lost. As he recounts his experiences on the island, the reader is immediately enveloped in the castaway's painful alienation within a barren landscape. Like Winnie buried alive in her mound of dirt in Beckett's *Happy Days*, Crusoe is reduced to a disgusting reptilian presence in a graveyard of volcanoes, a graveyard of weeks marking the empty passage of a year:

> Well, I had fifty-two
> miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
> with a few slithery strides—
> volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
> I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
> and count the others standing up,
> naked and leaden, with their heads blown off. (162)

The Beckettian mood of the scene weighs heavily as the floating modifier "naked and leaden, with their heads blown off" describes an ugly suicidal violence that could be applied to either the landscape or to Crusoe. It is not a passionate violence, either; it is depressive and banal as the casualness and boredom of his sitting and counting convey.

Depression skews your perspective (or, according to some, it erases "healthy" denial or coping fictions, giving one a truer view of the real). This

landscape unsettles Crusoe's perspective. He can no longer find a scale in which he can place himself in relation to the rest of the world. The figure of the explorer or Romantic bard amongst the natural world has grown oppressively large as has his object of contemplation:

> I'd think that if they were the size
> I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
> become a giant;
> and if I had become a giant,
> I couldn't bear to think what size
> the goats and turtles were,
> or the gulls, or the overlapping rollers (162)

This uncomfortable disgust for the size of the self—and by extension the size of the poet—and for the size of what the self or poet must take into her vision—is a recurring theme in Bishop. In a short prose piece published first in *The Kenyon Review* in 1967, Bishop uses the perspective of three small creatures in the subtropics to express the pain and solipsism of existence within a very limited body and particular point of view. The Giant Toad tells us "I am too big, too big by far. Pity me. My eyes bulge and hurt. They are my one great beauty, even so. They see too much, above, below, and yet there is not much to see" (*Complete Poems*, 139). The Giant Snail also feels the pain of his size: "I am heavy, heavy, heavy. My white muscles are already tired. I give the impression of mysterious

ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks. . . .That toad was big too, like me. His eyes beseeched my love. Our proportions horrify our neighbors." And despite the snail's confident sense, like the poet, of his ability to create beauty, "My wide wake shines, now it is growing dark. I leave a lovely opalescent ribbon: I know this," he remains appalled by his size: "But O! I am too big. I feel it. Pity me" (141).

The poet, ever since the Romantics, ever since he or she has had to bear the burden of revealing the "élan" of nature through expression, has occupied an uncomfortable place. Like Adam recognizing the peculiarity and distinctiveness of his role among God's creatures as namer and soon after realizing his nakedness, the poet in his new role as priest or spiritual mediator must make himself the focus as well as making nature the focus. By mid-twentieth-century this initial shift in focus has expanded to painful proportions. Crusoe as a twentieth-century Adam in Eden or twentieth-century poet has lost the sense of his scale in relation to the rest of the world and of the world in relation to himself. The lack of confidence that he feels for his perspective has become a prison from which he can see no escape:

> I couldn't bear to think what size
> the goats and turtles were,
> or the gulls, or the overlapping rollers
> —a glittering hexagon of rollers

closing and closing in, but never quite,

glittering and glittering, though the sky

was mostly overcast. (162)

The glittering geometric prison traps Crusoe in his isolation and his uncertain perspective. The sea as a beautiful but forbidding and formidable presence appears in many of Bishop's poems. In her early poem "The Unbeliever" the sleeping man on the mast hears the warning through his dream "I must not fall./ The spangled sea below wants me to fall./ It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all" (22). In his defensive fearfulness, the unbeliever's vision of the sea is aggressive. Rather than offering depth, immersion, or a connection to eternity, this vision of the sea, which is formed with eyes shut from the dreamer's imagination, threatens to obliterate everything with its cruelly beautiful and impenetrable surface. Often in Bishop's poetry the sea's continual dominating presence creates a tension between the desire for or anticipation of being immersed or soaked by its waters and its denial of any kind of engagement or baptism, of its "closing and closing in, but never quite." This is felt in "The Bight" when "Absorbing, rather than being absorbed/ the water in the bight doesn't wet anything"(60), and again in "At the Fishhouses" where the sea is an "element bearable to no mortal," only the fish and seals can be immersed in its clarity, for "If you should dip your hand in,/ your wrist would ache immediately,/ your bones would begin to ache and your hand

would burn" (66). In all these poems as well as "Crusoe in England" the sea figures as a primordial expanse suggesting the only escape from the isolated and limited perspective of each of the poem's heroes, and yet rather than offering a means of escape, of enlightenment, or loss of self in the rhythm and depth of its waves, it presents a hard, inviolable, and unbearable surface. Bishop's unbeliever's vision of the sea is the heir to Matthew Arnold's doubting, post-Romantic vision of the sea. In what has become representative of the "Victorian" statement about the crisis of faith—Arnold's "Dover Beach"—the "Sea of Faith" ebbs, leaving only:

> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world. (794)

In Arnold's re-figuring of the Romantic notion of nature as source, the sea, although withdrawn, still retains a kind of melancholy expansiveness mirroring the poet's own solitude. Bishop's sea offers no such companionship. It is downright indifferent, even hostile. Bishop's mid-twentieth-century hero's isolation from nature and from companionship is exacerbated by the "glittering hexagon of rollers/ closing in and closing in, but never quite." Crusoe's experience is much closer to Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*:

> . . .the sea tosses itself and breaks itself, and should any sleeper

fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul. (193).

The inhospitableness of the glittering sea surrounding Crusoe's island is matched by the island itself. It too affords no solace. Like the water in the sea, the rain on this "cloud-dump" does not soak, soothe, or refresh. It brings a violent cooling. Like a hot pan dipped in water, it hisses:

My island seemed to be
a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's
left-over clouds arrived and hung
above the craters—their parched throats
were hot to touch.
Was that why it rained so much?
And why sometimes the whole place hissed?
The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,
hissing like teakettles.
(And I'd have given years, or taken a few,
for any sort of kettle, of course.)

The folds of lava, running out to sea,

would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove

to be more turtles. (162-163)

Even the "sound" of the island is inhospitable. Hissing, since Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, has been perhaps the most misanthropic sound in nature.

The turtles contain the opposition of inhospitableness and homeliness. Hissing and lumbering, they are emblematic of that simultaneous presence of "otherworldliness" and "domesticity"[82] throughout Bishop's poetry. This sensibility is furthered by Crusoe's comparison of them to tea kettles. Nothing could be more evoking of cozy British domesticity than a tea kettle, and Crusoe's longing for one, his imagination transforming the unlikely turtle into a tea kettle, is a painful indication of this Brit's homesickness. His dislocation from home makes the value of time questionable. Is it an asset or a liability? The burden of its tedious passage like the marking of the "fifty-two/ miserable, small volcanoes" makes Crusoe revise the saying "I'd have given years" with "or taken a few" to express the value of a little bit of domesticity or home in relation to time or life. Years become valuable only within the context of being at home in the world. By recognizing the presence of the inhospitable within the homely Bishop is, however, pointing out the inherent instability of home. The objects

---

[82]These terms are taken from Helen Vendler's 1977 essay published in *World Literature Today*.

and persons that constitute our sense of home or being at home subsume an otherness that always threatens to displace us.

The longing for placement or the location of home is perhaps the central problem in "Crusoe in England." Where exactly is home for this castaway? While on the island his yearning for England, for objects that constitute "Englishness," transform turtles into tea kettles, snail shells into irises ["snail shells lay under these in drifts/ and, at a distance,/ you'd swear that they were beds of irises"(164)], and the sound of gulls wings stirring into flight into the sound of wind in the leaves of a sturdy English oak tree:

> When all the gulls flew up at once, they sounded
> like a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves.
> I'd shut my eyes and think about a tree,
> an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere. (165)

These comparisons created by a mind stricken with homesickness nearly become similes. A simile is perhaps the lowest form of trope, but in its literalness it draws attention to the creative act itself. Crusoe, with eyes shut, uses his imagination to provoke comparisons that function as therapy to his dislocated self; they bridge two seemingly disparate worlds, bringing a temporary wholeness to a fractured self. In many ways, this is the same function of figurative language in poetry. Bishop puts a new perspective on tropes by suggesting that their creation is motivated by a kind of search for home.

The sheltering in the shade of an oak and the comfort of a whistling kettle fall flat, however, once Crusoe returns to England. The central pathos of this poem lies in Crusoe's return. The title of the poem is "Crusoe in England" even though most of what is conveyed occurred on the island. But it is the voice from England, the grieving voice who recognizes at the end of his life that the only paradise is a paradise lost, that is the subject of the poem. Where is home for Crusoe? While on the island, it was England. But, after returning to England, it clearly seems to be back on the island.

But England is an island as well, as Crusoe points out upon his return: "Now I live here, another island,/ that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?"(166). Shipwrecked, Crusoe is sensitive to the vertigo caused by the isolation and limited perspective of island existence. He's "heard of cattle getting island sick," and his desperate gaze into the squinted eyes of the billy-goat sees "nothing" or perhaps only the reflection of his own angry blank stare:

> I'd heard of cattle getting island-sick.
> I thought the goats were.
> One billy-goat would stand on the volcano
> I'd christened *Mont d' Espoir* or *Mount Despair*
> (I'd time enough play with names),
> and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air.
> I'd grab his beard and look at him.

His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up

and expressed nothing, or a little malice. (165)

Grabbing the goat, Crusoe tries to connect or communicate with the bleary-eyed creature; the attempts at connection with the goat also serve as a kind of act of transference, an attempt to shake himself from the "island sickness." He recognizes the blank stare as his own. Island living makes one slightly daft, able to see only sameness, oneself, or even nothing.

After his return from this experience, Crusoe is able to reflect on the fact that England, too, is an island. Crusoe's observation provokes us into questioning the "seemingly" broad and geographic perspective that "we" as a "civilized" people hold. England, even though it does not seem like it, is surrounded by that same sea, limited in the same ways. His follow-up question "but who decides?" suggests the arrogant imperialism of an England or a West that writes the geography of others with the facile assumption that they are not limited by their own island experience. Part of the imperialism implicated in this statement is the geographer/naturalist's mandate to "name" the rest of the world and to think that this "naming" is synonymous with "discovery" or existence. The limitations of this premise are already alluded to in the opening stanza when Crusoe complains about the "un-renamable," "un-rediscoverable" status of his dear island. In the above passage, Bishop pokes fun at the self-importance with which we "name" the rest of the world, with Crusoe's pretentious christening of

one of the fifty-two miserable small volcanoes "*Mont d' Espoir.*" His parenthetical comment that he'd had "time enough to play with names" suggests not just the activity of an explorer/geographer but of a poet. With ironic self-deprecation, Bishop captures the "Henry Ford" sensibility which views the "time" that poets play with names or words as useless. But, as mentioned above, she also recognizes the parallels between the poet and the geographer, both burdened and buoyed, like Adam, by their role as "namer." I say burdened because throughout the poem various kinds of anxiety and frustrations with the poetic calling are expressed, and yet a recognition remains of its inescapable imperative. Like Jonah trying to run and hide from his prophetic calling, Bishop's poet/geographer is not a dignified priest/prophet bravely facing the challenges of so difficult and demanding a task, but a self-pitying child whose self-indulgence rather than self-denial is what makes the world his home:

> I often gave way to self-pity.
> "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.
> I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there
> a moment when I actually chose this?
> I don't remember, but there could have been."
> What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?
> With my legs dangling down familiarly
> over a crater's edge, I told myself

"Pity should begin at home." So the more

pity I felt, the more I felt at home. (163)

Crusoe's internal conversation reflects, perhaps, the residual Calvinism of De Foe's hero. DeFoe's Crusoe had a clear sense of God's purpose, predestination, and his own free will. Bishop, who found these "morals"and "all that Christianity" in *Robinson Crusoe* "awful," wanted to "re-see" the story "with all that left out."[83] With endearing self-deprecating humor, Bishop not only re-writes the staunch theology of DeFoe's Crusoe, she strips the Romantic notion of the poetic bard striving against all adversity to rise to his calling. We recognize the familiar image of the suffering artist, cut off from normal society in his inescapable predicament to serve as prophet to the commercial bourgeois world. But Bishop recasts this figure as wallowing in maudlin self-pity. The exhortation "Pity should begin at home" becomes a licence for Bishop's Crusoe to indulge in navel-staring. Bishop's hero/poet is very human, and his motivations come out of very limited, very selfish reasons. Crusoe's dislocation finds temporary relief in self-pity.

His destiny as a castaway is bound up with the imperative to create. Island living, by its very nature, forces Crusoe into the role of artist. Suffocated by the sameness and the solipsism of this existence, Crusoe tries his hand at

---

[83]She makes this statement in her 1977 interview with George Starbuck (Monteiro, 88).

painting:

> I got so tired of the very colors!
> One day I dyed a baby goat bright red
> with my red berries, just to see
> something a little different.
> And then his mother wouldn't recognize him. (165)

Bishop puts artistry or the creative impulse in the context of trying to escape the monotony of sameness, of trying to see something "other."

Artistry has a cost, however. She portrays Crusoe's creative act as having a violent or disruptive effect on the bonds of family. The mother goat no longer recognized her kid. The continuity and linearity afforded by the connections of family are values which find their apex in the nineteenth century. In this "age of history," family was a sacred locus which encapsulated the search for depth and origin.[84] Depth and origin were the key dimensions to mapping the geography of this age, for locating the self in relation to the other. We recognize Crusoe as a modernist, for the creative endeavors of art do not share the same private space with the family as they do in Romanticism. They are in opposition. Previously, both art and the family functioned similarly as avenues for encountering the wholeness denied by the limited logic of the industrialized world. Children, in

---

[84]See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Part II, and Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism*, chapters two and four.

the Romantic and Victorian sensibility, were often idealized because they symbolized a lost innocence and connection to this wholeness. These sensibilities seem to haunt Bishop's Crusoe, for he cannot let go of them, yet he is unable to embrace them. He "wanted to propagate [his] own kind"(165), but because his companion Friday is the same sex this desire is thwarted. Even the unconscious world of his dreams send him a disturbingly ambivalent message:

> Dreams were the worst. Of course I dreamed of food
> and love, but they were pleasant rather
> than otherwise. But then I'd dream of things
> like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it
> for a baby goat. I'd have
> nightmares of other islands
> stretching away from mine, infinities
> of islands, islands spawning islands,
> like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs
> of islands, knowing that I had to live
> on each and every one, eventually,
> for ages, registering their flora,
> their fauna, their geography. (165)

In the daytime he unintentionally causes the abandonment of the baby goat by its mother, and in his dreams, he finds himself, to his greatest horror, committing

infanticide. He is the disrupter and destroyer of family lines. Fertility, rather than being a source of creative continuity and connection, becomes a nightmare, endless reproduction turning the geographer into Sisyphus. Bishop powerfully conveys this oppressive and frightening vision through the images of cancerous procreation along with the accelerating rhythm of the verse and the close repetitions of the word "island." The task of Linnaeus and his disciples to register "their flora, their fauna, their geography" was to provide for a kind of mastery or containment of all things within a table or a taxonomy. In Crusoe's nightmare this attempt at mastery mocks him by eluding him with the infinite nature of its scope, as the elusive search for origin and depth was to mock attempts at mastery in "the age of history." Bishop is evoking both these traditions of geography, Linnean and Darwinian, and by association the task of the poet to explore the world and to register her findings, only to discover a bottomless depth rendering her undertaking both inexhaustible and thus seemingly pointless.

Mastery or attempts at mastery that perhaps made so much sense and seemed so necessary in England become pointless, even ridiculous, on Crusoe's island. As a castaway, Crusoe is forced to face certain existential questions, finding himself and his "miserable philosophy" painfully incomplete. He attributes this incompleteness to a possible lack of education. Education, that key discipline or tool to mastery, the holy grail of humanism, fails Crusoe,

proving to be mere pedantry rather than substantive:

I felt a deep affection for
the smallest of my island industries.
No, not exactly, since the smallest was a miserable philosophy.

Because I didn't know enough.
Why didn't I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I'd read were all full of blanks;
the poems—well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
"They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss. . . " The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up. (164)

"The bliss of what?" about sums it up for Crusoe for he is struggling to find meaning and joy in the solitary existence of the island. This deliberate anachronism works to draw in once again not just the seventeenth-century geography of Crusoe but also the geographies or mappings of a nineteenth-century figure such as Wordsworth and to set up Crusoe's geography in contrast to these. The lines that Crusoe is attempting to recall come from Wordsworth's

"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." While walking in the country, the poet comes upon a field of daffodils edging the waters of a lake. The sight proves to be a bounty for the senses and the soul at the time, and recalled in memory it serves the poet again and again in solitary moments of contemplation:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
>
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
>
> They flash upon that inward eye
>
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
>
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
>
> And dances with the daffodils. (294)

There is a double irony to recalling these particular lines. It is not surprising that Crusoe, as a castaway, cannot remember "the bliss of solitude." The very things that fail Crusoe, memory and solitude, are what sustain and fulfill Wordsworth. The "inward eye" as well as the outward eye offer a nourishment to the nineteenth-century poet whereas Crusoe is stifled by what he sees and by what he remembers and cannot remember.[85]

If the education (and poetry) that Crusoe feels would complete him, that

---

[85]It is not completely fair to lump all poetry of the time with the sentiments expressed in Wordsworth's poem. This poem has often been singled out for derision because of the facile way in which it attempts to condense Romantic sensibility onto the weak and sentimental images of a "lonely cloud" and dancing daffodils. This criticism begins already with Coleridge, who in the *Biographia Literaria* uses it as an example of "mental bombast" where there is "a disproportion of the thought to the circumstance and occasion" (in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins, New York: HBJ, 482).

would give direction and meaning to what lies before him, fails him, proves to be merely something to "look up" like a clue in a crossword puzzle, and if the "bright violet-blue" tree snails fail as irises (or Wordsworthian daffodils) to "flash upon his inward eye" and complete him in his solitude—then, what is left? Perhaps it is this pointlessness that is at the center of the new geography Crusoe is living. It is like the moment in Darwin that Bishop appreciates so much, the moment when his attempts at mastery at "case building" fall away:

> —and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (Stevenson, 66).

It seems to be a peripheral vision that is left to Crusoe, a sight that cannot be gained directly or intentionally. The experience of this vision comes only with a loss of self-possession. Crusoe seems to sense and desire this loss for he stages his "home-made" bacchanalia on the island in an attempt to let go—to achieve complete abandonment:

> There was one kind of berry, a dark red.
> I tried it, one by one, and hours apart.
> Sub-acid, and not bad, no ill effects

and so I made home-brew. I'd drink

the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff

that went straight to my head

and play my home-made flute

(I think it had the weirdest scale on earth)

and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats. (164)

One of the dynamic experiences while reading "Crusoe in England" is the way the poem so seamlessly moves through different historical epochs as well as moving from the very private details of Bishop's life to the public domain of experience and consciousness. In this passage, we recognize Bishop's humourous capturing of her bohemian contemporaries' voice (the poem was first published in 1971) in "sub-acid, and not bad" as well as her own (now well documented) ambivalent relationship to alcohol. There is a genuine appreciation here, of the motivation behind her LSD-using students and fellow poets as well as her own alcoholism. It is perhaps not always just a matter of mind-numbing escape that they are seeking. Like them, Crusoe is seeking an abandonment or loss of self that may give him this peripheral vision, this "perfectly useless, self-forgetful concentration." Like the passage relaying Crusoe's indulgence in self-pity, Bishop offers both a critical and a sympathetic perspective to Crusoe's drunken revelry. W. H. Auden, a fellow poet who, like Bishop, was familiar with the rewards and punishments of alcohol, shares a similar perspective. At a

difficult period in her life,[86] Bishop copies this passage from Auden into her journal, prefacing it with "DO NOT FORGET this FIRST QUOTE. . . .MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL":

> The drunk is unlovely to look at, intolerable to listen to, [and] his self-pity is contemptible. Nevertheless, as not merely a worldly failure, but also a [willful] failure, he is a disturbing image for the sober [citizen]. His refusal to accept the realities of this world, babyish as it may be, compels us to take another look at this world and reflect upon our motives for accepting it. (Lombardi, 113)

Drunkenness as a path to deeper engagement with the world has a long history. Baudelaire reclaims the bacchanalian rites when he embraces the dark side of experience as a way of escaping the banality that deadens our day to day lives:

> One should always be drunk. That's the great thing; the only question. Not to feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and bowing you to the earth, you should be drunk without respite. Drunk with what? With wine, with poetry, or

---

[86]Marilyn Lombardi brings this passage from Bishop's journals to our attention in her extensive examination of the relationship of Bishop's alcoholism to her poetry. Lombardi explains that the passage from Auden was copied into Bishop's journal when she was "well into her fifties and reeling from the shock of being told that she would have to leave Lota [her lover and companion for nearly fifteen years] because her presence was harmful to Lota's mental health." (113).

with virtue, as you please. But get drunk. (*Paris*, 74)

Like Baudelaire, Bishop's Crusoe feels the "horrible burden of Time weighing" on his shoulders. DeFoe's seventeenth-century Crusoe marks time by his productivity. His various projects while "cultivating" the island are what continues the plot. The reader shares in Crusoe's self-satisfaction as the narrative moves through these various accomplishments, the narrative time carrying the same impetus as the time spent by Crusoe on the island. It is appropriate that Bishop's Crusoe is not produced through narrative time but through poetry, a medium that is in some ways resistant to the logic and values of this kind of time (in both its reading as well as its production, "I had time enough to play with names"). In addition to measured productivity, one can find redemption in time through the connections and continuities of history or family. But Bishop chooses a protagonist for whom these ways of making meaning, and of placing the self, fail. Crusoe is a castaway, and his only companion is of the same sex and cannot help him "propagate his own kind." The redemptive values of productivity and of historical continuity fail and fall away from this twentieth-century Crusoe. He is still left with the same western figuring of time, but it can no longer carry these redemptive values; its predictive, measured, and repetitive qualities have become stultifying and pointless like the "fifty-two/ miserable,

small volcanoes."[87]

Baudelaire's remedy to "get drunk" is followed by Crusoe [and it is amusing that the creation of the "sub-acid" "home-brew" and the mystical flute are the accomplishments in which this Crusoe takes pride in: "I felt a deep affection for the smallest of my island industries"(164), Bishop's parody of DeFoe's Crusoe—the Calvinist work ethic to produce mind altering drugs—further marking the distance between the two]. The problem with this avenue to abandonment, however, is its willfulness, its deliberateness, its attempt at mastering the relinquishment of mastery. In the close of the essay "Circles," which Nietzsche found so provocative and drew from so heavily, Emerson writes of abandonment and its willed imitations:

> The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle. . . .The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment. . . .Dreams and drunkenness, the use of opium and alcohol are the semblance and counterfeit of this oracular genius, and hence their dangerous attraction for men. For the like reason, they ask the aid of wild passions, as in gaming and

---

[87]Much of the source for this argument concerning modernists' sense of the exhaustion of values in western time comes from Quinones's *Mapping Literary Modernism*.

> war, to ape in some manner these flames and generosities of the heart. (414)

Emerson's description of the "aping" of abandonment through artificial means fits Crusoe's "home-made" bacchanalia well, yet Emerson's exuberant "the way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment" hardly captures the mood of Bishop's Crusoe seeking to escape the singularity of his solitary island existence. While the belief and the motivation for abandonment remain, its realization for Crusoe is only ever partial. It is much closer to Proust's involuntary memory, the epiphany of the banal and everyday, fully experienced only after it has already been lost. It is the recognition of a Crusoe in England that "home" was the strangeness of his un-renamable, un-rediscovered island.

Marilyn Lombardi makes an extensive exploration of the relationship between Bishop's alcoholism and her poetry in her book *The Body and the Song*. While she makes no specific reference to "Crusoe in England," she does make the general argument that "For Bishop, inebriation seemed to lighten harsh realities, particularly the prospect of a transient life and the thought of a universe similarly devoid of purpose or volition. Under alcohol's influence, the world appeared whole and intelligible. . ."(112). This certainly matches well with Crusoe's attempts to unburden himself of the existential realities of the island. But, as Lombardi points out, Bishop's ambivalence toward this avenue of escape is as strong as her ambivalence toward the Baudelairian tradition in lyric poetry:

> She associated her struggle to quit drinking with her fight to rid poetry of various intellectual crutches that she identified primarily with the *poète maudit* tradition. . . . At first, drinking offered Bishop a seductive and habit forming sense of security and well-being. Gradually, she began to equate the attractiveness of alcohol with the allure of poetry that aimed for transcendence and promised to gratify her primal longing for a world of sublimity and sanctity. As she grew contemptuous of the one, she grew contemptuous of the other. (112)

Baudelaire and Nietszche claim the power of the artist to remake reality as superior to the merely given, natural world. Bishop's affirmation of the artist's ability to transfigure reality is much more modest, tentative even. While nature may remain mute and dumb for Crusoe, the artist's efforts hardly improve upon incoherent reality. The brilliant and terrible command of the Baudelairian alchemist has been reduced and tamed by the time it reaches Bishop's Crusoe; it has become the folksy creative endeavors that result in something "home-made."

The moment of reprieve for the castaway comes not through his own willing but through fate which allowed him the temporary companionship of Friday. The emotional and psychological tension in the poem crescendos from a quiet minor chord in the opening of the poem to the forte of frantic anxiety conveyed by his nightmares of cancerous fertility. The announcement of

Friday's arrival follows this nightmare, and through both its rhythm and emotional tonality, it plays like a soft chord resolving all the dissonance building up to it.

> Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
> another minute longer, Friday came.
> (Accounts of that have everything all wrong).
> Friday was nice.
> Friday was nice, and we were friends.
> If only he had been a woman!
> I wanted to propagate my kind
> and so did he, I think, poor boy.
> He'd pet the baby goats sometimes,
> and race with them, or carry one around.
> —Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body. (165-166)

"Friday was nice" says nothing, and yet in its repetition it says everything. It sounds as a sort of insistence or reassurance to self and to others. By mentioning "accounts of that have it all wrong," we are aware that there is an outside audience, an official account, against which Crusoe must play his own recounting, his own memory. But like the "un-renamable" status of the island, the relationship seems to defy naming or description, the amorphous adjective "nice" offering a stand-in for the inexplicable experience of companionship.

Bishop is once again drawing attention to the finite capabilities of the poet/explorer to describe, name, or account for all of experience. We have lost the power to truly name things. We come closer to realizing them by pointing to them, framing a space around them, rather than attempting to label what cannot be labeled.

There is sexual and emotional release with the simple statement "Friday came," and yet the release or resolution is only partially realized for Friday is not a "woman." The relationship is painfully limited with its inherent infertility. The longing for the connections and continuity found through family are met in this modern Crusoe by either nauseating nightmares of endless fertility, pointless creations spreading continually before him, or the sterility that frustrates the gratification of a same-sex relationship. The pleasures afforded one in the modern terrain of a Geography III are best represented not by heterosexual union but by an oblique but positively charged homoeroticism.[88]

Knowing the details of Bishop's biography, one finds it hard not to make

---

[88]Joanne Feit Diehl connects Bishop's valuing of the oblique with the aesthetic tradition of the American sublime, most notably Whitman's "poetic coupling of homosexuality with erotic power"(19). Noting Bishop's use of gender crossing in poems such as "Crusoe in England" as well as her use of different modes of distancing, Diehl argues that Bishop continues the American tradition of the sublime as well as transforms it:

> Bishop incorporates Whitmanian prudence with sexual radicalism, as prudence assumes the guise of verbal deflection of effacement, . . . .the definition of erotic pleasure through absence and the unspoken. Such verbal masking allows Bishop to preserve the erotic while deconstructing heterosexist categories. (19)

the jump from character to author as many critics have done.[89] It appears as if Bishop is self-consciously following here the well-worn tradition of travel/survival literature which often used the unfamiliar world of exploration to enact what would be considered taboo in the context of home. Bishop seems to be, on one level, using the Crusoe/Friday relationship to convey the complexities and contingencies of lesbian love. And yet to relegate this poem to a simple confessional statement would be to limit its critical and historical scope, to ignore how it contemplates our inherited traditions as well as the current possibilities and limitations for making meaning.

Bishop levels a critical eye upon the inevitable inequality in the relationship between Crusoe and Friday. Crusoe's erotic appreciation of the younger darker man comes through objectification " —Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body." This objectification certainly isn't reciprocated; one can hardly imagine the elegant and exotic Friday admiring the gnarly old European, Crusoe. One also recognizes the masculine and paternal gaze of Crusoe on the child-like Friday who would ". . .pet the baby goats sometimes,/ and race with them, or carry one around." As mentioned above, Bishop's Crusoe follows DeFoe's

---

[89]Lorrie Goldensohn argues that readers will miss the "fullest vocal range" of a poem if we do not consider biography when reading this (or other) poem(s). She recognizes in Crusoe a Bishop whose love for children conflicted with her lesbian relationships in a frustrated desire to "propagate [her] own kind." She hears in "Crusoe in England" a "numbed Elizabeth Bishop after her return to her homeland, reacting to the traumatic death of Lota de Macedo Soares." "The Body's Roses" (in *The Geography of Gender*, ed. M. Lombardi, Charlottsville: University of Virginia Press, 1993, 77).

Crusoe and other travel writers' protagonists by couching the erotic and even the transgressive erotic within the imperial gaze. By participating and rewriting this familiar story from survival literature, Bishop's poem implicates the poet along with the explorer as seeing through these eyes. The poet's appreciation of beauty and of the other is not free from the parameters and the politics of objectification.

Pratt describes the tradition of exploring the erotic in survival literature in her study *Imperial Eyes*:

> Throughout the history of early Eurocolonialism and the slave trade, survival literature furnished a safe context for staging alternative, revitalizing, and taboo configurations of intercultural contact: Europeans enslaved by non-Europeans, Europeans assimilating to non-European societies, and Europeans confounding new transracial social orders. The context of survival literature was "safe" for transgressive plots, since the very existence of a text presupposed the imperially correct outcome: the survivor survived, and sought reintegration into the home society. The tale was always told from the viewpoint of the European who returned. (87)

As the title"Crusoe in England"makes explicit, the controlling perspective and perhaps central message of the poem is "the viewpoint of the European who returned." But in this new geography, survival proves to be punishment. Set

off as its own stanza and directly following the reminiscence upon Friday's "pretty body" is the abrupt announcement "And then one day they came and took us off." The momentary pleasure afforded by the memory of Friday on the island is cut cruelly short by the necessary return to "home." The one sentence stanza serves as bridge connecting, with its "matter of fact" observation, the two worlds of the poem—England and the island, memory and the present. It is the travel between home and elsewhere. But where is home for Crusoe? Bishop's reinterpretation of survival literature makes the idea of home problematic. As the closing paragraphs painfully convey, Crusoe may survive the measles that take the life of his dear friend, but he cannot "reintegrate" "into the home society." "The imperially correct outcome" is thwarted.

Back in England, the volatile creativity of spawning islands has been extinguished:

> My blood was full of them; my brain
> bred islands. But that archipelago
> has petered out. I'm old.
> I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,
> surrounded by uninteresting lumber. (166)

No longer tortured and swollen by an overabundance of fertility, Crusoe is now comfortable but also bored. Bishop's modern Crusoe lives either with the disturbing and un-containable realities of the island or the flat and bracketed

existence of England, not unlike Beckett's two types of travelers who are either tossed about in the disorientation of culture shock or who flatten all before them with habit and familiarity. The ease, security and settled perspective of Crusoe's "home country," although longed for while on the island, has drained the "life" out of the objects around him. Yet, this realization—the significance and importance of these objects—comes only through retrospection, through a comparison between how they exist now as opposed to their presence and function in the past:

> The knife there on the shelf—
> it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
> It lived. How many years did I
> beg it, implore it, not to break?
> I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
> the bluish blade, the broken tip,
> the lines of wood-grain on the handle. . .
> Now it won't look at me at all.
> The living soul had dribbled away.
> My eyes rest on it and pass on.

Crusoe's knife lying on the shelf in England is severed from its original relationship with him. It has become, to use Heidegger's terms, *vorhanden* or "objectively present" as opposed to *zuhanden* or "handy." As a tool essential to

Crusoe's life, the knife existed originally as part of a practical living engagement with the world. Now, however, it is separate from him; it has become an object of contemplation disconnected from its original function, and "The living soul has dribbled away." By making these now useless and lifeless objects from the island the focus of Crusoe's attention at the close of his life's review, Bishop places herself squarely within modernism. For Crusoe/Bishop is pointing out how the subject/object division—so central to scientific, philosophical, and even poetical understanding in the western tradition—is a secondary construct, formed after an original situatedness in which we engage with the world. The "museum mentality" that Crusoe finds absurd can be applied to the poet as well. Bishop does not exempt herself from the realization that often a kind of violence occurs rather than a restoration when the poet attempts to take the world into her gaze. With bitterness, her character Crusoe finds these objects, so valued by others, empty and grotesque when compared to the effervescence of love and the memory of it:

> The local museum's asked me to
> leave everything to them:
> the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,
> my shedding goatskin trousers
> (moths have got in the fur),
> the parasol that took me such a time

remembering the way the ribs should go.

It still will work but, folded up,

looks like a plucked and skinny fowl.

How can anyone want such things?

—And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles

seventeen years ago come March. (166)

Crusoe in England is grieving. His perspective is one formed from the insights gained only through the stringent rigors of grief. Fullness of appreciation is impossible in the lived moment. It is experienced only in memory, only after loss and the passage of time. Just as Bishop makes the location of home problematic, so that a sense of what constitutes home is found only through a juxtaposition of places (home is England from the perspective of the island and the island is home from the perspective of England), so she makes the distance created through loss the only source of intimacy. Expanding on Adrienne Rich's observation that ". . .poems examining intimate relationships are almost wholly absent from Bishop's later work. . . .What takes their place is a series of poems examining relationships between people who are , for reasons of difference, distanced; rich and poor, landowner and tenant, white woman and Black woman, invader and native," Joanne Diehl points out that:

> Intimacy, along with a strong eroticism, exists throughout Bishop's work and yet that intimacy. . . is not simply distanced by

> differences of class and race but is invoked most powerfully in terms of loss. For it is through absence, departure, and death that eroticism in Bishop's poems receives its fullest expression, as if like Dickinson, Bishop believed that "absence makes the present mean." (23)

While it may be in loss that " the eroticism in Bishop's poems receive [their] fullest expression," one should not mistake this fullness for depth or self-possession. Grief slams us against the inescapable surface quality of our lives, as Emerson—after losing his four-year-old son—bitterly realized:

> The only thing that grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which , we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers. (472-473)

And yet "a description of the earth's surface" is, Bishop tells us, what defines a *Geography III*. The landscape of this geography retraces this surface and recognizes that self-possession is a deceiving fiction. Crusoe is forever divided between islands, between present and past, between:

> Life and the memory of it so compressed
> they've turned into each other. Which is which?
> Life and the memory of it cramped,
> dim, on a piece of Bristol board,

dim, but how live, how touching in detail

the little of our earthly trust. Not much. (176)

In this poem, entitled "Poem" and included in *Geography III*, Bishop humbly embraces the modest but utterly significant function of art within life. "Useless and free" because it "has never earned any money in its life," her "Uncle George's" sketch of a Nova Scotian Landscape "coincides" with her own memory of the same place. She delights in this recognition and in the strange connection it makes between her dead and distant relative and herself, and in this delight she understands that while memory and mimesis do not offer any kind of restoration of self or of life, their "coincidence" or juxtaposition do give a temporary reprieve or opening from the parameters of the present. The painting and the poem do not offer a restoration of self any more than they offer remuneration. They are "useless and free," but these are the values after all of a *Geography III*: "a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration."

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. "On Lyric Poetry and Society." In *Notes to Literature, Vol. I.* Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." In *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 3rd Ed.* Ed. Alexander Allison, et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983.

Barton, Anne. Introduction to *Twelfth Night or What You Will.* In *The Riverside Shakespeare.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Les Fleurs du Mal.* Trans. Richard Howard. Boston: David R. Godine, 1983.

_____. *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings.* Trans. Norman Cameron. London: Soho Book, 1986.

_____. *Paris Spleen.* Trans. Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions, 1970.

Bearn, Gordon C. F. "Wittgenstein and the Uncanny." *Soundings* 76.1 (Spring, 1993): 29-58.

Beckett, Samuel. *Proust.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1931.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Image of Proust." *Illuminations.* New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979.* New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989.

_____. *The Collected Prose.* Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984.

_____. *One Art.* Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994.

Cavell, Stanley. "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary." In *Quest of the Ordinary.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "uncanny"). *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976): 525-548.

Coleridge, Samuel T. *Biographia Literaria*. London: Oxford University Press, 1954.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York, Dell, 1960.

Colwell, Anne. *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997.

Costello, Bonnie. *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Doreski, C. K. *Elizabeth Bishop, The Restraints of Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Diehl, Joanne Feit. "Bishop's Sexual Politics." In *Elizabeth Bishop, The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi. Charlottsville: University of Virginia Press, 1993.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Experience." *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983.

Estess, Sybil P.. "Description and Imagination in Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Map.'" In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.

Freud, Sigmund. "Das Unheimliche." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, volume XVIII (1917-1919)*. Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press & Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1968. 217-253.

_____. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, Co., 1961.

_____. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. Dr. A. A. Brill. New York: Random House, Inc., 1978.

Foucault, Michel. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Harper Colophon, 1972.

_____. *The Order of Things, An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (A translation of *Les Mots et les Choses)*. New York: Random House, 1970.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Faust*. Trans. Walter Arndt. Ed. Cyrus Hamlin. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001).

Goldensohn, Lorrie. *Elizabeth Bishop: A Biography of a Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan, A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

*The Harper Dictionary of Foreign Terms, 3rd. Edition*. Ed. Eugene Ehrlich. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Harrison, Victoria. *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*. Cambridge: University of America, 1983.

Jameson, Frederic, "Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist: The Dissolution of the Referent and the Artificial "Sublime." In *Lyric Poetry, Beyond New Criticism*. Eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

_____. "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject." In *Psychoanalysis and Literature, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*. Ed. Shoshana Felman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

Kalstone, David. *Five Temperaments*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up from the Pedastal: Selected Writings in the Hisotry of American Feminism*. Chicago: Quandrangle Books, 1968.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977.

Larkin, Phillip. *Collected Poems*. New York: Noonday Press, 1998.

Levy, Silvano. "Magritte: The Uncanny and The Image." *French Studies Bulletin*. 46 (Spring, 1993): 15-17.

Lombardi, Marilyn May. *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995.

Margoshes, Adam. "Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vols. 7 and 8, Index*. New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1972.

McCabe, Susan. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

Mc Neil, Helen. "Elizabeth Bishop." In *Voices and Visions, The Poet in America*, (Companion to the PBS television series produced by the New York Center for Visual History). Ed. Helen Vendler. New York: Random House, 1987.

Merrill, James. "Elizabeth Bishop, 1911-1979." In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Eds. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.

Miller, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Monteiro, George, ed. *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996.

*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1986.

Pinsky, Robert. "The Idiom of a Self: Elizabeth Bishop and Wordsworth." In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Proust, Marcel. *Á la recherche du temps perdu vol.II (Within a Budding Grove)*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Rev. by D.J. Enright. New York: Modern Library, 1992.

Quinones, Ricardo J. *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Rajan, Tilottama. "Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness." In *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. Eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Ricouer, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Trans. Denis Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

Riquelme, J. P. "Location and Home in Beckett, Bhabba, Fanon, and Heidegger." *The Centennial Review*. 42.3. 541-568.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defense of Poetry." In *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

Stevenson, Anne. *Elizabeth Bishop*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Travisano, Thomas J. *Elizabeth Bishop, Her Artistic Development*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988.

Vendler, Helen. "Elizabeth Bishop: Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly." In *Part of Nature, Part of Us*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Wagoner, David. *Through the Forest: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987.

*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1983.

Whitman, Walt. *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1982.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Wordsworth, William. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." In *English Romantic Writers*. Ed. David Perkins. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991.

Yeats, William Butler. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989.