THE LITTLE OF OUR EARTHLY TRUST: THE POST-ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY IN THE POETRY OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this thesis is to demonstrate that Elizabeth Bishop's sensibility, often understood to be unique, is actually post-romantic. Her poetry displays a dynamic tension between the modern and romantic visions of the world. Modernism is exhibited in Bishop's recognition that she exists in a disordered, impermanent, dying world, wherein man is isolated from God, nature, and other men; romanticism is exhibited in her belief that art, as created by the active imagination or by memory to reconstruct the things of the world in an understandable manner, is capable of redeeming man from his desperate isolation, of providing the unity between mind and world necessary for survival.

The first chapter presents the definition of romanticism that forms the basis of the study, and suggests that a background to Bishop's poetry may be perceived in

the poetry of Emerson, Dickinson, Frost, and Stevens. The second chapter discusses Bishop's search for, and relinquishment of, a sustaining myth--a belief that God or nature orders the world in the interest of man. Her eventual acceptance of the world on its terms is demonstrated in the third chapter. This acceptance co-exists with a realization that imagination and memory, while they cannot actually recreate or change experience, can at least make it bearable. The conclusion presents Bishop's ultimate discovery that the sustaining myth must come from within herself.

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bishop, unlike many of her predecessors and contemporaries, rarely divulged what she believed to be the nature of poetry. Few of her poems, stories, or articles contain statements or even speculations about poetic theory, such as those in the writings of Marianne Moore or Wallace Stevens. Bishop was probably aware that, in a sense, her reluctance to comment on poetic theory separated her from her contemporaries. At the end of a 1977 interview with George Starbuck, she remarked: "Well, I haven't said anything profound. . . . In their interviews, Miss Moore always said something to make one think very hard about writing, about technique--and Lowell always says something I find mysterious. . . ."[1] When Starbuck gave her an opportunity to say something "mysterious," Bishop responded with what eventually appeared on the page as an exclamation point, and thereby avoided making a "profound" comment.

This reticence surrounding her ideas about poetry was characteristic of Bishop. An early example may be found in the short introduction she wrote to a few of her poems in a 1950 anthology. Asked about her method of writing poetry,

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[1]George Starbuck, "'The Work!': A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop," Ploughshares 3, nos. 3 and 4 (1977): 29.

she equivocated: "It all depends. It all depends on the particular poem one happens to be trying to write, and the range of possibilities is, one trusts, infinite."[2] Asked about her theories concerning poetry, she replied:

> Physique, temperament, religion, politics, and immediate circumstances all play their parts in formulating one's theories on verse. And then they play them again and differently when one is writing it. No matter what theories one may have, I doubt very much that they are in one's mind at the moment of writing a poem or that there is even a physical possibility that they could be. Theories can only be based on interpretations of other poet's poems, or one's own in retrospect, or wishful thinking.[3]

Sixteen years later, she still refused to commit herself to any generalizations about poetic theory. When, in a 1966 interview with Ashley Brown, she was asked to comment on the poet's need of a sustaining myth, she again responded:

> It all depends--some poets do, some don't. You must have something to sustain you, but perhaps you needn't be conscious of it. . . . The question, I admit, doesn't interest me a great deal. I'm not interested in big-scale work as such. Something needn't be large to be good.[4]

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[2]Elizabeth Bishop, "It All Depends," in Mid-Century American Poets, ed. John Ciardi (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1950), p. 267.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ashley Brown, "An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop," Shenandoah 17 (Winter 1966): 11.

A recently published transcript of conversations and class notes, also dating from 1966, reveals that Bishop's reticence about poetic matters was not complete; it also reveals that one of her principal concerns was technique. Criticizing the tendency of her students at the University of Washington to sacrifice technique for the sake of communication, she commented: "And if anyone in that class uses the word 'communicate' once more, I'm going to scream! I hate that word! Those students are not there to 'express' themselves; they're there to learn how to write a good poem."[5] Bishop's work displays her concern with writing "good" poems, and it is highly praised by critics for its technical perfection. During a career which extended from her years at Vassar in the 1930s until her death in 1979, Bishop published fewer than one hundred poems, which perhaps indicates that she spent much of her time polishing and revising her work. Her poems were usually written slowly; their composition sometimes extended over many years, as "The Moose," which took twenty years to complete,[6] exemplifies. In his poem "For Elizabeth Bishop 4," Robert Lowell commented on his friend's method of writing:

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[5]Wesley Wehr, "Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes," Antioch Review 39 (Summer 1981): 320.

[6]Elizabeth Spires, "The Art of Poetry XXVII: Elizabeth Bishop," Paris Review 80 (Summer 1981): 63.

> Have you seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf
> cling to the very end, revolve in air,
> feeling for something to reach to something? Do
> you still hang your words in air, ten years
> unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
> or empties for the unimaginable phrase--
> unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?[7]

The time and care she devoted to each poem, and her refusal to ally herself with any particular poetic school, become hampered by a philosophical system, or even acknowledge a sustaining myth, all contribute to the diversity that seems to characterize Bishop's poetry: the quality that makes each poem seem individual and independent of the others. As idiosyncratic as the poems may appear, however, they were not created in a vacuum. In various interviews, she has acknowledged the influence of several poets, especially George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Marianne Moore.

In Bishop's interview with Ashley Brown, she mentioned that she admired the surrealistic qualities of Herbert's poetry, particularly "Love Unknown," and mentioned that it is upon this poem that her own poem, "The Weed," is based.[8] Herbert's influence on Bishop may also be observed in the conceits that appear in such poems as

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[7]Robert Lowell, History (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 198.

[8]Brown, "An Interview," p. 10.

"The Colder the Air," in which the winter air is portrayed as a huntress,[9] or "The Man-Moth," in which a newspaper misprint of "mammoth" inspired her to conceive of man as a moth-like creature who inhabits "pale subways of cement" (CP, 16).

Bishop's interest in Hopkins is also expressed in her interview with Brown. This interest was of long standing; in early adolescence, she was given Harriet Monroe's anthology of modern poets:

> That was an important experience. (I had actually started reading poetry when I was eight.) I remember coming across Harriet Monroe's quotations from Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" for one. I quickly memorized these, and I thought, "I must get this man's work." In 1927 I saw the first edition of Hopkins.[10]

Hopkins' influence on Bishop may be seen in both the forms and subjects of her poetry. In an essay she wrote while at Vassar, she explored "timing" in Hopkins' poetry, the unity of various components of sound in a poem.[11] Her study of Hopkins is revealed immediately in her use of strongly stressed, alliterative language, as a glance at an excerpt

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[9]Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 7. All further references to this volume appear in the text, with the indication CP followed by a page number.

[10]Brown, "An Interview," p. 6.

[11]Elizabeth Bishop, "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry," Vassar Review 23 (February 1934): 5-7.

from a poem of each demonstrates:

> Glory be to God for dappled things--
> For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
> Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls . . .
>
> Hopkins, "Pied Beauty"[12]

> Granted a page alone or a page made up
> of several scenes arranged in cattycornered
> rectangles
> or circles set on stippled gray,
> granted a grim lunette . . .
>
> Bishop, "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" (CP, 65)

The "stipple" shared by the trout and the page of print labels a visual technique that each poet has translated into sound. The staccato of the harsh, alliterating consonants conveys the discontinuity in each scene that is described.

The same precise observation of nature that characterizes Hopkins' poetry is also present in Bishop's. "A Cold Spring" (1952)[13] opens with an epigraph that consists of the first line of Hopkins' poem "Spring":

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[12]Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 3rd. ed., edited by W. H. Gardner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 74.

[13]Date of first publication. This, and further references to dates, are from Candace W. MacMahon, Elizabeth Bishop: A Bibliography, 1927-1979 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980).

"Nothing is so beautiful as spring."[14] However, there is a difference between the poets' views of spring. Whereas Hopkins' spring is "lush," filled with "richness" and "joy," Bishop's spring is "cold" and stark. Unlike the weeds in Hopkins' poem, which "shoot long and lovely and lush," the greenery in Bishop's poem is restrained:

> For two weeks or more the trees hesitated;
> the little leaves waited,
> carefully indicating their characteristics.
> Finally a grave green dust
> settled over your big and aimless hills.
>
> (CP, 63)

But like Hopkins' "racing lambs," who "have fair their fling," the animals in Bishop's poem become active: "Four deer practised leaping over your fences." The thrush, who in Hopkins' poem, "through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring / The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing," is matched in Bishop's poem by the "song-sparrows," who are "wound up for the summer." Bishop's landscape, however, lacks the abandon of Hopkins': everything is cautious and graceful, less vibrant. The "practising" deer and the "wound-up" sparrows seem artificial. The most important difference between the poems, perhaps, is exemplified in the conclusions. Hopkins warns us to enjoy the spring while we can: "Have, get,

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[14] Hopkins, p. 71.

before it cloy." Bishop's scene, on the other hand, is less ripe, less likely to spoil:

> And your shadowy pastures will be able to offer
> these particular glowing tributes
> every evening now throughout the summer.
>
> (CP, 64)

W. A. M. Peters points out that Hopkins' precise observation of the elements of the landscape was a means to a greater end: to the discovery of their "inscape," what Peters calls "the outward reflection of the inner nature of a thing."[15] He defines Hopkins' term more completely as:

> the unified complex of those sensible qualities of an object that strike us as inseparably belonging to and most typical of that object, so that through the knowledge of this unified complex of sense-data we may gain an insight into the individual essence of the object.[16]

Bishop appears to have been influenced by Hopkins' concept of inscape, for her poetry reveals what David Kalstone calls "inner landscapes."[17] These exist within or beneath the outer landscapes she describes. Her precise observations

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[15] W. A. M. Peters, Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of His Poetry (N.p.: Oxford University Press, 1948; reprint ed., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), p. 2.

[16] Ibid.

[17] David Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Memory, Questions of Travel," in his Five Temperaments (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 40.

and her careful choice of words, like Hopkins', are attempts to reveal these inner landscapes. However, there is a sacramental quality in his view of nature that is not present in Bishop's; whereas God energizes Hopkins' landscapes, the driving force behind Bishop's landscapes--if there is one--is never revealed.

Probably the most widely recognized influence on Bishop is that of Marianne Moore. Bishop was introduced to Moore during her last year at Vassar, and her mentor's hand is very much in evidence in Bishop's early poetry. Letters from Bishop to Moore indicate that Moore read and made suggestions about "The Weed," "Paris, 7 A.M.," "A Miracle for Breakfast," "The Fish," and "Roosters."[18] Moore was responsible for Bishop's ultimate decision not to capitalize the first word of each line of poetry. She comments about "The Fish" in one letter to Moore: "I left off the outline of capitals, too, and feel very ADVANCED."[19]

Moore's greatest influence on Bishop, like Hopkins', may be seen in Bishop's constant delight in language, not simply as a descriptive tool, but as a means of finding unity and renewal. In her light-hearted "Invitation to Marianne Moore" (1948; CP, 94-96), she imagines her friend

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[18]Excerpts from these letters are reproduced in MacMahon, pp. 142-49.

[19]Ibid., p. 148.

flying over New York in the early morning. As an inducement, she says:

> The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged.
> The waves are running in verses this fine morning.
> Please come flying.

Bishop associates the waves with verses--nature with art--in this passage, an association she pursues a few stanzas later, as she envisions Moore:

> Mounting the sky with natural heroism,
> above the accidents, above the malignant movies,
> the taxicabs and injustices at large,
> while horns are resounding in your beautiful ears
> that simultaneously listen to
> a soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer,
> please come flying.

This passage contrasts the discordant sounds of accidents, "malignant movies," taxis, "injustices at large," and the horns of the city with the "soft uninvented music," a music "fit for the musk deer." Moore, with her "beautiful ears," can hear the natural music simultaneously with the discord. Bishop's awareness of Moore's power with language is revealed in the seventh stanza, where she again picks up the thread of discord in the contemporary world:

> With dynasties of negative constructions
> darkening and dying around you,
> with grammar that suddenly turns and shines
> like flocks of sandpipers flying,
> please come flying.

Again, the natural world is associated with art: the "negative constructions" possess both grammatical and social implications, and the "grammar" is compared to "flocks of sandpipers." The stanza presents Bishop's belief that Moore is able to overcome the pessimism of the contemporary world and the "darkening and dying," possibly, of contemporary poetic language by using language as a means of renewal, by investing it with the life to "turn and shine." And Moore herself shines:

> Come like a light in the white mackeral sky,
> come like a daytime comet
> with a long unnebulous train of words,
> from Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
> please come flying.

The clarity of Moore's language, the "long unnebulous train of words," is a characteristic that Bishop admired greatly and attempted to attain in her own poetry.

Along with her admiration of Moore's clear language went Bishop's respect for Moore's observant eye. In a 1948 essay on Moore's poetry, she wrote: "As far as I know, Miss Marianne Moore is The World's Greatest Living Observer."[20] Comparing Moore with Shakespeare and Hopkins, she claimed that Moore's descriptions are more accurate, and remarked:

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[20]Elizabeth Bishop, "As We Like It," Quarterly Review of Literature 4, no. 2 (1948): 129.

> I do not understand the nature of the satisfaction a completely accurate description or imitation of anything at all can give, but apparently in order to produce it the description or imitation must be brief, compact, and have at least the effect of being spontaneous.[21]

Throughout her career, Bishop attempted to obtain the same spontaneous effects that she perceived in Moore's poetry. The amount of critical writing which concentrates on Bishop's descriptions suggests that she was successful.

The influences of Herbert, Hopkins, and Moore on Bishop's poetry are fairly obvious. Less easy to delineate, but still clearly present in Bishop's work, are general assumptions about aesthetics and about life in general that characterized the era in which she wrote. Once these assumptions are extracted and examined, it becomes evident that, while Bishop may have denied the importance of a sustaining myth, she did possess a particular attitude toward life and art that shaped her poetry. That attitude, I think, is best described as post-romantic.

Bishop's sensibility combines romantic and modern characteristics. There are many characteristics of her poetry that are undoubtedly modern; the surrealistic qualities of some of her earlier work, and the elevation of the individual's perception and understanding of the world in combination with a sense of alienation from God, nature,

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[21] Ibid., pp. 130-31.

and man, exhibit the modern sensibility. On the other hand, present in Bishop's poetry is a constant quest for unity between alienated man and his environment, and a hope that some principle of order underlies the world. Moreover, her poetry exhibits occasional moments of transcendence beyond the things of the physical world, perhaps not completely understood, but experienced, nonetheless. These characteristics ally her with the romantic attitude. Of course, the romantic and modern sensibilities are not contradictory; rather, they represent different responses to the common perception that the world is not neatly ordered and easily comprehended by man, but chaotic and disordered. Whereas the romantic sensibility substitutes the imagination of the artist for an ordering principle, the modern sensibility exhibits a disbelief in any possibility of order; the world remains chaotic, and man remains alienated, but he accepts his lot, and survives.

Like an early romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wished to act as a mediator between traditional and contemporary poetic concerns,[22] Elizabeth Bishop may be described as an untraditional traditionalist, for there seem to be two impulses at work in her poetry. The first

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[22]Max F. Schulz, The Poetic Voices of Coleridge: A Study of His Desire for Spontaneity and Passion for Order (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964), p. 192.

is a definite breaking-away from tradition; the second is a desire to retain it, even if in an altered form. These conflicting impulses may be attributed to the fact that she is a post-romantic, combining the romantic desire to recreate the world imaginatively with the modern realization that the world exists independently of her imagination. The following chapters present the ways in which Bishop's poetry conforms to the romantic tradition, Bishop's eventual relinquishment of a sustaining myth, and her final acceptance of the world on its own terms.

I. THE ROMANTIC BACKGROUND

M. H. Abrams, in Natural Supernaturalism, identifies the major impulse of the romantic movement as "an attempt to sustain the inherited cultural order against what to many writers seemed the imminence of chaos,"[1] and discusses "the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking"[2] that characterized the era. The distinguishing feature of the early romantics, he says,

> derives from the fact that they undertook, whatever their religious creed or lack of creed, to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to the creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature.[3]

One of the major forces in the romantic ideal was the reconciliation of opposites. Abrams traces this notion back to the neo-Platonic idea that the fall of man was a "falling-away-from" God, and that it alienated man and God. The solution to this alienation was "reintegration," or in Christian terms, "redemption," a travelling back to the

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[1] M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971), p. 68.

[2] Ibid., p. 12. [3] Ibid., p. 13.

source, which was achieved by "love," or "cohesive and sustaining supernatural energy."[4] When secularized, the alienation between God and man became the conflict between nature and the mind,[5] and the trip back to the source was replaced by the spiritual journey.[6] The love that drew the conflicting elements together in the Christian scheme was replaced by the active imagination of the artist in the romantic scheme. Abrams quotes the German romantic philosopher Schelling as he explains that the resolution of conflict is located in:

> the concept of the "imagination" of the productive artist, the one faculty by which we are able both "to think and to reconcile contradictions," and which annuls, by uniting in a single activity and product, the ultimate contradiction working "at the roots of the artist's whole being," between nature and intelligence, conscious and unconscious, subject and object.[7]

The conflict is reduced, ultimately, to the self and the other. Robert Langbaum, in The Poetry of Experience, demonstrates how important the other, or experience of the natural world, is to the romantic attitude. He points out that the "romantic reconstruction"[8] that occurs in the

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[4]Ibid., pp. 151-52. [5]Ibid., p. 183.

[6]Ibid., p. 193. [7]Ibid., p. 174.

[8]Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (New York: Random House, 1957; reprint ed., New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963), p. 20.

romantic mind must be based on aspects of everyday experience. He argues that Locke's empirical view that ordinary perception is not reliable "gives us a world without aesthetic, moral or spiritual significance,"[9] and suggests that "against such a world view, the romanticist protests by appealing not to tradition but to his own concrete experience of nature, his own insight into 'the life of things.'"[10]

His insight, it may be suggested, is his imagination, which is characterized by sudden moments of recognition of meaning in the world, variously referred to as a moment of illumination, a moment of revelation, or an epiphany. Langbaum, like Abrams, claims that "imagination has been the instrument of revelation; while the revelation itself has been that living organic reality which the imagination perceives through immediate experience of the natural world."[11]

The close association between the perceiver and that which is perceived is characteristic of the romantic attitude, necessary to it, in fact. Langbaum says that the poet finds his own consciousness in experience:

> The act of knowing spontaneously and completely is an act of imaginative projection into the external object, an act of identification with the object; so that the living consciousness perceived in the object is our own.[12]

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[9]Ibid., p. 22. [10]Ibid. [11]Ibid., p. 24. [12]Ibid.

This identification of the subject with the object--of the observer with that which is observed--is an expression of unity. An extreme aspect of this unity is observable in Keats' concept of negative capability, wherein the personality of the artist is submerged in the objective world. Elizabeth Bishop's work demonstrates an impersonal, aesthetic distancing that associates it with the concept of negative capability. She is very reticent; her attention always appears to be directed at the objects of the physical world rather than towards her thoughts and feelings. Immediately evident in her work is this outward focus of her vision, the careful observations that emerge as detailed descriptions of the things she sees in the outer landscape. Her descriptions, in the manner of Hopkins and Moore, are so precise that the objects she represents seem to be in the eye of the reader as well as the eye of the poet. In Langbaum's sense of the word, then, Bishop is a poet of experience. While teaching at the University of Washington, she told her class:

> You should use more objects in your poems--those things you use every day . . . the things around you. Pop art has brought so many things to our attention, whether we like them or not. One can write very good poetry without vivid images, but I myself prefer observation.[13]

Moreover, the objects she describes in her poetry are things

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[13]Wehr, p. 321.

she has actually seen. She commented to Wesley Wehr:

> I always tell the truth in my poems. With "The Fish," that's exactly how it happened. It was in Key West, and I did catch it just as the poem says. That was in 1938. Oh, but I did change one thing; the poem says he had five hooks hanging from his mouth, but actually he only had three. I think it improved the poem when I made that change. Sometimes a poem makes its own demands. But I always try to stick as much as possible to what really happened when I describe something in a poem.[14]

In her interview with Elizabeth Spires in 1978, Bishop remarked about "The Moose": "It was all true."[15] And when Spires saw the painting that inspired "Poem," her reaction was: "The cows in this really are just one or two brush-strokes!"[16]

It must be remembered, however, as Nancy McNally points out, that the meaning of Bishop's poems "must reside at least in the poet's selection and implicit interpretation of details."[17] Bishop's selection, arrangement, and interpretation of details of the outer landscape implicitly reveal an inner landscape, that of the subject who is doing the selecting and arranging. In this sense, then, Bishop's poems are very personal; her presentation of the details of the physical world reveals much about the

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[14]Ibid., p. 324. [15]Spires, p. 62. [16]Ibid., p. 65.

[17]Nancy L. McNally, "Elizabeth Bishop: The Discipline of Description," Twentieth Century Literature 11 (January 1966): 190.

perceiving eye, and the perceiving "I." Her poetry, however, is rarely personal in the way that the poetry of the confessional poets is. The only poem in which she confronts a personal problem is "One Art," where she attempts to cope with the loss of a loved one. Even those poems which possess a similar theme, such as "Crusoe in England," seem impersonal in the sense that elements of the landscape, rather than the poet's feelings, are presented. Indeed, in "Crusoe in England," Bishop speaks from behind the mask of a fictional character. Nonetheless, this poem at least presents a human revelation. Earlier poems such as "The Bight" present personal revelations that are almost completely hidden in the mass of objective detail. The outer landscape becomes a map of the inner landscape.

Abrams bases his discussion of romanticism upon the European aspects of the romantic movement, and there is no doubt that Bishop's poetry presents a number of the same concerns as those presented by the earlier romantics. The most notable of these concerns is the desire for unity between mind and nature. Willard Spiegelman has compared both thematic and formal characteristics of Bishop's poetry with those of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and has found many similarities between Bishop's work and that of the romantics.[18]

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[18]Willard Spiegelman, "Landscape and Knowledge: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," Modern Poetry Studies 6 (Winter 1975): 203-24.

An examination of the poetry of the American romantics may provide further insights into Bishop's poetry. I do not suggest that there was any direct influence of poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost on Bishop's poetry, in the same way that Herbert, Hopkins, and Moore influenced it, although Bishop was certainly familiar with their work. Rather, I think that the poems of the American romantics and post-romantics such as Emerson, Dickinson, Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop exhibit a certain set of assumptions that may or may not be peculiar to Americans, but that seem to appear repeatedly in American poetry.

The most important American romantic, of course, is Emerson, whose theories about transcendence arose directly from the English romantic movement, probably via Coleridge. Like the English romantics, he acknowledged that the traditional structure of faith, and man's security in it, had changed; unlike the English romantics, who revealed a somewhat vague and unspecified supernatural quality in nature, Emerson revealed a divine presence, to whom he referred as "God,"[19] or more indirectly as "The Power."[20]

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[19]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Woodnotes I," in The Portable Emerson, ed. Carl Bode in collaboration with Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1981), p. 644.

[20]Emerson, "The Rhodora," in The Portable Emerson, p. 639.

He maintained that his moments of transcendence were moments of divine revelation.[21]

Emerson possessed the medieval notion that God was "a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere."[22] This definition neatly crystallized the essential paradox of the immanence of the divine in nature, and its transcendence beyond nature.[23] Experience of the natural world was, therefore, an important element of Emerson's thought, for nature was the vehicle through which the divine appeared to man. In order to see the divine in nature, Emerson believed that a special kind of vision was required:

> Using vision as a metaphor for all sensuous experience, Emerson developed, unsystematically but fully, a method of transcendence. Seeing with transparent eyeballs, opening the doors of our being, we could see the eternal Beauty, the flowing Spirit, everywhere.[24]

This kind of vision, however, was available only to the poet, and his task, as Emerson saw it, was to act as priest or prophet to the rest of mankind. A more accurate term for the poet's role might be "magician." In his poems "Merlin I" and "Merlin II," Emerson identifies the poet with the ancient

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[21]Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets from the Puritans to the Present (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 99.

[22]Emerson, "Circles," in The Portable Emerson, p. 228.

[23]Waggoner, pp. 193-94. [24]Ibid., pp. 100-101.

wizard:

> By Sybarites beguiled,
> He shall no task decline,
> Merlin's mighty line
> Extremes of nature reconciled,--
> Bereaved a tyrant of his will,
> And made the lion mild.
> Songs can the tempest still,
> Scattered on the stormy air,
> Mould the year to fair increase
> And bring in poetic peace.[25]

Suggested in this passage is the romantic idea that the poet can transform the warring elements of nature into a "poetic peace."

Elizabeth Bishop, like Emerson, believed sight to be the most important of the senses. She commented to Ashley Brown: "I think I'm more visual than most poets."[26] The identification of sight with knowledge in her poetry associates her with Emerson and the romantic attitude in general. Especially close, perhaps, to an Emersonian concept of vision (both ocular and transcendent), is a line in "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" (1948; CP, 65-67), a poem which simultaneously presents the features of an illustrated Bible and the poet's memories of her travels. Her travels end in the Holy Land, when she suddenly returns to a picture of the Nativity and demands:

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[25]Emerson, "Merlin I," in The Portable Emerson, p. 652.

[26]Brown, "An Interview," p. 11.

> 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.

David Kalstone offers several possible interpretations of the baffling final line:

> Where or when is away? Is it a measureless absorption in the scene, an invitation to keep exercising our wonderful infant sight? Or a loss of powers (to waste away)? Or a welcome relinquishment of burdens (to lose only infant sight--it keeps its Latin meaning of "speechless"--and become truly articulate)?[27]

I think that Kalstone's first suggestion is probably closest to the meaning of the line. The romantic--specifically American romantic--notion that to really see, one must look through the eyes of a child,[28] in conjunction with Emerson's remark that "infancy is the perpetual Messiah,"[29] should be considered in a reading of the poem. The images of transcendence which precede the final line--"the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light"--utilize the traditional symbolic association of light with understanding and darkness with confusion. Moreover, the darkness is implicitly associated with the

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[27]David Kalstone, "All Eye," Partisan Review 37 (Spring 1970): 311-12.

[28]Abrams, p. 411.

[29]Emerson, quoted in Abrams, p. 415.

rocks, an element of nature. Words such as "ajar" and "breaking" are suggestive of cracks in the natural world that allow the transcendent to shine through. The last line, then, presents the notion of looking through those cracks into the infinite world beyond, an infinity neatly captured in the repetition of the word "looked."

Despite the parallels between the poetry of Bishop and Emerson, there is no sense in her work of the poet as prophet or magician. Rather, she seems to be aware of the limitations of her knowledge; her demand in "Over 2000 Illustrations" is "Why couldn't we have seen . . . ?" and her discovery in "At the Fishhouses" is that knowledge is "an element bearable to no mortal" (CP, 73). Even in her descriptions of the physical landscape, she is not entirely confident that what she sees is actually what is there. This seems to be, essentially, an epistemological concern, dealing with the nature and limits of perception. Bishop's interest in epistemology has been noted by a number of critics,[30] but presented most clearly by Spiegelman. Suggesting that Bishop is "an epistemological poet in the tradition of William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge," he

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[30]These include John Ashbery, "The Complete Poems: Throughout is This Quality of Thingness," New York Times Book Review, 1 June 1969, p. 8; and Anne Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop, Twayne's United States Authors Series, no. 105 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), pp. 116-17.

argues that her poems "pose essential questions about the relationship between experience and knowledge, between what is empirically ascertainable and what must be deduced or inferred, and between what can be known and what not.[31] Technically, Bishop's desire to present the world exactly as it is, or exactly as she sees it, is reflected in the number of qualifications and refined descriptions she employs as she attempts to present what she sees as accurately as possible. These repetitions and qualifications tend to give her poetry an air of hesitancy,[32] rather than the magician's air of assurance.

Bishop's recognition of the limits of human understanding links her to another American romantic, Emily Dickinson, who did not see the poet as a magician, but simply as a vehicle for revelation. As Roy Harvey Pearce points out, Dickinson, like Emerson, considered the perceiving self to be of great importance,[33] but at the same time, her poetry exhibits "a humble, tragic, pathetic, even humorous realization of limitations."[34] When Dickinson writes in #883: "The Poets light but Lamps-- /

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[31]Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 203.

[32]A detailed analysis of Bishop's techniques of hesitation appears in Jane Shore, "Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Changing Your Mind," Ploughshares 5, no. 1 (1979): 178-91.

[33]Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 175.

[34]Ibid., p. 177.

Themselves--go out--," she speaks of the mortal nature of the poet, but also implies that the task of the poet is to see, momentarily, the "vital Light."[35]

By the time Dickinson was writing, the idea that the supernatural resided in the natural was quite common.[36] What Dickinson brought to the romantic tradition was a scaling down of both nature and the transcendent experience. Unlike Emerson and the English romantics, who sought, ultimately, an all-encompassing transcendent vision to order the world, Dickinson experienced visions that were quite independent of each other, and in miniature. Her poetry places more emphasis on the importance of everyday trivialities than Emerson's poetry does. Dickinson's view of the poet is expressed again in #448, where she says:

> This was a Poet--It is That
> Distills amazing sense
> From ordinary meanings--.[37]

As in #883, the poet is presented as a visionary, but joined to the idea that the poet is capable of reaching the concentrated, essential meaning of ordinary things is the drop-by-drop nature of the process of distillation--one small transcendent vision at a time.

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[35]Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), p. 419.

[36]Waggoner, p. 193. [37]Dickinson, p. 215.

When one considers the miniature quality of Dickinson's work, Bishop's comment that "something needn't be large to be good"[38] comes to mind. Her poetry shares with Dickinson's a concentration on small objects in the physical landscape, on tiny details of appearance. Her moments of transcendence happen not while she is observing mountains, sky, or sea, but during an encounter with a fish or a moose, or while she is sitting in a dentist's waiting room.

In "The Fish" (1940; CP, 48-50), the poet relates how she caught an ancient, ugly, battle-scarred fish. She notices every aspect of his physical appearance with precision: his skin like "ancient wallpaper," his barnacles like "fine rosettes of lime," his "tiny white sea-lice," his gills "fresh and crisp with blood," and, especially, his eyes:

> which were far larger than mine
> but shallower, and yellowed,
> the irises backed and packed
> with tarnished tinfoil
> seen through the lenses
> of old scratched isinglass.

Suddenly, and unaccountably, she releases the fish:

> I stared and stared
> and victory filled up
> the little rented boat
> from the pool of bilge
> where oil had spread a rainbow
> around the rusted engine

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[38]Brown, "An Interview," p. 11.

to the boiler rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oar-locks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Physical vision of the outer landscape leads to an imaginative vision of an inner landscape, where the fish is not merely a fish, but a hero, wearing his strands of fishing line "like medals with their ribbons." "Victory," she says, "filled up" the boat--but victory acts like light, spreading from the pool of bilge to the boiler, thwarts, oar-locks, and gunnels. The light take on the form of a rainbow--the mythical message from God--and the poet releases the fish. Her action is the result of seeing the fish in a new light, the result of an epiphany.

A similar epiphany occurs in "The Moose" (1972), where the poet relates an encounter with another wild animal. This time, it seems even more forceful, for it is shared by a number of other people: those who happen to be on an overnight bus trip through Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to Boston. Every aspect of the journey is noted by the speaker: the people who get on the bus, the changing of daylight to twilight and finally to darkness, the settling fog, the various sights along the way, and the muted, disjointed, sleepy conversations among the passengers. The somewhat indistinct atmosphere created by means of the dusk, fog, and sleepiness is suddenly rendered clear and

sharp by the appearance of a moose on the road, not an uncommon happening:

> --Suddenly the bus driver
> stops with a jolt,
> turns off his lights.
>
> A moose has come out of
> the impenetrable wood
> and stands there, looms, rather,
> in the middle of the road.
> It approaches; it sniffs at
> the bus's hot hood.
>
> Towering, antlerless,
> high as a church,
> homely as a house
> (or, safe as houses).
> A man's voice assures us
> "Perfectly harmless. . . ."
>
> Some of the passengers
> exclaim in whispers,
> childishly, softly,
> "Sure are big creatures."
> "It's awful plain."
> "Look! It's a she!"
>
> Taking her time,
> she looks the bus over,
> grand, otherworldly.
> Why, why do we feel
> (we all feel) this sweet
> sensation of joy?[39]

Coming out of the "impenetrable wood," the moose is "high as a church" and "otherworldly," and inspires an inexplicable joy in all of the observers. The poet seems to be implying that in the body of the moose, the supernatural is revealed

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[39]Elizabeth Bishop, Geography III (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 29-30. All further references to this volume appear in the text, with the indication G III followed by a page number.

through the natural.

In contrast to the experiences of the speaker in "The Fish" and "The Moose," in which she recounts her sense of victory and joy, the sudden insight Bishop presents in "In the Waiting Room" (1971; G III, 3-8) is attended by feelings of dislocation and fear. The epiphany is led up to by a catalogue of precise detail, as in the other poems. The poet, as a child, is waiting in the dentist's office for her aunt. She looks at pictures in a copy of the National Geographic, noticing every particular: a volcano, explorers "dressed in riding breeches, / laced boots, and pith helmets," a man captured and killed by cannibals, and:

> 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.

Suddenly, the child hears her aunt cry out in pain, then realizes with astonishment that she, and not her aunt, uttered the cry:

> 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.

The child attempts:

> to stop
> the sensation of falling off
> the round, turning world
> into cold, blue-black space.

She tries, romantically, to counter her sense of impending oblivion by returning to details of experience: the cover of the magazine, her seventh birthday in three days, her name. Yet the fear remains as she becomes aware of herself as both identical with the rest of humanity and distinct from it:

> I knew that nothing stranger
> had ever happened, that nothing
> stranger could ever happen.
> Why should I be my aunt,
> 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 all just one?
> How--I didn't know any
> word for it--how "unlikely". . .

The child almost faints (from the heat in the waiting room or the effect of her discovery), but the poem ends, as most of Bishop's poems do, with a return to the comforting details of experience:

> The War was on. Outside,
> in Worcester, Massachusetts,
> were night and slush and cold,
> and it was still the fifth
> of February, 1918.

Despite the various qualities of her poetry that ally her with the romantic tradition, Elizabeth Bishop can more properly be called a post-romantic poet, for she is unable to totally accept the romantic idea that the imagining mind creates the world, or at least, redeems it. There is always a sense in her poetry that the world of experience may be independent of her perception of it, and this contributes to the typically modern attitude her poetry seems, at times, to represent. The modern mind views the world of experience as alien or hostile, an attitude that is apparent in "In the Waiting Room," for example, even as the imagination of the poet strains to find order and "poetic peace." Combined with Bishop's awareness of her limitations as a visionary, then, is a sense of the alienation, or limitation, of the landscape. This is an awareness she shares with Robert Frost, who, as Frank Lentricchia points out, seems to straddle the romantic and modern views of the world.[40]

Lentricchia extracts the characteristically romantic ideas that appear in Frost's poetry. One of the most important is the notion that the poet's imagination is creative and capable of providing a meaningless world with meaning,[41] a notion that shaped the romantic attitude.

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[40]Frank Lentricchia, Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), p. 3.

[41]Ibid.

Frost discusses the function of poetry in his preface to the Complete Poems:

> It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.[42]

As William H. Pritchard points out, the definition of poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion" indicates that Frost views life as something that indeed requires the ordering of the artistic imagination: "Frost thinks of poetry as a precarious game played in the face of peril . . . and for that reason a game absolutely necessary to play."[43]

Balanced against Frost's acceptance of the romantic attitude, however, is his loyalty to common sense, which asserts logically that there is a world "out there,"[44] apart from the poet's act of imaginative perception, and that this world plays "a determinative role in our lives."[45] Opposed to the notion that the imaginative artist reconstructs the world, then, is the notion that the world exists independently of the mind. When nature is viewed as an

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[42]Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. vi.

[43]William H. Pritchard, "Diminished Nature," Massachusetts Review 1 (Spring 1960): 475.

[44]Lentricchia, p. 3. [45]Ibid.

independent entity, separated from man (and in this separation, alienated from God as well, since it is man's imagination that perceives order--God--in nature), the stature of nature itself falls. No longer a repository of divine revelation, it exists simply as itself. Frost is like the subject of his poem "The Oven Bird":

> The question that he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing.[46]

The "diminished thing," as Pritchard implies, is "experience as it is felt" as opposed to how it is desired: "partial, painful, limited."[47] Pritchard suggests that "The Oven Bird" exemplifies

> how Frost poetically confronts deprivation, the "diminished thing," by insisting upon the fact. Such insistence is perfectly imaged through the bird who makes song out of the very conditions [the dying of the landscape in autumn] which would seemingly deny that song and make it inappropriate.[48]

The result of the constant opposition between the world of experience and the creative mind is, as Lentricchia suggests in his discussion of Frost's "All Revelation," that:

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[46]Frost, Complete Poems, p. 150.

[47]Pritchard, p. 477. [48]Ibid., p. 481.

> From the "inside" he achieves the kind of imaginative vision demanded by his psychic needs--a vision . . . within his "redemptive" act of consciousness. From the "outside" he achieves an ironic self-consciousness which tells him that constitutive visions of a better nature are apparitions in the sense of "illusions." The act of ironic consciousness enables Frost to maintain his double vision, his skepticism, and his common sense which let nature be as it is.[49]

Much the same statement could be made about Bishop. Her poetry is characterized by a double vision of the world that on the one hand, allows her to expect some sort of transforming vision (and occasionally experience it), and on the other, forces her to accept the world as it is: meaningless, incomprehensible, and independent of her existence and perception. This ambiguous vision is apparent in many of Bishop's poems. Her poems of travel seem to encompass both the concepts of homelessness and of the romantic spiritual journey back to the source. Double vision can also be found in the poems where she observes a work of art, and purposely confuses it with reality, poems such as "Large Bad Picture," "Seascape," and "Brazil, January 1, 1502."

In "Large Bad Picture" (1946; CP, 12-13), we tend to forget that it is a painting, and not an actual landscape, that Bishop describes.[50] The birds that, in the painting, are "hanging in n's in banks," suddenly come to life:

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[49]Lentricchia, p. 7. [50]Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 212.

> One can hear their crying, crying,
> the only sound there is
> except for occasional sighing
> as a large aquatic animal breathes.

Equally incongruous is "the small red sun," which embodies real and artificial qualities as it

> goes rolling, rolling,
> round and round and round at the same height
> in perpetual sunset.

A similar deliberate confusion of reality and artifice appears in "Seascape" (1941; CP, 46). The poet is ostensibly describing a real scene, but she does so in such artistic terms that we sense that she is actually describing a painting, a "cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope."[51] The scenery is lush and artificial. Herons are comically

> got up as angels,
> flying as high as they want and as far as they want sidewise
> in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections.

Humble bird-droppings are transformed into "illumination in silver." Mangrove roots possess "suggestively Gothic arches," and a jumping fish creates "an ornamental spray of spray."

In a later poem, "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (1960: CP, 105-6), Bishop uses the same confusion of art and

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[51] See Raphael's Miraculous Draught of Fishes in A. P. Oppé, Raphael (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), plate 182.

reality to portray the ravishment of Brazil by European explorers. The epigraph to the poem is a quote from Kenneth Clark's Landscape Into Art: ". . . embroidered nature . . . tapestried landscape"; it provides Bishop with her artistic medium, a tapestry:

> Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
> exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
> every square inch filling in with foliage--
> big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
> blue, blue-green, and olive,
> with occasional lighter veins and edges,
> or a satin underleaf turned over;
> monster ferns
> in silver-gray relief,
> and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
> up in the air--up, rather, in the leaves--
> purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,
> rust red and greenish white;
> solid but airy; fresh as if just finished
> and taken off the frame.

The early explorers and the present day travellers are united by a similar view of the landscape, by "the 'artificial' guise in which it appears to both."[52] Reality merges with art as Bishop describes the entry of the "Christians":

> Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
> L'homme armé or some such tune,
> they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
> each out to catch an Indian for himself--.

Bishop's establishment of the Brazilian landscape as an integral, perfect work of art intensifies the horror we

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[52]Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 218.

feel as she depicts the insensitive explorers slashing at it.

Bishop's ability to see ambiguously is comically treated in "The Gentleman of Shalott" (1936; CP, 10-11), where she presents a man who is gazing at half of himself reflected in a mirror. He is not entirely sure what is real and what is reflected:

> He felt in modesty
> his person was
> half looking-glass,
> for why should he
> be doubled?
> The glass must stretch
> down his middle,
> or rather down the edge.
> But he's in doubt
> as to which side's in or out
> of the mirror.
> There's little margin for error,
> but there's no proof, either.

The man accepts the ambiguity, however. Rather than discover which part is real and which reflected, he prefers to remain in doubt, much as we sense Bishop does:

> The uncertainty
> he says he
> finds exhilerating. He loves
> that sense of constant re-adjustment.
> He wishes to be quoted as saying at
> present:
> "Half is enough."

"Faustina, or Rock Roses" (1947; CP, 81-84) also presents Bishop's perception of the ambiguity of appearance. As Faustina cares for a dying woman,

Her sinister kind face
presents a cruel black
coincident conundrum.

The ambiguity of Faustina's expression reflects the ambiguity of the poem's subject, death:

Oh, is it

freedom at last, a lifelong
dream of time and silence,
dream of protection and rest?
Or is it the very worst,
the unimaginable nightmare
that never before dared last
more than a second?

There is no final conclusion:

There is no way of telling.
The eyes say only either.
At last the visitor rises,
awkwardly proffers her bunch
of rust-perforated roses
and wonders oh, whence come
all the petals.

In this, the last stanza of the poem, the ambiguity between Faustina's kind yet sinister face, between the dream or nightmare of death, is reflected in the final image of the roses. Although they are "rust-perforated," obviously withering and ugly, the speaker can still wonder at the source of the petals.

In addition to her ability to practise double vision, Bishop shares with Frost, as J. D. McClatchy points out, an obsession "with the vain, bleak effort to domesticate the

world."[53] Bishop's desire to domesticate has been dealt with thoroughly by Helen Vendler, who suggests that the fact that "nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects."[54] One of Vendler's most illuminating comments concerns "Filling Station" (1955), from which she concludes:

> The domestic, we perceive, becomes a compulsion that we take with us even to the most unpromising locations, where we busy ourselves establishing domestic tranquillity as a demonstration of meaningfulness, as a proof of "love." Is our theology only a reflection of our nesting habits?[55]

Vendler's question deserves an affirmative answer, but it might be expressed in terms different from those she employs. The process of domestication is, essentially, the romantic process of creating the world, and the resulting theology, or "love," or meaning, is what is attributed to the disordered world by the transcendent or imaginative vision of the artist, whether the artist is God, the poet, or the anonymous "somebody," who in "Filling Station," has embroidered the doily, waters the plant, arranges the oil cans, and "loves us all" (CP, 150).

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[53] J. D. McClatchy, "The Other Bishop," Canto 1 (Winter 1977): 168.

[54] Helen Vendler, "Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly," World Literature Today 51 (Winter 1977): 23.

[55] Ibid., p. 24.

One of the major post-romantic poets of the twentieth century, Wallace Stevens, tried, like his predecessors, to make sense of a seemingly chaotic world, chaotic because of the loss of faith in the traditional Christian God. Stevens' search for faith in God, or something to replace it, seems almost desperate. "After one has abandoned a belief in God," he said, "poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."[56] The imagination of the poet was the faculty which was to afford redemption, yet Stevens felt that the romantics of the past had ascribed so much power to it that they had , consequently, falsified experience.[57] The modern poet, Stevens believed, must recognize the chaotic, meaningless world for what it is. In "Of Modern Poetry," he writes of:

> The poem of the mind in the act of finding
> What will suffice. It has not always had
> To find; the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script.
> Then the theatre was changed
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.[58]

While Stevens demands acceptance of experience as an independent entity, he tries to formulate "the poem of the

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[56]Wallace Stevens, quoted in Waggoner, p. 430.

[57]Waggoner, p. 431.

[58]Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), pp. 239-40.

mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." These lines demonstrate Stevens' concern with limitations. He is not looking for an expansive view of the world that will allow him to perceive order, as the English romantics and Emerson were. His ambition is perhaps closer to Frost's: to find "a momentary stay against confusion." This wording, like Frost's, suggests definite limits to the "stay." Frost expects something only momentary; Stevens expects something that will suffice: something adequate, but not excessive. Abrams describes Stevens' attitude as "skeptical naturalism," and suggests that he combines this with his "enterprise as a poet," and "confronts the alien other resolved to 'see the very thing and nothing else,' and by an act of creative fiction in lieu of the Creator, imposes the order and values it can no longer find."[59]

Nowhere is this "skeptical naturalism" more evident than in "Sunday Morning," where Stevens opposes Christianity to romantic insight into nature:

> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruits and bright, green wings, or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
> Divinity must live within herself:
> Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
> Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
> Elations when the forest blooms; gusty

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[59]Abrams, p. 423.

> Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
> All pleasures and all pains, remembering
> The bough of summer and the winter branch,
> These are the measures destined for the soul.[60]

Divinity is nothing, he says, if it cannot be experienced in imaginative perceptions of the things of the natural world. However, although the woman in the poem is

> content when wakened birds
> Before they fly, test the reality
> Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings,[61]

she still requires something more: "But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss."[62] The things of nature, Stevens points out, last longer than prophecy or vision, or "cloudy palm / Remote on heaven's hill,"[63] but only one thing outlasts nature, and that is death. By accepting death as the "imperishable" bliss she longs for, the woman is able to view nature as a source of both life and death,[64] and Christianity as something more concrete than the "cloudy palm," because of the fact of Christ's death:

> "The tomb of Palestine
> Is not the porch of spirits lingering,

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[60] Stevens, p. 67. [61] Ibid., p. 68.

[62] Ibid. [63] Ibid.

[64] Robert Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," American Scholar 28 (Summer 1959): 339.

It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."[65]

Throughout "Sunday Morning," Stevens juxtaposes conflicting associations of the sun with the natural and the supernatural, a conflict that crystallizes in the vision of ancient sun worshippers:

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
> Shall chant an orgy on a summer morn
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
> Not as a god, but as a god might be,
> Naked among them like a savage source.[66]

The final lines of the poem again play on the double association of the sun (as God and as natural element) as Stevens, in Langbaum's words,[67] presents a world that "both is and is not God-abandoned":

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.[68]

The "ambiguous undulations" of the pigeons characterize the

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[65]Stevens, p. 70. [66]Ibid., pp. 69-70.

[67]Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," p. 340.

[68]Stevens, p. 70.

entire passage. The freedom and imprisonment of man in the landscape are detailed in the connotations of "dependency," "solitude," "free," and "inescapable." The otherness of the natural creatures comes across clearly in the deer who "walk upon our mountains," and the quail who "whistle about us their spontaneous cries" (my emphasis). Finally, the image in the last three lines seems affirmatively Christian, as "casual flocks of pigeons . . . / . . .sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings." This image recalls the traditional descent of the Holy Spirit to earth in the form of a dove. Nonetheless, the birds' descent into darkness and their "ambiguous undulations" demonstrate that the poet is reluctant to ascribe any purpose to their flight. His stance, finally, is as ambiguous as their undulations.

In her interview with Ashley Brown, Bishop remarked that Stevens "was the contemporary who most affected my writing" in the 1930s.[69] Bishop shares with Stevens and the other romantics and post-romantics the acknowledgement of a chaotic world and a desire to order it somehow. Even more than Stevens, she possesses a desperate hope that the things of the natural world will provide sustenance. She is concerned with the inability of traditional Christianity to order the world, and presents, in such poems as "A Miracle for Breakfast," "Roosters," "At the Fishhouses,"

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[69]Brown, "An Interview," p. 9.

and "Cape Breton," the juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural, and the ultimate ambiguity that exists when they merge.

A glance at the early critical response to Bishop's poetry reveals that the imaginative aspect of her vision--her attempt to find unity between her mind and the world, the inner and the outer landscapes--has not always been recognized. Critics have often designated her as primarily a descriptive poet, whose major purpose is to observe her environment accurately and describe the objects she sees precisely and objectively. Some critics, such as A. Alvarez[70] and M. L. Rosenthal,[71] have even suggested that Bishop is essentially an Imagist poet in her presentation of concrete images and her unfailing employment of precise words in her descriptions. However, concentration on the surface of Bishop's poetry--on her accurate eye and her precise descriptions--implies that she is a poet of surfaces, that her descriptions are ends in themselves, rather than elements of a larger poetic vision. Critics who concentrate only upon these surface aspects of Bishop's poetry tend to be appreciative rather than analytic, and once they have pointed

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[70] A. Alvarez, "Imagism and Poetesses," Kenyon Review 19 (Spring 1957): 321-29.

[71] M. L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 254.

out the descriptions, and either praised them for their accuracy or criticized them for their "fussiness,"[72] they can say little more.

Critics who take a more thoughtful approach to Bishop's poetry argue that it reveals some sort of imaginative insight, and treat the descriptions as means to a greater end. Acknowledging that Bishop's ocular vision is remarkable, the proponents of this approach are more concerned with defining her imaginative vision--the vision that strains to link apparently disparate objects together and create order and unity among them. Critics who take this approach are more concerned with the ultimate meaning of Bishop's poetry: with the moral, philosophical, and psychological insights that are suggested by her particular view of the things around her, and most especially, with her ability to reconcile the inner landscape of the imagination with the outer landscape of physical reality. This approach has been taken by most of Bishop's critics in the last decade, possibly in response to the publication of The Complete Poems (1969), which seems to have encouraged a more comprehensive view of Bishop's poetry than had been taken earlier.

Indeed, few critical essays about Bishop's poetry appeared before the publication of her third volume, Questions of Travel (1965), which had been preceded by

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[72] Alvarez, p. 326.

North & South (1946) and Poems: North & South--A Cold Spring (1955). Various general essays or books on modern poetry published before 1965 include a comment, a page, or a chapter on her work, but emphasis is usually placed on the surface characteristics of the poetry. A notable exception is an essay by James G. Southworth. In it, he claims that meaning inheres in Bishop's selection of objects, her tone, and the "massing of details into significant form."[73] Southworth's essay is the first careful analysis of Bishop's poetry, but his division of her work into categories of pure description, description with an "imaginative leap," vignettes, and "intensely personal" poems,[74] with concentration on the last three types, results in a neglect of the so-called purely descriptive poems, which by his account include "Large Bad Picture," "Florida," and "The Bight." Recent critics, in particular, David Kalstone,[75] have demonstrated that poems of this type are not merely descriptions of the outer landscape, but complicated maps of the inner landscape.

The most valuable analyses of Bishop's poetry during this early period are found in the reviews of North & South and Poems. Although emphasis is always placed on the poet's

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[73]James G. Southworth, "The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," College English 20 (February 1959): 214.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop."

keen eye, some of the reviewers perceive, if only obliquely, that Bishop's poetry consists of more than a neat list of descriptions. Arthur Mizener, the first to notice this, says in his review of North & South that Bishop is very skillful at "transforming facts."[76] Whereas a poet such as Marianne Moore describes objects, he maintains, Bishop describes states of mind through the use of objects, and the states of mind, rather than the objects, determine the form of her poems.[77] This is essentially a romantic characteristic which demonstrates the interaction and unity between the self and the other. In addition, Mizener's recognition that the focus of the seemingly purely descriptive poems is subjective, rather than "as objective as poetry can well be,"[78] also links Bishop to the romantic tradition. This recognition seems to have initiated a trend in Bishop criticism that has culminated in Kalstone's recent contention that the poetry is subtly autobiographical."[79]

Selected reviews of Poems reveal a growing concern with the "self" in Bishop's poetry. Donald Hall suggests that Bishop's details are neither complete in themselves nor symbols for something else, but rather, "a refuge from

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[76]Arthur Mizener, "New Verse," Furioso 2 (Spring 1947): 72.

[77]Ibid., pp. 73-74. [78]Southworth, p. 213.

[79]Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop."

the self,"[80] a typically Keatsian example of negative capability. He notes that "she tells stories and describes impossible scenes not in pure allegory but in what seems an effort at releasing the unconscious."[81] Howard Nemerov pursues a similar path when he suggests that the poetry is "meditative or musing by means of detail, that, thoughtful as its workings are, it moves away from thought and towards vision, with an effect of deepening the silence about its conclusions."[82] Richard Eberhart returns to the point made by Mizener nearly a decade earlier when he says that Bishop somehow renders the world "imaginatively recreated."[83] All of these characteristics--the submerging of the self in the landscape, the movement towards vision ("vision" in the sense of a faculty which transcends the natural), and the imaginative recreation of the world--are aspects of the romantic attitude.

Following the lead of their predecessors, scattered reviewers of Questions of Travel show an attempt to define further Bishop's imaginative vision. Jean Garrigue suggests

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[80]Donald Hall, review of Poems, New England Quarterly 29 (June 1956): 251.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Howard Nemerov, The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop," Poetry 87 (December 1955): 179.

[83]Richard Eberhart, "With Images of Actuality," New York Times Book Review, 17 July 1955, p. 4.

that she is presenting "the strangeness of things as they are."[84] As Howard Moss puts it, "we have the sensation of seeing what things are really like."[85] The implication of these statements is that Bishop is in some way testing the very nature of reality. Peter Davision suggests that she recreates some of the stranger moments of real experience: "She communicates that sense of unfamiliarity at the end of a voyage, when land seems artificial and somehow more personable than land has any right to be."[86] Moss attributes Bishop's transformation of reality to distancing: she "transcends what in lesser poets is merely verisimilitude. She is a master of perspective as well as of tone, for we are in the exact center of what would appear to be conflicting forces."[87] The conflicting forces, it may be suggested, are mind and nature: nature the strange, unknowable entity, and mind the transforming, creative entity that endeavours to know the unknowable.

Two central points emerge from these early, disparate treatments of Bishop's work. First, the poems are not

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[84]Jean Garrigue, "Elizabeth Bishop's School," New Leader 158 (6 December 1965): 23.

[85]Howard Moss, "All Praise," Kenyon Review 28 (March 1966): 256.

[86]Peter Davison, "The Gilt Edge of Reputation," Atlantic 217 (January 1966): 85.

[87]Moss, "All Praise," p. 260.

entirely objective, but involve the subject, who is observing and amassing the objective detail, and second, the description of the objective detail seems to transform it into something else. These points are considered respectively in essays by Nancy L. McNally and Ralph J. Mills. McNally concentrates on the purpose and method of Bishop's descriptions. Like Southworth, she finds the poetry objective, yet she suggests that the meaning of the poems "must reside at least in the poet's selection and implicit interpretation of details."[88] What Bishop is testing in her poetry is the very nature of human perception and knowledge: "In positing a chiefly visual reality, it seems to imply a singular poetic epistemology--the necessary role of appearances in the comprehension of essential, non-visible realities."[89] Mills also says that Bishop's poetry rests on the perception of reality,[90] but adds that she transforms what she sees "to give birth to a reality that is somehow different from our known one,"[91] and that the transformations result from the poet's search for truth.[92]

The only book of criticism devoted entirely to Bishop's work is that of Anne Stevenson. Although her approach is

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[88]McNally, p. 190. [89]Ibid., p. 192.

[90]Ralph J. Mills, "Elizabeth Bishop," in his Contemporary American Poetry (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 73.

[91]Ibid., p. 77. [92]Ibid., p. 81.

more descriptive than analytic, Stevenson does observe that Bishop's poems "reveal doubt about the meaning of everything."[93] Like McNally, she suggests that perception, as well as the thing perceived, is a subject of the poetry: "For Elizabeth Bishop, doubt about the meaning of appearances leads to doubt about the nature of experience itself and inevitably, too, to doubts about the means by which experience can be described or understood."[94]

Interest in Bishop's poetry increased greatly in the years following the publication of The Complete Poems, and even more after the appearance of the poems which form Geography III (1976), her final volume. But only a few critics have attempted a sustained discussion, and definition, of Bishop's imaginative vision. Although none but Spiegelman actually associates this vision with romanticism, the observations made by Helen Vendler, Sybil P. Estess, and David Kalstone seem to point in that direction. These critics all recognize the conflict in Bishop's poetry between the imagination and experience. As Spiegelman says:

> She distrusts reality, wishes to place faith in the redeeming grace and gracefulness of the imagination, but constantly comes up against the realization that artifice and experience are not polar opposites at all, but rather twins which, though separate, are often identical.[95]

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[93]Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p. 50. [94]Ibid., p. 113.

[95]Spiegelman, "Landscape," pp. 212-13.

A similar recognition of the conflicting elements in Bishop's poetry appears in an analysis by Vendler. She believes that the poetry is characterized by a merging of the domestic and the strange. Domestication, Vendler suggests, is the active attempt of the poet to make the things around her knowable, despite their resistance. She concludes that:

> Elizabeth Bishop's poetry of domestication and domesticity depends, in the last analysis, on her equal apprehension of the reserves of mystery which give, in their own way, a joy more strange than the familiar blessings of the world made human.[96]

Both Spiegelman and Vendler, then, recognize in Bishop's poetry the conflict between mind and nature, and her attempts to unify the conflicting elements. Estess has also sensed these attempts. She writes that in Bishop's poetry, "objective reality and our subjective experience and/or our personal memory of it so merge that they are indistinguishable from one another."[97] Estess argues that the point of merging becomes an epiphany, or "radical self-insight."[98]

The best sustained analysis of Bishop's imaginative

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[96]Vendler, p. 28.

[97]Sybil P. Estess, "Elizabeth Bishop: The Delicate Art of Map Making," Southern Review 13 (Autumn 1977): 725.

[98]Sybil P. Estess, "Toward the Interior: Epiphany in 'Cape Breton' as Representative Poem," World Literature Today 51 (Winter 1977): 50.

vision is that of Kalstone. Evident in her poetry, he maintains, is an awareness of "the encircling or eroding powers"[99] that threaten her world. Her inner landscapes, he suggests, "show an effort at reconstituting the world as if it were in danger of being continually lost."[100] He observes that the subjects of exile, travel, and loss are central to her poetry. As he discusses poems from North & South and Poems, Kalstone demonstrates that Bishop seems to demand that vision somehow save her world from erosion, that it "restore our ancient home." The poetry in Questions of Travel, he suggests, "anticipates a new understanding, taking what comes on its own terms." He notes that the desire for complete understanding remains, but that "the observer is drawn very cautiously by accumulating detail, and questions themselves begin to satisfy the imagining mind."[101] Finally, he suggests that the poems of Geography III demonstrate Bishop's increasing concern with the themes of memory and loss: "Memory is her way of bringing to the surface and acknowledging as general the experience of losing which has always lain behind her work and which the work attempts to counter."[102] Implicit in Kalstone's study is the suggestion that Bishop's

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[99]Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop," p. 21.

[100]Ibid., p. 22. [101]Ibid., p. 31.

[102]Ibid., p. 35.

concentration on spatial detail is actually a method of dealing with temporal problems, especially in the poems of Geography III, where he perceives the landscapes as "scaled down to memory and the inner bounds of a human life."[103]

Kalstone displays two very important insights in his essay on Bishop's work: first, that she desires to "reconstitute" her world, and second, that she eventually accepts it as it is. These actions are characteristic of the post-romantic artist, reflecting the desire for imaginative recreation and the recognition that the world exists independently of the imagination, and the various ambiguities that such an attitude entails. The following chapter will deal with Bishop's search for unity and order in an ambiguous world, and her ultimate relinquishment of a ready-made sustaining myth.

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[103] Ibid., p. 37.

II. SLOUGHING OFF THE SUSTAINING MYTH

The romantic movement, as Abrams demonstrates in Natural Supernaturalism, was an attempt to reconcile traditional assumptions and values with contemporary thought. It was essentially a reworking of Christian mythology, in which the division between man and God was translated into a division between mind and nature. Unity, brought about in the Christian tradition by the coming of Christ, was achieved by the imagination of the artist in the romantic tradition. There still remained in the romantic tradition some principle of divinity, whether in the rather vague recognition that nature itself was divine, or more specifically, in Emerson's acknowledgement of "the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet."[1]

Elizabeth Bishop, like the romantics, found herself in a world where traditional assumptions and values were of dubious authority. The twentieth century has been characterized by an overwhelming recognition of man's isolation and alienation from God, from nature, and from other men. Man has denied the existence of any controlling principle in the universe, has systematically destroyed the

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[1]Emerson, "Circles," in The Portable Emerson, p. 301.

things of the natural world, and has engaged in wars of unprecedented scale and prepared the means of his final destruction. In such a social context, romanticism is as ineffective as Christianity in providing the assurance of order in apparent chaos. Order, whether it is embodied in a divine being or in nature, has been philosophically and aesthetically rejected.

Some artists, such as Wallace Stevens and William Butler Yeats, have attempted to create new systems of meaning, while others, such as T. S. Eliot, have finally returned to traditional systems of belief. Among these artists, Elizabeth Bishop stands out. Forced to reject Christianity and to question romanticism, she nonetheless continually exhibits her desire to find some truth within them. Her poetry thus demonstrates her ambivalent attitude toward the traditional systems, an attitude that is never finally resolved into a new system of belief. Bishop's poetry, on the contrary, reveals an endless search for meaning and understanding. But as David Kalstone remarks: "There are in her poems no final visions--only the saving, continuous, precise pursuits of the travelling eye."[2]

In a letter to Anne Stevenson in the early 1960s, Bishop revealed that she sensed the presence of some higher principle of order:

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[2]Kalstone, "All Eye," p. 312.

> 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.[3]

The implication here is that the "whatever it is" is only glimpsed in atmospheres that do not seem to be quite real: in the world of dreams, or within a work of art, or amidst the "always more successful surrealism of everyday life." Everyday life, it appears, is not quite real to Bishop. She is a descriptive poet; like the romantics, she draws on everyday experience to create her poems. But as Helen Vendler points out, there is always an element of the strange pervading the apparently simple descriptions of landscape. This quality has been defined as surrealistic, most recently by Richard Mullen, who writes:

> Her poems contain much of the magic, uncanniness and displacement associated with the works of the surrealists, for she too explores the workings of the unconscious and the interplay between conscious perception and dream.[4]

In her interview with Ashley Brown, Bishop commented that she had been very interested in surrealism during the 1930s.[5]

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[3]Elizabeth Bishop, quoted in Stevenson, p. 66.

[4]Richard Mullen, "Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Inheritance," American Literature 51 (March 1982): 63.

[5]Brown, "An Interview," p. 10.

This interest is reflected in poems of that decade, and earlier ones, which demonstrate slight shifts of perspective that send poet and reader, in Bishop's words, "sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown."[6] The characteristic shared by these poems is that vision, Bishop's most important sense, is somehow confused or impeded. Often, as in "A Miracle for Breakfast" and the dream poems ("The Weed," "The Man-Moth," "Sleeping on the Ceiling," "Sleeping Standing Up"), the action takes place in darkness. The world Bishop records in these poems is not recognizably real. Rather, it is a world perceived by someone in a state of consciousness between dreaming and waking.

Bishop's use of surrealism is limited to this creation of a dreamlike atmosphere. As Mullen notes, her poetry differs from that of the original surrealists, for she did not adopt automatic writing, or the techniques of violated syntax and illogical order that are the surrealist movement's bequests to later poets. On the contrary, he writes: "Bishop rejects the shapeless poetics accompanying the derangement of consciousness, and she enhances the mysterious oddity of things by her unique prowess for ingenious association."[7] Therefore, the label "surrealistic," when applied to her work, must be limited to its associations

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[6]Bishop, quoted in Stevenson, p. 66.

[7]Mullen, p. 64.

with dream, much as she must have limited it herself when she expressed to Brown her admiration of the "almost surrealistic" quality of George Herbert's poetry.[8]

Bishop's acknowledgement of the existence of a "whatever it is . . . that seems enormously important" is a useful adjunct to her poetry, for it helps to place into perspective the search that she carries out for an element of order in the universe. Nowhere is this search more clearly delineated than in "Sandpiper" (1962; CP, 153). When, in 1976, Bishop was presented with the Books Abroad / Neustadt International Prize for Literature, the program for the awards ceremony displayed a reprint of "Sandpiper." In her acceptance speech, Bishop commented on the appropriateness of the choice: "Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper--just running along the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something.'"[9]

In "Sandpiper," Bishop presents the picture of a small bird running along a beach, "finical, awkward, / in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake." While the ocean is roaring beside him, and the earth is occasionally shaking, the bird is oblivious to all but the

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[8]Brown, "An Interview," p. 10.

[9]Elizabeth Bishop, "Laureate's Words of Acceptance," World Literature Today 51 (Winter 1977): 12.

grains of sand that he sees between his toes. He displays a somewhat Dickinsonian microscopic perception of the world, rather than a more expansive perception. Yet clearly, he is trying "to See a World in a Grain of Sand,"[10] to achieve a grand vision; for this reason, he is a student of Blake.

The expansiveness, power, and even hostility of nature is revealed in the poem. Synecdoche is used to describe the sea as "the roaring alongside" and the waves as "a sheet of interrupting water"; metonymy further describes the sea as "the beach hisses like fat." The sandpiper's awareness of the sea is sensual and pragmatic, rather than intellectual ("The roaring alongside he takes for granted"), and is well echoed in the use of synecdoche and metonymy. In fact, the sandpiper is not aware that the ocean, as ocean, even exists. He is only aware of some of its practical manifestations: the world shakes, there is a loud noise, and occasionally a wave interrupts his progress along the beach:

> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.
> --Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them.

The bird is oblivious to the expansive world around him because he is focussing so completely on his toes, or as

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[10]William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," in The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 431.

Bishop qualifies casually, yet crucially, on "the spaces of sand between them."

Blake, in a letter to Thomas Butts, envisions jewel-like droplets of morning light, which are transformed into men who say:

> "Each grain of Sand,
> Every Stone on the Land,
> Each rock & each hill,
> Each fountain & rill,
> Each herb & each tree,
> Mountain, hill, earth & sea,
> Cloud, Meteor & Star,
> Are Men seen Afar."[11]

Blake's transparent vision allows him to transform elements of nature into men, but more important, it enables him to transform these men into one divine being:

> My Eyes more and more
> Like a Sea without shore,
> Continue expanding,
> The Heavens commanding,
> Till the Jewels of Light,
> Heavenly Men beaming bright,
> Appear'd as One Man.[12]

A "student of Blake," Bishop's sandpiper concentrates his vision on the grains of sand, "no detail too small" for his perception. "The dragging grains" occupy his full attention, rather than the power that drags them. But

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[11]Blake to Thomas Butts, 2 October 1800, in The Complete Writings, pp. 804-5.

[12]Ibid., p. 805.

his world, unlike Blake's, "is a mist": Blake's jewels of light have become droplets of fog, concealing rather than revealing.

Nonetheless, for just a moment, the sandpiper does experience a tiny, if incomplete, vision of the world:

> The world is a mist. And then the world
> is minute and vast and clear. The tide
> is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.

Suddenly and inexplicably, "the world / is minute and vast and clear." This statement is carefully enclosed between lines which present the sandpiper's confusion. Both its position and its meaning, therefore, set the statement apart from the rest of the poem. The sandpiper's apparent capacity to glimpse an expansive world, if only for an instant, demonstrates Bishop's affirmation of the <u>possibility</u> of experiencing a Blakean vision. But the vision does not last long enough for the sandpiper to recognize it as the "something, something, something" he is searching for. He still cannot tell if the tide "is higher or lower." Therefore, although a Blakean vision is apparently possible, it is not necessarily lasting, or even meaningful. The sandpiper's vision cannot expand into infinity "like a Sea without shore." Ironically, his vision is limited to a shore without sea. Rather than seeing the world in a grain of sand, he sees only the grains of sand:

> The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

The sandpiper may not be able to find the meaning he seeks, but there are compensations. The detail that he perceives in the sand is astonishing both in its multiplicity and its beauty. The colourful grains are beautiful in themselves, especially the semi-precious ones of rose and amethyst, which are placed at the end of the poem, in a position of emphasis. Bishop indicates that simple, natural beauty is enough for the sandpiper. As a student of Blake, he seeks a supernatural revelation, yet finds satisfaction in the most simple things of nature. The things of nature, as they are, seem to suffice.

Both nature and the power of the artist (as imaginative perceiver) are revealed as diminished or limited in "Sandpiper." The bird is "obsessed" with his quest for the "something, something, something," yet he does not know what the "something" is; the larger, typically romantic repository of meaning--the sea--is not within the bounds of his perception. He keeps searching; he never finds what he seeks, but makes do with what he can see and understand--the scenery along the way. It is in this sense that Bishop most closely resembles her sandpiper. Her poetry demonstrates the same search for the "something, something, something," the vague "whatever it is one can never see full-face but that seems enormously important." She

rarely glimpses it, but finds herself, instead, celebrating those things of nature that she can see full-face. This, I suspect, accounts for her fascination with objects. It also accounts for the ambiguity her poetry demonstrates: it is never completely objective or subjective, negative or affirmative, modern or romantic.

Bishop's search for the "something, something, something" has led her to a consideration of traditional Christianity as a sustaining myth, and she has consistently found that the myth no longer sustains. In one early piece, in fact, "Hymn to the Virgin" (1933),[13] it is difficult to determine the precise object of her satire: the beliefs, the believers, or both. In the poem, disillusionment and scorn mingle to create a scathing parody of prayer. It presents a group of petitioners, who have apparently stumbled across a decayed and battered statue of the Virgin, hidden in a shrine behind a curtain. She has been stored for

> years in that great attic, all the red plush portieres
> food of
> Sacramenting moths, and all the gilded ropes and tassels
> spotted
> By the doers-of-the-Word flies, midst magnificance and
> plunder rotted!

The central section of the poem consists of the petitioners'

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[13]Elizabeth Bishop, "Hymn to the Virgin," The Magazine 1 (April 1934): 161-62.

prayer:

We know a thing or two
 Mary, Mary,
Which we will tell to You
 Mary, Mary.

As you once housed the Truth
 Belly-within,
Whom else should we tell it to,
 You, without sin?

In its due season
 From Thy poor portals
Sans rhyme or reason
 Truth came. We mortals

Intrust now wistfully
 Into Thy tender side
Our Truth, to keep, till it
 Gets itself crucified.

Glor'ous effulgence--
 Time cannot dim it,
Alpha and Omega
 Thou art the Limit.

The poem is remarkable if only for the stinging quality of the rejection of Mary, which is achieved through a combination of sacred and profane address, and rollicking schemes of rhyme and rhythm, replete with feminine rhymes and frequent dactyls which undermine the apparent invocation. Throughout, the capitalization of "You," "Truth," "Thy," and "Limit," and the use of the second person singular form of address, follow the traditional Christian form. However, the repetition of "Mary, Mary," in addition to being slightly mocking, is reminiscent of nursery rhymes, as are the rhythm and rhyme schemes. Moreover, the passage

begins and ends with popular sayings from the time in which the poem was written: "We know a thing or two," and "Thou art the Limit," the latter, appropriately, translated into the second person singular and given an ironic capital "L" for respect.

The purpose of the hymn, apparently, is to beg Mary to keep "Our Truth," much as she housed and gave birth to the original Truth, Christ. The new Truth is not named, but set within the poem's atmosphere of decay, it is not unlikely that it represents the ineffectiveness of Christianity. The central irony of the poem is that the petitioners, while begging Mary to "strike on our senses again with smell-stale incense," are also demanding that she carry their disbelief in her womb as she once carried Christ. Not surprisingly, she (or the battered wood and wax statue that represents her) refuses, initiating the threat: "Shall we force it on you lust-wise?"

"Hymn to the Virgin" does not make clear exactly who or what Bishop's intended victim is: Mary, or a pretended belief in her. Probably, Bishop is satirizing both: Mary, as the representative of a decayed structure of meaning, and the petitioners, who retain remnants of belief, but twist it so that it becomes false, and they become no more than modern day barbarians chanting their new discovery to an old deity and trying to force it upon her. We cannot,

of course, make firm deductions about such an early and atypical form (atypical in that Bishop never again wrote such a stringent satire), but the poem does reveal Bishop's concern with the apparent decay and impotence of Christianity in the twentieth century.

A much more characteristic presentation of her attitude can be found in another early poem, "A Miracle for Breakfast" (1937; CP, 20-21). This poem bears a resemblance to Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning," not only in its "ambiguous undulations" between the acceptance and rejection of Christian belief, but also in its replacement of God with the things of the natural world. Constantly in this poem, the natural is balanced against the supernatural, and eventually proves to be stronger.

If Bishop was conscious of this balancing maneuvre, she never spoke of it. In her interview with Brown, she said of the poem: "That's my Depression poem. It was written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples, around 1936 or so. It was my 'social conscious' poem, a poem about hunger."[14] Set in the early morning, beside a river, the poem presents a number of hungry people waiting for a handout of coffee and bread. A man appears on a balcony above them, but seems completely unaware of their presence. Each person receives just one crumb and

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[14]Brown, "An Interview," p. 13.

one drop of coffee, and a number leave in disgust. The speaker, with a group of others, remains, and experiences a vision of sitting on a balcony in her own mansion, drinking as much coffee as she wants. After the vision, she and the others eat their crumb and drink their coffee, and the poem ends.

On the surface, the poem is about physical hunger, but a closer reading reveals that its primary subject is spiritual hunger.[15] It was originally published with an epigraph:

> Miracles enable us to judge of doctrine, and doctrine enables us to judge of miracles.[16]

The epigraph, omitted in later printings, presents what Bishop sees as the paradoxical relationship between belief and experience that is explored in the poem. Moreover, it suggests that the poem presents a judgement of doctrine and miracles, as indeed it does.

The first specific reference to Christian belief appears in the first stanza, where it is stated that the people are waiting for the "charitable crumb." This description of the crumb is simple, yet it possesses hidden resonance. It alludes to a passage in the Bible,

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[15]Barbara Gibbs, "A Just Vision," Poetry 69 (January 1947): 229.

[16]Elizabeth Bishop, "A Miracle for Breakfast," Poetry 50 (July 1937): 182-84, quoted in MacMahon, p. 143.

which reads: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."[17] Modern translators of the Bible, however, change "charity" to "love."[18] Charity and love, then, are interchangeable. We are reminded of Bishop's conclusion in "Filling Station" that "somebody loves us all" (CP, 150), and of Helen Vendler's subsequent link between love and theology.[19]

The handout is placed firmly within a Christian context when the speaker suggests that receiving charity will be "like a miracle." The handout is not yet regarded as a miracle, but only "like" a miracle; an analogy is made, but the elements are still separate. In the second stanza, the hopes of the people are rising. Instead of a crumb, a buttered loaf is desired, "by a miracle." Here is displayed their implicit acceptance of the possibility of a miracle. No longer is there simply an analogy between handout and miracle; a handout of a buttered loaf will be a miracle. Moreover, the word "loaf" evokes a specific Christian miracle--the multiplication of the loaves and fish.[20]

The balancing of the natural and the supernatural is epitomized in Bishop's use of light and darkness in the poem.

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[17] 1 Cor. 13:13. [18] 1 Cor. 13:13 (RSV).

[19] Vendler, p. 23. [20] Matt. 14:15-21.

Traditionally used to symbolize good and evil, or knowledge and ignorance, these symbols are expanded in "A Miracle for Breakfast" to encompass love and indifference. All of these symbolic meanings are embodied in the sun, much as they are in Stevens' "Sunday Morning," where he says:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night.[21]

Never does the sun actually shine on the people in Bishop's poem, however. It opens at six o'clock in the morning, at which time darkness is not remarkable. Yet at seven, and later, as the action progresses, the landscape remains dark and the people remain cold. The effect of the darkness is that the landscape is never clearly visible. There are a river, a group of people, and a surrealistically disembodied balcony, which combine to form a paucity of detail rare in Bishop's poetry. It is as if the sun is ignorant of the presence of the people. In stanza one, it is personified:

> One foot of the sun
> steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.

In stanza two, it is presented as almost malicious:

> It was so cold we hoped that the coffee
> would be very hot, seeing that the sun
> was not going to warm us.

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[21]Stevens, p. 70.

The indifference of the sun in the second stanza is paralleled by the indifference of the man on the balcony in stanzas three and four. Bishop makes an explicit--although qualified--comparison of them: "his head, so to speak, in the clouds, along with the sun." Both the sun in the clouds and the man on the balcony with his head in the clouds are above the people, literally and figuratively. Moreover, the identification of the man with the sun (within the Christian context that has been constructed by "charitable crumb," "loaf," and "miracle") links him with Christ. This identification is reminiscent of the ambiguities Stevens presents in "Sunday Morning" between the natural sun and the supernatural Sun or Son. Ironically, there is no light in the landscape of "A Miracle for Breakfast"; the miracle cannot happen. A servant gives the man "the makings of a miracle," one cup of coffee and one roll. Instead of multiplying them to feed the hungry, as Christ did, the man idly crumbs the roll.

Further implications of Christianity appear in the fourth stanza, as the coffee and crumbs are divided equally among the people, each recieving one crumb and one drop. In this parody of Holy Communion, the Eucharist is administered by and received by people who do not seem to attach any meaning to it. Inevitably, some flick their crumbs "scornfully into the river." However, the speaker

and some of the others stand, "waiting for a miracle."

She experiences a miracle in stanzas five and six, although it is not what she has expected. It is certainly "not a miracle" in the Christian sense, for it is not carried out by supernatural means. What she experiences is a vision that is almost Blakean in its intensity and mechanics; instead of seeing a world in a grain of sand, as the sandpiper is unable to do, the speaker sees a world in a crumb of bread.

The speaker envisions herself in a world which possesses everything that the drab world of the rest of the poem does not. The landscape is filled with beauty and light:

> A beautiful villa stood in the sun
> and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.

Moreover, the speaker lives in comfort in her visionary world, warmed from the outside by the sun, and from the inside by coffee:

> Every day, in the sun
> at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
> with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

This world, as she recognizes in the sixth stanza, has been created by a miracle, a natural miracle:

> In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
> added by birds, who nest along the river,

> --I saw it with one eye close to the crumb--
>
> and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
> my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
> through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
> working the stone.

Not only does the speaker have sunlight and coffee, she has her own balcony--"baroque white plaster"--attached, unlike the other balcony, to a definite mansion. All of these things have been created by natural forces, rather than supernatural,[22] "by insects, birds, and the river / working the stone."

The visibn itself, however, is the product of neither supernatural nor natural forces. Rather, as Barbara Gibbs points out (in the only piece of criticism that gives any attention to the poem), it is the product of "the imagination of the poet setting itself against disappointment."[23] The active imagination of the poet merges with the world of experience to create a new world, in true romantic fashion. The mechanics of the imaginary creation are explicitly set out:

> --I saw it with one eye close to the crumb--
>
> and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
> my mansion, made for me by a miracle.

By focussing carefully on the crumb, the speaker not only

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[22]Gibbs, p. 229. [23]Ibid.

catches a glimpse of the "something, something, something," she also creates a work of art.[24] The line which is set apart from the rest of the text by a dash at either end, and forms the last line of stanza five without a final end-stop, helps to display the self-containment of the imaginary landscape while it demonstrates the simultaneity of the artistic and physical worlds. One stanza flows into the next as the speaker sees first the crumb and then the "galleries and marble chambers." The simultaneous existence is expressed very neatly in the enjambement of the first line in the sixth stanza: "My crumb / my mansion." The lack of punctuation allows the crumb and mansion to flow into and become each other, forming a bridge between the drab outer landscape and the bright inner landscape of the imagination. The merging between the inner and outer landscapes is in itself a kind of miracle. Unity occurs between the mind and nature in much the same way that Christ provides unity between man and God. Therefore, the miracle in "A Miracle for Breakfast" has two components: the natural and the artistic. It is no less a miracle because it is transferred from the Christian framework to the romantic framework.

The shift from the sixth stanza to the envoy accomplishes a return from the inner landscape to the

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[24] Ibid.

outer landscape, where the speaker, along with the others who waited with her, swallows the meagre handout. Acceptance of what little physical nourishment is available has been accomplished by the imaginative vision, which has provided a nourishment of the spirit to offset the hunger of the body. And the vision has a lasting effect. The last three lines of stanza six are distinguished from the rest of the text by the use of the present tense:

> Every day, in the sun,
> at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
> with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

This conveys the idea that the vision is an accomplished fact, still experienced by the speaker as she later records the story of the miracle at the river. It is perhaps as a result of the vision, the imaginative miracle, that the speaker does not completely relinquish her faith in the possibility of a supernatural miracle:

> A window across the river caught the sun
> as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

The accomplishment of the miracle depends upon the presence of the sun. In one sense, the window across the river is merely reflecting the sun, much as the ripple of the river does in stanza one. However, the phrase "caught the sun" suggests that the window has literally entrapped the sun. Presumably, had that happened on the speaker's side

of the river, the expected miracle would have taken place.

The conclusion of the poem, then, like that of "Sunday Morning," is equivocal. As Gibbs notes, "the validity of the artwork . . . and that of reality . . . are asserted quite simply side by side. The vision is as valid as the reality is real."[25] This is typical of Bishop's poetry in general, and it illustrates why her attitude can be called post-romantic. The truth she discovers in her natural and imaginative miracle--that she can enter another landscape where fulfillment is possible--is parallel to, or co-exists with, the truth of her hungry, physical existence. Although she remains skeptical about the possibility of a supernatural miracle, she does not entirely discount it. What she does discount is an attitude of passive waiting, of automatically expecting a handout, or spiritual nourishment, or anything without some action on the part of the mind. She examines the possibility that fulfillment is achieved not simply by the passive acceptance of what the world offers, but the activity of the mind upon natural resources, however meagre--that it is achieved through art.

"Roosters" (1941; CP, 39-45) was written soon after "A Miracle for Breakfast," and shares a number of characteristics with it. The most important of these is Bishop's use of the sun as a symbol of both the natural and the

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[25] Ibid., pp. 229-30.

supernatural. Not only does the sun light and warm the outer landscape, it also illuminates the inner landscape. As in a number of Bishop's poems, the scene is set in the early morning, just as the sun is rising. She utilizes the rising sun as an analogue of her search for meaning; as the sun appears over the horizon, she seems to expect a transcendent moment, a moment of vision. But she is also aware of the confusion, visual and intellectual, that characterizes early morning half-light. In "A Miracle for Breakfast," "Roosters," and such other early morning poems as "Love Lies Sleeping," "Sunday, 4 A.M.," and "Five Flights Up," ambiguity, rather than clarity, prevails. The same ambiguity is evident in late afternoon half-light poems such as "At the Fishhouses" and "The Moose." It bears a relationship, perhaps, to the ambiguity of the natural and the supernatural in Stevens' "Sunday Morning."

Another characteristic that "Roosters" shares with "A Miracle for Breakfast" is its tripartite structure. It opens with a direct description of a physical scene, switches to a scene in the poet's imagination, then returns to the physical scene, presenting added perception or understanding. Willard Spiegelman points out that Bishop's use of this structure links her to Wordsworth, and suggests that her poems often fit M. H. Abrams' formula for romantic poetry.[26] This consists of:

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[26]Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 204.

> a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied or integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely intervolved with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.[27]

The central part of a poem of this type is the section which presents the inner landscape, the world created by the artist's imagination acting upon the outer landscape. In "A Miracle for Breakfast," the speaker focusses upon a crumb of bread and achieves a vision of warmth, light, and comfort, which forms the central part of the poem. In "Roosters," the speaker focusses on a mean, common bird and achieves a sacred vision of betrayal and redemption which also forms the central part of the poem.

G. S. Fraser has observed that Elizabeth Bishop (and other American poets of her generation) is not primarily concerned with writing poems that display "social relevance,"[28]

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[27] M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Romantic Nature Lyric," in From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 527-28. Quoted by Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 204.

[28] G. S. Fraser, "Some Younger American Poets: Art and Reality," Commentary 23 (May 1957): 454-55.

but just as she called "A Miracle for Breakfast" her poem about the depression, so might one, with qualifications, call "Roosters" her poem about war. A major concern of the poem, according to Bishop in a letter to Marianne Moore, is militarism. As she wrote the poem, she said, she was thinking of the "violent roosters" in Picasso's Guernica.[29] "Roosters" is filled with images that suggest militarism, violence, and war. The poem opens in "the gun-metal blue dark," and the first crow of a rooster is heard "just below / the gun-metal blue window." Images such as these, and the comparison of the roosters' cries to flares, convey a militaristic sense. Especially effective is Bishop's direct comparison of the roosters to soldiers:

> Deep from protruding chests
> in green-gold medals dressed
> planned to command and terrorize the rest.

Their cries, like soldiers in combat, come from every direction:

> making sallies
> from all the muddy alleys,
> marking out maps like Rand McNally's:
>
> glass-headed pins,
> oil golds and copper greens,
> anthracite blues, alizarins.

Bishop pointed out in her letter to Moore that the maps

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[29]Bishop, quoted in MacMahon, p. 149.

are meant to be military maps, and the pins represent the sources of the roosters' cries: "About the 'glass-headed pins': I felt the roosters to be placed here and there (by their various crowings) like the pins that point out war projects on a map--maybe I haven't made it clear enough."[30]

Bishop leaves the immediate scene of the natural world to ask: "Roosters, what are you projecting?" In other words, she wishes to discover the meaning behind their cries--if there is a meaning. She recalls the sacrificial roosters of ancient Greece, and notes that the Greeks labelled them "very combative." Continuing the militaristic imagery, she envisions cock-fighting:

> and one is flying
> with raging heroism defying
> even the sensation of dying.

She discovers the meaning behind the roosters' cries in the central section of the poem, where we are suddenly confronted with the scene of Peter's triple denial of Christ. In its original printing, the poem was divided clearly into three parts by devices between stanzas twenty-six and twenty-seven, and stanzas thirty-nine and forty.[31] In subsequent printings, these stanzas are separated by

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Elizabeth Bishop, "Roosters," New Republic 104 (21 April 1941): 547-48. Cited by MacMahon, p. 148.

only an extra space between each, which makes the separation less emphatic than in the first publication, but creates, perhaps, a greater unity among the sections. In the central section (stanzas twenty-seven to thirty-nine), Bishop envisions a tableau of "old holy sculpture," which portrays Peter and Christ after the denial:

> Christ stands amazed,
> Peter, two fingers raised
> to surprised lips, both as if dazed.

Between them, carved on a limestone column, is a picture of a cock, with the inscription "gallus canit; / flet Petrus" (the cock crows; Peter cries) beneath it. The Biblical account of the incident reads:

> 60. And Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayst. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. 61. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. 62. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.[32]

Peter's denial is represented by Bishop as the cry of the rooster, and this symbolism mingles with the militaristic imagery and disparaging references to the roosters to present them as sordid creatures. Throughout the poem, Bishop demeans them:

> Cries galore
> come from the water-closet door
> from the dropping-plastered henhouse floor.

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[32] Luke 22:60-62.

The military roosters create "a senseless order" in the town:

> A rooster gloats
>
> over our beds
> from rusty iron sheds
> and fences made from old bedsteads.

Marianne Moore apparently objected to the demeaning of the roosters. She retitled the poem "Cocks," and made several changes in Bishop's draft copy.[33] Bishop replied:

> I cherish my water-closet and other sordidities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. In the lst part I was thinking of Key West, and also of those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland and Norway, when the Germans took over, and their atmosphere of poverty. That's why, although I see what you mean, I want to keep "tin rooster" instead of "gold" . . . . And for the same reason I want to keep as the title the rather contemptuous word ROOSTERS rather than the more classical COCKS.[34]

Also contributing to the demeaning of the roosters is the rhyme scheme (triplets) and what Bishop calls "the rather rattle-trap rhythm."[35] Although the triplets obviously echo Peter's triple denial of Christ, they serve a more important function, especially those with feminine rhyme. Their effect (Bishop often has to stretch for a rhyme, such as "sallies," "alleys," and "Rand McNally's") is

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[33] Bishop to Moore, quoted in MacMahon, p. 148.

[34] Ibid., p. 149.

[35] Ibid.

ultimately comical.

In the central section of the poem, the demeaning references crystallize into the sin that inspired them. However, the whole point of the section is to effect a change of perspective, which almosts amounts to an epiphany, as the poet realizes what Peter cannot:

> those cock-a-doodles yet might bless,
> his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness.

The tableau of Christ and Peter, then, "all together / in one small scene, past and future," consists of denial, which is of the past, and forgiveness, which is of the future. Peter's tears, simultaneous with the cock's crow,

> run down our chanticleer's
> sides, and gem his spurs.

Peter's tears gild the common rooster with glory; now he is given a more poetic title, which implies that his cry is a song rather than a noise which "grates like a wet match." His spurs are adorned with jewels; he becomes an object of reverence:

> Tear-encrusted, thick
> as a medieval relic
> he waits.

Not simply a symbol of denial, a symbol of "sordidity," the rooster, paradoxically, is a symbol of forgiveness, redemp-

tion, and hope:

"Deny deny deny"
is not all the roosters cry.

And it is to embody such meaning that a bronze cock sits outside the Lateran chapel:

so the people and the Pope might see

that even the Prince
of the Apostles long since
has been forgiven.

The poem returns to the present, and to the physical landscape, where the harshness of "the gun-metal blue dark" has been replaced by the gentleness of "a low light floating"--the sun has risen. Hanging low on the horizon, it gilds the things of the world

from underneath
the broccoli, leaf by leaf;
. . . . . .
. . . . . the tiny
floating swallow's belly
and lines of pink cloud in the sky.

The roosters are no longer crowing. As they have gone from despicable creatures to holy symbols of forgiveness, so we have gone with Bishop from darkness to light. No longer is the landscape mean. Like the rooster, it is gilded, by new insight and by the sun:

The sun climbs in
following "to see the end,"
faithful as enemy, or friend.

Like Peter, who followed Christ "afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end,"[36] the sun faithfully rises each morning to see the night "come to grief."

"Roosters" is a poem of ambiguities. The rooster is a "raw-throated" creature, and a "medieval relic" with jewelled spurs. He is a symbol of denial, betrayal, and destruction, as Bishop demonstrates through her use of both military and Biblical imagery. Yet he is also a symbol of forgiveness and renewal; it is the rooster's cry that heralds the dawn, the rising of the sun. Just as Peter is both enemy and friend to Christ--betraying him, yet faithfully following "to see the end," and repenting--so the sun is both "enemy, or friend" to the world. But the emphasis in the poem is placed not on the concept of "enemy," but on that of "friend." The comma before "or" creates a hesitation, that makes "friend" act as a kind of counter-weight to "enemy." Its position at the end of the poem gives it even more strength. The scene with Peter and Christ ends on a positive note, as well. And finally, the poem is set in the early morning; a rising rather than dying movement is established.

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[36]Matt. 26:58.

It is important to recognize that even in a symbolic poem such as "Roosters," Bishop never entirely leaves the physical world. Just as "one foot of the sun," in "A Miracle for Breakfast," steadies itself "on a long ripple in the river," so Bishop steadies herself with one foot in the world of physical, sensually verifiable experience. Hence, the roosters are "roosters" and not "cocks," and the poem returns, after the central imaginative section, to the real world. But this real world, like that in "A Miracle for Breakfast," is ambiguously real. The sun, with its conflicting associations of the natural and the supernatural, has risen, yet the natural things are gilded "from underneath" by a "low light." Although the light logically emanates from the early morning sun, there is an implication that it actually comes from the earth itself--that the earth sheds light on the things above it. Meaning ultimately comes from within the things of the natural world, rather than from a supernatural "other"; it seems to be immanent, rather than transcendent.

Bishop explores this possibility in a slightly later poem, "At the Fishhouses" (1947; CP, 72-74). In it, she demonstrates that the sustaining myth of Christianity no longer sustains, and attempts to find sustenance in the romantic ideals of the existence of the supernatural in the natural, and the unity of mind and nature. She is successful only in the first part of her attempt. She

does manage to sense the presence of the supernatural in the natural, but she achieves no unity between her mind and the natural landscape. She tries to find the meaning she craves in water, the element that traditionally represents mystery, knowledge, and redemption. In "At the Fishhouses," however, water is a hostile element, which burns the hand that dips into it. The speaker is an intruder, and the water rejects her. Therefore, although the experience is romantic in intent, it is not romantic in practice. Although Bishop approaches it with traditional romantic expectations and methods, she fails to find the unity, the redemption, or the understanding she seeks.

The poem takes place in the evening, contrary to "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "Roosters." It is significant that it is set at twilight, as day is changing into night ("in the gloaming," as she puts it), for it is often at the changing of night into day or day into night that Bishop sets her poems of discovery, or anticipated discovery. In "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "Roosters" a revelation is experienced, and the sun rises, accompanying the light of recognition or understanding. In "At the Fishhouses," however, it can only get darker and darker, more and more mysterious. As a consequence, the ending cannot express the same hope as that present in Bishop's morning poems.

The poem contains a number of references to Christian myth. The steeply peaked roofs of the fishhouses suggest

the structure of churches.[37] They are deserted, except for an old man repairing his nets, who is almost invisible in the twilight. The whole scene presents an air of isolation and decay.[38] The shuttle is worn, the buildings are overgrown with moss, and the fishtubs and wheelbarrows are not only covered with fish scales, but have flies crawling over them; nature seems to be reclaiming the inventions of man. If we suppose that the fishhouses are indeed representative of churches, then the air of decay applies to the decay of faith. The old fisherman is repairing his torn net to fish for souls, and it may be significant, in this regard, that he is waiting for a herring boat to come in.

On a slope behind the fishhouses, standing over them,

> is an ancient wooden capstan,
> cracked, with two long bleached handles
> and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
> where the ironwork has rusted.

The capstan may represent the cross on which Christ was crucified.[39] Its age and its "melancholy stains, like dried blood," as well as its prominence in the scene, suggest that it is more than simply a capstan.

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[37]Crale D. Hopkins, "Inspiration as theme: Art and Nature in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," Arizona Quarterly 32 (Autumn 1976): 204.

[38]McNally, p. 198. [39]Hopkins, p. 204.

Like "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "Roosters," "At the Fishhouses" begins with physical description that merges into meditation. Rather than the parts being completely separate, however, with three clear sections (description of the outer landscape, movement to an inner landscape, and return to the outer landscape), "At the Fishhouses" presents a meditation that is frequently interrupted by observations of the physical landscape,[40] as if the poet is hesitant to follow the meditation through to its ultimate conclusion.

At the beginning of the meditative section, another reference to the supernatural appears. Bishop describes the sea as:

> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
> element bearable to no mortal,
> to fish and to seals.

Directly preceding the first digression back into the outer landscape, the reference to the sea as an "element bearable to no mortal" immediately suggests that the immortal, or supernatural, can bear the sea. And the comment that fish and seals can bear the sea implicitly associates these natural beings with the supernatural. The seal shares with the speaker a belief in total immersion, but then the sea is the seal's natural element. The speaker's belief is the

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[40] McNally, p. 198.

product of a Christian myth; belief has been overlaid on nature. Identifying with the seal because of their shared belief, the speaker sings him Baptist hymns, and "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which is a somewhat ironic choice. If the fishhouses are meant to represent churches, then in their decaying state they cannot be called a mighty fortress. The separation of "I also sang 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'" from the rest of the section (the line forms a complete sentence) emphasizes it, so that it acts as a punch-line might in a joke. And the seal appears to be somewhat suspicious of the import of the song:

> He stood up in the water and regarded me
> steadily, moving his head a little.
> Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
> almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
> as if it were against his better judgement.

This passage reveals both the seal's freedom in the water and, perhaps, the impatience of nature (and by earlier implication, the supernatural) with man's elaborate conceptions of the supernatural.

The speaker returns to her meditation, partially repeating herself:

> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
> the clear gray icy water . . . .

She interrupts herself again as she notices the fir trees on the land behind her:

> Bluish, associating with their shadows,
> a million Christmas trees stand
> waiting for Christmas.

The trees may be waiting for the coming of Christ, but it is more likely that they are waiting to be sacrified by man as an offering to God.[41] It is ironically appropriate that Christmas trees should be evergreen, eternally green and alive. The trees in this poem "associate with their shadows"; the living trees associate with their ghosts. This joining of life and death is, of course, central to Christianity. The death of the trees ("waiting for Christmas" implies waiting for death) is a miniature reproduction of the crucifixion.

Finally, the speaker returns to her meditation. It is in the final thirteen lines that the subject of the poem becomes clear. Speaking of the water, she says:

> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand
> would burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire
> that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray
> flame.
> If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
> then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
> 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.

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[41] Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 207.

Having recognized that Christianity has deteriorated badly, the speaker turns to the sea, an element of nature, for sustenance. However, she realizes that just as the sea will burn her physically, knowledge--or "what we imagine knowledge to be"--will burn her mentally, or spiritually. It truly is "an element bearable to no mortal." David Bromwich, in a recent article on the poetry of Marianne Moore, remarks that Bishop must have had Moore's "A Grave" in mind when she wrote "At the Fishhouses," for the sea in both poems displays a lack of unity with man.[42] As Moore says of it,

> it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing, but you cannot stand in the middle of this.[43]

Willard Spiegelman and Sybil Estess, in their respective analyses of the poem, suggest that the last section, where the speaker recognizes that knowledge, like the sea, is unbearable, constitutes an epiphany. Spiegelman, arguing that the poem fits perfectly into the romantic mould, says that it presents, by the end, "a vision of the attractiveness and the danger of human knowledge."[44] Unity

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[42]David Bromwich, "Marianne Moore's Poems," Poetry 139 (March 1982): 345.

[43]Marianne Moore, Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 56.

[44]Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 207.

is achieved in the poem because the poet recognizes by the end that "ocean and knowledge, permanence and movement, inhuman phenomenon and personified abstraction are one."[45] Estess claims that:

> For the poet at least, the sea has become transparent and clear. Since she now perceives the sea to transmit and reflect light--the light of the atmosphere and the light of the poet's evolved understanding of its nature, she finally associates it with the sheerness and clarity of total illumination.[46]

The nature of the speaker's epiphany, I think, must be questioned. Through the use of the simile comparing knowledge to the sea, the poet says that knowledge, like the water, is "bearable to no mortal," that it causes pain. Just as the sea rejects humanity, so does knowledge. The only epiphany the speaker experiences, in fact, consists of the discovery that knowledge is unattainable, that the things of the natural world are not going to reveal to her a meaning in life. The images Bishop uses to describe the sources of the sea (and therefore, knowledge) show how hostile she considers it to be:

> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever.

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[45]Ibid.

[46]Sybil Estess, "Shelters for What Is Within: Meditation and Epiphany in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," Modern Poetry Studies (Spring 1977): 58.

The "cold hard mouth" and the "rocky breasts" will provide, at best, a very lean sustenance.

It seems to me that the poem, rather than providing illumination, actually takes light away. Bishop approaches her subject from a romantic point of view, but cannot achieve the ultimate unity between mind and nature that characterizes a true romantic poem. The only knowledge the speaker gains is that she has no access to knowledge. Because she is mortal (neither natural nor supernatural), she can never hope to have understanding of the world. This is the crux of the conclusion--there is no hope for romantic unity. Having relinquished Christian communion for communion with nature, she discovers that it is impossible.

Yet the conclusion of the poem is not as bleak as it seems. The speaker is something like the sandpiper, who is incapable of experiencing a romantic vision, but finds beauty and even knowledge of the world in his perception of the multiplicity of the grains of sand between his toes. Although knowledge of the kind she seeks may be impossible to possess, another kind of knowledge may be attainable; she cannot immerse herself in knowledge, to experience an expansive vision, but she can taste it, even though "it would at first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue." Moreover, although the images of motherhood are hardly maternal, they are established, solid, and permanent. Knowledge is obscure, dark, painful, and elusive,

but it is nonetheless forever embodied in the cold rocky earth and burning water, and the fact that it can be tasted makes it at least potentially attainable. Its permanence is established in the last lines of the poem: it is "derived from the rocky breasts / forever." Our knowledge may be evanescent ("historical, flowing, and flown"), but the source of the knowledge is eternal.

Finally, although the speaker may not be able to immerse herself in the water, she can marvel at its physical beauty. Three times she describes its clarity:

> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear.
> . . . . . .
> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear.
> . . . . . .
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free.

This water is much different from the murky water evident in many of the early poems of Robert Lowell, who was a close friend of Bishop. "At the Fishhouses" may be seen as an analogue to Lowell's "The Drunken Fisherman" (1944).[47] This poem, too, deals with the decay of Christianity. The old man in this poem, in fact, is explicitly fishing for souls, and his drunkenness is an ironic comment on the state to which the fisher of souls has been reduced.

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[47] Robert Lowell, Lord Weary's Castle (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1946), pp. 31-32.

Bishop's old but industrious fisherman presents a great contrast, and perhaps embodies the ambiguities in her attitude toward Christianity. He is decaying, but he is not demoralized. Instead of working on his net, as Bishop's fisherman does, Lowell's fisherman dangles a single hook without much luck:

> Only the blood-mouthed rainbow trout
> Rose to my bait.

Instead of fishing in a pool of water, Lowell's fisherman casts his hook into a pool of blood, which he calls "this bloody sty" and "bloody waters." Apparently, the pool was once filled with water:

> the raging memory drools
> Over the glory of past pools.

But now, "the shallow waters peter out," unlike the water in Bishop's poem, whose source is eternal. Now, "remorse, / Stinking, has puddled up its source." His pool is now a "dynamited brook." Bishop's water, "cold dark deep and absolutely clear," presents a tremendous contrast to Lowell's bloody, stinking pond, a contrast that emphasizes its infinite beauty. Bishop is much more hopeful than Lowell, who is still using nature as a symbol and looking for transcendence--she is much more open to accepting the world as it is.

III. ACCEPTING THE WORLD ON ITS OWN TERMS

"At the Fishhouses" presents Elizabeth Bishop's ultimate relinquishment of a sustaining myth. It demonstrates not only the deterioration of the traditional myth, Christianity, but also the failure of the romantic imagination to replace it. The supernatural may repose within the natural, but the imagination of the artist lacks the power to glimpse it. Nonetheless, the eternal quality of the sea and its source inspires wonder in the speaker; she is able to accept them as they are, on their own terms. Bishop increasingly came to accept the world as it is, like her sandpiper, who ignores the larger world around him to concentrate on the coloured grains of sand. Although always searching for that "something, something, something," it appears that Bishop derived more satisfaction, as time went on, from the physical qualities of the objects in the outer landscape. Like Stevens in "Of Modern Poetry," she began to ask what, apart from the traditional, could suffice. But for Bishop, accepting the things of the natural world as they are meant accepting them on their own terms--and those things set out definite terms. Perhaps they do serve as the repository of the supernatural; if so, they apparently do not wish to reveal anything.

Nature is an individual entity; sometimes it is malicious or hostile, often indifferent. But it is frequently personified, and seems to observe the poet as steadily as she observes it.

Although the personification of nature is a common characteristic of romantic poetry, Bishop's use of the device is particularly effective, for she manages with it to present nature as "enemy, or friend." Nearly all of Bishop's poetry is descriptive, and at least three quarters of it describes aspects of nature. In many of these poems which describe nature, some part of it is personified. Bishop's use of personification results in two contradictory effects. By humanizing the elements of nature, she makes them potentially knowable, but by giving them minds of their own, she limits the possibility of unity between her mind and theirs. The seal in "At the Fishhouses" is clearly at home in the element that is "bearable to no mortal":

> He was curious about me. He was interested in
> music;
> like me a believer in total immersion,
> so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
> I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
> He stood up in the water and regarded me
> steadily, moving his head a little.
> Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
> almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
> as if it were against his better judgement.

The seal displays a number of human characteristics: curiosity, an interest in music, and most significant,

skepticism at the speaker's song. He believes in total immersion literally rather than symbolically. He may be curious about the speaker, but the sea is his home and he takes it for granted; as an element of nature himself, understanding of it is open to him. The speaker's personification of him, then, only serves to emphasize the difference between them.

A similar discrepancy between the relationship of nature with nature and that of humanity with nature forms the basis of one of Bishop's later poems, "Five Flights Up" (1974; G III, 49-50). This poem is reminiscent of those by Emily Dickinson in which she encounters an animal or other element of nature, and ponders on the differences between them. In #333, for example, she imagines how pleasant it would be to be a blade of grass. It consorts with bees and butterflies, dances in the breeze, and adorns itself with dew-drops. Even after it dies, its lot is a happy one:

> And even when it dies--to pass
> In Odors so divine--
> Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep--
> Or Spikenards, perishing--
>
> And then, in Sovereign Barns to dwell--
> And dream the Days away,
> The Grass so little has to do
> I wish I were a Hay--[1]

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[1]Dickinson, p. 158.

In "Five Flights Up," Bishop expresses her desire to be more like the elements of nature. The poem, like "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "Roosters," is set in the "still dark" early morning, the setting that Bishop utilizes to convey the imminence of an imaginative insight. The speaker is looking from her fifth floor window into the yard next door, where she observes a bird and a dog just before they awake:

> The little dog next door barks in his sleep
> inquiringly, just once.
> Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
> once or twice, quavering.
> Questions--if that is what they are--
> answered directly, simply
> by day itself.

The poet has personified the animals, and fancies that they are asking questions that are similar, perhaps, to the questions she asks. More cautious in her personification than she was in "At the Fishhouses," she qualifies her observation that the animals are asking questions: "Questions--if that is what they are." The answer they receive is natural rather than supernatural--the coming of "day itself." The coming of day for the speaker is not so direct and clear: "Enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous." The heaviness and dreariness of the speaker's morning stands in contrast to the simplicity of the animals' morning.

The dog awakes, and "bounces cheerfully up and down," despite his owner's reprimand: "You ought to be ashamed!" The speaker concludes: "Obviously, he has no sense of shame." His shamelessness is somehow related to his confidence in the coming of day:

> He and the bird know everything is answered,
> all taken care of,
> no need to ask again.

The bird and the dog, as elements of the natural world, experience a security within it that the speaker cannot share:

> --Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
> (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)

This contrast between animal and human seems to echo Emerson's "The Humble-Bee," in which the bee is:

> Wiser far then human seer,
> Yellow-breeched philosopher!
> Seeing only what is fair,
> Sipping only what is sweet,
> Thou dost mock at fate and care,
> Leave the chaff, and take the wheat.
> When the fierce northwestern blast
> Cools sea and land so far and fast,
> Thou already slumberest deep;
> Woe and want thou canst outsleep;
> Want and woe, which torture us,
> Thy sleep makes ridiculous.[2]

"Cape Breton" (1949; CP, 75-77) presents one of

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[2]Emerson, pp. 640-41.

Bishop's most effective experiments with personification to demonstrate the alienation of man and nature. Actually, because nature is strongly identified with the supernatural in the poem, the device might more properly be called deification, wherein nature is recognized as the ordering force of the world. This recognition is typically romantic, and was characteristic of nature poetry until the late nineteenth century. As Robert Langbaum points out:

> The religion of nature derived from Newton's demonstration that everything from the fall of an apple to the movement of planets is governed by a single law. To people whose Christianity was waning, a nature so orderly seemed to offer new evidence of God's existence and a new source of religious emotion.[3]

Langbaum notes that nature poetry declined as nineteenth century scientific theories gained acceptance. But he suggests that it flourishes in twentieth century America in a much different form:

> Swinburne tried to be optimistic about post-Darwinian nature, and Hardy was definitely pessimistic about it. But both were being anthropomorphic still, at a time when the exciting new concept, the only one that could inspire conviction, was that of the mindlessness of nature, its non-human otherness; a concept having nothing to do with optimism or pessimism.[4]

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[3] Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," p. 323.

[4] Ibid., pp. 323-324.

He cites the poetry of Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Richard Wilbur, in particular, to support his hypothesis that modern nature poetry presents "the mindlessness of nature, its non-human otherness." Bishop's poetry might be included with that of Moore, Stevens, and Wilbur, for it constantly demonstrates nature's non-human otherness. However, this modern characterization of nature is achieved, ironically, by Bishop's attempts to humanize it; humanization precludes mindlessness.

It is obviously a temptation to humanize the appearance and behaviour of animals. Bishop does it occasionally to make humanity look ridiculous ("Roosters"), but more often to point out the gap between man and nature ("Five Flights Up"). She goes beyond the personification of animals, however, to invest inanimate elements of nature with human motives and behaviour. In at least two of the poems that preceded "Cape Breton," these elements display hostility. In "The Colder the Air" (1936; CP, 7), Bishop transforms personification into conceit as she portrays the icy winter air as a skilled huntress who causes destruction wherever she goes:

> We must admire her perfect aim;
> this huntress of the winter air
> whose level weapon needs no sight,
> if it were not that everywhere
> her game is sure, her shot is right.

In "Wading at Wellfleet" (1946; CP, 8), the sea is displayed

as potentially hostile:

> A thousand warriors in the sea
> could not consider such a war
> as that the sea itself contrives
>
> but hasn't put in action yet.

"Quai d'Orleans" (1938; CP, 31) introduces the idea that Bishop was to give attention to again in "At the Fishhouses," "Cape Breton," and other poems--that while we are watching nature, nature is watching us:

> "If what we see could forget us half as easily,"
> I want to tell you,
> "as it does itself--but for life we'll not be rid
> of the leaves' fossils."

In contrast to the nature poetry that Langbaum discusses in his essay, then, Bishop's nature poetry does not present a mindless nature. Rather, as can be seen in "Cape Breton," it presents an intelligent, supernatural nature which, although the product of the modern view that nature is alienated from man, seems equally the product of the romantic view that nature is possessed of the power to order the world.

In "Cape Breton," the indifference and even hostility of nature toward man that was displayed in "At the Fishhouses" finds full expression. Much like Emerson, Bishop associates understanding with the ability to see. In "Cape Breton," she speculates that elements of the landscape--mist, trees, and a road--are purposely hiding from

her the interior of the landscape. And the interior represents meaning, much as the sea in "At the Fishhouses" represents knowledge. Both are inaccessible to their human observers. Ironically, although humanity is initially nothing more than an intruder in the landscape (represented by the sound of a motorboat, the presence of bulldozers, the entry of a bus into the scene), it ultimately initiates a renewal that transforms the deadly calm of the opening scene into an audible awakening. Despite appearances (or the lack of them), a relationship does finally exist between man and nature.

The atmosphere created in the first two stanzas is silent and mysterious, the quiet broken only by the occasional "baaa, baaa" from the sheep on Ciboux and Hertford, or the muted sound of a motorboat. Mist disguises the water between the islands and the mainland:

> The silken water is weaving and weaving,
> disappearing equally under the mist in all
> directions,
> lifted and penetrated now and then
> by one shag's dripping serpent-neck.

The speaker's eyes cannot penetrate the mist, but not surprisingly, the shag (a type of cormorant) can, being itself an element of nature, just as the seal in "At the Fishhouses" can live in the water, and the animals in "Five Flights Up" can face the new day so easily. Similarly,

the trees on the mainland pierce through the mist that surrounds them:

> The same mist hangs in thin layers
> among the valleys and gorges of the mainland
> like rotting snow-ice sucked away
> almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift
> among these folds and folds of fir: spruce and
> hackmatack--
> dull, dead, deep peacock-colors,
> each riser distinguished from the next
> by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,
> alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view.

In this passage it becomes clear that the mist is more than simply droplets of water. Rather, it is a supernatural entity. The poet is careful at first not to commit herself to this possibility, as she expresses the decayed quality of the mist with a simile, and then a qualification, as if she is not quite sure her perception is accurate: "like rotting snow-ice sucked away / almost to spirit." The next clause determines the association of the mist with the supernatural, as Bishop turns to metaphor, and refers to the wisps of mist as "the ghosts of glaciers." Implications of the Holy Spirit and haunting spectres mingle to produce an atmosphere of mystery. Yet this sense of the supernatural can only be perceived by concentration upon the natural. Sybil Estess, who has written much about "Cape Breton," states that:

> It is crucial to remember . . . that even in this context, where Bishop allows herself imaginatively to associate physical realities with a numinous

> "spiritual" world, she notices the trees to be specifically "spruce and hackmatack." By a process of careful description and only then meditative imagination it is almost as if she can allow herself to see the mist as ethereal and mysterious only when she notices the physical world in its actuality and particularity.[5]

The third stanza presents other elements of the landscape apparently in league with the mist to hide their "interior" from the eyes of the speaker. The road is deserted, as are the bulldozers upon it, because "today is Sunday." Apparently the churches are deserted, too, or at least "lost":

> The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills
> like lost quartz arrowheads.

The traditional religion symbolized by the white churches is as lost as the culture of the Indians. And nature--"the matted hills"-- has made sure that they are buried where no one can find them. As in Stevens' "Sunday Morning," traditional Christian faith (man's attempt to impose symbolic order on hature) seems to have been overwhelmed by nature. The road itself is almost personified, as it "clambers along the brink of the coast." The road, like the rest of the landscape, is devoid of human presence. The apparent emptiness of the landscape--of humanity and

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[5]Estess, "Toward the Interior," p. 51.

meaning--leads the speaker to meditate:

> The road appears to have been abandoned.
> Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to
> have been abandoned,
> unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
> where we cannot see.

The sudden "unless" turns the speaker around, so that she can proceed with the same guarded hope that characterizes "At the Fishhouses"; there is meaning, even if it is "bearable to no mortal," or held back "in the interior" by a malicious road. In the invisible interior,

> deep lakes are reputed to be
> and disused trails and mountains of rock
> and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
> like the admirable scriptures made on stones by
> stones.

There is reassurance in the memory of what is "reputed" to exist in the interior: other eyes have seen the lakes, trails, rocks, and forests. Most reassuring is the comparison of the burnt forests to "admirable scriptures." The description alludes to Biblical scriptures, a symbol of order. In this landscape, however, the scriptures have been created by natural rather than traditional supernatural powers ("made on stones by stones"), and nature is hesitant to divulge their meaning:

> and these regions now have little to say for
> themselves
> except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs
> floating upward

> freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and
> meshing
> in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets.

The last three lines of the passage, however, cement the hope the speaker has for eventual unity between herself and nature, for the songs of the birds escape the mist "dispassionately"; they act as impartial arbiters between the interior and the speaker.

The final stanza of the poem presents a break in the meditation as the speaker returns to the observable scene, and humanity enters the deserted landscape in the form of a crowded bus:

> It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
> climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small
> steep meadow,
> which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of
> daisies,
> to his invisible house beside the water.

The man and the baby, unlike the speaker, do enter the interior. They leave the road and pass through the meadow to their "invisible house." Their progress assures the speaker that their house is there, even if she cannot see it. The landscape loses its death-like calm as the moving bus, the man and the baby, and the oxymoronic "snowfall of daisies" initiate a somewhat ambiguous renewal. Throughout the poem appear images of death and decay that culminate in the "snowfall": the sheep falling over the rocks, the "rotting snow-ice," the "ghosts of glaciers," the "dull,

dead, deep peacock colors" of the trees, the "miles of burnt forests," and especially, the silence and absence of movement, broken only by the bird songs. Now, after the man and baby disembark:

> The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
> The thin mist follows
> the white mutations of its dream;
> an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.

When the bus leaves, nature is once more left alone. The mist, which was hesitantly labelled "spirit" at the beginning of the poem, has now become the living spirit of a renewed world, represented by the daisies, the singing birds, the bawling calf, and the rippling water. And it is the poet's recognition that the static and deadly world has a second nature that makes it capable of growth and renewal, that gives her hope to carry on. If the landscape is capable of renewal, then it cannot be entirely chaotic and meaningless; the cycle of death and renewal is in itself an ordering force. In "Cape Breton," awareness of this force, even if it cannot be understood, must be enough.

However, Bishop's constant travelling, her constant searching for the "something, something, something," contradicts her acceptance of the world on its own terms. One of the most pervasive motifs in her poetry is travel. From "The Map" (1935), which introduces The Complete Poems,

to the poems that compose Geography III, Bishop's work displays her concern with observing all the things the world has to offer, and some of the things it does not: She seems compelled to find the meaning of these things. It is as if by travelling as far as she possibly can, she may come across the knowledge and understanding she seeks. Her physical journeying around the world parallels a spiritual journey--to find unity, in typical romantic fashion.

Bishop never really experienced a settled life until she moved to Brazil in the early 1950s. Transplanted from Massachusetts to Nova Scotia and back again in her early childhood, living with various relatives, Bishop must have experienced the sense of homelessness that permeates her work. She told Elizabeth Spires: "I was always a sort of a guest."[6] A glance at the few details that have been published about Bishop's life reveals that she spent a great part of it looking for home. As Sybil Estess remarks, "an awareness of the chronology of her nearly nomadic adult life is essential in order to fully understand her sensibility and to appreciate her work."[7] Her travels began in earnest in 1935, a year after she

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[6] Spires, p. 75.

[7] Sybil Estess, "Elizabeth Bishop," in American Women Writers, vol. 1. ed. Lina Mainiero (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979), p. 158.

graduated from Vassar, when she travelled throughout Europe and North Africa. She spent the winter of 1936-1937 in Florida, where she returned in 1939 to make her home in Key West. In 1949-1950, she served as Consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress in Washington.[8]

Her poetry reflects these constantly changing environments. A brief survey of her poems reveals "Paris, 7 A.M.," "Quai d'Orléans," "Sleeping on the Ceiling," and "Sleeping Standing Up," all set in Paris; "Florida," "Jerónimo's House," "Seascape," "The Fish," "Songs for a Colored Singer," and "Cootchie," set in Florida; and "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress," "From Trollope's Journal," and "Visits to St. Elizabeth's," set in Washington. Her most important poems, however, seem to date from the period when she lived in Brazil. In 1951, Bishop embarked on a trip around South America. Forced by illness into a prolonged stay in Brazil, she discovered that she liked it enough to settle there. She lived in Brazil until 1966, when she returned to the United States to teach.[9] She maintained a home in Brazil until 1974, when she moved permanently to Boston.[10]

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[8]Ibid., pp. 158-59: [9]Ibid., p. 160.

[10]Ashley Brown, "Elizabeth Bishop: In Memorium," Southern Review 16 (Spring 1980): 257-59.

It is unwise to read too much into biographical details. Indeed, Bishop seemed to warn against doing so in her interview with Elizabeth Spires, when she protested:

> I really haven't travelled that much. It just happened that although I wasn't rich I had a very small income from my father, who died when I was eight months old, and it was enough when I got out of college to go places on. . . . But the biographical sketch in the first anthology I was in said, "Oh, she's been to Morocco, Spain, etc.," and this has been repeated for years even though I haven't been back to any of these places. But I never travelled the way students travel now. Compared to my students, who seem to go to Nepal every Easter vacation, I haven't been anywhere at all.[11]

It is not the fact of Bishop's travelling, but the way she used it, that is important to a study of her poetry. All of the places she encountered, whether north or south, familiar or strange, served as more than settings for her spiritual and epistemological meditations; they became the receptacles of meaning and knowledge. It is as if by finding the right place, finding a physical and spiritual home, Bishop might find the meaning she craved.

As David Kalstone suggests, the poetry in Questions of Travel (1965) "anticipates a new understanding, taking what comes on its own terms."[12] This new understanding is hinted at in the first poem of the volume, "Arrival at

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[11] Spires, p. 60.

[12] Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop," p. 31.

Santos" (1952; CP, 103-4), which concludes: "we are driving to the interior." The arrival in Brazil signals the move into the mysterious interior which was withheld from the eyes of the speaker in "Cape Breton." Brazil's roads, apparently, are not as possessive of whatever mystery they hold as the roads in Nova Scotia.

Two of Bishop's finest poems, "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" (1948) and "Questions of Travel" (1956), present the contrast between the pre- and post-Brazil travel poems. They deal with the same question: how (or whether) travelling to strange places can lead us to understanding, to the mysterious knowledge that exists in "the interior." The answers presented in each vary significantly. "Over 2000 Illustrations," the pre-Brazil poem, possesses a romantic conclusion (although it is typically individual and eccentric), whereas "Questions of Travel," although ostensibly following the romantic pattern of a journey toward a higher understanding, presents no real conclusion at all.

"Over 2000 Illustrations" (CP, 65-67), like so many of Bishop's poems, possesses a tripartite structure.[13] The first section, typically, consists of a description

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[13]This is not immediately evident in the printing in The Complete Poems; an intended space between lines thirty-one and thirty-two was apparently omitted. MacMahon, p. 152.

of the present scene; in this case, of the illustrations of the Holy Land in a Bible through which the speaker is flipping. The second section reveals the speaker's imaginative return to the past, as she retraces her travels in various parts of the world, some of which correspond to the pictures she sees in the Bible. The final section of the poem returns to the Bible--to the present--and contains a vision. Peculiarly, the vision is not spawned from the recollection of experiences, but from a painting reproduced in the book.

The poem opens with a suggestion of the ultimately unsatisfactory nature of experience: "These should have been our travels: / serious, engravable." Emphasis is placed on the unknown, on the scenes Bishop has never actually observed, as opposed to "The Seven Wonders of the World," which are "tired / and a touch familiar." Her observations in the pictures--of Arabs and date-palms--seem at first to be random, but they take on a structure as the poem progresses:

> 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,
> gone with its camel or its faithful horse.

The map is there, although the human presence is gone. Someone drew the diagram, and is responsible for:

> the specks of birds
> suspended on invisible threads above the Site,
> or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by threads.

The speaker's awareness of an artist becomes increasingly stronger:

> Granted a page alone or a page made up
> of several scenes arranged in cattycornered rectangles
> or circles set on stippled gray,
> granted a grim lunette,
> caught in the toils of an initial letter,
> when dwelt upon, they all resolve themselves.

The allusions to an artist: "made up," "arranged"; and to art: "scenes," "circles set on stippled gray," "a grim lunette," "an initial letter" are important, for they indicate the existence of an artist who has control over his scenes, and gives them meaning which can be grasped by the speaker as she concentrates on them. Significantly, the identity of the creator and the created subtly shifts through simile, in the last lines of the section, from artist and illustrations to God and the world:

> 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.

Not only the lines of print, but the "ripples above sand," "ignite" into the second section, where the attention of the speaker shifts from the Bible to memories of her travels.

In contrast to the scenes in the first section, which are still and silent, the scenes in the speaker's memory are full of sounds: "the touching bleat of goats" in the harbour at St. John's, the blowing wind in Rome, the juke-box in Mexico, the gossiping woman in Dingle, and the giggling prostitutes in Marrakesh. Her memories are fresher and more complete than any of the scenes she sees in the Bible, simply because she can utilize the senses of hearing and smell in addition to sight.

All of the scenes she represents demonstrate either bursting life, or decay and death: the goats and flowers in St. John's; the Collegians striding "rapidly" and "purposefully" at St. Peter's; the dead man and dead volcanoes in Mexico--which nonetheless glisten "like Easter lilies"; the poppies at Volubilis; the rotting hulks at Dingle harbour and the anticipated birth of the Duchess' child; and the pockmarked prostitutes at Marrakesh. The allusions to death and the Christian imagery that has appeared throughout the poem merge at the end of the second section, where the speaker recalls

> what frightened me most of all:
> A holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
> one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin
> open to every wind from the pink desert.
> An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
> with exhortations, yellowed
> as scattered cattle-teeth;
> half-filled with dust, not even the dust
> of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.

What frightens her, I think, is not that she is looking at a grave, for she has seen death in México and reported it indifferently. Rather, what frightens her is the fact that the holy grave does not seem "particularly holy." It does not possess the same power and mystery that the holy grave has in Stevens' "Sunday Morning." Instead, it is open to the elements--decayed and weather-beaten.

The unsatisfying climax to her recollections shocks the speaker into the present again, and the third section begins with her realization that her experience lacks pattern: everything is "only connected by 'and' and 'and.'" She gently orders her companion (herself?) to open the Bible:

> Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
> of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
> Open the heavy book.

The repetition of the order is reassuring, as is the gilt that clings to the fingers; although actual experience seems to leave nothing but disconnected memories, the book is solid and ever-touchable, and it leaves a residue behind--a residue that by implication is living and fertile. The book is opened to a representation of the Nativity, of the divine made human:

> 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.

It is an illustration of the Nativity rather than her living experience in the Holy Land that leads to the speaker's vision.[14] The illustration offers a more coherent and spiritual vision of the world than her travels do. Not imagination and experience, but imagination and imagination unite, as the dark and the rocks part to admit a light from within or beyond. The conclusion is hopeful, for it allows the possibility of romantic unity, but the static quality of the "undisturbed, unbreathing flame, / colorless, sparkless," suggests that the traveller has still not found the satisfaction she craves. Satisfaction, perhaps, will come only when the travels not only fall into a pattern that is "serious" and "engravable," but are also breathing and colourful.

These requirements are met in "Questions of Travel" (CP, 107-9), a poem that Willard Spiegelman sees as " a philosophical center in Bishop's work; it poses, methodically, the epistemological questions and alternatives which give most of her other nature poems their form and subject."[15] In this poem, Bishop meditates upon whether we should stay

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[14] See pp. 23-25 above.

[15] Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 218.

at home, as Pascal suggested, and imagine foreign places, or make the effort to see them ourselves. In earlier poems, such as "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "At the Fishhouses," she concludes on an ambivalent note, neither embracing nor rejecting meaning versus chaos, love versus indifference, unity versus alienation. But she keeps searching almost innocently for the understanding she needs so desperately. In "Questions of Travel," for the first time, she begins to analyse this quest for meaning--she exhibits self-consciousness. This takes the form of moral self-examination and self-mockery, a gentle self-mockery like that in "Sandpiper." The drive to the interior in the poem is twofold: first, the poet pursues her attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the world of experience, and second, she attempts to understand her own desire to discover these mysteries. The dimension that her life in Brazil adds to Bishop's poetry is, I think, that sense of self-consciousness. Ironically, she is home at last, in an environment that would seem to hold more geographical mysteries in its low-hanging clouds and thick tropical forests than do Nova Scotia or Florida with their (for the most part) clear-cut, well defined landscapes.

Like the other poems discussed, "Questions of Travel" opens in the present, shifts into a meditation, and returns to the present with an altered perception. The opening section presents a panoramic view of Brazilian scenery, the

atmosphere heavy with water, clouds pressing so firmly on the mountaintops that they "spill over the sides in soft slow-motion, / turning to waterfalls under our very eyes." She says that "there are too many waterfalls here," and

> if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny,
> tearstains,
> aren't waterfalls yet,
> in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
> they probably will be.

The section conveys an overwhelming sense of oppression. As Kalstone points out, the traveller is "glutted" with the lush scenery.[16] Similarly, the streams are glutted with moisture from the clouds and the mountains are glutted with waterfalls. Yet the clouds and streams are necessary to the mountains:

> But if the streams and clouds keep travelling,
> travelling,
> the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
> slime-hung and barnacled.

Without the masking clouds, the mountains would reek of decay. Spiegelman suggests that "the possibilities for the clouds are like those for the individual: movement for self-preservation, which reveals the essential otherness or deadness of objects touched or perceived along the way, or a static surrendering of self to the objects at hand."[17]

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[16]Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop," p. 30.

[17]Spiegelman, "Landscape," pp. 218-19.

Spiegelman's analysis crystallizes the central ambiguity in Elizabeth Bishop's quest for understanding. On the one hand, she travels for self-preservation (or her eye travels for self-preservation), as if by cataloguing all of the detail around her, she can verify her own existence. On the other hand, close observation of the details of the physical landscape reveals their otherness. More than that, it reveals their own powerful desire for integrity, for self-preservation, and for self-enclosure. This power overwhelms the viewer, and forces her, as Spiegelman observes, to surrender herself to "the objects at hand," to accept them on their own terms.

The second section of the poem presents the nagging questions--moral and intellectual--that face the traveller:

> Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
> Where should we be today?
> Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
> in this strangest of theatres?

In a sense, the traveller is an invader, spying on the "strangers" as if they were upon a stage, and unreal, much as the conquering Christians do in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," where the landscape appears to be a tapestry. She goes on to mock the desire for travel:

> 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?

Despite the traveller's wish to see the sun (and presumably other elements of the landscape, as well) "the other way around," she discovers that stonework, at least, is "inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view." It seems that no matter what angle an element of the landscape is seen from, it will not necessarily give up its meaning, whether it be sun or stonework. However, there is some compensation: by travelling to see the things she has only dreamed about, the traveller discovers that they are "always, always delightful." They possess a beauty in themselves that makes up for their refusal to reveal what is beneath the surface.

The traveller then recognizes her greed for both understanding and beauty:

> Oh, must we dream our dreams
> and have them, too?

As Spiegelman says: "Dreams are not cake: they can be dreamt and some form of them possessed simultaneously."[18] Yet the traveller seems to be impatient with herself for desiring everything: "Oh, must we . . . ?" The impatience

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[18] Ibid., p. 219.

vanishes as she spies another thing she would like to possess:

> And have we room
> for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

This sounds like self-mockery; the image of a traveller snatching the sunset from the sky and folding it carefully into her suitcase is undeniably amusing.

The third section of the poem presents some justifications for travelling, each prefaced with the negative defence: "But surely it would have been a pity / not to have seen . . . ." The tone is hesitant, and the images at first seem random, but as momentum is built up by the repetition of "a pity not to have," it can be seen that the traveller is straining to put her experiences into perspective, to discover or create some unity that will lead to an inclusive understanding:

> But surely it would have been a pity
> not to have seen the trees along this road,
> really exaggerated in their beauty,
> not to have seen them gesturing
> like noble pantomimists, robed in pink,
> --Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
> the sad, two-noted wooden tune
> of disparate wooden clogs
> carelessly clacking over
> a grease-stained filling-station floor.
> (In another country the clogs would all be tested.
> Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
> --A pity not to have heard
> the other, less primitive music of the fat
> brown bird
> who sings above the broken gasoline pump
> in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque.

Not only does she try to form things into a complete picture (syntactically, at least), she comments on the process itself:

> Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
> blurr'dly and inconclusively,
> on what connection can exist for centuries
> between the crudest wooden footwear
> and, careful and finicky,
> the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
> --Never to have studied history in
> the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages,
> --And never to have had to listen to rain
> so much like politicians' speeches.

The traveller's dreaming and pondering are the working of her imagination on the material at hand in an effort to unify the disparate images she has observed into a cohesive whole--to make connections, and satisfy her desire for art, as well as understanding. The ultimate image of the poem is that of the delicate wooden birdcages. Not only do they represent her wish to encage, and therefore possess, nature, they also resolve the other images: the trees, the wooden clogs, the "fat brown bird." The history that she studies in "the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages" is the history of artistic creation, which progresses from raw material (nature) to finished product (art). To associate the cages with calligraphy is to imply that the history is written for human eyes to read. It is here that the travels are recognized as both "serious" and "engravable," breathing and colourful.

As Crale D. Hopkins points out in his analysis of "Questions of Travel," there is in the third part of the poem "a recounting of the epiphanies that represent the poet's sense of art and nature unified."[19] In other words, the random memories that the traveller recounts are of the moments when it seemed to her that she gained understanding--moments when she glimpsed the "something, something, something" from the corner of her eye. Her questions of travel, then, are answered in her memories of the things she has seen. Her attempts to make connections by juxtaposing memories that relate art and nature--the pantomiming trees, the musical clogs, the cages composed of calligraphy (all natural wood)--answer the question of how travel can provide meaning. In her analysis of the poem, Ruth Quebe presents a similar observation:

> After harrassing self-questions, the traveler finds his [sic] potential for wonder and his capacity for knowledge filled through unadulterated perception. . . . The resolution is only temporary, for the traveler soon begins to ask questions again, but the connections he makes between footwear and birdcages, rain and speeches, exercises the imagination; in fact, the traveler justifies himself by his imagination.[20]

The final unity created by the traveller's imagination

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[19]Hopkins, "Inspiration as Theme," p. 210.

[20]Ruth Quebe, "Water, Windows, and Birds: Image-Theme Patterns in Elizabeth Bishop's Questions of Travel," Modern Poetry Studies 10 (1980): 78-79.

between art and nature is the connection between rain and the speeches of politicians:

> two hours of unrelenting oratory
> and then a sudden golden silence.

This image allows her to shift back to the present. In the silence, the traveller writes in her notebook:

> "Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
> to imagined places, not just stay at home?
> Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
> about just sitting quietly in one's room?
>
> Continent, city, country, society:
> the choice is never wide and never free.
> And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed
> at home,
> wherever that may be?"

In the final stanzas, resolutions become questions again as the traveller once more tries to discover why she travels; it is either a lack of imagination, or a desire to see for herself. In the last stanza, the traveller muses on the places we can visit, and determines that "the choice is never wide and never free." Our choice is rendered narrow, perhaps, by the limitations placed on us by our our "continent, city, country, society," and by our choices in the past--by the natural and human forces that determine our lives. She interrupts her train of thought in the third line, with "No." Perhaps she is contradicting herself, but she is also returning to the subject at hand: "Should we have stayed at home?" Her final question opens

up another area of speculation. Is home a place where you can sit in your room and let your imagination roam freely? Or is it a place where, in the real world, you happen to experience a moment of unity, a glimpse of understanding, despite the fact that "the choice is never wide and never free"?

These questions are considered in a later poem, "Crusoe in England" (1971; G III, 9-18). Many years after his rescue from the deserted island, Crusoe, back in England, is inspired by newpaper stories about volcanoes and islands to reminisce about his period of isolation. He remembers the island as an ugly, wild place, and his existence there as lonely and miserable. The poem follows the typical tripartite pattern (stanza one, stanzas two to ten, stanzas eleven and twelve). At the end of the poem, Crusoe returns to the present, and it becomes apparent that the island, ironically, is more truly his home than England is. On the island, he is continually occupied with his attempts to domesticate it,[21] to make it his own. Back in England, in an ordered, civilized world, these attempts are not necessary, and he is not content:

> I'm old.
> I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,
> surrounded by uninteresting lumber.

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[21]Vendler, p. 26.

But he takes comfort in the memories of his experience, in the fact that his island is:

> un-rediscovered, un-renamable.
> None of the books has ever got it right.

Memory may be defined as the imaginative reconstitution of the past; the process can be traced in the romantic nature poem, and in Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast," "At the Fishhouses," "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," and "Questions of Travel." In these poems, Bishop performs as an artist, using her imagination in an attempt to transform the landscape into something knowable. In "Crusoe in England," one of her few dramatic monologues,[22] she uses the form's distancing quality to portray, from a detached point of view, the imaginative artist at work. Crusoe is partially successful in achieving unity of mind and nature, in transforming the landscape, although the natural world he encounters is no more willing to be ordered by man's imagination than that in "At the Fishhouses" or "Cape Breton." And a new kind of unity is introduced in the poem: Crusoe finds ultimate satisfaction in the love of another human being. On his return to civilization, however, supposedly his desire from the beginning of his

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[22] The others are "Jerónimo's House," "Songs for a Colored Singer," "Manuelzinho," "The Riverman," and "From Trollope's Journal," all in The Complete Poems.

captivity, he loses both his island and Friday. Kalstone argues that: "Bishop seems involved with Crusoe because of the questions after travel, a kind of 'Dejection Ode' countered by the force and energy that memory has mustered for the rest of the poem. It acts out ways of overcoming and then re-experiencing loss."[23] Kalstone's remarks express the essential post-romantic paradox: the artist "re-invents"[24] the world, even as he realizes that some aspects of it do not fit into his scheme.

Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe has become an almost archetypal figure who represents solitary survival in a hostile environment. He is a man who conquers nature and makes it work for him. He survives, moreover, because he accepts that his presence on the island is God's will. Ultimately, he represents not only the triumph of ingenuity and common sense, but also the triumph of Christianity. But Robinson Crusoe was the product of Defoe's Protestant sense of "mission," and an eighteenth century sense of order. The romantic perception of imminent chaos and the modern perception that man cannot create order had yet to occur. Perhaps it is the absence of these perceptions in Robinson Crusoe that prompted Walter de la Mare to write:

> All praise and thanks that it is what it is, a triumph in its kind, and yet one may pine for what, given a

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[23] Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop," p. 36. [24] Ibid.

> more creative imagination, and a different Crusoe, the book might have been if the attempt had been made to reveal what a prolonged unbroken solitude, an absolute exile from his fellow creatures, and an incessant commerce with silence and the unknown, would mean at last to the spirit of man.[25]

Elizabeth Bishop, with "a more creative imagination, and a different Crusoe," explores the ramifications of prolonged solitude. To accomplish this, she makes Crusoe emphasize his loneliness, and describe the ways in which he tried to communicate with nature. First, however, she makes it clear that Crusoe does not possess the belief in God's will that ultimately sustains Defoe's Crusoe. In her interview with Starbuck, she said of Defoe's book: "I reread it all one night. And I had forgotten it was so moral. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to see it with all that left out."[26] This entailed, as de la Mare predicted, an entirely different Crusoe. As the original Crusoe bemoans his castaway state, he cries: "Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be thus used?"[27] Bishop's Crusoe, on the other hand, does not have a firm foundation of belief, although he does have a muddled notion that some higher authority is responsible for his predicament.

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[25]Walter de la Mare, Desert Islands and "Robinson Crusoe," quoted in Harvey Swados, "Afterword" to Robinson Crusoe, by Daniel Defoe (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 308.

[26]Starbuck, p. 18.

[27]Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 94.

But his own free will might also play a role:

> 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.

This Crusoe is unable to reach any conclusion about the reason for his presence on the island.

By dispensing with a sustaining myth, Bishop, in the romantic tradition, shifts the focus from the relationship between man and God to that between man and nature. Vendler points out that Crusoe domesticates nature by physically transforming elements of it to suit his needs.[28] He makes wine and dye from red berries, and fashions a home-made flute. He also, like his earlier counterpart, contrives a pair of shoes, some goatskin trousers, and a parasol. Essential to his small physical transformations of nature is the one implement he has salvaged from the shipwreck--his knife. Because he needs it for survival, it takes on a sacramental quality that it loses once he returns to civilization:

> 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 . . .

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[28]Vendler, p. 26.

> Now it won't look at me at all.
> The living soul has dribbled away.

Crusoe perceives a spiritual presence in his knife that is clearly derived from the Christian faith. United with that presence, he is able to create things out of the landscape--to make it, in some sense, his own. This type of creation is unnecessary back in civilized England; the knife has outlived its usefulness. Therefore, its "living soul has dribbled away" from disuse.

Bishop gives less attention to Crusoe's physical efforts to domesticate his island than she does to his mental efforts. Whereas Defoe's Crusoe devotes a great deal of thought to theological matters, Bishop's Crusoe develops a "miserable philosophy." His inability to recall "enough of something" depresses him. One of his attempts to recall a poem provides an ironic note:

> "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.

The missing word from Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," is, of course, "solitude." This is the condition that drives Crusoe to his "miserable philosophy," which is neatly expressed in another quotation that appears two stanzas earlier:

> 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.

His alteration of "charity" to "pity" demonstrates how his isolation has forced him to focus much of his energy inward, instead of outward. Charity, after all, is love: the "cohesive and sustaining supernatural agency" that, according to Abrams, achieves reintegration or unity.[29] Pity, especially self-pity, is a poor substitute for charity, but it is the best that Crusoe can achieve in isolation. And his feelings of self-pity, taking the place of charity or love (within the context of the familiar quote), allow him to feel "at home."

But his "miserable philosophy," he says, is "the smallest of my island industries." His major attempts to domesticate the island consist of cataloguing the things on it, naming them, and imaginatively transforming them into things that are familiar to him, through simile, metaphor, and personification. He describes in detail the volcanoes, the waves, the clouds, the beaches, the waterspouts, and other elements of the landscape and seascape. He actually enumerates the volcanoes, and the varieties of

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[29] Abrams, p. 152. (Remember that the "charitable crumb" in "A Miracle for Breakfast" forms the basis of the speaker's imaginative vision.)

life on the island.[30] Perhaps his enumeration is an attempt to associate himself with nature by considering that he is not the only solitary thing on the island:

> The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun
> rose from the sea,
> and there was one of it and one of me.
> The island had one kind of everything:
> one tree snail, a bright violet-blue
> with a thin shell, crept over everything,
> over the one variety of tree,
> a sooty, scrub affair.
> Snail shells lay under these in drifts
> and, at a distance,
> you'd swear that they were beds of irises.
> There was one kind of berry, a dark red.

As Kalstone observes, Crusoe soon refers to the snail shells as "my iris beds," seemingly forgetting that they are actually snails.[31] Similarly, the concentric waves around the island are imaginatively transformed into:

> over-lapping rollers
> --a glittering hexagon of rollers
> closing and closing in, but never quite.

The sky is so overcast that he imagines his island as "a sort of cloud-dump." The hissing turtles remind him of tea-kettles, and the beating wings of sea-gulls make him think of wind in a tree:

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[30] Catalogues and enumerations are common in Bishop's poetry. Especially notable are those in "Florida," "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," and "Questions of Travel," all in The Complete Poems.

[31] Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop," p. 36.

> 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.

The transformation of the unfamiliar life on the island into the familiar by the use of simile and metaphor (perhaps the transformation of snails into iris-beds is the best example) demonstrates Crusoe's desire to label things, to name them--to perform the essential function of the poet in the tradition of Emerson. He relates at the beginning that he has named "my poor old island," and that it is "un-renamable." This is perhaps because it has not been rediscovered, since it, as he remembers it, exists only in his imagination.[32] Later, he tells of another attempt at naming:

> One billy-goat would stand on the volcano
> I'd christened Mont d'Espoir or Mount Despair
> (I'd time enough to play with names).

The naming of the volcano makes it his. On another level, however, his choice of names demonstrates the paradox of his position on the island; despair and hope co-exist for Crusoe in much the same way that reality and art co-exist

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[33]Crusoe's island is somewhat reminiscent of Queequeg's island of Kokovoko, in Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, ed. Harold Beaver (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 150. Ishmael says of this island: "It is not down in any map; true places never are."

for the post-romantic artist--they are not quite distinguishable.

Crusoe's hope derives from his modest success at domesticating the island, his despair from his complete solitude. The companionship that Defoe's Crusoe finds with the things of nature is not available to Bishop's Crusoe, for the landscape on his island is almost lifeless. The island is covered with strangely small volcanoes, "dead as ash heaps," which look "naked and leaden, with their heads blown off." The heavy atmosphere adds to the deathliness of the scene:

> 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.

Unlikely as it seems at first, there is life on this island; turtles, goats, gulls, and snails populate it, and there is vegetation consisting of "one kind of tree" and "one kind of berry." Apart from these, and Crusoe, the island is lifeless. Nonetheless, like the sandpiper, and the speaker in "At the Fishhouses," he detects some beauty in the scene:

> The beaches were all lava, variegated,
> black, red, and white, and gray;
> the marbled colours made a fine display.
> And I had waterspouts. Oh,
> half a dozen at a time, far out
> they'd come and go, advancing and retreating,

> their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches
> of scuffed-up white.
> Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated,
> sacerdotal beings of glass . . . I watched
> the water spiral up in them like smoke.
> Beautiful, yes, but not much company.

Because he is so lonely, it is significant that Crusoe expresses the beauty of the waterspouts through the use of personification. Their heads (like that of the indifferent man on the balcony in "A Miracle for Breakfast) are in the clouds; their feet are scuffed, like shoes. They go beyond the merely human to become "sacerdotal," or priestly, but whatever mysterious powers they represent as they tantalize Crusoe with their "advancing and retreating" are never disclosed.

In fact, the landscape demonstrates a rather imperious indifference to Crusoe that borders on hostility, much like the landscapes in "At the Fishhouses" and "Cape Breton." The heavy clouds and advancing sea seem to be in collusion against him to create unpleasantness, like the rain that hisses when it comes into contact with the "parched throats" of the volcanoes. The sibilance of the atmosphere is echoed by the turtles, who "lumbered by, high-domed, / hissing like tea-kettles." This description reduces the menacing sound to a harmless and rather comical domestic image, but nonetheless, Crusoe finds their noise, and that of the goats and gulls, difficult to cope with:

> Baa, baa, baa, and shriek, shriek, shriek,
> Baa . . . shriek . . . baa . . . I still can't shake
> them from my ears; they're hurting now.
> The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies
> over a ground of hissing rain
> and hissing, ambulating turtles
> got on my nerves.

Bishop reproduces the nerve-wracking sounds by means of repetition, meanwhile giving them purpose as Crusoe labels them "questioning" and "equivocal." The personification of the goats, another attempt by Crusoe to gain companionship, is unsuccessful. Their "equivocal replies" give away nothing, just like their eyes. He recalls one goat in particular:

> I'd grab his beard and look at him.
> His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up
> and expressed nothing, or a little malice.

The expression in the goat's eyes is characteristic of the general response of nature to man in Bishop's poetry. It seems always to be poised somewhere between indifference and malice, mildly hostile if it deigns to notice humanity at all.

Crusoe's solitude is finally broken by the arrival of Friday, one of his own kind. With Friday he finds the companionship that he has been deprived of for so long:

> 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.

The importance of Friday's arrival is emphasized in the understatement of "Friday was nice"; Crusoe has stopped cataloguing. Vendler remarks: "Speechless with joy, Crusoe can speak only in the most vacant and consequently the most comprehensive of words. . . . Love escapes language."[34] The love that Crusoe shares with Friday produces the unity that he has searched for during his stay on the island, a unity that is reminiscent of the Aristotelian maxim that a friend is one soul in two bodies. Crusoe's one regret is that Friday is not female:

> If only he had been a woman!
> I wanted to propagate my kind,
> and so did he, I think, poor boy.

Nonetheless, Crusoe accepts with pleasure what the world has finally offered him:

> He'd pet the baby goats sometimes,
> and race with them, or carry one around.
> --Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.

Suddenly, they are rescued and returned to civilization, although the terms Crusoe chooses to relate the rescue suggest that he resents, rather than appreciates it: "And then one day they came and took us off." By the time

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[34]Vendler, pp. 26-27.

they are rescued, the island has become Crusoe's home; the civilized world is superfluous, even threatening. Crusoe becomes bored and impatient with the local museum, which has requested the material souvenirs of his experience:

> 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?

Ugly in themselves, not even endowed with the virtue of necessity, they can mean nothing, for they have lost their context in the civilized world. The museum may want these meaningless, lifeless objects in the belief that they are representative of Crusoe's experience on the island. Crusoe, on the other hand, believes that experience, ultimately, is too personal to recreate, or even represent accurately by anyone who has not in some way shared the experience: "None of the books has ever got it right." His boredom is more precisely a desperate ennui, for Friday, the one thing that finally made the island his home, has been snatched from him:

> --And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
> seventeen years ago come March.

Friday is killed by a disease of civilization, yet in a

broader context, his death can be seen as the final word of nature, the apparently arbitrary ordering force that was responsible for Crusoe's shipwreck to begin with. Aware that he can never truly have his island, and Friday, again, Crusoe nonetheless imaginatively recreates his experiences through memory. Memory, double-edged though it may be, sustains him in the absence of Friday. "Crusoe in England" is a clear example of Wallace Stevens' "poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice."[35]

Just as Crusoe finds love in his communion with another human being, and sustenance in memory, so does Bishop, in "Poem" (1972; G III, 36-39). Through the medium of a sketch of her childhood home in Nova Scotia, she experiences a sense of unity with the artist and the recognition that his recreation of the landscape on Bristol board and her memory of the landscape are indistinguishable from each other.[36] The conclusion, as in Bishop's other poems, is ambiguous. Her delight in the recreated landscape and shared memory is mixed with her resigned acceptance of the little that the world has to offer: "Life and the memory of it cramped, / dim, on a piece of Bristol board."

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[35]Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," in The Collected Poems, p. 239.

[36]Estess, "The Delicate Art," p. 725.

The poem opens with a brief description of the painting that establishes its apparent worthlessness:

> About the size of an old-style dollar bill,
> American or Canadian,
> mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel
> grays
> --this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
> has never earned any money in its life.
> Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
> as a minor family relic
> handed along collaterally to owners
> who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to.

The comparison of it to a dollar bill, the comment that it "has never earned any money," the adjectives "useless" and "free," and the remark that it has been "handed along collaterally" all contribute to the impression that the little sketch is valueless. Its value, however, exists in a realm other than the financial, as Spiegelman perceives:

> The nakedness of the title and the financial language of the first stanza are, in retrospect, ironic; like the painting it deals with, the poem proves the value of art as an agency of human communion.[37]

In the second stanza, the viewer examines the aesthetic qualities of the painting, the ways in which the artist has simulated reality:

> Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple -
> --that gray-blue wisp--or is it? In the foreground
> a water meadow with some tiny cows,
> two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;

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[37] Spiegelman, "Landscape," p. 221.

two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.

She has recognized the scene as part of Nova Scotia:

only there
does one see gabled houses
painted that awful shade of brown.

For the most part, however, her observations are objective and concentrate on technique. Nonetheless, a bit of subjectivity enters, as the viewer momentarily forgets that the landscape is not real: "The air is fresh and cold."[37] She quickly recovers to point out the "half inch of blue sky," and the "steel-gray storm clouds. / (They were the artist's specialty.)" The unreality of the landscape is finally determined as she confuses a "speck-like bird" with "a flyspeck looking like a bird."

The reality introduced with the mention of air, however, is a foreshadowing of what occurs in the third stanza, as the viewer suddenly recognizes the scene, and subjectively recreates it from memory, adding details that are not evident in the painting:

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind--I can almost remember the farmer's
name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,

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[37] Ibid.

titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?

Her idle "looking at" becomes an excited "looking for," as she scans the picture for familiar places that she knows must be there. Her memory enables her to see more clearly, to observe things that she might otherwise have overlooked, such as the farmer's barn, and assures her that the "gray-blue wisp" is indeed a church steeple. Her ability to recognize and name the things in the painting personalizes the scene by making it familiar, making it home, although she does maintain a certain distance from it as she states:

Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

In the fourth stanza, she reflects upon how the painting fell into her possession--the events that led to the coincidence of her great-uncle's artistic representation and her memory. This establishes the family relationship between them, although she admits at the beginning of the fifth stanza, "I never knew him." Yet she does know him, because:

We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart.

Spiegelman points out that for the romantic poets (he includes Bishop), "landscape, painted, remembered, or perceived, is a major means of human relationship and connection."[38] The viewer realizes "how strange" it is that they both loved the place enough to memorize it, and that it still exists, independent of their imaginative reconstructions: "(it must have changed a lot)." What seems most strange, however, is the similarity of their reconstructions:

> Our visions coincided--"visions" is
> too serious a word--our looks, two looks:
> art "copying from life" and life itself,
> life and the memory of it so compressed
> they've turned into each other. Which is which?

In this passage, Bishop finally puts into words the question that has silently haunted her detailed descriptions and her imaginative reconstructions in poems as varied as "A Miracle for Breakfast," "Questions of Travel," and "Crusoe in England." Perhaps it is the final question of travel, one to which there is no final answer. If there is a difference between life, her memory of it, and an artistic reconstruction of it, her limited human senses do not allow her to perceive precisely where the boundaries lie. That may be why, in the midst of the connection--an epiphany--she diminishes "visions" to "looks." By reducing a supernatural

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[38]Ibid., p. 222.

"vision" to a sensory "look," she is able to demystify her experience and gain some intellectual control over it.

In doing so, she returns to her meditation on the value of the painting. Now, however, because of her recognition that life and art are indistinguishable from each other, she enlarges her scope to ponder on the value of life itself:

> Life and the memory of it cramped,
> dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
> dim, but how live, how touching in detail
> --the little that we get for free,
> the little of our earthly trust. Not much.

Life, like the painting, is worth "not much." But just as the painting is "free," "handed along collaterally to owners," so is life "free," and "our earthly trust." It is all there is, so it must suffice, to be both cherished and endured:

> About the size of our abidance
> along with theirs: the munching cows,
> the iris crisp and shivering, the water
> still standing from spring freshets,
> the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

In this final enumerative passage, the "munching cows" and the "crisp and shivering" iris contrast strangely with the "standing" water of the "spring freshets" and the "yet-to-be-dismantled elms." The implication is that life, no matter how it flourishes--in reality or in memory--is

certain, one day, to decay. Our "earthly trust" is a mixed inheritance of life and death, and we have no choice but to accept it.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to demonstrate that Elizabeth Bishop's sensibility consists of a dynamic tension between the modern and the romantic. Her acceptance of the little the world has to offer co-exists with her ability to perceive the world imaginatively so that she can find meaning within it: a place to call home, and love. It is this ability, exhibited in the processes of imagination, memory, and artistic creation, that enables her to survive in the midst of a seemingly chaotic, meaningless world.

Although it is not the last poem Bishop wrote, "One Art" (1976; G III, 40-41) presents the ultimate expression of her post-romantic attitude, for it opposes the romantic and modern impulses. The romantic artist, who believes that the artistic imagination can redeem the fragmented world, attempts to create a world where she can cope with the loss of someone she loves, and forces the part of herself that is shattered to continue--"(Write it!)"--despite her sense that such a loss will cut her adrift from all meaning in a world where events such as abandonment or death (the poem does not specify the reason for the loss) demonstrate that they are frighteningly independent of her

control. The poem shows that Bishop's acceptance of the world on its own terms is finally contingent, paradoxically, upon the ability of her artistic imagination to recreate it in comprehensible terms.

A very important element of the poems that have been discussed so far is their tripartite form; the meaning of the poems, to a great extent, depends on the shifting of perspective from present action to meditation on the past, or on a landscape, back to present action again, with the increased understanding that the meditation has afforded. With the exception of "A Miracle for Breakfast," "Roosters," and "Sandpiper," all of the poems that I have analysed in depth are written in free verse; they are syntactically complex, and exhibit many echoes and repetitions, but they rarely fall into regular stanzas, rhythm, or rhyme schemes. In contrast, "One Art" is a villanelle: a highly restricted French form that requires a definite pattern of stanzas, rhymes, and repetitions. In addition, "One Art" consists of almost completely regular iambic pentameter rhythm. Curiously, it was not written by the same careful, word by word method that characterized the writing of Bishop's other poems. In her interview with Elizabeth Spires, she said of it:

> I wanted to write a villanelle all my life but I never could. I'd start them but for some reason I could never finish them. And one day I couldn't believe it--

> it was like writing a letter. . . . But that kind of thing doesn't happen very often.[1]

Bishop makes the creation of "One Art" sound rather frivolous, but its form is as carefully conceived and important to its meaning as the tripartite form is to the meaning of the meditative poems. It may be questioned that a poem in such a controlled, traditional form can be called "romantic," for one of the major objectives of the early romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge was to break away from artificial forms. But it is not the villanelle form in itself as much as what the use of it accomplishes that is important to "One Art." First, the poem is one of the best illustrations to be found of the control of strong feeling through the use of a restricted form. Bishop uses variations on rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, rather than an outburst of descriptive language, to emphasize strong emotion. As always, understatement characterizes her expression. The restricted form has a deeper purpose, however, for the "one art" Bishop propounds is reflected in the very self-conscious art of the villanelle. As an obvious art form, with a pattern determined before the poem begins, it serves as a practical reminder that it is indeed art that the poet is creating.

In "One Art," "the art of losing" is presented as a

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[1]Spires, p. 64.

skill that can be learned:

> The art of losing isn't hard to master;
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

As she personifies elements of nature in other poems, Bishop here personifies all of the inhuman elements of the world as if they are actually conspiring against humanity. If we can accept their evident hostility from the beginning, she implies, we can then master the art of losing. Her tone becomes explicitly didactic in the second and third stanzas as she speaks in the imperative, advising her unidentified audience further about the things that must be done to master the art:

> Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
> of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> Then practise losing farther, losing faster:
> places, and names, and where it was you meant
> to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

The teacher progresses from the trivial losses to the important ones in these lines. The "fluster" of lost trivialities, like keys, and an hour here or there, is fairly easy to cope with. Hypnotically, she repeats: "The art of losing isn't hard to master." But she goes beyond these unimportant losses to list things that we know from a study of her earlier poetry mean a great deal to her:

"places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel." She still maintains that "none" of these losses "will bring disaster," but her protestations are not completely convincing. There is a dark bitterness hidden in the lightness that characterizes the language of the poem: in the almost amusing didacticism; the feminine rhymes such as master / disaster, fluster / master, faster / disaster; and in the general flippancy of the initial claim. The subject, after all, is losing, and Bishop's pose as a teacher suggests that she considers herself an expert. Moreover, the otherwise light tone is undermined by the negative terms with which she makes her claim. The art of losing may not be hard to master, but it is not easy to master, either.

Still in the role of a teacher, she presents examples from her own experience to justify her statement, again going from the trivial to the important, or at least from the miniature to the gigantic:

> I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
> next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
> some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
> I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

Her control is not as complete in these stanzas as it was earlier. Reflection on the past--memory--brings pain, evident in the loss of "three loved houses." The three

strong stresses on these words, in combination with the connotation of "home" they provide, reveal a crack in the confident façade. Even "vaster," as she says, is her loss of "realms I owned." Perhaps the realms were hers in the same sense that Crusoe's island was "my island": they were home. Control slips again as she admits: "I miss them." She once more recovers to claim: "but it wasn't a disaster."

This recovery serves to introduce and emphasize the magnitude of the final loss:

> --Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
> I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
> the art of losing's not too hard to master
> though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

In this final stanza, Bishop reveals the nature of her most dreaded loss: the love of another human being. She demonstrates in "Crusoe in England" that this love is the most satisfying unity that we can hope to achieve; Crusoe's joy on the island is caused by Friday's arrival, his unhappiness in England by Friday's death. We now discover in "One Art" that the purpose of the lecture on "the art of losing" is to convince Bishop herself that the loss of her loved one can be endured. The teacher is the romantic reconstructor, the audience the wounded, confused modern spirit. Until the last few words of the stanza, it appears that the confident teacher has lost ground to the part of the poet that is overwhelmed by pain. This pain is revealed

by metrical variations in the first line of the stanza (the initial pause, the trochaic rhythm), and by the recollection of the beloved voice and gesture. Her control finally breaks in the last line, where she hesitates, apparently unable to finish the poem. David Kalstone comments that "the last stubborn heartbreaking hesitation . . . carries the full burden, and finally confidence, of her work, the resolve which just barely masters emptiness and succeeds in filling out, tight-lipped, the form."[2] It carries the "confidence of her work" because at the critical moment, the romantic artist orders her harshly to "Write it!" She does. By completing the work of art, she is able to accept the disastrous loss, and by doing so, survive. The "one art" that Bishop masters is not simply the art of losing, but the art of surviving. Her ability to complete the poem--to survive--is a fitting conclusion to her spiritual journey, as she discovers that the "something" she seeks exists within herself.

Throughout her poetry, Elizabeth Bishop attempts to contend with a flawed existence in a flawed world. Not only does she find that the world has little to offer (no perceivable ordering force, and no sustaining myth), she also finds that what little the world does offer, it

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[2]Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop," p. 40.

inevitably snatches away. Her artistic efforts are therefore not only directed toward finding or creating a sense of order, but also toward constructing a defense against the loss of her humble "earthly trust." Crusoe copes with the loss of his island and Friday by recreating them in his memory, the speaker of "Poem" copes with the loss of her childhood home by rediscovering it in an artistic reproduction, and the speaker of "One Art" copes with the loss of all the things she has ever loved by creating a world in which they are not important. In "One Art," Bishop presents her final discoveries that it is the artist who creates meaning in the world, and that it is art, ultimately, that ensures the survival of man. Her modern recognition of the impermanence of security (home), love, and life itself is countered throughout her poetry by her romantic conviction that the artist, by recording experience and recreating it imaginatively, renders it permanent.

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