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# CHAPTER 9

## Theory in Practice

### *Romantic Rhetorics (from Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language)*

C. K. Doreski

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Elizabeth Bishop's poetry was written during the era when the New Critics were prominent in the American academy and were setting the agenda for how students were supposed to understand and read poetry. Poems were best when they achieved a unity of form and content, welding universal idea to concrete image. The best poems were embodiments and revelations of great truths. Often those truths had a spiritual quality, as was the case with William Wordsworth, who felt nature consisted of embodied spirit. Look at a flower and you see God. Bishop's temperament was more skeptical and materialist. She delighted in describing the world, but she was reluctant to embrace the idea that the world embodied spirit. Indeed, in several poems such as "Crusoe in England" and "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," she mocks the notion that the world is anything more than world – simple material physical reality with no spirit in it. Moments of revelation when spirit supposedly intrudes in life are called "epiphanies," and C. K. Doreski describes how Bishop, following Wordsworth, evokes the possibility of an epiphanic revelation of spirit only to disappoint that expectation.

Epiphany and the power of naming (which in the modern era begins by naming the writer-as-authority) are two characteristically romantic-modern rhetorical embodiments of knowledge. Bishop, who largely learned these devices from Wordsworth, manipulates their conventions for some of her richest effects, and also for some of her most intriguing complexities. As I have previously argued, resistance to language that attempts to delve into the psyche or the world of the spirit characterizes her poetry. The process of resistance itself, however, constitutes a powerful rhetorical structure that shapes much of her best work. The epiphanic mode, which this chapter will discuss first, requires the poet to transgress the text and explicitly share its self-realization, its transcendence of

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language into immanence. Trust in the epiphany did not come readily to Elizabeth Bishop. As her poem “Santarém” warns, there is always the chance that the auditor might misunderstand the significance of the triggering subject and query “What’s that ugly thing?”, inadvertently mocking the ideational. What some critics consider Bishop’s extreme reticence and excessive decorum may be linked to her notions of decency and communion, and to her ultimate distrust of epiphany.

The challenge for Bishop was to use epiphanic staging (the means of preparing the reader) without violating her aesthetic of reticence (a literary more than psychological tic). Though often labeled epiphanies by her critics, Bishop’s gestures toward the Wordsworthian landscape of divine immanence do not usually function as such. In her encounters with the notion of a spiritual dimension suggested or revealed by landscape, the characteristic motion of her poems is a recoil from the beyond, retreating back into the poem itself.

This suggests the true depth of reticence in Bishop’s poetic. Epiphany would and should open up the poem to uncontrollable exterior forces, relinquishing the law of metaphor and imposing a dimension beyond the ordinary reach of language. Bishop, who viewed poetry as a limited, and fortuitously limiting, exchange, refused to acknowledge any pressure to contain, expand, define, or even escape life through art. From the shark-filled “spangled sea” of “The Unbeliever” to the sheltered interior of “The Monument,” from the road-checked interior of “Cape Breton” to the “armored cars of dreams” in “Sleeping Standing Up,” Bishop clearly defines the terms of commerce in part by delineating the interiority and the exteriority of, respectively, her presence and the poem’s surface strategies. Bishop’s decorum surely included a sense of propriety or decency. Rather than a personality quirk, deficient ego, or exaggerated morality, however, her reticence informs her original language and diction, and is the basis of her refusal of many conventional poetic motifs that would, if allowed to, render her poems almost ordinary.

Throughout her work Bishop explores various rhetorical postures that respond to Wordsworth’s epiphanic stance. At times she presents us with a natural vantage point, nature without human intervention. In “The Sandpiper” [QT], a creature scurries about in the midst of chaos; though “focused” and “preoccupied” he is not yet engulfed by the natural forces swirling about him. Unconscious of the threatening vastness, which humans might identify as epiphanic, he has developed a unique shoreline philosophy:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,  
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.  
[CP, 131]

At once a student of Blake (“in a state of controlled panic”) and Keats (“The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear”), the shorebird sees his random fate as one with the minute particulars of the “millions of grains” of sand. In his element, the sandpiper knows none of the frustrating dislocations of humans in the landscape and therefore sees no need to transcend them. The traveler-spectator Bishop, on the other hand, needs to correct and interpret, as well as frame the scene:

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.  
– Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,  
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains  
rapidly backwards and downwards.

Jealous of the bird's complete concentration on the particular, the poet introduces a human measure of scale. After all, the bird is obsessed with the sand, not his toes. Unlike the fleeing creatures of "The Armadillo" [QT], the sandpiper runs in a world devoid of human presence and its attendant scale. The poem shares a view from above – or beyond – this obsessed bird's seascape.

Though usually occupying a contemplative or a migratory presence in the landscape, Bishop occasionally assumes the advocacy-role of witness of human destruction of nature, the world of damaged shores. Exiled by her refusal of ordinary empathy, the poet grieves from a distance, regretting her undeniable kinship with destroyers. "The Armadillo" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502" confront the violent presence of humans in the natural world. Both deal with the role of Christianity in a fallen world in which humankind is a deadly presence. Bishop sees humans as oppositional, the only creatures capable of losing innocence. She traces sin to religion's door, accusing Christianity of sanctioning, or worse, ignoring true sin.

The paired Brazil poems shuttle back and forth through time, refusing epiphany through shifts in tone and regressions into history. In "Brazil, January 1, 1502" [QT], even as Bishop forsakes the literal for the pictorial frame, she identifies her intrusive presence in Brazil with that of the sixteenth-century conquistadors who, like herself, "left home." Perhaps like the wanderer of "Questions of Travel," these explorers "[t]hink of the long trip home." These men, unlike the poet, came to conquer, not to contemplate, and see their faith as the guiding spirit of their savagery. Leaving Mass, their celebration of interiority, the soldiers are heard

... humming perhaps  
*L'Homme armé* or some such tune,  
 they ripped away into the hanging fabric,  
 each out to catch an Indian for himself –  
 [CP, 92]

Yet Bishop refuses to acknowledge their conquest, preferring instead to depict the ever-receding unknown of the tropical "hanging fabric." The hellish pollution of the second stanza clearly emanates from these "hard as nails" Christians. This perception becomes the opportunity to capitalize upon Keats's mistake:

Or like stout<sup>1</sup> Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with wild surmise –  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.  
 "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"

Cortez (unlike Balboa, the true discoverer of the Pacific) leads the assaulting Christians of Bishop's poem. Christianity here is part of that life "of wealth and luxury" that has brought death and destruction upon the meek. The voices of the vulnerable, miniature women mingle with the cries of the natural creatures of the interior world; they seek a protection in that world beyond humanity.

Escape into that world is not always possible, however, and epiphany may offer only the illusion of escape into another dimension. Within a few pages, Bishop returns to the unyielding persistence of human violence. Again Christianity, or the fragments of religious celebration, hovers in the background, sanctioning the disarray and cruelties of

the piece. Unlike the protective fabric of the earlier poem, the firelit landscape of “The Armadillo” offers no sanctuary for the beleaguered creatures. The poem offers a glimpse of a secularized religious celebration, long since stripped of intent and meaning; the “frail, illegal fire balloons” ascend toward a waiting saint. In ascendancy, the fire floats assume lives of their own:

the paper chambers flush and fill with light  
that comes and goes, like hearts.

[CP, 103]

Unstable and undirected, these heaven-bound balloons, gestures of “love,” bear the potential of either love or war:

Once up against the sky it’s hard  
to tell them from the stars –  
planets, that is – the tinted ones:  
Venus going down, or Mars ...

Oscillating between the heavenly extremes, the “tributes” represent a kind of chaos, not order; terror, not relief and penance. Bishop suggests that their very uncertainty – “With a wind, / they flare and falter, wobble and toss” – aggravates earthly insecurities. Inappropriate celebrations, which are both blasphemous and ignorant, violate the sacredness of ritual and disrupt the relationship between culture and nature. Such violation is likely to provoke fate and turn “dangerous”:

but if it’s still they steer between  
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,  
receding, dwindling, solemnly  
and steadily forsaking us,  
or, in the downdraft from a peak,  
suddenly turning dangerous.

The final line plummets toward the grim consequence of a moment of particularized sensation – an actual event, not merely a condition. Yet Bishop turns this tale of fragile faith and false tribute not on the plight of humanity but of innocent creatures. As messily careless in descent as ascent, the fire balloon “splatter[s] like an egg of fire,” immolating airborne and ground-dwelling inhabitants alike. The scene commands full attention as the fire “egg” ironically brings death to the owl’s nest:

The flame ran down. We saw the pair  
of owls who nest there flying up  
and up, their whirling black-and-white  
stained bright pink underneath, until  
they shrieked up out of sight.

The appearance of the visibly immature (“short-eared”) baby rabbit captures the instantaneous transition of the setting:

So soft! – a handful of intangible ash  
with fixed ignited eyes.

Even as the poem reaches for the airy substance of the hare it disintegrates into the elements, returning the speaker's gaze with the steadfast certainty of death. An epiphany would reach for comfort and assurance, for insight and explanations through a glimpse of a dimension in which suffering doesn't occur. The lyric hero, however, responds only to ignorance and fear. In the italicized exclamation of the closure, the poet challenges even the aesthetic posture of poetry; she cries out as one forever earthbound:

*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!  
O falling fire and piercing cry  
and panic, and a weak mailed fist  
clenched ignorant against the sky!*

The harsh deformations reject all falsification and softening of reality. Invocation and resignation collapse together in an impotent outcry as rage displaces epiphany. Unable to transcend the horror of this awesome occurrence, yet unwilling to return into the experience of the poem, Bishop gestures angrily but agnostically toward the beyond, challenging the type and substance of the incomprehensible. Bishop, like Wordsworth, sees humanity's dilemma as one of estrangement from natural vision; but unlike her predecessor, she has neither the ability nor the will to penetrate the other-world and confirm herself in epiphany, further distancing herself from such harsh realities. She can neither accuse nor ignore her own kind; she can only grieve.

In her distrust of epiphany Bishop, however, occasionally finds herself competing with and antagonistic toward the natural or phenomenal world, and that dramatic situation requires an epiphany. "The Fish" [NS], Bishop's most frequently anthologized poem, relies upon a Wordsworthian spiritual exercise to justify a rowboat transformation from plunderer to benefactor. The collapse of distinctions between land and sea, the air and earth of the speaker, obscures the borders between life and art. Bishop perceives the fish in land-language of "feathers" and "peonies" and "tin foil" and "isinglass." Even as she works those changes, however, the fish works reciprocal wonders of its own. Passive resistance deprives the fishing poet of her triumph: "He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all." She soon understands that her knowledge of the fish is inaccurate.

Evidence of past encounters – "two heavier lines, / and a fine black thread / still crimped from the strain and snap / when it broke and he got away" – tells of a different fish. Earlier seen as "battered and venerable / and homely" (the line-break softening the accuracy of description), the fish now assumes the mock-role of tribal elder and hero:

Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,  
a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw.

[CP, 43]

Deprived of the fight, the poet must contemplate her position as the harbinger of death. The "little rented boat" marks a closed world wherein the speaker represents the moral force of her species. Taken by the incongruity and insignificance of the colloquy,

the reader is swept from the sensuous into the psychological, then moved beyond earthly particulars to a spiritual whole:

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

As in the Christian parable, the oil upon the waters brings peace. It also engenders communication with the otherworldly. Through a rare Wordsworthian “spot of time,” a genuine epiphany, the poet admits, somewhat reluctantly, a momentary conventional wisdom. This leap from perception to wisdom signals the arbitrariness so characteristic of the epiphany.

Though “The Fish” is certainly central to her canon, Bishop’s boredom and dissatisfaction with the poem suggests a fear that the poem settles into sentiment instead of expanding into true wisdom. The matter-of-fact weightiness of the fish, a real survivor, lured the poet beyond the limits of her usual work, and tempted her out of her characteristic reticence. Fully aware and thoroughly suspicious of the technique and purpose of epiphany, Bishop usually contents herself with a suggestive advance toward and a sly retreat from the world of imaginative fulfillment beyond the page. Most of her journeys circumvent the critical moment of epiphany. Even as the poem reaches a crescendo, the poet reverses the flow, forcing it back into the journey, back within the intended limits of the poem itself. As “At the Fishhouses” demonstrates, Bishop is capable of presenting a Wordsworthian landscape only to carve the mass into her own figure. The glistening eternal present yields to the recurring past participles and tide of subjunctives that transform an otherworldly scene into a shared earthly experience – bounded by knowledge that is “historical, flowing, and flown.”

The most useful examples of Bishop’s near-epiphanic mode are found in her journey poems. Her destined or indifferent traveler sets forth with an unvoiced program, an inescapable linearity, but remains uncertain of the destination. The poems never lack a sense of discovery, though the end looms invariably in sight. “Cape Breton,” “The Riverman,” and “The Moose” suggest that Bishop was always aware of figures in the landscape; the problem was to present them without invoking a facile sentimentality that would accrue through gratuitous access to epiphany.

An opportunity to read the landscape for significance without plunging into epiphany comes in “Cape Breton” [CS], which challenges the preconceptions and sensitivities of the reader as it prepares, shapes, and withdraws a glimpse of the otherworldly. Bishop expects her readers to recall the lessons of its neighboring poem,<sup>2</sup> “At the Fishhouses,” and apply that knowledge to this place and situation. “Out on the high ‘bird islands,’ Ciboux and Hertford,” readers enter a world removed from and yet sinisterly impregnated by human habitation. The relatively comical “razorback auks and the silly-looking

puffins” stand as ceremonial guards along the cliff’s edge “with their backs to the mainland.” Humanity’s presence, however, is everywhere: in the “pastured sheep,” in the frightening airplanes that threaten them, in the “rapid but unurgent [pulse] of a motorboat.” More than humanity’s “unnatural presence” threatens the islands, which are surrounded and upheld by the heartless immensity of the Melvillean<sup>3</sup> sea; as the ocean seems its calmest, it turns most hazardous. Effortlessly, Bishop draws attention from the placid uncertainties of the landscape to the more threatening uncertainties of the sea:

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

[CP, 67]

The times and tides of Bishop’s sea form and enact their own fate. Bishop does not rely solely upon the sea to produce such mysterious effects. The fog blocks the various natural penetrations and rents in the earth’s surface – “the valleys and gorges of the mainland” – further suggesting the difficulty of isolation peculiar to the islands. The poet introduces the spiritual, unearthly world to draw us toward but not into the formative, causative world beyond the poem. The essence of this otherworldly island world lies buried

among those folds and folds of firs: 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.

Bishop points to origins with the processional solemnity of “dull, dead, deep,” but quickly returns to the constraints of the quotidian. Moore’s “A Grave”<sup>4</sup> – where “The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top” – and Stevens’s “Domination of Black”<sup>5</sup> echo throughout this stanza. The “striding” color of “heavy hemlocks” and the cry of the peacocks in the Stevens poem suggest a sudden onset of perception and fear. Bishop’s descriptive language parallels Stevens’s imaginative world of tropes in acknowledging the interface between reality and the unknown, this world and the next. Stevens’s fear of the peacock’s cry stems from his discomfort with his ignorance, while Bishop allays a comparable anxiety by sharing the uncertainties engendered by the irregularities that characterize the scene. At the midpoint of “Cape Breton” Bishop seems willing to risk (in Keatsian fashion) the terrible revelations that occur when one “look[s] too far into” a landscape.

The third stanza opens with a reckless, if comical, abandon that indicates a radical change of tone or a penetration of the poem’s surface tension. Here lurks the first hint of the presence of humankind since the ghostly pulsations of the motorboat at the opening. Human works check the flow toward interiority. The island idles on this Sunday as its earthmovers stand driverless, but the mere presence of those objects tempers the movement toward epiphany. Not only has work ceased but so has religious activity:

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

The churches themselves are relics of another age and spiritual condition. The road is not a thoroughfare but rather the borderline between the experiential landscape and the interior, “where we cannot see.” Within,

where 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 –

lies the earth’s own record. Bishop suggests, however, that by its very uninhabitable nature, the landscape defies translation. She suggests that the real story has passed; human life has occurred after the fact:

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.

Bishop does not share Keats’s view of the nightingale as “immortal Bird,” but she is well aware of the poetic convention of bird-song as a tentative link between exterior and interior worlds. In “Cape Breton,” though, the sparrow songs and the torn netting pull the poem in a direction Bishop does not wish to follow. The fishnet metaphor, derived from Penelope’s weaving and the handiwork of the Fates, engages the inarticulate, magical creative imagination. The introductory movement of “At the Fishhouses” acknowledges this ominous weight, and uses it to further explore the relationship between netter and net, and by extension, poet and poem. In “Cape Breton,” however, the metaphorical insistence of the nets seems beyond the intended scope of the poem. They and the dangling notes of the song-sparrows drift into and become one with the world beyond her poetry. This marks a turning point, requiring either transcendence or a naturalistic embrace of these natural hieroglyphics to honor, as Bishop always does, the legibility of the text. Drawing attention from the celestial distractions, however, Bishop shifts the focus to the road below, which in following an erratic but earthly course asserts the power of human culture, especially its most mundane occasions, to place natural transcendence under erasure.

As a figure of narration, rather than of lyric ecstasy or brooding meditation, this “wild” road serves as a measure of limits and capacities. The confines of the bus, “packed with people, even to its step,” frame the pilgrimage, “It passes ... It stops,” and the availability of domestic knowledge:

... 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 family life of the baby-carrying gentleman remains in the imagination; his house, literally out of sight, is unrealized. The poet curiously regards the other guardians of the interior space; just two more passengers, “but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a hanger,” no different really in capacity from, say, the weekday

“groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts.” Like the tiny churches littering the hillside, these men of faith seem anachronistic.

“Cape Breton,” like “The Monument,” repeatedly shifts its stance<sup>6</sup> at the onset of epiphanic moments. Bishop is ostensibly shifting her viewpoint, but for what purpose? What does she hope to accomplish by moving from an island profile to a mist-shrouded glimpse of the settled mainland, and then to the departures and arrivals of a bus trip? In the final stanza, apparently on the brink of epiphany, an odd reversal occurs. Linked to the final lines of “At the Fishhouses,” the first line of the closure of “Cape Breton” – “The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts” – does not surprise. This assertive continuity is pure Bishop. Yes, the reader assents, this is true. Here, however, differing from more characteristic Bishop closures, an epiphanic suggestion of the otherworldly enters. The cloaking chill has its roots in *pre*history, beyond “earthly trust.” How different the effect of the last stanza would be if Bishop had chosen to retain the final word, to deliberately limit her poem’s world:

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

This remains for Bishop a rather open closure; the poem halts at a moment in which nature and culture seem in verbal congruence. The “ancient chill,” reminiscent of the “chill white blast of sunshine” in “A Cold Spring,” invokes the world of the unknown that engenders the brooks, calves, birds, and even buses of the phenomenal world.

When Bishop sorted and recast her memories of a bus trip from Nova Scotia to Boston, she made a poem of confrontation and exchange with nature that verges on epiphany, but retreats at the last moment into the natural domesticity of the creature world. “Back to Boston”<sup>7</sup> (the working title for “The Moose” [G]) bears the lineaments of an actual bus trip, but turns into a response to romanticism and what she saw as its conflict with life. Situating the narrator in the trope of westward travel, she builds toward and then deviates from an expected epiphany; rather than fully develop her trope, she prefers to pause and reflect upon the “little of our earthly trust,” confounding nature and culture in an embodiment, a creature that is neither threateningly wild nor sentimentally tame.

The measured sestets replicate the moral increments of the human condition. Unlike the repeated sameness of “At the Fishhouses” (“I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones”) or the monotony of the landscape of “Crusoe in England” (“The sun set in the same sea, the same odd sun rose from the sea”), the habits of the natural world of “The Moose” are vaguely reassuring, predictable, repeatable. The Möbius strip – winding and returning – six-stanza, single-sentence introduction creates a recognizable, though not necessarily specific, landscape. The scene defies placement on a map, but its characteristics are predictable. The world depicted in this journey-poem sustains the speaker with glimpses of domesticity to counter the dark and the unease of travel. Inhabited by consumers of “fish and bread and tea,” the landscape offers security in spite of the flux of travel and of the poem itself.

The herrings, the sun, and even the church depend on the will of the sea, which invests the land with life and uncertainty. The vulnerable landscape penetrates the very vehicle of discovery in the poem, the bus:

through late afternoon  
 a bus journeys west,  
 the windshield flashing pink,  
 pink glancing off of metal,  
 brushing the dented flank  
 of blue, beat-up enamel  
 [CP, 169]

The mortal substance of the bus reminds us of those “Under the Window” vehicles that so eloquently raised the issues of health and disease (the Mercedes-Benz truck with “Throbbing rosebuds” and the old truck with “a syphilitic nose”). Even as the bus displays a vaguely human anatomy, it reveals a relatively human temperament as it goes

down hollows, up rises,  
 and waits, patient, while  
 a lone traveller gives  
 kisses and embraces  
 to seven relatives  
 and a collie supervises.

The solitary traveler bids farewell to her kind, while the dog, a guardian of stationary domesticity, presides over the departure into the unknown. Linking the fixed and the mobile worlds in this genre scene gives the landscape an air of unity and harmony. By drawing the introduction together with a series of *wheres* and *pasts*, in the present tense, Bishop emphasizes the predictable, accountable, acceptable aspects of the scene.

As certainly as the traveler relinquishes family and home, the poem relinquishes the comfortable but momentary stasis of the genre scene, along with the scene itself. The true journey begins; the poem abandons the tropes of place-specific domesticity (elms, farm, dog) that embody family, home, and landscape. The mist, a painterly element, drifts in to shroud, enfold, and disclose the dislocating countenance of the natural surroundings. As the familiar world fades in the mist, the poem shifts its attention to a world of diminished scale and microscopic form:

The bus starts. The light  
 grows richer; the fog,  
 shifting, salty, thin,  
 comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals  
 form and slide and settle  
 in the white hens' feathers,  
 in gray glazed cabbages,  
 on the cabbage roses  
 and lupins like apostles ...

The atmosphere, though hardly threatening, rapidly grows murky. The “sweet peas cling” to their strings and the “bumblebees creep / inside the foxgloves” for certainty and shelter. As the fog obscures it adheres, transforming phenomena and affecting behavior. Whatever predictability this world possessed in daylight has receded in obscurity. Potentially magical as this landscape had become, it in no way resembles the celestial world of “Seascape” or the iridescent world of “At the Fishhouses.” Bishop is determined to avoid tropes of sublimity (though toying with Wordsworth’s Snowdon mist) and make this bus-trip only as rich as everyday life.

The gradual descent into evening (announced by “evening commences”) occasions a renewed commitment to routine, which offsets the slide into the romantic otherworld of the fog. Frequent stops, signaling arrivals and departures, suggest the continued proximity of the familiar world. The routine of a household as “a woman shakes the tablecloth / after supper” adequately deters the Homeric sense of travel-as-epic. Evening domesticity, despite the passage of the vehicle, enacts its schedule, regular as the tides. Gradually, however, this artificial world yields to the unfocused (because sensory-deprived) world of disconnected sensations, a world unorchestrated by familiar motifs of order and routine:

The Tantramar marshes  
and the smell of salt hay.  
An iron bridge trembles  
and a loose plank rattles  
but doesn’t give way.

Destabilized by unexpectedly full sensory application, the poem drifts through a narrative of peripheral glances, partial appreciations. Even as the postprandial woman fades in that flickering instant, the bus slips into a cloaked land and sea world where the salt marsh sensationally reveals its true and frightening origins. Human structures quake in the uncertainty of this setting; they react in “fear” as they “tremble” and “rattle.” Though they stand firmly, if dubiously, those structures (and the traveler) feel collapse may be imminent. Once again the poem prepares the reader to meet the otherworldly. Though reduced to noting particulars – synecdoches of books and bark – the traveler attempts to impose some structure on a formless environment, and in doing so risks epiphany:

On the left, a red light  
swims through the dark:  
a ship’s port lantern.  
Two rubber boots show,  
illuminated, solemn.  
A dog gives one bark.

This fixed, solemn scene is more than sufficient to trigger an epiphany and render the bus journey a romantic narrative into sublimity and otherworldliness; but the moment passes, ungrasped. The entrance of a particularized, characterized, destined human being interrupts the moment of epiphanic possibility. Her personal characteristics, as she enters “brisk, freckled, elderly” to encounter her fellow travelers, underscore her ordinary, reassuring earthiness, as if to assert in her bearing the sufficiency of this phenomenal world. With her words to the bus driver, “All the way to Boston,” the pilgrimage gains definition and a final destination. Having finally mapped the excursion and avoided premature closure, the poem returns to the preparatory atmosphere that clarifies even as it clouds.

Misty night landscapes and travel constitute a familiar romantic motif. Primed with specific literary sensations, the poem generates a powerful but familiar conjunction between the “moonlight and mist.” The landscape – “hairy, scratchy, splintery” – however, like the “brisk, freckled, elderly” traveler, resists the ascent into a symbolic mode. Eased by the consonantal texture of the material world, the speaker forsakes romance and allegory and reclines toward sleep. This moment of partial oblivion invokes the antecedent world of memory:

Snores. Some long sighs.  
A dreamy divagation  
begins in the night,  
a gentle, auditory,  
slow hallucination. ...

Sprung from but simultaneously divorced from the surrounding matrix of landscape and domesticity, the poem now drifts into the language of ancestry and archetype. Though relying on unsorted and scattered particulars, Bishop relates her speaker to humanity as a whole, and more firmly anchors her in the historical world of culture, by means of an overheard, extended flow of anecdote and genealogy, narrated by anonymous yet firmly characterized interlocutors:

In the creakings and noises,  
an old conversation  
– not concerning us,  
but recognizable, somewhere,  
back in the bus:  
Grandparents’ voices  
  
uninterruptedly  
talking, in Eternity:  
names being mentioned,  
things cleared up finally;  
what he said, what she said,  
who got pensioned;  
deaths, deaths and sicknesses;  
the year he remarried;  
the year (something) happened.  
She died in childbirth.  
That was the son lost  
when the schooner foundered.

Devoid of immediate personal significance, these recollections of strangers revolve upon the common organic insults of “deaths, deaths and sicknesses.” These consequential events, though requiring narration, stand isolated against the flow of history. Death itself, an abstraction commemorated in black-bordered obituaries is random and commonplace, yet humanly fascinating. Death occupies the poet’s attention in the way that births and marriages do, as dignifying aspects of the quotidian. Mention of the archaic tragedy – “the schooner foundered” – elevates the discussion even beyond the elevated quotidian to touch upon a mythic dimension and a classic sense of the tragic. Catastrophic events, however, derive their significance from their fatal outcome. The universality of

this closure makes it more bearable, more conversational, less newsworthy. Bishop notes the lack of impact of old news in her survey of “The Bight” [CS]:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up  
 against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,  
 and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,  
 like torn-open, unanswered letters.  
 The bight is littered with old correspondences.

[CP, 60]

Finally the tide of specificity affects only the living; a dreamy retrospect leaves us meditating dates that resonate – “the year (something) happened” – long after the significance of the event has withered. Shuttling pronominal exchanges invite the auditor into this world of common history, prompting recall of those universal characters who went “to the bad.” The tentacular frame of reference outlines a common family tree. Individuality, the raw particulars, dissolve in a repetitious history of insults, injury, and events. The drone of recurrence secures and assures the listener while imposing a sense of commonality through disaster.

The traveler in “The Moose,” withdrawing from recognition and resignation – “Life’s like that. / We know *it* (also death).” – cuddles down into a child’s secure understanding and relaxed confidence. Life passes in tranquillity, grandparents droning

in the old featherbed,  
 peacefully, on and on,  
 dim lamplight in the hall,  
 down in the kitchen, the dog  
 tucked in her shawl.

Now, it’s all right now  
 even to fall asleep  
 just as on all those nights.

Though at first this dream-world excursion seems to reach beyond the phenomenal world, Bishop withdraws, reorders, and projects the dream into the quotidian world of her poem. In spite of the childlike acceptance of everything predictable and routine, the language of the memory-passages is that of adult recall. An earlier version shows that Bishop had originally intended a childlike passage similar to the innocence of “Five Flights Up”<sup>8</sup> [G]:

Now, it is safe now  
 to go asleep  
 Day will take care of things.

[Typescript Draft]

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.

[CP, 181]

As Robert Hass<sup>9</sup> suggests, these midnight inquiries reassure by firmly situating the poem in the conscious world – “being and being seen.”

The encounter with the moose coincides with and benignly disrupts a false and earthbound self-assurance. Rather than reaching for the epiphanic sublime, Bishop summons one reasonably modest (though impressive in its own right) particular of the natural world. In the context of expected epiphany, this creature seems reassuring, only modestly awe-inspiring. Like the Poundian periplum,<sup>10</sup> the encounter is indeed a sighting, a looking on the horizon, but it is certainly not comparable to the grandeur and spiritual pretension of a Wordsworthian natural revelation, nor does it offer the psychological certainty of Joyce’s urban epiphanies. The moose initiates the exchange and actually experiences the bus:

It approaches; it sniffs at  
the bus’s hot hood.

Lacking gender, the creature appears at first both otherworldly and threatening; it seems a force unto itself. The curious animal beckons the dreamy travelers to consciousness. Unlike the retreating farmhouses and churches of the traveler’s landscape, the presence stands solid, comfortable, and inspirational:

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or, safe as houses).

“Towering,” vaguely threatening, but “antlerless,” somewhat tamed, the moose straddles the worlds of nature and culture, embodying a domestic sense of wholeness. Dwarfed by the unassuming grandeur of the natural world, the passengers resort to childish utterances of the commonplace and obvious, further emphasizing the creature’s domestic appearance and demeanor:

“Sure are big creatures.”  
“It’s awful plain.”  
“Look! It’s a she!”

Unembellished nature on a scale both intimate and impressive startles the passengers, but their commonplace expressions help ward off the sublime. A mute and mild moose, with its relative bulk, silence, curiosity, and sex, affects but does not intimidate them.

The moose does not in the least resemble the battered, defeated fish (“I looked into his eyes ... / They shifted a little, but not to return my stare”) or Crusoe’s goats with their blank, malicious eyes. Instead, like the seal of “At the Fishhouses,” the moose participates in a direct encounter and exchange. The moose “sniffs” and “looks the bus over,” as if in recognition of this fellow creature, vehicle and passengers complimented by its interest in their otherness. The casual yet intimate relationship between moose and travelers demonstrates how “earthly trust” includes all surface-dwellers; as the animal senses the people, so the Boston-bound passengers experience the moose:

For a moment longer,  
  
by craning backward,  
the moose can be seen

on the moonlit macadam;  
 then there's a dim  
 smell of moose, an acrid  
 smell of gasoline.

The essential fact grows dim and is finally displaced by the smell of gasoline, which complements the moose's own scent. Though posed for transcendence, the poem at the moment of confrontation retreats into domesticity and the commonplace, the marvelous transforming environment serving to sensitize and alert the travelers to the precious life they share without violating the poem's essential self-containment by evoking the sublime.

Though suspicious of the romantic hejira and the epiphany, Bishop employs their strategies while avoiding the moment of commitment to the ineffable of the infinite. The otherness of nature is but half a perception; nature sees human presence as unnatural and curious. Rather than strive to penetrate or transcend the phenomenal world, Bishop attempts to define domesticity in relation to otherness,<sup>11</sup> to learn by deferring the language of the interior to more clearly experience the language of the palpable world of surface and texture. Finally she asks, "What does nature make of us?" – underscoring the unbridgeable difference between the self and the exterior world.

Bishop attempts to pose an accurate relationship with the environment. Human limitations – destinations, schedules, births, deaths – mirror environmental complexities. Like Darwin, she delights in the natural world because it is natural; she sees the moose not as an emissary from the beyond but as a moose – and marvels at its "mooseness." Generating a language of the environment without attempting to confound it with the self empowers the quotidian, with its hint of epiphanic possibility, which for Bishop is the proper material of poetry.

The act of naming, the other rhetorical device referred to at the beginning of this chapter, in romantic poetics begins with and requires the invocation of the social construct of authorship. Autobiography, a characteristic romantic-modern mode, enforces the notion of the voice of witness as one of authenticity and authority. This claim to authority, however, which was explored in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and claimed by modern poets like Robert Lowell, troubled Bishop. Her lifelong debate with herself concerning the tensions between life and authorship, autobiography and poetry surface repeatedly in her correspondence with Lowell. What she claimed of Marianne Moore<sup>12</sup> (in her memoir, "Efforts of Affection"), she would claim of herself: "to be a poet was not the be-all, end-all of existence." In December 1957, when both poets were in the midst of their life studies, Bishop wrote to Lowell:

And here I must confess<sup>13</sup> ... that I am green with envy of your kind of assurance. I feel that I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say – but what would be the significance? Nothing at all ...

Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc., gives you, I think the confidence you display about tackling any idea or theme, seriously, in both writing and conversation.

The seriousness of this lament is offset by Bishop's "green with envy" sly aside. Though she sees a collateral relationship between "significance" and "confidence," this does not confirm a sense of insecurity on her part. Rather, I suggest, she recognizes the need for

a different kind of authorial posture for herself. If name-dropping and historical context will not work for her, what will?

Bishop requires a fresh approach to the question of authorial presence and its consequences for a poetry conscious of the problems of naming and unnamings. She intuits and anticipates the crisis of authorship<sup>14</sup> and the literary text discussed by Michel Foucault in “What Is an Author?” Foucault suggests that modern literary critics continue to believe that:

the author provides<sup>15</sup> the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design).

Like Foucault, Bishop challenges the romantic assumption of authorial presence. Further, she asks her readers to socialize the poem, to recognize its full range of significance, in the absence of conventional authorial sanction. The confidence of these poems derives from abandonment: the act of naming becomes one of unnamings. Biography, social position (Bishop appears to be saying), as pre-existent constructs with authority outside of the text, have no place in these poems.

“In the Waiting Room” and “Crusoe in England” – the opening poems of *Geography III* – read intertextually reveal just how deeply and ironically Bishop engaged in the relationship between the self and author, history and memory, orality and literacy, naming and unnamings – indeed, in the binary oppositions of her aesthetic. It is this rhetoric of unnamings that generates the complexity (not the debility) of self-reference and the provisional meaning not only in her last works but throughout her career. Here the poems beckon and then thwart the reader intent on finding significance embedded in a life. The reader obsessed with the mock reality of life will never encounter the real in Bishop’s world.

“In the Waiting Room” and “Crusoe in England” enact competing genealogies of social and personal identity. Insofar as these poems may be read as poems of poetic calling, they bear the testimony of a poet resolute in her determination to designate a fictional self without recourse to the power of naming conferred by the social construct of authorship, and to force authority, instead, from unnamings. This rejection of the self as social construct and privileged naming may seem even more romantic than the solipsism of authorship because it attempts to reinvigorate the originative power of naming. Bishop, however, neither claims access to origins nor refuses the social meaning imposed by language and culture. Instead she attempts to displace the romantic concept of authorial autonomy, because it is a received and therefore logocentric social construct, and install through unnamings and renaming a more broadly mediated sense of things and experience, a socially rather than egoistically based phenomenology.

“In the Waiting Room” may be seen as a prelapsarian poem of anticipation of that social state that precedes the acceptance of received namings; “Crusoe in England” may be read as a postlapsarian meditation on the originating power of naming and renaming. In reinventing the social world that connects the two, she seems willing to reconsider all forms of “name” appropriation: place, family, sex, generation, things. Discovering a world where (as Stevens found<sup>16</sup>) “Mrs. Anderson’s Swedish baby / Might well have been German or Spanish,” she then rejects all such forms of naming as well as (what Foucault calls<sup>17</sup>) “author construction.” Each poem reenacts

“birth, procreation, and death” as a debate between naming and unnamings, the loss imposed by a social (i.e., authorial) identity.

In 1961, Bishop wrote “The Country Mouse,” a posthumously published memoir dedicated to her childhood return to Worcester, Massachusetts, after a lengthy stay with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. Were it not for its startlingly revealing conclusion, the memoir, in spite of its abundance of details, would suffer from (by Bishop’s own standards) insignificance. In the final paragraphs, however, which constitute the nucleus of “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop begins to trouble over the obvious: the social obligation of being human. Having been jolted into awareness of her adoptive family’s class status (*hers* was a family with servants), she recalls with equal sensitivity the *strangeness* of being a human being. As she waits for her aunt in the dentist’s waiting room:

I felt ... *myself*. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt *I, I, I*, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was *one* of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. “You’re in for it now,” something said. How had I got tricked into such a false position? I would be like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely every once in a while. [CPr, 33]

The history of identity is bound to the memory of its occasion. The response is visceral, *not* intellectual:

“You are you,” something said. “How strange you are, inside looking out. You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are *you* and you are going to be *you* forever.” It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. *Why* was I a human being?

The fact of this prerational recognition scene resides in the primacy of childhood identity. The duplicity the child hears and sees in the adult world can only be named by those understudy pronouns: *I* and *you*. While dogs, trees, and even servants have names, this as yet unnamed child wrestles with but a taxonomic classification: human.

“In the Waiting Room” marks Bishop’s return to these issues of naming and unnamings, reading and writing, sounding and hearing. Though descriptive, the poem depends less on physical detail and more upon a dialogue between the unnamed (socially unrestricted) self – “I” – and the named (socially restricted) – “an *I*.” The child initially finds security in proper names: “Worcester, Massachusetts” and “Aunt Consuelo.” The certainty fades with the appearance of the intrusive, indefinite pronoun: “*It* was winter. *It* got dark / early” [my emphasis]. Bishop will rely upon the ambiguity of “it” and its corresponding reluctance or inability to name throughout the poem.

Left alone, the child “I” sees and reads the named *National Geographic*. Its “studied photographs” reveal an unpredictable, eruptive (prelapsarian) landscape. Literacy fails, except as an escape route, where metaphor is concerned. Investigating scenes from this magazine, she catalogues that which she can name: volcano erupting, Osa and Martin Johnson. Properly attired people bear names: “Osa and Martin Johnson”; dead people lose their names: “– ‘Long Pig,’ the caption said.” Orality and literacy compete for the child’s attention, each seductive in its way. But she *mishears* what “the caption sa[ys]”: “A dead man slung on a pole / – “Long Pig.” Mimicking the instability of spoken language and substituting a euphemism for a proper name, the conversational caption confuses the earnest student, who fails to understand that the dead man is here regarded as a food source.

The verbal unknown occasions further confusion as the child's eye traces the physical, sexual uncertainties of uncovered women. So foreign are the native unnamed women "with necks / wound round and round with wire" that the child "reads" right through them: "I read *it* straight right straight through. / I was too shy to stop" [emphasis added]. Unable to name, the child resorts to the tense comfort of the unnamed: "it." She retreats from the shifting planes of unnamed, unnamable uncertainty to the fixity of that which bears a name: "the cover: / the yellow margins, the date." Such is the force of Dickinson's notch in the maelstrom.

Unable to read her way into the larger constellation of human beings, the child nevertheless recognizes the sounded family identity when she hears it. Like the auditor in "The Country Mouse," this child hears from the inside out. History and memory fuse, creating a new identity for her:

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.

[CP, 160]

The intensity of this "it" draws upon the accumulated chain of reference: "winter," "dark early," "Babies with pointed heads," "horrifying breasts," and Aunt Consuelo's "oh! of pain." Acceding to the social demands, the effect of her aunt's voice, the child involuntarily discovers her own collective voice: *I* becomes *me*. Dates, like names or Aunt Consuelo's voice, momentarily pierce the surface of the "cold, blue-black space" – the sea of habit threatening the child's consciousness. She has lost perceived autonomy even as she has gained a social identity.

Cautiously authorial, the child reads this new self as a mode of being. For the moment the discovery is personal, familial. This is not an attempt to place a "Bishop" in context; rather, it is an opportunity to feel a "self" move forward and backward into genealogy, into time:

But I felt: you are an *I*,  
you are an *Elizabeth*,  
you are one of *them*.

Unlike the familial significance attributed to Lowell by Bishop, the effectiveness of Bishop's self-reading derives from the strategic use of the second person. As if to demonstrate her presence in the text, she removes her self from it long enough to proclaim a social identity, to name her self. This somewhat grudging sensation, verified spontaneously by the child's reaction to her aunt's cry, suggests the child's plight as it would seem from the outside. It recalls the Stevensian<sup>18</sup> self: "Detect[ing] the sound of a voice that doubles its own." However "unlikely" or "strange" these binding "similarities" seem to the child they are the social facts of her life. Though they seem to her unauthorized,

breasts, boots, the *National Geographic*, and the family voice nonetheless constitute homogenizing social realities. By adhering to the laws of pronominal reference, Bishop intensifies the almost Ibsenlike (recall the Button-molder of *Peer Gynt*) threat to an artist's emerging identity.

While "In the Waiting Room" has been routinely read as a poem of juvenile terror, isolation, and marginality, none of those readings account for the remarkable counterforce of the solitary "Me–Myself–I," the artist's isolated yet assertive self. Even if the unnamed self (as seen from the inside out) threatens to fail or consume, it remains the volatile poetry voice for Bishop. She may require (what Beckett calls) a "temporal specification"<sup>19</sup> – "fifth / of February, 1918" – to allow her "to measure the days that separate [her] from that menace" (that which threatens identity). The "falling off" enacted in this poem is the fall into social identity, restrictive or inaccurate naming. The alternative seems to be the "big black wave" of annihilation or namelessness. To be "back in it" is to survive with a social surface – name, age, gender, place – at odds with the continually unnamed self. "The War was on" presages a career intensely committed to slipping the yoke of social identity and changing the rules of the name game.

The child of "In the Waiting Room" advances with uncertainty from the passivity of reader to the tentative aggressiveness of writer – to the authority of authorship. The socializing power of language itself lures the unnamed *I* into the realm of a given and feminine name – and perilously into the beyond of collective, pronominal identity: "one of them." This rush of potential identities refuses to pause at the brink of authorial privilege – *Elizabeth + Bishop* – and instead accelerates into the swirl of *them*. Refusing even gender specificity (recalling that in her memoir, Bishop ends with the more general "Why was I a human being?"), retaining no element of uniqueness, this identity is as good as none.

If the waiting room child must advance toward naming and its requisite social obligation, then "Crusoe at Home" (Bishop's working title for "Crusoe in England"<sup>20</sup>) has the life-won opportunity to revert to his unnamed *I*. Even as "In the Waiting Room" advances the cause of poetic naming, "Crusoe" champions the necessity of retreat. The child relinquishes ignorance for the sake of her name; Crusoe abandons the text and the very power of naming as if discovering the devitalizing force of individuation. Like other world-weary "I am" poems (John Clare's "I Am," Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," Wallace Stevens's "First Warmth" or "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"), "Crusoe" makes its most compelling appeal for readership by its utter rejection of its social role.

The landscape seems familiar; yet this volcanic wasteland is "dead as ash heaps." The colonial appropriators, or namers, are no longer in the characters of Osa and Martin Johnson; they have coalesced into the discovering and naming country itself: England. Decidedly postlapsarian, Crusoe both remembers and re-enacts that ahistorical, asocial moment of genuine love in exile.

Exasperated by the feminine, childhood aspects of the name game, Bishop turns from the dilemma of the given and family name to explore the old age of the retired adventurer. Crusoe, like Lowell, comes with his attendant significance – his fictive and historical authority. In spite of that burden, however, he shrugs off his social (i.e., linguistic) inheritance as irrelevant and inaccurate. Seemingly revisiting in memory the landscape of the *National Geographic* of "In the Waiting Room," Crusoe dismisses everything the child struggled to acquire. Orality and literacy fail to capture the essence of his life,

which remains “un-rediscovered, un-renamable.” The authorial gesture of the poem depends upon the exasperation that “None of the books has ever got it right.” Like Ishmael, Crusoe knows that “true” places remain unnamed.

From Crusoe’s perspective, to acknowledge the shock of “waiting room” recognition is to acquiesce to the failure of language to identify. The core of the poem, preceded by the weary “Well,” charts the encumbrance of language in a solitary world. Relative scale (“I’d think that if they were the size / I thought volcanoes should be, then I had / become a giant”), proper names, aesthetics, categories of all kinds ring false in this underpopulated landscape of “one kind of everything.” Here the distinctions between ignorance and understanding, error and truth seem impossible to ascertain. Who would appreciate the act of delimiting that naming reflects? The landscape seems fated to the same oblivion as language as Bishop echoes “The Map” (where “The names of the sea-shore towns run out to sea”) in the volcanic landscape (where “The folds of lava, running out to sea, / would hiss”).

Like the speaker in John Clare’s “I Am,” Crusoe, too, is a “self-consumer of [his] woes.” Even in isolation this must be given a name and a circumstance: “‘Pity should begin at home.’ So the more / pity I felt, the more I felt at home.” Crusoe resorts to this colloquy with himself to externalize and verify the overwhelmingly interior sensation of pity. The physical remove becomes palpable as he conjectures: “What’s wrong *about* self-pity, anyway?” [my emphasis] Crusoe confesses his humanity through by naming his emotion. For as D. H. Lawrence asserts in his own “Self-Pity”<sup>21</sup>: “I never saw a wild thing / sorry for itself.” Locating his emotion in language denies Crusoe the spontaneity or wildness of the animal world.

Incapable of “looking up” that which he does not possess, Crusoe abides by the asocial strictures of solitude. An air of unreality pervades the intense reality of this itemized landscape. Like the waiting-room child, Crusoe “reads” the landscape and attempts to place through names its inhabitants. His solitary word games seek to defeat “the questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies / over a ground of hissing rain”: “*Mont d’Espoir* or *Mount Despair* / (I’d time enough to play with names),” but serve only to sound off: Names are rendered meaningless. Knowledge and language as social acts become nightmarish anachronisms:

... I’d have  
 nightmares of other islands  
 stretching away from mine ...  
 .....  
 .....knowing that I had to live  
 on each and every one, eventually,  
 for ages, registering their flora,  
 their fauna, their geography.

[CP, 165]

Such occupational investments in local identity terrify the stranded character. As the waiting-room child discovered, even local geography requires an audience to render the significance fixed.

The eight-stanza terror of the societyless residence is preemptorily displaced by Crusoe’s recollection of Friday. While language seems to have outlived its usefulness, Crusoe nonetheless fixes his “other” with a socially significant temporal marker: he names “Friday.” Even as Crusoe details the effect of this new society, the impoverishment

of language is complete. Declaring parenthetically that “Accounts of [Friday’s arrival] have everything all wrong,” he fails to meet the demands of language. Friday is “nice” and “pretty”; they were “friends.” Stripped of a linguistic interface, Crusoe appears to have met the private, unmediated demands of a relationship shared with but one. Language cannot intervene.

The authorial impulse to give memory a name by converting it into history is a commemorative one. With Friday’s deathdate comes the intrusive, factual marker – fixing in time the moment recalled, begging to be named. Crusoe’s/Bishop’s public and private artifacts seem destined for the Temple of the Muses: “The local museum’s asked me to / leave everything to them.” The human experiences of love and desperation coalesce about the devitalized remains: “the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes.” Like Yeats’s “Old iron, old bones, old rags,” the island artifacts sit unre-discoverable and unrenameable. In questioning the value of this hopelessly romantic, Emersonian art of naming, Crusoe challenges the public appropriation of named things even as he re-collects the private bonding of language to love:

How can anyone want such things?  
– And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles  
seventeen years ago come March.

Unable to thwart the named order of things – names, dates, countries, diseases – Crusoe can only recall a time when the world was unnameable but “nice.” Readers of Stevens will recognize both place and question: “These external regions, what do we fill them with / Except reflections, the escapades of death.”<sup>22</sup>

A reading of *Geography III* that considers the issues raised in discussing these two poems would presuppose a willingness to accept this paradox: that as autobiography abandons Bishop’s poems, they begin to live. In American poetry only Dickinson has been as successful in frustrating critics who need to use the life as a means of explaining. Bishop’s appreciation of Lowell’s “kind of assurance” drove her to assert her confidence from the “interior,” where, with due respect for the social and cultural energy that makes art possible, the poet is alone with the task of distinguishing her work from her self. Her life’s sad facts do not explain why “we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy” when reading her poems and correspondence. Critics too eager to privilege autobiography over other forms of fiction to satisfy current critical trends risk reducing these multidimensional poems to self-elegy. This lack of critical imagination unduly restricts access to a body of work demanding recognition of its, not the poet’s, authority.

The “old correspondences” littering *Geography III* can easily incite misreading, searching for poems definable by cultural or political communities Bishop herself rejected. Seeking the self Bishop deliberately withholds requires resisting a “knowledge . . . historical, flowing, and flown.” This resistance denies the power of her assertive unnamings, forgetting that to be at war with something (in this case, restrictive identities) is in fact to confront it.

Extending this reading method to the entirety of *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* reveals Bishop’s career-long desire to subvert the “author-function,” a desire largely fulfilled in the dialectic between autobiographical strategies and those of self-effacement. “Cape Breton” describes the resulting natural scene, which refuses the pathetic fallacy and turns a blank face to the viewer: “Whatever the landscape has of meaning appears to have been abandoned . . . these regions now have little to say for themselves.” The

private life inspiring Bishop's poems cannot sustain them; they must live on their own, but they do so by first appropriating that private life and then placing it under erasure. The reader, faced with the transparent splendor of these poems, might wonder with the speaker of "Anaphora": "Where is the music coming from, the energy? / The day was meant for what ineffable creature / we must have missed?" As Foucault warns, "The author is the principle of thrift<sup>23</sup> in the proliferation of meaning." Thriftier than most writers, and anxious that neither name nor gender restrict the authority of her poems, she withdraws, through unnamings, the authorial privilege by purposing, then exposing the feigned naïveté of autobiography. The resultant fiction in its complex reflexivity is too self-possessed for the reader or critic to unmask, and paradoxically refuses either to confound life and art or to clearly distinguish them.

### Notes

- 1 John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 38.
- 2 See typescript drafts of "Cape Breton" [Vassar]. Bishop notes in a piece titled "Bird Islands" that:

Ciboux and Hertford, about six miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. During the war planes practiced dropping bombs on a rock between the two. The sheep pastured on them would get frightened and often stampede in a panic and fall over the cliffs into the sea.

- 3 See Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), Chap. 47: "The Mat-Maker."
- 4 Marianne Moore, *Observations* (New York: Dial Press, 1924), p. 60.
- 5 Stevens, *Collected Poems*, p. 8.
- 6 See James McIntosh, *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) for a detailed discussion of Thoreau's "shifting stances" in the natural world with its implications for transcendentalism in general.
- 7 Working title "Back to Boston," 27/403 [Vassar].
- 8 See File 27/403 [Vassar].
- 9 See Hass, "One Body: Some Notes on Form" in *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), p. 152:

Being and being seen. R. D. Laing says somewhere that small children don't get up at night to see if you're there, they get up to see if *they're* there. ... Maybe our first experience of our own formation.

- 10 See Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 324.
- 11 For a useful discussion of domesticity as topic in Bishop, see Helen Vendler, "Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly" in *Modern Critical Views: Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), pp. 83–96. Once the only essay to make a compelling case for Bishop's place in the canon, it now seems overcommitted to its theme. For example, in introducing "In the Waiting Room":

No domesticity is entirely safe. As in the midst of life we are in death, so, in Bishop's poetry, in the midst of the familiar, and most especially there, we feel the familiar as the unknowable. This *guerilla attack of the alien*, springing from the very bulwarks of the familiar, is the subject of "In the Waiting Room" (87). [emphasis mine]

A "dentist's waiting room" does not seem to me to be "the very bulwarks of the familiar." In fact, if we are to accept Vendler's extreme depiction, it is just where one would expect the "guerilla attack of the alien."

- 12 See "Efforts" [CPr], p. 156.  
 13 EB to Robert Lowell (December 14, 1957) [Harvard].  
 14 See my earlier discussion of the rhetorical implications in "Elizabeth Bishop: Author(ity) and the Rhetoric of (Un)-naming," *The Literary Review* 35 (Spring 1992):419–28. My discussion of "otherness and (un)naming" is informed throughout by Kimberly W. Bentson, "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American literature" in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984), pp. 151–72.  
 15 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in Josué Harari, *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 151.  
 16 Stevens, "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," *Collected Poems*, p. 150. See Vendler's use of the quote in "Domestication," p. 88:

[U]nderstatement, so common in Bishop, gives words their full weight. As the fact of her own contingency strikes the child, "familiar" and "strange" become concepts which have lost all meaning. "Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby ..."

- 17 Foucault, p. 151.  
 18 Stevens, "The Woman That Had More Babies Than That," *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 104–5:

The self is a cloister full of remembered sounds  
 And of sounds so far forgotten, like her voice,  
 That they return unrecognized. The self  
 Detects the sound of a voice that doubles its own,  
 In the images of desire, the forms that speak,  
 The ideas that come to it with a sense of speech.

- 19 See Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 5.  
 20 See 27/402 [Vassar].  
 21 D. H. Lawrence, "Self-Pity," *The Complete Poems* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 467.  
 22 Stevens, "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," *Collected Poems*, p. 405.  
 23 Foucault, p. 159.

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