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**Intertextual Allusions as Bakhtinian  
Dialogism in Elizabeth Bishop's  
Poetics**

By

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## Synopsis

### **Intertextual Allusions as Bakhtinian Dialogism in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics**

Throughout her career, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) continually sought new possibilities for making poetry and for stretching her limits as a poet. The body of her work is marked by an increasing capacity to render elusive and complex experience with remarkable immediacy and to engage in contemporary social and cultural issues. Above all, Bishop's accomplishment lies in her unique position in American poetry as a "rebel" within the literary establishment, not simply subversive of conventional aesthetics, but "recognized" as an "authority" on revitalizing poetry from within traditional forms. This paper examines Bishop's poetics by drawing attention to her literary ambitions and theories. Informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, it seeks to shed light on the enabling conditions for Bishop's poetic achievement, while tracing her poetic development through her dialogic interactions with others' ideas, styles and texts. It is the researcher's contention, as such, that a study of Bishop's poetics in relation to her artistic theories will bring a better understanding of her distinct and enduring merit.

Elizabeth Bishop fulfilled in her poetry the "real hopes and ambitions" the speaker in her prose piece, "In Prison" articulates. Enacting his desire to be "unconventional, and rebellious," Bishop preserves, and renews what has been made even as she strives to find new ways of making poems. Perhaps the most significant impact of her poems on other poets resides in her demonstration that an effective ideological and aesthetic revolt cannot afford to abandon wrestling with the restraints of language and form. "Freedom is knowledge of necessity," as her allegorical prisoner reiterates. While posing challenges of many kinds, Bishop's *oeuvre* is, as she wished, a valuable "legacy of thoughts" for present and future generations of poets. Like all great art, her poems offer much more than ideas and designs. Seamus Heaney has put it well in saying that Elizabeth Bishop "does continually manage to advance poetry beyond the point where it has been helping us to enjoy life to that even more profoundly verifying point where it helps us also to endure it." In doing so, Bishop has certainly written poems that endure.

# Intertextual Allusions as Bakhtinian Dialogism in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics

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## I

Throughout her career, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) continually sought new possibilities for making poetry and for stretching her limits as a poet. The body of her work is marked by an increasing capacity to render elusive and complex experience with remarkable immediacy and to engage in contemporary social and cultural issues. Above all, Bishop's accomplishment lies in her unique position in American poetry as a "rebel" within the literary establishment, not simply subversive of conventional aesthetics, but "recognized" as an "authority" on revitalizing poetry from within traditional forms. This paper examines Bishop's poetics by drawing attention to her literary ambitions and theories. Informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism<sup>1</sup>, it seeks to shed light on the enabling conditions for Bishop's poetic achievement, while tracing her poetic development through her dialogic interactions with others' ideas, styles and texts. It is the researcher's contention, as such, that a study of Bishop's poetics in relation

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<sup>1</sup> The English term, dialogic and dialogism often refer to the concept used by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his work of literary theory, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin contrasts the dialogic and the "monologic" work of literature. The dialogic work carries on a continual dialogue with other works of literature. It does not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend a previous work, but informs and is continually informed by the previous work. Dialogic literature is in communication with multiple works. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogic extends in both directions, and the previous work of literature is as altered by the dialogue as the present one is.

to her artistic theories will bring a better understanding of her distinct and enduring merit. Marilyn Lombardi has recently suggested a procedural shift from allowing the critic's ideas to define Bishop's poetics, to letting Bishop articulate her own. Discovering that "Bishop's private papers reveal the poet's enduring interest in the relation between her own physical and creative drives," she examines how "the poet's asthma, alcoholism, and sexuality," have "their hold over her imagination, and their impact on her response toward poetic form, its pleasures and restraints" (5). But Lombardi's focus on Bishop's physical conditions as a productive force for her imagination prevents her from further investigating Bishop's poetics in relation to her own theories of artistic originality and creativity. This limitation, in part, results from Lombardi's contention, apparently shared by many other Bishop scholars, that Bishop "left behind no comprehensive and explicit statement of her artistic theories" (5).

Actually, Bishop has made both explicit and oblique statements of her artistic theories, not just in her unpublished material, but also in her published letters, essays, interviews, short stories and poems. Her letter to Robert Lowell, in response to his remarks in an interview about contemporary poetry, is one such example of Bishop's explicit statement of her artistic theories. In a 1961 *Paris Review* Interview with Frederick Seidel, Lowell complained that the work of poets of his generation, "particularly younger ones," had become too much of a specialized craft to handle much experience. He believed that "there must be some breakthrough back into life" (Siedel 111-12). In the same interview, Lowell looked back on an earlier period with admiration for its explosive revolutionary creative impulse; a period of Schonberg, Picasso, Joyce and the early Eliot. His remark on the poetry of Marianne Moore, a representative of the poets of his generation, was explosive: "You wouldn't see anyone as strange as Marianne again, not for a long while. Conservative and Jamesian as she is, it was a terrible, private, and strange revolutionary poetry. There isn't the motive to do that now" (Siedel 129). Lowell's last rueful comment provoked Bishop to disagree:

But I wonder – isn't there? Isn't there even more – only its terribly hard to find the exact and right and surprising enough, or un-surprising enough, point at which to Revolt now? .... The real, real protest I suspect is something quite different – (If only I could find it. Klee's picture called

FEAR seems close to it, I think.) (BMS Am 1905 (62-264) the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Bishop was certainly able to articulate clearly her idea of the kind of "protest" which she found difficult to define in Paul Klee's work. In her prose piece "In Prison," Bishop asserts a poetics of Bakhtinian dialogism which is a major statement of her artistic theories and which suggests that the "real, real protest" must be lodged from within literary traditions by revolting against conventional manners in order to achieve artistic originality and develop a distinct style of her own. It is through a male speaker in this prose piece that she states her theories of artistic innovation and reveals her plans to achieve them.<sup>2</sup> As the speaker in "In Prison" indicates, Bishop's idea of the "rebel" within the prison of literary establishment involves revising other's texts, appropriating other's voices and maintaining a rebellious stance against predominant norms of style, be they dominated by male or female authors. For the speaker of "In Prison," as for Bishop herself, the "imprisonment" of creative activity is a necessary condition for the realization of his "real hopes and ambitions."

Though critics, in general, consider "refuge and retreat" to be the major theme of "In Prison"<sup>3</sup>, yet this prose piece challenges conventional

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Vaught Brogan has pointed out in her article "Elizabeth Bishop: Perversity as Voice" (1993) that "In Prison" is "an ironically concealed manifesto" (184) "which expose[s] the lyric voice itself, with its implicit and traditional associations with authenticity, originality, and authority, as a manifestation of a traditionally dominant (and dominating) phallic poetics" (176). However, while Brogan's recognition of Bishop's "subversive purpose" in the speaker's intention to be "unconventional, rebellious" within "the severe constraints of prison" is a significant contribution to critical readings of "In Prison", yet her emphasis on Bishop's resistance to and subversion of "phallic poetics" presupposes a definition of poetics by gender alone, which neither Bishop's theory nor practice confirms.

<sup>3</sup> David Kalstone, for example, contends that Bishop's aim in this story "is to ritualize her nomadic separatist existence and her cravings for withdrawal" (59). Thomas Travisano argues that "In Prison" deals with "the safety of enclosure" as opposed to "the ambiguous freedom and danger of life at large" (25). Brett Millier regards the prose piece as "the first and most vivid manifestation of Elizabeth's lifelong daydream of solitary retirement" (134). David Lehman explores further the

notions of artistic originality by suggesting that a poetic text can be produced out of the poet's creative combination of fragments from a previous text and multiple voices from different speakers, rather than growing out of one single original source. The theory Bishop postulates in this prose piece is not so much about imagination (though imagination is inevitably involved here) as about originality and how to achieve it. Her remarks about "In Prison" reveal her intention to theoretically explore the conditions for poetic originality through a concrete situation with suggestive allegorical meanings. After sending "In Prison" to *Partisan Review* in January 1938, Bishop wrote to Marianne Moore about this piece, remarking that it was "another of these horrible 'fable' ideas that seem to obsess me." Moore lauded Bishop for her "creativity and uniqueness," but expressed her worries about Bishop's "tentativeness and interiorizing" (1 May 1938, *Letters* 390-91). Responding to Moore's comments, Bishop explained:

I was curious to hear what you thought of the story, because it is the first conscious attempt at something according to a *theory* I've been thinking up down here out of a combination of Poe's theories and reading 17<sup>th</sup> century prose! (5 May 1938, *L71*)

Bishop was more specific about this theory when writing to her friend, Frani Blough Muser:

Lately I've been doing nothing much but reread Poe, and evolve from Poe— plus something of Sir Thomas Browne<sup>4</sup>, etc. — a new Theory-of-

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implications of imprisonment in terms of the paradox of Physical confinement and spiritual freedom, concluding that, "as a theory of imagination which is necessarily a theory of absence, 'In prison' prepares us well for the projects of Miss Bishop's mature poetry." (71)

<sup>4</sup> Although Bishop did not say exactly what she had learned from Poe and Browne, Poe's ideas about "originality" can shed some light on the central concern of "In Prison." Poe argues in "The Philosophy of Composition," that "originality ... is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition." He continues: "In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation"(1264). Originality as involving more "negation" than "invention" is transformed into a revolt against established norms revealed in the distinct style of Bishop's "In

the-Story-All-My-Own. It's the "proliferal" style, I believe, and you will shortly see some of the results. There was an indication of it in the March *Partisan Review*. (2 May 1938, L71)

Once the speaker of "In Prison" is "securely installed" in his cell and "in full possession of [his] 'faculties'" (*CPr* 186), he will take the first step toward fully realizing them by misreading some books available in the prison:

I hope I am not being too reactionary when I say that my one desire is to be given one very dull book to read, the duller the better. A book, moreover, on a subject completely foreign to me; perhaps the second volume, if the first would familiarize me too well with the terms and purpose of the work. Then I shall be able to experience with a free conscience the pleasure, perverse, I suppose, of interpreting it not at all according to its intent. (*CPr* 187-88)

A boring and unfamiliar text will give the speaker the necessary distance and freedom to deconstruct it in order to create something new out of its fragments. Add to this, his own writing and the fragmentary speeches of the inmates:

From my detached rock-like book I shall be able to draw vast generalizations, abstractions of the grandest, most illuminating sort, like allegories or poems, and by posing fragments of it against the surroundings and conventions of my prison, I shall be able to form my own examples of surrealist art!- something I should never know how to do outside, where the sources are so bewildering. (*CPr* 188)

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#### Prison."

The other element—17<sup>th</sup> century prose—which Bishop combines with "Poe's theories" reverberate in her 1930s notebook in which Bishop copied passages from "The Baroque Style in Prose" by Morris W. Croll, which discusses a newly emerged prose style Croll calls: "Anti-Ciceronian, or Baroque" (212) writers such as Pascal, Montaigne, and Sir Thomas Browne. This device suggests a parallel to "the 'proliferal' style" which Bishop referred to in her letter to Frani Blough Muser— the branching out of several new apprehensions of the central idea expressed at the beginning. This device underlies the organization and meditative narrative of "In Prison."



The books available in prison and the inmates' major interests provide the speaker with proper material and set the necessary boundaries for his artistic creativity.

The speaker's deliberate misreading and appropriation of others' words in his work, demonstrate an intertextual revision and dialogic interaction involved in the creative process. In his discussion of "In Prison," David Lehman notes that the story "makes the case for creative misreading;" for what Harold Bloom calls "mis-prision"(65).<sup>5</sup> Younger poets' misreading and revising of older poets' texts in Bloom's theory reveal the dialogic nature of creativity, which Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes. As such, the misreading which Bishop's speaker plans to carry out directs our critical attention away from Bloom's theory of poetic influence based on the Freudian model of "family romance"<sup>6</sup> to a more inclusive, multi-voiced intertextuality. The primary conditions which Bishop's speaker insists on for the creation of his work, suggest that literary discourse involves an orientation toward what has been produced. As Bakhtin argues, a text "cannot fail to be oriented toward the 'already uttered,' the 'already known,' the 'common opinion' and so forth. The dialogic orientation of the discourse is "the natural orientation of any living discourse" (*DI* 279). In one of his essays, "The Problem of the Text," Bakhtin writes:

To what degree are pure, objectless, single-voiced words possible in literature? Is it possible for a word in which the author does not hear another's voice, which includes *only* the author and *all* of the author, to become material for the construction of literary work?... perhaps any literal, single-voiced word is naïve and unsuitable for authentic creativity. Any truly creative voice can only be the *second* voice in the discourse. (*SG* 110)

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike the "misprision" in Bloom's theory of poetic influence, the misreading of Bishop's speaker is not motivated by any relationship between the speaker and a precursor whose poetic power threatens to overshadow the speaker's. The author of the text chosen to be rewritten is, in fact, anonymous.

<sup>6</sup> Bloom's theory of poetic influence mainly concerns "the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet" and "the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance" (7-8). This life-cycle of the poet, according to Bloom's theory, is renewed by the younger poet's revision of the father-like precursor's poems.

The Speaker in "In Prison" states that this dialogic orientation toward others' voices will be crucial to his artistic composition. But more importantly, the collage he plans to construct, will be dialogic in the sense that the speaker's work, though intended to be distinct, will engage what has been written and incorporate what is being uttered by other inmates within the prison. Observe the speaker's words:

I shall read very carefully or try to read, since they may be partly obliterated, or in a foreign language, the inscriptions already there (on the walls of the cell). Then I shall adapt my own compositions in order that they may not conflict with those written by the prisoner before me. The voice of a new inmate will be noticeable, but there will be no contradictions or criticisms of what has already been laid down, rather a "commentary." (*CPr* 188)

This shows the significant role others' words will play in shaping his style and subject matter. Bakhtin has pointed out the inevitable role others' words play in the way anyone constructs utterances or expresses ideas: "The individual manner in which a person structures his own speech is determined to a significant degree by his peculiar awareness of another's words, and by his means for reacting to them." He argues that "one word acutely senses alongside it someone else's word speaking about the same object, and this awareness determines its structure" (*PDP* 196). This sheds light on Bakhtin's idea of the relationship between the self and others. According to Bakhtin, every person is influenced by others in an inescapably intertwined way, and consequently no voice can be said to be isolated. In an interview, Bakhtin once explained that, "in order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others" (np.) As such, Bakhtin's philosophy greatly respected the influences of others on the self, not merely in terms of how a person comes to be, but also in how a person thinks and how a person sees oneself truthfully.<sup>7</sup> Several of Bishop's poems

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin voiced a similar idea through his concept of the carnival. According to Bakhtin *carnival* is a concept in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together. This was his method of describing Dostoevsky's polyphonic

are made out of responses to other's words, ideas and images. Both Bishop's practice of "misreading" others' texts in her poems and the misreading the speaker in "In Prison" hopes to carry out are the kind of dialogic interaction Bakhtin considers fundamental to creative activity.

According to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, intertextual allusion<sup>8</sup>, or revision can serve as a strategy which offers possibilities for expressing complicated ideas from different points of view. Bakhtin notes in "The Problem of Speech Genres" that "all our utterances (including creative works), are filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-ownness,' varying degrees of awareness and detachment." And these varying degrees of otherness can be appropriated or revised to express our own meanings: "These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate"(SG 89). Moreover, a writer's incorporation of other's words are not just motivated by stylistic concerns, but also by new ideas developed with changing historical contexts. Observe Bakhtin's elaboration in "Toward a Methodology for the Human Science":

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will be renewed in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way

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style: each individual character is strongly defined, and at the same time the reader witnesses the critical influence of each character upon the other i.e. the voices of others are heard by each individual, and each inescapably shapes the character of the other. (PDP 302).

<sup>8</sup> Intertextual allusion is the relationship between two or more texts that quote from one another, allude to one another or otherwise connect. In the work of Roland Barthes, intertextuality is a concept that postulates the idea that the meaning of a work of art does not reside in that work, but in the readers or viewers. In the work of Julia Kristeva (who coined the term in 1966), intertextuality suggests the interdependence of texts, the continual deferment of meaning through and between texts; hence the term's near equation to Bakhtin's dialogism.

they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context).<sup>9</sup>  
(SG 170)

Creative activity, thus, involves a process which at once continues and renews inheritance from the past. In this sense, a current literary work will become part of the existing literary legacy and a point of departure for future development.

Just as the speaker intends to appropriate in his "compositions" the inheritance from the "inscriptions" left on the prison walls by former inmates, he expects to leave his own "works" as legacy to the prisoners after him. He contemplates that his writings on the prison wall and floor "will be brief, suggestive, anguished, but full of the lights of revelations," and he hopes that "no small part to the joy these writings will give me will be to think of the person coming after me – the legacy of thoughts I shall leave him, like an old bundle tossed carelessly into a corner!" (188-89). He regards his contribution to the previous writings on the wall in his cell as an "important aspect of prison life" (188). This reveals the kind of dialogic interaction in literary discourse which Bakhtin calls "a hidden anti-stylization of someone else's style." This, Bakhtin contends, is "an example" of "internal polemic" that is typical of the writer's "reaction to the preceding literary style, present in every new style" (*PDP* 196).

The logic of Bakhtin's dialogism sheds light on Bishop's speaker's elaboration on the effective measures for achieving a distinct style that is not only acknowledged, but also admired by his fellow inmates:

By means of these beginnings, these slight differences, and the appeal (do not think I am boasting here, or overestimating the power of details, because I have seen it work over and over again) of my carefully subdued, reserved manner, I shall attract to myself one intimate friend, whom I shall influence deeply. This friend, already an important member of the prison society, will be of great assistance to me in establishing myself as an authority, recognized but unofficial, on the conduct of prison life. (190)

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<sup>9</sup> cf. T. S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which explores the relationship between the poet and the literary tradition which precedes him/her.

This "carefully, subdued, reserved manner," cultivated as a strategy to become influential, to achieve recognition and to be established as an "authority," puts Bishop's characteristic reticence in a new perspective. Jacqueline Brogan has aptly remarked that "In Prison" challenges critical remarks on Bishop's "'decorum,' her 'modesty,' and her 'reticence,'" which "has become almost a critical commonplace" (184-85).

"In Prison," in consequence, expresses the wish to begin a life of artistic creativity, rather than the desire for withdrawal from life. The speaker's self-chosen imprisonment, as he remarks, "is the only logical step for me to take" in order to be "acted *upon* in this way" (191). For Bishop, literary "imprisonment" can provide her with material and a variety of styles for new inventions. Only within the "prison walls" of literary traditions can she find a "right and surprising enough ... point at which to revolt." The allegorically articulated strategies in "In Prison" reveal a number of dialogic principles of literary innovation which can shed light on Bishop's poetics and enable a better understanding of her poetry. In many of her poems, Bishop evaluates, appropriates and revises "varying degrees of otherness" in order to express different ideas and emotions, and to create a style distinctively her own. The fact that creative activity is a process which inevitably involves the reworking of what has already been written suggests that an analysis of Bishop's appropriation and revision of others' words and ideas in her poems will yield a new insight into her poetics and the process of her creative production. The methods, styles and ideas of others have provoked Bishop to seek new ways of making poetry while striving to achieve her own artistic originality.

## II

Many of Bishop's poems reveal an exquisite convergence of several strands of thematic and technical developments. Her versatile capacity illustrates the accomplishment in integrating several aspects of her poetics through a masterful combination of various technical and thematic strategies she has been exploring and developing for years. Bishop experiments with intertextual allusions in one of her early poems, "Large Bad Picture," (CP 11-12) which criticizes certain naïve readings of representational art. The painting, an early effort by an uncle who went on to create the oil sketch admired in "Poem" is "bad" both in conception and execution. It is a crude

imitation of nineteenth century landscape conventions: birds "hanging in *n*'s in blanks," and cliffs "fretted by little arches." The "entrance of caves" suggest diminutive depths to match the cliffs which are hypothetically "hundreds of feet high" and "masked" by "perfect" waves. Here, Bishop's great-uncle has been caught up in nostalgic clichés:

His exotic, remote geography, high receding cliffs, caves, intensely luminous sunset, translucent horizon, and ocean seem a poor imitation of church, Bierstadt, or Monet ... rather than individual objects of individual memory. (Costello 216)

Bishop hardly dwells on the crudeness of the picture, however. She plunges into the world of the picture as if it were literally present and creates a narrative about it, expanding beyond the visual to auditory sensations. Though the birds are "hanging in *n*'s," drawn by the most primitive conventions:

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

The stanza is allusive of Keats's notion that "heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter," with a walrus rather than a pastoral piper as the stimulus of imagined sound. No actual observer would hear the animal breathe. The pathos of this crying and sighing reinforces the nostalgic atmosphere of the painting. The poet, here, admires the painting less for its transcendent power than as link with an ancestor and his gesture of commemoration is another form of dialogism. "Remembering" is the first word of this poem, and it registers the nostalgic aspect of the painting since what is "remembered" is idealized as vision of eternity. Bishop, thus, dialogizes "remembering" by framing her description of the painting with details of the artist's life.

In "The Monument," (CP 23-25) Bishop explores the paradox between art's crude means and the effective powers of its illusions. The poet shapes the opposition as a dialogue, in which one speaker finds "piled-up-boxes," the other "a monument." The defender of the monument gets the final word, finding a role for art which is preservative and commemorative. One of the most allusive poems by Bishop, "The Monument" addresses a

long tradition of poems about monument making, which includes Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Shelly's "Ozymandias," Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," and Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" (itself allusive of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Her vision of the monument is particularly suited to a modern age, preserving a place for art after dismantling its idealism.

"The Monument" compares most dialogically to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan;" a dream of artistic mastery over nature's laws. Like Khan, Bishop's artist is a prince, a figure of authority, but his decree admits the "conditions of its existence." Observer Costello's elaboration:

He (the artist) is more obscure and less presumptuous than Khan. The poet conjectures that the "artist-prince/ might have wanted to build a monument/ to mark a tomb or boundary, or make/ a melancholy or romantic scene of it...." These are modest purposes: to commemorate, designate, evoke. History has erased his intention. The sea surrounding this monument is not defiantly sunless like Coleridge's, but rather is made of driftwood, already overexposed to the elements. (218)

The monument exemplifies the unfolding of the work of art: its making and its history. The decaying monument and its inscriptions do not seek to aggrandize as Ozymandias had ("Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair!"), or to mystify as Keatsian tautology ("Beauty is truth, truth is beauty,") but merely to commemorate:

The monument's an object, yet those decorations, carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all, give it away as having life, and wishing, wanting to be a monument, to cherish something. The crudest scroll-work say "commemorate".

The monument is a representational object. Bishop describes it in many removes from the original – in a poem about a picture of a wood replica of a landscape with a monument on it; hence the dialogism. The poet's discussion of the image shifts. The monument is exposed to sea and sun, yet that sea and sun are themselves made of driftwood. This ambiguity can be focused by identifying the source of the poem in a frottage by Max Ernst from his collection *Histoire Naturelle*. Ernst's "False Positions" depicts two long, narrow fretted cylinders juxtaposed on a horizontal base. The frottage technique, here, involves taking two impressions from the grain of wood which seem to suggest other significant shapes, in this case a monument in a seascape. Thus, not only the monument, but the sea and sky

appear to be made of wood. The representational aspect of this image separates it from its natural origins, yielding to imaginative invention. As in many surrealist artworks, the question of artistic authority and originality remains ambiguous. Ernst elaborates:

The procedure of frottage, resting thus upon nothing more than the intensification of the irritability of the mind's faculty by appropriate technical means, excluding all conscience mental guidance (of reason, taste, morals), reducing to the extreme the active part of that one whom we have called, up to now, the "author" of the work, this procedure is revealed by the following to be the real equivalent of that which is already known by the term automatic writing. It is as a spectator that the author assists, indifferent or passionate, at the birth of the work and watches the phases of its development. (VIII)

Frottage, thus, shifts to an extreme of expressive art; a mirror of the artist's psyche. The dialogism, in Bishop's poem, as such, while it seems to relegate art as a copy of nature, also elevates it as a psychic symbol. Frottage is involved with the question of the duration of art as opposed to nature. Wood, as a medium, allows for duration which indexes change and is the perfect emblem of dynamic form, "swarming still." But wood also continues to change even after it is removed from organic life. It is a "life" of decomposition. Bishop contrasts this natural process to aesthetic duration; as art object the monument is seen in a sequence of "now's." "It is the beginning of" something at the end of the poem, even while it is decaying. The final lines of the poem offer a more general reflection on the nature and value of art:

It is the beginning of a painting,  
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,  
and all of wood. Watch it closely.

In "Crusoe in England" (CP 162-166), Bishop deals with the speaker's life and experience on two levels simultaneously. On the surface level, everything in the poem is kept in accordance with Crusoe's life and experience; under the surface, all that Crusoe does and experiences suggests identification with Bishop and her life. The poem further illustrates Bishop's development in dramatizing her persona's convictions and emotional experience through intertextual dialogues. It shows a masterful integration of her thematic and technical concerns. Helen Vendler regards this poem as "a perfect reproduction of the self in words," and adds that it "contains, in its



secure and faltering progress, truthful representations of many aspects of Bishop" ("Recent Poetry" 419). By employing a fictional character, many aspects of Bishop's self emerge with Crusoe's emphasis on the uniqueness of his experience and values in relation to others. This representation of the self through interactions with others is an aesthetic necessity, according to Bakhtinian dialogism. Bakhtin emphasizes:

Without this essentially necessary reference to the *other* ... form fails to find any inner foundation and validation from within the author/contemplator's self-activity and inevitably degenerates into something "pretty," something I find immediately agreeable, the way I find myself feeling immediately cold or warm. (AA97)

In other words, without connections to and interactions with others, the speaker's feelings and actions will be aesthetically poor. Bishop has made use of this "reference to the *other*" by exploring the possibilities of dialogue in articulating the intensity of Crusoe's emotions.

It is also noteworthy that Bishop's intertextual appropriation and revision is motivated by her impulse to eliminate the Christian morals embedded in Defoe's Crusoe. In a 1977 interview, Bishop remarked that when she reread Defoe's book, she "discovered how really awful *Robinson Crusoe* was," with all its morality and Christianity; "so I wanted to re-see it with all that left out" (Starbuck 319). "Crusoe in England," as such, is not simply a reproduction of Bishop's own life through a fictional character, but also an intertextual revision of Defoe's book.

The poem begins with Crusoe in old age at home in England, scanning the newspapers which report the eruption of a volcano and the discovery of an island. Allusion to Robinson Crusoe enables Bishop's Crusoe to recall his life on another island by responding to the news:

A new volcano has erupted,  
the papers say, and last week I was reading  
where some ship saw an island being born:  
.....  
They named it. But my poor old island's still  
un-rediscovered, un-renamable  
None of the books has ever got it right. (162)

By emphasizing the singularity of his island, and its misrepresentation ("None of the books has ever got it right"), Crusoe begins to tell his own story on this "un-rediscovered, un-renamable" island. Unlike Defoe's Crusoe, who is constantly engaged in carrying out plans for survival, Bishop's Crusoe is more inquisitive and absorbed in observation, somewhat like Bishop herself.<sup>10</sup>

As Bishop explores Crusoe's loneliness, the volume of this emotion increases and is sustained through newly revealed sources which amplify it.<sup>11</sup> Crusoe's efforts to keep himself busy and to find solace in nature, like Wordsworth, become one of those sources which reveal the depth of his loneliness.

Because I didn't know enough.  
Why didn't I know enough of something?  
Greek drama or astronomy? The books  
I'd read were full of blanks;  
The poems – well, I tried  
Reciting to my iris-beds,  
"They flash upon that inward eye,  
which is the bliss ..." the bliss of what?

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<sup>10</sup> In a 1968 interview, when asked if Crusoe's record of every type of flora and fauna "intended to suggest the poet's duty or his burden," Bishop replied: "There is a certain self-mockery, I guess." (Johnson 20).

<sup>11</sup> Bishop's strategy for building and sustaining Crusoe's emotional intensity in the poem can be illuminated by her own analysis of "the sustained emotional height of most of Hopkins poetry, and the depth of the emotional source from which it arises" ("Hopkins" 6). In her essay on "timing" in Hopkins' poetry, Bishop examines his treatment of emotions:

A poem is begun with a certain volume of emotions, intellectualized or not according to the poet, and as it is written out of this emotion, subtracted from it, the volume is reduced - as water is drawn off from the bottom of a measure reduces the level of the water at the top. Now, I think, comes a strange and yet natural filling up of the original volume-with the emotion aroused by the lines or stanzas just completed. The whole process is a continual flowing fullness kept moving by its own weight, the combination of original emotion with the created, crystallized emotion .... ("Hopkins" 6)

One of the first things that I did  
when I got back was to look it up. (164)

Here, Bishop's rewriting of Defoe's novel by "interpreting" it "not at all according to its intent" (*CPr* 188), and by appropriating and revising information from it, including the anachronism of letting Crusoe recite Wordsworth, testify to this "island feeling" invention.<sup>12</sup>

Crusoe expresses his inconsolable loneliness by alluding to Wordsworth's philosophy about nature and undermining his claim of "the bliss of solitude" acquired from nature. For Wordsworth's speaker in "I wandered Lonely as a Cloud," the beautiful sight of daffodils becomes a lasting source of delight and comfort:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils. (191)

For Bishop's Crusoe, the beauty of his Iris-beds fails to console his loneliness. Writing to Robert Lowell on 30 June 1948, Bishop complained about the "almost drugging" dullness in "such completely boring solitude" and went on to express her unbearable loneliness: "People who haven't experienced complete loneliness for long stretches of time can never sympathize with it at all" (*Letters* 159). In this poem, therefore, Bishop articulates the inadequacy of natural beauty in comforting Crusoe's loneliness through subversive allusion to Wordsworth's remarks concerning "the bliss of solitude." Even though Crusoe tried reciting Wordsworth's lines to his iris-beds, his anguish in solitude made it impossible for him to share Wordsworth's philosophy of nature; he simply could not recall: "the bliss of what?" This, in fact, both articulates and mocks Bishop's own identification

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<sup>12</sup> According to Bishop, the anachronism of having Crusoe reading Wordsworth is deliberate. This makes possible Bishop's allusion and challenge to Wordsworth's notion of the blissful company of nature in her description of nature in solitude. She revealed in a conversation that *The New Yorker* sent the proof back to Bishop with the word "Anachronism" beside that line. But Bishop replied that the anachronistic allusions were on purpose. (Starbuck 317)

with Wordsworth's love of nature. She once mentioned to Lowell: "On reading over what I've got on hand I find I'm really a minor female Wordsworth – at least, I don't know anyone else who seems to be such a Nature Lover" (11 July 1951, Letters 222). Bishop shares Wordsworth's love of nature, but not his doctrinal notion about nature's nurturing influence on the poet. Her parodic reference to Wordsworth's poem, "I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud," ultimately serves to express Crusoe's, and in turn Bishop's, acute sense of loneliness.

Bishop's allusions to other poets' descriptions of the relationship between nature and man heighten the inconsolable loneliness while introducing a new emotion – boredom. This variation on Crusoe's emotional state is generated by another intertextual allusion which evokes Charles Baudelaire's remarks about the intimate relationship between man and nature in his poem, "Correspondences." In Baudelaire's "Correspondences":

All scents and sounds and colors meet as one.

Perfumes there are as sweet as the aboe's sound,  
Green as the prairies, fresh as a child's caress,  
- And there are others, rich, corrupt, profound

And of an infinite pervasiveness,  
Like myrrh, or musk, or amber, that excite  
The ecstasies of sense, the soul's delight.<sup>13</sup>

The "infinite pervasiveness" of nature is replaced in Crusoe's island by infinite boredom:

The island smelled of goat and guano.  
The goats were white, so were the gulls,  
.....  
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  
Got on my nerves. (CP 164)

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<sup>13</sup> This translated poem by Richard Wilbur is collected in Charles' Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 12.

The pervasive smell of goat and guano on the island and the dull, monotonous noise the goats offer a depiction of nature which contrasts with that of Baudelaire's "Correspondences." In Baudelaire's nature, "all things watch [man] with familiar eyes" (12); on Crusoe's island, the goats only add to the annoying, dull clamor which impedes any form of correspondence with him.

Ultimately, Bishop's subversive allusions to Wordsworth and Baudelaire's notions about the relationship between man and nature serve to sustain Crusoe's yearning for love and company.<sup>14</sup> Crusoe's unbearable loneliness enhances his joy at Friday's arrival;

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it  
Another minute longer, Friday came.  
(Accounts of that have everything wrong.)  
Friday was nice.  
Friday was nice, and we were friends.  
If only he had been a woman!  
I wanted to propagate my kind,  
And so did he, I think, poor boy. (*CP* 165-66)

Bishop's Crusoe revises Robinson Crusoe's position as the superior, civilized Christian saviour who rescued the savage native Friday from cannibals. "Friday" was the first word Robinson Crusoe taught him as his name, "for the memory" of the day when he was saved by Crusoe. The second word Defoe's Crusoe taught Friday was "master" to be addressed to him as his name, signifying their master-slave relationship (Defoe 204)<sup>15</sup>. Bishop rejects this relationship between a superior master and a grateful slave: "Accounts of that have everything all wrong." The happiness Crusoe enjoyed with Friday is expressed by his desire to "propagate my kind," which aptly echoes Darwin's argument that reproduction indicates happiness: "If all the individuals of any species were habitually to suffer to an extreme degree they would neglect to propagate their kind" (88). The

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<sup>14</sup> In her discussion of Hopkins' poems, Bishop notes that "because of this constant fullness [of emotions] each part serves as a check, a guide, and in a way a model, for each following part and the whole is weighed together" ("Hopkins"6).

<sup>15</sup> It is ironic that Robinson Crusoe taught his parrot to call him by his name.

implied homosexual relationship between Crusoe and Friday reflects Bishop's own lesbian point of view.<sup>16</sup>

Crusoe's monologue now shifts to his life in England, years after his rescue. Feelings of boredom and loneliness persist coupled by yearning for his dead Friday:

I'm old  
I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,  
Surrounded by uninteresting lumber.  
.....  
-And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles  
seventeen years ago come March. (CP 166)

the climax of loss and loneliness in the last two lines of the poem convey Crusoe's lasting, inconsolable pain of missing Friday. Crusoe's counting of the years of Friday's death allude to Bishop's loving memory and painful mourning of her friend, Lota Soares. "I miss her [Lota] more everyday of my life," Bishop wrote to Lowell on 27 March 1970 (*Letters* 516). Also, writing to Liz and Kit Barker to inform them of Soares's death, Bishop said: "I'm only sorry you didn't know Lota when she was well. I had at least 13 happy years with her, the happiest of my life" (28 September 1967, *Letters* 470). Bishop, as such, explores personal experience through an allusive persona and numerous intertextual allusions. Bonnie Costello, therefore, concludes that "this is a poem less about the poet's ability to transform personal experience to mythic and epic dimension than about the nature of memory as both personal and cultural" (208). Although Bishop's allusive persona does serve to locate the personal in a larger cultural context, her employment of Crusoe as persona and her allusions to Wordsworth and Baudelaire, help her articulate personal feelings more effectively because of the intertextual resonance.

Intertextual allusions are again evident in Bishop's prose poem, "12 O'Clock News" (174-75) in which the poet employs methods of visual distortion to transform the objects on her desk into a foreign country, full of mysterious, unknown objects and helpless, superstitious people. This foreign country and its people provide the material for the speaker's "news reports," which reveal the speaker's prejudices and values. Each object on

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<sup>16</sup> For a reading of "Crusoe in England" in relation to Bishop's lesbian identity, see Renée Curry 71-91.

the desk functions simultaneously as the observer and the thing being observed. Here, the speaker's speeches allude and parody other peoples' attitudes together with Bishop's opinions. However, the dialogized speeches in this poem take an acute tone of contemporary socio-cultural critique. In her allusion to the speaker's descriptions and comments as "news reports," Bishop seems to have appropriated the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's ironic strategy of exposing racial superiority and prejudice through an explorer's seemingly scientific interest and other speaker's remarks about an unfamiliar human being.

10  
In Lispector's short story "the Smallest Woman in the World" (which Bishop translated), the French explorer Marcel Pretre discovered an African Pygmy woman of seventeen and three-quarter inches high. "Feeling an immediate necessity for order, and for giving names to what exists, he called her Little Flower" and "informed the press" that Little Flower was "Black as a monkey" (501). When a life-size photograph of Little Flower appeared in the Sunday papers in France, a woman who saw the picture flinched because "it gives me the creeps," she said (502). A young bride found Little Flower "sad" and felt sympathetic, but her mother reminded her that Little Flower's was the sadness of an animal. "It isn't human sadness," the mother exclaimed (503). Even the explorer who examined Little flower, found that his scientific detachment gave way to a "sick" feeling when he "studied the little belly of the smallest mature human being" (505). Such reactions to Little Flower reveal a common feature: Judgment of a different race from a set of self-centred values and superior position. These values and attitudes which are exposed and satirized in Lispector's story are characteristic of Edward Said's definition of "Eurocentrism" which is the result of colonialism and European imperialist expansion. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said notes that, among other things, Eurocentric researchers "studied," "classified," and "verified" non-Europeans and banished their identities, "except as a lower order of being, from the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe" (222). Bishop appropriates and parodies this kind of Eurocentric judgment in "12 O'Clock News," which, like Lispector's story, reveals the speakers' stereotypical ideas about a non-European country and its people.

The poem opens with the speaker's matter-of-fact reporting manner, giving what appears to be objectively observed facts in news-report jargon.

So, the "gooseneck lamp" in the report becomes the moon as seen from the earth. Then, the report reveals that this small, foreign country is at war. The objects on a desk, identified in the left margin of each paragraph of description, indicate that all the reports are based on associations with these objects:

- Envelops* In this small, backward country, one of the most backward left in the world today, communications are crude and "industrialization" and its products almost non-existent. Strange to say, however, sign boards are on a truly gigantic scale. (CP 174)
- Ink-bottle* We have also received reports of a mysterious, oddly shaped, black structure, at an undisclosed distance to the east. Its presence was revealed only because its highly polished surface catches such feeble moonlight as prevails. The natural resources of the country being far from completely known to us, there is the possibility that this may be, or may contain, some powerful or "secret weapon." On the other hand, given what we *do* know, or have learned from our anthropologists and sociologists about this people, it may well be nothing more than a *numen*, or a great altar recently erected to one of their gods, to which, in their present historical state of superstition and helplessness, they attribute magical powers, and may even regard as a "savior," one last hope of rescue from their grave difficulties. (CP 174-75)

These seemingly accurate descriptions of the strange landscape and inscrutable objects of an alien country are ridiculed by their identification as actual objects on a desk.

As the poem progresses, the reporters' comments become overtly condescending, exposing their privileged position toward an "underdeveloped" country and its people:

- Ashtray* From our superior vantage point, we can clearly see into a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a "nest" of soldiers. They lie heaped together, wearing the camouflage "battle dress" intended for "winter war-fare...." The fact that these poor soldiers are wearing them *here*, on the plain, gives further proof, if proof were necessary, either of the childishness and hopeless impracticability of this inscrutable people, our



opponents, or of the sad corruption of their leaders. (CP 175)

The parodic mimicry of this jargon intentionally punctures the inflated superiority in the reporter's language. The poem, in consequence, becomes an exploration of double-voiced speeches, with its utterances orienting toward and incorporating the voices of others through parody. Observe Bakhtin's remark:

The expression of an utterance always ... expresses the speaker's attitude toward others' utterances and not just his attitude toward the object of his utterance.... The utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*, and they must be taken into account in order to understand fully the style of the utterance. (SG 92)

The voice in this poem, therefore, is not just that of the poet herself, but a spectrum of others' voices which express culturally shaped values and attitudes; thus creating an impact on the overall meaning and tone of the poem. Thus, Bishop mocks, even as she reiterates, precisely the kind of "Western view that sees the non-Western world as exotic, separate, different ... and ... pretended disinterest while observing the other from a privileged position" (Weiner 209).

Bishop's parody of the superiority of Eurocentric attitudes toward "underdeveloped" countries in "12 O'Clock News," is an important aspect of her poetics. She once remarked in an interview that living in Brazil among Brazilians had enabled her to recognize her own and other people's stereotypes about third world countries; had granted her an "excess" of seeing. Writing to James Merrill from Brazil, she mentions that she had almost giving up going to the concerts in which artists from the so-called developed countries "play down so to the Rio audience, as a rule." And the Rio audience, she added, "resent it very much" (1 March 1955, *Letters* 303). However, references to "the childishness and hopeless impracticability of this inscrutable people" and "the sad corruption of their leaders" in the closing line of the poem articulate Bishop's own prejudice about the discouraging aspects of Brazil during a particular period of her life when Lota de Soares, her companion, was deeply involved in Brazil's politics. She often criticized Brazil as uncivilized and dismissed the possibility of the country's capacity to overcome its backwardness and corruption. Writing to Robert Lowell, Bishop complained: "But I've had ten years of a backward,

corrupt country, and like Lota, I yearn for civilization...." (26 August 1963, *Letters* 418). To Anny Baumann, Bishop wrote; "I wish Lota and I weren't so involved in the politics of this hopeless country" (17 November 1964, *Letters* 427). As such, the attitudes expressed by the reporters are not Bishop's own. The speaking subject's position can be multiple and unstable.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the speakers' prejudices are not authorial or personal. As Victoria Harrison points out in her discussion of this poem, "Bishop reveals in layers the way we silence and speak for the other," as she "mocks the superiority of her speaker" (202-3).

In another Brazil-related poem, "Pink Dog" (190-91), Bishop challenges some socially determined values and attitudes through a grotesque visual image. The voice in this poem is single, but oriented toward other people's attitudes. The speaker's advice to the dog, hairless with a skin disease, criticizes social prejudices revealed through the pink dog's physical peculiarity. In a letter to Ashley Brown, Bishop referred to "Pink Dog" as her "Carnival poem," whose subject matter is "ghastly" (1 March 1979, *Letters* 632). The setting of the poem, identified as Rio in a note below the title, provides a suitable environment for Bishop's treatment of social discrimination:

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!  
Naked and pink, without a single hair...  
Startled, the passerby draw back and stare.

Of course they're mortally afraid of rabies.  
You are not mad; you have a case of scabies  
but look intelligent. Where are your babies?

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault points out that it is precisely because the speaker in a text is not identical with the author that it is possible for statements to be made from a particular subject position:

If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called "statement"... it is because the position of the subject can be assigned. To describe a formulation qua statement does not consist in analyzing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to): but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it. (95 - 96).

.....  
Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,  
to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?  
They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites  
go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights  
out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.

.....  
In your condition you would not be able  
even to float, much less to dog-paddle.  
Now, look, the practical, the sensible

solution is to wear a *fantasia*.

.....  
dog in *mascara* this time of year.

Carnival is always wonderful!

A depilated dog would not look well.

Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival! (CP 190-91)

The Pink Dog is associated, here, with the marginal and the disdained of society – beggars, idiots, paralytics and parasites. Bishop's specific reference to those outside the mainstream constitute a commentary of social prejudice and injustice. Commenting on this poem, Adrienne Rich remarked that Bishop's "essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity" enabled her "to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify with them" (127). The fact that Pink Dog is shunned and ill-treated because of its physical condition suggests a parallel to the situation created by gender and racial discrimination. The speaker's advice for the dog to disguise itself in a carnival costume for self-protection is a form of protest against a particular set of social values and attitudes. The carnival festival is itself a way of expressing what is usually forbidden and subversive of doctrines. Bakhtin points out that "the *official* life, monolithically serious and subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism reverence, and piety" is challenged by "*the life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything" (PDP 129-30). To "dress up and dance at Carnival" is to enjoy the freedom

and equality the carnival square offers. The speaker's advice for the naked dog to wear a "*fantasia*," however, ironically suggests that in order to enjoy equality and freedom, individuals who are different from others have to put on a mask and disguise their true identities. The poem, as such, achieves its aesthetic and social weight through dialogic engagement with particular cultural and social values and, thus, avoids reducing poems which reveal social problems to simple accusations.

"One Art" (178) continues Bishop's appropriation of others' ideas. It is evocatively imitative of the obsessional behaviour of mourners with their need for some form of ritual as resistance to "moving on":

-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.

The imperative self-prompting, "*Write it!*" conveys the immense energy needed to utter the last word: "disaster." Obviously, "the art of losing isn't hard to master" because losing is all we do. One does try to master loss, but Bishop recommends that we recognize our powerlessness with the condition of loss. Here, she appropriates what Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* calls the rule of "fort-da" (gone/there), after a game his grandson constructed in his mother's presence:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering the expressive "o-o-o-o." He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" ("there"). This, then, was the complete game—disappearance and return. (9)

Freud offers two explanations for the child's apparent gratification in this loss game:

At the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery acting independently of whether the (repeated) memory were in itself pleasurable or not. But still another interpretation may be

attempted. Throwing away the object so that it was "gone" might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case it would have a defiant meaning: "All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself." (10)

Freud, indeed, finally hands over to a "system of aesthetics" (17) the consideration of how pleasure can come from repeating traumatic moments. The child's rendering of loss in symbolic terms with the accompanying verbal gesture, "fort-da" suggests that loss marks an entry into our consciousness with gratification being a possible outcome. In "One Art," Bishop does not only make loss an intention and active part, but couples it with recuperation as a vital ingredient. The poem explores an array of plural loss. The middle line endings of the poem imply ultimate "evident" loss – "intent"/"spent," "meant"/"went"; signifying loss of control and renunciation. Bishop instructs us: "Lose something everyday," and in the third stanza, "Then practice losing further, losing faster." Loss is gradually built up from small "keys" to big "continents" with precision and momentum. We are reassured, however, in the third stanza, that mastery over loss will come to the novice in time; that we will eventually develop the ability to "accept the fluster."

The items lost become increasingly personal with her "mother's watch" at the centre, thus revealing the speaker's consciousness in process:

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.

There is still a potentially "last" or "yet-to-be-dismantled" house which remains to be forfeited by the speaker. But there will always, one senses, be a further house to be lost. It's a seemingly endless process where we apparently move forward, we also inevitably step backwards. In the penultimate line, the persona leaps from the moment of personal loss:

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.

She can afford to let go of these "realms" because her imagination can foster new ones to be lost again. It's an endless cycle of gain and loss.

Loss and gratification are eventually reconciled though at an immense emotional price:

-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.

Eventually resistance gives way to acceptance of losing. The speaker's "*Write it!*" is another way of saying "don't lose it." But disaster is too far a reality to be denied. As Freud explains, the "work of mourning," involves a gradual withdrawal of investment from the beloved and the lost object, but against such a necessity "a struggle of course arises – as may be universally observed that man never willingly abandons a libido position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him" (126).

"One Art," as such, becomes a representation of the struggle with losing; a process that is constantly with us, so that every loss becomes all losses. Ultimately, Bishop is practicing forfeiture in this poem; a recognition of human limits and imperfections which is also a potentially liberating activity. When Adrienne Rich writes in her poem, "The Village": "It's true, these last few years I've lived / watching myself in the act of loss," she is pointedly appropriating Bishop's "One Art" (98). Instead of sanctifying art, Rich insists upon imperfection, and says that "the art of losing" is "for [her] no art / only badly-done exercises." Rich's poem insists on the primacy of loss and refuses to accept "acts of parting." She concludes inconclusively:

trying to let go  
without giving up yes Elizabeth  
a village there a sister, comrade, cat  
and more no art to this but anger. (98)

Celebrating attachment to earthly things, Rich calls for a bitter response, not the pained submission that might be read in Bishop. Yet, Rich's poem presents itself as both homage and resentment in mirroring what "One Art," unsays by its terminal "disaster." Bishop does indeed feel her "heart forced to question its presumption in this world" (Rich, "Contradictions," *Your Native Land*, 98) because she does not see any reason to presume. Still,

"One Art" admits that tied to a ritual exercise of loss, she cannot but be caught up in desire and attachment.

And finally, another instance of intertextual allusion is "The End of March," (CP 179-180) in which Bishop appropriates John Keats's poetics and his approach to the moment in "Ode to a Nightingale." Both poems play a vital role in understanding their authors' *oeuvre*. Aside from obvious similarities - the natural setting and the sensory images - both poems observe the passing of time: Keats, ailing with the tuberculosis that would kill him and Bishop, aging, registering the changes taking place in her body; apart of course from the fact that both recognize the paradox of imagination, its powers and failures. Despite the speakers' varying situations, both poets rely on hope as a path out of deferment. The colon, dash, and question mark of Keats's "Fled is that music:-Do I wake or sleep?" is not far removed from Bishop's "A light to read by - perfect! But - impossible." Bishop was a great admirer of Keats. After seeing the manuscript for one of Bishop's poems at the Institute of Arts and Letters in New York, Frani Muser told Bishop that she felt she were "writing to Keats." Bishop also confessed to her Aunt Florence: "I'm glad to say I'm alive and have already lived twice as long as Keats, even if I have so much less to show for it" (Letter to Florence Bishop, [n.d.], VC)

It is likely that Bishop knew the story of the composition of "Ode to a Nightingale." As Charles Brown liked to tell it, one morning soon after "Ode to Psyche," Keats took his chair from the breakfast table, sat under the plum tree and composed the poem in a flurry (Rollins, II.65). Though the story seems far-fetched, it accentuates the image of the writer away from his/her desk. Observe Bishop's similar allusion to James Merrill, a few months before her death:

Alice and I are staying at John's house for a week or ten days. I find it much easier to work away from home for some reason. In fact, when I think about it, it seems to me I've rarely written anything of value at the desk, or in the room where I was supposed to be doing it - it's always in someone else's house, or in a bar, or standing up in the kitchen in the middle of the night. (Letter to Merrill, 23 January 1979, VC)

### III

The development of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is a progressive realization of the artistic goals she expressed in her essays, interviews, and through the speaker of "In Prison." She has stretched the limits of poetry by making observation and allusion serve multiple purposes through her persistent exploration of the possibilities which various literary traditions can offer. By contriving through appropriation and revision, and by maintaining a dialogic position in her poems, Bishop greatly expands the capacity of her poetry in order to portray as many aspects of life as possible, while rendering her poems increasingly responsive to major social and artistic concerns of her time.

However, Bishop's poetry resists being placed within either of the apparently contending schools of American poetry which emerged since World War II – the formalists and the anti-formalists. Mutlu Konuk Blasing describes the former as an "academic consolidation of early modernism's experimental impulse," and the latter as a "revolt that reaffirms presence and process in open forms"(1). Blasing identifies Bishop as a "formalist" poet who is "postmodern" in a different way from other postmodern poets such as Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, but one who shares their refusal to "buy into the modernist reification of poetic techniques and its underlying humanist belief in the values of progress, modernity, science, and natural truth"(3). It is possible that Bishop would have rejected a seemingly appropriate label as a "postmodern formalist," as she refused to be defined by any school of poetry in a 1977 interview with David McCullough: "I've been a friend of Marianne Moore's and Robert Lowell's but not a part of any school. Her poetry shares both what Blasing refers to as "early modernism's experimental impulse" evident in the formalists, and "an anti-formalist revolt that reaffirms ... process"(1). Her achievement challenges us to rethink our assumptions about her poetics, and to question the boundaries we draw between schools and genres of poetry.

The seemingly stylistic difference of Bishop's poems from those of her contemporaries is shaped largely by her dialogic position which rejects the kind of "modern religiosity" that "always seems to lead to a tone of moral superiority" (Brown 235).<sup>18</sup> A passage Bishop copied from John

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<sup>18</sup> In an interview, Bishop said that she had "the greatest admiration of Auden as a



Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* in an unpublished prose piece, "The Bees" (VC) further illuminates the importance of the dialogic relation she maintains with what is observed in her poems:

Any observed form or object is a challenge. The case is not otherwise with ideals of justice or peace or human brotherhood, or equality, or order. They too are not things self-enclosed to be known by introspection, as objects were once supposed to be known by rational insight. Like thunderbolts and tubercular disease and the rainbow they can be known only by extensive and minute observation of consequences incurred in action. (Dewey 56-57)

The historical perspective in this passage parallels Bishop's belief in the fact that "our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown." This historicity and dialogism underlie Bishop's poetics, which challenges the assumptions of poetic "originality" and raises questions about the generative conditions for artistic innovativeness.

An examination of both the thematic and technical development from Bishop's early works to her final poems reveals that her dialogic interactions with other poets are crucial in attaining her own distinctive poetic voice and style. As the speaker of Bishop's "In Prison" articulates, once he is "in," he must manage to establish and maintain a manner of his own, which will always be different from those of other inmates. Such a dialogic stance in relation to others' styles was necessary to establish and maintain her own artistic individuality.

Equally significant, as the speaker emphasizes, is the fact that his stylistic revolt must be staged from within the "prison" and among its inmates. Individual artistic innovation is defined by its difference from what have been the norms and conventions of artistic practice. Such an ongoing dialogue between old and new will ensure the continuity of literary traditions while stimulating the renewal of literary conventions. Bishop developed her own poetic style and voice by appropriating and revising

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poet," but "Auden's later poetry is sometimes spoiled for me by his didacticism." She adds, "I don't like modern religiosity in general; it always seems to lead to a tone of moral superiority." See Brown 235.

various aspects of established poetic conventions and others' techniques, styles, and even points of view. This dialogic interaction between the old and the new is a fundamental condition of Bakhtinian dialogism.

Bakhtinian dialogism can shed light on the logic of literary innovation and revolt. Bishop's understanding of this logic of artistic innovation is evident as early as her 1934 college essay "Dimensions for a Novel." In its opening paragraph, Bishop contends:

The discovery, or invention, whichever it may be, of a new method of doing something old is often made by defining the opposite of an old method, or the opposite of the sum of several old methods and calling it new. And the objective of this research or discovery is rather the new method, the new tool, than the new thing. In the come and go of art movements, movements in music, revolutions in literature, and "experiments" in everything, we often see this illustrated. (95)

This kind of invention is evident in Bishop's own poems, in which she persistently seeks new ways of "using things in unthought of ways," and insists on "doing it deliberately different from accepting that it is all that way."

The urge for revolt against conformity leads to Bishop's distinctive poetic style and artistic innovation. Her unique style often emerges not only from her revolt against conventions, but also from her appropriation of what has been written. After reading "From Trollope's Journal" and other Bishop poems, Robert Lowell complimented Bishop for the uniqueness and variety of her work:

I think you never do a poem without your own intuition. You are the only poet now who calls her own tune—rather different from even Pound or Miss Moore who built original styles then continued them—but yours, especially the last dozen or so, are all unpredictably different. (12 July 1960, Elizabeth Bishop Papers, 8-5, VC)

The speaker of "In Prison" anticipates Bishop's achievement in his confident assertion: "In a place where all dress alike I have the gift of being able to develop a 'style' of my own, something that is even admired and imitated by others" (*CP* 190). Bishop has developed a unique mode of descriptive poetry which, without repudiating literary conventions, constitutes a commentary on and a "protest" against literary conformism. As

the speaker of "In Prison" predicts, "By means of these . . . slight differences, and appeal" of his "carefully subdued, reserved manner," he will influence others, and eventually establish himself "as an authority, recognized but unofficial, on the conduct of prison life" (*CP* 190).

The innovative nature of Bishop's poems and their importance in the "evolution" of American poetry have been recognized and admired by critics and fellow poets. Howard Moss was perhaps the first to articulate the significantly "rebellious" nature of Bishop's achievement. In his review of Bishop's *Questions of Travel* (1965), Moss remarks that "what she brings to poetry is a new imagination; because of that, she is revolutionary, not 'experimental.' And she is revolutionary in being the first poet successfully to use all the resources of prose" ("All Praise" 259). Criticism, in general, has finally recognized this "revolutionary" aspect of Bishop's poetry. Essays in the 1991 anthology, *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* reflect this shift in evaluating Bishop's position in American poetry. Discussing the poetry of the 1940s, Richard Jackson points out that when her first book of poetry appeared in 1946, Bishop "was then considered a descriptive, simply referential traditionalist." But he argues that "in quiet poems usually as intellectually challenging as Stevens's and as much concerned with the speaker as Jarrell's, [Bishop] was a leader in an unannounced move to displace the old poetry and theory" (114).

Bishop understood that there could be no short-cut to establishing her own style. As the speaker in "In Prison" says: "The longer my sentence, although I constantly find myself thinking of it as a life sentence, the more slowly shall I go about establishing myself, and the more certain are my chances of success" (*CP* 190). Bishop worked meticulously at her poems, always searching for something new for her art throughout her career. Her integration of all kinds of technical devices from various sources makes her poetry appeal to other poets whose work is very different from hers. Anthony Hecht observes that "The mystery" of Bishop's unusual position in contemporary American poetry

is not that she should have established her own indisputable independence as a poet who belongs to no school and subscribes to no manifesto, but rather that other poets who never believed they had any common ground whatever are prepared to set aside their small parochialisms in admiration for her art. (118)

In a review-essay of Bishop's *The Complete Poems, 1917-1979*, Brad Leithsauser makes similar remarks: "[Bishop] managed to lure admirers from every school. Formalists, Beats, Iowans, New Yorkers, recounters of drug voyages and chroniclers of sexual triumphs . . . all contributed their share of fans" (36).

James Merrill's acknowledgment to Bishop's influence on him suggest that Bishop's accomplishment is more than simply formal. "The unpretentiousness of [Bishop's] form is very appealing. But," he said, "I don't know if it's simply a matter of form." He added: "Rather, I like the way her whole *oeuvre* is on the scale of a human life; there is no oracular amplification, she doesn't need that" ("An Interview" 200). Merrill also wrote that Bishop's poem, "Exchanging Hats," which deals with "the forbidden topic of transexual impulses," was written in a way so refreshing that it "pointed to new strategies" for him to address complicated emotional and psychological experience in his poems (*A Different Person* 140-42). In one of his last poems, "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia," Merrill pays homage to Bishop and her work:

In living as in poetry, your art  
Refused to tip the scale of being human  
By adding unearned weight. (87-88)

W. S. Merwin points out in his review of Merrill's Final volume, *A Scattering of Salts* (1995), that Bishop is one of Merrill's "immediate forebears" (3). Merwin, himself, also pays tribute to Bishop's influence on him in a poem entitled "Lament for the Makers":

. . . then that watchful and most lonely  
wanderer whose words went with me  
everywhere Elizabeth  
Bishop lay alone in death .... (32-33)

Robert Lowell was perhaps the most articulate of Bishop's admirers; often noting how Bishop's poems challenge him to attempt something new. While discussing his own poem, "Skunk Hour," Lowell acknowledges that it is written in imitation of Bishop. "When I began writing 'Skunk Hour,'" Lowell says, "I felt that most of what I knew about writing was a hindrance." He explains that the poem is dedicated to Bishop, "because re-

reading her suggested a way of breaking thorough the shell of my old manner. Her rhythms, idiom, images, and stanza structure seemed to belong to a later century" ("On 'Skunk Hour'" 199). And, again, in a 1964 talk with Stanley Kunitz, Lowell includes Bishop with Allen Tate and William Carlos Williams as "the poets who most directly influenced me." He adds that "Bishop is a sort of bridge between Tate's formalism and Williams's informal art" (Kunitz 86). Adrienne Rich also expresses admiration for the challenge Bishop's poems put to her both thematically and technically. Reviewing Bishop's *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (1983), Rich writes that she has been fascinated by "the diversity of challenges" that this volume contained, and by "the questions—poetic and political—that it stirs up, the opportunities that it affords" (126).

Although Bishop's accomplishment as a poet is inseparable from her life-long search for new possibilities in language and form, it is in part a result of the intellectual and artistic developments in Western art and literature. Marveling at the distinct prosodic structure of Marianne Moore's poems, Bishop suggests that the historical moment was a possible contributing factor to Moore's achievement of originality: "She had started writing at a time when poetry was undergoing drastic changes. She had been free to make the most of it and experiment as she saw fit" ("Efforts of Affection" 140). The changes taking place in art and poetry while Bishop was writing her poems also motivated her to respond to the aesthetic concerns of her time.

Elizabeth Bishop fulfilled in her poetry the "real hopes and ambitions" her speaker in "In Prison" articulates. Enacting his desire to be "unconventional, and rebellious," Bishop preserves, and renews what has been made even as she strives to find new ways of making poems. Perhaps the most significant impact of her poems on other poets resides in her demonstration that an effective ideological and aesthetic revolt cannot afford to abandon wrestling with the restraints of language and form. "Freedom is knowledge of necessity," as her allegorical prisoner reiterates (191). While posing challenges of many kinds, Bishop's *oeuvre* is, as she wished, a valuable "legacy of thoughts" for present and future generations of poets. Like all great art, her poems offer much more than ideas and designs. Seamus Heaney has put it well in saying that Elizabeth Bishop "does continually manage to advance poetry beyond the point where it has been

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helping us to enjoy life to that even more profoundly verifying point where it helps us also to endure it" (185). In doing so, Bishop has certainly written poems that endure.

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