

## ABSTRACT

This study of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath goes beyond the usual practice of labelling these writers either as reticent or Confessional. Instead, it places greater emphasis on their visual poetics which privileges the process of creativity – the different modes of seeing – over ethical and political considerations. I begin by discussing what each knew of the other and proceed to examine their common interest in perception and interpretation. Bishop and Plath seek to understand the depiction of ‘reality’ and the various forms that this takes: the concrete fact, the object or the authentic experience modulated by historical data, whether symbols, mythical forms or religious conventions. In their poetry the self objectifies the world, discovering and simultaneously defining observed phenomena. Alternatively, personal identity is determined as part of a symbolic order because the present is deemed inadequate in itself and, therefore, frames of reference need to be expanded, analogies drawn, historical parallels established, myths invoked. This historicised art is complex, stylistic and culturally established. Bishop’s poetry, for instance, distinguishes between customary ways of seeing; the symbolism of medieval painting and the untrained eye of individualism (Primitive art). Her poetic ‘transparency’, language which corresponds faithfully to actual experience, calls attention, by its very directness and apparent simplicity, to the various parts of a synthesising imagination that could, potentially, infringe upon pure vision. The analysis of Bishop’s language and its development is based upon her published and unpublished material.

Bishop and Plath underscore differences between description and meditation, empirical enquiry and symbolic transformation, the tangible and the abstract. They further consider religious beliefs ephemeral and place their faith in the primacy of the material world. Bishop is especially distrusting of symbolism in Christian imagery. Plath admired Bishop’s poetry for being ‘real’, that is intimate, but not self-obsessed, concerned with aestheticism and ‘pleasure-giving’. This was the type of poetry she aspired to write. The reading of Plath uses autobiography sparingly, while arguing that her work – including poems in *Ariel* – demonstrates the creative strategies of, what she termed, a ‘pseudo-reality’. This precludes the automatic designation of her poetry as fully Confessional.

Visual poetics is broadly defined to include a discussion on surrealism. Bishop was fascinated by the movement’s expression of the numinous and transcendent but recoiled from its illogical thinking. Plath was equally drawn and repelled by male surrealists’ portrayal of the woman subject. In her poetry the misogyny of this art is countered by the appropriation of more positive imagery found in female surrealists such as Leonor Fini.

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## List of Abbreviations

- CP Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983)
- CP Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)
- Journals* *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000)
- One Art* Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art. Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994)
- VA Elizabeth Bishop Collection, Vassar College Library

## Introduction

A reading of the poetry and prose of Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath must move beyond the conventional practice of categorising these two writers as either reticent or Confessional. The present study takes into account, for the first time, their prolonged and sustained engagement with visual poetics. This type of poetry forges a link between literature and painting in order to explore the act of perception – the different modes of seeing – and the transforming powers of the imagination. Visual poetics which, as shall be seen, takes a variety of forms in their work, seizes upon the tangible as its primary subject matter and privileges artistic intent over ‘religious or political propaganda’.<sup>1</sup>

In their work Bishop and Plath demonstrate a significant interest in the psychology and epistemology of perception. First and foremost, their visual poetics engages the senses and by virtue of its formal strategies – which at times take a self-reflexive stance – reveal how the poet attempts to convey a personal point of view, but comes to the realisation that the language needed to draw close to the truth of the original experience, and to articulate this to the reader, remains elusive. Hence, Bishop believes that description of a scene in precise and deliberately prosaic terms focuses attention upon the cultural and ideological forces which usually determine how vision is defined and communicated. Plath is similarly intrigued by her emotional response to what she sees and recollects, and seeks to understand whether the memories she holds – those often of her father – are continuously adjusted in accordance to her grasp of language. However, in contrast to Bishop, her poetic strategy for unearthing the powers of the imagination to alter

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 93.

vision is to foreground complexity and incongruity. That said, she is no less suspicious of the language of intense emotion, which exacerbates the writer's suffering rather than channel her 'energies in new and healing directions'.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1960s Plath has become the most celebrated female poet of her generation and, arguably, the most widely discussed of the Confessional poets. However, because of the supposed personal nature of her work, she has also drawn much criticism from those who argue that her identification with victims of genocide is self-indulgent and inappropriate. Admittedly, Plath rejected social and political poetry in favour of one of selfhood,<sup>3</sup> but, by the same token, she cautioned against the psychological consequences of self-indulgence. If Plath endeavoured to present herself as a victim, then perhaps in certain cases she overstepped the mark of poetic license. A counter argument, and one to which I subscribe, is that Plath did not set out to portray herself as simply an oppressed and distraught figure – her poetry offers much more than this. In “Little Fugue” (1962), for example, the speaker is troubled by the insidious memories of her father but resolves to block out the past in order to ‘survive’. It cannot be denied that this is a poetry of melancholy. Nevertheless, if the male figure in “Little Fugue” is in fact the poet's father, then the biographical detail, or ‘confession’, serves not to draw the reader's pity but to illustrate a mind determining the self as it encounters the external world. What she remembers of her father – whether truthful or not – is dependent upon the metaphors that she is able to conjure in her mind. This is revealing of the flawed mechanics of retrospect.

“Little Fugue” reflects upon perception, experience and personal history, but its themes are not unique, and in later poems such as “Cut”, “The Moon and the Yew Tree”, “Fever 103°”

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<sup>2</sup> David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (London: Hogarth), p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, pp. 92–93.

and “Wintering”, Plath further explores the psychology of perception and imagining. This interest continues from her first book of poems, *The Colossus* (1960), which is often considered impersonal. Building on discussion of *The Colossus*, my intention in this study is to examine closely Plath’s poems of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which were later collected in *Ariel* (1962) and *Winter Trees* (1971). Certainly, she did not depart from, what I have termed, visual poetics in *Ariel*, a book generally regarded as the apotheosis of the Confessional style – an all-encompassing category that does not articulate fully the scope of its members’ objectives. Of course, Plath is commonly viewed as a Confessional poet, who, along with Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Anne Sexton amongst others, wrote about intensely private experiences. However, by the poets’ own admission, their writing was strategic and incorporated both fact and fiction. This has proved especially controversial amongst critics, who argue that fictionalisation leads not to truth but ambiguity for readers.<sup>4</sup> Bishop was critical of some Confessional poetry which breached privacy and, in the case of women writers, met the gendered expectations of the reading public. However, in the hands of poets like Plath and Lowell, Confessionalism represented a significant development in the American poetry of selfhood.

When in an essay of 1962 Plath sought to define the poetry she wished to write, she found as most fitting a line in Stevie Smith’s “The New Age”: ‘Art is wild as a cat and quite separate from civilisation’.<sup>5</sup> Such poetry does not concern itself unduly with the wider political and social issues of the day and, when given free rein, can probe the emotive language of perception, however profound or unsettling the experiences that the poet chooses to deal with. “Blackberrying” (1961) is a case in point. The poem paints, in figurative terms, a sombre mood. However, of equal interest are themes of alienation and the imagination more often associated

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<sup>4</sup> There is in the following chapter further discussion of the Confessional style as context for Plath’s and Bishop’s poetry.

<sup>5</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

with Bishop. The subject walks amongst the brambles, documents obsessively the shapes and colours of berries and birds, and anticipates the sea, which, when finally in view, correlates to a sense of the indomitable. This is the seascape of the mind '[t]hat looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space/ Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths/ Beating and beating at an intractable metal'. (CP, p. 169) In "Blackberrying", "The Moon and the Yew Tree" and "Little Fugue" there are echoes of Bishop's "Questions of Travel": 'Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?'; "'Is it lack of imagination that makes us come/ to imagined places, not just stay at home?'" (CP, pp. 93– 94). Either a person determines to see something directly or allow the imagination to intervene and create context, in the same way that a powerful metaphor – 'death opened, like a black tree, blackly' – presents itself as the schema of understanding in Plath's "Little Fugue".

In common with Bishop, Plath's visual poetics constantly shifts between the various forms of perception and the function of language. Their personae ruminate upon the conscious and unconscious states of wakefulness, sleep and even death ("Love Lies Sleeping"). Some poems first consider how the mind orders the world. In Plath's "The Swarm" and "Wintering" the speaker's 'black' environment correlates to how she feels. However, this creative process may be reversed if it is accepted that the individual exercises no influence over the space she inhabits. Thus, in "Wintering" the world that is everywhere present imposes its dark 'asininity' upon the speaker so to possess her (CP 218). In Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping", similarly, the city exists independent of the sleeping, perhaps dead man and enters his unconscious mind where it is 'revealed' (CP, 17).

In Bishop's and Plath's poetry, furthermore, the mind adjusts continuously between objects which are present (viewed directly) and absent (recollected). For this reason, both poets



often take up the analogous position of the visual artist, who paints what he sees *in situ*, or summons up an image from memory, gathered from previous experience. In the latter case, the imagination is understood to mean, in plain and simple terms, that the mind of an individual, based upon his or her knowledge and grasp of language, gives context and meaning to objects which are absent. These memories may be of places where the poet once lived (Bishop's Nova Scotia) or of family members (Plath's late father), and the reflective language of approximation transcribes the emotions through use of basic metaphors, whether natural or cosmological. On a more complex level, the metaphors are cross-sensory, as in Plath's "Little Fugue", and suggest the complicated relationship between language and the senses. Further still, both poets are intrigued by symbols. The sign, or instant of perception that is easily translatable into a painting, can in meta-poetry be carefully scrutinised from all angles in order to determine the system of knowledge that governs its meaning. In Bishop's work objects proliferate and in her consciousness she forms contexts in order to emphasise their materiality – their distance, dimension and relation to other objects. However, as in "A Miracle for Breakfast" ordinary phenomena, like coffee and crumbs, or a man addressing a crowd of people, are soon transformed in the minds of readers into symbols of transubstantiation and Christ preaching. The symbol, therefore, may be understood as being familiar, essentially historicised and belonging to a narrative. It has, nevertheless, other qualities. Crusoe views his knife as merely a pragmatic tool, but when alone on the island he contemplates this possession, it appears like a 'living soul', an inanimate companion ("Crusoe in England", CP, 166). This individual's awareness of objects and symbols and the subjective values which they hold for him may be revealed by the meta-commentary of poetry.

Plath valued highly the material world, the 'basic truth, the fact of matter, impersonal,

neutral'. However, she questioned whether the 'reality' of pure description, or 'cold vision', based primarily on the senses, had as much intrinsic value as subjective interpretation – the individual's emotional 'biases' toward people or objects.<sup>6</sup> She also regarded personal experience by itself inadequate and, instead, favoured poetic 'illusion for man-on-street' in order to make her ideas 'universal'.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the strategies Plath employed further reflected Bishop's concerns about heightened emotions. Far from being self-obsessed, Plath interrogates, even in later poems often considered biographical ("Fever 103", "Lady Lazarus" and "Mary's Song"), identity and how the 'I' can become increasingly introverted or the starting-point of a fictive and outward-looking imagination. She scrutinises the subtle variations of creative modes of seeing in determining authentic experience or illusion. In the internal dialogue of several poems – carried out both with herself and the reader – it is the strategies of creativity which come under direct scrutiny. Of course, biography is important for understanding certain aspects of Plath's work, but, beyond this, we should equally recognise in her poems a second 'voice' thinking 'out loud' about the poet's unique perception and imagination.

The essential concern in Plath's and Bishop's poetry is the philosophy that underpins notions of beauty,<sup>8</sup> reality<sup>9</sup> and creativity – morality is of lesser importance.<sup>10</sup> Bishop's

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<sup>6</sup> *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 121. Hereafter *Journals*.

<sup>7</sup> *Journals*, pp. 45, 132.

<sup>8</sup> Plath occasionally conceives of beauty as stone-smooth, perdurable and classical. This view owes much to trends in European sculpture of the early twentieth century. See Ezra Pound, *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions Books, 1970). In Plath, furthermore, the concept of beauty emerges from the artist's narcissism. The fragmented female figure in some of her poems corresponds to formalistic dismemberment in modern painting, which, arguably, points towards the painter's search for self-expression. Wendy Steiner's work is particularly germane in this regard, especially *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> As this study shall demonstrate, Plath was interested in differences between objective 'truth' and illusion, whatever shape the former or latter may take. Bishop, in comparison, has been commonly viewed as following in the footsteps of American poets of reality chief amongst them William Carlos Williams. This tradition

aestheticism attempts to return all objects in her poems, including words, to their source, probing their inception, function and continuing existence. The importance of this meta-commentary far outweighs any desire for political or moral judgement. Will it suffice, she considers, if poetry takes as its subject matter everyday objects or is it necessary for poets to explore universal themes? Should verse be composed of the symbols of our common history? What emphasis should be placed upon the inherent values of objects, metaphors and myth to mediate the self?<sup>11</sup> Bishop demonstrates in her published and unpublished work an unremitting focus on the subject of artistic depiction, a central theme of *North & South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), *The Complete Poems* (1969) and *Geography III* (1976). A notable part of this study is based upon the Bishop archive, which serves as an invaluable context for her work. The papers help to define and categorise her writing within the canon of contemporary American poetry. A close examination of verse fragments, essays, letters to friends and publishers, travel diaries and book reviews, covering more than five decades of Bishop's life, informs my reading of a number of her published poems. There are also notebooks which she kept from her time at college, right through to the 1950s when she was living in Brazil, and up to her time as a university lecturer at Harvard in the 1970s. The unpublished material includes tentative beginnings and working titles for poems on places, people and culture. Among her papers one can also find many quotations, whether from the Old Testament – the kernel of ideas, perhaps, for future poems – or from poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Berryman. What is more, we

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is generally discussed in L.S. Dembo, *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Bishop, however, is not an amoral aesthete. Her Baptist upbringing left her with a sense of the importance of right and wrong. There are political undertones in her poetry, although she remains non-judgmental.

<sup>11</sup> In their poetry Plath and Bishop are quite often preoccupied with the function of symbols and objects in painting and literature. In examining this subject I have made particular use of Charles Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry', *PMLA*, vol. 91, no. 1 (Jan. 1976): 101– 114; Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); and Meyer Shapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

gain some understanding of Bishop's forthright opinions on other writers, including her remarks on Plath's frankness in a review of *Letters Home*. (VA 54.20).<sup>12</sup> All in all, the Bishop archive paints a picture of a poet that is in many ways at odds with the one we are so familiar with, a poet publishing relatively little in comparison to her contemporaries and the little that she did publish was highly oblique in its presentation. For a woman who jealously guarded her privacy, the archive is, in an ironic sense, a revelation of the personal, imperfect and revisionist Bishop.

Bishop was a thoroughly 'un-Romantic' poet of materiality and pragmatism.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in truth, no one writer living in the twentieth century could have failed to be influenced to some degree by the Romantics and their successors. There are in Bishop's work Romantic undercurrents beneath its un-Romantic surface, and deserving of attention is her review of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and its insistence on the naturalness of poetry. (VA, 68.2) In its most fundamental form Bishop's language renders her verse immediate and vivid, and no subject, however ordinary and mundane, is beyond poetic consideration. The poet has a necessary role, in a Poundian sense, to make the reader see something anew.<sup>14</sup> Bishop amalgamates imagery and sensorial experience and continuously readjusts perspective on the outside world, mapping the contours of actual and imagined experiences. Concomitantly, the voice of the poet is heard remarking on the act of perception. The oxymoronic term 'dramatic paralysis'<sup>15</sup> describes perfectly the ability to observe directly the external world and, simultaneously, to gauge the process of thought. In "North Haven" – written in memory of Robert Lowell – Bishop suggests similarities and essential differences between the physical world and art. She describes the stillness and imperceptible evolution of her natural

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<sup>12</sup> All references to Bishop's material from the Special Collections at Vassar Archive are cited in the text as VA.

<sup>13</sup> Eavan Boland, 'An Un-Romantic American', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 14.2 (1988): 75.

<sup>14</sup> Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

<sup>15</sup> Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry': 106.

surroundings. Nature is diurnal ('Nature repeats herself') and uncontrollable, set apart from the poem, which is subject to the vagaries of the writer's emotions. The poet, moreover, can only 'derange, or re-arrange' his words in his lifetime (CP, 188–89). Within its poetic structure "North Haven" reflects upon its own creation.

Meta-commentary on the value of art itself is at the heart of Bishop's poems. In the preface to *Geography III* the questions concerning the earth – its cartography, cardinal directions and natural development – are at once a form of instruction and guidance in perceiving the physical world. If knowledge is not based upon direct experience through the senses, then it is factual books which inform the reader of what exists beyond his or her immediate surroundings. In addition, books can be interpretive, imputing meaning and value to their subject matter. In Bishop's "Verdigris" the sculptures have deteriorated over time, but '[t]he catalogues will tell you that they mean' (VA, 64.13). Their historic and artistic value is asserted. The poem differentiates between the poor physical appearance of the artwork and the language of description. The objects have no significant meaning without words, which have greater endurance. The viewer is instructed '*that* they mean' and not '*what* they mean', which implies unequivocal estimation of the sculptures' value. In this case aesthetic judgment is based upon authoritative opinion.

Drawing upon contemporary theories of epistemology and phenomenology, Bishop considers whether a flawed or simplistic painting or sculpture have any intrinsic artistic value. Such ideas of aestheticism are at the centre of Bishop's "Poem", as well as Plath's "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay", "Watercolor of Granchester Meadows" and "Poems, Potatoes". Is, moreover, the ability to depict reality a measure of an artwork's value? Arguably, unlike painting, the depiction of reality in literature is not about excessive detail and Bishop queries standards of judgment in

the evaluation of real depiction; vision can either be individual or universal. In the latter case accustomed ways of seeing, namely style, becomes a frame of reference in the evaluation of reality. This may be further conceptualised as differences in painting between increasing forms of self-expression (Romanticism, for example) and the classic ideals of religious art (the Renaissance tapestry in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”). Bishop’s poetry and prose probe concepts of style, periodization,<sup>16</sup> and the symbolism of Christian art which give form and substance to the intangible. The tenets of Christianity are based in large part on human faith in an ineffable entity, and for Bishop this bears relevance to poetry’s capacity to conjure up illusion, or a sense of mystery, that either precedes or supercedes facts and knowledge.

In some of her poems Bishop describes in detail either a work of art which has personal relevance (“Poem” and “Large Bad Picture”), a well known drawing (“Seascape” and, possibly, “The Weed”), an artefact that imitates the technique of a particular artist (Joseph Cornell in “The Monument”), or a composite image that reflects a certain artistic style (Renaissance symbolism in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”). These poems take as their theme contextuality and the interpretation of objects and symbols, which either reflects individual or collective ways of seeing. The drawings in “Large Bad Picture” and “Poem” illustrate places of immediate connection for both artist and poet, whereas in “Seascape” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the artwork follows conventional design and foregrounded style.<sup>17</sup> Bishop emphasises how certain techniques embellish a scene by adding symbolic meaning. Christian symbols can denote hierarchy (“Brazil, January 1, 1502”), faith and conviction (as signified by the knife in “Crusoe

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<sup>16</sup> A number of theories of the relationship between painting and literature inform the present study, one of which, periodization, is not wholly discounted as a pervasive spirit of the times. On this subject see B. Richards, ‘Ut Pictura Poesis’, *Essays in Criticism*, 21 (1971): 323.

<sup>17</sup> John Berger has argued that paintings not only embody different ways of seeing, but also offer, more than any other ‘relic or text’, ‘direct testimony about the world which surrounded other people at other times’; *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 10.

in England”), heaven and hell (“Seascape”), or unyielding Christian doctrine (“Roosters”). Moreover, she differentiates between the art of the outsider, often associated with marginalised or alienated figures, and religious art, which corresponds to customary ways of depicting the world. In “Seascape” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the Renaissance artists symbolise religious ideas. The clarity of Renaissance art is derived from a combination of observation and rich design, decoration and formalisation, and its subject matter expresses effectively human nature, history and religion. Bishop clearly distinguishes between this type of painting and increasing self-expressionism, that is to say, the poet-artist who projects the self upon the subject – a form of expressionism common in writers from the Romantics to the post-war Confessionalists. The style of painters and poets reaffirms how a society sees objects and people, but for Bishop this distorts the actual experience of the individual. Partly for this reason, she admired Primitive art because its practitioners were not schooled in any particular artistic mode.

Bishop fixes observations of the external world and she is, in this sense, resolutely non-symbolic and de-historicist. This poetic form conveys the immediacy of individual perception. A further strategy she employs aims to eliminate overtly ethnic, sexual or ethical contexts. Her politicism, however, cannot be wholly discounted, and certainly the subject of war recurs in her poetry. She worked briefly for the United States Navy (1942–1943) and the time spent in Washington D.C. as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress (1949–1950) left its mark on her writing. The inflated show of patriotism manifest in military parades and commemorative memorials may have contributed to an antiwar sentiment discernable in her verse.<sup>18</sup> However, Bishop was not a political poet. Even in those poems which touch upon social issues, there is a marked obliqueness. In “Florida”, for instance, racial differences are seen in terms of nature,

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Dickie, ‘Bishop on Conflicts: War, Race, and Class’, in *Stein, Bishop and Rich: Lyrics of Love, War and Place* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 105, 108.

while, arguably, in “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” the subject of militarism finds expression only in the poet’s description of Washington’s neo-classical architecture. Tellingly, Bishop distanced herself from suggestions that “Roosters” was influenced by the Spanish Civil War. Initial claims that the poem was inspired by Picasso’s *Guernica* were later denied in order to remove the political context which critics were projecting onto her work.<sup>19</sup> Her unpublished work is generally revealing of this de-contextualising strategy.

Bishop’s language is colloquial, her places recognisable and her address direct. She is interested first of all in the poem’s proper materials, but then in ‘something not of them’ – what she terms the ‘spiritual’ – that is to say, ‘the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and poetic’.<sup>20</sup> Bishop’s authentic experience involves the process by which poetry enacts the material. From the poet’s alliance with the outside world, best illustrated in “Cape Breton”, arises a sense of the ‘beautiful’, ‘nostalgic’ and ‘ideal’ beyond ‘potentially collective systems of meaning’.<sup>21</sup> This brand of the ‘surrealism of everyday life’<sup>22</sup> in Bishop’s poetry may be termed an ‘inverted realism’. She was drawn to certain aspects of surreal art: intense microscopic documentation of detail; manipulation of perspective as well as dimension; and seamless negotiation between the concrete and abstract. My argument is that Bishop was inspired by surreal art, sharing in ‘l’esprit surréaliste’, and incorporating within her poetry some of the stylistic elements we commonly associate with this movement. She was interested in dreams, psychology and the unconscious, but her poems were not necessarily about the marvellous – the purely psychic automatism. Grounded in observation, they nevertheless exude a partial mystery. This synthesis of the

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<sup>19</sup> *One Art. Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), pp. 96, 316. Hereafter *One Art*.

<sup>20</sup> Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry’: 103.

<sup>22</sup> This phrase is taken from a letter Bishop wrote to Anne Stevenson in 1964; Richard Mullen, ‘Elizabeth Bishop’s Surrealist Inheritance’, *American Literature*, 54, Number 1, March 1982: 64.



concrete and mysterious can be found in the works of writers, artists and thinkers, like Pascal, Darwin,<sup>23</sup> the surrealist Magritte, or the Primitive painter Gregorio Valdes. Bishop's inverted reality is, on the surface, a comprehensible and accessible vision in a decidedly modernist sense. From her first book *North & South* the purpose of illustrations and the plastic arts constitutes the central idea of several poems. Surreal images were especially important, and although Bishop was generally critical of the movement's irrationality and denied being a surrealist, she did endorse a kind of obliqueness which placed in order of importance the actual and concrete before the unconscious.<sup>24</sup> This inversion equates with the solid image of the city that 'grows down' into the 'open eyes' of the man in "Love Lies Sleeping".

Of course Bishop was famously reticent when it came to personal issues, but that is not to say her poetry of self-determination and 'sense-perception' (VA, 53.11) ignored human fears completely. Her persona does not reflect the peculiarly private but articulates our common concerns without appearing to fall into that trap of overwrought emotion she accuses other women writers of exploiting. While some poets find it necessary, for example, to appropriate and revise history, to adopt an alter ego in order to come to terms with sexuality and relationships, Bishop's visual poetics promotes a genderless voice, one that is not self-consciously female. There appears to be no compulsion to remake history and her focus remains resolutely on things that do not categorise men or women. This de-historicist poetic, which resists the urge to revise and personalise history, seems to go against the grain of women's struggles and present an alternative legacy of female writing, one which is specifically independent of the traditional opposition between masculine and feminine cultural forces. She has a very clear idea about the direction which American poetry should take, and finds particularly objectionable poets who like

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<sup>23</sup> Bishop makes reference to Darwin's methodology in one of her most important aesthetic statements. This is discussed in Chapter V.

<sup>24</sup> *One Art*, p. 135.

to express it all. She is most adverse to explicitly personal poetry, which constitutes as ‘third-rate’ art. The poet should not appear as some kind of ‘neurotic working off his complexes at the expense of the public’.<sup>25</sup>

Bishop’s de-historicising strategy, in other words, her desire to focus on the surface structure of objects, as opposed to symbols, enabled the poet to emphasise the equal, indeed asexual voice of writers, without being required to prove the existence of a uniquely female language. In fact, Bishop’s poetry challenged contemporary views of ‘women writers’ and the marginalising and derogatory ways in which this category was often applied. ‘I’ve always considered myself a strong feminist’, asserted Bishop in the late seventies,<sup>26</sup> and extolled the virtues of taciturnity; her advice to women writers was to use direct language. Along with H.D and Moore, this was the true ‘weapon’ of feminist militancy.<sup>27</sup> She criticised the work of some Confessional poets of the 1960s, a period which was marked by notable female ‘revisionist mythmaking’ that, according to Alicia Ostriker, reasserted the ‘validity of the (feminine) I’.<sup>28</sup>

Plath acknowledged Bishop’s principal contribution to an alternative female literary legacy, one which was chiefly interested in poetic craft far removed from any form of political or religious proselytising. And although on the surface they appear to be very different poets, they are similar because their writing seeks to understand how we observe and shape reality. From early on Plath described herself as a ‘matter worshipper’<sup>29</sup> and echoed Bishop’s sentiments when stating that the material must take precedence over the spiritual. For Plath reality can be the

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher Caudwell as cited by Bishop in *One Art*, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> George Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 101.

<sup>27</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (New York and Oxford: Open University Press, 1992), pp. 105–106.

<sup>28</sup> Alicia Ostriker, ‘The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking’, in Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom (eds), *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Journals*, p. 120.

expression of feelings about certain people and places – such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, London and the Yorkshire moors – paintings and sculptures, museums and hospital interiors. She recognised that poetry was not intended simply an acting out the writer's neuroses, but rather an initiation into some understanding of how the individual perceived and ordered the world, either directly by means of the senses, through the refraction of symbolic language, or the resonances of the past (personal memories or historical conditioning). There is much critical analysis of her work, attaching a great deal of biographical significance to her mythical and metaphorical imagery. My approach goes beyond this in considering Plath's self-reflexive verse, which explores the act of creativity and how the imagination can often be prone to hyperbole. There is a need to emphasise that she not only appropriates myth in her poetry but also reflects soberly upon its qualities and, at times, negative functions.

Plath is concerned with how much poetry should mediate the subjective. The ego is the starting-point, although sublimated into a context that avoids self-obsession. A poet should not feel compelled to express it 'all'. Plath's "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad", "Cut" and "Fever 103<sup>o</sup>" reflect upon the act of creativity. If, initially, the poet seeks artistic and metaphysical solace in the intense study of natural objects, her re-visioning of physical reality in imaginative terms reveals a predisposition for hyperbole. In "On the Plethora of Dryads" the speaker's study of an apple-tree leads to the conclusion that the bodily hunger which she subjects herself to – and any other form of religious asceticism – does not reveal the 'quintessential beauty' of this natural object (CP, 67). Hence, she looks to the tree's outward beauty, but as she describes the 'patchwork' leaves, they speak to her in 'babel tongues'. In the formation of art the senses, on this occasion, prove insufficient ('Surfeiting eye, ear, taste, touch, smell') and so she resorts to drug taking, an act that will render the tree a metaphor of sexual experience. The

tangible becomes subject to metaphorical transformation resulting from a fit, a feverish dream, or other hypnagogic states brought on artificially by prescription drugs or alcohol.

Arising from feverishness or delirium are Plath's religious images – especially the poet's identification with Mary and Jesus Christ – and her controversial allusions to the Holocaust. These extraordinary metaphors serve either to express the magnitude of Plath's pain – and draw attention to the intensity of her feelings – or, taken as descriptions so disproportionate to the predicaments she finds herself in, they seem to comment upon the poet's tendency for imaginative embellishment. This aspect of Plath's poetry, especially when it issues in self-irony or even humour, should be further emphasised. A number of her poems explore how actual personal experiences are, perhaps unnecessarily, mythologised.

Plath's writing further tends toward Bishop's aesthetics by questioning the value and function of history, which itself becomes a subject in their work. There is, they agree, a desire in art to derive inspiration from the past. Plath is fully aware of the irresistibility of myth to women writers, and of the historical patterns which quite often determine and reinforce female social position. Her poet of the New World speaks in similar terms, disparaging those who in art seek self-aggrandisement from the 'Greek beauties you brought/ Off Europe's relic heap/ To sweeten your neck of the New York woods' ("Private Ground", CP, 130). Moreover, the constant need to draw parallels between contemporary society and antiquity accentuates the psychological attachment of the daughter to her father ("The Colossus"). She conceives of their relationship in terms relating to classical sculpture. Other historicised constructions reinforce the idea that, as in the story of Oedipus, the future has already been determined and whatever cathartic value poetry holds, its language has no enduring substance or meaning. Although creative words ('The indefatigable hoof-taps') emerge from the individual's experiences of life, they, ultimately, have

no control over a world that is ‘fixed’, separate from art, and ungovernable (“Words”, CP, 270). This is a fatalistic vision. Plath, moreover, explores how women in their search for personal empowerment through historical revision move away increasingly from a concrete reality. Myth is irresistible to female writers because of the gravitas it confers on their work, allowing them to articulate a set of power relations between men and women not wholly defined by patriarchy. However, if their intention is to revise history in the hope of uncovering a feminine language, this can be dangerously undermining when it reaffirms the indestructibility of the masculine voice.

The apolitical logic of Bishop’s ‘close to the bone’ aestheticism had direct influence on Plath. Unlike, for instance, Adrienne Rich’s feminist militancy or Denise Levertov’s strongly expressed views on war, Plath’s poetry is in keeping with Bishop’s indirect form of politics. As Robin Peel has argued, Plath was politically astute, and more motivated by and responsive to global events than previously thought.<sup>30</sup> And such subjects as thalidomide, nuclear proliferation and Cold War anxiety do form the basis of a number of her poems. This makes further the case that Plath was not simply an introverted poet. I would add, nevertheless, that in some of her poetry she deals, tangentially, with issues of a political nature. In this way she is able to reflect, perhaps in an ironic manner, on how controversial events of the day may be used strategically to ground and heighten the predicaments of an individual. Plath treated political issues as ‘deflections’ and felt no compulsion to make moral judgement. However, her individualism and apparent indifference is more problematic than Bishop’s neutrality, since in Plath’s poetry the coalescence of fact and fiction poses a greater challenge to personalise and, at the same time, contain the expansive force of history. Her attempt to unify these conflicting ideas has proved

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<sup>30</sup> Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

especially controversial.

Bishop's and Plath's non-utilitarian poetry privileges craft and technique, 'pleasure' and beauty. Each writer had an understanding of history and its function, and apparent are the crucial and obvious differences between 'transparent' and historicised language in their work. Additionally, Bishop was opposed to excessively 'self-conscious' American writers and endorsed 'real' poets of the senses, such as Stevens, Moore – a mentor and close friend for almost forty years – and Lowell. Put simply, her main criticism of some poets was that they had too much to say. Bishop, as I later discuss, was a self-declared feminist who shunned association with the Women's Movement. She had a reputation for contradiction and reticence and, as the archive reveals, there was great care taken to refine the strategies of negotiation between private and public faces, as well as to avoid subjects which could be interpreted as belonging to a particularly female strand of literature. Above all, Bishop wished critical assessment of her to be focused on the aesthetic strategies which mediated personal feelings. Plath viewed this attitude to craft as indicative of poetry's status as a pleasure-giving art form.<sup>31</sup> But what is Bishop's craft, and why should her language be considered transparent? A definition is attempted and a distinction made between this and transparent form in surreal poetry.

Bishop's poetic recognises the individual's attempt to order his or her existence according to the senses, while trying to come to terms with human fears. But if in a poem such as "Crusoe in England" the self consciously reflects upon modern society's pragmatism and increasing proclivity to objectify and quantify its world – an obsessive behaviour which seems to suppress the troubling images of anxiety in Crusoe's dreams – then, by comparison, Plath's poetry is about rediscovering the unconscious as a true centre of personality, a willingness to think metaphorically without fearing the psychological consequences of reanimating images. Her

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<sup>31</sup> Plath, "Context", in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 93.

maternal and paternal archetypes, drawn from folklore and childhood fairytales, speak generally to human concerns.<sup>32</sup> It is argued, however, that Plath's poetry incorporates certain strategies which elevate it above the merely self-indulgent and emotionally uninhibited, traits which Bishop is highly critical of. The poet, for instance, has the ability to move away from autobiographical documentation (the nakedly confessional) either by combining verifiable facts with imagined details, or through self-dramatisation and performance. The latter strategy is most recognisable in a fellow Confessional poet, John Berryman, who adopts the persona 'Henry' in *The Dream Songs*,<sup>33</sup> but it also finds significant expression in Plath's incorporation of mythical stories. Her poetry combines and scrutinises myth and Christian iconography, namely the classical ideals of *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>34</sup> It is also relevant to examine in Plath's prose work the idea that literature should be grounded in the past and never conceived *ex nihilo*. This statement has wider cultural implications, born of the theory that everything has a history, which is to say 'in any advanced civilisation, a genuine beginning always starts from somewhere'.<sup>35</sup>

Apart from the discussion of Plath's interest in the mechanics of creativity, visual poetics, as I earlier explained, can be more broadly understood as incorporating the role of the artist vis-à-vis the subject and spectator. This is a common theme in Plath's poetry. In the Rousseau-inspired poems "Snakecharmer" and "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies" Plath is fascinated with the portrayal of the female sitter, the intentions of the artist and the role of the spectator. Those looking at Rousseau's painting are divided by the poem into either 'literalists' unable to understand why Yadwigha lies naked on her red couch in the jungle, or fantasists open

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<sup>32</sup> Rensselaer W. Lee viewed self-expressionism as hostile to the concept of *ut pictura poesis*; see *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: The Norton Library, 1967), p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

<sup>34</sup> On the definition of *ut pictura poesis* and the recurring themes of history, myth and religion in literature and painting see Lee, *The Humanistic Theory of Painting*.

<sup>35</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 168.

to such surreal juxtapositions. Plath further evaluates the role of the artist, who displaces the female subject from her usual surroundings (the ‘fashionable monde’). He is the creator and possessor of the ‘private’ reason why the couch accompanied Yadvigha to the jungle. As a measure of his control, it is he who ‘put you on the couch/ To feed his eye with red’ (CP, 85–86). As Wendy Steiner has argued in her work on modernist depictions of the female subject, the woman ‘may be the representation of a flesh-and-blood person or an idea. But always the experience of viewing her and the experience of viewing the art in which she figures fall together. Art is about pleasure and gratification, the message seems to be: the pleasure a heterosexual man (the implied artist or viewer) has in looking at a woman’ and vice versa.<sup>36</sup> The woman is a subject of pleasure for the voyeur and, reciprocally, she elicits enjoyment from being viewed.

The artist-voyeur in “Conversation Among the Ruins” depicts the woman in a typically surrealist pose. Plath incorporates in this and other poems certain practices often associated with surrealism, whether dream imagery, drugs, hallucination, clairvoyance, or the macabre decoration of inanimate objects – ‘my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade,/ My right foot// A paperweight’ (“Lady Lazarus”, CP, 244). But Plath would have objected to the misogyny of male surrealists who considered women less individualistic and less imaginative than men.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, women were viewed merely as a catalyst for the male – often violent – imagination. “The Detective”, for instance, appears to draw upon male surrealists’ fascination with detective fiction and sex crimes.<sup>38</sup> However, an examination of points of similarity between Plath’s mythopoeism and the paintings of the French-Argentine surrealist Leonor Fini reveals

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<sup>36</sup> Wendy Steiner, *The Trouble With Beauty* (London: William Heinemann, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Robert J., Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb*, pp. 135–37.



more positive images of femaleness. Little or nothing of significance has been written on areas of shared interest between Plath and this artist. Female surrealism countered male sexuality or looked to paradigms of idealised asexuality. The Finian heroine entices the observer into her world, and the motive force of Plath's poems is the transformation of the status of woman. Apart from being an investigation into aspects of female power and sexuality, this argument addresses further the issue of representation of the female form by women poets and artists. An exploration of Plath's poems defines the Plathian woman precisely as possessing a shifting protean identity; she has a tendency toward mutability and multiplicity, the *sine qua non* of all change, development and formation. Such change is physical, psychological and creative – transferences across, through and over. At critical moments in her life the woman is imagined as a more powerful mythical-liminal figure, while inter-structural and generalised symbols express, paradoxically, the opposing binaries of life and death. Moreover, it is often in dreams or febrile hallucinations that the Plathian woman imagines herself empowered with the gift of 'envers', a preternatural ability to reverse the forces that govern her life – the motif of several Fini paintings. In Plath's poetry symbols of menstruation, gestation and parturition – which reaffirm belief that women's writing is quite often bound up with the 'menstrual flow; the cycle of each pregnancy'<sup>39</sup> – speak of undoing or reversing the signs of sexual maturity. Ultimately, however, the Plathian woman is resigned to the impossibility of envers.

The definition of feminine beauty becomes the *raison d'être* of a number of Plath's poems. Such standards of femaleness reflect the way men generally regard women in paintings and sculptures. Their depictions of the female body can either be fragmented completely or the classic ideal, statuesque but also, in some cases, disfigured. These forms of representation enable

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<sup>39</sup> Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p. 161.

the artist to express himself and to make his presence felt at the expense of the female subject. His image, which depicts the woman as pure white, ageless and durable, opposes the flesh and sordidness of parturition. As his subject or sitter, however, she seems complicit, composed and stoic in his presence (“Conversation Among the Ruins” and “Edge”).

Plath’s poems exploring the role of the artist and the subject reinforce the idea that a woman’s understanding of her own body is quite often shaped by male depiction of the female figure. Her many drawings, block prints and collages from art classes at Smith College – which I examine in greater detail in chapter seven – are further revealing of her interest in the presentation of the female form in pictorial practices.<sup>40</sup> Plath, like Bishop, considered becoming a professional artist, and her self-education in art history continued after she decided to pursue a writing career. An abiding interest in the culture, history and theory of artistic presentation underscored her poetry. In this sense, she could admire Bishop’s poeticism and, not least, the latter’s desire to forge an alliance between language and painting, so to expose individual and collective ways of seeing.

I have outlined the type of argument that warrants a joint consideration of Bishop’s and Plath’s visual poetics. Apart from examining the artist-subject relationship, Plath wishes to understand how different modes of seeing order the world, and she maintains an ambivalent attitude toward the transformative powers of an imagination not accessed directly through the senses but which emerges only in states of delirium. These images are the myriad symbols, myths and histories stored in the unconscious. For Bishop such connections with the past are equally troubling. Her non-utilitarian and self-reflexive poetry avoids political and religious contexts by focusing the reader’s mind on the strategies of creativity. This singular act favours

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<sup>40</sup> Many of Plath’s artworks, including illustrated notebooks, are held at the Lilly Library, Indiana University at Bloomington.

de-historicism over symbolism. Bishop's short story "In Prison" (1938) articulates her enduring fascination with self-contained works of art, which in commenting upon their own formation represent fracture from the past. Plath, by her own admission, is equally distrusting of but irresistibly drawn to history and myth. She appropriates historical facts, closely identifying herself, for example, with victims of the Holocaust, although she remains aware of the controversy that may arise from exploiting imagery of war and atrocity. Taken together the work of Plath and Bishop demonstrates the opposing binaries of object-symbol, fracture-history, description-imagination.

## Chapter I

### Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath: A Comparative and Contrastive Analysis

Bishop and Plath were, ostensibly, very different poets. They wrote about personal issues, although for Bishop what may have begun as a preoccupation with the subject of intimacy – as evidenced by her unpublished work – constituted only a point of departure from which to explore, more generally and more objectively, the relationships between humans, the environment and art. While Bishop did not wish her poetry to be included in a women's anthology, Plath tended to be more interested in what was expected of women's writing. Plath remarked upon her desire to perceive the world through her senses,<sup>41</sup> but feared the loss of an imagination that could go beyond surface sensations, and rejected 'that photographic mind which paradoxically tells the truth, but the worthless truth, about the world'.<sup>42</sup>

Both poets were very different in the way they were affected by geography and environment. Bishop was not only supremely conscious of her immediate surroundings, and well-travelled throughout the Americas and Europe, but lived in places defined by a sense of space and elevation as well. The expansive views and aerial perspectives from her apartment overlooking the beach in Rio de Janeiro, the mountain house in Ouro Prêto, the study above the waterfall in Petrópolis and the Lewis Wharf condo above Boston Harbor could not have failed but inspire her.<sup>43</sup> The chronotopes, or geographic features, of these locations are charged with

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<sup>41</sup> *Journals*, p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> *Journals*, p. 210.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Colwell, *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 1.

personal resonances and give physical form to her mental reflections.<sup>44</sup> The perspective in some poems is from a great height looking down or across a landscape or seascape. Following in the tradition of nineteenth-century American writers (and painters),<sup>45</sup> Bishop's aestheticism seizes upon the sublime in the Romantic sense of the word: the sheer size of the natural world, and in particular the unfathomable sea, leaves the individual in awe of her environment, filled with the pleasure of all there is to experience through the senses, but troubled by the infinity of nature, whose magnitude bears testimony to a greater power that can never be known.<sup>46</sup> If, however, Bishop's world is about the existence of the poet in a boundless space, observing as if from a great distance, Plath's is one of intimacy, where emphasis is on the survival of the self within close proximity to its surroundings.<sup>47</sup>

Plath typically measured the strength of her poetry against that of her 'rivals', and aimed to surpass the achievements of the 'lesbian & fanciful & jeweled' Bishop.<sup>48</sup> Plath was interested in the way Bishop opposed private and public faces: the sophisticated and well-travelled poet, who lived secreted away in Brazil with a female lover, and whose godmother was the 'ageing giantess' Marianne Moore. The latter inseparable relationship defined most accurately the

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Barry uses Bakhtin's system to arrive at the term 'chronotopic' poetry, in which places are identified with names and other precise details; see *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 52ff.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825–1875* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the sublime in Romantic literature see Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 85–106. We may draw further comparison between nineteenth-century theories of knowledge, experience and sensation and renewed interest in the early decades of the twentieth century in the psychology of perception and the 'aesthetic system' of observation. On the iconic significance of the sea in poetry see W.H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood; or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), passim.

<sup>47</sup> This is generally true, although there is some extension out into space or down into watery depth in some of Plath's significant poems like "Ariel", "Wuthering Heights", "Lorelei" and "Suicide at Egg Rock".

<sup>48</sup> *Journals*, pp. 322, 360.

literary reputation of either woman.<sup>49</sup> In the 1950s Moore remained an important role model for younger female writers,<sup>50</sup> and not least Plath who mimicked admiringly her poetic forms.<sup>51</sup> In 1958 she even visited Moore's home in New York.<sup>52</sup> However, whether Plath intended from this brief acquaintance literary endorsement or even mentorship, she was to be bitterly disappointed by Moore who was, ultimately, disparaging of the younger poet's work. Plath was so affected by this rejection that, even a few years later in October 1962, she was unable to keep her anger out of "The Tour" (CP, 238), a poem that poured scorn on the pompous and conceited attitude of a maiden aunt. This figure, it has been convincingly argued, was a caustic caricature of Moore.<sup>53</sup> If in Bishop's courteously worded, though partly ironic, "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore", her mentor is lauded for her precise diction and impeccable manners, and imagined as a comet, a cosmic force of literature, in "The Tour" Plath scathingly mocks the older poet's manners and eccentricities. In an abrasive tone that derisively correlates good poetry with clean and moral living, Plath labels her own house as a 'wild machine', a 'mess' (CP, p. 237) and proceeds to ridicule the delicacy and inhibition of the older woman.

Moore could never be Plath's literary mother, but the bitter conclusion of their acquaintance did not detract from the high regard in which she was originally held by the younger poet. Of course there were generational and lifestyle differences and, in many ways, Bishop's sexual discreteness, as opposed to Plath's preoccupation with the gendered politics of

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<sup>49</sup> *Journals*, p. 360.

<sup>50</sup> Vivian R. Pollak, 'Moore, Plath, Hughes, and "The Literary Life"', *American Literary History*, vol. 17, no. 1, spring 2005: 96.

<sup>51</sup> *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 344. For general references to Moore in Plath's writing see *Journals*, pp. 360, 406, 516 and *Letters Home*, pp. 168, 169, 340, 341, 343, 344.

<sup>52</sup> *Letters Home*, p. 340.

<sup>53</sup> Pollak, 'Moore, Plath, Hughes, and "The Literary Life"': 109–10.

marriage, with children and writing,<sup>54</sup> was more in tune with Moore's private and old-fashioned values<sup>55</sup> the latter admired most the 'potent retiringness' and 'close observation' of Bishop's poetry.<sup>56</sup> Plath, furthermore, recognised, as others did, that Bishop's poetic reserve and apparent detachment was strategic; the way she chose to present personal fears and anxieties made her poetry unlike that of Moore.<sup>57</sup> Bishop's reputation for reticence was, invariably, interpreted as a form of deflection from personal issues and aroused in readers an interest in how her work negotiated a way between public and private personas. But, of course, focus remained firmly on the formal propensities of her poetry. In the same way that Confessional poets of the time profited from public and critical assumptions about the near identity of the poet and persona in their works, so too Bishop played upon her status as a reticent writer. Literary reputation preceded her. Perhaps ironically for a woman who sought to conceal her private life from the reading public, contemporary female writers were inclined to draw their own conclusions on her poetry based in part on sexuality and a reputation as an outsider.

Bishop was a naturally shy person, but the outsider tag suited her and she carefully protected this self-image among readers and critics alike.<sup>58</sup> Her sexuality was an open secret and she deliberately separated herself from other women writers. She enjoyed appearing quite a contradictory figure because this made her too complex a poet to compartmentalise. For

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<sup>54</sup> *Journals*, pp. 100, 500.

<sup>55</sup> Moore, it appears, refused in 1961 to recommend Plath for a Guggenheim because she asserted 'the value of her experience as a mother in putting herself forward' for the grant; Pollak, 'Moore, Plath, Hughes, and "The Literary Life"': 107.

<sup>56</sup> Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> *Journals*, p. 516.

<sup>58</sup> For various views by Bishop's friends and contemporaries on the type of writer she was, see Anne Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Twayne, 1966); Marianne Moore, 'Archaically New', introduction in Ann Winslow (ed.), *Trial Balances: An Anthology of New Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1935); Octavio Paz, 'Elizabeth Bishop, or The Power of Reticence', *World Literature Today*, vol. 51, no. 1 (winter, 1977): 15–17; Penelope Mortimer, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Prose', *World Literature Today*, vol. 51, no. 1 (winter, 1977): 17–18; Frank Bidart, 'On Elizabeth Bishop', *World Literature Today*, vol. 51, no. 1 (winter, 1977): 19.

example, she set herself up as a ‘strong’ feminist in favour of many ideals of the Women’s Movement, but stubbornly refused to be included in an anthology of female writers.<sup>59</sup> She published little and made of this a virtue, ironically entitling the collected volume of her work in 1969 *The Complete Poems*. Moreover, as an up-and-coming writer Bishop was influenced by Moore and although there were times when she disagreed creatively with her mentor, she always valued and stressed their literary friendship. From the time they first met in New York in 1934, Moore was a ‘point of departure’ for Bishop’s writing, even though she became increasingly critical of the form, or ‘mechanics’, of the younger poet because it accentuated her “‘tentativeness’”.<sup>60</sup> Bishop demonstrated a ‘willingness to sustain the provisional’,<sup>61</sup> and for Kalstone, this was her ‘unfinished nature as a moralist – a poet whose *method* was her message’.<sup>62</sup>

Bishop endorsed all aspects of this cultivated self-image in lectures, interviews and essays. It was something she wanted to be understood and by deliberately emphasising the boundary between a public and private face, she could fix in the minds of readers the purpose of her poetry. In this respect, ironically, public self-representation – the image Bishop refined – has proved as important and enduring to her readership as the complex lives of Confessional poets to theirs. Such are the concerns of a poet who contemplates the extent to which personal matters should become part of her work. She could be open and honest or remain elusive like the artist-prince in “The Monument,” whose ‘bones’ ‘may be inside’ the artwork ‘or far away on even drier soil’ (CP, 25).

Bishop and Plath were not acquainted, but they knew of each other’s work. Bishop much

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<sup>59</sup> *One Art*, p. 549; Plimpton, *Writers at Work*, p. 145.

<sup>60</sup> Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, pp. 5, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 101.



admired *The Bell Jar*,<sup>63</sup> while Plath had mutual respect and admiration.<sup>64</sup> At Smith College she wrote poetry that mimicked Bishop's techniques,<sup>65</sup> and commented, in a journal entry, on the older contemporary's work, her 'fine originality, always surprising, never rigid, flowing, juicier than Marianne Moore'.<sup>66</sup> This appraisal of Bishop acknowledges similarities to her mentor Moore, as well as echoing Lowell's assessment of her poetry as more 'human' and 'personal'.<sup>67</sup> The paradoxical nature of a language that can be both objective and profound is especially striking. In Bishop's poems there is certainly an opposition between the real and the ideal, between the 'plastic', sharp visualiser, interested in observing outside reality, and the symbolist poet.<sup>68</sup> In "The Bight," for example, the opposition is between the visual-pragmatic and the auditory-symbolic. The poet delineates the scene and, in so doing, comments upon perception and imaginative transformation. The dull coastline appears like a dying flame, so much so that '[o]ne can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire/ one could probably hear it turning to marimba music' (CP, 60). The significance of "The Bight" rests upon this single comment, which is revealing of the poet's understanding of art. The poem is not symbolic, but focuses attention upon its own creation. The bight is tactually apprehended, an uncomplicated vision of surface detail, with simple arrangement of sea, sky, boats and birds. The reference to marimba music adds an exotic touch to an otherwise sombre, almost colourless, scene. This aspect of Bishop's work Plath valued highly; the poet bears no responsibility for the social function of words beyond their essential meaning.

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<sup>63</sup> *One Art*, p. 543.

<sup>64</sup> *Journals*, p. 322.

<sup>65</sup> Kathleen Connors, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds), *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>66</sup> *Journals*, p. 516.

<sup>67</sup> Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History and Discord*, p. 128.

<sup>68</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p. 85.

“The Bight” demonstrates how the poet can be largely concerned with presenting his or her sense impressions of the world with preponderant emphasis not on taste, touch, smell and hearing, but sight. He or she is interested in preserving the palpability of the actual and in presenting emotions by means of objects, people, or scenes, but not in expressing these feelings abstractly. Visual sensation is primary, and thus the colour, shape and size of the things of this world will dominate. There are, nevertheless, poems which carry emotional shades. In the poignant opening of “The Bight”, for instance, ‘On my birthday’ is parenthesised under the title. The vibrant Floridian colour tones in “Jerónimo’s House” express a lighter mood, unlike that of the earlier, stark, monochrome landscapes of Nova Scotia. The poem’s composition or snapshot of daily life in a poor Cuban home, the eclectic mix of furniture and ornaments, resembles very much the sort of primitive art Bishop was so fond of. The cluster of objects and profusion of garish colours (red green, blue and scarlet) almost overwhelm the senses. Indeed, various exponents of Primitive art greatly interested Bishop, including Rousseau and Valdes, ‘our new Key West Rousseau’.<sup>69</sup> In their paintings the apparent lack of a recognisable style was a means of private expression for the artist. Perhaps the personal connection she felt toward this artistic form was born of a sense of marginality or ‘outsiderhood’, which found common cause in self-taught craft. From this point of view the description of Bishop as a Primitive is apt, drawing, as it does, significant parallels between the media of poetry and painting. Generally, Bishop was intrigued by art which was flawed or held little value to anyone other than the person who possessed and cherished it. For instance, her great-uncle’s paintings inspired “Large Bad Picture” (*North & South*) and, almost thirty years later, “Poem” (*Geography III*). In an interview she pointed out how extremely fond she was of her great-uncle’s two paintings and the childhood memories that

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<sup>69</sup> *One Art*, p. 75; Elizabeth Bishop, “Gregorio Valdes”, in *The Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 51–59.

they evoked. They illustrated real places and the literal rendering of the scenes in her poems – except for the odd detail<sup>70</sup> – recalled the artist’s power of evocation, however unreal his composition may have appeared to the trained eye.

In describing Bishop’s poems the poet Howard Nemerov remarked: ‘[In her work] art and nature, as it were, compare themselves to one another, or stand in such a relation that a remark about one is a remark about the other’.<sup>71</sup> The overriding emphasis is upon observation and imagination. One can see this, for example, in the undated fragment, “Low Tide, Ragged Island,” inspired by Prince Edward Island. Bishop closely observes both the seals playing in the water and the out-going tide (VA, 73.3b) in the same ‘obsessive’<sup>72</sup> detail that the speaker in “Half Moon Hotel, Coney Island” (c.1947) describes the industrial landscape of gas tanks, tenements and thousands of brick villas. Equally observational is the urban pastoral “Full Moon, Key West”, where the poet’s panoptic eye scans the cityscape and observes the shapes and colours that are formed from a distance. And, like the bird in “Sandpiper”, the poet’s search for meaning in the order of the world that she observes, verges on the obsessive. The sandpiper on the beach ‘runs, he runs straight through, watching his toes’, but he is not idly gazing at his feet; rather he is ‘[w]atching...the spaces of sand between them’. He observes intently the millions of grains in a new light; the minute objects of contemplation make the world seem ‘vast and clear’.

These poems are typical of Bishop’s careful documentation, but there is a need to be precise in our understanding of the way her poetry functions. One is inclined to ring-fence those poems which either showcase her precise notation (“The Fish,” “The Moose,” “The Map”) and indicate her esotericism, or are enigmatic with surreal tendencies (“The Weed,” “The Man-

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<sup>70</sup> Plimpton, *Writers at Work*, pp. 132–33.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas J. Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 94.

<sup>72</sup> In “Sandpiper” Bishop comments upon the ‘obsessed’ bird, who looks in places (where ‘no detail too small’) in search of ‘something, something, something’.

Moth”, “Sleeping on the Ceiling” and “Sleeping Standing Up”). Bishop tries to present things as she sees them, and her language of simplicity and self-restraint allows the description of much of her sensory notation to register all the more strongly. She assumes there is a solid world outside herself, of which her senses can make a reliable record, and a language which can accurately transmit that record. Perceptual reality, for Bishop, is the ‘poet’s proper materials with which he is equipped by nature, i.e. immediate, intense physical reactions’ (VA, notebook, July, 1934). She admired the meticulous ‘construction’ of Moore’s poetry,<sup>73</sup> the way its plenitude of precisely observed detail is moulded into idiosyncratic, yet deeply satisfying forms. Moore’s poems achieve an artful physicality and this is a quality May Swenson notes in Bishop when she talks of the ‘bodies of words’ which catch the eye.<sup>74</sup> Bishop’s approach to subject matter is wholly experiential – ‘all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*’.<sup>75</sup> – and her language is natural and conversational. Her places are real and recognisable – Florida, Cape Breton, Washington, Nova Scotia – the particular settings seemingly humdrum – a waiting room, a library, a bus stop, a fish-house. ‘I can’t imagine being *taught* – I’m so easy’, remarked Bishop in a postcard to her friends Sandra and Henry McPherson.<sup>76</sup> There is, however, in Bishop’s poetry an underlying sense of ennui and loneliness, but although it makes use of personal experiences, she does not subscribe to radical subjectivity: the external world is always given priority over the internal one.<sup>77</sup> Bishop insists on a poetry which is clear-headed, objective and

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<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore’, in *The Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 123.

<sup>74</sup> The words are taken from Swenson’s poem “In the Bodies of Words”; May Swenson, *Dear Elizabeth. Five Poems and Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> Randall Jarrell, ‘The Poet and His Public’, *Partisan Review* 13 (1946): 488–500.

<sup>76</sup> Joanne Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore. The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp 55–56.

<sup>77</sup> Bishop had the sort of life that especially qualified her to become a Confessional poet; the early death of her father, her mother’s madness, early adoption, lesbian miseries, suicide of her Brazilian lover,

descriptive.<sup>78</sup>

What then may be gleaned of the personality of a poet who remains cautious about how much she reveals of herself, a poet of ‘modesty’?<sup>79</sup> Bishop’s status as a reticent poet leads to several assumptions about her life. However, her impersonal – or, more accurately, less personal – aesthetic avoids as much as possible gender, race and politics because these are issues apt to elicit overtly subjective opinion. She was inclined toward the classic ideal of restraint, producing a poetry of ‘aestheticist logic’<sup>80</sup> that queried human nature. In Bishop’s poetry human figures are actively looking, thinking and shaping the world around them. For instance, the man in a “Miracle for Breakfast,” a pseudo-visionary, messianic figure, represents doubt, ambiguity and the subversion through miracles of reality and actual appearance. The other human type is Crusoe who can objectify and quantify the world around him. However, that sense of control leads to a false or narcissistic sense of power (“Crusoe in England”). Alternatively, the little girl in “The Waiting Room” sees the world through others’ eyes. This is a young person’s point of view. Bishop’s personas shape their identity according to the choices they make. The hermit in “Chemin de Fer” questions his existence and in old age seems to regret that he has not loved. Similarly, Crusoe remains ambivalent toward his supposedly blissful solitariness and yearns for companionship. His initial isolation gives him a sense of power and control over the island, and his increasing belief in the real and tangible leaves no room for a transcendent force such as a Christian God. In some of Bishop’s poems the mind of the individual is preoccupied with questions of identity and spirituality.

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alcoholism and late loneliness in a job she did not want to do. Yet her poetry resolutely resists the Confessional mode. In this context, ‘One Art’, which alludes to the traumas tangentially, ironically, stoically, is a good test case.

<sup>78</sup> In a letter to Frani Blough (27 August, 1935) Bishop writes: ‘You don’t know what a blessing it is to have you the one, *the* one, friend who has been here, so I don’t feel duty bound to -- or maybe, I can’t possibly let myself -- DESCRIBE everything’; *One Art*, p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> The term is from “The Gentleman of Shalott” (CP, 9).

<sup>80</sup> Dembo, *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry*, p. 47.

Bishop makes us believe she has the ability to preserve genuine experience, and to express the immediacy and intensity of physical reaction. It is verse, notes Swenson in admiration, which gives readers the impression that the poet is describing what she is seeing, whether people, objects, or places of personal interest. This unique perspective differs from collective and symbolic viewpoint in art. Although ostensibly, the tangible has precedence over the spiritual in Bishop's work, she remains strongly resolved to understand why certain people value the non-material over the physical. I explain later that while Bishop views religion in terms of its symbolic representation in art, her treatment is, on the whole, without any form of judgement.

### **Truth and Fiction in Confessional Poetry**

Bishop's poetry endorsed personal experience, but by the late 1950s, she was also conscious of the contemporary challenges facing poets: could language, with all its conventions, forms and idioms, convey a singular viewpoint predicated on an understanding of the human condition? Bishop's poetry is quintessentially stoical, defiant of life's afflictions, but other poets demonstrated less reserve, or strength when faced by their fears and anxieties. In this period, after all, psychotherapy was commonly used to treat various mental disorders and people were encouraged to articulate more openly their deepest feelings. What may be agreed upon is that in America in the 1960s certain poets were more inclined to write about familial and relational breakdown, mental illness and depression, all expressed in a first-person 'psychological lingua franca of modern self-observation'.<sup>81</sup> This mode, marked seemingly by its spontaneity and speed of composition, was developed specifically to explore themes of death and suicide, religion and

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<sup>81</sup> Laurence Lerner, 'What is Confessional Poetry?', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1987): 52, 53, 64.

loss of faith. However, it is important to add that the rise to prominence of this generation of writers, later labelled Confessional, was preceded by decades of experimentation amongst its members in poetic craft. Berryman, for instance, was a student of literary history and his *Dream Songs* (1969), which incorporated private experience ‘into the realm of poetry required a long education in style’.<sup>82</sup> These poets wished to resolve certain questions: is plain language, informality and the use of American idioms to describe modern life more honest than the neo-classical ideals of, for example, Eliot? How can poems be personally truthful reflections of general human afflictions?

Bishop had grappled with such questions for many years and the aesthetic principles of her philosophy found fullest expression in *North & South*. The publication of this book coincided with that of William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* and provided Randall Jarrell with the opportunity, in his 1946 review of both works, to praise a poetry that sought to understand the ‘truth about things’. He was keen to emphasise their ‘personal’ honesty and to assert their difference from other writers who used poetry as a form of self-healing or ‘gruesome occupational therapy’.<sup>83</sup> Jarrell also pointed to important cultural changes in postwar America, a time when ‘most people can’t and don’t read poetry’.<sup>84</sup> In her reading of Williams’ *Paterson* Bishop cast a critical eye over the private and public domains of literature. She wrote to Lowell criticising Williams for including in *Paterson, Book Two* (1948) letters from the poet Marcia Nardi because they were ‘too overpowering emotionally’ and served only to provoke debate about their factual accuracy.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps, this “‘mixture of fact & fiction’”<sup>86</sup> aroused public interest

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<sup>82</sup> Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 124.

<sup>83</sup> Jarrell, ‘The Poet and His Public’: 498–99.

<sup>84</sup> Jarrell, ‘The Poet and His Public’: 500.

<sup>85</sup> *One Art*, p. 159.

<sup>86</sup> *One Art*, p. 159.

in poetry, but it also created an ambiguous relationship between author and reader. In his review of *Paterson, Book Two*, the poet Richard Eberhart questioned whether the prose parts were based on fact, though Bishop was less doubtful of their veracity and objected to Williams' 'streak of insensitivity', which deflected from 'honest' poetry.<sup>87</sup> Twenty-five years later, she disagreed with Lowell for incorporating in *The Dolphin* (1973) intimate private letters from his second wife Elizabeth Hardwick.<sup>88</sup>

Although Bishop described Lowell's *The Dolphin* as 'magnificent' work, she was critical of the way that his original brand of 'confessional' verse, as it first appeared in *Life Studies* (1959), had been corrupted. His work was 'real' and 'necessary', she acknowledged in correspondence.<sup>89</sup> Bishop's letters to Lowell demonstrate that she was not opposed to autobiography *per se*, and she praised him for making everything 'material for poetry'. As she explained to Lesley Wehr, what she disliked most was the rise in popularity of Confessional writing among poets who 'seldom have anything interesting to "confess" any way'.<sup>90</sup> Lowell, in comparison, could illuminate poems about family breakdowns and failed relationships by his form, rhythm and 'control', characteristics indicative of inner strength and resolve ('life is all right, for the time being').<sup>91</sup> Jarrell had highlighted similar traits of stoicism in his review of Bishop's *North & South*.

Lowell's work was *sui generis*. However, as Bishop noted, its uniqueness could be further attributed to literary reception. In Lowell's case, he belonged to a prominent New England family and for Bishop this biographical detail left its mark on critical appraisal of his

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<sup>87</sup> *One Art*, p. 562.

<sup>88</sup> *One Art*, pp. 561–62.

<sup>89</sup> *One Art*, p. 562. Confessional poetry may be described as a loose 'school' or a 'movement' because its principal poets of the 1950s and 1960s knew each other personally and shared many beliefs about how poetry should be written.

<sup>90</sup> Lesley Wehr, 'Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes', *Antioch Review*, 39 (1981): 327.

<sup>91</sup> *One Art*, p. 350.



work.<sup>92</sup> In the 1960s there were other cultural forces at play, which had unprecedented effect on poets. In this period Confessionalism became, in broader terms, the domain of female private writing,<sup>93</sup> but quite often this ‘truth-telling’ was led by the need for commercial and literary success. Take, for example, Plath’s expressed desire to write on a subject of the ‘New Yorker (magazine) sort’.<sup>94</sup> Critics, moreover, were inclined to describe the Confessional style as performance and, by the poets’ own admission, they quite often dramatised the basic material of their poetry. Form manipulated facts. Berryman, for instance, was interested in transformation of life into something ‘nobler’ and in being the opposite of what he was,<sup>95</sup> whilst Sexton admitted that facts in her poems could be manipulated for artistic reasons.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, the relationship between ‘truth’, that is, the private details which a poet chose to include, and the language of expression or transformation grew increasingly convoluted, and there developed an ‘ambiguous relationship between a poet’s private experience and of the public language of art’.<sup>97</sup>

### **Plath and Poetic Context**

Confessionalism was rooted in the personal poetry of Lowell, but clearly it developed on many levels both in terms of subject matter and formal conventions. It also reflected changes in American society, literary fashion, views of the roles of women and even public reception. I would add that in this period literary criticism increasingly functioned as an intermediary of the reading process. All these factors were, importantly, of concern to the poets of selfhood and their work, often in a self-regarding manner, explored how artistic craft could articulate truthfully or

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<sup>92</sup> *One Art*, pp. 351–52.

<sup>93</sup> Susan B. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), pp. 95–96, 129.

<sup>94</sup> *Journals*, p. 466.

<sup>95</sup> Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon*, pp. 104, 105.

<sup>96</sup> Lerner, ‘What is Confessional Poetry?’: 54–55.

<sup>97</sup> Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon*, p. 102.

ambiguously the experiences of the society in which they lived. In an apologetics of 1962 Plath identifies the merit of writers such as Bishop and Lowell and prompts, it seems, by accusations that her work lacked moral engagement with the political and religious issues of the time, she defends her poetry of selfhood: ‘Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure—not its influence as religious or political propaganda’.<sup>98</sup> Plath praises those poets who preserve the aesthetic principles of verse and compose images that reflect the essential feelings of the writer. They do not lose sight of the fact that poetry is an artistic form, separate from the political and religious issues which impact on people’s lives. In *London Magazine* Plath set out to explain how she used recent historical events, while at the same time avoiding political context:

The poets I delight in are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing. Their finest poems seem born all-of-a-piece, not put together by hand; certain poems in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, for instance; Theodore Roethke’s greenhouse poems; some of Elizabeth Bishop and a very great deal of Stevie Smith (‘Art is wild as a cat and quite separate from civilization’).<sup>99</sup>

It is fascinating to note that at a time when Plath was writing her late poems, which would subsequently be collected in *Ariel*, she was implicitly comparing herself to Bishop, amongst others. Plath identifies an affinity between certain works of so-called Confessional and those of reticent writers. Some of their poems seem ‘born all-of-a-piece’, self-contained personal effigies. They are, she further contends, ‘solid’, a word that echoes Swenson’s description of Bishop’s verse as ‘feelable’. Understandably, Plath recognises similarities of form between Bishop and Lowell given that the latter borrowed the ‘rhythms’ of the former in his later verse, and found the naturalness of her language most compelling: ‘Bishop is usually present in her poems; they happen to her, she speaks’.<sup>100</sup> Bishop’s ability to avoid a strong political context is of equal

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<sup>98</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

<sup>99</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Lowell, ‘Elizabeth Bishop’s *North & South*’, in *Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987), p. 78.

importance to Plath. It is the desire to write ‘poems of deflection’. According to Plath, the ‘real poem’ is primarily of the self and not based upon some capricious political viewpoint or ‘shifting philanthropy’, which in itself is objectionable.<sup>101</sup> In her poems and, for that matter, prose, she uses history as a stratagem of creativity, an approach that has over time proved controversial. *The Bell Jar* demonstrates this well. The reference in the opening paragraph to the execution of the Rosenbergs seems crassly dismissive. However, this episode has indirect relevance to Esther Greenwood, since it foreshadows her own suffering and electric shock treatment. Therefore, if argued from a biographical point of view, this is not a case of deflecting from the private sphere. And yet Plath’s ‘sidelong’ look at the politics of the time becomes a double-edged sword: it accentuates the writer’s feelings and, simultaneously, opens up further public spheres where such events hold much greater significance. In the case of the Rosenbergs, the concomitant issues of anti-Semitism, the barbarity of the death penalty and the execution of an innocent woman in turn leads to accusations that Plath is being flippant and even impudent. This demonstrates the difficulty for the writer in containing and controlling history. Plath self-consciously addresses this theme in her poetry.

In addition to the subject of history, Plath was also very interested in exploring in her work matters of faith. During the summer of 1952 she worked as a child minder for a Christian Science family, the Cantors. She also published several poems and short stories in the *Christian Science Monitor*, and from her first submitted poem “Bitter Strawberries” in 1950, she became quite a regular contributor. She could satisfy the religious views of the magazine’s readership and, at the same time, maintain her ‘pagan’ ideas.<sup>102</sup> As a non-believer it seemed to her illogical that followers of Christian Science regarded the spiritual as real and all the material aspects of

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<sup>101</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

<sup>102</sup> *Journals*, pp. 480–81.

their existence as illusion.<sup>103</sup> She found it objectionable that while this form of transcendent reality stayed hidden, everyday life was deemed flawed, sinful, and a screen which, believers argued, had to be removed before the truth of God could be revealed. Plath could not agree with this privileging of mind over matter because the individual refused to deal directly with his or her existence and receive whatever benefits the material world had to offer. In *The Bell Jar* Esther hates the visit in hospital of her former employer, a Christian Scientist, who talked ‘about the mist going up from the earth in the Bible, and the mist being error, and my whole trouble being that I believed in the mist, and the minute I stopped believing in it, it would disappear and I would see I had always been well’.<sup>104</sup> Esther could not reconcile healing with the letting go of all the ‘erroneous’ events which had led her to this point in life. The problem with religion, she remarks, is that ‘[n]o matter how much you knelt and prayed, you still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world’.<sup>105</sup>

Instead Plath defined reality, principally, as everything which was of physical and emotional relevance to her. ‘I am what I feel and think and do’, she declared.<sup>106</sup> Thus assertion of the primacy of tangible reality over the spiritual constitutes a strong statement of self-identity. However, if the poet repudiates the existence of God, who is equated with perfection, the ideal and the universal, how can the ego aspire to replace such an omniscient being? The young Plath wished to make of everyday life the ‘jumping-off place’ for poetry, but her ‘provincial’ viewpoint failed to satisfy her godly alter-ego.<sup>107</sup> Certainly, the trials and tribulations of the self provided effective source material for poetry but, as Plath contended, the poet’s propensity to involve herself directly could be trying and, ultimately, unsatisfying, if what she wrote about

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<sup>103</sup> *Journals*, pp. 119–20.

<sup>104</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 214.

<sup>105</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 174.

<sup>106</sup> *Journals*, p. 45.

<sup>107</sup> *Journals*, p. 45.

remained unmediated by a more creative and universal imagination. In Plath's case, therefore, the poet should observe and analyse the world with whatever emotions were induced, as long as the compulsion for introversion, or self-obsession, was suppressed. Plath was not interested simply in truth-telling, rather in creating 'plots' or fictionalising.

The discussion has so far underlined Plath's poetic strategies. Primarily, the self is a sentient being drawn to tangible objects, whether, for example, a tree, an owl, a moon, candles, a painting, or a sculpture. Plath favoured the physical realm and asserted that she was a "matter worshiper". She also stressed that 'the abstract words are synthesised from the realms of concrete experience',<sup>108</sup> although she accepted that nothing could be viewed in completely neutral terms. Bishop endorsed a similar argument in a letter to Swenson when remarking that in none of her poems was she totally detached from the subject matter, however impersonal the verse may appear to be. In Plath's case, subjectivity coloured all perception, but 'confession' – in the fullest sense of the word – a moral obligation to express the whole truth was not necessarily required of the poet. Plath's life experiences are unified and organised and the subjective voice scrutinised as its intentions become the actual focus of poetry. All this may be understood to mean that she is not purely Confessional. Her verse amounts to more than self-obsession and for this reason it is important to underscore the meta-commentary in, for example, "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay" and "Poems, Potatoes"; the self-aggrandising role of the poet-artist ("The Surgeon at 2:00 am"); the purpose of myth ("The Death of Myth-Making"); and the classic debate surrounding objectification and symbolism ("The Wishing Box" and "How to Conjure Up a Dryad"). Of course, the traumas of Plath's life in 1962–1963 found expression in her work. However, a second voice remains evident in "Lady Lazarus," "Fever 103°," "Mary's Song," and "Cut," poems which reveal the poet's self-irony, as she reflects upon the position she assumes as

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<sup>108</sup> *Journals*, p. 122.

a recurrent subject of her work (she becomes the ‘golden child’, CP, 257). The poet can also detect an imagination that inclines toward powerful and exaggerated metaphors of religion and the Holocaust; the drama or performance of personal sacrifice; and the cut as symbolic of her position as both victim and healer. “Fever 103<sup>o</sup>”, moreover, focuses upon the imaginative forces at play, while ‘Words’ concerns the power of language and expression.

The experience of reading Plath should not be governed by rigidly set rules of interpretation. She clearly follows in Bishop’s footsteps in the way that the formalities of her writing are employed to illustrate a mind in the act of perceiving. Plath admired Bishop’s ability to present the poem as an art form and, in so doing, permit the reader to enter the consciousness of the writer. In this way Plath could make sense of the literary status of the poet as a modern day ‘pied-piper’, willing to resort to self-irony and even self-ridicule. In “Cut” the persona ruminates on a bleeding finger and parodies the poetic practice of yoking together episodes of private pain and disparate metaphors of universal import. It has been noted that the darkly humorous side of Plath’s character in such poems as “Cut” and “Berck-Plage” reveals a mind in pursuit of strangely incongruous and uncouth images.<sup>109</sup> Certainly, Plath’s “Cut” achieves both comic and ironic effect, the speaker conceding that her mind is easily prone to exaggeration. The sliced thumb is a cause for celebration but such an insignificant mishap suggests new ways of seeing the world: ‘Straight from the heart./ I step on it,/ Clutching my bottle/ Of pink fizz’ (CP, 235). The small detail becomes overwhelmed by escalating images and the sight of blood provokes in the thoughts of the poet metaphors of war and aggression; red-coated soldiers, Kamikaze pilots and the Ku Klux Klan. In “Mary’s Song,” equally, the poet revels in the freedom of boundless imagination. The roasting lamb ‘[s]acrifices its opacity’, thus giving rise to

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<sup>109</sup> J.D. O’Hara, ‘Plath’s Comedy’, in Gary Lane (ed.), *Sylvia Plath. New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 78–82.

an infinite space within which all metaphorical constructions are possible. The cooking meat crackles in its fat:

The fire makes it precious,  
The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,  
Ousting the Jews.

...

The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

It is a heart,  
This holocaust I walk in,  
O golden child the world will kill and eat. (CP, 257)

The imagination, equated here with fire, grows exponentially. ‘The same fire’ burns metaphorically in the poet’s mind making it possible for her to see in the homely image of roasting lamb the ‘precious’ symbolism of Christian sacrifice, as well as to find connection between the melting fat of the meat and that of the heretical Jews. The glowing ovens suggest the growing intensity of the poet’s imagination, and the creative ego, or ‘golden child’, is now, ironically, approximated to Christ as saviour.

It is important to bear in mind Plath’s aesthetic statements, as set out in “Context”, when analysing her writing of the early 1960s. What makes a poem a work of art? What elevates verse above mere description? How does art transcribe the senses? Can the imagination truly be an escape from external reality? The poet grapples with such questions in “Wintering” and “The Moon and the Yew Tree”. The mind either projects or mirrors the blackness of nature. In “Wintering” the isolated speaker’s senses are, at first, given form by the black objects she sees. But if they are objective correlatives, in time their blackness comes to possess and oppress her – ‘It is they who own me’. Who gives form to whom ponders the speaker? In the stanzas that follow despair is realisation that this troubled mind – metamorphosed into a swarm of bees –

cannot escape its seclusion, whether it is of its own making or not: ‘Now they ball in a mass,/ Black/ Mind against all that white’. The poet, however, is momentarily hopeful – the white snow wears a ‘smile./ It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of Meissen’ – although the idea that nature can offer respite is quickly aborted (into this snow ‘[t]hey can only carry their dead’) (CP, p. 218). Plath reminds us of our immortality.

In the companion poem “The Swarm” the intractable mind has not been cured of its ills and again it is compared to a ‘black ball’ of bees (CP, pp. 215-17). This time, however, the poet is fascinated by the creative force of envy; ‘Jealousy can open the blood,/ It can make black roses’. In the speaker’s mind such a powerful emotion is projected and given natural form. The image of a black rose is both literal and symbolic. However, envy is not easily containable and imagination, in a reprise of the bee metaphor, spreads out like a swarm (‘Clouds, clouds’). Such artful contrivance can even justify the anger and violence arising from envy; the mind (it is ‘[s]o dumb’) hears the repeated ‘pom, pom’ of a shotgun fired at the beehive and believes that this sound is the ‘voice of God/ Condoning the beak, the claw, the grin of the dog’. The increasingly heightened language enables Plath to revel in mismatch and incongruities, assigning emotions to countries, continents and historical figures. Nevertheless, a warped and expansive imagination amounts to, in a figurative sense, the ‘greed’ and megalomania of Napoleon invading Russia. It makes the poet fearful that such a ‘black’ mind is, ultimately, destructive either of itself or of those it encounters. For this reason, the man ‘with gray hands’, the pragmatist, kills the colony of bees; “‘They would have killed *me*’”, he exclaims. And yet, such gloom is partly lifted by the humorous incongruity of the last two lines: ‘Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything./ O Europe! O ton of honey!’. Perhaps, in the final reckoning, there is no more to fear than a creatively extravagant mind. Plath returns to this theme in “Cut”.



Plath seeks to understand how the self responds to its environment and, as in Bishop's "Crusoe in England", the external world becomes an analogy of the speaker's state of mind. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree" seclusion appears both physical and psychological: 'This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary./ The trees of the mind are black'. The mind and universe are inextricably linked and the solipsistic persona declares: 'The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God'. (CP, p. 172). Again, the question is whether the mind projects or mirrors its surroundings. Plath is fascinated by perception and mental distortion and in "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" (1956) she warns against manipulating the 'outer world into a mere shadow of her inner life'.<sup>110</sup> However, the imagination could be induced in the mind of an individual at various points of wakefulness, sleep or hallucination. Thus, at times in Plath's poems, intoxication is literal, fuelled by alcohol or prescription drugs, and in the tradition of the *poète maudit*; connection is made between delirium and poetic vision.

In July, 1957 Plath, was in Cape Cod with Ted Hughes after returning from England. She had not composed poems or stories for six months and writer's block made her reflect upon creativity. Dreams of the 'horrors and fears' produced by her father were not, she asserted, the true source of inspiration for poetry. Rather, the emphasis was to be on writing about 'experience' in a 'realistic' and 'naturalistic' fashion', and "Sow" was typical of her new style: 'small descriptions where the words have an aura of mystic power'.<sup>111</sup> However, it is not the case that Plath's later poems constitute a definite departure from this objective vision towards the greater truth of personal mythmaking. The same questions persist. What kind of seeing is more truthful? Does the sentient being build knowledge by synthesising images of the past? Plath seeks answers in "Little Fugue" (1962). In this poem the mind recognises, via the senses, the

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<sup>110</sup> Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon*, p. 246.

<sup>111</sup> *Journals*, pp. 12–13.

significance of external objects and their relationship to the speaker's experiences (memory). Cradling her baby, she watches closely the branches of a yew tree moving in the wind as '[c]old clouds' gather above. The scene has this effect on the speaker:

...  
 So the deaf and dumb  
 Signal the blind, and are ignored.

I like black statements.  
 The featurelessness of that cloud, now!  
 White as an eye all over!  
 The eye of the blind pianist.

...  
 He could hear Beethoven:  
 Black yew, white cloud,  
 The horrific complications...(CP, p. 187)

The confusion of the senses is comical, whilst the self-reflexive comment about 'black statements' points towards a creatively opaque mind. But there follows a sudden alteration of the view, the nebulous cloud 'now!' frozen, which triggers a corresponding memory of the blind piano player. The metaphor allows for transition and the poem shifts to the speaker sitting at a table on a ship watching this man. The fact that he cannot see but can hear, unlike Beethoven, elicits a further self-regarding comment: the mind, full of 'horrific complications', finds visual and auditory correspondences in past experiences unrelated to the original context from which they emerged, namely the sight of a yew tree. The latter is treated recursively in "Little Fugue" in imitation of its musical equivalent. The displacement of the image of the blind man initiates a third movement, this time based on the sense of hearing, or rather the lack of it:

Deafness is something else.  
 I see your voice  
 Black and leafy, as in my childhood

A yew hedge of orders,  
 Gothic and barbarous, pure German.

Dead men cry from it.  
I am guilty of nothing.

The yew tree is preserved as the basic element of a cross-sensory statement that gives physical form to her father's voice. As Plath explains in her journal, it is the complexity of the synesthetic 'visual image' which is poetic.<sup>112</sup> From the 'yew hedge of orders' may be inferred her father's Germanic sternness. However, his introduction evokes memories not only of a personal nature, but of universal import as well. The words 'Gothic' and 'barbarous' complement each other, whilst 'pure German' relates both to medieval tribalism and more recent ideologies of Aryan supremacy. The images are increasingly surreal, so much so that the speaker proclaims a calm detachment from this horror: 'I am guilty of nothing'. And when, in the following stanza, the mind approximates the dark yew tree to Christ, she questions her ability to make balanced comparisons: 'Is it not as tortured'? There may be similar self-critical irony when Plath presents herself as a persecuted Jew.

In "Little Fugue" the sight of a yew tree, an objective correlative of the speaker's melancholy, functions as the first link in a chain of analogous images that demonstrate how the mind responds to the senses. When the speaker recalls her father, she is presented with the image of a 'dark tunnel' signifying 'silence'; his muted voice can only register in the present if given fleeting form by the morbid metaphor of the yew tree ('death opened, like a black tree, blackly'). She recognises that childhood memories ('I was seven, I knew nothing./ The world occurred') have been profoundly shaped in the intervening years, so much so that understanding of her father seems contingent upon her grasp of language and expression. Such mental adjustments reinterpret experience. The speaker recalls poignant memories of her father, but '[t]his was a man, then!', silent and distant, now connected to her by the deathly metaphor of a 'black tree'. In

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<sup>112</sup> *Journals* p. 87.

the present reality she ‘survive(s)’ by undoing the metaphors (‘These are my fingers, this my baby’) and attending to her responsibilities as a mother. If the last line conveys the idea of a troubled relationship, the stanza as a whole is marked by resolve and a desire to remove oneself from such dark images.

The schema of “Little Fugue” can thus be summarised: in the first instance, the subject’s understanding of the familiar yew tree is conveyed in terms of a metaphor (‘The yew’s black fingers wag’). From this transformation may be subtly inferred feelings of sadness. As is often the case in Plath’s poems, the metaphor in “Little Fugue” grows exponentially until it becomes a surreal representation, and the clever interlinking of images suggests that the poet is interested in making direct statements not of the subject’s father but of a mind that continuously adjusts to his absence. This is the power of the imagination to shape understanding.

### **Pre-reflective versus Historicised Language**

The discussion of Bishop’s and Plath’s poetry has suggested areas of shared interest. First, Bishop lays emphasis on all forms of art that reflect lived experience and, fundamentally, the emotional response of the individual to places, people and objects. Secondly, she is concerned with the public and private face of the poet and how the language that he or she uses reflects or deflects from personal decision-making. Plath reaffirms the significance of the experiential truth, and judges this tangible existence as more valuable in shaping self-identity than religious notions which detract from individual choice. Of course Plath desires to articulate her pains and anxieties, but she also comments upon an intensely creative mind that is prone to exaggeration. Moreover, Bishop and Plath question the function of objects, symbols and myth in poetry. In their work the distinction can be made between the non-symbolic and historicised

language that establishes common frames of reference. The concept of poetry as reflective and its poets as agents of continuity, inheriting and bequeathing familiar images from the past – as Plath says, acting as a ‘mouthpiece of the dead’ (“The Colossus,” CP, 129) – is in opposition to the notion that verse ought to be independent, as much as possible, of such historical influences. Hence, poetry can be either symbolic and mythical, or non-rhetorical and pre-reflective. The latter type takes as its starting-point the material – whether it be a monument, painting or sculpture, a tapestry, map, or place of personal interest. There is established an immediate connection between the poet and the chosen object. By comparison, historicised language introduces by means, for example, of symbols, universal and strongly evocative themes. Moreover, the application of myth – tales of gods, liminal figures, or magical animals – as context for Plath’s poems, generalises what was originally a personal experience. Thus a historicised poem constitutes inherited ideas and images. Such a classically configured poem shapes its words according to stylistic canons, and suppresses the poet’s individuality of expression to some extent.<sup>113</sup>

According to Mühlhözer the object, primarily, is regarded as an empirically demonstrable thing of this world and its meaning or ‘truth value is uniquely determined independently of any speaker and context of utterance’.<sup>114</sup> However, is this a feasible definition of objectivity in a poetic context? Bishop’s literary reputation rests on her perceived detachment. Thus, oriented toward objects, her poetry minimises the subjective. But, arguably, is it not the case that the objective is inseparable from the subjective?<sup>115</sup> In other words, are not all objective statements in poetry, ultimately, of the subject? And does not a poet’s lexical choice or designation (as

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<sup>113</sup> Jan Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, trans. by John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Felix Mühlhözer, ‘On Objectivity’, *Erkenntnis*, vol. 28, no. 2 (March, 1988): 192.

<sup>115</sup> On this simultaneity see Mühlhözer, ‘On Objectivity’: 223–24.

opposed to arbitrariness) constitute subjectivity? The following premise is true of Bishop's poetry: her language is relativised, in the sense that it is specific to her immediate sensory perceptions in a particular time and place. Words embody her peculiarly subjective response to surroundings. But the form which her direct expressions take eliminates for the reader historicised or expanded frames of reference. Her poetry, it may be suggested, eradicates the element of empathy that is an integral part of much literature.

The difference between pre-reflective and historicised language in Bishop's and Plath's work can also be seen in terms of colour. The referents of signifying colours may be universal and cultural, the application of which results in representational art.<sup>116</sup> Colours, conversely, are instinctual, meaning that they transgress any established codes. In pre-reflective poetry, for example, colour condenses emotion, becoming an objective correlative and, arguably, when used in this manner, obviates a great deal of discursive language. The desire of the latter poets is to imitate artistic or exponential immediacy in their language. Poetry of this kind is directed toward the 'icon', the sign (Derrida), the ideogram (Fernollosa), or the metonym.<sup>117</sup> And the aim of all these techniques is to recreate in a few words as complete an image as possible in the mind of the reader. It is poetry that breaks with narrative, myth and metaphor. William Carlos Williams, for instance, attempts to free the object from metaphor and see 'it as it actually existed, within its own experiential framework'.<sup>118</sup> In a similar vein Charles Altieri describes the disjunction between poetry which either creates connections with the past or its language is understood in

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<sup>116</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 220.

<sup>117</sup> This may even be described as the 'universalizing' of language when dealing with objects; Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Literature and Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>118</sup> Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, p. 178.

relation to a particular ‘time and place’.<sup>119</sup> Kristeva, furthermore, presents a parallel argument to Altieri’s when describing the function of subjective and objective colour in art:

Color is the shattering of unity. Thus, it is through color – colors – that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as conscious subject accepts....We would suggest, on the contrary, that this “formal”, chromatic grid, far from empty, is empty only of a “unique or ultimate signified”; that it is heavy with “semantic latencies” linked to the economy of the subject’s constitution within significance.<sup>120</sup>

In the same way that the use of objects in poetry represents for Altieri a fracture from the past – a poet’s fragmented or incomplete ‘world view’ – so too for Kristeva, when pictorial colour relates uniquely to the emotions and energies of an artist, and is thus ‘engendered as the meaning of a singular being’, a work of art ceases to be merely representational, symbolic, or ideological. In both cases, literary and artistic, individuality amounts to a break from tradition. Thus, importantly, pre-reflective language is relative to ‘time and space’, that is, to the immediate temporal and spatial framework of a poem – or, in structuralist terms, to the ‘dynamic’ as opposed to the ‘static’.<sup>121</sup> This may be understood to mean that words derive their relevance primarily from within a poem’s unique context, and not from external structures of interpretation. Altieri has further written:

The primary psychological aspect of relativism is a continual sense of the incompleteness of one’s own discourse; each statement and, indeed, each world view is at best a fragment of a deeper whole that can be recognized only as a nagging absence or a shadow.<sup>122</sup>

The modern writer endeavours to displace in the mind of the reader comfortingly familiar structures of shared experience with a relativism based upon the immediacy of sense and perception. In theory, free-standing poetry, with its self-contained meaning, does not require a

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<sup>119</sup> Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry’: 104.

<sup>120</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, pp. 221–22.

<sup>121</sup> Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>122</sup> Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry’: 104.

great deal of foreknowledge. Invariably, this defamiliarisation leaves some readers alienated because of the perceived difficulty of understanding a poem, which, though transparent in language, seems esoteric and impenetrable.<sup>123</sup>

In art and poetry objects and colours may be used in such a way as to suggest a breach with historicised meaning. This creative strategy points to similarities in how function and effect work in both media. Essentially, the function is to create in the mind of the spectator or reader what has been variously described as a ‘void’, a ‘silence’ or a ‘lack’,<sup>124</sup> and to effect a sense of mystery, uncertainty, or impenetrability. Hence, on the subject of Bishop’s poetics of restraint, Kirstin Hotelling Zona comments: ‘[H]er silences were often strategic, in the service of unearthing assumptions instead of giving answers’.<sup>125</sup> Such a poetic strategy is best illustrated in Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502”. In the first stanza her description of a Renaissance tapestry renders the colours of nature in such literal terms that they appear ‘as if just finished/ and taken off the frame’. That is to say, by virtue of Bishop’s prosaic language, the colours are freed of previous religious associations. This type of poetry, which is about ‘[m]odesty, care, *space*’,<sup>126</sup> becomes a paradox: it is, on the surface, devoid of any recognisable ideology and yet a powerful comment upon human existence. In Bishop’s work these silences are not accidental but deliberate strategy, whose function is as valid as other conventional devices of verse or rhetorical tropes like ellipsis and aporia. Ostensibly, the language is ‘transparent’, but, paradoxically, it insinuates a human incomprehension of both god and nature. These silences or voids –

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<sup>123</sup> In *Theory of Prose* Viktor Shklovsky distinguishes between ‘recognition’, on an unconscious level, of objects observed in the world and art which has the capacity to present things as if seen for the first time. In the latter case, the viewer, in a self-regarding manner, becomes more conscious of the complex process of creativity and perception; *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), pp. 1–15.

<sup>124</sup> Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry’: 103.

<sup>125</sup> Kirstin Hotelling Zona’s afterword to Swenson, *Dear Elizabeth. Five Poems and Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 30.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore. The Psychodynamics of Creativity*, p. 55.



equivalent to the mid-sentence gaps in Bishop's "O Breath" – build upon the ineffability of the spiritual or numinous.

Having briefly investigated the nature of pre-reflective poetry, its function and its effect upon the reader, this discussion ought to make a distinction between objects, on the one hand and symbols and metaphors on the other, the latter of which may be subdivided into the sensuous, natural, or bodily. All such tropes are supposedly born of the mind, Baudelaire's idea of the imagination, for example – perfectly incarnated in Bishop's "Imaginary Iceberg" – describes how thinking gives order and meaning to objects in the external world. 'The whole visible universe is a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform'.<sup>127</sup> Through the process of ideation named objects become collectively identifiable. Subsequent to this, the context and meaning of language proliferate over time and grow 'into the race's skin'.<sup>128</sup> The apple, for example, becomes gradually a historicised symbol connoting nourishment as well as temptation and sin. Words mean other words and, in an historical or religious sense, Symbolists like Baudelaire are able through such devices to transform the visible world into something transcendental. The symbol is, indeed, a compact 'word-object', but beneath its surface meaning runs deep. For this reason, the symbolic focuses attention on the past, on the 'true experiences of mankind',<sup>129</sup> whereas, I believe, metaphorical language can focus the reader's senses on the immediate world. This is a spatial realm. By its very nature, the aesthetic function of this poetry concentrates the mind on the 'linguistic sign'.<sup>130</sup> For instance, in Archibald MacLeish's 'Ars

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<sup>127</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, trans. J. Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1955), p. 239.

<sup>128</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 36.

<sup>129</sup> Erich Neumann, *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 65.

<sup>130</sup> Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, p. 4.

Poetica', which is examined more closely in the following chapter, the metaphors employed are visual precisely because they gauge their stillness directly from nature – it is a world familiar to the reader's direct gaze. In comparison, other metaphors do not suggest sight but touch. Bishop's line '[t]hese peninsulas take water between thumb and finger/ like women feeling for the smoothness of yard goods' ("The Map," CP, 3) is both sensuous and sensual – unsurprisingly, sexual implicitness has been read into this tactile language.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, in "Cape Breton" Bishop's tangible metaphor relates how 'the silken water is weaving and weaving' (CP, 67). Historicised poetry, by comparison, appropriates those metaphors which hold, essentially, universal meaning.

It may be further suggested that poets cannot choose to work in isolation, but are compelled to use the 'talents' that have been handed down to them.<sup>132</sup> Either the creative naturally arises from the instinctual,<sup>133</sup> or it is reflective of external factors. The latter relates to the tradition in modern poetry, which asserts that a poem is like a monument and that poets are socially conditioned by the ideas and images impressing upon their consciousness from an early age. The powerful resonance of fairytales in the work of Plath, for example, is clear enough to see. But to what extent are poets influenced by writers of previous generations? T.S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual" wrote of poets who were shaped by the past.<sup>134</sup> This is a form of historical conditioning. Similarly, Stan Smith has argued, in his discussion of Plath, that for her 'identity itself is the primary historical datum: the self is a secretion of history, and therefore not initially "my" self at all, but the voice of its antecedents, its progenitors, a

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<sup>131</sup> See pp. 259–60.

<sup>132</sup> On this point see Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, p. 219.

<sup>133</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, pp. 217–21.

<sup>134</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 41.

“mouthpiece of the dead.”<sup>135</sup> Bishop, however, was wary of literary influences, the writers from whom she unconsciously borrowed images and ideas, and her indebtedness, not least to Moore, was, she conceded, derivative, almost plagiaristic. According to Bishop humans are incapable of resisting the ‘bewildering’ sources which life has to offer, and choice is an inherent weakness of self-determination since it only serves to reflect the familiar ‘terms and purposes’ of history that are always at play. She does, indeed, employ in her poetry traditional forms such as the ballad, sonnet, villanelle and sestina and, as Bishop remarks in “In Prison”, it is the responsibility of the writer to comment upon what has gone before – ‘there will be no contradictions or criticisms of what has already been laid down’.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, “In Prison” appears to parody Eliot’s conception of the ideal poet as having ‘historical sense’ of the whole literature of Europe (‘the mind of Europe’) which has preceded him. Bishop’s ‘prisoner’ feels lesser regard for such order and describes her literary legacy impudently as ‘an old bundle tossed carelessly into a corner’.<sup>137</sup> It is incumbent upon the poet, as a true measure of originality, to underscore that which is different to what has come before. But, more importantly, the body of work should not easily suggest for readers a perpetuation of the literary legacy.

## Conclusion

Bishop and Plath agree upon the primacy of the material over the spiritual world, and believe that language, in all its subjective and objective forms, reflects an individual’s sensory responses to his or her surroundings. Moreover, both are of the opinion that nothing can be viewed in a detached manner, or presented in completely impartial terms. Plath is adamant that

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<sup>135</sup> Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1982), p. 202.

<sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “In Prison”, in *The Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 188.

<sup>137</sup> Bishop, “In Prison”, p. 188.

poets are never totally disconnected from the world because of their incapability of grasping ‘the whole impersonal neutrality of a universe’.<sup>138</sup> In their poetry there is an ongoing debate over the position and mediation of the self via objects, symbols, myth and other historical data. They are, equally, critical of those who endorse religious practice that detracts from authentic experience and thus insist upon conformity of thought rather than freedom of enquiry. Additionally, Bishop and Plath demonstrate how the way we see things is affected by what we know and believe, whether it is social, political or religious. In its most basic form, this seeing is either based upon personal experience and first-hand knowledge, or shaped by conventional ideas and customs. Bishop’s poetry attempts to go against symbolic order and for this reason it appears like a series of fragmented world views. The object she describes focuses attention upon its own function – we are encouraged to view its self-formation; like the iceberg it ‘cuts its facets from within’. For Plath, similarly, the act of perception incorporates individual biases, attitudes and influences.

The reconsideration of Plath as a poet acutely aware of the subtle differences in seeing and meaning makes it possible to set her apart from other Confessional women writers. Bishop had a particularly strong aversion to, she declared mockingly, the ‘self-pitiers’ of the ‘anguish-school’, and their compulsion to depict their experiences of suffering.<sup>139</sup> As a responsible or ‘moral’ poet who aims to describe things as they truly are, she objects to poets who ‘confess’ untrue personal matters, and thus violate the trust of their readers. Plath could admire most Bishop’s poetic which, though connected intimately to the self, never loses sight of its artistic, non-utilitarian value. For Plath, the ‘real poem’ remains a ‘unicorn-thing’.<sup>140</sup> Her feelings are rooted in real and often traumatic events, but she does not want to risk sounding crass and believes, strongly, that readers cannot bear too much reality. It is the responsibility of the writer

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<sup>138</sup> *Journals*, pp. 120–21.

<sup>139</sup> *One Art*, pp. 431–34.

<sup>140</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

to build ‘illusion for man-on-street: shroud of mystery’.<sup>141</sup> Imagination is the ability to go beyond introversion, or mere reproduction of the ego.<sup>142</sup> She does recognise that her language can be historicised and in poems such as “To Conjure up a Dryad,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Fever 103°,” she explores the differences between objectification and a heightened imagination. The exaggerated images of religion and the Holocaust that she employs, moreover, veer from the context of their original meaning, serve to magnify her personal experiences and highlight the difficulty for the poet to contain and personalise the immense significance of past events. There is an internal dialogue that comments upon our collective history and how women, in particular, choose to reflect or measure their feelings through or against such images.

In Plath ‘the conversation of life of all people in all places’ is the point of departure for exploring the self in direct relation to its surroundings.<sup>143</sup> She identified in Bishop’s poetry a kind of intimacy that reflects the rhythms of the poet’s ‘own breathing’. Plath felt a strong affinity with this form of poetic self-expression. But in order to understand more the basis of their shared ideas, the following chapter focuses principally on Bishop and further discusses the essential strategies of her visual poetics as revealed in both published and unpublished material.

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<sup>141</sup> *Journals*, p. 132.

<sup>142</sup> *Journals*, pp. 92, 99.

<sup>143</sup> Plath, “Context”, in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

## Chapter II

### Bishop: The Poem as Object or Monument

Bishop's letters, literary reviews and essays reveal an interest in poetic language that is accurate, natural sounding and 'spontaneous.' Her attention to poetic craft was commented upon by Lowell in his review of *North & South* (1947), and she credited him with identifying in her work a 'general drift or consistency' that other reviewers had failed to recognise.<sup>144</sup> Most importantly for Lowell, Bishop's poems 'fitted together,' giving 'such body to her reflections.'<sup>145</sup> The words unfold logically from beginning to end, ordering all things animate and inanimate in a direct manner that adds to their inscrutability. She describes, for instance, a fish or a map and the precise language appears to 'mirror' or trace the poet's mental choices as she shapes context and reflects upon the formation of meaning.<sup>146</sup> Such a poetic 'exercise' constitutes an intimate act and there are, seemingly, no tropes that allow entry into an indivisible alliance between object and subject. The reader, who follows intently Bishop's descriptions, becomes gradually aware of the function of historicised symbolic forms, which, though not present, could potentially infringe upon immediate perception. By their very absence, the formal components of alternative modes of seeing emerge more strongly.

Poets in the 1930s were increasingly influenced by scientific theories of psychology and phenomenology, how the mind formulates ideas and the relation between the conscious and unconscious. And in 1936, while living in New York, Bishop wrote to Moore commending

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<sup>144</sup> *One Art*, p. 146.

<sup>145</sup> Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 79.

<sup>146</sup> Metapoetry, Bishop stated in notes for a lecture entitled "Three American Poets" (c. 1968), remained an essential facet of American literature in the second half of the twentieth century (VA, 53.11).

Stevens' *Owl's Clover*. What she liked most about the collection was 'that it is such a display of ideas at work'.<sup>147</sup> This was perhaps her understanding of Stevens' well-known formulation that poetry represents 'the mind in the act of finding'.<sup>148</sup> How do we perceive the world through our senses and how do subjective factors affect this? Lowell, in his review of *North & South* repeated Bishop's idea, when praising her poetry that appeared to be 'in motion', but he understood this in a more literal sense ('...the weed that grows to divide...the waves rolling in on the shore...', etc).<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, he could criticise Bishop for being 'self-indulgent' in poems such as "The Map" and "Casabianca," because the action in these 'seems blurred'. They had no substance, but were simply 'whimsical commentary on an almost nonexistent subject'.<sup>150</sup> However, the meaning of such poems arises not from the observed subject, but the poet's ability to reflect upon the process of perception: can the poet replicate authentic experience and see something as it is without distortion?

In many ways Lowell adhered to the poetic principles Bishop approved of, not least a grounding in the factual, which made his verse 'more real, fresh, and immediate'.<sup>151</sup> For Lowell the first part of a Bishop poem was description followed by reflection, either by the poet or a persona, for dramatic effect. These strategies of poetic structure were, Lowell stated, key

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<sup>147</sup> In her letter to Moore regarding Stevens' *Owl's Clover* Bishop wrote: '...it is such a display of ideas at work—making poetry, the poetry making them, etc. That, it seems to me, is the way a poet should think'. He did not indulge in 'exhortation or bits of melancholy description...'; *One Art*, p. 48. One technique Bishop borrowed from Stevens was the use of French titles as a means of complicating the reader's responses to the poem; Mark Ford, 'Mont D'Espoir or Mount Despair: Early Bishop, Early Ashbery and the French', in Lionel Kelly (ed.), *Poetry and the Sense of Panic. Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>148</sup> Bishop's letters reveal the many books on psychology which she read in the early years of her writing career, including Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*. Caudwell's 'very worthwhile' book attempts a psychoanalytical reading of poetry, and his arguments on the organisation of ideas and emotions closely parallel Bishop's own (*One Art*, p. 63)

<sup>149</sup> Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 77.

<sup>150</sup> Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 78.

<sup>151</sup> *One Art*, p. 562.

influences on the Confessional style of *Life Studies*.<sup>152</sup> Thus in “Skunk Hour” he employs Bishop’s speech tones, carefully signaling in stanza five the shift from describing places and people (hermit, millionaire and fisherman) to revealing the poet’s consciousness or state of mind (‘My mind’s not right’).

Bishop’s poems about poetry explore ‘sense-perception.’ (VA, 53.11) In “Anaphora” and “Love Lies Sleeping,” for instance, the sentient being, whose ‘eyes/ first open on’ to the light of ‘[e]arliest morning’, becomes aware of his surroundings (CP, 16, 52). This was Bishop’s understanding of subjectivity – the poet’s self-investment in the work created – and she criticised Confessional writers who corrupted this original idea. Bishop was interested to see carried forward the debate about subjectivity. In “Three American Poets” it seems that the natural progression of ‘real’ poetry extended from Stevens and Moore, through her, and on to Lowell, and bypassed the self-obsession of much American verse. She was convinced that poetry should not say it all and labeled a great deal of American poetry as peculiarly ‘self-conscious’ and thus inferior. Confessional women poets were particularly culpable for producing verse that circumscribed the world according to mostly female experiences. Obviously, Bishop’s fervent opposition to Confessional writers did not mean outright rejection of subjective poetry, if such a thing were indeed possible. In her work the ‘I’ is concerned primarily with establishing its position relative to the objects observed.

### **Bishop’s Transparent Language**

Bishop begins with a kind of tabula rasa, a narrowed or select vision, which demarcates the perceiver’s sense of time and place and circumscribes how the formal properties of language, in describing objects, create context. From this unambiguous point all other factors which in

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<sup>152</sup> Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 227.



poetry can distort the reality and truth of an experience are thrown into sharp relief. One of these, fundamentally, is the symbolic. By contrast, Bishop's 'accurate', 'spontaneous' and 'mysterious' (VA, 68.2) language carefully orders the objects that she perceives, and is specifically developed for reflecting philosophically on reality. Her words are 'transparent' in the sense that they describe minutely the world she experiences directly. The transparent language of "Santarém," "Questions of Travel," "Brazil, January 1, 1502" and "Sandpiper" – poems discussed at greater length below – is particularly revealing of their ideological basis and, as I argue in a later chapter, Bishop's exploration of habitual style.<sup>153</sup> But what is transparent language? In an essay written in 1962 John Ashbery described the verse of the French modernist Pierre Reverdy as *transparente*, and articulated a poetic genre based on images of transparency and coherency, not symbolism, essentially 'sans signification philosophique'.<sup>154</sup> Notably, this call for a poetical mode of transparency and directness, which had a strong liberating effect on modernist writers such as Ashbery, ran counter to the doctrine of symbolist orthodoxy. In short, according to Ashbery,

Reverdy parvient a restituer aux choses leur vrai nom, a abolir l'eternel poids mort de symbolisme et d'allégorie ...C'est comme si on voyait pour la première fois un paysage naturel, n'ayant vu jusque la que des paysages peints.<sup>155</sup>

This acclamation of poetical purity reads like an endorsement of aesthetic objectification, denouncing symbolism and allegory in preference for natural language over hyperbole. Admittedly, Reverdy's language was transparent, but crucially he was a surrealist who favoured ambiguity as an essential facet of poetry. In an essay on 'The Esthetics of Ambiguity' Eric Sellin

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<sup>153</sup> See pp. 169–84.

<sup>154</sup> John Ashbury, 'Reverdy en Amerique', *Mercure de France* (Special Issue: Pierre Reverdy), 344 (January/April, 1962): 109–12.

<sup>155</sup> Ashbery, 'Reverdy en Amerique':110. 'Reverdy wants to restore to things their true name, to abolish the eternal deadweight of symbolism and allegory...It is as if we see for the first time a natural – not painted – landscape' (own translation).

described Reverdy as ‘one of the foremost exploiters of the suggestive and disparate image’.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, radical poeticism, a ‘dismembering of language’,<sup>157</sup> pattern and meaning, is in keeping with theorists who would argue that the dislocation and ‘randomness’ of word formation only adds to a poem’s multidimensional-reading. Ashbery enjoys the duplicitous nature of language, in much the same way that his contemporary May Swenson chooses at times to divest the poem’s rhetoric of its teleological order. Do we need, therefore, to understand what Ashbery meant by ‘transparent’? As a poet he certainly grew out of surrealism and, arguably, Reverdy’s transparent style, so highly praised by Ashbery, should be differentiated from Bishop’s.<sup>158</sup> She was ambivalent toward some surrealist poetry, which she remarked, ‘terrifies me because of the sense of irresponsibility & *danger* it gives of the mind being “broken down” – I want to produce the opposite effect’.<sup>159</sup>

It is interesting that the term transparent may be used in reference to Bishop and Reverdy, and yet they are very different poets. Both aim to simplify language and reject the ungrammatical obscurities most commonly associated with surrealists. Generally-speaking, their work also disavows symbolism. However, Reverdy’s poetry upturns the logic of order and progress since his precise syntax insinuates a context within which disparate images are simultaneously realised. Transparent language in Bishop’s work needs, therefore, a better definition. Importantly, she is not guided by the principles of juxtaposition and simultaneity, which so often

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<sup>156</sup> Eric Sellin, ‘The Esthetics of Ambiguity: Reverdy’s use of Syntactical Simultaneity’, in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *About French Poetry from DADA to ‘tel Quel’: Text and Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), pp. 112–25.

<sup>157</sup> Mutu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 204.

<sup>158</sup> For the poet of reality ‘[n]o symbolism is acceptable’; William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 213.

<sup>159</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, ed. Alice Quinn (Carcanet Press: Manchester, 2006), p. 272. In Bishop’s short story “In Prison” she desires to produce her ‘own examples of surrealist art!’; *Collected Prose*, p. 188.

lead to abstract ideas. Certainly, Bishop, like the surrealists, is interested in the ‘modes of knowing’<sup>160</sup> and in her poetry looks to the gaps and silences in our knowledge, but while they endeavour to create a ‘spark’ in the gap – through the ambiguities of discordant imagery – she aims merely to bring attention to it. Bishop makes no claims to fill these spaces, but points readers in their direction. Rather the poems are metaphors for an enquiring mind.

The starting point for Bishop is the subject, which is defined as the ‘material’ part of a poem. This idea is the rational, concrete fact, the noun, the ‘manifest content’, or the ‘memory image’.<sup>161</sup> Bishop wrote to Moore:

But I have that continuous uncomfortable feeling of ‘things’ in the head, like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly placed pieces of furniture. It’s as if all the nouns were there but the verbs were lacking – if you know what I mean. And I can’t help having the theory that if they are joggled around hard enough and long enough some kind of electricity will occur, just by friction, that will arrange everything. But you remember how Mallarmé said that poetry was made of words, not ideas – and sometimes I’m terribly afraid I am approaching, or trying to approach it all, from the wrong track.<sup>162</sup>

Bishop’s poems begin as objects, material ‘things’ or concrete nouns in the mind, while the kinetic components of language which provide motion, temporality and lucidity (the verbs) are often an afterthought. Bishop’s pragmatic concern, from the outset, is with the ‘theory’ or function of poetry. Indeed, this is the subject of Bishop’s “The Imaginary Iceberg”, where nouns or concrete images are treated as ready composites of external reality. Her paramount objective is to present the motif or structuring principle that guides the poet throughout, and is the focus of the reader’s attention. Hence, it is worthwhile emphasising this curious combination in Bishop’s work of lucidity – a comprehensible and familiar reality – and elusiveness, which emerges from

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<sup>160</sup> Sellin, ‘The Esthetics of Ambiguity: Reverdy’s use of Syntactical Simultaneity’, p. 115.

<sup>161</sup> Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality. A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1946), pp. 128, 212. Bishop read Caudwell’s book when it was first published in 1937; *One Art*, p. 63.

<sup>162</sup> *One Art*, p. 94.

a pre-reflective and exclusive frame of mind. The reader is thus denied familiar points of entry, commonly established by trope. As Bishop mentioned in her letter to Moore, the objects are uncomfortably or awkwardly juxtaposed in her mind in such a way as to suggest random associations. However, the primacy of the object in her poetry is in disagreement with Mallarmé's dictum that poetry is written with words, not ideas.<sup>163</sup> Whereas the surrealists are inclined to give automatic free-reign to the irrational, Bishop's intention is to arrange and to rationalise objects in a lucid language that does not reduce their inscrutability. She describes this as the 'idea' of thought, namely the process of ordering or making sense, but not necessarily of engaging in rhetoric. Undoubtedly, the surrealists' belief in the power of the unconscious was a notable influence on her work.<sup>164</sup> But Bishop's lapse into the unconscious could still avoid the 'pitfalls of abstraction of language.'<sup>165</sup> Her surrealism was unlike Mallarmé's words of free association or Ashbery's random urges to mystify language. She could, however, identify more closely with the theory advanced by Randall Jarrell (who greatly admired her work) that poetry 'represents a struggle and consequent equilibrium between the Conscious and Unconscious'.<sup>166</sup> Tipping the balance either way would prove deleterious to a poem. Jarrell argues against the 'extremely great differentiation' of 'conscientious surrealism', which lacking the 'dialectical structure' (or equilibrium) he advocates, consequently destroys poetic 'suspense and tension'.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Mallarmé's view on poetry was expressed to Degas and reported by Valéry. See Paul Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, trans. David Paul (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 62.

<sup>164</sup> In the 1930s Bishop was reading surrealist literature, and in a letter to Moore, dated January 1937, she asked her friend about her work on Cocteau and the Surrealist Exhibition; *One Art*, p.57

<sup>165</sup> Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 34.

<sup>166</sup> Randall Jarrell, 'Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry', *Georgia Review*, 1996: 701–702. 'Poetry exhibits a constant struggle between the general and the particular: if the general overpowers the particular, we get the abstract intolerable didacticism of the worst eighteenth-century poems; if the particular overpowers the general we get doctrinaire imagism or surrealism'.

<sup>167</sup> Jarrell, 'Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry': 702.

Transparent language has been defined as presenting ‘things as they are’.<sup>168</sup> A poet drawn to the object itself and nothing more steps, as Stevens puts it, ‘barefoot into reality’,<sup>169</sup> and abandons ‘the will to power over things’.<sup>170</sup> This poet is preoccupied with ‘not ideas about the thing but the thing itself’.<sup>171</sup> In espousing the concretisation of poetic language, William Carlos Williams praised Marianne Moore for ‘wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted unto them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts’. Moore’s words ‘first stand crystal clear with no attachments; not even an aroma.’<sup>172</sup> Williams’ remark anticipates structuralist poetic theory. Of course, only within a context do words begin to mirror the actual, but, as Williams points out, figurative language gradually distorts or dilutes concrete reality. Again Williams makes the traditional distinction between spatial and temporal forms in poetry, and recognises that the freeing of words allows the ‘static’ (spatial) – as opposed to the ‘dynamic’ (temporal) – unit to take shape.<sup>173</sup> The objective poet is thus wary of figurative language that continuously unfolds and creates contexts which are open to seemingly infinite interpretation.

Bishop further suggests that the spatial concept critics so often associate with works of literature is in fact indicative of a specific way of thinking. “In Prison” she describes poems as consisting of the fragments of ideas ‘posed’ on a ‘wall’ ‘against the surroundings and

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<sup>168</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), pp. 25–26.

<sup>169</sup> Wallace Stevens, ‘Large Red Man Reading’, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 423.

<sup>170</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality. Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 8.

<sup>171</sup> Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, p. 534.

<sup>172</sup> Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays*, p.128.

<sup>173</sup> On the difference between static and dynamic units see Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, pp. 46–47.

conversations' of her mind.<sup>174</sup> In attempting to understand this mental process, Altieri has written:

We might summarise these differences as an opposition between the earlier, essentially symbolist poetic concerned primarily with the powers of the imagination to create values and structures for interpreting experience and the more recent concern for discovering the energies and possible moral forces inherent in acts of perception in our immediate prereflective experiences of nature and society.<sup>175</sup>

Altieri sets in opposition the poetry of symbolism and reflection against that of immediate experience. The basis of this argument is essentially philosophical, and brings attention to the debate over human knowledge and reasoning. Knowledge can be a priori; that is, symbols of reasoning exist in the mind, in the imagination, independent of real life observation. The symbolist endows tropes with a hierarchy of values, while the empiricist overturns such values. Take, for example, Bishop's poem "A Miracle for Breakfast" and its insistence on the accumulation of knowledge a posteriori. 'I can tell you what I saw next; it was not a miracle', exclaims the speaker, who, observing the ritual of transubstantiation at the heart of the Christian Mass, sees no chalice of wine and holy bread, but instead a cup of coffee and crumbs (CP, 18). The empiricist refuses to allow the imagination to displace the original objects or the fundamental truth of the experience. This philosophy of knowledge proposes that at the core of realism lies the acts of perception and truthfulness, and further informs Bishop's "Anaphora", in which human consciousness attempts to deal with the unknown and inexpressible – that 'ineffable creature' – by attaching to it 'earthly', historicised symbols (CP, 52). After all, as the speaker in "At the Fishhouses" remarks, 'our knowledge is historical' (CP, 66). The theory of a priori knowledge forms, significantly, the central thread of Bishop's poems on religion. In

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<sup>174</sup> Bishop, *Collected Prose*, p. 188.

<sup>175</sup> Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry': 101.

“Seascape”, for instance, and “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance”, empirical enquiry returns over and over to the same conundrum (a kind of aporia): how do we give a name (a symbol), an identity to something unknown, nameless and unobserved? In this ‘dark’ space symbolic consciousness and reasoning help to visualise the unseen – heaven, for example, is likened to a tropical mangrove island in “Seascape”, even though heaven ‘is not like this’ (CP, 40). The empiricist views negatively this type of knowledge as a ‘victim’ who falls prey to the plotting minds of human ‘intrigue’ (“Anaphora,” CP, 52).

The essential distinction in Bishop’s poetry is between that which is symbolic and actual, ‘devoted to fleshing out particular life situations’.<sup>176</sup> We may consider, furthermore, how Bishop makes use of context. Take, for example “Sonnet” (1979), in which the idea of breaking free has been read as suggestive of division (‘a creature divided’) and sexual ‘otherness.’<sup>177</sup> However, “Sonnet”, typically, turns attention upon itself. The self-reflexive poem is, in Bishop’s work, the ideal context because it sets its own parameters, achieves its own ends and avoids an exponential imagination. This fundamental belief in meta-poetry remains constant in Bishop’s work. The poem reflects upon its function or, more precisely, upon the classical straightjacketing configuration of the sonnet (the octave-sestet form speaks of conventional and historical question and resolution). The interpretation is not of the outside world, although the material object of comparison is drawn from the actual. It is not symbolic or interpretive of the external reality, rather, it is internalised. The poet may feel, as a consequence, entrapped within the context of an analogy and she comments upon this captivity. Does she desire other contexts in which to explore? There are various entrapments: the spirit-level, the thermometer, the sonnet form, the

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<sup>176</sup> Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), p. 90.

<sup>177</sup> Adrienne Rich, ‘The Eye of the Outsider: Elizabeth Bishop’s *Complete Poems, 1927–1979*’, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 130.

mirror, the imagination. Analogous to the bubble in the spirit level or the mercury in the thermometer, Bishop's "The walls went on for years & years..." explores further the idea of poetic context and containment.<sup>178</sup> It is a reflection on the imagination, or the creative process from which ideas emerge and, though perhaps worthless and discarded, fragments are subsequently imbued with significance:

In passing up  
 one could write down a word or two  
 a whole page or a joke  
 gone the next morning.  
 Think of them sliding edgewise through  
 the future holding up those words  
 as something actually important  
 for everyone to see, like billboards.  
 The ceiling was tiresome to watch  
 overburdened with fixtures & burning lights  
 but the floorboards had a nice perspective.  
 They rose a little here, sagged there  
 but went off alas under the wall.  
 Did they flow smoothly on or meet  
 in the next room in a clash of splinters?

The prosaic floorboards, positioned within the walls of this containing room, suggest the bare and unmediated idea. The latter represents an immediate reality, an adequate sphere for the discovery of self by way of direct contact with material phenomena. Antithetically, the adjacent room insinuates everything that remains invisible and open to the boundless speculations of an enquiring mind. On the whole, the poet favours direct language which corresponds to the 'natural' and 'beautiful' ('The morning light on the patches of raw plaster'), and rejects a literary legacy of rhetorical and elevated verse (the ceiling 'overburdened with fixtures').

### **Individual Experience and Historical Synthesis**

How, intrinsically, does Bishop's poetry relate to the notion that it is never what a poem

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<sup>178</sup> Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box*, p. 61–62.



says which matters, but what it is? This poetic concept goes back to the modernist belief that the poem is a self-sufficient object, which does not have any political or moral meaning. Essentially, this is an aestheticist idea because the poem exists in and for its own beauty and this is its value. For MacLeish ‘A poem should not mean/ But be’ (“Ars Poetica”): it is ‘mute’, ‘dumb’ ‘wordless/ As the flight of birds’, and ‘motionless in time/ As the moon climbs’.<sup>179</sup> The assertion that verse may be, simultaneously, spatial and temporal, verbal and yet visual, is paradoxical, but MacLeish’s statement holds true if we accept that the meaning of a poem – which, in its most basic form, is composed of a phonic alphabet – should not rest entirely upon its linguistic configuration, but rather the resonance of words, which have the power to linger as images in the mind. Mukařovský’s statement about the aesthetic function of poetry, that it focuses the mind of a reader on the ‘linguistic sign’, is here germane.<sup>180</sup> It is these arresting images where ‘meaning’ – what Northrop Frye defined as the ‘seeing’ part of a poem<sup>181</sup> – is apprehended synchronically that MacLeish alludes to. Furthermore, according to MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica”, ‘[a] poem should be equal to:/ Not true./ For all the history of grief/ An empty doorway and a maple leaf’. This objectification of emotions runs counter to the humanising function of historical verse, which has the power to bring readers into the fold of a symbolic order (Kristeva<sup>182</sup>) or unifying code (Jacobson<sup>183</sup>) based upon shared structures of meaning. Rather, in “Ars Poetica” MacLeish’s metaphors – comparing poetry to various natural elements – draw upon their immediate surroundings. One may note strong similarities between MacLeish’s paradoxes in “Ars Poetica”

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<sup>179</sup> Archibald MacLeish, *Collected Poems: 1917–1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), pp. 106–107.

<sup>180</sup> Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, p. 4.

<sup>181</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 77–78.

<sup>182</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, p. 220.

<sup>183</sup> Roman Jakobson, ‘Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics’, in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1960), p. 353.

and those in Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira's "My Last Poem" (translated by Bishop in the 1950s). Bandeira desires poetry that is ardent 'like a tearless sob' and beautiful as 'almost scentless flowers'. Words are like 'limpid diamonds' – hard yet transparent objects – driven by an impulse held in check by a language which is simple and natural ('least intended'). It is poetry that is full of the 'passion of suicides', but, 'without explanation', is enigmatic and elusive, refusing to leave the reader with familiar frames of reference (CP, 231).

Alternatively, the words of a poem are understood to represent the 'skeleton' or structure of experience; they order, control and consolidate. Words, in this regard, 'spring from experience'.<sup>184</sup> The statement that poetry is experiential should, nevertheless, be qualified, and again a distinction ought to be made between universal and individual experience. If, therefore, universal poeticism establishes for readers a common ground for the convergence of human emotions – what may be termed the initiation of empathy – alternatively, the individualistic disposition of the poet, governed by more immediate spheres of influence, articulates an emotive response that signifies a break with traditional ways of seeing and understanding. Hence, typical of what McLeish views as 'history of grief' poetry is Dylan Thomas' "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", a poem that brings immediate attention to its universality, as it addresses to 'mankind' the historicised theme of the death of youth and innocence. Compare this poem with Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia" where the inconsequentiality of death and the locus of experience – the parlour where the child is placed in a coffin – have the effect of making the reader feel somewhat excluded. The difference may be further demonstrated between Plath's "The Colossus", which is historicised and humanised, a 'mouthpiece of the dead,' and Bishop's "The Monument", a poem about an artwork that eliminates any obvious references to

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<sup>184</sup> I.A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1926), p. 25–26; Walter J. Ong, 'A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives', in James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (eds), *Perspectives on Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 119.

the past.

The aesthetic precepts underlying “The Monument” are constant in Bishop’s work, and throughout her life she remained wary of the historicising effect of poetry. In “Santarém”, written in 1978, her memory of a journey taken along the Tapajós and Amazon is recollected:

I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.  
 Two rivers. Hadn’t two rivers sprung  
 From the Garden of Eden? No, that was four  
 and they’d diverged. Here only two  
 and coming together. Even if one were tempted  
 to literary interpretations  
 such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female  
 —such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off  
 in that watery, dazzling dialectic. (CP, 185)

The scene is recounted or re-imagined in prosaic terms, as the poet, debating with herself what ‘idea’ she should have of this special place so fondly remembered, comes to the conclusion that the language of immediate perception is sufficient for the process of recollection, without having to resort to such historicised themes as the story of Adam and Eve to shape or gild the reader’s imagination. Why compare this vivid South American scene to the Garden of Eden and its four rivers, when, in reality, there are only two? The ‘temptation’ for the poet – as if drawn by the invidious symbolism of Adam’s apple – is to find creative solace in the greater arena of rhetoric, where ‘literary interpretation’ attributes immense metaphoric and thus metaphysical significance to this place. Such a strategy lacks linguistic transparency and builds its images on hyperbole and ‘dazzling dialectic’ – the yoking together of opposites – which, rather than solidifying and clarifying experience, dissolves it rapidly in the minds of the readers in that ‘watery’ rhetoric. What follows in the rest of “Santarém” is minute description of the two rivers and the hustle and bustle of travelers.

Bishop takes up further the themes of historicism, rhetoric and the power of the

imagination in “Questions of Travel”. The poet witnesses first-hand the natural world, but is, nevertheless, compelled to embellish the scene, to translate metaphorically the sight of streams spilling over the mountaintops so that they begin to look like waterfalls. Over time, ‘in a quick age or so, as ages go here’, everything is susceptible to an aesthetic of transformation. Thus trees are translatable into ‘noble pantomimists, robed in pink’; the ‘clacking’ wooden clogs play a doleful tune on the ‘grease-stained filling-station floor’; and the ‘fat brown bird’ sings in its ornate cage, ‘in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:/ three towers, five silver crosses’. Then the poet utters self-reflexively and, perhaps, ironically:

— Yes, a pity not to have pondered,  
 blurr’dly and inconclusively,  
 on what connection can exist for centuries  
 between the crudest wooden footwear  
 and, careful and finicky,  
 the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.  
 —Never to have studied history in  
 the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages.  
 — And never to have had to listen to rain  
 so much like politicians’ speeches:  
 two hours of unrelenting oratory  
 and then a sudden golden silence...(CP, 94)

Is it necessary for poetry to make such historicised connections? And is the significance of persons and objects to be understood according to inherited images and symbols, which over time become endowed with meaning? The poet contemplates whether the context of metaphor takes the reader gradually away from the original scene to higher planes of the imagination or to murkier and inconclusive domains.

Bishop is concerned with the nature of poetry, which either stands as a testament to time (a historicised monument) or places greater emphasis on the present as sufficient in itself. According to the literary tradition, certain poems, particularly elegies, are like verbal

‘monuments’.<sup>185</sup> Eliot in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ states that ‘[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone’. He suggests that there exists a fundamentally aesthetic relation between artists and the past, which thus compels critics to compare them to their predecessors. ‘What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new’.<sup>186</sup> Eliot goes on to assert that as a writer develops a ‘consciousness of the past’ his progress as an artist ‘is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality’.<sup>187</sup> His ‘impersonal theory of poetry’ advocates a depersonalisation, or what, perhaps, may now be termed as the non-confessional genre.

The internal dialogue of “The Monument” is born of this enquiry into the nature and value of art, as well as being a statement on the creative process. The poem brings to light Bishop’s reluctance to assume the role of the privileged and all-knowing ‘artist-prince’. On the contrary, she identifies as a fundamental flaw human nature’s predisposition to be easily led. For instance, she rejects, even ridicules, the imperious and revelatory figure of Balthazar in “Twelfth Morning or What You Will”, who proclaims “[t]oday’s my Anniversary”.../“the Day of Kings” (CP, 111), or the prophetic leader in “A Miracle for Breakfast” whose head is ‘so to speak, in the clouds—along with the sun’ (CP, 18). This human weakness haunts Bishop’s work. She does not claim to know it all and is not privy to any special hidden knowledge. Rather, Bishop de-mystifies the relationship between poet and reader.

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<sup>185</sup> Ong, ‘A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives’: 119.

<sup>186</sup> Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, p. 41.

<sup>187</sup> Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, p. 44. See also Harold Bloom’s Freudian study of literary influence. Poets, he argues, measure their talents against those who have come before. This makes them anxious and increasingly self-conscious about their own work and its originality; *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

In “The Monument” a three-dimensional assemblage draws the attention of the speaker. Bishop was fascinated by this art form and two of her undated collages, “Feather Box” and “Anjinhos” (“Angels”) – assembled after she witnessed the drowning of a young girl in Rio de Janeiro – recall the American artist Joseph Cornell’s work.<sup>188</sup> Cornell’s boxes of eclectic objects, constructed from the 1930s until his death in 1972, expanded both the European and American *trompe l’oeil* tradition, while his disruptive aesthetics continued the surrealist presentations of the 1920s.<sup>189</sup> In “The Monument” the speaker seems disappointed by the monument’s careless and shoddy workmanship, and not least the wooden-looking sea and sky, and clouds full of splinters. These representative objects have a disorientating effect on the speaker’s eye and mind. Such a monument becomes a sort of ‘stage-set’, both artificial and man-made, and the speaker rejects the monument as nothing but a rigid ‘temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery’. And yet this temple of crates is not as ordinary and trivial as it at first appears:

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. (CP, 24)

There is more to the monument’s decorations than meets the eye. With its multiple images and disruptive aesthetic, the work of art signals different imaginative connections. In “The Monument” two people – or perhaps two voices engaged in an internal monologue – debate the artistic merit of the piece. Their views differ and one tries to convince the other of the need to adopt a receptive frame of mind in order to appreciate this construction. The opening lines of the poem are about precise observation. The monument is an artist’s representation of nature, and the

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<sup>188</sup> Collages reproduced in *Exchanging Hats*, edited with an introduction by William Benton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 49–51.

<sup>189</sup> Allen Fisher, ‘Plurality and the Reproduced: A Selective Approach to American Visual Arts in the 1950s’, in Dale Carter (ed.), *Cracking the Ike Age: Aspects of Fifties America* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992), p. 156.

persona of the ‘artist-prince’ is in keeping with Bishop’s other poems where there is a strong male presence. The poem next describes the artwork’s spatial dimensions – perspective, as in a Renaissance painting, becomes a subject of the poem.<sup>190</sup> The monument foreshortens the natural scene (‘The view is geared/...so low there is no “far away”’). But how realistic is this three-dimensional wooden seascape? “‘Why does that strange sea make no sound?’” (CP, 23). At this point of artistic contemplation Bishop appears to draw upon psychological theories of sensory associations. The shape, surface colours and dimensions of the artwork act as visual stimuli on the observer and excite memories of an actual seascape. But attempts to connect the senses of seeing and hearing are futile because the associated sound of the sea recalled from the memory of the observer seems to be missing.<sup>191</sup>

“The Monument” is an exhibited work of art – perhaps a modern piece – depicting (or commemorating) not in a conventional sense a recognisable figure, but a scene of land, sea and sky. What, though, is the *raison d’être* of this aged wooden ‘artifact’? ‘Why did you bring me here to see it?’ asks the interlocutor, seemingly dismissive of the unrealistic object under scrutiny. ‘[W]hat can it prove?’ (CP, 24). “The Monument” posits the question: what purpose, function, or inherent value has art? The poem is evidently a statement on the nature of art and whether painting, or for that matter poetry, is necessarily endowed with meaning or intention. Perhaps the peremptory artifact is no more than a monument of recycled material, and the imperative ‘commemorate’ elicits the question ‘commemorate what?’ These piled-up boxes ‘may be solid, may be hollow’. Does the observer confer meaning upon the artwork? Or, alternatively, does the object possess its own inherent meaning or signification, but keep it

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<sup>190</sup> John Bender, *Spencer and Literary Pictorialism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 97.

<sup>191</sup> For a discussion of visual stimuli and memory see Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, pp. 136–42.

deliberately concealed? (‘which after all/ cannot have been intended to be seen.’) – an assertion which recalls Bishop’s remark that in some of Hopkins’s poems ‘the point seems to be missing’.<sup>192</sup> Compare this enigma, furthermore, with the speaker’s observation in “Cape Breton” that ‘[w]hatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,/ unless the road is holding it back, in the interior, where we cannot see’ (CP, 67).

“The Monument” proceeds to consider how much of the artist’s persona is invested in the artwork:

The bones of the artist-prince may be inside  
or far away on even drier soil.  
But roughly but adequately it can shelter  
what is within (which after all  
cannot have been intended to be seen). (CP, 25)

This ambiguous metaphor does seem to evaluate the degrees of the artist’s emotional attachment to or detachment from the artifact. Dryness or barrenness distinguishes their relationship: the dry bones of the artist are buried either within the artwork or elsewhere in ‘even drier soil’. A recurring debate in Bishop’s work is between emotionally heightened (Confessional) or detached (non-sentimental) approaches to poetry writing. In these penultimate lines of “The Monument” the example of a work of art says something about how a poem is written. A poem, like Bishop’s, may seem to be a representation of a number of not very attractive objects (boxes) in a seemingly not very attractive arrangement, but, in fact, all poems, even hers, that seem to be forbiddingly objective are of important personal significance to the poet. They are monuments, like tombs, commemorating the vital personal and emotional associations that these objects have for the poet. You cannot see it but the creator’s bones are probably to be found inside the boxes; they contain all that is left of experience. The beholder must literally look beyond the material content of the monument. Thus the interaction between artist and object, not composition, must

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<sup>192</sup> Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 3.



be given pride of place.<sup>193</sup> Put otherwise, one cannot just make poetic notations of the things of this world. Instead, these images must also have connections with the subconscious sources of feeling in order to energise them and make them mean something to the reader.

“The Monument” reaffirms Bishop’s belief in the importance of the relationship of the artist to the object and how this manifests itself most forcefully in the work of art. On the surface, the composition of differently shaped boxes fails in the eyes of spectators to represent what it purports to be. The poem dwells on these seeming contradictions between seeing and representing. First, the artifact recreates the artist’s observations and, secondly, “The Monument” reproduces the work of art and transcribes further the thoughts of the poet. On either level the viewer or reader becomes engaged in this exercise of knowledge-building and contextualising of sea imagery. This type of poem appears unambiguously descriptive, transparent, and yet generates internally its own dialogue. Its reading suggests that all objects described acquire significance only within the actual process, and context, of their creation. “The Monument” also returns to the question of the artist’s self-investment.

### **The Shaping of Bishop’s Objective Mode**

Thus far I have considered Bishop’s de-historicised strategies, and her ability to use language to concretise feelings toward people and places. These concepts are the basis of “The Monument” and “Santarém.” In the latter poem, moreover, the materialist Bishop reveals her distrust of the symbolic – and what she describes as ‘literary interpretation’ – in the same way that in “The Bight” she expresses disapproval of the transcendentalism of the *langue augmentée*. For Bishop the hyperbolic style of poets like Baudelaire distorts reality. In “Questions of

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<sup>193</sup> It is ‘that desperation of trying to give shape to obsessions’, remarked Cornell in an undated journal entry; Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (Hopewell, N.J.: The Ecco Press, 1992), p. xiii.

Travel”, equally, the temptation for the observant poet is to see ‘the trees along this road,/ really exaggerated in their beauty’. All these poems suggest that figurative language should be handled cautiously. Even a poem like “A Miracle for Breakfast”, which could be read as an allegory of war and leadership, disputes the unreal every step of the way. Metaphor, rather, should be a tool of description that intensifies a poet’s true perception and feelings.

This summary of Bishop’s poetics relates to work written from the mid-1930s right up to the late 1970s. But if we are to understand her formal techniques comprehensively, we need to look even further back, especially to some of her earliest essays written at college. What is most distinctive in these works is Bishop’s psychodynamics of poetry, and her interest in exploring or mapping the process of thinking. For Bishop there are two kinds of poetry: that ‘*at rest* and that which is in action, within itself’.<sup>194</sup> To elucidate this point, Bishop made use of Morris W. Croll’s “The Baroque Style in Prose”, which, she remarked enthusiastically in a letter to Donald E. Stanford, gives ‘a very good description’ of poetic style.<sup>195</sup> Croll’s essay articulated most accurately for Bishop her ideas about what poetry should be. Poetry, written in language that is concise – what Croll termed as a *stile coupé* or ‘curt style’<sup>196</sup> – should evolve and present ideas progressively as initially conceived in the mind, and by this reasoning, avoid mental revision as much as possible. In his study of the ‘*période coupée*’ Croll identifies in a particular group of writers an economy of style – characteristically short, self-contained sentences, tending toward the aphoristic – and an ordered progression of ideas from the concrete to the imaginative. These elements are of course recognisable in Bishop’s poetry. However, at first, it is perhaps puzzling why Bishop found Croll’s essay so enlightening, bearing in mind that his subject matter, the

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<sup>194</sup> *One Art*, p.11.

<sup>195</sup> *One Art*, p.12. The Baroque writers attended to the twists and turns of perception, achieving surprise, the poetic quality most admired by Bishop; Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 4.

<sup>196</sup> Morris. W. Croll, ‘The Baroque Style in Prose’, in J. Max Patrick et al (eds), *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm; Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 211.

Baroque style, is, generally-speaking, considered wilfully ornamental, self-consciously decorative and incrementally hyperbolic. However, it may be argued that Croll's essay opposes, in certain respects, the periodization of seventeenth-century style, and thus refutes the commonly held view of the Baroque as ornate and theatrical. This is a moot point. Nevertheless, Croll was a significant influence on the young Bishop because he demonstrated the importance of poetic mentation, as well as the functionality of direct, concrete and pre-reflective language. The curt form drew Bishop because of its closeness to the plain style of the Anglo-American empirical and Puritan tradition. Baroque writers, according to Croll, liked to avoid "prearrangements and preparations" and were interested in trying to exhaust "the mere fact of the idea; logically there is nothing more to say".<sup>197</sup> However, they could not enervate its "imaginative truth or the energy of its conception". Writing then becomes "a progress of imaginative apprehension, a revolving and upward motion of the mind as it rises in energy" and a "spiral movement". But the best part, according to Bishop, and one which perfectly describes the kind of 'poetic convention' which she aspires to is this: the Baroque writers' purpose "was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking".<sup>198</sup>

Apart from Croll, Bishop's aesthetics during her time at Vassar (1931–1934) were shaped by other individuals and philosophies, not least Hopkins. The college essay written in 1934 on technical aspects of Hopkins' poems, and later published in *The Vassar Review* (1934), is essential reading for a better understanding of her poetics. For Bishop, above all, 'Father Hopkins' was 'the most intricate of poets technically and most taxing emotionally'. She had read his poetry compulsively since early adolescence, and in an interview with Ashley Brown (1966) she recounted how in the 1920s, while at summer camp, she had been given, by 'one of the more

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<sup>197</sup> *One Art*, p.12.

<sup>198</sup> *One Art*, p.12.

sophisticated girls', a copy of Harriet Monroe's anthology of modern poets. 'I remember coming across...Monroe's quotations from Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" for one. I quickly memorised these'.<sup>199</sup> In 1927 Bishop acquired the first edition of Hopkins. His standing as a Victorian Jesuit, classically-educated and yet, in the eyes of his contemporaries, an unorthodox poet, would have appealed to the youthful Bishop's spirited nature.<sup>200</sup> In some of the poetry written in her youth Hopkins' influence was already very evident, not least in the use of repetition, alliteration, internal rhymes and language, which at times veered toward the archaic. The poem "Behind Stowe" (1927), composed when Bishop was only sixteen, is typically romantic in its evocation of nature, whose charms seduce the senses of the speaker. While "To a Tree" (1928) depicts nature as an omnipresent companion alleviating the speaker's 'tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves'. The sonnet "Thunder" (1928), moreover, renders the beauty and destructive might of the natural world in mythological terms, as the poet imagines the stormy skies inhabited by giants who '[w]ith huge, rough hands...flung the gods' gold balls/ And silver harps and mirrors at the walls/ Of Heaven'. In these lines may be heard echoes of Hopkins' 'God's Grandeur': the almighty power, they insist, must be heeded by humans at all times. Bishop returns to the theme of spirituality in "Sonnet" (1928). The 'magic' melody of poetry casts 'a spell of rest' over the listener, '[h]eld in the arms of rhythm and of sleep'. Listening to poetry induces a feeling of rest and immersion that is akin to some form of religious experience, a sort of baptism. Poetry is healing: 'A song to fall like water on my head'. Bishop pays homage to Hopkins' love of poetic musicality as well as his technical dexterity in such lines as '[o]ver my fretful, feeling fingertips' and '[o]f some song sung to rest the tired head'. Further experimentation in verse rhythm

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<sup>199</sup> On Hopkins' influence see Sandra Barry, 'Shipwrecks of the Soul: Elizabeth Bishop's Reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Dalhousie Review*, 74, no. 1 (Spring, 1994): 25–50.

<sup>200</sup> Along with some student friends Bishop launched the college magazine *Con Spirito* as a rival to the more conservative *Vassar Review*.

and lineation, as well as a continuing interest in the notion of human interaction with nature, is evident in the poem “The Wave” (1929). Written when Bishop was eighteen, the poem’s simplified dimetric structure – interspersed with long lines – delineates stark images of land, sea and sky effectively. The iconic sea, as in later Bishop poems, most notably “At the Fishhouses”,<sup>201</sup> assumes a spiritual aura and ‘wonder’. But on this occasion the sea, unlike Moore’s, is not to be feared. As the wave rolls in, ‘[w]e do not move,/ We do not flee’. And with youthful, perhaps naive, bravura the speaker challenges the powers of nature: ‘We are too innocent and wise,/ We laugh into each other’s eyes’ (CP, 217).

Bishop’s experimentation with verse-form had seen her gradually loosen the tight reigns of metre in favour of allowing more strongly resonant images to determine rhythm and meaning. “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” (1933) was an early marker of Bishop’s development. The octave and sestet in each of the three poems follow the rhyming scheme of the Italian sonnet. But, as Bishop readily admitted, the strict metre or ‘smoothness’ of the sonnet was not always compatible with the way she wanted to write or sound. Partly for this reason, “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” reads awkwardly in places. Her style occasionally descends to the verbose and disjointed. It is the rapid transition of ideas that creates the true rhythm of the poem. Interestingly, the same building up of ideas in “The Imaginary Iceberg” dictates rhythmical pattern, but the verse-form, which is accommodating of her linguistic dexterity, conveys more adequately the mechanics of internal discourse.

In the Hopkins essay Bishop draws an analogy between poetry and fine art:

Hopkins’ abundant use of alliteration, repetition, and inside rhymes are all characteristics which place firm seals upon his words, joining them, at the same time indicating the sound relationships in the same way that guide lines, or repeated forms might in a drawing. (VA, 70.10)

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<sup>201</sup> Robert Boschman, ‘Anne Bradstreet and Elizabeth Bishop: Nature, Culture and Gender in “Contemplations” and “At the Fishhouses”’, *Journals of American Studies*, 26 no. 2 (1992): 247–60.

We may ask what this resemblance or approximation between poetry and art is. The commonality can be found in the poet's or artist's technical ability to direct the reader or observer. In Hopkins' poetry the reader is guided, above all, by the choice and combination of words – the 'sound relationship' which they create – similar to the way that repetition of form in the visual arts instructs the eye. Repetition in art creates a sense of balance, emphasis and a thematic unity, whereas in poetry the same mechanism places a 'firm seal' on the sound and rhythm of words. Bishop continues by commenting on the process of writing a poem:

A poem is begun with a certain volume of emotion, intellectualised or not according to the poet, and as it is written out of this emotion, subtracted from it, the volume is reduced – as water 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. (VA, 70.10)

Emotion, argues Bishop, is the genesis of any poem, and whether it is 'intellectualized' or not, its 'volume' is constrained by the poetic format, which, unlike the novel with its greater scope for expression, binds the poet to certain conventions. What counts is the ability of the poet to 'catch and preserve' the emotion as accurately and as naturally as possible within this limited space. It is essential for the poet to give back effectively what is lost through the translation of emotion onto the page. In Hopkins' poetry 'crystallized' emotion is achieved through the use of organic, natural sounding language. His sprung verse, according to Bishop, allows for technical 'irregularities' while preserving 'a feeling of timeliness', of naturalness. Such poetry expresses the 'flowing fullness' or 'motion' of the idea or thought in the mind at the initial stage of its discovery. Indeed, a well-written poem is reducible to a simple formula constituted of specific

elements, namely a naturalness of language and sound derived from spontaneity and clarity of thought, often epitomised by a ‘good attack’, whether a ‘rapid’ line or a ‘tight’ rhythm (VA, 68.2). Additionally, a good poem describes a subject in accurate, ‘correct’ or vivid terms, which Bishop associates with the visual. Mystery is the final component, an elusive quality she attributes to Hopkins, Auden and Wordsworth, but is perhaps, in her opinion, lacking in Burns. Mystery can also be expressive of the immaterial and spiritual. In support of these ideas Bishop quotes from Coleridge’s discussion of Wordsworth in *Biographia Literaria*<sup>202</sup>:

The characteristic fault of our elder poets is the reverse of that which distinguishes too many of our recent versifiers; the one conveying the most fantastic thoughts in the most correct and natural language, the other in the most fantastic language conveying the most trivial thoughts. (VA, 68.2)

Bishop aimed for the ‘most correct language’, judging from her drafts and numerous abandoned poems. This was something she did not always find easy to do. As she remarked in one of her notebooks, ‘[w]riting poetry is an unnatural act. It takes great skill to make it seem natural’. (VA, 68.2) In over half a century Bishop published, apart from short stories, translations and a travel guide on Brazil, only four collections containing seventy-five poems.

For Bishop, there were poets who encapsulated qualities of not only accuracy, naturalness and spontaneity, but also mystery in their writing. For instance, she quotes from George Herbert’s poem “The Church Floor” because of its particular distinctiveness in this regard. Herbert employs simple language to describe a commonplace subject: a church’s stone floor. The stress is on poetry that directs the eye, instructing both vision and thought without abstracting language. She also expresses admiration for Auden’s “The Fall of Rome”, particularly the last stanza, which reads:

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<sup>202</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in W.G.T. Shedd (ed.), *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868), vol. iii, p. 439.

Altogether elsewhere, vast  
 Herds of reindeer move across  
 Miles — miles of golden moss,  
 Silently and very fast.<sup>203</sup>

Bishop describes this kind of verse as ‘accurate, like something seen in a documentary movie. It is spontaneous, natural sounding – helped considerably by the break between adjective and noun in the first two lines. And it is mysterious’ (VA, 68.2). Other poets she admires for their spontaneity, accuracy and yet mystery, include her friend and mentor Moore, whose poem “A Grave” makes use of ordinary language to describe the iconic sea and its mysterious association with death. Bishop is drawn to Moore’s fascination with perception and the panoptic eye: the viewpoint of the individual standing alone at the centre of a vast universe. The sea is unfathomable and the individual is in awe of this natural expanse. One notes, interestingly, the sudden change in mood half way through the poem (‘The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx – beautiful under networks of foam’). From the death-obsessed opening lines there is a sudden shift toward a much more lyrical observation of the sea. The individual responds to stimuli – to the sound of seagulls and of waves lapping against the shore. This heralds a new sense of freedom from the stresses or ‘repression’ of life. In all of the poets Bishop admires a careful choice of language is paramount. She recognises the power of a single word in the works of Frost, Lowell and Baudelaire. In Frost’s macabrely comical poem, “The Witch of Coos”, Bishop focuses on one particular line: the ghost ‘that carries itself like a pile of dishes’. Her comment is: ‘a single word does it all’. It is not a ‘fantastic’ line, but is rather immediate, comical and, above all, natural. Some of Lowell’s poetry has the same impact. In one particular poem (“Salem”) Bishop singles out the word ‘hung’ in ‘[r]emember, seamen, Salem fishermen/

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<sup>203</sup>

W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 258.



Once hung their nimble fleets on the Great Banks'.<sup>204</sup> For her, 'hung' is the 'simplest sort of natural verb to use'. While, in Baudelaire, the use of the word 'charbon' in the poem 'Le Balcon'<sup>205</sup> is 'telling'; it is accurate, surprising and 'dating'. It makes the poem seem real, yet at the same time enigmatic. (VA, 68.2)

### **The Act of Perception in Bishop's Poetry**

In Bishop's close-to-the-bone poetic the reality of personal experience comes to be present in the object itself. She insists on the primacy of the world's and then the poem's materiality, which is the poet's 'immediate intense physical reactions.'<sup>206</sup> The American poet Louise Bogan admired Bishop for her 'naturalist's accuracy of observation...Miss Bishop...is firmly in touch with the real world and takes a Thoreau-like interest in whatever catches her attention'.<sup>207</sup> She demonstrates an intense awareness of the minutiae of the world, and her poetic approach is akin to that of the pragmatist; all objects, whatever their form, size, texture, or colour are scrupulously noted. Her vision seems calm and untroubled on the surface.<sup>208</sup> In "Cape Breton" and "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress" descriptions of immediate surroundings are laden with visual references. In the former her "yellow bulldozer" is what it is, so too are 'the giant tree', 'the little flags', the 'small bus'. The poem's 'bird islands' – Ciboux and Hertford – are places we can locate on a map. "Cape Breton" was written in the late 1940s

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<sup>204</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 29.

<sup>205</sup> 'Les soirs illuminé par l'ardeur du charbon./ Et les soirs au balcon, voilés de vapeurs roses./ Que ton sein m'était doux! que ton coeur m' était bon'; Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 34.

<sup>206</sup> Bishop, Notebook, late July 1934; Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*, p.3.

<sup>207</sup> Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p. 182.

<sup>208</sup> It was devoid of what Miller terms 'the profound abysses of subjectivity'– the ego as a separate entity in search of signification; *Poets of Reality*, p. 288.

and recalls the sights and smells of this Canadian golden isle, situated off Nova Scotia. The poem describes the island's tranquil scenery precisely – its silly-looking puffins, silken water, thin mist, wild roads and little white churches. In a similar vein Bishop scans the natural movement of the landscape: 'the silken water is weaving and weaving'; 'the same mist hangs in thin layers'; 'the ghosts of glaciers drift/ among those folds and folds of fir.' Metaphoric observations of the natural world predominate. Again, in "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress" Bishop's descriptions give unifying substance to her visual reflections. The poem was written in the early 1950s when she was Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress in Washington. Sitting and looking out of the library window, she describes how:

Moving from left to left, the light  
 is heavy on the Dome, and coarse,  
 One small lunette turns it aside  
 and blankly stares off to the side  
 like a big white old wall-eyed horse.  
 On the east steps the Air Force Band  
 in uniforms of Air Force blue  
 is playing hard and loud, but – queer –  
 the music doesn't quite come through. (CP, 69)

We are presented with a view of the Capitol from inside the Library of Congress. Her panoramic eye moves from 'left to left', from the surface appearance of the Dome to that of the Air Force Band, and then from the giant trees to the little flags; the trees, 'catching the music in their leaves/ like gold-dust', begin to sag, while the little flags 'feed their limp stripes into the air'.

The intricate interrelation of perspective, colour and sound can add aesthetical texture and substance to a poem. In the first stanza of "Chemin de Fer", for instance, the speaker, guided along by a railroad track, seems anxious 'with pounding heart'. As is characteristic of Bishop's poetic, an air of indeterminacy soon arises: 'The ties were too close together/ or maybe too far apart' (CP, 8). From the speaker's perspective it may be that the rail-track sleepers gradually

diminish to a point in the distance. The second stanza then demarcates the natural scene, which is ‘impoverished’. The word ‘impoverished’ plays upon the ascetic existence of the hermit, as well as the aesthetic barrenness or primitiveness of the landscape. The ‘scrub-pine and oak’ are part of the foreground, and the compound adjective ‘gray-green’ describes the foliage simply as it extends over the whole landscape. The eye is led ‘beyond’ the foliage of intermediate colours to a distant little pond where the hermit lives. Here we see the same mysterious properties of perspective that Bishop discovered in Valdes’ painting of a Cuban cabin and Rousseau’s “La cariole du père Juniet” with its curious little dog in the right-hand corner of the painting.<sup>209</sup> “Chemin de Fer” continues by means of an inscrutable simile: ‘I saw the little pond// where the dirty hermit lives,/ lie like an old tear’. The tear-shaped pond, ‘holding onto its injuries’, intimates the moral dubiousness of the classical idea of suffering and atonement. This hermit is either a religious figure or simply someone who has chosen to live a solitary existence as a kind of self-imposed punishment. Significantly, from the beginning of stanza three the first-person speaker ceases to be a participant and merely becomes an observer. Suddenly the quietness and remoteness of the scene is ruptured by the sound of shot-gun. The blast shakes the tree and reverberations ripple in the pond. Sound is thus visualised, as in “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress”, where the music from the Air Force band becomes tangible ‘like gold-dust’ caught in the leaves of the trees, ‘till each big leaf sags’ (CP, 69). In “Chemin de Fer”, moreover, the stillness of the scene is invaded by the screaming hermit and clucking pet hen. Sound acts as a catalyst, energising the still picture with motion and momentum. The rhythm suggests a forward movement toward the hermit’s aphoristic utterance: ““Love should be put into action!”” Is this declaration born of doubt? Is it a commentary upon the futility of solitary existence? According to scientific principles, for every cause there is an effect, and so in the

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<sup>209</sup> Bishop, *Collected Prose*, p. 51.

woods the unnatural sound of the hermit's shot-gun impacts upon the natural world. However, the hermit's affirmation goes unheeded: 'Across the pond an echo/ tried and tried to confirm it'. Although he makes a profound statement, there is no other human either to validate or even question the accuracy of his words.

Much of Bishop's verse presents a structured and 'magnified attention to minutiae',<sup>210</sup> as, for example, in "The Fish" where we find the description of a figure both *en face* and *en profil*. Its very title is a model in precision. Bishop tells us: 'I caught a tremendous fish' and his 'brown skin hung in strips/ like ancient wallpaper,/ and its pattern of darker brown/ was like wallpaper:/ shapes like full-blown roses/ stained and lost through age' (CP, 42). Bishop's mode of expression becomes more intimate, and her 'I' statements set into motion a show of visual sensations. What began as an exercise in heightened perception ends on a note of noble emotion. The mundane is given a meaningful dimension, and the humble fish is invested with the solemnity of a victor: 'I saw/ that from his lower lip// grim, wet and weapon like, hung five old pieces of fish-line// Like medals with their ribbons' (CP, 43).

In "The Moose" we further encounter Bishop's probing eye, her taste for tonality and constantly shifting perception. This poem strikes a dualistic note in the sense of both time and space. The subject of the poem seems to be the experiential foray of an individual on a bus journey. The poem attempts to capture the totality of that experience by including what is going on in the speaker's mind, what is going on around her, on the inside of the bus and what is happening on the outside, the external world (the colour-drenched landscape). The signification of colour, moreover, in "The Map" is ancillary to poetic structure as well as the articulation of sound values. The first poem of *North and South* describes a map in which the '[I]and...is

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<sup>210</sup> Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp.199–200.

shadowed green' (CP, 3).<sup>211</sup> The notion of shadowing, the distribution of colours, light and dark (reminiscent of the artistic effect known as *chiaroscuro*) gives definition to the map's structure separating the land from the sea. Bishop describes the colours of the land, shadowed green in one stanza and yellow in another. Colours mingle and interact with each other – 'showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges/ where weeds hang to the simple blue from green' – and are at once a source of intersection and a means of individuation.<sup>212</sup> 'Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colours?/ – What suits the character or the native waters best?' In the final assessment 'topography displays no favorites.' The map's 'earth bodies' are 'super-animate,' drawing and tugging the sea from under.<sup>213</sup> The reverse of this statement is also true: 'Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is'. The landscape is dream-like ('quiet', 'flat', 'still', 'moony'), and the lulling-quality of the *l* sound confers on the poem a note of meditation and reverie.<sup>214</sup> The poem's melodic sound is conveyed through the alliterative patterns of '[I]and lies', 'shadows, or are they shallows', 'where weeds hang', 'the land leans', 'lending the land'. The imagery is purely descriptive – 'These peninsulas take water between thumb and finger/ like women feeling for the smoothness of yard goods' – and the imitative is Bishop's source of inspiration. The only time she intervenes, or gives any sense of interaction, is in stanza two: 'We can stroke these lovely bays,/ under a glass as if they were expected to blossom'. Bishop gives the map pictorial vividness, setting before the reader the very object or scene being described. The poem ends on a significant note, a conjunction of opposites: 'Norway's hare runs south in agitation' in contrast to

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<sup>211</sup> The poem, wrote Bishop, 'was inspired when I was sitting on the floor...I was staring at a map. The poem wrote itself'; Alexandra Johnson, 'Geography of the Imagination', *Christian Science Monitor*, March 23, 1978: 24–25.

<sup>212</sup> James Heffernan, 'The English Romantic Perception of Color', in Karl Kroeber and William Walling (eds), *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 134–35.

<sup>213</sup> Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 105.

<sup>214</sup> The dream landscape as manifestation of subconscious states owes a great deal to surrealist art.

the motionlessness of the mapped waters. Art (the map) is a spatial stasis, brought to life by the temporal movement of language (the motion of the hare running south).

Bishop's poems are mental exercises in the way they invite the reader to challenge the conventions of poetry and the purpose which it serves, and to consider afresh how ideas at the moment of conception in the mind are translated onto paper. Bishop's introspective "Little Exercise" is a case in point. She uses the word 'think', yet indulges not in abstract thinking, but thinking in images. There is in the poem a logical progression of thought from one stanza to the next: 'Think of the storm roaming the sky uneasily', then think of what devastation it might have wreaked: palm trees 'suddenly revealed/ as fistfuls of limp fish-skeletons' (CP, 41). "Visits to St. Elizabeths" is a similar exercise in thinking. Incrementally, each of the poem's stanzas increases by one line, ending in a twelfth stanza consisting of twelve lines. On the model of "This is the House that Jack Built" Bishop constructs a chain of ideas beginning with the first line of the first stanza: 'This is the house of Bedlam' (CP, 133). Each stanza subsequently builds in concrete manner upon the ideas of the previous one. It has a cumulative, sequential effect, complemented by the rhythmical pattern of its organisation. "Visits to St. Elizabeths" perfectly sums up Bishop's poetic theory: to write poetry in action 'within itself', mimicking the natural process or rhythm of the mind thinking. Bishop's "The Imaginary Iceberg" is equally about the action that goes on inside the mind.<sup>215</sup> The poem constitutes a shift inward, a kind of inner representation. Versification, in this instance, serves a dual purpose. First, there is the artistic product: the poem consisting of three symmetrical stanzas each made up of eleven lines. Secondly, the poem itself is an exploration into the actual process of thought, the act of creativity. There is a theory which underlies this kind of poetry: 'What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing

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<sup>215</sup> According to Fred Moramarco 'the mimetic function...is [often] limited to an imitation of the artist's immediate sensibility...not an external or objective scene or series of events'; Fred Moramarco, 'John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poet', *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 5 (September, 1976): 444.

that is necessary for its creation'.<sup>216</sup> The two are mutually inclusive. In this regard "The Imaginary Iceberg" – an amalgam of both the work of art and the process necessary to create it – further exemplifies a poem in action within itself, seeking to imitate the 'releasing, checking, timing, and repeating of the movement of the mind'.<sup>217</sup> For Bishop, creativity is about building a 'solid case' based upon the relationship between the imaginary and the real, the original and the imitative, the visible and the invisible.<sup>218</sup> In a letter written to Anne Stevenson, Bishop explained, '[w]hat one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration'. This experience is part of the 'always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life'.<sup>219</sup> Bishop's full statement of poetic intent has drawn the attention of critics because of her belief that surrealism should never be confined solely to the arts but regarded more generally as a *modus vivendi*. In life all kinds of experiences, therefore, whether staring intensely at common objects or works of art can result in unexpected 'vision'. This is similarly true of reading poetry. The poet seeks to approximate and not hinder this process. As Stevenson observed 'art, for Elizabeth Bishop, is neither an end, a truth that must be worshiped in a disintegrating society, nor is it really a means to such an end'.<sup>220</sup>

In "The Imaginary Iceberg" Bishop considers the process of imagination, the mind's ability to assimilate and synthesise images – the 'things' held in the memory or in 'the head'.<sup>221</sup> Bishop, for one, is careful to distinguish between concrete reality and abstraction. The poet must

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<sup>216</sup> Unpublished letter from Bishop to Stevenson; Anne Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Twayne, 1966), p. 66.

<sup>217</sup> Quoted from Bishop's college essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins; see Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 37.

<sup>218</sup> The split between reality and imagination in Bishop's poetry is discussed in Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms*, pp. 101–15.

<sup>219</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Twayne, 1966), p. 66. A more detailed explanation of this aesthetic statement is provided in Chapter V.

<sup>220</sup> Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 66.

<sup>221</sup> Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, p. 104.

resolve abstract thought and make it real, tangible and visual. How should we interpret the iceberg? The iceberg becomes the emblem of the poem of the mind, of inspiration and creativity, imagination and fantasy, intangibility and abstraction. Yet this abstraction must be resolved, that is realised. She asks: ‘are you aware that an iceberg takes *repose*/ with you, and when it *wakes* may pasture on your snows?’ (CP, 4) The poem’s main paradoxical contention is the conflict between those ‘elements least visible’ (unknown, dormant and vague) and those most visible. We are told: ‘Icebergs behoove the soul/ (both being self-made from elements least visible)/ to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible’. It constrains the speaker to think of the iceberg and the soul as alike. These abstract entities must be brought to life – ‘fleshed,’ ‘erected,’ and made ‘indivisible.’

Immediately following “The Imaginary Iceberg” in *North & South* is “Casabianca”, the shortest poem in the collection, which deals with the process of mentation. The poem was based on a Felicia Dorothea Hemans poem of the same name, which was recited by generations of Victorian school children. The compositional simplicity of “Casabianca”, consisting of two short stanzas, and its economy of words belie a complexity of thought:

Love’s the boy stood on the burning deck  
 trying to recite “The boy stood on  
 the burning deck.” Love’s the son  
     stood stammering elocution  
     while the poor ship in flames went down.

Love’s the obstinate boy, the ship,  
 even the swimming sailors, who  
 would like a schoolroom platform, too,  
     or an excuse to stay  
     on deck. And love’s the burning boy. (CP, 5)

The line ‘Love’s the boy stood on the burning deck’ carries a certain indeterminacy. The poem presents the notion of staging, and in contrast to “The Imaginary Iceberg,” where the ‘shifting’



stage is identified with the mind in the act of thinking, the poet here ruminates upon the idea of a child reciting lines on a ‘schoolroom platform’. Bishop’s concept of staging an idea or image is a recurrent theme. In “The Monument” the unrealistic artwork depicting a seascape is ‘like a stage-set; it is all so flat!’ (CP, 24), while “Twelfth Morning; or What you Will” describes the Company’s stage props as shoddy and ‘shopworn’: ““Shipwreck,” we say; perhaps/this is a housewreck’ (CP, 110). In the latter poem, Bishop’s observations reflect the mind thinking out loud. The eye’s initial registration of the colours, shapes and surface of the stage set – including a foundered ship, a boy, a fence and a horse – trigger in the receptive mind – as in “The Monument” – memories of the sea. But ‘[t]he sea’s off somewhere, doing nothing. Listen./ An expelled breath. And faint, faint, faint/ (or are you hearing things)’. This perceptual-mental sequence, which recollects the observer’s experience of being near the sea, fails to find the expected corresponding sounds. The water can only be heard at the end of the poem when Balthazár walks on stage carrying on his head a four-gallon can: ‘You can hear the water now,/ inside slap-slapping’. We need no longer rely on our imagination.

Let us consider the structure and unity of “Casabianca”. Bishop, after all, shared Jarrell’s belief in the tension which exists between complex meaning and simple poetic form. In his lecture of 1942 Jarrell declared that poetry is interested in ‘communicating extremely complicated systems of thoughts, perceptions and emotions, which have extremely complicated non-logical structures; for this, logical structure is pathetically inadequate’.<sup>222</sup> Jarrell argued that logic cannot serve as the structure or organisation of poetry because it is, in essence, fixed and ‘static’. Poetry, however, is the complete opposite of this; it is not systematic or mechanical but dialectical, composed of ‘non-unifying’ forces, that is to say, contradictions, paradoxes and

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<sup>222</sup> Jarrell, ‘Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry’: 705. See also Thomas Travisano, ‘Elizabeth Bishop and the Origins of Narrative Postmodernism’, in Lionel Kelly (ed.), *Poetry and the Sense of Panic. Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

ambiguities. Poetry, therefore, should be forever evolving. Bishop in “Casabianca” attempts a unification of ambiguities and contradictions, and poetic unity is brought about by contrasting markedly different images. The structural method of this poem is the mediation between the conscious and unconscious, between the real and imagined. In “Casabianca” the notable shortness of the poem is most striking. The first line is a self-contained statement: ‘Love’s the boy stood on the burning deck/ trying to recite “[t]he boy stood on/ the burning deck”’ (CP, 5). The subsequent line of the first stanza and two lines of the second stanza are a variation on this initial idea: ‘Love’s the son’, ‘Love’s the obstinate boy’ and the concluding ‘[a]nd love’s the burning boy’. With constant shifting or reframing of the same idea (or resonant image) within a limited space, Bishop achieves the prismatic effect or ‘dynamic way of looking’ which Travisano has noted in other of her poems.<sup>223</sup> Such is the fluidity of the images, moving seamlessly between schoolroom and shipwreck, that they seem to merge or dissolve into one another. But, ultimately, what significance does “Casabianca” have? Is it hollow or solid (to borrow a phrase from “The Monument”)? Is it ‘self-indulgent’ as Lowell remarked and thus devoid of meaning? Certainly, it continues on from the theme in “The Imaginary Iceberg” where the idea, in the shape of a monumental iceberg, does literally take centre stage. “Casabianca” is as much about how something is said – how ideas are articulated – as what is said. It is concerned with the very process of communication. A poem like “Visits to St Elizabeths” invites comparison with “Casabianca”. Incongruously told in the manner of a sing-along nursery-rhyme, the story of a soldier in a mental institution alludes to Ezra Pound who was sent to St Elizabeths at the end of the Second World War. The allusion to Pound may be compared to implicit reference to Hemans in “Casabianca”. In either case, the life and work of these poets are deemed appropriate material for poetry, and where Pound is concerned, Bishop demonstrates little interest in employing

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<sup>223</sup> Travisano, ‘Elizabeth Bishop and the Origins of Narrative Postmodernism’: 104.

conventional verse to describe chronologically her meeting with this controversial figure of American literature. Her language, instead, has an alternative function, one that orders repeatedly and expansively the sequence of memories. In “Visits to St Elizabeths” repetition expands and refocuses upon a single image or thought. The complete utterance, ‘[t]his is the house of Bedlam’, is continuously being displaced: ‘This is the man/ that lies in the house of Bedlam’ (CP, 133). The poem’s vertical chain of descriptive details mimics the process of remembering. In terms of organisation, the gradually changing stanzas induce the reader to discover differences between them. And in accordance with cinematic principle, the stanzas embellish further the initial framed idea; they take on shape and increasing depth.

## **Conclusion**

Bishop’s poems are frustratingly difficult if one’s objective is to derive some obvious or absolute meaning from her work. It is necessary to go beyond traditional modes of criticism and to adopt a more theoretical mindset. In Bishop’s poetry the act of perception circumscribes and contextualises in precise terms an image, and we are encouraged to explore the meaning of its configuration and representation and its susceptibility to the vagaries of selfhood and history. Such an understanding of poetic function has relevance to William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow”. “The Monument”, in particular, belongs to this tradition and, like other Bishop poems, incorporates various aspects of visual poetics. The self by means of the formal properties of verse explores the boundaries between vision and representation. Furthermore, in these exempla the poet or artist views the spectator or reader as an accomplice in the act of creation. Why is something a valid work of art? What constitutes legitimate subject matter? How do we see and represent, and what is authentic depiction? I pursue this line of argument in Chapter IV

and evaluate Bishop's conceptualisation of the act of seeing in literature and painting, as well as her keen interest in 'real' depiction based upon a personal or universal (customary) viewpoint. This has further bearing on the principles of aestheticism. To recreate an object in words the poet may avoid verisimilitude that otherwise encourages overzealous and excessive detailing. In "The Traveller to Rome" (VA, 75.3b), for instance, what is perceived the first time 'is the fact/galvanised', and in the process of observing a cathedral and composing into words this point of view, the perceiver and reader are united by the immediacy of near-identical experience. But "The Traveller to Rome" poses the question: if 'his mind is richer' would the cathedral 'be more beautiful [?]'. Is foreknowledge necessary in order to appreciate the beauty or pleasure of something observed?

The Bishop archive makes it further evident that she regarded feelings as the basis of verse, but this certainly did not correspond to the heightened subjectivity associated with some Confessional poets. In fact, the writers she cites as having the greatest influence on her share a language of naturalness, accuracy and mystery, and in her work these components are achieved through a combination of transparent, non-symbolic language and de-historicising strategies. She presents each poem as a perfectly realised object or fragmented world view. The archive is useful in tracing Bishop's poetics from as early as her college years, not least the careful development of a language that can reflect reality sufficiently. The real is understood as the act of seeing and ordering into words what is experienced immediately through the senses. This in turn establishes a spatial context whose motif, or structuring principles, is indicative of how we think. But, more than this, for Bishop verse that is in 'action within itself' – and relates to the 'poem about poetry' genre – is especially believable to readers because it mediates an individual's thoughts; it is genuine and uncorrupted.

## Chapter III

### Plath, Myth and Objectification

Plath's poetry is firmly rooted in the familial and the social pressures brought to bear on the individual. It is revealing of emotions through the intense application of myth. In comparison, Bishop's poetry appears on the surface to be an arena lacking obvious anxiety. There are grounds of course for finding differences between these poets, but it is important, nevertheless, to emphasise that in both their work they directly scrutinise the process of creative thinking. They employ similar strategies which enable them to reflect upon poetic language, which, with all its strengths and deficiencies, serves to mediate between observed phenomena and the inner space of the imagination, between description and meditation. In poems such as Plath's "Mary's Song" and "Cut" the starting point is the external world, the humdrum Sunday lunch or the sight of a bleeding finger. These concrete experiences become material for the transforming powers of the imagination. Conversely some of Plath's poems emerge from a purely mental state, where ideas are modulated so as to reveal thoughts taking shape, expanding or rising ("Fever 103<sup>o</sup>"). In all of these examples the poem is conceived of as embodying consciousness. Wordsworth writes of 'turning the mind in upon itself' ("The Prelude"<sup>224</sup>) and Plath demonstrates a similar need for introspection over and beyond mere description. However, whereas Wordsworth describes the 'spread' of thought – giving form to an inner landscape of the senses – in Plath it is, in its mythical configuration, heightened and extending unceasingly

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<sup>224</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Five-Book Prelude*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), Book III, p. 111.

upwards in response to the sensations of outward experiences. I previously explained how in Bishop's poetry this shift inwards may be preceded by questions – 'Now can you see the monument?', "'Why does that strange sea make no sound?'" ("The Monument," CP, 23) – or an invitation to 'enter' the mind of the poet ("Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance"). In Plath the inward gaze is initiated by a dream, feverishness, or hypnagogia. The liminal, or in-between, state is a common framework in Plath's poetry for exploring the imagination.

Plath reflects soberly upon the way her mind oscillates between the poles of immanence and religio-mythical form especially in "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" and "Fever 103<sup>o</sup>", poems which interrogate the value and purpose of re-envisioning the world in historical terms. Either the poet describes faithfully the objects that she sees and draws energy from direct communion with nature or, believing inadequate this process of self-discovery via contact with the external world, she looks to myth in order to contextualise personal experience. In seeking to discover in the past meaningful imagery, the poet runs the risk of indulging merely aesthetic sensibilities deemed pretentious and esoteric. Plath is fascinated with history, not simply what it had to teach, but how it functioned: whether its events were cyclical (Nazism and imperialism), causal and deterministic (the speaker's fate compared to Oedipus in "The Eye-Mote"), or fatalistic, in which case volition or individual choice is removed. But if it is accepted that poetry need not be about drawing parallels between contemporaneous society and antiquity, women's language could avoid the usual pitfalls, namely the myth that merely reinforces the psychological attachment of the daughter to her father and her inability to ever repair this damage ("The Colossus"). Alternatively, myth suggests that the future has already been determined by the past and nothing the person does can change this fact. There is a sense of this fatalism in "Words" ('From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars/ Govern a life') (CP, 270). Plath's treatment of self and

myth reveals the Pandora's Box of controversies which the appropriation of history uncovers.

Plath explores self-reflexively the value of objectification and the exaggerated nature of feminine language. At times she feels compelled to describe objects in their pure and unadulterated form. This kind of artistic vision attains a moral significance, in the sense that it is natural and uncorrupted by human value and judgement. But pure objectivity is a poetic desire, which, even in Bishop's work, serves ultimately to emphasise the incompatibility between elements that exist in the external world and the language of their expression and approximation. In "On the Plethora of Dryads" Plath strives to bridge this chasm and, no matter how improbable the task, to reveal the complexity and limitation of a language system which creates and constantly redefines the world. She writes of the 'quintessential beauty' of trees whose essence is an inspiration only to the pious and employs a similar religious metaphor in "Context" when describing the 'miraculous' works of poets like Bishop. Such are the contradictions in Plath's poetry; the decidedly female voice denounces patriarchal hegemony and asserts self-identity and yet questions her leaning toward hyperbole and mythical revisionism, which, paradoxically, reasserts the masculine as the fulcrum of creativity. This poetry has at its heart a notable self-irony. There is a concern that poetry will displace objects from their core value. However, one senses that for Plath objectification remains inspiring but unattainable, a vision of reality that she understands in philosophical terms as the antithesis of the unreal, and which requires of the poet the courage to privilege the craft of description – a particular criticism of her early poetry – and to resist the belief that self-empowerment flowed from the transformative language of symbols, deciphered by or filtered through a female mind. It is the female poet's search for and struggle with a muse that is at the heart of "On the Plethora of Dryads." According to Louise Bogan, inspiration 'comes and goes; it cannot be forced and it can very rarely be summoned up by the

conscious will'.<sup>225</sup> Plath intuits a similar understanding of inspiration; the speaker of “On the Plethora of Dryads” marvels upon earthly beauty, but then dispenses with that ‘metaphysical Tree’, and the classical ideals of animism – the artistic contemplation of nature in sustained and reverential terms – and finds hallucination, ‘a wanton fit’ brought on by the ‘seductive/ Reds, greens, blues’ of prescription drugs, effectively achieves a greater degree of imaginative power. Hence hypnagogic states and feverish dreams often unnaturally induced by pills or alcohol (“The wishing Box”) recur in Plath’s work. “On the Plethora of Dryads” proceeds to give things in the wood symbolic values and corrupts with overtly sexualised images their innate virtue. Sylvan dryads become the poet’s muse, but these images appear unsatisfying. The poet ‘battle[s]’ with what is true inspiration and her dilemma remains unresolved, whether to fix her metaphysical look upon objects and experience, ‘[h]earing a white saint rave,’ or resort to unnatural means, a drug-induced ‘fit,’ in order to imagine human mythical forms (CP, 67–68).

Plath’s language is often considered feminine in the traditional sense of asserting personal identity, rejecting patriarchy and revising history, especially mythology. What is understood as feminine writing is thus dependent upon cultural forces and the extent to which a writer submits to or resists such social contingencies. But we should consider other equally important facets of Plath’s poetry, including the ability to write in a self-critical fashion, while commenting upon the imagination and the irresistible attraction which female writers feel toward myth. In terms of subject matter, this kind of feminine language uncovers the strategical ways in which history can be applied and revised and, paradoxically, ‘diagnostic’ self-scrutiny reveals both Plath’s emotional attachment as well as detached, sober reflection.

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<sup>225</sup> Louise Bogan and Ruth Limmer, *Journey Around My Room: The Autobiography of Louise Bogan* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), p. 119.



### Plath's 'Pseudo-Reality'

Confessional poetry may be defined as a genre rooted in late Romantic ideology, which was particularly associated with a group of poets of the second half of the twentieth century who were generally thought of as open to the extremities of experience. However, a reassessment of these writers cautions against indiscriminately labelling their work as Confessional.<sup>226</sup> It is imperative to distinguish between poetry of the naked ego – the documenting of actual events and experiences in the life of the writer – and the literary alter ego or poetic persona through which the personal is filtered. In addition, we must take into account the linguistic strategies which elevate poetry above the purely autobiographical or purely psychoanalytical and render verse into an aesthetic experience for the reader. In this context consider Plath's opinion of herself as a writer:

My purpose...is to draw certain attitudes, feelings and thoughts, into a pseudo-reality for the reader...Since my woman's world is perceived greatly through the emotions and the senses, I treat it that way in my writing – and am often overweighed with heavy descriptive passages and a kaleidoscope of similes.<sup>227</sup>

Plath's mind is occupied with writing verse which is not replete with autobiographical material, but constructed as a work of art, an illusion, or 'pseudo-reality' that gives lyrical shape to an emotional intensity. For this reason, aesthetic strategy places greater emphasis on feelings rather than personal details. Perhaps it is this kind of intimacy that sets apart the Confessional verse of the twentieth century from that of the nineteenth century.<sup>228</sup>

Plath did compose wholly descriptive poems, as, for example, "Watercolor of

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<sup>226</sup> It has been argued that Confessional poetry was rooted in America in the 1930s; see Steven K. Hoffman, 'Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic', *English Literary History*, vol. 45, no. 4 (winter, 1978): 687–709. See also the introduction by Alvarez in *The New Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 28–29; Lerner, 'What is Confessional Poetry?': 46–66.

<sup>227</sup> *Journals*, p. 88.

<sup>228</sup> For a discussion on whether Confessional poetry is, strictly speaking, symptomatic of our modern age, see Lerner, 'What is Confessional Poetry?': 47–48.

Grantchester Meadows” (1959). The latter was not, to my knowledge, based on an actual painting or immediate impression – she was living and working in Boston at the time – but on aestheticised memory, the objective of which was simply to recreate a scene. On the day the poem was written Plath noted: ‘Wrote a Granchester (sic) poem of pure description. I must get philosophy in. Until I do I shall lag behind ACR (Adrienne Cecile Rich). A fury of frustration, some inhibition keeping me from writing what I really feel’.<sup>229</sup> The poem draws romantically on a scene which holds some kind of significance in the poet’s memory, but this is a ‘watercolor’ meant to be for the reader an approximation of the natural beauty of Grantchester. Although in the last two lines of the poem there is certainly some of the menace of Plath’s later expressionist verse (‘How in such mild air/ The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out’), “Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows” was written ‘bucolically’ for ‘them’, that is, the *New Yorker* magazine.<sup>230</sup> In the poem she frames the idyllic scene in terms of dimension and perspective. However, if purely realistic depiction was something to be wary of, equally ‘lyrical sentimentality’<sup>231</sup> – which Plath recognised in some of her own writing – had to be avoided. She wanted to be more robust like the poet E. Lucas Meyers, whom she admired greatly for his strong technique and discipline. Subjectivity was not always, for Plath, a force of creativity but of reproduction, and, therefore, there were times when a poet needed to assume a more objective stance. Imagination was the ability to think outside the self. She wrote in her journal: ‘At present, the last thing I can do is be objective, self-critical, diagnostic – but I do know that my philosophy is too subjective, relative & personal to be strong and creative in all circumstances’.<sup>232</sup>

This discussion of the kind of writer Plath aimed to be leads invariably to the whole

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<sup>229</sup> *Journals*, p. 469.

<sup>230</sup> *Journals*, p. 477.

<sup>231</sup> *Journals*, p. 38.

<sup>232</sup> *Journals*, p. 151.

debate about the various phases of her career as a poet. Hughes, most notably, divided her writing into three neat sections, ending with *Ariel* (1965), and highlighted the transitional periods in her work. His chronology has influenced later critics like Bundtzen, Perloff and Rose. Of the 220 poems written between c. 1952 and 1956 Hughes included 50 at the end of *Collected Poems* entitled 'Juvenilia'. These were, in his evaluation, of little interest except to 'specialists'. In this way he was able to establish what he considered to be the first phase of her work. In the second phase, significantly, only *The Colossus* was published during Plath's lifetime, while two other volumes, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* (1971), were published posthumously. This would suggest that *The Colossus* is most representative of Plath as a writer during this transitional phase: she chose the poems for the collection, ordered them and gave them a title which changed several times. The collection's poems and 'substance' 'evolved' over a number of years, according to Hughes. Turning our attention to *Ariel*, we can say that this is the next most representative: before her death in 1963 Plath was in the process of putting the volume together and did indeed give the work its title, but, as is well known, her choice for the collection differed from Hughes' eventual compromise, which included thirteen poems originally intended for a third book. However, in considering Plath's development as a poet, it is important to note that the dates when the volumes were published did not necessarily reflect the chronological order of the poems. For this reason, Plath's *Collected Poems* is more accurately representative of her output and multiple inspirations. Two further points should be added in this regard. First, the phases overlap; for instance, the poems "In Plaster" and "Tulips" were written on the same day but included in different collections, *Crossing the Water* and *Ariel* respectively. Interestingly, in the latter collection, which was often viewed by critics as superior to the former, Plath's 'true' voice was regarded as more developed. Secondly, some poems which Plath wrote in the mid-to-

late-fifties seem to belong stylistically to a later period. Hughes remarked that Plath ‘anticipated herself’. I accept this point, but perhaps it was not so much anticipation as openness to experiences. Such a reconsideration of Plath’s work militates against rigid delineation of phases in her development as a writer.

Plath’s poetic ‘voice’ of the 1960s did indeed undergo a thematic change from the earlier *The Colossus*. The poems reflected intimately her experiences in this period. However, the controversy surrounding the original manuscript of *Ariel* and its list of contents, as well as Hughes’ inclusion of the later poems in the first edition, coloured its reception and critical interpretation, and ‘transition’ was often used, in relation to Plath, to mean less the technical development of the book and more the significant parallels that could be drawn between her life and art. In the foreword to the revised edition of *Ariel* Frieda Hughes again emphasised the transitional phase of her mother’s poetry, repeated that her true ‘voice’ only began to emerge in late 1961, and echoed her father’s assertion that in earlier verse Plath ‘anticipated herself’ before she eventually ‘found a subject on which [she] could really get a grip’.<sup>233</sup> This argument was in defence of Ted Hughes’ inclusion in *Ariel* of earlier and later poetry that did not belong to the original manuscript, the latter of which formed the basis of the restored edition. Again, however, the thematic development of *Ariel* was stressed by Frieda and although she attempted to diffuse the controversy over her father’s arrangement of the collection, she did, nevertheless, maintain the association between this work and her mother’s marriage break-up and the ‘agonies’ which ‘brought a theme to the poetry’.<sup>234</sup> Frieda’s reference, moreover, to Plath’s assertion that *Ariel* ended with the word ‘spring’ from the poem “Wintering” added a further biographical, albeit

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<sup>233</sup> Frieda Hughes (foreword), *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. x–xii.

<sup>234</sup> Hughes, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. xii.

more positive, note.<sup>235</sup> However, this optimism had been somewhat negated by Ted Hughes' placement of "Words" and "Edge" at the end of *Ariel*, the final poems Plath wrote before her suicide. This once more fixed the book in the minds of readers as thematically and chronologically representative of Plath's life and death.

The controversial history of *Ariel* should not detract from the breadth and depth of Plath's later poetry. I am not inclined to apply rigid phases of thematic development to her work because the broad visual interests she held at the time grew out of *The Colossus* and even earlier poetic theories formulated at college. In the light of this debate I suggest an approach that does not draw too heavily on parallels between Plath's life and poetry, but, rather, remains focused on the aesthetic value of her work. I am less interested in biographical phases in her writing and more with understanding what she meant by the term 'pseudo-reality' and especially with the function of myth, which is a focal point of this chapter. Plath's poetry brings together various artistic strands, both real and imaginary: the fables and fairytales of childhood<sup>236</sup>; mythical gods and goddesses; Biblical stories and saints' lives; the contemporary vision of Lowell and Roethke<sup>237</sup>; the narrative and stylistic legacy of Woolf.<sup>238</sup> Plath's poetry and prose also reveal the appropriation of certain powerfully vivid images drawn from artists such as Rousseau, de Chirico and Klee.<sup>239</sup> It is further relevant to consider how myth – an essential literary legacy, which operates within structures of shared meaning connecting poet and reader – masks or deflects and, at the same time, accentuates the poet's emotional state. However, I should at this point qualify

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<sup>235</sup> Hughes, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. xii.

<sup>236</sup> *Journals*, p. 35.

<sup>237</sup> J.D. McClatchy, 'Short Circuits and Folding Mirrors', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Sylvia Plath* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), p. 84.

<sup>238</sup> Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), pp. 141–68.

<sup>239</sup> What I have in mind, in this regard, is the image of the eye and tear in the "Beekeeper's Daughter", which has been compared to a similar motif in Bishop's "The Man-Moth"; Margaret Dickie, 'Seeing is Re-seeing: Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop', *American Literature*, vol. 65, no. 1 (March, 1992): 131–46.

the latter statement. It must be understood that the mythical is universal only in a cultural sense, where individuals, brought together by their education and common exposure to certain works of art, are, as a result, inclined to recognise the values of certain ancient stories. And though some may be more lacking in knowledge than others, all can project upon myth a significance which they believe carries the weight of cultural import. But if, therefore, myth has general application, is it, arguably, personalised by Plath? The poet delineates mythical imagery and makes use of the pronoun 'I' to convey emotion; these two elements, Alicia Ostriker suggests, operate in synchrony.<sup>240</sup> When myth is handled intimately, therefore, what matters most is not accuracy of detail – which is always open to question – but true and intense feeling. Is there not a contradiction of terms here? Does Plath appropriate and realign myth to personal experiences?<sup>241</sup> In order to answer such questions, consideration should be given to a series of poems written in the late 1950s that reveal Plath's poetic aspirations.

### **Mythical Form, Objective Vision**

In "On the Decline of Oracles", "The Death of Myth-Making", "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay" and "Poems, Potatoes" Plath explores differences between myth and reality, metaphor and object, and endorses poetry that is neither self-absorbed, nor completely self-effacing. Too often in the past she has been unfairly accused of self-obsession, an unwarranted accusation that undervalues her creativity. Attention should be focused on Plath as a poet who was concerned with aesthetics, who could be ambivalent about the function of myth, symbolism and

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<sup>240</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language. The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 213.

<sup>241</sup> On the distinction between poetry of 'action' and 'representation' see Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), passim.

historicity.<sup>242</sup>

In “On the Decline of Oracles” Plath refers to the late nineteenth-century Swiss Symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin, whose painting “The Island of the Dead” (1880) she read about in Strindberg’s *Ghost Sonata*. Böcklin paints a night scene inspired by the volcanic island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples. Its mysterious tomb-like caves, tall dark cypress trees and the whitewashed walls of a villa suggest a mythical setting. Toward this island, set in the middle of an ominous sea, a boat carries two figures, one seated and recognisably human and the other ghostly, shrouded in white. In her journal Plath remarked upon the painting’s powerful allure: the nocturnal and the oneiric, the play between light and shade, the island’s ‘angular pale stone’ set against a dark background, the gothic and the supernatural.<sup>243</sup> Böcklin’s iconic imagery and Strindberg’s bleak, pessimistic outlook on life become the leitmotif of Plath’s poem:

My father kept a vaulted conch  
 By two bronze bookends of ships in sail,  
 And as I listened its cold teeth seethed  
 With voices of that ambiguous sea  
 Old Böcklin missed, who held a shell  
 To hear the sea he could not hear.  
 What the seashell spoke to his inner ear  
 He knew, but no peasants know.

My father died, and when he died  
 He willed his books and shell away.  
 The books burned up, sea took the shell,  
 But I, I keep the voices he  
 Set in my ear, and in my eye  
 The sight of those blue, unseen waves  
 For which the ghost of Böcklin grieves.  
 The peasants feast and multiply. (CP, 78)

The poem’s characters, gifted in some way or another, become intertwined. The first stanza

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<sup>242</sup> In response to Plath’s critics, Tim Kendall has argued that she does not exploit history, but rather incorporates it within the ‘private domain’ of her poetry in order to emphasise how war is a cyclical and unavoidable ‘contemporary experience’; *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 169–74.

<sup>243</sup> *Journals*, p. 322.

represents the isolation of the Swiss painter, ‘Old Böcklin’, who lives far away from the sea, but has the ability, nevertheless, to envision its mystery through the power of his imagination. He possesses the gift of artistry. The ‘vaulted conch’ he holds to his ear reminds him of the sounds of the sea and connects him to the speaker and the speaker’s father. All possess this shell, though none is in need of it. ‘[T]he sea took the shell’ but Böcklin already ‘knew’ the voices of that ‘ambiguous sea,’ and the speaker ‘keep[s] the voices he (the father)/ Set in my ear’. The speaker retains the power of artistry and imagination inherited, so it would seem, from the father, whose death brings about the destruction of his books.<sup>244</sup> The father, like the ghost of Böcklin, can now only grieve at the loss of ‘[t]he sight of those blue, unseen waves’. The speaker’s imagination contrasts, somewhat ironically, with that of the ‘peasants’ who lack creativity and imagination, and merely ‘feast and multiply’ in the same way that the Student in Strindberg’s *Ghost Sonata* is able to see what others cannot – ‘where everything fulfils its promise in his imagination’ – and, as one of the chosen prophets, lives among the human multitude of ‘poor miserable creatures’.<sup>245</sup> Plath’s “Mushrooms” continues this theme: the masses are the ‘earless and eyeless’, ‘[n]udgers and shovers’. Nevertheless, the beginning of stanza three of “On the Decline of Oracles” marks a growing sense of weariness, disillusionment, or complete indifference to the transforming powers of the imagination. A new age is heralded, one in which ‘eyes [have] gone dull/ That once descried Troy’s towers’. The world no longer has mystery or fantasy, neither ‘brazen swan nor burning star’, and the three wise men, de-historicised and de-mystified, are now consigned to the pages of a ‘gross comic strip’.

During the summer of 1958 Plath, according to Hughes, was finding it increasingly

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<sup>244</sup> This could be a reference to Prospero in “The Tempest”. On a more biographical note, Plath commented on the enduring presence of her father even after his death: ‘There is your dead father who is somewhere in you, interwoven in the cellular system of your long body’ (*Journals*, p. 64).

<sup>245</sup> August Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, translated with an introduction by Michael Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 285.



difficult to write,<sup>246</sup> and in the first of the sequence of poems from this period, “The Death of Myth-Making”, she debates the direction that her poetry should take and contemplates the competing functions and values of the mythical and rational. In this poem the virtues of ‘Reason’ and ‘Common Sense’, assuming the guise of pragmatic civil servants, ride out on their horses to court ‘doctors of all sorts,/...housewives and shopkeepers’. Their intention is to create a sense of order:

The trees are lopped, the poodles trim,  
 The laborer’s nails pared level  
 Since those two civil servants set  
 Their whetstone to the blunted edge  
 And minced the muddling devil

Whose owl-eyes in the scraggly wood  
 Scared mothers to miscarry,  
 Drove the dogs to cringe and whine,  
 And turned the farmboy’s temper wolfish,  
 The housewife’s, desultory. (CP, 104)

In the pursuit of reason the trees are cut down and the deep, dark and ‘scraggly’ wood is demystified. This once mythical, unfathomable place no longer holds fear or even fascination. Instead, in this new antiseptic, tangible reality the doctors uphold rational thought, while housewives and shopkeepers occupy themselves with the mundane and commonplace. In her study of American women poets and revisionist mythology, Ostriker has written: ‘While women poets in our time share a distrust for rationalism, they do not share the modernist nostalgia for a golden age of past culture’.<sup>247</sup> This perspective articulates well Plath’s ambivalence toward the growth of rationalism and materialism in “The Death of Myth-Making”. Myth exerts a powerful and destructive influence on human behaviour because it is so generally embedded in structures of meaning. Hence, in the poem pregnant mothers who deviate from what is, perhaps, considered

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<sup>246</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 287.

<sup>247</sup> Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, p. 213.

to be maternal virtue, run the risk of punishment, of miscarriage. Such is the conditioning that the housewife's temper is rendered 'desultory'. Alternatively, the death of myth spells the end of spontaneity, the end of imagination, and the growing force of rationalism denies the woman poet access to a mythical past, which she would attempt to subvert and reconfigure.

In addition, the pursuit of the rational in "The Death of Myth-Making" has an anaesthetising effect on the woman; the 'scissors' of common sense are sharpened for her to perform domestic or trivial tasks – such as trimming her nails or grooming and styling her poodles – but this in turn breeds apathy and blunts the intellect. It should be noted that the two virtues of common sense and reason are gendered; the negative connotation of such terms as 'nag', 'scissors', 'squat' and 'trim' point toward a feminine inertness in the face of the inscrutable. The antonymous 'stallion', 'knives', '[l]antern-jawed' and 'lopped' convey the notion of a more powerful, dynamic and intellectually energetic male. Reason in the poem, presumably a more masculine trait, considered the domain of the intellectual, sets out to confront and challenge the 'reality' of myth, to lop with knives the trees of that scraggly wood.

In "The Death of Myth-Making" the poet has to tread carefully: does she set out to recreate as accurately as possible an object or scene observed? Or must she allegorise or mythologise her subject? Bearing in mind this ambivalence, should not the woman poet, in particular, be cautious about restricting the scope of her imagination? A similar dilemma is at the heart of "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay". This may be regarded as an eco-feminist poem, although, as it follows immediately "The Death of Myth-Making" in the *Collected Poems*, I would argue that the meta-fictional framework of "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay" is equally relevant. The poet revisits the Winthrop peninsula, which for well over a decade she has had fond memories of, only to discover that this putative 'idyll' is no more than a 'shoddy' place ravaged by pollution

from the nearby airport:

No lame excuses can gloss over  
 Barge-tar clotted at the tide-line, the wrecked pier.  
 I should have known better.

Fifteen years between me and the bay  
 Profited memory, but did away with the old scenery  
 And patched this shoddy

Makeshift of a view to quit  
 My promise of an idyll. ... (CP, 104–105)

The poet is faced with a dilemma which she chooses to deal with in a direct manner. How does she interpret this natural scene? Should things observed be taken at face value? In “Green Rock, Winthrop Bay” there are echoes of Bishop’s poetic technique of drawing attention to herself ‘thinking out loud’. Further parallels may be drawn between this poem and Bishop’s “The Moose” with its childhood recollections of Nova Scotia. In “The Moose” Bishop registers subtly the familiar and diurnal. There is belief that this kind of ‘dreamy divagation’ – describing literally the movement of the tide, the course of the river and the long bus journey – sustains poetry and allows for a quiet self-regard, a reflection upon the act of perception. In “Green Rock, Winthrop Bay” the poet equally contemplates the past, although she is more intrigued by the process of judgement and awareness now that she has returned to this ‘[i]nimical’ and ‘niggard estate’. Either the ‘naked ego’ does ‘this tawdry harbor/ A service and ignore it’, or proceeds to gild – in a play on words – ‘what’s eyesore’, to create an illusory bay, but then risk being labelled a ‘liar’. The dilemma for the poet is between the immediate, unadulterated and truthful representation of subject matter – noting, for example, the ‘periwinkles, shrunk to common/ Size’ – and the dependency on distant memory that, nevertheless, creates a time and space vacuum between the thing observed immediately and the thing recalled at a later date. In the latter case the poet’s recollection is selective and not always truthful. However, perhaps there is a

distinction to be made between external and internal truth. The poetic recollection could be false to the actual specifics of what she experienced but true to her overall emotional response. Thus the debate about rational and imaginative poetry, first raised with so much ambivalence in “The Death of Myth-Making”, continues unabated in “Green Rock, Winthrop Bay,” with the poet still pondering uneasily the moral and aesthetic merit of her verse.

This dilemma of poetic enterprise that seems to weigh heavily on Plath’s mind – whether to place greater value on direct presentation over meditation or vice versa – approaches resolution most clearly in “Poems, Potatoes”. A clue is contained in the rather dull-sounding title: poems, or, for that matter, works of art, whose words or lines attempt to reflect precisely, as in a mirror, an external reality, are as dull as the mundane subjects which they endeavour to reproduce. The first line of the first stanza is an implicit denunciation of that Imagist attempt to make words embody things absolutely. The poem renounces Pound’s precept which holds that the ‘natural object is always the adequate symbol’.<sup>248</sup>

The word, defining, muzzles; the drawn line  
Ousts mistier peers and thrives, murderous,  
In establishments which imagined lines

Can only haunt. Sturdy as potatoes,  
Stones, without conscience, word and line endure,  
Given an inch. ... (CP, 106)

Rational thought ‘muzzles’ and limits the ‘mistier’ imagination to such an extent that the poet’s ‘conscience’ becomes almost redundant. Defining words and ‘drawn line[s]’ are ‘murderous’; that is to say, rationalism, sturdiness, concreteness, those traditional virtues of commonsense and reason, have such immense powers as to destroy the imagination. In a similar vein the knives of rational order in “The Death of Myth-Making” are instruments of a destructive absoluteness, lopping the trees of that mythical wood. Ultimately, “Poems, Potatoes” rejects the art of self-

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<sup>248</sup> *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 5.

effacement, of cold detachment, and advocates poetry and painting of imagination and, importantly, of conscience. Contrary to Auden's conception of the anti-heroic and politically-minded rationalist, Plath's ideal poet can be both egotistic (heroic) and socially conscious. Wallace Stevens sums it up well in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": the poet 'fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others'.<sup>249</sup>

### **The Artist and the Creative Mind**

A poem which takes as its subject matter the role of artist as creator is Plath's "Sculptor" (1959), written for *Arts in Society*, along with "The Goring" and "Aftermath", and later published in *The Colossus*. The 'obdurate' angel takes centre stage, and the sculptor, like the poet, contemplates life, but the former is able to go further: 'palpable' bodies give shape and form to his abstract concepts. The sculptor fashions stone, wood and bronze and his ideas become tangible:

Hands moving more priestlier  
 Than priest's hands, invoke no vain  
 Images of light and air  
 But sure stations in bronze, wood, stone. (CP, 91)

Plath juxtaposes the ethereal (Stations of the Cross), where the hands of the priest move in vain, with the concrete materials of the artist ('sure stations'). In "Sculptor" there is an affinity in the poet for stone, wood and bronze. Following her visit to Leonard Baskin's studio with Ted Hughes in 1958, Plath gave a detailed description in her journal of the carved figures – including

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<sup>249</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951). The element of 'humane kinship' in Confessionalism, the 'complex interaction of the developing self with other people', especially in the poetry of Robert Lowell, is discussed by Hoffman in 'Impersonal Personalism': 705–706.

the angel – he was working on.<sup>250</sup> She was struck by the giant-size ‘[d]ead men’ bronzes and the large and cumbersome wooden angel which ‘shouldered us into the corners & dominated the room’.<sup>251</sup> Aesthetically, the angel’s solidity and luxuriant colour were most affecting: ‘the rich dark-honey walnut wood glows golden in my memory’.<sup>252</sup> According to Hughes, ‘some of the gods he (Baskin) was carving at the time were also part of her pantheon – namely, the huge bald angels, the mutilated dead men, the person with the owl growing out of his shoulder’.<sup>253</sup> Plath drew inspiration from statuary, sculptures and stone carvings of ancient gods, and in “Sculptor” the dead bronze figures are more alive than the living:

Bronze dead dominate the floor,  
Resistive, ruddy-bodied,  
Dwarfing us. Our bodies flicker

Toward extinction in those eyes  
Which, without him, were beggared  
Of place, time, and their bodies.  
Emulous spirits make discord,

Try entry, enter nightmares  
Until his chisel bequeaths  
Them life livelier than ours,  
A solider repose than death’s. (CP, 91–92)

The bronze figures possess the ‘spirit’ of the sculptor. This spirit is the power of art to transform

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<sup>250</sup> Baskin, who at the time was teaching at Smith College, was known for his immense figures and reliefs in bronze, limestone and wood.

<sup>251</sup> *Journals*, p. 407.

<sup>252</sup> *Journals*, p. 407.

<sup>253</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems’, in Charles Newman (ed.), *The Art of Sylvia Plath. A Symposium* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 189. Plath was fascinated with stone and ‘solider figures’. In Boston, in the winter of 1958, she commented on the statue of the ancient Greek general and statesman Aristides the Just: ‘Blue shadows of trees looped on the sunwhite snow of the park in Lousyberg (sic) Square: the toga-Greek statue clutching his stone sheet in the frost. Clear air. Bless Boston, my birthtown’ (*Journals*, p. 440). In “Barren Woman” Plath writes: ‘Empty, I echo to the least footfall,/ Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas/...I imagine myself with a great public,/ Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos’. Similar ideas are explored in “Morning Song”; “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” – ‘The body is a Roman thing./ It has shut its mouth on the stone pill of repose’; and *The Stones* section of a “Poem for a Birthday” – ‘The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry/ Open one stone eye’ (‘I became a still pebble’).

stone, wood and bronze into something meaningful and eternal. Art enlivens the '[b]ronze dead'. These are 'solider' figures, sturdy and immortal: deathly but defiant of the mechanics of death. They are 'livelier' and healthier, empowered, '[r]esistive, ruddy-bodied', standing in the face of mere, putrescent mortals, who, like a 'flimsy light,' 'flicker toward extinction'. This is not the death we fear in reality, but one which is elevated, transformed and serene.

The division between the forces of creativity is further suggested in "Snakecharmer." Three worlds exist and are bound together: the first is that created by a god, the ineffable; the second is man-made, concrete and prosaic; while the third is born of the artist's creative mind, made manifest through metaphor. Thus the snakecharmer 'begins a snaky sphere' and '[p]ipes green. Pipes water':

Pipes water green until green waters waver  
 With reedy length and necks and undulatings.  
 And as his notes twine green, the green river

Shapes its images around his songs.  
 ...(CP, 79)

Plath described "Snakecharmer" as 'a green and moony-mood-piece'<sup>254</sup> based on a painting by Rousseau entitled *The Snake Charmer* (1907). She reads religious significance in the image of a silhouetted nude figure standing on a reeded river bank in the middle of a forest, whose piping charms the partially camouflaged black snakes from their arboreal habitat. Plath sees the painting as split in two: between the water and open space on the left, and the verdant vegetation on the right with its dark and ominous shadowing. Rousseau's camouflaging technique becomes the leitmotif of Plath's poem. "Snakecharmer" gradually takes on a more psychic-metaphoric structure and the poet explores the dark recesses of the creative mind:

...He pipes a place to stand on, but no rocks,  
 No floor: a wave of flickering grass tongues

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<sup>254</sup> *Journals*, p. 359.

Supports his foot. He pipes a world of snakes,  
Of sways and coilings, from the snake-rooted bottom  
Of his mind. And now nothing but snakes

Is visible...(CP, 79)

The piper is artist-creator and his pipe is the tool of his creativity. The brush, for example, of the artist gives shape to the imagination: the ‘sways and coilings’, the ‘twist’ of lines and ‘undulating’.<sup>255</sup> And so the artist shapes ‘images around his songs’. In the imagined world of snakes, which takes root in his mind, he has the ‘might’ to turn everything on its head, to create a new secular form of religion which subverts the old: instead of sainthood there is a snakehood, instead of light ‘let there be snakes’. He forsakes God and righteousness and aligns himself to the world of his creation. The artist creates and erases his world as he wishes and, when tired of his creation, undoes his ‘snaky sphere’ and ‘pipes the world back to the simple fabric/ Of snake-warp, snake-weft’.

### **Plath’s Outer and Inner Worlds**

There is in Plath’s poetry and prose an ongoing debate – and unmistakable ambivalence – about the superior value of imaginative over prosaic language. For a poet who rejected outright ‘that photographic mind’ in favour of a ‘synthesizing spirit’ with ‘more inventiveness than God’,<sup>256</sup> there is doubt intermittently cast upon the use of extended metaphor in verse. Arguably, therefore, Plath’s poetry is underpinned by an objectifying agenda. The concern of the poet that her ‘gilding’ words will be judged the utterances of a ‘liar’ reemerges in “Green Rock, Winthrop Bay”. The poet feels compelled to elevate reality, though failure to do so is equated with a

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<sup>255</sup> The poet’s creativity may be compared to Stevens’ “Ideas of Order at Key West”, where the song of the woman-artist creates the order that is the poem out of natural chaos.

<sup>256</sup> *Journals*, p. 210.



mental sickness. In Plath's story "The Wishing Box" the protagonist bemoans her inability to see beyond the 'pragmatic existence' of objects: "The utterly self-sufficient, unchanging reality of the *things* surrounding her began to depress Agnes".<sup>257</sup> Indeed, in Plath's journal, fundamental differences between 'concrete object' and abstract noun play on her mind. The advice she received from the fiction writer Val Gendron was '[v]isualise, emotionalise, afterwards'.<sup>258</sup> Importantly for Plath, life should be experienced through the senses – the abstract words are 'synthesized' from the object, or actual instance, the 'individual percept'.<sup>259</sup> In a later entry, 'critical' and 'diagnostic' objectivity, a philosophy that is not 'too subjective', is the agency of creative individualism.<sup>260</sup>

Hughes remarked that in her work Plath was, like the still-life graphic artist, 'loyal to objects. Nothing refreshed her more than sitting for hours in front of some intricate pile of things laboriously delineating each one'.<sup>261</sup> But, as he also noted, this attention to detail was a 'helplessness' because mere observation proved not enough for her creatively. In Hughes' poem "The Owl" (*Birthday Letters*) it is the young Plath who is a poet transformed by his influence: 'You were a camera/ Recording reflections you could not fathom./ I made my world perform its utmost for you./ You took it all in with an incredulous joy' For Hughes, the camera is a perfect metaphor for the objective poet who records faithfully the material world, and the 'prevailing morality of our time' is the morality of the camera, which is 'utterly devoid of any awareness of the requirements of the inner world'.<sup>262</sup> Plath had from early on regarded highly Hughes' natural and imaginative poetry and their relationship seems to have been based on mutual admiration of

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<sup>257</sup> Sylvia Plath, "The Wishing Box", in *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

<sup>258</sup> *Journals*, p. 142.

<sup>259</sup> *Journals*, p. 122.

<sup>260</sup> *Journals*, p. 151.

<sup>261</sup> Hughes' introduction to Plath's *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 12.

<sup>262</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p. 146.

each other's work.<sup>263</sup> However, Hughes recalled that during their time at Cambridge they shared both an artistic alliance and the kind of rapport which existed between a teacher and his student.<sup>264</sup>

Hughes identified myth as the greatest source that reconnects with our emotions. However, in this mythical poetry may be recognised an 'objectivist' language that is in Plath's work vivid and ordered.<sup>265</sup>

The inner world, separated from the outer world, is a place of demons. The outer world, separated from the inner world, is a place of meaningless objects and machines. The faculty that makes the human being out of these two worlds is called divine. That is only a way of saying that it is the faculty without which humanity cannot really exist. It can be called religious or visionary. More essentially, it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit.<sup>266</sup>

Moreover, Hughes believed that art has the power to lift 'us out of our egotistic prison and connects, as it seems, everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself'.<sup>267</sup> Essentially, therefore, poetry should aim to create imaginative connections through the accumulation and transformation of mythical stories – the very basis of consciousness – in order to help us understand better ourselves.<sup>268</sup> He makes a distinction between the 'rising prestige of scientific objectivity and the lowering prestige of religious awareness'.<sup>269</sup> The merely descriptive, an 'intelligent eye', insofar as it is a building block of modernism, is inadequate and, like an incessant camera, lacks 'human morality'. Hughes' viewpoint recalls Plath's denunciation of the meaningless, purely literal truth.

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<sup>263</sup> Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 55.

<sup>264</sup> Ekbert Fass, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 77.

<sup>265</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 159, 161.

<sup>266</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 151.

<sup>267</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 92.

<sup>268</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 88, 141.

<sup>269</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 146.

For Plath the decision to place an object at the centre of a poem is intrinsically a projection of the familiar. In her prose piece “A Comparison” she describes the process:

I do not like to think of all the things, familiar, useful and worthy things, I have never put into a poem. I did, once, put a yew tree in. And that yew tree began, with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair...It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it—everything! I couldn't subdue it. And, in the end, my poem was a poem about a yew tree. That yew tree was just too proud to be a passing black mark in a novel.<sup>270</sup>

The chosen object is closely observed and though the poet attempts to permeate this natural scene with emotion, she fails. The yew tree is not transformed and its physical and overwhelming presence assumes a far greater significance in the poem than its equivalent description in a novel. Plath explores further the difference between the physical and metaphysical nature of a tree in both “On the Plethora of Dryads” and “On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad”:

But no hocus-pocus of green angels  
 Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye;  
 ‘My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,  
 And that damn scrupulous tree won’t practice wiles  
 To beguile sight:  
 E.g., by cant of light  
 Concoct a Daphne;  
 My tree stays tree.

‘However I wrench obstinate bark and trunk  
 To my sweet will, no luminous shape  
 Steps out radiant in limb, eye, lip,  
 To hoodwink the honest earth which pointblank  
 Spurns such fiction  
 As nymphs; cold vision  
 Will have no counterfeit  
 Palmed off on it. (CP, 66)

When merely observed, frustratingly ‘[m]y tree stays tree’. The poet, nevertheless, must proceed

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<sup>270</sup> Sylvia Plath, “A Comparison”, in *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 57.

cautiously in transforming but not corrupting this object of nature, which in its purest form is ‘honest’ and ‘chaste’. She may choose to look beyond ‘cold vision’ – an objective philosophy which rejects symbols and gives to things their true name – and transform imaginatively the tree into ‘a Daphne’, but open herself to accusations of ‘hoodwink’, ‘counterfeit’, of beguiling ‘the sight’. This dilemma can only be resolved if the poet insists on the ‘real’ object, which must be imbued with a philosophy that elevates its significance beyond its materiality; poetry must ‘discover that metaphysical Tree which hid/ From my worldling look its brilliant vein’ (“On the Plethora of Dryads”).

In her *Journals* Plath expressed a desire to write poetry which emerges from real people, objects, events, relationships, and then transcends the actual:

Poems are bad to begin with: elaborate ones especially: they freeze me too soon on too little. Better, little exercise poems in description that don't demand philosophic bear-traps of logical development. Like small poems about the skate, the cow by moonlight, a la the Sow. Very physical in the sense that the worlds are bodied forth in my words, not stated in abstractions, or denotative wit on three clear levels. Small descriptions where the words have an aura of mystic power: of Naming the name of a quality.<sup>271</sup>

Hughes admired Plath's poetic language of ‘solid hieroglyphic objects and events, meaningful in a direct way, simultaneously earthen and spiritual, plain-statement and visionary’.<sup>272</sup> Words, in this sense, are like pictograms saturated with meaning. It was the mythical (‘emblematic visionary events’) and spiritual (the ‘transfiguring eye of the great white timeless light’) which, in his opinion, set Plath's poetry apart from that of the more autobiographical Lowell and Sexton.<sup>273</sup> Nevertheless, I would emphasise certain points of similarity between Plath's appropriation of historical narratives and Lowell's use of myth to create hyperbole – a strategy

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<sup>271</sup> *Journals*, p. 285.

<sup>272</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 224.

<sup>273</sup> Fass, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 180.

which Hughes would have approved of<sup>274</sup> – in order to establish the rhythm and resonance of his verse. I agree, however, that Lowell's mythical-personal statements are different from Plath's as they are born of a desire to reconfigure and subvert his own Catholic beliefs, which had early in his writing served as a 'source of myth and moral authority'.<sup>275</sup> Plath, by contrast, takes a consistently secularist position in her poetry.

### Phases of Metaphorical Transformation

The inclination for Plath is to rearrange things, employing metaphor to synthesise objects and emotions. In a journal entry of 1951 we have an example of how this works:

The wind has blown a warm yellow moon up over the sea; a bulbous moon, which sprouts in the soiled indigo sky, and spills bright winking petals of light on the quivering black water.<sup>276</sup>

The metamorphic moon is light like a balloon, yellow like the sun, its warmth a reflection of Plath's present mood. The first line is a 'vague imprecise allusion' and the whole image insinuates a disjunction between lightness and earthiness; the moon suddenly becomes 'bulbous' – in Plath's own words it has undergone 'rapid metamorphoses'. The reader connects the unusual 'yellow' colour of the moon to the 'bulbous' shape of the crocus. In the synthesised image of the moon floating above the sea, verbs and nouns are unusually conjoined: the moon 'sprouts' in the sky; and the rays of light 'spill' like liquid. The contrast is between the luminosity<sup>277</sup> of the moon (its 'bright winking petals') and the indigo darkness of the sky and sea. The yellowness of the

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<sup>274</sup> Exaggeration is an essential facet of Hughes' poetry; Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 14–15.

<sup>275</sup> Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon*, pp. 5–14.

<sup>276</sup> *Journals*, p. 87.

<sup>277</sup> A recurrent theme in the first few pages of the journals is light; white, glittering, luminous. It is well worth considering, from a visual point of view, the attraction to what is bright and intense. This may be contrasted with darkness: 'Black is sleep; black is a fainting spell; and black is death, with no light, no waking'; *Journals* p. 45.

moon, in this respect, suggests growth, fullness and roundness. This passage is illustrative of the complexity of the ‘visual image’, which ‘is capable of infinite variations with every combination of words’. There is no simple definition, or formula, and meaning is extended. Apart from its visual components, the line also synthesises the speaker’s mood. The moon is indicative of the poet’s feelings of contentment in a time of spring traditionally associated with growth and rejuvenation; while the portentous and iconic sea, ‘quivering’ and unfathomable, suggests a ‘sometime-in-the-future physical state’. These unlikely images fuse together imperceptibly but naturally.

The complex description of the moon demonstrates how words and thus images simultaneously displace and complement each other. Plath’s intention in creating such poetry is spelt out in a college essay: ‘Another dimension of this world builds its facets from a spinning platter. Because we think in terms of synesthesia, we like to visualize and verbalize music’.<sup>278</sup> The stimulation, therefore, of one sense is automatically experienced by another, and when expressed as a cross-sensory metaphor, this certainly energises Plath’s poetry. In “Little Fugue” (1962) its full effects are realised; colour synesthesia gives form and substance to her father’s voice. The poem very much reflects upon the various senses employed in the act of recollection. Returning to Plath’s description of the moon, the ‘bulbous’ object in the sky is meant to evoke the sensation of touch, though, of course, this is metaphorical. Nevertheless, the principles of synesthesia demonstrate how the senses are used in conjunction with language. For example, Plath notes that in her poetry ‘double focus’ combines adjectives and their ‘phantom’ nouns. Hence, the word ‘soiled’ in the line ‘soiled indigo sky’ has both a painterly dimension, suggesting a ‘smudged dark blue sky’, and an earthiness, complementing the idea that the moon

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<sup>278</sup>

Connors, ‘Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath’, p. 96.

is the shape of a yellow bulb. Similarly, the line ‘[the moon] spills bright winking petals of light’ triggers sensations of sight and touch. Syntactically, the various senses – or emotions – are attached to multiple, relatable images conveyed by means of language.

A synthetic strategy that draws on mythical imagery to shape intimate feelings is found in Plath’s “Dark Wood, Dark Water.” The poem, composed of short, trimetrical, three-line stanzas, vividly describes images of a wood and a lake in a language both concise and intense. The poem’s mythical and spiritual dimensions convey the foreboding of the poet, who remains peripheral and yet connected emotionally. The first line of “Dark Wood, Dark Water” attaches the distinctive smell emanating from the deep wood to the readers’ shared experience of entering a place of worship, like a church, where the ritualistic burning of incense acts as a form of purification or absolution: ‘This wood burns a dark/ Incense. Pale moss drips/ In elbow-scarves’ – the elongated natural image is somewhat reminiscent of Mannerist art.<sup>279</sup> The line is most intense because of the ‘tension’ which is created by placing words in apposition. In the context of this sylvan image, the verb ‘burns’ has quite a complex meaning, among whose connotations is not the destruction of the trees. Rather, the ‘double focus’<sup>280</sup> of ‘burns’ and the adjective ‘dark’ signifies both the mustiness and murkiness of the wood, and connects to the image of pungent smoke rising from burning incense.

For Plath, intense language translates the ‘mood’ of the poet. “Ariel” demonstrates the power of words and syntax to evoke the exhilaration and energy experienced by the rider. From what we know of Plath’s life, “Ariel” recalls an actual ride on Dartmoor. In the poem, composed of short three-line stanzas, ‘[t]he rider/ poet becomes agent, act and object, a unity conveyed

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<sup>279</sup> Certain Mannerist art was distinguished by its excessively stylistic and artificial representation of nature; John Shearman, *Mannerism. Style and Civilization* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 174.

<sup>280</sup> The words ‘tension’ and ‘double focus’ are Plath’s own, taken from her discussion of the complexity of the visual line; *Journals*, pp. 87–88.

thematically, enacted verbally'<sup>281</sup>:

...How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to  
The brown arc  
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye  
Berries cast dark  
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,  
Shadows. ... (CP, 239)

The bold colours are striking and add potency and a sense of urgency. Of course the word 'nigger' carries strongly racial overtones and though included in a poetic context, is no less offensive for readers who may object to its usage. However, similar controversy surrounds Plath's allusions to the Holocaust. In "Ariel" the choice of 'nigger' is again strategic as it conveys, on the surface, all the menace and threat of a deeply pejorative term. It is of interest to compare this poem to the slightly earlier and more muted observations of "Blackberrying", which describes the berries as '[e]bon' coloured. In "Ariel", furthermore, the frantic rhythm suggesting the speed of the bolting horse is intermittently punctuated by long dashes, which function further as visual signs of the forward momentum of the rider. The fragmented language mirrors the mind working very quickly, multiplying or changing images, and in several stanzas only one or two words make up a line. Verbs encroach as little as possible, and nouns and adjectives, strung together to give the impression of motion and immediacy ('Black sweet blood mouthfuls'), are set against each other in a seemingly arbitrary way. For example, the nouns and adjectives in the line '[n]igger-eye/ Berries cast dark/ Hooks' simultaneously complement and

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<sup>281</sup> D.F. McKay, 'Aspects of Energy in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1 (spring, 1974): 55.



conflict with each other; ‘nigger’ and ‘dark’ have an affinity, while the combination of soft berries and sharp hooks heightens in the mind of the reader the sense of how dangerously uncontrollable the ride has become. It is interesting at this point to compare “Ariel” with “Whiteness I Remember”, a poem written four years earlier about the exhilarating experience of horse riding. Like “Ariel”, “Whiteness I Remember” is about a ‘runaway ride,’ which according to an entry in Plath’s journal took place in Cambridge.<sup>282</sup> In both poems there is a strong connection between rider-horse-poet, although in “Whiteness I Remember”, described by Plath as a ‘book poem’, the objective is to present more descriptive detail of the ride,<sup>283</sup> while in “Ariel” religious and pseudo-historical invocations – the possible Biblical provenance of the name Ariel, and the allusion to the mythical ‘God’s lioness’ and Lady Godiva – intensifies that feeling of exhilaration, of being propelled forward, perhaps by the death drive; ‘Something else// Hauls me through air’, ‘The dew that flies/ Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red// Eye, the cauldron of morning’.

In “Ariel” the application of metaphor transforms and energises the experience of riding a horse. But whereas this poem represents an outward projection of the imagination, “Fever 103” appears to turn in upon itself, revealing the poet’s desire for abstraction and elaborate language. Here, the woman’s feverishness (‘...all night/ I have been flickering, off, on, off, on’) allows us entry into her mind. The images are then presented in rapid succession like hypnagogic hallucinations, while parataxis creates syntactical disjunction akin to surrealist aesthetics. “Fever 103” speaks both of suffering and healing – Christianity in a post-nuclear age. The suffering body, an open wound, both physical and mental, undergoes the process of spiritual healing and redemption. The speaker, Christ-like, is both sufferer and healer. Whatever the actual

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<sup>282</sup> *Journals*, p. 403.

<sup>283</sup> *Journals*, p. 407.

circumstances that gave rise to the poem, they are overwhelmed by an imagination which tends toward hyperbole.

The speaker, who is in a state of delirium brought on by the fever, declares herself to be ‘dissolving’ the many masks which she has cultivated and, in so doing, becomes the ‘pure acetylene/ Virgin.’ But is “Fever 103” Confessional? Is it a poem about finding your true self through the ‘dissolving’ of multiple identities? After all, the root of Confessional poetry is the verb ‘to confess’, whether this is understood in a religious sense as a desire to reveal the absolute truth, or in psychotherapeutic terms as the compulsion to unburden one’s concerns through the process of writing. Invariably, parallels will be drawn between references in the poem to adultery and the well-documented breakdown of Plath’s own marriage. In “Fever 103” the speaker’s illness causes her to ‘confess’ to the ‘sin’ which has held her down and, metaphorically-speaking, infected her body. The feverish body fights to free itself from infection, and the sinner seeks atonement through confession. But what is the sin being confessed? What is the speaker guilty of? The impression is that Plath’s speaker is less interested in the smaller details of personal relationships. Even the intimacy insinuated in the reference to ‘Darling’ in stanza ten is diminished by the scope and drama of her imagination in the rest of the poem:

Pure? What does it mean?  
The tongues of hell  
Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus ...

...They will not rise, ...

Darling, all night  
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.  
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher’s kiss....

I think I am going up,  
I think I may rise——

The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene

Virgin

Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,

By whatever these pink things mean....(CP, 231–32)

The speaker begins her feverish journey in hell, rises to the surface ‘of the globe’ to feel the full force of Hiroshima’s nuclear fallout, before she ascends to Paradise. In so doing, she is both confessor and absolver of her own sins. There is arrogant loftiness about her powers, impudently equating her suffering and resurrection (recovery) after three days with Christ’s. The analogies are overwhelming, carrying the speaker increasingly away from a recognisable reality or truth. There is the typical Plathian interlacing of images: the speaker is a lantern, a glowing moon ‘[o]f Japanese paper’, a camellia, a Virgin. What she now aspires to is not so much truth or forgiveness as omniscience. God is usurped. “Fever 103” runs the gamut of Christian dogma: heaven and hell, sin, purity and redemption, virginity and whorishness. And within this theological realm can be found the irreverent approximation of feverish ailment to a Christian self-sacrifice that equates human suffering with redemption. ‘Pure? What does it mean?’ asks the speaker. How is this purity achieved? The answer is as nebulous and elusive as purity itself, removed from the real world and placed within the realms of myth, religion and metaphor. As a consequence there are no apparent references in the poem to the actual and recognisable world, except mention of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, Isadora Duncan strangled by her own scarf, and the mundane ‘[l]emon water, chicken/ Water’ that helps alleviate sickness. Hence, the irony of “Fever 103” rests in the futile pursuit of purity – the absolute undoing of sin, the regaining of virginity. The tragic truth is that believers put their faith in a higher power, seek absolution over a lifetime dedicated to the attainment of perfection, but remain consumed with

the guilt of impurity.<sup>284</sup>

In “Fever 103” the poet is self-dramatising; she is caught up in the imagination and, removed from the actual, gives free reign to the mythical: ‘I think I am going up,/ I think I may rise...’ The mind artfully synthesises sundry images and the poet, by bringing attention to the cognitive process of assigning symbols to fashion identity, relegates cherubim to ‘whatever these pink things mean’. In the imagination the empowered self is meant to signify healing: ‘The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I// Am a pure acetylene/ Virgin’ – the enjambment leaves the ‘I’ hanging, suggesting a love of self. This egotism, nevertheless, may be ironic since the imagination transcends surface reality, inspires the improbable, but also belongs to a delirious and delusional mind. The subject ‘I’ in “Fever 103” resolves to fashion an identity through an elaborate and imaginative process of identifications with religious and mythical figures. As elsewhere, Plath’s adoption of myth enables the imagination to supersede the surface reality of human existence.

The discussion of Plath’s poetry from the late 1950s is revealing of the poet’s difficulty in trying to reconcile the worlds of reality and imagination. The term ‘pseudo-reality’, coined by Plath, is in itself indicative of this dilemma. There is, on the one hand, acknowledgement of an objective truth, summed up in Agnes’ repetition to herself of Gertrude Stein’s famous dictum, ‘a rose..., is a rose, is a rose...’,<sup>285</sup> and on the other hand, a tendency to engage the metaphorical in an attempt to rearrange the actual and mundane. In one of her final poems, “Words”, Plath makes her strongest case against a language which has the same forceful impact as a falling axe:

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<sup>284</sup> Plath had read St Therese of Avila’s autobiography, *The Way of Perfection*, in the late 1950s. In her journal she commented that this book brought on a sense of ‘terror of the contradiction of “relic and pomp admiration” and the pure soul. Where, where is Jesus. Maybe only the nuns and monks come near, but even they have this horrid self-satisfied greed for misfortune which in its own way is perverse as greed for happiness in this world’; *Journals*, p. 454.

<sup>285</sup> Plath, “The Wishing Box”, in *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams*, p. 53.

Axes  
 After whose stroke the wood rings,  
 And the echoes!  
 Echoes travelling  
 Off from the centre like horses. (CP, 270)

A complex fusion of images immediately follows: from the wood, upon which the axe falls, wells the sap-like tears, ‘like the/ Water striving/ To re-establish its mirror/ Over the rock’, that drops like a stone into a pool and turns into a skull eaten by weeds. Such poetry is strongly resonant. In the first two stanzas of “Words” the comparative images are of wood rings and concentric circles in the water. The poet is at the centre and everything emanates from this core. But certain type of metaphor – especially the elaborate – is about displacement, about going away from the centre. Removed from the self, such metaphoric words have, on reflection, lost their potency. An initial belief in the power of language is, toward the end, replaced by a greater scepticism in its efficacy.

## **Conclusion**

In “Words” the images become interlinked as the poet creates apposition and double meaning, or ‘double focus’. It is Plath’s trademark and such complex metaphors, evident in later poetry, including “Fever 103°” and “Little Fugue”, further relate to her ideas on synesthesia. I would emphasise in “Words”, finally, the search for an objective truth, which had already been contemplated in “On the Plethora of Dryads”. These poems explore how language mediates and, perhaps, corrupts the act of perception, although in “Fever 103°” the pursuit of purity – whatever moral or lingual form this may take – appears improbable. What, therefore, questions the poet, is true perception? Plath, for instance, places in a poem a tree – a significant motif in her work – and acknowledges that description merely magnifies the distinctness of this entity from the rest

of its environment (“A Comparison”). Arguably, however, poetry should be more than description and so Plath feels compelled to determine whether objects observed directly in the external world, or transformed by language amounts to true awareness. In the latter case, there are other factors, she considers, which may guide how the poet sees and, in observing a tree metaphorically, take a reader ‘far deeper in gross wood/Than axe could cut’ (“On the Plethora of Dryads”).

In a number of poems of the 1950s and 1960s Plath grapples with this question: what is true awareness? Perhaps, illusion makes humans more aware; the tree, for example, transformed by a trick of light that triggers the imagination – To beguile sight:/ E.g., by cant of light (“On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad”). Alternatively, external objects are internalised – ‘The trees of the mind are black’ (“The Moon and the Yew Tree”). For Plath, isolation makes more acute the senses; there is greater awareness of entities as objective correlatives of her state of mind. But, at the same time, objects can begin to possess her. She ponders the ‘[p]ossession’ of objects which can psychologically overwhelm the self (“Wintering”), and in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” she becomes ‘[s]eparated from the house by a row of headstones./ I simply cannot see where there is to get to’. This perception, nevertheless, is direct and revealing of her true emotions at any particular time. However, it is when she recollects people, as in “Little Fugue,” that the truth or falseness of judgement is questioned. Can the imagination be trusted in such cases? The grossly dark tree metaphor through which the speaker recalls her father may be an elaborate conceit, whilst in “Fever 103°” the invocation of religious figures appears self-moralising. If, therefore, the tree core represents the point of perception and direct experience (“Words”), metaphoric language loses its potency as the poet’s ability to make fair judgement gradually diminishes.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Bishop, Pictorial Design and Habitual Style**

When we speak of the properties of a poem as visual, we often mean that the objects under contemplation are described realistically, in terms of colour, size, shape and movement. But what is real description or depiction in literature or art? Is it facsimile, faithful reproduction – if, indeed, such a thing is feasible in poetry? And is reality solely in the eye of the beholder or must it be understood according to a society's accustomed way of seeing? The basis of discussion in this chapter is Bishop's interest in artistic representation and expression, in other words the act of seeing and comprehending through the intellect. She explores how the various senses – sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing – inform, in the first instance, our perception and enable us to reconstitute multi-dimensional images in our minds. Moreover, for Bishop, subjective representation in painting or literature can be susceptible to the changing styles or modes of seeing in any place or period. This stylistic change in how we see the external world and construct its meaning depends upon cultural influences. For example, in "Brazil, January 1, 1502" the tapestry exemplifies how symbols can be shaped into a reality especially recognisable to the early modern mind. This form of art relates to the traditional concept of periodization. Indeed, Bishop's poetry reveals a notable engagement with various aspects of what may be termed 'pictorialism'. Her poetic alignment between visual images and words, the act of seeing and thinking, enables the poet to explore how the skills of artistic representation conjure up a sense of reality in pictures. All in all, Bishop's poetry explores the psychology of perception. However, before proceeding to discuss this subject in more detail, it is necessary to survey

briefly the meaning of pictorialism.

### The Art-Literature Analogy

The art-literature analogy has a long history stretching from antiquity to the present, and the great debate over what constitutes pictorialism or visual writing reaches at least as far back as the eighteenth century and the German philosopher Lessing's ideas on the art of poetry and painting. For Lessing painting is a spatial medium and the painter can only make use of a single moment in time and 'this moment from one point of view'.<sup>286</sup> Poetry, however, which is a temporal medium, allows the imagination free rein and has the power to take up every action and pursue it from its source to its outcome. Lessing was opposed not to the theory of *ut pictura poesis*, but to the more aggressive use of descriptive detail that resulted in no distinct image.<sup>287</sup> In the late 1950s Hagstrum took his cue from Lessing when tracing the pictorialist element in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature. 'In order to be called "pictorial"', Hagstrum writes, 'a description or an image must be, in its essentials, capable of translation into painting or some other visual art ... its leading details and their manner and order of presentation must be imaginable as a painting or sculpture'.<sup>288</sup> However, the art-literature analogy has been applied retrospectively by some critics who regard poetry from certain literary periods as inherently pictorial. Indeed, one commentator described spatial form in poetry as a 'crucial aspect of the

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<sup>286</sup> G. E. Lessing, *Laokoön*, trans. E.C. Beasley and Helen Zimmern (London: George Bell and sons, 1879), p. 19.

<sup>287</sup> *Ut pictura poesis*, 'as a painting, so also a poem'. For a discussion of Lessing's review of Ariosto's Alcina see Lee, *The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, p. 4.

<sup>288</sup> Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp xxi–xxii. In *Spencer and Literary Pictorialism* John Bender makes an interesting attempt to modify the theory of literary pictorialism by combining it with Gombrich's study of the psychology of perception in art. For Bender a passage is pictorial not because it reminds us of the visual arts, but only when its language mimics the psychological process of visual perception. He isolates three kinds of perception found in the poetry of Spenser: focusing, framing and scanning; Bender, *Spencer and Literary Pictorialism*, passim.



experience and interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures'.<sup>289</sup> But while sceptics state that comparing a literary work to a painting is merely a figurative gesture, a counter argument holds that metaphorical description – for example, that a poem has spatial form – is viable and 'actual', if not literally true.<sup>290</sup> Such an argument marks a definite shift in the function of critical language and description. At any rate, there can be no absolute answer as to how the two arts resemble each other, and an obvious risk of making comparisons ad infinitum. Numerous, often confusing and contradictory terms are employed in this field, whether in a spirit of approximation, analogy or contiguity.

Of course, differences exist between painting and literature in terms of production: the one makes use of language, the other of materials (for example, paint, canvas, wood, plaster or stone). In the arrested image of painting, moreover, you are compelled to endow the figure with one particular emotion – for instance, an expression of anger or happiness – rather than the articulation of multiple emotions made possible by literary narrative. Nevertheless, it was traditionally argued that the visual poet, like the artist, 'painted' with words images of the external world which were vivid, full of colour, and arranged into a spatial coherence. This type of poetry was viewed as descriptive; the poet's intention was to create a scene by adding form, size, dimension and effects of light, dark and colour. Poets and artists, moreover, who possessed the requisite descriptive skills to delineate a scene or an object in realistic terms, were often lauded for attending to the outside world with faithfulness. Hence, artistic contemplation of an object – sustained, reverential, minute – could be perceived in religious terms as an act akin to

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<sup>289</sup> For a discussion of real and metaphoric criticism see W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory', *Critical Enquiry*, 6 (1979–80): 541.

<sup>290</sup> Mitchell, 'Toward a General Theory': 540, note 1, and Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, pp. 68–69.

veneration or idolatry – a type of animism, finding the numinous, the spirit within objects.<sup>291</sup>

It was generally thought that in order to be described as pictorial, a poem must conjure up predominantly visual images. Sound values – the primary elements of stress, intonation, rhythm, cadence and the verbal music of assonance and alliteration – were regarded as not being pictorial, and, therefore, had to be muted in a pictorial poem. Thus, Plutarch invoked the analogy between the two arts, to the effect that ‘painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture’.<sup>292</sup> Further still, Romantic aestheticism placed special emphasis on the ideas of solidity and particularity contained in the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*. By imitating the material precision of art, language could avoid the pitfall of abstraction and wayward generalisation.<sup>293</sup> This alliance between painting and poetry can be aptly illustrated by John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” and Rimbaud’s *Le Sonnet des Voyelles* (in which each vowel is assigned a colour), a tradition that has continued into the twentieth century with William Carlos Williams who devoted a whole volume to *Pictures from Brueghel*. But in addition to pure imitation (the mimetic or ekphrastic), John Ruskin also emphasised the emotional and moral expression of poetic pictorialism. Painting and poetry were two forms of ‘language’ through which the artist’s noble emotion expressed its visions.<sup>294</sup> This power to evoke objects and scenes coloured by emotion through the use of vivid language has over the centuries been known by various names, such as *enargeia* or *viva dipintura* (lively painting).<sup>295</sup> Renaissance writers spoke of *enargeia* as a necessary characteristic of true poetic style, and for the seventeenth-century poet

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<sup>291</sup> Anthony Hecht, *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>292</sup> Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris, 1985), 3: 347a. See also Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts*, p. 10.

<sup>293</sup> Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p. 34.

<sup>294</sup> Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p. 34

<sup>295</sup> This term was coined by the Italian neoclassical critic Lodovico Antonio Muratori. See *Della perfetta poesia Italiana* (Milan: Marzorati, 1972), vol. II, book IX.

and literary critic George Chapman *enargeia* or acuteness of representation was essential in poetry since it added ‘motion, spirit and life’.<sup>296</sup> Language is thus infused with the energy of the poet, who vividly presents his or her sensations, so that the reader of the poem can to some extent reenact the original sense experience, as well as get through to its implicit emotional force. In the twentieth century other technical terms defined this type of poetry: Pound described a vivid versification that approximates to painting as ‘phanopoeia’ and for the Czech Structuralist Jan Mukařovský ‘semantic coloration’ or ‘maximal intensification’ could be found in poetry, whose charged language was strongly imagistic or emotional.<sup>297</sup>

Further attempts to explain the relationship between painting and literature, to define their uniform effect on viewers and readers, and to infer a habitual way of ‘seeing’ led to the theory of periodization. This concept, otherwise known as *Zeitgeist*, recognised consistencies and similarities in style between disparate works of art and literature bound together by a common structure in a particular period. Much disagreement, however, centred on periodization, and the theory that there existed a common source of inspiration was challenged. Wölfflin, Sypher and Laude, among others, wrote on the subject, although criticism was levelled particularly at Mario Praz’s work on *air de famille*.<sup>298</sup> In a letter to Lowell (July 1960) Bishop mentions having

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<sup>296</sup> Phyllis Brooks Bartlet (ed.), *The Poems of George Chapman* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 49.

<sup>297</sup> Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, p. 39. Pound’s term, ‘phanopoeia’, defines language which has the effect of throwing ‘a visual image on to the reader’s imagination’. The concrete image, traditionally associated with the Imagist movement, is incomplete when, as Pound contended, the language of description lacks intensity. Such an absence will prevent the poet from converting mere description into the higher mode of presentation. Pound distinguishes between ‘melopoeia’ (the poetry of sound effect), ‘phanopoeia’ (the poetry of visual images) and ‘logopoeia’ (the poetry of reason, argument or satire); Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 37.

<sup>298</sup> Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts*, passim; Jean Laude, ‘On the Analysis of Poems and Paintings’, *New Literary History*, vol. iii, no. 3 (Spring, 1972): 471–72. Kristeva alludes to the theory of periodization when drawing a distinction between the chromatic code in Byzantine and Renaissance painting; Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, p. 220. This generalised approach, however, contrasts with critics more inclined to study the specific influences of the individual writer; see, for example, Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p. 6.

recently attended a lecture by Praz in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>299</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s Praz, along with the other notable theorist of pictorial representation, E.H. Gombrich,<sup>300</sup> considered the relationship between narrative literature and visual media, and demonstrated how the Horatian dictum of Renaissance and neo-classical aesthetic theory, *ut pictura poesis*, became a guiding principle of the nineteenth-century.<sup>301</sup> The counter argument to this tradition was that the process of deciding which texts should be related to which paintings and vice versa tended to be random or capricious.<sup>302</sup> Where, in other words, was the primary evidence to validate any substantial degree of artistic interrelatedness? Further criticism of this research was that it made use of inadequate samples of comparison and, as such, resemblances between painting and literature in any given period, for example, the Renaissance, Baroque, or Romantic, were merely coincidental.<sup>303</sup> In addition, these labels appeared applicable to more than one period: the word ‘Romanticism’, for instance, progressively expanded in meaning from its initial association with writers and artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. W.H. Auden redefined the Romantic era as stretching from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century,<sup>304</sup> while, more recently, neo-Romanticism has been closely associated with the rhetorical excesses of inward-looking, American Confessional poeticism. There are obvious pitfalls in the study of

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<sup>299</sup> *One Art*, pp. 386–88.

<sup>300</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1960).

<sup>301</sup> Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p. 7.

<sup>302</sup> Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p. 6; Laude, ‘On the Analysis of Poems and Paintings’: 472.

<sup>303</sup> James D. Merriman, ‘The Parallel of the Arts: Some Misgivings and a Faint Affirmation’ (Part 1), *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. XXXI, no. 2 (winter, 1972): 153–64.

<sup>304</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind’, *Poetry Review*, 79, no. 2 (summer, 1989): 10–14. In the 1950s assessments of Romanticism and its legacy were provided by two leading scholars: René Wellek, ‘The Concept of “Romanticism” in Literary History’, *Comparative Literature* 1 (1949): 1–23, 147–72; and M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). For more recent literary criticism see Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 17–21.

periodization and there is a need for a more consistent method of analysis when evaluating the interrelationship of the arts.<sup>305</sup> Arguably, generalisation can be overcome if more chronologically-specific labels such as, for example, Elizabethan or Victorian are employed because they refer to the lives of artists which fall within fixed dates. Wendy Steiner, who is especially sceptical of this ‘chronological coincidence’,<sup>306</sup> has written: ‘...there can be no final consensus about whether and how the two arts resemble each other, but only a growth in our awareness of the process of comparing them, of metaphoric generation and regeneration’.<sup>307</sup>

The art-literature analogy raises as many questions as it answers. Writing and painting can never be completely reconciled as the differences between them are many. However, what is clear is that there are, as in Bishop’s work, certain vital contexts for considering the two media together, and in this way they become two sides of the same coin. By this I mean that the poet finds affinity with painters especially when her creative endeavours are increasingly geared towards an understanding of visual perception. She makes reference to a well known painter, whose work or style may easily be conjured up in the reader’s mind, and in so doing, reaffirms the notion that language is an essential component of the mental process of seeing. The word and image are inseparable and, as Plath discovers in “Little Fugue”, knowledge of the past depends very much upon the subject’s grasp of the language of imagery. In the case of the poem’s speaker, the lost memories of her father find new meaning in the metaphoric images of the always present, and these bear testimony to her growth and intellectual development. “Little Fugue” suggests, therefore, that imagination and, by extension, painting, is tied up with our experience of language.

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<sup>305</sup> See, for example, Merriman, ‘The Parallel of the Arts: Some Misgivings and a Faint Affirmation: 154–58; Laude, ‘On the Analysis of Poems and Paintings’: 471–72; Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, pp. 16, 183.

<sup>306</sup> Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, p. 16; Wylie Sypher, *Four stages of Renaissance Style: Transformations in Art and Literature 1400–1700* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956).

<sup>307</sup> Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, p. 2.

## Style and Literary Legacy

Having considered broadly the language of criticism that has managed to reveal points of overlap between art and literature, I shall, at this juncture, explore notions of spatiality, temporality, style and periodization in Bishop's prose and poetry. There is, as Bishop recognises in her essay "In Prison", unceasing desire, on the part of critics, to compartmentalise writers and to direct focus on conflicting styles, the divergent and customary ways of seeing the world. The writer feels compelled to make use of the sources that already exist and invariably, Bishop reflects, there is an allocated position for her within a literary order, a responsibility to carry forward and bequeath a literary 'legacy'.<sup>308</sup> She contemplates the strategies that will enable her to break free of this literary order, and in a metaphor that circumscribes the spatial character of writing, she speaks of poems consisting of the 'fragments' of ideas 'posed', like individual pictures, against a 'wall' of other free-standing literary examples. This suggests ways in which poetic images may stand apart from the literary edifice. But, as Bishop concedes, to separate the poet and her reputation completely from the poem is inconceivable; her voice will, in time, emerge as a peculiar style. This form of categorisation preoccupied Bishop's mind both in her poetry and prose and, certainly, the debate she initiated "In Prison", over which genre her work belonged to, is preceded by certain questions: to what extent should an author recede into creative seclusion or succumb completely, as one critic has put it, to the 'vice of solitude'?<sup>309</sup> And what do we mean when we say that an author belongs to a school of thought, a movement of writers or artists with shared ideologies, working toward similar creative objectives, based at times on established rules or a manifesto. Of course, some writers view themselves as affiliated to a particular movement or they may be categorised thus by critics retrospectively. In the case of

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<sup>308</sup> Bishop, "In Prison", *Collected Prose*, pp. 188–89.

<sup>309</sup> Laude, 'On the Analysis of Poems and Paintings': 475.

Bishop attempts have been made to describe the kind of poet she was and opinions vary.<sup>310</sup> She has been labelled a romantic, a surrealist and a feminist.<sup>311</sup> The Irish poet Eavan Boland even described Bishop as ‘the one-unromantic American poet of her generation’: ‘Her earth is not represented as a dramatised fragment of her consciousness’.<sup>312</sup> There seems to be an endless conferring of cursory labels, but this is understandable given that Bishop was such a restless and unpredictable writer, and by her own admission a ‘grasshopper-type girl [with] a serious nature’.<sup>313</sup>

Many people – friends, correspondents, colleagues, close associates and critics – have commented on Bishop’s work. During her senior year at Vassar she began a lively exchange of letters and poems with Don Stanford, a graduate student at Harvard. Stanford’s propensity for overwrought and highly emotive poetry made him rather critical of Bishop’s style, which he found un-womanly, ‘almost impossible’, unbearable. Bishop reacted angrily by asking, ‘Is there some glandular reason which prevents a woman from having good perception or what?’<sup>314</sup> She objected to the implication that ‘perception’ was a predominantly masculine trait and disapproved of over-sentimental writing. She roundly criticised Stanford for a poem on the theme of lust because it was too ‘unrestrained in tone.’<sup>315</sup> In contrast, she approved of the poet Richard Blackmur who wrote an article on Pound without ‘getting into that horrible life & death

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<sup>310</sup> Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy*, pp. 19–20; Louise Bogan review of *North & South*, *New Yorker*, 5 Oct., 1946: 113. See also L. Schwartz and S.P. Estess (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1983), p. 183.

<sup>311</sup> Richard Wilbur called her poems ‘inexhaustibly fresh’, and as standing ‘at the edge where what is most worth saying is all but impossible to say’; Robert Giroux, ‘Introduction’ *One Art*, p. vii. Other critics have gone on to adopt a slightly different approach, describing her poems as either emotive or detached. For Joanne Feit Diehl, Bishop is different because she is intensely subjective; Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity*, p. 55.

<sup>312</sup> Boland, ‘An Un-Romantic American’: 76.

<sup>313</sup> *One Art*, p. 110.

<sup>314</sup> *One Art*, p. 12.

<sup>315</sup> *One Art*, p.19. Bishop wrote: ‘Your Hamlet is a disgusting romanticist who remains disgusting because he can’t show his own horror without ranting and half-boasting about his virility’.

hysterical tone'.<sup>316</sup> Dudley Fitts, editor of *Hound and Horn*, was equally unflattering in his review of some of her poems. He found her to be 'too mannered' and 'too clever'.<sup>317</sup> What is more, she reminded him of Hopkins and Hardy. Bishop dismissed Fitts' remark likening her – 'of all people'<sup>318</sup> – to Hardy, a writer she had hardly read. She would have approved of comparison to Hardy's simple, lyric directness, but felt greater affinity for Hopkins' intellectual robustness.

However, if in Fitts' appraisal Bishop was too mannered, she was, in Moore's mind, a little impudent. Bishop's first published poems appeared in *Trial Balances* (1935) and in Moore's introduction to the anthology – bearing the title "Archaically New" – she remarked upon the young poet's 'methodically oblique, intent way of working' as showing real promise.<sup>319</sup> Bishop had achieved success at a relatively young age, and the three poems selected by Moore – "The Map", "Three Valentines" and "The Reprimand" – were as much revealing of the older mentor's poetic leanings as those of her protégé's. It was Bishop's technical dexterity and exactness of thought which was immediately striking. She could be formulaically precise, even pedantic – traits which elicited as much criticism as praise – but she was ambitious, even competitively so with her peers, though always modest about her achievements.<sup>320</sup> She crafted her poems painstakingly, imitating the style of a poet she much admired or was keenly interested in at the time of writing. Each poem was a distillation of a poetic style demonstrating her

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<sup>316</sup> For Bishop, Hopkins' most successful poems contained nothing of passion or agony.

<sup>317</sup> *One Art*, p. 17.

<sup>318</sup> *One Art*, p. 17.

<sup>319</sup> Moore, 'Archaically New', pp. 82–83. Bishop remarked on the introduction in a letter to Moore; *One Art*, p. 29. Not until four years after they started corresponding did Bishop address "Dear Miss Moore" as 'Dear Marianne'. Bishop genuinely admired the older poet and their friendship lasted until Moore's death in 1972.

<sup>320</sup> Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 35: Bishop wrote to Lowell in 1955 and mentioned drafting 'a complicated poem about Hopkins and E. Dickinson ... I am aiming as high as your Ford Madox Ford one, but have my doubts' (excerpt from unpublished letter, 23 November, 1955). Bishop could be self-critical or even dismissive of her own poetry. In a letter to Moore (February, 1940), she described "The Fish" as a 'real "trifle." I'm afraid it is very bad and, if not like Robert Frost, perhaps like Ernest Hemingway!'; Bishop, *One Art*, p. 87.



scholarly understanding of the mechanics of verse. Assiduous study of poetic form and avid reading of criticism and reviews are attested to in her letters.<sup>321</sup> It was a case of Bishop calling ‘her own tune’, remarked Lowell,<sup>322</sup> and this contributed in part to the unpredictability of her work. She had a chameleon-like capacity to assume the persona of other writers and could ‘sound’ like, for instance, Herbert or Hopkins. Moore summed Bishop up cleverly when comparing her to a hermit-crab who from time to time selects a new shell as a home. The imitative approach afforded her a degree of ‘protection’ and, to her commentators, the adoption of a persona, or alter ego, underscored a sense of detachment, which preserved an ‘avowed humility’ and kept emotions in check.<sup>323</sup>

In the same way that the reclusive writer of “In Prison” considers the imitation of particular literary figures as mere pastiche, so too for Bishop critical comparison could imply her work is derivative and lacks a unique voice, that an adopted style in a poem encrypts the real identity of the poet. Consistently in Bishop criticism the search is for an ego, an enigmatic truth of the personality, which needs to be uncovered in her poetry. And she was aware of this preoccupation among critics and close friends. Unexceptionally, Swenson was, at least to begin with, inclined to label Bishop’s writing as detached, unlike that of poets who invested a great deal of their personality in their work. Her poems, far from being self-effigies, were articulated through ‘layers of masks’.<sup>324</sup> However, if Swenson was initially frustrated by the need to graft meaning onto Bishop’s poems, she appreciated the natural restraint of the verse and subtle infusion of self, traits which Moore had recognised early on. This scrutiny of the poet’s identity

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<sup>321</sup> *One Art*, p. 12. As an aspiring poet at college, Bishop copied out a passage from T.S. Eliot’s review of Moore’s first book because it suggested to her a ‘method of approach’ to writing poetry; see Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>322</sup> Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 2 (excerpt from unpublished letter, 12 July 1960).

<sup>323</sup> Moore, ‘Archaically New’, pp. 82–83.

<sup>324</sup> Swenson, *Dear Elizabeth. Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, pp. 7, 27.

becomes a source of playfulness in “From Trollope’s Journal” (1965), as Bishop mimics the style of the novelist Anthony Trollope. There appears to be no attempt to disguise or insinuate a truth or opinion, other than to make an ironic comment on the strategy of masking itself. Bishop sent a copy of “From Trollope’s Journal” to Lowell in 1960, pointing out that the poem did not ‘sound’ like her because it was meant to be like Trollope. And, as she readily conceded, the poem incorporates several of the details from Trollope’s chapter on the city of Washington in *North America*.<sup>325</sup> Five years later, while preparing the poem for publication, Bishop wrote to Lowell that “From Trollope’s Journal” was in fact an ‘anti-Eisenhower poem, I think’, and emphasised that it mimicked Trollope ‘phrase after phrase’.<sup>326</sup> This rather vague explanation as to what inspired her originally to write the poem made the political connection seem tenuous and almost incidental. It is the imitation of a style in “From Trollope’s Journal” and a general comment on the adoption of a persona as a device to mask or negate the self, which gives it enduring value.<sup>327</sup>

In their assessment of Bishop’s work critics were required to find new ways to describe the language she used. They could define her work as spatial or still and other visual metaphors were employed in order to express what were, in essence, objectifying and de-historicist strategies. Additionally, they could suggest that her verse was purely imitative and lacking even poetic energy, or implicit emotional force. On reading some of Bishop’s poems, Swenson found them to be ‘cagey’. ‘[Y]our poems ... engage something else than the emotions’, wrote Swenson in 1955, ‘What is it? It is something else and something more important. They are hard, feelable, as objects – or they give us that sensation – and they are separate from the self.’ Swenson, unable

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<sup>325</sup> *One Art*, p. 387.

<sup>326</sup> *One Art*, p. 439.

<sup>327</sup> Bishop also once remarked: ‘if after I read a poem, the world looks like that poem for 24 hours or so, I’m sure it’s a good one — and the same goes for painting’; *Exchanging Hats*, p. 97.

to share in Bishop's poetic schema, employs the odd term 'feelable', which, on the one hand, seems to refer to some form of alliance or connection between reader and writer, while, on the other, intimates a degree of emotional objectification. But, in truth, Bishop and Swenson were different poets. Swenson was forthright in her feelings. In a poem she never showed to Bishop, she confessed: '...I was nuts/ about you. And I couldn't say/ a word. And you never said *the/* word that would have loosed my doggy love'.<sup>328</sup> In another poem, Swenson is ingenuously open toward her friend: 'Little Elizabeth/ who still keeps me/ wild at the end of your chain-because/ I can't reach you, have never/ pawed you ... // the unknown you'.<sup>329</sup> In Swenson's fervid poetry language seems unable to contain strong emotions adequately, unlike Bishop's cooler poetry with its emphasis on containment and self-restraint.<sup>330</sup> But did this latter approach attribute to any kind of disassociation between a poet's language and emotion? Bishop rejected such an idea and was adamant that her poems were at their core emotive. In a letter to Swenson she stated:

I am puzzled by what you mean not appealing to the emotions [...] What poetry does, or doesn't? And doesn't it always, in one way or another? A poem like "Never until the mankind making" etc. one feels immediately, before one has started to think. A poem like "The Frigate Pelican," one thinks before one starts to feel [...] And poetry is a way of thinking with one's feelings, anyway."<sup>331</sup>

The line Bishop quotes from Dylan Thomas' "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child" is taken from a poem about the tragic death of an innocent girl in which the language of

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<sup>328</sup> Swenson, *Dear Elizabeth. Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 26.

<sup>329</sup> Swenson, *Dear Elizabeth. Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 27. The title of this poem, "Somebody Who's Somebody", is provided by the editor.

<sup>330</sup> Swenson wrote: '[T]he poetic experience is one of constant curiosity, scepticism, and testing-astonishment, disillusionment, renewed discovery, re-illumination. It amounts to a virtual compulsion to probe with the senses into the complex actuality of all things, outside and inside the self and to determine between them'; May Swenson, 'The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age', in Howard Nemerov (ed.), *Poets on Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 148.

<sup>331</sup> Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 2 (excerpt from unpublished letter of 6 September, 1955), p. 29.

loss is intense and overwhelmingly solemn. The cognitive process of feeling before thinking is, however, reversed in Bishop's poetry as it is in Moore's "The Frigate Pelican". The poem "First Death in Nova Scotia" deals similarly with the death of a child (this time a young boy), but Bishop's treatment of the subject matter bears no resemblance to Thomas'. Her recollection of the event through the eyes of a child remains dry, conversational and matter-of-fact throughout. The tone at times seems uncomfortably trivial, death appears merely incidental. The effect is deferred, but "First Death in Nova Scotia", ultimately, engages the emotions no less than Thomas' elegy. Bishop would have argued it was impossible to disconnect feeling from creative composition and vice versa. In her copy of *The Marianne Moore Reader* she underlined the following: 'One writes because one has a burning desire to objectify what is indispensable to one's happiness to express'.<sup>332</sup>

Paradoxically – and contrary to Swenson's earlier assertion – writing for Bishop is a way of objectifying subjective material.<sup>333</sup> This involves a direct channeling of a poet's experience via closely-observed objects or places, which when aligned to or endowed with certain emotions or sensations become inseparable. In "Cape Breton", for example, object and word – the 'yellow bulldozer' – forge a self-contained identity which is, in its most primitive or natural form, completely removed from any allegorical constructions or symbolist transformations. Bishop's poems, which insist on the primacy of subject matter, are devoid of explicit didacticism; they are not meant to be read as moral allegories. Rather, their true ethical value is in 'establishing a relation between artist and object'.<sup>334</sup> One can attain, according to Jarrell, a moral vision from

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<sup>332</sup> Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p. 56.

<sup>333</sup> Bishop experimented between 'things as metaphoric counters and things as natural material'. See Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 184.

<sup>334</sup> This ethical value may also be identified in the poetry of Williams; Terrence Diggory, *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford : Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 10. See

Bishop's poetry: she is 'morally so satisfactory'.<sup>335</sup> Bishop endorses a morality embodied by the poems themselves. She refuses to overstate their emotional importance, and remains scrupulously and aesthetically honest in recording her sensations.

For Jarrell "Roosters" and "The Fish" are 'calmly beautiful' and 'deeply sympathetic',<sup>336</sup> and though he detects in Bishop's work anguish, melancholy and a sense of injustice, against these anxious feelings the language and metre of poetry exude 'restraint, calm, and proportion', suggesting that, whatever adverse circumstances the poet finds herself in, a degree of mental strength and tenacity prevails.<sup>337</sup> Bishop's morality is contained within the choices she makes, the objects she observes, and this often seems, when compared to those who 'govern, rationalise and deplore' – that is moralise and judge others according to long-established rules and conventions – small in detail ('infinitesimal'). In other words, she chooses not to hide behind poetry that concerns itself with the 'wickedness and confusion of the age', as this only serves to approximate or pass judgement on the immorality of others.<sup>338</sup> Jarrell finds the greatest hope in Bishop's form of morality; her 'easy and natural' language conveys the courage and victory of a simple fish. Paradoxically, therefore, this restrained poetry is a 'revolution of things', the inverse of the dogmatic and universal. History and religion are upturned and Peter's 'dreadful rooster come[s] to mean forgiveness'. This poetry, noted Anne Stevenson, definitely does away with the "high thinking" morality of certain art.<sup>339</sup>

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also Barbara Page, 'Elizabeth Bishop: Stops, Starts and Dreamy Divagations', in Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), pp. 12–30.

<sup>335</sup> Jarrell, 'The Poet and His Public': 499. See also, Schwartz and Estess, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, pp. 180–81.

<sup>336</sup> Jarrell, 'The Poet and His Public': 498.

<sup>337</sup> Jarrell, 'The Poet and His Public': 499.

<sup>338</sup> Jarrell, 'The Poet and His Public': 500.

<sup>339</sup> Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 51.

### **Realism in Poetry as Design or Habitual Style**

Bishop's language refrains from the hyperbolic, and she is highly sophisticated in her choice of words. To her the real object is of paramount importance. It is original and uncorrupted, but adjectives – especially ones relating to colour – have a vital part to play in intensifying expression. Words are tied to the senses but images and metaphors of a physical nature – as, for instance, a woman washing her hair – acquire a sensual ambience and, in the opinion of some critics, a sexual nuance. The concretions of life are the details of observation, although the application of conventional devices, such as the repetition of words (*epizeuxis*) – ‘Thirty or more buzzards are drifting down, down, down’ (“Florida”, CP, 32); ‘two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon,/ grandly, silently flowing, flowing east’ (“Santarém”, CP, 185) – lend an air of indefiniteness that privileges sight over other qualities of the words, in a way reminiscent of MacLeish's view of poetry as ‘wordless/ As the flight of birds’. Perhaps, even, Bishop's repetition of a word once or twice intensifies the emotion. Take, for instance, “The Fish” where the speaker remarks: ‘I stared and stared/ and victory filled up/ the little rented boat...until everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!’ (CP, 43–44) Bishop's love of exactitude in description results in an accumulation of emotion. She is, moreover, consistently drawn to natural phenomena and it is this which makes her metaphors particularly imagistic. In “Pleasure Seas”, for example, metaphors follow in rapid succession, intensifying for the reader the awe-inspiring immensity of the sea. The poet revels in the imagery and derives aesthetic pleasure from the verbal realisation of the seascape. But the figurative images are unobtrusive; they ‘mirror’ an alternative meaning that deflects little from the original scene contemplated. They are static in that they preserve the essence of the moment. In “The Bight”, similarly, the attempt to describe accurately a Floridian coastline adds an extra-aesthetic dimension. The seemingly

objective details have a personal resonance transformed by the tropes of simile.

It is quite common in Bishop's poetry for the speaker to interject and draw attention to how the external scene is ordered. Dimension in literature suggests contrast between distance and proximity, between height and depth, and the poet, like the artist, becomes intrigued by design, by the way objects are constructed, or naturally created. Fascination with the rules of perspective, with geometrical formation (size, shape, protrusion, foreground and background) forms an essential part of Bishop's work. The relationship between dimension and geometric design provides an important component of Bishop's "Paris, 7. A.M.". The poem presents a multitude of shapes ranging from 'the sequence of squares and squares' to 'circles and circles'. The speaker is confined to a Paris apartment and, at the same time, everything else surrounding her is made subject to some form of containment: 'I make a trip to each clock in the apartment'<sup>340</sup>; 'circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles'. Even time is 'a star inside a rectangle', given shape or dimension (CP, 26–27). Bishop further explores the theme of geometrical design in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance". Here the 'several scenes arranged in catty-cornered rectangles/ or circles' are 'set on stippled gray'<sup>341</sup> (CP, 57). In "The Man-Moth" the size of the Man-Moth's shadow appears inconsequential compared to the overwhelming magnitude of the city; his shadow is 'only as big as his hat/ It lies at his feet like a circle' (CP, 14).

The transformation of the external world into works of art – a transfigured reality – depends upon the artist's skills of representation. However, fidelity is not necessarily tantamount

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<sup>340</sup> Responding to Moore's suggestion that Bishop change the word 'apartments', she replied in a letter of September 29, 1936: 'I am sorry I am being so obstinate about "apartments." To me the word suggests so strongly the structure of the houses, later referred to, and suggests a 'cut-off' mode of existence so well—that I don't want to change it unless you feel it would mean a great improvement'; *One Art*, p. 46.

<sup>341</sup> As in other cases, there is use of terminology commonly associated with visual media, words like 'stippled faces' ("Anaphora") and 'grim lunette' ("Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance").

to realism – there is an essential difference, one may argue, connected to the way different societies are, in any particular time and place, accustomed to seeing. Commenting upon standard systems of interpretation that rates a painting, and perhaps even a literary work, as realistic, based upon, not excessive detail, but usual or stereotypical modes of representation, Nelson Goodman declares:

Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given time...[and] the name for a particular style or system of representation...Realistic representation, in brief, depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation...If representation is a matter of choice and correctness a matter of information, realism is a matter of habit.<sup>342</sup>

Realism represents the style of a particular society, and inculcation is obviously periodization in all but name, inasmuch as it points toward a paradigm, a so-called system or common modes of seeing – in other words, accustomed ways of seeing nature depicted in a habitual fashion. ‘Style’, therefore, becomes the frame of reference in the evaluation of realism (realistic depiction). Does it, therefore, suffice to highlight Bishop’s powers of description, her factuality – what Moore pinpointed as ‘enumerative description’<sup>343</sup> – as exemplifying realism? Of course, one may admire those poems which spell out the conditions of a precise, intense and pure language. But realism, surely, is not simply about duplication or exact resemblance (verisimilitude). Although in painting a detailed picture may deceive the viewer into thinking that its properties carry a certain resemblance to the original, in literary form there is no correlation between escalating detail and increasing realism. Style works on a level of familiarity to the known concrete objects of this world ordered in a certain conventional manner. The images are stereotypical and instantaneously recognisable. The verbal medium of poetry, however, has more to offer: the poet interjects and comments upon how we perceive objects, and in the pursuit of reality prescribes

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<sup>342</sup> Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>343</sup> Marianne Moore, ‘A Modest Expert’, *Nation*, CLXIII (September 28, 1946): 354.



the conditions of perspective; a given angle, a distance foreshortened, an aerial view. This kind of poet, largely suspicious of style that constitutes conventional representation or symbolism, places more trust in objects because they serve as a tool of sight and not of displacement. Bishop was fascinated by this method of close observation, which she found, most notably, in the work of Darwin.<sup>344</sup>

It was argued in the previous chapter that Bishop's poetry de-familiarises and unburdens the reader of the weight of historical and symbolic import. In "Brazil, January 1, 1502" a tapestry depicts nature as seen by sixteenth-century artists. Bishop's starting point is an epigraph taken from Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art*.<sup>345</sup> His deep knowledge of Renaissance painting presented Bishop with a tripartite ideal. First, the artist's observations are precise and meaningful. Secondly, for the viewer this decorative work takes on symbolic value, a style that corresponds to contemporary ideas and beliefs (style in "Brazil" is transitory). Thirdly, the art becomes expressive of mood, from devotional or profane love to dream or fantasy.

Rensselaer W. Lee, in his discussion of the humanistic concept of art in the sixteenth century, argued that the tripartite ideal of painting or poetry, which was aesthetically dynamic, was, most probably, the provenance of *ut pictura poesis*:

If the painter's inventions were to be comparable to those of the poet in power, depth, or beauty, he must choose themes from ancient and modern poetry, and from history sacred and profane; his genius was said to have its most intimate affinities with the poet's in his power to express human emotions...for he must aspire not merely to give pleasure, but to impact wisdom to mankind.<sup>346</sup>

The classic ideal combines aesthetic imagery, history and expression; 'the painter like the poet must in the act of creation retain a certain power of judgement and selective discrimination that

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<sup>344</sup> Bishop's admiration of Darwin is discussed in Richard Mullen, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Inheritance', *American Literature*, 54, Number 1, (March 1982): 63–80. See also *One Art*, p. 543.

<sup>345</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray, 1979).

<sup>346</sup> Lee, *The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, p. 67.

is not compatible with unlicensed self-expression'.<sup>347</sup> Lee further argues that as painting's portrayal and interpretation of universal human experience gradually gave way to self-expression, the concept of *ut pictura poesis* was undermined. This individuality, whether in the form of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Romanticism or the tortured extremism of Expressionism at the beginning of the twentieth century, assailed the classic ideal. Indeed, for some practitioners, especially of the high Renaissance style, the landscape painter should never be satisfied with mere imitation pleasing to the eye. Rather, ideal art should carry further moral and historical associations centred upon the subject of the human body as an 'omnipotent medium of expression'.<sup>348</sup> Moreover, increasing interest in the Middle Ages in the science of nature meant a growing trend among painters in favour of 'detheologizing' stories<sup>349</sup> and replicating the effect of light, topography and concrete actuality. This represented a fundamental movement away from symbolism and moral or historical didacticism toward art of purely aesthetic value. For its detractors art of this kind relegated the human subject, which up to then, owing to its religious significance, had assumed a central position in the foreground of the painting. Art that privileged the natural landscape represented not only the skill of the artist, but also, in observation of and response to an external world, the expression of the self; this was a quality previously deemed debased and even sinful.<sup>350</sup>

"Brazil, January 1, 1502" and "Seascape" underscore the perpetual debate, from the Renaissance to the present day, about the representation of observed reality. To what degree should poetry be concerned with humanistic matters? Are poetry and painting intimately affiliated through their symbolic capacity to invoke ancient themes – or 'history sacred and

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<sup>347</sup> Lee, *The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, p. 68.

<sup>348</sup> Clark, *Landscape into Art*, p. 54.

<sup>349</sup> Shapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*, p. 33.

<sup>350</sup> On medieval perception of ideas as divine and senses as sinful see Clark, *Landscape into Art*, p. 3.

profane<sup>351</sup> – so in order to express human emotion? What value, therefore, has poetry which is merely descriptive and seemingly devoid of emotional content? In “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the symbolic tapestry with animal and tropical forest imagery has the power to evoke emotion, either spiritual elation or, more ominously, rapacious feelings roused in the soldiers on discovering new wealth and pleasure:

A blue-white sky, simple web,  
 Backing for feathery detail:  
 brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,  
 a few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;  
 and perching there in profile, beaks agape,  
 the big symbolic birds keep quiet,  
 each showing only half his puffed and padded,  
 pure-colored or spotted breast.  
 Still in the foreground there is Sin:  
 five sooty dragons near some mossy rocks....(CP, 91)

If, previously, the realisation of a tame and circumscribed nature (the medieval concept of *hortus conclusus*) depicted birds as delicate and decorative, yet dormant symbols of Christianity, the reality of religious conquest, combined with the bellicose intonation of *L'Homme armé*, now stir in the soldiers a sense of righteousness. The birds become emblematic of wild, untamed and ‘maddening’ women. Initially, the ‘big symbolic birds keep quiet’, like mute signs that draw attention merely to their characteristic colouring, but by the end of the poem, they are read as ‘those maddening little women who kept calling,/ calling to each other’ (CP, 92). Five sooty dragons in the foreground of the tapestry are, subsequently, read as ‘Sin’. Symbols and meanings suddenly proliferate and these tapestried signs, functioning no longer within themselves, are ‘retreating, always retreating’ in the minds of observers. Words, declares the speaker, are ‘corresponding’ to and transforming the world in which we live. To the Eurocentric Christian conquerors, this unnamed (unidentified) place is built upon a fertile imagination, an inherited

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<sup>351</sup> Lee, *The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, p. 67.

symbolic order that assigns premeditated symbols or designata to the unknown. Just as the poet in “Santarém” is tempted to merge the two rivers Tapajós and Amazon with the rivers running through the Garden of Eden, so too in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the conquistadors have constructed a symbolic fantasy, envisioning this new world as full of lovers, bowers, cherries and lute music. Paradoxically, on their arrival, the unknown becomes the ‘not unfamiliar.’ In this way the language of religion forges correspondences and collective expectations (whether these are fulfilled or not), and the ‘not unfamiliar’ or humanised symbols are most comforting when we are lost for words in attempting to explain the unknown.

“Brazil, January 1, 1502” has been variously interpreted. In the opinion of David Bromwich the speaker identifies with a westernised masculine militarism.<sup>352</sup> Lorrie Goldensohn, however, finds Bromwich’s reading troubling ‘as it understresses the feminist, antimilitarist point of view of the poem emerging in satire against the imperialist machismo of armored soldiers.’<sup>353</sup> And yet, Goldensohn readily concedes, a framing ideology or ‘controlling perspective...seems to be missing’.<sup>354</sup> Such contradictory readings are often the result of attempts to impose a political, feminist, or historicist agenda on Bishop’s poetry when there is, possibly, no overriding ideological perspective. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502” opposing readings of feminism and militarism (or antimilitarism), racism and antiracism, Eurocentricity and Eastern mythology are all conflicting interpretations of symbols to be found in the picture-poem. The artist Margaret Miller admired greatly “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, and wrote to her friend Bishop:

There is something about it that is completely unique, unlike any poem I have ever read. Now it is hard to say just what this is, but I believe it is the absolute clarity, the sharp focus of the image, the expanding size of the image, and best of all the surprising changes in scale...It is an extraordinary feat of illusionism

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<sup>352</sup> David Bromwich, ‘Elizabeth Bishop’s Dream-Houses’, *Raritan* 4 (summer, 1984): 77–94.

<sup>353</sup> Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), p. 199.

<sup>354</sup> Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 199.

and I take my hat off to you.<sup>355</sup>

In the first stanza of “Brazil, January 1, 1502” ‘absolute clarity’ is achieved through ‘sharp focus’ on the tapestry’s detail, its shapes, colours and dimensions. The date of the title has initially no historical relevance, and the viewer is presented with the nature of all ‘Januaries’. The second stanza, however, transforms objects into symbols, a natural illustration that re-imagines, in a contemporaneous ‘style’, ‘wealth and luxury’ in a beautiful and exotic landscape. For Bishop, this type of early modern tapestry (‘embroidered nature’) is the apotheosis of the landscape of symbols and the most richly decorative, patterned naturalism – ‘every square inch filling in with foliage’. These words echo Clark’s description of the frescoes at Avignon: ‘There is not a square inch without some delightful reminder of the visible world, all translated into poetry more real and yet more formal than Spencer’s *Faerie Queene*’.<sup>356</sup>

In “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the palimpsest of signs, when taken as a whole, suggests for the instructed viewer more comprehensive meanings of biblical provenance. The various motifs forge together into a symbol system, a recognisable context, which achieves a dynamic and expansive temporality. From this point on, January 1, 1502 begins to acquire an historical significance – the date of Brazil’s discovery by Portuguese explorers – as well as exegetical relevance. The final stanza continues to explore the transmutation of biblical text into symbolist art. Stylised representation is further reflected in the colouration. The natural palette of the foliage, which initially ‘greet our eyes’, begins to take on less vibrancy, and the more diluted blue-whites and pale-greens of the background throw into sharp relief the malevolent intricate colours in the foreground.

The tapestry maker depicts the natural scene with accuracy and vibrancy, his artistic

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<sup>355</sup> Bishop: *Edgar Allen Poe and the Juke-Box*, p. 260.

<sup>356</sup> Clark, *Landscape into Art*, p. 13.

skills recognisable to both modern and early modern viewers ('Januaries, Nature greets our eyes/ exactly as she must have greeted theirs'). His attention to detail is sustained throughout. However, Bishop's description reduces the tapestry's composition to the individual colours on a grid, which she chooses to list prosaically:

purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,  
rust red and greenish white;  
solid but airy; fresh as if just finished  
and taken off the frame.

This mimetic function of poetry reveals the power of language to construct (contextualise) or deconstruct the tapestry's narrative. Stripped of their context, the colours appear bereft of meaning, or at least their meaning exists beyond the reader's comprehension. I have discussed in a previous chapter how an artist's choice of colours can present a fragmented world view that, in Kristevan terms, breaches the symbolic code. In the second stanza, nevertheless, the shift in descriptive language marks a change in visual focus: the inscrutable fragments of colours are gathered together and given a meaningful form that points towards a 'unique or ultimate signified'.<sup>357</sup> God is invoked and so too the opposing forces of good and evil. The line 'lovely hell-green flames' is complex and telling of the simple, aesthetic pleasure of viewing the tapestry as well as the inherent menace of its subject matter. Other hyphenated colours function similarly: 'pure colored', 'hell-green', 'red-hot wire'. The Renaissance artist seems overly concerned with the external world as a source of inspiration, though, importantly, nature is not being worshiped and nor is the image he has created meant to be idolised.

In the tapestry the parasitical lichen and 'hell-green' moss cling and overwhelm the rocks, which are 'attacked' by vine leaves. The poet also interjects and directs readings of the signs as having sexual connotations. The large lizards eye the smaller 'female one', while, more

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<sup>357</sup>

See pp. 60–61.

ominously suggestive of rape and pillage, each soldier of Christ is ‘out to catch an Indian for himself’. In the final assessment, “Brazil, January 1, 1502” may be read on two levels: primarily, the tapestry’s symbolic context, which is readily open to semiotic exploration, and, alternatively, the ‘second language’ or meta-commentary that draws attention to the function of symbols by questioning how analogy and iconography reflect the values of a particular society. If, therefore, objectification in the opening stanza achieves ‘absolute clarity’, then, following this, the symbolic may be described as the ‘expanding’ image or exponential imagination. The distinction is between the perceptual and conceptual.

Just as the Europeans in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” scrutinise and absorb the stylised image of a distant land that incorporates within its stitches the formalised symbols of a deeply religious culture, so too the little girl in “In the Waiting Room” reads the National Geographic and shapes her identity in terms of what she sees in the photographs. These snapshots are of course more truthful and factual than the tapestry, but, equally, in the potent symbols of nude women, cannibalistic tribes and twisted bodies is reflected the intrigue, shock and repulsion of a western culture unaccustomed to such ‘horrifying’, savage existence. In other words, in these photographs, ‘what we take as artistic “mirroring” is merely the reinforcing of conventions of correspondence...What we take as a standard for correspondence is our knowledge of how people make pictures’.<sup>358</sup> The speaker asks:

Why should I be my aunt,  
 or me, or anyone?  
 What similarities—  
 boots, hands, the family voice  
 I felt in my throat, or even  
 the *National Geographic*  
 and those awful hanging breasts—  
 held us all together  
 or made us all just one?

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<sup>358</sup> Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, p. 29.

How—I didn't know any  
word for it—how “unlikely”...  
How had I come to be here,  
like them, and overhear  
a cry of pain that could have  
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright  
and too hot. It was sliding  
beneath a big black wave,  
another, and another.  
Then I was back in it.  
The War was on....(CP, 161)

The subject 'I' is curious about identity, and if in Bishop's "Poem" the miniature painted landscape – 'a minor family relic' – connects the speaker rather tenuously to an unknown great-uncle, in "In the Waiting Room" *Elizabeth* and her Aunt Consuelo are somehow physically indivisible, their identity, in the speaker's childhood recollection, fused inexorably. But why should this be the case? Whatever status she is conferred, which identifies and relates her to a certain group of people – 'an *I*', 'an *Elizabeth*', 'one of *them*' – seems strangely detached from the self. The use here of italics and the indefinite article creates distance between subject and outward identity. Such detachment, further implied by the speaker's declaration that she could only recognise herself by observing others ('I scarcely dared to look/ to see what it was I was'), suggests the randomness of place and identity. Closely observant of her own kind, the speaker is both intrigued and shocked by the pictures she finds printed in the *National Geographic*, which though black and white, are, nevertheless, exotic and explicit in their depiction of nudity, barbarity and abnormality.

In "In the Waiting Room" the world is at war with itself and yet the combatants constitute a small percentage of people, fighting in a foreign land that hardly affects the everyday lives of most Americans. The significance of this date for the little girl is thus not associated with war: 5



February, 1918, Worcester, Massachusetts, is three days before her birthday. The magazine, however, with its photographs and captions – like the museum catalogues in “Verdigris”, the compendious “2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance”, or even the simple geography lessons of a Victorian schoolbook prefacing *Geography III* – instructs and reinforces specifically cultural points of view – historical, religious, geographical, aesthetical. The *National Geographic*, moreover, contextualises people and places, asserts anthropological differences between western societies and so-called uncivilised natives. However, in the process of restructuring her world in relation to the photographs by the explorers Osa and Martin Johnson, recognising what the ‘horrificing’ figures denote, and re-identifying how the sight of women’s ‘awful hanging breasts’, ‘a dead man slung on a pole’ and ‘[b]abies with pointed heads’ correspond to rules of civility, the little girl discovers a universalising reasoning that brings her closer to her aunt and those people whose significance is held within the pages of this magazine.

In “In the Waiting Room” the *National Geographic* photographs reinforce stereotypes and mirror conventions of correspondence. Equally, the artist of the Brazil tapestry frustrates with his symbols, so much so that he aggravates the Portuguese invaders to ‘rip’, so to speak, into the hanging artwork, as if desperate to make some sense of this scene. There are, accordingly, two ways of seeing the world: either through the eyes of the ‘professional’ artist of the Brazil tapestry, for example, who practises conventional forms of composition, perspective and symbolism, and believes these to be the ‘only way of recording and preserving eternal truths’,<sup>359</sup> or from the uniquely experiential viewpoint of the primitive artist. Because he has neither learnt nor inherited any established artistic practices, the primitive painter assumes – or is allocated – a position on the margins of society, which regards his manner of painting critically as unconventional and untraditional. In his work, nevertheless, he does not feel compelled to use

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<sup>359</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), p. 64.

symbols in order to mask or deflect from his own lived experience. Traditional style and composition are so deeply ingrained in the minds of some artists that it becomes difficult for them to depict even the most ordinary or mundane subject ‘in any but a mythological or symbolic way’.<sup>360</sup> Arguably, conventional style can also leave an indelible mark on objective poetry. It is relevant to mention in this regard Bishop’s “A Miracle for Breakfast”, a poem that intimates a religious scene – perhaps Mass or the Sermon on the Mount – even though this was not the poet’s aim. Of course the unintentional may arise not from a predilection on the part of writers or artists to represent the world symbolically, but more as a result of the inclination of readers or viewers to search for signs and contexts to construct meaning.

In “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, “Large Bad Picture” and “Poem” the alliance between art and poetry is based not upon exact replication of an observed image, but, rather, on the notion that similar signs can be found in both media, which either correspond to broadly cultural or profoundly personal experience. Bishop accentuates the semantic and semiotic comparability of art and poetry. She was intrigued by how social background often affected cultural reception; an artist’s work was either valorised or abased according to his or her class and education. Intellectual elitism was built upon the notion that valuable art was produced by a select group of people, who had the training and requisite skills to practise their craft – it did not exist on a quotidian level where individuals from various walks of life could aspire to write and paint without the need for a formal education. These were Bishop’s first impressions of the publishing industry whilst living in New York, a city that inspired in her ‘sudden intuitions into the *whole* of contemporaneity’.<sup>361</sup> She experienced first-hand the lure and commercialism of popular culture, and though this was Depression-era America, her abiding memory of 1934, the year she

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<sup>360</sup> Berger, *About Looking*, p. 66.

<sup>361</sup> Quoted in Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 18.

graduated from Vassar, was working very briefly in a correspondence school for aspiring writers. She was a young woman from a privileged background, the product of an elite college and already a published author with an ‘idle curiosity’ about the realities of employment. She noted that the burning desire of her correspondence students was to become published authors in order, it seemed, to ‘get into’ society, to find acceptance and escape ‘loneliness’. ‘Fame’, in plain terms, over and beyond financial rewards, equated to projected ‘identity’.<sup>362</sup>

In this formative period Bishop discovered the ‘mysterious, awful power of writing’. The students were often poor labourers and farmhands, living in remote places, whose artistic endeavours were primitive in the sense that they did not recognise or understand literary fashions.<sup>363</sup> For Bishop, the school suggested various ways in which writing could be utilised to convey the actual experiences of its correspondents, and however removed the individuals were from the contemporaneity of New York, their work was testimony to an existence no less relevant to the whole of modern society. She even professed an ‘ignorance of reality’ and recalled conversations she had with Rachel, a work colleague, whose views on the meaning of ‘realism’ were shaped by authors Bishop did not particularly like.<sup>364</sup> What version of reality, Bishop considers, could be of artistic worth? And who is qualified to confer such value? As a teacher, she found the students’ unconventionality appealing. Whilst the unschooled artist ‘lingers’ over detail ‘at the expense of the picture as a whole’, thereby distorting the perspective and dimension, the primitive writer ‘seems in a hurry to get it over with’,<sup>365</sup> tending also to allegorise, sentimentalise and moralise. These were obvious flaws, but how would greater understanding of artistic principles transform, and perhaps enhance, a peculiarly personal

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<sup>362</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “The U.S.A School of Writing”, in *The Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, 1984), p. 44.

<sup>363</sup> Bishop, “The U.S.A School of Writing”, in *The Collected Prose*, pp. 39, 45.

<sup>364</sup> Bishop, “The U.S.A School of Writing”, in *The Collected Prose*, p. 39.

<sup>365</sup> Bishop, “The U.S.A School of Writing”, in *The Collected Prose*, p. 46.

viewpoint? This question of value was not, it seems, the overriding concern of the school; its aim, as a business, was to provide false encouragement. Bishop even assumed the name of the previous tutor, Mr Margolies, a person whose criticism of the correspondents' work was shaped by kindness rather than brutal honesty.

In their stories primitive writers remained truthful to personal experiences, and the naïve belief that they could become published authors was, for Bishop, endearing. However, it was important for her that their unfamiliarity with literary conventions made them more accessible, yet not populist – she disliked, in particular, the anti-intellectualism of the latter.<sup>366</sup> Rather, primitive artists lived on the margins of society, beyond the approval of popular and consumer culture, although, ironically, their unusual talents could only be recognised by the art establishment. Bishop, for instance, noted that the appeal of the primitive artist Gregorio Valdes was his inability to paint in any way other than his own unique 'style'. His pictures lacked perspective, but this was not a deliberate strategy as he aimed for 'verisimilitude'.<sup>367</sup> Bishop was equally admiring of Wesley Wehr, whose paintings, she wrote in 1967, embodied everything she valued in art. These seemingly insignificant miniatures were full of 'so much space, so much air' that they suggested 'distances and loneliness'. Such works of art inspire a 'sense of release, of calm and quiet' because they are small-scale objects in 'our vast and ancient world'.<sup>368</sup> Their most vital theme is common in Bishop's work: existence in an immense and unknowable universe.

Bishop was generally inspired by painting which, though flawed compositionally, held

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<sup>366</sup> Marylyn May Lombardi, *The Body and the Song* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), p. 188.

<sup>367</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "Gregorio Valdes", in *The Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, 1984), p. 58.

<sup>368</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "Wesley Wehr", in *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (The Library of America: New York, 2008), p. 469.

profound value for the person who had possession of it. In this regard, she was especially interested in her great-uncle George Hutchinson, a cabin boy in the 1860s, who became a member of the Royal Academy. He was mostly a forgotten artist, but his seascapes hung on the walls of Bishop's family home when she was a child, and it was this familiarity with his work and its local origin which was most fascinating to her.<sup>369</sup> In "Poem" the speaker's description of a great-uncle's 'useless and free' painting coincides with her own recollection of the same Nova Scotian landscape. The viewer looks intently at the picture and as the eye processes the information described the parallel words of the poem are similarly scrutinised:

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,  
 American or Canadian,  
 mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays  
 — this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)  
 has never earned any money in its life.  
 Useless and free, it has spent twenty years  
 as a minor family relic  
 handed along collaterally to owners  
 who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to. (CP, 176)

It matters how the painter contemplated the original scene and replicated the process of cognition and senses. Aesthetic memory provides moments of sensorial experience and unites verbal and visual arts without residue.<sup>370</sup> Hence, the miniature painting appeals directly to the poet's state of mind, suggesting various sensations of literal expression: 'Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,/ fresh-squiggled from the tube./ The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring/ clear as gray glass'. The various arts are employed to suggest the same interpretation of this Canadian landscape ('they've turned into each other. Which is which?'), and the affinity between the poet

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<sup>369</sup> Lilian Falk, 'George Hutchinson in London', in Gwendolyn Davies, Sandra Barry and Peter Sanger (eds), *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place* (Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2001).

<sup>370</sup> Praz, *Mnemosyne*, p. 58. For an introduction to the 'variability of artistic vision' and the psychology of perception and illusion see Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Representation*, pp. 1–25.

and the painter – a distant relative whom she has never met – is revealed first of all in the situation they present (‘It must be Nova Scotia’) and then in their corresponding depiction. The creative power of the poet mirrors that of the painter, as she too gives us every detail: ‘the munching cows,/ the iris crisp and shivering, the water/ still standing from spring freshets/ the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese’. Bishop addresses the concept of likeness and familiarity:

I never knew him. We both knew this place,  
 apparently, this literal small backwater,  
 looked at it long enough to memorize it,  
 our years apart. How strange. And it’s still loved,  
 or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).  
 Our visions coincided – “visions” is too  
 Serious a word – our looks, two looks:  
 art “copying from life” and life itself,  
 life and the memory of it so compressed  
 they’ve turned into each other. Which is which? (CP, 177)

This ‘literal’, personal, nostalgic scene cannot be regarded as a universal and transcendental ‘vision.’ Certain lines of the poem, furthermore, seem to stress the common basis of inspiration and experience: ‘We both knew this place’, this ‘small backwater’; ‘How strange. And it’s still loved’. They see in the same landscape shapes and objects which are familiar: the steeple, the farmer’s barn and meadow, Miss Gillespie’s house.

The literal detail also catches Bishop’s attention in “Large Bad Picture” and her approach to the painted source is one of registration. The poem describes a work of art, also painted by her great-uncle, which seems to be an inaccurate depiction of a familiar seascape. “Large Bad Picture” opens with the lines: ‘Remembering the strait of Belle Isle/ or some northerly harbor of Labrador’ (CP, 11). The uncle’s seascape leaves the poet baffled as to the painting’s precise location. It depicts ‘overhanging pale blue cliffs’ infinitely receding ‘into a flushed, still sky’ with a ‘quiet’ sea where ‘sits a fleet of small black ships’. The details are more artificial than natural: the bases of cliffs exaggerated into ‘little arches’, the sea that looks more like a ‘quiet

floor’, and the spars of ships that resemble ‘burnt match-sticks’. The verbal medium of poetry thus interjects and questions the validity of these signs which are unlike the objects contemplated. And yet in their very presentation these things become the chief source of information for a reader to envision and interpret this maritime scene. As is so often the case in Bishop’s work, the poem comments upon its own function and validity. “Large Bad Picture” draws attention to its own inscrutability. How does description reflect the world and its objects accurately? Furthermore, akin to the picture’s simple composition, the language is uncomplicated and resolutely faithful to the scene observed: ‘still sky’, ‘little arches’, ‘quiet floor’, ‘small black ships’, ‘perfect waves’, ‘tall cliffs’. Bishop’s verbal synthesis appears to mimic the painting’s unrealistic quality. However, in the last two stanzas the interpretive nature of poetry seems to animate the lifeless painting:

In the pink light  
 the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,  
 round and round and round at the same height  
 in perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling,

while the ships consider it.  
 Apparently they have reached their destination.  
 It would be hard to say what brought them there,  
 commerce or contemplation. (CP, 11–12)

In this instance, Bishop makes use of the idea of sound and motion to comment upon the limitation of painting. We are told of the black birds ‘crying, crying’ and the red sun ‘rolling, rolling’. The repetition of words might add to the unremarkable quality of the painting by suggesting nursery rhyme, while through the use of extended vowel sounds the poet achieves contrast between the beginning of the poem – the ‘motionless’ square-rigged sails, the ‘quiet floor’ of the sea – and, toward the end, the full motion of thought in attempting to comprehend where these ships are destined. Bishop’s language does add movement and sound to the static

imagery, but the sun which goes rolling remains perpetually ‘at the same height’. It may be a consolingly ‘perpetual sunset’, satisfyingly captured in the glow of a ‘pink light’, but the speaker remains baffled as to what meaning this seascape holds. The natural scene is enclosed within the framed space of the painting, although the perspective appears distorted and the objects are placed in such a way that pictorially the composition seems ungrammatical. Even the ships ‘consider’ the sunset bemusedly, as if unsure about their own position relative to the other objects. But are they destined for commerce or contemplation? It is difficult to say, because the diagrammatic and relational aspects of the painting, which are vitally important for interpreting its meaning, are lacking.

“Large Bad Picture” and “Poem” reveal Bishop’s continued interest in the aesthetics of the visual and the traditional analogy between painting and literature. In both the spatial and temporal context it is the skills of representation which create the illusion of reality. Bishop’s language does not simply describe the picture, but also traces the mental readjustments of vision. In “Poem” the artist’s lack of skills is evident: ‘Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple/ —that gray-blue wisp—or is it?’ While in “Twelfth Morning or What You Will” the ‘big white horse’ (*Are you supposed/ to be inside the fence or out?*) elicits the statement and question: ‘He’s bigger than the house. The force of/ personality, or is perspective dozing?’ (CP, 110) The rules of dimension are, furthermore, manipulated in “The Monument.” ‘Now can you see the monument? It is of wood/ built somewhat like a box. No. Built like several boxes...’ The box-like rectangles piled ‘one above the other’, ‘one-third set against/ a sea; two-thirds against a sky’ are representative of the natural world. The land and sea are condensed and contained within a work of art so that distance and proximity merge into one. The artwork is a paradox which allows the viewer to be within view of what in reality would have remained unseen – ‘(which



after all/ cannot have been intended to be seen.’) (CP, 23). In Bishop’s poems representation can also be informed by some kind of knowledge. She is able to gain a deeper and more real understanding of her great-uncle’s painting because of their shared memories of the place depicted. However, in general terms, not all scenes hold personal relevance to viewers, and so their evaluation of an artist’s ability to transfigure reality depends very much upon the technical skills of visual illusion. The stage set in “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will” is poorly executed and does not seem to represent any concept of reality. Nevertheless, in the final two stanzas, Balthazár’s entrance heralds a clarification of vision in contradistinction to the earlier indefiniteness of ‘thin gray mist’ that enveloped the stage. Somewhat reminiscent of “A Miracle for Breakfast”, the biblical theme only gradually insinuates itself, and the poet’s attempts to describe in objective terms part of the nativity – ‘the four-gallon can/ approaching on the head of Balthazár’ – is eventually overwhelmed by symbolic potency and meaning. There is even stronger identity: ‘But the four-gallon can/ approaching on the head of Balthazár/ keeps flashing that the world’s a pearl, *and I, I am/ its highlight!*’ As subjects we relate things to other things and to ourselves. Bishop traces back much of this symbolism to the influence of religion on art. But she continues to debate, as in “Crusoe in England”, whether our lives can be completely empty of symbols.

### **The Real and Symbolic in “Crusoe in England”**

For Moore ‘half poets’ are either complete ‘literalists’ or fantasists simply interested in delving into the dark recesses of the mind, and Bishop was in agreement that a complete poet must strike the right balance between the actual and the imaginary. Poets, according to Moore, should be “literalists of the imagination”, and poetry should be composed of “imaginary

gardens with real toads in them”’. Bishop was a firm believer in this poetic alliance and her subject matter can be unconventional – the “business documents and school-books”; all these phenomena are important<sup>371</sup> – while, at the same time, she manages to capture in verse the partial mystery of the ordinary and mundane. “The Gentleman of Shalott” and “Crusoe in England” endorse this ‘economical design’, a balanced vision that keeps a tight rein on both the abstract and the concrete. Thus, arguably, personality is a process of ‘collisions between the outer world and the inner’.<sup>372</sup> In his predicament Crusoe has time to reflect upon the root cause of his solitude, and whether he is marooned or back home in England, the island remains analogous to his state of mind:

A new volcano has erupted,  
 the papers say, and last week I was reading  
 where some ship saw an island being born:  
 at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;  
 and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—  
 rose in the mate’s binoculars  
 and caught on the horizon like a fly.  
 They named it. But my poor old island’s still  
 Un-rediscovered, un-renamable.  
 None of the books has ever got it right. (CP, 162)

This is Crusoe’s island, first seen, inhabited and named by him. From his vantage point he carefully surveys its fifty-two volcanoes, and within his panoptic gaze nature is contained and comprehended and reality revealed without distortion. But as seeing becomes imagining, Crusoe begins to think of himself as a giant in an inverted world where nature is diminished and manipulated. However, as with Stevens’ “Three Academic Pieces” where the speaker measures himself against a tree and finds that he is much taller (‘For I reach up to the sun’), this self-aggrandisement is ironic, given that Crusoe is wholly dependent upon nature to feed his

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<sup>371</sup> Quoted from Moore’s “Poetry”.

<sup>372</sup> C.G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 5.

imagination.<sup>373</sup> And yet it is perhaps inevitable that this sort of existence, which detaches Crusoe from the rest of humanity, makes him increasingly narcissistic in the way he imposes his own images on the natural world.

It is possible to follow closely how Crusoe thinks and manipulates imaginatively what he sees. At times his mind seems unclear ('a sort of cloud-dump'), but such a comparison (metaphor) is immediately displaced by a more prosaic explanation: the hot volcanic craters made it rainy ('Was that why it rained so much?'). Crusoe's thoughts then turn to the sight of turtles, whose hissing begins to resemble the sound of teakettles. This imaginative transformation is, however, momentarily apprehended, and in his afterthought the objects revert back to their original status: the kettle is a kettle that has practical benefit – 'And I'd have given years, or taken a few,/ for any sort of kettle, of course'. After watching the turtles, Crusoe looks intently at the beaches and their colours appear vibrant and intense:

And I had waterspouts. Oh,  
 half a dozen at a time, far out,  
 they'd come and go, advancing and retreating,  
 their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches  
 of scuffed-up white.  
 Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated,  
 sacerdotal beings of glass...I watched  
 the water spiral up in them like smoke.  
 Beautiful, yes, but not much company. (CP, 163)

In this most elaborate manipulation of nature the funnel-shaped waterspouts materialise miraculously and begin to resemble priestly figures walking on water with 'their heads in cloud'. This natural phenomenon, a powerful metaphor for religious experience, calls to mind the image of the 'skeletal lighthouse' in clerical dress, which mediates between heaven and earth in "Seascape". However, Crusoe's mind turns to more practical matters: these waterspouts may be

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<sup>373</sup> For a discussion of "Three Academic Pieces", see Dembo, *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry*, pp. 85–86.

beautiful and inspiring, but they are not much company. The religious experience fails to sustain Crusoe's needs.

Crusoe's mind vacillates between objectifying and manipulating nature, but in the most self-critical assessment of his obsessions and 'little industries', solitude, he concludes, is of his own making:

I often gave way to self-pity.  
 "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must,  
 I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there  
 a moment when I actually chose this?  
 I don't remember, but there could have been." (CP, 163)

This, after all, is a 'brain bred' island, and possibly Crusoe has deliberately attempted to distance himself from other people. How he chooses to live proves at times unbearable, but he may be loath to alter his ways, his character. He finds himself in a dilemma whether to perceive the world in its purest form or to transform it in his imagination and thus render it more lyrical.

Like the enquiring mind of a naturalist – "Crusoe in England" was partly based upon Darwin's notes on the Galápagos<sup>374</sup> – or the meticulous observations of an objectifying poet, Crusoe has time to study everything on the island, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, in detail:

...I'd have  
 nightmares of other islands  
 stretching away from mine, infinities  
 of islands, islands spawning islands,  
 like frogs eggs turning into polliwogs  
 of islands, knowing that I had to live  
 on each and every one, eventually,  
 for ages, registering their flora,  
 their fauna, their geography. (CP, 165)

Crusoe obsessively enumerates and measures everything that he sees: fifty-two volcanoes; half a

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<sup>374</sup> Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 249.

dozen waterspouts; one kind of berry ('The island had one kind of everything'); the scale of the volcanoes; the size of the flute. But what purpose has such diligent industry? Why is there a need to register assiduously all the things which he sees? Crusoe is almost a child again, a sentient being rediscovering, relearning about nature, so exposed to the sights, sounds and smells of his island that his heightened senses are super-sensitive even to the cries of gulls, whose painful shrieks he cannot shake from his ears. But should this solitude be described as 'bliss' or a 'nightmarish' existence? Crusoe is frustrated at the growing sense of lassitude, not necessarily due to the oppressive monotony of the island, but instead to the lack of opportunity to philosophise. The torpor seems to drain his energy. What he had to preoccupy his mind was, he concluded, a 'miserable philosophy'.

As the title suggests, "Crusoe in England" is as much about emotional as physical dissociation and when Crusoe is rescued, he feels no less isolated as he finds himself back in England living on 'another island,/ that doesn't seem like one'. He exhibits neurotic tendencies, an urge to observe things intensely and to familiarise himself with his surroundings, to repress through rituals (or 'island industries') that shape and fill his days, whatever anxieties arose from his solitude. He has, moreover, a fear of acting out aggressive (unconscious) impulses – the recurrent dreams of slitting the throat of a baby he has mistaken for a goat – as this makes him aware, perhaps, of his more savage side. Deep-seated anxieties appertain even to his sexuality – Friday was a companion, but he was simply 'nice', a mere 'friend' – 'If only he had been a woman!' The statement 'I wanted to propagate my kind' is especially revealing, since Friday could not satisfy fully his desire for companionship; he is not of Crusoe's kind. Crusoe could look on at the 'pretty body' of the little boy, but desire or physical attraction is, under the circumstances, understood not as pederasty, but rather as a natural human urge to procreate and

repopulate.

Jung stated that a fully functioning mind requires the fusion of both the conscious and unconscious:

What the separation of the two psychic halves means, the psychiatrist knows only too well. He knows it as the dissociation of personality, the root of all neuroses; the conscious goes to the right and the unconscious to the left. As opposites never unite at their own level, a supraordinate ‘third’ is always required, in which the two parts can come together.<sup>375</sup>

Crusoe’s personality lacks this ‘supraordinate “third”’. The islands which multiply in his mind are forever disconnected, and he is obsessed with the interminable task of registering each of their flora and fauna. Crusoe yearns for a link between his sharpened senses and a world where objects have meaning beyond his physical existence. Jung continues:

And since the symbol derives as much from the conscious as the unconscious, it is able to unite them both, reconciling their conceptual polarity through its form, and their emotional polarity through its numinosity.<sup>376</sup>

The symbol embodies both the conscious and unconscious, namely the concrete – that is the pragmatic value of the knife – and the emotional resonance which resides in the mind and associates the object with, perhaps in this case, religious significance. Back in England Crusoe reflects that in times of hardship his knife proved to be the most useful and indispensable of his possessions, and for this reason it was immensely symbolic:

The knife there on the shelf —  
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.  
It lived. How many years did I  
beg it, implore it, not to break?  
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,  
the lines of wood-grain on the handle...  
Now it won’t look at me at all.  
The living soul has dribbled away.  
My eyes rest on it and pass on. (CP, 166)

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<sup>375</sup> Jung, *Aion*, p. 180.

<sup>376</sup> Jung, *Aion*, p. 180.

On his island a vulnerable Crusoe could regard the knife in awe and implore it not to break. Such faithfulness in the ‘living soul’ of an inanimate companion amounts to a far greater spiritual – indeed Christian – sustaining experience than any other of his island industries. However, once back in England the knife loses its lustre, its significance; it fails, absolutely, to emanate any symbolic meaning. The implication is that the potency of symbolism is relative, in the same way, as Jung explained, Christian symbols, in an increasingly scientific age, ‘are miles away from a modern man’s conscious understanding’.<sup>377</sup> For Jung, however, symbolism is a vital and healing part of our lives, whereas the speaker in “Crusoe in England” is perplexed that the local museum would wish to exhibit his knife and other mementoes of his time on the island, including the flute, ‘shrivelled shoes’, goatskin trousers and parasol.

Crusoe is like Adam encountering the world for the first time. But the poem serves to convey the poet’s dilemmas and expresses her anxieties over physical representation. Is objectification merely a personal experience that bears no relevance to existence in a community? Burdened with responsibility to present fact, does this unique form of perception require a symbolic framework, a life constituted of history and correspondences? And is the mediation of self in close unison with nature independent of an imagination that orders the world according to existing social norms and conventions? Does the poet desire a centred or de-centred existence? Reality in “Crusoe in England” consists of identification of the self with the island’s interior. Symbolism, however, which extends beyond the boundaries of this land mass, corresponds most to our human emotion, and for this reason it is the distinct lack of humanity – in some cases religious – which is most apparent in the poem. If initially solitude is blissful, Crusoe eventually yearns for human companionship. He wishes to propagate not only other people with whom to share his island, but also a guiding philosophy by which to live. At times

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<sup>377</sup> Jung, *Aion*, p. 177.

material needs must be accompanied by immaterial or spiritual edification. The knife remains the only symbol because it ‘reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.’

### **Reality and Stevens’ Angel-Poet**

“Crusoe in England” explores the opposition between actual and imaginary (symbolic) experience, whereas the thoughts of the literalist and the ‘fantasist’ appear to coalesce in “The Gentleman of Shalott”. The mind constructs a reality: we perceive and then we expand on what we see. This may be explained in terms of the interpenetration of perception and imagination. A similar connection between that which is perceived and imagined exists in “The Gentleman of Shalott”. The man describes himself as standing alongside – rather than facing – a mirror, so that only one side of himself is reflected; he is ‘half looking glass’, not ‘doubled’ (CP, 9). In the mind of the speaker empirical observation and imagination are thus synthesised. They form together an ‘economical design’ for life and, inextricably linked, each is dependent on the other. The suggestion that reality is grounded in the imagination carries further the debate among the Romantics that the world is out there and we contact it through the use of our senses, and the idealists who believed that we create the world in the act of imaginative perception. In terms of modernist ideology, consider, for instance, Stevens’ “Ideas of Order at Key West” where the artist, the singing woman, brings an order out of the chaos of nature that is the sea.

Stevens’ poetry, especially “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”, “Sunday Morning” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”, helped shape Bishop’s ideas on the relation between actuality and the imagination, and the older poet’s preoccupation with connecting words to the senses inspired her to present new ways of seeing objects in a context relative to the lives of readers, which somehow retained a ‘spiritual’ aura. In unpublished notes for a proposed lecture of 1968 (VA:



26), Bishop outlined the merits of Stevens' poetry. She became familiar with his work in the early 1930s, and quickly began to feel that he stood out among the generation of American modernists. She found confirmation of her aesthetics in his verse. A favourite poem was "Sunday Morning" from the collection *Harmonium* (1923), which represented for Bishop the essence of religion – or salvation – but in a substituted form, in this case poetry. "Sunday Morning", she writes, is about 'intense sense-perception'; a pseudo-religious poem which mixes iconography with secular and contemporary images. Bishop is particularly struck by the technical dexterity of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream", "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating". These poems are especially affecting because of their curious terminology. (Yet, notably, Bishop's use of words and their sounds has a much more puritan sobriety to them.) She singles out, in this respect, the obscure line '[m]oonlight fubbed the girandoles' from "The Ordinary Women" (VA, 53.11). Bishop's letters reveal a life-long fascination with Stevens' ideas about art and the role of the artist. She read with great interest his published letters and volumes of poetry, *Ideas of Order* (1936), *Owl's Clover* (1936) and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), and declared that he was the contemporary who made the most impression on her work in the 1930s.<sup>378</sup> She thought highly of his character and the way he lived and worked. Stevens, a private man, was 'urbane, rich, well-ordered, meticulous, reserved, and rather intimidating'.<sup>379</sup> She appreciated his formula of 'highly polished' composition, chiefly his language, and isolated three aspects of his verse which she most admired: his choice of 'odd'

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<sup>378</sup> Ashley Brown, 'An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop', in Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil Estess (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), pp. 289–302. She first read Stevens' *Harmonium* in 1931 and this made a 'tremendous impression' on her. Quoted from 'Three American Poets' Vassar College, Box 26, Folder 370 in George S. Lensing, 'Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop: The Way a Poet Should See, The Way a Poet Should Think', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Fall, 1995): 115–32. 'I liked Mr. Stevens's article in *Life and Letters Today*; it was the first of his prose I had seen' (*One Art*, p. 38).

<sup>379</sup> Vassar College, 'Three American Poets,' (Box 26, Folder 370), in Celeste Goodridge, 'Elizabeth Bishop and Wallace Stevens: Sustaining the Eye/I', *The Wallace Stevens Journals*, v. 19, no. 2 (1995): 146.

words, ‘startling’ alliteration and musicality.<sup>380</sup> Stevens lived up to his name as a ‘verbal musician’,<sup>381</sup> the language of his poetry, declared Moore, was a ‘kind of open cipher’, demonstrating the morphological relationship between words (‘a few words tuned and tuned and tuned and tuned’). Bishop could, however, be critical of Stevens’ at times pretentious or self-conscious poetry. She referred in this regard to phrasing and versification in ‘Montrachet-Le-Jardin’<sup>382</sup> from the collection *Parts of a World* (1942), and the mono-tonal blank verse in “Owl’s Clover”.<sup>383</sup> His poetry was essentially different from Bishop’s in the way that words were orchestrated, awkwardly juxtaposed (‘Bastard chateaux and smoky demoiselles’), ambitious but at times dizzyingly eclectic, syntactically obscure and polarised (‘As facts fall like rejuvenating rain’.<sup>384</sup>)

This metaphysical and psychological reading of “The Gentleman of Shalott” does to some extent remind us of Stevens’ “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”, and his enquiry into the nature of being. Both poems take the form of riddles and are, ultimately, concerned with the concept and value of poetry. In “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” Stevens first makes a hierarchical distinction between the countrymen and the angel.

*One of the countrymen:*

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

*The angel:*

I am the angel of reality,

Seen for a moment standing in the door.

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<sup>380</sup> ‘Three American Poets’, Vassar College, Box 26, Folder 370; Lensing, ‘Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop’: 128. She also made reference to his preoccupation with the weather and climates; *One Art*, p. 499.

<sup>381</sup> Marianne Moore, ‘Review of *Ideas of Order*’, in Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (eds), *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>382</sup> Lensing, ‘Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop’: 128.

<sup>383</sup> *One Art*, p. 48.

<sup>384</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), p. 263.

The angel of reality is a paradoxical figure because he is not enveloped in a spiritual aura. In appearance he is not heavenly for he has neither ‘ashen wings’ nor ‘tepid aureole.’ But the angel is not a charlatan as he does not make any unfounded claim or promise miracles like the man in Bishop’s “A Miracle for Breakfast”. He is an angel of earth and of their minds, who renders acute the countrymen’s hearing, seeing and thinking. Conversely, he needs them to validate the ‘necessary’ position which he assumes in their lives. Through them he guides thinking and his words ‘[r]ise liquidly in liquid lingerings’. The angel is:

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man  
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in  
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn  
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?

The angel is located in the minds of the countrymen, but he remains a half-formed, half-seen thought. He is a poet of ‘half-meanings’. His clothes, which are of very light material, can be compared with the conceived idea in Bishop’s “The Imaginary Iceberg”, that ‘is light enough to rise on finest ropes/ that airy twists of snow provide’ (CP, 4). The angel-poet can claim to be a force for good but on a par with the countrymen: ‘I am one of you’, he says. Stevens’ notion of poetry as having ‘redemptive’ powers, though not in a religious sense, was first partially explored in *Ideas of Order* and later more fully in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*.<sup>385</sup> Stevens did not believe in God, but neither did he believe that poetry could or should replace any defunct system of faith. Poetry, rather, is hedonistic, a way of enjoying a life of the senses, a momentary stimulus that guides and enlightens, although remains free of dogma. The poet, therefore, ought to refrain from endorsing any personal code of belief. Stevens’ angel-poet – the poet of hope, as he appears elsewhere<sup>386</sup> – is unlike the priest-poet-prophet of Shelley’s “Ode to the West

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<sup>385</sup> Guy Rotella, *Reading and Writing Nature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), p. 125.

<sup>386</sup> See, for example, “Academic Discourse at Havana”; *The Collected Poems*, pp. 142–44.

Wind”,<sup>387</sup> who ‘prays in the language of litany, enumerating the powers of the wind spirit’,<sup>388</sup> or the apocalyptic figure of Tiresias in Eliot’s “The Waste Land” who is able to predict the future. The role of the angel-poet is not to deal in absolutes, but to maintain a dichotomous stance that balances hope and doubt, possibility and limitation, expectation and attainment.<sup>389</sup> Returning to Bishop’s “The Gentleman of Shalott”, we may thus conclude. Viewed from an inward perspective, as if in a state of regression, the speaker in the poem ‘felt’ his person to be a duality not a double. He wishes to elicit from others the view that ‘[h]alf is enough’. He is a man of ‘modesty’ or reticence, whose perspective is continuously readjusting between reality and imagination. If, however, he had been doubled, he would have appeared, in the view of the speaker, self-indulgent and egotistical.

## Conclusion

Stevens made Bishop conscious of the power of poetic language to recreate imaginatively a reality based upon the senses. Bishop’s concern from the outset is to organise language and capture the minutiae of life, to privilege above all perception, and to impute significance to elements carefully arranged even though they are not symbolic. The real in Bishop’s poetry is expressed, primarily, in words that visualise nature as first seen. For her, moreover, most art is paradigmatic and depicts reality according to a set of rules; artistic ‘mirroring’ reinforces conventions of correspondence. In this respect perception in poetry and painting may be described as corresponding to the style of a particular time and place. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, where the visible world is presented in both literal and formalised terms, style is regarded

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<sup>387</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 412–13.

<sup>388</sup> Reuben Brower, ‘The Speaking Voice (Dramatic Design)’, in James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (eds), *Perspectives on Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 99.

<sup>389</sup> On Stevens’ views on the role of the poet see *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 402–404.

as a frame of reference in the evaluation of realistic depiction, a way of delineating reality according to habitual modes of seeing. The Christians' art does just this; in the absence of verifiable evidence of what life is really like in this far off land, the tapestry maker shapes reality according to a peculiar set of conventions. Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502" recalls the humanistic concept of art (*ut pictura poesis*) which endorses in painting and literature the classic ideals of historical and moral associations, religion, symbolism and the central importance of the human body. This theory of art discredits any form of aestheticism that emerges from a sense of individualism and increasing emotional self-expression. "Poem" further highlights differences between sensations of literal expression and universal 'vision.'

Style to Bishop is troubling, and as "In Prison" demonstrates, a writer invariably assumes a position in relation to others who have come before. It is incumbent upon her to find new ways of synthesising material drawn from literary heritage. She is, however, almost resigned to the fact that her work will be categorised, and that assumptions will be made about literary inspirations, and the significance which the work has to her (the search for a naked ego), to the past (symbolic resonance) and to the present (relativism). "From Trollope's Journal" appears to parody the inception of a poem – the choice of subject matter as suitable poetic material. The staid images offer only clues about Bishop's literal mindedness and the faint political message fails to register as the true source of inspiration. The poet is more concerned with exploring how an almost verbatim account of Trollope's first impressions of Washington compels readers to search for symbolism, for correlations perhaps, which suggest that the poet is acting to mediate between resonances of the past and the present. In response to such perplexing poetry critics coined new terms – often visual metaphors – to describe Bishop's objectification, but assumed wrongly that this verse was devoid of an emotional core. In truth, Bishop favoured the

unconventional individualism often associated with Primitive artists of nature because, fundamentally, this was a pure form of self-expression. Such depiction of reality remained honest and uncorrupted. However, if objective poetry appears devoid of corrupting symbols, the inclination to isolate the self, to live as Crusoe on a deserted island and to absorb, narcissistically, overpower and shape nature becomes troubling. What other dimensions of life express human emotions? Should dreams and other outlets for the unconscious be allowed to impinge upon the senses? And of course, a man who chooses to live on the margins may begin to doubt certain aspects of his existence, and to question whether, in fact, he needs companionship. Symbols, not least, on Crusoe's island, are forms of spiritual sustenance, even if their value remains only relative – back safe in England, Crusoe no longer has use for the knife. Whatever may be perceived as spiritually edifying cannot be completely ignored.

## Chapter V

### Elements of Spirituality in Bishop's Poetry

Religious icons, mythical tales or symbols extend and perpetuate enquiries into knowledge, and promote in art an open-endedness that generates questions and possible meanings ad infinitum. The symbolist actively encourages inexhaustible enquiry: hence the line in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” about the colonisers who ‘ripped away into the hanging fabric’ (CP, 92) may be interpreted, on the one hand, as the act of aggression perpetrated against the natives and, on the other, as a measure of the energetic and passionate desire of European Christians to delve deeply into this artwork and figuratively take it apart in order to find meaning in its symbols. The objective poet disapproves of such indefiniteness and unashamedly concedes that though there exists a void, an unknowable, it is not the poet’s *métier* to provide answers. The ability to remain in doubt without an irritable reaching after facts is what Keats called ‘negative capability’.<sup>390</sup> Bishop sums this up in her reaction to the symbolic topography of “Cape Breton” with its churches and long winding roads:

The wild road clambers along the brink of the coast.  
 On it stand occasional small yellow bulldozers,  
 but without their drivers, because today is Sunday.  
 The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills  
 like lost quartz arrowheads.  
 The road appears to have been abandoned.  
 Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been  
     abandoned,  
 unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,  
 where we cannot see,

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<sup>390</sup>  
 2006), p. 1351.

Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass., Oxford: Blackwell,

where deep lakes are reputed to be,... (CP, 67)

In stanza three contrast is achieved between the landscape's internal and external realities. There is a setting aside of everything which is visible,<sup>391</sup> but in her search for meaning she fails to penetrate the island's 'interior' and, dispensing with that which 'we cannot see', she returns to the concrete:

A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes  
 packed with people,...  
 It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,  
 climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,  
 which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,  
 to his invisible house beside the water. (CP, 68)

In one of Bishop's letters to Lowell she mentions how much she liked the people of Cape Breton, who, with their strange-sounding accents,<sup>392</sup> are part of its history, to which also belongs the churches with their ornate steeples pointing or aiming at nothing in particular. These churches, however, have now been 'dropped' or 'lost', and the road that winds ever more deeply into the 'interior' has been abandoned.<sup>393</sup> This landscape with its historical and cultural background has become, for the speaker, a myriad of enigmatic inscriptions: 'The thin white mist follows/ the white mutations of its dream'. The use of the colour white in Bishop's poetry often indicates visual obliqueness. Thus, in "Love Lies Sleeping" the immense city rises into 'a weak white sky, it seems to waver there'; the city comes to a halt. In the pursuit of natural knowledge

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<sup>391</sup> The distinction that Bishop makes between simply viewing the island and looking at it attentively can be related to a distinction made by Poussin. There are, he writes, 'deux manières de voir les objets, l'une en les voyant simplement, et l'autre en les considérant avec attention'; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Murray, 1983), pp. 48–49.

<sup>392</sup> *One Art*, p.147.

<sup>393</sup> James Southworth has written: '[Bishop] is not interested in the abstract truth at the end of the road, but in concrete truths that lie along the way'. This concrete truth has been likened to 'a bowl of peaches by Cezanne, a wheat field by Van Gogh, a lady playing the lute by Ter Borch'; Schwartz and Estess, p. 182.



‘it is necessary to choose between the true testimony of sight and misleading interpretations’.<sup>394</sup>

In truth, some of Bishop’s poetry, *prima facie*, seems straightforward, but at the point of *envoi* there appears to be something less definite, or something missing, a pervading sense, in the poet’s own words, of ‘partial mystery’.<sup>395</sup> Objects, ironically, lose meaning and the mysterious, or unknowable, is plainly acknowledged. This ironic function of object-words where the initial response of readers is to elicit meaning – in, for example, a map or a fish – may explain Anne Stevenson’s opinion that ‘one of the things [Bishop] could do best was write metaphorically, even symbolically, without appearing to do so’.<sup>396</sup> Her poetry presents what I would term an inverted realism; her images are real, but modulated imperceptively toward mystery by something dark and disquieting. Inverted realism describes a poetic duality, that is to say, a reality which is firmly etched but simultaneously undefined. I would argue, therefore, that there are two essential elements in Bishop’s *modus operandi*, namely the material and the unknowable, which she at times describes as the spiritual. She may be understood as maintaining a complicated dynamic between these latter two opposing ideas. As I later argue, this notion of reality has relevance to Pascal’s concept of *le néant* in the way that its formal strategies concede the absence of a transcendental being. At this point, however, it is necessary to consider how inverted realism grew out of Bishop’s interest in surrealism.

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<sup>394</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, p. 80. Alternatively, the use of the colour white has been read as having racial connotations in Bishop and Plath; see Renée R. Curry, *White Women Writing White. H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and Whiteness* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000).

<sup>395</sup> These are Bishop’s own words used in reference to her friend, the painter Gregorio Valdes; see Bishop, “Gregorio Valdes”, in *The Collected Prose* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 51–59.

<sup>396</sup> Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 92.

### Bishop's Inverted Realism

The term inverted realism takes into account Bishop's indebtedness to surrealist art and literature and the element of mystery in their work, what she defined as the 'spiritual'. She shared in 'l'esprit surréaliste' and was originally beguiled by those irrational qualities generally ascribed to the movement's ideology. However, for Bishop surrealism proper was part of everyday life, an inverted reality; it was not dogmatic but tangential, or even osmotic like that of Octavio Paz. For her it was an attitude of mind that tapped a natural part of the human psyche. Bishop, undoubtedly, was intrigued by the de-historicising function of surrealist language in the way that it betrayed readers' expectations by throwing together familiar objects in unfamiliar contexts. However, if Bishop was originally inclined toward surrealist art and literature, she ultimately questioned its principles and disagreed chiefly with artists who sought immediate and total immersion in the abstraction of odd associations. To unleash the revelatory power of the imagination was inspiring – the omnipotence of dreams and the oneiric – but for Bishop the induced state of deliriousness was a step too far. She was a poet who aimed to keep her poetry firmly grounded.

Bishop's first association with the surrealists dated back to the mid 1930s, and she subsequently explored surrealism on lengthy trips to France.<sup>397</sup> 'I had read a lot of surrealist poetry and prose', she told interviewer and friend Ashley Brown.<sup>398</sup> Certainly, she loved art and was something of an artist herself.<sup>399</sup> 'I'd love to be a painter', she declared, and unusually for a

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<sup>397</sup> Thomas J. Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 19. Even Moore, her mentor, was at one time intrigued by surrealism and wrote an essay on Cocteau and The Surrealist Exhibition; *One Art*, p. 57

<sup>398</sup> Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*, p. 42.

<sup>399</sup> *Exchanging Hats*, p. xviii. A collection of Bishop's watercolour and gouache paintings were first exhibited in 1993 at East Martello Tower Museum in Key West.

professional writer, she thought drawing ‘more fun than writing’.<sup>400</sup> Bishop was also a collector of art – she owned an Alexander Calder mobile (‘Vertical out of Horizontal’, c. 1948) – and her painterly sensibility was shaped by various artists, most notably Dadaists-Surrealists like Joan Miró, Max Ernst, the early work of Giorgio de Chirico (interest in the latter is reflected in her poem “Cirque d’Hiver”) and Kurt Schwitters. She felt Miró’s *Farm* (1922) was wonderful and intensely descriptive – ‘with everything in it, trees, hens, fences, etc., and a dog barking at footprints’.<sup>401</sup> The farmyard scene – similar to a Brueghel painting in its obsessive documentation – is composed of many things, but what must have also captured Bishop’s eye was Miró’s transgression of the traditional rules of perspective, the detailing in the painting bringing forward the distant horizon and giving the impression that foreground and background are on a level surface.<sup>402</sup> Bishop, as I previously discussed, had a keen interest in the Renaissance and studied Hieronymus Bosch, a painter of religious scenes. And as discussion of the religious dimension of “The Man-Moth” will later reveal, the cityscape, which this surreal figure inhabits, is a corollary of Bosch’s dreamlike landscapes as well as the search for a hidden God. Bishop’s second association with surrealism was, perhaps, the most intriguing – that of friendship. During the 1970s she met the Mexican surrealist poet Octavio Paz who was at Harvard to give a lecture on Spanish American Poetry.<sup>403</sup> She went on to translate with the help of Paz a number of his poems: “The Key of Water” (a sensual poem), “Along Galeana Street” (a visual-verbal *mélange*), “The Grove” (a work of syntactical distortion and mental drift), “January First” (on

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<sup>400</sup> *Exchanging Hats*, p. xv. ‘Her paintings – gouache, watercolour, pen, and ink – are small – a few no more than lap-sized – literal depictions of, mainly, domestic objects on sheets of paper the same size that one might write a poem on’; *One Art*, p. 9. Bishop’s earliest dated work (1937) is a child-like portrait of her Floridian friend Charlotte Russell, entitled *Sha-Sha*; *Exchanging Hats*, p. xviii.

<sup>401</sup> *One Art*, p. 90.

<sup>402</sup> Ideas of perspectives abound in Bishop’s work: ‘The view is geared/...so low there is no “far away” (“The Monument”); ‘is perspective dozing?’ (“Twelfth Morning; or What You Will”); ‘Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West’ (“The Map”).

<sup>403</sup> *One Art*, p. 581.

the conjugations of time) and “Objects & Apparitions” (a poem about Joseph Cornell).<sup>404</sup>

Bishop was inspired by the spirit of surrealism, the movement’s continual projection of the imagination, its poetics of dream and reality and its foregrounding of aspects of the marvellous, irrational and revelatory (poetry as ‘revelation’ of the ‘truth’).<sup>405</sup> Surrealism had the power to express various forms of emotion indirectly. In “The Weed”, which, she tells us, ‘was influenced, if by anything, by a set of prints I had of Max Ernst – lost long ago – called *Histoire Naturelle*’.<sup>406</sup> These 34 peculiar etchings (1926) are a series of intensely personal pictures of plants and animals created by the technique of *frottage*, or rubbing. Ernst, a revolutionary artist interested in discovering methods of stimulating the imagination, began to use *frottage* in the early 1920s as a visual equivalent to the surrealists’ automatic writing. Such a technique, as he pointed out, ‘excluded conscious mental influences (reason, taste, morals) tending to eliminate the active part played by the so-called author of the work’.<sup>407</sup> Ernst was intrigued by the technique: ‘I was surprised at the sudden intensification of my visionary faculties and at the succession of images, hallucinating and contradictory, superimposing themselves one above the other with the persistence and rapidity that is peculiar to amorous memories’.<sup>408</sup> Ernst’s *Histoire Naturelle*, which explored the link between the human and natural worlds, took root in Bishop’s mind and was ultimately to find verbal expression in “The Weed”. His unique collection of mysterious shapes recalls our natural histories – “la mer et la pluie” (plate 1); “petites tables autour de la terre” (plate 2); “le tremblement de terre” (plate 5) – the earthquake anticipates a

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<sup>404</sup> Paz’s surrealist poems were included as part of Bishop’s own work, and of course as part of her own poetics. Paz once described his brand of surrealism as ‘osmotic’: ‘a vital attitude, total – ethic and aesthetic – that expressed itself in action and participation’; Jason Wilson, *Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 33.

<sup>405</sup> Wilson, *Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics*, p. 25

<sup>406</sup> *One Art*, p. 478.

<sup>407</sup> Max Ernst, *Histoire Naturelle: Leaves Never Grow on Trees* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>408</sup> Ernst, *Histoire Naturelle*, p. 3.

new beginning, the start of “les pampas” (the pampas grasses); “les champs d’honneur les inondations les plantes sismiques” (plate 12) – a bulbous-shaped plant appears against a lightly shaded background, followed by “les moeurs des feuilles” (plate 18); “l’origine de la pendule” (plate 26); and “la roue de la lumière” (plate 29) – the seeing eye. The concluding frottage bearing the title “éve la seule qui nous reste” (plate 34), takes up the biblical theme of creation. Disparate images of birds, trees, scarecrows, insects, sky, man-beast hybrids, horses, plants and flowers are brought together in a less lucid and more complex form. Psychic tensions constitute the principle theme of these plates. *Histoire Naturelle* is ‘our human history encircled’, writes Roland Penrose, ‘by the uncontrollable activity of gods, devils and hazards that tempt us and threaten our progress’.<sup>409</sup>

In “The Weed” Bishop’s contrasts between light and dark, reality and dream lend the poem an air of surrealist association. The opening lines of the poem with their dream imagery and affirmation of the strange or marvellous betray the poet’s surrealist sensibility. In the dreamlike vision of meditation and death a slight weed grows ‘like a blade of grass’ that ruptures the heart of the speaker (CP, 20). The weed signifies young love, or rather the transmutation of love from a state of fragility to potency. The poem conjures up the image of the dormant heart revived by the dominion and allure of youth. A dead or dying heart is revived by a slight young weed: ‘Suddenly there was a motion,/ as startling, there, to every sense/ as an explosion’. The emotions are awakened and the immeasurable force of the human heart meeting that of the weed causes a flood. The heart bleeds water in order to sustain its young weed. Moreover, the speaker embarks on a revelatory journey from darkness into light, from a state of physical constraint to sensual revelation: ‘In the cold heart, its final thought/ stood frozen.../and we

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<sup>409</sup> Ernst, *Histoire Naturelle*, p. 2.

remained unchanged together...’ – the pronouns ‘its’ and ‘we’ suggesting a distance between the two. The heart within the body lies dormant awaiting a spring-rebirth, and release comes in the shape of an adventurous, mischievous and regenerative weed (reminiscent of plate 12 in Ernst’s *Histoire Naturelle*, “the fields of honour the floods earthquake plants”) delivering and liberating the cold heart from inertia, dissolving bodily constraints and bringing to life epiphanic images of light and discovery. The poem’s surrealist conception is perfectly drawn. The illuminated drops of water enhance the speaker’s optical perception – ‘A few drops fell upon my face/ and in my eyes, so I could see’ (CP, 21) – and the speaker’s state of dreaming gives way to clear vision – these ‘racing images’ – which recalls the surrealists’ belief in the unconscious as possessing a higher reality than the active functioning of thought.<sup>410</sup> ‘Surrealism’, Ferdinand Alquié explains, ‘is not flight into the unreal or into dream, but an attempt to penetrate into what has more reality than the logical and objective universe’.<sup>411</sup>

In Bishop’s “The Weed” and Ernst’s *Histoire Naturelle* the successive images rupture the framework of the accessible exterior world to surpass it and summon up a seemingly inaccessible interior world. For Ernst *frottage* stimulated the force of his imagination and, in particular, his amorous memories. In “The Weed” truth-seeking dialogue between the weed and the heart ensues:

“What are you doing there?” I asked.  
 It lifted its head all dripping wet  
 (with my own thought?)  
 and answered then: “I grow,” it said,  
 “but to divide your heart again.” (CP, 21)

These are now not the thoughts of the weed but those of the speaker. The word ‘again’ pinpoints

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<sup>410</sup> Ferdinand Alquié, *The Philosophy of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1965), p. 26.

<sup>411</sup> Alquié, *The Philosophy of Surrealism*, p. 84.

a cyclical progression. The weed's presence is felt inside the very being of every heart – its cataclysmic symptoms surface in states of physical perception, eroticism as well as spiritual awakening – and, analogous with love, it is revealed at once as devouring and rupturing, overwhelming and natural.

“The Weed” demonstrates Bishop and surrealism's shared belief in the total union between the conscious and unconscious functioning of thought. Strictly-speaking, however, she was never an orthodox surrealist. In a letter to Anne Stevenson she writes:

There is no ‘split’. Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can't believe we are wholly irrational – and I do admire Darwin. But reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic – and then comes sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.<sup>412</sup>

I cite this passage at length because it makes clear the close affinities – and disagreements – between Bishop and surrealism. The ‘self-conscious’ approach or ‘convention’ – the word which Bishop liked to employ<sup>413</sup> – in writing is in contradistinction to what she regards as the ‘un-self-conscious’ or ‘self-forgetful’ theorising of thinkers, whether in the field of art or science. Bishop describes Darwin's process of writing and her way of reading (and responding to his work). He builds his ‘solid case’ out of facts and details, but in his text Bishop notes forgetful phrases where Darwin's argument seems to lapse into the ‘unknown’, the ‘peripheral’, ‘unexpected’ (or incomprehensible). A reader then experiences the ‘strangeness of his undertaking’. Thus artistic creation and the experience of reading are regarded by Bishop as being one and the same. Such ‘interstitial’ moments represent the true ‘lingua unconscious’, and in these interstices there is a

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<sup>412</sup> Quoted by Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 66. This is taken from Bishop's letter to Stevenson.

<sup>413</sup> *One Art*, p. 12.

meeting of the ‘factual’ and ‘the fabulous’, and the ‘perfectly natural’ and the ‘highly artificial’.<sup>414</sup> Bishop identifies the irrational – the unconscious or automatic – as a vital psychic mechanism of ‘everyday life’. The irrational is that function of the mind which enables us to look beyond all logical and material considerations. But ‘I can’t believe we are wholly irrational’, stresses Bishop – we are not totally outside the control of reason. The states of mind which characterise Darwin’s work are rational (solid, factual) and irrational (unknown, strange, visionary). He sets up his own dialectic of conscious ‘heroic observations’ and unconscious or automatic ‘sudden relaxations’. Darwin’s dream state (‘his fixed eyes’) is a state closely allied to psychic automatism. Equally, Bishop’s seeing eye (‘catch a peripheral vision’) is contrasted with the eye of the imagination (‘whatever it is one can never really see full-face’). Put otherwise, the fundamental objective of surrealism, as André Breton explained it, was the amalgamation of two contraries into one continuum: ‘I believe in the future resolution of these two states of dream and reality seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality’.<sup>415</sup>

Bishop does not share completely the surrealist belief in the marvelous or wholly irrational, the ‘systematic confusion and “disorder of the senses”’.<sup>416</sup> Instead her poems reveal a pattern of duality: that is, delight in the material world and the world of dream, in truth and artifice, in intense perception and reflection, in calm and tension, in search and frustration. Ultimately, however, Bishop endorses a poetry which is immediate and grounded in material reality. In one of her notebooks she briefly discusses ideas for a short story based on her maternal

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<sup>414</sup> Linda Anderson, ‘The Story of the Eye: Elizabeth Bishop and the Limits of the Visual’, in Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books), p. 164.

<sup>415</sup> Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics Of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 20.

<sup>416</sup> In Ernst’s ‘Au-dela de la Peinture’ (‘Beyond Painting’), written in the 1930s, he defined collage art as an ‘alchemical composition of two or more heterogeneous elements resulting from their unexpected reconciliation’; Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 98.



grandmother. (VA, 68.2) The theme of the story – inspired by Herbert’s “The Temple” – is the polarity in literature, and life in general, between the actual and synthetic. According to Bishop, her austere grandmother cared little about appearance and because she rarely looked in a mirror, her glass eye was occasionally not in its correct place. Bishop writes in her notebook: ‘The situation of my grandmother strikes me as rather like the situation of the poet: the difficulty of combining the real with the decidedly un-real; the natural with the unnatural; the curious effect a poem produces of being as normal as sight and yet as synthetic, as artificial, as a glass eye’. (VA, 68. 2) This inverted or oblique kind of realism is transformed and distorted and it recalls Bishop’s search for a transparent language that achieves both natural and curious effect. Arguably, this inverted realism has a visual equivalence in the work of Magritte, which is, significantly, more figurative, less-symbolic and not as concerned with the abstract concepts traditionally associated with several of his contemporaries. Magritte aimed to present the world in ways which he believed inspired in people a freedom of thought. In his paintings he placed together objects and figures in unusual contexts in order that these material signs pointed toward some profound and ‘impossible’ emptiness beyond human existence. This philosophy underscores both Bishop’s surrealist-inspired and ‘religious’ poems. For instance, “The Man-Moth” observes that the ‘vast properties’ of the universe and the immense dimensions of nature are reducible to a mere concrete detail – ‘The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat’ (CP 14). From below ground the Man-Moth can only sense the ‘queer light’ of the moon falling on his hands – its temperature ‘impossible to record in thermometers’ – but he thinks it is ‘a small hole at the top of the sky’, an image that recalls Bosch’s *The Ascent into Empyrean*.<sup>417</sup> Bosch used the empyrean, the visible light or heaven at the end of a tunnel, as a sign for yearning, a

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Kurt Falk, *The Unknown Hieronymus Bosch* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 2008), pp. 18–19.

hope for what is beyond. In the same way, the Man-Moth searches for answers.<sup>418</sup> Bishop attempts to translate the poetic emotions of resolution, of sublimity into stone, and words like ‘shadow’, ‘circle’, ‘buildings’, ‘façade’, ‘cloth’, ‘scrolls’ and ‘surface’ are strongly visual signs of the immeasurable. There is, moreover, a union between the surface, the dark eerie city and the subterranean (‘the pale subways of cement he [the Man-Moth] calls his home’). Contrast between light and shade in the city and its subways results in pictorial vividness, chiaroscuro-like effects in description: the shadow of man and that of the Man-Moth, which drags behind him ‘like a photographer’s cloth’, bears testimony to an all-pervasive light.

The language in “The Man-Moth” is enigmatic; it is, in the words of J. J. Mayoux, “une langue de lapsus, tres exactement, c’est a dire de glissements”.<sup>419</sup> It lapses and glides into reflection. Furthermore, the use of architecture in the poem as a constructional devise permits the Man-Moth to ‘scale the faces of the buildings’. These convey a sense of solidity, while the element of escape into the phenomenal beyond is offered by the moon. In the poem’s fifth stanza, however, the Man-Moth returns to the subways and the poet surrenders to the hypnagogic (the ‘rushing brain’). Each night the Man-Moth must ‘be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams’. The earlier photoscopic images – instances perceived as black and white stills<sup>420</sup> – suggest the work of a selective mind, whereas in the final stanzas the Man-Moth appears in a state of frenzy and agitation. Though superhuman in his ability to scale buildings and reduce the whole city to an object of philosophical reflection, the Man-Moth remains in sleep more prone to the pains of relentless search. Dreams are exhilarating, but they can also be self-destructive:

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<sup>418</sup> Is he the ‘mammoth’ or simply the ‘Man-Moth’?

<sup>419</sup> J.J. Mayoux, ‘L’heresie de James Joyce’, *English Miscellany*, vol. 2 (1951): 219, 222.

<sup>420</sup> For a discussion of the photoscopic see Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et société: naissance et destruction d’un espace plastique, De la Renaissance au cubisme* (Paris: Gallimard 1965), pp. 129ff.

He does not dare look out of the window,  
 for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,  
 runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease  
 he has inherited the susceptibility to...

...  
 If you catch him,  
 hold up a flashlight to his eye...(CP, 15)

The Man-Moth's dilated pupil and the 'one tear, his only possession', which burns 'like the bee's sting' as it slips down his cheek, speak of emotional depth. However, when such an image is observed by others, it appears beautiful and rejuvenating; the tear becomes 'pure enough to drink'.

Bishop's 'surrealist' poems incorporate their own dialectical opposites. The somnambulistic "Love lies Sleeping" is at once imaginary and real as it recalls its knowledge of the conditions of human love and death. In "Paris, 7 A.M." the invisible play of thought – 'introspection', 'retrospection' and 'recollection' – runs parallel to the visible, 'the sequence of squares and squares and circles, circles?' In "Cirque d'Hiver" the mechanical horse's mane and tail are straight from a de Chirico metaphysical landscape. Reality alternating with fantasy is expressed metaphorically in terms of horse and rider. However, in poems such as "Sleeping on the Ceiling" the worlds of waking and sleep are intermingled rather than separated:

It is so peaceful on the ceiling!  
 It is the Place de la Concorde.  
 The little crystal chandelier  
 is off, the fountain is in the dark.  
 Not a soul in the park.

Below, where the wallpaper is peeling,  
 The Jardin des Plantes has locked its gates.  
 ... (CP, 29)

The exclamatory remark of the opening stanza, the illusionistic image of sleeping on the ceiling, the peculiar reference to the 'Place de la Concorde', the isolation of the short phrase 'is off', the

shift from 'on' to 'below', all create a tension between the actual and imaginary. On closer analysis, however, everything internal and external is precise in detail. The speaker lives in a Paris apartment building, and so sleeping 'on the ceiling' becomes a literal statement. The description, moreover, of the hanging chandelier and the fountain in the park seems to bring the outside world inside and vice versa. Around the edge of the window frame the wallpaper is peeling and beneath this can be seen the Jardin des Plantes. The suggestion that the latter appears directly 'below' the former again suggests proximity and incongruity. The language of description continues to confuse: 'Those photographs are animals'. What could have been a metaphorical approximation of animate beings to photographic stills, is worded in such a way that the statement sounds matter-of-fact, once again making it difficult to establish whether the animals are actually inside or outside the apartment. These ambiguities emerge from the distortion of perspective. The final stanza marks a change as the speaker contemplates sleep and psychic transference beyond observable phenomena (the fountain and the square). In this unconscious state the individual 'must go under' and succumb completely to the overwhelming force of dream.

Repressed illicit thoughts forbidden in our waking state, or refused consciousness, find in sleep the force of realisation. But as in "Sleeping on the Ceiling" and "The Man-Moth" 'recurrent' dreams, which every human has 'inherited susceptibility to', can be enchanting and destructive, liberating and disturbing. In Bishop's "Sleeping Standing Up" the recumbent thoughts 'rise' at night and make a 'forest of thick-set trees'.

The armored cars of dreams, contrived to let us do  
 so many a dangerous thing,  
 are chugging at its edge  
 all camouflaged, and ready to go through  
 the swiftest streams, or up a ledge  
 of crumbling shale, while plates and trappings ring. (CP, 30)

The poem takes up the forest motif and explores its psychological significance. The speaker journeys in search of the crumbs or pebbles, ‘like those the clever children placed by day/ and followed to their door/ one night’. In this instance, Bishop alludes to the Grimm Brothers’ *Hansel and Gretel* in which the forest is the place ‘where social wrongs can be righted’ and essential truths can be found.<sup>421</sup> “Sleeping Standing Up” becomes part of an oneiric reconstruction combining complex levels of ideology and Indo-Germanic fairytales. Moreover, ‘armored cars of dreams’, ‘all camouflaged’, and ‘ugly tanks’, carry fervent suggestions of aggression and impending danger. In the final reckoning, the ‘racing images’ of sleep (the ‘swiftest streams’) are illogical – ‘crumbling’, ‘dissolving’, disappearing – and the trail, which the dreamer has followed through the forest, leads nowhere.

As the state of consciousness ‘clear[s] away what presses on the brain’, the speaker in “Love Lies Sleeping” awakes and becomes alert and sensitive to the sights and sounds of the city. There is interest in colours, the visual contrasts of light and shade and in things natural and artificial. The first stanza introduces the break of dawn, the cataract of light from outside – ‘Earliest morning’. The speaker observes closely ‘an immense city’ before turning to look at the ‘street below’:

queer cupids of all persons getting up,  
 whose evening meal they will prepare all day,  
     you will dine well  
     on his heart, on his, and his,

so send them about your business affectionately,  
 dragging in the streets their unique loves.  
     Scourge them with roses only,  
     Be light as helium...(CP, 17)

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<sup>421</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, introduction with notes by Elizabeth Dalton (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), pp. 56–63. See also Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 45.

The communion of the sacred and the profane – Christian and secular images of a rose and a whip, an evening repast and a sacrificial meal – speak both of routine and ritualistic suffering. The reference to ‘queer cupids’ adds an element of the mythical as well as a note of cynicism. However, unlike this composite of people, ‘all persons getting up’, this one man (or human type) appears to break the mould:

for always to one, or several, morning comes,  
whose head has fallen over the edge of his bed,  
whose face is turned  
so that the image of

the city grows down into his open eyes  
inverted and distorted. No. I mean  
distorted and revealed,  
if he sees it at all. (CP, 17)

In the final stanzas the mood and tone of the poem undergo a definite shift from union toward seclusion. The man lies slumped on his bed, eyes wide open. He is in a semi-conscious or unconscious state, perhaps even dead.<sup>422</sup> The poet enquires whether only the conscious mind of this individual has the power to construct knowledge of the world in which he exists. He is inert and unresponsive and yet the city grows down into his eyes and becomes ‘inverted and distorted’ ### it has an external and independent existence outside of the self. I discussed earlier how in Plath’s poetry there is similar interest in a consciousness which either mirrors or projects external reality. In “Love Lies Sleeping” the speaker is intrigued by the idea that the exterior world does not find material shape in the mind of the individual, but is, instead, determined by forces unconnected to the act of seeing and thinking. This makes the city’s formation illogical (‘distorted’), but, at the same time, it is ‘revealed’ as conforming to some ineffable ideal beyond wakefulness. There is emphasis in the poem on contemporary notions of individuality. Set apart

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<sup>422</sup> Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 67.

from the routine preoccupations of the broader community, the man's alienation, his possible death and rediscovery of the city in a state of mind beyond consciousness, represents a form of self-determination, a decidedly 'subjectivist theology'.<sup>423</sup>

### **Bishop's Poems on Religion**

Bishop's inverted realism and its dialectal strategies presents a pragmatic antithesis to abstract notions. In her discussion of poetic convention (1934) she also identifies the 'un-self-conscious' or the self-forgetful poetry 'where the point seems to be missing', which is the inexplicable or elusive. This enduring interest in something beyond the material, beyond concrete actuality, inclines her toward the unknowable and, in her own words, 'the spiritual, that is the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and poetic' (VA, notebook, 1934). She observes that the material cannot exist without the spiritual; the two go hand in hand. The spiritual 'proceeds from the material, the material is eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place' (VA, notebook, 1934). Significantly, however, the appeal of certain religious poetry for Bishop, like that of Herbert and Hopkins for example, stems from the belief that this type of verse combines spiritual ineffability with a lucid and concrete language. Mental reaching out is an essential facet of the human condition.

It is well documented that following the death of her father and her mother's commitment to a mental hospital, Bishop was brought up from the age of four as a Baptist by maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. Despite her assertion that 'I am not the slightest bit religious',<sup>424</sup> religion remains a notable theme in several of her poems and stories. Throughout her life she

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<sup>423</sup> Charles Altieri, 'From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics', *Boundary*, 2, vol. 1 (1972–1973): 615.

<sup>424</sup> See Jeredith Merrin, *An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and the Uses of Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 42.

surrounded herself with religious objects and on her many travels enjoyed, perhaps for mainly aesthetic reasons, visiting churches. She read and admired Herbert, who dealt with strongly devotional themes in his writing,<sup>425</sup> St Augustine's *Confessions*, the works of St Ignatius Loyola and St Theresa's *Way of Perfection* (a favourite book in her library). She even submitted seven Christian hymns for her *Poetry Pilot* selection.<sup>426</sup> The poetry Bishop wrote in her early twenties, like "Hymn to the Virgin" with its archaic phrasing and incorporation of Biblical references, owed something to the religious ardour of Herbert and, in particular, the alliterative style and staccato rhythms of Hopkins, whose 'songs' God sustained 'with iron' (VA, 74.14). However, the archaic solemnity of Bishop's early poetry jars awkwardly with her largely belligerent views on religion. In "Hymn to the Virgin", published in April of 1933 in *Con Spirito*, Vassar College's rebel literary magazine,<sup>427</sup> Bishop evokes the ambiguous relationship between the blessed and the mortal. The poem's reified and 'indelicate' language<sup>428</sup> treats religious belief in an adolescently direct and provocative way. There is, on the one hand, the worshippers' effusive show of spiritual exaltation ('the mood of/ Adoration's shamefaced exposé and brazen knee-bending'); but on the other hand, the speaker bemoans Mary's silence, the Virgin's stillness. "Hymn to the Virgin" delineates the struggle between the bitter-sweet experience of religious hope and despair, this effervescent nothingness. There exists, in other words, a disjunction

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<sup>425</sup> In a 1974 talk entitled 'Influences', which she gave to the Academy of American Poets, Bishop described Herbert as one of her favourite poets – 'if not my favorite'; Elizabeth Bishop, 'Influences', *The American Poetry Review* (January/February, 1985): 11.

<sup>426</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, 'Seven Christian Hymns', *Poetry Pilot* (1964): 14. 'Religious rhetoric of the soul and of divinity', according to Bonnie Costello, 'haunts Bishop's poems'; Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 91.

<sup>427</sup> *Con Spirito* was started by Elizabeth Bishop, Mary McCarthy, Margaret Miller and the Clark sisters, Eunice and Eleanor, because 'they were dissatisfied with the stodgy official Vassar Review, which rejected their writings. After three issues *Con Spirito* ceased publication'; *One Art*, p.8.

<sup>428</sup> Thomas Travisano, "'The Flicker of Impudence': Delicacy and Indelicacy in the Art of Elizabeth Bishop', in Marilyn May Lombardi (ed.), *Elizabeth Bishop. The Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).



between religious edifice and human devotion which calls for some form of reciprocity: ‘Come, Blessed Mary, hear our prayer!’ (CP, 221) In her repetition of a Latin phrase taken from Isaiah (c.45.v.8), Bishop urges the Virgin to ‘[s]hower, O heavens, from above’, and ‘let the skies rain down righteousness’.<sup>429</sup> Bishop grapples with the blessed and tries to make sense of ‘it’. The poet’s final cry is for the Virgin to make her presence visible.

After writing a “Hymn to the Virgin”, Bishop continued contributing poems, stories, articles and reviews to both *Con Spirito* and the mainstream *Vassar Review*. In 1934 she graduated and spent the next few years travelling before settling down in Key West, Florida. In the mid-1930s Biblical themes remained a notable aspect of Bishop’s work. The religious dimension in *North & South*, as well as the story, “The Baptism” (1937), had its roots, of course, in her religious upbringing. In terms of imagery her poetry generally divides between the muted and barren, rather puritanical northern coast and the Catholic, more ‘sensuous’ scenery in, for example, “Seascape”.<sup>430</sup> Bishop did not shy away from using religious motifs in her work. Take, for instance, the references to the clerical figure and Christian art in “Seascape”, and “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, to sacramental ablutions in “At the Fishhouses”, and to St Peter’s sin in “Roosters”. In this latter poem guilt weighs heavily and the sinner is forever penitent: ‘Tear-encrusted thick/ as a medieval relic [Peter] waits’ (CP, 38). The meaning of his denial of Christ could be constructed into an ‘Old holy sculpture’, ‘one small scene, past and future’. From the Christian point of view the petrified symbols of sin and denial are to be seen everywhere; the ‘weathervane’ on the basilica must be endowed with religious significance.

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<sup>429</sup> In a 1933 letter to Donald E. Stanford, Bishop wrote: ‘It [“Hymn to the Virgin”] isn’t sacrilege – it’s really supposed to be sad...I was writing of people who can’t leave things to retire peacefully, who “know a thing or two”. Raising one’s eyes airplane-wise means simply upwards...on to what’s up there’; *One Art*, p. 11.

<sup>430</sup> Tom Paulin, ‘Dwelling Without Roots: Elizabeth Bishop’, in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 197. For a discussion of Bishop’s Baptist upbringing and her ‘Protestant habits of mind’ see Laurel Snow Corelle, *A Poet’s High Argument: Elizabeth Bishop and Christianity* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 1–5.

A continuing interest in religion afforded Bishop a context within which to explore differences between objective reality and divine ineffability. If, in fact, her poems look ‘[h]eavenward, or off at an angle’, at the same time, their ‘real eye look[s] at you’.<sup>431</sup> As Bonnie Costello rightly observes, Bishop is in search – at times frustratedly – for a ‘meaning or authority to which [she] might submit’.<sup>432</sup> There is a clear attempt in Bishop’s work to resolve or confront the uncertainties which arise from Judeo-Christian ideology and conventional human – predominately symbolic and Eurocentric – response to the supernatural in painting and literature. Take, for example, “The Imaginary Iceberg”. Bishop constructs a *visibilia*:

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

If the iceberg represents fixity, circularity and space, then by comparison, the ship corresponds to time, motion and progression along a historical line. In stanza two the iceberg is a metaphor for the idea that forms and materialises itself in the poet’s mind. Bishop focuses upon the relentless desire among writers to fashion meaning from nature using a highly contrived and adorned language. The ‘sailor’ may choose to ‘ignore’ the ship – the history and legacy of art – but he remains inexorably a part of it. His attempt, therefore, to ‘correct elliptics in the sky’, merely gives rise to artifice, which is akin to the empty gestures of ‘he who treads the boards’. That Bishop’s philosophy opposes the ‘artlessly rhetorical’ can be seen in stanza three: ‘This iceberg

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<sup>431</sup> Barbara Page, ‘Elizabeth Bishop and Postmodernism’, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 19, (Autumn, 1995): 166–79.

<sup>432</sup> Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, p. 91.

cuts its facets from within/ like jewellery from a grave'. On the surface the idea is visible and yet a projection of all else that remains invisible, unknown and absent. It is 'self-made' and self-perpetuating and like the 'soul' constituted of unseen parts. Both can be 'fleshed', given bodily form and made 'fair' to the human eye. This is the essential paradox and mystery of the idea. Indeed such inscrutability has an air of solemnity in "The Imaginary Iceberg"; even the language has a religious sense as exemplified by the vocative form of address ('O solemn, floating field,/ are you aware an iceberg takes repose/ with you...').

### **Pascal and Religious Symbolism in "A Miracle for Breakfast"**

Bishop's notion of the 'spiritual' or unknown reconciled poetry and religion, and her interest in the way that natural language operated within the field of epistemology and religious practice led her to the work of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal. She wrote to Moore in 1937:

I am reading *Pensées* for the first time and I find them so full of magnet-sentences that accumulate strayed objects around them that I shall be very much ashamed if I do not return with a sort of poetic-calendar or birthday book of my stay here. Or it may be just a happy correspondence of the book to the scenery—the French *clarity* and the mathematics fit in so well with the few, repeated natural objects and the wonderful transparent sea!<sup>433</sup>

Pascal's aphoristic utterances in *Pensées* on God, miracles and *le néant* served as an ideological framework for Bishop's objectifying experience of the Floridian seascape.<sup>434</sup> The draft of "A Miracle for Breakfast", which she sent to Moore, included a quotation from Pascal, probably the epigram which later appeared with the poem in the 1972 reprint of *North & South* – 'Les miracles discernent la doctrine, et la doctrine discerne les miracles' ('Miracles differentiate

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<sup>433</sup> *One Art*, p. 55.

<sup>434</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

between doctrine and doctrine differentiates between miracles’).<sup>435</sup> Bishop was typically elusive as to the reasons she wrote “A Miracle for Breakfast” and, in spite of its religious connotations, in a letter to U.T. and Joseph Summers (1967) she expressed surprise that critics had interpreted the poem as being about the Eucharist.<sup>436</sup> However, Bishop enjoyed keeping readers ‘in the dark’,<sup>437</sup> and if the ritual of Mass was not on her mind when writing the poem, she certainly incorporated other religious elements, most obvious of which were miracles and illusion, faith, the mystery of existence, transcendent force (natural and supernatural), messianic authority and cult following. Interestingly, in this latter regard, Bishop’s quasi-religious figure in “A Miracle for Breakfast” may have alluded to the curious Koreshan Unity sect, which in the 1930s was based in Estero, Florida. The body of their leader Cyrus R. Teed, who had convinced his followers of his immortality, was laid on the banks of the Estero River in anticipation of his resurrection. Bishop sent some literature on this group to Moore in correspondence.<sup>438</sup>

Bishop was impressed by Pascal’s reasoning. His pithiness owed much to the fact that his ideas in defence of Christianity had been first published posthumously in 1670 in their note form as the *Pensées*. Bishop could easily relate to the implicit agreement in this work between literary form and content. The book reveals the pattern of paradoxical thinking as Pascal affirms and disputes various theological propositions. Bishop admired his ability to reconcile science and religion and to rationalise the complexity of Christian doctrine. She could draw other parallels between his writing and her poetry, not least the way in which the human mind comes to terms with visible and invisible elements. In *Pensées* Pascal asserts miracles to be the foundation of Christianity. He defines a miracle as ‘an effect which exceeds the natural power of the means

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<sup>435</sup> Candace W. MacMahon (ed.), *Elizabeth Bishop: A Bibliography 1927–1979* (Charlottesville: University press of Virginia, 1980), p. 143. Moore approved of Bishop’s use of the quotation; *One Art*, p. 55.

<sup>436</sup> *One Art*, p. 477.

<sup>437</sup> *One Art*, p. 478.

<sup>438</sup> *One Art*, p. 55.

employed'.<sup>439</sup> It is a *signum* (a sign) perceived in the external world, which signals the transformation of objects into something else entirely different. Water is transmuted into wine and bread and fish that seem to be enough for a few feed many. Miracles are also denotative of transference from one extreme state to another: a dead man is brought back to life; a blind man can see again. These signs encapsulate both visible change and the invisible presence of a higher being or supernatural force. Hence religious meanings proliferate: wine symbolises the blood of Christ; the fish connotes spiritual edification; the revived Lazarus points to Christ's resurrection; sight signifies truth (in *Pensées* those who did not believe Christ's miracles were, metaphorically, blinded to the truth).

Although the images in the title "A Miracle for Breakfast" conflict with one another, the poem as a whole seems to suggest a spiritual journey: the rising sun, the long river, the first ferry of the day, the early morning darkness, the gathering of people at dawn to witness a miracle take place.

At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee,  
 waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb  
 that was going to be served from a certain balcony,  
 —like kings of old, or like a miracle.  
 It was still dark. One foot of the sun  
 steadied itself on a long ripple in the river. (CP, 18)

It is 'we', the multitude of people, who are in search of true miracles. But who exactly is the man in the poem? Is he a divine figure? He stands on the balcony and towers above the people, in close proximity to heaven (or God?). Is he mad or perhaps an impostor? Initially, this man will hand out 'the charitable crumb' to feed his hungry followers, but he must perform a miracle in order for his words to be believed:

He stood for a minute alone on the balcony  
 looking over our heads toward the river.

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<sup>439</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 106.

A servant handed him the makings of a miracle,  
 consisting of one lone cup of coffee  
 and one roll, which he proceeded to crumb,  
 his head, so to speak, in the clouds—along with the sun.

Was the man crazy? What under the sun  
 was he trying to do, up there on his balcony!  
 Each man received one rather hard crumb,  
 which some flicked scornfully into the river,  
 and, in a cup, one drop of the coffee.  
 Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle. (CP, 18)

The crowd demand proof of the supernatural powers of this man in the same way that in *Pensées* Christ is required by the people to perform miracles: ‘What do you have to make us believe you rather than the rest? What signs can you give us?’<sup>440</sup> These questions can be asked both of this man and of the poet who writes a ‘religious’ poem that deals with spiritual themes in distinctly secular terms. Pascal’s *Pensées*, moreover, though logical in its mode of argumentation retains a profound sense of solemnity, whereas “A Miracle for Breakfast” emerges from the thoughts of a non-believer.

“A Miracle for Breakfast” was written as a sestina, which Bishop described as a sort of ‘stunt’ or a ‘trick’.<sup>441</sup> This form compels the poet to experiment with language and to demonstrate how the unusual combination and repetition of words to describe what appears to be a Depression-era cult leader, maintains a rhythm that accentuates, indeed mimics, the incongruity – whether in art or life generally – between the physical forms of natural objects and the abstract concepts of spirituality. In “A Miracle for Breakfast” Bishop insists upon describing secular objects instead of religious symbols, and in a letter to Moore (1937), she relates the difficulties of striking the right balance between ‘unusual’ and ‘colorless’ words – citing in the latter case the

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<sup>440</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 97.

<sup>441</sup> *One Art*, pp. 54–55. See also MacMahon, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Bibliography 1927–1979*, p. 143 and Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 47.

influence of Sidney – in order to achieve what is ostensibly a ‘natural’ sounding poem.<sup>442</sup> However, it is the sestina’s incongruous combination of words (for example ‘sun’ and ‘crumb’) which signals most effectively how language may be interpreted within a schema of understanding: the concrete description remains powerfully suggestive of Christian miracles simply because the content, though seemingly prosaic, corresponds to religious signs deeply ingrained in the reader’s imagination.

In “A Miracle for Breakfast” Bishop will resort to metaphor where it is needed: the man’s head, ‘so to speak, is in the clouds’ – he is not supernatural and suffers, perhaps, from conceit, a very human fault. Bishop’s language reaffirms how our attention does not simply rest upon the verbal surface but moves beyond the literal meaning of such words as coffee and crumb, in the same way that we look to interrogate signs or symbols within religious contexts. The scene of a messianic-type figure standing on a balcony attended by acolytes and apportioning food is endowed with so much iconic status that the context invariably suggests the correspondence of the equivocal objects, coffee and crumb, to the act of transubstantiation at the heart of the Christian Eucharist, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, or the water turned to wine at Cana, even though this was not Bishop’s ‘conscious’ intention.<sup>443</sup> From such a reading we arrive at a further deduction. The dark substance of the coffee and the scarcely palatable crumb must therefore be emblematic of spiritual opacity: this is a good example of an objective poem which gradually acquires a context and concomitant meaning. The combining together of sacred and non-sacred phenomena is common practice in modern poetry.<sup>444</sup>

“A Miracle for Breakfast” appears to dispute the existence of the miraculous and denies

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<sup>442</sup> *One Art*, p. 54.

<sup>443</sup> *One Art*, p. 477.

<sup>444</sup> On this point see Altieri, ‘From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics’: 615.

the central male figure his position of power. The truly miraculous becomes part of the natural. Stanzas five and six mark a change in the speaker's consciousness and initiate a sense of complete union between self and environment. What the speaker says next is pertinent:

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.  
 A beautiful villa stood in the sun  
 and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.  
 In front, a baroque white plaster balcony  
 added by birds, who nest along the river,  
 —I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—  
 and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb  
 my mansion, made for me by a miracle.... (CP, 18–19)

The parenthetical line, marked by dashes, effects a shift in the poem's direction. The description of the beautiful villa runs over the stanza ending and on into the next, mirroring the speaker's heightened visual awareness. The 'eye' suggests a more autonomous vision, and the 'my' and 'I' pronouns replace the earlier 'us' and 'we'. The aspirant's desire for a state of union with the physical world is presented as one of absolute fulfilment: 'my crumb', 'my mansion', 'my balcony', 'my feet'. There is a sense of complete ownership, which contrasts with the people awaiting the 'charitable' and meager offerings of the man on the balcony. (As anticipation of a miracle diminishes the promised loaf becomes a crumb and the cup of coffee no more than a drop.) Stanzas five and six of "A Miracle for Breakfast" recount moments of natural and aesthetic elation and contentment. The speaker attempts to make language correspond to the experience: 'Everyday, in the sun, at breakfast I sit on my balcony/ with my feet up and drink gallons of coffee'. The 'one lone cup of coffee' in stanza three is replaced by 'gallons of coffee' in stanza six and intimates a life of plenty. The speaker turns to the Darwinian miracle which evolves 'through ages by insects, birds, and the river/ Working the stone'.<sup>445</sup> This mansion is

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<sup>445</sup> Merrin, *An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and the Uses of Tradition*, p. 55.



created and made possible through the graceful and rhythmic motion of the natural world.

In the final stanza the individual returns to the fold:

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.  
A window across the river caught the sun  
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony. (CP, 19)

The word ‘miracle’ with its connotations of the subversion of the real signals the poet’s interest in the ambiguities of appearances. The rays of the sun are ‘caught’ by the window glass, but this play of light, which may otherwise be interpreted as a heavenly vision, can easily be explained by the laws of science without need to invoke religion. Thus the concept of the miraculous is redefined as being a natural phenomenon or effect. The glass in this case is not transformed but reflects the sun’s rays, which can be seen by those across the river. The changes taking place are perceptual and the miracle that is ‘working’ is not channeled through the supernatural powers of an individual. As so often the case in Bishop’s poetry, there is belief in the actual and rejection of illusion.

In a notebook of the 1930s Bishop wrote down a quotation from Kierkegaard, which further articulated her conception of religion and art: ‘Poetry is illusion before knowledge; religion illusion after knowledge. Between poetry and religion the worldly wisdom of living plays its comedy. Every individual who does not live either poetically or religiously is a fool’ (VA, 75.3A).<sup>446</sup> For Kierkegaard poetry can be obscure and enigmatic, before critical analysis reveals its implicit meaning, whereas religion is founded upon the knowledge of Scriptures and other doctrines of faith, which, though studied, lead invariably to abstraction. In “A Miracle for Breakfast” Bishop rejects the illusion of symbols which designate the miraculous (supernatural) and establish values by which to live. As she tends toward a poetic that is first composed of facts

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<sup>446</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), chapter iv, section 2a.

and places greatest value on the material, she is interested in how Christian culture is inclined to give symbolic shape to such immaterial and ineffable concepts as miracles. In poems like “Santarém”, “Brazil, January 1, 1502” and “Questions of Travel” Bishop traces the outlines of a Judaeo-Christian lingua franca, a historicised language whose powerfully regenerative symbols bind together disparate peoples according to common frames of reference. The symbolism is ‘out of style’ (“Brazil, January 1, 1502”), having issued from a distant age, but it is, frustratingly, ineluctable like the five silver crosses on top of the bird cage in the filling-station (“Questions of Travel”).

Such poems are preoccupied with the artistic depiction of an absent God and carry further the opposition between a religious symbolic order and human disorder. For Pascal this is ‘le néant’, a void which can only be filled with an ‘infinite, immutable object, that is to say, God himself’.<sup>447</sup> The ‘Dieu cache’ cannot be proved for certain, but it is essential to ‘investigate the physical universe in order to discover reasons that pointed at this existence as a probable but not certain fact’.<sup>448</sup> In comparison to this solipsistic uncertainty, the religious artist conceives of a community as held together by shared beliefs and principles. For the medieval painters symbols of God proliferated throughout nature, while the Renaissance artists depicted myth, morality and classical history as the locus of the divine. The Romantics believed that God was a transcendental force embodied in nature, and for the poets of the mid-nineteenth century He existed beyond the physical world. Hence, for the deeply devout Hopkins the ‘isolated ego faces the other dimensions of existence across an empty space’.<sup>449</sup> The writers of the twentieth century heralded the death of all supernatural being, a nihilism which denied all existence, when

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<sup>447</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, 181.

<sup>448</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. by Philip Thody (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 233.

<sup>449</sup> Miller, *Poets of Reality*, pp. 2–3.

consciousness became ‘the foundation of everything’.<sup>450</sup> This philosophy, however, was anteceded by the Nietzschean notion that viewed the emptiness of space as a sign of the death of God.<sup>451</sup> In Bishop the concept of the void signifies what cannot be known and only enquired about. Although no knowledge is absolute, it is retained in her poetic, wherever it may exist. God, therefore, is not completely negated as He is part of that knowledge after which human beings enquire. As an agnostic Bishop does not reject out of hand propositions which maintain belief in a higher being, but, rather, she insists upon a methodical evaluation of the evidence based upon the premise that the acquirement of knowledge must be preceded by doubt about the existence of a deity.<sup>452</sup> From this philosophy arises the concept of *le néant* that casts man as a tragic figure in infinite space, who aspires to discover absolute truth, but realises his limitations and inability ever to draw near such values.

Bishop’s poems express two states of being: a person who either belongs to a community ordered by religion and history, or exists on the margins of society, isolated and deracinated. For the latter individual the importance of hierarchy is relegated, although this self-determination is ‘accompanied by the disappearance of any external norm which might guide the individual in his life and actions’.<sup>453</sup> This infinite space, or *le néant*, is no longer shaped by the ‘language of God’ and the individual, Bishop suggests in her letter to Lowell, ‘float[s] on an unknown sea’.<sup>454</sup> Orderliness can of course be found in all areas of life, whether in politics, religion, or art. Bishop, however, suggests an alternative to this notion of a ‘stable self living in a correspondingly

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<sup>450</sup> Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 3.

<sup>451</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), section 125.

<sup>452</sup> Agnosticism has been described as energising Bishop’s poetry; Corelle, *A Poet’s High Argument*, p. 2.

<sup>453</sup> Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Vision in the Pensées of Pascal*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>454</sup> Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 213.

ordered universe of plan, design and ultimate value'.<sup>455</sup> Her language does not simply focus on private experience but immerses readers in a pervasive sense of anxiety, alienation and uncertain existence. This is poetry of human tragedy. Frank Bidart, a close friend of Bishop in her last years has pointed out the 'dark side' of her poetry since 'too often she has been considered "cool" and "perfect", and not the profound, even tragic artist she is'.<sup>456</sup> Kalstone has further remarked that Bishop's 'blithe strengths were the product of tensions and fears'.<sup>457</sup> This melancholia may be traceable to very early age when her father died and her mother was institutionalised. Depression in later life, furthermore, was symptomatic of alcoholism, bouts of sickness and struggles to cope with the mental breakdowns of close friends.<sup>458</sup> Of course, Bishop's writing is sustained by memories of childhood, but the specifics of personal tragedy are not easily detectable. Rather, the breadth and depth of her ideas makes poetry, especially that of landscape and infinite space, an effective metaphor for generalised and abstract notions of fear and anxiety.

### **Symbolism in Christian Imagery**

In Bishop's poetry spirituality is associated with an immense unknown, and throughout she considers the deficiencies of language to articulate this gap in knowledge, and the reasons why Christian writers often resort to inadequate symbols to give shape to this concept of a hidden God. The subject of religion brings her closer to an understanding of how humans fashion meaning and identity from abstract notions. She sees in visual art the vital synthesis between ineffable propositions like the miraculous and heaven and material signs. The irresolvable

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<sup>455</sup> Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History and Discord*, p. 118.

<sup>456</sup> *One Art*, p. vii.

<sup>457</sup> Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 21.

<sup>458</sup> For a study of Bishop's translation of physical ailments 'into artistic strength' see Lombardi, *The Body and the Song*, pp. 3, 11, 219.

dilemma is whether to accept or reject the suggestiveness of symbols that seem to transcend empirical truth, but which, nevertheless, effect further enquiry into reason and meaning.

Bishop's "Seascape" incorporates the symbols or religious connotations within the context of a Renaissance painting. Parallels may be drawn between this poem's Raphael cartoon backdrop, based on *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*,<sup>459</sup> and Moore's Dürer-inspired "The Steeple-Jack" – a favourite poem of Bishop (VA, 26) – with its allusion to the meticulous and quirky detail of the artist ('Dürer would have seen a reason for living/ in a town like this, with eight stranded whales to look at'.) As we come to expect from Bishop, her words in "Seascape" are allied to a work of art and, like "Brazil, January 1, 1502", a tapestry with Catholic iconography is the focus of attention. This mimetic alliance is all the more strong because it is assumed viewers and readers are bound by cultural and historical ties, and similarly drawn to those vital motifs that are of emblematic significance. A heavenly seascape, envisioned by the artist of the cartoon, is given form, narrative and substance:

This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,  
flying as high as they want and as far as they want sidewise  
in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections;  
the whole region, from the highest heron  
down to the weightless mangrove island  
with bright green leaves edged neatly with bird-droppings  
like illumination in silver,  
and down to the suggestively Gothic arches of the mangrove roots...  
(CP, 40)

Bishop takes this cartoon cliché and extends it into a conceit, a series of comparisons between a Christian afterlife and a mangrove island where herons are 'got up as angels' and the 'arches' of the mangrove roots are 'suggestively Gothic' – the incorporation of tropical imagery owing to

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<sup>459</sup> This was one of ten tapestry drawings commissioned by Pope Leo X. Bishop admired "The Miraculous Draught of Fishes" in the Raphael Room at the Vatican Museum, '[its] shallow blue water, reflections, the bird feathers—very Florida-like and calm'; Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press. 1993), p. 131.

the fact that Bishop found Raphael's cartoon to be 'very Florida-like'.<sup>460</sup> The poem describes the foreground (the seascape), middle-ground (the 'weightless' mangrove island) and background (the herons flying high). Bishop is interested in dimensions of space, the contrast between distance and proximity, between height and depth. She is also sensitive to movement – the motion of birds, fish, plants and waves. But for an empiricist who goes after fact, so much of human knowledge, as depicted in Raphael's cartoon, is a priori; reasoning is consigned to an imagination which, independent of real life observation, assigns 'earthly' symbols to the celestial. This identificatory process that visualises a great deal of knowledge is inherited and deeply engrained.

Of course, the earthly manifestations in "Seascape" resonate with Catholic symbolism. The description of the 'celestial seascape' evokes moments of spiritual elation, and the speaker cannot help but be inspired, despite the poem's ironic opening: 'it does look like heaven'. Bishop's adoption of Catholic art and iconography, which recurs notably in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502", allows her greater scope to explore theistic concerns, as well as to counterpoint the strongly visual force of symbolism with the more prosaic attitudes of her Protestant upbringing. In "Seascape" the words 'angels', 'celestial' and 'immaculate' carry strongly religious associations, but, at the same time, spiritual tension is apparent in the irreverent image of the bright green leaves edged with 'bird-droppings like illumination in silver'. In one sense this celestial drawing is Raphael's preliminary design for a tapestry, but, in another, the word 'cartoon' hints at something comical, while the scatological remark adds a further element of ridicule. In "Seascape" we are told:

But a skeletal lighthouse standing there  
in black and white clerical dress,  
who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.

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<sup>460</sup> Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, p. 131.

He thinks that hell rages below his iron feet,  
 that that is why the shallow water is so warm,  
 and he knows that heaven is not like this.  
 Heaven is not like flying or swimming,  
 but has something to do with blackness and a strong glare  
 and when it gets dark he will remember something  
 strongly worded to say on the subject. (CP, 40)

The ‘But’ of the first line marks a turning point in the poem, as the beauty of the celestial seascape is marred by ‘a skeletal lighthouse’. This looming black and white edifice, emblematic of clerical grandeur and mystical aura, does not appear in Raphael’s *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, which depicts Jesus with his disciples Peter and Paul. The superimposed edifice is the manifestation of a troubled conscience, the mental frailty, perhaps, of the cleric, the proselytiser, or the person who, like the poet, views this representation of heaven. To draw a comparison with the figure in “A Miracle for Breakfast”, the conscience in “Seascape” appears equally burdened by enquiry and responsibility. He ‘thinks he knows better’, but ‘lives on his nerves’ because of the secret which he harbours: ‘he knows that heaven is not like this’. It is not *like* flying or swimming, but it does have ‘something to do with blackness and a strong glare’. He understands that innate human act of assigning symbols to the unfathomable ‘blackness’ in the pursuit of knowledge. This earthly manifestation of heaven in “Seascape” is the same as that encountered in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”. In “Seascape” the man’s conscience reads the signs that promise eternal salvation to believers, but he also extrapolates from the shallow water in the picture a warning to sinners of impending hell. However, though doubtful of these signs, the last two lines of the poem speak of the power and allure of symbolic language: ‘when it gets dark he will remember something/ strongly worded to say on the subject’.

For Bishop religious images and abstract concepts such as miracles are projected onto a canvas, and superimposed upon this surface are humanistic signs which connote conscience. In a

subsequent transcription of the drawing into a poetic form, the poet further grafts her voice and critical enquiry, as exemplified by the clerical figure in “Seascape”. Bishop continually confronts the contradictions of the written word which has the power to captivate one person conditioned to read its signs, but holds little relevance to another who is unable to envision or contextualise its meaning. The imagery of “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance” has two functions: aesthetic and religious. The poem is one of Bishop’s most graphically descriptive and its hybrid nature reveals a constellation of vital themes beginning with spatial stasis.<sup>461</sup> In the opening stanza the speaker looks through the books of illustrations:

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

The illustrations, some of which have become too ‘familiar’, are ‘serious’ and ‘engravable’, at once historical and significant.<sup>462</sup> The poet is interested in the formation of religious art; the creative act of seeing that conceives of the present as incomplete in itself and invokes history – against whose values an individual must be measured – as the essence of meaning. The allusion in the poem’s title to two thousand years of Christian history is obvious. The artists’ ability to render images of religious import sets their illustrations apart from the pictures of the mind which the poet visualises in stanza two. The former images are transcendent, serious and

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<sup>461</sup> Likewise, in Bishop’s “Poem” and “A Large Bad Picture” the emphasis is on the notion of spatial stasis.

<sup>462</sup> Bishop wrote: ‘Something wrong with the middle of “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance,” and I really shouldn’t have used the title if I wanted to drag in the old books we had with the Seven Wonders of the World with them, too’; *One Art*, p.307.



referential, the correspondences laden with value. Some of the illustrations connote racial divisions and Christian imperialism, while others are threaded together by the narrative of the Passion. The ‘human figure’ with ‘outstretched arm and hand’ points toward a divine power. Everything takes on an air of ‘solemnity’, value, order, completeness, and the image of ‘God’s spreading fingerprint’, which recalls the force of an omniscient being in Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur”, intimates a cosmological sense of togetherness. The symbolic ‘Tomb’ and ‘Sepulcher’ draw energy from the interrogative gaze which they are made subject to. This vitality is dependent upon the artist-viewer’s powers of prehension, the ability, in other words, to gather together the object perceived and its historical value, which can be related back to the individual’s own experiences. However, as the poet continues to look more closely at the pictures, her vision comes to rest on the surface of the objects, and she becomes more interested in the aesthetic value of what she sees in the illustrations, some of which are poorly executed. The branches of the date-palms look ‘like files’; the cobbled courtyard ‘is like a diagram’; and birds like specks, ‘suspended on invisible threads’. At the same time there is increasing interest in the design of the pictures – several scenes are arranged in ‘catty-cornered rectangles’ or ‘circles’ – while the use of variegated colours point to the surface reality of the illustrations.

In stanza two of “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance” the stillness and ‘seriousness’ of the opening lines gives way to successive images conjured up in the mind:

Entering the Narrows at St. Johns  
 the touching bleat of goats reached to the ship...  
 And at St. Peter’s the wind blew and the sun shone madly. ...  
 In Mexico the dead man lay  
 in a blue arcade; the dead volcanoes  
 glistened like Easter lilies ... .  
 I saw what frightened me most of all:  
 A holy grave, not looking particularly holy...  
 of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there. (CP, 58)

The word '[e]ntering' marks a change, a shift inwards as the poet recalls her travels to Italy, Mexico, Morocco, England and Ireland. The images are selective and elliptical ('Everything only connected by "and" and "and"'): 'reddish' goats 'leaping up the hill' are glimpsed; then 'at St. Peter's...the Collegians marched in lines'; next in Mexico the image of a dead man. And so we move from the outside to the inside and vice versa: 'The Englishwoman poured tea'; 'And in the brothels of Marrakesh/ the little pockmarked prostitutes/ balanced their tea-trays on their heads...'. There is use of copulative verbs – balanced, glimpsed, marched, poured – while pronouns convey a sense of personal involvement. Bishop switches from 'we' to 'I' or to 'our' – from the collective to the singular, and then back again to the collective. But if stanza one reaffirms how a person identifies his or her place in the world by discovering the historical and theological values of the illustrations scrutinised, in stanza two the framework of delineative thought places focus on the self – whose gaze falls on immanent objects – as it discovers affinities with the environment in which it travels and simultaneously defines. The relevance and meaning of the latter loco-descriptive images emerge not from the context of history, but by virtue of the fact that they represent an alternative consciousness, a way of experiencing and determining self by means of creation (immanence) rather than recreation (history). However, this mode of seeing and comprehending introduces a feeling of deep anxiety. In the final lines of stanza two Bishop calls attention to the moral paradox she finds in the image of the prophet's grave, which is envisaged antithetically: it is holy but 'not looking holy'. It is a marble trough, 'half filled with dust, not even the dust' of 'the poor prophet'. The barrenness of this secularised world reminds the self of its own mortality.

In the final stanza the poet returns to the illustrations, which confine her view to a host of guiding images, so potent and contagious that the pages upon which they are drawn 'pollinate'

the fingers. ‘Why couldn’t we have seen/ this old Nativity while we were at it?’ The pronoun *it* is purposefully left ambiguous, but suggests an iconic vision that has faded since youth, or at least the ability to stare open-eyed like children until, as it were, you lose your sight in a picture. This is echoed by the last epigrammatic line: ‘and looked and looked our infant sight away’ (CP, 59). At this point Bishop comments upon the growth of the human mind which alters modes of perception. The line is ambiguously worded, but from it we may derive this meaning: a person’s familiarity with certain images in life, which comes from accumulated knowledge, negates the youthful amazement and pleasure of seeing drawings of foreign places for the first time. This aestheticism defines beauty as the mystery of the other, the unknown, the never previously experienced. The word ‘foreign’ is deliberately used to denote cultural difference. In comparison, adulthood is a period increasingly marked by the cynicism of the ‘familiar’; there is a need to rediscover that earlier sense of awe. In “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance” it is either the image of the infant Christ that ‘freely’ feeds the ‘colorless’ breaking light (which contrasts to the vibrant and emblematic colour blue in the illustrations) or merely that of a ‘family with pets’.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed Bishop’s concept of spirituality in relation to various aspects of literature and painting, including Catholic iconography and theological books. In her reading of religious poetry, like that of Herbert and Hopkins, she could lay aside the moralistic nature of such verse and equate implicitly the poetic with ‘spirituality’ and ‘mystery’. An interest, furthermore, in the way that artists sought to give form to the transcendent or *le néant*, led her to the work of the surrealists. Some of Bishop’s poetry is revealing of this movement’s

influences – stemming originally from her time in Paris in the 1930s – although it has been argued that this association with surrealism was more accurately osmotic. In truth, her poems do radiate a mystery. However, there appears a contradiction between Bishop’s language, which remains at all times rational and refrains steadfastly from odd juxtapositions, and that of the surrealists who advocate radical disassociations in their work. The most hypnagogic imagery is perhaps to be found in “The Weed”. But, of course, the surrealist aesthetic amounted to more than an expression of a ‘*sensation of the impossible*’<sup>463</sup> or an extraordinary, dreamlike visualisation of the unconscious. Certain surrealist painters, chief among them Magritte, were preoccupied with an essentially paradoxical question: how can the void be expressed through the careful selection and arrangement of objects in a painting? This void was understood as the unknown and perhaps the ability of the artist to use objects not as symbols per se, but as material signs, which pointed beyond existence, was the reason surrealism held so much fascination for Bishop. This was a surrealism in which the ‘impossible has been grasped, measured and inserted as an *absence* in a statement made in a language originally and specifically developed for depicting particular events in particular settings’.<sup>464</sup>

Bishop’s inverted realism draws attention to the material value of objects, which point toward spiritual inscrutability. In this way language resolutely rejects the symbolic – which is essentially moralistic – the ‘pompous’, ‘abstract’, or ‘formal’. (VA, 54.15)<sup>465</sup> Bishop’s repudiation of symbolism betrays a deeply ingrained Puritanism, and reaffirms the view that distrust of cultural order typifies the ‘Protestant cults of presence’ in modern poetry.<sup>466</sup> Catholic

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<sup>463</sup> Berger, *About Looking*, p. 157.

<sup>464</sup> Berger, *About Looking*, p. 157.

<sup>465</sup> In a review of a collection of verse by Walter de la Mare (*Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes and Poems for the Young of All Ages*), Bishop highlighted ‘what R. Jarrell once called “thing-y” poems’ (VA, 54.5).

<sup>466</sup> Altieri, ‘From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics’: 611.

iconography, moreover, is adjudged to be an unsatisfactory attempt to circumscribe the unknown, and miracles, not least, are manifestations of the ineffable. Hence poems such as “Hymn to the Virgin”, “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Concordance” and “Seascape” are, in terms of subject matter, Catholic in form. But disjunction arises in these poems as a direct result of the various strategies employed by Bishop to undo their formality, whether, for example, in her use of pared-down language to counterpoint the iconic (“Hymn to the Virgin”), the application of irreverent humour to undermine solemnity (“Hymn to the Virgin” and “Seascape”), or the opposition of Catholic iconography of heaven to the Puritanical insistence on the grimness of hell (“Seascape”). Equally significant, Bishop challenges conventional representation, as one can see, for instance, in the incongruity that exists in “A Miracle for Breakfast” between symbolic form – familiar religious settings – and content – commonplace objects such as coffee and crumbs.

Rather, for Bishop, to read poetry is to experience the mystery of the unknown, which begins where the conventional function of words ends. Here, ‘[t]he road appears to have been abandoned’ and extends into the distance ‘where we cannot see’ and ‘where deep lakes are reputed to be (“Cape Breton”). In “Argument”, moreover, the land stretches ‘indistinguishably’ ‘all the way to where my reasons end’, whilst in “Maine Fog” ‘the world ends across the road –/ or ends beyond the line of firs’ (VA, 68.3). In the final assessment Bishop’s exploration of religious art presents alternative ways in which the individual comes to a conscious realisation of his or her existence. The symbolic style of Catholic art – which is underpinned by ethical conventions of history – requires of the viewer to draw parallels between the past and the present, in order to achieve a greater sense of completeness. However, an opposing concept holds that the individual does not see the world in this way because the present is adjudged to be

a sufficient arena for determining the self by discovering and defining external phenomena. The language which corresponds to actual experience presents the world as immediate and spontaneous.

## Chapter VI

### Bishop and Female Writing

This chapter sets out to explore what may be described as Bishop's genderless voice or 'transsexual self', and examines how a mode of visual poetic, rather than being inhibitory, afforded her a position of strength that was devoid of a self-conscious need to speak with a resolutely 'female voice'. For Plath's generation, Bishop's craft and technique suggested ways in which women's writing could be radical in its paradoxical conformity to rather than subversion of so-called masculine language.

In a discussion of the different forms of female poeticism Kristeva has written:

Under what conditions does this "esotericism" in displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying practices, correspond to socioeconomic change, and, ultimately, even to revolution? And under what conditions does it remain a blind alley, a harmless bonus offered by a social order which uses this "esotericism" to expand, become flexible, and thrive?<sup>467</sup>

Kristeva debates the utilitarian and artistic value of poetry, whether writing could serve a practical, iconoclastic, even revolutionary purpose or merely aspire to 'esotericism' as justification for its existence. In the latter case women writers especially, Kristeva considers, are permitted by the 'social order' to push the boundaries of literature, as long as what they do remains 'harmless'. It may be fair to argue that Bishop's language is more accessible to a general readership. However, her poetry may be viewed alternatively as elitist, an esotericism that leads up a 'blind alley' and serves no purpose except to advance aesthetic theories relevant to a specific group of people, knowledgeable about art and its processes. Even Bishop was affected

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<sup>467</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Walker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 16.

by this criticism, torn as she was between responsibility as a writer to engage with the social concerns of her day and to take a position of neutrality on such issues as race, class and sexuality. But, as already noted, the independently-minded Bishop refused to move her poetry in any prescribed direction in order to serve a political purpose. Interestingly, when Adrienne Rich comments that Bishop is considered ‘one of the few and “exceptional” women admitted to the male canon’ (Kristeva’s ‘social order’), she views this in a negative light; ‘skill and artistry’ in poetry is a male bastion to which only a few women, ‘token outsider[s]’, are given admission.<sup>468</sup>

Female literary tradition has placed emphasis on self-identity and sensuousness over artistry. Plath’s *The Colossus* was variously dismissed as ‘apprenticeship to her art’, emotionally ‘straitjacketed’ ‘by too much technique’,<sup>469</sup> while Marjorie Perloff compared the ‘transitional’ poetry of *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* unfavourably with *Ariel* because of the ‘gratuitous description’ she found in the former.<sup>470</sup> Lynda Bundtzen went so far as to argue that Plath only truly discovered her ‘distinctly female’ voice in her final work.<sup>471</sup> In all of these examples Plath’s early poems are there to be admired for their ‘aesthetic detachment’<sup>472</sup>: they are works of art, ‘six-inch masterpieces’<sup>473</sup> (Oates); ‘charming miniatures’ of the ‘observant art student’ (Bundtzen); and no more than ‘an exercise in creative writing’ (Birkle). The poems are,

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<sup>468</sup> Rich, ‘The Eye of the Outsider: Elizabeth Bishop’s *Complete Poems, 1927–1979*’, p. 135.

<sup>469</sup> Pamela Smith, ‘Architectonics: Sylvia Plath’s *Colossus*’, in Edward Butscher (ed.), *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977), p. 124.

<sup>470</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, ‘On the Road to *Ariel*: The “Transitional” Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, in Edward Butscher (ed.), *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977), pp. 139–40.

<sup>471</sup> Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath’s Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p. 161.

<sup>472</sup> Bundtzen, *Plath’s Incarnations*, p. 169.

<sup>473</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, ‘The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, in Edward Butscher (ed.), *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977), p. 218.



generally-speaking, ordered and not evidently personal<sup>474</sup> – some, indeed, were literally exercises set by Ted Hughes – and these critics, keen to stress the poet’s aesthetic control, refer, metaphorically, to Plath’s work in painterly terms as being observational and detailed. They echo Hughes’ remark that a Plath poem was ‘ordered and powerful, like a marvellous piece of sculpture’.<sup>475</sup> The crux of their argument is that some of Plath’s early predominately descriptive poetry appears unfeminine and incompatible with the traditional concept of women’s writing. Bundtzen, in the style of Simone de Beauvoir, declared that Plath only truly found her voice in poetry centred emphatically in the ‘woman’s body and its functions – the rhythm of the months and menstrual flow; the cycle of each pregnancy, each flowering’.<sup>476</sup>

Bundtzen’s argument ties in with Kristeva’s assertion of the somatic significance or bodily consciousness of feminine language:

Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgement but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax.<sup>477</sup>

There is movement toward colour, rhythm and sound, all connected to the poet’s senses. The image is the space underlying the poet’s selection of words from the standard lexicon, the language she is compelled to use in order to make herself intelligible, but which, through connections to the senses – chromatic, kinetic and phonetic – gather together the feminine imagination. This equating of the imagination to bodily sense is again reminiscent of Rich’s controversial theory that a woman’s true voice is internalised and sexualised. The female poet’s ‘face’ is truly unveiled only when she can freely express her sexual orientation, even her

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<sup>474</sup> Carmen Birkle, *Women’s Stories of the Looking Glass: Autobiographical Reflections and Self-Representations in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), p. 80.

<sup>475</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘Sylvia Plath’, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, no. 44 (Feb. 1965): 1–2.

<sup>476</sup> Bundtzen, *Plath’s Incarnations*, p. 161.

<sup>477</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 29.

lesbianism: ‘It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman’.<sup>478</sup> Ironically, this feminist approach seems to be returning to the discredited stereotype that women are emotional, men intellectual. But why do we deem this type of sensual language uniquely feminine? Is Confessional poetry more akin to female writing than impersonality? Does, therefore, objectifying poetry lack femininity, imagination and creativity? After all, objective language involves an externalising of emotions, whereas bodily imagery suggests greater personal consciousness and intimate vitality, which Bishop is wary of.

In ‘Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind’ Anne Stevenson, Plath’s official biographer, discusses two contemporaries whose influence in the 1950s and 1960s helped her steer a steady course between the ‘seething subjectivity’ of the Confessional writers and the ‘serious but quaint objectivity’ of the school of reticence.<sup>479</sup> Her critical work attempts to find common ground between the two. Stevenson reminisces, in particular, about her student years and the creative and ‘modern’ path which many young poets of her generation had to choose. For Stevenson, the shaping of modern poetry in the second half of the twentieth century was marked by three significant dates and publications. She cites, first, Auden’s *The Enchafed Flood* (1951), which describes a ‘new age’ that has no place for the romantic and heroic ‘Art-God’. In this Cold War era, Auden states, there is a need for a new type of a pragmatic and politicised hero, a ‘less exciting figure’ to address social rather than individual concerns.<sup>480</sup> It did seem as though poets in this decade were embracing altruistic

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<sup>478</sup> Adrienne Rich; ‘It Is the Lesbian in Us...’, in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences. Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pp. 200–201.

<sup>479</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind’, *Poetry Review*, 79, no. 2 (summer, 1989): 10–14.

<sup>480</sup> Auden, *The Enchafed Flood*, passim.

ideology; Donald Hall's *New Poets of England and America* (1957),<sup>481</sup> significantly, epitomised neo-classical 'Auden-like precepts of order, iambics and impersonal themes'.<sup>482</sup> In fact, Stevenson underplays Auden's strongly critical views of the Romantically-inclined poets who were deemed cowardly, reclusive and unashamedly egotistical, so much so that they risked demeaning, indeed 'prostituting' themselves. However, a poetic movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which was to prove Auden's theory of the demise of the hero-poet unfounded, brought to prominence the 'circling ego' verse of a group of writers who came to be known as the Confessional Poets. Their reputation was consolidated in England by the publication of Alvarez's *The New Poetry* (1961) – which included among other American poets John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Plath.

### **Language and Sexual Identity**

Bishop's poetry proves far more perplexing especially to female readers because her de-historicist strategy runs counter to the struggles women poets often find themselves in and their need to confront, revise and personalise history. She challenges this traditional notion of female language and in so doing makes a strongly feminist and autonomous statement. She explores, for instance, the habitual desire to mediate the self through an historical persona in "From Trollope's Journal". Readers are led to question the true identity of the speaker and to speculate upon the vital strength and resolve of the female voice to be heard through and inspired by a pragmatic male persona. One strand of conventional literary criticism is to unveil the poet's ego. And yet "From Trollope's Journal" repeats accurately what the novelist has included in his travel book. There is little attempt on Bishop's part to manipulate or transform metaphorically this historical

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<sup>481</sup> D. Hall, R. Pack and L. Simpson (eds), *New Poets of England and America* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

<sup>482</sup> Stevenson, ' Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind': 11.

data and we seem to learn more about Trollope's first impressions of Washington than about the poet herself. We associate immediately the 'I' with Trollope. Perhaps there is indirect reference to militarism, political corruption and Bishop's views of her time spent in the capital, but these incidental details give way to a more general comment upon the power or powerlessness of the poet's voice and the temptation to adopt a persona as a device to mask the self. In Plath's poetry this objective-subjective struggle continues as a paradox: at times she finds, as other women writers, strength from appropriating and revising myth through language and imagery, and yet, conversely, in self-analytical poems such as "The Death of Myth-Making" and "Fever 103<sup>o</sup>" she is ambivalent toward this culturally prevalent mode of creativity and the unremitting female search for a persona or alter ego to inhabit and find inspiration from.

Bishop's preoccupation with craft and technique demonstrates the possibilities of an 'asexual' or 'transsexual' language that may be achieved through the propensities of poetic objectification rather than any radical usurpation and subversion of language or revision of the past. Above all, Bishop's de-historicist strategies rid language of its misogyny by focusing the gaze on things and aspects of life which do not categorise and emphasise the differences between men and women. There is no compulsion to remake language or history and whatever concessions are made in her poetry to the traditional strictures of feminism, for example the rejection of patriarchy, emerge only indirectly as a result of her negation of social order and hierarchy and increasing emphasis upon the alienation of a non-gendered individual. Such a poetic, especially in the context of the 1960s, when women writers were keen to stress the powers of the *écriture féminine* that emerged from the exploration of the body, deprived readers of the customary practice of decoding and psychoanalysing images of female intimacy. Moreover, Bishop's poetry achieves a degree of silence, non-judgemental passivity and

reticence. These feminine traits, which have traditionally been considered weak, never take on such negative connotations in her work. Instead, this objectification and de-historicism becomes a sign of asexuality and strength.

Bishop did not feel it necessary to make sexual identity a focus of her work, and women writers could, therefore, either reject her poetry completely as not relating to and empathising with female experience or speculate that she must have been masking or coding more personal pains. Of course, our understanding of Bishop's life and work is shaped, to a great extent, by her published poetry, prose and letters, although this material represents only a fraction of her entire output. After her death in 1979 her fame as a poet increased, but for a long time perception of her work ossified. She was firmly established as a poet of reticence and observation, an apolitical and asexual writer, whose work merely hinted at subjects of a personal nature. However, as Bishop's status as a reticent poet grew, the suspicion among critics arose that she must have been trying to cloak or code a personal reality and, recently, a much more intimate nuance has been read into her work, not least in terms of sexuality. This latter tendency may be traced back to the late 1980s when the feminist poet Adrienne Rich wrote an influential essay, 'The Eye of the Outsider', which questioned the notion of 'outsiderhood' in the poetry of Bishop and suggested a lesbian subtext to her work. According to Rich:

Outsiderhood is a condition which most people spend (and are often constrained to spend) great energy trying to deny or evade, through whatever kinds of assimilation or protective coloration they can manage...the social person who is the poet may also try to "pass", but the price of external assimilation is internal division.<sup>483</sup>

This 'internal division' was noted by Rich in, among other poems, "The Weed", "The Gentleman of Shalott", "Chemin de Fer" and "The Colder the Air". Since the publication of Rich's essay other critics have followed suit and gradually Bishop has been drawn into the feminist fold and

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<sup>483</sup> Rich, 'The Eye of the Outsider', pp. 127–28.

its offshoot, lesbian studies (which is ironic in a poet who resisted gendered classification). Certain critics have gone one step further in applying Rich's theory to poems which had hitherto been considered predominantly formal and objective statements. Victoria Harrison, for instance, has argued that "The Map" is a poem about 'same-sex love', whilst Jonathan Ellis has detected an underlying 'sexual movement' and 'human intimacy' in the same poem.<sup>484</sup> Kathleen Brogan, furthermore, viewed the relationship of the lovers ('we') in "Roosters" as 'unclear', yet suggested that they were both female because of Bishop's own sexual preference.<sup>485</sup>

Besides the inference of sexual latency in Bishop's work, critics have questioned the extent to which her poetry was politicised. If 'political' means a poet is opinionated about issues such as gender, war, race and class, then arguably Bishop is apolitical. However, there is implicit critique in her poetry and on those occasions when she broaches the subject of war, as, for example, in "Roosters", it is, as she points out in a letter to Moore, 'to emphasise the essential baseness of militarism'.<sup>486</sup> And in "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress" there is an underlying contempt for the pomp and ceremony of Washington militarism. Furthermore, she was troubled by the abject poverty she witnessed while living in Ouro Prêto, but her views were mostly privately expressed, and it was not until the posthumous appearance of "Pink Dog"

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<sup>484</sup> Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 46; Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), pp. 65, 66.

<sup>485</sup> Kathleen Brogan, 'Lyric Voice and Sexual Difference in Elizabeth Bishop', in Suzanne W. Jones (ed.), *Writing the Woman Artist. Essays on Poetics, Politics and Portraiture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 65. See also Norma Procopiow, 'Survival Kit: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop', *Centennial Review*, 25.1 (1981): 1–19; Crystal Bacon, 'That World Inverted: Encoded Lesbian Identity in Elizabeth Bishop's "Insomnia" and "Love Lies Sleeping"', in Laura Jehn Menides and Angela G. Dorenkamp (eds), *"In Worcester Massachusetts": Essays on Elizabeth Bishop from the 1997 Elizabeth Bishop Conference at WPI* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 139–48. For a lesbian reading of "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress", see Camille Roman, 'Cold War 1950: Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath', in Laura Jehn Menides and Angela G. Dorenkamp (eds), *"In Worcester Massachusetts": Essays on Elizabeth Bishop from the 1997 Elizabeth Bishop Conference at WPI* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 255.

<sup>486</sup> *One Art*, p. 96.

(1979) – intended as the first in a group of poems on Brazil<sup>487</sup> – that she dealt openly and ironically with the issue of class and the ‘problem’ of street beggars in Rio de Janeiro, the outcast ‘idiots, paralytics, [and] parasites’ whom an uncaring authority would rather see eliminated (‘[t]hey take and throw them in the tidal rivers’.) Such forthrightness, however, emerges rarely, and Bishop’s political critique is otherwise indirect and, quite radically, pursued through visual description. “Florida” is a case in point. The poem, inspired by a trip to Key West, is intimate in observation and juxtaposes natural and human experience. Written in the mid-1930s, it is a variation on the genre of the voyage poem. The poet seems to have been holidaying somewhere along the coast, near the state’s swamps and coastline. In “Florida” Bishop uses an amalgam of dead and living organisms. She gives an earthy, decaying image to the coastal swamps, unlike that of the rich, natural ‘fantasy’ of the Floridian landscape as described by Bishop in her letter to Moore.<sup>488</sup> In “Florida” Bishop’s descriptions are conceived antithetically: ‘The state with the prettiest name’ is ‘the state that floats in brackish water’ (CP, 32). She juxtaposes natural and mechanistic objects – ‘like ancient cannon-balls sprouting grass’ – and upturns all values, treating the naturally beautiful as if it were ugly. Mangrove roots become like skeletons; the state’s blue and white birds rush ‘unseen and hysterical up the scale/ every time in a tantrum’; there are ‘[e]normous turtles’ who die, leaving behind on the beach ‘their large white skulls with round eye-sockets’. The poet presents a vision of desolation: the ‘fading shells’ and ‘rotted calico’ skirt; ‘the monotonous, endless, sagging coastline’. All this leads up to a final moment of social critique,<sup>489</sup> concerning the issue of race. The poem as a whole has the unity of a single day,

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<sup>487</sup> *One Art*, p. 629.

<sup>488</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* (London: Bellew, 1998) pp. 99–100. During the winter of 1936–1937 Bishop visited Florida for the first time. She stayed at the Keewaydin Club with her friends Charles and Charlotte (Sha Sha) Russell, fishing and drafting a poem she later called “Florida”.

<sup>489</sup> “Florida” was written during the Depression and published in 1939; Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, p.117.

which by night is ‘[c]old white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,/ and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks’. The expressive tones are a reflection of the ominous mood of the scene, while the dramatic chiaroscuro emphasises the pathos of corruption. Florida by night is just as unpleasant, just as careless. That the moonlight is ‘coarse-meshed’ (reminiscent of the earlier image of dead mangrove roots) reinforces the suppressive mood of the landscape. The words ‘[c]old white, not bright’ serve to stress the theme of infinite racial division in Florida (CP 33).

There are, possibly, more politicised undertones in poems such as “The Weed” and “O Breath”, which, as suggested by Rich, emerged from the poet’s uneasy sense of ‘outsiderhood’, a troubling lesbian sexuality. But this oblique or unintentional treatment of sexual identity lacks the force of political endeavour, and it was not, by and large, Bishop’s intention to be a political poet in the same vein as, say, Denise Levertov. In reviewing Levertov’s *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970) Bishop’s opinion is that blatantly political subjects (not least the Vietnam War) do not make good poems (VA, 53.14). Consider, for example, “12 O’Clock News”, in which poem war is almost incidental to the poet’s interest in geography, the ‘lay of the land’. (CP, p. 175) As in “Crusoe in England”, the speaker describes, from a ‘superior vantage point’, the geographical formations as they are discovered. “12 O’Clock News” follows a pattern typical in Bishop’s poems: the documentation of natural features seen directly or, because of their distance, speculated about (‘It is dark-speckled. An airstrip? A Cemetery?’); phenomena existing out of sight but revealed by natural illusion (the surface of a ‘black structure’ catching the moonlight); and the customary knowledge that directs how we interpret experience (‘what we *do* know, or have learned from our anthropologists and sociologists’). The references to conflict come at the end of the poem with the description of dead soldiers in a crater, though, predominately, there is



fascination with their camouflage uniforms and inscrutability.

But if, as seems evident, Bishop did not subscribe to any political ideology, her non-conformist poetic practice that defied the way women were expected to write was, nevertheless, from a formalist point of view, politicised. We may ask, therefore, whether there is an alternative way to read Bishop. Is it possible, for instance, to study her poems purely in terms of form? Susan Wolfson comments in her book *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* that:

New Aesthetics...see poems as living forms rather than dead objects. As such, a poem or story is continually contaminated and informed by the touch of history and politics, biography and ideology. I see the study of form as coming before these things or at least occurring at the same time; never form for its own sake, without awareness or reference to other matters.<sup>490</sup>

In Bishop's poetry political criticism and sexuality are troubling terrain because she does not intend, principally, to fashion self-identity based upon the intersections of race, class and gender. These social processes are not uppermost in the poet's consciousness. Her poetry, therefore, invites, probably more than any other, a reading based principally on form. As Wolfson readily concedes, there is always the danger of 'contamination' from a historical, political, or biographical point of view. Perhaps, therefore, Rich's reading of a lesbian subtext to Bishop's poems is tantamount to biographical reductivism. Biography, indeed, has informed our reading of other modern poets, most notably Plath. Following her death in 1963, scholarly works were, generally-speaking, focused primarily on aesthetic value with less dependence on biographical material – the reason for this was due in part to the fact that Plath's journals and letters had not as yet been published. Gradually, the more critics learned about her private life the more her poetry was viewed as an extension of herself. One may draw a direct correlation between increasingly

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<sup>490</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: University Press, 1997), p. 231.

feminist readings of Plath's poetry and her growing popularity among readers. Critics were inclined to project upon her work a chronological and biographical order which did not necessarily exist.<sup>491</sup> They made of her life a neat trajectory, viewing her, to begin with, as a poet of description, who went on to write verse centred on the self in rather heightened language. By doing this, some critics seemed to value more Plath's emotional verse – as typified in *Ariel*, judging her earlier poems, especially those in *The Colossus*, as inferior, straitjacketed by too much technique.

From the 1960s onwards Plath's popularity coincided with, or emerged from, a growing interest in women studies and *écriture féminine*, spearheaded by writers like de Beauvoir, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray. In comparison, Bishop's poetry proved less accessible to some feminist critics. Rich was simultaneously 'drawn, but also repelled' by Bishop's early work. She writes:

I mean *repel* in the sense of refusing access, seeming to push away. In part, my difficulties with her were difficulties in the poetry, of Bishop as a young poet finding her own level and her own language. But in part there were difficulties I brought with me, as a still younger woman poet already beginning to question sexual identity, looking for a female genealogy, still not yet consciously lesbian.<sup>492</sup>

To some extent Rich was as guilty as some of Plath's critics in the way she distinguished between Bishop's earlier 'impenetrable' work and later poems, which she found more accessible because they embodied a need 'to come to terms with a personal past, with family and class and race'.<sup>493</sup> By casting Bishop as 'a young poet finding her own level and her own language', Rich had reason to judge the early 'intellectualized' verse of "The Map" or "The Monument" (*North & South*) inferior to poems like "O Breath" and "Shampoo" (*Cold Spring*). In truth, speaking in a

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<sup>491</sup> The identification, by some female critics, of personal experience as the true source of feminist writing, over and beyond the creative value of literary forms, is discussed by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 3–4, 8, 9.

<sup>492</sup> Rich, 'The Eye of the Outsider', pp. 124–25.

<sup>493</sup> Rich, 'The Eye of the Outsider', p. 126

specifically ‘female voice’ was problematical for Bishop. As Rich argues, the subject of woman-to-woman relationships has been and, to a certain extent, is still regarded as taboo. In her opinion:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language – this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*.<sup>494</sup>

Rich proceeds to define broadly the creative force of lesbianism:

And I believe it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength. It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack.<sup>495</sup>

First, according to Rich, what is required of women as readers is to unveil the female ‘faces’<sup>496</sup> of the literary canon. Secondly, it is expected of them as writers to create a new literature, one which replaces the traditional one with fresh images of female relationships, articulated in a language that suitably conveys their shared experiences. This, argues Rich, amounts to a strong feminist stance. However, whether Rich was defining lesbianism in a broad sense as meaning the political ‘realm’ which women inhabit or taken as reference to their sexuality is a moot point. More controversial is the idea that creative or imaginative poetry is born either of a woman’s shared experiences (relationships) with other women or because of her sexual orientation. For Bishop, women writers need not emphasise their femininity, least of all their lesbianism. She

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<sup>494</sup> Rich, ‘It Is the Lesbian in Us...’, p. 199.

<sup>495</sup> Rich, ‘It Is the Lesbian in Us...’, pp. 200–201.

<sup>496</sup> Rich quotes Emily Dickinson on the subject of woman-to-woman relationships – ‘My Classics veiled their faces’; ‘It Is the Lesbian in Us...’, p. 200.

would have agreed, however, with Rich's view of the 'self-chosen woman'<sup>497</sup> poet as creatively free from the literary conventions traditionally imposed upon her. They differed, nevertheless, in this respect: whereas Rich advocated an expanded language to express or 'grasp' effectively female experiences, Bishop called upon a neutral language, one which should not be construed as censoring but rather precise and direct in expression. The former subscribed, some may argue, to a separatist, specifically female ideology, whilst the other favoured a genderless and all-inclusive poetic.

### **The Personal Poetic in Bishop's Archive**

The Bishop archive reveals her exceptional eye for detail as well as an ability to create significant poetry from ordinary subjects. However, it is not surprising that among the unpublished materials there are examples where Bishop's writing appears less assured and, in such cases, it is more justifiable to agree with Lowell's assessment that she can at times appear 'self-indulgent'.<sup>498</sup> She is most culpable in poems that explore abstract notions such as time and love in a merely whimsical fashion, imitative, for example, of metaphysical conceit. More often than not, the words illustrate that simplicity is not necessarily the key to good poetry and Bishop knew this very well. The deliberate attempt to write plain verse for mere effect was a flaw she pinpointed in others' work. Thus, in one particular review, she was highly critical of the writer for leaving out 'too much. The reader wants to know more, to have the people and emotions filled in, to see more. In other words, the reader wants his or her imagination stirred by action'. (VA, 54.16). Indeed, some of Bishop's unpublished poems deal with a slight subject matter incapable of sustaining the interest of readers and these are, of course, abandoned. In others,

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<sup>497</sup> Rich, 'It Is the Lesbian in Us...', p. 202.

<sup>498</sup> Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 77.

specific lines demonstrate her natural ease of writing and, though she discards such fragments, the words are reprised in published poems. In “Desk at Night” (1950), for example, the poet’s eye lights upon the topographical features of a corrupt military state, whilst reference to dead soldiers ‘tossed in unnatural postures’, impractically uniformed in white camouflage, is merely matter-of-fact. (VA, 64.14). The same unusual effect of focusing on the terrain of a foreign enemy re-emerges in “12 O’clock News”.

Bishop in notebooks and reviews was disparaging of some feminist poetry, in particular that which she felt was not so much liberating as unhealthily self-pitying and, by the 1960s, when it had a large following, unashamedly derivative. She did, nevertheless, regard highly the work of her close friend Robert Lowell, whom she admired for the intimacy and emotional resonance in his collection *Life Studies*, but was scathing of younger Confessional writers, those voguish imitators of his poetry naively aiming to ‘out do each other’ by revealing ‘ALL’ (VA, 53.11). However, the redeeming feature of Plath’s verse, for Bishop, was that it did not fall into the ‘[o]rder is a lovely thing’ category of poetry, although, in her opinion, it did veer toward another extreme which can only be described as the unlovely world women inhabit (VA, 53.14). Bishop was especially dismissive of poetry of the hearth and home which she regarded as genteel, inhibited and unworldly. ‘I am sick of domesticity’, she complained (VA, 53.14), casting her critical eye on the work of Mona Van Duyn and Sandra McPherson, two poets whom she admired but felt their writing was somewhat flawed by their naïve fixation on their domestic surroundings. Bishop was puzzled as to why these women insisted on centring poetry in the home, when men, more at ease assuming the role of the adventurous flâneur, had no such proclivity. Bishop could be equally disparaging of what she called the ‘domestic end’ of letter writing, women’s inconsequential matters of daily life. In a review of *Letters Home* Bishop

commented on Plath's 'fierce, direct style' and the desire to write more generally about birth, death and marriage (VA, 54.20).

In a general comment Bishop described contemporary American verse in the 1960s as 'extremely self-conscious' (VA, 53.11). Did it draw attention unnecessarily to the poet? For Bishop, the concern was that writers, by the very nature of their profession, were cut off or alienated from society, and that somehow they felt they had to justify their role. All the same, it was not necessary to make public one's private life. Bishop is the quintessential reticent poet, but, in point of fact, her unpublished manuscripts are replete with personal references which never resurface in published work. A number of poem-fragments dating from the 1930s up to the 1950s are notable for their use of the 'I' pronoun, and the poet's presence is more keenly felt in the exploration of relationships, gender and childhood. There are certain words or gestures which we would not necessarily find in her published work: a loving couple, for example, hold, kiss and address each other in terms of endearment ('Dear\_\_ please let's go back/ to that little provincial museum'). However, Bishop retains control of the emotion and is never completely consumed by the moment. As such, the dynamics of a relationship in the fragment poems are never fully laid bare, but rather defined indirectly according to location: two people share a room in a hotel where they will not be recognised ("Miami"); meet clandestinely ("The Museum"); or sleep serenely in a bedroom while a storm rages outside. Moreover, her lover Lota is mentioned by name in a verse epistle of the 1950s, as is her friend Robert Lowell, nicknamed 'Cal'. Both names are then crossed out. In another untitled poem, the initial 'M' alludes to a mystery person, possibly Marianne Moore or Margaret Miller (VA, 75.1). This is indicative of Bishop's methodology: self-censorship is not uncommon in her archive. But was it necessarily the case that Bishop cloaked the personal because she was wary of her status as an outsider? Was it a

deliberate attempt to disguise or obscure her emotions? Could it be suggested, alternatively, that this was not simply a question of cloaking, but rather a desire to adopt a poetic template that shaped a less personal aesthetic? Therefore, to borrow a phrase from Bishop, the unpublished material should not be viewed as an opportunity for ‘literary detective-work’ (VA, 54.18). What I mean by this is that Bishop wrote poetry with certain objectives in mind, chiefly naturalness and spontaneity of language, and accuracy of observation. Such a poetic formula did not allow for overtly personal revelations. It was precisely because the ‘point seems to be missing’, that a ‘sense’ of mystery was invoked. This was a deliberate form of versification with an ‘ulterior motive’, written in ‘secret confidence’.<sup>499</sup>

As a young woman Bishop could be sentimental and romantic, and explore with ease the theme of love and ‘unrequited passions’, as, for example, in “Three Valentines” (1934). But it was rare for the more mature Bishop to reminisce evocatively, and somewhat dolefully, on human relations. In the closely observed “The Shampoo” the speaker washes the hair of a ‘dear friend’, captivated by its sheen; the moment recalled is tactile and tender. At other times Bishop’s so-called love poems are, more accurately, *cri de coeur*, redolent of the fear of solitude and the lack of human companionship. For instance, “Four Poems” was written in the 1940s during Bishop’s stay at Yaddo, an artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. Judging from her correspondence, she was experiencing great personal anxiety, and in a letter to her artist friend Loren MacIver, she expressed absolute misery ‘at being alone’, her life ‘disintegrating’ from the worry that those who had helped her in the past, including her close friend and physician Dr Baumann, would ‘give up on her’.<sup>500</sup> Seclusion at Yaddo only served to compound

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<sup>499</sup> Marylyn May Lombardi, ‘Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art’, in Marylyn May Lombardi (ed.), *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>500</sup> *One Art*, pp. 186–89.

her anxieties and apprehensions about her new job in Washington at the Library of Congress (1949–50). “Four Poems” exemplifies Bishop’s manipulation, or ‘re-verse’<sup>501</sup> of poetic structure, word-pattern and rhythm. Part *IV/O Breath*<sup>502</sup> requires of the reader some form of optical focus.

<sup>503</sup> Each line is spaced about mid-point:

Beneath that loved    and celebrated breast,  
 silent, bored really    blindly veined,  
 grieves, maybe    lives and lets  
 live, passes    bets...(CP, 79)

To look at, the syntactical subversion suggests a poem still in draft form. The spaces act like heavy pauses that interrupt the reading of the lines. The lacunae are intriguing or perplexing to the reader who, accustomed to a poet’s language, grammar and punctuation for direction, questions what purpose the silent gaps serve. But these white spaces, perhaps, suggest an internal discourse. Looked at in this way the poem is a palimpsest of thoughts either spoken or censored. The gaps may even intimate the theme of detachment in the poem – two people divided, one person and two voices, or a mirror reflection. In addition, the cleaving may denote a desire for individuation.<sup>504</sup> The poem invites a multiplicity of interpretations, although a biographical reading presupposes both voices in the poem are female, and that one woman observes the other asleep, intrigued by the desire ‘caged within’ the body of her companion.<sup>505</sup> Such an argument

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<sup>501</sup> Mutu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 101.

<sup>502</sup> “Four Poems” is divided into four sub headed parts: “I/ Conversation”, “II/ Rain Towards Morning”, “III/ While Someone Telephones” and “IV/ O Breath”.

<sup>503</sup> In “A Wish” Swenson employs a similar but more radical poetic construct. She separates every word to give the impression of rhetorical hesitation; May Swenson, *New and Selected Things Taking Place* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), p. 290.

<sup>504</sup> As a point of comparison, whereas the gaps in Bishop’s “IV/O Breath” seem randomly situated, in Swenson’s “Bleeding” the spaces create a discernible pattern on the page because of their positioning in almost the same place in each line. The vertical pattern suggests a bleeding cut or perhaps a knife slash. There is, nevertheless, in Swenson’s poetry, more so than in Bishop’s, a deliberate attempt to create a congruity between poetry and art; Swenson, *New and Selected Things Taking Place*, p. 104. Further examples to consider are Swenson’s “Orbiter 5 Shows How Earth Looks from the Moon” (p. 94), “Women” (p. 105) and “Fountain Piece” (p. 240).

<sup>505</sup> Lombardi, *The Body and the Song*, p. 34.



identifies voyeurism, temptation and restraint as the pivotal themes of the poem. However, whilst I agree Bishop focuses attention upon the enigma of outward appearance, in “O Breath” the unseen element, or depth, that lies beyond the surface is mysterious, but not necessarily sexualised. As in other Bishop poems ‘[e]quivocal’ or indeterminate feelings arise from close observation, except in this case the object being watched intently is the human body. Moreover, “O Breath” appears less a poetic realisation of physical intimacy if we accept that the stillness of ‘thin flying of nine black hairs’ around her ‘celebrated’ breasts suggests a painting of a female nude. The speaker, therefore, is a captivated beholder, studying carefully the work of art and wagering (‘passes bets’) that beyond everything that meets the eye exists ‘something moving’, invisible, yet significant.

More intimate poems about love and companionship are found in the archive. In “The Museum”, for instance, the speaker addresses an anonymous person affectionately: ‘Dear\_\_ please let’s go back/ to that little provincial museum’ (draft 2) ‘and take all the time we want/ even the whole day’ (draft 1). The private nature of this assignation in a small and ‘neglected’ place where the galleries are ‘dim’ and the shades ‘mostly drawn’ implies an illicit encounter. The affair is conducted privately away from prying eyes, in the same way that the anonymous lovers of the undated “Miami” share a room in a shabby and insalubrious hotel. Likewise, an untitled poem-fragment of the 1940s explores the unfulfilled desire of two people to be together (VA, 75.3b). ‘I see you far away, unhappy’, declares the speaker, ‘behind those horrible small little green grills// like an animal at Bronx park’. The suggestion of a masculine order objecting to their relationship is reinforced through both the images of iron grills acting as a barrier to any kind of closeness, and ‘his big hands’ coming ‘in between us’. As was previously mentioned, Rich read into Bishop’s early published poems ‘the pain of division’; for instance, the cleaving

of the heart in two in “The Weed”, and the ‘tension’ and ‘erotic freeing-up’<sup>506</sup> in the sequence “Four Poems”: ‘The great light cage has broken up in the air,/ freeing, I think, about a million birds’ (CP, 77). This form of sexual liberation takes on more passionate intensity in “Antibes and Antibes Way” (1949-50) (VA, 64.12). The speaker delights in the charms of this tourist resort and views quizzically the ‘war-like array’ of the old fort, which stands as a reminder of a more violent past. There is no ‘military air’ as the speaker, acknowledging her status as an outsider (‘After all! after all I am not acquainted there’), scans from her vantage point, atop the seaside town, the quaint scene: the fishermen mending nets, the medieval church, fountains and vineyards. But there are no soldiers, unless, ponders the speaker, they are billeted throughout the town. The final part of the poem is an eroticised dreamscape:

I want them, enticed by the sand of the beach  
 its blue contending with the rest of the seas  
 I want them transported by their dream horses  
 Confusing their manes with the loved one’s hair  
 to the moon’s court of love to go galloping galloping  
 With the same ardent gesture of lovers embracing  
 the woman’s neck and that of the mare  
 etc..., etc..., etc... (that’s enough for Antibes...)

The speaker desires that the soldiers reappear, that they are ‘enticed’ from their hiding places, but ‘transported’ back into their dreams. However, compared to the sexually ambiguous relationship between anonymous lovers (“The Museum” and “Miami”), the image of soldiers and dream horses here is unambiguously heterosexual. This erotic freeing-up does, of course, begin to take on more ominous undertones in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”. The feminine assumes the guise of the smaller ‘wicked’ lizard, a reptilian temptress, while the soldiers’ libido – liberated in their new colony – is equated with lust, aggression and even rape.

If the published poems treat the subject of relationships obliquely, by comparison, the

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<sup>506</sup> Rich, ‘The Eye of the Outsider’, p. 128.

fragments discuss love and eroticism more directly. At the time Bishop was writing “The Museum” and “Miami”, she was reading Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* with its prevailing themes of love, reverie and sensuality, as well as corrupted or tainted beauty. But while for Baudelaire beauty enchants lovers and inspires poets, in Bishop’s rather cynical “The Strike of Love”, the speaker asserts, love ‘refused to enter/ the heart of any man’, and ‘all our loves looked ugly’ (VA, 75.3b). Moreover, cages are forms of incarceration or, as in ‘I see you far away, unhappy’, grills are a means of division. So too in “Four Poems” (“II/Rain Towards Morning”) the capacity to think and act freely without any remnant of guilt weighing on the mind is finally achieved through the destruction of the bird cage. In a further untitled three-stanza fragment-poem about human closeness amidst the full force of nature, two people are waking up together ‘at the same minute’, as ‘[a]ll over the roof the rain hisses.../And below, the light falling of kisses’ <sup>507</sup> (VA, 75.2). The air is clear, ‘prickling’ and charged with electricity. Nature is threatening and yet at the same time all-enveloping. In the second stanza the lightning rod on the roof draws the electricity down and around the house: ‘And we imagine dreamily/ How the whole house caught in a bird-cage of lightning/ Would be rather delightful rather than frightening’. In the dream world the impossible is made possible, a place where two people can be together safe in the midst of danger:

And from the same simplified point of view  
 Of night and lying flat on one’s back  
 All things might change equally easily,  
 Since always to warn us there must be these black  
 Electrical wires dangling. Without surprise  
 The world might change to something quite different,  
 As the air changes or the lightning comes without our blinking,  
 Change as our kisses are changing without our thinking.

From the ‘same simplified point of view’ the lovers ‘imagine dreamily’ a world that holds no

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<sup>507</sup> This poem has been dated to the 1940s (the Florida years) by Lorrie Goldensohn in ‘Elizabeth Bishop: An Unpublished, Untitled Poem’, *American Poetry Review* 17, no. 1 (January/February, 1988): 40.

surprises or looks upon their relationship disapprovingly. In this imagined and inverted world incarceration is liberating, ‘delightful rather than frightening’, and lightning and electrical cables revitalising, but never threatening. The speaker imagines this change taking place naturally, almost imperceptibly, like the electricity which strikes down from the ‘black mesh of wires in the sky’ and dissipates beneath the house harmlessly, leaving only a trace of energy in the air. In this perfect world where possibilities are boundless there is no surprise, no danger and no disapprobation. Of course in reality such a conceit is barely realisable.

### **A Reading of Bishop’s “Miami” and Keats’ “Eve of St Agnes”**

Bishop broached the subject of relationships, but to whom were her so-called ‘love’ poems addressed? Were they to another woman? We know of her lesbianism, but we must be cautious of making assumptions about what kind of relationships these were. In order to understand the sexual nuances of her love poems, it is necessary to examine her methodology more closely. For this reason the two drafts of the poem “Miami” (post 1946) – inspired by Keats’ “Eve of St Agnes” – deserve close scrutiny. As this modern and secular affair arises from a religio-mythological context, she is wary of language which exposes the reader’s imagination to complex or latent structures of meaning for interpreting experience. The second draft of “Miami” is a case in point; the suggestive word ‘adulterous’ is crossed out in order to maintain, as much as possible, an objective poetic voice. However, the poet’s awkward attempt to combine elements historicised and pre-reflective proved, ultimately, a failure and partly the reason why “Miami” remained unpublished.

Bishop’s notebooks reveal her indebtedness to British Romantic literature, not least the works of Coleridge and Keats. If she looked to Coleridge for guidance on points of technique to

enhance the naturalness of her poetry, she turned to Keats, on this occasion, for sensual inspiration, especially to his poem “Eve of St Agnes” (1820).<sup>508</sup> For Bishop the regenerative story of chastity and marriage, combined with the legend of the captivating beauty of La Belle Dame Sans Merci, provided a historical context within which to explore aspects of sexuality in post-war America. Keats’ “Eve of St Agnes” informs our reading of “Miami” and vice versa. The epigraph to the first draft of “Miami” is taken from the last stanza of Keats’ “Eve of St Agnes”, a powerfully chivalric and gothic poem steeped in religious and mythological symbolism. The epigraph describes how the lovers Madeline and Porphyro flee together:

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago  
 These lovers fled away into the storm.  
 That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form  
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,  
 Were long be-nightmar’d. Angela the old  
 Died palsy-twitch’d, with meagre face deform;  
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

Bishop’s reading of Keats’ “Eve of St Agnes” brought to her attention the feast day of this fourth-century saint and the regenerative tale of piety and marriage. Through Keats’ ‘mythological intuition’<sup>509</sup> – that is, his reinterpretation of this Christian story, set within a chimerical context – Bishop came to explore the powerful relevance of the archetypes of marriage, love and sexuality in a modern, secularised world. According to medieval tradition, the

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<sup>508</sup> In a letter to Lowell (March 30, 1959) Bishop writes: ‘During the ten weeks I read & read & read – the 3-volume life of Byron, Greville in 3 volumes, Lucan (didn’t you say you were reading that, too?), etc. etc. – and now I’m finishing the new edition of Keats’s letters – all to what purpose I’m not sure, but all fascinating. At the moment I find the Keats the best of the lot, though. Except for his unpleasant insistence on the *palate*, he strikes me as almost everything a poet should have been in his day. The class gulf between him and Byron is enormous’; *One Art*, pp. 371–72.

<sup>509</sup> This intuitiveness Erich Neumann identified in Rilke’s poetic interpretation of the legend of Admetus and the bride-of-death motif; *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 66.

young Agnes, wishing to remain chaste, spurned the advances of suitors for her hand, and was arrested and sentenced by a Roman court for being a Christian. As punishment, she was taken to a house of prostitution, where men who dared to look upon her with desire were stricken with blindness. The fathers of the early Church emphasised the steadfastness of St Agnes' faith, extolled the excellent virtue of her abstinence and denounced the illicitness of carnal pleasure and voyeurism – the forbidden gaze of mere mortals. The cult of St Agnes' martyrdom underscored the inviolable sanctity of marriage, and over the centuries her tender age and physical beauty took on such mythical significance that it was believed young girls who performed certain rites on the eve of her feast day would discover their future husbands in their dreams.

Keats' "Eve of St Agnes" has been described as a 'consummate exploration of creativity, imagination and individual identity'.<sup>510</sup> The narrative verse recounts the story of how the lovers Madeline and Porphyro are brought together on this propitious eve, when, it is said, '[y]oung virgins might have visions of delight,/ And soft adorings from their loves receive/ Upon the honey'd middle of the night'. Ritual and superstition dictate that the virgin retire to her room without supper, making sure that she neither looks sideways nor behind her, and lie on her back to dream of her future husband. In "Miami" the lovers are transposed to a twentieth-century setting and ensconced in a cheap Floridian hotel. The speaker describes both the inside of the room and what is seen from the window:

across the bay the tattered screens of lines  
of...scorched Australian pines  
The smell of fried potatoes from below

The hot air pulses...  
the long-bladed fan, black and quarter-fed...

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<sup>510</sup> Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 59.

and at your head...  
 a ten cent store reading lamp [and] two soiled telephone books  
 filled with their thousands of names  
 and none of them are ours thank God  
 in the dark drawer undoubtedly a Gideon Bible. ...

Endless crowds in cottons, toilet waters,  
 [buy] shoes at Burdines, place their bets, drink coconut milk...

From the window can be seen throngs of holidaymakers milling about in the streets. There are references to aspects of contemporary living and well-known brand names: the Gillette blade and Burdines department store. The hotel room seems sparse and shabby. It is a modern-day love affair. The lovers belong to this tainted reality where even the glitter of the bay is 'sleazy'. They must be from out of town because their names do not appear in the telephone books. But, apart from this fact, what do we know of their relationship? And why, as the speaker goes on to declare, is their affair 'adulterous', ridiculous and yet deep? The answers may be found in Keats' "Eve of St Agnes" and in the dynamics of the relationship between the young Madeline and Porphyro. Keats' sensuous language in stanza X heralds the arrival of Porphyro.<sup>511</sup> He is portrayed as an ardent suitor 'with heart on fire', and his intentions for the virtuous Madeline are propelled by desire. His heart is '[l]ove's fev'rous citadel:/ For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,/ Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,/ Whose very dogs would execrations howl/ Against his lineage'. But just as Keats carefully restrains his language in order that highly wrought sensuality does not cause undue offence to his readers, so too the ardour of Madeline's suitors is 'cool'd' by her 'high disdain' and Porphyro's fiery passion dampened by the brewing storm. In the eyes of Porphyro the pious Madeline's physical beauty is ultimately bewitching: 'He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,/ In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy:"/

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<sup>511</sup> For a discussion of eroticism and vulgarity in Keats' poetry, and the reason why his diction lent itself so perfectly to this type of verse, see John Bayley, 'Keats and Reality', *Proceeding of the British Academy*, 48 (1962): 99–102.

Close to her ear touching the melody'. Porphyro's voyeurism and dissemblance are somehow forgotten or even excused by what he describes as the enthralling beauty of Madeline, which now becomes associated with the legendary story of the merciless lady. In a most curious sense, therefore, her physical allure is to blame for Porphyro's longing.<sup>512</sup>

In "Miami" Bishop draws upon this Keatsian notion of love as born primarily of physical attraction. There is a sudden shift in tone and setting from the stifling heat of Miami to a cooler bucolic idyll. At this point we glimpse a dream-world:

As if by the freshest brooks, in shades  
Where shepherds sing, they (went to sleep) fell asleep  
(by) five o'clock from love that was  
absurd, (adulterous), and deep.

Bishop's definition of love as ridiculous, furthermore, connects with Keats' treatment of the rituals of divination surrounding the eve of St Agnes. In Porphyro and Madeline's story this ritual appears both idealistic and quixotic. Porphyro, who is described by the maid Angela as cruel and 'impious', craftily turns up in Madeline's chamber and hides in a closet in order to gaze upon her sleeping. She awakes to find him beside her and naively or forgivingly accepts that he is the husband of her dreams.

To conclude, we see a strong thematic connection between the lovers in Keats' "Eve of St Agnes" and those in Bishop's "Miami". In both poems the absurdity and illicitness of love is described, but in Bishop these abstract nouns strike a more judgmental note at odds with her usually restrained and presentative language. Her final crossing out of the word 'adulterous' may be interpreted as either approval of this affair or a refusal to pass judgement on its moral basis. I would end by highlighting the various oppositions created in "Miami" between Keatsian and

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<sup>512</sup> Feminist critics have read into this gaze male 'narcissistic projection'; see, for example, Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, p. 25.



modern notions of love. Bishop manages to dovetail a natural and spiritual setting with a modern and secular reality; whereas love is deep and meaningful in an imagined existence, it is deemed corrupt in the real world. The lovers can conform to or escape from social conventions and, like Porphyro and Madeline, flee the fortress and merge into the outside world.

“Miami” is an example of what the Bishop archive has to offer in terms of poetic methodology. It reveals Bishop’s muse and the strategies she employs in order to transform the source of her Romantic inspiration. Equally apparent is the overlaying of themes in “Miami” and, unusually in Bishop’s work, the physical and transcendental states are equated with, on the one hand, immorality and, on the other, virtue. Overall, the archive is testimony to Bishop’s willingness to explore relationships conducted privately. The anonymity of these assignments lends an air of mystery to such poetry.

## **Conclusion**

Rich did of course maintain that Bishop’s published material revealed how the cost of social assimilation was, for a lesbian writer, internal division, which emerged sub-consciously as a recurrent motif in her work. Other critics followed suit by suggesting sexual undercurrents in her poetry as a result of psychological sublimation. Nevertheless, as I have sought to demonstrate, the attempt to cloak intimacy is not something that particularly interests Bishop, and although there is strong suggestion of outsiderhood in her work, this need not be interpreted necessarily in terms of her lesbianism, but instead as arising from a sense of individuation or alienation. Ironically, moreover, where Bishop is concerned, outsiderhood has come to mean her distancing from the mainstream of female literature, and her ‘detached ‘eye’, so long admired by critics as sharply observant, is thus understood as more an attempt to identify closely with others

similarly marginalised.

What matters more to Bishop is the aesthetic of seeing and interpreting. And this distinct poetic makes her especially intrigued by the varying inspirations of other women writers. As her unpublished material reveals, the subject of relationships does not always make for a successful poem. Perhaps, therefore, it is important to find stimulation in aspects of life not related exclusively to women's experiences – travel, in Bishop's opinion, is one of these. The woman poet, she declares, must imitate her male counterpart because 'modern' poetry is 'perfectly suited to travel-impressions' (VA, 64.12). And, unsurprisingly, some of her most effective verse draws on those places she knows best and which mark the changing phases of her life: Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, Florida, Brazil. Besides women's inability to extend their vision beyond that to which they have grown accustomed and to encompass subjects traditionally monopolised by literary men, Bishop was of course critical of the revisionist preoccupation of female writers, who in their search particularly for a mythical muse discovered an alter ego. By extension, the failure of some Confessional poets was, in her opinion, their proclivity to say it all, or – and here Bishop was especially critical of feminism – to be open about various issues, which paradoxically limited the female voice to the vagaries of human relationships. In reviewing Emily Dickinson's correspondence, Bishop admired the 'sketchiness' of her writing, which was devoid of the trivialities of daily life. (VA, 54.18) And even though Dickinson's love letters were strongly affectionate, they were still able to project 'strength' and 'structure', 'while making one aware of the current of death and depths of darkneses (sic) below'.<sup>513</sup> If, however, the personal traumas of life became the predominant source of a poet's imagination, then this type of women's poetry could seem as ineffective as the other extreme that centred solely on the 'happy

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<sup>513</sup> Moore was equally scathing of attempts to unveil the 'secrets' of Dickinson's life in critical appraisal of her letters; *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, pp. 290–91.

housewife'. Though critical, Bishop, nevertheless, found the 'fierce' streak in Plath's personality a redeeming feature, elevating her work above that of Confessional writers whom she had accused of being derivative. What was most noteworthy was Plath's 'direct style', her acerbic tone 'sparing no one' (VA, 54.20).

Besides an attempt to distinguish Bishop's poetic from that of her female contemporaries, I have repositioned her work within the parameters of *écriture féminine*. This, importantly, has drawn attention to the role of the woman poet and the muse that is her true source of inspiration. Bishop, it was argued, promoted a genderless voice in poetry that demonstrated little or no compulsion to remake or personalise history. She refused, moreover, to take as a subject of her gaze anything which emphasised differences between men and women. If, therefore, feminism, in general terms, defined the extent to which women submitted to or rejected cultural forces, then Bishop presented an alternative paradigm of female writing, one that opposed the strident and politicised. Plath, who admired the creative substance of this poetry, was certainly associated with the Confessional poets, but, in terms of women writers, she discovered, by her own admission, great affinity with such literary figures as Bishop and Stevie Smith, who believed that poetry could be an agent of the self as well as reflection of the various forms of seeing and interpreting.

## Chapter VII

### Liminality and the Bodily Image in Sylvia Plath and Leonor Fini

Following on from the earlier discussion of myth and objectification in Plath's poetry, I propose in this chapter to extend the definition of visual poetics in order to examine the influences of painting in her work and the recurrence in it of corporeal imagery. The objective is to evaluate the perceptions of the Plathian woman from the 1950s to the early 1960s by tracing the changing concept of female power and sexuality in relation to surrealism, in general, and the artist Leonor Fini, in particular. Plath's work has, in recent years, been discussed from the point of view of visual arts,<sup>514</sup> and consideration of Fini reveals points of correspondence between her paintings and Plath's poetry. However, the choice of Fini as a subject of comparison is not done randomly, but is based on the knowledge that Plath admired this Argentine artist of Spanish-Italian descent. The fact that these two women were from two very different backgrounds may present problems in comparing like with like. Plath was, after all, an American archetype, the Fulbright scholar at Cambridge, who lived a great part of her adult life in England. Fini, by comparison, was a cosmopolitan and continental polyglot, an exotic mixture of South American and European heritage, who identified closely with the surrealists in Paris. That said, Plath and Fini were close contemporaries united by the spectre of Cold War, in whose work, paradigmatically, there may be detected an inheritance, intimate appropriation and reconfiguration of mythological representations of women. I interpret the Finian woman's sexuality to be both erotic and formidable in the sense that it invites and perturbs at the same

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<sup>514</sup> See, in particular, Connors and Bayley (eds), *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, passim.

time. This heroine, ‘La belle dame sans merci’, who re-emerges in Plath’s late poems – “Ariel”, “Lady Lazarus” and “Edge” – uses her body as a means of sexual empowerment; her nakedness or déshabillé is not equated with vulnerability. She is far removed from Plath’s early portrayal of the woman as a passive object of sexual desire.

In the 1950s America witnessed remarkable social, political and economic changes. This was an age of ‘painful paradox’ – a period labelled ‘Scoundrel Time’ by the American playwright Lillian Hellman<sup>515</sup> – of economic prosperity but terrible anxiety, a country fraught with fear of espionage, sabotage, treason and internal subversion, a country swayed by McCarthy’s anti-intellectualism. This was the decade of the Korean War, the trial and conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury and the execution of the Rosenbergs for treason. In the opening lines of *The Bell Jar* Plath writes: ‘It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs...The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick’.<sup>516</sup> For Plath the execution of the Rosenbergs represented the irrationalities of the period, a scathing indictment of the barbarity of Cold War society and culture, and – in reference to her own depression, hospitalisation and electric shock treatment – of its crass insensitivity. Such a time demanded self-censorship and objectivity, and perhaps a compliant, less spirited and more visibly emotional Ethel Rosenberg may have escaped the electric chair. She was in the eyes of Americans the unfeminine or even neurotic woman.<sup>517</sup> The stereotypical fifties woman was perfect wife and mother, who was not expected to engage in political rhetoric. Unlike Ethel Rosenberg, the political opinions of Esther Greenwood – Plath’s protagonist in *The Bell Jar* – are kept at bay. She cloaks her critique in an informal and chatty style. Besides mentioning the execution of the Rosenbergs, Esther does not

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<sup>515</sup> Eugenia Kaledin, *Daily Life in the United States, 1940–1950: Shifting World* (London: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 76.

<sup>516</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 1.

<sup>517</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 52.

dwell on any other detail of the case, which she seemingly dismisses with the facile remark, ‘I am stupid about executions’. Esther’s self-critical ‘I’, assuming a defensive position, offers her a refuge from the scrutiny of others and their condemnatory attitude toward outspokenness. Throughout the fifties the media accentuated the idea that a woman could neither be politicised, nor career minded. Career was a ‘dirty word’<sup>518</sup> and in magazines the image was not that of a career girl, but of a young, pretty woman whose main goal in life was to attract a male. This was the archetypal woman depicted in a collage Plath completed when she was an art student at Smith College. At the centre of this picture, entitled “Cold War Era Images”, is the cut-out figure of President Eisenhower seated behind his desk; in the foreground a tube of Tums and flying above his head a military plane.<sup>519</sup> Plath’s assemblage of cut-out iconic figures sums up an age of militarism, gender division, popular culture and consumerism. Her work with its coded synthesis intimated her feelings about civic America in the fifties.

Plath’s “Cold War Era Images” betrays a degree of conscious politicisation. However, this work was exceptional, and predominately what we find in her drawing and writing of this period is style over political substance. There is a ‘trying on of linguistic clothes and attitudes’: ‘A new life of my own I shall make’, she wrote in her journals, ‘from words, colors and feelings’.<sup>520</sup> In her art class at college Plath was mostly interested in painting women and drew the female nude in different poses. Her themes were often mother and child, biblical figures, cityscapes and shadowy streets and picturesque rural settings.<sup>521</sup> “Chapel Meeting at John M.

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<sup>518</sup> Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 67.

<sup>519</sup> As an art form, collage was capable of presenting multiple images, of disrupting cultural norms; see Allen Fisher; ‘Plurality and the Reproduced; The Selective Approach to American Visual Art in the 1950s’, in Dale Carter (ed.), *Cracking the Ike Age; Aspects of Fifties America* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992).

<sup>520</sup> Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, p. 98; *Journals*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>521</sup> I was able to view Plath’s paintings, sketchbooks, photographs and scrapbooks at the Lilly Library, Indiana University (Plath mss. II and III). An exhibition of her work was held in 2002 at The School of Fine Arts (Indiana University).

Green” (1951) is infused with bright light, and the use of primary colours is vibrant and garish. The same palette is repeated in “The Women at Window” (1950–1951), which depicts a girl with blonde hair, face turned away from the viewer, comforting an older woman hunched over a table, her arms folded, covering her face. The bold brush strokes, however, do lend a degree of stylisation to the painting; the vital colours, which in the “Chapel Meeting at John M. Green” suitably convey the energy and liveliness of the audience, seem strangely at odds with the emotion being explored in the picture. Moreover, Plath’s “Nine Female Figures” (1950–1951) and “Two Women Reading” betray further Expressionist influences. The vivacious colours remain the same, although the painting marks a subtle change in style, a move away from earlier attempts at representation toward abstraction. In “Two Women Reading” it is a warm day and a female figure sits on the chequered picnic blanket with a book under a tree cross-legged. She casts a shadow and beside her rest a large bottle and half a melon. To her left and protruding from the bottom edge of the painting can be seen a pair of legs and hands holding a book. There are two buildings in the background – one perhaps a church – which seem to be disintegrating, their vibrantly coloured walls floating apart. The fracturing suggests a summer haziness, an intensity of heat.

In recent years there has been growing interest in aspects of the visual arts in Plath’s poetry. It is known that she illustrated her poems from an early age. She also competed for art prizes and, in later years, whilst studying in Cambridge and travelling to France and Spain, she composed sketches to accompany her short stories. However, at Smith College Plath became aware of the limitations of her artistic talents in comparison to the success she had already achieved as a published writer.<sup>522</sup> She continued, nevertheless, to compose art-poems and was inspired by, among others, Matisse’s “The Piano Lesson” (1916), “Interior with a Violin”

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<sup>522</sup> Connors, ‘Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath’, pp. 4, 5, 22, 32–33.

(c.1917), Gauguin's "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel" (1888) and "The Loss of Virginité" (c. 1890) ### this latter painting of a girl lying naked in the open, clutching a fox to her chest, was perhaps reminiscent of Rousseau's mysterious *Yadwigha*.<sup>523</sup>

If, in the first instance, Confessional poets looked to American modernists, such as Eliot, Pound, Williams and Stevens, for the style and tone of their poetry, they also discovered in twentieth-century painters – not least the surrealists – a valuable context for their work. Plath's 'deepest source of inspiration' was art,<sup>524</sup> and by attending exhibitions she was able to view personally the paintings and sculptures. In 1954 she visited the Whitney Museum Annual Exhibition of American Art and, judging from a college essay she wrote about this experience and the subsequent poems it inspired, artists like Hugo Robus, Gregorio Prestopino and Alexander Calder (a subject of the poem "Midsummer Mobile") particularly impressed.<sup>525</sup> For Plath, their use of colour – along with European artists Raoul Dufy and Nicholas de Staël – was most fascinating and, in the case of Robus, it was his representation of classically fragmented nude women which caught the eye. As I later discuss, the formalistic interpretation of the female subject by male artists became a theme of Plath's poetry.

Plath wrote "'Three Caryatids Without a Portico', by Hugo Robus. A Study in Sculptural Dimensions" after visiting the Whitney Museum exhibition. Diane Middlebrook noted that when "Three Caryatids" was composed in 1955, Robus' three female figures were correctly described by Plath as 'decapitated', but in a later version of the poem submitted to *Chequer*, a literary journal published in Cambridge, they were provided with 'aristocratic heads'.<sup>526</sup> Middlebrook

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<sup>523</sup> *Journals*, p. 324,

<sup>524</sup> *Letters Home*, p. 336.

<sup>525</sup> Connors, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', p. 96.

<sup>526</sup> Diane Middlebrook, 'Plath, Hughes, and Three Caryatids', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds), *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 158–62.



speculated that Plath wished to give these women a point of view.<sup>527</sup> This may have been the case, although the most significant aspect of “Three Caryatids” was the response of some of Plath’s Cambridge peers to her poem. The St Bortolph’s Review poets – among them Ted Hughes – were, argued Middlebrook, acolytes of Robert Graves, who, led by their misogyny, dismissed the poem as an ekphrastic exercise by a woman writer incapable of affirming ‘man’s animal [and mythical] instincts’. Only male poets could align themselves to the ‘power of [Graves’] White Goddess by falling obsessionally in love with an actual woman’.<sup>528</sup> The process of writing “Three Caryatids” and the negative reaction to the poem must have been an illuminating experience for Plath both in terms of gender expectations and public reception. First, the exhibitions she attended showcased predominantly the talents of male painters and sculptors and the fragmented female image in some of their work was, more than any other, an expression of the self, not the subject. The desire of the narcissist for his image to displace or, more accurately, to assimilate with that of the sitter, by means of the formalistic depiction of the woman as limbless or deformed, is a theme, for example, in “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” and “The Detective”. Secondly, the response of the St Botolph’s poets must have affirmed to Plath the sexualised ideal of male art: the female was positioned as a muse for the artist, a captivating and true source of inspiration. A woman poet, therefore, could not approximate this relationship and Plath’s ekphrasis was merely the focus of her objective eye, which could not articulate universal myth beyond what she saw.

In her enthusiasm for experimentation Plath became very interested in the genre of ekphrastic poetry during the mid-fifties. The commission by *Art News* magazine to write a poem

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<sup>527</sup> Middlebrook, ‘Plath, Hughes, and Three Caryatids’, p. 166.

<sup>528</sup> Middlebrook, ‘Plath, Hughes, and Three Caryatids’, p. 162. For a detailed discussion of ekphrasis in Plath’s poetry see Fan Jinghua, ‘Sylvia Plath’s Visual Poetics’, in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds), *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath’s Art of the Visual* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

on a painting of her choice inspired her imagination. The ‘art poem’ was something she particularly excelled in, and having often been commissioned to write poetry for magazines and journals, she was practised at adapting her style in response to varying demands. In this sense Plath was very commercially minded in her approach to writing. In fact, between 1956 and 1958 she wrote at least three poems based on paintings by de Chirico, four on etchings by Klee and two on paintings by the French Primitive Henri Rousseau.<sup>529</sup> But it was the sonnet “Conversation Among the Ruins”, inspired by de Chirico’s “Colloquio”, that epitomised Plath’s woman of the mid-1950s. In de Chirico’s painting (a postcard reproduction of which was pinned to the door of Plath’s college room at Cambridge) a man stands next to a seated woman in what appears to be a ruin, surrounded by a mountainous and barren landscape. He is looking intently at her face which is turned away from the viewer. This facial omission is worth bearing in mind for it is a detail that helps to expose the male surrealist ideology of the feminine. Images of women were usually those of eternal victim or suffering innocent, and in de Chirico’s “Colloquio” the faceless female is less a participant than a trigger for the male. The surrealist figure of woman, whether plaything, mannequin, hysteric, automaton, sacrificial victim, or witch, was everything except herself.<sup>530</sup> As in the painting Plath’s “Conversation Among the Ruins” is about sexual antagonism, the symptomatic association between male violence and female passivity. Plath’s male stands heroic in coat and tie, while the woman, mild and passive, ‘sits/ Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot’, unable to move, rooted to the man’s ‘black look’. The term ‘psyche-knot’ implies her frame of mind; on account of his unruly temperament, she has lost her

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<sup>529</sup> Plath wrote at least twelve poems based on the works of painters or sculptors. These are “Conversation Among the Ruins” and “The Disquieting Muses” (de Chirico); “On the Decline of Oracles” (de Chirico and Arnold Böcklin); “Virgin in a Tree”, “Perseus”, “Battle-Scene” and “The Ghost’s Leavetaking” (Klee); “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” (Brueghel); “Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among lilies” and “Snakecharmer” (Rousseau); “Sculptor” (Baskin); and “Full Fathom Five” (Jackson Pollock?).

<sup>530</sup> Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, 6–11, 79–89.

clear-headedness and, despoiled of her being, she can only ‘act’ not ‘be’ (CP, 21).

Plath’s imitation of the surrealist style in writing and, in particular, the oneiric motif in her art poems pointed to an adherence to the movement’s network of connotations. Intriguingly, she chose surrealism as a screen upon which to project her desires, in spite of its perceived misogynistic ideology. For this reason her seeming complicity with a movement that at times disdained women seems highly problematical. One possible explanation is that her overriding objective was to draw attention to the unchanging reality of the world in which she lived, namely female subordination. Equally, she may have wanted to mimic the male surrealists in order to burlesque or poke fun at their insecurities and anxieties. The obverse of this argument, and one to which I subscribe, is that Plath’s surrealism in the mid-1950s was aesthetically rather than ideologically driven. She mimicked the mannerisms of surrealism, which sparked her imagination and sensual observation, while giving little thought to its tenets. Her art poems were not an exercise in art appreciation, and she neither condemned nor condoned the male surrealists. What tended to happen was a collusion of images and ideas between Plath and these artists. This is understandable, given that her focus on carving a career as a successful writer meant that politicisation at Smith College was often eclipsed by creative considerations. Plath remarked in her journal upon the setting aside of idealism for ‘books, concerts, paintings, travel – all of which costs more than intangible dreams can buy’.<sup>531</sup> This single-minded preoccupation with art and personal success meant that for Plath politics in this period was ‘the servant of her philosophy of individualism’.<sup>532</sup> But although ambitious and driven, she also shows evidence of emotional fragility from early on. The elation of love is often immediately followed by a sense of despair and depression. Plath’s journals ricochet between a need for success and a fear of failure.

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<sup>531</sup> *Journals*, p. 173.

<sup>532</sup> Peel, *Writing Back*, p. 99.

This blinkered individualism, however, was not to last and, as Robin Peel has argued, in the period 1960–1963 Plath made a more committed engagement with wider global issues, in particular, gender politics.<sup>533</sup> The poet's ideological position, which involved repudiation of the primacy of masculine status and disdain for the subordinate 1950s heroine, was paralleled by a fundamental shift in her late poems. From being marginalised, the woman of the sixties, autonomous and sentient, finally attains her *raison d'être*. Furthermore, the emergence of gendered politicisation in Plath's work marked a change in surrealist fealty. Some of her late poems position the woman within a female – specifically Finian – surrealist terrain, and deal with the autonomous and authoritative figure.

From its origins surrealism was non-conformist and radical in its challenges to social and cultural paradigms. Moreover, the movement, as an historical and theoretical phenomenon, was critical of life's inherent contradictions. In 1959 the Mexican poet Octavio Paz remarked to his friend Claude Couffon: 'I have found in surrealism the idea of rebellion, the idea of...liberty'.<sup>534</sup> The extent, however, to which women artists could wholly partake of surrealist ideology, given, especially, the misogynistic proclivities of some of its practitioners, is debatable. Nevertheless, for avowedly surrealist women like Fini and Carrington, the movement's liberal ideology did not equate necessarily with political change, social resistance, or even rebellion, but, more importantly, for these artists, its transgressive and antagonistic character could transcend the real or ordinary. In this context surrealism could be a force hostile to and free from repressive culture. Such a movement could challenge the role of women within the traditional institutions of family, church and state, and establish new terrains where women artists might begin to articulate the

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<sup>533</sup> Peel, *Writing Back*, p. 99.

<sup>534</sup> Wilson, *Octavio Paz: A Study of His Poetics*, p. 22.

‘complex and ambiguous relationship between the female body and female identity’.<sup>535</sup> It became the first modernist movement in which women artists explored female autonomy and gave form to a feminine imagination. If, therefore, for the male surrealist woman was icon, femme-enfant (like the legendary Melusine, who is half-woman and half-fairy), erotic muse and the incarnation of ‘amour fou’, for the female surrealist, woman was powerful, magical and intuitive. It was, above all, Fini’s series of visionary, iridescent and phantasmagorical women, beautiful and merciless, human and bestial, destructive and regenerative, which appealed to Plath’s poetic imagination. She shared with Fini this vision of female liberation, and repeatedly the image of woman that emerges from both their work is caught up in a continuous process of natural and cultural transformation. In essence, therefore, Plath’s and Fini’s heroines are alike: they are rebellious in spirit, non-conformist. They turn away from the niceties of femininity (the conventional female roles) and embrace the autonomous ideal. The women in Plath’s late poems, such as Lady Lazarus, white Godiva, Clytemnestra and the Acetylene Virgin bear a strong resemblance to Fini’s ‘libertarian spirit’ or icon of feminine angst. Her sexuality is – to use Meret Oppenheim’s paradoxical term – ‘[e]rotique-voilée’.<sup>536</sup> It is important to view Fini’s woman as provocative but anti-erotic. The gaze turned on her body is not an ‘eroticized gaze’.<sup>537</sup> ‘She throws in men’s faces her scandalous manner of living’ in the words of Nora Mitrani.<sup>538</sup>

Fini provides an essentially visual analogue to Plath’s late poems. Born in 1918 in

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<sup>535</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Images of Self Representation* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1988), p. 4.

<sup>536</sup> Mary Ann Caws, ‘Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art’, in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 278.

<sup>537</sup> Carol M. Armstrong, ‘Edgar Degas and the Representation of the Female Body’, in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 222–42.

<sup>538</sup> For a discussion of this see Dawn Ades, ‘Orbits of the Savage Moon: Surrealism and the Representation of the Female Subject in Mexico and Post War Paris’, in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Images of Self-Representation* (Cambridge, Mass, London: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 107–127.

Argentina of Spanish-Italian parents, Fini became a painter, theatre designer and illustrator. She rose to prominence in the 1930s and exhibited for the first time in 1936 with other surrealists – including Jacqueline Lamba Breton, Eileen Agar and Dora Maar – at the New Burlington Galleries in London. Over the next two and a half decades she established an international reputation, exhibiting throughout Europe and the United States. In November 1960 Plath attended an exhibition of hers at a gallery in London.<sup>539</sup> I presume that this was the Kaplan exhibition, the only solo exhibition by Fini in this country at the time. The Kaplan had on show forty-two of her paintings and drawings, including “Le Double”, “Zorniga”, “Les Devenants” and “Les Metamorphes Equivoque”. In his preface to the Kaplan exhibition Max Ernst called Fini a woman of ‘Sens Plastique’, a clairvoyant in body and mind. He described her world as secret and closed, and her painting as ‘feminine...Super-feminine even. Faithful to the functions of a woman’s eye...she paints hollowness; her pictures are dizziness’.<sup>540</sup> Enthralled by the Kaplan exhibition, Plath wrote to her sister-in-law Olwyn Hughes, describing:

[t]he fabulous Leonor Fini who divides her time between Corsica and Paris...a polyglot...given to wearing animal masks about the house and has among some bad stuff – jewel like misty otherworldish damsels and cadavers with weird terrifying beauty, like necrological mannequins – I’d like to pay a pilgrimage to her Corsican monastery – reachable only by donkey.<sup>541</sup>

What we may gather from Plath’s description of Fini is that the artist’s imagination, her fabled and enigmatic world, is in large part appealing. Plath could relate to the well-travelled Fini and is especially intrigued by her reclusive eccentricity. The reference to ‘animal masks’ is most telling; the positioning of the body at the boundary between the human and animalistic really excites Plath. It is well-known that female surrealist painters drew heavily on animal symbolism.

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<sup>539</sup> Leonor Fini, *Catalogue of an Exhibition held at Kaplan Gallery, November, 1960* (London: Kaplan Gallery, 1960). A copy of this catalogue is kept at the library of Wolfson College, Oxford University (750 Box A).

<sup>540</sup> Max Ernst, ‘Preface to Leonor Fini’s Exhibition’, Kaplan Gallery, London.

<sup>541</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 203.

The horse denotes Carrington's magical animal of transformation, while in Remedios Varo's paintings the wise owl possesses alchemical powers. Moreover, Fini's hybrid sphinx (in "Petit Sphinx Gardien") – representative of the power of life and death – acknowledges woman's connection to the world of nature and animals.<sup>542</sup> Plath similarly endows her women with animal and magical characteristics. White Godiva may be aligned with Fini's "Hecate" – the mythical witch and chthonic dog-headed goddess – and "Reine de Saba". She becomes metaphorically one with the horse, and the fusion between human and bestial results in a cathartic release of passion and energy. In Fini the petrified appearance and physical luminosity of these iconic hermaphrodites *en déshabillé* draws the eye, while their state of limbo, half-human and half-animal existence, suggests – as in the coalescence between horse and rider in Plath's "Ariel" – a totemistic identification with women who, in their artistic representation as corpses, cadavers, or liminal beings seem to transcend the normal limits of daily life. Paradoxically, it is the power of the image, whether in art or literature, that reanimates these unreal figures and, like the Virgin Mary, they become cherished (deified) and worshiped icons.

Adhering to the surrealist theory of the paranoiac,<sup>543</sup> of double and triple imagery, the representation of the horse in "Ariel" suggests that the speaker participates in more than one realm of being. The poem ends by connecting White Godiva with the role of sorceress: 'And I/ Am the arrow, // The dew that flies/ Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red/ Eye', 'the cauldron of morning' (CP, 239–40). The 'cauldron' is perhaps synonymous with fertility and inspiration, a metaphor that unites the traditional role of the woman as nurturer with that of sorceress. In Graves' *White Goddess* Gwyn as a boy, according to Celtic myth and Grail literature, tasted the brew from the cauldron of Cerridwen and was reborn as poet. The witch,

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<sup>542</sup> The image of the sphinx was important to Fini, and in a number of her paintings the depiction of this hybrid creature ("Sphinx Amalburga", "Sphinx Philagria" and "Sphinx Regina") represents death and initiation.

<sup>543</sup> Ruth Brandon, *Surreal Lives: The Surrealists 1917–1945* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 378.

furthermore, we are told in Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*, is not burnt at the stake but is borne away on a black horse. Equally, in Fini's "Reine de Saba" the female figure appears to be ruled by an instinctual and animalistic drive. At her feet sits a vulture with its left wing wrapped protectively round her legs. Her challenge to the observer lies in her upright pose, intense facial mien, fanatical eyes, exposed breast, coiffure and traces of bodily hair. Fini depicts animals as having the power to reconnect humans with the primordial. In her work, goddess-like woman acknowledges her affiliation with nature.

Both Plath and Fini map out the dualistic identity of women and the double serves as a context for their imagination because both are fascinated by ideas of masking and masquerading as defence against non-identity. Plath, moreover, is drawn to the mythical and mysterious qualities of Fini's women, who, she remarked, are 'fabulous' and 'otherworldish' creations, at once both athletic, muscular, and flowered, bejeweled. The fundamental appeal was women surrealists' intimate reconfiguration of mythical stories. In a surrealist-feminist commentary written on the occasion of her 1976 exhibition in New York, Varo laid claim to women's legendary powers: 'Most of us, I hope, are now aware that a woman should not have to demand Rights. The Rights were there from the beginning, they must be Taken Back Again, including the mysteries which were ours and which were violated, stolen, or destroyed'.<sup>544</sup> The mythical art of women surrealists was personal and self-revelatory, and for Fini the female form became a source of inspiration for exploring her own bodily experiences and psychic powers. Plath's late poems reveal similar ideational affinities; they are personal, intuitive, emotional and uninhibited. In the same way that the Finian woman uses her body as a means of empowerment, so too

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<sup>544</sup> Leonora Carrington, *A Retrospective Exhibition*, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Centre for Inter-American Relations, 1976).



Plath's late poems adopt the female form to 'express a concrete [personal] reality',<sup>545</sup> positioning the body as powered by internal forces, intuitive and natural.

### **Liminality and the Female Form**

We recognise in the works of Fini and Plath an awareness of bodily change – whether sexual *rites de passage* in the former, or menstruation, gestation and parturition in the latter – which, connected intuitively to natural and meteorological patterns, are expressed through symbols. Victor Turner, in a discussion on the symbolism of rites of passage, argued that the 'coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterises the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both'.<sup>546</sup> This paradoxical unity may take the form of colour, substance, object, or being, placing in harmony the opposing binary classifications of life and death (the un-dead), male and female (hermaphrodite) and animal and human (hybrid). There are in Plath's poems various incarnations of this liminal persona whether it be, for instance, the totemistic horse-woman ("Ariel"), the queen bee ("Stings"), or the lioness ("Purdah"). Other inter-structural and generalised states include foam, dew and gas (acetylene) – from which the transitional figure emerges purified and more powerful – and material objects, such as the 'black sack' in "The Jailer" ('Where I relax, foetus or cat') that is symbolic both of gestation – a womb or sanctuary for the foetus – and of suffocation (CP, 226). Between life and death, moreover, the newly-born 'dead' children in "Edge", coiled like serpents, '[o]ne at each little/ Pitcher of milk, now empty', are folded back, 'as petals', into the mother's inert body (CP, 272). The ancient symbol of the coiled serpent

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<sup>545</sup> Louisa Buck, 'Faceless Femmes Fatales: Unearthing Surrealist Women Using Bodies as Source and Subject', *Women's Art Magazine* (Nov–Dec, 1992), no. 49: 16–17.

<sup>546</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 99.

usually signifies both fertility but, in this case, its opposite, barrenness. In “Edge” parturition is antiseptic; there are no bodily excretions, no milk, blood, or birth fluids, only ‘odors bleed/ From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower’. The moon in “Edge” has further positive and negative connotations, a diurnal waxing and waning which mirrors the biological changes in the female body. The moon intimates either growth or degeneration and, in the final stages, wears its ‘hood of bone’, no longer rhythmically aligned to the ‘dead’ body. The state of betwixt and between life and death is perfectly realised in the title ‘Edge’.

A symbol of fertility is woman’s rotund figure – the fully distended belly – as opposed to flatness, which Plath associates with male aggression or female barrenness. In “Three Women” this flat, perhaps neutral, form is sexless and, being neither one thing nor another, has socially negative connotations: ‘I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman,/ Neither a woman happy to be like a man, nor a man/ Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack’ (CP, 182). In comparison, we recognise the physical ambiguity of some of Fini’s figures. They are androgynous beings, sexually indeterminate and yet, in this other-world they inhabit, their physicality, within a greater social context, is troubling precisely because it evades structural classification.

Plath evokes the image of the visible woman who is free of cultural representation or intervention. To be visible is to be present, active and confident. The woman in her late poems strongly calls to mind Fini’s female whose bare torso is redolent with fear and fascination. For Paul Friedrich this liminal figure is dynamic and transgressing; she often refutes, confronts or crosses over fundamental categories of society and the ethical norms of a culture.<sup>547</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing of all Plathian processual figures is the protagonist in “Purdah”, who, like Fini’s

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<sup>547</sup> Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 132–33.

iconic women, promises to reveal her body:

Attendants of the eyelash!  
I shall unloose  
One feather, like the peacock.

Attendants of the lip!  
I shall unloose  
One note

...  
I shall unloose  
From the small jewelled  
Doll he guards like a heart —

The lioness,  
The shriek in the bath,  
The cloak of holes. (CP, 243– 44)

Of particular interest here is the term ‘unloose’, repeated four times in the last seven stanzas of the poem. It speaks of an overwhelming desire to cry, unveil, break free and finally become visible. The letting loose or the liberation of the mouth or body is the rejection of the status quo since, as Jean-Paul Debax has argued, ‘[l]anguage, the tongue, is woman’s weapon’.<sup>548</sup> In “Purdah” where the image of the exposed female body is positioned as a site for resistance, the persona is a far more potent, dangerous and predatory woman. She sheds her inhibitions, the veils in which she is enveloped, and emerges actively struggling against her cocooned existence. To take up Linda Mead’s point: ‘bodily transgression is...an image of social deviation’.<sup>549</sup>

Plath and Fini are drawn to physical brightness, what Mary Anne Caws describes (in her discussion of La Tour’s *Repentant Magdalene* pictures) as the ‘heavy metaphysical light of a vanities’.<sup>550</sup> They share a fascination with light and shadow, ‘the nacrous (sic) pulsations’, as Ernst put it, ‘of chimerical flesh, like the bifid copulation of the sphinx’. Plath and Fini identify

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<sup>548</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Woman as Semiotic Object’, in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 310.

<sup>549</sup> Lynda Mead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>550</sup> Caws, ‘Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art’, p. 282.

woman with lustrous skin and pure white radiance: the acetylene virgin's skin is of a bright-golden luminosity ("Fever 103"); Lady Lazarus exudes brightness, her skin is as 'bright as a Nazi lampshade' (CP, 244); and Godiva is the White Goddess of love and death ("Ariel"). This physical luminosity has a verbal and visual impact. Fini's women, images of 'rayonnante du feminine', were inspired by statues in her hometown of Trieste where she spent her childhood. In "La Passagère", "La Serrure" and "Hécate", for example, as night transmutes into day, her protagonist appears unveiled from the stygian dark, glowing in white, unbending and serene. Fini's and Plath's female protagonists undertake this epiphanic journey, moving from one world to the next and from total darkness to liberating light. In Fini's "La Serrure" a goddess-like woman, adorned with flowers, emerges from a keyhole-shaped doorway into the light. The perception of the feminine 'comme clef symbolique universelle' conveys a freedom of spirit, a magical woman in keeping with Jung's notion of the soul as feminine – to man belongs the animus ('The man in my painting sleeps', says Fini).<sup>551</sup> A similar notion of liberation may be detected in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" where the Phoenix-like woman steps forward from the dark ('Out of the ash') and flies away in exaltation ('I rise with my red hair/ I eat men like air') (CP, 247).<sup>552</sup> The woman is transformed into a sort of heroic goddess, and her red hair is a potent metaphor for strength. To take another example, in "Ariel" the woman emerges from the stasis of darkness into the 'substanceless' blue: 'White/ Godiva, I unpeel – / Dead hands, dead stringencies', and then her body foams (CP, 239). Graves described Godiva as the White Goddess of love and death, Holda and hell.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 188.

<sup>552</sup> In a reading prepared for the BBC Plath introduced "Lady Lazarus" as 'a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first'; Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 294, note 198.

<sup>553</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 403.

Woman is caught up in the notion of change (the modes of representation); her identity is not fixed, but mutable and fluid, reminiscent, in many ways, of Kristeva's assertion that female creativity is sensitive to the rhythmical undulations of the body.<sup>554</sup> Variable identity is a striking feature of Plath's "Purdah" and "Fever 103" where certain aspects of Fini's doubling or multiplying of self-images – recurrent in paintings such as "La Fete secrete", "Le Double", "La Ligne d'ombre" and "Pour Sheridan le Fanu" – fit into Plath's notion of shifting identity. In the opening stanzas of "Purdah" the woman appears obedient and smiles, 'cross-legged,/ Enigmatical' (CP, 243). By stanza eight she is veiled from head to toe, a fetishistic object, 'a mute ideal'<sup>555</sup> She cannot speak: 'I breath, and the mouth// Veil stirs its curtain'. She is entrapped ('I am his. Even in his absence...'), historicised and incorporated within a biblical as well as cultural narrative. Secluded and closed-off from the outside world, she exists in a state of reverie, her body inert and passive. By the final image of the poem, however, the woman has been transformed into murderous Clytemnestra or Lilith – Fini's anti-Eve.

Likewise in "Fever 103" the female protagonist appears in a series of guises. She is a lantern whose head is a moon of Japanese paper, her skin bright and fiery red. She mutates into a camellia and spreads like a flower blooming and flowing out continuously in all directions. The blossoming and rounding of the speaker's body denotes a turning point, the heralding of a new beginning. In her final stage of metamorphosis, signifying the speaker's new centre of identity, she emerges like a 'pure acetylene virgin' (a carefully selected term, I feel, that is free of any connotations of the sexual). The phrase '[a]ll by myself I am a huge camellia' (CP, 232) articulates a sense of self-containment (or alienation). For Mary Harding the virgin goddess is

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<sup>554</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 234–63.

<sup>555</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Woman as Semiotic Object', p. 310.

‘one-in-herself’; virginity refers not to her physical state, but to her single mindedness.<sup>556</sup> The virgin in “Fever 103” signifies the change in the speaker’s identity, her new status. Hence, surrounded by roses, which are a mark of her femininity, she is presented as the germinating Virgin Goddess. One thinks of Fini’s “La Passagère” where a similar rose motif can be seen. Her protagonist is a strikingly beautiful young girl with a silvery white luminous body, pale round face and golden hair, who appears to possess all the powers of innocence and destruction.

In Plath’s “Ariel” the protagonist appears as white Godiva. The woman feels the need to undress and peel away the old layers of impurities: ‘And now I/ Foam to wheat, a glitter of sea’ (CP, 239). To put it yet another way, ‘she emerges [like the liminal Aphrodite] from foam, which is itself, like dew, between air and water’.<sup>557</sup> Again, parallels may be drawn with “Fever 103” where the pure acetylene virgin undresses layer by layer: ‘(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) –/ To Paradise’ (CP, 232). This transcendental experience or rite of passage is a simultaneous refining of body and spirit. There are similarities, I feel, between the terms ‘unpeel’ in “Ariel”, ‘unloose’ in “Purdah” and ‘dissolving’ in “Fever 103”. (We recognise these as code terms for liberation.) The act of dissolving tends toward a certain physical transmutation, an emotional assertion to break free from the gender specificity of the body that is the female as fetish or object. Rejection of the male is emphasised by way of a repetitive rhetorical device governing the poem’s final stanza (‘Not you, nor him// Not him, nor him’). In “Fever 103” the old whorish self is destroyed, and in its stead physical purity resurrected.

These poems remind us of Fini’s “La Passagère” with its similar denunciation of male sexuality. By ‘passagère’ Fini refers, in the first instance, to a rite of passage or other acts of liminality. The posture of the young girl resembles that of a deity. Her arms are lifted – a gesture

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<sup>556</sup> Mary Esther Harding, *Woman’s Mysteries Ancient and Modern* (London: Rider and Company, 1971), p. 125.

<sup>557</sup> Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, p. 146.

of omnipotence – and at her feet is a dragon which conveys ‘une jouissance charnelle’ – carnal pleasure.<sup>558</sup> She presides over the monstrous and tramples on her mythical victim. Her aetheric body, virginal and partially veiled with gossamer-like material, appears to float autonomously. The woman undergoes a moment of sudden revelation, and, like Plath’s acetylene virgin, overcomes the sexual (the dragon), experiencing a form of physical transcendence, a symbolic material and spiritual transformation that is both purifying and cauterising. Fini’s young woman and mythical creature recall the story of St George slaying the dragon, but instead of the powerful medieval depiction of the knightly soldier, a female warrior presides over the monster. It is important to point out that the male’s weaponry, his sword, is rendered ineffectual and is replaced by a white rose signifying that the feminine form, vested with intuitive magical powers, is enough to defeat the monster in a psychological form of warfare. It is again worth repeating that the surrealist ideology of female artists, including Varo and Carrington, celebrated the magical and intuitive powers of woman.

I have sought to demonstrate that Plath and Fini place at the centre of their works images of other women. They share a phantasmagoric vision of independent and triumphant femininity. The potent image of Fini’s “The Alcove: An Interior with Three Other Women” is of Carrington as woman the warrior, the epitome of power and autonomy. In her late poems Plath embraces the ideas often associated with female surrealism and incorporates various surrealist practices into her poetic dialogue. Besides the Finian motif of the double, the significance of chiaroscuro and the attribution of animal characteristics to humans, the themes of bodily exposure and luminosity mark out the female torso as a sign of physical and spiritual liberation. Thus, the Plathian woman who at first tends toward subservience, moves at the end toward subversion. There is a

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<sup>558</sup> Pierre Borgue, *Leonor Fini ou le théâtre de l’imaginaire: Mythes et symboles de l’univers finien* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1983), passim.

progression in Plath's poems from erotic muse and femme-enfant (the stereotypical male construction seen in her "Collage of Cold War Images"<sup>559</sup>) to priestess and goddess, from material reality to a higher level of being. This was partly for Plath the legacy of surrealist women, whose appropriation of myth and art to illustrate the transmutation of the female form left a strong impression on the young poet. Plath could admire Fini's hermetic existence and the passion and independence of a woman who had turned her back on marriage. She would also have agreed with Ernst's description of Fini as a woman of the sixth sense, a kind of occultist. The epitome of this latter woman is to be found in Fini's "L'Envers d'une Geographie". Translated it means the reverse of how something is laid out or positioned. In this case, it is the positioning of an entombed woman who promises "l'envers" of everything. She is endowed with the powers of reversal and transformation – death into life, darkness into light, night into day.

The human desire to revert to a mythical past marks out liminality as a 'realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a freedom to juggle with the factors of existence'.<sup>560</sup> However, although I have so far brought attention to the link between power and mythmaking in female surrealism and Plath's poetry, I would qualify this. Whereas the iconoclastic Fini could challenge social conventions by the way she chose to live, for Plath the act of subversion remained firmly in the area of her imagination. As the speaker in "The Jailer" remarks resignedly, 'I wish him dead or away./ That, it seems, is the impossibility'. Indeed, it is only through dreams and drug- or fever-induced hallucinations that customary roles and relationships can be reversed and reconfigured, as, for example, in "Fever 103". The delirious speaker yearns to 'dissolve' or revert to an original pure state. In a similar fashion "The Jailer" confronts and unburdens many anxieties of modern society associated chiefly with relationships and sexuality:

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<sup>559</sup> In Plath's collage the cut-out female figure consigned to the picture's periphery is no more than a 'painted doll', a physical attraction.

<sup>560</sup> Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 106.



My night sweats grease his breakfast plate.  
 The same placard of blue fog is wheeled into position  
 With the same trees and headstones.  
 Is that all he can come up with,  
 The rattler of keys?

I have been drugged and raped.  
 Seven hours knocked out of my right mind  
 Into a black sack  
 Where I relax, foetus or cat,  
 Lever of his wet dreams. (CP, 226)

The woman in “The Jailer” recognises her abject position. However, her night sweats, as in “Fever 103°”, symbolise overwhelming transformation, a point at which she assumes a more autonomous state. The feverishness arises, perhaps, from an infection or is alternatively psychogenic. The ‘fever trickles and stiffens in my hair’, she declares, as if sweating out or expurgating his lies (‘What have I eaten?/ Lies and smiles’.) Furthermore, delirium is possibly symptomatic of a drug-induced fever. In all of these cases, which may have been the root cause of her feverishness, the body undergoes struggle, expurgation and transference. ‘That being free’, she can, therefore, dream ‘of someone else entirely’ and her imagination completely opposes the jailer’s sexualised ‘wet dreams’. This is a marginal period, which, nevertheless, entirely transforms the most crucial aspects of the speaker’s whole existence. The naturally powerful attributes of the male are subdued and he becomes ‘[i]mpotent as distant thunder’. This emasculation is similar to Fini’s depiction of the dormant and reclining male. But the act of undoing, of ‘subversion’ in “The Jailer” – what may be further identified as ‘envers’ or reversal in Fini’s paintings – is deemed punishable.

Changes to the body during puberty, menstruation, gestation and parturition are irreversible, and each moment of transformation in a person’s sexual status leaves an indelible mark, a taint, so to speak, which from a Christian perspective has connotations of carnal

pleasure. Thus in *The Bell Jar* Esther defines sexual development as the central existential fact:

When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue.

Instead of the world being divided into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody, and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another.<sup>561</sup>

Esther's increasing obsession with relationships inclines her to differentiate crudely between people according to their sexual experience or lack of it. Once a person is sexually active, according to this young girl's moralistic viewpoint, he or she becomes impure. And in order to wash away this taint, Esther prescribes taking hot baths, equating this ablution to baptism:

I lay in that tub...for near on to an hour, and I felt myself growing pure again...I said to myself: 'Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure.'<sup>562</sup>

Esther longs to dissolve the layers of impurities and regress to a more innocent age – she remarks, tellingly, that she was only 'purely' happy before she was nine.<sup>563</sup> But this is the same futile desire for dissolution, undoing, or even rebirth, which we encounter in "Fever 103°" and "Lady Lazarus".

### **The Image of Fragmentation in Painting and Poetry**

The appeal of Fini's art for Plath was its projection of a decidedly female vision. In her later poems male surrealists (especially de Chirico) whose innovation, iconoclasm and dynamism had once proved such an inspiration, become targets of parody, as the poet exposes, through

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<sup>561</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 85.

<sup>562</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 21.

<sup>563</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 78. This is related not just to pre-menstrual 'purity', but also to a time when her father was still alive.

various images of fragmentation, the insecurities, anxieties and narcissism of male artists, their obsessions with self-expression, fame, immortality and control of the female subject. The relationship between artist and subject thus becomes a metaphor for relations in general (it is a case of art “copying from life” and so ‘compressed/ they’ve turned into each other’<sup>564</sup>). Formalist dismemberment, which challenges more conventional representations of women, is characteristically modernist: for instance, Rodin’s partial figures that imitate ruined fragments of antiquity; Brancusi’s elimination of facial features; Gaudier-Brzeska’s and de Chirico’s blank-faced statues; and Matisse’s limbless figures. In all these examples artists gradually sought to privilege form – with all its distortions of line, volume and size – over subject matter, while the underlying themes of dismemberment challenged the response of viewers to traditional depictions of beauty. In Plath’s take on physical fragmentariness the woman in “The Detective” and “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” plays the part of the subject – the sitter or perceived – and the male figure in each poem is equated with the self-glorifying painter or sculptor. The accusation is that narcissists view their distorted formalist techniques as channeling greater personal expressivity. The idea that these artists make of all their paintings portraits of the self corresponds with a prevailing view in poetry of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most notably, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Portrait” (1870) takes as its theme the death and immortalisation of a woman by her artist lover.<sup>565</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen’s discussion of this poem brings to light some interesting points apropos the relationship between the portraitist and female subject.<sup>566</sup> The dead woman in “The Portrait” is resurrected, re-imagined and reanimated by the gaze of the artist, who is, ostensibly, in awe of her painted beauty, but regards, narcissistically, the portrait as a reflection

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<sup>564</sup> This is quoted from Bishop’s “Poem”.

<sup>565</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems* (London: Dent, 1961), pp. 73–75.

<sup>566</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 117–21.

upon his own fame and immortality: ‘This is her picture as she was:/ It seems a thing to wonder on,/ As though mine image in the glass/ Should tarry when myself am gone’.<sup>567</sup>

If, however, Plath’s images of the fragmented body cast doubt on the artist’s altruism and healing capabilities, Ted Hughes, by comparison, makes some impressive claims for the sculptor, who, like the surgeon, wields a blade, and his power is such that the incisions he makes are ‘more a laying on of hands – a blessing – a caress – and a glorification’.<sup>568</sup> In making this statement Hughes had in mind Leonard Baskin’s woodcuts and especially “The Hanged Man”. The subject of Baskin’s art is the wound, and Hughes takes this to mean the artist’s obsession with cutting into the suffering body, and in healing the human casualties of a modern world. It is the artist who has salvaged the suffering ‘human form divine’ that had previously been the responsibility of religion. This corporeal art, though ubiquitous in modernism, is, in its highest form, also regenerative and redemptive, and so in Baskin’s drawings ‘the suppliant becomes Holy, and a Healer’.<sup>569</sup> Thus art is the locus of healing and the artist is the surgeon: ‘What religion once did is now, it appears, the work of an impoverished field hospital. And (Baskin’s) the Hanged Man, the century’s flayed victim, lies there on the operating table’.<sup>570</sup> In Plath’s poetry, however, this altruism turns to egotism, a vainglory, a self-glorification and, though Hughes sees the corpse as ‘*the aesthetic moment*’<sup>571</sup> from which beauty flows, it is in “Edge” an aestheticism that imagines a woman dead, rigid, resigned.

The fragmented-body metaphor in Plath’s poetry evokes, excites and perturbs the reader’s senses more than any other type of trope. Such corporeal figures, it has been argued,

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<sup>567</sup> Christina Rossetti comments on the artist’s obsessive narcissism in her poem “In an Artist’s Studio”: ‘...He feeds upon her face day and night/ And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,/.../ Not as she is, but as she fills his dream’.

<sup>568</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 97.

<sup>569</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 93.

<sup>570</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 96.

<sup>571</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 97.

‘grow out of [the] body, the needs of [the] body, and their vitality for the reader lies in the needs of [the] body’.<sup>572</sup> Bodily metaphors in art are most intimate because they incorporate human emotion and disjointedness has been noted in the drawings of psychotic patients.<sup>573</sup> The premise, therefore, of this generalised hypothesis is that images in painting and literature of bodily fragmentation may be understood as resulting from a universal psychosis, a psychological malaise that can only express itself through metaphor. In Plath’s poems of the 1960s the potency of the body metaphor is unmistakable, but I do not think that it merely functions as an extension of the self. Rather, the motif of fragmentation<sup>574</sup> incorporated in her verse casts a critical light on the formalist practices of modernists such as de Chirico and Matisse and their tendency to deconstruct the female sitter. This theme, for instance, is identifiable in “Lady Lazarus” where the woman’s body is systematically dismembered: the right foot (a ‘paperweight’), the knees, nose, eyes, teeth, hands, hair and heart. She is not perceived as a whole, nor does she operate as a complete entity. A similar disjointed image of beauty is conjured up in “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.”, which begins:

The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven.  
 The microbes cannot survive it.  
 They are departing in their transparent garments, turned aside  
 From the scalpels and the rubber hands.  
 The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful.  
 The body under it is in my hands.  
 As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese white... .  
 How I admire the Romans —  
 Aqueducts, the Baths of Caracalla, the eagle nose!  
 The body is a Roman thing.  
 It has shut its mouth on the stone pill of repose.  
 It is a statue the orderlies are wheeling off.

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<sup>572</sup> Robert Rogers, *Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 85.

<sup>573</sup> Rogers, *Metaphor*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>574</sup> Interestingly, the image of fragmentation is further apparent in Plath’s paintings. “Nine Female Figures” (c. 1950–1951), for example, delimits the nude woman’s features – her face, breasts, crotch, mouth and eyes – to blocks of differing sizes and colours. The artist is captivated, in the sense of intrigued, by the reducibility of woman’s wholeness to mere aesthetic signs of individual body parts.

I have perfected it.  
 I am left with an arm or a leg,  
 A set of teeth, or stones  
 To rattle in a bottle and take home,  
 And tissue in slices—a pathological salami.  
 Tonight the parts are entombed in an icebox  
 Tomorrow they will swim  
 In vinegar like saints' relics.  
 Tomorrow the patient will have a clean, pink plastic limb. (CP 170–71)

The surgeon in the operating room ‘hack[s]’, like a sculptor, at the patient, whose featureless body, ‘[a] lump of Chinese white’, is gradually and skillfully shaped into the form of a Roman ‘pale marble’ statue. The naked and mutilated figure, or ‘statue’ – the inert and dependent state of the anaesthetised patient – whose form reflects the surgeon’s skills, is in many ways reminiscent of Magritte’s “Attempting the Impossible” (1928), a painting of a suited artist gazing intently at a nude female subject.<sup>575</sup> Her body is perfectly proportioned, except for the left arm which, as the position of the artist’s brush suggests, remains to be completed. However, he is not interested in depicting her physical completeness. Rather, self-referentially, he paints himself in the picture as imagining her into existence and, like Rossetti’s portraitist, sees reflected his own work and aesthetic values. Physical deformity or imperfection is, paradoxically, at the heart of a perfectly complete work of art in the same way that the speaker in “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.”, oblivious to the imperfection of his work – a body missing a limb – declares of his subject: ‘I have perfected it’. The poem’s intention may thus be summarised: a macabre fascination with the body’s internal organs, which gives rise to a profusion of colour against an antiseptic white background (‘I worm and hack in a purple wilderness’); the incongruously aesthetic description of the innards (‘This is the lung-tree./ These orchids are splendid.../...The blood is a sunset. I admire it’); the image of a body fragmented into lungs, heart, arm, leg and teeth; and the depiction of the surgeon as artist basking in the glow of accomplishment (‘I am the sun, in my

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<sup>575</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Portable Magritte* (New York: Universe, 2002), p. 6.

white coat,/ Gray faces, shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers’) (CP, 171).

Further images of eradication reemerge in “The Detective” where questions are asked of the disappearance of a woman. The setting of this mystery is the ‘valley of death’, a surrealistic landscape echoing to the sound of a train that ‘shrieks’ ‘like souls on hooks’. Plath’s oneiric vision of a train crossing a barren landscape corresponds to the steam engine motif in several of de Chirico’s and of Magritte’s paintings, while the tenebrous interior of the house (‘There is the sunlight, playing its blades’) and the murder mystery plot are characteristically film noir. Chiaroscuro speaks both of her ‘imaginative identity’<sup>576</sup> and of the ‘mysteriously-shadowed squares in a de Chirico painting (‘the long shadows cast by unseen figures’.<sup>577</sup>) But what is the ‘killer’ guilty of? After all, [t]here is no body in the house....’: ‘This is a case without a body./ The body does not come into it at all’ (CP, 209). There is no murder weapon: no arrow, no knife, no poison. She is not a flesh-and-blood person but an idea, and the speaker knows well the type of man whose mind conjures up the woman’s fate. Her image is thus confined and he, anxious and a little conscience-stricken, is unable ‘to face’ his fingers, ‘those egotists’ ‘tamping’ her into the wall, ‘[a] body into a pipe’. In the end, however, he surveys his work and ‘smiles’ with a sense of accomplishment.

If art is, traditionally, about the gratification of male perception of the woman subject, then, reciprocally, it is about the ‘pleasure a heterosexual woman has in being seen by a man as beautiful’.<sup>578</sup> Many mythological allusions to women and many acts of self-adoration are to be found in poetry, and well-known among these are, of course, Apuleius’s *Psyche*,<sup>579</sup> Milton’s *Eve*

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<sup>576</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 212–18.

<sup>577</sup> *Journals*, p. 385.

<sup>578</sup> Steiner, *The Trouble With Beauty*, p. 34.

<sup>579</sup> Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1994).

staring at her reflection in a pool<sup>580</sup> and Madeline engrossed by her own image and captivating beauty in Keats' "Eve of St Agnes".<sup>581</sup> However, it is necessary to stress that in the case of Plath's poetry this action represents, fundamentally, a case of conformity and the craving of attention rather than vanity. The woman of "In Plaster" is, so we are led to believe, the archetypal 'real saint' – a divine white figure 'reflecting the sun', statuesque and adored. But the speaker pours scorn on her other self, whom she accuses of being without a personality; she is an empty vessel, 'a vase of not very valuable porcelain' (CP, 159). And yet the woman transforms herself into this feminine ideal on account of the fact that she invites his (the perceiver's) attention. She is responsive to a predominantly male audience, and feels the necessity to manifest certain bodily signs, which she believes are ideals of beauty – particularly her inertness ('She lay in bed with me like a dead body') and muteness ('I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer'.)

In "Lady Lazarus" the suicidal woman becomes a subject of deathly fascination for the observer, and she herself derives not sexual gratification from the experience, but some form of pleasure from the attention which she garners. 'I am your opus', she declares. 'It's the theatrical' which appeals; she is the subject of dark fascination for the voyeuristic 'peanut-crunching crowd', which '[s]hoves in to see// Them unwrap me hand and foot—/ The big striptease'. Her near-death experiences, the three attempts to take her life, inspire a perverse gratification and

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<sup>580</sup> Eve is mesmerised by her own image: '.../ As I bent down to look, just opposite,/ A shape within the watry gleam appeerd/.../It started back, but pleas'd I soon returnd,/ Pleas'd it returnd as soon with answering looks/ Of sympathie and love, there I had fixt/ Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire'; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, eds Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book iv, lines 460–66.

<sup>581</sup> Whilst the saintly and captivating Madeline sleeps, Porphyro plays for her on his lute an 'ancient ditty' called "La Belle Dame sans mercy". When she awakes, he declares: "'My Madeline! Sweet dreamer! Lovely bride!/"Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?/.../“Ah, silver shrine here will I take my rest'; John Keats, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems* (Otley: Woodstock, 2001), p. 102, lines 334–37. For a discussion of 'aesthetic import' in literature in general, and Keats' "Eve of St Agnes" in particular, see Steiner, *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature*, pp. 59–67.



pride: ‘Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well.//...I guess you could say I’ve a call’. It is the act of ‘dying’, a present participle, a continuous process, even a performance. And concomitant to every failed suicide attempt are the doctors, nurses and crowds of inquisitive or concerned spectators. It is this commotion which perhaps she craves. Likewise, the act of killing oneself is for her an aesthetic calling or poetic *métier*, perpetuating ever further this melodrama. As subject or opus the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” places upon herself a monetary value:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
 For the hearing of my heart —  
 It really goes.  
 And there is a charge, a very large charge  
 For a word or a touch  
 Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. ... (CP, 245–46)

The female is a subject for the ‘eyeing’ crowd, but what draws these people? It is not just sexual curiosity. Certain things in life have this power to captivate, like works of art, theatrical performances, or, since the Middle Ages, the miraculous promise of reliquaries. The speaker imagines parts of her body or clothes as relics, but she acknowledges her role and culpability in this melodrama. She carries a scar as a permanent reminder of her suicide attempts, and performs to the crowd and feels justified to ‘charge’ them for the privilege of watching her. Furthermore, she remarks, self-reflexively, upon the power of the spoken or written ‘word’ that is born of such experiences. The female speaker in “Lady Lazarus” recognises her value as a subject, ‘[t]he pure gold baby’, and so willfully contributes to her captivation.

As we have seen, Plath’s poems are, in certain regards, an exploration of aesthetic constructs, namely, the position of the woman as a subject and the role of the artist in shaping her

identity and destiny. In “Edge” this relationship witnesses an interesting development. The solidified figure of a dead woman expresses the aesthetic creativity of the sculptor, who, though absent, makes his presence felt:

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga...(CP, 272)

It is a further example of the artist who makes of his work a portrait of the self. In his eyes the woman’s ‘[b]ody wears the smile of accomplishment’, meaning that this concretised and perfected construction of beauty, as achieved through death, reflects his skills as a sculptor. In this way, the perceiver projects himself upon her image and, in so doing, displaces her identity. In “Edge” one may detect two voices: the first is the spectre of the artist, and the second that of the female subject, who exposes this necrophilic ‘illusion’. The art of death – serene, immaculate and inscrutable, cold as sculpted stone – transcends the pains of life, but, nevertheless, this is merely an illusion, a ‘necessity’ of Greek myth and the painless and reified beauty depicted by artists.

The dichotomy of reality and illusion is evident in earlier Plath poems. “In Plaster”, for instance, a differentiation is made between ‘the new absolutely white person’ – a woman constituted of ‘unbreakable’ material, inanimate and ‘immortal’ in appearance like the sculpture of antiquity – and ‘the old yellow one’, the colour signifying, in sharp contrast to the coldness of white, an organic and highly emotional state of being.<sup>582</sup> This opposition runs counter to the Aristotelian principle which holds that physical appearance is a true reflection of human nature. Hence, in “In Plaster” the speaker’s outward appearance, her ‘tidiness’, ‘calmness’, ‘patience’

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<sup>582</sup> The yellow colour also suggests age, illness and decay.

and saintliness, is at odds with her temperament – ‘She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy’. If, furthermore, she were to die, she imagines herself entirely petrified, encased from head to toe in plaster like an Egyptian mummy, which wears the painted and inscrutable face of a pharaoh. A physiognomic incongruity exists, again, between the beautiful mask and the ‘mud and water’ of which the mummy is made. What, therefore, constitutes beauty in this poem? It is, primarily, the durability and impassiveness of ‘whiteness’, characteristics generally associated with sculpted saintly figures (icons) and pharaonic masks. The beautiful and ideal is stone-smooth and ‘caressable’ like Greek sculpture.<sup>583</sup> Hence, in “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” the plastic art analogy opposes the density and perdurability of sculpted marble to the ephemeral and transitory state of the human body. In addition, while the solidity of marble is perhaps representational of the timelessness of classical mythology, the preserved human parts are denotative of the real and organic. In the final assessment, the ephemeral wilderness of the female protagonist in “Edge” is swept away by a sense of creative order, stillness and composure. There is, however, a degree of resignation that equates the art of death with stillness, immobility and the ideal of beauty.

## Conclusion

I have explained in this chapter how Plath’s enduring interest in the visual arts warrants a reading of her work as focused upon the different modes of seeing objects and the human, predominantly female, form. This type of visual poetics takes as its subject the gaze of the artist or beholder and the relationship which each assumes in relation to the sitter. What is especially fascinating are the motifs of modernist art in Plath’s poems, most obviously the images of bodily disfigurement. However, this idea of artistic cross-fertilisation is not randomly conceived. Plath’s college paintings of fragmentation and distortion are testimony to specifically modernist

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<sup>583</sup> Pound, *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska*, p. 97.

influences, whilst her art-poems reflect a strong interest in surrealism. Moreover, Plath and Fini were compared because there existed in their work striking ideological resemblances.

In her poetry Plath engages in what Gombrich terms the game of ‘making and matching’,<sup>584</sup> that is to say, she places herself in the position of artist and beholder, in order to expose their share in a mutually inclusive act of creativity. It is this desire to observe from all angles the complex nature of imitation and representation which, I have consistently argued, makes Plath’s approach to poetry so similar to Bishop’s. Hence, in their writing the artist makes forms of animate and inanimate phenomena, whilst the beholder strives to match what he sees to what he knows and previously experienced. Gombrich has stated: ‘All culture and all communication depend on the interplay between expectation and observation, the waves of fulfillment, disappointment, right guesses, and wrong moves that make up our daily life’.<sup>585</sup> The beholder looks, for instance, at sculpted female forms and searches in his mind for standard representations of the feminine ideal, and on discovering these, he again experiences the sensual pleasures of viewing and caressing the smooth stone of classical figures. These sculptures are everywhere in Plath’s poems and elicit most from readers the sense of touch. They are, moreover, the material representations of the mythical gods and goddesses, which feminists argue, she appropriates and reconfigures. This is true in certain respects, but Plath’s meta-commentary seeks to explain as much as to subvert the mechanics of art and, in so doing, she uncovers the misogyny to which, in our search for the ideal, beautiful and pleasurable, we often turn a blind eye. For Plath, ultimately, the idolisation of the female form by male artists permeates all aspects of society, culture and language. Importantly, in this creative process of making and matching she incorporates a further component, namely the sitter. This is the female

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<sup>584</sup> Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 157.

<sup>585</sup> Gombrich, *Art ad Illusion*, p. 53.

muse, the subject of the narcissist.

Plath regards attentively landscapes and human subjects, paintings and sculptures, and I return again to the essay “Context” in order to illustrate the similarities of her ideas to Bishop’s aesthetic statements. First, Plath asserts that her poetry concerns ‘the night thoughts of a surgeon’, a figure of significance, who connotes, usually, the painter or sculptor, creator or destroyer, healer or egotist. She is preoccupied with understanding his view of women. Secondly, Plath describes her poetry as imitating ‘a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark’. These words, in their literal sense, find correspondence in Bishop’s poetry of ‘sense-perception’: the sentient being drawn to the materiality and concept of things, aware of his position within a context or a space, and coming into being through knowledge accumulated from birth. Thirdly, Plath states that she attaches words to the images she sees: ‘the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree’.<sup>586</sup> Her poems are about the instant of perception, the arrested natural image. In observing external phenomena, the subject gathers, projects, documents and recollects, and part of this psychological development involves language, which further determines how the senses are given literal form. In Plath’s poetry, it may be concluded, the individual considers and orders his or her world and contemplates what can be known for certain about objects which are present or absent.

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<sup>586</sup>

Plath, ‘Context’, in in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

## Conclusion

This study has established essential connections between the poetry of Bishop and Plath and avoided their critical pigeonholing as either a reticent or Confessional poet respectively. The objective versus subjective was deemed a misleading confrontation because both writers could be critiqued collectively in terms of how they explored different aspects of visual poetics. I defined visual poetics in relation to Bishop as encompassing strategies of de-historicism and non-symbolism, which emphasised, fundamentally, the material and tangible objects of real experience, the primacy of the material world over the spiritual. Bishop defined reality in poetry as conveying the immediate responses of the sentient being to his or her surroundings. Indeed what drew Plath and other contemporary writers to Bishop was her apolitical and close-to-the-bone aestheticism. As a writer she gravitated toward real experiences and was fascinated by the portrayal of all things animate or inanimate. Her attentive eye turned to the objects themselves as they appeared. She described in detail the structure of the map, the battered appearance of the fish, the consequential reality of the rooster and the subliminal meaning of the moose. Bishop's objects were exposed to the probing eye through both physical representation and mental reflection. Certainly, she was interested in the mechanics of her sense perceptions, preoccupied with the nature of reality and imagination and anticipatory of the responses and expectations of readers to language, often allied mimetically to a work of art, whose objects and symbols they read and absorbed. Semantic and semiotic enquiries abound in her work.

Bishop's interest in cognition – and the reason perhaps why Gombrich held so much fascination for her – centred on the 'linguistics of the visual image' and the psychology of

perception.<sup>587</sup> She was interested in points of equivalence between painting and literature, and what constituted authentic depiction in either medium. Do pictures conjure up reality? And in literature is duplication, or excessive description, the basis of realism? She queried authentic depiction, evaluated according to individual artistic intent or universal interpretation based upon habitual ways of seeing the world. In the latter case style, or paradigm, became a frame of reference in the appraisal of realism. If, therefore, for Bishop Primitive art denoted a unique and more personal perspective, style, according to “In Prison”, suggested conflicting artistic choices, which imposed themselves forcefully and bewilderingly upon the intellect. This was the reason why Bishop rejected foregrounded style and formalised representation in favour of language that was direct and transparent. Once the array of historic influences had been negated, one was left a self removed from political and religious contexts, determined, like Crusoe marooned on his island, to rediscover uniquely the senses and to question existence. In fact, certain Bishop poems, such as “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, deal directly with issues of periodic style, namely the contradistinction in art between the classic ideal of historical and moral associations and increasing forms of self-expression. Bishop’s fascination with painting is most revealing of her philosophy. She searched for a life less chaotic and found that Primitive art, in particular, depicted, more than anything else, existence in its purest form. She sought to reproduce in lyrical detail the uncomplicated nature of humanity as observed in paintings. Even her drawings of ordinariness, featuring uncluttered rooms filled with common household objects like teapots, stoves, vases, tables and candelabra, bore testimony to her search for a less complex version of life.

It was necessary in this study to stress the de-historicising strategies at the heart of Bishop’s visual objectification. Most notably, “In Prison” articulated a breach with history by

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<sup>587</sup> Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, pp. 7, 10.

means of the formal propensities of writing, which enabled poetry to appear as ‘fragments’ of ideas posed on a wall. This idea was related to Altieri’s conceptualisation of literature as differentiating between immediate experience (pre-reflective) and the symbolic. Such a philosophy of knowledge further articulated Bishop’s distrust of historicised or mediated language that weighed upon poetry. Rather, the role of the writer was earnest observer and vivid recorder of the external world from direct experience, which gave rise to the imagination. Octavio Paz’s “Objects and Apparitions,” based on a Joseph Cornell assemblage and translated by Bishop, sums up perfectly her enduring fascination with visual art and the power of objectifying language. Cornell’s carefully constructed wooden boxes containing miscellaneous fragments present objects ‘caged’ within the four corners of a miniature box. For each observer the assembled fragments lend themselves to a differing interpretation. In “Objects and Apparitions” Paz’s description of Cornell’s ‘[h]exahedrons of wood and glass,/ scarcely bigger than a shoebox’ reads like an objectifying agenda: objects are ‘[m]onuments to every monument’, and hence self-reflexive or self-contained; they do not seek to go beyond their material existence. The observer of the box frantically searches for absolute meaning, but in vain. In “Objects and Apparitions” Paz’s philosophy of meaning mirrors that of Bishop in other respects: both admired the relativism of Cornell’s assemblages (the ‘tales of the time’) and the way in which opposing objects contained within boxes avoid a recognisable context that is suggestive of universal meaning. This ordering puts ‘the laws/ of identity through hoops’. The conventional process of identification, which Cornell overturns, is at the heart of Bishop’s “Seascape” where the context of a celestial mangrove island allows symbols and spiritual meaning to proliferate. This is similarly true of the symbolic significance of the tapestry in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”, while the equivocal scene in a “Miracle for Breakfast” leads us to



assume that the coffee and crumbs are symbolic of the Eucharist. Cornell's transgression of the process of identification creates 'incoherent fragments' that constitute a break with history or, as Paz states, are 'opposite of history'. Context was a particular concern of Bishop who, as we saw in "Miami", tried to purge as much as possible any mythical subtext. For Paz, moreover, objects are ordered with the eye of the artist firmly fixed on their surface reality, so much so that they materialise as if from no emotional source. This is the potency of a language that allows the poet to remain peripheral and yet consciously connected to the order of words and objects. And while Bishop chooses not to deal directly with emotion (the non-visible), which remains below the surface, she does not believe in the existence of good poetry that is completely detached.

Of course, Bishop's individuality is not one we readily associate with Confessional poetry. Rather, the alienated self articulates general human concerns. It is poetry of 'sense-perception' that also manages to convey feelings of deep anxiety. On the issue of poetic intention and justification, Bishop discovered a satisfying answer in the words of John Berryman. When asked in an interview (1968) why he was a poet (VA, 75.1), Berryman quoted from the German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann by way of Kierkegaard. Berryman maintained that the question which should preoccupy the mind of a writer was not 'why (do I) write?' but rather 'for whom?' In his opinion, you write not for prestige or money: 'It's just something you *do*'. An excerpt from this interview was included in Bishop's notebook of the 1960s, and at the top of the quotation she handwrote the word 'Why?' For her this question has relevance to all aspects of life, and in a fragment-poem of this period concerning a plane crash which had claimed the lives of women and children, Bishop states: '.... I kept wondering/ why we expose ourselves to these...dangers'//...why do we undertake/ these terrifying and cruel trips & why did I come here'. The interrogative 'why' remains unanswered and reminds us of the Berryman interview,

though in Bishop's poem these questions relate to the uncertainty of human existence in general. Hence, her persona either subsists alienated and deracinated or belongs to a community ordered by the guiding principles and norms of society. The theme of conformity is further explored in "Hymn to the Virgin" and "A Miracle for Breakfast". As we have seen, the symbolism of Christian art helps to confirm, shape and give substance to the numinous. However, according to Bishop, such an unknown entity (or hidden god) can never be revealed, and it is the role of the poet to underscore human speculation and search for knowledge. This lack or absence (*le néant*) is achieved by means of the formal strategies of her poetry, a sense of mystery – equated with the spiritual – invoked through the real and tangible. Such an inverted realism appears familiar and recognisable, but, because of its ordinariness, the reader begins to intellectualise an absence in meaning that exists beyond its materiality.

In its most basic form Bishop's poetry seeks, in the words of Randall Jarrell, to communicate 'extremely complicated systems of thought'.<sup>588</sup> Plath recognised the strategies of Bishop's craft and artistry, a poetic orientated toward aspects of seeing and meaning in literature and painting. Further still, Bishop presented an alternative voice in female writing. The two poets were considered within the context of the female literary canon and whether the objective language of visual poetics could be regarded as being at odds with women's writing. It was argued that there has been a tendency to devalue poetry perceived as lacking emotion and detaching itself from the real experiences of women. However, in spite of efforts to draw Bishop within a specifically female tradition, her poetry has continued to resist any forms of literary categorisation. She believed that the genderless or androgynous voice of objectifying language empowered a woman writer because it liberated her from the yoke of cultural forces and expectations, which she was categorised as either submitting to (traditionalist) or resisting

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<sup>588</sup> Jarrell, 'Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry': 705.

(feminist). Bishop's poetry went against the grain and its de-historicist strategies called attention to the common and irresistible urge among female writers to appropriate, personalise and subvert history. She felt no such compulsion. Plath could appreciate the merits of a writer such as Bishop, whose formal strategies crafted poems which stood in stark contrast to what she described as poems of 'shifting philosophy'.<sup>589</sup> This poetic drew attention to women's attitude to history and, though it has been generally accepted that myth, for instance, has the power to reveal 'the unconscious representation ... [and] true experiences of mankind',<sup>590</sup> Bishop's objectification underscored the fact that the enigmas of the past could impose themselves harmfully upon the individual will. The real self, a tragic figure searching but forever failing to find answers to fundamental questions, was central to Bishop's work. She was especially critical of women writers who, unlike their male counterparts, chose to limit their subject matter to domesticity and heightened subjectivity. She recoiled from the 'curse' of the poetry of 'personality'.<sup>591</sup>

Attention was also paid to the changing face of Bishop criticism. Initial studies focused predominantly on her technical accuracy. Conversely, Rich's reading of Bishop's writing extolled the virtues of poems she believed insinuated honest concerns about female sexuality and marginality and criticised other poems because of their impenetrability and inaccessibility. In the essay 'The Eye of the Outsider' (1983) Rich even remarked that she felt repelled by Bishop's early work because she found it 'intellectualized to the point of obliquity'.<sup>592</sup> And in order to reposition Bishop within a female tradition, she suggested 'new ways of entering her work', one of which was to read a lesbian subtext to her poetry. Rich looked for and found 'encodings and

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<sup>589</sup> Plath, "Context", in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92.

<sup>590</sup> Neumann, *Amor and Psyche*, p. 65.

<sup>591</sup> *One Art*, p. 13.

<sup>592</sup> Rich, 'The Eye of the Outsider', p. 125.

obscurities'.<sup>593</sup> Her reading of Bishop was, however, equally revealing of her own prejudice against white middle-class heterosexuals and the male canon. In fact, Rich's exploration of woman-to-woman relationships and her controversial suggestion that creativity was chiefly sustained by female experience differed from Bishop, who did not insist on her femaleness, but, rather, advocated a neutral language that was precise and direct in expression. Rich subscribed, arguably, to a separatist, specifically female ideology, while Bishop favoured an androgynous all-inclusive poetic. Moreover, Rich's lesbian reading of Bishop's work positioned the poet as an 'outsider', choosing to intimate or cloak sexuality. Nevertheless, this stereotypically feminist argument betrayed Rich's own bias and did not take into account Bishop's poetic intention, which was intrinsically objectifying.

In truth, Bishop did not totally shy away from exploring subjects of a personal nature in her unpublished work. The archive provided a more comprehensive insight into her writing output. As evidenced in fragment-poems – predominately from the 1930s and 1940s – she wrote about relationships, but was fastidious in her choice of material for publication, and in most cases these works remained unpublished, considered too personal in detail and betraying a degree of sentimentality which Bishop was not comfortable with. Of course, she was less favourably inclined toward poetry purely centred on the self or, to borrow Plath's term, 'ego circling'. In this respect Rich's idea that Bishop projected in her verse a 'freeing up' of sexuality is true to an extent. It was, however, interesting to consider that, apart from a few poems of the 1950s in which a lesbian subtext could possibly be read, the issue of intimate relationships never resurfaced in Bishop's published work. If it ever existed, the subject was completely abandoned. This seems odd if we are to take up Rich's argument that Bishop should now be counted as part of a feminist, even lesbian, tradition.

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<sup>593</sup> Rich, 'The Eye of the Outsider', p. 125.

The summation of Bishop's aesthetics draws together her profound interest in the accumulation of knowledge a posteriori or a priori, either through empirical enquiry or historical conditioning. Plath followed in the literary tradition of writing poems about poetry and admired Bishop's formal strategies which extended beyond mere politicisation, in order to reflect upon the act of envisioning: an individual's emotional response to the external world either shaped by direct experience of objects contemplated and memories of places recollected, or coloured by symbolism and the various inspirations derived from history. This poetic constellation suggested the possibilities and limitations of art imitating reality. Plath acknowledged the merit of Bishop's craft and, in so doing, rejected any notion that this form of aestheticism was, in Kristeva's sense of the word, esoteric and socially 'harmless'. Fundamentally, it has an essential value relative to the experiences of the individual. And, importantly, aesthetic strategies place greater emphasis on emotional response to the environment than the details of personal intimacy. Clearly, both Plath and Bishop adopted a particular take on the world around them based upon their own unique experiences, and although Plath's mythical appropriation was a key difference to Bishop's objectification, their poetic remained rooted in similar non-utilitarian ideology.

In ordering the physical world the poet aimed to strike the right emotional balance – Plath too believed that excessive subjectivity distorted reality.<sup>594</sup> She was consciously aware of the need to write poetry which was neither too self-absorbed nor completely self-effacing. But, as has been consistently argued, Plath could reflect soberly upon the ineluctable qualities of myth, and remained suspicious of and, ultimately, resigned to some of its negative functions. The essence of Plathian aesthetics was laid bare in such poems as "On the Decline of Oracles", "The Death of Myth-Making" and "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay". In this series of poems, written in the late 1950s, she explored the function of myth and, though she acknowledged its power to rouse

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<sup>594</sup> *Journals*, pp. 120–21.

the imagination, she remained ambivalent toward its basic value. Plath did see her volatile emotions as intrinsically feminine, but she could, as revealed in her journals, be self-critical of too much subjectivity. She cited the ‘taut...spare...distilled intensities’ and ‘lyric clarity and purity’ of writers such as Louis Untermeyer, e.e cummings and Elinor Wylie, as notable stylistic influences.<sup>595</sup> There were times when ‘diagnostic’ observation and description were more creative; metaphor could prove overwhelming.

The approach of this study has been to resist relying too heavily on Plath’s biography, as this often leads to expectations and assumptions which obscure other aspects of her work. I also examined Plath criticism that generally regarded less her poetry of technique, and used ‘painterly’ metaphors to describe the visual attributes of her poems in order to derogate their aestheticism and – it was believed – emotional detachment. Plath’s true voice, some critics have asserted, emerged in later poems that were more feminine in their orientation. There was a tendency to ignore what Plath had stated were the aesthetic principles behind the emotional force of her work. Moreover, myth in her poetry was revealed as having a dual purpose: it connected and accentuated the poet’s emotional state and enabled her to be peripheral in terms of personal identity, place and circumstances. (The choice of myth as metaphor amounts to a profoundly intimate act and one of which, as we have seen, Bishop was very suspicious). The particularly striking imagery of “Fever 103°” reveals its emotional intent. However, the metaphorical comparisons in this poem, at times grossly magnified and wildly disproportionate to Plath’s subject matter, tend to take the reader immediately away from a recognisable reality or an objectified truth. Hence even the speaker’s bout of sickness takes on biblical proportions. But what is also apparent in this poem is a voice coming to terms with an imagination that has the power to gather shape around an emotional core. This is the poet’s mind actively, even

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<sup>595</sup> *Journals*, p. 88.

frantically (to take up the metaphor of feverishness), acknowledging the palliative properties of mythical and religious characters, as she rises ever further into the imagination. In the final assessment the poet's voice in "Words" is resigned and despondent: metaphors are in fact 'riderless' and ineffective.

The study argued, furthermore, the appeal to Plath of surreal aesthetics, especially Fini's female figures, which represented an appropriation and reconfiguration of mythical stories. Most importantly, for a poet increasingly conscious of the politics of gender, liminality presented a vision of empowerment that was alternative to the conventional – and at times misogynistic – depiction of the woman in male surrealism. However, this more positive imagery of the female in Plath's later poetry was counterbalanced by increasingly negative bodily images. There was a common leitmotif of fragmentation that drew on modern art. Plath delves into the principles of aestheticism and in particular those relating to female physical appearance. Masculine appraisal of feminine beauty conforms to ideas on correspondence explored in Bishop's poetry. It was discussed how in poems such as "In the Waiting Room" human – indeed female – identity is shaped according to habitual forms of representation. In Plath, moreover, ways of seeing reinforce conventions of correspondence. Put simply, what women regard as standards of femaleness exist in the images created by other people, specifically men. In this social (symbolic) order the definition of female beauty is predominately male-orientated. Hence in Plath's poetry the modern depiction of a woman can be a classic ideal, a Roman or Greek stone figure, statuesque, but disfigured. The poet seizes upon certain indubitable facts. First, what women consider the ideal of female beauty – the 'perfected' woman of "Edge" – is a reaffirmation of how men regard the female form. Secondly, formalistic images of this kind establish unmistakably the creative presence of the artist at the heart of any painting or sculpture

of the female subject. Nevertheless, the woman may be complicit in this act of narcissism, since she is a consenting sitter, just as the speaker in “Conversation Among the Ruins” ‘sit(s)/Composed’. Plath explored the position of the female as a subject of the artist – the ‘egotist’, or ‘Lord of the mirrors’ (“Purdah”) – in “The Surgeon at 2.00 a.m.”. Her protagonist accepts this concept of feminine beauty, which is held up as the ideal, an aestheticism that imagines the woman as pure white, durable and timeless, untouched by the unpleasantness of parturition. In “Edge” each child is petrified and ‘folded’ into the woman’s body – art in western culture is rarely about the act of childbirth. Whatever profound and enduring pains she may feel, whether physical or psychological (‘Her blacks crackle and drag’), is of little consequence to the artist. However, we may ask, is this woman compliant or resigned? In “Edge” a sense of resignation prevails; the female sitter’s emotions – reflected in the natural and organic imagery of the last two stanzas – have no bearing on physical beauty as defined by male artists – ‘this is the kingdom you bore me to’ (CP, 76).

In Plath’s poetry the depiction of the female body is firmly rooted in the tradition of male artistic practices. The discussion of this aspect of her work formed part of the broader definition of visual poetics, which revealed Plath’s and Bishop’s general interest in the modes of perception and interpretation. Their poetry demonstrates how authentic experience and individual vision can be formalised and modified by historical data, not least symbols, myth and religious conventions. For Bishop the objective truth forms the basis of art, although the ineffectual pursuit of reproduction or verbal replication – mere facsimile, even if possible – proves a hollow achievement. Poetry, therefore, requires a language that is both precise and, conceptually, indeterminate. Plath believed, similarly, in the secular world of sensual observations, but was adamant that too much personal detail in poetry was unnecessary – there is need for a creative



and fictionalising language to mediate real experiences. However, the poet who adopts the latter approach always runs the risk of appearing to exaggerate emotions. In Plath's and Bishop's poetry, finally, the definition of physical reality and imagination can take on a multiplicity of forms, dependent upon how the self determines its position and identity either in relation to its immediate surroundings, or by means of the cultural and historical contexts made available by the greater community.

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