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Elizabeth Bishop and The Life of Her Poetics

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INTRODUCTION

Since her death in 1979, Elizabeth Bishop's legacy has remained enlivened by what seem to be the inherent differences in reading her poetry. The range of Bishop criticism that has come forward since the early 1980s has widened the view by which readers come to understand and speculate about her poetry. Appreciated by friends and fellow poets throughout her poetic career, Bishop did not receive full universal fame until the publication of posthumous biographies and criticism;[1] works that drew connections between her life and poetry (an act of introspection that Bishop actively avoided in her early work) subsequently opened a window of opportunity for Bishop's work to forever squirm (yet still be read) beneath critics' conjecture.

In contrast to Elizabeth Bishop's relatively small body of work (Bishop only published four collected works in her lifetime, *North & South (1946), A Cold Spring (1956), Questions of Travel (1965), Geography III (1976),* each printed about a decade later than the next), its criticism is extensive and varied in kind. What began shortly after Bishop's death as a distinctly feminist critique about "outsiderhood"[2] from Adrienne Rich in her article "The Eye of the Outsider: the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," soon became a biographical turn in criticism towards what could be "uncovered" by that which Bishop chose to keep to herself. With the emergence of what has been called the "confessional poetics" of *Geography III,* critics became infatuated with what she had "disclosed" to the public through poetry. It was also the biography of the poetry, brought to light by David Kalstone's *Becoming a Poet (1989)* and Lorrie Goldensohn's *The Biography of a Poetry (1992),* and Brett Millier's *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It (1993)* that ignited the trend that Rich sparked in delving into the life behind the poetry, consequently giving critics access to and validation for wide range of possibilities in *how* to appraise it.[3]

With this variety, three prevalent categories of scholarship emerged out of the many divergences in reading Bishop. The first, an interest in the biographical poetics, has become the most dominant. I see this as the result of Bishop's "hidden" confession – the personal side of Bishop that was, for most of her poetic career, kept under wraps until she gave a taste of it in her last published collection – and the mystery that led critics to attempt at "uncovering." Resulting in this newfound searching, Bishop's sexuality became situated at the forefront of critical interest; feminist critics like Rich found perplexing Bishop's interest in women sexually, and her contrasting disinterest in being associated with "women poets."[4] Further, with the recognition of Bishop's lesbianism, some critics found an entirely new path (aside from discussing her poetry in relation to her childhood losses) in reading her "lesbian poetics," which has now developed as an integral part of Bishop's s known identity.[5] The biographical and thus contextual Bishop, not only fascinating in suppressed familial grievances, was further supported by her sexual preference and later (but less dynamically) in her political views.[6] In his critical work on Bishop, Langdon Hammer points to this underlining draw of Bishop's biography: "The notion…is that Bishop's life and work are one art, joined in a unity she discovered only over the course of her career" (173). The "remembered Bishop," both referring to her person and her poetry, is thus most complete when viewed in its full form.

The second category of scholarship focuses on Bishop's relationships with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, her two influential poetic mentors. From the many letters that have been compiled over the years, evidence towards a "dual poetics" in both relationships is often presented in favor of a more complete portrayal of Bishop's poetry. In her relationship with Moore, Bishop is often portrayed as indebted to Moore's influence and the forcefulness by which she urged the young poet to send out her work.[7] In her essay on Bishop, Joanne Feit Diehl has

suggested Moore as "literary mother," writing not only of her "controlling and manipulative as well as terrifyingly unique" presence, but also proposing that "Bishop's relationship to Moore [was] an outgrowth of [her] earliest relationship with her own mother" (13). This kind of dependence, both in the poetic and non-poetic worlds, is emblematic of the basis in which many critics find grounds for comparison. Bonnie Costello, for example, writes in her essay, "Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence" that "Bishop seems to have found in Marianne Moore a source of stability, vigorous enchantment, optimism, and dedication to craft" (148). Considering this dependence and what is known of Moore's hands-on influence in many of Bishop's earlier poems,[8] the emergence of Bishop's poetics from this mother-like relationship is both interesting and telling. However, where critics like Brett Millier find interest in the moments of direct influence is also the point at which Bishop's own voice is often lost. On this subject, David Kalstone notes " that critics linked their names both flattered and irritated, amused and puzzled the women – seemed an evasion of what mattered most, the stubborn particular" (*Trial Balances* 115). In this, Kalstone aptly underlines the importance of "the particular," where Bishop's poetics emerge as their own entity apart from Moore and are substantiated in her *own* trajectory.

Bishop's relationship with Robert Lowell is similarly situated in a critical dependency complex. In the preface to the recent compilation of Bishop's correspondence with Robert Lowell, *Words In Air,* Thomas Travisano writes, "Through wars, revolutions, breakdowns, brief quarrels, failed marriages and love affairs, and intense poetry-writing jags, the letters kept coming…For each, personally as well as artistically, these letters became a part of their abidance: a part of that huge block of life they had lived together and apart over thirty years" (ix). In a similar fashion to how Moore's relationship with Bishop is often understood in the

critical world, Travisano notes the role of the Lowell correspondence in fueling Bishop's continued endurance in both life and poetics. The idea of Lowell's mentorship, like Moore's, is here expanded to include the influence he gave beyond the poetry. As Kalstone notes Moore's influence to be like a "steady slow infusion to the bloodstream" (*Trial Balances*, 133), the Bishop we look back on is often seen as only "half" the equation, and incomplete without the full knowledge of her full relations with both Moore and Lowell.

The third category, engaged in Bishop's poetics apart from her biography, is outlined by Jonathan Ellis in his book, *Art and Memory in the Works of Elizabeth Bishop*:

> [After Bishop's death], Mary McCarthy compared the experience of re-reading Bishop's work to a game of hide-and-seek: 'I envy the mind hiding in her words, like an "I" counting up to a hundred waiting to be found' (McCarthy, 1983, p.267). Bishop, in her writing, remains 'waiting to be found.' We can never be sure where (or even whether) the poet's 'I' lies within the poem, whether art mirrors life or runs away from it… McCarthy is recalling a '*mind* hiding' (my emphasis) here, not an actual person. Bishop's 'real' life, such as it is, cannot be found or recovered even by the writer, certainly not by this critic. All that is left to be written about are words forming and reforming on the page, the mind's exquisite transformation of the life of a person into the life of the poem. Writers can give us no more; critics should expect no less (16).

What is emblematic of this category in Ellis' words is the idea that the poet's mind in writing is not necessarily the poet's person (suggesting a turn away from reading poetry alongside of the poet's biography), and that the mind, interpreting the poet's livelihood, transfers that same energy into the poem, creating the "life of the poem." Ellis suggests a presence of the poem on its own terms, influenced by the poet as she is involved in writing, but apart in terms of its status as "creation." Once a poem is created, it is severed from the poet as its own "being."

In essence, this category of viewing poetics holds its interest in the trajectory of the poetic life. In a short article on Bishop, Nobel Prize winner and fellow poet Octavio Paz wrote, "The poem has a life independent from the poet and from the gender of the poet. Poetry is the *other voice.* The voice that comes from *there,* a *there* that is always *here"* (15). The distinct "*there*" that Paz points to (meaning the poem) is also *"here"* within the poet. It is a view of poetry

manifested in the idea of the poet as artist, and the poem as art, forever creating outside and inside both living bodies. The link between poet and poem exists almost silently, as their relation lies in an understood presence always; it is only sometimes that the poet explicitly expresses in her poem, "I am here."

At the foundation of this last category is a theory of poetics that has its basis in a regard for poetry having its own existence, capable of carrying out its own trajectory. This view in poetics, however, is often overlooked because Bishop critics find it to be malnourished in its separation from her colorful biography. If the connections exist between the biography and the poetry, why not make them? What is the harm? The idea that most undermines this third category of criticism is that which finds poetry to be always supported (and thus explained) by a time, place, and person. In this view, poetry on its own, explained by its own functions and contents, has a lack. Poetry that has its basis of understanding in the poet's life will never be without explanation, whereas poetics on its own will forever be unstable as it is solitary. As there is some aspect of truth in this, explanation based in biography is not always the best and most thorough understanding of the poetics. Yes, a solitary poetics is unstable in its detachment from the poet; yet, when allowed to breathe, poems by themselves take on a vibrancy of their own that is often *more* telling about the poet than any biographical link could ever be. The truth of a poet and her poetry, often assumed to be only in fact, can also be spoken through poetics.

The legacy of Bishop's poetry that exists within these three critical stances is one that is fraught with undesired dispute. In my view, the divergences that have occurred in the last thirty years dilute the importance of Bishop's poetry – the heart of our interest in her. By unwrapping the many layers of Bishop's biography and correspondences, we unquestionably find out more about Bishop the poet. It is by peeling the enveloped layers of her poetry, however, that we may

"find" the heartbeat of her poetics.

Objective

Have you seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf,
cling to the very end, revolve in air,
feeling for something to reach to something?[9]

It is by this image that we must understand the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. In his poem, "For Elizabeth Bishop," Robert Lowell compares Bishop's poetic writing process to an inchworm clinging to the very edge of a leaf. Denying Bishop's awareness of the strain of her poetics by asking whether she has seen the inchworm's struggle, Lowell in effect questions, "Have you seen yourself?" Emblematic of this image in Bishop's poetics (including her processes and strategies) is quiet risk – the idea that, "revolving in air," the inchworm is still suspended on the tip of a leaf, almost deceiving itself in believing that it is without basis. It reaches treacherously without fully realizing the risk, and thereby does so "quietly." Immersed in that state, Bishop's poetics seem to "reach to something" by means of "feeling for [an unstable and sometimes unknown] something." In thus bringing to attention the inchworm's natural path, Lowell points out the attention to balance necessary in reaching, and the concurrent insecurity the leaf provides. It is thus not only the action of the inchworm that suggests an adventurous poet, it is the grounds on which it chooses to reach.

I use Lowell's image of the inchworm to begin this paper because the connection he draws to Bishop's poetics is one often lost in translation. Her early poetry, which has become attributed to mere outcries of struggles in Bishop's personal life, has somehow become estranged from the actual function of the poetics. The poet as she writes is no longer; thanks to many critics and readers alike who find value in matching biographical facts to the poetics, the poet is as she lives. Inferences from a poet's biography can be quite telling in matters of clarifying references

unexplained in the poetry; however, the inclusion of biography comes far too quickly to be a "necessity" in understanding. The weight borne by the poet's life onto the comprehension of their poetics consequently becomes the scale by which the poetry and the poet are judged. If a poem seems detached and unlinkable to the life of its poet, then it becomes strange and unexplainable, and thus not worth looking at.

It is in this conflict of reading biographically that I find the heart of this paper. In researching, what became most apparent in Elizabeth Bishop's work is that in praising her last published work of poetry, *Geography III*, critics tend to dismiss the poetry of her first published work, *North & South.* It is because of the confessional nature of *Geography III* that Bishop's less autobiographical works seemed to become "unreadable." It is the intention of this paper to bring to light the accessible uniqueness in *North & South* by means of discussing its strategies in poetics (Chapter I), its failures (Chapter II), and its connected but distinct relationship to *Geography III* (Chapter III). The idea is not to prove what is "better" or "worse," but to consider the poetry as a battle against grouping and labeling. It is a fight against the short cuts, and a welcome granted towards those who read.

What *North & South does* as a collection is of prime interest in this paper, and it is therefore important to note how it has been viewed in the critical world up to this point. The first feature common in critical approaches to *North & South* establishes that Bishop's strategy of poetics is linked with and a product of travel. In her article included in the anthology, "Invisible Threads and Individual Rubatos: Migration in Elizabeth Bishop's Life and Work," Sandra Barry notes that "almost from birth Bishop began to travel" (62) and then later, "her poetry presented a gentle dénouement rather than ecstatic revelation, leaving room for further travels in the imagination" (69). As Bishop's poetry in *North & South* literally moved from the North to the

South geographically (as she lived and wrote in both New York and Florida), critics like Barry understand the traveling of Bishop and the movements of her poetry to be connected. It is not only the traveling of the body from place to place ("The Map" was written in New York City, "Seascape" in Florida), but the traveling of the imagination (in dreamlike poems such as "Sleeping on the Ceiling" and "Sleeping Standing Up") in which the poetics of *North & South* seem to move in all directions – even those past logical comprehension.

Brett Millier, Bishop's biographer, argues that an asthmatic Bishop traveled in order to find air she could breathe.[10] Millier writes "for Elizabeth – who had the means to travel – asthma was intimately tied up with the idea of "place." She had at this time no scientific information about what caused her attacks and could learn this only by experience" (75). This idea, based more on Bishop's biography than Barry's understanding, suggests a certain intensity and need by which the poet traveled. Millier thus links Bishop's act of writing poetry with the act of living; in her biography, Millier often notes on how Bishop's work was more fruitful when she was in a place she could breathe.[11]

A second opinion on this subject is one that interprets Bishop's movement in *North & South* as a search for home. Harriet Y. Cooper writes in "Elizabeth Bishop: Longing for Home - and Paradise" that "At the center of Bishop's endeavor is the loss of home and the condition of displacement…this desire for a nurturing environment is a result of the separation from the place first known and lost" (119). Cooper's assertion comes from knowledge of Bishop's personal life, namely the loss she experienced when her mother was admitted to a mental hospital in 1916.[12] It is thus the *North & South* poems with autobiographical references that fuel Cooper's idea of Bishop's "searching travel" (120). For example, Cooper might suggest that a poem such as "Large Bad Picture" (which discusses a painting by a 'great-uncle') was an attempt at restoring a

familial connection that was never quite brought to its hopeful fruition. Heavily based in the loss that the young Bishop experienced, Cooper's interpretation of *North & South* leads her to read poems with an agenda of finding aspects of Bishop's painful memories.

In her essay, for example, Cooper draws a comparison between a scream from Bishop's mother (described in Bishop's memoir, "In the Village," Cooper sees it as "the personification of her illness, a sound that, intensified, forever scores the consciousness of her five-year-old child" [Cooper 121]), the scream of Bishop's aunt in "In the Waiting Room," and the "scream" of the birds in "Large Bad Picture."[13] Cooper writes that the original sound of her mother's scream was "for Elizabeth… to signify the origin of all pain and become its metaphor" (121). Cooper's notion of the "indelible" scream, in fact only linked to Bishop's mother in her memoir, is assumed to be carried into Bishop's poetry via like-sounds. The pain of Bishop's aunt in "In the Waiting Room" is thus not attributed to her scream; rather, Bishop's feelings about her mother are found instead. Further, the cry of the birds in "Large Bad Picture" is in Cooper's view not associated with their dispassionate portrayal; it is instead linked to Bishop's mother's pain.

In a further example, Cooper writes about Bishop's poem, "Jerónimo's House" in a manner that suggests her insistence on a biographical approach. Cooper writes, "she recognized the home's purpose as refuge, 'shelter from the hurricane,' but more importantly, as the place of love" (126). In this, Cooper insists that Bishop's intention in writing about Jerónimo is not to portray the man, but her own feelings through his. The assumption here lies in the fact that the poem discusses a house, and therefore, because Bishop was "searching for home," the poem is "truthfully" about *her* struggles. In Cooper's view, Bishop's portrait of Jerónimo is not simply a view from outside, but a strategic self-experiment relating back to her own pain in searching for a home.

Annexed to the idea of searching for a home, the poems in *North & South* are often seen to reflect Bishop's interest in positioning herself geographically. In her essay, "A Poet Between Two Worlds: A Cross-Genre Study of Exile in the Life and Works of Elizabeth Bishop," Audrey Hooker contends with Bishop's denial of lacking a sense of home when she discusses the consistency with which Bishop traveled. Hooker's reading of "The Map" gives the poem a playful intention: the speaker makes up her own geography by playing with words and imagination.[14] As Hooker sees Bishop's interest and apparent ease in this positioning, she is nevertheless unsettled by her ambivalence about a geographic center as she mentions Bishop in saying, "I've never felt particularly homeless, but, then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess that's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it within him" (111). Rather than focusing on the resolution Bishop seems to come to when she feels at ease with having a geographical center within herself, Hooker goes on to ask a series of questions that insist on a need for a center outside the self, something like a home. Hooker's interest in "where she eventually found a center from which the rest of her world radiated and took shape" (111) is emblematic of her interest in "The Map," as it seems to predict the kind of dominance one might have in their geographical center. As the speaker of "The Map" looks down on the map before her, she has full control and is able to use her imagination to see it how she likes. The idea is, then, that like traveling for the sake of finding breath and a home, traveling to position one's self is an important process in poetic creation.

Displaying a third feature common to critical approaches to *North & South*, David Kalstone points to Marianne Moore's influence on the poetry of Bishop's first collection in description. As he comments on Wallace Stevens' remark that Marianne Moore's subject matters were based on the "sudden recognition at the moment of perception, the unexpected and

revealing 'intermingling' accomplished by the imagination" (*Becoming a Poet* 52), Kalstone draws a parallel to Bishop's early work in describing objects "to express something not of them – something, I suppose, spiritual" (*Becoming a Poet* 53). Kalstone seems to suggest by this that in writing descriptive poetry, the experience in description becomes part of that of the poetry. The unit created, a concoction of poetics and description, displays both the inspiration of writing and its product: Kalstone remarks that descriptive poetry is not only "a launching point of a poem [but also] its purpose" (*Becoming a Poet* 53). In describing "purpose," Kalstone transitions the descriptive poem from one that refers back to the described to one that embodies a new portrayal. In describing an experience, a place visited, a memory, the poem becomes the only explanation.

Kalstone's view of Bishop's early poetry in this way is uniquely different from the other groups discussed because it intentionally leaves the realm of autobiographical linkage and enters the practice of interpreting the poetry in its own terms. As the other ideas of travel are in fact grounded in Bishop's own explorations, they lack a certain interest in the function of the poetry itself in favor of connecting poems to travels like postcards to cities or postage stamps to postcards. In positing "intentions" on groups of poems in this way, there exists the tendency to pick and choose between what "works" and what does not: poems are not allowed to breathe in their own way, and are forced into prescribed versions of themselves which often release their integrity (along with their true meaning) to the wind. Considering this, my intention of this paper is to follow in Kalstone's footsteps here and set apart Bishop's poetics from any adherence to biography and to focus on her poetry only as it appears on the page. Chapter I highlights this goal by showing the very strategic function of the poetics by means of close reading. It shows how two of Bishop's poems from *North & South* are active in their search for establishing poetic

grounds and are thereby not just "descriptive" or "searching for home." Chapter I thus underlines the importance of being interested in the function of the poetics, rather than what can be done with them.

Chapter II of this paper focuses on what I call the "false starts" that characterize much of what *North & South* is about – mainly the idea that in attempts, strategies, and failures we see an array of poems that do not act the same in their endeavor at poetic voice. In his review of *North & South,* Robert Lowell aptly described these false starts:

> One is reminded of Kafka and certain abstract paintings, and is left rather at sea about the actual subjects of the poems…characterizing it is an elusive business…the motion-process is usually accepted as necessary and, therefore, good; yet it is dreary and exhausting. But the formula is mysterious and gently varies with its objects. The terminus is sometimes pathetically or humorously desired as a letting-go or annihilation; sometimes it is fulfillment and the complete harmonious exercise of one's faculties.[15]

As Lowell writes, though false starts are natural in the process of writing, they are unfortunately frustrating in their unfulfilled potential. As they vary, false starts sometimes fail in this way, but other times "exercise one's faculties" in a manner we wish was continued in later work. Unable to be characterized, unfettered by a single trajectory, and unattainable by means of abstraction, the false start poems of *North & South* are, as Lowell writes, nevertheless "harmonious."

The poems of *North & South* are, as I see them, like a color wheel in which hues derive from one white point in the center. As if all color were born from the absence of color, so too are the poems of *North & South* fresh in their presence as "first." Further, as the hues on the wheel are blended at their edges yet remain distinct as "red," "orange," and "yellow," Bishop's early poems are distinct in their methods yet all derive from the same poetic process. As a circle, too, what is emblematic of the color wheel in *North & South* is that the possibilities in further poetic strategy and voice are endless. There is not one trajectory by which we immediately see the future of Bishop's poetry, but many which all appear as the same wedge-like form. As a

collection that not only includes some successes in searching for poetic voice, its failures are just as vibrant in process.

With the idea of the color wheel in mind, it occurs to me that its white center might have the ability to move like the colors emerging from it. On this subject, Sandra Barry writes, "Rather than seeing her as a wanderer without destination, readers should regard Bishop as a seasonal migrant…the migration experience contributed to 'that sense of constant re-adjustment' which became such a significant component, both a positive and a negative force, in Bishop's life and work" (61). In this, the idea of migration is similar to that of a color wheel in its reliance on a starting point. But what Barry's image adds is a freedom given to the poet by means of an absent structure (such as my color wheel). For explaining purposes, the color wheel works in that it functions because of the white spot that always exists clearly in its center. This is the poet and the origin of all color in poetry. Barry's idea, however, removes the obvious and trusts in our knowledge of the poet's ever-presence in the creation of the work. What is more, the lack of an obvious center leads us to a subsequent lack of expectation: white does not necessarily become the bluest blue at the edge of the color wheel's circle; it becomes whatever it becomes. As Barry writes, in migration, there is no expectation in a final destination; and that is most clearly what makes the false starts of *North & South* able to be vibrant and interesting. If we look at them as simple failures that do not have relevance in what Bishop's poetry eventually became, then the poems become flat and uninteresting. However, if we look at the false starts as they had the potential to become their own trajectories with their own strategies and modes of voice, then they spring to life in possibility.

Considering this life of Bishop's poetry, it is also relevant to think about *how* the trajectory is carried forth. In her essay "Elizabeth Bishop and the Pragmatic Line in American

Poetry," Helen McNeil finds a grounding element to the false starts of Bishop's poetry: "In Bishop's poetic the desire is to become truly embedded in the world, the society, the sex you already are in, by knowing it through poetic inquiry. Rarely is the process smooth or complete, but Bishop uses it again and again as her epistemological tool" (205). This view of strategy is one that draws attention to the "embedding" of divergent movement - the migrant may place a stake where she pauses – and thus the mark left by existing apart from one's center. The false starts of *North & South* function as these marks, simultaneously in contact with their center (Bishop) and their own poetic path. What is more, McNeil finds the experience of embedding understood via "inquiry." In this view, the false starts of *North & South* do not pretend to know where they are headed but proceed through exploration and curiosity. They are the product of Bishop's statement, "If only I could see half as clearly *how* I want to write poems"[16] – with a muddled view of the future, poetry comes through the act of writing. Though Bishop hopes for a clearer view of how she wants to write, that might mean disregarding the process of learning and inquiry and possibly the fulfillment of an established poetics. It is my belief that if Bishop had known "how," her false starts would never have been created and the trajectory of her poetics critically altered.

Chapter III of this paper discusses the negative effects of reading poetry with an autobiographical lens. As I go into these effects in depth in this chapter by considering critical work that does the poetry a disservice by reading it autobiographically, I also find it useful here to point to scholarship that *does* warn against such reading practices in reading Bishop's work. Kirstin Hotelling, for instance, writes that

> It is tempting to read [Bishop's later poems] as distinct from Bishop's previous explorations of identity – as more grounded, confident, and self-possessed than [her earlier poems]. Yet …while feminist criticism often lauds Bishop for her subversions of the 'dominative ego of Romantic Poetry,' just as "pertinent and pressing… is Bishop's challenge to the stereotypical subject of

> contemporary lyric autobiography, to the expressive self, prized in American poetry since mid-century (187-88).

The temptation Hotelling writes of here is emblematic of the ease by which the common perception of Bishop's poetics has become centered on the confessional poetics of *Geography III.* In rejection of this, Hotelling points to the merits of poetry that are distinctly *not* expressive of the self – the kind that "challenges" instead of submits to stereotypes. It is with this insertion of the word "challenge" in describing the non-confessional character to Bishop's early work that Hotelling underlines Bishop's own negative feelings on the subject early in her career. Her early poetry functioning as a quiet critique of the confessional, its presence is nevertheless not to be ignored.

On this subject, the quiet challenge of Bishop's poetry is also a rejection of being what is often referred to as a diary-poet. In her book, *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics,* Marilyn Lombardi notes how "objecting to the way confessional art transformed the poet into a diarist and the reader into a confidant or confessor, Bishop insisted that the actual bond between writer and reader was marked not by genuine intimacy, but by distance and impersonality" (31). Contrary to what her later poetics became, this dismissal goes hand in hand with Bishop's admonition, "I hate confessional poetry,"[17] which, representative of the non-autobiographical majority of poems in *North & South*, seems to succeed in underlining the distance between Bishop's early poetics and any sense of confessing. In asserting that autobiographical reading turns the poet into a "diarist," Lombardi taps into the very act of describing that Kalstone noted in Bishop's early work. Negatively, the poetic function of describing could be similar to writing one's diary; however, as Bishop uses her imagination in conjunction with her perceptions, she "expresses something not of them."[18] By refusing to

regard her poems as a diary entry or an act of confession, Bishop creates poetry that dos not fit with purely autobiographical reading. To read in such a manner, in effect, is to miss the point.

Another aspect of this issue is the fact that one must realize, in thinking about the poet behind the poetry, that because she is behind its creation, *the poet* is necessarily engaged in its final product, the poem. There is no way around this, and to deny the subtlety of that correspondence between poet and poem in favor of loud biographical connections is to undermine the function of the poetics as the poet's creation. It is, in a sense, to distrust the poetry in fear of not understanding. It is also a way of feeling fully informed. Most unfortunately, however, it is a way of denying the poetry its artistic merit. In her book, *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop,* Anne Colwell writes, "her ambivalences … are not an indication of her failure to know herself or to believe in her creative processes, but rather an indication of the paradox and ambiguity that come out of her life and inform all of her work" (2). Colwell here points to the natural state of the poet in the work, as tendencies in Bishop's work "come out" of all that which makes up the poet. This may include musings on her past, or uncertainty about her personal life; however, their presence in Bishop does not translate to her creation of confessional poetry. Alternatively, confessional poetry comes from a place of choosing, not of writing.

At the University of Washington where she taught poetry workshops in 1966, Bishop wrote that her students "keep telling me that they want to convey the 'truth' in their poems. The fact is that we always tell the truth about ourselves despite ourselves…If my students would concentrate more on all the difficulties of writing a good poem, all the complexities of language and form, I think they would find that the truth will come through quite by itself."[19] Here Bishop underlines the point that the "truth" about a poet comes through her work naturally. As she

writes, "despite ourselves," Bishop alludes to the fact that even when a poet tries to be un-confessional in writing, her presence is nevertheless included in writing. Also in this quotation, Bishop notes how focusing on the act of writing and trying to produce a "good poem" naturally produces the truth about the poet. Referring back to Helen McNeil's discussion of "knowing through poetic inquiry," it is just this searching within poetic bounds that Bishop praises. In pursuit of poetic truth, which is at least partly knowledge, examining the poetic process is the most effective method. As Bishop wished she knew what it was she wanted to write, she found that *writing* was in fact the best if not most appeasing answer.

Bishop's poetics, as they range from *North & South* to *Geography III*, do not naturally form a poetic narrative based in biography. Rather, such a trajectory has been implanted in the understanding of her work. Considering Bishop's career, it is "tempting," as Hotelling puts it, to look back from the poetics she eventually wrote and create a storyline by which the poetry falls into place. In relying on pattern and sequences of events, however, viewing poetry becomes just as demeaning an act as comparing it to diary entries. The function of the poetry thus becomes to *get to* the established end; the strategy becomes forever pointed at one all-inclusive direction. In this way, the act of aligning poems into a pattern becomes more important than reading them: "this poem is about…" becomes sufficient in describing and understanding the poetics because it can be categorized in the larger scheme.

This paper means to "concentrate more on all the difficulties of writing a good poem, all the complexities of language and form, [in order to] find that the truth will come through quite by itself." Taking advice like one of Bishop's students, I find that the conflict within autobiographical reading comes to be a matter of art versus knowledge; in focusing on Bishop's poetry as it functions as its own entity, I find an artistic and unique creation, not a tool. And what

is poetry if not a creation? As the poetry from *North & South* is descriptive, imaginative, and inquisitive, it never ceases to constantly readjust and redefine on artistic grounds. Uniquely varied, the poetry's *adherence* to "feeling for something to reach to something" is nevertheless characteristic of Bishop's early poetic display and her ineffably unique poetic divergences.

CHAPTER ONE – *Reticence as a Quiet Searching*

It is common to talk of Elizabeth Bishop's earlier work as reticent,[20] and thereby not fully realized, as much of her later work is idealized and well known to be self-expressive, autobiographical, and thus settled in what some critics see as poetic maturity. There seems to be a plethora of explanations for this view of Bishop's work, and not much in the way of an alternate opinion; I attribute this to the fact that the popularity of the work in Bishop's *Geography III* overshadows her early poetry to the point that it often becomes discredited by seeming like solely influenced work. I see this as a problem in that it simplifies and essentially credits Bishop's effort in finding her voice to figures like Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, who no doubt influenced the young poet, but did not write the poems for her. As Harold Bloom writes in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, "Poetic History is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence" (5), he points to the issue at hand with Bishop and her influences: the fact of communication overshadows the actual act of that connection. It has become too easy for critics and readers of Bishop to dismiss or overlook works like those in *North & South* as less "Bishop-like" because of their connection to other poets.

In this chapter, I will present common critical arguments in favor of Bishop's reticence, and examine the complications of those arguments. I will then close read two of Bishop's early poems, "The Map" and "Large Bad Picture," both from her first published work *North & South,* in order to explicate what I will argue is Bishop's "grasping and defining" period (that which is *not* reticent in its attempt to situate Bishop with a poetic voice). My goal is not based in proving that Bishop's "non-reticence" is an embrace of the opposite of reticence (such as a confessional poetry that she in fact did embrace much later in *Geography III);* rather, it is the fact that in calling Bishop's early work "reticent," critics deny the poetry an able voice of its own in

searching. If in calling Bishop's work in *North & South* "reticent" we can understand that lack of vibrant self-expression as a "quiet searching," then the word is fitting. However, it is the case that in reticence, Bishop's early poetics too easily become viewed as a collection of absence. The object, then, of this chapter is to present some of Bishop's poems that work in favor of her voice, and that do so on terms that coexist with Marianne Moore's influence, but that nevertheless do not rely on imitation. Further, it is my purpose here to highlight the work that Bishop's early poetry performs, and how it does so in a way distinctly *not* reticent in quiet action. By close reading, I will show how Bishop's poetry in *North & South*, divergent in strategy, nevertheless unites under the action ("life") of the poetry.

Reticence

The first argument I will address comes from Ann K. Hoff, who comments in her article, "Owning Memory: Elizabeth Bishop's Authorial Restraint," that Bishop's reticence is thought to be "due in part to Moore's influence. Lorrie Goldensohn remarks that Bishop's poems might have been more daring 'if Elizabeth Bishop had been born thirty years earlier into another public decorum, and if her keen, Moore-trained observer's eye had been released from Moore's prohibitions'" (580). These prohibitions, as Hoff states, included "[steering] her young protégée toward more delicate expressions" (581), and thus not revealing *too* much of the personal so as to nauseate a reader, but rather to entice through self-portraiture.[21] As it is true that Bishop cast off Moore's so-called repressive influence as she uncovered her own inspiration,[22] it is also the case that Bishop was very much involved with Moore in the span of time between her graduation from Vassar in 1934,[23] and the publication of *North & South* in 1946.[24] Considering Moore's poetic style – uniquely observant without outward personal interest – it makes a good deal of sense that Bishop's perceived reticence would be inspired by Moore. Bishop, awestruck by the

proximity to which she was able to work with Moore was without question taken under Moore's poetic wing; Millier notes that "Elizabeth remembered …that Moore 'believed that graceful behavior – and writing – as well, demanded a certain reticence. 'Elizabeth's native sense of privacy and discretion was so great that one suspects the two had this belief in common from the start (70). Whether that reticence was integrated into Bishop's poetry-writing, however, is in question.

The second aspect of Bishop's perceived reticence has to do with what Laurie Goldensohn calls her "refusal to open out perspective" (101). Goldensohn attributes Bishop's attention to "static description" (101) in her poem, "Jerónimo's House" with an active rejection of looking elsewhere, or as is insinuated, toward herself.[25] Goldensohn writes, "*North & South*, abounding in dream and fantasy landscape, alone among Bishop's books slights the description of places through full loving naturalistic detail" (101). As I will later explore in more depth, the "elsewhere-ness" of Bishop's poems like *"*Jerónimo's House*"* seem to be belittled, here by Goldensohn, by their proximity to her later work. The argument here with *"*Jerónimo's House*"* seems to ground itself on the poem's first two stanzas, which give metaphor to the house detailed by the speaker (apparently inspired by a man Bishop knew[26]) - "My house, my fairy / palace… / My home, my love-nest" (l.1-9) - and thus do not set the speaker in a dream or fairytale, but rather *in his home.* Goldensohn's argument for the "emotional thinness" (101) of Bishop's portrayal is one that chooses to see her choice of topic only as an escape from writing about herself. Because poems like *"*Jerónimo's House*"* do not express an intense biographical expression as her later poems do, they seem, to some, to be devoid of emotion and thus are reticent.

Continuing this argument, David Kalstone writes that many of Bishop's early poems are "set on the edge of waking" (12). If we take Goldensohn's assertion that Bishop's early poetry "primarily [took] on the inner and allegorical world of the sleeper, or dream and fantasy" (101), then Kalstone's understanding seems to work well to show Bishop's intent on *becoming* unrestrained and thus not yet there. As it is true that some of the poems from *North & South* are unmistakably dream-like (such as "Sleeping on the Ceiling*,"* and "Sleeping Standing Up"*),* their presence in the collection does not suggest the state of the collection as a whole. Thus, the effect of calling Bishop's early work "dream-like" in face of her later "awake" work is synonymous to naming them "night" and "day," as if the presence of the sun were completely void in one, fully existent in the other.

Addressing another aspect of Bishop's proposed reticence, David Kalstone notes her interest in seventeenth-century issue of the soul trapped in the body:[27] "The gap between the observed world and the unknown, the psychic one, is something that only long experience helped [Bishop] overcome. Thirty years later she is able to speak as if there were no conflict" (15). As seen in "The Man-Moth" and "The Weed," both poems exhibit subjects, like Kalstone suggests, that are evidently "trapped" within themselves: the weed within the speaker's body, the Man-Moth within his pariah role. According to Kalstone, these "protagonists have trouble accommodating the claims of the world" (13) and are thus unenthusiastic about asserting themselves in that world. To make this claim for Bishop is not a stretch, as she did struggle to find her place in the poetry world; however, she did not by any means actively trap herself in any body, place, or mindset through her poetics. Rather, as I will argue in this chapter, Bishop focuses on the struggle to move herself out in all things.

There is not one obvious conclusion to the question of Bishop's proposed reticence; this is due to the fact that in many of her early poems, Bishop struggles to find her voice as poet. In the poems of *North & South*, for example, Bishop is explorative in how she finds herself in poetics, and thus included are many types of poems that are sometimes dream-like and sometimes trapped, but never one thing. This seems to confuse readers into thinking that her divergences are a result (and a recapitulation) of her reticence. It is in this early phase of Bishop's poetry, however, that we find the inner workings of her mind turning on display – in different places, people, things – and it is in those introspective moments, or poems, that we find the character of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry *before* it was so defined.

The two poems discussed in this chapter "The Map" and "Large Bad Picture," are elemental of *North & South* in displaying its divergent nature. Both showing a searching Bishop in how she attempts to "grasp and define" in her poetics, the poems underline a non-reticence, characteristic of what T.S. Eliot has called a "secret release, "despite their differences.

"The Map"

THE MAP

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

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains

-the printer here experiencing the same excitement
as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,
lending the land their waves' own conformation:
and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,
profiles investigate the sea, where land is.
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?
-What suits the character or the native waters best.
Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

Brett Millier, Bishop's biographer, calls "The Map" "the first 'Elizabeth Bishop' poem we have" (76). Although Millier and I have different readings of "The Map," we share this opinion in that "The Map" was Bishop's break from seeing things in "that mannered, imitative collage" (Millier 76) way she found from Moore in favor of searching for her own voice. With "The Map," Bishop essentially takes hold of her own imagination, and wonders at the ability to touch a glass map in front of her – the ability, it seems, to have the world at her fingertips – and thus she allows herself to engage with a poetics all her own.

Something I find imperative to the reading of "The Map" is a line Bishop wrote about its generation: she states, "I always like to <u>feel</u> exactly where I am geographically all the time, on the map."[28] The overall tone of "The Map" extends from Bishop as an empty vessel in that its speaker strives to reach out and "<u>feel,</u>" and in effect *possess* (with knowledge of that feeling) the navigated environment in order to place herself in that environment. That place being poetics, the function of "The Map" has its basis in beginning her legacy.

The first stanza of "The Map" showcases Marianne Moore's influence on Bishop at the time of the poem's composition.

> Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
> Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges

showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf,
is the land tugging at the sea from under? (l. 1-8)

With an observant eye, Bishop creates the first stanza through the seeing of an object. This style, recognizably characteristic of Moore's poetry, lets the reader know that the poetry is in fact observation and *that* is the art of it, the way one can find art by looking at a single thing. Bishop's first line interprets Moore's style as if it were not her own, stating that "Land lies in water; it is shadowed green" (l. 1). The "Bishop" of the poem, however, steps in soon after with the correction stated in the next lines: "Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges / showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges / where weeds hang to the simple blue from green" (l. 2-4). As Bishop ponders the way she sees the map, she struggles to find the right image: does she see shadows or shallows represented by the map's lines?

The correction in Bishop's second line lets us know a few things: first is the fact that the change of observation alludes to a *process* of thinking, rather than an objective truth. In viewing the map, the speaker is open to the possibility of seeing subjectively, and simultaneously imaginatively. She isn't constrained to the "art of describing" as it was, but rather with the "art of observing." Second, the correction allows us to see a bit of the personality of the speaker, who, without touching the eraser, has *let* us be a part of the process of observing. We not only see the corrected observation, we are taken along as the image turns into details only imagined by the speaker - "sea-weeded ledges / where weeds hang to the simple blue from green" – and from there, we see in the additional way she sees; as edges turn to sea-weeded ledges, and weeds on those ledges hang into the blue ocean from where they once were on green ledges. As words are

added and each time expanded, the reader is invited to make the same leaps as Bishop colors the map we originally pictured with her lines and words.

My third point about the correction lies in the uncertainty of Bishop's voice: by showing us the corrected image she suggests her fallibility in perception. That is to say that the change allows the reader to again see her process, and understand that she is in fact only training her eye, not stating a credo. With these lines Bishop essentially states her own inexperience, and thus her state of learning. In the subsequent lines of the first stanza, Bishop poses yet another correction, "Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, / drawing it unperturbed around itself?" (l. 5-6), and in doing so takes hold of her first bit of the map through *feeling.* In this image, the land is personified as it is given the ability to lift and draw the sea around itself. I argue that though this is another corrected image, it is more importantly a metaphor for how Bishop seeks to be wrapped up in a place just as the land lifts the sea around itself. Bishop's desire is to be lifted up from her dwelling space and given a place of purpose in poetics. There is suddenly something to be felt and something to be grasped as the observed glass map turns into Bishop's reachable desires in place of her previous simple observations.

The second stanza of "The Map" also presents feeling as a mode of establishing residency.

> The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
> Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
> has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
> under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
> or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
> The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
> the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
> —the printer here experiencing the same excitement
> as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
> These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
> like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods. (l. 9-19)

Bishop writes, “We can stroke these lovely bays, / under a glass as if they were expected to blossom” (l. 11-12), and thus she again reaches out to feel (or “stroke” in a distinctly loving manner) the depictions of the map. However, in this stanza Bishop identifies this as part of her imaginative process as she writes “*as if* they were expected to blossom,” suggesting that she knows that she asks too much of the map by desiring to touch and possess its parts as they exist three-dimensionally in her mind. In this, Bishop gives her poem some perspective, and thus verifies herself again as a “thoughtful” poet. Eager not to be defined as being stuck in dream-like poetics, Bishop further checks her imaginative scope as she goes on to write about what I feel is the art of writing in the following lines:

> The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
> the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
> — the printer here experiencing the same excitement
> as when emotion too far exceeds its cause (l. 14-17).

Here Bishop literally writes about the writing of names on the map – grappling with the actions of the mapmaker, she in effect takes on his role as she gives the map’s names the ability to “run” and “cross neighboring mountains.” Bishop reinvents the names by their abilities (they do more then name now) and in doing so, reinvents her role as observer. In line sixteen, however, it seems that Bishop again checks her role as poet as she writes that she, the printer, may have been too indulgent in creating from her imagination. She writes that the printer feels that same excitement “as when emotion too far exceeds its cause” and thus Bishop reins herself in from being too prominent in her voice.

The last instance of feeling that I can see in “The Map” occurs at the end of the second stanza: “These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods” (l. 18-19). In these two lines, Bishop again assigns an ability (to touch, or grasp) to a part of the map, and in doing so she plucks that part for her own. However,

just having "checked" herself for being too indulgent in the previous few lines, Bishop adds a simile ("like women…yard-goods") perhaps to buffer the impact of her again repeated act of touch. In the paired images of the two lines, the pinching action of the first is "smoothed" out by the second; the women feel the texture of fabric as one might feel the splash of waves against fingers. The motion, then, of eagerly taking, is masked by the sensual experience of that action.

As I feel that the simile is a crux within the poem, I do believe that it does well for Bishop's intended image, in that it ties the picking of the map back to her longing for a home in voice, implied here by the domestic image of women working. This, I feel, is the natural progression of Bishop's thought process in the poem. She started off in her known place of comfort (simple observation), then grew to find pleasure in her observation, pulled back to be modest, and now readjusts to what she feels is appropriate imagery. Further, to finish the poem with an action associated with profession or place may suggest a comfort taken in the map; as she has grasped many things, this last act instills in her emotion that moves past the constructs of the poem, and enters into the desire of poetic place. Thus, as Bishop fingers her way around the map, she lastly comes upon her self imprinted on the pages. Embedded in her perception of the map is her perception of herself. The process shown, whether Bishop intended it or not, indicates both the newness of her relationship with poetry, and the self-perception she fostered as she put herself out into the poetic sphere.

Brett Millier and I have different ideas about Bishop's motives in writing "The Map," as her poetic style is assertive but unspecific in its intent. Millier suggests that Bishop writes the poem under the pretext that she is eager to "hold forth both the map and the actual geography …as realities" (77), and thus she asks the map questions it cannot answer in order to continue the subject without negation. Though I agree with Millier's perception of the questions as

"semirhetorical questions of perspective" (77), I do not see them as simply tools, but rather modes of exploration by which Bishop considers her alternatives. As I have indicated by the many "checks" throughout the poem, I do not see Bishop unapologetically indulging, or "holding forth" (77) the imagined realities of the map as she is too young in her poetics to be so bold.

Further, Millier's analysis of "The Map" concentrates heavily on the line, "as when emotion too far exceeds its cause," because Millier believes it to be the indicator of Bishop's emotional presence in the poem.[29] Millier writes, "this part of the map depicts Elizabeth's 'home,' or as near as she had come to it. Alone as she was on New Year's Eve, acutely uncertain about what the future would bring, nostalgia might be that emotion" (77). Miller's argument for the implication of Bishop's Nova Scotia home in this poem is furthered by her assertion that the "women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods" in the poem might be the women the young Elizabeth grew up with.[30]

It is interesting to consider Millier's perspective on this point because as her analysis has some grounds, there is a strong pull, I feel, in the direction of the poem towards the future, rather than the past as she suggests. In Bishop's last stanza, she writes "Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is, / lending the land their waves' own conformation" (l. 20-21) which I take to be commentary on what was the reality of Bishop's poetic world full of influence and possible direction. Bishop's thoughts on the lonely New Year's Eve when she wrote "The Map" were most likely based in the hectic "land" around her in both present and future standings. Thus she writes that the "mapped waters" she sees under the glass are "more quiet than the land is." Following this, when Bishop writes that the waters are "lending the land their waves' own conformation," I take her meaning to lie in the present participle of the verb "to lend." In perpetuating the action, Bishop's metaphor essentially looks towards the continuation of the

implemented structure that was working towards complete poetics and thus a stability in writing. The end is therefore implied in the means, and perhaps it is not too far of a stretch to think that Bishop's hope was for a usable poetics, and thus a purpose in the written world.

The last point I will make about Millier's analysis of "The Map" lies in her assertion that Bishop's interest in "feeling" herself in geographical terms translated to the fact that "many of her poems describe the struggle to locate herself in the world. To be able to say, 'I am this many miles from Rio' or 'this many miles from New York,' …Her need to name it again and again is a sign of her lifelong uncertainty about it" (78). While I see Millier's connection between Bishop's interest in perspective and the relentlessness of her later travels, I do not, however, see that desire to "know where she is" in "The Map." My readings have led me to believe that Bishop was searching for a place to settle her poetics, rather than linger in the present moment trying to locate herself. As I discussed with the first few lines of the poem, Bishop does not spend much time with observation or location, but instead lets her imagination digress. Her action is forward, not stagnant.

In conclusion, "The Map" shows how Bishop took Marianne Moore's poetic style as inspiration, but broke from it in order to assert her own voice. It also indicates Bishop's intent on widening her perspective, as she does not simply muse on the map as it is, but relishes in the imaginative aspects she can bring to its many curves and colors. Further, as one might argue that "The Map" is dream-like in its imaginative direction, Bishop's intent on "feeling exactly where [she is]…all the time" (Miller 78) suggests a purpose to simultaneously imagine and establish a basis for feeling

"Large Bad Picture"

LARGE BAD PICTURE

Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
some northerly harbor of Labrador,
before he became a schoolteacher
a great-uncle painted a big picture.

Receding for miles on either side
into a flushed, still sky
are overhanging pale blue cliffs
hundreds of feet high,

their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running in along the level of a bay
masked by perfect waves.

On the middle of that quiet floor
sits a fleet of small black ships,
square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
their spars like burnt match-sticks.

And high above them, over the tall cliffs'
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in n's in banks.

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

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.

Bishop's poem "Large Bad Picture," published in *North and South*, is a work that outwardly seems to serve as a means by which the young poet displayed her artistic ability. On

the surface of it, the poem's function appears only to involve describing a painting by "a great-uncle," and in doing so carefully outlines (and sometimes subjectively embellishes) the aspects and nuances portrayed. This, we assume, is Bishop's attempt at paying homage to the painter by making *more* art from his work. We also assume, by Bishop's adherence to measure (lines one and three of each stanza have four feet; lines two and four have three feet) throughout most of the poem, that her objective is to turn the great-uncle's visual focus into her metrical one.

Further, for a good deal of the poem Bishop uses the rhyme scheme, ABCB DEFE GHIH… in each stanza, further implying the intent to show her poetic skill in interpreting the painting.

> Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
> some northerly harbor of Labrador,
> before he became a schoolteacher
> a great-uncle painted a big picture.
>
> Receding for miles on either side
> into a flushed, still sky
> are overhanging pale blue cliffs
> hundreds of feet high,
>
> their bases fretted by little arches,
> the entrances to caves
> running in along the level of a bay
> masked by perfect waves.
>
> On the middle of that quiet floor
> sits a fleet of small black ships,
> square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
> their spars like burnt match-sticks (l. 1-16)

Each word in description is thus chosen carefully from her own observations of the great-uncle's painting – each phrase calculated to meter and rhyme – and so we think, with each stanza, how keen her eye must have been to notice the stillness of the painted sky ("a flushed, still sky" [l.6]), or the quiet of the waves as the small fleet rests upon the water's surface ("on the middle of that quiet floor / sits a fleet of small black ships" [l.13-14]). With the context of the

poem in mind (given to us in Bishop's first stanza), we feel warmed by her intent to show her skill through celebrating that of another, though we feel perplexed by her distinctively negative title.

There are complications with this initial reading of Bishop's poem: for one, her title confuses our understanding of her admiration by blatantly naming what we thought was good, "large" and "bad." Having lost our sense in Bishop's intent with the consideration of her title, we delve deeper into the poem to unveil its method, and in doing so answer questions such as, why does Bishop's rhyme scheme change before the third-to-last stanza? Why does she throw out her consideration of meter around the same point as she does her rhyme? Why does the reader get the sense that towards the end of the poem, the painting is no longer objectively described? And finally, what is the sense in Bishop's last stanza?

In returning to Bishop's first stanza, we may shed light on her tone by considering *how* she acquaints us with the great-uncle.

> Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
> some northerly harbor of Labrador,
> before he became a schoolteacher
> a great-uncle painted a big picture. (l.1-4)

First, we must acknowledge the fact that Bishop's initial description of the painting verges on calling its conception mere caprice: the great-uncle, remembering the Strait of Belle Isle, or somewhere in that general area, paints a picture. Bishop leads us to see the great-uncle's action of painting as simply a result of thinking about an undecided place; his intent is not well thought out, and thus not earnest in its artistic endeavor. If Bishop's tone towards the great-uncle is negative in these first lines, then her third line only underlines the point: "Before he became a schoolteacher" suggests that he had not yet, when he painted the picture, matured into his career and thus should not, once again, be taken seriously. By this, the great-uncle clearly isn't a

painter; however, Bishop *is* a poet. Bishop is such a poet that she creates witty rhymes out of his whim – she is such a poet that she is able to tell that the great-uncle's painting is nothing but a "large bad picture." But why, then, write a poem that goes on to simply describe such a picture? In stanzas two through five, I argue that Bishop's objective portrayal of the painting is slowly unraveled by the implication of her subjective opinion in certain words and phrases. In other words, Bishop does not *simply* describe the great-uncle's picture, but slowly grants her opinion place in the poem.

In the second and third stanzas of the poem, Bishop begins her observations of the painting as she relays its parts:

> Receding for miles on either side
> into a flushed, still sky
> are overhanging pale blue cliffs
> hundreds of feet high,
>
> their bases fretted by little arches,
> the entrances to caves
> running in along the level of a bay
> masked by perfect waves (l. 5-12).

It is clear that these stanzas are description put into verse – there is nothing inherently Bishop's about the imagery because it belongs to the great-uncle in his painting – and thus it lacks her voice as it is without her own perspective of the scene. At the end of the third stanza, however, there is one word that marks Bishop's unraveling: "*perfect*" is of course not an objective adjective, and hints at Bishop's annoyance with the impracticality of the painted scene, for waves are never perfect. Further, we do not associate the beauty of waves with any kind of perfection, as water is loved as fluid, changeable, untamed. The portrayal of perfect waves in the painting thus seems unfairly sentimental, even fanciful.

In the following two stanzas, the crack in Bishop's attention to description widens as she becomes increasingly upset by the painting.

> On the middle of that quiet floor
> sits a fleet of small black ships,
> square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
> their spars like burnt match-sticks.
>
> And high above them, over the tall cliffs'
> Semi-translucent ranks,
> Are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
> Hanging in *n*'s in banks (l. 13-20).

As Bishop describes the ships on the water, she indicates that they are "square-rigged," their "sails [are] furled," and how they are "motionless," but then switches suddenly to simile as "their spars [are] like burnt match-sticks." With this dismal image, we consequently picture the ships differently – as lifeless, burnt – as what should have been strong wooden supports turn into weak charred match-sticks. In doing this, Bishop points to the negative stagnation of the black ships through diction that serves to demean that which they represent, and further, points to how the painter has removed their gusto in favor of decorating the scene.

In the following stanza, as Bishop begins with "And high above them," she extends her critique of the painting from the previous line by pointing to the "scribbled" birds above the ships. Again, amidst the description of the painting, Bishop negatively comments on aspects that pertain to the painter's inconsiderate hand. As the birds may have shown up in the great-uncle's memory of the place, he only scribbles them down on the canvas in "*n"* shapes only to indicate their presence. Thus, Bishop again establishes a negative diction that subtly critiques the great-uncle's painting.

Unlike the first stanzas in which Bishop performs her muted critique, the last three stanzas mark how she overtakes the portrayal, as the great-uncle's painting is no longer described, but shredded under a new denunciatory poetic vigor. In the third-to-last stanza, Bishop allows the painting to "come alive," as if she herself stepped into the scene as it is painted:

> One can hear their crying, crying,

> the only sound there is
> except for occasional sighing
> as a large aquatic animal breathes (l. 21-24)

In the speaker's portrayal, the scribbled birds are suddenly heard, and are thus given the means to cry. As Bishop repeats "crying, crying," she performs the actuality of her next line which indicates the incessant sound of the birds. Furthermore, with this repetition Bishop underlines the importance of the fact that the birds are *crying* – because they are stagnant in paint, because they are only scribbled lines of afterthought – and that in their cries, they speak for the painting itself as it is a "Large Bad Picture." In addition, as the only sound that breaks the unrelenting cries is the "occasional sighing / as a large aquatic animal breathes," Bishop points to the unseen aspects of the place, and the subtleties washed over by the careless paint of the great-uncle. Only with Bishop's voice do we think about what lies under the water, and thus she gives the painted picture a three-dimensionality that is solely directed by her own poetic imagination.

With this shift of imagery also comes a concurrent shift in rhyme and in the following stanza, a shift in meter. As if breaking down all fronts, Bishop coincides her own release of objectivity with the liberation of her meter, and by so doing allows her full agenda to match the rigor that the poem's title proclaims. By expanding the limitations of the painting to include the imagery in the last three stanzas of her poem, Bishop oversteps the boundaries the painter faced with his paintbrush, and thus professes herself as poetic artist.

Bishop continues her vigorous and unveiled critique of the great-uncle's painting in her new meter and rhyme in the last two stanzas of the poem:

> 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. (l. 25-32)

In the first stanza here, Bishop portrays the sun of the painting as having ability (rolling round and round), but not being able to *go* anywhere. It, like the birds, cries out in repeated movement as it is continuously at the "same height / in perpetual sunset," only instead of crying, it goes "rolling, rolling," attempting to escape the constraint. In this position, Bishop writes that the sun is "comprehensive, consoling" as it stays in sunset as depicted, and in doing so, she points to the "assets" of its condition: as it is comprehensive, it is never not a sunset, and therefore able to be understood that way; as it is consoling, it will never change, never leave, and thus it will provide stability to those who look upon it. Ironically, as a never-failing sunset provides these positive things, it is, in fact, negatively stagnant and unnatural.

Following the enjambment to Bishop's last stanza, we find ourselves faced with ships that consider the perpetual sun, and thus we are called upon to question *them* in their own questioning. Bishop does not give us the thoughts of the ships, and thus we are on our own to ponder not only the sun, but also the fact that the ships contemplate with us. Like the birds and the sun, the ships here have the ability to think, but cannot tell us what about. The line, "Apparently they have reached their destination" suggests that the speaker must guess, because she has no indication from the ships themselves. She writes that "it would be hard to say what brought them there, / commerce or contemplation," and in doing so further acknowledges their state in limbo, unable to be named, unable to name themselves. As she writes, "apparently they have reached their destination," Bishop also comments on the fact that their destination reached is obvious – the ships will never move because they were painted in such a way – the paint halted their travels. Further, with Bishop's last two lines, "It would be hard to say what brought them there, / commerce or contemplation," she alludes to the fact that it would be hard to say

because they are, in truth, just ships scratched on canvas decorated by flimsy spars – in the painting they have no depth to them, and thus it wouldn't be hard to say, it wouldn't be possible to say.

If Bishop's agenda in this poem was to promote herself as a poet, her last stanza seems to perform in a manner that pushes against that goal. My point here is twofold: first, as Bishop is liberated of her traditional measure in the second-to-last stanza, in her final stanza she takes it a step further and essentially composes prose lines such as, "Apparently they have reached their destination" (l. 30). In her attempts to promote herself as an able and imaginative poet (depicting the painting's ships as able to ponder, etc.), Bishop essentially acts less like a poet in creating prose.

Secondly, in Bishop's last three lines of her poem, the poetic tone shifts, and we feel the presence of a new facet of the poet's mind. As I suggested earlier, Bishop may have been commenting on the irony of the painted ship not being able to move, or the fact that they are really just depictions of ships. It is certainly the case, however, that Bishop imagines a third dimension to the painting by which the images exist beyond what is seen, where ships have agendas and large aquatic animals breathe under waters where, as viewers, we cannot see them. It is then odd that Bishop would go so far as to imagine this third dimension, and then in conclusion sell herself short of being able to say what they might have been up to. We question where her ability to imagine went – where her confidence in seeing the un-painted disappeared. Further, as she states that it would be "hard to say" what brought the ships to the harbor, Bishop refuses to take authority over the image, and thus throws away her last line as if only to complete the rhyme. In suggesting "commerce *or* contemplation," Bishop also leaves the choice up to the reader, and in doing so gives us a choice that, in retrospect, is not particularly relevant to our

experience of the poem. To wonder what the ships were doing in the harbor of the painting is really not what one should walk away thinking – and yet, Bishop leaves us with an unsatisfying image and an irrelevant pondering.

In considering what I see as Bishop's self-professing agenda throughout the poem, it seems to be most clear in her title, in the first stanza, and scattered throughout the poem's end. The agenda's presence, as I do not deny it, however, is puzzling because it at times does not seem realized by the poet herself. As a musing, I pose the idea that Bishop's poem may have performed her ultimate agenda before she knew it existed; the writing itself gradually developed it. This could explain the fact that the beginning stanzas of her poem seem actually to do some sort of justice to the painting, even though a few critical words slip out now and again. Bishop could have written this poem with the initial reading I posed – an attempt to pay homage in order to show her perceptive abilities as a poet (in a strictly admiring manner) – and then realized her opinion as she found it painful to *just* describe a painting she did not really admire. Her struggle in realizing her point of view could, if true, explain the fact that the poem seems to struggle within itself to find its performative function: its first half is rigid with description, but every few lines is broken by Bishop's subjective voice; its meter is controlled, and then fiercely broken into prose-like phrases; its carefully kept rhyme is switched all of a sudden into its complete opposite; its conclusion is poignant, and then almost self-consciously taken back by the poet herself, who, realizing her gusto, might have felt she had been too assertive.

It is then with this consciousness that Bishop again displays her inexperience with seeing herself as poet; however, it is also clear that almost in spite of that anxiety, Bishop develops a sense of her own confidence and power as a poet in her ability to be critical. As imagination then takes the place of mimetic representation, Bishop's direction towards her own poetics is

ultimately unknown at this point, like the ships' purpose or the possibility of what lies beneath the waters. What *may* be there is attainable through imagination; what stands in actuality is not quite ready to be seen.

It is apparent that Bishop's ability to grasp through writing was essential to establishing herself as a poet. Not only is it the act of extending the arm toward some attainable thing in poetics, but the sensuality of feeling and holding that suggests Bishop's intent on an active poetry that strives towards extending not just an arm, but her person into that poetic sphere. To pull towards oneself is just the first step – a step actualized by the poems of *North & South* including "The Map" and "Large Bad Picture;" pulling one's whole poetic self *towards*, however, is the ultimate goal.

It is thus through the close reading of Bishop's poetics that the active nature of her poems is displayed and released. The non-reticence that has been defined by Bishop's quiet *action* in poetry is the gem of *North & South.* It does not profess its importance, but rather gleams beneath the muddy waters of criticism and its tendency to group. Further, the "grasping and defining" (the poetry's action) that Bishop crafts in poems like "The Map" and "Large Bad Picture" of *North & South* can be seen as the emblem of her early poetics. It is a definition of her unique divergence amidst a ceaselessly readjusting medium. By searching, experimenting, imagining, and testing her own voice, the life of Bishop's poetics in *North & South* characterize a time in Bishop's poetic career that showcases what active poetry can do and be. Not expressing the poet she became, Bishop's early poetry defines what was her ineffable potential.

CHAPTER TWO – *False Starts*

"At last we have a prize book that has no creditable mannerisms. At last we have someone who knows, who is not didactic" -Marianne Moore[31]

In speaking of Elizabeth Bishop's first collection, *North & South*, Marianne Moore distinguishes Bishop from poets who muse on the brink of whim, who are inspired without their own inspiration. In marking the absence of "creditable mannerisms," Moore places a veil of uniqueness over *North & South* that not only draws attention to what she perceives as solidarity in the singular voice, but also the knowledge with which that voice comes. Moore, with the relief that seems to accompany her statement, thus finds a certain ease by which Bishop's poems are her own – funny to think of when we consider the amount of over-the-shoulder-looking Moore did herself – and we thus surmise that those creditable mannerisms of which she speaks are marks of a lesser poet, a poet who has not yet become prize-worthy.

Marianne Moore's claim about Bishop's first published collection is in my opinion dubious; it is very much the case that Bishop took up an array of mannerisms not her own in writing the poems of *North & South*. As the person who knew her work best, Moore makes a statement that seems to disregard how the "Bishop" of Bishop' poems was found through interpreting the established, or the "creditable mannerisms" of others. What I will discuss in this chapter, against the connotations of Moore's statement about the poems of *North & South*, is the idea of Bishop's false starts: those paths which Bishop explored in order to be inspired, but also through which she was able to hew more closely to the direction of the kind of poet she wanted to be. There are poems, acting as false starts in *North & South,* that do not seem to fit with commonalities of Bishop, that is, with directions of her poetry found in later collections. There are also poems that were initial steps that did not quite meet their intended fruition. Though they

may be "false," Bishop's false starts are, like any great artist's work, the discarded building blocks – the crossed-out lines in the bound notebook – and still exist as part of Bishop's poetic journey.

Moore's comment, "someone who knows, who is not didactic" seems to classify Bishop's adventurous poetic nature as a certain knowledge, rather than an inquiry. To think about this knowledge as characteristic of Bishop's work in *North & South* is actually contradictory to what I argue is a searching – a defining and rendering of a poetics through the measuring of others. It is by this measuring that Bishop eventually finds her own, but also through taking the already established and tweaking it slightly to her own point of view. It isn't that she *knows* what she writes about (she certainly did not know what the Gentleman of Shalott would say or think when she wrote her poem about him). Rather, she knows how to flex the muscles of her imagination. And that, certainly, is some kind of knowledge.

Interpreting the Established

Many of the poems included in *North & South* depend upon the existence of another work, understanding, or event. Such poems take the established and essentially pose an opinion – an alternate point of view – through which Bishop's poetics emerge. These interpretations are influences, but more than just borrowed thoughts; they take on the subject as if it were the speaker's creation. In other words, Bishop does not identify herself as interpreter nor does she see herself as "one who is influenced;" she is the author, though for the second time.

It is my understanding that these interpretations are modes of exercising an unestablished poetic voice. At the time of writing the poems that would later appear in *North & South*, Bishop was still not in her own light, not with a poetics that resonated with what she wanted to

accomplish with writing poetry. In fact, it is the case that at this time Bishop was not even certain of herself as a poet. David Kalstone, in his book *Becoming a Poet,* points to one of Bishop's letters to Robert Lowell in which the young poet wrote that she had "a sense of being a 'poet by default.'" [32] At this early point in her life, being a poet was not as clearly "right" as it later would be. In interpreting the established, then, I argue that Bishop attempts to find some confidence or purpose in writing by starting with what she knew was successful, maybe even what she aspired to in her own work. The idea of getting inspiration from other poetry is not a new one; however, for Bishop, it was not only a tool but a *method* of testing the waters. As she interpreted the established, Bishop then developed strategies by which she exercised her poetic ability through renewing what she saw as accepted.

As this chapter is about false starts, I feel I must explain first why the poems I have selected for this chapter are uniquely false starts, especially since Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England," published in *Geography III* (Bishop's last published work) would seem to discredit my categorization of these poems as "stunted." "Crusoe in England" is a poem that takes on the voice of Robinson Crusoe as he reflects back on his life as an explorer. It interprets a character that would otherwise be seen as confident and gives him more character in fault, as he is humorously deemed directionless, "One day I dyed a baby goat bright red / with my red berries, just to see / something a little different" (l.125-128). As established, Crusoe is reinterpreted. So why, then, if this poem appears in Bishop's later work, do I claim that her early poems of this nature are false starts? The answer lies in the function of the poetry: the false starts of Bishop's early work emerge from her process of figuring out of her own poetic voice in each poem through the persuasion of her own self and her readers. "Crusoe in England" is a completed work that has a clear voice that seems to be separated from Bishop's – in other words, we read Crusoe,

not Bishop on Crusoe. In contrast, Bishop's early poems of this kind are subtly hesitant – not smooth in interpretation – not confident in purpose. Through their portrayals, they uncover parts of Bishop's poetic voice, and thus are explorations of her imagination, writing abilities, and confidence. In this manner, they are like miniature reviews one might find in one of Bishop's notebooks; they are, too, as intricate and full of life as one of her sketches is scratched on the paper, with multiple lines drawn where one would be expected. As explorations, they exist on many levels as "Crusoe in England" does just one. Thus, as false starts, the following poems discussed try to assert themselves as poetic voices, but also tend to sell themselves short as worthy of pen and ink.

"Casabianca"

CASABIANCA
Elizabeth Bishop

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.

CASABIANCA
Felicia Dorothea Hemans

The boy stood on the burning deck
Whence all but him had fled;
The flame that lit the battle's wreck
Shone round him o'er the dead.

Yet beautiful and bright he stood,
As born to rule the storm;
A creature of heroic blood,
A proud, though childlike form.

The flames rolled on – he would not go
Without his father's word;
That father, faint in death below,
His voice no longer heard.

He called aloud – "Say, father, say,
If yet my task is done?"
He knew not that the chieftain lay
Unconscious of his son.

"Speak, father!" once again he cried,
"If I may yet be gone!"
And but the booming shots replied,
And fast the flames rolled on.

Upon his brow he felt their breath,
And in his waving hair,
And looked from that lone post of death
In still, yet brave despair.

And shouted but once more aloud,
"My father! Must I stay?"
While o'er him fast, through sail and shroud,
The wreathing fires made way.

They wrapt the ship in splendor wild,
They caught the flag on high,
And streamed above the gallant child,
Like banners in the sky.

There came a burst of thunder sound–
The boy – oh! Where was he?
Ask of the winds that far around
With fragments strewed the sea!–

With mast, and helm, and pennon fair
That well had borne their part–
But the noblest thing that perished there
Was that young, faithful heart.

Bishop's poem, "Casabianca" of *North and South* is a work that attempts to gain perspective from a poem already in existence and an event far in the past. Felicia Dorthea Heman's poem also entitled "Casabianca" dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, and itself comments on an actual event that occurred in 1698 during the Battle of the Nile on the French ship, The Orient.[33] Heman's ballad tells the story of a young boy who was aboard that ship – the son of the Commander – who remained at his honored post while the ship burned in hopes that his father would relinquish him from his duty. As Heman's poem recounts, the boy's father, unconscious, cannot come to his rescue, and the boy burns to death in the shadow of his father's love. Heman's "Casabianca" provides a melodic theater of the event, incorporating dialogue and rhyme to perpetuate the interactive quality of the long-past event.

Turning to Bishop's "Casabianca," the story implied is fundamentally the same as Heman's: the boy on the burning deck waits for his father's command which does not come, and he thus burns with the ship. Bishop's poem, however, does not simply tell Heman's narrative; seen initially by the difference in lengths, Bishop's two stanzas create dialogue with, rather than restate, the first version. As Heman's poem begins with the line, "The boy stood on the burning

deck" (l. 1), Bishop's begins with, "Love's the boy stood on the burning deck" (l.1). The principal difference between the two poems is already clear: unlike Heman's narrative poetics, Bishop seems to explore the idea of the boy as a symbol – like "Love" is such a symbol– thus making her poem one that provides an original interpretation of the original's established content.

Speaking of the established, it is important to know in considering Bishop's interpretation, that Heman's original was one of the most popular poems of the 19th century to have children recite in school.[34] Because of this institutionalization, "Casabianca" became like a used sponge, unable to be further functioning in soaking up water – in effect, it became as meaningful as classic rhymes, like *Humpty Dumpty* are "meaningful." With the literary death of the poem's non-rhetorical function, "Casabianca" also became the go-to material for parody, as comedy is often derived from that which is well known and established. Toppling Heman's poem from its educational status, then a way of confronting mindless recitation practices, stripped "Casabianca" to the point of skeletal memory, then used by Bishop to revive its meaningful potential and her just-as-meaningful poetic voice.

> 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 (l. 1-5)

Here in Bishop's first stanza, the boy becomes a symbol as he is united with Love's established status. As such, the boy not only stands for honor as he firmly plants himself on the burning deck as he waits for his father, but also for voice, which he undoubtedly has trouble with in the above stanza. However, as he stammers and tries to recite, he projects "elocution," as if his attempts at honor through the recitation of his position ("The boy stood on / the burning deck")

should be considered clear and precise, though stumbled over. It is as if Bishop, in her portrayal of the boy on the burning deck, means to draw attention to the boy's chosen actions, rather than those he did not choose (saving himself in neglect of his search for honor). In this discussion of speech, on which the poem's first stanza so clearly focuses, Bishop not only refers to her version of Heman's poem to its history of educational recitation, she resuscitates its limp body, as if each stammer were a gasp of breath, a speeding of the heart.

To support this, it would seem that in the lines, "Love's the son / stood stammering elocution / while the poor ship in flames went down" (l.3-5), Bishop revives the boy (or the son) in her use of the present perfect, as he "stood stammering" - as if he, like the poem, is resuscitated with each repeated word. This is of course in opposition to the fate of the ship, which in the past tense "went down." The completed action of the ship, in relation to the boy, seems to conflict with what we know what happens from Heman's poem (the boy goes down with the ship); however, it can be argued that with this, the boy as symbol lives on past the fate of his body. As he recites his present state on the burning vessel, the boy, like the poem, *can* exist beyond death.

Speaking in metaphorical terms, if the boy as symbol can escape death and continue on as a stammering schoolboy, then one questions what the "poor ship in flames" might represent. As the ship stands for the boy's platform in the poem, it is thus the flames that pose a threat to his speech as they destroy the grounds on which he grasps tightly at honor. The flames, then, which do not seem to affect the boy in the first stanza, (but only the "poor ship") are overcome by the boy as symbol. Metaphorically, if the symbolic boy is like Heman's poem (which overcomes its death with Bishop's revival of it) then the poem's flames are all those things which destroyed the original's livelihood: the mindless repetition, the parodies, etc. As the ship is poor in its lack of

resistance, so was Heman's original when it was so toppled before Bishop's revival – though the ship will forever be sunk in the ocean, the force by which Bishop pulls Heman's poem from a dusty storage room is undoubtedly strong enough.

If only to prove herself right, Bishop continues in her second stanza:

> 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.

Here, as the boy becomes "obstinate," Bishop asserts that as a symbol, he is strong, stubborn, unyielding in its position as such. In a turn, however, it seems that as Bishop groups "the ship, / [and] even the swimming sailors" as *also* "Love," she makes them symbols of their own, as the boy originally was so made. Acknowledging its presence in the symbolic world, the ship, as stated earlier, becomes a part of what the symbolic boy is – it is that on which he found his voice – and thus it not only exists in the boy's journey, but also on its own as a necessary element of the boy's ability to speak.

The sailors, on the other hand, as symbols are those who are envious of the boy's ability and status. As Bishop writes "even the sailors," we take her last-minute inclusion to be a second thought, as they originated as envious, they in themselves are emblematic in the boy's journey to speak and are thus symbols of his environment. Metaphorically, as the symbolic boy and the ship represent Hemans' poem in various stages, the sailors would seem to represent those who see the Hemans' poem for a second time in its glory, or even Bishop's poem as a refreshment of the original. In a way, the sailors represent the reaction towards the renewal – as they "would like a schoolroom platform, too, / or an excuse to stay / on deck," the second-lookers, as Bishop wants to see them, would like a second chance with the poem. In desiring a schoolroom platform or an excuse to stay on deck, the sailors, like the second-lookers, would like to be the boy on the

burning deck – proceed on the journey he traveled – and thus be the symbol *he* represents, not the supporting roles they play.

In interpreting the established, Bishop here does a fine job of renewing with her own poetic voice; however, with her last line, she seems to cut the poem off, as if her interpretative strategy failed: "And love's the burning boy." Not only does Bishop end her poem with a line that seems like an afterthought (an aside to close, as if the statement might be read in a hushed voice, almost unheard but still present), she does so in a manner that is utterly frustrating in its timidity. The idea that such a line, which seems to crush the boy's status as symbol as it sunk the burning ship, should begin with the word "and" seems to rob the poem of its gusto. As a symbol of honor, speech, and revival, the boy's fate as "burning" seems to suggest, like his previous "stammering" in the first stanza, that it is with the constant destruction of these pillars that he exists. With so much implied, the line cuts the poem at its stem; and as we beg it to "regrow," it simply ends with an afterthought. As it is conclusive in its adherence to Heman's narrative end, the poem undoes its potential in discussing the merits of finding one's voice while in search of honor.

Such an idea, finding one's own voice in pursuit of acknowledgement from others, is one that Bishop herself deals with, as all speakers do, in interpreting the established. It isn't necessarily that those who speak wish to *convince*, but rather, just to be heard. That is, of course, the reason to speak (and thus not limit thoughts to the mind). To consider "Casabianca" from a larger perspective, the poem may have in fact been an attempt at giving merit to interpreting the established, as Bishop turns a poem about the pursuit of honor into one about the *method* of that pursuit, and the stammering that may, and often does, occur in the process. In fact an active poem in this way, "Casabianca" may be thought of as a metaphor for Bishop's journey in finding

voice. As she is the boy, her burning deck is all that strives to stop her (her insecurity in "being" a poet, her struggle with asthma and finding air clean enough to breathe); and further, as the sailors are those she hopes will look upon her with admiration someday, the burning boy is the failure of that hope, the doubt that it will come true. In this, "Casabianca" is further proved to be a false start because it shows how Bishop's process of interpreting, though good, is suspended like the boy who, thriving as a symbol, is put to ruin.

"Seascape"

In another of her poems from *North & South*, "Seascape," Bishop takes influence from an experience she had while fishing in a small motorboat one evening in Florida.[35] Analysts have written about this Bishop poem as a clear expression of contrast because its first half is ethereal, "white," pure, and its second half is dark, black, unknown.[36] As a false start, it is of my opinion that Bishop navigates this contrast between dark and light as she attempts to takes hold of the seascape's celestial and non-celestial properties. In doing so, Bishop interprets the established through defining the effects of her initial experience.

"Seascape" begins with an idealization of the speaker's observations:

> This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,
> flying as high as they want and as far as they want sideways
> 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
> and the beautiful pea-green back-pasture
> where occasionally a fish jumps, like a wild-flower
> in an ornamental spray of spray;
> this cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope:
> it does look like heaven. (l. 1-13)

As "white herons" are released in angelic agency, their image, stamped below on the water's surface, is praised for its perfection; the scene, not only beautiful, is *celestial.* Broadening the scope, the "whole region, from the highest heron / down to the weightless mangrove island" is not only sensational in harmonious and ornate detail, but is fit for a Pope's tapestry in an image of *Heaven.* In this first half, the poem functions by way of the poet's ability to see her own experience as comparable to that of Heaven – to see the small ornaments of existence on earth as emblematic of that above – and to find resolve in writing "it *does* look like heaven." The emphasis placed on that line points to its presence as an affirmation of what the reader, and possibly the poet herself, had already established in the mood taken from the seascape described. In effect, the line accepts not only the comparison, but also the interpretation and understanding of the established, Heaven.

Bishop's second half of "Seascape," considered the "dark" side, is however not just the antithesis of the previous half.

> But a skeletal lighthouse standing there
> in black and white clerical dress,
> who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.
> 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. (l.14-23)

On the one hand, if we look at the depiction of the "skeletal lighthouse" as it is portrayed personified, we understand that he is the emblem of all that is not like the celestial seascape: he "lives on his nerves," suggesting an emphasis on all earthly sensation (good and bad), and he "thinks that hell rages below his iron feet," thus posing as the antithesis to the lofty herons who reflect perfection below them. Further as the lighthouse seems to take the position of the speaker

from the first half of the poem, asserting its opinions, the second half is further opposed to the first: as the seascape was established in the first half of the poem as just like Heaven, here the latter opinion is directly opposed and then expanded upon: "Heaven is not like flying or swimming, / but has something to do with blackness and a strong glare" (l. 20-21). In this way, it would seem that the poem perfectly opposes itself in a balanced duality; however, if we consider the lighthouse not to be a *new* speaker, but the speaker commenting on her own poem, then our perception changes.

"Thinking he knows better," the lighthouse, in truth, only "thinks" and does not know. This distinction of thinking is repeated in the second half of the stanza ("He thinks he knows better," "He thinks that hell rages") as if to underline the fact that he only speculates ("thinks") about what is there, and seems to "know" what is *not* there, "he knows that heaven is not like this." In that sense, he knows no affirmative. As a strategy, the lighthouse stands to unveil the "knowing" that is taken for granted in the first half of the poem; the lighthouse clearly distinguishes between what he thinks and what he knows, whereas the speaker of the previous half only seems to know. This critique, which seems to create an interesting dialogue within the constraints of the poem, adds a depth to the ways in which we think about moments or seascapes that seem to lead us to other realms whether they be high or low. The lighthouse's critique, as it includes a direct refusal of an image from the first half of the poem, nevertheless still finds that he has his own opinions, too. Just as fallible as the perception of the seascape as like Heaven, the lighthouse stands strong but humble.

The reason that "Seascape" is a false start, however, is not solely due to this duality, which seems to resonate with completion and the interpretation of the established. No, it is the extraneous last two lines of the poem that undermine the defining accomplished by Bishop

throughout her poem. The last two lines undermine the authority of the poem and seem to cut off thought as if to say, "never mind:" "and when it gets dark he will remember something / strongly worded to say on the subject" (l. 22-23). In Bishop's poem, "Large Bad Picture," the poem's last two lines function in the same manner: "It would be hard to say what brought them there, / commerce or contemplation" (l. 31-32). The poet's uncertainty about what her own creation does suggests a lack of trust in her own imagination, as if wonderment about such subjects is the safer path to choose – no final word to judge, no clever ending to call foolish. In "Seascape," Bishop ceases to take control when she writes the word, "something," as if the continuation of the lighthouse's musings "on the subject" should be a satisfactory ending to the poem. The snuffing of the poem's dialogue is emblematized in its last word, "subject," which seems to denounce the entirety of the piece to that one word – to just *something* talked about, to just *something* able to be expressed in one unimaginative designation. This "subject," then, that was so crafted through the poet's own poetics, is betrayed by its own creator. The idea that a single word should suffice to explain the words so brilliantly compiled is maddening, as the poem is thus false in its ambitious start, pruned too hastily and for the wrong type of tree.

Quotations as Endings

In Bishop's *North & South*, it is also common to see poems that act as false starts because of a quoted finish. The strategy behind this deliberate act of ending her poems was for Bishop not always manifested in the same manner from poem to poem. The three poems I survey in this section are a testament to this as they seem to borrow strategies from each other; nevertheless, not one is not like the other. Almost as if the poet was unaware of her tendency to end poems with quotations, the same may be said for the acknowledgement of how those endings affect the poem

as a whole, as they often render the poem such that its poetic trajectory changes both completely and often negatively. As false starts, the following three poems are undermined by the quotations with which they end. The poetics themselves give reason to the ways in which this happens; we may also wonder if Bishop felt herself holding back as she, in effect, disturbs the success of her own poetic voice.

"Cirque d'Hiver"

CIRQUE D'HIVER

Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,
fit for a king of several centuries back.
A little circus horse with real white hair.
His eyes are glossy black.
He bears a little dancer on his back.

She stands upon her toes and turns and turns.
A slanting spray of artificial roses
is stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice.
Above her head she poses
another spray of artificial roses.

His man and tail are straight from Chirico.
He has a formal, melancholy soul.
He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back
along the little pole
that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,
under his belly, as a big tin key.
He canters three steps, then he makes a bow,
canters again, bows on one knee,
canters, then clicks and stops, and looks at me.

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.
He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately —
his eye is like a star —
we stare and say, "Well, we have come this far."

In Bishop's "Cirque d'Hiver," the speaker is first distanced from the toy she observes, and then is seemingly united with it in an imaginary field of toy-human connection. In the first

stanza, as the mechanical toy is "across the floor," it is also referred to as a toy, drawing attention to the fact that its mechanized "flitting" is non-living, sterile. Further, the toy is "fit for a king of several centuries back," further distancing the speaker from the toy, as it does not seem of her time, or worthy of her gaze as it has "real white hair" and is "fit for a king." The specialness of the toy is immediately mysterious and untouchable, as the circus horse's eyes are "glossy black," daunting in their luminous depth.

As the poem moves on, the speaker watches the movements of the toy, and it becomes clear that the toy comes to bear some alternate existence to that of a wooden toy, as "He" and "She" are mentioned to have souls able to be "melancholy" and "pierced" as they are confined to the metal stake holding them upright and united. Suddenly, by a word, the historical distance is torn by the look given to the speaker by the toy horse ("canters, then clicks and stops, and looks at me" [l.20]). The horse pauses in his mechanized movement if only to look at his gazer, and for the first time, we see not only the speaker's recognition of herself in the poem, but the meeting of the two spheres in one imaginative scenario. In this introduction and meeting, the toy horse takes on intelligence while leaving the absent dancer behind; and as he does so, we see a leveling of fields, a rebirth of the world described, an opportunity for insight in imagination.

The fruition of this foresight, however, does not come. It is in fact the opposite we are left with, as Robert Dale Parker notes, and "the poem ends before we can tell what that recognition leads to or if it leads to anything at all" (52). The recognition here is of course that connection that happens between the toy horse and the speaker, the crux of the poem, the moment when everything has the possibility to change. The ending quotation that follows which seems to be spoken by both the horse and the speaker in tandem, "Well, we have come this far," thus terminates not the connection of the two as they speak together in finish, but rather the resolution

of their meeting. Thus, as Bishop does not tear the horse and the speaker from each other, their relationship is stagnated by ending the poem with a statement that itself looks back, rather than forward.

Although we see this quoted ending as cropping the poem as we wanted it to be, it must be considered that Bishop's strategy of using a quotation may not have so intended. The humor that seems to come from the line, "Well, we have come this far" suggests a certain relief of intention, a retrospective glazing intended to wipe away any serious mood conjured previously. The "Well" used in the statement is especially telling, as its colloquial causality implies a familiarity between the speakers – something we know does not exist – a certain buffer used in speech to indicate pause after thought, after some sort of communication. The communication here, of course, is simply a look between toy and human – and to think that both would come to say, 'Well, we have come this far" is humorous in its absurdity.

The ending also functions by way of humor in that it seems to suggest a long journey – "this far" – and yet, the leap of imagination made, and the momentary glance that unites the two, seems more synonymous to a hop onto a train than that train's long journey. Further, as if to make sense of their status as united, the two find resolution in the length of their travels together; and with a "well…" they seem to do so casually, denying any absurdity in their imagined meeting. Commenting on their own meeting, (a human and a toy horse in completely imaginary terms), the players themselves denounce their basis of interest, and we as readers are supposed to thus see the whole poem as a moment of indulgent whimsy.

As Bishop thus allows the speaker to grasp the idea of being in a parallel world with the toys on the floor, she ends up mocking her own poem with her choice of final quotation. Obliging the reader to view her poem as an outsider rather than a participant, the reader becomes

someone to laugh at her indulgences in imagination rather than one that plays along with it. Bishop takes that from the poem which underlines the validity and importance of imagination.

As a last thought about this poem, I find it interesting to note that Bishop stated the following about "Cirque d'Hiver," "I think the title referred more to the mood than anything else."[37] What this comment suggests is that contrary to what the poem performs and creates in its last few stanzas, the title is the real mood-maker of the piece. As this just seems absurd (in the sense that there is nothing in the poem that suggests the importance of winter), it may be the case that in retrospect, Bishop realized her err in ending, and wished to draw attention away from it. Whatever was the reason for stating the prominence of the title, it is clear that from it, Bishop confuses the poem with a certain disparity in what her intentions may have been, and what the actuality of the words succeeded in doing.

"Quai d'Orléans"

QUAI D'ORLÉANS

For Margaret Miller

Each barge on the river easily tows
a mighty wake,
a giant oak-leaf of gray lights
on duller gray;
and behind it real leaves are floating by,
down to the sea.
Mercury-veins on the giant leaves,
the ripples, make
for the sides of the quai, to extinguish themselves
against the walls
as softly as falling-star come to their ends
at a point in the sky.
And throngs of small leaves, real leaves, trailing them,
go drifting by
to disappear as modestly, down the sea's
dissolving halls.
We stand as still as stones to watch
the leaves and ripples
while light and nervous water hold

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

"Quai d'Orléans," another of Bishop's false starts, is a poem that discusses the passing of memories by means of an extended metaphor in which leaves floating down a river, towed by barges (or "giant oak-leaves), exist as the weight of memories to each living soul. The poem journeys with the leaves as they "extinguish themselves / against the walls," and "go drifting by / to disappear as modestly;" just as we are introduced to Bishop's imagined world of "Cirque d'Hiver," here the speaker watches these leaves as they simply *are* a mighty wake. Introduced, the reader is then shown the speaker as she identifies herself and another (maybe more) as "We" in line seventeen; similar to how the speaker of the latter poem states her presence as the horse looks at "me," here the poem becomes more than a removed observation from a speaker not present with the leaves and the barges. As the speakers of "we" "stand as still as stones to watch / the leaves and ripples" (l.17-18), the extended metaphor is united with the speakers, and the poem becomes centered on the speaker's actions, rather than the slow movements of the leaves.

Shortly after the speakers as "we" are introduced, the poem ends with the following quotation:

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

Here, the ending quotation functions in a similar way to "Cirque d'Hiver," in that it cuts off a newly found relationship that we see as the crux of the poem; however, this poem also, with this particular ending, seems to close with a false sense of wisdom, which, hasty, reads like an aside one might find in the *middle* of a poem. It is possible that the ending reads as it does because the

speaker of the quoted lines directs the speech to a "you," whom, up until this point the poem does not mention, and in doing so seems to escape from the present moment of the poem in a quiet moment of personal dialogue. This caesura of sorts, as it is then filled with a different mood and tone altogether, is then just the end. As a strategy of ending, the poem seeks to resonate with a "what if" statement – one that attempts to beg the reader to consider the leaves as they affect our own lives – however, the actual effect is that we feel left out of the equation, uninterested in the unattainable secret behind the metaphor.

The truth of the matter is that "Quai d'Orléans" is in fact dedicated to Bishop's dear friend, Margaret Miller, who, according to Bishop's biographer Brett Millier,[38] had just been in a terrible accident previous to the writing of this poem. The "you" of the poem we then take to be Miller; however, the success of the poem's ending does not change with this name, because even as we know the "you," the statement in itself refuses to make sense in context and we are left, still, feeling unsatisfied. The reason behind this dissatisfaction may be mostly related to the fact that in rational speech, the quoted statement not only cuts itself off without resolve, but also ends with a metaphor that incomprehensible. Firstly, as the statement starts, "If what we see could forget us…," we expect a "then" to follow; instead, however, the line is cut off with a dash, and we the phrase is not resolved. Instead, what the poem leaves with is an alternative, which in effect provides the "reality" by which the speaker sees it, "but for life we'll not be rid / of the leaves' fossils." This truth – this bit of wisdom – as it attempts to resolve the entirety of the poem with its drifting leaves and wakes and barges, leaves us with the knowledge that "we'll not be rid of the leaves' fossils;" however, it is very much the case that leaves on water cannot *make* fossils. With metaphor, especially extended metaphor, we put initial trust in the poet to guide us through the poem with the promise of deeper understanding at its close; acknowledging that pact

of sorts, it is then a true failure of trust to confuse the reader as Bishop does with her last image. As an ultimate denial, the poem ends on a note of failure, both in the meaning of Bishop's words as we piece together understanding, and in the denied fruition of her metaphor.

"**Chemin de Fer"**

CHEMIN DE FER

Alone on the railroad track
I walked with pounding heart.
The ties were too close together
or maybe too far apart.
The scenery was impoverished:
scrub-pine and oak; beyond
its mingled gray-green foliage
I saw the little pond

where the dirty hermit lives,
lie like an old tear
holding onto its injuries
lucidly year after year.

The hermit shot off his shot-gun
and the tree by his cabin shook.
Over the pond went a ripple.
The pet hen went chook-chook.

"Love should be put into action!"
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo
tried and tried to confirm it.

Bishop's "Chemin de Fer," yet another false start with a quoted ending, follows a narrative form and has the appearance of folk lore, as the speaker finds herself faced with a wise but fearsome hermit in classic rhymed ballad lines. The template used seems to be that of a traditional quest in which a protagonist sets forth by his or herself and at some point meets an unlikely character that in some way alters the journey's path. As the speaker of Bishop's poem sets forth by herself on the railroad tracks, something seems to be at stake: she walks with a "pounding heart" – her own, we assume – but nevertheless, one of some weight as she feels she

must walk "with" it. The oddity, too, the she finds with the ties of the track leads us to feel the tense tone the speaker feels as she doesn't feel comfort in hitting each rung. Further, as the poem moves on, we see "impoverished" surroundings and "mingled gray-green foliage," underlining the speaker's isolation in uneasy waters.

When the speaker arrives at the hermit's abode, he, like a traditional "refuser of the quest," shoots his gun as a warning to the intruder not to come near. As his environment seems to respond to his actions as the pond ripples, and the "tree by his cabin shook," the speaker is not heard of. Further, in the next and last stanza, the hermit speaks, "Love should be put into action!" and in doing so, changes the focus of the poem to that line. As the hermit "screams" this, however, the speaker is again nowhere to be found, though the natural setting around him responds, "Across the pond an echo / tried and tried to confirm it." This absence of the speaker is, like the failed metaphor of the latter poem, a severing of what a few lines ago became the crux of the poem; and with this stagnation comes the paired non-fulfillment of the poet's task as poet.

As an ending, the attempted strategy of having such a quotation is the same as we saw with "Quai d'Orléans;" the wisdom provided here, however, seems even *more* out of place than with the latter. As the quotation at the end of "Quai d'Orléans" at least finishes the poem with a reference (although a failed one) to the extended metaphor, here, the question of what Love should do seems erratic – so much so that it seems as if the poet used the constructs of the poem to promote that very line, and nothing more. In its solitude, the statement from the old hermit seems placed on a pedestal that could have been of any kind. With the realization of this, the strategy of using the quotation actually becomes more of an irritation to the reader than anything else. Considering the fact that the speaker whom we have followed is dropped, we as readers are forced to become as stranded as the hermit's exclamation and are thereby also dismissed.

As I stated that the poem's sole function seems to be holding up the last quotation, it is important to note that Bret Millier believes the line is associated with Bishop's struggles with being homosexual, feelings that she was afraid to let surface.[39] If true, I feel it necessary to ask why it would be, then, that the *echo* of the hermit's words tries and tries to confirm it? If we take the "I" of the poem to be Bishop, why should she deny herself action in engaging with the hermit if only to breathe a little life into the statement, which, with the end of the poem, is snuffed out with repeated trying of its own echo. Even if Bishop is the hermit, it seems that her words, still, are unheard. Screaming, "Love *should* be put into action," Bishop the hermit nevertheless does not *put* love into action, thus affirming the statement herself; rather, the statement continues to exist in solitude, trying and trying to establish itself. In either case, the failure of the quoted statement to perform, to become established, and to carry the poem is a testament to its status as a false start; the poem's desire to share is neglected, and thus left sundered.

In considering these three poems as they display Bishop's failed strategy of ending her poetry with quotations, they unveil a certain trait to Bishop's writing that manifests itself in her instability in becoming a poet. Not to say that she was insecure in herself - I see the establishing of one's own voice as comparable to standing on the shifting of plates beneath the earth's surface, able to feel the movement and sudden collisions while trying to be still. It is the case that the instability that comes with "being still" is just as tangible as one's attempts at "being a poet." The failed strategies of balance, the attempts at confidence through grasping and defining, and the glance towards the concrete all serve this purpose of stillness. And that stillness, although not always found through brilliance, is nevertheless sought with vigor.

The issues of false starts discussed in this chapter center around two tendencies found in Bishop's first collection, *North & South,* that exist as positive and negative charges in both the poetry itself, and the poetic process. The first, the idea of interpreting the established, comes from a place discussed in my last chapter – a need to grasp and define in order to establish surroundings and voice – however here, the change rests in the interpretation, rather than just the holding. It is in the creativity of Bishop's poetic eye that poems like "Casabianca" are able to diverge from the original version and make something fresh with a poem so well known one would think it couldn't be thought of in any other light than it already bears. Further, with poems like "Seascape" that interpret the establishment of experience, rendering them something unique was a part of Bishop's process of learning about herself as a poet. To try, to really *see* how the mind fits around a certain chosen topic, is the positive of producing false starts, which are not necessarily negative in their overall existence. A question that seems granted with an obvious answer is thus not so clear: does a poet who knows who she is (as a poet) from the start of her career *really know*? In the sense that making mistakes is also producing poems that are only experiments of the mind, the idea of failing is thus production.

On the other hand, the negative of the false start, what I have pointed out as the unfortunate endings – the strategies of concluding that seem to cut off, undermine, annoy – seem to be unfairly weighted, as they have the ability to singlehandedly make a poem a false start, they also have the ability to ruin a poem of its successful interpreting of the established. In poems like "Cirque d'Hiver," for example, the idea of terrorizing the imagination from its respectable place in thought is favored by the poet as she steps outside the realm of the poem at the very end to mock the very grounds it works on. Poems like "Chemin de Fer," too, deteriorate the stilts by which they function –here a quest – and in doing so deny the poems closure.

The idea that this happens, the collapsing of such work at its very close, suggests something about the poet's process in how it functions itself. As the poetry itself does not lay out the reasons, we question whether the failed endings have to do with Bishop's simultaneous building of confidence as a poet – that, too, comes with its own positives and negatives – or, whether they exist due to a lack of knowing how. Wondering about these annexed curiosities, I find it must be stated that they are, although related to the poem's creation, not weighting down every word as though a poem were a diary entry. Sure, it is the case that poetry can be based on experience, but once a poem comes into being, it is no longer bound to that poet's experience. As the poetry takes its own life, we consider *that* as it exists in a world of *its* influence, *its* tone, mood, function. The poems discussed in this chapter are thus not only part of Bishop's collected work, they *make* her collected work – for good or bad – and thus they exist both on Bishop's terms, and their own.

CHAPTER THREE – *North & South* and *Geography III*

What is uniquely equivocal about Elizabeth Bishop's *North & South* is the stance by which her poems diverge from one poetic strategy. This characteristic of Bishop's early poetry is in constant conflict with the common perception that Bishop always wrote with herself in mind – as an autobiographical poet – and thus her poetic searching is misunderstood to be reticence, her false starts interpreted as diversions. The way of viewing Bishop's poetry has negative repercussions; when unable to "fit" her poetry into interpretations derived from her biography, those who read Bishop's poetry in this autobiographical way (opposed to those who read poetry apart from biography) tend to dismiss the poetry in various ways. A common misunderstanding of Bishop's first collection is thus manifested in the influential critical framework that states the worth of *North & South* in terms of its autobiographical connections.

Characteristic of this framework is a tendency to view Bishop's *North & South* by means of a *Geography III* lens. Through its confessional poetics, Bishop's last collection, *Geography III,* changed reader's perceptions of Bishop as a reticent poet into an autobiographical one. Taking Bishop's change in *Geography III* as a "last word," readers and critics often find Bishop's newfound reflections to be her "true" motive throughout her poetic career. Herbert Butterfield writes about this conflict in *The Whig Interpretation of History*:

> We cling to a certain organization of historical knowledge which amounts to a whig interpretation of history, and all our deference to research brings us only to admit that this needs qualifications in detail. But exceptions in detail do not prevent us from mapping out the large story on the same pattern all the time; these exceptions are lost indeed in that combined process of organization and abridgement by which we reach our general survey of general history (6).

As Butterfield speaks of history, the same process is nevertheless present in the appreciation of poetry. The whig interpretation, outlined by Butterfield, "studies the past with reference to the present" (11) and thus is always looking back, just as Bishop critics view her poetry as a

retrospection from *Geography III.* In this process of reference that Butterfield's suggestion of "mapping" is cultivated in a prospective that overlooks the details. Consequently, in poetry, collections like *North & South* (very much in the "past") are looked at with a *Geography III* (very present) lens. Viewpoints are thus geared towards a "general" history of the poetry, headed by the present state of poetics: What poems can explain the switch to confessional? Did early poems hint at a desire to be nostalgic? Was Bishop aware of her "true" intention in autobiographical poetry? Viewing *North & South* in this manner, the poetic function of the collection in its own right is overshadowed by a search for an autobiographical explanation.

In contrast to the established view that Bishop's entire collected works are autobiographically merited, this chapter shows how the often overshadowed *North & South* functions as its *own* showcase of a searching poetics, and not a solely introspective poetics. Further, this chapter underlines the unique qualities of *North & South* by showcasing their presence in Bishop's later work: strategies developed in *North & South* that carry over to later work emphasize their vitality in Bishop's poetics by means of their lastingness in the creative process.

Bishop's poem, "One Art" of *Geography III* for example*,* deals with the poet's personal emotion, and the rendering of that feeling is characteristic of the searching seen in *North & South.* As the speaker exclaims, "The art of losing isn't hard to master," her belief in the statement is actualized through a series of stanzas. In each stanza, the speaker give examples of *how* "the art of losing isn't hard to master" and thus attempts to convince herself that the statement is true. In one stanza, the speaker states, "I lost my mother's watch. And look! My last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went. / The art of losing isn't hard to master" (l. 1-12). Explaining the ease by which she lost her houses and her mother's watch, the speaker

searches to verify her statement through readjustment. Similar to how the speaker in "The Map" continually corrects herself in describing in order to define the map on her terms, the speaker here copies that form – "My last, or / next-to-last" – in an attempt to create a convincing argument. Continued throughout the poem, the speaker's strategy of readjustment is highlighted in the poem's last line: "the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!)* like disaster" (l. 18-19). As the speaker exclaims her final feeling on the art of losing, it is interrupted by an aside that readjusts (as it undermines) the forthright tone. In the aside, "(*Write it!),"* we are tuned into the speaker's insecurity about the statement, and therefore are shown the active function of the poem in searching.

The strategy seen in this searching originated in the poems of *North & South*. Though in "One Art" it is geared towards expressing the personal, the re-used strategy of poetics successfully carries over to accomplish a new poetics by means of that defining. Whereas earlier in the poems of *North & South,* the act of searching in poetics was often written in descriptive, imaginative, and only sometimes autobiographic terms, in Bishop's later work, the same function is used towards only one goal of retrospection. From many uses to one, the same strategy is present through the creation of Bishop's poetics. Consequentially, the understanding of "One Art" and other of Bishop's later poems like "Poem," do not explain the poetics that preceded them; rather, they rely on them.

Though the predominant critical framework surrounding Bishop's work renders *North & South* negatively in favor of her later accomplishments*,* there are critics who understand *Geography III* as a positive "refiguring" of what came before. David Kalstone, for example, notes that "these pieces, collected in *Geography III*, revisit her earlier poems as Bishop herself once visited tropical and polar zones, and that they refigure her work in wonderful ways"

(*Becoming a Poet* 25). In using simile to comment on the use of early poetics in later work, Kalstone sees the "*pieces*" (the poems) as they revisit the earlier *poems*, and "Bishop *herself"* as she visited the tropical and polar *zones.* Kalstone draws a dividing line between the autobiographical and the poetic as the poems allude to themselves, and the biographical note stays removed. Further, "revisiting" is not a "remaking," and the "refiguring" is not a "redefining;" in this way, Kalstone notes the "wonderful ways" in which the early poetry is used, but does not dismiss the merit of it. It is this kind of scholarship that poses a counter-argument to the many critics who automatically deem Bishop's poetics autobiographically driven; it is this kind of scholarship that supports this chapter.

The argument for reading and viewing *North & South* as its own entity is in this chapter arranged by means of discussing the strategies that attempt to dismantle it. In close reading a few testaments to Bishop's poetics, I assess the actuality of each in terms of its relevance and application to the poetry of *North & South.* Drawing upon what is most unique and exciting about Bishop's poetics in *North & South*– the process of establishing a poetics – an argument against viewing that process as an autobiographical attempt will show the merits of reading poetry as its own creation.

Colwell on Bishop

In her study of Elizabeth Bishop, entitled *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop*, Anne Colwell praises Bishop's first collection, *North & South* for its singularity and individuality in exhibiting "sheer experimentation" (70). In discussing *North & South,* Colwell writes, "for it is here that Bishop works out her own idiom, finds a language for the joyful and painful uncertainty of all human perception" (70). She admires a certain truth-

telling to Bishop's language in *North & South* as it "centers on the metaphor of the human body as the mediator of truth" (70). It would seem that Colwell perceives Bishop's early work in *North & South* to have merit in how it unearths a truthful poetic self, and in how the work experiments with reaching towards manifestation of that self. In sum, the act of reaching out in investigation is a simultaneous tap into the "truth" of poetic vision.

However, as we have confidence in Colwell's understanding of *North & South*, in her later chapter about *Geography III*, she seems to look back upon Bishop's first collected work exclusively through the lens of what "balance" the poems of *Geography III* brought to the "fleeting" achievements of the original work (173). What is most troubling about Colwell's understanding of Bishop's *Geography III* is a tendency that many critics and readers of Bishop fall into; this is a tendency of looking retrospectively from *Geography III* and seeing the subject of the "past" (as so expressed in most of the poems in *Geography III)* as a conflation of both Bishop's biographical past and her poetic past. Consequentially, the successes of *Geography III* are thus equated with Bishop's confrontation and acceptance of her biographical past through her poetics, and with the renewing and rejuvenating of her past poetry in voice and strategy. Bishop's early poetry, grouped in a "past" that also included her traumatic childhood experiences, is thus seen as just as old and menacing as her negatively suppressed feelings about her family. Further, as Bishop confronts these "past" issues in the poems of *Geography III,* the act of "improving" her old poetics is conflated with an act of facing suppressed emotion. In this view, Bishop's work in *Geography III* puts to rest her unresolved feelings about the "past" in both her life and work.

On this subject, Colwell writes the following: "By evading loss, the poems of *Geography III* focus on it. By embodying the past in the form of the poem, Bishop recovers it" (173). In her

discussion of this recovery, Colwell notes that a few of the poems of *Geography III* "return to the themes, the images, and sometimes the forms of much earlier poems" (172); poems like "12 O'clock news," "Poem," and "The Moose," she explains to have earlier beginnings in Bishop's notes, letters, and in the case of "Poem," its origin she explains was in Bishop's poem, "Large Bad Picture" published in *North & South.* In light of these poems that had long-standing grounds in Bishop's poetic life, Colwell writes that "by literally recovering or re-embodying old themes and forms, many of the poems of *Geography III* reenact the process of loss and recovery of which they speak" (172). According to Colwell, this loss and recovery comes in many forms ranging from experiments with the mind (in poems like "One Art," and "Five Flights Up" [172]), to the "exploration of the…isolated body" (172) (in poems like "End of March," and "In the Waiting Room"), to the "process… of embodiment" (in poems like "Crusoe in England," "Poem," and "The Moose") (172). As they discuss (in loss) the terms of her past, these poems of *Geography III* "embody the past in the form of the poem…[and] recover it" (Colwell 173). "The past" is thus not only old and reused poetic forms and ideas, but also a series of losses (such as death discussed in Bishop's poem "The Moose") that must be recovered from.

As I am not here to contest the presence of loss (like that of death) in Bishop's work, I am concerned with Colwell's metaphorized idea that the convalescence of her early poems is comparable, and even synonymous to the recuperation one goes through after loss. For, if we take this comparison to be accurate, we then imply a death in Bishop's early work in *North & South* through a need for recovery. Colwell writes that the poetry enacts that which it speaks of, and thus we think, *when did* North & South *cease to be?* When did the action of experimenting with voice and poetics halt, if only to be renewed in Bishop's last published book of poetry? Poems that Colwell mentions in her attempt to show this rejuvenation of spirits, such as "The

Moose," were not sprung up from the dead, but rather evolved from Bishop's poetics of her earlier years of being a poet. If anything, the example of "The Moose," worked on over two decades[40], shows that instead of a loss, there existed a formulation – not necessarily producing something better nor worse than the original – and in that a mirroring of the experimental action that exists in Bishop's *North & South*.

"Poem"

In order to further explicate this conflict, I find it beneficial to examine Bishop's later poem, "Poem" and the earlier, "Large Bad Picture." What is most clear in the comparison is not a rejuvenation of "what once was," but rather a change in the poet's voice, and a shift in (but not a change in) her strategy of poetics.

LARGE BAD PICTURE (1946)

Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
some northerly harbor of Labrador,
before he became a schoolteacher
a great-uncle painted a big picture.

Receding for miles on either side
into a flushed, still sky
are overhanging pale blue cliffs
hundreds of feet high,

their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running in along the level of a bay
masked by perfect waves.

On the middle of that quiet floor
sits a fleet of small black ships,
square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
their spars like burnt match-sticks.

And high above them, over the tall cliffs'
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in n's in banks.

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

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.

POEM (1976)

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

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees., low hills, a thin church steeple
-that gray-blue wisp-or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back,, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind-I can almost remember the farmer's
name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?
Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

A sketch done in an hour, "in one breath,"
once taken from a trunk and handed over.
Would you like this? I'll Probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle
George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with
Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A....

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?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
-the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Apparent in the relationship between these two poems is that the latter-written is indeed not so much about the painting of "Large Bad Picture," but rather about the history and family connections to it. Using the original painting, Bishop meditates on her connection and relationship to it as a part of its history; very clearly, the speaker of the poem views the great-uncle's painting as an object within a world, rather than an object that *is* a world. In "Large Bad Picture," Bishop examines and critiques the constructs with which the painting is created – how aspects are represented (such as birds and sighing large aquatic animals) and how she, as the poet, is able to interpret and include her imagination into them. Whereas with "Poem," the painting itself is a mere map of memories and the signification and meaning for the poet is not with the painting itself (though the act of painting is discussed in brush strokes and dabs), but with that which it represents.

Putting aside the poems' differences in content, the strategy by which Bishop conducts "Poem" bears more insight into her change in poetics. What becomes clear through the tone involved in discussing the painting of "Large Bad Picture" is that the speaker is no longer concerned with *her* perception of the object in terms of how she can map it out; rather, her interest lies in a new kind of speculation which turns towards looking introspectively.

In the first stanza of "Poem," Bishop briefly describes the "little painting" (l. 4) in terms of spatial constructs and presence. As the speaker, she details it to be "about the size of an old-style dollar bill, / American or Canadian" (l. 1-2), "mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays" (l. 3), and "useless" (l. 6) in its sketch-like banality. Reading on, it becomes clear that in this first stanza, Bishop summarizes the painting in her previous poem, "Large Bad Picture" in controlled and confident renderings. The opening phrase that begins, "About the

size…," for example, suggests the speaker's casual awareness of the object in its lack of specific description ("About"); however, it also shows the speaker's knowledge by referencing the dollar bill. Instead of giving measurements to portray an abstract picture of the painting, the speaker suggests that image which the reader must simply *take* to be true, assuming he or she knows little about the size of an "old-style dollar bill, / American or Canadian." In both cases, the speaker takes control of the portrayal of the object: by sounding casual, she insinuates her lack of interest in the matter and thus the reader understands the matter to be unimportant by her standards; by describing, she makes references that function by our reliance on *her* understanding.

The speaker also takes control of the painting by diminishing it to a list of colors in the third line, and in the forth and fifth by deeming it insignificant in its size and worth. Phrases like "mostly the same…" not only suggest the speaker's insistence upon causality (as seen in the first line) and thus insignificance, but also an interest in portraying the picture as unoriginal and standard with the "same" colors as one might see in any landscape painting. The strategy functions, whether or not the reader knows the poem, "Large Bad Picture" or not, by means of understanding that sameness is not a good quality in painting.

Our understanding of the speaker's confidence in rendering the painting is only furthered by her appraisal of its size, "little," and her consequential wonderment about, or perhaps a comment on, its sketch-like quality. In parentheses, the speaker questions the reason behind the size of the painting and thus insinuates with the addition of her next line about worth, that it is "little" in the sense that it is insignificant. As she personifies the painting in giving it a "life" (l. 5) in which it never made any money, the speaker compares the little painting to a person who, grown, never amounted to anything. Looking back on its "life," the speaker simultaneously looks

down on the painting as "useless and free," "minor," and unworthy of looking at ("handed along collaterally to owners / who looked at it sometimes, didn't bother to").

What becomes clear, knowing the poem, "Large Bad Picture," is that in this first stanza, the entirety of "Large Bad Picture" is summarized by these controlled and confident statements. As this first stanza of "Poem" diminishes the painting in many clear statements, it is a far leap from how Bishop rendered the same kind of tone in "Large Bad Picture." In the latter poem, Bishop relied only on the speaker's nuanced interpretations in order to express annoyed sentiments about the painting. In "Large Bad Picture," the speaker moves from stanza to stanza in description, subtly adding her subjective views through words and phrases that blend in with her portrayal. In depicting the same picture, the speaker of "Poem," instead of understanding opinion through description in eight stanzas, simply states the poem's first four lines, which both diminish and map-out the painting. It is then true that the first stanza here *does* comment on what came before it; yet, as fleeting as the stanza is, the idea that this reestablishment is important to the poem is also ephemeral. Clear as it is that the voice here is more pungent and pithy that that in "Large Bad Picture," the strategy of "Poem" is not to re-interpret its inspiration. Its first stanza, a starting ground and foundation, serves only to restate the already-established and move on.

Clear and precise, at the first stanza's end the speaker of "Poem" expresses that "[the] family relic [was] / handed along collaterally to owners / who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to." These few lines that come at the end of the painting's appraisal disrupt our interest in the painting as a painting – we are, like one of the many owners, not expected to "bother" with looking at it because it is not of any importance. The effect of this dismissal in "not looking" is significant to Bishop's understanding of the painting also: the speaker's notation of only looking

at it sometimes acts out the reality that Bishop only refers to the great-uncle's painting from "Large Bad Picture" in brief. The occasional glance back to what the painting actually represents is only a means by which the speaker touches the foundation, the painting, of her intent on indulging in memory. This last sentiment in "Poem" is thus the perfect severance and act of differentiation from "Large Bad Picture" because it gives the latter its place in the new scheme of autobiographical poetic interest. As relatives pass it on and maybe look at it, the painting now exists in the realm of *who* looks at it, not *what it is* that is looked at.

Throughout the poem, the speaker's backward glances direct her intent. The second stanza with a glimpse and then a rumination:

> It must be Nova Scotia: only there
> does one see gabled wooden houses
> painted that awful shade of brown….
> The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring (l. 10-22).

In this stanza, the speaker's knowledge of Nova Scotia coalesces with the bits of the painting she mentions, and sometimes that merging turns into a nostalgic remembrance. It is not that the cow is painted, but that the speaker *knows* from experience that they are "confidently cows" (l. 17). It is not that the artist's specialty was steel-gray storm clouds (l. 24-25), but that she knows the freshness of the air. It is about the realization, "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!" rather than the "one dab" that represents the steeple behind the farmer's barn. Fostered by Bishop's intent on looking back to her childhood experiences, the speaker's recollection of memory, inspired by the painting, is thus where the poem goes – how it functions – and where it ends up.

In the fourth stanza, the poem shifts, and the speaker turns from her memory of the depicted (in the painting) to her memory of the painter. Beginning with an italicized monologue from a relative, the speaker introduces the painter as an "Uncle George" who "left them all with Mother / when he went back to England" (l. 45-47). Whereas before Bishop offered a view of the

speaker's memory through the constructs of a painting, here she shows a moment in time by which we are let into her personal rumination on the past. The inclusion of such a personal aside has the function of calling attention to the poet herself – ironically, the inclusion of another's words (her uncle's) focus our eye on *her* experience of them as she recalls them. Because of this, the poem becomes, even more poignantly than before, a poem expressing Bishop's understanding of the history behind (and autobiographical connections to) the painting seen in "Large Bad Picture," rather than an understanding of the painting itself.

From the monologue, Bishop enters her last stanza in which she ruminates on the shared knowing of the great-uncle's depicted place: the "life and memory of it" (l. 55), the "coincided visions" (l. 50), the effect of one's *act* of looking being able to inspire another's *memory* of looking. The poem thus ends with a discussion of the painting's place in the world known by both Bishop and her great-uncle; its presence, a point of connection in Nova Scotia, is distinctly personal and undoubtedly nostalgic.

It is clear that Bishop's two poems differ quite a bit, but the latter is distinctly not a revision of the former. "Poem" serves as an autobiographical annex to "Large Bad Picture" in its introspective nature. Adding to our understanding of the poem seen in 1946, "Poem" provides a different viewpoint: a brushstroke representing a cow is still an unfortunate brushstroke, yet it is in "Poem" a trigger for a remembered experience, observation. The act of recognition that takes place in "Poem" is one that does not topple the understanding of the painting as a painting. It is one that moves from that observation towards a more personal understanding. I suggest that in this change of interest, we may note a function of Bishop's poetics. The purpose of Bishop's poetry, emblematic in these two poems, is not to name and be done with it, but to figure out in hopes of naming. "Large Bad Picture" and "Poem," though using different poetic strategies,

share a vital continuity in searching. Whereas "Large Bad Picture" relies on imagining the constructed painting, Bishop relies primarily on constructed memory in "Poem." Imagination thus turns to memory**.**

This similarity is outlined by Thomas Travisano in his book *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development:*

> Bishop's later poems are just as inclined to explore enclosures or objects within frames as her early work had been, but there are important developments. In the early work, enclosures and frames dangerously limit as they protect, and the chance of escape is only hinted at…In her later work, enclosures and frames tend to open dramatically, both outward and inward (188).

Important to note is Travisano's use of the word "exploring" to suggest the function of Bishop's poetics in first being limited (like in her "false starts" in *North & South)* and then in being set free. That both periods of Bishop's poetic career are acknowledged as exploratory is a fundamental outline of her poetics: though her perspective changes, she is nevertheless always the poet of *North & South*, and thus always searching.

Lombardi on Bishop

In the prologue to her edited collection entitled, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender,* Marilyn May Lombardi also views *Geography III* as the explanation and resolution for Bishop's earlier work, and thus determines the poems of *North & South* to be of lesser value in their unexplained "strangeness" (3). In her text, Lombardi notes that John Ashbery wrote, "Bishop's great subject had always been 'the strangeness, the unreality of our reality' – a strangeness that her 'rooted, piercing vision' continually rediscovers."[41] Yet Lomardi condemns this very quality that Ashbery found so appreciable and noteworthy for its inability to show readers the "true" Bishop:

> Until the final years of her life, however, few readers could have sense the enormity of Bishop's alienation; … Not until the publication of her last and warmest book, *Geography III,* did Bishop

> begin to speak publicly of herself as a feminist and more candidly about the limiting factors that shaped her art: her "era, sex, situation, education" (3).

It is here that we note how Lombardi, like Colwell, finds the uneasy and experimental quality of *North & South*, the "strangeness," synonymous to the suppression Bishop felt in her personal life. Lombardi further suggests through her appraisal of Bishop's last published book, her "warmest book" (3), that there is a certain "cold" to what came before it. As Colwell surmised a "loss" needing recovery, Lombardi implies a darkness because Bishop's so-called "alienation" as a poet in her personal life did not shine through her poetics. Further, Lombardi writes that "only Bishop's circle of intimates would have been aware of all the ways in which her life and art violated accepted decorum's and social norms" (3), which is to insinuate indirectly that Bishop's poetic technique (her "art") was just as much a "violation of social norms" as her sexuality ("life"). Lombardi discredits Bishop's poetry as an art form in attempting to characterize it as part of a scandalous life choice, and she further associates her poetics with the coldness (or "alienation") found before *Geography III*, connecting life choices with artistic ones to make yet another assumptive explanation of her overall "poetics." As a result of her unconventional sexuality, Lombardi seems also to suggest a certain failure in Bishop's poetics to incorporate her struggles with being a lesbian, because "only [her] circle of intimates would have been aware." Unclear in intent, I am unable to say whether Lombardi only means that Bishop's poetry was unsuccessful in confession – she may also mean to say that it was only Bishop's "intimate" friends (her lovers) who could understand because they knew her sexualized "lingo." Whichever the case, it is the unfortunate truth that Lombardi here sees a lack in a poetics that does not explain the personal, and a subsequent "darker" period of writing. Unable to see past Bishop's personal struggles, Lombardi dubiously assumes her poetry to be a reflection of, rather than its own creation around, her sexuality.

I comment on this particular critique from Lombardi because her intentions, not only rampant in assumption, are presented in an interestingly subtle manner. First, Lomardi shows a perceived positive (Bishop is praised by Ashbery for her "strangeness" in style when she wins the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1976 [3]). With a "however," Lombardi proceeds to explain how no one knew the kind of alienation Bishop was experiencing. Finally, as if Lombardi herself were unveiling the light at the end of the long, dark, and confusing tunnel, she writes, "Not until the publication of her last and *warmest* book, *Geography III*..." (3); with the warmness we feel from *Geography III* Lombardi suggests that the unveiling of Bishop's own personal struggles through her newly autobiographically-toned poetics is a turn for the better, as we are enlightened to the poet's struggles thus *the poetry she had always meant to create.*

This last point about intention is another problem I see with Lombardi's analysis of Bishop's *Geography III*, because she goes on to say the following about Bishop's entire collection of work:

> When Bishop published *Geography III* she revealed for the first time how autobiographical her poems had always been, despite their practiced indirection and reserve. The new work also confirmed the impression already held by her most sympathetic readers that Bishop's greatest subject had always been "strangeness" and that her empathy for the exiled, liminal creature, and the peripheral perspective, was drawn from her own profound sense of difference (3).

First, this statement suggests that in reading *Geography III* we are able to finally understand that all of Bishop's poetry leading up to this point has been autobiographical. Noting the fact that Bishop's poetry of *Geography III* is undoubtedly very autobiographically driven, it is simply not the case that poetry seen in collections such as *North & South* are also so attuned to one mode of poetics. In truth, the poetics of *North & South* are experimental and uneasy in their attempts at sculpting voice and strategy. Written by Bishop the poet, they are chiefly reflective of her as she experienced various moods, experiences, and modes of living. But to say that a collection such as *Geography III* suddenly explains the kind of searching found in *North & South* – the kind of

false starts, the "strangeness," and the complete and utter differences in poetic voice seen throughout - puts Bishop's first published work under a veil that unfairly simplifies it to something that could never be as wholly explicative as her last volume.

Lombardi not only groups all of Bishop's poetic career under one autobiographical goal, she also writes that this is true "despite practiced indirection and reserve" (3). What this suggests is that Lombardi sees Bishop's early work, like that in *North & South*, to have a clear direction that is muffled by "practiced" distractions. With this intention, then, Bishop *practiced* strategies of poetics that made that "hidden" goal untouchable to the everyman and only available to her closest circle, or those who were "sympathetic" readers.

This interpretation lends to Bishop a certain dulled sensibility in writing her earlier works. *North & South* thus seems irrelevant, and Bishop's hand in making it only further propels the discrediting of her ability of her deliberate searching, her eagerness in experimenting with different strategies of poetics as an able and intelligent poet. In this, Lombardi suggests a poetic depression up until the publication of *Geography III.*

Not only that, we also consider the use of the word "sympathetic" to denote those readers who had *always known* that Bishop's poetry was really about herself and her private struggles. The word, an interesting choice, indicates a certain competence to the readers in their ability to see past the confusion that was the entirety of *North & South* in favor of a more direct line of meaning. Further, it also suggests a certain care towards Bishop as someone to be sympathized *for*. Those sympathetic readers are not only able in their poetic aptitude, they also have a concern for the poet herself. Lombardi sees those readers to be "sympathetic" to Bishop's "true aim" to be those who read poems as a lens to meaningful sympathy with poets (not necessarily poems).

In valuing the personal, then, the effectiveness of poetry becomes dependent on how much is gleanable through the words presented (and thus, we think, why not read a biography?), rather than how much is rendered by the poetics themselves. Those sympathetic readers who were able to see it then were the lucky ones – all else were fooled, in the dark, unaware – who were able to, because of their understanding of her work as autobiographical, fully see the struggles Bishop faced and the pain she suffered.

Pinsky, Schwartz, Estess & Vendler on Bishop

The established poet and former Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky, has a rather different view of the Bishop's early and late work. Contrasting Lombardi's views in his essay on Bishop, Pinsky writes,

> In a way, she had to write *Geography III* … in order to teach us readers the full extent to which her poems were not merely what critics and fellow poets had always called them – "perfect," "crafted," "readable," "exquisite' – but profoundly ambitious as well (256).

In an effort to praise Bishop for her work in *Geography III*, Pinsky here ends up implying the need for rescue – just as Colwell and Lombardi suggest in their analyses of Bishop's poetic works. Pinsky writes that the emotion displayed in Bishop's last collection somehow proves the critics, who had all adhered to the cliché in praising Bishop for her "eye" (256), very wrong in their limited views. The autobiographical ferocity of *Geography III*, according to Pinsky, was that which unveiled her true talent; the voice and strategy of poetics that developed accomplished what Bishop herself called here a poetics of "just description" better than other methods used previously.

Though Pinsky adheres to this notion that the autobiographical poetics of Elizabeth Bishop were those that saved her, he also diverges from the previous two critics mentioned in that he does not agree that Bishop's early poetics were uninviting and difficult to navigate.

Pinsky writes that Bishop needed to write *Geography III* in order to show readers that her poetry was not perfect, crafted, readable, nor exquisite. In opposition to these qualities, Bishop's last collection provided a "fierceness" (Pinsky 256) in self-definition that showed her ambition as a poet. In contrast to Colwell's and Lombardi's perceptions of Bishop's early work, Pinsky here favors *Geography III* in light of an ambition he sees to be unique to the autobiographical openness of her last collection. Yet the personal has reappeared: as if showing one's pain and struggles in the personal life is emblematic of ambition, Pinsky sees a "powerful motive" (256) in *Geography III* that was the necessary aid to keep readers from thinking her poetry too restrained and perfect. Pinsky writes that he acknowledges that her poetry had always been "profoundly ambitious as well;" however, it would seem that in this view, it is only through the understanding of her work in an autobiographical manner that is able to see the ambition rampant in Bishop's earlier work.

The widespread phenomenon of the autobiographical turn in reading Bishop does not stop here. Reading in favor of what *Geography III* can "tell us" about her earlier poetry, many critics and readers view Bishop's work with a complete blindness to the unique function of *North & South*. In the introduction to the collection, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art,* authors Llyod Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess write, "the emotional openness of these poems, their clarity and directness of exposition…seemed to supply a clue to the elusiveness of the earlier work, and to create a need for the revaluation of Bishop's total accomplishment" (xvii). Again we see words like "clarity" and "need" and "revaluation" in regards to looking back upon what *Geography III* left behind it. Further, "supply a clue" suggest a lack in the early work in explaining what was "really going on." The "need for revaluation," as the icing on the cake, is here the ticket to reading blindly: ironically, the "need" in looking closer to *find* a confessional poetic career is in

fact a shield from accepting what Bishop's previous poems were (though not just of one kind and direction – difficult to interpret, indeed!) in their own right.

For a further example, Helen Vendler's "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly" adds that "Elizabeth Bishop's poem in *Geography III* put into relief the continuing vibration of her work" (32). This common relief, it seems, comes from some instinctive desire to understand enough about a person in order to be able to sympathize – feel something that they feel, and then pity them for that feeling that we are relieved we do not have to experience – and thus truly understand. Far too often poetry readers feel they must know the creator poet in order to fully understand the poetry – fully feel and sympathize and know. But a poem is not a lens by which we see the poet; the poet is the maker of the lens by which we see the world.

What must be clear is that I am not suggesting that Elizabeth Bishop's poetry did not change, nor am I attesting to whether it is "better" than her earlier poetry in *North & South*. I argue for what seems a deceptively simple idea that Bishop's earlier work should not be today looked at as if it were only useful in explaining. The translation between understanding the autobiographical poetics and understanding the complete poetic works is stifling in its incomprehensibility, for it is the function of the poetics in collections like *North & South* to be undecidedly searching and experimenting with different forms, influences, voices. The relief felt by so many in reading *Geography III* is one that is understandable, but that feeling has no place in understanding her earlier poetry. To say that Bishop's poetic strategy in *Geography III* is more intent on using the autobiographical is true; it is also true that in her earlier poetry, autobiographical topics are present in some of her poetics. Yet the combination of these two

truths does not mean just one thing, but rather a simple change –from an inward to an outward searching - in poetics.

The autobiographical will always be linked to Bishop's poetry. Because her last and least reticent voice came by way of confessional poetics in *Geography III,* and because many feel it necessary to explain poetry with biography, I believe the struggle is one that must be constantly battled. In a recent review in the *New York Times Book Review*, William Logan continues the everlasting force of the common critical framework by linking Bishop's poetry to her biography. In doing so, Logan suggests that we continue to appreciate Bishop's poetry because we understand the pathos of her struggles. Logan writes, "Bishop saw the world with a willed innocence [which is later stated as a "peculiar infantilism…that is what we love"], which was not, not exactly, that of a miserable adult trying to relieve childhood. Yet the pathos of such innocence lies in our knowing it is experience denied." In short, Logan reverts to the idea that we "love" Bishop's poetry because we know that her attempt at "willing innocence" is denied in her personal life ("experience"). Though he writes that the innocence is "not" about rejuvenating a lost childhood, he adds "not exactly" as if to allow the idea the potential for truth. It is thus that Logan conflates our understanding of poetry with the acknowledgement of pathos for the poet.

Later in the article, Logan writes, "Bishop's lightness of bearing cannot disguise a darkness of being," in which he automatically assumes that the poetry functions to dialogue with the personal. The fact that Bishop's "lightness of bearing" (her relatively sparse collection of work) "cannot" disguise the being implies an attempt that is simply an assumption on the part of the reader; thus, we think, is this all anyone really cares about? Along with Harold Ross' frustration with not "understanding" Bishop's work in the New Yorker, and Hemingway's

similar account in wanting to "know" about "The Fish," are we to take these things as the only ways of reading?[42] Is it only interesting to focus on an understanding of poetry in the autobiographical way the poet herself experiences it? Is our interest quenched only by an endless linkage from poetics to biography and from biography to poetics – as if they complete and settle each other's dissatisfying experience and meaning?

It is thus not a case of setting up a battleground between Bishop's early and late poetry that I think is necessary; rather I argue for a simultaneous mapping both far from and up close to the poetics. It is a need for understanding *North & South* in its own right – as less autobiographical, yes, than *Geography III* – and in that pursuit acknowledging the roots that make it unique, and the exploration that ignites its merits in the face of what came later. It is a caution against generating critical assumptions, especially autobiographical ones, to a poetics that exists on its own meaningfully. The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, in its vitally independent early explorations, is such a poetry, and enduringly unique in its persistence.

CONCLUSION

When I first began this project, the idea of discussing Bishop's first published work was based on my own prejudices about it. Like most readers of poetry, I knew Elizabeth Bishop as the confessional poet of *Geography III* – facing the personal with a dry yet deep sense of distance – and because of that, I knew nothing about her earlier work. I read Bishop under the veil that had been presented to me when I first read her poem, "One Art;" so entranced by the poetics, I found no reason to look back on poetry that did not resemble what I knew I loved. I, like many readers of Bishop, avoided what was different and ephemeral.

I knew that I wanted to write about Bishop for this project, but I found when researching that the overabundance of scholarship available focused mostly on *Geography III*, and left *North & South* to simply blend in with Bishop's biography in explaining her "confessional poetics." Knowing *Geography III* so deeply, I realized that the world of scholarship seemed to as well, and thought it would not be enough (nor would it be interesting) to go the *Geography III* route in writing about Bishop's poetry. I did not want to write a paper in which I simply scaled a framework of established ideas – referring to them with my interspersed commentary – rather, I wanted to write about Bishop and learn in doing so. Consequently, *North & South* became my focus as I pried myself away from *Geography III.*

My next step came by way of an unfortunate absorption into a Bishop biography by Brett Millier. Inviting were Millier's pithy poetic analyses, interspersed between her detailed biographical account. In the beginning stages of my research, I found Millier's overall presentation like the perfect summary that included (unlike many of the other works I'd read) a lot of attention in discussing *North & South.* After reading the entirety of the book and engaging in analyses of my own, however, it became clear that my head was stuck in Brett Millier's

analyses, her interpretations, her unrelenting connections between poetry and biography. Every line, for Millier, had a biographical explanation, even if it were reduced to Bishop's "confusion" about something or other. As I wrote, I found myself comparing my notes to Millier's, and having trouble when our interpretations differed. I felt as though her insights, because they were based in factual biography, would trump mine. It was because of my advisor, Nancy Leonard, that I was reminded of that which I had always known but had forgotten in the midst of insecurity: I could not ground my readings in biography. I could not rely on that which denies the poetry its own voice in writing. In simple terms, I had to put Millier and my hundreds of post-it notes back on the shelf.

Thus, the idea for focusing on *North & South* came about in a necessary severing from what my mind had already established about Bishop. In opening my own eyes, I realized quickly that in writing about the relevancy of *North & South,* I was up against a critical framework that would be hard to unpack and undermine. This framework, based in an unfortunate tendency to interpret by biographical grouping, would have to be relieved of its decline into lethargy. I would have to bring to attention the mishaps caused by reading that are not based in the words – autobiographical reading, that is – and thus revive the need for the simple act of reading *every word*.

It has always been my belief that poetry is not like any novel or short story or memoir. This is due to the simple yet momentous fact that it *always* calls for close reading. As the format shrinks to pages instead of chapters, stanzas instead of paragraphs, the eye must focus on the breath and significance of each word as it relates to its space and surroundings. In refusing to do so, the reading of poetry becomes an act of naming instead of discovering. As if a poem could be a checklist, elements are categorized in order to label with the words "this is about…" What this

kind of reading does, in effect, is relieve the poetry of that which makes it a poem and not a diary entry: questioning "what?" is not enough, but "how?" If a reader wishes to know the "what," it is sufficient to read a summary in a biography in which the biographer may even include a little analysis. However, it is in the "how" that readers find the art of the poem and the truth of that "what" – a truth that is often unexplainable but always *felt* – and thus in wanting to know that "how," we must read closely.

What I hope has been made clear by this paper is a need for considering all angles of a poetic career. In my attempt to show the intricacies of Bishop's *North & South* by means of its searching, its failures, and its comparison to her later work, I have realized the impact of thinking about a poetic narrative as having a start and a finish. The very "newness" in which *North & South* was written is part of its unique character; however, is it with the knowledge of *Geography III* as "last" that we should read by? The scale somehow seems unbalanced, since the idea of reading "last" as a resolve or explanation is not necessarily the truth. As we know that *North & South* is Bishop's first collection, and as we *see* the struggles and inquisitive eye in it, the collection is necessarily searching, finding its way. But how can we say that *Geography III* was not still searching? How can we say that the poems of *Geography III* absolutely explain, in ending, all the rest? How can we say a poetic arc is finished when the poet herself kept on writing?

It must then be that the imprinting of a poetic narrative on paper is a call for its engagement – the "Collected Works" of Elizabeth Bishop seem to draw our attention to this beginning and end. As I learned, however, it is not useful in the pursuit of poetics to capture just the bigger picture; one must acknowledge it as a construct, but look within. Comparable to a jewelry box, its harbored pieces are not able to be categorized (except in terms of their mutual

place of keeping, i.e. the poet) by the looks of the box. In opening it, rows of rings are nevertheless not all of one stone; necklaces do not all bear the same weight. One cannot know these things without opening what could just be a box on its own; one cannot perceive the fade of the opal, the perfection of the diamond. In viewing Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, then, the intricacies only *seem* hidden beneath a tempting and fascinating biography. Yes, Bishop did lead an interesting life full of constraints, indulgences, recklessness, and sorrow. Her poetic career was, too, often influenced by where she lived, whom she loved, and what she felt about poetry. As biographer Brett Millier does a fine job outlining and explicating, these things are without doubt a story in themselves. Because there is interest in Elizabeth Bishop, the person, they certainly deserve their own light. We must not forget, however, that the reason we love Bishop, contrary to what William Logan asserts is an understanding of her pathos, is because of her poetry. We *know* her because of her poetry and we find her biography fascinating *through* that poetry. Yet, that poetry, before we knew of its creator, was just a submission on a page, unknown to the world and its interests. Elizabeth Bishop's poetry was accepted before Bishop herself, and I find *that* one part of her biography, though taken for granted, to be the jewel in the haystack.

NOTES

Introduction

[1] Johnathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Works of Elizabeth Bishop* (Burlington, 2007), 2.

[2] Adrienne Rich, "The Eye of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizbaeth Bishop," *The Boston Review* (June 1984).

[3] Ellis 11.

[4] Rich

[5] Thomas Travisano, "The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon," *New Literary History* (Autumn 1995), 909.

[6] Ellis 2.

[7] Brett Millier writes that "Moore took an active role in managing the younger poet's professional affairs, including introducing her and her work to editors and publishers, recommending reading and places for her to submit her writing, and offering line by line criticism of poems and stories," in *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and Memory of It* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1993),107.

[8] Millier 107.

[9] Robert Lowell from *History*. Quoted from Thomas J. Travisano and Saskia Hamilton, *Words in Air: the Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, (New York, 2008), vii.

[10] Millier 75.

[11] Millier 249.

[12] Millier 20.

[13] Harriet Y. Cooper, "Elizabeth Bishop: Longing for Home - and Paradise" (New York 1999), 121.

[14] Audrey Hooker, "A Poet Between Two Worlds: A Cross-Genre Study of Exile in the Life and Works of Elizabeth Bishop" (1999), 110

[15] Robert Lowell, "Thomas, Bishop, and Williams," *The Sewanee Review 5,* no. 3 (July-September 1947), p. 497, quoted from David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York, 1989), 133-134.

[16] Elizabeth Bishop to Marianne Moore, May 5, 1938, quoted from David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York, 1989), 57.

[17] Elizabeth Bishop, quoted from Eden Osucha, "Poetic Identity/Identity Politics: A Geography of the Self" in *In Worcester, Massachusetts": Essays on Elizabeth Bishop, from the 1997 Elizabeth Bishop Conference at WPI*, 328.

[18] Elizabeth Bishop, quoted from David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, 53.

[19] Elizabeth Bishop quoted from Eden Osucha, "Poetic Identity/Identity Politics: A Geography of the Self" in *In Worcester, Massachusetts": Essays on Elizabeth Bishop, from the 1997 Elizabeth Bishop Conference at WPI*, 329.

Chapter I – Reticence as a Quiet Searching

[20] Ann K. Hoff, "Owning Memory: Elizabeth Bishop's Authorial Restraint," *Biography* 31.4 (Fall 2008): 580.

[21] Hoff 581

[22] Millier 107.

[23] Millier 71.

[24] Millier 180

[25] Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: the Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 101.

[26] Goldensohn 100

[27] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, 15.

[28] Elizabeth Bishop quoted from Millier 78.

[29] Millier 77

[30] Millier 77.

Chapter II – False Starts

[31] Anne Colwell, *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop* (Tuscaloosa 1997), 21.

[32] Elizabeth Bishop quoted from David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, 117.

[33] William Flesch, *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry 19th Century* (New York 2010) 61.

[34] Flesch 61.

[35] Bonnie Costello, *Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge 1991), 37

[36] Johnathan Ellis writes that Bishop uses "Black and white in a fairly stereotypical way" in *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Aldershot 2006), 162.
Sarah Riggs writes, "the effort to see particulars in the face of ambiguity reaches a certain breaking point at which a particulate, colorful scene reverts to a coarse black and white" in *Word Sightings: Poetry and Visual Media in Stevens, Bishop, and O'Hara* (New York, 2002), 44.

[37] Elizabeth Bishop quoted from Bonnie Costello, *Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge 1991), 49.

[38] Millier 124

[39] Millier 178.

Chapter III – North & South and Geography III

[40] Colwell 172.

[41] John Ashbery quoted from Marilyn May Lombardi, *Elizabeth Bishop: the Geography of Gender* (Charlottesville 1993), 3.

[42] William Logan, "Deal with the Devil" (New York, 2011), 18-19.

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