

METAPHORS OF INNOCENCE AND CHILDHOOD:  
PARALLELS IN ELIZABETH BISHOP AND  
THREE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY  
METAPHYSICAL POETS

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## PREFACE

The vivid imagery and subtle wit of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry have intrigued me ever since I first encountered her work in an undergraduate seminar at the University of Utah. Moving from regularly anthologized poems such as "The Fish" to the more obscure "Nova Scotia" poems and then into scholarly criticism of Bishop's work, I was dismayed to discover that many critics read her poems as touching, cathartic encounters with her tragic childhood instead of deliberate pieces of fiction. Even very helpful bibliographies, such as the recent one by Barbara Page, call poems featuring child speakers "autobiographical" or discuss critics' explorations of "autobiographical" elements, without defining or proving why they are autobiographical.

Finding no help in the critics, I turned to other poets and, following T. S. Eliot's lead, looked back to the image-filled worlds of George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan. In their poetry, I found parallel metaphors of childhood and poetic techniques that helped me modify the purely autobiographical readings of Bishop and establish her as part of a poetic tradition. This study does not try to prove that the seventeenth-century poets influenced Bishop, but instead aims to refute the autobiographical readings by

establishing technical and thematic parallels.

I extend a generous note of thanks to my major advisor, Dr. Edward Walkiewicz, for his guidance and patience, and also to the other members of my committee, Dr. Paul Klemp and Dr. John K. Crane, for their time and helpful insights.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of her first book, North & South, Elizabeth Bishop has been admired, and rightly so, as one of the most visual and innovatively descriptive poets of her age. Although Bishop lacks the philosophical foundation of Eliot or Pound, the anti-romanticism of Auden, the obvious passionate angst of the confessionals, and the overt social consciousness of many of her contemporaries, her poems subtly stun the reader with controlled flashes of visual and intellectual insight. Her personal genius stems from the "unrhetorical cool" (Lowell 497) and apparent narrowness of focus that disguise this brilliance. Under the formal control, the purposeful limitation of scope, the "lack of emotion," and the anti-philosophical stance lie a passionate, informed, albeit very private poetic genius. Pivoting on metaphors of geography, travel and nature, Bishop's poetry moves from the "modern" images and themes of North & South, through the more naturalistic vision of A Cold Spring, to the internal and external explorations of Questions of Travel. This seemingly quiet journey culminates in Geography III, where the unmistakable autobiographical overtones and ostensibly emotional verse

have led critics to rejoice in Bishop's "letting go" and to provide pat psychoanalytical readings of poems that deal with elements of her sometimes tragic childhood in Nova Scotia and Worcester, Massachusetts. These explications merit consideration. Elizabeth Bishop did suffer a tragic childhood, losing her father when she was eight months old and losing her mother to insanity shortly after. And, indeed, the poems of Geography III seem filled more obviously with the human emotion and pathos that many critics complain the earlier work lacks. Yet while these two elements do provide the foundation for much of Bishop's final book, they are parallel, not causally connected. Reading Bishop's last poems as autobiographical confessions or cathartic free-association destroys much of the passion and meaning that lie just below the textual surface and diminishes the capabilities of a poet whose genius arises, at least in part, from her ability to render issues clearer and more transparent than they actually are.

The confusion surrounding Bishop's use of seemingly autobiographical details originates in the social and literary climate in which she wrote. Amidst the post-war social consciousness of some of her contemporaries and the confessionalism of others, Bishop stood as a sort of anti-philosophical, private anomaly. Patricia Wallace illustrates this idea as she sees Bishop poised between the dark, rather isolated self-exploration of confessionalism



and transcendentalist merging with humanity (96). Ironically, Wallace falls into the critical trap of attributing this tension and ambiguity to Bishop's alienation and confusion as a child (98). Seeing Freudian slips where they do not exist, Wallace sensitively interprets Bishop's tone but distorts her reading of the poetry by seeing Bishop as a neurotic adult, permanently scarred by her childhood.

A more accurate assessment of Bishop comes from her friend and mentor Marianne Moore, who, in a review of North & South, hails Bishop as "someone who knows, who is not didactic" (179). Bishop glories in showing the reader the intricacies of very narrowly focused inner and outer worlds, but refuses to explicitly tell anyone anything. In fact, when George Starbuck expressed admiration for Bishop's "morals" and philosophies, Bishop replied "I didn't know there were any" and unself-consciously recalled reviews of North & South that admired her poetics, but complained of the poetry's having "no philosophy whatever" ("The Work!" 316-17). Dana Gioia reinforces this idea in a touching sketch of his semester as Bishop's student at Harvard.

Gioia remembers:

She wanted us to see poems, not ideas.  
Poetry was the particular way the world  
could be talked about only in verse, and  
here, as one of her fellow Canadians

once said, the medium was the message. One did not interpret poetry; one experienced it. . . . A painter among the Platonists, she preferred observation to analysis, and poems to poetry. (101).

This penchant for observation--what Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller call her preference for being an "eye" rather than an "I" (538)--when coupled with her almost pathological shyness<sup>1</sup> explains Bishop's avoidance of confessionalism. Echoing Randall Jarrell's description of much of modern poetry as "gruesome occupational therapy for a poet who stays legally innocuous by means of it" (234), Bishop is quoted in Time as saying:

. . . confessional poetry "is really something new in the world. There have been diaries that were frank--and generally intended to be read after the poet's death. Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world." Speaking of some of [Robert] Lowell's confessional imitators, she adds: "The tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they'd keep

some of these things to themselves."

(68)

Despite such strong statements, Bishop is not anti-emotional or even anti-confessional. She simply prefers to distance herself from the surface of the text by writing objective, visually-oriented poetry and injecting lush, significant meaning just beneath the textual surface.

Unwilling to stop psychoanalyzing her and assuming that she has something to hide, critics seem intellectually paralyzed by the existence of autobiographical clues or overtones in Bishop's poetry. Although immersed in the realm of fiction--they are, after all, criticizing poetry--these critics seem to lose all critical judgment as Bishop sets a poem in Nova Scotia or calls a persona "Elizabeth." Faced with such seemingly incontrovertible evidence, they disregard any ideas of unreliable narrators or metaphorical speakers in favor of very insightful, if limited autobiographical readings. Paul Eakin argues that readers react this way in response to their preconceived ideas about the definition of autobiography:

We want autobiography to be true, we expect it to be true more or less, and most of us are content to leave untested the validity of its claim to a basis in verifiable fact; most of the time we are not in a position to make such a test

anyway. In those cases when we are forced to recognize that autobiography is only fiction, we may feel cheated of the promised encounter with biographical reality. (9-10)

Given only two choices, truth or fiction, the reader cannot be blamed for seeing the context as the poet's life and the persona as the poet. For most critics, this misstep leads to labelling a poem "autobiographical" and reading as literal all the autobiographical "facts." Others, such as Peter Sanger and David Kalstone, make the autobiography the argument.

Sanger focuses on the "Nova Scotia" poems and short fiction and attempts to authenticate every detail Bishop uses in these pieces. After conducting interviews in Bishop's home town, Great Village, Nova Scotia, Sanger presents an exhaustive list containing character names that Bishop has "exactly or phonetically based" (25) on "real" people in the village and places that appear in the poems that are "really there." As interesting as these details may be, the only attempt Sanger makes to explain their significance lies in his argument that Bishop was obsessed with enabling "real objects, events and people to outlast both their immediate occurrence and the limits of the individual mind which tries to remember and describe them" (26). Individual memories and questions about remembering

dominate Bishop's work. These elements transcend the boundaries of description, however, and serve as meditative poetic vehicles. Kalstone avoids being trapped by the individual details of the so-called autobiographical work, but sees Bishop's poetry, along with that of Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, and John Ashberry, as moving increasingly toward autobiography. He sees the increasing openness in Bishop's poems as typical of poets who "came of age" after 1945 and did most of their writing in this very volatile social climate (Five Temperaments 6). Studying New Criticism under such "masters" as John Crowe Ransom or Robert Penn Warren, these poets developed a sense of what Kalstone calls "the right way to do things" and began to think in terms of the "single, perfect poem" instead of poems with organic shape and revision within the text (7). Kalstone suggests that the "autobiography" in Bishop's late poetry developed as a reaction against this formalism and views Questions of Travel as a search for a more original, singular voice (8). Although he objects to the label "confessional" because of the acuteness and urgency it applies, Kalstone sees poetry of the 60's and beyond as moving increasingly toward self-disclosure (8).

His argument accurately traces Bishop's trend toward openness but ignores the fictive dimension of the autobiographical details. The children and childhood places that haunt the later poetry serve as literary vehicles for

Bishop's themes. Throughout her poetry and prose, Bishop uses images of innocence and metaphors of childhood to express the mutability and ambiguity that for her characterize man's existence in the modern world. Linking what Helen Vendler called "the domestic and the strange" ("Domestication" 23), Bishop looks through the empirical eyes of children and the childlike and suggests a view of the world that balances liminal anxiety with the objective calm of the uninitiated. The children that populate the later poems do not belong in Bishop's memoirs. Instead, they form part of a metaphor that begins with generic images of innocence in the early poetry and evolves into the "Elizabeth" of "In the Waiting Room." Read in this light, Bishop's increasing openness and use of "domestic" imagery represent her escape from the urbanity and cosmopolitanism of early Modernism, not her reaction against New Criticism.

The troubled little girls, fretful grandmothers, and rugged Nova Scotia coastlines that dominate Bishop's later work have undeniably intricate roles in Bishop's past. By weaving them into a fictive medium such as poetry, however, Bishop subordinates their autobiographical significance to their importance as interlocking components in a literary medium. Recent studies in autobiographical theory support this idea of autobiography as an unavoidably fictive discourse and attempt to explain the faulty reasoning that

leads critics to precipitately label works as autobiography.

Echoing Eakin's earlier discussion of the polarity in most critic's thinking about autobiography, Janet Gunn argues that debate about autobiography should focus on authors' readings of themselves, not whether or not they are being deliberately fictitious. She sees the creation of autobiography as an "an act of reading" that involves both the author and the intended audience (8). The text becomes increasingly more fictive as authors "read" and interpret their lives and then present them to readers, who, based on their own experience, read and interpret again (8). This cumulative process is further complicated by what Eakin calls the "unconscious workings of the memory" (17), which distort and select events until the newly created "whole" is merely a fictive version of "real" life.

Estelle Jelinek expands on this argument and suggests that the success of autobiography, like any other fictive discourse, depends on the skill of the author in creating believable, well-rounded characters (xi). Both autobiographers and "fiction" writers try to find a pattern or "type" that best expresses their theme, and then analyze themselves or their protagonists to see how well they fit the pattern (5). The final product, in Jelinek's mind, resembles the type or archetype much more than the autobiographer (5).

Although these theories of autobiography deal exclusively with fiction, they apply to the autobiographical scenes and characters that Bishop employs in her poetry.

Richard Coe notes that:

. . . if the autobiographical element, however memorable, provides merely a background, while the essential structure of action or of psychological development is drawn from other sources, then we may . . . assign the work to the domain of fiction. (5)

Susanna Egan agrees and adds that autobiographical "facts" serve as prompts that aid in the author's creation of a myth of self. Shaped by both the author's perception of himself and the audience's expectations, the product cannot escape being labelled as fiction (20). Admittedly, the previous theories concern work purposefully written as autobiography, but they illuminate the blurred lines between memory, fact, and fiction.

Critics reading from a reader-response perspective help clarify this argument against viewing Bishop's poems as autobiography as they see Bishop purposefully furnishing her poems with what David Bromwich called "eccentric details." These "red herrings" lead the reader away from discovering any "truth" about the poet and give the poems a false sense of intimacy (84). Yet even as Bromwich sensitively



interprets the facades that cover the surfaces of many of Bishop's poems, his discussion implies a randomness and coolness in Bishop that is misleading. Lee Edelman repeats this misstep as she intelligently argues that Bishop's insistence on factuality and "literality" (179) in poems like "In the Waiting Room" is in itself "figural" (182), but then goes on to see Bishop and her personae as victims of the woman-hating, paternalistic literary establishment (196). Despite the feminist overstatement, Edelman's argument that Bishop's poems anticipate "their own misreading" (182) and her view of the persona of "In the Waiting Room" as a symbolic presence illustrate how Bishop manipulates autobiographical truth.

Although neither refers directly to Bishop's poetry, the critical theories of Walker Gibson and Michael Riffaterre reinforce Bishop's "pre-meditated," and therefore fictive, use of these images. Gibson distinguishes between a real reader and a "mock reader" (255-56)--the mock reader being the role we assume when we pick up a text. The "bad book," Gibson argues, is the one in which we are unwilling to assume the mock role because we find it irritating or threatening (269). In this context, Bishop's poetry and short fiction work because the role she assigns the reader is so compelling that it can easily obfuscate the secondary meaning. By waving the tragic autobiographical details in front of readers, Bishop almost forces them to assume the

role of the sympathetic, or even empathetic confidant, who feels compelled to admire the courage of the "brave" young speakers or the poet who is finally exorcising her ghosts. Reading as protective adults or sympathetic friends, critics and lay readers alike risk losing the objective distance necessary to see these details as symbols or metaphors. Riffaterre also notes the dichotomy between textual surfaces and connotative meaning and suggests that the significance and success of a poem depend on its ability to surprise or its "unpredictability" (38). In Bishop's work, the "predictable" or facile meaning is the autobiographical one and the unpredictable, universal elements in the sub-text depend on seeing the autobiographical elements, especially the children, as metaphorical.

Although other readers argue against strictly autobiographical readings and for the idea that the child metaphor originates in earlier poetry, their readings stress psychological and psychoanalytical connections that dilute and distort meaning. By seeing the lack of biographical "Nova Scotia" imagery in North & South as evidence that Bishop was "too close" to these memories to write about them and viewing the images she uses as disguises for the "secret child" that she has yet to exorcise (85), such critics as John Unterecker not only presumptuously second-guess Bishop's mental state but also assume that her poetry must be read with an eye to her biography.

Considering that at this time no biography has been published and keeping in mind Bishop's penchant for privacy during her lifetime, this is a questionable assumption. What we know of Bishop's life, we know from interviews and official records and while these sources contain interesting information, Bishop neatly sidesteps questions she thinks are nobody's business. When asked by Elizabeth Spires about the emotional "openness" of Geography III and whether there was more of "her" in this book, she replied:

This is what the critics say. I've never written the things I'd like to write that I've admired all my life. Maybe one never does. Critics say the most incredible things. (64)

The pathos of Bishop's work read in a biographical context is incredibly powerful, but outside this context power and meaning remain and flourish. Too often, the biographical overtones seem to blur the reader's sensitivity to more subtle, universal poetic elements.

The autobiographical theorists and reader-response critics argue convincingly, but they fail to establish a literary precedent for Bishop's poetic techniques. The most compelling refutation of the autobiographical readings, however, results from comparing Bishop to her seventeenth-century British poetic ancestors. Although Bishop's work lacks the Christian myth that dominated this Metaphysical

poetry, her use of plain diction, compacted imagery and meditative movement parallels that of George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan because she responds to similar problems and dilemmas. Faced with the ambivalence of adulthood and the complexities of a changing world, Bishop and her seventeenth-century counterparts turn to nature and metaphors of childhood as imperfect, temporary havens. Surrounded by the gratuitous ornamentation of Ciceronian poetry or the intellectualism and social consciousness of much Modern poetry, they turned to visual, simple language and meditative transformations. While the technical and thematic parallels help establish a poetic precedent for Bishop's work and thus aid in discounting erroneous readings, she cannot be seen as a deliberate neo-metaphysician who set out to revive seventeenth-century poetry. Aside from "The Weed," an imitation of Herbert's "Love Unknown," Bishop's work shows little evidence of her using the work of seventeenth-century poets as a direct model. Bishop admits that she "got more from Hopkins and the Metaphysical poets than [she] did from [Wallace] Stevens or Hart Crane" ("Interview" 9), but what she directly "got" is secondary to why she got it.

Bishop's use of children as a metaphor to express the ambivalence and mutability of the world most closely parallels the work of Henry Vaughan, as both respond to the frustrations and fears of adulthood by looking back to

childhood. Vaughan focuses primarily on the religious implications of journeying back to infancy, but he shares Bishop's vision of childhood as a collection of traits that can and should be imitated, at least eclectically, by adults. Whereas Vaughan sees children as ideal, small, sinless adults, children serve as the best spokesmen for Bishop's themes because they are, by nature, empirical and thus capable of observing situations with what Anne Stevenson described in Bishop as a version of "negative capability" (47). Joanne Diehl reinforces this idea of empiricism in the child-personae as she argues that the androgynous mind of a young child is capable of more objective observations and prone to fewer distortions than an adult persona with a well-developed sexual identity would bring to the poem. While Diehl's feminist reading focuses primarily on Bishop's avoidance of Emerson's overwhelming influence, her discussion of the clear, if limited perspectives of Bishop's young speakers validates the child as empiricist link.

Defined in a strictly scientific context, empiricism refers to the acquisition of knowledge based on observation and experience, instead of theory or past knowledge. In a philosophical context, however, this concept suggests that empirical knowledge is "better" or somehow "more true" than information derived from other sources. Poetically, this judgment takes the form of what Anne Stevenson called "pure,

resonant images" (84) or highly visual language that subordinates abstraction to description. Although Bishop allows for the lack of experience and limited powers of deduction in her young personae, she values their ability to see without the philosophical distortions of adults. The unfiltered, highly visual observations of her children, especially when juxtaposed with the clouded, if well-intentioned perspectives of the scarce adult personae, reveal very lucidly the ambiguity and mutability of the modern world. Free from the sexual, philosophical, and social implications of adulthood, these children look and think and wonder without the need, or even the ability, to draw distorting conclusions.

This vision must not be confused, however, with nostalgia for the idyllic days of childhood. The days recalled in Bishop's child-dominated poetry are often traumatic, or tinged with an ominous sense of impending or recent doom, and the children rely on empiricism not just for information, but also for psychological insulation. "In the Village," "Gwendolyn," "In the Waiting Room," and other works discussed in more detail later in this study illustrate how minute observation and immersion in physical reality can work as blinders to shut out emotional pain and sorrow.

Although this obsession with observation serves a useful purpose both for the persona and the poet, it has

drawbacks. Excessive reliance on looking and experiencing not only enables awareness or sometimes escape, but also distorts perceptions in ways that become eerily evident in poems like "In the Village" or "Sestina." The children in these poems cope, but at the expense of more accurate or practical adult perceptions. The built-in weaknesses of this childish empiricism only further illustrate Bishop's dominant mood of ambivalence. By layering the good and bad aspects of empiricism with the transience of physical childhood, Bishop simultaneously emphasizes the importance of both and warns of limitations.

Even in poems that do not feature children as personae, Bishop links the concept of childishness and lack of experience with the ability to see clearly. The dominant travel/geography motif relies heavily on this idea as such poems as "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" and "Questions of Travel" demonstrate the unimportance of travel, unless the "sights" are seen with a clear eye. By juxtaposing what "should have been our travels: serious, engravable" (2) in "Over 2,000 Illustrations" with the reality of the sordid third-world village square, Bishop emphasizes ironically naive adult assumptions and stubbornly questions the purpose of travel and vision.

The "fog-soaked weeds" (35), "purposeful Collegians" (37), "jukebox" (42), "Englishwoman pouring tea" (47), and

giggling, childlike "pockmarked prostitutes" (50) that crowd the second stanza add to the horror of this question, yet as David Kalstone observed, the only thing worse than asking is the thought of not asking ("Elizabeth Bishop" 27). Despite the tragic distance between the dead Mexican man in the square and the "Duchess" about to have a baby, the "why" that dominates the last stanza is the key to understanding Bishop's perspective.

Bonnie Costello crystallizes this idea as she argues that in sad, violent places like this, and in the modern world in general, "home seems to be in question, or rather in questioning" (128). The adult voice that rejects the scene and longs for the simplicity of childhood is very naive, but better off than if he or she were unaware of the disparity between the frightfully real "brothels of Marrakesh" and the "family with pets" that the Nativity "should" be:

Everything only connected by "and" and  
                   "and." [t/o]  
 Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the  
                   edges [t/o]  
 of the pages and pollinates the  
                   fingertips.) [t/o]  
 Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we  
                   have seen [t/o]  
 this old nativity while we were at it?



--the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with  
           light, [t/o]  
 an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,  
 colorless, sparkless, freely fed on  
           straw, [t/o]  
 and, lulled within, a family with pets,  
 --and looked and looked our infant sight  
           away. (65-74) [t/o]

Bishop adds an ironic twist to her undercutting of the adult perspective as the "infant sight" of the final line serves as a foil to the only differentiated child-figures in the poem--the childish, but not childlike prostitutes of the second stanza. Unable or unwilling to deal with the contradictions inherent in a child prostitute or the squalor in the city of the Nativity, the speaker yearns for what she thinks is "infantile," but what in reality is unfortunately adult. She longs for the comfortable stability of her delusions, not the empirical vision of a child. This need for stasis and "an undisturbed, unbreathing flame" extends to "Questions of Travel" as the urge to "see the sun the other way around" (20) is identified first with "childishness" (18) and finally with a very sincere desire to experience the world as human, instead of foreign. Bishop simultaneously magnifies and refutes the pejorative context of the word "childishness" by introducing the "tiniest green hummingbird" and the "inexplicable stonework"

as souvenirs of the speaker's wanderings. Instead of balancing the dark, "real" side of travel with what "ought" to be seen, as she did in "Over 2,000 Illustrations," Bishop subtly lists inconsequential items until their very triviality becomes desirable:

What childishness is it that while  
     there's a breath of life [t/o]  
 in our bodies, we are determined to rush  
 to see the sun the other way around?  
 The tiniest green hummingbird in the  
     world? [t/o]  
 To stare at some inexplicable old  
     stonework, [t/o]  
 inexplicable and impenetrable,  
 at any view,  
 instantly seen and always, always  
     delightful? [t/o]  
 Oh, must we dream our dreams  
 and have them, too?  
 And have we room  
 for one more folded sunset, still quite  
     warm? [t/o]  
 But surely it would have been a pity  
 not to have seen the trees along this  
     road, [t/o]

really exaggerated in their beauty,  
 not to have seen them gesturing  
 like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.  
 --Not to have had to stop for gas and  
           heard [t/o]  
 the sad, two-noted, wooden tune  
 of disparate wooden clogs  
 carelessly clacking over  
 a grease-stained filling-station floor.

(18-39)

What was initially "childish" in a negative, uninformed sense, becomes childlike in a very positive, empirical sense. By the end of the poem the "fat brown bird / who sings above the broken gasoline pump" (43) and the "rain/so much like politician's speeches" (56) become overwhelming, compelling reasons to leave "home,/wherever that may be?" (67). This final question, like the pervasive "why" in "Over 2,000 Illustrations" underscores the importance, in Bishop's scheme, of seeing the "small picture" and drawing knowledge, much like a child, from minutiae. By continually conceptualizing "home" or "travel" and wondering when they should be looking, these speakers miss the very things that they travelled to see.

The self-conscious rhetorical questions asked by Bishop's adult personae adequately express her themes of mutability and ambiguity, but they lack the naive

oversimplification and directness that shock the reader into understanding the child-dominated poems. The young personae in poems such as "First Death in Nova Scotia" or "In the Village," unable to analyze motives or theorize about implications, rely on simple, visual language to express tragically complicated dilemmas. Bishop's juxtaposition of childish naivete and adult complexity reflects her very modern sense of ambiguity, but it also harkens back to the ambivalent pastoralism of Andrew Marvell. Through the characters of his childlike Mowers, Marvell illustrates the inconsistencies in both man and nature and argues, like Bishop, for acceptance of these flaws. Unwilling to accept the concepts of absolute goodness, or beauty, or innocence, both poets advocate recognizing the qualities of the pastoral bower, but coming to terms with the world's imperfections.

This acceptance results from what Louis Martz calls "meditation" (Poetry of Meditation 3) or the poetic movement from an object or image to a new, synthetic feeling or idea. Exploring every conceivable connotative meaning, stretching figures of speech almost beyond their limits, and linking initially disparate imagery, the meditative poet discovers "a moment of dramatic, creative experience" that melds his senses, his emotions and his intellectual capabilities (The Poetry of Meditation 1). The synergistic power of this connection, coupled with what Vendler called "inventive

transformations" of thought (The Poetry of George Herbert 4) turns mundane subjects like a cow moose or an English meadow into meaningful, poetic metaphors.

This focus on simplicity and "uninspirational" imagery serves as a parallel technique itself, as both Modernism and the seventeenth-century meditative poets sought to replace overly-sophisticated, academic language with more simple diction and accessible imagery. M. L. Rosenthal reiterates this idea and suggests that, despite the difficulty of much modern poetry, the trend has not been toward obscurity but "from relative formality to simplicity and directness; an unpretentious intimacy, an awareness of everyday life" (4). Bishop responds emphatically to this trend, using highly visual, concrete language in her poetry and criticizing former student Dana Gioia for using "literary" words and writing at the bottom of one of his more self-consciously profound essays, "When in doubt, use the shorter word" (101).

George Herbert most closely resembles Bishop in diction and tone as he responds to the cry of the last decade of the sixteenth century for "More matter and less words" and lets his concentrated, hard thoughts be reflected in his "strong-lined," compacted style (Gardner xx-xxi). Like Bishop, Herbert uses subtle, often ironic juxtaposition of words and images to concentrate and "pressurize" meaning until it explodes in a one-or-two word reversal that complicates and

sometimes refutes earlier ideas. Although Herbert's poetry pivots on metaphors of religion and man's relationship with God, both poets explore the limits of nature and natural objects in accurately representing human emotions and situations, and meditatively discover new meaning in unpromising or overused images.

Illustrating the technical and thematic similarities between Bishop and the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets not only underscores Bishop's mastery, but also reinforces the idea that a poet's sensitivity to the human condition is not time-bound or changed by twists in literary tastes. Discussing John Donne as the most "noisy" and dramatic of the meditative/metaphysical poets, Stephen Orgel remarks that despite the innovative meditative techniques,

What is new is the intelligence, the sensitivity, the extraordinary command of the language and emotive detail: what is new, in fact, is what is new about every great poet. (231)

Quietly, and more subtly than Donne, Bishop and Herbert, Marvell, and Vaughan are also "new." Faced with the ambivalence of man's relationship with nature, his past, and God, these poets respond in remarkably similar ways. Their parallel use of images of childhood and pastoralism, meditative techniques, and subtle diction transcends religious or temporal contexts and combines to help refute

the autobiographical readings of Bishop's work and perhaps validate her often underrated poetry.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bishop was so shy that she became physically ill every time she was asked to do a reading of her poetry and was unable to perform. Her anxiety was so acute that she even became unable to listen to her friends read their work because she would burst into tears, fearing that they would make a mistake. For more information about Bishop's problems with shyness see her interview with Elizabeth Spires, "The Art of Poetry XXVII: Elizabeth Bishop" and Dana Gioia's "Studying with Miss Bishop."



## CHAPTER II

### BISHOP AND HERBERT:

#### A TONAL CONNECTION

Although Herbert's poetry primarily explores questions of theological doctrine and the limits of religious devotion, rhetorically and thematically, he shares much with Bishop. Asked about her poetic roots, Bishop confesses to being an avid admirer of Herbert's "naturalness of tone" ("An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop" 10) and her poems reflect his deceptively simple diction and syntax and his apparent emotional "coolness." In fact, Helen Vendler's contention that "It is scarcely credible that anyone could attribute to him more subtlety than he possessed" (Poetry 5) can easily be applied to much of Bishop's work. Whereas Herbert's illusiveness results from expressing matters of eternal significance in seemingly mundane metaphors, Bishop's indirect themes come out of the mouths of innocent, but very empirically aware children. Herbert examines the issue of innocence from a theological standpoint, but he uses images of nature, not children, to represent unaware, uninitiated states. Herbert and Bishop see nature as an ideal foil to human, adult problems; and they use pastoral imagery, and almost simultaneously undercut it, to emphasize

the ambiguity of appearances and the limitations of natural metaphor to express human conditions.

In poems such as Herbert's "Vertue" or Bishop's "A Cold Spring," both poets paint visual, image-filled scenes and avoid any extended explanation or interpretation. Relying on ironic juxtaposition and very selective word choice to arouse the reader's suspicions, these poets bury sensitive ideas and themes under the "obvious" meaning of the textual surfaces. Upon first and even second readings, "Vertue" seems to be a fairly straightforward presentation of the Christian relationship between virtue and immortality, but the strange way Herbert presents this theme makes the reader doubt the simple reading. Vendler remarks in her book on Herbert that she viewed the poem as "easy" until she tried to reconstruct Herbert's stream of consciousness in creating it. She had problems with the linear movement of the poem, but found that rationalizing the choice of diction and imagery was most difficult (9).

The "Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright" (1) that opens the poem perfectly illustrates this difficulty as the listed adjectives do not appear appropriate for a day that is going to be called "bridall" in the following line:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm so bright,

The bridall of the earth and skie:

The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;

For thou must die. (1-4)

"Cool," "calm," and "bright" seem rather tepid word choices to describe a day as bridal, but the natural beauty and celebratory mood of the first two lines justify the Spenserian, pastoral echoes that Vendler hears in the poem (Poetry 11). The connotative meaning of "bridall," as a joining or connection, however, complicates and strengthens the sense of inevitability in the poem. Visually, the "bridall" or connection of the "earth and skie" pulls the mind's eye to the horizon and, by extension, the future, and thus propels the meaning of the poem toward the "fall," both biblical and nocturnal, in the next line. Additional images such as the significantly "angrie and brave" (5) hue of the rose that mixes militarism with the "sweet" pastoralism, the ironic "box where sweets compacted lie" (10), which emphasizes the limitations and triviality of natural beauty, or the odd image of the "season'd timber" (14) as a metaphor for the virtuous man, further reinforce the distance between the "goodness" of nature and the virtue necessary for man's salvation in Herbert's Christian scheme. They also suggest the gap between language and human emotion that Herbert, and later, Bishop attempted to bridge. The strangeness of metaphors like the "season'd timber" of the soul or Bishop's moths "exactly like the bubbles in champagne" ("A Cold Spring" 45) illustrates the difficulty inherent in expressing human or divine love and points out the mastery of both poets in formulating the metaphysical conceit.

Less obvious elements in "Vertue," such as the connectors "for" (4), "and" (8), "and all" (12), and "then" (16) that begin the last line of each stanza, add to the complex subtext of the poem. The causal connotation of the "for" (4) following the "fall" (3) of the first stanza is strengthened by the more inevitable "and" (8) of the second stanza and the even more inclusive "and all" (12) of the third, until a resolution occurs in the forward looking, definite "then" (16) of the final stanza. The repeated imperative phrase "must die" (4, 8, 12, 16) that follows the first three of these connectors adds to the sense of impending, unequivocal doom and provides a foil to the oddly phrased last line:

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,  
 Like season'd timber, never gives;  
 But though the whole world turn to coal,  
 Then chiefly lives. (13-16)

The superlative connotations of the word "chiefly" convey an expected sense of success and provide a fitting reward for the "vertuous soul" that endures "though the whole world turn to coal." The secondary meanings of "mostly" or "for the most part" prove problematic. Vendler sees "chiefly" as a "limiting word" that neutralizes the triumph of the last stanza and leaves the soul not with "heavenly sweetness" but with the "deprivations of judgment, with the soul sternly more alive, but lonely in its solitary

immunity over fire, its strength taking precedence, visibly, over its sweetness" (23). Like Bishop in such poems as "Five Flights Up" or "One Art," Herbert calmly exits the poem having subtly, almost parenthetically reversed the reader's expectations and responses.

This anti-emotionalism, purposeful over-simplification, and juxtaposed imagery instead of didactic narrative are part of a technical tradition which Bishop utilized in her "A Cold Spring." Like Herbert, Bishop uses pastoralism, in this case undercut by cliché and irony, to emphasize the distance between human angst and the natural world. Unable, however, to find the solid, Christian stoicism of Herbert's speaker, Bishop's persona finds a tentative, secular solution in a more ironic, tense self-control. Bishop is by no means anti-religious in this poem. Religion, in fact, seems conspicuous by its general absence in her poetry. In a 1966 interview, she argues that despite her lack of commitment to organized religion, she read Herbert and Hopkins with great pleasure and admiration. In fact, she objects far more to what she called "modern religiosity" and "didacticism" (particularly in Auden's later poetry) that seem inevitably to lead to "a tone of moral superiority" ("An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop" 10). "A Cold Spring," in keeping with its cool, seemingly detached surface, seems more informed by naturalism than any sort of supernaturalism as Hopkins's celebratory epigram "Nothing is as beautiful as

spring" is immediately deflated by the apparently unpastoral natural landscape of the first stanza.

As in Herbert's poem, all the elements of a "Spring poem" are present in this first stanza, but Bishop blurs the traditional focus with a distorting close-up of the scene:

A cold spring:  
 the violet was flawed on the lawn  
 For two weeks or more the trees  
                   hesitated; [t/o]  
 the little leaves waited,  
 carefully indicating their  
                   characteristics. [t/o]  
 Finally a grave green dust  
 settled over your big and aimless hills.  
 One day, in a chill white blast of  
                   sunshine, [t/o]  
 on the side of one a calf was born.  
 The mother stopped lowing  
 and took a long time eating the after-  
                   birth [t/o]  
 a wretched flag,  
 but the calf got up promptly  
 and seemed inclined to feel gay. (1-14)

The speaker's memory of this significantly "cold spring" (1), the "flawed violets," "hesitant trees," and "grave green dust" of the budding hillsides provides a refreshingly

non-sentimental perspective, but the dissonance between tone and image signals a deeper problem. The juxtaposition of the "chill white blast of sunshine" with the birth of a calf and the mother who "took a long time eating the afterbirth" jars the reader with a shocking, though not entirely unpleasant organicism, but the calf who "got up promptly / and seemed inclined to feel gay" most disrupts the tone. Amidst the earthy, fecund images of a very unromantic spring, the pastoral overtones of this "gay" creature seem ironically out of place.

This shift in tone continues in the second stanza as Bishop calls the "next day" simply "warmer" (16) and describes:

Greenish-white dogwood infiltrated the  
 wood [t/o]  
 each petal burned, apparently, by a  
 cigarette-butt; [t/o]  
 and the blurred redbud stood  
 beside it, motionless, but almost more  
 like movement than any placeable color.  
 (17-21)

In each line, the delicate floral images are undercut by the negative connotations of words such as "infiltrated," "burned," or "blurred" and the reader is left as ambivalent as the "unplaceable" color of the redbud. This vacillating tone continues throughout the stanza as the bitterly

sarcastic images of deer that "practiced leaping" (22), song-birds "wound up for the summer" (24), and "the complementary cardinal" who "cracked a whip" (25-6) balance lyric images of "infant oak leaves" (23), the hills "stretching miles of green limbs from the south" (27), and a cap of lilacs whitening and "falling like snow" (29).

Even as "a new moon comes" (31) and "The hills grow softer" (32), the speaker dilutes his reverie as he recalls the "Tufts of long grass show / where each cowflop lies" (32-3) and compares the bullfrogs to "slack strings" (35). The simplicity and familiarity of these natural images serve as a revealing foil to the rest of the poem as the focus leaves the hillside and approaches a house. Although the most direct, this is not the first human presence in the poem. The catalyst that sends the speaker of the earlier lines meandering between cliché and poignancy is the word "your"--the easily ignored, yet very significant object of the speaker's outburst.

The remaining lines, awash in the light "against your white front door" (36), and perhaps the most beautiful in the poem, illuminate the significance of this person as the ascent of the exquisitely colored moths parallels the speaker's rising emotions. Described by Alan Williamson as "rather like a cello solo--slow, darkened, languorous" (102), these final lines increase in emotional intensity until they drift "simultaneously to the same height, / --



exactly like the bubbles in champagne" (44-45). The dash before this climactic line signals a literal breaking point for the speaker as painful memories cause her to seek refuge in the controlling power of language. As she has earlier, when moved by the vital natural scene, the speaker resorts to ironic, carefully chosen diction to distance herself. The finicky language of the "particular glowing tributes" and the sense of inevitability in "every evening now throughout the summer" (49) successfully contain her emotions, but they taint her response to the rebirth and organicism of the hillside. This balance between control and passionate emotion will be tested again in the child-oriented poems as the speakers in "In the Waiting Room" and "In the Village" try to cope with painful, often unresolvable adult situations.

Despite the passion that rests beneath the surface of much of Bishop's poetry, "A Cold Spring" is one of the very few "love" poems in Bishop's work, and as in "Varick Street," "Rain Towards Morning," and "The Shampoo," the foreground of this poem is filled with natural, minutely detailed imagery instead of dialogue or more revealing "overheard" thoughts. Part of this may be due to Marianne Moore's considerable influence on Bishop's early poetry and the elder poet's dislike of overt emotionalism ("The Art of Poetry XXVII" 70). Alan Williamson's more psychological theory, however, suggests that Bishop considered reciprocal

love almost "metaphysically impossible" (96-97) and feared admitting emotion that was "insusceptible to rational or, in poetry, to structural counter-argument" (96). Both theories provide valid commentary on the poem, but they ignore the meditative movement from "objet trouve" to emotional resolution that brings to mind Donne's "flea" or his "twin compasses" and links Bishop to the metaphysical/meditative tradition.

Jerome Mazzaro examines this preponderance of objects and their importance in the development of Bishop's poems as he argues that the lack of sentimentalism and overt emotional language in Bishop is a technical rather than a psychological issue. Borrowing a theme from John Crowe Ransom, Mazzaro suggests that Bishop asserts value in her poetry by piling up descriptive details around her chosen "precious object" until the reader is impeded by these details and must slow his reading and pay closer attention (167). Of particular interest to this study is Mazzaro's discussion of the use of this technique in the early poem "The Weed," a poem that Bishop says is modelled on Herbert's "Love Unknown" ("An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop" 10). Although Mazzaro hears echoes of Emily Dickinson's humility and Herbert's imagery in this poem (36), both predecessors are quickly forgotten as Bishop's intricate description of the "twisting, waving flag" (21) of a leaf, thickening stem,

and "nervous roots" (23) sidetracks the ideological movement of the poem and narrowly focuses the reader's attention.

Although Herbert's descriptions, particularly the "font, wherein did fall / A stream of blood which issu'd from the side / Of a great rock" (13-15) similarly arrest the reader's attention, they serve in "Love Unknown" as vivid descriptive components of a narrative that ends in religious resolution and a soul that is "new, tender, quick." In Bishop's poem, the description is the poem, and the weed that exists "but to divide your heart again" (56) emphasizes an existential ambiguity that Bishop feels cannot be resolved by religion. In Herbert's poem, the ordeals of the heart become beneficial "tempering" influences (Howard 31) as the "cleansing of the font, the softening of the furnace, and the sensitizing by means of thorns are attempts to mend what the possessor of the heart has marred" (Mazzaro 36). Bishop's speaker's suffering, however, produces only an awareness of the mutability central to Bishop's work and a sense of very modern inevitability. Like some sort of a surreal natural cycle, the weed combines healthy, lush growth, with a frightening sense of insidious intent.

Despite its horrifying, very unpastoral premise, "The Weed," like the rose in "Vertue" and the hillside in "A Cold Spring," links the qualities of infancy or unspoiled nature with this sense of awareness. The "slight, young weed" (15) and its "insistent, cautious creeping / in the region of the

heart" (12-13) and the subsequent images of transparency and vision cement this connection and prefigure pastoral child-figures and real children in later poetry. But in between the racing reflected images (48), "the half-clear streams" (33), and the illuminated droplets (44) of "The Weed" and the painfully aware "Elizabeth" of "In the Waiting Room," there are numerous, empirical child-figures whose origins may be found in the metaphysical tradition.

Two such children appear in the ironically titled "Elsewhere" section of Questions of Travel. The personae of these "Nova Scotia" poems represent contrasting extremes: the child in "Manners" parrots adult ideas concerning what a child knows and must know to survive; whereas the child in "Sestina" illustrates the limitations of and loopholes in this information. Bishop's rare use of established forms in both of these poems echoes this opposition as the modified ballad stanza and largely anapestic trimeter lines in "Manners" skip through the recitation of country etiquette while the repetitions of the "Sestina" transform the initially warm, domestic scene into something more ominous. This metamorphosis, both within "Sestina" and between the two poems, has roots in Herbert's "The Rose" in which the initially innocuous rose becomes, through metaphysical meditation, emblematic of the dangerous, yet controllable joys of the world.

Control is the central issue in these modern poems as well. While Herbert's persona struggles for satisfaction with what Vendler called "sustained experience over fleeting initial response" to the world (The Poetry of George Herbert 83), Bishop's children struggle to deal with grief and loss in a world where their insightful empirical perceptions are misunderstood or ignored. The controlling devices available to them, as demonstrated in "Manners," provide little real help; they simply assuage the sense of responsibility in the often confused adults in the poems.

The "fine day" (7) and the sounds of "shouting at the top of our voices" (28) that dominate "Manners," the first poem in "Elsewhere," seem an odd beginning for a series of poems that will deal with subjects ranging from the confusion of "First Death in Nova Scotia" to the insanity of Ezra Pound in "A Visit to St. Elizabeth's." A quick look back at the opening section of Questions of Travel, however, sheds some light. The last line of the opening poem "Arrival at Santos" and its promise of "driving to the interior" (40) are only partially answered by the exotic "Brazil" section and find their culmination in the domestic explorations of "Elsewhere."

Read out of the context of the rest of the book, "Manners" appears to be a happy, if simple piece, yet this joy is undercut and limited by the all-encompassing nature of the grandfather's advice:

My grandfather said to me  
 as we sat on the wagon seat,  
 "Be sure to remember to always  
 speak to everyone you meet" (1-4)

His universal admonition to be polite to all, "man or beast" (23), as "good manners required" (32), covers all situations in which one could encounter man or crow, but fails to provide any answers for the situations in later poems that manners cannot cure. The rhymed second and fourth lines in each stanza further emphasize this limitation as the exact rhymes of "seat/meet," "hat/sat," "shoulder/older" and others suggest the same sort of perfect fit that the Grandfather's advice propagandizes. Unfortunately, the formula that works for the "tired mare" (30) is no match for the self-doubt and grief of later poems.

Herbert's "The Rose" strives for the same degree of control over the rhyme, a control which Vendler questions the efficacy of, but Herbert's poem more closely resembles the meditative transformation of the later "Sestina." Vendler sees Herbert's attempts at following each appearance of the rose with an "-ose" rhyme as largely unsuccessful (The Poetry of George Herbert 84) and suggests that the cleverly paired juxtapositions and word choice achieve the gentle rebuke of this very elegant "contemptus mundi" poem (85). The simultaneous undercutting of word pairs such as "sugred lies" (2), "Colour'd griefs" (6), "blushing woes"

(7), and the "deceits / delights" (9-10) misstatement illustrate the same firm, if indirect rejection of the situation within the context of the poem as do the techniques in Bishop's "Sestina." The difference is that Bishop's child is faced not with worldly temptation but the dichotomy of her tear-filled reality and the way that things "should" be.

Bishop encloses all this pain in the very demanding sestina form to emphasize the boundaries of the almanac's "knowledge" and to increase the building tension in the poem. In the introduction to her edition of poems of the metaphysical poets, Helen Gardner describes the metaphysical style as a "limiting frame" that concentrates and amplifies meaning (xxiii). Bishop's modern metaphysical poem responds directly to this idea as the form, the almanac, the house, and the echo of the rules of "Manners" serve as boundaries to limit the child's response. Childhood itself works as a sort of limiter in Bishop's scheme as the characteristically empirical child lacks power to assert any influence or change. Sitting in the kitchen in the somber "September rain" (1) and listening to the grandmother "laughing and talking to hide her tears" (6), the child rejects the world "foretold by the almanac / but only known to a grandmother" (9-10) and watches instead as the "small, hard tears/dance like mad on the hot black stove" (14-15).

Unable or unwilling to express her sorrow in the "equinoctial tears" (7) of her grandmother, the child sees tears everywhere: on the stove, filling the grandmother's teacup, in the buttons of the man she draws. Like her grandmother, the child has access to the "wisdom" of the almanac that hovers "birdlike" (19) over the two personae in stanza 4, but she has not yet accumulated the psychological filters that would allow her to fight her pain by putting more wood on the stove or talking through the tears. Instead, she draws "rigid" (27) "inscrutable houses" (39) to symbolize her isolation and waits for the time when:

the little moons fall down like tears  
from between the pages of the almanac  
into the flower bed the child  
has carefully placed in front of the

house. (33-36)

[t/o]

Just as in Herbert's poem, in which the speaker's anger at the "temptor" is controlled by elegant, undercutting juxtapositions, Bishop's uses the sadly "inscrutable houses" (39), the almanac's strange warning "Time to plant tears" (37), and the voices of the Marvel Stove--"It was to be" (25)-- and the almanac--"I know what I know" (26)--to control the confusion and grief of the child. Even the form reflects this uneasy control as the echoing word repetition necessary in the sestina magnifies the terrible muteness of the child's grief. Although the recurring image of tears



and the sadness of the child have been read autobiographically by critics previously discussed, the "It" in the stove's lamentation and the grandmother's angst illuminate Bishop's themes of arbitrariness and ambiguity. The presence of the "tidy" (17) grandmother and the "inscrutable" child, the stove and the almanac, and the tears both inside and out, provides an equilibrium of emotion that closely resembles what Vendler called the "equilibrium of virtue" (The Poetry of George Herbert 87) at the end of "The Rose." Bishop's personae, however, lack the comforting, religious backdrop of Herbert's poems, and the balance between the noisy rules of "Manners" and the painful silence of "Sestina" is a tentative one.

While Herbert's poems gain a sense of certitude from their theological boundaries, they also digress and surprise as these boundaries are questioned and explored. The "slips of the tongue" like the "thoughts/thorns" (51-2) misstep in "Love Unknown" and "deceits/delights" (9-10) in "The Rose" are merely the more obvious examples of what Vendler called Herbert's "re-inventing" the poem as he went along (The Poetry of George Herbert 25) or having "second thoughts" (27) within the text. While she sees this quality as proof that Herbert believed in the fallibility of logic and "allow[ed] his moods free play," Stanley Fish argues that such a view encourages the reader to read autobiographically or see Herbert as a didactic teacher completely separated

from his speakers (175-76). Fish offers instead a reading that sees the speaker as a Socratic questioner who "catechizes" individual readers and leads them to discover for themselves the meaning within the text (178).

Bishop's children can be seen as "apprentice" questioners who lead the reader to "truth" within a very limited rhetorical and intellectual frame. Unlike the adult speaker in "One Art" who instructs the reader from within the strictures of the villanelle to "practice losing" (7) based on her vast experience of losing "continents" (14), "keys" (5), "houses" (11), "realms" (14), the child in "In the Waiting Room" conducts her "catechism" from a position of liminal anxiety and confusion over her place in the human scheme. The reader of "One Art" is thus led to a discovery of the particular significance and pain of events that "look like (Write it!) like disaster" (19), while the adult reader of "In the Waiting Room" re-discovers a personal epiphany of "belonging" to the human race:

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

or made us just one?

How--I didn't know any

word for it--how "unlikely" . . . (75-

85)

The discoveries do not end there, however, as the childish, feminine voice recounting the "horrifying" (31) breasts of the "black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs" (28-30) inspires horror and then a more abstract sense of feminism in the reader. Lee Edelman takes this feeling a step further, as she sees the child reacting against the "reduction of woman to the status of a literal figure, an oxymoronic entity constrained to be interpreted within the patriarchal text" (196). Although this reading argues for the sense of layering of adult memories and childish epiphanies, it distorts the feminine recognition and ignores much of the purely human empathy in the poem.

The gender-neutral images of "shadowy gray knees" (68), the "big black wave" (92) of anxiety and the strange and "unlikely" (85) sense of impending adulthood serve as touchstones that lead the reader from empathy with the child persona and through personal memories to a discovery of a new, more abstract truth. Filtered by empathy, memory, and adult interpretation, these "truths" transcend the childish perspective and language of the poem and lead the reader to the realm of adult, social awareness that initially prompted

the child's anxiety attack. The claustrophobic sense of enclosure that dominates this poem as it moves from the yellow boundaries of the National Geographic cover to World War I concentrates and telescopes meaning until personal recognition and subsequent epiphanies occur and again expand the focus. Prompted by the instructive, catechizing clues of the speaker, the reader's mind moves much like the "zoom" lens of a camera, blurring and focusing as memories and philosophies distort and change the meaning. The result of all this layering is a synthetic meaning, greater than the sum of the clues given or the understanding of the speaker.

This ability to draw significant themes from the unpromising subject of a dentist's waiting room points out Bishop's technical and thematic parallels with Herbert. Maintaining the quiet, still surfaces that have become almost a trademark of both poets, Bishop explores the boundaries of the self and its ambiguous place in the world and, as Robert Lowell said, "makes the casual perfect" ("For Elizabeth Bishop 4" 14).

### CHAPTER III

#### BISHOP AND MARVELL:

#### PASTORALISM AND AMBIVALENCE

Although the mood of Herbert's deceptively sterile poems parallels Bishop's controlled tone, Andrew Marvell best illustrates the ambivalent pastoralism and humane criticism that dominate the "child" poems and more subtly inform such poems as "At the Fishhouses" and "The Man-Moth." Through the persona of a mower or another naive rural speaker, Marvell gently dismantles the idea of the pastoral as "perfection" and replaces it with a more balanced view of innocence, nature, and civilization. Described by Rosalie Colie as "a cool customer, a smiler in his sleeve, a smiler with a knife" (viii), Marvell uses rich, descriptive language and precise diction to set the same kind of rhetorical trap Bishop constructs with her supposedly "well-mannered" verse as both poets give the reader elegantly manicured surfaces that conceal considerable substance. Even Colie, who spends a book praising Marvell's genius admits that he can seem "faint and slack, affected and irrelevant" because of the "sheer beauty of his lines" and "soothing textual surfaces" (viii). Despite the chasm of centuries that separates Bishop and Marvell, Oscar Williams

echoes this conclusion in a review of North & South in which he paints Bishop as a sort of "academic" country club matron (184) capable only of "expected, charming little stained glass bits here and there" (185). Both poets, however, present scenes that resemble the reflective, "scratched isinglass" (40) of Bishop's "The Fish" much more than the rosy glow of stained glass.

The vivid visual texts of both poets draw much of their power and effectiveness from narrowness of focus and concentrated imagery. By fixating on a single object or lone speaker and then explicating the various elements, the poets concentrate literal and connotative meaning and discover illuminating perspectives. Marvell's "On a Drop of Dew" beautifully illustrates this technique as we are introduced to the "Orient Dew" by the simple command to "see" it (1) and proceed on a prepositional descent into the "blowing roses" (3) and the origin of this phenomenal droplet:

See how the Orient Dew,  
Shed from the Bosom of the Morn  
    Into the blowing Roses,  
Yet careless of its Mansion new;  
For the clear Region where 'twas born  
    Round in its self incloses:  
    And in its little Globes Extent,  
Frames as it can its native Element.

(1-8)

The focusing power of lines such as "Shed from the Bosom of the Morn / Into the blowing Roses," or "careless of its Mansion new," combined with limiting phrases like "Round in its self incloses, "Globes Extent," and "Frames as it can its native Element," concentrates without distorting and leaves the dew delicately suspended "Like its own tear" (13).

This suspension, born of the dew's being "so long divided from the Sphear" (14) of its origin, further concentrates meaning as the "mournful light" (12) reflects the longing of the droplet for its celestial home and focuses the reader's attention on the inside of the droplet itself. Robert Ellrodt suggests that this intensely intimate focus is only part of the magnifying power of Marvell's imagery. Ellrodt argues that Marvell can superimpose "microscopic and cosmic vision" (153) without distortion or distraction because he foregrounds images without reference or perspective (152). With no limiting horizon in view, just the "Glories of th' Almighty Sun" (40), the reader can feasibly travel into the heart of the droplet, emerge "trembling" (16), be "exhaled" (18) back into the sky, and still relate this movement to the journey of the Soul that ends the poem. In fact, such extreme deviations in scope, when applied to the lowly "congeal'd and chill" dew (38), amplify both what is possible and what

is expected of the Soul as a drop from the "Fountain of Eternal Day" (20).

Bishop incorporates a similar shifting focus and echoes Marvell's "sensuous particularity" (Summers 124) in her early poem "The Man-Moth," the title of which arose from a newspaper misprint for the word "mammoth." Like Marvell, Bishop sets up a comparison pitting human against non-human, but in Bishop's case the mythical "Man-Moth" represents an empirical child-figure and the "Man" (3) an observing adult. The backdrop to this comparison, unlike Marvell's, is full of boundaries: the sky, the edge of the sidewalk, the facades of buildings, underground tunnels. But whereas Marvell's descent into the droplet depended on the reader's foregrounded focus on this minute object, Bishop's poem depends on the vastness between the boundaries of the subway and the sky to emphasize the childish Man-Moth's fear and determination. The adult "Man," seen significantly as a shadow in the first stanza, does not share in this fear because he has lost the sense of inevitability and clear vision of the mythic, uninitiated Man-Moth:

He does not see the moon; he observes  
 only her vast properties, [t/o]  
 feeling the queer light on his hands,  
                   neither warm nor cold, [t/o]  
 of a temperature impossible to  
                   record in thermometers. (6-8) [t/o]



The vision of the "Man-Moth," however, is almost too perceptive for his own good:

But when the Man-Moth  
 pays his rare, although occasional,  
     visits to the surface, [t/o]  
 the moon looks rather different to him.  
     He emerges [t/o]  
 from an opening under the edge of one of  
     the sidewalks [t/o]  
 and nervously begins to scale the faces  
     of the buildings. [t/o]  
 He thinks the moon is a small hole at  
     the top of the sky, [t/o]  
 proving the sky quite useless for  
     protection. [t/o]  
 He trembles, but must investigate as  
     high as he can climb. (9-16) [t/o]

David Bromwich sees this compulsion to investigate as a sort of Darwinian instinct--"a disease [the Man-Moth] has inherited the susceptibility to" (l. 39)--and views this creature as a sort of wandering "second-story man" (82) who milks every encounter for what it is worth. Trying to justify this oddly unsympathetic reading, Bromwich admits that it was hard to ignore the "poignancy" of the poem, but argues that one encounters a "force field" (83-84) when trying to probe the sub-text.

Yet plenty of evidence exists on the surface to refute his hard-nosed reading. The fact that "what the Man-Moth fears most he must do" (23), coupled with the fearful, tentative words surrounding his ascents and descents, point to a child fearful of growing up, not a naturalistically driven automaton. The ominous threat that fuels the continuous movement of this child-figure strengthens the connection of innocence and ambiguity only suggested in the vaguely drawn speakers in "A Cold Spring" and "Over 2,000 Illustrations." The rushing, dynamic description of this creature who is forced to careen through "artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams" (34) further illustrates the uncontrollable fate of Bishop's child. But the disturbingly sensuous description of the creature itself removes all objective distance and illustrates the vulnerability of the odd persona. The hypothetical encounter with the Man-Moth that ends the poem, however, points as well to the negative side of this innocence :

If you catch him  
 hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's  
     all dark pupil, [t/o]  
 an entire night itself, whose haired  
     horizon tightens [t/o]  
 as he stares back and closes up the eye.  
     Then from the lids [t/o]  
 one tear, his only possession, like the

bee's sting, slips. [t/o]  
 Slyly he palms it, and if you're not  
 paying attention [t/o]  
 he'll swallow it. However, if you watch,  
 he'll hand it over, [t/o]  
 cool as from underground springs and  
 pure enough to drink. (41-48) [t/o]

Despite the presence of the innocent, uninitiated persona, "The Man-Moth" lacks the bucolic setting and carefree speaker to be considered a conventional "pastoral" poem. Even so, it does partake of the pastoral as defined by Marvell, in that it toys with the convention of the pastoral scene reflecting the mood of the speaker and presents a limited, present moment in time. David Kalstone views this focus on the isolated "here and now" as one of the most positive aspects of pastoralism because it illustrates man's best, not just his potential ("Conjuring with Nature" 252). Jerome Mazzaro agrees and sees one of Bishop's "greatest achievements" in her ability to "willfully suppress the past in order to focus on one time and place and . . . avoid nostalgia" (179). Even as she sympathizes with the plight of "Man-Moth" or any of her child-figures, Bishop avoids the dramatic sentimentalism that would lessen the poetic impact. In the same way that the narrowness of focus concentrates meaning, the limited slice of time presented in the lives of Bishop's naive

personae or Marvell's mowers allows for a minute explication of the scene that reveals the sometimes contradictory details necessary in both poet's schemes.

One of the most illuminating contradictions revealed in the pastoral flashes of both poets appears in Marvell's "The Mower's Song" and Bishop's "At the Fishhouses." The indifferent nature that dominates both poems violates what Rosalie Colie describes as the necessary equation between the mind of the pastoral speaker and the landscape (33) and questions the ability and the advisability of seeing nature as a reflection of man. Marvell's very plot asks this question as the Mower, frustrated by the "unthankfulness" (13) of the "luxuriant" (8) garden, vows to bring the garden--"Flow'rs, and Grass, and I and all"(21)--to the same abysmal level as his spirits. Underneath this larger question, however, lies a nagging problem of perception that Bishop will incorporate in her poem. The extreme comparison of the "gawdy May-games" (15) of nature and "trodden" (16) spirit of the mower can be read on one level as a hyperbolic conceit, but the Mower's interpretation of the scene in the first stanza presents Marvell's real theme:

My Mind was once the true survey  
Of all these Meadows fresh and gay;  
And in the greenness of the Grass  
Did see its Hopes as in a Glass;  
When Juliana came, and She

What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and

Me. (1-6)

[t/o]

When he was contented, the Mower perceived the perfection and serenity of nature as a reflection of his condition, despite the ironic fact that he was mowing it down. Having been frustrated by the remote Juliana, he perceives the gap between the cycles of nature and his emotions and restores the harmony of inner and outer worlds by force. Seen as destructive in the foreign, unpastoral Juliana, this force becomes ironically acceptable for the Mower and therein lies Marvell's gentle criticism of the pastoral mode itself.

Commenting on his sensitive critical eye, Rosalie Colie admits that what she most admires about Marvell's poetry is his awareness of "the lapse between all appropriate languages and the problems raised by human psychology--or by human beings" (5). The Mower's sad song elaborates on this distance between feeling and expression as language fails the child-like Mower and he searches for understanding in physical, natural elements. This inability to conceptualize extends to his interpretation of Juliana as her rejection can be understood only in terms of her doing to the Mower what he does to the grass. The egocentrism of such a view elicits empathy, not bitter irony from Marvell because he understands the impossibility, even for the pastoral primitive, of finding a completely comforting human metaphor

in language or in nature. Joseph Summers summarizes this attitude as he argues:

The Mower poems conveniently define the crucial terms of Marvell's most frequent poetic use of nature. Marvell did not discover an impulse from the vernal wood which spoke unambiguously to the human heart and which offered a possibility for man's atoneness with all. Nor did he, like George Herbert, usually see in nature patterns of a distinguishable and logical divine will, the paysage moralise which offered a way to the understanding and imitation of God. Human moral criteria do not apply to most of Marvell's landscapes.

(127)

Bishop echoes this view of nature as neutral or parallel to human emotion in "At the Fishhouses," a poem that presents a speaker standing adjacent a fish processing station, chatting with a Wordsworthian solitary and contemplating the "clear gray icy water" (61). The speaker spends the long first stanza describing the fishhouse:

All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,  
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,  
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,

the lobster pots, and masts, scattered  
among the wild jagged rocks,  
is of an apparent translucence  
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss  
growing on their shoreward walls. (13-20)

The silvery gleam of the scene, intensified by the herring scales like "creamy iridescent coats of mail" (24) or "sequins" (37) on the vest of the old fisherman, gives the poem an ethereal, otherworldly feeling that continues until the speaker attempts to evaluate the scene. In the third stanza, where the speaker pronounces the sea "element bearable to no mortal" (48) the silver changes to "gray icy water" (61) that is "cold dark deep and absolutely clear" (60). The opacity of the first stanza has given way to an emphasis on clarity that becomes ironic when the speaker tries to communicate with a nearby seal:

He was interested in music;  
like me a believer in total immersion,  
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.  
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."  
He stood up in the water and regarded me  
steadily, moving his head a little.  
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge  
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug  
as if it were against his better judgement. (51-  
59)

Despite her multi-denominational approach, the speaker fails in her light-hearted attempt to deal with the enigmatic seal. This inability to make a connection continues as the stanza progresses and she first dips her hand in the water and then tastes it, encountering a taste and temperature that "burns with a dark gray flame" (75) and makes extended contact impossible:

If you should dip your hand in,  
 your wrist would ache immediately,  
 your bones would begin to ache and your  
     hand would burn [t/o]  
 as if the water were a transmutation of  
     fire [t/o]  
 that feeds on stones and burns with a  
     dark gray flame. [t/o]  
 If you tasted it, it would first taste  
     bitter, [t/o]  
 then briny, then surely burn your  
     tongue. [t/o]  
 It is like what we imagine knowledge to  
     be: (71-78) [t/o]

Actual physical contact failing her, the speaker finally tries to associate the sea with something particularly human and unconsciously underscores the absolute distinction between the two worlds.

In her surmise that "It is like what we imagine



knowledge to be" (78) the compounded uncertainty of "like" and "imagine" ironically emphasizes the impossibility, in Bishop's world, of the sea ever being adequately understood or of human knowledge being completely reflected in nature. Anne Stevenson and Jerome Mazzaro support this reading as Stevenson describes Bishop's view of nature as "neutral" to man's spiritual struggles (32) and Mazzaro calls her a "relativist" who is "more willing to see life as a dialectical process involving man and his environment rather than a process of man's will being imposed on his surroundings" (196). Crale Hopkins also notes the ambiguity in the poem, but sees it as a stepping stone to Bishop's "finally coming to terms with nature" (212) in Questions of Travel. He can be forgiven this overstatement, however, because his article was published in 1976, before he had a chance to experience the dichotomies and ambivalence in Geography III.

Bishop not only fails to come to terms with nature in Questions of Travel, she also presents her most poignant embodiment of empirical innocence in the character of the child in "In the Village," a prose work published with this book. Amidst the pastoral lyricism of the child's view of the village stores, filled with unbearably delightful treasures, and the humorous descriptions of the cows and people who populate her world, the ominous overtones of her mother's insanity linger even after the woman is gone. The

pain and confusion that haunt the child transcend her understanding and become concentrated into a single scream the mother uttered while being fitted for a dress:

A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, skies that travelers compare to those of Switzerland, too dark, too blue, so that they seem to keep on darkening a little more around the horizon--or is it around the rims of the eyes?--the color of the cloud of bloom on the elm trees, the violet on the fields of oats; something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory--in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever--not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it. (251)

The disturbing juxtaposition of the vibrating scream

and the very pastoral world of the child is intensified by shifts in diction and level of detail. The mother, as Marjorie Perloff notes, is never referred to as anything but "she" or "her" and usually enters the scene symbolically, in the form of a packet of postcards or the smell of perfume (178). When the child can escape this presence, or its memory, she refers to herself in first person and muses with childish curiosity on the blacksmith's horse who is a "whole brown world" (257) or the shoes in the mercantile window "exactly the color and texture of pink and blue blackboard chalks" (262). In the presence of the mother, or a painful memory, however, the point of view shifts to third person and "the child vanishes" (253), leaving the story to plod along in a series of "first" and "then" and "then" sentences (252) that emphasize the speaker's difficulty in reproducing the narrative. This difficulty takes on added meaning if we consider that the speaker, an adult remembering her childhood, falters, even after so many years.

Even when the child can physically escape to the "squishy, moss-covered hummocks" (265) of the pasture or the fanciful, thread-strewn house of the dressmaker who "sleeps in her thimble" (258), the ominous overtones of the scream intrude in the form of the purple dress, threatening to "echo, what it has heard" (259) or Nelly's cow bell bringing on a "sibilant, glistening loneliness" (265). The only place, in fact, where the child feels insulated is the

steaming, blackened world of Nate's blacksmith shop, where the sound of the "clang" of his hammer becomes a sort of mantra for the child and shuts out the sound of the scream. This anti-pastoral refuge provides only temporary shelter, however, as the child cries for the sound to "strike again" (274) as the story closes.

Anne Stevenson views Nate's clanging hammer as a solution to the child's problem, as she argues that the "primal unity" (33) of this provincial village can absorb and neutralize the tragedy. Seeing the story as one more example of Bishop's "instinctive sympathy with unsophisticated peoples" (33), she ignores the final cry and the repeated failures of the natural scene to do anything but briefly divert the child and reads Bishop in a distortingly philosophical light. Penelope Mortimer provides a much more sensitive reading as she describes the story as "an invocation of childhood ending with the cry of an adult heart" (18) and underscores the meditative exploration that David Kalstone sees as the dominant characteristic of the modern pastoral ("Conjuring With Nature" 264). While the products of this exploration, Kalstone adds, may "lack the hospitable qualities of the Theocritean bower" (264), they mirror the ambivalent conclusions of innovative seventeenth-century poets like Marvell and provide instructive commentary on the modern world.

Like the ominous sounds that punctuated the pastoral landscape of "In the Village," a sense of impending doom haunts the mood of Marvell's "Damon the Mower" and transforms this poem of unrequited love into a study of the mutability of mortal life. Rosalie Colie argues that this "death-theme," derived from a biblical allusion to death as a "mower," is "kept in counterpoint to the simple happiness normally attributed to the pastoral environment " (30-31) to question the limits of the pastoral mode (30) and examine man's alienation from God and nature (32). Although Damon is not alienated from the scene in the same way as the speaker in "The Mower's Song," the fact that the scorched landscape reflects his heart provides no comfort. The scene does not respond in sympathy to the Mower's plight, but wilts under the unnatural heat of Juliana's "beams" and emphasizes his powerlessness against her.

In an attempt to reassert his identity and his intimate connection to the landscape and escape "the Fires/Of the hot day, or hot desires," Damon seeks refuge in ritualistic daily behavior similar to that of Bishop's child in "In the Village":

I am the Mower Damon, known  
 Through all the Meadows I have mown.  
 On me the Morn her dew distills  
 Before her darling Daffadils.  
 And, if at Noon my toil me heat,

The Sun himself licks off my Sweat.  
 While,going home, the Ev'ning sweet  
 In cowslip-water bathes my feet. (41-  
 48)

He goes on to assert his prowess as a mower (49-56) and his physical beauty and charm (57-64), but is unable to regain the pastoral state enjoyed before "Love here his Thistles sow'd." Colie sees the presence of Juliana in the poem as that of an adult foil to the child-like, innocent Damon. She cannot (or will not) understand the naivete of the mower or the meaning of the landscape (34). Seen in this light, Damon's inability to regain his earlier state and the warning of the last stanza that only death can cure those "whom Juliana's Eyes do wound" (86) could be read as his fear of succumbing to the sophisticated, apparently adult behavior of this woman. Unlike the child in "In the Waiting Room" or "In the Village," Damon has already reached adulthood. His liminal anxiety stems from his fear of upsetting the delicate balance of adult responsibility (his work) and the child-like sense of wonder that prompts him to bring "Chameleons changing-hue/And Oak leaves tipt with hony due" (37-8) to his lady.

Although Marvell's mowers represent naivete and wholesome innocence, they lack the sentimental, endearing qualities of real children. Even Bishop's persona in "In the Village," despite her exquisite focus on "painterly"

details (Perloff 177), is a very serious little girl, whose speech is littered with the perspective of the adult memory through which she appears. Both poets, however, give us traditional little girls in the characters of "little T. C." and "Gwendolyn" and consequently intensify the sense of ambivalence about man's relationship with nature. In "The Picture of little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers," the coaxing voice that instructs T. C. to "Reform the errors of the Spring" (27) and watches her tell the roses "What Colour best becomes them, and what Smell" (8) initially sees the humor in the charming little girl trying to change nature with the same coy elan that she will later use to break men's hearts. As the poem progresses, this amusement changes to alarm as the childish activities come to symbolize man's use of nature.

In this context, the "disarming" of roses (30) and the harvesting of buds become what Joseph Summers calls "abstract ideals" (134) that man attempts to impose on the necessary randomness of Nature. While these half-joking absolutes seem harmless in a child's garden, Summers sees Marvell's poem as a warning that an "ideal" world can exist only on an eternal plain, "outside time" (134) and is impossible and even undesirable (149) for mortal man. The lack of development of the child's character and the brief, undifferentiating initials T. C. ("the child"?) underscore the generic insistence of this warning. By using a little

girl, surrounded by the wild flowers, as the vehicle for these rather somber sentiments, Marvell emphasizes the desirability of maintaining a balance between ideals and nature and underscores the benign ambivalence in which T. C. and "Flora" (36) can coexist.

The title character in Bishop's short story "Gwendolyn," however, cannot achieve this balance as her role as the perfect "little girl" outweighs her health, her parent's common sense and, eventually, causes her death. Described at one point as "everything that the slightly repellent but fascinating words 'little girl' should mean" (216), Gwendolyn Appletree serves as a reminder of where failure to accept the ambivalence of the human condition can lead. The story unfolds through the eyes of a very normal, inquisitive little girl--a less emotional version of the speaker in "In the Village"--whose confused perceptions of Gwendolyn illustrate the dichotomy between what should be and what that the adults only sense.

The fascinating doll that opens the story, with its "unbearably thrilling" (213) dresses and elaborate skating costume pre-figures Gwendolyn, but provides an ironically less artificial image in the mind of the child-speaker. Having lain in a drawer for many years, the doll is limp and droopy, and yet somehow familiar to the speaker, who, recovering from a serious bout of bronchitis (213), pronounces it "well suited to the role of companion to an



invalid" (214). Her first encounter with Gwendolyn, however, produces curiosity and envy as the wonderful "dactyl trisyllables" (216) of her name and her physical appearance fill the speaker with awe:

. . . although older, she was as small  
 as I was, and blond, and pink and white,  
 exactly like a blossoming appletree. And  
 she was "delicate," which, in spite of  
 the bronchitis, I was not. She had  
 diabetes. I had been told this much and  
 had some vague idea that it was because  
 of "too much sugar," and that in itself  
 made Gwendolyn even more attractive, as  
 if she would prove to be solid candy if  
 you bit her, and her pure-tinted  
 complexion would taste exactly like the  
 icing-sugar Easter eggs or birthday-  
 candle holders, held to be inedible,  
 except that I knew better. (216)

Dressed in her perfectly matched outfits and smothered with affection by her parents and all those around her, Gwendolyn fulfills her role as a "beautiful heroine" (218), but has none of the qualities that Bishop prizes in her empirical children. Instead she "smile[s] as if pleased with everything" (219) when the adults are looking and hides her coldness like the lacy, but torn and dirty drawers that

so shock the speaker when Gwendolyn visits for the night (220).

The inconsistency between the sugary surface and the seemingly empty insides disturbs the speaker so much that, unable to come to terms with Gwendolyn's death, she finally displaces her memory of her into the doll that opened the story. Undressing the doll, and covering it with flowers in the backyard (226), the speaker finally can deal with Gwendolyn by associating her with something that she knows is not human and thus cannot be held responsible for being artificial. By juxtaposing the speaker and Gwendolyn, Bishop not only emphasizes her recurrent theme of ambivalence, but like Marvell, acknowledges the flaws inherent even in a pastoral, child-like state.

Discussing Marvell's use of pastoralism, Rosalie Colie comments that "in a fallen world, even pastoral innocence is not innocent enough" (42) and exposes a problem inherent especially in Bishop's world view. If ambivalence and uncertainty are necessary conditions to existence and we have lost the empiricism that allows us to see clearly, what happens next? The answer lies, at least in part, in the nexus of civilization and wilderness, adulthood and childhood that occurs during the bus trip of Bishop's dreamy poem "The Moose." By presenting the markedly different personae in the "Mower" poems in the same pastoral vocation, Marvell provides a similar, if more optimistic answer.

Although all of Marvell's Mowers explore the boundaries of different pastoral conventions, the greatest distance in tone and dominant emotion stretches between the dazed confusion of the "Mower to the Glo-Worms" and the cranky grumbling of "The Mower against Gardens." Both the stunned alienation of the Mower addressing insects and the sarcastic, ornamental language of the natural "purist" reinforce the idea that, as Colie has said, "the pastoral cannot provide a satisfactory working model for lives as men and women must live them" (41). Instead, man must choose eclectically from these different brands of innocence and balance them with his worldly, adult experience. In this context, the "displac'd" (15) mind of the mower is not more innocent or pastoral than the angry gardener; he is just responding to a different cue. Viewing the vituperations of the gardener as more sophisticated, or somehow more worldly than the other Mower's musings obfuscates Marvell's deliberate manipulation of the convention. The fact that the language of the Mower is more ornate or detailed than the others' relates more to the Mower's intimate knowledge of the subject--field and gardens--than to his worldliness. If he lacked a close connection with the landscape, it would not grieve and anger him that

Luxurious Man, to bring his Vice in use,  
 Did after him the World seduce:  
 And from the fields the Flow'rs and

Plants allure, [t/o]  
 Where Nature was most plain and pure.  
 He first enclos'd within the Garden's  
 square [t/o]  
 A dead and standing pool of Air:  
 And a more luscious Earth for them did  
 knead, [t/o]  
 Which stupifi'd them while it fed.

(1-8)

Like the speaker in "The Picture of little T. C.," he fears that the hybridization or imposition of man's version of ideal beauty will destroy the "wild and fragrant innocence" (34) and alienate man from the qualities that only the pastoral scene offers.

Both "The Mower to the Glo-Worms" and "The Mower against Gardens" represent extremes that Marvell uses to illustrate the limits of pastoralism. The submissive helplessness of the one and the self-righteous anger of the other suggest an absolutism and polarity that does not exist in Marvell's version of the pastoral. David Kalstone expands on this idea as he argues that:

pastoral is not merely a bundle of preferences: country is better than city, gardens better than streets. Both are concerned with the active engagement of the singer or poet in a landscape:

with the resources it offers to the  
 spirit, the roles it allows him to take,  
 the play of voices it allows him.

("Conjuring With Nature" 251)

Seen in this light, sophistication and civilization are no more innately evil than pastoral innocence, if they are balanced and controlled.

Bishop echoes this need for balance and compromise in her poem "The Moose," a softly-focused study of making peace with age and nature and of the question of "home." Riding along in a bus through the rich scenery of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the speaker thinks dreamily about nature and recalls her childhood, only to have her reverie interrupted by an unlikely encounter with a cow moose. Seeing a docile moose in the company of a busload of people seems like the last situation in which to experience any kind of significant personal epiphanies, but the mundane nature of the scene is essential. Like Marvell, Bishop sees the pastoral as an eclectic mix of nature and innocence that transcends traditional definitions and includes everything from confused mowers and lonely children to fragile wild flowers.

Before the moose makes her debut, however, Bishop sets up the first of four movements, in this long poem, in her detailed description of the "narrow provinces / of fish and bread and tea" (1-2) that flash past the windows of the bus.

This sensation of "flashing" results from Bishop's generous sprinkling of prepositional phrases and that quickly move the reader to the next line and landmark:

on red, gravelly roads,  
 down rows of sugar maples,  
 past clapboard farmhouses  
 and neat, clapboard churches,  
 bleached, ridged as clamshells,  
 past twin silver birches. (19-24)

Although the objects that appear through the windows appear "geographical" or mundane, the care with which they are described makes them seem benign and comfortable. Whether regarding the river's "wall of brown foam" (9), the "lavender rich mud" (17) that covers the flats, or the bus's windshield "flashing pink" (27) in the late-afternoon sun, the speaker sees through a lens that familiarizes and softens. As the bus stops to pick up its first new passenger (31-36), this sense of intimacy and the visual focus narrows and deepens.

Following this stop, the "light grows richer" (40) and "cold, round crystals" (43) of fog erase the background and restrict the vision of the speaker (and the reader) to isolated details: "the sweet peas cling / on their wet white string" (49-50), "a woman shakes a tablecloth / out after supper" (67-68), a fisherman's "two rubber boots show / illuminated, solemn. / A dog gives one bark" (70-72). By

limiting the focus of these lines to minute, seemingly random objects, the speaker simultaneously increases the reader's intimacy with the scene and her isolation from the world outside the windows of the bus.

This reverie is broken again, however, as another passenger enters the bus, this time a "brisk, freckled, elderly" woman (75) and the bus enters a more heavily wooded area:

Moonlight as we enter  
the New Brunswick woods,  
hairy, scratchy, splintery;  
moonlight and mist  
caught in them like lamb's wool  
on bushes in a pasture. (79-84)

Surrounded by the moonlight and the thick forest, the passengers and the speaker shift into a dozy, "dreamy divagation" (87), punctuated by the voices of grandparents "talking, in Eternity" (98) about "deaths, deaths and sicknesses" (103) and "Talking the way they talked/in the old feather bed" (121-2). The movement from the details of the second section to the abstract, yet familiar talk of death and birth in this one give the speaker a comforting sense of belonging, as she slips into sleep just in time for the entrance of the moose into the poem.

Having dealt with her relationship to the land, the isolated images of the second section, and her memories, the

speaker encounters primitive nature as the moose emerges:

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

A man's voice assures us

"Perfectly harmless...." (139-44)

As the moose moves around the bus and the passengers murmur in awe, the speaker muses "Why do we feel/(we all feel) this sweet/sensation of joy?" (154-6) and cements the key concept to understanding Bishop's and to a large extent Marvell's, use of the pastoral. The joyful, brief encounter with this "curious creature" (157) and the mingled "dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline" (166-68) that end the poem illustrate the ambivalence both poets feel for innocent, pastoral states. This odd nexus also emphasizes their belief in the importance of recognizing the value of the pastoral bower, even if just in passing.



## CHAPTER IV

### BISHOP AND VAUGHAN: CHILDHOOD AS A METAPHOR

Despite the presence of actual children, Henry Vaughan's poetry initially appears to provide only a questionable analogue for the fallible, empirical children in Bishop's work. Vaughan presents the topic of innocence and childhood much more directly than either Herbert or Marvell, but his happy, sinless children seem too good to be true. On the surface, Vaughan counterpoints the absolute innocence of childhood, or even pre-existence, with an adulthood that he sees as a vehicle for cumulative sinning. Closer examination, however, reveals a nagging ambivalence that lurks under the longing and frustration threatening to overwhelm his speakers. Using language more overtly emotional than Herbert's, yet less "decorated" than Marvell's, Vaughan meditates on his own desire for a more sinless life and the problematic Christian ideal of becoming like a little child (Matthew 18.3) in order to see God again. Although Bishop's personae more closely resemble living children than those idealized by Vaughan, both poets use metaphors of childhood, not realistically drawn children, to express their seemingly antithetical themes.

Bishop values her empirical personae for their abilities to view life free from the philosophical distortions of adulthood, but she recognizes and utilizes the limitations of such a perspective. In poems like "First Death in Nova Scotia" or "In the Waiting Room" the obliviousness of the child-personae intensifies the epiphanic moment, and underscores the delusions of the adults in the poems. Connotative and abstract meaning loom just out of reach of the child's understanding and emphasize the power and precision of empirical, sensuous observation.

Vaughan also sees children as exemplary, but he values childhood more for its lack of sin than for any particularly childish qualities. Whereas Bishop yearns for the unclouded vision of youth, Vaughan longs to relive the blissful ignorance and simplicity of his infancy and pre-existence with God. Despite their theological differences, both poets look back to distant, quaint times to find metaphorical vehicles to express their themes. Therein lies the difficulty. The filter of memory allows the poet to pick and choose details and rearrange past reality. When this unavoidably selective process combines with poetic imagination, a new, synergistic fiction emerges. Firmly anchored in real experience, memories mesh with new attitudes and adult perspectives until they become "versions" of the poet's past. Thus Bishop and Vaughan do not write about their respective childhoods, but experiment

with concepts of childhood in the worlds of their personae.

Bishop illustrates this metamorphosis of memories beautifully in "Large Bad Picture" and "Poem." Although these pieces do not qualify as "child poems," they emphasize the transforming power of memory and imagination that both poets use in their versions of childhood. In "Large Bad Picture," Bishop manipulates the speaker's perspective, but she never lets the persona completely lose sight of the fact that she is looking at a work of art. Opening the poem by referring to her great-uncle's painting simply as "a big picture" (4), the speaker continues this broad description as she notes the cliffs "receding for miles on either side" (5) and the "flushed, still sky" (6) that form the painting's background. As she continues gazing at the painting, the focus of the poem narrows and she begins noticing that:

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'

[t/o]

semi-translucent ranks,

are scribbled hundreds of fine black

birds

[t/o]

hanging in n's in banks. (13-20)

Despite minute details like the "square-rigged" sails (15) or the "hundreds of fine black birds" (19), the simile "like burnt match sticks" (16) and the word "scribbled" (19) force the reader to remember that a painting, not an actual scene is being described. As sound enters the poem, however, in the form of the "crying" of the birds, the focus abruptly shifts, and we are in the scene, instead of looking at it:

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

(21-24)

The sensuous detail of a walrus-like creature sighing and the sudden aural focus of the poem immerse the reader in the scene and overpower the visual touchstones that have dominated the discussion up to this point.

This discovery of a new world within the world of the poem continues in the dizzying descriptions of the sun in the following stanza as:

In the pink light  
the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,

round and round and round at the same  
 height [t/o]  
 in perpetual sunset, comprehensive,  
 consoling. (25-28) [t/o]

With the word "perpetual" (28), the static world of the painting returns. Although the speaker tries to regain this connection, musing about how and why the ships came to the harbor, the immediacy of the earlier stanza is gone. Yet for a brief moment, the speaker's memory of her great-uncle remembering "the Strait of Belle Isle or/some northerly harbor of Labrador" (1-2) merged with the painted images and her imagination to create a new, albeit fictive reality.

"Poem," written much later for Bishop's final book (Geography III), focuses on a painting as well:

About the size of an old-style dollar  
 bill, [t/o]  
 American or Canadian,  
 mostly the same whites, gray greens, and  
 steel grays [t/o]  
 --this little painting (a sketch for a  
 larger one?) [t/o]  
 has never earned any money in its life.  
 Useless and free, it has spent seventy  
 years [t/o]  
 as a minor family relic  
 handed along collaterally to owners

who looked at it sometimes, or didn't

bother to. (1-9)

[t/o]

Like the beginning of "Large Bad Picture," the opening of "Poem" provides a rather off-hand, objective evaluation of the painting and emphasizes its relative insignificance in the speaker's life. This casual dismissal not only sets the stage for the epiphany of connection late in both poems, but also insists on the worthlessness of the painting. By de-emphasizing the painting's value as art, Bishop highlights the importance of all the elements--art, imagination, and memory--in producing the synergistic effect at the end of the poem. The painting in "Poem" is not a remarkable piece of art that overwhelms the reader with its verisimilitude. Instead, it serves as a visual touchstone in a poetic process.

After the disparaging, general discussion of the first stanza, the second stanza accelerates toward increasingly specific detail. The speaker's revelation "It must be Nova Scotia" (10) prompts an up-close examination of the painting that reveals "tiny cows, / two brushstrokes each" (16-17), "two minuscule white geese" (18), "a wild iris, white and yellow, / fresh-squiggled from the tube" (20-21), and "steel-gray storm clouds. / (They were the artist's specialty)" (24-25). Punctuating the visual dissection of the painting, phrases such as "[t]he air is fresh and cold; cold early spring / clear as gray glass" (22-3) foreshadow

the more intimate recognition in the next stanza and signal the speaker's entrance into the remembered world of the painting.

Yet even as she recognizes the place, the speaker clings to her personal perspective as she maintains "[t]hose particular geese and cows / are naturally before my time" (35-6) and reminds herself that the painting is "[a] sketch done in an hour, 'in one breath'" (37). This resistance, like the deprecatory evaluation in the opening stanza, prevents any sort of synergistic creation because it violates Bishop's version of negative capability. The meditative connection cannot take place until the speaker relaxes and objectively compares her empirical impression of the scene with that of her uncle's in the painting.

Admitting she "never knew him" (45), the speaker recognizes nevertheless that they are connected by their mutual, similar "memorizations" (47), despite the fact that the "real" scene has obviously changed:

Our visions coincided--"visions" is  
too serious a word--our looks, two

looks: [t/o]

art "copying from life" and life itself,  
life and the memory of it so compressed  
they've turned into each other. Which is

which? [t/o]

Life and the memory of it cramped,

dim, on a piece of Bristol board,  
 dim, but how live, how touching in  
     detail [t/o]  
 --the little that we get for free,  
 the little of our earthly trust. Not  
     much. [t/o]  
 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. (50-64) [t/o]

At the word "abidance," this connection blossoms into a new, fictive scene that transcends the confines of memory and art and poetic imagination. By "abiding" or maintaining an almost Taoist sense of "negative capability" (Stevenson 47) when faced with the ambivalence of change, the speaker "get[s] for free" (58) the incredibly sensuous images that end the poem.

Commenting on the blending of consciousness and artistic perspective that leads to this lush scene, Alfred Corn calls the poem a "rainbow of relationships" (537) and provides an apt metaphor for the meditative process. Sybill Estess shares this belief in the power of poetry to synergistically transform memory and imagination, but warns against forgetting the importance of the "located places"



of memory ("Elizabeth Bishop" 161). These memories, even in their subjective and flawed form, provide the essential grounding for poetic and psychological knowledge. Estess suggests that neither sensation nor imagination alone can produce poetry, and argues that writing fiction is "discovering by remembering" (161). By combining flashes of memory with adult perspectives, and then manipulating or distorting various aspects of the traditional view of childhood, Bishop and Vaughan "discover" and then re-create metaphors that express their very different reasons for wanting to go back in time.

Bishop uses the metaphor of childhood as a sort of lens, through which she points out inconsistencies or ironies in the adult "real" world. Although the speakers appear to be children, the poems are related in the past tense, implying that the "real" speaker is an adult remembering childhood and trying to present the events from a child's perspective. At times, "adult" language or insight will briefly surface, but Bishop focuses primarily on the particularly childlike aspects of the speaker's reaction and the limited childish point of view. By casting these "children" in difficult dramatic situations or as passive objects of an adult speaker's perception, she draws tacit meaning from the distance between what the child says or does and the response the adult perspective assumes is appropriate.

Whereas Bishop mediates all information in the poem through the dual filters of memory and childish vision, Vaughan uses the metaphor of childhood as a yardstick to measure how far from unspotted innocence his adult speakers have fallen. Vaughan looks back at childhood from an often despairing adult perspective and focuses primarily on the sinful, corrupt, mortal foibles that it lacks. Instead of trying to project his message through childish eyes, Vaughan's speakers remember a childhood that combines an almost adult awareness of eternity and mortality with a brief time on earth for knowledge and sinning. The personae interpret childhood from a particularly personal, adult perspective and value the sinlessness, not anything qualitatively "childish."

Although his fictive childhood lacks the endearing quiriness of Bishop's remembered world, Vaughan should not be considered insensitive or unsympathetic to children. He creates metaphors that serve as foils to the problems of adulthood, evaluates the theological, not the practical aspects of being a child, and in poems like "The Retreat," focuses on the eternal, abstract implications of "growing up." Vaughan's poetry lacks the physical lushness of Bishop's Nova Scotia or Marvell's meadows because the things his speakers long for are spiritual, not natural. In fact, he defines past worlds of childhood and pre-existence largely by negating the world he currently inhabits:

Happy those early dayes! when I  
 Shin'd in my Angell-infancy.  
 Before I understood this place  
 Appointed for my second race,  
 Or taught my soul to fancy ought  
 But a white, Celestiall thought,  
 When yet I had not walkt above  
 A mile or two, from my first love,  
 And looking back (at that shorter  
                   space,) [t/o]  
 Could see s glimpse of his bright-face;  
 When on some gilded Cloud, or flowre  
 My gazing soul would dwell an houre,  
 And in those weaker glories spy  
 Some shadows of eternity;  
 Before I taught my tongue to wound  
 My Conscience with a sinfull sound,  
 Or had the black art to dispence  
 A sev'rall sinne to ev'ry sence,  
 But felt through all this fleshly dresse  
 Bright shootes of everlastingnesse. (1-  
 20)

Instead of the very physical, exuberant world of human  
 infancy or even the beatific happiness of "Heaven," the  
 speaker describes a time and place filled with "white,  
 Celestiall thought" and absolute innocence that is

essentially Earth without sin. The image of the "gilded cloud, or flowre" illustrates this idea, as the speaker gazes on elements that exist in his adult world, but are transformed and made better and more valuable in the world of his "Angell-infancy."

These parallels to his adult world suggest that Vaughan hates sin, not adulthood and uncover an even more troubling inconsistency in the speaker's vision of childhood. After gazing on the gilded objects, the speaker significantly spies "Some shadows of eternity" (14) and later compares his present state of sinfulness to an earlier time when he "felt through all this fleshly dresse / Bright shootes of everlastingnesse" (20). These lines imply an awareness of sin and immortality that seems inappropriate and impossible in the unspotted child he longs to be. Pre-existent angels, of course, could possibly recognize the implications of their sacred surroundings, but the nexus of innocence and enlightened awareness still seems odd, especially given the speaker's early longing for life before he understood anything (l. 3-6).

Merritt Hughes offers possible explanations for this and other apparent inconsistencies in Vaughan's work as he argues that the poet's belief in pre-existent states and his attempts at describing them transcend traditional definitions of infancy or childhood. Hughes argues that the first twenty lines of "The Retreat" prove Vaughan's belief

in a conscious antenatal life filled with absolutely perfect moral beauty (485-86). In this light, the aware, enlightened "angell-infants" seem more appropriate, but Vaughan's insistence on the sinlessness of newborn babies moves him dangerously close to ignoring or refuting the concept of original sin. L. C. Martin notes the delicacy of this theological position and suggests that Vaughan was obsessed with imagining child-like innocence and saw it as a Platonic ideal, not a theological reality. Martin sees Vaughan as a kind of Wordsworthian figure who, unlike Wordsworth (and Bishop), wanted to go back to the clear spiritual perceptions of childhood, instead of using them to better his present life ("Henry Vaughan and the Theme of Infancy" 243-46).

Louis Martz provides the most helpful explanation, however, as he sees Vaughan's desire to return to an earlier time as a wish to be near God again and share in His blessedness ("Vaughan: The Man Within" 48). Martz sees Vaughan's view of childhood as a kind of telescoping symbol that includes the "early days" of his childhood, the infancy of the human race, and being a "child of God" (49). Vaughan does not necessarily want to be like a child again; he wants to be with God, and he is confused about how to get there. This spiritual need, coupled with his need to see clearly and rid himself of confusion, leads him to seek the

simplicity and purity of childhood as the most useful metaphor to express his dilemma.

Like Herbert's speaker in "The Rose," Vaughan's speaker understands that living a virtuous life is the "way" to regain God's presence, but he shares Herbert's ambivalence and moments of doubt. Obsessed with the sin he has already committed, the speaker initially rejects the idea of trying to move forward and instead resorts to what he assumes is an absolute--his life before he had a chance to sin. Upon meditation, however, he discovers the theological and psychological contradictions in his wish as he laments:

Oh how I long to travell back  
 And tread again that ancient track!  
 That I might once more reach that  
                   plaine, [t/o]  
 Where I first left my gloriuſ traine,  
 From whence th'Inlightened ſpirit ſees  
 That ſhady City of Palme trees;  
 But (ah !) my ſoul with too much ſtay  
 Is drunk, and ſtaggers in the way.  
 Some men a forward motion love,  
 But I by backward ſteps would move,  
 And when this duſt falls to the urn  
 In that ſtate I came return. (21-32)

The certainty of his longing to travel back to a very specifically located "plaine" or the "City of Palme trees,"

where he may "tread again that ancient track" and be "Inlightened," gives way (l. 27) to confusion as the poem closes. The definite, specific language of "when" and "where" he wants to be is side-tracked by the nagging question of "how" he is going to get there. Although the speaker attributes his miserable state to his soul, drunk with the sins of his mortality, his sin presents less of a problem than his attitude.

Attempting to trace the movement of the last six lines of the poem underscores the confusion that has resulted from his obsession. Following his very definite wish to go back, his progress is interrupted by his soul, which "staggers in the way." Focused on his sinful nature, he does not see that his soul is not in the way, it is the way. Without his soul, he can never achieve the immortality to see God again. His confusion continues as he spurns the forward motion of "Some men" and prefers "backward steps." The adult awareness of the world he describes in the first stanza makes his wish for "backward" movement illogical as well, as he obviously longs not for childhood, but for the comfort of God's presence. He then surmises that "when his dust falls to the urn / In that state I came return" and further complicates the linear movement of his ideology. He wants to be with God and to be sinless when he dies, but he does not want to move forward in time to achieve this state. The speaker's desire for virtue and perfection merits

admiration, but his obsession with sin literally paralyzes him until his despair is added to the list of sins that burden his already laden soul.

By balancing the speaker's overt desire for a more perfect existence with the contradictions and irony of his obsession, Vaughan emphasizes the ambivalence of fallible man's attempt to fit in to the Christian scheme and echoes Bishop's questioning attitude about returning to earlier states. Like Vaughan, Bishop longs for the simplicity and semblance of clarity in childhood, yet both poets sense the limitations and futility of trying to recapture their youths. Whereas Vaughan's frustration springs from his inability to enter into the metaphor of innocent infancy he has created, Bishop's ambivalence emerges from the unrecognized value of the children in her literary world.

Even in poems that feature children as passive objects of an adult speaker's commentary, children serve as foils to the deluded, subjective world of adulthood. In "Squatter's Children," Bishop contrasts the character of a Brazilian squatter with her children to reveal a more secular version of Vaughan's theme in "The Retreat." The poem opens with a description of a distant scene of children playing:

On the unbreathing sides of hills  
they play, a specklike girl and boy,  
alone, but near a specklike house.  
  
The sun's suspended eye



blinks casually, and then they wade  
gigantic waves of light and shade.

A dancing yellow spot, a pup,  
attends them. Clouds are piling up.

(1-8)

The relative insignificance of these "specklike" children foreshadows Bishop's theme as they are no more important or differentiated in this first stanza than the sun or the hillsides or the dog. Unaware of their role as "squatters" on someone else's land, the children also ignore the irony inherent in "playing" with their father's tools and do not notice the squalor of the "unwarrantable ark" (20) of a house in which they live. Their mother, on the other hand, cannot escape the cultural and social filters of adulthood and is immune to the weird pastoralism of the poverty stricken scene:

The children play at digging holes.

The ground is hard; they try to use

one of their father's tools,

a mattock with a broken haft

the two of them can scarcely lift.

It drops and clangs. Their laughter

spreads

[t/o]

effulgence in the thunderheads,

weak flashes of inquiry

direct as is the puppy's bark.  
 But to their little, soluble,  
 unwarrantable ark,  
 apparently the rain's reply  
 consists of echolalia,  
 and Mother's voice, ugly as sin,  
 keeps calling them to come in. (10-24)

Like the speaker in "The Retreat" the Mother cannot or will not escape the adult implications of her situation and thus has no access to the "rooms of falling rain" (32) that her children inherit from nature, "a bigger house than" theirs (29). The squatter's children resemble Marvell's Mowers in this respect as they are in tune with the changes of natural scenes, but they have a quality that the Mowers lack. Anne Stevenson describes this quality as a kind of pervasive unself-consciousness (34) that allows children to respond to the physical phenomena of a situation instead of its philosophical implications. Although Stevenson's comment refers directly to The Diary of "Helena Morley," a child's diary she translated from Portuguese, the concept can be applied to both Bishop's and Vaughan's poetry. Both Bishop's "mother" character and Vaughan's speaker lack the "unselfconsciousness" to deal with the inconsistencies of their situations.

Bishop does not reject the practical necessity of self-awareness and understands man's love of philosophical and

theoretical thought, but she objects to theorizing about life when opportunities exist to observe it and then draw conclusion. John Unterecker describes Bishop's brand of visual, dramatic poetry as a collage of "moments of beingness" or stopped "nows" (76) that highlights the specific, revealing details of very limited situations. Whereas Vaughan "explicates" his feelings and thoughts about his place in the Christian scheme, Bishop objectively analyzes the visual, physical aspects of her fictive dilemmas. Even longer prose pieces like "The Country Mouse" or "Primer Class" reflect Bishop's insistence on visual, objective renditions of "theme" as the child-protagonists in these stories empirically observe incidents and people but lack the psychological mechanisms to interpret them. Instead, the adult reader must draw conclusions about the child in "Country Mouse" having all her meaningful, extended conversations with the Boston terrier "Beppo" (21) or the child's innocent, yet highly embarrassing questions about her grandmother's glass eye in "Primer Class" (6). In both stories, the children suffer at the hands of well-meaning, deluded adults, and by showing these situations to well-meaning adult readers, and letting them draw conclusions, Bishop reinforces her choice of children as metaphoric vehicles .

In Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia" and Vaughan's "The Burial of an Infant," death provides an extremely

revealing context for comparing both poets' manipulation of this metaphor. Although both poems contemplate the death of a young child, Vaughan's speaker views the child's death from an adult perspective and evaluates the situation in a theological framework. Bishop projects her poem through a child-persona and deflates adult euphemisms about death by juxtaposing them with the honest, empirical reactions of the child. Vaughan's poem may initially seem remote or "academic" when compared with the powerful subtext of Bishop's, but Vaughan's objectivity when dealing with the metaphor of childhood is balanced by comforting, domestic imagery that reveals his human concern.

Even the title of the poem emphasizes Vaughan's attempts to distance the death as he writes of the burial of an infant, not any particular infant. Vaughan differentiates this indefinite article in the opening lines of the poem, but he does so by using a floral metaphor, not by describing the child itself:

Blest Infant Bud, whose Blossome-life  
 Did only look about, and fal,  
 Wearyed out in a harmles strife  
 Of tears, and milk, the food of all (1-  
 4)

"Bud" and "Blossome" connote potential for growth and natural beauty, but they purposefully distract the reader from the fact that an innocent baby has died. By

concentrating all of the child's beauty and vulnerability into the metaphor of a flower, and then implying a causal connection between the child looking around at the world and then dying from the sinfulness of it all, Vaughan creates the perfect foil for adult experience. This child, fresh from his pre-existence with God, cannot bear sin, unlike the transgression-laden adult reader of the poem.

Vaughan removes the sting of insensitivity from his speaker's objective evaluation by supplying him with tender, domestic metaphors that reveal his tacit sadness and concern. The "tears and milk" of the first stanza combine with the maternal images in the rest of the poem to create a tone that tempers the happiness at the infant's return to blessedness with the tragedy of his brief life:

Sweetly didst thou expire: Thy soul  
 Flew home unstain'd by his new kin,  
 For ere thou knew'st how to be foul,  
 Death wean'd thee from the world, and  
 sin.

[t/o]

Softly rest all thy Virgin-Crums !  
Lapt in the sweets of thy young breath,  
 Expecting till thy Saviour Comes  
 To dresse them, and unswadle death. (5-  
 12)

Although the juxtaposition of death and "weaning" seems an odd conceit, Vaughan dilutes the reader's inclination toward grief or horror by meditating on death as a sort of nanny, who saves the child from learning to be "foul" and prepares him for the final ministrations of Christ. By counterpointing the child's "flight" home, away from the dangerous mortal kin of a physical body, with the lush images of waiting in the last stanza, the speaker achieves the sense of joy that his Christian "contemptus mundi" stance demands, but responds with sadness and empathy to the baby's death.

In Vaughan's religious context, the metaphoric death of a child is not tragic because the child has missed the wretchedness of sin and, essentially, gone directly from being with God to being with God again. Unlike the speaker in "The Retreate," this speaker can look forward without trepidation, if only because the child has nothing to fear from the final judgement. Despite the ambivalent feelings of sadness and joy, the speaker draws comfort from his belief in the Christian afterlife. Bishop's speakers and personae have no such assurance, as they approach death with varying degrees of naivete and confusion. Ironically, and in keeping with Bishop's themes, the confusion originates in the deluded perspectives of the adults, not the overtly confused, yet revealing vision of the child.

Bishop outlines these competing views in the first stanza of "First Death in Nova Scotia" as:

In the cold, cold parlor  
 my mother laid out Arthur  
 beneath the chromographs:  
 Edward, Prince of Wales,  
 with Princess Alexandra,  
 and King George with Queen Mary.  
 Below them on the table  
 stood a stuffed loon  
 shot and stuffed by Uncle  
 Arthur, Arthur's father. (1-10)

By subordinating any description of the actual dead child to discussing the royal photographs and the history of the stuffed loon, Bishop illustrates the polarity of the childish and adult attitudes about death. The pictures of the royal family serve as symbols for the fantasy that the supposedly wise adults use to explain Arthur's death to the child speaker. The loon, on the other hand, represents the child's attempts to understand Arthur's death by relating it to the familiar "deadness" of the loon. Although both perspectives are distorted, the child comes closest to understanding, albeit unconsciously, the tragic meaning of the other child's death. The doubling of the words "cold," "stuffed," and "Arthur" not only emphasizes the dueling perspectives foreshadowed in this stanza, but also echoes

like a kind of dirge and undercuts the tidy picture of the royal ensemble.

Having set up the scene in the first stanza, the speaker ignores the corpse of the other child and fixates on the stuffed loon in the second stanza. The speaker's description of the loon, who "hadn't said a word" (13) since he had taken Uncle Arthur's bullet, combines fanciful naivete with ominous, arcane details:

Since Uncle Arthur fired  
 a bullet into him,  
 he hadn't said a word.  
 He kept his own counsel  
 on his white, frozen lake,  
 the marble-topped table.  
 His breast was deep and white,  
 cold and caressable;  
 his eyes were red glass,  
 much to be desired. (11-20)

The strange juxtaposition of the dead child of the first stanza and the cold, but caressable red-eyed loon of the second stanza emphasizes the child's empirical eye for detail and gives the poem a rather macabre edge, but the most jarring element enters with the mother's voice in the third stanza. The child's vision of the marble table as a "white frozen lake" or his comment that the loon has "kept his own counsel" are childlike fantasy, but at least they



are based in empirical "fact"--the loon has been silent and the marble is cold and white. The mother's perspective, however, contains an element of delusion and deliberate falsity that confuses the child-speaker and points out the limited usefulness of so-called adult wisdom:

"Come," said my mother,  
 "Come and say good-bye  
 to your little cousin Arthur."  
 I was lifted up and given  
 one lily of the valley  
 to put in Arthur's hand.  
 Arthur's coffin was  
 a little frosted cake,  
 and the red-eyed loon eyed it  
 from his white frozen lake. (21-30)

Bishop balances the mother's exhortations to "Come and say goodbye / to your little cousin Arthur" (22-23) with the child's vision of the coffin as "a little frosted cake" to underscore the delusion and fantasy that exists in both worlds, but she tips the scales in favor of the child as she exits the stanza. Responding to the adult's address to the corpse as if it were alive, the child animates the loon and sees it "eyeing" the cake-like coffin and then tries to reconcile the empirical evidence with the adult fantasy in the confused concluding stanzas. Because she is a child, the speaker tries to process and relate all the information

she receives as if it contained the same degree of truth. In this light, the adult perspective merits as much consideration as the observed, if limited visual evidence about death and forces the child to assimilate adult euphemism into her thinking about "dead things."

Taking her mother's cue, the child spends stanza four describing Arthur's dead body in terms more reminiscent of fairy tales than elegies. She views his reddish hair as having been "painted" by "Jack Frost" (33-34) just like the "Maple Leaf (Forever)" (36), but puzzles significantly over why Jack Frost left him so "white, forever" (40). This echoing double use of "forever" brings back the ominous mood of the earlier stanzas and foreshadows the poignant confusion of the final stanza where:

The gracious royal couples  
 were warm in red and ermine;  
 their feet were well wrapped up  
 in the ladies' ermine trains.  
 They invited Arthur to be  
 the smallest page at court.  
 But how could Arthur go,  
 clutching his tiny lily,  
 with his eyes shut up so tight  
 and the roads deep in snow. (41-50)

Although the imagery of the poem has come full circle, the mood and focus of the child bear little resemblance to

the opening stanza's. Instead of fanciful, concrete discussion of the loon, the child expresses genuine anxiety about the tragic dichotomy between the royalty and the dead cousin. Trying to juggle the physical reality of the death and the snowy weather with the stupid adult idea of "the smallest page" to the photographed royalty, the child expresses the only honest responses to death in the poem. Her realization of the finality of the situation and the loopholes in her mother's well-intended fairy story transcends both her limited knowledge and the comforting cliches of the adults in the poem

Commenting on "First Death in Nova Scotia," Alberta Turner argues that this child speaker is particularly effective because "the poet chooses images for her to notice that will appall the reader beyond the child's understanding of them" (43). Instead of crying out directly against the delusions of adulthood or the remarkable capacities of children, Bishop juxtaposes sinister loons, cake-like coffins, and ermine-wrapped ladies to jar the reader into personal interpretation. Lloyd Schwartz reiterates this idea when he speaks generally of Bishop's use of tone:

. . . we face a double tone--the  
dramatic irony of a speaker who doesn't  
fathom the full implications of what he  
reports [and] the poet's own voice,

laconically indicating her own capacity  
for perception. ("One Art" 144)

This layering of the adult poet's voice, the naive speaker, and the "synthesizing" adult reader works brilliantly, as well, in previously discussed child-oriented works such as "In the Waiting Room," "Gwendolyn," and "In the Village." In all of these works, Bishop uses the distance between the child's understanding, the reality of the situation, and the adult's perspective to illustrate her idea that although neither world is perfect, adults must mesh the peculiar qualities of childhood and adulthood if they hope to deal with the ambivalence in the world.

The psychological and theological distance between infancy and maturity shapes Vaughan's poem "Childe-hood," but in a different way than it did in "The Retreat." In "Childe-hood," Vaughan argues for recognition of the virtues of childhood and admits, as the speaker in "The Retreat" could not, that he cannot go back to that state:

I cannot reach it; and my striving eye  
Dazles at it, as at eternity. (1-2)

Although the confusion and despair do not dominate the tone as they did in "Retreat," E. C. Pettet sees "Childe-hood" as simultaneously much sadder and more optimistic. He argues that while the "happy days of innocence, purity, and vision seem further away," the speaker is more conscious of his delusions and sees the value of eclectic use of

"childish" qualities in adult life (207). Pettet warns, however, that despite this sense of insight and emotional control, the speaker still turns away, at times, "from the burden of thought about religion to simple, even child-like affirmations of faith" (21).

The resulting shifts in tone and diction resemble hearing one side of a dialogue or conversation as the speaker shifts from hindsight, to defensive explanation, to reverie in the space of four stanzas. After establishing a context in the opening couplet, the speaker employs a kind of retrospective *carpe diem* motif as he muses:

Were now that Chronicle alive,  
 Those white designs which children  
                   drive, [t/o]  
 And the thoughts of each harmless hour,  
 With their content too in my pow'r,  
 Quickly would I make my path even,  
 And by mere playing go to heaven. (3-8)

Although he longs for the simplicity and innocence of childhood, the abstract rendering of childhood experience in such phrases as "white designs" or "thoughts of each harmless hour" prevents any sense of despair or urgency. The idea of playing his way into heaven seems to momentarily exacerbate the speaker's frustration, however, as in the next stanza, he asks quite defensively just why he should not prefer childhood to adulthood.



Where love without lust dwells, and  
                   bends [t/o]  
 What way we please, without self-ends.

An age of mysteries! which he  
 Must live twice, that would God's face  
                   see; [t/o]  
 Which Angels guard, and with it play,  
 Angels! which foul men drive away.

(31-38)

While idealizing the selfless love and mysteries of the childish realm, the speaker subtly provides the solution to his earlier defensive outbursts in the phrase "Must live twice."

By "living twice" the mysterious age of childhood or imitating all that is good in children, the speaker hopes to bring back the angels, be nearer to God, and recover the happiness of his metaphoric vision of perfect childhood. This discovery restores the rational, patient tone of the opening stanza as the speaker realistically evaluates the possibilities of seeing more than the "bordering light" of childhood and vows to study children instead of the sins of man:

How do I study now, and scan  
 Thee, more then ere I studyed man,  
 And onely see through a long night

Thy edges, and thy bordering light!  
 O for thy Center and mid-day!  
 For sure that is the narrow way. (39-  
 44)

This speaker responds more calmly than his counterpart in "The Retreat," but the ambivalence of the earlier poem remains, manifesting itself in the tension between adult reality and what Pettet calls "a strange otherworldliness that marks [Vaughan's poetry] off from all the other religious verse of his age" (22-23).

Of the Vaughan poems previously discussed, "Childhood" parallels Bishop's work most closely as both poets respond to their disillusionment with adulthood by turning to metaphors of childhood for alternatives and comfort. Vaughan's speakers never abandon their beatific visions of absolute innocence or their desire to return to blissful ignorance of sin. Even so, they echo Herbert, Marvell, and Bishop in their realization that man must deal with ambivalence and the mutability of life by finding an equilibrium between an honest, innocent utopia, and the sometimes frustrating realities of adulthood.

This delicate balance too often escapes readers of Vaughan because the speakers' longing for earlier times and their disillusionment with the present overshadow what French Fogle called the "essential simplicity of statement" (xiii) that disguises Vaughan's complex emotion and subtle



imagery. A legacy of his mentor, Herbert, who urged Vaughan to use more "everyday images" (Pettet 51) in innovative ways, this deceptive simplicity provides a strong foundation for sensitive metaphysical meditation.

Although both poets create metaphors of childhood as alternatives to the problems of adulthood, Vaughan's Christian speakers explore worlds with more distinct boundaries than Bishop sees in hers. Vaughan thinks of life as a condition existing between pre-existence and eternal life and, despite his anxiety, takes comfort in the plan of Christian salvation. Bishop's agnostic attitude does not allow for the absolutes of Christian theory, and her speakers face an adulthood filled with what Bonnie Costello characterized as a "bleak inheritance of certainty without security" (114). Jerome Mazzaro agrees and argues that the stark realities of adulthood either send adults to "isolation, self-pity, drink, and eventually suicide" or to childhood or some other primitive state for the answers (45). Bishop would be the first to admit that all of the answers to adult problems cannot be found in becoming childlike or returning to the ways of childhood. If she believed this, she would not have created such fallible, incomplete children as speakers. Refusing to tell readers what to do, she instead offers them the empiricism of children as an eclectic solution and advises patience as "All the untidy activity continues / awful but cheerful" ("The Bight" 35-36).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Both the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries contain much to prompt poet and layman alike to shout dramatically about the human condition and anxiously wonder what the future holds. Events ranging from the revolutionary scientific developments of the Royal Society (1662) to the discovery and utilization of nuclear fission created climates in which overstatement would seem the norm. Bishop and the three poets discussed, however, responded with deceptively simple style and diction that controlled and focused passionate emotion. In her poem "The Imaginary Iceberg," Bishop comments on this control as she paints a scene in which a ship passes a magnificent iceberg and the sailors stand in awe of the natural phenomenon:

This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes

for.

[t/o]

The ship's ignored. The iceberg rises  
and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles  
correct elliptics in the sky.

This is a scene where he who treads the

boards

[t/o]

is artlessly rhetorical. (12-17)

Bishop, Herbert, Marvell, and Vaughan react to the abstract, psychological "icebergs" of ambivalence and mutability by subtly, "artlessly" persuading the reader of both the necessity for faith and patience and the possibility for mortal and eternal survival. Using metaphors of childhood or natural innocence, Bishop and her seventeenth-century counterparts created a poetry that offers new ways of looking at old ideas and objects and insists on "trueness" of emotional response and a corresponding exactness of language.

Scientific demands for very descriptive nomenclature, especially in the seventeenth-century, shaped even literary language. By moving toward more concrete, image-filled poetry, writers of both centuries stepped back from the surface of the text and left the reader in charge of what Stephen Orgel sees as metaphysical synthesis. Orgel argues that all so-called "metaphysical theory" has ever proven is that "'metaphysical' really refers not to poetry, but to our sensibilities in response to it" (245). Modern and seventeenth-century readers alike respond to "metaphysical" poetry because, despite its difficulty, it strikes a chord of immediacy and empathy.

Babette Deutsch echoes this idea in her commentary on modern imagism and touches on points salient to Bishop and the Metaphysical trio previously discussed as she suggests:

They wanted the warmth of true-tongued feeling; they wanted a sky that had been overextended by "poetic" usage to become once more something they could relate, "star-eaten" and remote though it was, to the shivering human. They wanted words that would give the sting of experience, endured and known. Hence the emphasis on the concrete detail--the object seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, on the metaphor that has the force of a physical sensation. (87)

Although both Bishop and the Metaphysicals use more narrative than the Imagists, the "sting of experience" lies just below the surface of their poetry. Linking a mower and a firefly or a cow moose and a bus, and creating what Joseph E. Duncan calls "correspondences" (12), these poets provide the meditative catalyst for new, synergistic thought. Their subjects and philosophical foundations differ and are sometimes at odds, but their reactions and techniques are surprisingly similar.

Other critics, most notably T. S. Eliot, have noticed the parallels between the "Moderns" and the "Metaphysicals," but their discussions focus more on theoretical concerns, such as unified sensibilities, than the metaphor and imagery with which this study is concerned. In his discussion of T.

S. Eliot's "revival" of the Metaphysical poets, however, Duncan argues that what Eliot saw as a unified sensibility was really just an extension of psychological realism. With this statement, Duncan unconsciously strengthens the parallel connection of Bishop and the Metaphysicals (144). The "modernity" that Eliot saw in the metaphysicals focused on their presentation of the "mind in action," the poet meditating "out loud" on a personal or religious problem. Bishop and this Metaphysical trio (especially Marvell) focus on recording the mind observing the world through a series of metaphoric speakers. By making these speakers children or creating "innocent" foils to adult experience, they limit and narrow meaning until a new, concentrated version of childhood experience emerges.

Lloyd Frankenberg notes this limited focus and links Bishop's genius and success as a poet to her mastery of three seventeenth-century poetic concepts--"perception, precision, [and] compression" (333). Bishop's very physical, image-laden, geographical picture of the world, like the parallel poetic techniques of Herbert, Marvell, and Vaughan, presents significant, limited slices of experience that lead the reader, instead of pushing him toward knowledge or some kind of theme.

In her early poem "The Map," Bishop writes: "More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors" (l. 27). Bishop's poetry gives delicate directions on

surviving the unavoidable ambivalence in the world, not a boldly-marked path back to the real, historical details of her childhood. Empirical experience dominates her poetry, but it serves as proof that survival is possible. Randall Jarrell argues:

Instead of crying, with justice, "this is a world in which no one can get along," Miss Bishop's poems show that it is barely but perfectly possible--has been that is for her. Her work is unusually personal and honest in its wit, perception, and sensitivity--and in its restrictions too; all her poems have written underneath, I have seen it.

(235)

Speaking of Bishop's "One Art" in relation to William Empson's "Missing Dates," J. D. McClatchy suggests that "A poet's debt is her starting point; her interest cancels it" (35). By sharing with the reader a concentrated, synergistic version of the world she has seen, Bishop not only cancels her debt, but provides a wealth of information and intuition for readers and perhaps future poets to enjoy.

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