

Towards a Postmodern Poetics: Reading Elizabeth Bishop's Reccy of Realities

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Abstract

In this paper, I have tried to analyze a few poems by Elizabeth Bishop to show how she takes up or takes in shifting identities and subject-positions in a clear dialogue with cultural norms and expectations. I have also sought to chart her poetic trajectory from alienation to alterity to show how she started by refusing to accept the 'otherness' about her and her various poetic personae based on such determinants as gender, sexuality, class or age, and ultimately accepted those self-same counts of 'otherness' in a never-ending melee with the 'so-called' metareality of conundrum and contingency that is provisionally called 'life'.

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The charm and challenge of studying the role of postmodernism in American literature and culture, at once, consist in and issue from a plethora of perspectives on a 'definitive' meaning of postmodernism. If Postmodernism has been seen and shown to be little more than a mere 'moment', a 'condition' or a 'style', then it has also been elevated to the prominence and durability of a historical 'period'. In this connection, Linda Hutcheon asseverates:

There is certainly no shortage of differing opinions and competing models of postmodernism, but the critics are not the only ones to blame for the sometimes confusing number of explanations and descriptions [...] Although the word existed before, it first gained wide acceptance (and its current meaning) in the field of architecture in the 1970s [...] It was not long before the term 'postmodern' spread to other art forms that also demonstrated a paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites [...] (Hutcheon: 2006, 115).

To contextualize Hutcheon's statement, these differences result as much from differing critical perspectives as from 'the multiplicity and complexity of the cultural phenomena gathered together under this heading' (Hutcheon: 2006, 115).

Setting aside the daunting postmodernese, so vehemently opposed now-a-days, we may safely postulate postmodernism as a trident of approaches: I) reaction, II) liberation, and III) diffusion. First and foremost, it can be called a reaction against the *grands recits* of modernity, namely, the megamyths or metanarratives of progress, truth, meaning, knowledge, and nationalism, to name a few. Secondly, it is a liberation from the dogmas of authority – the authority of the self, of the text, and of the narrative. Thirdly, it can also become a dissipation or diffusion of certainties, whereby reality, self, and narrative – all get dislocated and dispersed into an endless stream of difference, simulacra, and simulations.

Much of the 'postmodern' depends on the maintenance of a 'sceptical attitude'. According to Jean-François Lyotard *postmodernism* is 'incredulity towards metanarratives' that celebrates 'difference and understandings located within particular

local knowledge regimes' (Lyotard: 1984, xxiv). There is, he argues, no single 'Truth' but countless 'little narratives' or *petites histoires* which demand our understanding and allegiance. This conceptual fluidity transforms entelechies like 'universality', 'reason' and 'truth' into constructs of language valid only within the language-games of its formation and operants. As Chris Barker puts it, 'Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment philosophy of universal reason and progress, and understands truth as a construction of language' (Barker: 2004, 158). It argues that knowledge is not 'metaphysical', 'transcendental' or 'universal' but is 'perspectival in character and there can be no one totalizing knowledge that is able to grasp the "objective" character of the world' (Barker: 2004, 158). 'Knowledge', for Barker and the ilk, is 'specific to particular times, spaces and language-games' — 'not a question of discovering that which already exists', but of constructing or accommodating 'interpretations about the world that are taken to be true' (Barker: 2004, 158). This vast plurality and the consequent blurring of divisions make the postmodern critic discard the concept of a single anchoring centre.

Since, an autopsy of postmodernism is beyond the scope of the present study, we should first set the theoretical radar to zero in on those aspects of postmodernism that affected Elizabeth Bishop the person and activated Elizabeth Bishop the poet. Postmodernism has inherited as its asset and liability – a world beset with nuclear threat and an ever present terror alert – a reality, mediated by media-interests and state-ideologies – a language bereft of any definitive meaning – and humanity torn between either the acceptance and assimilation provided by the 'norm' or the alienation and alterity resulting from 'deviance'.

How and why should Elizabeth Bishop deserve a study in this context, when she has been variously dismissed as 'an exquisite miniaturist', 'a private poet of descriptive details', and a poet of 'mildly feminist sensibility', must presuppose a glance at her life and career as a poet. Born in 1911 and poetically active from 1946 till her death in 1979, Bishop certainly belonged with all the so-called *post-caps* such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism, to name a few. Brought up by her grandparents after the untimely death of her father when she was only eight months old, and the consequent lifelong mental derangement of her mother, Elizabeth Bishop grew up negotiating her 'difference' against the prying questions of other children from 'functional' households. Later on also, she had to negotiate her sexual difference as a lesbian – the 'other' to the so-called heterosexual 'self'. Rootless in a specific soil and wandering through countries and continents, Bishop wrote about feminine experiences and thorny issues like colonization, male chauvinism, and chromatism, etc. and yet she was always careful to avoid categorization or extreme involvement. Thus she appears to us as a 'quintessentially' postmodern poet (if such essentialization may go with postmodernism) whose relatively slight and manageable poetic oeuvre has received extraordinary critical attention both in her lifetime and after her death.

Bishop's encounters with the post-Second World War scene in both her native US and on her many travels abroad gave to her a sense of isolation and indeterminacy, and a characteristically postmodern sensibility that could, at once, accommodate and embrace diversity and fluidity. A disturbed childhood, an *ab-normal* sexual orientation (lesbianism), and a lifelong nomadic disposition reinforced her playful acceptance of surfaces, utter distrust of the objective or scientific truth, and studied resistance to the socio-cultural norms that try to legitimate power and exploitation in the name of order, and often become the last fortress of white male privilege.

These facets of her doxa became instrumental in formulating a poetic stance that brought her close to,

- radical feminism in highlighting the inbuilt politico-linguistic gender inequalities, and in putting forward an 'alternative imaginary' over the 'hegemonic imaginary',
- postcolonialism in trying to lay bare the transactions of the colonized subjectivity with the colonizer's ideology, and in creating an agency for the dispossessed and the underprivileged, and
- post-structuralism in denying any fixed meaning, and in affirming the mediation of reality through linguistic representation.

Postmodernism that is at bottom the system(s) of argument to read and/or theorize Postmodernity has points of intersection with the above-mentioned theories thanks to its ever decentralizing and proliferent aspects. The condition of postmodernity that formed and framed Bishop's *weltanschauung* became the 'implicit principle' that in the words of Earl Miner, formulates the poetics of a writer (Miner in Preminger: 1993, 929). Needless to say, Bishop's claims to the appellation of a postmodern poet rest as much on her postmodern sensibility as on the amenability of her poems to the typically postmodern critical pluralism in being accommodative of their divergent insights and requirements.

Much of Bishop's work seeks to defamiliarize the ordinary events and experiences of a postmodern world. Commonplace objects and occurrences often produce unusual symbolic meanings for her and the need for self-exploration and self-definition assume the form of meditations on these external objects. This tendency of the poet is clearly expressed by James McCorkle, 'The extreme process of self-definition, for Bishop, is the provisional and momentary act of writing and self-revelation' (McCorkle: 1987, 93). Thus, a Bishop poem becomes less of an empirical enquiry and more of an interiorized debate. Their multiple voices, rather than being separate characterizations, become projections of a compound self — a self that continually interrogates itself and reveals in the process inherent contradictions and complexities.

This idea of the essential fragmentedness of the world and of human experience leads Bishop to her typically postmodern perspective by breaking down the modernist binaries of stasis and process. By quoting the wise words of Coleridge, Bishop clarifies her poetic credo that opposed to the tiresome practice of conveying the most 'trivial' thoughts in the most 'fantastic' language, she promotes the expression of the most 'fantastic' thoughts in the most 'correct' and 'natural' language and tries to look through the openness of politics, history and the self, exposing the falsity of their divisions and coherence (Bishop: 2006, 134). Her poetry thus highlights not only the fluidity and nonconformity of a typical postmodernist but also what lies beneath and beyond it. Giving up the desire to correlate and thereby to maintain a balance between the opposites, Bishop exhibits a unique postmodern poetic characteristic whereby the poet and his/her perceptions stand far away from the social and/or natural constructs as also, transcend them in order to create possibilities of an alternative order.

In this paper, I have tried to analyze a few poems by Elizabeth Bishop to show how she takes up or takes in shifting identities and subject-positions in a clear dialogue with cultural norms and expectations. I have also sought to chart her poetic trajectory from alienation to alterity to show how she started by refusing to accept the 'otherness' about her and her various poetic personae based on such determinants as gender, sexuality, class or age, and ultimately accepted those self-same counts of 'otherness' in a never-ending melee with the 'so-called' metareality of conundrum and contingency that is provisionally called 'life'.

How even ordinary natural phenomena can yield deep insights if only they are minutely observed comes to the fore in a poem like 'Roosters'. To Daniel Hoffman, in this poem 'the reality of the roosters is emblematic, external to the observer whose imagination plays so sportively over barnyard and Gallic steeple with metaphors and associations based on fidelity to the actual and on religious imagery lightly invoked' (Hoffman in Hoffman: 2004, 478). In fact, Bishop analyzes the cock's crow in the 'gun-metal dawn' from a woman's perspective and soon it gets metamorphosed into the shrill cry of patriarchy charging the fair sex to obey and conform. David Perkins, in this context, has opined, "In 'Roosters' [...] she [Bishop] bristles at male assertion and perhaps even more at feminine admiration" (Perkins: 2006, 375). This 'feminine admiration' however has to be situated within the preferential scope allowed to the female.

'Roosters' begins with a temporal adverbial 'At four o'clock'. The wee hours of the morning form and frame the context of the cock's crow as well as that of the response it evokes. The first cock's crow initiates a series of echoes till it spreads like 'wild fire' through out the town. Their cries are symbolic of authority, violation and violence:

At four o'clock
in the gun-metal blue dark
we hear the first crow of the first cock (CP. 35)

What irritates the poet-speaker the most is the horrible insistence of the cries that bruises the pre-morning sleep of both the hen-wives and the woman persona:

where in the blue blur
their rustling wives admire,
the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare. (CP. 35)

And again,

"each one an active
displacement in perspective;
each screaming, "This is where I live!"
Each screaming
"Get up! Stop dreaming!"
Roosters, what are you projecting? (CP. 36)

The traditional cries of the Roosters are sustained both by the *admiration* of the 'rusting wives' and by their own 'cruel' and 'stupid' 'glare'. According to Betsy Erkkila:

Insisting on the relationship between the cocks who 'command and terrorize' women in the private sphere and the 'senseless order' of war, militarism and violence in the public sphere, 'Roosters' is also a kind of veiled 'coming out' poem in which Bishop registers her personal protest against the 'senseless order' of marriage and heterosexuality that 'floats / all over town' and 'gloats' over the bed of lesbian love" (Erkkila: 1996, 295).

That the cries are 'orders' for the 'wives' who 'lead hens' lives' to be 'courted' or 'despised' at will, gives the speaker the added incentive to break out of the male/female binary that heterosexuality always implies and imposes. So, she adopts the two-fold strategy of debunking such 'wives' and interrogating the roosters' right to command them:

what right have you to give

commands and tell us how to live,
 cry "Here!" and "Here!"
 and wake us here where are
 unwanted love, conceit and war? (*CP*. 36)

That by the expression 'unwanted love' the speaker hints at a lesbian relationship becomes clear from the negative modifier 'unwanted'; for this love is surely associated with the hen wives (female) and judged by the roosters (male). That Bishop finds the fulfilment of femininity in the adoption of lesbianism points up her strategic displacement of the hierarchy of heterosexuality, first by the anarchy of women's refusal to obey, and then by the equiarchy of female bonding.

That 'love' is 'unwanted' and that 'conceit' and 'war' reign 'here' imparts to the poem a note of profound sadness. Male posturing which is equated with militarism makes 'Roosters' not so much an anti-war poem (the poem was written in 1941) as a thorough enquiry into the impulses towards brutality, domination and imperial aspiration that precipitated the World War II (and any war for that matter). The 'virile presence' of the roosters is variously indicative of sexual prowess and 'combative' mentality. By extension, the virility of patriarchy leads the war-mongers to use the pretext of defending wife and home to bring the world to the verge of destruction:

The crown of red
 set on your little head
 is charged with all your fighting blood.
 Yes, that excrescence
 makes a most virile presence,
 plus all that vulgar beauty of iridescence. (*CP*. 37)

It is in this context that Jeffrey Powers-Beck has highlighted how Elizabeth Bishop '[...] mocks the aggressors [who happen to be male] in images of roosters' (Powers-Beck: 1995, 82). Powers-Beck further points out how in this poem Bishop has critiqued 'the cocks' proprietary and insistent crowing, their ostentatious and bloody fighting, their control and sacrifice of "hens' lives", their stupid conceit and will to power, and their utter indifference toward their victims [including themselves as well]' (Powers-Beck: 1995, 82-3).

The poem also describes the denial of responsibility as well as the dissipation of patriarchy by alluding to the biblical story of St. Peter and a natural description of the clear morning beyond the 'traditional cries' of the roosters. According to Jonathan Ellis, 'Roosters' is perhaps her [Bishop's] most religious poem with its allusions to scripture and final plea for forgiveness' (Ellis: 2010, 16-17). Howbeit, neither the 'religious' nature of the poem nor the 'plea for forgiveness' can be accepted without reservations. St. Peter, the archetypal Christian patriarch, committed a sin of the 'spirit' by thrice denying Christ, the Saviour, and even then got His 'forgiveness' as well as his own religious rehabilitation (deification). In contrast, Mary Magdalene's sin of the 'flesh' (prostitution) though it got Christ's forgiveness provoked unrelenting strictures from the church. This differential treatment meted out to the patriarch and the prostitute surely points at the hypocrisy of a male-dominated religious establishment.

Besides, such divergent reactions of 'Saviour' and 'Church' to the same 'sin' of a woman indicate a clear double standard in practice. That the roosters could at once symbolize St. Peter's conviction and deification foregrounds patriarchy's right and might in controlling culture. But at the fag end of the poem the female-speaker has the last laugh as the roosters representing patriarchy become 'almost inaudible' (*CP*. 39), a

spent force, clearing up thereby the possibility of a peaceful existence for 'hens' and 'women', the so-called gender equals beyond the barrier of species. The final message of the poem, therefore, foregrounds an 'alternative imaginary' of (female) coexistence over the 'hegemonic imaginary' of (male) domination and destruction.

If 'Roosters' presents an oblique comment on 'male militarism' and 'imperial ambition' of and from the 20th century, then 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' gives us a classic case of militarism and colonization from the 16th century. The prolonged stay in Brazil left a profound mark on Bishop's poetic sensibility. Already with the postmodern times and the postcolonial reality, she could easily identify with the spirit of the land, thanks to the colonial past that the United States shared with Brazil. Bishop focuses in her Brazil poems on a densely textured intersection of race, class and gender ideologies and foregrounds the politics of colonialism and colonial conquest of the New World. In fact, as Robert Boschman has shown us, "'Brazil January 1, 1502" implies a loss of the sense of current, civilized time as the speaker takes an imaginative excursion over four centuries into the past to envision the first Portuguese conquistadors' encounter with the Amazon rainforest and its native inhabitants' (Boschman: 2009, 74).

In 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', the poet gives a full expression to a multi-layered dispersal of perceptions and perspectives that her postmodern sensibility brought into the description of a postcolonial scene. That postcolonial in this context refers to the time of intersection between the colonial discourse and the colonized subjectivity comes to the fore in Bishop's choice of the title. In fact, 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' is at once a physical and discursive space caught in the temporal stasis of a date as also in the spatial confines of a country: '... embroidered nature ... tapestried landscape' (*CP* 91). Bishop's reference to 'Januaries' merges the time of the European colonization in the sixteenth century with that of the American tourist's observation in the twentieth century. But, though Nature might have revealed herself to both the conquistadors and the poetic persona in the exactly similar manner, their perceptions, thanks to their different perspectives (if we are prepared to overlook changes wrought by time), must have been different.

Bishop's 'visual poetics' which Bonnie Costello has called attention to (Costello: 1991) in its proliferent elasticity now disperses the act of sight into the wide spectrum of subject-positions from Nature to the conquistadors to the colonized. At a later stage, however, the poetic surface transfers itself from the poet to the readers by way of a 'postmodern diffusion' of the narrative:

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
every square inch filling in with foliage—
big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
blue, blue-green, and olive,
with occasional lighter veins and edges, (*CP*. 91)

Lionel Kelly opines, 'To put January in the plural immediately posits multiplicity; and we know "Nature" cannot "greet" anyone, unless they are anthropomorphizing their environment' (Kelly: 61). It is quite plausible that both the Portuguese conquistadors and the visiting poet 'anthropomorphized' their 'environment'. However, their motives for such anthropomorphization must have been different; for while the conquistadors wanted a pretext for plunder, Bishop needed a context for her critique thereof.

The European colonizers came to Brazil with the purpose of pillage and brought with them the assumptions of their socio-religio-literary culture. So, they tried to assess

and judge the landscape on the basis of their preconceptions. The jungle of the real Brazil did not tally with the bower they had envisioned. But it was for this very reason that they forced the real to fit the ideal, trying to read the old world into the new. As the pillage of the colony coincided with the rape of the indigenous women, the project acquired obvious sexual implications. What prompts the poet to associate herself in this game of vision is that 'her own possession of Brazil', as Helen Vendler points out, 'she [Bishop] suspects, has something in it not unlike the plunder and rape of the conquistadors, who came "hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting / in creaking armour" to the New World, a tapestry of vegetative and human attraction' (Vendler: 1987, 832). Bishop gives a free reign to her poetic imagination in re-creating the scene of colonization:

Directly after the Mass, humming perhaps
L'Homme arme or some such tune,
 they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
 each out to catch an Indian for himself—
 those maddening little women who kept calling,
 calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
 and retreating, always retreating, behind it. (*CP*. 92)

The references to the 'Mass' and the 'Hymn' connect the politico-economic project of colonization to the religious project of Christian evangelism. As a result, the surveyed scene of tropical opulence gets superimposed with a post-lapsarian Eden where nature becomes indicative of the original sin rather than with any creative vitality. Ideological naïveté allows the conquistadors to gloss over their own lasciviousness under the guise of bringing Christian salvation to those 'maddening little women'.

The conquistadors equate these 'maddening little women' to birds and lizards; for the exotic and erotic charms of those women 'madden' them. That 'maddening' as a signifier is a product of the conquistador's gaze and not that of the 'women's' design may problematize the male privilege of inspection and judgement. 'Here Bishop's poetry', as Angus Cleghorn has suggested, enacts 'animification as opposed to personification' and in doing so she reveals 'her awareness that colonialism past and present prevent those visiting Brazil from ever capturing the native place' (Cleghorn: 2004, 23).

As per the postcolonial discourse, the chased women create a community that seeks to resist the colonizing project of homogenization. The strategy they adopt is two-fold. First and foremost, they subtract themselves from the colonial discourse by stepping out of the picture (tapestry) and going behind it. Secondly, they shatter the at once auditory and ideological silence of the colonizer's discourse by waking up the big symbolic birds (the colonized communities) to unite and fight back this ideological domination. The perception of the Europeans was formed and framed by what their individual and group interests. So, the work of art (tapestry) that they made was sure to reflect this partial view. This sequence of causality may lead us to the slippery path of reality, representation, and knowledge. Since, all reality is representational in nature, and all representation makes knowledge ideological and then therefore provisional, connects this poem to the postmodern metareality of conundrum and contingency.

If 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' presents a poet's revisions of the project and process of colonization, 'Crusoe in England' presents a colonizer's revisions of both the project and the process from the perspective of lived experience. Bishop begins a game of linguistic destabilization with her choice of the title; for 'Crusoe', who is always already associated in the readers' mind with his uninhabited tropical island is strategically

displaced to England, the citadel of 'civilization' and 'society'. In this connection Kit Fan has reminded us, 'Crusoe comes back to England but is still tied to the umbilical cord of his island' (Fan: 2005, 45). In fact, Bishop's Crusoe is fated to go on negotiating the chain of meeting and loss that his 'arrival at', 'stay in' and 'rescue from' the uninhabited island brought him. In fact, he has found his island, lived there and left it for 'other islands'. Similarly, he had lost his shipmates, found Friday and lost him. But, the surface certainties of this referentiality get dispersed across the poem's narrative structure.

Bishop exhibits an extraordinary penchant for indeterminacy by partly revealing and partly concealing a post-structural interpretative possibility. According to Robert Boschman,

While *Crusoe* [Defoe's hero] sees its narrator splitting his perspective between England, which represents the domesticated past, and the wild, unnamed island where he has been shipwrecked alone, Bishop's speaker emphasizes [...] how his island eventually became home even as England gradually became an alien place. After his long solitude, Bishop's Crusoe now finds himself dislocated in England 'another island, / that doesn't seem, but who decides?' (Boschman: 2009, 152).

Thus, the poem collates the subject-positions of the speaker from the opposite poles of exile and domicile. At the same time Bishop defamiliarizes the ordinary experiences that get continually deferred in the process of signification. In Fan's words, "'Crusoe in England' returns to the chasm between text and experiences—and to dislocation' (Fan: 2005, 45). Thus, the immediate gets mediated by the modes of knowledge and reportage that we superimpose upon it through our preconception and representation.

'Crusoe in England' opens by describing Crusoe's account of the discovery of an island as reported in the newspaper. According to the report, the birth of this island was seen by some passing ship. Thus, the mariners/passengers of the passing ship, the newspaper reporter, Crusoe as reader, and Bishop as poet — all stand the chance and run the risk of distorting as well as reconstructing a natural process through their divergent subject positions as revealed through their reception and reportage:

at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—
rose in the mate's binoculars
and caught on the horizon like a fly. (*CP*. 192)

The representational nature of this reality (i.e. the birth of the island) problematizes any notion of knowledge as is suggested in the last line of the first stanza: 'None of the books has ever got it right' (*CP* 192). No mode of knowledge, Bishop implies here, has ever got it 'right' or can ever get 'it' right. This points up the fact that a direct first-hand impression or experience of nature is inaccessible to us; for reality is always mediated through the supplemental aid of 'papers' or 'binoculars', and we should therefore make the necessary allowance for all the delay and deferment that the repetition inherent in such representation demands.

As the island was created by volcanic eruption, Bishop's Crusoe shifts his attention to volcanoes. Michael Ryan shows us how 'descriptive language', here, assumes a 'reductive' austerity ('miserable, small volcanoes', 'a few slithery strides', 'volcanoes dead as ash heaps'). Since knowledge remains grounded in a perspective that is itself in contact with and in the grip of the word, 'knowledge without binoculars' brings a mere literal sense of objects that operates at variance with the accounts to be

found in books, substitute descriptions in language that can never 'get it right' (Ryan: 1999, 92). Bishop is aware of and fascinated by the fact that perspectival alteration may, and often does, alter reality and its perception. She as a result cannot be impervious to the implication that our ethical concerns about the right and the wrong are contingent initially on perception and eventually on perspective:

I'd think that if they were the size
I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
become a giant;
and if I had become a giant,
I couldn't bear to think what size the goats and turtles were. (CP 193)

Life on this island is characterized by its quiet bliss as well as its irksome sameness and a lack of human company. Crusoe's loneliness is alleviated temporarily, just as it is in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, by the arrival of Friday:

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
another minute longer, Friday came. (CP 194)

That 'Accounts of that have everything all wrong' testifies to the pseudo-factual nature of representation. The identity of Friday is imbricated by being the embodiment of the colonizer's 'will' for human subjects and on account of a veiled reference to a mutual desire between Crusoe and Friday:

Friday was nice
Friday was nice, and we were friends. (CP 194)

The same vein of appreciation is continued in Crusoe's assertion, 'Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body' (CP 194). The hint of a heterosexual narrative thwarting the reality and/or desirability of their relation, 'If only he had been a woman' gets brushed aside by the final endearment, 'Friday, my dear Friday' (CP 196) as also by the sense of loss that the death of Friday entails for Crusoe, the provisional speaker of the poem. 'Bishop's poem', as Victoria Harrison points out, 'downplays the hierarchy Defoe establishes between the two men' (Harrison: 1993, 191). As Harrison further states, 'Although Crusoe speaks for Friday, he does so less as colonizer than as surviving, mourning friend' (Harrison: 1993, 191).

Crusoe and Friday share a happy life together. But, their Utopian life in the island is cut short as they are rescued/miscued:

And then one day they came and took us off.
Now I live here, another island,
that doesn't seem like one, but who decides? (CP 195)

This curt statement blots out the givens of an authentic existence. The weighted present gets swamped by the temporal vortex of a contingent continuum as Bishop allows both deletion and articulation to stand and mean. The subsidence of a whole saga into a single sentence is signalled as Crusoe resets the historical, chronological frame discarding established formal considerations. The intrusive 'And' that abruptly ushers in the event at once telescopes and superposes narrative elements into staging devices. In this context, C.K. Doreski comments "Only in retrospect does it become clear that *them* and *us*, *then* and *now* form the lyric hinges of the poem, the rhetorical elements that defer narrative in favour of lyric or meditative strategies" (Doreski: 1993, 161).

Bringing to the surface the 'textual subconscious' the desperate groping of 'but who decides?' destabilizes referentiality of experience on the one hand, and knowledge

on the other; for decision needs determinacy and determinacy is found to disappear in the quicksand of discourse. The isolation on a physical island has been replaced by a random, careless existential interior remove. The erstwhile governor of an unsettled island, Crusoe is now caught between and bored by the real and uninteresting of this 'other island', made so because of the post-mortem realities. So, he can bring himself to offer but a visual approbation to those treasured relics of a life left behind. Reticent to handle his memorabilia, he whispers, 'My eyes rest on it and pass on' (CP197), because the knife that had once 'reeked of meaning like a crucifix' has no 'life' utility for him anymore. In fact, the 'meaning' of those things has expired in course of the ceaseless march of time making them mere 'uninteresting lumber' (CP 197). In fact, it seems 'uninteresting' only to the self-interested 'I'.

If we subject the poem to an intensive post-structuralist scrutiny, disunity is revealed on 'the verbal', 'the textual', and 'the linguistic' levels. On the verbal plain, the 'glittering rollers' and the 'overcast sky' construct a visual paradox that on the literal level seems utterly incompatible with each other. Since an 'overcast sky' causes rapid deterioration of sunlight, the 'glitter' of the rollers seems optically untenable. But having to live in an uninhabited island, Crusoe develops a different kind of vision that can easily attribute an imaginary 'glitter' to the free and moving waves. On the textual level, we come across various shifts and breaks in the poem that can be said to constitute its fault-lines. Through out the poem the focus keeps shifting from the birth of the new island to Crusoe's life in the uninhabited island, to Friday's arrival, to their rescue from the island, and ultimately to Crusoe's afterlife in England. Boschman opines that Bishop's Crusoe is 'a solitary observer who meditates for twenty-eight years on the sea and landscapes of the island where he had formerly been shipwrecked' (Boschman: 2009, 152).

In 'Crusoe in England', time shifts both backward and forward, enlisting the techniques of 'flash back' as well as 'psychic projection'. Though all the events described are recounted by Crusoe, the birth of the new island that sets the narrative ball rolling takes place years after Crusoe's removal from the island. The past that is at once revisited and reconstructed through memory and representation sometimes comes up to the plain of the present as well. Shifts in tone are also to be perceived whereby the speaker starts by describing the discovery of a new island as reported in the newspapers in a satirical vein, light-heartedly talks about 'fifty two / miserable, small volcanoes', fondly remembers the relief that the arrival of Friday had given him, mulls over their rescue from the island with a feeling of nostalgia and ends by lamenting the same 'rescue' on account of his 'uninteresting' contemporaneity.

On the linguistic plain, we come across a few moments in the poem when the adequacy of language as a viable medium of communication is itself called into question. The discovery by some ship of 'an island being born' and the fact that 'they named it' can be cited as two representative cases in point. The birth of the island is seen by some passing ship, through the 'mate's binoculars' and reported in the newspapers. The whole process is thereby distanced and provisionalized through sight and reportage holding reality to ransom by representation. The blanks in the poem might have resulted from the kind of books that Crusoe had read in the island:

Because I didn't know enough.
 Why didn't I know enough of something?
 Greek drama or astronomy? The books
 I'd read were full of blanks;
 the poems—well, I tried

reciting to my iris-beds, (*CP*. 193)

In another instance, the textual world of the poem quite like the textual world of the island reverberates with the 'questioning shrieks' of the gulls and the 'equivocal replies' of the goats:

The island smelled of goat and guano.
The goats were white, so were the gulls,
and both too tame, or else they thought
I was a goat, too, or a gull.
Baa, baa, baa and shriek, shriek, shriek,
baa ... shriek ... baa ... (*CP*. 193)

Here the premodifiers 'questioning' and 'equivocal' at once qualify and render as indeterminate both the shrieks and the replies respectively; for if the questioning shrieks issue from ignorance or uncertainty in the questioner's mind then the equivocal replies too foregrounds the unwillingness or the inability of the answerer to proffer definite information or analysis. Crusoe's playing with the names of the volcanoes can be associated with the post-structuralists' irreverent attitude to language:

One billy-goat would stand on the volcano
I'd christened *Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*
(I'd time enough to play with names),
and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air. (*CP* 193)

As a matter of fact, to name is to define, and to define is to mean, whereas to 'play with names' is to destabilize the signifier/signified correspondence and in short the whole process of *signification*.

In the journey towards a postmodern poetics the poem 'At the Fishhouses' may provide us with a brilliant case study to analyze Bishop's negotiations with the characteristically postmodern themes, tendencies, and attitudes. In the words of Peggy Anne Samuels, "In 'At the Fishhouses' there is a greater emphasis on surfaces that peel off and attach themselves to other bodies; nets that begin to undulate, transforming into deeper surfaces; and there is the bringing together of unlike elements in a kind of 'lucky strike'" (Samuels: 2010, 126). Needless to say, these layers of detachable 'surfaces' and their ability/propensity to form myriad contingent bondings of significations foreground the questing poet's 'greater' awareness of the 'undulating' postmodern terrain of spatio-temporal flux and linguistic free fall.

The title 'At the Fishhouses' pins us down to a place of stasis where 'fishes' that represent 'meaning' are absent and we are left with the mere traces like 'smell' ('the air smells so strong of codfish') and 'scales' ('The big fish tubs are completely lined / with layers of beautiful herring scales'). As exemplified by the stative verbs of the poem's opening section ('have', 'is', 'are', 'is', etc.), the described scene seems eternally suspended:

The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
*** *** ***

Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,

cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted. (CP. 74)

On a deeper level, however, Bishop's description implies that the scene is a product of continual changes wrought both by man and by nature. The man's shuttle is 'worn and polished', the ironwork on the capstan 'has rusted', the buildings have 'an emerald moss / growing on their shoreward walls' and the wheelbarrows are 'plastered' with 'creamy iridescent coats of mail'. 'Such details', according to Lynn Keller, 'make us aware that a future visitor would find a different scene in which these processes of erosion, decay, and growth were further advanced' (Keller: 1987, 124).

The poet goes on to populate the scene with 'iridescent flies' and 'an old man'. The flies as well as the man wait in a characteristically postmodern posture for a 'herring boat'. The 'prospect' and/or the 'image' of the 'herring boat' (yet 'to come in') constitutes for both a glittering amalgam of 'memory' and 'desire' that we can term a kind of 'hyperreality' or 'simulacrum'. Significantly, the old man 'sits netting / his net' (to perpetuate his profession), and 'waits for a herring boat to come in' (in which he cannot go fishing anymore). These bits of information coupled with the retroversion, 'He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty, / from unnumbered fish' (he no longer does so), skilfully contrast the past and the present of the old man:

an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished. (CP 74)

Evidently, the man has lost much of his strength and power with age, as is indicated by his 'black old knife / the blade of which is almost worn away'. The knife is a phallic symbol, the wear and tear of which signifies the dissipation of patriarchal vigour, presenting an alternative model of asexual egalitarianism in lieu of the hegemonic model of sexist paternalism. His remembered act of scraping the 'scales' from 'the unnumbered fish' may stand for the language game of separating the 'trace' (scales) and the 'meaning' (fish), and contextualize his present 'decline'. The 'heavy surface' of the sea and the old man wait alike. Because of its eagerness, the sea is described as 'considering spilling over' but never does. The old man in his part has been and ceased to be a seafarer waiting instead for the herring boat that is yet to come.

By way of a postmodernist intervention, Bishop at this juncture infiltrates the 'scene' with herself as an active participant to undercut its ahistorical fixity. She at once gives the old man a 'Lucky Strike' and begins a conversation with him. By embedding more overt reminders of historical processes, she states 'He was a friend of my grandfather' (implying thereby the grandfather's death) and alludes to 'the decline in the population' (alluding therein to broader sociological changes). In this way, as Umberto Eco has taught us, the postmodern interlocutors revisit the past with irony (Eco: 1992, 227). This they do by accepting and enjoying the fragmentation of the past rather than lamenting it and engaging in language games to rationalize the said process:

The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring boat to come in
while he waits for a herring boat to come in. (CP. 75)

'He was a friend of my grandfather', coupled with 'the *decline* in the population' (emphasis added), frames the context of the conversation whereby the old acquaintance and shared community of the 'grandfather' and the 'old man' and the demographic change in the locality are all brought to the fore but indirectly, avoiding false innocence but expressing the intended opinions all the same. This language game of 'recognition', 'courtesy', and 'concern' imparts social identity to both the old man and the speaker. The kind of legitimating discourse of 'truth'/reality' that the old man and the speaker seek and logocentrism demands is parodied by the 'opaque' surface of the sea and the yet-to-return 'herring boat'. Whereas the 'opacity' of the sea surface resists the efforts of the observer/speaker to *know*, the 'deferred/unocurred arrival' of the herring boat pits *absence* against *presence*. This is also a parody of the totalizing metadiscourse of *epistemology* and *need*, a practical demonstration of the language game of truth which is all that is available to the postmodern man.

Leaving aside the old man, dangling precariously between 'expectancy' and 'indeterminacy', the speaker now talks about 'one seal particularly':

One seal particularly
 I have seen here evening after evening.
 He was curious about me. 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 judgment. (CP 75)

Bishop's attempted identification with the agreeable seal blurs the boundaries between the 'perceiver' and the 'perceived'. She strategically personifies the sea mammal by using exactly the sort of words that are usually applied to a human acquaintance. According to Helen Vendler, the 'total immersion' that Bishop, like the seal, is fond of takes place for her in 'the bitter Atlantic of an icy truth' (Vendler: 1987, 830). The 'mere initiation' to that 'total immersion', however, proves so tough and troublesome that the speaker is forced to concede that it is humanly unattainable:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
 the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,
 the dignified tall firs begin.
 *** *** ***

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
 drawn from the cold hard mouth
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (CP. 75-6)

In a clear contrast to this, the curious seal is perceived to be at home in the water implying a possibility, even if remote, of one getting used to 'total immersion'. This 'total immersion' however, makes 'the' truth 'a' truth, problematizing its conceptualization as well as its expression, on account of the indeterminacy that is characteristic of the postmodern condition. According to Vendler, 'the seal' is 'Bishop's characteristic

“signature” here’ since her ‘radical isolation and scepticism’ are often poetized with/through ‘such a moment of self-detachment and self-irony’ (Vendler: 1987, 830).

Taking her cue from the scene of contrast between man’s inability and the seal’s ability to achieve ‘total immersion’, Bishop puts forward the sea as a symbol of ‘what we imagine knowledge to be’. The different tastes of the sea water (‘bitter’, briny,’ and ‘burning’) as it is likened to the different manifestations of ‘knowledge’ (‘dark’, ‘salt’, ‘clear’, ‘moving’, and ‘utterly free’), brings us to the postmodern conception of knowledge. The megamyth of ‘knowledge’ is based on and determined by ‘meaning’ – ‘meaning’ that is itself permanently deferred, always subject to and produced by its difference from other meanings and thus volatile and unstable. Knowledge thus provisionalized and made indeterminate comes to be a kind of a metanarrative. So any access to and hold on knowledge becomes at once provisional and tenuous. By suggesting that our pretensions to any kind of knowledge are always already invalidated in adhering to a vision of difference, Bishop betrays her strong poststructuralist/postmodernist leanings. ‘Knowledge’ for Bishop, as James McCorkle suggests, is ‘derived [‘drawn’] from concretes, and then therefore, phenomenal’ (McCorkle: 1992, 65).

‘The cold hard mouth of the world’ and ‘the rocky breasts’ that are the ‘outlet’ and the ‘source’ of this knowledge respectively at once feminizes its origin and makes it resistant to easy comprehension. The sea that is the source and the outlet of knowledge is likened to and is itself the primordial grounding of ‘form’, ‘formlessness’ and ‘life’. Similarly, the phenomenon, which is the constant and erosive flux, becomes a repository of ‘mystery’ and a nullification of ‘mastery’. The knowable object, therefore, foils any bid to objectify or hold it fixed. This fact makes our knowledge ‘flowing and flown’, ‘temporal’ and a ‘linguistic construct’, and then therefore, vulnerable to ‘change’ and ‘decay’. Near the end of the poem the relation between knowledge and the sea is conveyed in and through the repetitive and connective consonance between ‘flowing and drawn’ and ‘flowing and flown’. Thus, as Susan McCabe has remarked, “In usurping and reversing the usual functions of tenor and vehicle, deliquescence becomes the central term and knowledge a way to convey it” (McCabe: 1994, 136). In other words, by accepting the dispersal of knowledge caught in the flux of time and perspective, Bishop constitutes and conceives of an epistemology wherein ‘knowledge’ becomes utterly free, diffuse, and an unlimited entity. As a result, ‘knowledge’ can be paradoxically ‘dark’ and ‘clear’ being at once both and none of these.

Bishop’s postmodern poetics evolves through a constant dialogue between the ‘self’ and the ‘world’. As per the taxonomy of sight, she tries to see and interpret the scene or the situation from her shifting subject-positions. As a result, we come across the cultural outsider (‘Brazil, January 1, 1502’) and an active insider aiming at ‘total immersion’ (‘At the Fishhouses’). In her different avatars the observer/speaker tries to I) peep at reality from outside in ‘Brazil, January 1, 1502’) inspect as well as introspect on ‘scene’ and ‘meaning’ through ‘total immersion’ (involvement) in ‘At the Fishhouses’. It is true that her poetry is premised on ‘loss’ – the loss of ‘certitude’ and ‘social acceptability’, but, as Wordsworth would have said ‘other gifts / Have followed, for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense’ (Wordsworth: 1997, 59). In Bishop’s case, these ‘gifts’ may refer to a gain in perspective and the acceptance of both ‘difference’ and ‘difference’. Rather than avoiding ‘alienation’, Bishop’s poetic personae are perceived as courting it in and through the recognition and acceptance of ‘alterity’ of the victimized female in the ‘Roosters’ or of the desperate seeker after ‘total immersion’ in ‘At the Fishhouses’. On another level, it is this recognition of alienation and acceptance of

alterity that enables the poet to critique and question the imperialist project of homogenization and eraser of the native identity in such poems as 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' and 'Crusoe in England'.

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry presents her valiant attempts to accept the endless varieties of the postmodern world that jostle for our understanding and accommodation. Breaking down the binaries between the 'self' and the 'other', the 'then' and the 'now', and the 'introspective' and the 'inspective', Bishop fashions a poetics that is at once postmodern and antinormal. According to Ihab Hassan, 'Her own objectivity in discerning the aspects and relations of things is visual, and so clear as to be dream-like, fantasmic like some imaginary iceberg, "jewellery from a grave" sparring with the sun' (Hassan: 1973, 105). As a matter of fact, in the smithy of the poet's mind, 'scene' gives 'sense'; 'sense' crystallizes into 'sensibility'; and 'sensibility' brings forth a 'textuality' that at once propagates the need for 'harmonious coexistence' and rationalizes disharmony in terms of 'difference', 'injustice', and 'ignorance'.

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