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**AN INTERRUPTING POEM:
ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "CRUSOE IN ENGLAND"**

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Resumo: A intertextualidade na poesia de Elizabeth Bishop é frequentemente descurada, e as citações e alusões na sua obra têm recebido uma atenção menor do que a dispensada a poetas como Marianne Moore e Robert Lowell. Mas, à medida que as suas cartas e outras obras têm saído à estampa, começa a ser possível avaliar com mais exatidão a sua prática intertextual. De natureza muitas vezes lúdica ("Sunday at Key West", um aceno despreocupado a Wallace Stevens), as práticas alusivas operam em geral na textura profunda do poema, como em "The Fish". Quando explícitas, implicam com frequência um investimento na objetividade, entrando-se imaginativamente na consciência de um outro, como é o caso de "From Trollope's Journal", de forma a tomar uma posição política através do uso da voz desse outro. Este artigo analisa o uso da alusão em Bishop com especial ênfase num dos seus poemas tardios mais longos, "Crusoe in England", em que a intertextualidade está presente desde o início na alusão a Defoe. A autora utiliza anacronisticamente uma citação de Wordsworth e reflete sobre a herança literária e o seu próprio posicionamento no âmbito da tradição poética. A análise das intertextualidades

neste poema permite-nos repensar a sua poesia, tendo em conta o uso da persona e a estratégia de uma autobiografia por assim dizer deslocada.

Palavras-chave: Elizabeth Bishop; “Crusoe in England”; poética; alusão; intertextualidade.

Abstract: Elizabeth Bishop’s intertextual practice is often overlooked, with her borrowings and allusions receiving less attention than those her mentor Marianne Moore and her friend Robert Lowell. But as more of Bishop’s work and her letters become available, we can start to assess her intertextuality a little more certainty than before. Her borrowings and usages are often playful (“Sunday at Key West” as a lighthearted glance at Wallace Stevens), and are typically embedded deeply in the poem, as in “The Fish.” When they are explicit they often involve an investment in objectivity, an imagined entry into another consciousness, as in “From Trollope’s Journal,” a tactic allowing political statement into the poem, voiced by another. This paper considers Bishop’s allusions with a focus on one of her longer, late works, “Crusoe in England.” This poem is, naturally, intertextual from the start, borrowing from Defoe. It also includes (anachronistically) a key quotation from Wordsworth, and Bishop examines literary heritage, and her own positioning in poetic tradition. I explore her borrowings and the implications of them for a reassessment of her poetry, and consider the use of persona that the poem involves, and the strategy of deflected autobiography.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bishop; “Crusoe in England”; poetics; allusion; intertextuality.

“Well, it takes an infinite number of things coming together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, last night’s dream, experiences past and present – to make a poem.”

Bishop, letter to Jerome Mazzaro, April 27, 1978.

In sharp contrast to those of her friend and mentor Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop’s literary and textual allusions are characteristically muted and often playful. For Moore, allusiveness or borrowing almost turns into a method of writing. In the 1960 *Paris Review* interview with Donald Hall, she responds to the question of her “extensive use of quotations” with disarming frankness:

I was just trying to be honorable and not to steal things. I’ve always felt that if a thing had been said in the *best* way, how can you say it better? If I wanted to say something and somebody had said it ideally, then I’d take it but give the person credit for it. That’s all there is to it. If you are charmed by an author, I think it’s a very strange and invalid imagination that doesn’t long to share it. Somebody else should read it, don’t you think? (Moore 1960: 260)

Quotation for Moore becomes an engrained element of poetic texture. To put it another way, her poems absorb the allusions and quotations gleaned from a remarkably wide range of reading, so that they do not seem intrusive, do not interrupt the poem’s flow. Bishop is considerably less allusive than Moore, and in some significant ways her allusions are less absorbed into her poems. Often the allusiveness is playful; a good example is her conflation of two of the major poems of Wallace Stevens in her “Sunday at Key West”. By using her titles to indicate her borrowings, Bishop typically makes them obvious and apparent: examples here are “The Gentleman of

Shalott”, “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will” and “From Trollope’s Journal”. In this way, allusion obtrudes in her poems rather than being absorbed. In this paper I want to explore the interruptive effects of allusion, focussing particularly on her poem “Crusoe in England” from her 1976 collection *Geography III*.

“Crusoe in England” had an extraordinarily long gestation – even for Bishop the perfectionist who spent almost 20 years on her poem “The Moose”. She first recorded the starting idea for “Crusoe in England” when she was aged 23. In a letter from Summer 1934 while she was on holiday on Cuttyhunk Island off the Massachusetts coast she wrote:

On an island you live all the time in this Robinson Crusoe atmosphere; making this do for that, and contriving and inventing. . . . A poem should be made about making things in a pinch – & how it looks sad when the emergency is over. (Millier 62)

Thirty years later in August 1964 Bishop remarked in a letter to Robert Lowell that she had been working on “a poem about Robinson Crusoe”; apparently titled “Crusoe at Home” at that time (in Travisano 552). The poem was not finished in time to be included (as intended) in her 1965 collection *Questions of Travel*; she finally sent it to Howard Moss at *The New Yorker* where it was published in 1971, six years after first promising it to him.

The poem’s long journey is fascinating in that while the original impulse of “making things in a pinch” is maintained as a strand of meaning in the poem, it turns into only one of many among the poem’s rich accumulation of meanings and experiences over time; the life experiences of Bishop between the ages of 23 and 59. This 36 years is, as it happens, even longer than the 28 years Defoe sentenced his Crusoe to life on the uninhabited island (Alexander Selkirk, the factual original of Crusoe, was on his island for 4 years – and incidentally, on an entirely different island than the one Defoe

imagined for Crusoe).¹ This is not to suggest of course either that Bishop worked at all continuously on the poem that would become “Crusoe in England”. She seems to have worked at it intermittently but intensely; in this way it becomes one of the great poems of retrospection, the poet or the poet’s character at a point of looking back over a life. The final version is comparable in this regard to poems such as Robert Frost’s “Directive” and Wallace Stevens’ “Long and Sluggish Lines”, embodying a mature retrospection unavailable to Bishop the age of 23.

While “Crusoe in England” may be read as a deeply personal poem, it is, characteristically for Bishop, oblique in its personal representation. Again this may be seen as one of the effects of the long period of composition in that the poem becomes less tied to one occasion or event, and is consequently capable of flexible incorporation of many experiences. It is interesting in this respect to consider the contrasts between “Crusoe in England” and “In the Waiting Room”, the poem which precedes it in *Geography III*. “In the Waiting Room” opens the collection and records one dramatic moment of awakening for the child, who, almost 7 years old, is confused and distraught over questions of kinship and identity prompted by pictures in a *National Geographic* magazine in the dentist’s waiting room. The event is clearly autobiographical (in spite of the change of name for the aunt whom the child was accompanying), and Bishop wrote a prose account of it at the end of her posthumously published autobiographical essay “The Country Mouse”. Bishop takes care to make “Crusoe in England” and “In the Waiting Room” complement one another. The violent interiors of the volcanoes the child finds unsettling in the magazine are

¹ Selkirk had been stranded on one of the Juan Fernandez Islands, in the Pacific off the coast of Chile. Defoe relocated this to the Caribbean and has an appropriate climate and crops.

transformed for the elderly reminiscing Crusoe a kind of trivial news item: "A new volcano has erupted,/the papers say' and he goes on to recall his island's 'fifty-two/ miserable, small volcanoes I could climb/ with a few slithery strides -/volcanoes dead as ash heaps" (Bishop 1984:162). The prebuscent child in the waiting room is stricken with horror over what her life might be; the retrospective elderly man on what his life has been.

As usual with Bishop, the autobiographical is represented obliquely, even while having a factual basis. As is well known, while Bishop admired Lowell's *Life Studies*, writing a blurb for it, she was less impressed by the use of the highly personal in the work of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. She also deplored Lowell's use of private material (including letters from his estranged wife) in his drafts of *The Dolphin* (in Travisano 706-9).² While Bishop preferred reticence in self-presentation, the personal element was important to her as an aspect of her poetry. She did though, represent it as one element only; as she remarked in regard to "Crusoe in England", "it takes an infinite number of things coming together. . . to make a poem" (Bishop 1994: 621).

While it is one of the most Protestant of English novels, *Robinson Crusoe* is also, as Robert Frost remarked, very much about self-reliance. Frost repeatedly nominated the novel (along with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*) when asked in interviews about his favourite reading. "I never tire" he once remarked, "of being shown how the limited can make snug in the limitless" (123). The castaway improvises and makes a home on the island, and this activity is linked for Frost with the very process of creating poetry. In this respect Frost's famous comments on the making of the poem make a specific link between Bishop's views on poetry

² In this letter Bishop writes that she finds "confessional" poetry deplorable (708).

and their representations of *Robinson Crusoe*. In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes” Frost wrote that the poem

begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. (132)

Bishop’s attitude to Frost was ambivalent and equivocal, but notably she directly echoed this sentiment; the poem clarifies life, makes a barrier against chaos. This is one of the themes of her poem “Sestina” in which the bereaved child’s repeated self-protective drawing of the house is echoed in the demanding stanzaic form of the poem itself, as if Bishop too is drawing a house in order to keep confusion outside³ (1984: 123-4). In a 1957 letter Bishop wrote memorably of making poetry as exactly this Frostian “stay against confusion”. She described a recent period of her life

when everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry – or not material, seemed to *be* poetry, and all the past was illuminated in long shafts here and there, like a long-awaited-for sunrise. If only one could see everything that way all the time! It seems to me *it’s* the whole purpose of art, to the artist (not to the audience) – that rare feeling of control, illumination – life *is* all right, for the time being. (in Travisano 246)

³ It is worth recalling that the etymological origin of “stanza” is from the Italian for “room”. This is deliciously exploited by Wallace Stevens in his celebrated two-stanza poem “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”, where each stanza represents a different room, the convivial kitchen or the bedroom containing the body of the dead woman.

However, both Bishop and Frost sense that in order to have vitality the poem must give some sense of what lies beyond that room, that wall, that barrier. In “Mending Wall” Frost wrote of the need to be aware of what the wall excludes as well as what it encloses. He also wrote that every poem needs a “door”; some point of access for the reader. Almost as an aside in her essay on Marianne Moore (unpublished in Bishop’s lifetime) Bishop remarked that “Surely there is an element of mortal panic and fear underlying all works of art?” (*Collected Prose* 144). It took Bishop some time to learn how insert a door into her poems, and Thomas Travisano suggested that Lowell’s poetry encouraged her in the suggestions of the personal. As Travisano elegantly puts it, commenting on *Geography III*, Bishop “produced a compelling series of self-exploratory poems that provide readers with a window into the latent yet powerful personal element that informs all of her writing” (in Travisano XVIII). These “windows” transform our understanding of the poem, typically permitting a glimpse into what lies beyond the masterly control, indicating the struggle between potentially corrosive introspection and reticence. Publication of Bishop’s letters and several critical biographies have effectively transformed our reading of the poems by giving fuller substance and actuality to the personal elements that we momentarily sense. One good example of a “window” appears in “The Bight” from *A Cold Spring*. Like “At the Fishhouses” the poem appears to be primarily (and brilliantly) descriptive. But the brief phrase printed in small font parenthetically below the title is a window, inviting us to read the poem as a narrative of subjectivity, of interiority. The apparently laconic “On my birthday” makes “The Bight” into a different kind of narrative; a poem by someone who said she hated her birthday, a poem on a day in which we inevitably, if unwillingly, reflect on our lives, friendships, family, achievements, failures, aging (Bishop

1994: 630).⁴ Looking through the window requires us to read “The Bight” as a kind of “Dejection” ode, and to see that the poem’s opening phrase “At low tide” is figurative and not literal, is concerned with the mood of the self. When read through the window, the poem’s last lines, “All the untidy activity continues/ awful but cheerful” become a moving exhortation to stoicism, with an almost epitaph-like quality (*Collected Prose* 61).⁵

Another example of a window is important because it actually comes close to threatening the very composure of the poem. As suggested above with respect to “Sestina” Bishop’s use of demanding form is directly proportionate to the emotional demands of the subject matter – the more difficult the topic the harder the form. Another of the *Geography III* poems, the celebrated “One Art” embodies this once more. As a villanelle it could of course be seen to carry the “trace” of the villanelle form, so often preoccupied with loss and inevitability. “One Art” remorselessly and even stoically records a life’s losses; door keys, the mother’s watch, houses, cities, continents. The poem is organised as a crescendo of losses, culminating in the speaker’s contemplation of the future loss of a lover, envisioned as the ultimate catastrophe, although one which the speaker will survive through having learnt the lessons that losses teach. Except that the poem comes close at this point to breaking down, disrupting the set form. For a moment the poem wavers, a point that could be considered as a window, certainly, but is also much more than that. In the quatrain which

⁴ “I HATE birthdays, or mine, that is” she wrote on what turned out to be her last one, in 1979.

⁵ The line “awful but cheerful” is inscribed on Bishop’s tombstone in the family plot at Worcester, Massachusetts.

formally brings together a villanelle's two alternating refrains, Bishop writes:

– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

(Bishop 1984:179)

Like many composers of villanelles, Bishop slightly modulates her refrains, but nothing prepares us for the interruption of "*Write it!*" in the final line. Like "On my birthday" the phrase is parenthetical, yet somehow its potentially disruptive force seems to be increased by this rather than marginalised. In a highly composed poem attesting to the need for stoic endurance, "*Write it!*" is an indication of the effort, the emotional price that the composure costs. The composure is an act of will, and it transforms the poem utterly, opening up a vision of pain and effort otherwise suppressed by the very act of composition. "*Write it!*" exposes the artifice of the poem as well as the need for it; it provides a glimpse into the "panic and emptiness" that Bishop saw as a necessary condition for art.⁶

In this way "*Write it!*" is interruptive, performing exactly as one of our leading poetry critics has observed:

without the forceful, *interruptive* calling of attention to an
utterance, whether from
without *or* within, what we call "poetry", that it is to say the
imagined self-enclosed

⁶ The transformation of this poem over its 17 available drafts is analysed by Millier (508-12), and is also discussed by Harrison 1993. The poem's drafts are reproduced in Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe* (233-40).

perfection of an utterance, would not exist as such. (Ramalho Santos 222, emphasis in the original)

In her villanelle's final line Bishop does forcefully call attention to the function of utterance, shattering the otherwise "self-enclosed perfection" of her poem.

Bishop's "Crusoe in England" has several interruptive moments which serve both to expose the artifice of the poem, disturbing it as performance, and to locate an intense emotional source for the narrative. Some of these interruptions are to do with Bishop's reshaping of Defoe's narrative.⁷ Indeed, the changes indicate how far Defoe's hero is not the primary subject at all, but is rather a starting point to Bishop's deflected autobiographical interrogations. In this respect the main change is in the death of Crusoe's island companion, the native Friday. In Defoe, Crusoe saves the life of a native, names him Friday, and designates himself "Master". The master-servant relation is swiftly established, with Crusoe immediately referring to "my Man *Friday*" (*Collected Prose* 207). In fact, Crusoe's treatment of Friday is a classic example of colonising the other, and is also reminiscent of Prospero's enslavement of Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He dresses Friday in clothes that resemble his own, although Friday had apparently no need of clothing before this, and he converts him to Christianity. Having been alone on the island for 24 years, Defoe's Crusoe intensely values the human company that Friday provides. Yet he never ceases to regard him as a servant rather than a companion. When they manage to escape from the island after four years together, Friday is brought to England as a servant, and the two engage in further adventures. Friday does

⁷ Given her departures from Defoe (including having him make his own alcohol) it is clear that Bishop's Crusoe is very much her own. Peter Robinson details some of these changes in "The Bliss of What?" (127-143).

not die in *Robinson Crusoe*. In one of Defoe's sequels, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* he is killed by cannibals after he and Crusoe have returned to the island.

Bishop's adaptation of the story has three major features. Firstly, Friday becomes the transformative emotional centre of Crusoe's island life, his arrival coming at Crusoe's lowest point (another "low tide"): "Just when I thought I couldn't stand it/ another minute longer, Friday came" (*Collected Prose* 164).⁸ This is notably figured in Crusoe's self-evaluation before Friday; when he contemplates there being "one kind of everything" on the island, as well as one sun "there was one of it and one of me" (*Collected Prose*: 163). Secondly, Bishop foregrounds the love between the two men and posits it in terms of equality, excluding any reference to the master-servant relation, and thirdly, she has Friday die of measles, presumably in England after their return from the island. In some regards it is striking how little Friday appears in the poem, when it is considered how his presence transforms it into so powerful a poem of bereavement and grief. There was apparently much more of Friday in the poem's earlier drafts (Kalstone 255). While Bishop's characteristic reticence and discretion concerning autobiography are evident in the poem, it still conveys a remarkable emotional intensity which comes, the reader feels, from making language for her own deepest feelings.

Friday's arrival is, again, interruptive, and it is striking how the poem's language register changes when his friendship is recalled. In the earlier sections of the poem Crusoe exhibits a sophisticated latinate multisyllabic vocabulary attuned to metaphor and simile. For instance, he describes the island's waterspouts in figurative terms; "Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated,/sacerdotal beings of

⁸ Bishop mischievously adds a parenthetical remark, "Accounts of that have everything all wrong", echoing the poem's tenth line, "None of the books has ever got it right".

glass" (*Collected Prose* 163). The rendering of Friday is a striking reversion to childlike language with simple sentences dominated by monosyllables:

Friday was nice.
Friday was nice and we were friends.
If only he had been a woman!
I wanted to propagate my kind,
and so did he, I think, poor boy.
He'd pet the baby goats sometimes,
and race with them, or carry one around.
– Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.
And then one day they came and took us off.

(*Collected Prose* 165-6)

The poem's emotional centre is a return to the simple, to the elemental, and the language shift registers this (Vendler 97-110; 106).⁹ It is a deeply moving moment, partly because of Bishop's rendering of Crusoe's joy at the friendship. Indeed, rather than rejoicing in the end of his exile on the island, Crusoe represents it as though he and Friday had been kidnapped. The dully monosyllabic passive line "And then one day they came and took us off" suggests no will or agency on the part of himself and Friday, as though the intention of unnamed others was the destruction of an idyll. But is moving also because it is difficult not to see another interruption here, akin to the "Write it!" of "One Art". The lines are self-reflective, opening up for a moment to Bishop herself reflecting on her own

⁹ In this essay-review of *Geography III*, "Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly", repr. as "Elizabeth Bishop", Helen Vendler noted this register shift, remarking on Crusoe reverting to "the most vacant and consequently the most comprehensive of words". This is an important essay in elucidating a key strategy in Bishop's poetry, of making the threatening and the unfamiliar bearable through acts of domestication.

life, on her bereavement and on the consequences of her lesbianism. This is far more than a simple autobiographical representation, even though some critics have found it easy to create analogies between Friday and Bishop's long-time partner Lota de Macedo Soares, who had committed suicide in 1967, and Bishop's resentment at Lota's treatment from those politically opposed to her work. Bishop tried for years after Lota's death to write an elegy for her, but never accomplished it. The understated final lines of "Crusoe in England" are about never-ending grief:

– And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
seventeen years ago come March. (*Collected Prose* 166)

"I miss Lota more every day of my life" Bishop wrote to Lowell, and again, saying that she felt life had been emptied of meaning. It is the simplicity of the statement that makes it so poignant (in *Travisano* 648).¹⁰ Crusoe's simple language when recalling the living vibrant Friday points also to what Bishop called her "worst regret" of her life, her childlessness.¹¹ The utterance here is another glimpse into the poem's emotional depth, and in effect by interrupting the utterance of Crusoe, shows us the reasons for Crusoe as a mask. It is in this respect analogous to how Lowell had strategically structured *Life Studies*, where several poems in the collection are dramatic monologues from a variety of personae – Marie de Medici, Hart Crane, a mad African-American soldier. But these investments in imagined other voices is dropped for the book's final section, where Lowell speaks as himself, in his own voice. Retrospectively we realise that however remote the supposed speakers of those dramatic

¹⁰ Millier usefully provides some of the autobiographical contexts for "Crusoe in England" in *Elizabeth Bishop*, 446-453.

¹¹ In a letter dated October 6 1960, Bishop commented on Lowell's daughter, saying that not being a mother was her life's "worst regret". See *Words in Air*, 342.

monologues were from Lowell, they were analogues of his own self, roles adopted in order to permit self-expression in a particular way. By interrupting her own dramatic monologue, Bishop briefly allows us to see her own face behind the mask of Crusoe; indeed she commented several times on the freedom the monologue gave for self-expression: “You can say all kinds of things you couldn’t in a lyric. If you have scenery and costumes you can get away with a lot” (Conversations 26).

This interruption is actually a modulated and a more subtle repetition of an earlier one that occurs in the poem, considerably more audacious and blatant. Crusoe reflects on his painful lack of elementary knowledge, his missing books, and trying to remember things from them:

Why didn’t I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I’d read were full of blanks;
the poems – well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
“They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss. . .” The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was to look it up. (*Collected Prose* 164)

The truncated quotation is from Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”. Wordsworth’s speaker recalls the experience of unexpectedly encountering thousands of daffodils, and the recollection brings joy into the speaker’s life:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood.
They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.¹²

It is of course the word “solitude” which Crusoe has forgotten – forgotten or repressed. It is the word he cannot speak, because his loneliness is too appalling and unwanted to bear the positive connotations that “solitude” possesses. For him there is no bliss in solitude and, unlike Wordsworth’s speaker, no joy in recollecting a time of happiness. It is an odd moment in Bishop’s poem. Firstly, of course, it is anachronistic, in that Defoe’s fictive Crusoe, appearing in a novel published in 1719 could not possibly have known Wordsworth’s poem, published in 1807.¹³ Secondly, Bishop’s Crusoe, now at home in England, can readily access the actual poem; that is, he is fully aware of the word that he withholds from us. The elision of “solitude” is blatant and deliberate, an attempt to recall his state of mind and represent it accurately.

The truncated Wordsworth quote is an interruptive moment, another point at which the mask of Crusoe slips and we see the face of the poet. But it functions as more than that. The phrase “The bliss of what” has a resonance all of its own. It of course testifies to Crusoe’s loss of bliss, unable to find pleasure or joy in his life, and now feeling an exile in England (another island) as much as he had on the other island. But it is also a phrase that describes the kind of poetry Bishop wrote. She is very much a poet of “what”, of things, of actuality, of objects, a poet who distrusts abstractions and grand narratives and favours what is there, what may be seen

¹² *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*. Ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 304. The poem is also known as “Daffodils” and editors typically have a comma rather than a period after ‘mood’.

¹³ With their characteristic scrupulousness the *New Yorker* editors actually queried this anachronism. See Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop*, 448.

and touched. A poet who relishes what Martin Heidegger famously called “the thingness of things” (152). While this attitude is evident in numerous poems, it is an especially prominent theme in “Questions of Travel”. For the speaker, the plenitude of an exotic actuality threaten to be too much (“There are too many waterfalls here”) or may be incomprehensible to our understanding (“some inexplicable old stonework,/inexplicable and impenetrable”) (*Collected Prose* 93). But the material objects that are encountered make real to us what are otherwise the grand abstractions. Thus the speaker may understand a locality’s history “in/the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages” or is invited to ponder the relation between “the crudest wooden footwear/and, careful and finicky,/the whittled fantasies of wooden cages” (*Collected Prose* 93-4). “Questions of Travel” is perhaps Bishop’s most powerful and memorable expression of a theme that appears constantly in her work: the responsibility to experience actuality for what it is rather than for what we might imagine it to be. It is this that makes us at home in reality. This an answer to one of the “questions of travel” that the poem ponders, the question “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” (*Collected Prose* 93) Thinking and imagining are radically different from bearing witness to actuality, to touching and seeing; it is not enough to imagine or to dream a world; our responsibility is to become immersed in its materiality. This is why “the bliss of what” has such resonance for Bishop, and it recurs in major poems such as “The Fish”, “At the Fishhouses”, “First Death in Nova Scotia”, “The Filling Station” and “The Moose”.

Expressed in this way, one can readily see the intellectual affinities between Bishop and Wallace Stevens, a poet she greatly admired. Stevens continually renegotiates the relation between the imagination and reality. In some of his greatest poems he celebrates, as the Romantics had, the imagination’s power to invest reality with meaning, to order, illuminate and enrich what is otherwise

inchoate and meaningless. But in another strain in his poetry Stevens expresses longing for an experience of actuality in which the actual is sufficient, he desires experience of the real, freed from the impositions of our human imaginative constructions, wants to feel the “affluence” of the real rather than its impoverishment; “Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare”.¹⁴ In another poem, he longs for an unmediated experience of the actual, “The the”.¹⁵ “The bliss of what” could be used to encompass this strain of Stevens, as it also could for a similar strain in the poetry of John Ashbery, one of Bishop’s greatest admirers. Indeed one of Ashbery’s poems from *Houseboat Days* is titled “What is Poetry”. The title is not actually a question, and, typical of Ashbery’s ludic sensibility, the poem consists of seven questions which effectively function as answers to the question the title has not asked.

In this way, “Crusoe in England” could on the face of it be readily coopted as one of Bishop’s poems that explores an attitude familiar in her writing, and a theme of domesticating the unfamiliar that has long been seen as a crucial in her work. But in many ways “Crusoe in England” is a quite untypical poem. As we have seen, “the bliss of what” is not used to allude to a poetic. Crusoe’s self-reliance is not an ideal but a pragmatic response to need. Even as Bishop’s poem flirts with the familiar American Adamic poetry tradition it falters in this area, since her Crusoe is so reluctant a namer. Moreover, the names he gives to spaces become radically unstable signifiers, as when he names one volcano both *Mont d’Espoir* and *Mount Despair*. Most significantly, “Crusoe in England” undoes Bishop’s

¹⁴ From Stevens’ “Evening Without Angels” (137). Maria Irene Ramalho Santos writes of this poem, “To enjoy evenings ‘without angels’ means, therefore, to be pleasurably comforted. . . by the repetitive naturalistic knowledge that there is no ‘secret in skulls’” (204).

¹⁵ “The Man on the Dump”. *Collected Poems* 203. A variation of “The the” appears in the closely linked poem “The Latest Freed Man”, which ends with “the chairs” (205).

more familiar trust in things, in objects. Although he may be seen as the heroic domesticator of wilderness Crusoe finds no joy in this, no real pride in the recollection of his accomplishments. The things that he made and which were crucial to his survival are now emptied of meaning and purpose. Removed from the only context in which they had significance, all the surviving impedimenta have become “uninteresting lumber”:

The knife there on the shelf – it reeked of meaning,
like a crucifix.]
It lived. How many years did I
beg it, implore it, not to break?
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
the bluish blade, the broken tip,
the lines of wood-grain on the handle. . .
Now it won't look at me at all.
The living soul has dribbled away.
My eyes rest on it and pass on. (*Collected Prose* 166)

Crusoe is also mystified by the local museum's request that he bequeath the items to them; “How can anyone want such things?” (*Collected Prose* 166) Bishop's journey from a loving articulator of actuality to this negating question is extraordinary. It also indicates the real subject of “Crusoe in England”; the corrosive effects of grief at the loss of a beloved. It is the loss of the irreplaceable actual Friday which renders the objects meaningless, recalls them as mere objects. In this way “Crusoe in England” resembles “Father's Bedroom”, one of Lowell's poems from *Life Studies*. In this section of the sequence Lowell writes of the death of his father yet in “Father's Bedroom” he permits no emotional expression at all, providing what appears to be an enumeration of the objects left in the bedroom after the death. Yet the idea emerges that these objects are now

meaningless because of the father's absence. So while it seems to be a poem which resists anticipated emotional expression, it actually explores the effects of grief, of bereavement. While it ranges around considerably more than Lowell's poem, being one of Bishop's longest, "Crusoe in England" possesses the same emotional core, the grief deflected and not directly expressed but available throughout Crusoe's monologue.

While its characteristics are entirely typical of Bishop's style, "Crusoe in England" is somewhat exceptional in its questioning of ideas that are otherwise central to the themes of her poetry and to our understanding of it. In this respect it is both a poem with an interruption, and a poem that interrupts the course of her established work. This is one effect of the loss that the poem indirectly articulates; after all, scarcely anything is more interruptive to one's life than bereavement and the consequent grief. Another effect for Bishop may have been the loss of belief in the capacity of poetry to resolve, to provide coherence and meaning. As we saw, Bishop had once expressed a firm belief in the purpose of art to provide "that rare feeling of control, illumination", to stand against panic and emptiness (in Trivisano 246). But that belief wavers, and as she sombrelly remarked in an interview in 1966, "People seem to think that doing something like writing a poem makes one happier in life. It doesn't solve anything" (*Conversations* 41).

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