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Under the Influence: Elizabeth Bishop's England and Frances Leviston's Louisiana

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Abstract

Elizabeth Bishop's relationship to the literal places she lived in, travelled through and sometimes made home, has long been a key concern of critics and readers. What interests me in this article is Bishop's relationship to a country she visited on just a few occasions, namely England. In so doing, I intend to focus not so much on

Bishop's experiences in England—she made short trips there in the 1930s, 1960s and 1970s—but rather on her idea of England as a poetic home and the extent to which contemporary poets in Britain and Ireland have been influenced by her writing. Bishop's England is thus at least two things here, a body of literature she herself reads and reinterprets in her poetry, and, more recently, a national poetry that has itself become Bishopesque in light of her contemporary popularity.

Keywords

Elizabeth Bishop; Frances Leviston; poetic influence; travel; Twentieth-Century Literature; Contemporary Literature

Under the Influence:

Elizabeth Bishop's England and Frances Leviston's Louisiana

In 2014 English poet Frances Leviston was invited to write a short piece for *Harriet*, the literary blog of the Poetry Foundation. Leviston had just had her first poem accepted by *Poetry*. The poem was included not in a regular issue but in a special number showcasing contemporary British poets. Leviston admitted to feeling "disappointed at this news":

The poem will still be in the magazine; it will still find a readership; but the prospect of escaping the usual British context to be read alongside an international range of work was something I found immensely appealing. Other forms of orientation have more valency than nationalism for me. I've never felt any deep attachment to a country, a town, a landscape; never written in that grounded, territorial sort of way. The books most important to me over the last few years have been by Elizabeth Bishop, George Seferis, and Ange Mlinki, poets whose relationships with British poetic traditions are helpfully indirect.[1]

I have been intrigued by Bishop's "indirect" relationship with British poetic traditions for several years. What felt new to me was how this oblique relationship to the tradition might be "helpful" to contemporary poets as well, in Britain and Ireland just as much as in America. Critics are familiar with the idea of Bishop as a hybrid American poet (Canadian and/or American) whose travels north and south, including her long stay in Brazil, make her more of an Atlantic writer than anything else. In a

draft poem her friend, Robert Lowell, addressed her in precisely these terms, as "Half Nova Scotian, half New Englander, / Wholly Atlantic".[2] More recently, Marvin Campbell has connected Bishop's poems about Florida to a broader Global South Atlantic, linking her to poets like Audre Lorde and Claudia Rankine. According to Campbell, "Bishop's investments in Nova Scotia, Florida and Brazil … reveal a transnational geography consistent with a commitment to interrogating how geographies have been drawn by cultural and state power …. Bishop traces a larger arc, if not an archipelago, that spans Great Village to Tierra del Fuego, Great Labrador to Port-au-Prince, Bermuda to the Galapagos, and Mexico City to Puerto Rico".[3] In a related move, James McCorkle has identified what he terms (following Marc Shell's 2014 book *Islandology*) Bishop's "poetics of islandology": "At the heart of Shell's islandology is the acute listening to overlapping sounds, interpenetrating and permeable meanings, a shift from an insular reading to littoral and osmotic readings, or from a politics of containment to one of interconnection. Bishop and her island poetics encompass isolation and identity, containment and connectivity, and especially the permeability of the visible".[4]

The aim of this article is to extend Campbell and McCorkle's idea of Bishop as a Global South Atlantic poet or a poet of islandology to include Britain and continental Europe within its geography and to take seriously Leviston's implicit identification with Bishop as an international writer. A transatlantic reading of Bishop's poetry alters and extends our interpretation of her as an eternal traveller sceptical of home and of national belonging by broadening the contexts and traditions in which she herself grew up in, traditions revitalised by her own writing. It is to see Bishop as a poet at home in but at the same time in flight from various homes and

national traditions, what Edward Said characterises as the condition of the exile, a state both positive and negative:

For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring, together contrapuntually. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntual juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgement and elevate appreciate sympathy. There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be.

This remains risky, however: the habit of dissimulation is both wearying and nerve-racking. Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure.[5]

Bishop never identified herself as an exile—she nearly always chose to live elsewhere, especially as an adult—though she certainly described the exile's experience in "Crusoe in England", one of her longest and most ambitious poems, written from the perspective of a home, England, that is anything but, about an island experience that for the most part only generated nightmares. Bishop's Crusoe talks about home throughout the poem but as a feeling ("Pity should begin at home") rather than a real place, or a literal invention in the case of the "home-made brew" that goes straight to his head.[6] As Said points out, there is both pleasure and risk in liberating a sense of home from a fixed place, in being the type of person who is "at home wherever one happens to be" and at one and the same time, never "satisfied, placid, or secure". Crusoe makes his island home but in making it home, particularly with Friday, he renders his original home, England, a drab alternative. Bishop does the

same with different homes, different national traditions, throughout her poetry. Her identities shift depending on where she is writing from and whether that place reminds her of somewhere else. To decide on one or other nationality within which to frame Bishop's poetry is, in other words, to still the restless energy those poems embody, to give them a home they eventually shake off.

Bishop's own practices thus sit squarely within an established transatlantic tradition of thinking and writing. As Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor point out, "Complex interchanges between the Americas, Europe and Africa, with all the forces of 'global' markets and movements of people, are a fundamental feature of modern life, one that makes clear the futility of continuing with nation-based studies developed in a world whose parameters looked very different".[7] The crucial point about considering Bishop as transatlantic is not that she becomes more or less American or British than in previous accounts, though that may be the case with readings of individual poems, but that our overall understanding of her imaginative world becomes less formal, less static, more in keeping with her own mapmaker's transgression of lines and borders in the early poem "The Map", a poem that opened her first book *North & South* (1946), establishing her identity as a descriptive poet who explored the possibilities and limits of such description. Bishop exists in a similar in/out position in relationship to American and British poetic traditions. Accepting the Neustadt Prize for Literature in 1976, her speech focused on the figure of the sandpiper from her eponymous poem. "Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper—just running along the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something'".[8] In the poem's middle stanza, Bishop depicts him watching the spaces of sand between his toes "where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains / rapidly backwards and downwards".[9] It's an odd

detail: to imagine the whole Atlantic drain between the toes of a small bird. Surely, it's just a miniscule drop in a very large ocean? What does she mean by pressing such a large body of water into such a small space on the sand? Bishop often hides oracular statements within plain-sounding descriptive passages. It's one of the reasons why she is such an admired poet. The mystery is both on the surface and somewhere between the lines. Her engagement with the Atlantic tradition is similarly open *and* hidden. Like the Atlantic Ocean in the poem that "drains / rapidly backwards and downwards", it is both there and on the point of disappearing: something, and then nothing at all. Sifting through Bishop's poems in this article, I hope to catch some of her transatlantic influences and to show how Bishop's influence has made contemporary British poetry transatlantic too.

Bishop's relationship to the literal places she lived in, travelled through and sometimes made home, has long been a key concern of her biographers, critics and readers. Barbara Hammer's documentary film, *Welcome to This House: A Film on Elizabeth Bishop* (2015), made it the centre of her exploration of Bishop's biography. The film follows Bishop by following Bishop's travels, or rather by visiting Bishop's houses, including the "three loved houses" she mourns in "One Art".[10] There are at least four candidates for special-house status in Bishop's imagination: her grandparents' house in Great Village, Nova Scotia; the house she bought with Louise Crane in Key West, Florida; the house she shared with Lota de Macedo Soares in Petrópolis, Brazil; and the house she bought herself and restored in Ouro Preto, also in Brazil.[11] Colm Tóibín's *On Elizabeth Bishop* (2015) similarly focuses on the actual places Bishop lived in, especially Nova Scotia, Key West and Brazil. Like Hammer,

he actually revisits them in an attempt to get closer to Bishop's artistic spirit.[12] But to what extent might the places that are important to Bishop be imaginary rather than real? To cite her own words from the beautiful late poem, "Santarém": "I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place".[13] Does Bishop like the place and the idea of the place equally? Or does she in fact prefer one over the other, the idea of place to its messy reality? Is the second phrase that comes after the semi-colon a correction and perhaps rejection of the first statement? Questions like this are crucial to Bishop's poetry. Indeed, one could argue that it is one of the questions for which she is most famous. "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?" she asks in "Questions of Travel"?[14] "Where are we?" she asks more generally in "The Monument".[15] The semi-colon that divides the two phrases in "Santarém" is critical to answering this question. Joelle Biele's edition of *The New Yorker* correspondence highlights the importance of punctuation to Bishop's poetry. In her introduction to the book, Biele offers one of the most suggestive definitions of Bishop's use of colons and semicolons. "The colon", Biele writes, "says the speaker is headed in a particular direction; the semicolon gives her the possibility of wandering".[16] The semi-colon is, in other words, the perfect punctuation mark for a poet of travel since it encourages her to keep more than one idea in play. What Bishop may be saying in "Santarém" is not that the idea of place is better than being in that place, but that both are equally important to her. The semi-colon, like a thin dividing wall between two rooms, allows both views to be heard.

We have been here before of course. The first poem in Bishop's first book celebrates the mapmaker's idea of place alongside the experience of living in real places like Newfoundland and Norway ("The Map"). In Yiyun Li's novel, *Where Reasons End* (2019), "The Map" is celebrated not for its accuracy about geography

but for its acuity about memory. It is the poem, the mother tells her son, that "made you realize memory turned the places we traveled to into different colors".[17] "Brazil, January 1, 1502" is another poem that balances at least two representations of place, this time of Brazil, both mediated via different textual guides. A twentieth-century English speaker, instructed by Kenneth Clark's book, *Landscape into Art*, interprets every landscape as potentially worked over and written upon: "fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame".[18] In the second half of the poem, a sixteenth-century coloniser takes over. Empowered by Biblical and Renaissance iconography, he sees the landscape as a "hanging fabric" as well.[19] Bishop doesn't rank one perspective over another, even when one might expect her to do so. "This is what the world looks like now," she constantly seems to be saying. "But I may think differently if you ask me again."

Bishop is a great poet of frames and framing devices. Dedications, epigraphs, footnotes, place names and other forms of sidebar text increasingly bookend and interrupt the body of her work from five out of thirty poems in her first book *North & South* to five out of ten (exactly half) in her last book *Geography III*. A Bishop poem, for all its apparent finish and polish, is a curiously shape-shifting object. Nothing, including the name of a place and by implication our associations with that place, is ever one thing.

This article focuses on the second type of place, the idea of place. Real places can, I trust, still be imagined. What interests me here is Bishop's relationship to a place she visited on just a few occasions, namely England. In so doing, I intend to focus not so much on Bishop's experiences in England—she made short trips there in the 1930s,

1960s and 1970s—but rather on her idea of England as a poetic home and the extent to which contemporary poets in Britain and Ireland have been influenced by her writing. Bishop's England, in this sense, is both Bishop's idea of England and England's idea of Bishop. I'll begin with the former. Although Bishop was born in New England, she spent many of her formative years in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia was, and perhaps still remains, a resolutely Anglophile region of Canada. In her memoir, "The Country Mouse", Bishop remembered her Canadian school day beginning with "God Save the King" and "The Maple Leaf Forever".[20] In her poem, "First Death in Nova Scotia", she recalls chromographs of "Edward, Prince of Wales, / with Princess Alexandra, / and King George with Queen Mary".[21] Taken to Boston by her paternal grandparents, she "hated saluting the flag …. I wanted us to win the War, of course, but I didn't want to be an American".[22] *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box* contains further evidence of this Anglophile upbringing via references to several English writers, including Blake, Auden, and Mrs Carlyle, whose letters Bishop once taught. In her recently published *North Haven Journal*, written in the last five years of her life, we find further evidence of her lifelong love of English literature. In one entry, she complains about Virginia Woolf's "ruthless gossip & lack of charity".[23] In another, she records reading Graham Greene's latest novel: "Lent it to Mrs. P & she hated it".[24] Although Bishop eventually moved permanently to New England, she spent the majority of her adolescence with another Nova Scotian relative, her mother's elder sister, Maude Bulmer Shepherdson.[25] Bishop traced her interest in poetry to this time: "My aunt, like so many Victorians, belonged to the village's poetry society and she recited a great deal to me—Longfellow, Browning, Tennyson. So obviously I memorized a lot and it soon became an unconscious part of me".[26] In drafts for an unfinished elegy for Maude, Bishop recalled the "crowded furniture" of

her aunt's house, the "*National Geographics* piled on the sewing machine / Browning like a pillow / Shakespeare falling apart"[27]. This literal furniture later became the mental furniture she would raid when thinking about poetry. It comforted her, as she says, exactly "like a pillow", albeit not a conventional one.

Bishop's time with Maude and her husband, George Shepherdson, has until recently been a relatively overlooked period of Bishop's life. Brett Millier's biography, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (1993), devotes just four pages to the years between 1918 and 1927, the year Bishop enrolled at Walnut Hill School for Girls. Millier focuses mainly on Bishop's impressions of the community in which they lived, a neighbourhood of Irish and Italian immigrants in Revere, Massachusetts, another instance of Bishop's knowledge of those who lived in exile. Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau's oral biography published a year later doesn't add much to the story though they presciently register Bishop's silence on the subject of one relative in particular: "George Shepherdson is curiously absent from any of Bishop's comments about this time".[28] Alice Quinn's edition of Bishop's uncollected work in 2006 filled in some of these gaps but not all. In the mid-1950s, more or less the same period when she was working on other Nova Scotian writing, Bishop began two elegies based around the memory of visiting her aunt's grave in Nova Scotia, probably in 1946 or 1947. In "For M.B.S., buried in Nova Scotia", she addresses her aunt as if she were still living. "Yes, you are dead now and live / only there, in a little, slightly tip-tilted graveyard".[29] A second poem that Quinn provisionally titles, "One afternoon my aunt and I…", focuses on her aunt's blueberry-picking skills, "the men's rough voices" held at a distance.[30] Finally, in "Mrs Sullivan Upstairs", a memoir Quinn dates to the early 1960s, her aunt appears again, this time as "small, worried, nervous, shy". "My aunt and I loved each other and told each other

everything and for many years I saw nothing in her to criticize…".[31] The sentence ends mid-thought here, as if promising some further information later. A paragraph on, Bishop recalls overhearing arguments in the street. It seems briefly as if she is about to share something about her own home life: "Would they fight? Used to violence in the neighbors and a certain amount threatened in my own apartment—".[32] The next paragraph down, Bishop tries a third time: "I suppose my aunt despised everyone a little. It is true she was a cut above them—and she probably was intensely unhappy in our …".[33] What could Bishop not bring herself to say, even in an unpublished story? In 2009, following the death of Bishop's literary executor, Alice Methfessel, a collection of letters to Bishop's psychiatrist, Dr Ruth Foster, was sold to Vassar. In them, we learn of George molesting Bishop from the age of eight-years old until at least she was fourteen or fifteen, an experience she repressed until her aunt's death in 1940. "As long as my aunt was alive I completely forgot or suppressed[,] whatever you say[,], all the details of his sexual behaviour to me[,] but when she died I remembered it all—not all at once, the more recent parts first".[34]

The legacy of her time with Maude *and* George was one Bishop attempted to write about at regular intervals after Maude's death. The letters to Dr Foster were written in 1947. The poem about Maude's grave drafted in Brazil was probably begun around the same period. The composition of "Mrs Sullivan Downstairs", like her other prose writing about Nova Scotia, is likely to date from the 1950s. She worked on two further drafts about her time with Maude and George, in the 1970s. Megan Marshall's recent biography, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* (2017), cites from the Dr Foster letters but seems concerned, like Bishop, to move the story along. Other critics have been less squeamish. Lorrie Goldensohn writes of the letters as driven by Bishop's "shame", especially about her drinking: "Bishop was guided by

the hope that someone she loved and trusted might free her of her addiction. These letters, flushed out by dismaying amounts of alcohol and marked by intervals of disabling hangovers, emerge as if a scalpel had laid bare the life underneath".[35] For Linda Anderson, "what the Foster letters show us—and where their value lies […]—is less with discovering more about the 'awful times' than with offering us insight into how Bishop was developing trust in herself to write freely, and without censorship".[36]

Revisiting her comparison of Browning to a "pillow", the family copy of Shakespeare "falling apart", we find in these images from an unpublished poem a hint at the unhappiness and violence she experienced and witnessed at home. Might some of this distress have carried through into her memories of the English poems she was reading at the same time as a young girl and teenager, poems that she reworks as an adult poet later?

Bishop's first collection of poems, *North & South*, responds quite explicitly to two Victorian poems that schoolchildren of Bishop's age would have been asked to memorize in the first few decades of the twentieth-century: "Casabianca" by Felicia Hemans and "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Bishop's versions of these poems, titled "Casabianca" and "The Gentleman of Shalott", draw for some of their effects on a reader's knowledge of these Victorian poems. Indeed, her "Casabianca" is a poem about the very act of reciting poetry:

Love's the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite "The boy stood on
the burning deck." Love's the son

stood stammering elocution

while the poor ship in flames went down.

Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,
even the swimming sailors, who
would like a schoolroom platform, too,

or an excuse to stay

on deck. And love's the burning boy.[37]

Is the boy in this poem the same boy as in Hemans's poem or a schoolboy attempting to remember the poem afterwards? Disregarding the ambiguity about the main character, should one envy the boy's devotion to his task (whether remaining on the ship or remaining on the schoolroom platform) as an act of love or are we meant to consider his life wasted? I cannot answer any of these questions with any certainty. Indeed, I wonder whether the poem is actually about any of these questions at all. Perhaps it is simply about the difficult art of poetry, particularly love poetry. That, after all, is the word Bishop keeps trying to find an analogy for in the poem: "Love's the boy", "Love's the son", "Love's the obstinate boy, the ship, / even the swimming sailors", and, in the very last line of the poem, "love's the burning boy".[38] In responding to and rewriting a Victorian poem, Bishop is attracted to the artifice of the poem, to *how* rather than *what* the poem is saying: the "trying to recite". She is practising the sound of poetry rather than writing poetry per se.

One of Bishop's favourite poets was Gerard Manley Hopkins. In an unpublished essay on contemporary poetry, Bishop admitted that "the three qualities" she admired most in poetry were "*Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery*. My three

'favourite' poets—not the best poets, whom we all admire, but favorite in the sense of one's 'best friends,' etc. are Herbert, Hopkins, Baudelaire".[39] While at Vassar, Bishop completed an audacious and sophisticated analysis of the idea of timing in Hopkins's poetry. At the same time, she attempted to imitate Hopkins's verbal trickery in her own writing. The 1933 poem, "Hymn to a Virgin", is, according to James Fenton, an example of Bishop as "the aspiring poet bent double with laughter at his effects, borrowing sprung rhythm to take it for a run around the block".[40] Here, to give some idea of what Fenton means, is the second stanza:

> Pull back, pull back
> And through the crack
> Glimpse of the dusty grandeur, faith's fall'n in paraphernalia rise!
> Ah, on the dais of the dazzled, dust-beclouded skies
> Come, Blessed Mary, stand on air,
> *Rorate coeli desuper*,
> Strike on our senses strong again with smell-stale incense, *Ave* cries
> And reds and blues and golden-oaks. We aeroplane-wise raise our eyes![41]

For all that it anticipates Bishop's multi-sensory response to the world in her later work, this, it seems to me, is not a great poem. Sprung rhythm cannot spring much further without appearing ridiculous. Consonance and sibilance seem similarly overused to the point of silliness. As with "Casabianca", this looks and certainly sounds like a poem, but in imitating Hopkins so closely, even if on purpose, even if for parody, "Hymn to a Virgin" leaves no more than a superficial impression on the reader. Bishop sensibly chose not to include it in her first collection and it is hidden at

the back of her 1983 *Complete Poems* under the heading "Poems Written in Youth". A more accurate heading might have been "Poems Written Under the Influence". Hopkins's presence does not disappear altogether from Bishop's writing after this. Her opening poem in *A Cold Spring* (1955) opens with an epigraph from his poetry. Bishop's introduction to *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* (1957) also quotes at length a letter by Hopkins to Robert Bridges, as does her famous 1972 letter to Robert Lowell on what she felt to be his misuse of Elizabeth Hardwick's letters in his collection, *The Dolphin*.

I want to leave Hopkins's influence on Bishop behind at this point and take up a different Victorian artist, or at least an artist who lived in Victorian England. One of Bishop's uncles, George Hutchinson, travelled to England in the 1880s to pursue a career as a painter. Bishop thought wrongly that he became a member of the Royal Academy, although he was the first illustrator of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Bishop published two poems about Hutchinson's paintings, "Large Bad Picture" in *North & South* and "Poem" in *Geography III* (1976). The second poem, called "Poem", is one of Bishop's best poems about the relationship between art and memory, specifically about the capacity of visual art to commemorate not just a place, but also the moment of painting it. In Bishop's descriptions of her uncle's painting the reader's attention is drawn as much to the brushstrokes and squiggles of paint from the tube as the houses and steeples they represent:

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.

Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
—that gray-blue wisp—or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two miniscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's speciality.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?[42]

This is a characteristic Bishop stanza in many ways. We see, in a memorable phrase from one of her letters, "not a thought, but the mind thinking".[43] The authoritative beginning, "It must be Nova Scotia", is about as certain as Bishop gets. It is all doubts and questions from here on in. The "gray-blue wisp" looks like "a thin church steeple", "or is it?" "A specklike bird is flying to the left. / Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?" The love of colour and the precision of those colours are also striking. In addition to brown and white houses, white geese, blue water and blue sky, there is also the "gray-blue wisp" that may or may not be a steeple, a "white and yellow" wild iris and "steel-gray storm clouds". Bishop's attention to shades of grey and blue is very painterly. She is also attracted to the painting's small-scale. There are at least

four or five references to size in this stanza: “some tiny cows”, “two miniscule white geese”, “a half inch of blue sky” and the “specklike bird”. According to Susan Rosenbaum, Bishop celebrates miniatures in art because they represented something fundamental about her philosophy of life.[44] Put simply, Bishop looks at the kind of objects, people and places many other poets pass by. She is a collector and elegist of the everyday, commemorating the sort of secondary status objects that often go uncollected by museums and galleries.

One might also trace the influence of Bishop’s other favourite Victorian writer, Charles Darwin.[45] In a justly celebrated letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop wondered at both the heroism and strangeness of Darwin’s undertaking, in particular the movement in Darwin’s writing from “facts and minute details” to “sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown”.[46] This final experience sounds like fainting or perhaps even death. The act of looking at things closely in a Bishop poem is often frightening, more so than many readers have recognised. In “The Fish”, the speaker spends so much time looking at the eponymous catch that he/she almost loses the chance to let the fish go. In “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance”, endless looking leads not to epiphany or insight but only to an empty grave.[47] In “Sandpiper”, one of Bishop’s most autobiographical poems as we have already seen, “looking for something, something, something”, appears both a brave and somewhat desperate affair.[48] Will the sandpiper ever find what he is looking for? What each of these looks, each of these poems circles around, is surely death. The fish is not dead yet, but by keeping it out of water “the terrible oxygen” is slowly killing it.[49] As much an ode to nature, the poem is also a sadistic account of species torture. “Over 2,000 Illustrations” is even more explicit about its main subject. Death is everywhere, from the dead man “in a blue arcade” to the “dead volcanoes” that “glistened like Easter

lilies".[50] The one experience we can never share is our own death, though Bishop, like other poets, often imagines dying. The early poem, "The Weed", begins with a dream of death: "I lay upon a grave, or bed, / (at least, some cold and close-built bower)".[51] For all its wryness of tone, her birthday poem, "The Bight", is also a grim depiction of a charnel house, imagining in awful (but cheerful) detail what happens to a body when it begins to rot. "Breakfast Song" is even more unflinching in its description of "ugly death" as a "cold, filthy place" where one is forever separated from the "nightlong, limblong warmth" of a lover's body.[52]

One of the best readings of this relatively unstudied trope in Bishop's writing was published by Frances Leviston, whose own poetry is the subject of the second half of this article, in 2015. In "Mothers and Marimbas in 'The Bight': Bishop's *Danse Macabre*", she demonstrates how "the maternal presence in 'The Bight' is intimately connected to the poem's engagement not simply with Baudelaire but with the seven-hundred-year-old tradition of *danse macabre* that Baudelaire reimagined".[53] In a dazzling close reading of the poem that takes in allusions not just to Baudelaire but to an international cast of musicians, painters and poets, including Hans Holbein, George Herbert, John Bunyan, Edgar Allan Poe, Camille Saint-Saëns, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and W. H. Auden, Leviston identifies a "deconstructed *dance macabre*" in almost every single line of the poem:

Bishop scatters its component parts through her lines (ribs here, marimbas there) so as not to disturb the surface appearance of "plain description," but with its knockabout etymological puns on "humorous elbowings" and claves/clavicles/keys, its percussive consonantal echoes mimicking the clicking of bones, and its frequent subliminal reminders of the dead, like the phonetic ghost of *Les Fleurs du mal* in "jaw*ful of*

marl," "The Bight" nevertheless takes its place in the *danse macabre*'s "long & complicated" "Awful but cheerful" history. Deconstructing the tradition in this way extends the mocking, leveling power of the tradition itself.[54]

Leviston believes the coming-together of cultural traditions is "a transaction of mutual replenishment: not only does the tradition of *danse macabre* invigorate Bishop's approach to her material, but the resulting poem also reinvigorates the tradition".[55] We will see how this idea motivates her own poem's approach to Bishop's writing later.

Death creeps up on Bishop more slowly in "Poem". After analysing the paint strokes, she suddenly realises that she knows the place her great-uncle has painted and can almost remember "the farmer's name".[56] Looking, in other words, often becomes remembering. The poem does not end here, however. As elsewhere in Bishop's poetry, looking—"our looks, two looks"[57]—eventually leads to thinking about death, or if not to death itself, then certainly to a state close-by.

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

the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.[58]

Bishop's "yet-to-be-dismantled elms" locate the painting and poem in two distinct time periods: turn-of-the-century Nova Scotia not yet scarred by Dutch elm disease and a more recent past in which the elms have already been taken down. As Jamie McKendrick points out, Bishop's "strong pictorialising impulse … frequently come up against the passing of time—not just in the formal sense that in a poem phrase follows phrase … but also conceptually".[59] This is definitely the case here. While the painting suspends time, the poem cannot help but set it ticking in spite of the euphemistic language. To be dismantled raises the possibility of being put together again. But the elms in the painting are gone, never to come back. The poem's speaker knows her similar fate, that at some point we will look at the poem as she looked at the painting, not as something "live" and "touching in detail" but as something that only reminds us of "the memory of it". The poem, like the painting, is a perfect still life, delicately poised on the threshold between being and disappearing. As Mark Doty points out in his wonderful book, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, there is "a deep pun hidden in the term: life with death in it, life after the knowledge of death, is, after all, still life".[60]

Bishop's three-dimensional scrutiny of the painting, and by extension, her own poetry, is prompted by her possession of a humdrum object by what by all accounts was a competent rather than a spectacular artist. The artist in question, George Hutchinson, was once "quite famous", as Bishop says in the poem, but not any more, or at least not as a painter. He is probably more famous now for being the great-uncle of Elizabeth Bishop. George Hutchinson gave his great-niece more than just a painting, however. As other critics of Bishop's poetry have shown, he was an

important example, perhaps the first example in her life, of the artist in exile who nevertheless held onto his memories of home.[61] Bishop hardly ever used the word, "home", without clarification, but Nova Scotia was almost certainly the one place she felt most at home writing about. She must have seen her relative as a kindred spirit in this regard. He proved to her how one could leave home without leaving behind the idea of home. Like Joelle Biele's definition of Bishop's semi-colons, in particular its employment in "Santarém", Hutchinson embodied "the possibility of wandering".

Hutchinson's apparent success in late Victorian England must also have intrigued Bishop. Later in life, she made several trips to England, most pilgrimages of sorts to writers' homes, among them Charles Darwin's home in Kent and John Keats's in Hampstead. Bishop mentions "England" just once in the poem, in an italicised section that appears to be in the voice of another relative (perhaps Aunt Maude?):

Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know he was quite famous, an R.A. . . .[62]

The phrase, "back to England", is not particularly attention-grabbing. On first reading, I doubt whether many readers see beyond Bishop's imitation of a generic relative. *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box* has many equally wonderful passages tucked in the notes. Here is one:

He was a man; he was a man; not a young man: along in years; well, like Uncle and me; along in years; well, along in years. He was a man, well, George, didn't he say he was from Boston? Well, a *nice* man, you know; a *nice type* of man; I wish you could meet him; well there was something sort of refined; not a young man; I mean he was just a nice *man*; better than Mabel Raite and *that* crowd; and oh the things he said about her![63]

This is not the place to probe Bishop's employment of such notebook entries; she clearly used them to draft and finish poems like "Poem". I want to focus instead on that physical journey across the Atlantic, to Uncle George's going "back to England", and where Bishop places this detail in the poem. It occurs just before Bishop's speculations about the relationship between art, life and memory, right before the poem changes register from personal reflection to philosophical statement. In a small-scale way, perhaps in a way Bishop is not even conscious about, England is identified as at least one of the places where questions about artistic form begin to be phrased. Bishop spent the first ten years of her life reading Victorian poetry, to such an extent that Victorian poetic forms became, as she herself admitted, "an unconscious part of me". In her first collection of poems, as we have seen in "Casabianca" and one might discover in a half-dozen other poems, Bishop used her memory of Victorian poetry to practise writing poetry herself, and above and beyond that, to work out the sort of poetry she was eventually going to become famous for herself. That search for a poetic voice begins, I think, with all the Victorians artists she came into contact with, whether that be in the form of a painting or poem. Her strangeness to us and to the

story of twentieth-century poetry is in part about the strangeness of Victorian forms in twentieth-century settings.[64]

In the final section of this article I would like to travel, a century or so after George Hutchinson, "back to England". If the rise in Bishop's reputation in North America has been, in Thomas Travisano's useful phrase, something of a "phenomenon",[65] the rise in Bishop's status in Britain and Ireland as one of *the* most important twentieth-century poets has been equally if not more dramatic. In fact, it is probably easier to come up with a list of poets who haven't cited Bishop's influence than it is to talk about poets who have. Seamus Heaney, who knew Bishop in the 1970s, was one of the most prominent advocates of Bishop's poetry, praising what he calls in *The Government of the Tongue* her "ultimate fidelity to the demands and promise of the artistic event".[66] James Fenton has focused on her love poetry; Lavinia Greenlaw and Jo Shapcott have stressed her fascination with science; Mark Ford and Jamie McKendrick her interest in Surrealism, and, again and again, different poets are drawn to her sense of being an exile. Eavan Boland, for instance, admires in Bishop's "fishhouses" and "cold springs" the index of the "true exile, the inner émigré, who sees them for the first time and may not see them again",[67] while Tom Paulin praises her fondness for "makeshift, temporary dwellings" which he sets in opposition to the ideological dangers implicit in being rooted in one place.[68] The Anglo-American poet, Michael Donaghy, makes a similar point in his recognition of Bishop's "exile" accent, which he celebrates for rejecting the two godparents of American poetry, Walt Whitman's "yawp" and Emily Dickinson's "centripetal concision".[69] Among younger poets, Deryn Rees-Jones, Caitríona O'Reilly and Leontia Flynn and have all written

poems explicitly in dialogue with Bishop's work. Rees-Jones's "The Fish", from her second book *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998), reinterprets Bishop's "The Fish" as a love lyric.[70] O'Reilly's "Thin" borrows its form and indirect storytelling from "Sestina", a late twentieth-century bedroom replacing Bishop's early twentieth-century kitchen.[71] Flynn's sonnet, "Elizabeth Bishop", from her second book *Drives* (2008), begins, as Bishop did, in Worcester, Massachusetts, before switching its attention to the poet as "soon-to-be veteran loser".[72]

Until recently, nobody has offered an overview of the Bishop phenomenon outside North America. Simon Armitage, in one of his first lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry, called Bishop's "semi-untouchable status … something of a conundrum":

While her poetry subtly captured or even anticipated urgent literary themes of gender politics and sexual orientation, hers is, on occasions, a traditional and an orthodox art. By which I mean she is at times an old-school rhymer and versifier, a romantic, a poet who dabbles in homespun wisdom, and someone who, now and again, will offer some fairly queasy perspectives on "others" and "otherness". She is also, here and there, a poet of simple diction, conservative syntax, conventional line breaks and sequential logic, an approachable and relatable writer whose work can be read straight off the page and "understood" by almost anyone with a reasonable grasp of the English language. [73]

Armitage's analysis is not particularly flattering to Bishop or to Bishop readers, that is if one agrees with his rather broad-stroke generalisations about her poetry. I do not. Stephanie Burt, in a more generous and to my mind infinitely more insightful essay

on the same subject, opens by comparing Bishop's appeal to that of John Donne. "She is intellectually rewarding, sometimes intellectually demanding, intricately involved with doubt and disbelief, and with code or indirection about sexuality."[74] Following Donne, Burt invites us to think about Bishop's reception history in relation to T. S. Eliot: "She is, as he is, the author of a relatively small body of published verse whose highlights are clear, and which many poets have already imitated, a poet who might be taken to encapsulate her culture's concerns; a poet whose major poems are surrounded by an expanding body of prose, much of it hard to find for decades after its first appearance, some of it still in the archive, where it serves a continuing scholarly industry".[75] She goes on to summarise some recognisable features and modes of speaking: "Bishop's published poems do not usually end with a bang, but neither do they leave off unexpectedly, mid-sentence or mid-idea. They adhere to prose conventions and prose sense, and they have recognisable roots (however far they ascend) in possible, and paraphrasable, claims about perceptions and actions in a visible world".[76] What ultimately excites Burt about Bishop's poetry, however, is not her likeness to Donne or Eliot, or her "paraphrasable" philosophy, but something less easy to characterise, something that Burt finds by following Bishop's rainbows:

Rainbows gave Bishop uniquely powerful reminders that what we see is not just what we see: it is also produced, and reproduced, by what we expect, by our angles, by what we know—and yet it seems single, closed and distinct to us when we perceive it nonetheless. It seems to have borders and ends, keeps on seeming that way, even when we know that "really", physically, geographically, it does not: you can't get to the end of the rainbow, nor can you isolate a border in the sky, independent of any perceiver, and call that zero-width border the rainbow's curved edge.[77]

Burt's Bishop-inspired poets include writers from both sides of the Atlantic: Lavinia Greenlaw, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Emily Berry, Michael Kindellan, Margaret Ross and Allan Peterson. For Burt Bishop's poetry continues to be relevant because her work anticipates "our dual awareness, first, that we could lose everything we have (a sense that the poets of the Cold War shared, though they feared nuclear war more than climate change), and second, that any sense of security we may have about our professional lives, our physical safety, our families, our housing, our food supply and so on is more a fact about our current social position than it is a fact about the world".[78] Bishop knows, in the words of her maternal grandmother, that "*Nobody knows*".[79] This is not a particularly attractive message; I certainly wouldn't call it "approachable" or "relatable".

It is possible to cite work by each of these poets and many others to demonstrate Bishop's influence. I am going to confine myself here to a discussion of a recent poem by contemporary British poet, Frances Leviston, whose critical work on Bishop we have already encountered. I thought it might be illuminating to share the story of how I encountered the poem and some of my first reactions to it. First impressions, as Bishop points out in numerous poems from "The Monument" to "Arrival at Santos", frequently reveal blinkered habits of reading. We expect, as she observes wryly in "Questions of Travel", not to be taken too far outside our comfort zone. The "tiniest green hummingbird in the world" will await our inspection. "Inexplicable old stonework" will nevertheless be "delightful". There will be "room" in our imaginary suitcases for "one more folded sunset, still quite warm".[80] A few summers ago, Leviston contacted me out of the blue in the middle of writing a dissertation on the representations of the library in contemporary poetry. As an

Elizabeth Bishop scholar, she wondered whether I had any leads. After exchanging a couple of e-mails, she added the following postscript: "I hesitate to mention this, but it occurs to me you might be interested in it as a curiosity if nothing else: I had a poem in *The Guardian* at the weekend called 'Bishop in Louisiana', which is sort of about Bishop and sort of about the Deepwater Horizon spill".[81] Here is the poem I found:

Bishop in Louisiana

Twelve days since I took up my post in this village,
a handful of clapboard houses crowded round the harbour
and the concrete yards glittering with scales
where church groups serve up grits and tamales
from long trestle tables and the interiors of white vans.

I myself eat at the hotel: beef, pasta, anything but fish,
watching the black sea break foamlessly
against the chemical barricade. On its surface orange curds
ride like surfboards or children's life-preservers.
After dinner I take my coffee in the privacy of my suite.

There is little to accomplish here. I walk on the beach
where the nests of common terns driven upwind to breed
are marked with red flags mounted on popsicle sticks,
hundreds of them, bunting in the wind. Each nest is no more
than a dint in the sand, easily made with a fist.

Yesterday I saw a dead sea-turtle turning to soup
inside its own shell. I am not immune to the irony of this.
I write cheques for the fishermen fitting their boats
with booms to skim the water, and speak to sad newscasters
under a flypast of helicopters and a crop-duster salute.

Try to imagine what a hundred million litres means.
You can't. At night, before bed, in the surprisingly deep bath,
I push my big toe into the streaming faucet
and feel its pressure build to a hot, relentless gush,
nightmarishly pleasurable, like pissing myself in my sleep.[82]

Four days later, I sent the following reply:

Thanks … for sending me the link to your poem. I have a gigantic pile of *Reviews* waiting to read on the coffee table but since the birth of my son a few months ago Literary Life has been placed on hold. I thought the atmosphere and mood of the poem was very Bishopesque. I loved the echoes of all those coastline-poems, particularly "The Bight" and "At the Fishhouses". The only line I had misgivings about is the last one, partly because it appeared a change of tone in relation to the rest of the poem, and partly because I don't think Bishop would have ever said that in a poem. I've had arguments about this subject for years with my wife (who has published some poems whereas I never have) and she says quite rightly that I regularly behave like Marianne Moore in relation to Bishop's poem, "Roosters". Do

you know about their famous spat over Bishop's use of a water-closet? Moore thought some words inappropriate in a poem, Bishop less so. Now in that poem Bishop does have all kinds of droppings and poo but they're of an animal variety! Elsewhere she talks of preferring "closets, closets, and more closets". I suppose I like my closets shut rather than open! Of course, if it didn't have Bishop in the title, and you hadn't told me to listen out for Bishop, it wouldn't have bothered me at all. So in relation to your question, I think it's a damn good poem and certainly much more than a curiosity ….

P.S. Feel free to e-mail back, à la Bishop, "The last line is perfect. FRANCES KNOWS BEST."[83]

A few weeks later, Leviston responded to my Marianne Moore misgivings thus:

Thank you … for your comments on the poem, which you didn't have to supply, but which I enjoyed thinking about, and of course your overall verdict was "flattering to my vanity" as I think EB said at some point. You're absolutely right about the final line not being something she ever would have written. It seemed important, in a poem that so blatantly borrows someone else's voice, to clearly put it off again at some point, and allow an unexpected element to intrude; especially when you're talking about losing control. I'm not sure how she would write about this world we're living in now, for one thing. Sandpipers running through oil slicks?[84]

As an example of critics getting things wrong and of the danger of first impressions, I have since remembered that Bishop does indeed have a poem in which piss features prominently. It even occurs in the final line, just as in Leviston's poem. The poem's

speaker, enjoying a summer afternoon in the countryside, follows the pasture track by the river. These are the last two stanzas:

The smell of cow manure is delicious.
The cattle look at me unenviously
And when there comes a sudden stream and hiss

Accompanied by a look not unmalicious,
All of us, animals, unemotionally
Partake together of a pleasant piss.[85]

If you do not think this poem sounds much like Elizabeth Bishop, you are right. It's actually Bishop's translation of a poem titled "Sonnet of Intimacy" by Brazilian poet, Vinícius de Moraes, most famous nowadays for being the lyricist behind the song, "The Girl from Ipanema". Bishop, in other words, *is* happy to "partake" of "a pleasant piss" in a poem she is translating. Although not a strict translation from one language to another, one might say Leviston is absorbing Bishop's spirit in her poem too, or rather Bishop's spirit in Brazil (she was a lot more reticent when publishing in her own name).

As Leviston pointed out to me, her poem is only partially "about Bishop". Of equal importance is the environmental disaster triggered by the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010. What caused her to imagine Bishop there? The Deepwater Horizon oil spill, also known as the BP oil spill, was a transatlantic environmental disaster. To date, it is considered to be the largest oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry: an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. Environmental

politics transcend fixed ideas of nations and places. One cannot insert a border down an ocean, whatever British politicians arguing about Brexit might think. Bishop didn't write explicitly about environmental disaster (perhaps "The Armadillo" is the exception that proves the rule?), but we can find a remarkable number of oil spills in her writing. In "The Fish", the cause of the poem's epiphany—"rainbow, rainbow, rainbow"—is, we tend to forget, the little rented boat and its "pool of bilge".[86] In "Filling Station", almost everything is "oil-soaked".[87] In "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto", an old truck grinds up "in a blue cloud of burning oil". By the end of the poem, "Oil has seeped into / the margins of the ditch of standing water".[88] "The Moose" ends not just with a bus staring at a moose, or a moose staring at a bus, but with both elements co-existing: "a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline".[89] Amy Waite, in an essay on what she calls Bishop's diffraction patterns, describes what happens when such elements interact. Drawing on Karen Barad's idea of "intra-action", she demonstrates how Bishop catches the reader in "material and ethical entanglements"[90]:

Bishop's poetry very rarely, if ever, leaves us contemplating "the little that we get for free". On the contrary, it frequently instils a sense of the sheer enormity of our task: the extraordinary breadth and depth of our combined responsibilities, and the work we must put in to meet them.[91]

How do Waite's insights relate to Leviston's poem? Well, I think they prove Bishop's lifelong environmental consciousness, decades before eco-poetics became a fashionable poetic tradition. Leviston's critical work evidences her awareness of Bishop's literary knowledge; her poem testifies to an equal knowledge of her green

poetics too. Perhaps Bishop *had* already imagined a sandpiper running through an oil slick? She had obviously seen the damage of an oil-dependent country when living in Brazil.

Leviston's Bishop is more than just an observer: she is given a job to do. It is, the poem begins, "twelve days since I took up my post in this village". What, we might ask, is Bishop's "post" in this village? The real Elizabeth Bishop lived on a modest trust fund for most of her life, though it allowed her to buy houses in some of the world's most idyllic locations. The only "posts" she held were temporary teaching positions towards the end of her life. Even these were mostly stand-ins for her friend Robert Lowell. There is perhaps a clue in the first line. The specific reference to "this village" surely evokes that other village to which Bishop is connected, Great Village in Nova Scotia. Her prose poem about Great Village is called "In the Village" as if, as turned out to be true, a singular village remembered well might stand in for all villages. Great Village is memorialised and transformed in other ways in Bishop's writing. Individual hills ("Manners"), kitchen stoves ("Sestina") and even road signs ("The Moose") become something more than simply names significant to Bishop and to those who live in the Maritimes. Like Crusoe's knife before it entered the museum, these places and things reek of meaning "like a crucifix".[92] They attest, as crucifixes do, to both pain and survival. Bishop's unofficial "post" in Great Village was as a collector and recorder of daily life, of the events and experiences that may seem trivial at the time but that time's passing transforms into history, myth and symbol. It took Bishop years to fulfil this role. In a sense, she took up the post without ever realising she held it. Although she lived in Nova Scotia as a child and regularly returned as an adult, one could not say she was a writer-in-residence there as poets are nowadays. Indeed, much if not the majority of Bishop's writings about Great Village

took place in Brazil. It was a country elsewhere enough to trigger thoughts of home but not homely enough to offer memories of Nova Scotia direct competition.

If one of Bishop's posts in life was to be Nova Scotia's unofficial poet laureate, what sort of post is Leviston imagining for her today? How is "this village" in Louisiana different from that other village in Nova Scotia? As in Brazil, Leviston's Bishop notices things that remind her of her Canadian home, not just the clapboard houses, harbour and yard but particularly the bird life all around her, the nests of common terns, the dead sea-turtle. Leviston's Bishop, like Bishop in her final collection *Geography III*, cannot help but see things that remind her of earlier Bishop poems. The clapboard dwellings feature in the long opening of "The Moose". "The concrete yards glittering with scales" are reminiscent of the "beautiful herring scales" in "At the Fishhouses".[93] The refusal to eat fish seems a wry invocation of "The Fish".[94] The hotel view is another recognisable Bishop perspective, similarly the walk on the beach. Writing cheques for the fishermen clearing up the oil spill is also akin to the moment in "At the Fishhouses" when the poem's speaker settles down to talk to a friend of her grandfather about the "decline in the population / and of codfish and herring".[95] Both poets make more or less identical political points. Bishop's speaker laments the loss of community life via the industrial-scale fishing that has already replaced it. She sees the damage done to both people and animals. Leviston's Bishop, brought back to life a half-century later, witnesses the effects of this outsourcing close-at-hand. The ocean has become a "black sea" from which human beings childishly extract as much pleasure as they can, the oil transforming the surface of the sea into orange curds that "ride like surfboards or children's life-preservers". The abandoned terns' nests also look edible from afar like "popsicle sticks" while the dead sea-turtle is in the process of "turning to soup / inside its own shell". The sea-turtle is

another of Bishop's iconic animals, making its presence felt in her own poetry as a group of "hissing, ambulating turtles" that repeatedly gets on the speaker's nerves in "Crusoe in England".[96] In Leviston's poem, her imaginary Bishop finally gets the better of them. Leviston's title is itself an allusion to the poem. As Bishop imagines Crusoe in a place (England) that he no longer feels at home in, reciting poetry (Wordsworth's "Daffodils") that anachronistically he was not alive to read, so Leviston imagines Bishop in a place (Louisiana) she probably never visited three decades after her actual death. That is not to say Bishop doesn't belong here. On the contrary, the oil spill, as we have seen from an overview of her poems, is an all too familiar sight in her writing.

The act of imagining Bishop in Louisiana reveals, I think, the extent to which Bishop is perhaps always imagining herself in or in relation to Nova Scotia and, more significantly, the extent to which Bishop was not just a friend of one or two fishermen but a knowledgeable and sympathetic advocate for what we now call environmental politics. By absorbing and bringing together all of Bishop's writings about the sea, including those in which oil features, Leviston presents a body of work that forms a coherent and consistent thesis. That in this village, as in many others, humanity is killing not just the sea but also itself, and that this is an issue which affects many countries, whichever side of the Atlantic one happens to live in. Her "post in this village", as in Great Village, is to share this story with anyone who will listen. Interestingly, Leviston's original title for the poem was "The Representative". For Leviston, this highlighted the idea of diplomacy in the poem. While Bishop sympathises with the fishermen and helps to represent their plight, she has the luxury of leaving Louisiana behind. Her living does not depend on the sea. Or does it? After

all, her final activity in the poem, is to wash herself clean, and presumably free of oil, in a “surprisingly deep bath”.

I have not yet addressed the final line about which I had misgivings on first reading. As Leviston pointed out to me in her e-mail, this seems to be the point in the poem when Bishop’s presence is thrown off and, if not entirely rejected, then certainly updated for a twenty-first century audience. The opening line of the final stanza—"Try to imagine what a hundred million litres means”—recalls a similar imperative in “At the Fishhouses”: “It is what we imagine knowledge to be”.[97] Whereas Bishop almost gives us an answer, albeit through analogy (“If you should dip your hand in”; “If you tasted it”), Leviston counters that such attempts are impossible. “You can’t”. Bishop’s dream-like conclusion to “At the Fishhouses” has attracted many admirers. Indeed, one might say it is Bishop’s most loved poem, particularly among poets. Leviston herself has a version of its conclusion in the poem, “To All Intents and Purposes”, in which she imagines not just “how the raw side of a coffin smells” but also “how the scorch of a gun would taste / at the rim of the mouth, would burn / on the back of the tongue”.[98] What Bishop is encouraging us to imagine in “At the Fishhouses”, as Leviston suspects in her own re-writing, is death. To dip one’s hand in the ocean, to taste it, is not to go swimming but to drown. (This is even more the case when the ocean is polluted with oil.) “At the Fishhouses” is a poem about the decline of the fishing industry that turns into a poem about the death-drive. Seamus Heaney has written eloquently about what he terms the poet’s “big leap”:

It is not that the poet breaks faith with the observed world, the world of human attachment, grandfathers, Lucky Strikes and Christmas trees. But it is a different, estranging and fearful element which ultimately fascinates her: the world of mediated

meaning, of a knowledge-need which sets human beings apart from seals and herrings, and sets the poet in her solitude apart from her grandfather and this old man, this poet enduring the cold sea-light of her own *wyrd* and her own mortality.[99]

As Heaney points out, Bishop is confronting her "own mortality" in those closing lines, "the rocky hard breasts"[100] not of a nurturing mother but of a Mother Earth indifferent to human distress and fear.[101]

Leviston backs away from such a brutally nihilistic conclusion, however. While "the surprisingly deep bath" might be compared to the "black sea" outside, it is no coffin. Indeed, her Bishop averts her gaze from what Heaney calls her "cold sea-light" and instead indulges in a game of pushing her toe "into the streaming faucet" that while dangerous is certainly not suicidal. In fact, this gesture is more childlike than anything else, reminiscent, as the final line has it, of "pissing myself in my sleep". Bishop once joked in a letter to Lowell that she only had "two poetic spigots, marked *H & C*",[102] presumably hot and cold. Most of her published writing is of the cold sort, particularly her writings about Nova Scotia. But long stays in Key West and later Brazil encouraged the other spigot too, one amenable to writing about love and sexuality in poetry. While Leviston concentrates on the cold spigot in the first four stanzas of the poem, she rejects the drift oceanwards and deathwards of a poem like "At the Fishhouses" and instead places Bishop in a hot bath, unselfconsciously playing in the water. At the same time, this action isn't simply joyful but "|nightmarishly pleasurable". An element of guilt, of shame even, lingers. The poet can write cheques for the fishermen but there are limits to this aid as there are limits to what poetry can do to remedy the situation. On reflection, I think this is a perfect end to a poem that is about the poet Bishop was *and* the poet she remains to contemporary writers.

Before beginning this article, I planned to answer a few of the following questions. To what extent might we describe Bishop as an English just as much as an American or Canadian writer? Do discussions of individual poets in terms of national traditions help or hinder our readings of their work? How important is placing a poet in terms of place? Reading these questions again, I wonder if perhaps all of them are ultimately unanswerable. Bishop's sandpiper, it is worth remembering, has his back to the land and to the sky. He likes to watch where "the Atlantic drains / rapidly backwards and downwards".[103] He is a creature of the space between the land and sea, a space that is permanently impermanent, subject to the wind and the tide and to our own often clumsy presence here. The shoreline is both a real place and an idea of a place, just as Bishop is both a real poet and an idea of a poet for other writers to draw on. As Bishop recites Victorian poets in the twentieth-century, eventually throwing off their influence at some point to introduce her own notes and registers, so twenty-first century poets like Rees-Jones, O'Reilly, Flynn, and Leviston absorb, transform and sometimes reject her example, on both sides of the Atlantic. Poetry, like semi-colons, makes such wandering possible.

NOTES

[1] Frances Leviston, "The Red Squirrels at Coole", *Harriet* (October 2014), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/10/the-red-squirrels-at-coole. Accessed 15 July 2019.
[2] Cited by David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (London: Hogarth Press, 1989), 182.
[3] Marvin Campbell, "Elizabeth Bishop and Audre Lorde: Two Views of 'Florida' in the Global South Atlantic", *Reading Elizabeth Bishop: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 280-1.

[4] James McCorkle, "Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Islandology", in *Reading Elizabeth Bishop*, 267.
[5] Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile", *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, ed. Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 290.
[6] Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 183, 184.
[7] Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, "Introduction: What is Transatlantic Literary Studies?", *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, 3.
[8] Cited by Brett Miller, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 517
[9] Bishop, *Poems*, 129.
[10] Ibid., 198.
[11] See Jonathan Ellis, "Elizabeth Bishop in the Present Tense: On Barbara Hammer's *Welcome to this House*", *Another Gaze* 2 (November 2018), 52-6.
[12] Colm Tóibín, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[13] Bishop, *Poems*, 185.
[14] Ibid., 91.
[15] Ibid., 25.
[16] Joelle Biele, "Introduction", *Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence*, ed. Joelle Biele (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), xlvii.
[17] Yiyun Li, *Where Reasons End* (London: Hamish Hamiton, 2019), 20.
[18] Bishop, *Poems*, 89.
[19] Ibid., 90.
[20] Elizabeth Bishop, *Prose*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 95.
[21] Bishop, *Poems*, 123.
[22] Bishop, *Prose*, 95.
[23] Elizabeth Bishop, *The North Haven Journal, 1974—1979*, ed. Eleanor M. McPeck (North Haven: North Haven Library, 2015), 41.
[24] Ibid., 42.
[25] The majority of biographers and scholars write "Maud" (as did Bishop herself) but the correct spelling is Maude.
[26] Elizabeth Bishop, *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 98-99.
[27] Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, ed. Alice Quinn (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 307.
[28] Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, *Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 16.
[29] Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 98.
[30] Ibid., 99.
[31] Ibid., 203.
[32] Ibid., 203.
[33] Ibid., 203.
[34] Elizabeth Bishop, Letters to Ruth Foster (1947), Vassar Archive, Folder 118.33.
[35] Lorrie Goldensohn, "Approaching Elizabeth Bishop's Letters to Ruth Foster", *The Yale Review* 103.1 (January 2015), 5.
[36] Linda Anderson, "Disturbances of the Archive: Repetition and Memory in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry", in *Reading Elizabeth Bishop*, 21.

[37] Bishop, *Poems*, 7.
[38] As Deryn Rees-Jones points out, "The image of the burning child recurs in Bishop's work, not only in 'In the Village' … but also in the early poem 'Casabianca', which includes the line 'And love's the burning boy', and the late unfinished draft 'A Drunkard', while likewise recalls the Salem fire, to which the mother and child are witness". See "Repetition and Poetic Process: Bishop's Nagging Thoughts", in *Reading Elizabeth Bishop*, 137.
[39] Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 208.
[40] James Fenton, "The Many Arts of Elizabeth Bishop", *The New York Review of Books* (15 May 1997), 13.
[41] Bishop, *Poems*, 219.
[42] Ibid., 196.
[43] Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 12.
[44] Susan Rosenbaum, "Elizabeth Bishop and the Miniature Museum", *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.2 (2005), 61-99.
[45] See Jonathan Ellis, "Reading Bishop, Reading Darwin", *Science in Modern Poetry: New Directions*, ed. John Holmes (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 181-193. Also Zachariah Pickard, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Description* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).
[46] Bishop, *Prose*, 414.
[47] Bishop, *Poems*, 58.
[48] Ibid., 129.
[49] Ibid., 43.
[50] Ibid., 58.
[51] Ibid., 22.
[52] Ibid., 327.
[53] Francis Leviston, "Mothers and Marimbas in 'The Bight': Bishop's *Danse Macabre*", *Twentieth-Century Literature* 61.4 (December 2015), 437.
[54] Ibid., 454.
[55] Ibid., 438.
[56] Bishop, *Poems*, 196.
[57] Ibid., 197.
[58] Ibid., 197.
[59] Jamie McKendrick, "Bishop's Birds", *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, ed. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), 139.
[60] Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 69.
[61] For further information see Sandra Barry, *Elizabeth Bishop: Nova Scotia's "Home-made" Poet* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2011); Joelle Biele, "Three-Fourths Painter", *Elizabeth Bishop: Objects & Apparitions* (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 2011), 33-42; and Lilian Falk, "George Hutchinson in London: A Career in Black and White", *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place*, ed. Sandra Barry, Gwendolyn Davis and Peter Sanger (Wolfville: Gaspereau Press, 2001), 37-45.
[62] Bishop, *Poems*, 197.
[63] Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 246.
[64] Victorian poetry is clearly not the only English poetic tradition Bishop was influenced by. Metaphysical poets like Donne and Herbert were just as important, likewise Romantic writers, in particular Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. In the

twentieth-century Anglo-American poets, Auden and Eliot, not to mention William Empson and even Dylan Thomas, also influenced her at different stages of her career. More research remains to be done on, for example, her interest in the early modern masque or her frequent allusions to Shakespeare. So too her interest in English hymns and nonsense poetry. See Elizabeth Bishop, "Elizabeth Bishop: Influences", *American Poetry Review* 14.1 (1985), 11-16; Bonnie Costello, "Bishop and the Poetic Tradition", *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 79-94; Vidyan Ravinthiran, *Elizabeth Bishop's Prosaic* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015); and Eleanor Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[65] Thomas Travisano, "The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon", *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and their Readers*, ed. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), 217-244.

[66] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 101.

[67] Eavan Boland, "An Un-Romantic American", *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 14.2 (1988), 85-6.

[68] Tom Paulin, "Dwelling Without Roots: Elizabeth Bishop", *Grand Street* 36 (1990), 94.

[69] Michael Donaghy, "The Exile's Accent", *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, ed. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), 120.

[70] Deryn Rees-Jones, *Signs Round a Dead Body* (Bridgend: Seren, 1998), 12.

[71] Caitríona O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2001), 20-1.

[72] Leontia Flynn, *Drives* (London: Cape, 2008), 34

[73] Simon Armitage, "Like, Elizabeth Bishop", *PN Review* 44.6 (July-August 2018), 18.

[74] Stephanie Burt, "Elizabeth Bishop at the End of the Rainbow", in *Reading Elizabeth Bishop*, 321.

[75] Ibid, 321.

[76] Ibid., 322.

[77] Ibid., 323-4.

[78] Ibid., 329.

[79] Bishop, "The Grandmothers", *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*, 107-8.

[80] Bishop, *Poems*, 91.

[81] E-mail to author, 5 August 2010.

[82] Leviston, "Bishop in Louisiana", *The Guardian* (2 August 2010). Reprinted in *Disinformation* (London: Picador, 2015), 8-9.

[83] E-mail to Leviston, 9 August 2010.

[84] E-mail to author, 28 August 2010.

[85] Bishop, *Poems*, 250.

[86] Ibid., 44.

[87] Ibid., 125.

[88] Ibid., 176.

[89] Ibid., 193.

[90] Amy Waite, "'The Color of the World All Together': Elizabeth Bishop's Diffraction Patterns", in *Reading Elizabeth Bishop*, 70.

[91] Ibid., 70.

[92] Ibid., 186.

[93] Ibid., 62.
[94] In Bishop's poem the fish becomes inedible after the speaker's long scrutiny of it. In Leviston's poem the fish are literally inedible due to the oil slick.
[95] Bishop, *Poems*, 62.
[96] Ibid., 184.
[97] Ibid., 64.
[98] Frances Leviston, *Public Dream* (London: Picador, 2007), 24.
[99] Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, 105-106.
[100] Bishop, *Poems*, 64.
[101] In the letters to Dr Foster Bishop connects this image to a dream she had on a drunken bus ride in New Hampshire: "I had a dream in which everything was very wild & dark & stormy & you were in it feeding me from your breast. (I should think a common dream about a woman analyst) anyway you were much bigger than life size, or maybe I was just reduced to baby size, and it seemed to be very calm inside the raging storm". Vassar Archive, Folder 118.33.
[102] Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 18.
[103] Bishop, *Poems*, 129.