
Elizabeth Bishop's Politics of the Sea

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I

In *The Complete Poems* of Elizabeth Bishop, the word “Marxist” appears just once in “Lullaby for the Cat,” a poem of 1937:

Minnow, go to sleep and dream,
Close your great big eyes;
Round your bed Events prepare
The pleasantest surprise.

Darling Minnow, drop that frown,
Just cooperate,
Not a kitten shall be drowned
In the Marxist State. (204)¹

Without context, it is hard to decide whether Bishop uses the word “Marxist” ironically or seriously or whether she sees the “Marxist State” as a dystopia or a utopia. But we can say at least that in this poem, which is supposed to be a lullaby for the poet’s cat, the use of the word “Marxist” causes an unordinary

¹ All subsequent references to Bishop’s poems will be to *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

shock. The word “Marxist” turns a personal sentimental lullaby into a manifestation of the poet’s political consciousness. Furthermore, in this early poem, the image of being “drowned” in the water, or the sea, has already been linked to the poet’s political consciousness. This is exactly what this essay is about: how does the image of the sea function in Bishop’s political poetics?

In this essay, I attempt a Marxist approach to Bishop’s poetry. This does not mean, however, that I am trying to test the applicability of this or that type of Marxist literary criticism to Bishop’s poetry, which is beyond my ability. Rather, I am simply concerned with discussing the motif of the sea in Bishop’s poetry, or how the poet sees the sea, in terms of the similarity between her insight into the political structure inherent in the various scenes of the sea, and the Marxian—or Althusserian or even Jamesonian—conception of structure. For Bishop, the observer, the sea is more a political object than a natural one. To put it more precisely, in Bishop’s poems, the sea is split between its naturalistic surface and its political implications. In this sense, Bishop’s account of the sea is more often than not implicit and subtextual—not direct at all.

Bishop’s insight into the political implications of the sea reminds us of Fredric Jameson’s method of interpretation, which Adam Roberts explains as follows:

In particular, Jameson accepts a Freudian model of surface and depth, something that puts him at odds (again) with many post-structuralist thinkers, who would deny exactly that model. In essence, Jameson argues that we need to treat texts as if they were psychiatric patients; that the *surface* meanings of texts are not necessarily reliable indicators to the important stuff, to what is really going on *underneath the surface*. A critic, by paying attention to the ‘symptoms’ of the text, can access the unconscious ‘reality.’
(75-76)

In Bishop's poems of the sea, the "symptoms" appear as the ordinary view of the sea, while the "unconscious 'reality'" as something unordinary about the ordinary view of the sea. This set of the ordinary and the unordinary is our replacement for Jameson's "symptoms" and "reality"—or the conscious part of the text and the political unconscious in the text—, and also for base and superstructure in the Althusserian sense. What is crucially different, however, between our set of the ordinary and the unordinary and Jameson's or Althusser's equivalent set is that we do not necessarily think Bishop's subtext—the unordinary—as unconscious. I have to admit that this is the limitation of my argument. My reading of Bishop here is not aimed at digging out an allusion to a phase of capitalism more or less unconsciously made by the writer, but analyzing Bishop's own insight into the relationship between the conscious—ordinary—and the unconscious—unordinary—phases that a view of the sea involves. Therefore, the unconscious here means what a seer of the sea in Bishop's text or an implied reader of the text is unconscious of.

There is another limitation with my argument. As we shall see later, what is important for our reading of Bishop's work is the idea of immanence, which is common to both Jameson's set of "symptoms" and "reality" and Althusser's base and superstructure. In our reading, however, the idea of immanence is replaced by that of inversion. Nothing would be lost by such a replacement, however, in particular in the case of reading a literary text, since a subtext immanent in a text (A) means a text (B) showing up when the text (A) is inverted. The following quote from Jameson will prepare us for such an inversion of text and subtext:

Still, we need to say a little more about the status of this external reality, of which it will otherwise be thought that it is little more than the traditional notion of "context" familiar in older social or historical criticism. The type of interpretation here proposed is more

satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that “subtext” is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow “reality” to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notable of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. (81)

Unlike context, a subtext is not outside a text, but immanent in it. Although in our reading we do not pursue the linkage between what Jameson calls “subtext” and Lacan’s concept of the Real, we borrow the idea that just as the Real is carried by language, the subtext is carried by the text. To read a subtext, then, we have to reverse the process whereby the text comes to carry the subtext. That process is the inversion. In Bishop’s sea poems, the sea itself often functions as the process in which the ordinary and the unordinary are inverted. For us the reader, then, the sea in Bishop’s texts is a chasm through which we can look into the unordinary truth that has been repressed under the ordinary view of the sea. Such is the critical function of the sea in Bishop’s sea poems.

II

In "Seascape," a poem Bishop wrote a few years after she visited the Vatican Museum in 1937 and published in the *Partisan Review* in 1941 (Miller 131, 165), the sea takes on a critical function against a "skeletal lighthouse" that "thinks he knows better" (40). The contrast here suggests a Marxian contrast between base and superstructure; what is criticized here is a bourgeois thinking, or ideology as false consciousness. In another, yet even earlier, poem entitled "The Flood" (dated 1933), written in the poet's college days, Bishop sounds more apparently Marxist. In the poem, a flood drowns a town, and

Beyond the town, subaqueous,
the green hills change to green-mossed shells;
and at the church, to warn the ships above,
eight times they ring the bells. (220)

The irony here is sharp and clear: the flood has already been a warning, the Marxian warning against ideologies including the "church," which is now under the water, ringing the bells in vain to "warn the ships above." Whether or not our Marxist reading of these two poems — "Seascape" and "The Flood" — is correct, one thing seems clear: in these poems, the sea, or the water, inverts our sense of the ordinary and the unordinary, and thereby functions as criticism against our life on the shore.

In his 1950 book, *The Enchafèd Flood: or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, W. H. Auden elaborates on the functions of the sea in literary texts, especially from a Marxist perspective. *The Enchafèd Flood* begins with characterizing Romanticism through the symbolism of the sea. For the pre-Romantic writers, the sea was the symbol of chaos, disorder, and evil. Here, Auden refers to Marianne Moore: "As to the sea, the classical authors would have agreed with Marianne Moore. 'It is human nature to stand in the middle

of a thing; But you cannot stand in the middle of this.’ A voyage, therefore, is a necessary evil, a crossing of that which separates or estranges” (7). On the contrary, the Romantic writers begin to see the sea as the place where one recovers the sense of self, or spiritual unity, which he/she (for the Romantics, mostly he) has lost in the city. Auden summarizes the meaning of the sea for the Romantics as follows:

- 1) To leave the land and the city is the desire of every man of sensibility and honor.
- 2) The sea is the real situation and the voyage is the true condition of man.
- 3) The sea is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial.
- 4) An abiding destination is unknown even if it may exist: a lasting relationship is not possible nor even to be desired. (12-13)

Then, referring to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Auden gradually moves on to the criticism of modern people, who lack “individuality” (31), “personal choice” (29), and the “true community” (30). Although Auden is known as abandoning the Marxism of his early years, his criticism of modern civilization in this book, which is based on the lectures he gave in 1949, still echoes his early readings of Marx and Freud:

If, in the overlarge, industrialized cities against which the romantic poets protest, the masses during their hours of leisure lack any real common bond of love or commitment and turn into crowds, in their working hours they tend to become mere instruments of their particular function, to have no existence over and above what they do to earn their living. (28)

For Auden, though even anachronistically, the sea of the Romantics emerges as

a route, or simply the symbol, of going beyond the disillusionment aroused by both industrial capitalism's and Soviet communism's oppressive tendency. Even if he is no longer an "angry socialis[t]" (Eagleton vii), Auden is still a kind of Marxist in the sense that he is a critic of the illusion of everyday life in modern industrialized cities, modern people's estrangement from his/her own society, and the dualism of modern person's ego, that is, the dualism in which, "as freely owing a self, . . . [the ego] describes a self of which it can approve" and "as solitary it desires to be approved of for the self it has" (Auden 118).

Bishop, for whom Auden was a favorite in the 1930s, was not a communist, though her hatred against communism should be understood as stemming from both "her naive experience of the likes of burned churches" in Spain and her own life's instability incurred by the communist reform in Brazil (Miller 98, 353-54). Like Auden, however, Bishop kept her interest in Marxism, with which she had gotten acquainted when she went to Vassar College in the early 1930s, throughout her life. For example, according to Betsy Erkkila, "The Burglar of Babylon" is written about "'a burglar and killer' whose pursuit by soldiers [Bishop] watched from her Balcony" and "registers the disruptive social effects of industrialization on the Brazilian masses, . . . and the apparent indifference of the rich . . . in their responses to the endless cycle of poverty . . ." (300).² Indeed, this poem's central contrast is between the poor and the rich. In other words, this poem is concerned with the class struggle. A closer look, however, reveals another contrast, the contrast between the monotonous repetition of four line stanzas and the burglar's strong sense of the imminent end of his life. It seems as if Bishop's political interest in the class struggle were engulfed by the monotonousness of the poem, or the sea, and mixed up

² Bishop began writing "The Burglar of Babylon" in April 1963 and published next year in *New Yorker* (Miller 345-46, 355).

with the poet's own personal, existential concern, which might also be a legacy of the 1930s.

In the poem, the burglar is running toward the end of his life in the scene of everyday life, in which the poor and the rich are equally bystanders who are living their ordinary lives. The burglar sees the sea:

Micuçú hid in the grasses
Or sat in a little tree,
Listening for sounds, and staring
At the lighthouse out at sea.

And the lighthouse stared back at him,
Till finally it was dawn.
He was soaked with dew, and hungry,
On the hill of Babylon.

The yellow sun was ugly,
Like a raw egg on a plate—
Slick from the sea. He cursed it,
For he knew it sealed his fate. (115)

The burglar sees the lighthouse, and then the sunrise, which he takes as the sign of his doom. Through the eyes of the burglar, the poet is trying to grapple with the essence of what is happening here:

He saw the long white beaches
And people going to swim,
With towels and beach umbrellas,
But the soldiers were after him.

The burglar sees the ordinary people, both the poor and the rich, go swimming. He, "[a]n enemy of society" (112), is the only unordinary being. In a sense,

however, he is also ordinary, because he is part of the ordinariness of the whole scene. The whole scene, including himself, the rich, the poor, soldiers, is ordinary. In its ordinariness, however, the whole scene is unordinary. What is happening here is a kind of defamiliarization, or inversion: the ordinary view of the sea becomes unordinary, and an unordinary burglar becomes ordinary. To the burglar's eyes, the sea seems unordinary, because it is as ordinary as always in spite of his imminent death.

This is not the first time that the burglar foresees his death as he looks at the sea:

Below him was the ocean.

It reached far up the sky,

Flat as a wall, and on it

Were freighters passing by,

Or climbing the wall, and climbing

Till each looked like a fly,

And then fell over and vanished;

And he knew he was going to die. (113-14)

An ordinary view of the ocean, the sea, gradually becomes defamiliarized, or becomes something unordinary. Then the burglar sees the image of his ending in one of those freighters, or a fly, which climbs up the sea, falls over, and vanishes. Although there is nothing unordinary in the view of the sea with freighters, the burglar sees the unordinary loneliness of the fly. Then the whole scene comes to look unordinary in spite of the ordinary calmness of the sea. This is somehow similar to the situation that Auden described, the situation in which the modern ego at once "as freely owing a self, . . . describes a self of which it can approve" and "as solitary it desires to be approved of for the self it has." If we want to apply this Auden to our reading of "The Burglar of

Babylon,” we should not take it as a paraphrase of Sartre’s *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, or the existential freedom and a fear of it. Rather, we should take it as representing a distinction between the ordinariness, on the one hand, with which a modern ego at once approves of itself and desires to be approved of, and the unordinariness, on the other, of such a dual situation in which the modern ego is caught. Then the burglar is not so much a metaphor for the modern ego as for the poet who reveals the unordinariness of modern people’s ordinary, everyday life.

III

In an interview of 1966, calling herself a socialist, Bishop says that she is opposed to writing poems with apparent political implications:

I was opposed to political thinking as such for writers. What good writing came out of that period [the Marxist '30's], really? . . . A great deal of it seemed to me very false. Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked “social conscious” writing. I stood up for T. S. Eliot when everybody else was talking about James T. Farrell. The atmosphere in Vassar was left-wing; it was the popular thing. (Monteiro 22)

Bishop’s answer here tells us about her early poetics, or her way of mixing politics and poetics. Bishop’s preference of Eliot to Farrell should not be taken as the sign of her preference of formalism to Marxism, but rather as her dislike of “dogmatic poetry” or “didacticism” that she finds even in Auden (Monteiro 23). John Palattella points out that Bishop read Eliot for his formalism “imbued with political interests” (25). Bishop’s interest in Eliot, whom she interviewed when he came to Vassar, was not necessarily nonpolitical. Bishop continues:

I felt that most of the college girls didn’t know much about social

conditions.

I was very aware of the Depression—some of my family were much affected by it. After all, anybody who went to New York and rode the Elevated could see that things were wrong. But I had lived with poor people and knew something of poverty at first-hand. About this time I took a walking trip in Newfoundland and I saw much worse poverty there. I was all for being a socialist till I heard Norman Thomas speak; but he was so dull. Then I tried anarchism, briefly. I'm much more interested in social problems and politics now than I was in the '30's. (Monteiro 22)

Bishop was a socialist in her own way, and her socialism was neither a political doctrine, nor a poetics. Rather, it was her personality nurtured by her sympathy with the poor.

Bishop's letter to Marianne Moore dated April 11, 1953, should be read in this context:

I've finished Darwin's Diary on the Beagle . . . and I thought it was wonderful. . . . I'm also reading Simone Weil after staving it off for several years—the mysticism often repels—and then suddenly she says something so amazing & so simple you wonder why no one ever said it before. (Giroux 255)

It is curious that in Bishop's mind, at least when she wrote this letter, Darwin and Weil could co-exist. On the one hand, it is easy to see Darwin's influence in Bishop's poems, because some of them apparently treat the relationship between human perception and nature, mind and the world, subject and object, interiority and exteriority, and imagination and reality.³ Bishop could learn from

³ For example, David Kalstone writes: "Crusoe's whole poem is pervaded by the play of curiosity. He asks questions, concentrates and then, as Bishop says elsewhere of Darwin, one sees him, 'his eye fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into

Darwin how to relate herself to natural objects, or how to turn ordinary birds and animals into unordinary characters in her poetic world. For Bishop, reading Darwin was a training in seeing things differently. On the other hand, we rarely pay attention to the relationship between Bishop and Weil. The reason seems simple: Weil's mystical Platonism does not look compatible with Bishop's apparent naturalism. But, for Bishop, Weil could be another teacher, as well as Darwin, of seeing things differently. We know that Weil, in spite of her chronic headache and occasional sneers from others at her efforts to do physical labors, hated scholarliness and, according to Gustav Thibon, "felt at ease on the lowest rung of the social ladder, lost among the masses of poor folk and outcasts of the social ladder" (xvii). We do not know how well Bishop knew about Weil, or to which book by Weil she refers in the letter above, or even when she read Weil for the first time. But, apart from the fact that Weil was an extreme left, Weil was probably in Bishop's mind when she found herself in company with people of the lower class in Brazil. Weil's interest in lower-class people, especially those who are under political or institutional oppression, was also Bishop's.⁴

the unknown'" (35-36). Also, Marjorie Perloff, in her essay on D. H. Lawrence's breakaway from existing canons, refers to Bishop as doing nothing more than repeating the dichotomy of subject/object: "when Bishop's 'I' contemplates the fish she has just caught, there is a clear distinction between subject and object. . . . Bishop's discourse is characterized by its consistency and narrative continuity, 'I looked . . . It was . . . I admired . . . then I saw'" (113-14).

⁴ Bishop was well aware of the class structure in Brazil: "The society, Elizabeth said, was essentially feudal—by which she meant that the small landowning upper class both lived off of and provided a living for the large underclass, creating households consisting of the typically large Brazilian extended family and the multiracial extended families of their servants" (Miller 243). Unfortunately, however, just like Weil, Bishop might be another intellectual who happened to be there, but never belonged there: "That her status as a wealthy white woman put these people in some sense under her control made the situation ideal—she liked to be waited on" (Miller 243).

In her letter to Randall Jarrell dated March 20, 1965, Bishop writes:

Here in Brazil I think people are more realistic about life, death, marriage, the sexes, etc. — although they go so rhetorical and sentimental about these things in their speechmaking and writing. Nevertheless, it is a country where one feels closer to real old-fashioned life, somehow. Tragedies still happen, people's lives have dramatic ups & downs and fairy-tale endings—or beginnings. . . .

With all its awfulness and stupidities—some of the Lost World hasn't quite been lost here yet The people in the small places are so absolutely natural and so elegantly polite. I'm not really off the subject of your poems—it is that I think the thing you feel loss for aren't entirely lost to the world, yet. I gather up every bit of evidence with joy, and wish I could put it into my poems, too.

(Giroux 434-35)

Bishop does not see the “people in the small poor places” near Rio de Janeiro as noble savages, who are at once “so absolutely natural and so elegantly polite.” Nor does she see the way the “realistic” for those people is represented, or repressed, by the eyes of the tourists from advanced countries as “old-fashioned” or “fairy-tale.” On the contrary, what Bishop sees here is the way those Brazilians live a “realistic” life and at the same time have strategically learned to represent it in the “rhetorical and sentimental” “speechmaking and writing.” In other words, those Brazilians have learned to accustom themselves to the way their life—the “realistic”—is necessarily represented by the “rhetorical and sentimental.” Furthermore, what seems more curious to Bishop is the fact that those people have learned to blur out the boundary between the “rhetorical and sentimental” and the “realistic.” In other words, they have acquired a way to dissolve the gap between the “realistic” and the “rhetorical and sentimental” and make themselves look at once

“so absolutely natural and so elegantly polite.” Nothing is lost between the “realistic” and the “rhetorical and sentimental.” Hence Bishop’s words: “the thing you feel a loss for aren’t entirely lost to the world, yet.” There is no “loss” here.

To clarify what is happening here, let’s go back to “The Burglar of Babylon.” Susan McCabe reads this poem as Bishop’s attempt to connect the historical (the political) and the personal. For McCabe, who sees Bishop’s writings as an attempt through language to “come to terms with loss” (1), the “anonymous multiple” (178) language of this ballad-like poem gives a “greater scope to her loss of home, connecting this loss with historical displacement” (183). Although I agree with McCabe on the point that Bishop’s poetry is at once personal and political, I have to oppose her way of treating Bishop’s loss as something which is already there, waiting for the poet to write about it, or to play with it with her poetic techniques. For McCabe’s Bishop, loss has already been represented before the poet writes her poems. Since it has already been there, the poet has only to represent, or even displace, it: “One can mourn a loss for as long as time lasts. Yet even as Bishop writes to enact loss, she can only do so by displacing what has been lost; language, for her, does not permit escape from loss but foregrounds it” (McCabe 13-14). There is a loss here.

Contrary to McCabe’s reading, I would say that there is nothing lost in “The Burglar of Babylon.” What is revealed in this poem is similar to what Fredric Jameson calls the “political unconscious.” Jameson does not directly explain what it is, because he wants to conceive it as a concept that always deconstructs its own conception. However, Jameson also seems to want to conceive it as something similar to what Louis Althusser calls structure in “structural causality”:

The structure is not an essence outside the economic phenomena

which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, absent because it is outside them. The absence of the cause in the structure's "metonymic causality" on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the very form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects. This implies therefore that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short, that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects. (qtd. in Jameson 24-25)

The concept of "structural causality" is supposed to replace the old-fashioned concepts of the "mechanistic [or Cartesian] causality," in which a cause is followed by its effects as seen in the movement of "billiard-ball model" or in the vulgar Marxist conception of base and superstructure, and also the "expressive [or Hegelian] causality," in which the whole is reducible to an inner essence as seen in the allegorical reading of the Bible (Jameson 25-32). We can see that McCabe's idea of loss serves as an inner essence in the "expressive causality" of Bishop's poetry, since McCabe regards Bishop's language as representing, or expressing, the essential loss, that is, the "ultimate identity" (Jameson 41). For McCabe, Bishop's entire poetry is an allegory about loss, and the inner essence of Bishop's texts is like a moral lesson existing outside the text or before the text is written. Therefore, for McCabe, loss can be easily identified.

On the contrary, "The Burglar of Babylon" reveals, or allows the reader

to have a glimpse of, what is never lost but cannot be identified. Althusser and Jameson call it structure or the political unconscious. In Bishop's poem, it is called "The hill of astonishment / The hill of Babylon" (118) in our everyday life. As seen in Jameson's quotation from Althusser, what is important about Althusser's concept of structure is that it is at once "absent" and "immanent." We can see the same logic in Althusser's explanation of Freud/Lacan's conception of the Oedipus complex:

Thus the Oedipus complex is not a hidden "meaning," which would be lacking only in consciousness or speech. The Oedipus complex is not a structure buried in the past that can always be restructured or transcended by "reactivating its meaning"; the Oedipus complex is the dramatic structure, the "theatrical machine," imposed by the Law of Culture on every involuntary and constrained candidate to humanity, a structure containing in itself not only the possibility but the necessity of the concrete variations in which it exists, for every individual who manages to reach its threshold, live it, and survive it.
(29)

Structure is not hidden. Structure is not the cause of its effects—the cultural phenomena, texts, and our everyday life—as long as it is necessarily revealed in them. Structure has always/already been represented on the surface of the text, in our everyday life, or in our ordinariness. It does not exist before it is represented. In Lacan, the Real and the Imaginary can be perceived only after we have gone through the Symbolic; in Althusser, structure is revealed only after we have its effects; in Jameson, the political unconscious is perceived as functioning in History only after History is textualized and retextualized: "History can be apprehended only through its effects" (Jameson 102). In the same way, we should say that, in Bishop, the unordinary is revealed only in the ordinariness of everyday life.

In "The Burglar of Babylon," the unordinariness of our everyday life is seen through the burglar's ordinary death:

This morning the little soldiers
Are on Babylon hill again;
Their gun barrels and helmets
Shine in a gentle rain.

Micuçú is buried already.

They're after another two,
But they say they aren't as dangerous
As the poor Micuçú. (117)

A "poor" burglar is buried, and the meaning of his death is also buried under the denial of his heroism, the evasive depictions of the "little soldiers" in "a gentle rain," and the replacement of his incident with the pursuit of "another two." Through this poem, Bishop suggests that our sense of the ordinary in everyday life is structured through the denial, or the evasion, or the replacement, of the unordinary. In other words, in our everyday life, the unordinary has always/already been inverted. Bishop's poem is an attempt to describe such a process, or history, of inversion.

For Bishop, to see people means to examine how the ordinary and the unordinary are inverted in people's everyday life. As illustrated in "The Burglar of Babylon," by sticking with the ordinariness of the scene of a burglar's death, Bishop tries to reveal its unordinariness. In a sense, this represents the poetics that Bishop shares with Moore. As Lynn Keller has pointed out, "[t]he energy Moore and Bishop devote to making their readers see physical things implies a shared faith in the meaningfulness of visible surfaces" (86). However, Keller also points out that compared with Moore, Bishop is "less committed to the 'relentless accuracy' of 'fact,' more interested in the dreamier truths of the

imagination” (84). In our context, we must modify Keller’s last sentence to assert that Bishop is more interested in the “absent” and “immanent” structure in the Althusserian sense.

IV

Bishop’s attempt to cause in the text the inversion of the ordinary and the unordinary has already begun in the 1930s. “The Map,” published for the first time in 1935 (Miller 76), can be read as an attempt to defamiliarize the ordinariness of an ordinary map. Bonnie Costero asserts that this poem is “an inquiry into the nature of perspective” (111). Annie Colwell, on the other hand, referring to Helen McNeil’s reading of Bishop’s poetry as revealing what Freud called the uncanny, points out the defamiliarizing effect of the poem: “rather than making the land more comprehensible, the simile [that is, the ‘comparison between peninsulas and women’s hands’] makes the apparently familiar image of women feeling fabric seem strange. It makes the body seem foreign, other” (35). But what is more interesting about this poem is that such a perspectivism or defamiliarization is Bishop’s pretense. Mutlu Konuk Blasing points out that “the speaker’s appearance as naive and female may well be an effect of Bishop’s foregrounding her formal conventions” (76). Blasing gives us an insight into a subtext immanent in Bishop’s text: “Bishop’s map reader, it would appear, is mastered and feminized by the formal conventions of poetic representation and is presented to us as an ‘exotic’ text, very much as the map is to the map reader with her defamiliarizing metaphors” (76). Then what is revealed in this poem is the unordinariness of the ordinary representation of an ordinary, “naive,” “female” map reader. By pretending to be a “naive” “female” map reader, who seems attracted especially to the image of lands (the scene of the political) lying under the sea (the apolitical world), Bishop questions

the ordinariness of our—in particular the male reader's—tendency to think that women are likely to write a poem like this. In other words, by making her speaker look apolitical, Bishop challenges the ordinariness of the male reader's prejudiced reading.

As seen in both "The Burglar of Babylon" and "The Map," the sea in Bishop's poems is a kind of fulcrum, with which the poet makes the inversion of ordinary/unordinary happen. Finally, we will see how the sea is used in "Sandpiper," another poem in which the sea functions as such a fulcrum, and also in "The Sea & Its Shore," Bishop's early prose work. "Sandpiper," finished and published in 1962, originates in a short story entitled "The Sandpiper's Revenge," which Bishop wrote during her stay at Keewaydin in 1937, the same period when she wrote "The Sea & Its Shore" (Miller 116, 334). In this sense, "Sandpiper" and "The Sea & Its Shore" can be considered to be a pair of twin pieces, sharing motifs and images.

According to Miller, "Sandpiper" reflects Bishop's "complaint about her left-leaning, reform-minded friends in the 1930s," especially men who "tended to focus on larger issues, trends, and patterns and to miss the details" (334). Indeed, in the poem, the sandpiper is characterized as male ("he"), and his simple-minded, large-scale thinking is satirized:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake. (131)

The sandpiper "takes for granted" that the world presents itself as "the world," that is, an abstract idea, which reminds us of Blake's images. On the other hand, he also knows that the world presents itself as details, that is, as each individual grain of sand on the beach:

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,

where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

In spite of his awareness of the world as details, the sandpiper can do nothing about it. The grains of sand, or details, keep slipping away from his feet. Looking at those grains, he is still trying to grasp the meaning, or the structure, of the world:

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focussed;⁵ he is preoccupied,
looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

What the sandpiper does not understand is that the meaning or the structure of the world has always/already been at his feet. While staring at the “dragging grains,” which are exactly the meaning or the structure of the world that he is looking for, he is obsessed with “something”—the meaning or the structure of the world that he assumes to exist outside the world. If we can assume that “something” to be the cause of the world, what the sandpiper is looking for is the cause in either the “mechanistic causality” or the “expressive causality.” He does not realize that the world he “takes for granted,” or takes as ordinary, is the same as the sand of the beach. The sea in this poem is a fulcrum that the seer of the sea—the sandpiper—never realizes as so. What the sandpiper lacks is the perspectivism with which one

⁵ “Focussed” probably means focused + cussed.

can look at the unordinary phase of the ordinary view of the sea. The sandpiper should know that what is ordinary is the unordinary inverted.

While "Sandpiper" ironically represents the inversion of the ordinary and the unordinary, it remains an abstract sketch of one—the sandpiper—who does not realize the inversion. The poem lacks the orientation for the reader to identify the target of its apparent critical tone. Without orientation, its apparent message that the "world is a mist" but at the same time "minute and vast and clear" sounds like an expression of the vulgar Marxism—the idea that ideology ("mist") is the effects of the base structure ("minute and vast and clear"). In its twin piece, "The Sea & Its Shore," however, Bishop directs her criticism more specifically to the inversion of nature and institution in our modern life.

In "The Sea & Its Shore," first published in 1937, Edwin Boomer lives on a public beach and makes his living by keeping the "sand free from papers" (Bishop, *The Collected Prose* 171). Although he collects the papers to keep himself warm, read, and make models, "the point was that everything had to be burned at last" (179). He is situated at the margin of industrial society, and his job is to play the role of nature:

Of course, according to the laws of nature, a beach should be able to keep itself clean, as cats do. . . .

But the tempo of modern life is too rapid. Our presses turn out too much paper covered with print, which somehow makes its way to our seas and their shores, for nature to take care of herself. (172)

Nature is supposed to recycle everything that has been thrown away from our life. But our modern life has already broken its cycle. Instead, we have to have our own nature, or an institution called nature, to keep our life clean. The sea is such an institution, or a factory in the guise of nature, where industrial wastes are supposed to be transformed into something invisible.

Boomer's job is to keep providing modern people with an illusion that nature—that is, institution—serves them well and everything is all right. Boomer knows that this kind of illusion is necessary in modern life, but does not particularly like it: “Although he enjoyed the fire, Edwin Boomer did not enjoy its inevitability” (180).

Boomer reads the papers, and classifies them according to the meanings they can have for him. He is obsessed with the meaning of paper, which is supposed to have been lost when the paper was dumped into the sea. Unlike the sandpiper in “Sandpiper,” however, he is not obsessed with the meaning of the world. In this short story, the sandpiper represents a writer or a thinker:

Boomer held up the lantern and watched a sandpiper rushing distractedly this way and that.

It looked, to his strained eyesight, like a point of punctuation against the “rounded, rolling waves.” It left fine prints with its feet. Its feathers were speckled; and especially on the narrow hems of the wings appeared marks that looked as if they might be letters, if only he could get close enough to read them. (178-79)

As a writer or thinker, the sandpiper leaves letters on the sands/paper.⁶ For Boomer, however, the sandpiper's letters mean as little as the letters left by the “people who frequented the beach in the daytime” (179). To Boomer, even the “sand itself, if he picked some of it up and held it close to one eye, looked a little like printed paper, ground up or chewed” (179). The sandpiper tries to give meanings to the world and transmit them to others by leaving letters on the beach. For Boomer, on the other hand, the “best part of the long studious nights was when he had cleared up the allotted area and was ready to set fire

⁶ Bishop might be punning on the word sandpiper (sand + paper) here, meaning that the sandpiper is confusing the sands with paper.

to the paper jammed in the wire basket" (179). Boomer does not particularly hate the meanings of the world. At least he reads the papers and even keeps them for a while if they mean something. However, Boomer's job is to sustain the world by keeping it away from too many meanings that are produced everyday. He is the institution in the guise of nature, in which our daily products are turned into wastes, or, in other words, sense is inverted into nonsense. In this sense, Boomer is the most severe critic who has to say no to everything he reads, everything modern thinkers present to him. Even if he does not particularly like the inevitability of burning the papers, he likes the burning or the fire itself, which symbolizes his own presence as a critic against the modern world: "Because of such necessity for discrimination, he had grown to be an excellent judge" (173).

As an individual, of course, Boomer reads the papers. There is nothing unordinary about that. But in the cycle of modern life, in which everything is at once a product and a waste, reading itself becomes something unordinary. Boomer is said to have "lived the most literary life possible" (172). Of course, there is an irony here. Not that a man like Boomer has "lived the most literary life possible," but that the "most literary life possible" is possible only after a literary product lost its initial meaning, or when a literary product turns into a waste. Boomer himself is the institution in which every kind of literary product is transformed into a waste, and that is the "most literary life possible" in modern life. In this sense, it is interesting that his house is described as looking "like an idea of a house than a real one" (171). Being an "idea" is not given a pejorative meaning here. Rather, it means to be critical against the so-called "real." In other words, it means the unordinary against the ordinary. Boomer's house is also called a "shelter" (172) from our ordinary life; it is "not for living in, for thinking in," since it does not allow you to live or think in an ordinary manner. Boomer's house, Bishop also says, "was, to the

ordinary house, what the ceremonial thinking cap is to the ordinary hat.” As an idiom, to put on a thinking cap means to think well. To put on a “ceremonial thinking cap,” on the other hand, probably means to criticize the gesture of putting on a thinking cap. By putting on a “ceremonial thinking cap,” Boomer criticizes those who believe that they think well, or even know well, about their life. Ultimately it is a criticism against thinking in general in modern life, in which we rarely realize the unordinariness of modern thinking—that is, the unordinariness of thinking in the cycle of production/disposal or in the inversion of sense/nonsense.

The sea in “The Sea & Its Shore” is a factory. In the short story, an ordinary view of the sea is inverted into an unordinary view of a factory, especially that of industrial waste disposal facilities. With Bishop’s politics of the sea, nothing is unordinary, but everything is unordinary. Here we can see the difference between Auden and Bishop: in Auden, the sea is outside the modern world, and functions as the place for modern people to recover his or her lost self; whereas in Bishop, the sea is at the margin of the modern world—there is no outside—, and functions as a chasm through which we can glimpse the unordinariness of our ordinary life. For Auden, the sea is the place to go, and the “shore life is always trivial.” For Bishop, on the other hand, there is no difference between the sea and the shore. Auden escapes to the sea, whereas Bishop only sees the sea. Bishop knows that there is no more difference in effect between the sea and the shore than between the ordinary and the unordinary.

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