

Landscapes, Animals and Human Beings: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry and Ecocentrism

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Abstract

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is characterized by a deep gaze at the landscapes, containing animals and human beings – i.e. the vivid actuality of the earth as a biosphere, rather than anthropocentric absorption in idealism, *logos* or ideologies of human society. Although deviating from contemporary confessional poets, Bishop might be ranked among American nature writers due to her attachment to nature. Symptomatic of modern American nature writings, Bishop foregrounds nature; in Bishop's poetry nature is not an ornamental background upon which human dramas are played. Detailed facts of a natural scene or animals themselves often constitute the main texture of Bishop's poems, while human wills become insignificant. Critics describe these qualities of Bishop as reticence, impersonality or painters' craft. In this essay I seek to relate these characteristics of Bishop to an ecocentric worldview in terms of deep ecology. An ecocentric vision is seen in Bishop's poetry, in which other creatures register autonomy, while man is a mere component rather than dominant protagonist of the landscapes. Bishop's poetics illustrates an interactive egalitarianism, rather than sterile, hierarchical relationship between man and nature. Instead of the alienation resulting from authoritarian imposition of anthropocentrism, a reciprocal relationship between man and nature is brought about by Bishop's selfless stance of mutual esteem. Thus, in Bishop's scenes, there is a higher harmony, in which human consciousness ceases trying to give order to but surrenders itself to nature. Bishop's poetry evokes the reader's innocent, wholesome kinship to the land and other creatures of the earth, although the inherent link between man and nature may not be retrieved.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bishop, deep ecology, ecocentrism, anthropocentrism.

I. Introduction: Elizabeth Bishop, Writing Nature, and Deep Ecology

In the poem “To a Tree,” written when she was sixteen, Elizabeth Bishop states,

Oh, tree outside my window, we are kin,
For you ask nothing of a friend but this:
To lean against the window and peer in
And watch me move about! Sufficient bliss

For me, who stand behind its framework stout,
Full of my tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves,
To lean against the window and peer out,
Admiring infinites’mal leaves. (*Complete Poems* 212)

Though a juvenile work, the poem reveals Elizabeth Bishop’s inherent pastoral disposition, which develops more full-blown in her mature poems, characterized by their deep gaze at the landscapes, seascapes, animals as well as human beings – i.e. the vivid actuality of the earth as a biosphere or greater community, which includes all beings, rather than absorption in anthropocentric *logos*, ideologies, egoistic pathos and melancholy -- those “tiny tragedies and grotesques grieves” of human society. As the poem “To a Tree” demonstrates, the reciprocal kinship and companionship of the tree is a “sufficient bliss” for young Bishop, which helps to dismiss her personal, trivial grievances. When the young poetess admires the infinitesimal leaves of the tree, her “infinite mal” “leaves;” that is, her infinite, tiny sorrows (mal) become less intense and disappear (leave). In fact, Bishop’s preoccupation with nature and landscapes is manifestly conveyed by the titles of her books – *North & South*, *A Cold Spring*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*; all these titles are concerned with the earth, geography, and travel. Bishop’s fascination with the phenomenal world, instead of idealism or personal psychology, distinguishes her from English Romantics and her contemporary confessional poets, such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who are more subjectively engaged in personal myths.

Although deviating from her contemporaries, Bishop does not stand alone in the tradition of American poetry. In regard to Bishop’s style and prosody, Harold Bloom argues,

Bishop stands . . . securely in a tradition of American poetry that began with Emerson, Very, and Dickinson, and culminated in aspects of Frost as well as Stevens and Moore. This tradition is marked by firm rhetorical control,

overt moral authority, and sometimes by a fairly strict economy of means.

(x)

That is, Bishop is aligned with her poetic American predecessors by virtue of her strict discipline and self-restraint in rhetoric and solipsism. In fact, the characteristics of impersonality and self-restraint in Bishop's poetry are typical of the schools of Modernism and New Criticism, as she received proper Modernist/New Critical training in reading poetry during her education at Vassar in the 1930s (Harrison 1). According to T. S. Eliot, the pivotal Modernist/New Critic, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (312-13). Ezra Pound stresses that poets should adhere to principles such as "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective" and "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (308). Bishop's impersonal poetics bespeaks her indebtedness to Modernism/New Criticism, which emphasizes the materiality of poetry.

Nevertheless, unlike the Modernists, Bishop is preoccupied with the natural world. Bonnie Costello contends that although Bishop was indebted to Modernism, she gradually eschewed "the abstraction and idealism" of the Modernists and immersed herself "in the observable world, sometimes in disdain toward its social forces, but with delight in its natural beauty" (9).¹ Due to her attachment to nature, Elizabeth Bishop might be ranked among the modern American nature poets, such as Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore, who are concerned with nature as preceding Puritans and Transcendentalists (e.g. Emerson), yet are more resistant to idealism, and more candid, attentive to the phenomenal world (Rotella 3-4).² As Guy Rotella observes, Bishop's poetic style is "to accept the nature of things and to avoid the fraudulent impositions of religious or romantic self-indulgence, claiming more meaning than the facts can bear" (198). That is, as a modern poet, Bishop is more attentive to nature than are the poets of former generations, who are concerned more with human idealism or religious truth than with nature itself in their approaches to nature.

In fact, nature in American literature tends to be less idealized than in its poetic English counterpart. Unlike in English literature, which abounds with idealism and traditional mythological allusions,³ in American literature wild nature takes an

¹ With regard to Bishop's departure from Modernism, Victoria Harrison states that Bishop avoids "the purposefully difficult, obtuse mythmaking of her modernist predecessors" (1).

² Rotella contends that by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, faith in the correspondence between the physical and the metaphysical "is everywhere challenged and often lost." In the twentieth century, the faith "is frequently replaced by a sense of the world as having no metaphysical dimension at all" (3).

³ Thoreau argues,

English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets -- Chaucer and Spenser and

integral, overwhelming role, which often dwarfs human characters. Major American literary works, like those by Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Hemingway and Faulkner, are characterized by a preoccupation with wild nature without wishful romanticism or sentimentalism. The ecocritic Scott Russell Sanders remarks,

Again and again in the great works of American literature, the human world is set against the overarching background of nature. As in Hardy's novels, this landscape is no mere scenery, no flimsy stage set, but rather the energizing medium from which human lives emerge and by which those lives are bounded and measured. (183)

Sanders' statement may also well describe the human-nature relationship in the juvenile work "To a Tree" and other major poems of Bishop, in which nature acts as "the energizing medium from which human lives emerge and by which those lives are bounded and measured." Namely, nature in Bishop's poetry, as well as in other major American literary works,⁴ does not serve merely as ornamental background but rather is featured as an overwhelming foreground, in relation to which human beings are dwarfed and trivialized.

Among modern American nature poets, Bishop is featured with her self-forgetful attentiveness to natural scenes, the wilderness, the vernacular, the domestic, even the banal. In her poetry Bishop is inclined to take her time unsentimentally describing scenes which contain artificial objects, e.g. churches, houses, harbors or boats, as well as natural objects, such as seabirds, fish or plants, while neither human nor non-human elements are dominant. She often casually juxtaposes or incorporates human and non-human objects into her poems with as little hint of human assumption as possible, especially in her landscape poems. In those poems Bishop parallels human cultural elements, such as Christianity, with boundless, incomprehensible nature—signified by animals or landscapes, without asserting a definite conclusion, judgment or preference for either side. At stake is that when confronted by incomprehensible nature, human, civilized schemes become less overwhelming or even insignificant. For example, in "At the Fishhouses," the narrator sings Baptist hymns to a seal, who is completely ignorant of Christianity, yet Bishop

Milton, and even Shakespeare, included -- breathes no quite fresh, and in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome. Her wilderness is a greenwood, her wild man is Robin Hood. There is plenty of genial love of Nature, but not so much of Nature herself. (23)

⁴ In addition to the authors mentioned above -- Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Hemingway and Faulkner, more recent American nature writers include, for example, Wendell Berry, Eudora Welty, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez . . . etc, who "seek to understand our life as continuous with the life of nature; they project 'the little human morality play' against the 'wilderness raging round'" (Sanders 191).

playfully and ironically opposes Christian hymns to the animal. Thus, Christianity is suspended and becomes less solemn or formidable. In addition, in “The Fish,” when the narrator looks into the fish’s eyes, “They shifted a little, but not / to return my stare” (*Complete Poems* 43). Guy Rotella suggests that “when she looks into the fish’s eyes its otherness prohibits comprehension” (216). In both “The Fish” and “At the Fishhouses,” Bishop dispassionately or mockingly parallels humanity/cultural force with nature, while restraining from anthropocentric, egoistic expectations or value judgments. In other words, Bishop treats the man-nature relationship in a characteristically impersonal way.

To epitomize the man-nature relationship in Bishop’s poetry, on one hand, nature for Bishop not only occupies a substantial position, but is completely alien, autonomous, and beyond human conception. Bishop simply admires and respects the autonomy, integrity and alienness of a natural object. On the other hand, nature in Bishop’s poetry is embodied by tangible, specific natural objects, instead of the abstract concept of “nature” found in some Romantic or Transcendentalist poetry where human consciousness is the predominant protagonist while nature is subordinate, or at most respondent to human idealism.⁵ Bishop’s nature is not an ornamental background upon which human dramas are played; rather, detailed facts of a natural scene or of animals themselves often constitute the main texture of Bishop’s poems, while human will becomes irrelevant or trivial.

Critics describe these qualities in Bishop’s work as reticence, impersonality or painters’ craft. In this essay I seek to explore Bishop’s selfless attitude toward nature in light of ecocriticism and relate these characteristics to an ecocentric worldview. Although the selfless poetics is symptomatic of her discipline in Modernism/New Criticism, the impersonal, self-restraining approach to man-nature relationships can be seen as in tune with ecocentrism if we take Bishop’s preoccupation with nature into consideration. Bishop’s approach to nature is distinctively less egoistic, anthropocentric or romantic; such a gesture accords with an ecocentric vision in terms of deep ecology,⁶ which asserts ecocentrism, instead of anthropocentrism,

⁵ Laurence Coupe states that when Ralph Waldo Emerson, influenced by Romantics (that is, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge), wrote on nature, “he was concerned chiefly with the potential of a transcendent self to commune with a transcendent divinity lying beyond natural phenomena” (Introduction to Part I, Section One 13). Namely, while approaching nature, Romantics and Transcendentalists concern more with human idealism than with nature itself.

⁶ The term “deep ecology,” in contrast to “shallow ecology,” was first used by the Norwegian writer Arne Naess, referring to philosophical and cultural thinking about man’s relationship with natural environments. Differentiating the two terms, Capra argues, “Shallow ecology is anthropocentric. It views humans as above or outside of nature, as the source of all value, and ascribes only instrumental, or use value to nature.” Deep ecology, on the other hand, sees the world “as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent,” and “recognizes the intrinsic values of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life” (20). In brief, deep ecology stresses ecocentrism/biocentrism and holism, while

logocentrism and utilitarianism. With regard to the relationship between man and nature, ecocritics advocate the repudiation of hierarchal, utilitarian anthropocentrism in favor of egalitarianism, as seen in Bishop's poetry. As Laurence Coupe argues, "We must replace the sterile opposition of humanity as 'one-for-oneself' and nature as 'thing-for-us' with the principle of 'anotherness', by which culture opens itself up to 'interanimation' with nature" (Introduction to Part IV, Section Two 159). Namely, human beings should restrain from crude anthropocentrism and respect the "anotherness" of nature, in order to achieve reciprocal "interanimation" with nature. In Bishop's poetry, as well as in deep ecology, man is a mere component, never a dominant lord, of landscapes and nature. As the ecocritic Sueellen Campbell asserts, humans are "neither better nor worse than other creatures (animals, plants, bacteria, rocks, rivers) but simply equal to everything else in the natural world" (128). In Bishop's scenes, human beings are as trivial or important as birds and trees, while natural creatures themselves are often juxtaposed solidly and independently against humans, to the extent that the animals appear far more formidable and impressive than human beings.

In terms of deep ecology, Bishop's typically modest, self-restraining, reticent, yet attentive and intimate attitude toward nature informs an ecocentric worldview. Her posture attests to a "recognition of the other as self-existent entity," which enables "the further recognition of interrelationship and interanimation, but on a heterarchical basis rather than on a hierarchical use-value or exchange-value basis," in Patrick D. Murphy's words (195). Such an egalitarian man-nature relationship finds expression in Bishop's deliberately impersonal juxtapositions of human and natural objects in the harbor poems, such as "The Bight," "At the Fishhouses," and "Cape Breton." Furthermore, natural kinship, rather than utilitarianism, between mankind and other creatures is also vigorously manifest in her deep observation of and ingenuous intimacy with animals, e.g. the fish, the seal, the sandpiper or the moose in her poems such as "The Fish," "The Moose," "Sandpiper," etc. In the third part of this essay, Bishop's poems concerning landscapes, seascapes and animals will be examined in depth from the perspective of deep ecology and ecocentrism.

On the other hand, if we take her biographical background into consideration, the value she puts on sobriety, discipline, and self-restraint can also be seen in the way that Bishop deals with her personal life; she tends to deal with even her own emotional and psychological conditions as an objective observer and artist. Doreski points out that "restraint for this poet is a necessary element in the relationship she finds between language and life" (x). In the second part of this essay, before approaching Bishop's poetry, we will examine the ecocentric inclination revealed in

shallow ecology takes an anthropocentric and utilitarian view toward nature.

her comments and attitudes concerning the contemporary confessional poets, as well as her own life. From ecocritics' viewpoint, cosmology like Bishop's is wholesome and virtuous, because it relates humanity to the world in a more proper, interactive and harmonious way. In contrast, overt assertions of individualism, human pride and avarice are censured by ecocritics, for they are at odds with the natural law of ecocentrism, and are ultimately detrimental to both the environment and humanity itself.

II. "The art of losing isn't hard to master:" Bishop's Temperament as in Tune with Ecocentrism and Deep Ecology

As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, due to her objective and reticent tendencies, Bishop is distinguished from her contemporary confessional poets. In fact, Bishop deliberately separates herself from the milieu of her peers, although she has a personal life tragic enough to confess. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop writes, "Although I think I have a prize 'unhappy childhood,' almost good enough for the textbooks – please don't think I dote on it" (qtd. in Colwell 6). As for those confessional poems of her contemporaries, Bishop is unambiguous: she does not care for them. Confessional poets "overdo the morbidity," Bishop once wrote, and "You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves" ("On 'Confessional Poetry'" 303). Bishop also shows little interest in the "intellectual" activities of her contemporaries. In a letter to Lowell, she states,

I guess I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated and have known so few of my "contemporaries" and nothing of "intellectual" life in New York or anywhere. Actually it may be all to the good. (qtd. in Colwell 2)

In other words, Bishop would rather turn to art, nature or the phenomenal world than to society, ideology, solipsism, or analysis of personal psychological complexity. With regard to her taste in artistic style, Bishop states,

I don't like *heaviness* – in general, Germanic art. It seems often to amount to complete self-absorption – like Mann & Wagner. I think one can be cheerful AND profound! – or, how to be grim without groaning –

Hopkins' "terrible" sonnets are terrible – but he kept them short, and in form.

It may amount to a kind of "good manner", I'm not sure. The good artist

assumes a certain amount of sensitivity in his audience and doesn't attempt to flay himself to get sympathy and understanding. (qtd. in Ellis 14, emphasis original)

Explicitly, Bishop professes her distaste for "self-absorption," self-indulgence or sentimentalism, and insists on her reticent, sober, "cheerful AND profound" poetics.

As far as her childhood is concerned, Bishop has the best reason to indulge herself in personal tragedies, yet there is no self-pity in her works. Robert Giroux, the editor of her prose works, remarks that "her life almost from its beginning was marked by losses, which makes it all the more admirable that there is not a trace of self-pity in her writing" (ix). In her autobiographical prose work "The Country Mouse," Bishop reveals her distaste for sentimentalism, an attitude dating from her childhood. Upon her friend Emma's inquiry about her parents, the narrator Elizabeth states,

I said my father was dead; I didn't ever remember seeing him. What about my mother? I thought for a moment and then I said in a *sentimental* voice: "She went away and left me ... she died, too." Emma was impressed and sympathetic, and I loathed myself. It was the first time I had lied deliberately and consciously, and the first time I was aware of falsity and the great power of sentimentality – although I didn't know the word. My mother was not dead. She was in a sanatorium. . . . I didn't know then, and still don't, whether it was from shame I lied, or from a hideous craving for sympathy, playing up my sad romantic plight. But the feeling of self-distaste, whatever it came from, was only too real. I jumped up, to get away from my monstrous self that I could not keep from lying. (*Collected Prose* 31-2)

In Bishop's eyes, sentimentalism or pretension is equivalent to "falsity" or "lying" out of "monstrous self." Thus, Bishop deliberately avoids self-pity, due to her natural candidness, and also because she cannot take advantage either of her parents' or her own tragedies, to play up her "sad romantic plight."

Although her childhood was miserable and she chose to turn to nature and poetry, Bishop's is by no means the story of a Romantic poet, such as that of Byron or Shelley, who wanders around the world, lamenting over his tragedy and seeking comfort. Bishop does not try to console herself with a vain concept of "nature." Instead, she loves travel, and practically engages herself in deep observation and detailed, original description of the world. Due to her love of observation, Bishop

admires Darwin. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop writes that “reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case built up out of his endless, heroic observation.” Bishop compares this “heroic observation” with art; “What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration” (“The ‘Darwin’ Letter” 288). Indeed, Bishop’s art is wrought through her “heroic observation,” “self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration” on the natural—whether human or non-human, phenomenal world. Louis Bogan asserts that Elizabeth Bishop “is firmly in touch with the real world and takes a Thoreaulike interest in whatever catches her attention.” Hence, her poems “strike no attitudes and have not an ounce of superfluous emotional weight, and they combine an unforced ironic humor with a naturalist’s accuracy of observation” (182).

Instead of concentrating on and magnifying the darkness of her own personal life, she turns her eye to nature, the real world, thus dissipating her miseries, which are hardly mentioned in her poetry. In “To a Tree,” gazing at the tree is a “sufficient bliss,” which helps her confront her trivial sorrows. As Marti Kheel argues, “Learning to respond to nature in caring ways is not an abstract exercise in reasoning. It is, above all, a form of psychic and emotional health” (260). In “One Art,” Bishop culminates her impersonal poetics, or ecocentric poetics in terms of deep ecology, by trying to master the “art” of losing;

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
 so many things seem filled with the intent
 to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lost something every day. Accept the fluster
 of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
 The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

 --Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
 I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
 the art of losing’s not too hard to master
 though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster. (*Complete Poems* 178,
 emphasis original)

In this poem, through the portrayal of her attempt to overcome selfishness and egotism, Bishop not only captures but transcends the disastrous pain of losing her beloved, which thus becomes artistic and admirable.

Bishop’s integrity and candid style might be attributed to her pastoral,

ecocentric disposition, which brings her to look at life from a panoramic, naturalistic rather than individualistic viewpoint. According to ecocritics such as Joseph Meeker and William Rueckert, if one is less solipsistic and turns one's attention more to the natural world, one will not be so preoccupied with and overwhelmed by personal tragedy, which is actually petty and trivial in front of nature. In ecology what matters is the whole ecosystem rather than individual human being, even though he or she may be a tragic hero in the humanistic tradition. Nature writers and ecocritics emphasize that man is not the lord of the earth; thus, should not be so egocentric as to attribute all natural phenomena to personal tragedy, or worse to exploit nature for personal ends. Meeker contends, man's "high moral ideals and glorified heroic poses are themselves largely based upon fantasy and are likely to lead to misery or death for those who hold them" (160), because they are against the ecocentric natural order. In ecology, the truth of the natural order is,

No individuals and no particular species stand out as overwhelmingly dominant, but each performs unique and specialized functions which play a part in the overall stability of the community. It is the community itself that really matters. . . . (Meeker 162)

Man's anthropocentrism has been regarded as a tragic flaw by some ecocritics. William Rueckert maintains, "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (113). Without the "tragic flaw" of anthropocentrism, Bishop is less morbidly egoistic and seems to be more profound than her confessional peers who insist on exploring their individual psychology. On the other hand, due to her self-restraint in regards to sentimentalism, the natural objects in her poetry register more integrity and autonomy. In "One Art," it is by virtue of impersonality or restraint of selfishness that Bishop manages to transcend the pain of loss, though it is virtually a devastating experience, if one insists on a solely egoistic viewpoint. Nevertheless, Bishop's disciplined, objective treatment of the pain of loss never abates but paradoxically endows her agony with more dignity and profundity, to the extent that the pain is sublimated to art. "One Art" exemplifies Bishop's aesthetics, revealed in her comment about Romantic, Germanic art mentioned above. Instead of self-absorption, Bishop seeks to achieve a style, which is "cheerful AND profound," "grim without groaning," and "may amount to a kind of 'good manner,'" because "[t]he good artist assumes a certain amount of sensitivity in his audience and doesn't attempt to flay himself to get sympathy and understanding," in Bishop's own words mentioned above (qtd. in Ellis 14).

Our discussion concerning “One Art,” her autobiographical prose and letters, etc. manifest that Bishop does not care to probe into personal psychology, to pity herself or to exaggerate morbidity. She would rather be a sober on-looker, who observes the world and her own life, including her own sorrows, with a childlike curiosity, from a more impersonal viewpoint. In short, Bishop’s temperament corresponds to ecocentrism because both are concerned more with man and nature as a whole than with narrow anthropocentric, personal human psychology or ideology.

III. Bishop’s Ecocentric Poetics: Landscapes, Animals and Human Beings

In *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, Bishop’s fascination with the earth is made eminently clear in the title of the first poem, “The Map,” with which Bishop means to initiate the reader into the landscape of her poetry. As Jan B. Gordon observes, “Elizabeth Bishop’s introductory poem is itself a kind of map to the volume” (12). Throughout the poem Bishop affectionately expresses her engrossment for the map, signifying the earth or geography rather than history, which is comparatively more ideological and political. The following lines are suffused with Bishop’s passion for and intimacy with the land;

...We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
– the printer here experiencing the same excitement
as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods. (*Complete Poems* 3)

Bishop’s affection for the land and sea seems to permeate the expressions such as “stroke these lovely bays,” “expected to blossom,” “excitement,” “emotion too far exceeds its cause,” “take the water between thumb and finger,” and “feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.” As a traveler, Bishop naturally looks forward to a map, which is pivotal as a symbol of the earth, the seas and lands to explore. In her prose “Primer Class,” Bishop also expounds upon her love for maps and geography. In the prose, the first-person narrator, Elizabeth, explains how she has admired the world map since she was in a kindergarten:

Only the third and fourth grades studied geography. On their side of the room, over the blackboard, were two rolled-up maps, one of Canada and one of the whole world. . . . I was so taken with the pull-down maps that I wanted to snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands. (*Collected Prose* 10)

Similarly, in “The Map,” Bishop almost lovingly caresses the seas and the lands while gazing at the map. At the end of the poem, after expressing her admiration of the map, Bishop withdraws her emotion and appeals to reason,

Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?

– What suits the character or the native waters best.

Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West.

More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors. (*Complete Poems* 3)

Bishop states that topography is neutral, devoid of prejudice, as it “displays no favorites,” thus, “[m]ore delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.” By “delicate,” Bishop means tender, subtle and sensitive. That is, a map-maker is less rude or arbitrary, and does not impose his personal will or political ideology on the world as a historian often does; hence, Bishop prefers geography to history. Jan B. Gordon affirms, “In her craft, as in her life, geography always triumphs over history” (11). Stephen Stepanchev also contends that “she distrusts history, with its melodramatic blacks and whites, and prefers geography, with its subtle gradations of color” (qtd. in Travisano 123). From ecocritics’ points of view, geography is, in comparison, more objectively or attentively concerned with the earth, the land, while history focuses on complicated human political and social affairs, and tends to ignore the environment or regard it as a mere background of human drama.⁷ As Linda Vance argues, “Traditional histories, with their emphasis on great men and great wars, have tended to ignore the natural environment except as a site where the real drama took

⁷ Although in comparison with history, geography is more objectively concerned with the land and the earth rather than human politics and ideology, some geographical scholars maintain that geography might be inflected by cultural forces such as politics or ideology. For example, Yi-Fu Tuan implies that “‘culture’ dictates our perception, recording, range, and ‘awareness’ of space” (Shigley 36). In her reading of “The Map,” Bonnie Costello also argues, “The map may represent an ideal of perspectiveless, unchanging totality, but as an object of contemplation and expression it is always drawn back by its beholder into history, time, the many active displacements of perspective. Thus, Bishop, as mapmaker, is always also historian” (237). On the other hand, by history I mean the history influenced by politics and ideology, rather than that referring to memory or time.

place” (127).⁸ Bishop’s preference for geography over history reflects her adoration for the land, the earth instead of human politics and ideology.

Maps are fascinating to Bishop because they embody the earth, and represent keys to the world; therefore, what matters to Bishop is not the map itself, but real scenes and landscapes. Although they may be banal or ugly, true landscapes are always intriguing to Bishop, because she enjoys exploration for exploration’s sake, or in other words, she loves nature for nature’s sake. Bishop insists on probing the world in person, as she questions and answers in “Questions of Travel,”

What childishness is it that while there’s a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?
The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?
To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,
at any view,
instantly seen and always, always delightful?
Oh, must we dream our dreams
and have them, too? (*Complete Poems* 93)

Though there is childishness in her impulse to probe the world, it is “always, always delightful.” In the first sentence, Bishop’s accentuation of uncontrollable childishness in her impulse to be in touch with the world conveys her primal, instinctive tie with nature. If “The Map” is only a map, a dream or an aspiration, the landscape and travel poems stand for practical realizations of Bishop’s dreams and her physical, experiential interactions with the land. Bishop’s love for nature is not abstract but essentially and inevitably involves travels, landscapes or practical experiences in nature; she has to relate herself to nature in person, as she asserts in the last sentence, “*must* we dream our dreams / and have them, too?” (emphasis added). Therefore, she must strive to see “the sun the other way around,” the “tiniest green hummingbird in the world,” some old stonework, more intriguing when it is inexplicable and impenetrable, “at any view, / instantly seen and always, always delightful.”

Furthermore, her fascination with geography, travel and landscape as revealed in “The Map” and “Questions of Travel” not only attests to Bishop’s intimacy with and sensitivity toward the land, but also calls our attention to her consciousness of place, which is crucial in the view of ecocritics, who stress that “[t]here is no such

⁸ Despite traditional histories, Vance adds that “the new field of environmental history has emerged, conceptualizing and analyzing interactions between humans and their environment as dialectical and historical, a process of ongoing change” (127).

things as individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place” (Everden 103). Wendell Berry echoes in “Poetry and Place,” “In the moral (the ecological) sense you cannot know *what* until you have learned *where*” (103, emphasis original). Bishop’s consciousness of place illustrates environmental writers’ emphasis on “that relatedness, and the intimate and vital involvement of self with place” (Everden 103). As well as her impersonal, self-restraining artistic style, Bishop’s awareness of place also corresponds to ecocritics’ proposals for human beings’ respect for and attentiveness to the land.

Through the initiation of “The Map,” the reader is introduced to the landscapes within Bishop’s poems such as “The Bight,” “At the Fishhouses,” and “Cape Breton.” In “The Bight,” Bishop takes her time depicting all the messy but vigorous activities at the bight, including those of the boats, the dredge, birds, etc. Most of the poem is devoted to the insignificant details at the bight; yet, the reader is never bored but instead savors the serene atmosphere pervading the lines. The first line of the poem, “At low tide like this how sheer the water is,” communicates Bishop’s familiarity with the locale; she is not an outsider but an observer who knows the tides. The reader also shares the narrator’s mood of delight, revealed by phrases such as “the pilings dry as matches,” “marimba music,” “the dredge . . . plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves,” “The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in / with the obliging air of retrievers” . . . etc. Afterwards, Bishop sums up,

The bight is littered with old correspondences.
Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful. (*Complete Poems* 60-61)

If all the former lines about the various activities at the bight are like fresh water, Bishop distills the water into wine with the concluding lines, especially the last phrase “awful but cheerful.” The monotonous sound of the dredge “Click. Click.” embodies a paradoxical “chaotic rhythm” beyond human or divine intention. All the muddled activities at the bight are insignificant, “awful but cheerful,” which elucidates how Bishop looks at the world -- dirty, untidy, yet delightful. The bight is charming because it is real; all the creatures simply concentrate on their affairs, oblivious of any observers or of God. There is nothing but reality, no intricate idealism, romanticism or theology. This poem exemplifies Bishop’s typical knack in capturing sincerity from the common, which, thus, becomes amusing without any superfluous, pretentious presumptions. Bishop corresponds to deep ecology in respecting wild nature, but she

is more tolerant of, and even enjoys, everything natural, including crude human activities, without any trace of anxious criticism or interpretation. In her poetry, all the objects and creatures are engaged in their own affairs – respectively, not harmoniously, which seems to be too sublime a concept for Bishop. There is hardly any anger, anxiety or sentimentalism in her poetry, for she rarely criticizes, advocates or beautifies, but revels in mere gazing and describing. Like Emily Dickinson, Bishop simply “confronts the truth,” concludes Harold Bloom (x).

Bishop’s conscious exclusion of solipsism is more prominent in another poem “Cape Breton,” in which Bishop portrays another landscape in detail. Similarly, there are human and natural objects: birds – different, specific birds, sheep, mist, trees, a cliff, a motorboat, bulldozers, churches, a small bus, and so on. However, in this poem Bishop claims more plainly, “Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been / abandoned” (*Complete Poems* 67). In addition,

And these regions now have little to say for themselves
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets. (*Complete Poems* 68)

In these lines, Bishop manifests that the landscape itself is not meant to suggest any solemn, divine oracle. “The landscape defies translation,” as C. K. Doreski puts it (43). The only sound is the sparrows’ songs, “floating upward / freely, dispassionately.” As the natural scene seems to be “transcended” or “elevated” by the sparrows’ songs, the narrator checks the reader not only by the adverb “dispassionately” but also by the “brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets,” which cannot be more mundane and squalid.

In “Cape Breton,” the sparrows are by no means the English Romantics’ nightingale or skylark, which seems to matter less in itself as a bird than a messenger from heaven to inspire or encourage the poets. In Bishop’s poems, as in nature, birds act purely out of their own instincts. Bishop’s portrayal of birds as indifferent to human world is also found in the poem “Sandpiper.” Similar to other birds in Bishop’s seascape poems, the sandpiper concentrates on searching the beach, regardless of the waves, Gods or human beings. Hence, the sandpiper’s “beak is focused; / he is preoccupied, / Looking for something, something, something. / Poor bird, he is obsessed!” (*Complete Poems* 131). Unlike humans, the sandpiper is utterly one with the seascape without alienation, thus he takes the world for granted, as Bishop describes,

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. (*Complete Poems* 131)

The bird is used to the waves, because he is akin to nature and the sea. He is a student of Blake, as he persistently tries to find truth in a grain of sand. Nevertheless, Bishop is being playful and ironical, for, in fact, the sandpiper cannot be more ignorant of Blake. Furthermore, the comparison smacks of a slight satire on the Romantics, as far as Bishop's distaste for sentimentalism is concerned. In contrast to those birds in the poetry of the Romantics, Bishop's birds are far from Keats's nightingale and Shelley's skylark, and illuminate one feature of modern nature writings – a “refusal to imagine nature existing for human benefit or yielding a moral for human consumption” (Buell 205).

Henceforth, in “Cape Breton,” the sparrow songs float not only “freely, dispassionately” but “meshing” in “torn fish-nets.” The birds are free and dispassionate; they sing out of instinct, not for God or human beings. In addition, the connection to ugly “torn fish-nets” suggests that the birds are not heavenly but earthbound. Obviously, Bishop means to disillusion; as Guy Rotella asserts, Bishop's words “deny what they invoke” (191). She confronts the reader with nothing but reality, which could be lovely or banal, but hardly spiritual or idealistic. In the end of the poem, Bishop depicts a scene in which,

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks. (*Complete Poems* 68)

Again, Bishop parallels human and non-human phenomena at random – “The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.” Human beings are equal with other creatures; they are not the *homo sapiens* to dominate the world, but a mere member of the biosphere. Bishop's purposeless juxtaposition of human and non-human phenomena evinces a heterarchical man-nature relationship and ecological egalitarianism, in contrast to romantic, hierarchical anthropocentrism.

In the end of “Cape Breton,” beyond the birds, the calf and the bus, “The thin mist follows / the white mutations of its dream; / an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.” Ultimately Bishop imposes no unifying vision, and attributes everything to nature; at most there are “[t]he thin mist,” “the white mutations of its dream,” and “an ancient chill” “rippling the dark brooks.” In “Cape Breton,” Bishop completely sets

the scene free from any visionary premises, as she does with the fish in “The Fish;” “—until everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! / And I let the fish go” (*Complete Poems* 44). Although Bishop rejects unifying visions, she is not nihilistic. She respects incomprehensible natural law -- if there is one, and would rather gaze and appreciate than impose conceptions. As Sybil P. Estess contends, “Elizabeth Bishop seldom violates objects by imposing on them preconceived definitions, a priori interpretations, or sentimental descriptions” (219).

In addition to the birds in her seascape poems, there are other animals observed and dramatized by Bishop, among which the fish is the most impressive. In “The Fish,” the object scrutinized and detailed is a fish, a most amazing and alien creature in Bishop’s delineation. Bishop commences the poem plainly;

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
.....
He didn’t fight.
He hadn’t fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. . . . (*Complete Poems* 42)

With the few strokes, Bishop readily captures the fish’s silent, heavy and ancient otherworldliness, like wild nature, which is never romantic or spiritual, but “battered,” “venerable,” and “homely.” Then Bishop deliberately observes the body of the fish inside out – his skin like wallpaper, speckled with barnacles and sea-lice, the frightening gills, the pink swim-bladder, and the filmy eyes. Bishop’s fascination with the body, the physical texture of the fish might be associated with Melville’s thorough exploration of the whales’ bodies in *Moby-Dick*. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville devotes substantial space to the depiction and the anatomy of the whale’s body, to emphasize the materiality of the whale, instead of a spiritual, mysterious and unattainable concept of the whale. Both Bishop and Melville’s practical investigation into and crude contact with the ancient, tremendous fish, evince their fearless curiosity toward and intimate kinship with nature, typical of American nature writing.

Bishop’s full concentration on the very body of the fish rather than any vain concept beyond the fish itself also distinguishes the poem from Bishop’s godmother Mirianne Moore’s poem of the same title. According to Anne Colwell, “Bishop’s work concerns a particular fish, the body of one fish, while Moore’s work concerns all fish, fish as phenomenon.” Thus, “Bishop’s fish is an individual, with a will and with

a body,” and “Moore’s fish . . . is a species . . . or an ‘it’ that the poem holds at a distance . . .” (20). In brief, Bishop’s radical observation of the particular body of the fish professes her esteem for wild nature devoid of idealistic, logocentric assumptions, especially when she turns to the fish’s eyes,

Which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare. (*Complete Poems* 43)

The fish’s alienness is highlighted especially by his eyes, which are definitely unlike those of human beings’, far larger, shallower, yellowed, opaque, and, above all, unresponsive to human beings’ wishful thinking. “The fish can never be a friend,” as Thomas J. Travisano analyzes; Bishop admires the fish, “but empathy does not delude her, because she avoids the naïve anthropomorphism that would imagine a response from the fish’s eyes. . . . Bishop’s language lends the fish a personality while respecting his autonomy” (Travisano 66). Inevitably Bishop cannot avoid personifying the fish, because she can only take a human’s viewpoint when approaching the fish, yet she always restrains her egotism and respects the fish’s autonomy, by stressing the physical, material reality of the fish’s body. Bishop’s expressions illuminate her reverence for the fish’s autonomy; for example, she states, “I admired his sullen face,” the fish’s lower lip –“if you could call it a lip -- / grim, wet, and weaponlike,” the fishlines and hooks clung to the fish

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw. (*Complete Poems* 43)

Furthermore, Bishop gains joy by unselfishly admiring the fish rather than by plundering or condescending to it, as she states, “I stared and stared / and victory filled up.” Naturally, in the end, “I let the fish go.” Bishop’s approach to nature is of an artist, a lyricist, instead of a hunter or a philosopher. Therefore, she captures unique beauty from crude, natural reality. “Bishop was intrigued by the way beauty

penetrates ordinary things,” rather than those elevated or affirmed by social conventions, as Thomas J. Travisano observes (87).

Not only “The Fish,” but another poem “The Moose” also evidences Bishop’s childlike admiration for wild animals, from a different perspective. In the long poem, Bishop sketches a bus journey from Nova Scotia to Boston. A lone traveler leaves her hometown -- “narrow provinces / of fish and bread and tea.” She gives goodbye kisses “to seven relatives / and a collie supervises” (*Complete Poems* 169-70). As the bus travels, the landscape shifts, the passengers snore, sign, or chat, and the reader seems to be mesmerized into a trance;

A dreamy divagation
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination. . . . (*Complete Poems* 171)

Some elderly passengers gossip about relatives’ deaths, sicknesses and losses, as the world seems to fall asleep, then

-- Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,
in the middle of the road.
It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus’s hot hood. (*Complete Poems* 172)

From the beginning of the poem, Bishop has prepared the whole scene for the appearance of the moose. The reader and the passengers have to be hypnotized into a dream in order to meet the wild animal. Bishop’s arrangement for the appearance of the moose implies that when man is too awake, reasonable or defensive, he cannot see real nature and become one with it. The scene is dreamlike, as it seems that only in dreams can human beings achieve an instinctual union with nature, that is, when human nature itself becomes more released from the alienating utilitarianism of civilization. From deep ecologists’ viewpoint, modern civilization of reason and

science leads to man's alienation from his inherent, original bond with nature.⁹

Bishop's delineation of the moose is similar to that of the fish; she simply adores the alien, autonomous beauty of the animal, without making any attempt to impose presumptions. Like the fish, a wild animal, which does not respond to human expectations, the moose takes her time and "looks the bus over, / grand, otherworldly." Yet, Bishop asserts, "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" (*Complete Poems* 173). The question sentence suggests that the sweet sensation of joy, resulting from purposeless confrontation with a wild animal, is shared by all and lies beyond reason; all the passengers are affected by the feeling, but do not know why. The accidental encounter with the moose restores man's primitive, subconscious tie to nature, hence, the sensation of joy is beyond reason or language. Like the fish, the moose leaves in the end, since in Bishop's poetry wild animals are never sentimentally involved with human world. Nevertheless, in the wake, ". . . there is a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline" (*Complete Poems* 173). As in other poems, there is a sheer juxtaposition or innocent encounter of man with nature. In "The Moose," the passengers catch a glimpse of wild nature by chance, surprised and impressed, and that seems to be enough. Bishop means to capture the pure beauty of the encounter; therefore, a definite, theoretical conclusion is redundant.

Once in an interview with Bishop, George Starbuck commented about "The Moose," saying: "You obviously do like to know and use exact geographer's knowledge about things . . . the knowledge of particular things, but let me embarrass you: I admire the philosophy of the poems, the morals." Bishop responded, "I didn't know there [was any philosophy]. . . ." Then, she explained, "You know, about my first book one fairly admiring friend wound up by saying, 'But you have no philosophy whatever.' And people who are really city people are sometimes bothered by all the 'nature' in my poem" (Starbuck 316-7). In other words, Bishop manifests, there is no philosophy but nature in her poetry, which is so much that "people who are really city people are sometimes bothered." As in the end of "The Moose," Bishop insists on a simple parallel between the smell of moose and the smell of gasoline, avoiding exterior, philosophical assumption. However, the charm of Bishop's poetics lingers, more perceptive than logical argument and philosophy.

IV. Conclusion: Poetry Evoking the Innocent Tie between Man and Nature

⁹ For example, Oleschlaeger argues in his criticism of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, "The vestiges of humankind's tie to nature . . . were erased by the alchemy of Modernism" (95). Oleschlaeger states, machine technology, along with capitalism and democracy, effected "the conversion of nature into a standing reserve possessing market value only. Modernism thus completes the intellectual divorce of humankind from nature" (96).

Bishop's reticent, impersonal and egalitarian approach to the man-nature relationship corresponds to that of deep ecology, according to which, man should first of all modify his selfish, anthropocentric worldview to achieve a genuine recognition of his proper position in the ecosystem. Deep ecology asserts restraint of human egotism for sake of the harmony and balance of the whole ecosystem, which now includes not only members of human society but also all other creatures and the land. The ecocentric vision privileged by deep ecologists is seen in Bishop's poems, as the poetess portrays her landscapes, containing human and non-human objects, with minimal anthropocentric, logocentric presumptions.

As a result, in Bishop's scenes, natural creatures register more autonomy, which is often indifferent to the human world, yet due to her selfless, admiring attitude, there is paradoxically more intimacy between the poetess and nature. As the juvenile work "To a Tree" discussed in the beginning of this essay demonstrates, the reciprocal kinship between the narrator and the tree is brought about by an impersonal relationship of mutual esteem rather than authoritarian, condescending imposition. Travisano makes an observation concerning the poem,

When the young writer asserts kinship with the tree, it is because the tree implicitly recognizes her shyness and permits their relationship to remain a purely aesthetic basis. She can "admire" the tree because she is protected by a "framework stout." This loneliness is pleasing, its melancholy tempered by an awareness of correspondences. The tree seems all the more humanized because it is distanced and framed, yet it retains the miracle and mystery of "infinite's mal leaves." (24)

Because Bishop simply appreciates the autonomy of a natural object, which retains its own "miracle and mystery" as the tree does in "To a Tree," her poetry illuminates a dialogic, heterarchical and interactive rather than sterile hierarchical relationship between man and nature.

As an artist, nature lyricist, she captures the plain beauty of the aimless confrontations between man and nature. In this way, Bishop the poetess transcends ecocritics, for with her poetry Bishop literally illustrates the ecocentric, egalitarian man-nature relationship that ecocritics profess. Ecocritics advocate man-nature egalitarianism in anxious, prosaic arguments, while Bishop seizes the relationship with the art of her poetry, which, in fact, often stands as autonomous as nature does. As the reader appreciates the purposeless man-nature relationship sketched in the poems, Bishop's art mitigates the alienation of man and nature caused by modern technology and industrialism. Bishop's poetry evokes the reader's innocent,

wholesome kinship to the land, places and other creatures of the earth, although the inherent link between man and nature may not be retrieved. As an artist, at the ends of Bishop's poems, she always lets nature go, while in the wake of her release, there is serenity, victory or a sweet sensation of joy, surpassing logical theories and appealing to a higher natural order, which is beyond yet in accord with humanity. Bishop's poetics sets not only nature but also humans free from the anxiety of solipsism and utilitarianism of modern industrial civilization.

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