

**Mastering the Terrors of Dissolution and
Isolation in Elizabeth Bishop's Epiphanies.**

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The concept of literary epiphany has received surprisingly little theoretical attention in recent years. "Privileged moments of secular revelation have become a literary commonplace in poems and prose narratives, but only a handful of scholars have considered the wider implications of the technique derived from William Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and first called 'epiphany' by James Joyce" (Nichols 467; the very recent collection of essays edited by Tigges may be an indication of change in this regard). This oversight may be an after effect of new criticism, whose stress on "organic unity" made it seem heretical for the critic to study an epiphany apart from its context in the unified work one hoped to find. The mysterious or nonrational effect produced by epiphanies may also have discouraged theorists from thinking of a given writer's epiphanic moments as a class of constructed objects agreeable to systematic study. But if we have a diverse depth psychology to help us grasp the puzzling logic of dream constructions, we need a complementary epiphanology to reveal the less-than-obvious logic of epiphany patterns. Each epiphany

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maker establishes a uniquely individual recurrent pattern that correlates with a personal configuration of psychological concerns, fears, and desires. In creating epiphanies, as the example of Elizabeth Bishop testifies, one becomes most intensely who one is.

No attempt has yet been made to analyze the distinctive pattern of Bishop's powerful verse epiphanies. In two brief, overlapping essays, Sybil Estess finds certain poems of Bishop's lyrics epiphanic because they are "meditative," show rich "powers of association," offer descriptions in "minute detail," and are "tentative" while expressing the "spirit of wonder" ("Shelters" 53, 55, 59; "Toward the Interior" uses similar phrasing). [1] But these remarks barely begin to distinguish Bishop's epiphanies from her lyric utterances generally, much less to define what makes her epiphanies different from those of other poets. In the following analysis of the most complete and strongest epiphanies in the poetic work of Elizabeth Bishop, the study will apply a method worked out in *The Patterns of Epiphany* (1997) and further tested in recent papers on Philip Larkin (1999) and J. D. Salinger (2000). Here, as in those studies, one begins by using three criteria to define a literary epiphany. (1) It is a moment that affects us as exceptionally intense in feeling. (2) It is expansive in meaning, appearing to signify more than such a brief experience would have any right to mean. (3) And it is mysterious in effect because its intensity and

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~~expansiveness~~ are unaccountable by any rational explanation in the writer's text. [2]

The technique used for the study of the idea of epiphany is borrowed from French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard a threefold focus on (1) elements, namely earth, water, air, fire, along with elementally related imagery such as rainbows; (2) motions, vertical or horizontal, rapid or gentle, sudden or gradual and (3) shapes, often geometric, such as circles or spheres. The methodology of the study differs from the techniques of close analysis used by new critics and offers advantages for psychological analysis as well. New Critical study of imagery tended to ignore such components of the epiphanies because these components are semi-abstract, not obviously picture-like. In the method applied, the motion pattern is sought regardless of what moves, the geometric shape identified independently of what fills it, the element studied whatever the variety of its endless shapes or chaotic defiance of form. The semi-abstract nature of these components of epiphanies may actually take us deeper than new critical analysis into structures of an individual's mental functioning. At the same time, however, the components of the patterns of epiphany that the study offers are far less generalized than the images of cyclicity (lunar, diurnal, seasonal) systematized by Northrop Frye (158-62). Where Frye sought imagery that would clarify universal myth patterns and classes of genres based on them, the study

attempts to isolate the irreplaceable, individual pattern of interaction that brings elements, motions, and shapes together in an epiphany maker's personal "style."

This paper does this by first locating the given epiphanist's "paradigm," definable as the one epiphany where the writer's characteristic element-motion-shape pattern is most complete and intense; then the paper studies variants of that pattern. In the paradigm epiphany, psychological implications of the writer's distinctive epiphanic pattern will come through most fully because of the paradigm's superior intensity and elaboration. These implications can then be explored further in variants of the paradigm. In Bishop's epiphanies, often labeled "dreams," psychological insights, afforded by pre-oedipal analysis of the epiphanic data, will illuminate the paradox of her intense creative moments, for these are to an equal degree moments of threatened destruction.

Terror, together with the lifelong attempt to master it, is at the root of Bishop's art, to the extent that only epiphanology, combined with psychoanalysis, can show. In Bishop's epiphanies, the terror of flooding or fiery motions that threaten mental chaos through dissolution of the self is as great as the contrasting fear of rounded, hardening shapes that embody the deadness of the isolated, bounded self. How psychoanalysis and what the study calls epiphanology combine to elucidate the problem and its semi-abstract visual embodiments

will be most fully shown when we examine Bishop's epiphanic paradigm from both standpoints.

After first offering an analysis of Bishop's epiphanic paradigm, "In the Waiting Room," the study will show how pre-oedipal psychoanalysis can expose the roots of the terror that the poem recalls and arouses. With the help of Fairbairn's psychological insights, and with reference to various controlling strategies, the paper will next study Bishop's strongest epiphanies in a two-stage progression that leads from four epiphanies climaxing in dissolution, submersion, death or the threat of death, to seven epiphanies showing a greater degree of what Bishop calls "controlled panic," a psychological mastery of the threat of the self's disintegration or deadening dispersal. Such control is attained through spatial distancing, conceptual framing, or both.

Finally, the paper will show that Bishop attains a rare, hard-earned psychological "victory" (clarified by "Sonnet") through compassionate understanding when she finds an adequate visionary love object in "The Fish," a poem giving a sense of destruction narrowly averted by the liberating revelation of a spreading, flowing light. Before analyzing specific epiphanies or Bishop's epiphanic paradigm, however, one must first explain the semi-abstract pattern of motions, shapes, and elements that unifies Bishop's epiphanies.

Motion in Bishop's epiphanies is sudden, violent and terrifying; the psyche of the Bishop epiphanist-

persona is subject to upheavals, eruptions, and surges from within and without, all of them threatening psychological dissolution. In Bishop, panic-striking movement is most often vertical, upward surges and downward plunges, sometimes a surge followed by a plunge, but that it can also be horizontal indicates that the source of terror is either inside (a sinking feeling, a rising excitement) or outside (an invasive incursion). Because dramatic motion is central for Bishop, she focuses on flexible elements: fire and water. She links eruptions and submersions to fire (volcanoes) and water (powerful descending waves), though she may strangely merge fire and water, and in the merger may reverse their most common directions of movement. A weed suddenly bursting up from the ground may bring the element of earth, as well, into the pattern of violent vertical motion. Bishop may find lateral movements equally threatening: tide-like currents cause a blackout; the horizontal rolling of a rocklike armored car is devastating. Especially with surging-plunging surf-like waves, water movements may merge vertical and horizontal. Any of these sudden motions may annihilate the epiphanist-persona.

Bishop's recurrent epiphanic shapes, circular, spherical, or rounded, convey another kind of psychological threat, that of constrictedness and boundedness rather than chaos. Bishop uses these forms to evoke the pathos of

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the isolated self. They often suggest death or a deadly form of life in their links to poison, crying, blackness, and deception. Rounded forms are allied to terrifying constriction, contraction, or condensation; to fragmentation, deadening dispersal, or depression. Though at times these forms may momentarily acquire life-giving or expansive potential, as when tears [3] turn to seeds, less often, the rounded shapes (helmet-like waves, armored cars) may be vehicles of threatening expansive movements. The rounded forms that contract, depress, or threaten may be watery or fiery (tears imaged as condensing dew, or rising and falling fire-globes). Or these forms may be elementally allied to earth in a great variety of ways and with varying degrees of solidity or hardness: examples are berries, breasts (which may be "rocky"), bread crumbs, seeds, sand grains (varied as diamonds), islands, helmets, armored cars, multiple rings of wire or string wrapped around a neck or head, the rounded forms of dead birds and polliwogs. Finally, the rounded forms of liquid spheres may condense to earthy, solid ones: tears turn to seeds, drops to black berries.

Objects linked to unnatural vertical motion create a special horror. When, for instance, dead, black, blinded birds or fire globes fall instead of rising, we are made to feel the unnaturalness of both the irrational dissolution-threatening plunges and the deadening, hardening spheres of isolated egos. Bishop makes less

obviously "earthy" and less obviously "rounded" shapes (innumerable sand grains, an army of faces, a stream of countless water drops) less violently threatening. But, for her, countlessness or ungovernable multiplicity is a problem, too. The sensation they create of unencompassability, of relentless, uncontrollably prolific increase, can suggest to the bewildered, panicky perceiver, a threat of infinite fragmentation or identity-dispersal: they represent yet another way of being dissolved or "swallowed up." On occasion, though, because Bishop likes a suite of varied colors, as in sand grains or rainbows, a sideways motion will convey an attractive flowing, of mercury or of a liquid rainbow.

Though for Bishop dissolution and isolation are a psychological Scylla and Charybdis, both surged and rounded or bounded objects have their positive potential, too. Suggesting life and hope, black tears can suddenly become seeds or children's faces. When not utterly annihilating, eruptive surges and plunges and hostile sidelong waves can be enigmatically liberating. If they threaten the epiphanist with the disintegration of identity, they also offer the exhilaration of a bursting-free of deeper powers. If they can be psychologically mastered through a sufficient mustering of ego strength, these eruptive-submersive (unconscious) forces may be tamed, or refrained, into an "elemental sublime," the victory of inner impulse over a dead, constrictive, false identity. Even the usually deadly bounded objects can

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then be transformed into richly colored jewel-like sands and become emblematic of a boundless aesthetic variations.

In order to illustrate Bishop's increasing control over the contending forces of identity dissolution and deadening isolation, this paper arranges the epiphanies studied here in a non-chronological sequence. The Bishop epiphanist-persona that will be shown, becomes psychologically less vulnerable by employing three techniques of mastery. (1) Spatial distancing or miniaturizing offers a sense of control. Using this technique, one can view the hostile sea from the secure vantage of a wader rather than the vertiginous perspective of a sailor on a ship mast, or one may contemplate a miniaturized volcanic landscape from the safety of an airplane. (2) The technique of conceptual framing through partial allegorizing or the suggestion of a philosophic framework places the threats of solitude and chaos in a coherent poetic context. (3) The exercise of compassion or imaginative empathy for a fellow sufferer, in such a rare epiphany as "The Fish," may transform vulnerability into visionary victory. In speaking of Bishop's interrelated (spatial, conceptual, and empathetic) types of psychological "mastery" [4] or "control," however, one does not want to imply that less terrifying poems are better ones. No matter how skillful the framing or moderating tactics in any given case, the surging or whelming and fragmenting or isolating forces

must remain powerful if the epiphanies are to be intense, mysterious, expansive. Whether hopeful or horror-stricken, all the epiphanies I look at here are aesthetic triumphs.

Bishop's paradigm epiphany, "In the Waiting Room" (159-61), shows the threat of chaos (fiery surges) and the contrasting but equal threat of constriction (rounded shapes) combining to initiate a child into epiphanic terror and wonder: "I knew that nothing stranger / Had ever happened, that nothing / Stranger could ever happen" (II. 72-74). As the persona recalls reading a 1918 issue of National Geographic while she was waiting for Aunt Consuelo at the dentist's, the paradigmatic up bursting epiphanic motions revive with remembered photos of an eruption:

**The inside of a volcano,
Black, and full of ashes;
Then it was spilling over
In rivulets of fire. (II. 17-20)**

After the eruptive surges come horrible constricted, rounded shapes, pith helmets, string-wound heads, wire-wound necks, light bulbs, terrifying breasts. The doubled use of doubling, "round and round" repeated, conveys the obsessive, hypnotic horror of the circles:

**Osa and Martin Johnson
Dressed in riding breeches,**

Laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
Wound round and round with string;
Black, naked women with necks
Wound round and round with wire
Their breasts were horrifying.
Like the necks of light bulbs. (II, 21-31)

Why rounded breasts are horrifying is left unexplained, for they recall a trauma prior to the child's acquisition of language. [5] They indicate that not only do the obvious and very real patriarchal torments [6] but also Mother-related childhood terrors infuse the nightmare.

As the girl reads, the epiphanic motions are resumed; a rising voice within her precipitates a complementary motion of falling:

Came an oh! of pain
Suddenly, from inside,
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
Not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
Even then I knew she was
A foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
But wasn't. What took me
Completely by surprise

Was that it was me:
My voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I-we--were falling, falling,
Our eyes glued to the cover
Of the National Geographic,
February, 1918. (II. 36-53)

Bishop combines two terrors here: The sensation that the girl is inseparable from her disliked "foolish" aunt (their voices and even their eyes are the same) and the sensation of an inevitable "falling." The feeling of oneness, as a dissolution of separate identities, is a fall, an experience of being overwhelmed by chaos:

And you'll be seven years old.
I said to myself: three days
I was saying it to stop
The sensation of falling off
The round, turning world
Into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
You are an Elizabeth,
You are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
To see what it was I was. (11. 54-65)

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These lines show that losing one's identity is not the only, or ultimate, horror: being an "I," an ego, a separate entity, is also a fear one scarcely dares to face, for it means being "one of them." The speaker tries to arrest the dissolution of identity into chaos by forcibly recalling her consciousness of being a separate self. Yet limited, discrete selves are likewise revealed to be highly questionable, perhaps contemptible, like her aunt (called "foolish" twice). This is the epiphanic moment when the speaker knows that nothing stranger can ever happen to her.

The mystery of identity, of the terror of its loss and the equal terror of its recapture, remains:

**Why should I be my aunt,
Or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
Boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
The National Geographic
And those hanging breasts--
Held us all together
Or made us all just one?
How--I didn't know any
Word for it--how "unlikely" [...]
How had I come to be here,
Like them, and overhear
A cry of pain that could have
Got loud and worse but hadn't? (II. 76-89)**

These lines indicate that her disorientation is complete: The menace of identity-dissolution is incomprehensible, but so is the unexplainable stopping of the cry of pain before it might have overpowered the girl completely. Yet it is this very thought, the thought of utter inexplicability, that finally overwhelms her, in an epiphanic lateral and downward fiery and watery plunge:

**The waiting room was bright
And too hot. It was sliding
Beneath a big black wave,
Another, and another. (II. 90-93)**

Although the girl does not die (she and her aunt are soon outside in the cold, slushy night), the death-menacing epiphany of a rising of fiery rivulets and a rising voice, followed by a double falling or blacking out, first into blue-black space and then under repeated big waves of blackness, is paradigmatic for all of Bishop's epiphanies. In them, dreadful rounded objects, "and those awful hanging breasts", will continue to accompany the overpowering vertical and lateral motions. Bishop's paradigm epiphany dramatizes the dread of being either distinguishable or indistinguishable from "family," particularly from the disappointing mother-figures evoked by the "foolish [. . .] woman" Aunt Consuelo and the nightmarish breasts. This double dread is the mysterious, horrifying sensation that Bishop's varied

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epiphanies poetically convey in all its forms and degrees of psychological recuperation.

The best way to clarify the psychological implications of Bishop's epiphanic paradigm is provided in *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* by W. R. D. Fairbairn, a pre-oedipal theorist of mother-child dynamics in the tradition of "object relations" founded by Melanie Klein. [7] This kind of theorizing stresses early ambivalence toward the maternal "object" (a word used to mean either the breast or the mother herself, since in early developmental stages the child has no sense of the mother as a whole person). The breast, like mother herself, is sometimes available and sometimes not; the child develops both idealized and resentful portrayals of the maternal "object." In cases of traumatic frustration, the child may experience guilt, not only for desiring the breast, but also for the aggressive greed arising when breast, love, or attention is suspended. As Fairbairn's theory (in Guntrip's summary) makes clear,

The more the need to love is frustrated, the more intense does it become and the unhappy person oscillates between an overpowering need to find good objects and a compulsive flight into detachment from all objects, under pressure mainly of the terror of exploiting them to the point of destruction; for the destruction of the love-object feels then to involve also the loss of

the helplessly dependent ego which is in a state of emotional identification with the object. Love-object relations are the whole of the problem, and the conflicts over them are an intense and devastating drama of need, fear, anger and hopelessness.(287) [8]

The subject, paradoxically, is drawn, in hopeless dependence, to extreme identification with the maternal object, but at the same time, as a result of past disappointment and guilt, compulsively fears identifying with such an object. It is as bad to be overwhelmed by the flood of identity-canceling oneness with the object as to be banished from the object into love-starved separation. The love-frustrated, distressed child cannot escape this threatening dependence, whereby child and mother-object are either unhappily merged or unhappily disunited. In the epiphanic terms of Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," the babies' heads are "wound round and round" with string; the mothers' necks are "wound round and round" with wire; mother and child are miserably separate and bounded, yet miserably blended. Breasts are desired, yet "horrible."

When Aunt Consuelo's voice rises up inside the child, is the aunt swallowing it, or it swallowing the aunt? When the final flood falls, is the child "blacking out" the aunt, or she "blacking out" the child? Fairbairn's thinking, as

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Guntrip summarizes it, can show how the two options merge. Often, people who

suffer from strong feelings of identification in their infantile dependence on parents lose all trace of any personality of their own when they are in the presence of the parent [cf. Aunt Consuelo as parent surrogate] with whom they feel identified. They report that [...] they become lifeless, silent, tired, and a nonentity.

So identification comes to represent not only a flight to safety [...] but also being swallowed up by and in another person. [...] Infantile dependence includes not only the factor of identification which originates before birth, but also the factor of oral incorporation from the breast which is added to identification after birth. These two mingle and alternate. Identification with the mother is felt to be both the mother swallowing the infant and the infant swallowing the mother. All relationships are felt as both a mutual swallowing and a mutual merging, and [the traumatized or love-frustrated child] is never quite sure at any given moment whether he feels most as if he is being swallowed or doing the swallowing.(315) [9]

Fairbairn's analysis suggests that what Bishop describes is a mutual overpowering of child and mother-figure, a surge equally rising from inside the child and coming down from outside, like a rising voice or volcanic fire and a lateral descending wave. Annihilation is the threat to be mastered. But mastery is made harder when the impulse toward "flight from all objects" that might overwhelm a person turns out to mean another kind of flight, from the unacceptable likelihood that one might have an identity resembling that of the loved but hated, unavailable care-giver.

As "In the Waiting Room" suggests, Bishop's epiphanist-persona typically must cope with two contrasting psychological terrors: (1) floods, eruptions, armored cars, vertical or lateral incursions indicating a dissolution, a swallowing of the love object and a being-swallowed by her (two inseparable dangers that imply each other); and (2) the equal trauma of a sense of oneself as separate, isolated identity, an identity either deadened by deprivation, by the possibility of being annihilated, or, alternatively, repelled by the deadening likelihood of being "one of them," one more in a world of inadequate love objects.

Four of Bishop's epiphanies, discussed below, show the terrifying psychological dilemma, dissolution versus deprivation, with great vividness and force. The first appears in "Some Dreams They Forgot" (146), a sonnet about a nightmare arising from unnatural, violent motions:

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The dead birds fell, but no one had seen them fly,
Or could guess from where. They were black, their eyes were shut,
A and no one knew what kind of birds they were. But
All held them and looked up through the new far-funneled sky. (II. 1-4)

Burnt and blind, the falling birds seem to have been shot up from a fiery eruption, deadened by a chaotic surge arising like an overwhelming rage from within the epiphanist's psyche. In Bishop's epiphanies, violent upward and downward motions often imply each other, for, as here, the annihilating vertical impulsions can come either from within or without, or both.

Also, dark drops fell. Night-collected on the eaves,
Or congregated on the ceilings over their beds,
They hung, mysterious drop-shapes, all night over their heads,
Now rolling off their careless fingers quick as dew off leaves. (11. 5-8)

Dark like the blackened birds, these drops "congregate," as if they were obscure identities craving relief from the "deadness" of solitude. Suspended like Damoclean swords over sleepers' heads, they finally fall as did the birds. Resembling dewdrops, they do not nourish but darkly threaten.

Where had they seen wood-berries perfect black as these,
Shining just so in early morning? Dark-hearted decoys on
Upper bough or below-leaf. Had they thought poison
What flowers shrink to seeds like these, like columbine?
And left? Or--remember--eaten them from the loaded trees?

But their dreams are all inscrutable by eight or nine. (11. 9-14)

Here, the epiphanic dream is mysterious, expansive, "inscrutable" as it embodies the unresolved psychological enigma of equivalent contrasting evils: deadening violence, deadening form. Like separated selves or drops of black Damoclean dew, the envisioned berries are deceptive, dark-hearted decoys (blackened birds again!), promising "shining" relief from the shapeless violence of chaotic inward surges that kill the birds of the spirit, yet, as isolated, fixed, already-dead identities, poisonous in their limited, "perfect" sphericity. Did the sleepers eat the fruits? Were the poison berries also flower seeds? Which way does the funnel point in the "new far-funneled sky"? Is there any hope? Bishop's poem answers none of these questions.

The dream-epiphany of "Sleeping Standing Up" (30) embodies a nightmare of dissolution or mutual overwhelming, precisely the kind that Fairbairn has explained as the blending of a swallowing and being swallowed by the love object. This epiphany competes in horror with the one just looked at, and its outcome is even sadder, for in Bishop's revision of the tale of Hansel and Gretel, the "armored cars of dreams" (1. 7) not only blindly fail in their seeming mission to rescue the children but annihilate any traces that might have pointed to their cottage. Horribly, the speaker herself, capable of both "swallowing" and "being swallowed," is

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one of those who steer the armored vehicles, one with the dreadful dream-force that crushes the pebbles or crumbs, little tokens of child selves, yet also one with those child selves. As the epiphany begins, "thoughts that were recumbent in the day / Rise as the others fall, / Stand up and make a forest of thickset trees" (11. 4-6). Dream thoughts rise in menacing verticality. But the lateral motion of the armored dream-tanks is a fatal epiphany of violent sideways movement. It brings back to us (from the paradigmatic "In the Waiting Room") the slipping waves that blacked out the girl's consciousness at the dentist's office:

--Through turret-slits we saw the crumbs or pebbles that lay
Below the riveted flanks
On the green forest floor,
Like those the clever children placed by day
And followed to their door
One night, at least; and in the ugly tanks
We tracked them all the night. Sometimes they disappeared,
Dissolving in the moss,
Sometimes we went too fast
And ground them underneath. How stupidly we steered
Until the night was past
And never found Out where the cottage was. (11. 13-24)

Crumbs and pebbles, like isolated child-selves, tiny and magical or sustaining, were intended to ensure life and rescue; yet here, like the dewdrops, berries, and decoys of the dream-sonnet, they lead instead to death. An

armored power, allied with the "grim" fairytale to a cannibal-witch or paranoiac image of the consuming mother, crushes the crumbs and pushes down the pebbles, the tokens of child life. Yet the child-dreamer is also horribly one with this whelming force, this "ugly" armored tank. In Bishop's nightmare epiphany of the frustrated, dependent child, the merciless mother-power blends with one's own threatened selfhood.

As the study passes from the ironically titled "Sleeping Standing Up" to the ironically lovely folk music of the fourth of "Songs for a Colored Singer" (50-51), the pebbles and crumbs turn to a sequence of changing, separate, rounded identity shapes. Puzzling and ambivalent because the identities take such varied forms, all in the end are nightmarish and alarming. Tears, dew, seeds, fruits, flowers, and then an "army of faces," getting "darker and darker" as the song concludes, mark the stages in the ambivalent yet finally saddening transformation. The poem is a riddle:

**What's that shining in the leaves,
The shadowy leaves,
Like tears when somebody grieves,
Shining, shining in the leaves?**

Recalling the bright, dark-hearted decoy berries of "Some Dreams They Forgot," these dream-tears are at once shining and shadowy, as attractive and perilous as a separate selfhood to a fearful child. [10] "Is it dew or is it tears?" the speaker asks (1. 5), and when the spheric

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moisture falls with a "beating" sound (1. 16), it changes to "seeds" that "take root,/conspiring root" (II. 21-22). Will a "flower or fruit" (1. 23) result?

Fruit or flower? It is a face.

Yes, a face.

In that dark and dreary place

Each seed grows into a race.

Like an army in a dream

The faces seem,

Darker, darker, like a dream.

They're too real to be a dream. (II.1-4)

Young faces, potentially separate, vulnerable identities, may be as much a terror as a hope. To the extent that blossoming and fruitfulness blend into the faces (even in a "dark and dreary" woods), we might see a heartening vision of children in spring. But, rising from a "conspiring root," they are also an "army" recalling the invasive armored cars of the Hansel and Gretel epiphany. As the army gets darker and its obscurity threatens, the faces become surreal or super-real, "too real to be a dream," harboring aggressive and lurking fantasy-fears, an army of unreliable objects that may be retreating into darkness or preparing a fatal ambush, either withdrawing from contact or getting ready for assault. Deprivation or annihilation, it is a dreadful dilemma, but in Bishop a familiar one.

"The Armadillo" (103) offers the epiphany of a vulnerable little armored creature. Quite the reverse of

an armored car or an army, it is rather like a child protesting, sadly and ineffectually, against the assaults of inexplicably sudden surging and descending powers, uncontrollable emotional forces. The culprits here, "illegal fire balloons [...] Climbing the mountain height" (II. 3-4) to honor a Brazilian saint, are also pathos-laden portraits of human love objects that prove frustratingly elusive, unreliable: "The paper chambers flush and fill with light / That comes and goes, like hearts (II. 7-8; emphasis added).

Truly, as Fairbairn suggests, love-object relations are the whole of the problem here. When the deceptive-decoy fire globes withdraw, they disappoint; when they return, they threaten:

**Receding, dwindling, solemnly
And steadily forsaking us,
Or, in the downdraft from a peak,
Suddenly turning dangerous. (II. 25-32)**

Bishop describes a balloon that "splattered like an egg of fire," so that the "flame ran down," owls "shrieked up out of sight" (II. 22, 24, 28), and then

**A glistening armadillo left the scene,
Rose-flecked, head down, tail down,
And then a baby rabbit jumped out,
Short-eared, to our surprise.
So soft!--a handful of intangible ash
With fixed, ignited eyes.
Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!**

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O falling fire and piercing cry

And panic, and a weak mailed fist

Clenched ignorant against the sky! (II. 17-20)

The ashy "baby" rabbit, recalling the blackened birds we saw before, is also like the armadillo. In embodying childlike vulnerability to ascending-descending fiery terrors (from within or without the psyche), to annihilating, identity-cancelling surges and plunges, the armadillo is seen now as a weakly armored feckless fist (like that of a "too pretty" child?). It pathetically mocks the unknown Power, the seemingly hostile, even fatal Other, the faithless heart that comes and goes, its departure and return equally unsettling and ego-dissolving. (II. 31-40)

In the next seven epiphanies the study examinest, Bishop attains greater control of the twin terrors of dissolution and ego-deadening. She does so through the techniques of a spatial distancing or miniaturizing of the eruptive threat, a conceptual framing or partial allegorizing, or a combination of spatial and conceptual framing devices. In the treatment of "primary process" materials, the hazard of any distancing or framing is that the epiphanic power of the resulting poetry may be weakened. But in these seven exhibits Bishop avoids the hazard: the epiphanies are so intense in feeling, so resonant with expansive, mysterious implications, that they burst out of their spatial or conceptual frames.

The epiphany of "Crusoe in England" (162-66), culminating a sequence of remembered childhood fears and fantasies, shows growing psychological mastery of menacing emotional forces, a degree of terror-taming that enables some volcano-shrinking. The Hansel or Gretel of the "armored cars" epiphany has now seemingly become a maturer traveler, though one still having to deal, on his imagined isle, not only with the "questioning shrieks" of gulls and the "equivocal replies" of goats (failed dialogues, the doubtful answer of the unavailable love-object), but also with the "hissing rain / And hissing, ambulating turtles" (another frustrating dialogue of hemispherically-armored animals and a hostile element [II. 101, 107-09]). Here, the recalling persona moderates his eruptive nightmare images by shrinking them into helpfully miniaturized, if still "miserable," volcanoes he "could climb / With a few slithery strides" (II. 12-13). And now, the pebbles of the Gretel story have reassuringly metamorphosed into beautiful beaches of "lava, variegated, / Black, red, and white, and gray; / The marbled colors made a fine display" (II. 43-45).

But a feeling of abandonment recrudesces in recurrent dreams of hatred, repressed rage transformed into cruelty:

**Dreams were the worst. Of course I dreamed of food
and love, but they were pleasant rather**

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than otherwise. But then I'd dream of things
like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it
for a baby goat. I'd have
nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I had to live
on each and every one, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna, their geography. (II. 43-45).

In "Geography," National Geographic has returned from Bishop's epiphany paradigm: The annihilating blackout waves of the psyche's dissolution are now transformed into surges of spawning, of psyche-fragmenting, of endlessly multiplying separate, rounded polliwog-islands, each a prison-self where one "had to live", yet at one point the epiphanist achieves enough conceptual distance to make a literary joke about it. All the places one might go are isolating and frustrating, like all the inadequate identities one might assume, all the people one might "be," as the little girl speculated in the dentist's waiting room in Bishop's epiphanic paradigm. If these islands, solitary selves, are prisons where one has to live, no wonder the speaker cannot complete Wordsworth's phrase "'which is the bliss [...]' The bliss of what?" (I. 97). There is slight joy in a confining and

fragmenting "solitude." [11] But a touch of literary wit helps frame the situation. (II. 129-41)

The epiphany of "Night City [from the plane]" (167-68) partly tames the horror of uncontrolled mental forces through a double framing strategy of both miniaturizing volcanic threats and allegorizing them. The airplane's distancing perspective can shrink the eruptive fires, though they remain unequalled. No foot could endure it,

Shoes are too thin.

Broken glass, broken bottles,

Heaps of them burn.

Miniature electric lights become a lava-landscape of inferno: (II. 1-4)

Over those tires

No one could walk:

Those flaring acids

And variegated bloods.

Acids and bloods, deaths and lives, energy and the threat of dissolution into mental chaos, all are alike implied by these potentially eruptive fires, "where run, molten [...] silicate rivers" (II. 21, 24). The landscape, or inscape, remains that of a grieving, guilt-ridden, anguished and raven psyche: (II. 5-8)

The city burns tears.

A gathered lake

Of aquamarine

Begins to smoke.

The city burns guilt.

--For guilt-disposal

The central heat

Must be this intense.

Diaphanous lymph,

Bright turgid blood,

Spatter outward

In clots of gold [...]

The epiphanic power remains vital because the psychoanalytic depth remains uncannily intense. We seem to view the city's psyche, not that of the speaker, but we know better. (II. 9-20)

Yet in addition to her miniaturizing, distancing tactics, Bishop conceptually frames the drama through allegory as she makes a "tycoon", rather than the poet-persona, responsible for weeping a whole "pool of bitumen," another tycoon for "cr[ying] up" a "skyscraper" (II. 25-27, 29-30). The plunges and surges are less utterly annihilating than usual; they are disposing of guilt, though there is always more to "burn." "Still," despite the dead sky,

[...] there are creatures,

Careful ones, overhead.

They set down their feet, they walk

Green, red; green, red. [...]

The careful, birdlike creatures are unburnt. The plane and the distancing allegory "lift" the epiphanist, the

fantasy-birds, above fear of dissolution in "tears" of "guilt." (II. 37-40)

In "Wading at Wellfleet" (7), a strategy of distancing in space as well as time allows the epiphanist, far enough removed not to be endangered by opposed surges of surf, to compare the ever-alarming maternal sea to an Assyrian chariot with "sharp blades around its wheels" (I. 3). In this fine version of Bishop's regular epiphany of the nightmarish laterally advancing armored car,

This morning's glitterings reveal

The sea is "all a case of knives."

Lying so close, they catch the sun,

The spokes directed at the shin.

The chariot front is blue and great.

The war rests wholly with the waves:

They try revolving, but the wheels

Give way; they will not bear the weight.

The overweening cruel powers threatening the psyche's dissolution seem quelled for the time being. But even a "thousand warriors in the sea / Could not consider" a war as vicious "as that the sea itself contrives / But hasn't put in action yet" (II. 710). The epiphany is that of an elemental spirit, a potential identity-annihilating surge, whose dark conceivings are more destructive than one thousand human imaginations would dare to conjure up. (II. 11-18)

The epiphany climaxing "At the Fish houses" (64-

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66) inflicts a sharp, complex, watery-and-fiery pain little lessened by its framing tactic of tentative allegorizing, for it is compounded by the implicit threat of dissolution. "The water seems suspended / Above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones" (II. 65-66):

**If you should dip your hand in,
Your wrist would ache immediately,
Your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
As if the water were a transmutation of fire
That feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
Then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
Dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
Drawn from the cold hard mouth
Of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
Forever, flowing and drawn, and since
Our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.**

This revelatory moment resembles "Wading at Wellfleet" as a conceptually framed epiphany allegorically suggesting a personified cosmic malevolence. Here, it is the uncaringness of a harsh, rejecting parent at the burningly cold heart of life: all our knowledge comes from her dreadful "cold hard mouth" and "rocky breasts"! This non-nutritive liquid, paradoxically "dark, salt, clear", flows and disappears into a nonentity that threatens anyone whose being will

require validation by such an impossible love object. Yet if the liquid of knowledge is "utterly free" in its flowing and flight, it sets the model for a liberating abandon. Since putting your hand, mouth, mind into the world of this bitter water-knowledge is a test, the stoic who passes it may also undergo a magical mental "transmutation." (II. 71-83)

In "The Unbeliever" (22) the mastering, therapeutic force of will power freezes the fear of mental dissolution into a conceptually framed and spatially distanced, though still menacing, tableau of awful brilliance. Here, the dreamer, like the precariously posed skeptic in the Bunyan epigraph that also forms the poem's first line, "sleeps on the top of a mast," but his dream, far from entrapping him in illusion, will offer an epiphanic opportunity, not of abandon to the freedom of flux but of a Keatsian trancelike concentration (as in "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). At first we may think the dream will turn him into a variant of Bishop's dead and blinded birds, or engage him in one of Bishop's so often deadly spheres of isolation:

Asleep he was transported there,

Asleep he curled

In a gilded ball on the mast's top,

Or climbed inside

A gilded bird, or blindly seated himself astride. (II. 6-10)

For a moment we are tempted to equate the sleeper's mental security to that of the deceived, believing cloud

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that thinks it securely rests on the "marble pillars" it sees reflected in the water, or to the folly of the gull who is likewise gulled by reflections into supposing the air is "like marble" (11. 11, 18):

But he sleeps on the top of his mast

With his eyes closed tight.

The gull inquired into his dream,

Which was, "I must not fall.

The spangled sea below wants me to fall.

It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all." (II. 21-25)

Though "la mer/mere, madre/mar", the traumatically unreliable love object, is hard and heartless, to approach her is to die, the dreamer's identity is so secure, so credible, he can resist plunging into nonentity and can try to explain (in epiphanic "dream" language) why he does so. An unbeliever in the lure of pitiless brightness, he has achieved, for this perilous moment, belief in himself as an adequate resistor. The barely suspended terror is convincing as hallucinatory dream; the seemingly blind seer is the truest epiphanist. [12] Hard as the surface of an armored car, the sea can be contemplated as a trance of diamonds, a spangled sheet of particulate light, in the timeless moment of aesthetic semi-distancing.

In "Sandpiper" (131) Bishop achieves a conceptual framing as well as a spatial miniaturizing by representing the ever-threatening dilemma of dizzying

surges versus elusive identity-objects as not her own problem but that of a small, perplexed, resourceful bird. The bird's vision epiphanically blends terror and beauty, chaos and extreme precision, in the carefully but precariously "controlled panic" of a threatened identity:

**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.**

Here, the great, menacing contrarities of Bishop's epiphanic domain, identity-dissolving surges or thrusts and limited, rounded, or particulate shapes, are to a degree psychologically mastered. The sandpiper has learned to take the surges for granted, and in confronting the countless particles, he expects to find not a death or a prison but a Blakean "world in a grain of sand." (II. 1-4)

As the bird watches the sand grains between toes, "the Atlantic drains / Rapidly backwards and downwards," taking with it the "dragging grains" (II. 10-12). Although these familiar lateral and plunging motions usually drain away the seer's selfhood, the bird, having been through this endless times, knows that chaos or dissolution will alternate with microscopic clarity:

**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 focused; he is preoccupied.**

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A virtuoso of concentrated Blakean perception, the sandpiper, recalling the mast-top dreamer of "The Unbeliever," views a spangled surface "minute and vast and clear." But, preoccupied with a search for something, this bird is trying to maintain his shaky sense of one discrete individuality in the face of newly-appearing millions of particles suggesting an unstoppable chaotic fragmentation: (II. 13-16)

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.

Is it his identity he is looking for? Like the girl in the dentist's waiting room, he could "be" any of these separate selves or "family" members, these alike-and-different particles. Yet, finally, the bird, its perspective blended with that of the epiphanist, is aesthetically liberated into the perceptual abandon of endlessly shifting tableaux, where minutely distinguished beauties are observed even amid the ever-present threat that at any moment they may all be dragged down and sideways, identities dissolved into oblivion. Controlled panic, suspended terror, the threat of dissolution combined with perspicuous discernment of discrete individualities in a rich aesthetic manifold, these represent Bishop's terrifying elemental sublime.
(II. 17-20)

In "The Weed" (20-21) a conceptual, quasi-allegorical framing tactic barely tames terror. Terse and detailed like "Sandpiper," "The Weed" varies that bird's epiphanic problem / Solution, clear aesthetic perception of the threatened dissolution of identity, in the vegetative realm. The speaker dreams that, "dead and meditating," she lies on a "grave, or bed, (at least, some cold and close-built bower)" (II. 1-3), from whose comfortless strictures she is mentally unmoored by an "explosion" (1. II). This threatening upward thrust subsides to a slower growth, but one just as ominous: A weed (definable as an unwanted plant), developing up from the dreamer's heart, pushes out leaves like a "twisting waving flag" or a "semaphore" (II. 21-22). Then the heart, splitting, produces "a flood of water," forming "Two rivers," cascading down her ribs (II. 30-31, 34). These "half-clear streams," "smooth as glass,/ Went off through the fine black grains of earth" (II. 33, 35-36). Since lateral-descending surges can sweep away the self, when "The weed was almost swept away" as it "struggled with its leaves" (II. 37-8), it recalls the sandpiper's barely controlled panic over the retreating sand grains dragged down and swept away by the tide.

The threat of identity-dissolution, known to us originally from the paradigmatic emotional blackout waves overwhelming the girl in the waiting room, is just as palpable here. But as the weed lifts its leaves above the retreating streams, drops fall in the dreamer's eyes. She sees

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That each drop contained a light,
A small, illuminated scene;
The weed-deflected stream was made
Itself of racing images.
(As if a river should carry all
The scenes that it had once reflected
Shut in its waters, and not floating
On momentary surfaces.)
The weed stood in the severed heart.
"What are you doing there?" I asked.
It lifted its head all dripping wet
(with my own thoughts?)
And answered then: "I grow," it said,
"but to divide your heart again." (II. 43-56)

The sandpiper's Blakean sand grains, each containing a world, are now aesthetically transfigured into drops, each containing a light, a scene, an image. No longer are these drops seen as tears, black dew, black seeds, poison berries, or decoys like blind birds, like deprived and deadened selves. The rivers are flowing away but somehow carry their water-drop scenes intact within them, like the poet's lyrics sent out into the world as adequate substitute identities.

Yet this miraculous image-making and image-preserving flood comes only from an unmasked for plant spirit, an invasive energy from below, a threat bursting up from the unconscious, whose baleful intent is

repeatedly to divide the poet's heart, between sad, isolated selfhood and chaos-threatening, undifferentiated unity? Although Bishop seems only "half-clear" about this, the study of many variants of her epiphany pattern suggests that the menacing psychological divide will always be a riddling conflict between two threats, dissolution and isolation, that sadly imply each other. The oracular weed personifies, allegorizes, frames the epiphanist-persona's recurrent problem, but leaves it mysterious, expansive and intense. The weed announces, but can never explain, how the need for emotional division and heartbreak, caused by its violent upsurge, is the necessary condition to create light-drops out of deadness.

The epiphany of "The Fish" shows Bishop's most satisfying psychological mastery of terror. It is a mastery attained by a compassionate imaginative empathy that transcends the more limited techniques of spatial and conceptual framing we have seen up to now. In the didactic lyric "Sonnet" (192), a parable in images, the poet shows threats of isolation and dissolution giving way to psychological freedom. In doing so, she prepares us for her reconciling epiphany in "The Fish." Here, first, is "Sonnet":

Caught--the bubble

In the spirit-level,

A creature divided;

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And the compass needle

Wobbling and wavering,

Undecided.

Freed--the broken

Thermometer's mercury running away;

And the rainbow-bird

From the narrow bevel

Of the empty mirror

Flying wherever

It feels like, gay!

The parable is based on the metaphor of the spirit level, defined in Webster's as "a glass tube held in a frame and containing a liquid, usually alcohol, with a bubble in it: when the bubble rests at the center of the tube, the frame, or a surface upon which it is placed, is known to be level, or horizontal." As a spirit level is thus a "creature divided" psychologically between constrictive sphericity (imprisoned, isolated individuality) and a surrounding chaotic flux of dissolving oneness, so the psychological balance it enfigures is insecure, unstable as the wavering of a compass needle. By contrast, the spectrum of reflected colors in the curved glass surface at a mirror's edge opens up a world of (f)light and color, not particulated like the sandpiper's sand grains, but more reassuringly continuous, a colored rather than a blackout wave. The contrast Bishop draws between (mentally) "caught" and "freed" suggests that to worry about the precise positioning of one's enclosed identity

relative to the surrounding flux is itself an imprisoning mentality. The liberated silver-white mercury, a sort of freed light, and the flying rainbow are the sought-for emancipating alternative. But how can such a freeing light-flow be psychologically attained?

As indicated by the reconciling epiphany in "The Fish" (42-44), empathy for an adequate love object is the liberating answer, the most exhilarating means of psychological mastery. A double epiphany of rainbows converts likely death into a double victory when what was "caught" is "freed," both in world and mind: what saves "The Fish" from the didacticism of "Sonnet" is the epiphanic power not only of the menacing surge (of oil on water), but also of a transformation doubly aesthetic and psychological achieved through compassionate empathy. The fish caught here is depicted as itself an astonishing rainbow: "brown skin" with a pattern of darker brown" like "wallpaper," "shapes like full-blown roses," barnacles like "fine rosettes of lime," "tiny white sea-lice" infesting the body, "rags of green weed," the gills "crisp with blood," then the imagined "coarse white flesh," the "dramatic reds and blacks / Of his shiny entrails, / and the pink swim-bladder / like a big peony" (11. 10, 11-12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 25, 27, 30-33). But suddenly, as the speaker looks at the victim, with pieces of fish line (from previous escapes) even now stuck in its jaw like a "five-haired beard of wisdom" (1.63), another, more overwhelming color spectrum appears: [13]

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I stared and stared
And victory filled up
The little rented boat,
From the pool of bilge
Where oil had spread a rainbow
Around the rusted engine
To the bailer rusted orange,
The sun-cracked thwarts,
The oarlocks on their strings,
The gunnels--until everything
Was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go. (II. 65-76)

But whose "victory" has "filled up" the boat? The first color spectrum or "rainbow" of the epiphanic poem, summed up above in the portrait of the "catch", might have made us think the "victory" was the speaker's crude conquest of the passive fish, as the colors of the victim's inward parts were prospectively imagined by the lucky, aggressive captor. But the startling beauty of the shapes and colors had already begun to "win over" the epiphanic perceiver and imaginer. Now, with the second rainbow surging upwards and outwards in terror and beauty as the dangerous but brilliant oil-in-water rises in the boat, it is the fish that seems to attain a strange visionary and psychological victory in the face of death. Just as, in "The Weed," the epiphanic, terrifying but poetically creative "flood of water" rises from the split heart of the "dead,

and meditating" dreamer, so here the fish's triumph is equivocal. But though the creature may not survive when released, as a transforming spectacle, the fish offers an epiphany of dignity earned through multiple trials, a dignity the fish teaches the humbled captor.

Another scarred survivor, the captor is raised above herself through heightened empathetic perception and through a surge of compassion recalling Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Both poet and fish seem "caught" yet "freed." In the poem's imagery, psychological mastery is achieved, and epiphanic power is preserved. For the Bishop epiphanist-persona, the adequate love-object here proves to be a fellow sufferer, subject to comparably threatening (physical or emotional) surges that one must try to survive. The epiphanist's empathy, like the bright, spreading rainbow, arises in a context of suffering. As manifested in the vivid spectrum of Bishop's epiphanies, such torments have proved often horrifying. Here, however, the moment of vision may be a shared and strangely loving, brief and costly victory over the terrors of dissolution and isolation. [14]

Notes

- (1.) In "Shelters," Estess finds "The Sandpiper" and "At the Fishhouses" epiphanic (50-51, 53-59), as we do also below. In "Toward the Interior," she agrees in finding "The Fish" epiphanic (50), but her remarks on "Cape Breton," aiming at showing that "it also demonstrates epiphany, even if in a manner and voice quite understated" (50), are less convincing. Apart from Estess's essays, I did not find titles focusing on epiphany in books and articles on Bishop during the last thirty-five years.
- (2.) The second and third criteria are borrowed from Nichols 28.
- (3.) Bishop's recurrent epiphanic motif of tears owes much to her metaphysical poet-mentor, George Herbert (Powers-Beck).
- (4.) Costello uses the word "mastery" in a purely aesthetic sense, to note devices helping Bishop "master plurality and flux" (5).
- (5.) Interestingly, the National Geographic photos reproduced by Powell (173-74) as likely sources for Bishop's poem show two women with wire-wound necks and one with wire-wound neck and lower arm, but the latter's bare breasts are unconstrained.
- (6.) Among the most thoughtful and complex interpretations of this poem to date are those of Edelman and Shigley, whose feminist-deconstructive readings show how the lyric performs a "dismantling of binary oppositions" that would make woman "the monstrous creation of the patriarchy" (Edelman 104; see also Shigley 139-40). Powell's excellent

study, with its reproduced photos as likely sources for the poem, also suggests "a more overtly 'feminist' vision than is often attributed to Bishop," "a critique of the cultural objectification of women's bodies and of acculturated gender roles" (172). A feminist critique of patriarchies is thus crucial to a complete reading of the poem. Yet maternally related terrors are also not only strikingly present in the poem, but also seem even more central to the deepest levels of Bishop's imaginative feeling throughout her career. Powell, incidentally, brings citations from Rilke into a more general view of the poem's implications of a "polyphrenic self" and a "sacrificed child" (161, 170); this link may suggest parallels between Bishop's and Rilke's fears of dissolution and fragmentation (see Kleinbard *passim*).

(7.) Diehl, noting that Bishop read Klein's "A Study of Envy and Gratitude" (12), applies Kleinian object relations theory to Bishop's attitudes toward Marianne Moore as "literary mother" (13, 106-10, and *passim*).

(8.) Though such psychoanalytic implications are deducible from Bishop's epiphanies themselves, biographical data confirm them:

These are the facts of Bishop's biography not to be forgotten: her father, William Thomas Bishop, dies eight months after her birth. She moves with her mother to Great Village, Nova Scotia, the home of her maternal grandparents. Her mother is hospitalized several times for mental breakdowns and, in 1916,

when Bishop is five, Gertrude Bulmer is permanently institutionalized until her death in 1934. Many years later, in a letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop wrote simply, "I didn't see her again." (Wallace 83)

McCabe adds, "Though personal loss is often not explicitly confronted in Bishop's poems, I argue that it pervades them" (95). McCabe rightly supports Kalstone's detection of the "clearly confessional" aspect of Bishop's poems (82), its "autobiographical strength" (citing Kalstone 10). Stevenson adds, "The divisions that tore at Elizabeth Bishop were multiple, but most of them can be traced back to the bleak uncertainties, and some certainties, too, of her early childhood" (17). For exploration of these problems in Bishop's prose, Lombardi's chapter "'In the Village': Madness and the Mother's Body" (192-217) is valuable. Doreski says, "The early death of her father, and the insanity and institutionalizing of her mother, prompted Bishop to explore, even to exploit" a "sense of 'being not quite all there'" (71). Harrison writes of the "terror" of the "confusion of boundaries" in Bishop's work (54), but though "object-relations theories" are said to "hover behind" many of Harrison's readings (16, 213 n13), they are not foregrounded.

- (9.) The earlier quoted Guntrip passage and part of this one are also cited in Layton and Shapiro ("Introduction" 11-12).
- (10.) Parker (20) finds here "anxieties over creativity and pregnancy," just as she finds in "The Weed" (see below) terror of both "poetic power" and "pregnancy" (8).

- (11.) As Curry points out, however, a fuller exegesis of the poem as a whole reveals in the eventual, ostensibly male bonding with Friday a coded lesbian autobiographical reminiscence that partly counteracts this nightmarish solitude (after "ten stanzas tortuously descriptive of despair" [86]).
- (12.) Parker notes that "when we recall how Bishop makes fun of the security of the cloud's and the gull, then we might suspect that the unbeliever [...] gains something that in their assurance they miss" (23). Travisano's point that the unbeliever should merely wake up from his incapacitating "timid self-absorption" (48) is too simple; in Bishop's epiphanies dreams tell deep truths.
- (13.) Citing "The Fish," "The Prodigal," "Going to the Bakery," and "Sonnet," Goldensohn says, "For the whole of [Bishop's] life, it was worth observing how the world's light fractured into color over oil and water" (81). Doreski calls "The Fish" a "genuine epiphany" but thinks Bishop may have feared that it settled "into sentiment instead of expanding into true wisdom" (41).
- (14.) McFarland (369, 371-72) makes the Coleridge analogy; he insists that the victory "is only incidentally (or coincidentally) that of the fish" since it is "the role of human beings" to "identify beauty" and "make value judgments" (375). Strictly speaking this is true, but it does not describe the poem's epiphanic experience of imaginatively shared victory.

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