



QUESTIONS OF TRAVAIL:
TRAVEL, CULTURE, AND NATURE IN THE POETRY OF
ANNE BRADSTREET, ELIZABETH BISHOP,
AND AMY CLAMPITT

BY

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Abstract

This study examines the work of three American poets, Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), and Amy Clampitt (1920-1994). Besides the thematic strands of culture and nature, the thesis presents travel, geography, and cartography as underlying metaphors for the processes by which European culture has transplanted itself to this continent. Obviously Anne Bradstreet thought about travel and geography as she set out for the New World in 1630 at the age of eighteen. The English Puritan culture that encodes itself in Bradstreet's poems often reveals how she imagines her own distance from England. Such an engagement also makes Elizabeth Bishop central. Not only does she focus extensively on the themes of travel and geography, but for her such preoccupations stem from a disrupted childhood that made it continually necessary to redefine "home" throughout adult life. Amy Clampitt is also constantly moving about the globe in ways that make the metaphor of travel significant and intriguing. Like Bradstreet and Bishop, Clampitt imagines the landscape as a living organism subject to the actions of humankind, and like them she looks back on a ruptured early personal history.

While I have attempted to take an individualistic approach with each of Bradstreet, Bishop, and Clampitt, I have also continually sought to disclose the important ways in which their *oeuvres* are related. Thus while the chapters on Bradstreet refer the reader to the extensive critical and historical work already extant concerning both her and her community, those on Bishop similarly allude to her rich association with the work of Charles Darwin, particularly his *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1836). Clampitt, likewise, looks to Darwin in a no-less important way, although I have also regarded her work on the intersections between nature and culture as akin to that of Annie Dillard. Like Dillard, Clampitt has invited God back into the discourse, taking a step otherwise too problematic for the likes of Bishop. Indeed, the deity so integral to the Puritan interpretation of the environment closely examined in the chapters on Bradstreet cannot be reintroduced without raising serious issues relating to nature.

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For John Boschman
1905 1968
Teacher, Scholar, Grandfather

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Introduction

This study examines the work of three American poets, Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Bishop, and Amy Clampitt. Although the chronological gap between Bradstreet and Bishop is distinct, I have attempted here to enlarge on my article published in the *Journal of American Studies* (1992), "Anne Bradstreet and Elizabeth Bishop: Nature, Culture and Gender in 'Contemplations' and 'At the Fishhouses,'" which demonstrates how the English Puritan acculturation of landscape in the New World is overturned by Elizabeth Bishop three centuries later. The poetry of the late Amy Clampitt, whose *Collected Poems* saw publication just as this thesis reached completion in the summer of 1998, makes up an additional third of the study.

Although Clampitt's work has consistently attracted notice as being of the highest calibre ever since her dramatic 1983 appearance on the American literary scene at the age of sixty-three, there are as yet no major critical works on her poetry. In her introduction to *The Collected Poems*, Mary-Jo Salter describes

The sixty-three-year-old girl skipping the streets of New York . . .
about to receive one of the warmest receptions for a first book of

poems by any American in this century. Helen Vendler in *The New York Review of Books* predicted that a hundred years from now, the book would

take on the documentary value of what, in the twentieth century, made up the stuff of culture. And later yet, when (if man still exists) its cultural terminology is obsolescent, its social patterns extinct, it will, I think, still be read for its triumph over the resistance of language, the reason why poetry lasts. (Salter xx-xxi)

The inclusion of Amy Clampitt here is therefore significant. With it, this dissertation constitutes not only the first cultural and literary study of these three writers taken together, but for many readers the sections on Clampitt will amount to a critical introduction to her work.

Besides the thematic strands of culture and nature, the thesis deals with travel, geography, and cartography as underlying metaphors for the processes by which European culture has transplanted itself to this continent. I am interested in how—either consciously or unconsciously—these poets respond to and employ such metaphors. Obviously Bradstreet thought about travel and geography as she set out for the New World in 1630 at the age of eighteen. The English Puritan culture that encodes itself in Bradstreet's poems often reveals how she imagines her own distance from England. Such an engagement would also make Bishop central. Not only does she focus extensively on the themes of travel and geography, but for her such preoccupations stem from a disrupted childhood that made it continually

necessary to redefine "home" throughout adult life. Clampitt is also constantly moving about the globe in ways that make the metaphor of travel significant and intriguing. Like Bradstreet and Bishop, Clampitt imagines the landscape as a living organism subject to the actions of humankind, and like them she looks back on a ruptured early personal history. "The firstborn of Roy and Pauline Clampitt's five children," writes Salter, "never lost the sense of her early childhood as a paradise from which she was expelled" (xiii).

Much of what is presented in this study regarding Anne Bradstreet is given in the historical context, a context crucial to understanding not only the work of Bradstreet herself but also that of Bishop and of Clampitt, both of whom take up Bradstreet's themes and concerns. Indeed, what Bishop and Clampitt do in their work vis-à-vis the origins and history of America is twofold, and intricately related to the way I have chosen to structure this study. First, each takes up what Bishop calls the "Questions of Travel," rigorously investigated throughout her poetry. In the context of Bradstreet's perilous voyage to the shores of North America, and also in the wider context of other European voyages of exploration, Bishop examines, probes, and parodies the heroic traditions of travel. Amy Clampitt, in a very real sense, carries on this work, albeit in her own singular way. For Clampitt, what she calls "transhumance" constitutes her "epic theme," her project being no less

than a grand recapitulation of the westward migration of peoples over a period of several thousand years. This theme finds its crescendo in the mid-west of America, where Clampitt's family settled in the mid-nineteenth century.

Concomitant with the theme of travel shared by Bradstreet, Bishop, and Clampitt is another that is just as crucial, and which I have already alluded to: the relationship between nature and culture. The "discovery" of the Americas by European explorers resulted in massive, irrevocable changes to the ecosystem. These changes grew directly out of the general European world-view, still dominant today, in which nature is seen as a resource to be exploited, rearranged, and consumed.

In dealing with the relationships between exploration and the environment, God and nature, technology and landscape, I have relied on Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) and the more recent *Landscape and Memory* (1995) by Simon Schama. Ronald Wright's *Stolen Continents* (1992) has also been significant to my work. More importantly, however, I have found creative inspiration in the disparate theories of Dr. Lyall Watson and Dr. John Livingston, the latter a professor at York University, whose *Rogue Primate: An Investigation of Human Domestication* won the Governor General's Award for non-fiction in 1994.

Livingston's study has been especially invaluable to me in my work on these three poets, against which Watson's book, *Dark Nature: A Natural History of Evil* (1995), has acted as a useful foil. Livingston argues that humans are the only creatures arising out of nature who have domesticated themselves, and in doing so have created what he calls *prosthetic being*, a term that covers the invention and evolution of ideologies and technological devices that enable the manipulation of the rest of nature. Livingston's account demonstrates not only how humankind has essentially removed itself from nature, but how it has domesticated other species as well, making them a part of the prosthetic state.

Watson, on the other hand, a British biologist and traveler, argues along the same lines as Annie Dillard in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1982). For Watson, nature repeatedly displays signs not just of indifference but of a Melvillean malevolence written into the genetic code itself. Humans, he writes, are the only creatures who recognize this fact, having brought it into consciousness, and as such it is incumbent upon them to oppose and curb the malignant tendencies inherent in nature. This twentieth-century biologist sounds strangely like a William Bradford or a John Winthrop writing in the wilderness of the eastern seaboard over three centuries ago.

While I have attempted to take an individualistic approach with each of Bradstreet, Bishop, and Clampitt, I have also continually sought to disclose the important ways in which their *oeuvres* are related. Thus while the chapters on Bradstreet allude to the extensive critical and historical work already extant concerning both her and her community, those on Bishop similarly allude to her rich association with the work of Charles Darwin, particularly his *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1836). Clampitt, likewise, looks to Darwin in a no-less important way, although I have also regarded her work on the intersections between nature and culture as akin to that of Dillard. Like Dillard, Clampitt has invited God back into the discourse, taking a step otherwise too problematic for the likes of Bishop. Indeed, the deity so integral to the Puritan interpretation of the environment closely examined in the chapters on Bradstreet cannot be reintroduced without raising serious issues relating to nature, issues raised by Watson, Dillard, and by Amy Clampitt herself.

Part I

Culture and Travel: The Look of Exile Foreseen

The look of exile
foreseen, however massive or inconsequential,
hurts the same; it's the remembered
particulars that differ.

—Amy Clampitt

Chapter 1

Anne Bradstreet Questions of “Travail” to New England

Having set sail from the Isle of Wight on 8 April 1630, John Winthrop took an important step towards achieving his first significant objective as Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company: “to passe the Seas (vnder Gods protection) to inhabite and continue in new England” (Winthrop 152).

After a delay of several weeks due to contrary winds, Winthrop was at last freed to use his various maps and models for living in a largely unknown land. As his letters and journals reveal, this leader of a threatened minority in England was under considerable pressure to orient both himself and his passengers to a precarious new existence in the New World.

The Winthrop Fleet consisted of eleven ships carrying approximately four-hundred seamen and seven-hundred emigrants, “the largest number of Englishmen sailing as passengers in one body across the Atlantic up to that event” (Banks 24). Not only did the *Arbella* have to steer the fleet over many miles of strange, often turbulent waters by hugging latitude 43° 15’ north (Banks 41), but Winthrop was responsible for rallying his people as they struggled with seasickness, boredom, limited rations, cramped quarters, and

scurvy, not to mention doubts and fears about the expedition's chances for success. Up to this point, only a few hardy explorers had tried to build colonies in New England and, other than the pilgrims who had settled in and around Plymouth during the previous decade, most had failed.

Winthrop's knowledge of the New England coast was scant: he possessed a chart that, with a meager but accurate line, traced the coast for less than twenty miles from Gloucester to Marblehead (Winthrop 280).¹ But just as important as navigating the coastline was the task of accurately piloting the company of emigrants towards a promising settlement, and Winthrop partially accomplished this with his well-known "A Modell of Christian Charity," composed and delivered aboard the *Arbella*. In "[seeking] out a place of Cohabitation and Consorteshipp vnder a due forme of Government both ciuill and ecclesiasticall," the colony would be viewed by the outside world "as a Citty vpon a Hill" (Winthrop 293 & 295). As such, the new settlement would be a refuge as well as a beacon, providing both sanctuary from England's political and religious problems and a model for true Christian civility.

Even as eighteen-year-old Anne Bradstreet, on board the *Arbella* with her siblings, parents, and husband, disembarked at Salem Harbor,

Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Company was conscious of itself as set apart from, and yet culturally attuned to, England and English ways. Leaving behind "her comfortable life in the mansion of the earl of Lincolnshire, where her father, Thomas Dudley, had been steward of the earl's estate and her husband, Simon Bradstreet, had been her father's assistant" (Martin 20), Bradstreet later wrote how she "fovnd a new World and new manners at *wch* my heart rose, But after I was convinced it was *ye* way of God, I submitted to it & joined to *ye* chh., at Boston" (CW 216). From the day she left England forever until her death in 1672, Anne Bradstreet would lead a contradictory existence. Committed to—and, indeed, writing on behalf of—a community where "the care of the publique must oversway all private respects, by which not onely conscience, but meare Ciuill pollicy doth binde vs" (Winthrop 293), Bradstreet would, as Wendy Martin states, "[question] the validity of the Puritan voyage and [doubt] the existence of God The grievances that brought the Puritan expedition to New England were not Anne Bradstreet's but belonged to the two men she loved" (Martin 4 & 20).² Like so many other New England settlers, she would find herself caught between personal and communal claims and values, and her reservations about the

¹ A gloss on the chart states: "Very likely it is a tracing of a larger chart made by Governor Endecott's orders, and sent back to England as an aid to the *Arbella's* navigation" (Winthrop 281).

² On page 4, Martin adds: "But she ultimately learned to control her agonizing skepticism by committing herself to the religious values of her culture."

Puritan experiment would be compounded by feelings of ambivalence about the New World itself.³

The members of the Great Migration of 1630 were unique in so far as they constituted “a close facsimile of English society” (Anderson 26). Once settled in the New World, their sense of identity became intensified as they found in the ocean what Edward Johnson called a great “ditch between England and their now place of abode” (Cressy 194-95). As the distance between themselves and England threatened to “uncode” them, the Puritans found it necessary “to erase the distance” by continually redefining their Englishness even though they had also in many ways rejected England as a viable place to live (Samuels 233-34). Ironically, as Michael Kammen has written, “At the outset, early American society may have been more ‘traditional’ in character than English society itself”:

Many who left England [during the 1620s and 1630s] did so in the certainty that God would destroy their homeland—a corrupt nation where few men honored their obligations to Him. Nevertheless, despite these forebodings of doom, despite their hostility, most colonists brought with them a great pride in being Englishmen. (Kammen 183 & 144)

³ The conflict between individual and communal values in Puritan New England has been the subject of much discussion; as such, it has a bearing on this and other chapters concerning Anne Bradstreet in this study. See Michael Zuckerman, “Identity in British America,” *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, Ed. Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 130-31, 140-43; Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization*, (1972; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 23-30, 112-116, 169-204; Virginia Dejohn Anderson, *New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 89-121; and Martin, 26-7 and 65.

Several historians and critics of Puritanism in the New World strenuously emphasize this point. David E. Stannard writes, "It has often been said that no one is more English than the Englishman away from home" (96).

Many of the people of the Massachusetts Bay Colony therefore saw themselves as a remnant salvaged from a homeland in danger of imminent destruction. Unlike the Puritans remaining in England, who broke up into different, often conflicting groups, the brethren in New England stressed the need for homogeneity within the community. In order simply to survive, they needed to safeguard their identities not only as Englishmen but also as Puritans, and they attempted to accomplish this by creating a monolithic "Community of perill" (Winthrop 287) in which the place of the individual would be subordinated.

At the same time, however, the Puritan movement of the early seventeenth century required that its members be subversive, that the individual be able to assert himself to the point of undermining political and religious orthodoxies. Central to the Calvinist belief system was, in addition, the right of the individual to a relationship with God unmediated by hierarchical institutions. The Puritan emigrant's sense of self would be made even more acute by mere dint of boarding a ship to live elsewhere. As Wayne Franklin states, the traveler is "almost by definition an iconoclast; his

departure, even if he goes in the service of 'home' purposes, hints not merely at the general authority of experience, but also (and more subversively) at the prospective power of individual life beyond the horizon" (Zuckerman 129).

This force of the individual within the Puritan community clarifies the fact that its members saw themselves as pilgrims *en route* to an earthly as well as a heavenly destination, and that, indeed, pilgrimage was "the most powerful metaphor pervading Puritan devotion" (Anderson 86).

Yet, having boarded a ship in the Winthrop Fleet, the emigrant also agreed to submit "to the strictures of those he embraced as brothers. His very attachment to them placed his outward behavior under their ceaseless surveillance and made his most inward experience, the vicissitudes of his regeneration, subject to their scrutiny" (Zuckerman 130). If, at any time, the individual went beyond the bounds of belief or behavior as defined by the Puritan community—as did Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and Anne Bradstreet's sister, Sarah Keayne—he or she would be excommunicated, which would entail either returning to England or joining another colony elsewhere in the New World.⁴

⁴ Wendy Martin writes that "Thomas Dudley was so angered by his daughter's [Sarah Keayne] conduct that he disinherited her" (59). Concerning dissidence in general, see Dudley's "Letter to the Countess of Lincoln," *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay*, ed. Alexander Young (Boston: Charles C. Little & James Brown, 1846), 315 & 331; also Stannard, 132-33; Martin, 16-17; Anderson, 118.

The Puritan traveler was therefore constantly negotiating with the paradoxical claims of self and community. The rejection of and separation from England defined the terms of travel towards, and eventual settlement in, a place whose very name suggested tension. Such contradictions, simultaneously involving subversion and submission, are readily apparent in a letter dated 21 August 1629 from John Winthrop to his father, who would remain in England:

For the businesse of N[ew] E[ngland] I can say noe other thing but that I beleeeve confidently that the whole disposition thereof is of the Lord who disposeth all alterations by his blessed will to his owne glory and the good of his, . . . and for my selfe I have seene so much of the vanity of the world that I esteem noe more of the diversities of Countries then as so many Innes, wherof the travailer, that hath lodged in the best, or in the worst findeth noe difference when he commeth to his Journies end, and I shall call that my Countrie where I may most glorifie God and enioy the presence of my dearest freindes, therefore heerin I submit my selfe (laying by all desire of other imploymentes whatsoever) to the service of God, and the Company herin, with the whole endeavours both of body and mind. (Winthrop 150-51)

Anne Bradstreet was just such a “travailer” during her 42 years of experimental living in various communities in New England. The poems examined in this chapter disclose not so much the patterned musings of a woman fomenting rebellion as the kinds of contradiction and paradox that were typical of many members of the Puritan community. Bradstreet is often represented as a dissident and early feminist, although my analysis of her poems reveals that she also wrote as a committed member of the Puritan

community in New England. As such, she also articulated the difficult position in which many of her contemporaries of both genders found themselves. That she delineated such a position does not make her simply a rebel, though we may be taken aback by this Puritan woman's occasional forthrightness. On the contrary, Anne Bradstreet throughout her poems occupies a tenuous position between the conflicting but necessary claims of self and community. Although periodically she directly expresses doubt, and while she arguably defies her God in poems such as her elegy for her granddaughter Elizabeth, more often than not she speaks on behalf of the collective enterprise. There are reasonable grounds for believing that her poetic voice is frequently co-opted by the powerful male forces of orthodoxy represented by her father. To refuse to set forth the Puritan ideology would be seen not only as an abdication of responsibility but as a threat to the community, and Bradstreet would thus be risking the fate of an Anne Hutchinson or a Sarah Keayne. For the colonial Puritan, "Poetry," as Perry Miller states, "existed primarily for its utility" (White 125), and it is no surprise that Miller quotes Bradstreet herself: "I have not studied in this you read to show my skill, but to declare the Truth—not to sett forth myself, but the Glory of God" (CW 215). To declare the "truth" in seventeenth-century Puritan New England was, as we shall see, no simple exercise.

Traveling over three thousand miles to begin life anew in a strange land and under harsh circumstances, Bradstreet, like many of her fellow colonists, developed a more or less permanent feeling of being far-flung, of existing on the edge of the civilized world. The resulting “wistfulness, nostalgia, and disorientation,” which David Cressy states “may have underlain the early history of New England, and may have been a common syndrome on the frontier” (Cressy 206), would naturally have tended to influence many aspects of life in the New World. In various ways, Bradstreet voices her acute sense of separation, or distance, from a number of places and persons: from England, which she would never see again; from her father, Thomas Dudley, a stern, orthodox colonial governor whose death elicits a curious elegy and marks a turning point in her poetry that parallels the beginning of the slow demise of New England Puritanism; from her grandchildren, whose untimely deaths make for dark nights of the soul that compel Bradstreet to question her beliefs; and, penultimately, from her God, who would inflict suffering with no apparent reason other than to teach her the vanity of all things, as well as to remind her of the possibility of the eternal separation that haunted the lives of many Puritans. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Puritanism constantly threatened to separate Bradstreet from herself, and it was against this danger that she mainly

struggled. For Anne Bradstreet, poetry helped to ease the pain of these various types of separation. By means of poetry, she could imaginatively traverse the distances she would feel between, for example, New England and Old, or herself and a dead grandchild.

I.

“A Dialogue Between Old England and New” (1642) constitutes Bradstreet’s attempt to come to terms with the distance between the mother country, where civil war had broken out, and the young colony, which, while rejecting England, continued still to depend on it for supplies, trade, settlers and, perhaps most importantly, a cultural and political identity.⁵ During a period when news from abroad was dear, Bradstreet’s “Dialogue” would reflect, and perhaps ease, the acute anxiety felt by Puritan colonists because of the conflict between Royalists and Parliamentarians.⁶ “Dialogue” would, in effect, speak to a particular *audience*, bringing the wilderness community together through the elements of ritual and repetition central to the poetic act. Originally composed in 1642, but not published until 1650, “Dialogue,” like all the poems in *The Tenth Muse*, was written first and

⁵ I am indebted to Peggy Samuels for her fascinating article, “Imagining Distance: Spanish Explorers in America,” *Early American Literature* (Vol. 25, No. 3, 1990), 233-252.

⁶ See Cressy 193-244; Anderson 18; Stannard 123; Ziff 80-82; White 157-169; and Kammen 125-132.

foremost for Bradstreet's father, Thomas Dudley, and her husband, Simon Bradstreet. Closely connected to the poem's audience is the issue of *projection*: "Dialogue" demonstrates Bradstreet's ability to "imagine distance" in terms of England's stance towards its colony during a period of upheaval that threatened the colony's very existence. For an explorer such as Captain John Smith, it was common to "[imagine] distance not from the point of view of his own distance from England but from the point of view of England's distance from himself" (Samuels 248-49), and this is precisely the strategy that Bradstreet adopts here. "Dialogue," finally, participates in the Puritans' creation of an orthodox reading of New England's colonial history that excludes a variety of others. The poem represents the perspective and interests not so much of Old and New England as of a specific group within the colony led by John Winthrop and Thomas Dudley.

Although it stridently emphasized communal values, New England Puritanism remained in many ways a culture of separation and solitude, and the pain and anxieties that attend separation insinuate themselves at many points within Bradstreet's poetry. While over the course of her poetic career she voiced her acute sense of separation from a number of places and persons, her articulation of distance from England itself is of fundamental importance—not simply because it naturally made her perception of loss

keener while living in the New World but, more substantially, because the geographic distance from her homeland inevitably became entwined with the Puritan belief-system in her community. Much has been written and said already about Bradstreet's marriage poems and elegies, all of which deal in one form or another with her sense of separation from a loved one, be it her husband, Simon, who traveled frequently, or her father, who died in 1653, or the three grandchildren who died either in infancy or in early childhood. Rosamond Rosenmeier has made a thorough analysis of the theme of separation in the marriage poems, calling it their "most distinctive feature" (Rosenmeier 119). Less attention, however, has been paid to analyzing Bradstreet's attempt to surmount the distance between England and the strange, new world in which she and her fellow Puritans eked out their existence after 1630. Specifically, in "A Dialogue between Old England and New," Bradstreet wrote as a dedicated member of her community during a time when civil war was breaking out in England over the very issues that, in part, compelled emigration. By composing a "Dialogue" that would see Old England delineate a Puritan colonial point of view, Bradstreet not only reflected the acute sense of isolation felt by her fellow Puritans but also reminded her community of its original purpose "as a Citty vpon a Hill" and

thus shored up its flagging self-esteem in a time of political and economic uncertainty.

Contrary to what Elizabeth Wade White states in her biography of Anne Bradstreet, the “New Jerusalem of Winthrop’s company” was *not*, by 1642, “sure of its continuing existence,” even if it “had settled into a substantial human community” (White 157). Instead, more recent historical research indicates that as far back as 1632 rumours “about the impending collapse of the Massachusetts Bay Colony” were common in England (Cressy 23). A worried Thomas Dudley would write to the Countess of Lincoln that “they who went discontentedly from us the last year, out of their evil affections towards us, have raised many false and scandalous reports against us, affirming us to be Brownists in religion, and ill affected to our state at home, and that these vile reports have won credit with some who formerly wished us well” (Dudley 331). During the 1630s there was, in point of fact, a plethora of English viewpoints regarding the state of New England, but

By 1637 the news was mostly bad, tainted by reports of ‘error and faction’ and the long-distance echoes of the Antinomian controversy. The leaders of the Bay Colony still attempted to limit the export of unfavourable news, to soften the impact of criticism, and to ensure that their spokesmen in London could control the damage, but contradictory and unflattering stories continued to leak out. . . . Rumour circulated in England again in 1640 to the effect that the Massachusetts Colony was about to fold. Migration faltered, even before the rapidly-evolving religious and political crisis in England transformed the situation. Sudden economic ruin and crisis of spiritual confidence beset the holy commonwealth, leading to a further

evolution of its image in England. Some New England settlers, cold, depressed and disappointed, toyed with the idea of further migration to a more favoured place. Hundreds went back to England. (Cressy 23, 24, & 26)

Rather than a growing, prosperous colony with ship-filled harbours exchanging people and supplies, New England in 1642 found itself increasingly isolated by rumours and bad press as well as by the onset of civil war in England. If nothing else, there was an exodus of people returning to England that exceeded the number of new settlers (Cressy 201). So many important New England Puritans found themselves sailing eastward, both to escape tensions and to join the Parliamentary forces in England, that the flux constituted what we would call “a brain drain,” about which “John Winthrop was furious” (Cressy 200). On the other side of the Atlantic, “The end of migration to New England . . . coincided with the resurgence of Puritan political power in England. Why travel 3,000 miles to create a new society when one could now remake the world at home?” (Anderson 18).

For those who remained in New England, “A Dialogue between Old England and New” would reflect the ways in which they would repeat and revise their reasons for emigration as well as interpret the crisis abroad in terms acceptable to the Puritan community. Thus Bradstreet’s audience *circa* 1642 was primarily a New World one, even though the poem would

eventually circulate in England.⁷ Having stated this, I must disagree with White's contention that, because the two speakers in "Dialogue" are female, "The poem is essentially feminine, for although the ladies employ the language of preacher, politician, and soldier in their conversation, one is constantly reminded that this is an outspoken discussion of a family crisis, between a mother and daughter who are as closely bound in affection as they are in blood" (White 160). On the contrary, because the female speakers converse in mainly masculine terms, they demonstrate the strength of a specific patriarchal audience in Bradstreet's society. The poem arguably discloses the subordination of the female—in this case in particular, a woman poet testing her craft—to concerns that are primarily male. It is simplistic to argue that "Dialogue" reveals a bond of affection between the two representatives of Old England and New; rather, what is more in evidence throughout the poem is Bradstreet's desire, on behalf of her community, to put words in the mouth of England that express what she believes Puritan colonists would wish to hear.⁸ Although what the poem delivers is, in part, the expression of a vital desire to remain connected—politically, culturally,

⁷ Anne Bradstreet's brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, arranged the publication of *The Tenth Muse* in England in 1650 without Bradstreet's knowledge (White 252-57).

⁸ As Kenneth Requa states: "It is no surprise in a poem by an American Puritan that Old England acknowledges New England to be the current source of truth and knowledge" (Requa 155).

and economically—to England, Bradstreet also makes the Puritans' reasons for dissension and exile abundantly clear.

When Old England, in response to her daughter's query, asks at the outset of the poem,

Art ignorant indeed, of these my woes?
Or must my forced tongue these griefes disclose?
And must my selfe dissect my tatter'd state,
Which 'mazed Christendome stands wondring at?,

she begins to manifest a distinctly colonial perspective. In the interrogative, the mother-figure alludes to problems arising from the distance between herself and New England, making it plain that the colonial Puritans are apprehensive regarding their own lack of information and knowledge about events abroad. Such anxiety would, of course, stem from the trickle of news available to settlers in New England. The lines that follow raise questions about the connection between England and the colony, and reveal the Puritans' ambivalence about themselves and their relationship to England:

And thou a childe, a Limbe, and dost not feele
My weakned fainting body now to reele?
This Phisick-purgings-potion I have taken,
Will bring Consumption, or an Ague quaking,
Unlesse some Cordial thou fetch from high,
Which present help may ease this malady.
If I decease, dost think thou shalt survive?
Or by my wasting state, dost think to thrive?
Then weigh our case, if't be not justly sad,
Let me lament alone, while thou art glad.

Through the mouth of Old England, Bradstreet makes plain the Puritans' distress about how events across the sea will reflect their identity and affect their future. The series of questions are essentially those of Bradstreet's audience about its own strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis Old England. While they reflect the Puritan colonists' view that their cause is godly since they have access to a "Cordial" they can "fetch from high," that indeed they might well be comforted to some extent by their distance from civil strife, there is also the distinct suggestion that the settlers see a disquieting causal link between England's condition and their own increasing isolation.

The poem's questions, moreover, all focus on the issue of determinism, and are, in effect, Puritan questions, i.e., Will the community in New England be subject to the consequences of English strife, or will it remain unaffected due to its godliness? The metaphors of "childe" and "Limbe" both imply contingency; New England is a part related to a larger whole without which it cannot survive. Each of the three queries probes this issue in one way or another, and we can be sure that the subject of New England's affiliation with Old England was foremost in the minds of Bradstreet's audience. Colonial Puritans would be anxious about their

isolation at the same time as they might feel “glad” about England’s “wasting state.”

In other words, the Puritans in New England felt that they stood to be both vindicated and isolated by the events unfolding across the Atlantic. And the litany of English history that ensues in New England’s reply discloses the colonists’ desire to prove that, more than a decade after the trans-Atlantic crossing, they remain very much in touch with their English roots. Certainly New England goes to great lengths in her delineation of an English historical point of view, consoling homesick pilgrims by shrinking the distance between England and its colony. In twenty-two lines, Bradstreet has her speaker recite a tortuous short history of English wars from Saxon times to the present, the upshot being that New Englanders are still primarily *English* in their world view. Referring to herself as “Your humble Childe,” New England evokes submission and demonstrates that she is more than able to “guesse” at the possible historical causes of Old England’s current misery. But by thus displaying her ready knowledge of things English, New England also displays how her own identity still hinges on that of the mother country:

Your humble Childe intreats you, shew your grief,
Though Armes, nor Purse she hath, for your releif:
Such is her poverty, yet shall be found
A supplyant for your help, as she is bound.

The Puritan colonists' precarious position in relation to England is constantly implied. They are "bound" to England at the same time as they want to maintain their repudiation of her. Farther on in "Dialogue," New England goes so far as to take partial responsibility for her mother's "fearfull sinnes" even though, strangely, it is just these acts that the daughter claims have driven her into exile: "My guilty hands (in part) hold up with you, / A sharer in your punishment's my due" (145).

The extent of the ambivalence evident in "Dialogue"—of the Puritan colonists' conflicting feelings of yearning and self-righteousness—is also apparent in Old England's willingness to malign herself, especially for her past mistreatment of Puritans. Because Bradstreet imagines England's point of view, the dissection referred to in Old England's opening address is actually performed by proxy, not only to reveal New England's awareness of the homeland's "tatter'd state" but also to compel some kind of contrition, however fictitious. Curiously, such a strategy is not unlike what a child will do to address a perceived injury at the hands of a parent. Here England's tongue is indeed "forced" as Bradstreet enacts her community's official narrative, or story, of events abroad. Having responded to and confirmed her daughter's history of her wars, Old England makes a diagnosis of her current problems in terms that would not only exonerate but aggrandize the Puritan

community in New England. Old England's putative "selfe-dissection" is truly a colonial Puritan analysis with a colonial Puritan agenda.

Neglected and almost forgotten in the maelstrom of events in England, the Puritan colonists were moved to anger and indignation, and thus the figure of Old England goes on to state:

Famine, and Plague, two sisters of the Sword,
Destruction to a Land doth soone afford;
They're for my punishments ordain'd on high,
Unless thy teares prevent it speedily. (143)

As forces congenial to Puritanism waged a successful war on Charles I, a war which would ironically bring England "into its period of greatest permissiveness" (Ziff 80) and thus threaten the stability of Puritan New England even more, Bradstreet attributes to England a perspective that amounts to sheer wishful thinking. Fitting the current crisis into a Calvinist framework, she imagines New England as possessing the spiritual power to curb God's wrath and "prevent it speedily" from being visited on the motherland. Yet the reality of the situation, as Cressy observes, was that "Instead of a model 'city upon a hill,' New England was, by 1642, in danger of becoming a forlorn and distant side-show":

the principal attraction of New England in those troubled times was its remoteness from the distress of public affairs in old England. New England had become a refuge rather than a beacon. John Winthrop, Jr., described the colonies as "an hiding place . . . when their precious brethren have been so long under the hurries, hazards and sufferings of civil wars." New

England could at least offer “settled peace and prosperity” in contrast to the confusions in “our dear native country,” although Quakers, Baptists, Antinomians and Indians knew better. (Cressy 28-29)

Cressy’s final point—that even the notion of New England as a refuge for dissenters was a spurious one since the government was essentially a theocracy intolerant of heterogeneity—applies especially to “Dialogue.”

The extent of the confession “forced” from the tongue of Old England must have made sweet reading for many New England Puritans:

Before I tell the effect, ile shew the cause,
Which are my Sins, the breach of sacred Lawes;
Idolatry, supplanter of a Nation,
With foolish superstitious adoration;
And lik’d, and countenanc’d by men of might,
The Gospel is trod down, and hath no right;
Church Offices are sold, and bought, for gaine,
That Pope, had hope, to find *Rome* here againe;
For Oathes, and Blasphemies did ever eare
From *Beelzebub* himself, such language heare?
What scorning of the Saints of the most high,
What injuries did daily on them lye;
What false reports, which nick-names did they take,
Nor for their owne, but for their Masters sake;
And thou, poore soule, wast jeer’d among the rest,
Thy flying for the Truth I made a jeast. (143-44)

Even if one argued that the Puritan voice is justified here because Roundheads led by Cromwell would eventually win the war in England, this distinctly Puritanized English “history” reveals the extent to which Bradstreet projects a specific perspective across the Atlantic and back again. Such a point of view is also rife with myths held by Puritan colonists about

themselves, not least of which is the belief they had left England “for the Truth.” Many historians today would agree with Charles Edward Banks, writing over sixty years ago, “that a considerable part of the passengers of the Winthrop Fleet were loyal to the English Church and had no intent or desire to be a part of any scheme that pretended otherwise. . . . Many of them never joined the Puritan churches, nor became Freemen after their arrival” (Banks 22).⁹

If such a statement seems to contradict the more common assumption that settlers in general—or passengers of the Winthrop Fleet in particular—were of one mind in their reasons for migrating, or that they constituted a cohesive, revolutionary movement, “Dialogue” establishes itself as typical of the ruling party’s resolve to inscribe and maintain a particular history of New England. “‘Puritans,’” writes Cressy, “stride through the pages of popular New England history as if no one else was present” (Cressy 79).

What emerges from this is the fact that Anne Bradstreet composed “Dialogue” not on behalf of a struggling, yet essentially unified New World community but, rather, on behalf of the Puritan group within a heterogeneous one. With a vested interest in the civil war in England, this subversive, yet authoritarian group had to find ways to protect its image—and

⁹ See Cressy 74-81, 100-102, 140; Stannard 96; and Zuckerman 143-44.

thus its power—as “a Citty vpon a Hill,” and, as in any war, one of the most effective tools at its disposal would be propaganda.¹⁰ Wendy Martin’s assertion that “‘A Dialogue between Old England and New’ laments the devastating effects of male territoriality, . . . [revealing] Bradstreet’s distress about the waste and loss caused by the battles to demonstrate moral superiority” disregards Bradstreet’s own complicity (Martin 38).¹¹ Martin too easily perceives Bradstreet as writing against the patriarchal grain, when in fact she is serving its purposes. Nothing more readily evinces Bradstreet’s submission to the tenets of Puritan ideology at this point in her life than the disseminating tenor of her poetic voice. This tenor is most apparent as Old England castigates herself hyperbolically:

For Bribery, Adultery, for Thefts, and Lyes,
Where is the Nation, I cann’t paralize;
With Usury, Extortion, and Oppression,
These be the *Hydra’s* of my stout transgression;
These be the bitter fountains, heads, and roots,
Whence flow’d the source, the sprigs, the boughs, and fruits;
Of more than thou canst heare, or I relate,
That with high hand I still did perpetrate;
For these, were threatned the wofull day,
I mock’d the Preachers, put it farre away;

¹⁰ C.V. Wedgewood states: “The supporters of each side in the political struggle recognized the need for propaganda that would strike home quickly to men’s minds . . . From the outbreak of the war even some poets who were highly skilled in the fashionable manner of the 1630s adopted a simple, even a crude, form of writing when their intention was to defend the cause . . . to as wide a public as possible” (White 165).

¹¹ How much Anne Bradstreet willingly participates in the ideological warfare waged by Puritans is a question that will be discussed further on. Rosamond Rosenmeier also writes that here “Bradstreet anticipates what Ivy Schweitzer has called ‘a glorious gynocentrism,’ one that, in Schweitzer’s words, is ‘indefinitely deferred’” (Rosenmeier 47).

The Sermons yet upon record doe stand,
 That cry'd, destruction to my wicked Land:
 These Prophets mouthes (alas the while) was stopt,
 Unworthily, some backs whipt, and eares cropt;
 Their reverent cheeks, did beare the glorious markes
 Of stinking, stigmatizing, Romish Clerkes;
 Some lost their livings, some in prison pent,
 Some grossely fin'd, from friends to exile went:
 Their silent tongues to heaven did vengeance cry,
 Who heard their cause, and wrongs judg'd righteously.

Not only a jeremiad, “Dialogue” is also a call to arms, which again suggests Puritan New England’s ambivalence about its own distance from English strife. Even though a Puritan victory abroad would result in the loss of New England’s exemplary status, the crucial issue remains that “Religion, Gospell, here lies at stake” (146). The poem’s frequently violent language is deployed at a time when “England was experiencing all the tensions created by the development within a single society of [the] two distinct cultures [of “Court” and “Country”]. . . . there were no secure monoliths in Jacobean and Caroline England” (Kammen 131). Thus Bradstreet has New England hope “That Right may have its right, though’t be with blood,” and zealously proclaim that

These are the dayes, the Churches foes to crush,
 To root out Prelates, head, tail, branch, and rush.
 Let’s bring *Baals* vestments out, to make a fire,
 Their Myters, Surplices, and all their tire,
 Copes, Rochets, Crossiers, and such trash,
 And let their names consume, but let the flash
 Light Christendome, and all the world to see,

We hate *Romes* Whore, with all her trumperie. (146-47)

Elsewhere in “Dialogue,” Bradstreet’s speakers pun on the imprisonment and execution of their High Church enemies: “They took high *Strafford* lower by the head, / And to their *Laud* be’t spoke, they held i’t’h Tower, / All *Englands* Metropolitane that houre” (144-45). As White informs us, the four lines ending in “Romish Clerkes”

were deleted from the second printing of the poem. They refer to the punishments inflicted, at the behest of Archbishop Laud, on such writers as William Prynne, Henry Burton, and John Bastwick. Although the Court of Star Chamber, in which these men were tried, imposed many cruel sentences on nonconformists before its abolition in 1640, it never admittedly contained “Romish Clerkes,” and Anne Bradstreet was well advised to cancel these lines while preparing the poem for its second appearance. (White 163)

Such lines would have indeed been dangerous in the post-Restoration period that followed, when “extreme penalties were inflicted on the Regicides and other Puritan leaders, a number of whom were arrested and executed” (White 166).¹²

“A Dialogue between New England and Old” is less a dialogue than a representation of a narrow ideology striving for greater hegemony, what Samuel Eliot Morison called the “codfish aristocracy” (Kammen 181). As

¹² Controversy exists over the nature and extent of post-Restoration retribution against the Fifth Monarchy plotters. B.S. Capp devotes a whole chapter to the subject, extensively delineating “severe persecution under Charles II and James II”: “Strict censorship and a ban on religious meetings outside the Established Church returned not far behind the king” (195). Wilfrid Prest notes executions, purges, espionage, censorship, and show trials, but qualifies the notion of a “general reign of terror” after 1661 (37).

such, the poem excludes and abjures the *other*, i.e., Catholics, Laudians, Royalists, Muslims (Turks), and any other “Canaanites” (148), just as New England Puritans would in practice ostracize Quakers, Antinomians, Aboriginals, and anyone else “who found that in crossing the Atlantic they had not journeyed far enough to find liberty of conscience” (Anderson 118). The Canadian environmentalist, John Livingston, calls this kind of orthodoxy a form of “exotic ideology,” a set of values introduced into a new environment with “an effect similar to that of a measles bug, or a goat, or a mongoose, or a sailor on first glimpsing one of Madagascar’s extraordinary terrestrial lemurs” (Livingston 56):

Such is the nature of world conquest by a system of ideas and beliefs indigenous originally to Europe, exotic everywhere else. It rests fundamentally on Western philosophy, science, and technology, together constituting a metaphysics peculiar to its area of origin. It is anointed and sanctified through the manifest truth of its extraordinary success in competition with ideologies indigenous to other parts of the world. Its advancement is understood to be necessary and inevitable. It purveys the image of a mechanistic, economic, rationalistic, humanistic universe. It says nothing about Nature. (71)

One significant result of the introduction of “exotic ideology” is what Livingston calls *pseudospeciation*: “The invaders see themselves as qualitatively different from the invaded indigenous peoples, and behave accordingly” (56).¹³

¹³ Elsewhere, Livingston also states: “Members of a particular society tend to receive and apprehend the nature of reality through the mediation provided by the prevailing ideology. As societies have

The Puritans' exclusive perspective is readily apparent in "Dialogue's" last words, spoken by New England. Having exhorted her mother "To sack proud *Rome*, and all her vassals rout," as well as to wage war on "*Turky*" and "*Gog*," New England concludes her depiction of England's glorious future as a champion of the Puritan cause throughout the world:

No Canaanite shall then be found ith' land,
And holinesse, on horses bells shall stand,
If this make way thereto, then sigh no more,
Farewell dear mother, Parliament prevail,
And in a while you'l tell another tale. (148)

The last two lines suggest the triumph of the colonial Puritan perspective as it becomes institutionalized in England and from there proliferates via official codes and narrative structures. The end of "Dialogue" therefore envisages the repression and destruction of alternative perspectives at the same time as it elevates its own. If another tale is to follow, then it will constitute a sequel to this one, the implication being that "Dialogue" possesses primary status as a kind of "first word" from the New World. "Tale," however, connotes the power of the imagination to create fictions and fantasies. As such, "Dialogue" also reveals itself as one expression of the colonial Puritan desire

members, ideologies have adherents. Before the days of intercontinental homogenization and simplification, human societies the world over had developed ideologies appropriate to their environmental circumstances. Their ideologies grew out of those circumstances. They were indigenous. . . . The exotic ideology rests upon a dualistic image of the relationship between human beings and all other natural phenomena. Its stance is human chauvinist; its program is Baconian

to be heard and noticed abroad. In the final analysis, the poem is not a dialogue but a powerful projection of the dreams, wishes, and fears of New England Puritans.

Writing about the Puritan colonists, Michael Zuckerman points out: “Saved and damned, Christian and heathen, civilized and savage, white and black were counterpositions that came congenially and, indeed, compellingly to the colonists, as though they could redeem their own enigmatic identities by disparaging the identities of others. . . Thus these settlers came to know themselves by their negations” (Zuckerman 143). Part of a community that, defining itself by what it was not, still desperately needed to retain its ties to England, the author of “Dialogue” tries to traverse the distance between homeland and colony by imagining the English point of view. But in doing so, Bradstreet cannot help but make that perspective both English and Puritan, as a consequence of which all other points of view, both abroad and at home, are necessarily denied existence. The only way I can agree with Rosamond Rosenmeier’s statement that “The relationship of mother to daughter is initially presented as extremely close—*symbiotic* might describe it” (Rosenmeier 47) would be in terms of such a rhetorical strategy. In other words, when the mother says (to quote the same passage that Rosenmeier

does), “And thou a childe, a Limbe, and dost not feele / My weakened fainting body now to reele?” (141), the implied symbiosis is a poetically conjured one. It allows the Puritan New England government, led by men like John Winthrop and Thomas Dudley, to continue to validate its own existence and to believe in itself as vitally connected to English concerns.

While it is true that “Dialogue” repeatedly signals how deeply the Puritan colonists yearned for, and worried about, England, the sense of partisanship, of difference and distance from home, remains so ingrained that the longing and distress are always qualified. Old England’s speech indicates colonial concern but like the rest of the poem the perspective also reveals the need for vindication. The mother-figure speaks of “My plundered Townes, my houses devastation, / My ravisht virgins, and my young men slain,” but with that she also appeals to the strength of her daughter’s “child-like love”: “For my relief now use thy utmost skill, / And recompence me good, for all my ill” (146). New England’s qualified response again manifests the tripartite agenda that I have argued underlies the entire poem: “Your griefs I pity much, but should do wrong, / To weep for that we *both* have pray’d for long” (146, emphasis mine). These words imply, as well as speak to, the audience of Puritans in New England; attribute to Old England a distinctly

Puritan point of view; and in so doing exclude the other perspectives whose existence is nevertheless suggested all along.

II.

In many ways, New England colonists merely replicated the divisions and tensions they had left behind in England. Despite the goal of establishing a unified, coherent community based on Calvinistic precepts, Puritans nevertheless found themselves facing problems of faction and turmoil, problems that stemmed in part from the very desire to root out and banish outsiders. As Anne Bradstreet wrote to her children, “god will haue vs beholden one to another” (209). Such thinking was deeply embedded in the Puritan psyche, with its instinct for self-preservation; and, indeed, Bradstreet herself was quite adept at warding off the possibility of her own exclusion from the community. She would have witnessed the debacle surrounding Anne Hutchinson and felt acutely the anger of Thomas Dudley towards her sister, Sarah Keayne: both these women had “been excommunicated from the church and ostracized by the community for speaking their minds in public” (Martin 17).

If Bradstreet wanted to speak her own mind, she had to be careful not to offend her father, who, while encouraging her to read and write poetry, also took it upon himself to keep the community purged of subversive elements (Dudley 315; Cressy 45 & 85). In her dedication of *The Tenth Muse* to Dudley, Bradstreet “assumes the persona of the obedient daughter” (Martin 16) but, more than that, the epigram also evokes the chains of obligation and submission that compelled her to move to the New World in the first place: “From her that to your self, more duty owes / Then water in the boundless Ocean flows” (CW6). The subtle tension contained by these lines is understandable in view of the sense of debt felt by Bradstreet. Rosamond Rosenmeier calls this line

A typically cryptic and typically complex Bradstreet statement: the ‘duty’ owed by daughter to father appears to be greater than the ocean. In her phrasing of this ‘debt,’ however, the daughter suggests that the debt is lost in the ‘boundless’ body of water to which it belongs. After all, how does one separate waters from an ocean? This debt is more like a great source that the father and daughter share than it is like a specific sum to be paid or duty to be performed. (Rosenmeier 41).

Bradstreet expands on the subject of her debt and obligation to her father in “To her Father with some verses” (CW 183-84). Only the death of Thomas Dudley, Anne’s first reader, would see that debt discharged, and with this release would come a noticeable change in her poetry. With the possible exception of the marriage poems, which White estimates were written between

1642 and 1647 (White 207), Bradstreet's post-1653 "poetry is deeply personal, even sensuous" (Martin 32). Moreover, in his essay entitled "Anne Bradstreet's Poetic Voices," Kenneth Requa persuasively separates Bradstreet's poems into public and private work. Published in 1650, *The Tenth Muse* is made up of poems composed for the public, and as such would not jeopardize Bradstreet's position as a poet who was both a Puritan and a woman. On the other hand, *Several Poems*, which contains all the private pieces, appeared in 1678, six years after Bradstreet's death. Of these latter poems, certainly the majority were written after 1653. As the editors of *The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet* (1981) state in the "Introduction": "The most significant development in her new writings after 1650 was a turn toward a more personal mode of expression, away from the formality of her already published work" (McElrath, Jr. & Robb xx).¹⁴

Thus, while Dudley's death constituted a profound loss to the Puritan establishment, it may have freed Bradstreet to articulate her emotions more genuinely. In the years that followed, she would elegize more intensely, expressing more doubt and anger and less caution and restraint while grieving the death of a loved one. Put another way, Anne Bradstreet would more

¹⁴ Simon Bradstreet's transcription of his mother's "Meditations Diuine and morall" provides the chronology for most of her later poems. "Bradstreet . . . documents—with dates, happily, in many cases—the highs and lows of her life throughout the manuscript book" (McElrath, Jr. & Robb xxi-xxii).

surely find her voice, and she would do so in a way that paralleled a gradual but clear transformation in New England Puritanism, such that the practice of austerity was increasingly replaced by one that placed more emphasis on ritual and ornamentation. David E. Stannard comments, for instance, on changes in Puritan burial practices, linking these to a wider cultural instability:

Prior to mid-century, there is no extant evidence of New England's Puritans taking much care at all to even mark the graves of their deceased. While it is possible that some sort of wooden markers may have been employed in the early years, it is a striking phenomenon that only in the mid-1650s did New England's cemeteries begin to become populated not only with bodies, but also with carefully carved stones to indicate the sites of burial. By the 1660s the popularity of this practice was widespread, and the stones themselves had grown increasingly large and the carvings on them more elaborate. (Stannard 116-117)

Thomas Dudley's last testament provided his family with an unequivocal reminder of the kind of life he had led and, by implication, enjoined them to continue to do likewise: "I have hated & doe hate every falce way in religion, not onely the Old Idolitry and superstition of Popery, which is weareing away, but much more, (as being much worse), the newe heresies, blasphemies, & errors of late sprange upp in our native Country of England, and secretly received & fostered here more then I wishe they were." Likewise, a poem found in his pocket concluded: "If Men be left, and otherwise Combine, / My Epitaph's, I DY'D NO LIBERTINE" (White 296-97).

Simple and stark, this epitaph evokes the kind of tension that Anne Bradstreet would never really be able to resolve satisfactorily but that nevertheless informs her best poetry. For Dudley, such tension—between the claims of the individual and those of the community, as signified by “Combine” and “LIBERTINE”—seems to have been less problematic. Throughout the years of his role as a colonial leader, Dudley remained true to his vision of what it meant to be a Puritan: “We are not like those which have dispensations to lie; but as we were free enough in Old England to turn our insides outwards, sometimes to our disadvantage, very unlike is it that now, . . . we should be so unlike ourselves” (Dudley 332).

Turning the “insides outwards” was to the Puritans a proclamation in itself of freedom from pretension, and in the first part of the seventeenth century it entailed the renunciation of any kind of embellishment. Hence when Anne Bradstreet begins her elegy, entitled “To the Memory of my dear and ever honoured Father, Thomas Dudley Esq” (CW 165-66), she tries to make it immediately clear that she is not straying from the path of decorum: she is “By duty bound, and not by custome led / To celebrate the praises of the dead.” In the face of death, early Puritans looked on elaborate memorials and funeral ceremonies as not only improper but possibly blasphemous, since no one but God could actually know the condition of the departed soul

(Stannard 99; Geddes 110). “To celebrate the praises of the dead,” then, was to take a risk, for it assumed that the soul had all along been saved for paradise even though Calvinists rigidly believed that most people were predestined to be damned for eternity. Of course, Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic wrote elegies, and the New England custom established by the mid-1640s of attaching verses to the coffin or hearse (or throwing them into the grave) of the departed circumvented the dearth of graveside prayers, eulogies, and sermons. But as Stannard says of Bradstreet’s elegy for Dudley, “By comparison with others, Bradstreet was being positively emotional”: “the overwhelming tendency was to resist such sentiments” (154-55). To this Cheryl Walker adds, “Elegies, too, were pared and pruned to exemplify the pattern of Christian piety. The poet grows in stature as he comes to speak for the public and political rather than the lyrical self” (111).

Stating that her elegy stems from being “duty bound,” Bradstreet still manages to retain a hold—albeit a precarious one—on propriety. Patriarchal New Englanders would understand that Dudley was her “Father, Guide, Instructor too, / To whom I ought whatever I could doe.” Just as no one “knew him better,” so too there was no “greater debtor” than this daughter of Thomas Dudley, and the poem, in fact, is viewed by Bradstreet as a kind of final payment: “But now or never I must pay my Sum; / While others tell his

worth, I'll not be dumb." Bradstreet is also careful to point out that, besides being zealous, humble, and "Truths friend," Dudley had renounced all worldly pursuits:

High thoughts he gave no harbour in his heart,
Nor honours pufft him up, when he had part:
Those titles loath'd, which some too much do love
For truly his ambition lay above.
His humble mind so lov'd humility,
He left it to his race for Legacy:
And oft and oft, with speeches mild and wise,
Gave his in charge, that Jewel rich to prize.
No ostentation seen in all his wayes,
As in the mean ones, of our foolish dayes.

Finally, what Bradstreet says about Dudley's life of austerity and strict adherence to basic Puritan precepts creates ironic tension in the poem, a tension that may have been present at many Puritan gravesides. "No ostentation" is dealt with by the public broadside sheet that is nonetheless "only . . . rarely used by the author as a 'Vent hole' for grief. Elegies expressed public sentiments" (Geddes 159). Writes William J. Scheick, "they were not designed to survive this occasion, and that they did not is evident from their scarcity today. . . . The elegy was funeared" (298). The New England funeral elegy, unlike its English counterpart, "plumbed the depths of the collective self" and was customarily left in the grave (290).

Bradstreet's elegy, moreover, may also be seen as ironic insofar as it tests the Puritan concept of "due distance" between parents and children. As

Stannard has shown, “The prescribed and common personal relationship between parents and children was one of restraint and even aloofness” (57). “Due distance” enabled Puritans to cushion themselves against the possible death of a loved one, either parent or child, but it also prevented too much emotional attachment to one who might well be destined for eternal damnation (Stannard 57-8).¹⁵ Thus Bradstreet presses the limits of traditional Puritan practice if she fails to keep her distance from her father. Here she assumes her father’s salvation—“For he a Mansion had, prepar’d above, / For which he sigh’d and pray’d & long’d full sore”—and expresses her grief with a “mournfull mind, sore prest.” Wendy Martin’s observation that “Bradstreet struggled to write poetry in a society that was hostile to the imagination; nevertheless, she was able to express the range of her feelings” more than ever points to the paradoxical circumstances in which Bradstreet wrote (Martin 9).

Her elegy for her father is, in point of fact, part of what Stannard and others argue is a gradual transformation in New England society; we can add it to the earlier elegies and “David’s Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan,” which Rosamond Rosenmeier identifies “as the first poetic fruits of New

¹⁵ Stannard: “Edmund S. Morgan has shown how this ‘due distance’ worked in both directions, as when Benjamin Colman’s daughter Jane wrote to her father requesting forgiveness for the ‘flow of affections’ evident in some of her recent letters. Colman . . . commended her” (57-58).

England's declension" (86). Isolated by English strife and mired in economic decline, New England was moving steadily towards instability after 1642 and, as Stannard points out, "in unsettled and unstable societies . . . the loss of an individual is simply much more disruptive to the social order" (128).

As long as the New Englanders maintained their identities as Englishmen, as long as English Puritanism provided a model and England promised an eventual home for them, as long as they felt themselves part of the forces of history at work in their homeland, the Puritans of New England were culturally and psychologically at one with their relatives and friends on the opposite side of the Atlantic. But once these ties were severed, if not formally at least conceptually, New England's Puritans were on their own. The existence of such a break became apparent within two decades of settlement, by the turn of the 1650s. (122-23)

Thus Bradstreet's elegy for Thomas Dudley may be seen as part of a turning point that is both private and public.¹⁶ As Stephen Fender adds, describing Dudley's final parting with Anne's sister, Mrs. John Woodbridge, in 1648, five years before Dudley's death, "There is something in his depression that is almost fatalistic, as though New England is decaying along with him, its lifespan to be measured on the scale of the human fourscore and ten" (Fender 275). Not only would Bradstreet find herself separated by death from the influence and authority of her father (he will no longer be around to "*try* her

¹⁶ Stannard sees this instability beginning with the eruption of civil war in England, which "brought in its wake an official doctrine of religious toleration" (123). This was further exacerbated by migration back to England, the deaths of the leaders of the first generation, the failure of Christ to return by mid-century, and the growing material wealth of New Englanders. William J. Scheick supports this view in his intriguing "Tombless Virtue and Hidden Text: New England Puritan Funeral Elegies." He sees growing instability especially after 1660 (see 289-291), when New

verses [Rosenmeier 54]), but the Puritan community in New England would lose one of the leaders of the original Winthrop Fleet—"His Generation serv'd his labours cease; / And to his Fathers gathered is in peace"—and thus find itself ever more separated from England and English Puritanism. A new generation of New England Puritans would come of age that "ritualized death as only the most non-Puritan of pre-Restoration Englishmen would have dared to do. In meeting death, it seems clear, [New England Puritans] encountered something their English ancestors never had. What they encountered was themselves and their profound sense of tribal vulnerability" (Stannard 119-22).

Such vulnerability is seen in the epitaph for Dudley with which Bradstreet's elegy closes:

Within this Tomb a Patriot lyes
 That was both pious, just and wise,
 To Truth a shield, to right a Wall,
 To Sectaries a whip and Maul,
 A Magazine of History,
 A Prizer of good Company
 In manners pleasant and severe
 The Good him lov'd, the bad did fear,
 And when his time with years was spent
 If some rejoyc'd, more did lament.

The several martial images here—describing Dudley as “a shield,” “a Wall,” “a whip and Maul”—suggest how keenly New England Puritans felt threatened by difference and diversity. As a “Patriot” now ensconced within his “Tomb,” Dudley would become part of his own “Magazine of History,” another figure or “weapon” in the store of personages and events that would be represented later by Puritan writers such as Cotton Mather. In view of this, the irony of Anne Bradstreet’s epitaph for her father seems to mount. It is written with the characteristic doubleness that Rosenmeier identifies as a major feature of Bradstreet’s voice, and it also resonates with the difficult relationship Bradstreet had with her father and with the “difficult task” of composing his eulogy (Rosenmeier 13, 87, & 91).

III.

One of the most anthologized of Anne Bradstreet’s poems, “In memory of my dear grand-child Elizabeth Bradstreet” (CW186-87) dispenses with communal requirements to question privately the elusive ways of the Puritan God. Written over a dozen years after the death of Thomas Dudley, this elegy displays a more complete disregard for public questions of predestination and “due distance” than “To the Memory of my dear and ever honoured Father.” While, according to Stannard, many Puritan parents and guardians still saw “the large number of acknowledged ‘reprobate infants’” as irrevocably

damned, and while many others were “‘putting children out,’ both to early apprenticeship and simply extended stays with other families . . . [in order to maintain] the necessary distance between parent and child” (Stannard 52 & 58), Anne Bradstreet earnestly lamented the death of her year-and-a-half-old grandchild. Indeed, like Ben Jonson’s “On My First Son” (written over fifty years earlier), Bradstreet’s elegy for Elizabeth veers away from Christian tradition to display a subtle yet intense fury over the arbitrariness of “fate,” which for Jonson is “Exacted . . . on the just day” and for Bradstreet is guided “by [God’s] hand alone” (Jonson 762).

In Bradstreet’s poem, the concept of predestination is implicated as a source of irony and personal anguish instead of being viewed as an intellectual and theological concept to be upheld publicly and applied to the majority of the population. Although separated from Elizabeth by death, Bradstreet uses language that intimates a deeply-felt connection to the child at the same time as it tries to camouflage a heretical rejection of divine will:

Farewel dear babe, my hearts too much content,
 Farewel sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye,
 Farewel fair flower that for a space was lent,
 Then ta’en away unto Eternity.
 Blest babe why should I once bewail thy fate,
 Or sigh thy dayes so soon were terminate;
 Sith thou art settled in an Everlasting state.

2.

By nature Trees do rot when they are grown.

And Plumbs and Apples throughly ripe do fall,
 And Corn and grass are in their season mown,
 And time brings down what is both strong and tall.
 But plants new set to be eradicate,
 And buds new blown, to have so short a date,
 Is by his hand alone that guides nature and fate.

Bradstreet's stance in this poem has been the subject of considerable debate.

Critical opinion has ranged from Wendy Martin's, that "Although

Bradstreet's sorrow threatens to overwhelm her, the second stanza expresses resigned acceptance of Providence" (Martin 69), to Randall W. Mawer's, that "The conclusion resulting from these meditations . . . is not resignation . . . but high, righteous anger, all the more fearful in its ability to disguise itself as orthodox acceptance of God's will" (Mawer 210).¹⁷ Taking Robert Daly and others to task for seeing it as a "mere tract," Mawer rightly gets to the crux of the poem when he states, "If blame is to be placed, the blame is God's, and that surely is cause for grief" (Mawer 213 & 211).

Bradstreet begins her elegy by stressing the painful contrast between reality and desire. The heavily-accented first two feet of lines 1 through 3, with the thrice-repeated "Farewel," underscore the pain of separation felt by Bradstreet, who, at first glance, seems to berate herself for having invested too much emotionally in the relationship. But "my hearts too much

¹⁷ I am indebted to Mawer for his thorough analysis of Bradstreet's elegy for Elizabeth as well as for his insightful exposition of the wide array of critical viewpoints. See "'Farewel Dear Babe':

content” also contains nuances of anger directed at a culture that values the practice of “weaned affections” (Miller 172). Instead of interpreting the death as a divinely-ordained purgative experience, Bradstreet makes the clause subtly sardonic by juxtaposing it with the repeated “Farewells” and by frankly admitting having done away with “due distance” to commit the sin of vanity by making the “sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye.” The question posed in the first stanza remains unanswered in the second only if the reader is looking for some kind of resolution typical of Puritanism, which is what Ann Stanford does when she criticizes the poem for failing to “lead into a conventional Christian apotheosis. . . . The reply is closer to Herrick and the Cavaliers than to most Puritan poetry” (Stanford 85). That Bradstreet’s elegy contradicts Puritan convention is precisely the point. With its anguished question directed at the Puritan God in a triplet that ends with an Alexandrine—

why should I once bewail thy fate,
Or sigh the dayes so soon were terminate
Sith thou art settled in an Everlasting state

—her elegy for Elizabeth has more in common with Jonson’s for his son, which poses a similar question:

Oh, could I lose all father now! for why

Will man lament the state he should envy—
 To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
 And if no other misery, yet age?¹⁸

Bradstreet, in fact, goes well beyond Jonson in her criticism of divine justice (Jonson 762). While Jonson concludes by vowing that “what he loves may never like too much,” Bradstreet portrays the natural order as one in which all living things are born, grow to maturity, and die, when “time brings down what is both strong and tall.” The point, of course, is that the dead grandchild, like “plants new set” and “buds new blown,” does not fit into this pattern. Ultimate responsibility rests, as Bradstreet sees it, not with the human subject to love judiciously, but with God, for it is “his hand alone that guides nature and fate.” Mawer supports such a reading when he notices that “‘his’ in the second foot must take at least a secondary accent, acquiring stress not only from the divinity of its antecedent, but also from its alliteration with the following ‘hand’” (Mawer 214). With such a rebellious conclusion, Bradstreet places herself in direct opposition to the orthodoxy represented by her father. By aligning herself with a stance on the problem of suffering that is more Cavalier than Roundhead, she separates herself from a

¹⁸ Wendy Martin also draws a parallel between Bradstreet's elegy for Elizabeth and Jonson's "On My First Son," although without making my point that Bradstreet's poem more than merely "[resembles] Elizabethan elegies such as Ben Jonson's"; instead, I argue that we are invited to interpret her elegy as subverting the Puritan convention on one's attitude to the death of a loved one (Martin 70-71).

theological position in which she herself as a fallen creature would shoulder the blame for feeling the loss of her equally-depraved grandchild.

Bradstreet once again tries, and fails, to disguise her anger in yet another elegy for a deceased grandchild, “On my dear Grand-child Simon Bradstreet,” and it is just this failure that makes her later work so atypical:

No sooner come, but gone, and fal’n asleep,
 Acquaintance short, yet parting caus’d us weep,
 Three flours, two scarcely blown, the last i’th’ bud,
 Cropt by th’ Almighty’s hand; yet is he good,
 With dreadful awe before him let’s be mute,
 Such was his will, but why, let’s not dispute,
 With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust,
 Let’s say he’s merciful, as well as just,
 He will return, and make up all our losses,
 And smile again, after our bitter crosses. (CW 188)

As in her elegy for Elizabeth, albeit with less effect, Bradstreet subverts Calvinist dogma even as she pays it lip service. The semi-colon in the fourth line punctuates the contradiction found in an omnipotent deity who “crops” infants like “flours,” but is nonetheless “good.” Bradstreet thus reveals her awareness of the old dilemma felt by those who have believed that God is both all-powerful and just. There is, of course, irony in the fact that she then immediately proposes to her audience that “let’s be mute” when she obviously intends to speak her mind. Such a strategy results in sarcasm. In dissident fashion, with her “[mouth] put in the dust,” Bradstreet conspires with the

like-minded element in her readership but without overtly saying anything unorthodox: “Let’s say he’s merciful, as well as just.”

After the death of her father in 1653, Anne Bradstreet was freed to articulate her attitude towards Puritan culture more openly. During his life, Thomas Dudley exerted considerable influence on his daughter’s poetry and politics. Even though Rosamond Rosenmeier portrays a rift between the Dudleys and the Bradstreets over the Antinomian controversy of the late 1630s, she also describes Anne as presenting “The Four Elements” and “Of the four Humours in Mans Constitution”—two of the longer poems in *The Tenth Muse*—“to Thomas Dudley in March 1642.” Dudley was, in effect, the foremost member of a society of “sanctified readers” for whom Bradstreet specifically wrote many of her poems (Rosenmeier 61, 87-88).¹⁹

But the tension between the Dudleys and the Bradstreets also points to Anne’s need to determine her own attitudes and strategies as a writer, and her emancipation as a poet is most apparent in the elegies written for her grandchildren, Elizabeth and Simon. The marriage poems, probably written during the mid-1640s, certainly reveal a strikingly different voice than that

¹⁹ Rosenmeier: “She is writing for a readership both of men and women who possess the quality of mind and temperament that in her dedication she ascribed to Thomas Dudley—the ability to judge, prove, try, and sort the work and to distinguish chaff from wheat” (61).

found in “Dialogue.” Rather than the violent images of “Dialogue,” the marriage poems employ language that is sensuous and erotic—“Return my Dear, my joy, my only Love, / Unto thy Hinde, thy Mullet and thy Dove” (CW 183)—and in doing so take up the theme of separation in a novel way.

My purpose in mentioning them here, however, is to stress again the existence of a different, private voice (private because these poems were not published until after the poet’s death). This voice, I have argued, is less restrained after the death of Thomas Dudley; except in the elegy for her father and “Contemplations,” both of which disclose ambivalence about the poet’s public duty, Bradstreet is liberated after 1653 to express herself more genuinely. Although the elegy for her father constitutes a kind of final payment of Bradstreet’s debt to Dudley, and as such releases her from her lifelong sense of obligation to him, the grandchild elegies are at once more intimate and anguished. Unlike Bradstreet’s father, who had died “fully ripe,” these infants are likened by their grandmother to “plants new set,” “buds new blown,” and “Three flours, two scarcely blown.” Not even the possibility of heaven is really consoling, so that Bradstreet merely gestures wearily in the appropriate direction: “Such was his will, but why, let’s not dispute.”

With the often turbulent attitudinal changes that her poetry exhibits towards her culture, Bradstreet's strategy frequently involves an attempt to come to terms with an acutely uncomfortable sense of separation from the Old World. She not only desired to heal the wounds of travel but also prevent such injuries from recurring in various other ways. Accompanying her endeavours to overcome distance is, moreover, her ambivalence about the whole Puritan colonial project. Then again, this ambivalence had been imported as well as inherited by many early colonists like Bradstreet. As Michael Kammen observes, "Colonization seemed one way to resolve . . . tensions bred from pluralism; but it would sometimes aggravate them instead, and oftentimes create new ones from the old matrix" (Kammen 138). From this perspective, then, the *Arbella* can be seen as a metaphor for failed escape from contradiction. Its cargo was not simply anxious colonists but all their "ambivalent attitudes toward primitive peoples and plantations as well" (Kammen 118). Uncertain and isolated, Puritan colonists were continually compelled to redefine themselves both as Englishmen and as reformers. Equally uncertain and isolated within this community, Anne Bradstreet wrote poems that enabled her over time to redefine herself and thus to travel periodically beyond the communal confines.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth Bishop To Dream Our Dreams: Questions of Distance and Desire

I.

Like Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Bishop concerned herself with the meaning of distance and of place in order to fulfil certain longings. If John Winthrop possessed a mere outline of the coast near Boston by which to guide his fleet of colonists, Bishop employed a variety of colourful maps as metaphors for desire, the kind of desire—for the unknown, the sacred, for new patterns of community, and for home—that has often propelled travel. For Bishop, however, the need to overcome distance and find a place to call her own was less political and more personal: she was the solitary traveler observing and questioning the passing details of the moment, and searching for home. And her celebrated questions of travel are also questions about the meaning of home.

In her poems about travel, distance and desire are entwined, mainly because for Bishop travel was a matter of fulfilling personal desire, of moving towards some far-off goal. At the same time, Bishop's poems reveal how

desire is thwarted, denied, or deferred during travel. The seemingly casual language she employs helps to take the edge off disappointment, but also signifies the modernists' dilemma concerning the formal expression of the desire for meaning. Bishop attempted to solve this problem by articulating it, returning again and again to expressing a wish for what could no longer be had, using a language whose apparent nonchalance became a device both for expressing desire and for surviving disappointment and pain.

Along with cartography and geography, travel constitutes a primary theme of Bishop's work, from her early poem "The Map" to "Santarém," published in 1979, a year after her death. The titles of three of the four volumes that appeared during her lifetime—*North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography*—reflect this theme and reveal how consistently and consciously Bishop worked it into her art. Not surprisingly, such an obviously crucial aspect of Bishop's poetry has been the subject of much critical attention, most recently by Lorrie Goldensohn, Bonnie Costello, Anne Colwell, and Susan McCabe. Bishop's critics, fellow poets, and biographers have thoroughly examined her difficult childhood,²⁰ finding in it the determining factors behind her celebrated lifelong search for home.

²⁰ Including her mother's nervous breakdown and commitment to a sanatorium, and Bishop's traumatic removal at the age of six from the home of her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia, to that of her staid paternal grandparents in Massachusetts.

These details are, of course, crucial to understanding Bishop's work, illuminating such poems as "First Death in Nova Scotia," which appears in the "Elsewhere" section of *Questions of Travel*, and the late "Pink Dog," where Bishop's friend Lloyd Schwartz says we can catch a glimpse of the poet's tortured psyche:

Naked, you trot across the avenue.
 Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!
 Naked and pink, without a single hair . . .
 Startled, the passersby draw back and stare.

While the rigours of travel constitute a major feature of Bishop's writing, providing one significant area of comparison to Bradstreet's "travail," Bishop's poetry can be read not just as a record of such "travail," but as a reckoning of the yearnings that cause one to undergo the kind of suffering implicit in this older word for travel. Eric J. Leed describes "travail" as "the paradigmatic 'experience,' the model of a direct and genuine experience, which transforms the person having it":

We may see something of the nature of these transformations in the roots of Indo-European languages, where *travel* and *experience* are intimately wedded terms. The Indo-European root of experience is **per* (the asterisk indicates a retroconstruction from languages living and dead). **Per* has been construed as "to try," "to test," "to risk"—connotations that persist in the English word *peril*. The earliest connotations of **per* appear in Latin words for "experience": *experior* and *experimentum*, whence the English *experiment*. This conception of "experience" as an ordeal, as a passage through a frame of action that gauges the true dimensions and nature of the person or object passing through it, also describes the most general and ancient conception of the effects of travel upon the traveler. Many of the secondary meanings

of **per* refer explicitly to motion: “to cross space,” “to reach a goal,” “to go out.” The connotations of risk and danger implicit in *peril* are also obvious in the Gothic cognates for **per* (in which *p* becomes an *f*): *fern* (far), *fare*, *fear*, *ferry*. One of the German words for experience, *Erfahrung*, is from the Old High German *irfaran*: “to travel,” “to go out,” “to traverse,” or “to wander” These crossings of words and meanings reflect one of the first conceptualizations of travel as suffering, a test, an ordeal—meanings explicit in the original English word for travel: *travail*. (Leed 5-6)

Thus defined, the word *travail* certainly applies, as we have seen, to Anne Bradstreet’s risky voyage from England to the New World. But Bradstreet was obviously willing to make this journey because she shared, albeit reluctantly at times, in her community’s need to search out a new land and create a new community. While Elizabeth Bishop might not completely identify with the communal aspects of this particular goal, she well knew what it was like to want to go somewhere. Like her sandpiper, she seemed always to be “looking for something, something, something” (“The Sandpiper”). Though by Bishop’s time there were fewer frontiers, and thus fewer opportunities and/or demands for heroic individual and communal action (in the Old World imperialistic senses of those words—*frontier*, *heroic*, *action*), she could ask in “Questions of Travel”: “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too?”

To ask such a question is surely to risk disappointment, and Bishop’s unpretentious terms hide neither her courage nor her ambition. In fact, in her poems dealing strictly with notions of travel, she repeatedly returns to the

ways in which desire is contained, configured, and, most importantly, frustrated, in a world where seemingly everything has already been mapped and explored. In the novel *V*, one of Thomas Pynchon's characters states: "[Tourists] want only the skin of a place, the explorer wants its heart. It is perhaps a little like being in love. I had never penetrated to the heart of any of those places, Raf. Until Vheissu. It was not till the Southern Expedition last year that I saw what was beneath her skin.' 'What did you see?' asked Signor Mantissa, leaning forward. 'Nothing,' Godolphin whispered. 'It was Nothing I saw'" (Pynchon 204). Like Pynchon's Godolphin, whose very name suggests mythopoeic longing, Bishop's speakers reveal how the ancient voyager's desire to reach the Happy Isles or find the Holy Grail remains vital but without the kind of fulfillment enacted and promised in ancient texts. The apprehension evident in Bishop's poems is expressed not just in *V* but in an entire body of writing from the last century and a half, from *Moby-Dick* to "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," "Journey of the Magi," "Heart of Darkness," *Ulysses*, and so on.

But what sets Bishop apart from these other writers is her use of casual language, language which acts as a distracting veneer to the compelling underlying issues. The significance of Bishop's usage becomes all-too apparent when we compare it to that of Charles Darwin, whose life and work,

particularly *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1836), she ardently admired. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop makes this celebrated comment:

reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phase, and one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding off into the unknown. 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. (Millier 246)

As others have already noticed, here Bishop gives us an unusual look into what for her was a confirmation of her own genius for observation. Like Darwin, she revelled in the ephemeral details of the world, recording what Darwin called “the most trivial signs of change” (Darwin 154). Anyone reading *The Voyage* will know what Bishop means by “endless heroic observations,” and will therefore also understand how Darwin impressed and influenced a like-minded young poet a century later.

But Bishop’s use of the word *heroic* signals an important distinction between Darwin’s sense of observation and her own. It would, in fact, be better to refer to Bishop’s endless observations as unassuming precisely because, in contrast to Darwin, no monumental purpose is ever explicitly announced as being behind them. Darwin’s use of language, on the other hand, constantly implies elevated mission and motive. He and the crew of the *Beagle* are like “the navigators of old” (Darwin 154), and at key points

throughout his journal Darwin seems almost overwhelmed by his own observations. For example:

We spent the day on the summit, and I never enjoyed one more thoroughly. Chile, bounded by the Andes and the Pacific, was seen as in a map. The pleasure from the scenery, in itself beautiful, was heightened by the many reflections which arose from the mere view of the Campana range with its lesser parallel ones, and of the broad valley of Quillota directly intersecting them. Who can avoid wondering at the force which had upheaved these mountains, and even more so at the countless ages which it must have required, to have broken through, removed, and levelled whole masses of them? . . . all-powerful time can grind down mountains—even the gigantic Cordillera—into gravel and mud. (Darwin 221)

Here Darwin goes beyond “minute details” to ask a question apparently more sublime in scope than what we might expect of Bishop who, for instance, asks in “Filling Station,” “Why the extraneous plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?” If she often appears not to take her travels seriously, it is because the desire she shares with a writer such as Darwin can no longer be articulated and implemented in his terms, not to mention those of other explorers Bishop admired, William Bartram, Richard Burton, and Alfred Russell Wallace. Her poems may evoke and incorporate older notions of the voyage but they do so mainly to clarify a single reality: that desire and experience are seldom, if ever, wedded during travel.

Bishop’s use of language thus indicates a transformation in the scope of travel, from heroic and auspicious to modest and unsure, a change exemplified by her attempt in 1951 to take a cruise to Tierra del Fuego, to

see there the cruel, entangled, rocky landscape where Darwin met with “savages” whose desolate way of life he found astonishing.²¹ In contrast to Darwin’s mission as ship’s naturalist, Bishop’s journey was much more of a strictly personal odyssey. Apart perhaps from Marianne Moore, Bishop had no John Stevens Henslow compelling her to travel in search of raw empirical data and to report back regularly by way of letter. Instead, “Her compass kept pointing her south, to a warmer, more colourful, less puritanical climate” (Schwartz 89). In fact, Bishop’s journey to Tierra del Fuego, far from ever being accomplished, was aborted during a stopover in Rio de Janeiro: “Wandering through the city, she ate some cashew fruit that she had bought from a street vender, and had a violent allergic reaction. She was hospitalized, and had to give up her ‘dream-trip to the Straits of Magellan, et cetera.’ The ship sailed on without her. She stayed in Brazil for nearly twenty years” (Schwartz 89).

Part of the difference between Bishop and Darwin as travelers also lies in the fact that Bishop was never sure she had a home to which to return. The idea of home, of course, plays an integral role in the mind and memory of the traveler, and Bishop frequently discusses it. Darwin writes at the close of *The Voyage* that he struggled with homesickness throughout the

²¹ Bishop would also visit the Galapagos Islands and Darwin's house in Kent, England. See also

expedition. Home for Darwin was represented not only by the memory of familiar landscapes, friends, and family, but also by the notion of “a harvest, however distant that may be, when some fruit will be reaped, some good effected” (Darwin 434). Such thoughts helped to keep him going for almost five years. Bishop, on the other hand, regardless of her admiration for Darwin or her love for the Nova Scotia of early childhood, was the “touring foreigner, in the place but not of it, wanting to ‘stay forever’ but finding it impossible” (Millier 47). As Bishop wrote in a letter to Robert Lowell: “I guess I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated & 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” (Millier 198).

Here, as in her poetry, Bishop’s casual idiom carries serious implications, implications readily apparent in the poems examined in the rest of this chapter. The discussion that follows concentrates on two main tasks:

- 1). to sort out Bishop’s articulation of the kind of desire that precipitates travel and of how such desire is constantly frustrated or put in question; and
- 2). to give cognizance to the ways in which she alludes to an older and possibly more stable tradition of travel whose language and images speak of

satisfying desire and thus contrast with her own. More specifically, this desire will be seen as a desire for place, for what Anita Desai calls “spirit of place or ‘feng sui,’” a Chinese term defined by Robert Graves as “spiritual atmosphere” (Desai 101). Desai goes on to make a statement that, here, partly applies to Bishop also: “I tend to move into areas with a particularly strong *feng sui* and . . . occupy my time spent in these areas by writing about them I lay claim to this nose for *feng sui* as part of my equipment as a novelist” (Desai 101). Although Bishop too had a “nose for *feng sui*,” her quest was never so easily successful as Desai’s seems to have been.

II.

If Bishop sometimes includes older expressions of travel in her poems, she does so in order to express their collapse in terms that are either ironic or comic. Her work alludes to what might be called a high tradition of travel that contrasts sharply with an actual array of seemingly trivial details. This ideal tradition, which is beckoning as well as elusive, provides a backdrop, a large canvas, to all the celebrated Bishopian minutiae. “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” begins by referring directly to this tradition and the way in which it has been preserved and idealized: “Thus should have been our travels: / serious, engravable” (CP 57). What follows describes what the speaker has seen, read, and desired in a biblical text

accompanied by elaborate pictures and a concordance, all meant to take readers through a kind of guided tour of traditional western thought and dogma—"our Christian Empire." The hyperbolic title suggests the scale of the ideal to which the speaker brings her mind and desires, having experienced travel herself. Yet she also immediately excludes herself from these patterns where experience is idealized and sublimely arranged, even though she remains intrigued by the arrangement:

Thus should have been our travels:
 serious, engravable.
 The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
 and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
 innumerable, though equally sad and still,
 are foreign. Often the squatting Arab,
 or group of Arabs, plotting, probably,
 against our Christian Empire,
 while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand
 points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher.
 The branches of the date-palms look like files.
 The cobbled courtyard, where the Well is dry,
 is like a diagram, the brickwork conduits
 are vast and obvious, the human figure
 far gone in history or theology,
 gone with its camel or its faithful horse.
 Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds
 suspended on invisible threads above the Site,
 or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by threads.

Such representations indicate an older belief in a transcendent ordering power that makes the various scenes coherent and unchanging.

Bishop's diction, i.e., "files," "diagram," "engravable," "cobbled," "brickwork

conduits,” evokes a model for human experience that is carefully ordered and purposive; and central to this model is “the Site”—“the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher”—where death itself is conquered. “The creation of holy sites and a sacred literature,” says Leed, “occurred from the fourth century on. The sacred sites demonstrated the truth of the text, while the text supplied meaning to the sacred site” (Leed 142).

David Kalstone sees in this poem a disjunction between childhood desire and adult reality, as the speaker goes on to juxtapose the biblical vision with the frightening reality of her own travels. Citing one of Bishop’s childhood memories of reading her “grandfather’s Bible under a powerful reading-glass,” Kalstone states: “in the formal arrangement of Bishop’s poem, such memories are strictly cordoned off from adult life, unavailing, displaced as a childlike fantasy” (Kalstone 130). Leed’s comment on the ties between holy site and sacred text, however, supplies us with a clue to a parallel approach to “Over 2,000 Illustrations.” Along with the child/adult rupture identified by Kalstone, the poem also enunciates the discovery of the gap between text and site, and as such goes beyond the biographical to describe, and thus engrave in its own way, what has become of travel as a metaphor for experience. Anne Colwell sees the poem doing this in comic terms:

The tone and diction of the first stanza poke fun at the desire, present equally in both poet and reader, for a knowledge invulnerable to time, a

desire to connect with something serious and permanent, to have one true “biblical” experience that can be preserved in a photograph, affirmed by the whole culture—to possess the definitive edition. (Colwell 102)

If Anne Bradstreet’s experience of travel included dislocation, it was also replete with spiritual hopes and consolations, the greatest of which was the creation of the community of pilgrims as a “city vpon a hill.” Bishop, on the other hand, records how such hopes and consolations elude one’s grasp; the speaker’s express desire to locate a sacred site is, in this poem at least, unfulfilled. Although Bishop’s speaker conveys a sense of community in her use of the first-person plural, the actual travels she describes contain none of the tensions between self and community found in Bradstreet’s “Dialogue.” Bishop’s use of “we,” rather than evoking any contradictory claims of group and self, supports the speaker’s disillusionment with travel. If she does speak on behalf of another, the speaker does so in order to describe a shared sense of incongruity. During real travel, she says, one finds holy sites “not looking particularly holy,” and this discovery, which constitutes the nadir of the poem, frightens the speaker “most of all.” Rather than confirm what the biblical text has always “Granted,” “a page alone” or “a grim lunette,” which lead the eye “through the lines / the burin made, the lines that move apart / like ripples above sand, / dispersing storms, God’s spreading fingerprint,” actual travel, with its visits to holy sites, reveals

An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
 with exhortation, yellowed
 as scattered cattle-teeth;
 half-filled with dust, not even the dust
 of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.

Like the biblical post-resurrection grave of Christ, this tomb is empty; but it is empty not because of the numinous but because of the passage of time, which Bishop's traveler notes in a manner that quietly parallels Darwin's eloquent description of what "all powerful time" can do. For Darwin, such observations led to radical theorizing about the mutability of nature. For Bishop's speaker, the revelation this experience brings of the brutal reality of death leads to irony. (Indeed, although Darwin himself does not wax ironic, irony may be seen as an inevitable consequence of his thought.) Next to the grave is a travel guide: "In a smart burnoose Khadour looked on amused." The speaker's other experiences, leading up to her visit to this holy site, are almost equally ironic. They take note in the same wry and quiet way of the effects of time:

In Mexico the dead man lay
 in a blue arcade; the dead volcanoes
 glistened like Easter lilies.
 The jukebox went on playing "Ay, Jalisco!"
 And at Volubilis there were beautiful poppies
 splitting the mosaics; the fat old guide made eyes.

Likewise, the speaker sees "little pockmarked prostitutes" filling "the brothels of Marrakesh," and this vignette is juxtaposed with an Englishwoman "In

Dingle harbor . . . informing us / that the Duchess was going to have a baby” while “the rotting hulks held up their dripping plush.”

Such anecdotal accounts, strung together as they are, constitute the speaker’s experience of a world where life vies with death rather than triumphs over it.²² A catalogue of details that blatantly defy desire, the speaker’s record of her travels acts as the disconcerting foreground to a “vast and obvious” biblical tapestry. In the opening line of the third part of the poem, the speaker states, “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and,’” acknowledging how the reality of travel is based on an arbitrariness for which she has had little preparation. While the various characters and constituents of the biblical illustrations are suspended by threads, filed, cobbled, or otherwise ordered, the speaker’s actual experiences seem haphazardly serialized. Her poetic “engraving” of her journey, such as it is, is “*only* connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” [emphasis mine].²³

But this realization also preludes a return to her contemplation of “the heavy book,” makes her want to open it once more, as she did when she was a child (if we keep Kalstone’s reading in mind), and as she has done at the very outset of the poem itself. The speaker repeatedly returns to the book because

²² To be sure, these accounts also recall Bishop’s aborted trip to the Straits of Magellan.

²³ Susan McCabe takes a slightly different angle: “[Bishop] laments the repetition of the conjunction ‘and’ and its lack of signifying power, but then proceeds to rejuvenate it . . . We must make do with our linking ‘ands’” (McCabe 132-33).

it has instilled in her a deep-seated desire for transcendence and order. She still yearns to see the evidence for these even though what she has witnessed during her travels stands in stark contradiction:

Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family of pets,
—and looked and looked our infant sight away.

These lines resonate with the kind of longing found at the end of the first passage, where the speaker sees “God’s spreading fingerprint” in the embellished pages of the Bible, only here she explicitly recognizes how the book mesmerizes—indeed, how its power is analogous to the erotic in so far as it “rubs off” and “pollinates the fingertips.” If there are signs of sexual intimacy and fertility here, it is because the Bible promises life and love, and records at great length who begat whom. The “old Nativity,” Christ’s miraculous entry into the world, is the genealogical high point of the post-Adamic world, and the speaker’s question—“Why couldn’t we have seen / this old Nativity while we were at it?”—echoes Eliot’s speaker’s in “Journey of the Magi,” “[W]ere we led all that way for / Birth or Death?,” and presages the

“questions of travel” that Bishop will pointedly ask further on in her career (Eliot 110).

The tableau the speaker wishes she could have seen with her own eyes represents her unmitigated desire for epiphany “while we were at it.” It is an image of perfect domesticity that fulfills the biblical promise of immortality; it is, in point of fact, another holy site, one which would “demonstrate the truth of the text” and thus belie the numerous, frightening images of death encountered by the speaker during her travels. But this wish for epiphany and confirmation also brings up the issue of seeing, of the meaning of the traveler’s eye. Observation, especially the observation of minutiae, has thus far brought disillusionment, irony, terror. Dreadful details meet the eyes of the traveler: “the dead man,” “the dead volcanoes,” “beautiful poppies splitting the mosaics,” “rotting hulks,” and “little pockmarked prostitutes.” Indeed, the speaker goes so far as to observe how others look at these things in the real world: “the fat old guide made eyes”; “Khadour looked on amused.” Against these is “a family with pets” illustrated in “the heavy book,” while the poem’s last line brings up a different kind of looking. Seeing “this old Nativity” would constitute another order of observation, which the speaker has never experienced. She calls such looking “infant sight” not because it already has incipient existence but because its birth is

contingent on seeing the miraculous. Such looking cannot exist without its proper object, even though the speaker can imagine its happening and can ask a question for which there is no answer but the gap between text and site, dream and reality.²⁴

Thus the illustrations are “sad and still,” the speaker noting how there is “Always the silence.” The word *infant* stems from the Latin *infans*, meaning “unable to speak.” If travel is about seeing, then the speaker cannot, in the final analysis, describe what she has not seen, although she can intonate her desire to look on something for the first time. After all, such desire is what motivates the traveler to test limits, push boundaries, and report to others what he or she has witnessed. But again, Bishop’s speaker is very clear about what she has not witnessed, so that “Over 2,000 Illustrations” does not contribute further to the gap between text and site: instead, it describes that gap and, as a text itself, is unwaveringly honest in its attempt to be accurate and true to the experience of the traveler. Yet at the same time, the poem also freely acknowledges the traveler’s dreams, frustrated as they are.

²⁴ Simon Schama makes an intriguing point about how his book *Landscape and Memory* is made of “good wood pulp.” He goes on to describe the wood-books created by Germans in the eighteenth century: “By paying homage to the vegetable matter from which it, and all literature, was constituted, the wooden library made a dazzling statement about the necessary union of culture and nature” (Schama 19). Obviously, for Schama the gap between text and site does not need to be there.

In “Arrival at Santos,” the first poem in the “Brazil” section of *Questions of Travel*, Bishop begins with a pointed, unflinching question that, like “Over 2,000 Illustrations,” contrasts acutely with the mundane details that greet her eyes as her ship approaches port “after eighteen days of suspension” at sea:

Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, and immediately,
after eighteen days of suspension? (CP 89)

Couched in terms that seem simple at first, Bishop’s question is a bold, humorous one. “Oh, tourist,” with its combination of apostrophe and holiday light-heartedness, aptly sums up her attitude. “After eighteen days of suspension” at sea, Bishop finds a scene that fails to meet her expectations, expectations which would have arisen not just during “suspension” but possibly while reading Darwin’s *Voyage* and which are juxtaposed with the disappointing scene before her. Darwin, who we already know was reminded of “the navigators of old” as his ship approached the shores of South America, makes the following comments shortly after arriving in Brazil: “In England any person fond of natural history enjoys in his walks a great advantage, by always having something to attract his attention; but in these

fertile climates, teeming with life, the attractions are so numerous, that he is scarcely able to walk at all"; and "every form, every shade, so completely surpasses in magnificence all that the European has ever beheld in his own country, that he knows not how to express his own feelings" (Darwin 22 & 27). Infant sight indeed. By contrast, Bishop qualifies what she sees with adjectives such as "meager," "sad and harsh," "frivolous," "feeble," and "uncertain." Her presentation is matter-of-fact: "Here is a coast; here is a harbor; / here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery." This, as Susan McCabe has also noticed, "strips topography of the romance of travel and arrival" (McCabe 149). The mountains are "impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying"; they are also "sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery."

This also recalls Anne Bradstreet's much-discussed uncertainty when she reached New England, finding "a new World and new manners at *wch* my heart rose." Elizabeth Bishop's heart rises too as she expresses disaffection with ports in general. They "are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap, / but they seldom seem to care what impression they make." Like Bradstreet, Bishop recognizes and yields to the necessary rites of passage; but while Bradstreet eventually submits to what is a practical necessity ("after I was convinced it was ye way of God"), Bishop creates a comic moment by

depreciating her “immodest demands” with some pragmatic advice: “Finish your breakfast.”

Finish your breakfast. The tender is coming
a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag.
So that’s the flag. I never saw it before.
I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag,

but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
and paper money; they remain to be seen.

For Bishop all the paraphernalia surrounding arrival might be “ye the way of God,” but if it is she does not explicitly say so, saving more direct talk of God for the poem that follows, “Brazil, January 1, 1501.” At this point, her main concerns are the practical ones which so defy and deflate her “immodest demands,” and out of which she continues to create a comedy of manners that parodies conventional representations of arrival.

Exactly how Bishop creates a parody may be seen by comparing certain parts of “Arrival at Santos” with Anthony Smith’s recent recounting of the official discovery of Brazil by Pedro Cabral “at the hour of Vespers” on 22 April 1500:

A party went ashore in a single boat, and Nicolau Coelho became the first man from that fleet to walk upon the land that would become Brazil. He reported back to his commander that the people he encountered were amiable, naked and curious, never having seen such foreigners before. . . . On 26 April, Low Sunday, Cabral went ashore, together with a large number of priests and friars from among his complement of 1,200 men. He had no stone (*padrão*) to mark the place, as was customary on voyages of discovery, but made the carpenter construct a wooden cross to serve as a

token of possession. This was erected on 1 May after a Mass had been celebrated. He then named the land, not knowing if it was a huge island or a continent. *Terra da Vera Cruz* was his choice: Land of the True Cross. (Smith 5)

Because they are about seeing things for the first time, accounts of arrival are nearly always writ large, representing the triumphant fulfillment of desire.

Thus, in accounts of discovery, places are marked, rituals observed, and there is an accompanying evocation of magnitude or destiny—what Bishop calls the “immodest demands for a different world, / and a better life, and complete comprehension / of both at last.”

Along with her “fellow passenger named Miss Breen,” Bishop too is seeing Brazil for the first time but her rhetoric pokes fun at desire and at the idea of arriving itself: “So that’s the flag. I never saw it before. / I somehow never thought of there being a flag.” Likewise, as we have seen, her first impressions are anything but grandiose: there was a flag “all along,” and the currency will “remain to be seen” by other tourists. Her mode of arrival occurs in plain contrast to the prowess implied in Smith’s account, just as her comic vision contrasts sharply with the “infant sight” yearned for in “Over 2,000 Illustrations”:

And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward,
myself and a fellow passenger named Miss Breen,

descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters
waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans.

Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook!
 Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's

skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
 a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
 with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression.
 Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall

s, New York. There. We are settled.

All the traveler desires on a larger scale is here subordinated to the necessity for movement from one craft to another, but the competent Miss Breen, representing law and order, gets caught on a boat hook. She and the speaker worry about their whiskey. Like the irony found in "Over 2,000 Illustrations," this poem's comic tone stems from the incongruity between wish and reality—between the speaker's "immodest demands" and the practical need to "gingerly . . . climb down the ladder backward" without getting snared or falling. Bishop's use of the present tense accentuates the awkward everyday reality of travel ("There. We are settled.") as does the unusual enjambment breaking a single letter from the place name for Miss Breen's home. Language at customs will slip across the page like the damp postage stamp.²⁵ For the time being, larger desires are laid aside—"The customs officials will speak English, we hope, / and leave us our bourbon and

²⁵ This was identified by Professor Richard Morton, who also sees the poem as comic: "Cortez puts up a cross and kills everyone in sight—the Misses Bishop and Breen worry about smuggling whiskey!" (letter to the writer, 9 September 1994).

cigarettes”—but the poem ends with an unmistakable gesture towards grappling with them as soon as possible: “We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior.”

With this final line, “Arrival at Santos” reconfigures the dichotomy between reality and dream with an analogous one between surface and interior. With its flag, currency, and customs officials, Santos is merely the skin of Brazil, which is why Bishop likens it to “the unassertive colours of soap, or postage stamps” since both these products are made only for contact with surfaces. The poem that follows, on the other hand, takes the reader into both history and jungle. The journey back in time seems directly proportional to the trip into the rain forest. Indeed, at the outset “Brazil, January 1, 1502” implies a loss of the sense of current time as the speaker takes an imaginative excursion over four centuries into the past to envision the first Portuguese conquistadors’ encounter with the Amazon rainforest and its native inhabitants: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs” (*CP* 91). But what the jungle, the interior, offers is not the fulfillment of “an old dream of wealth and luxury,” but rather an endless series of surfaces the speaker compares to a “hanging fabric.” Susan McCabe, glossing the epigraph by Kenneth Clark with which this poem

begins, locates the fascinating connection between landscape and art that forms the background to the poem. I quote both McCabe and Clark here:

Early medieval art disregards nature as either irrelevant or shuns it as either irreverent or terrifying; it is only the domestication of nature into garden that allows landscape to emerge:

Natural objects, then, were first perceived individually, as pleasing in themselves and symbolical of divine qualities. The next step towards landscape painting was to see them as forming some whole which would be within the compass of the imagination and itself a symbol of perfection. This was achieved by the discovery of the garden—be it Eden, or the Hesperides, or Tir-nan-Og—it is one of humanity's most constant, widespread and consoling myths.

Here McCabe makes an interesting point, arguing that Bishop—acting from the desire I have maintained informs her poems about travel—is guilty of the same sins as the colonizers: “The conquistadors cannot ‘see’ the landscape: it appears before them as a tapestry, and Bishop implicates herself along with the present-day colonizers, as caught up in the same composition of the landscape as paradise” (McCabe 153-54).²⁶ The speaker’s “we,” says McCabe, states that Nature is seen “exactly” as it must have appeared to the Spanish. John Livingston, writing in the context of a discussion of Darwin, comments on the process of observation, what he calls “the traditional perceptual lenses”:

The lenses have not changed because they are prescribed and ground within the ideological prosthetic device which dictates how we receive and

²⁶ Yet I agree with Anne Colwell when she states: “I think it is shortsighted to argue, as many critics do, that Bishop attempts to speak in the ironized voice of the male doer but somehow falls into her own trap” (Colwell 142).

apprehend the nature of reality. We *must* receive and apprehend the world through the bias of competitive striving because if Nature were *not* an economic marketplace, then it would not be in our preferred image, and if it were not in our preferred image, then we would have no way of predicting and controlling it. We would have no way of domesticating it—of bringing Nature into the orbit of human power, of making it *just like us*. (Livingston 91)

Suffice it to say that Bishop's fabric consists of "big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves," "every square inch filling in with foliage," and is likened to a painter's canvas, "fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame." Both metaphors—of nature and of art—evoke vulnerable artificial surfaces that can be torn or "ripped away," which is what the speaker imagines the conquistadors doing "Directly after Mass, humming perhaps / *L'Homme armé*, or some such tune." "[M]addening little women" become the focus of desire, native women who are elusive, "retreating, always retreating, behind [the hanging fabric]." As in "Over 2,000 Illustrations," the traveler's desire is seen in sexual terms, although here those terms do not describe a pollination of the fingertips but a rampage through layers of rain forest. Colwell, writing about both "Arrival at Santos" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502," also notes the element of sexuality: "In both poems, the movement from the entrance to the interior, from the orifice to the center, has an insistent element of sexuality" (Colwell 131).

Thus, this poem too, like “Over 2,000 Illustrations” and “Arrival at Santos,” indicates how the objects of desire remain intangible and elusive, no matter how much they seem to correspond to “an old dream.” “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” to be sure, points out how one of the great hazards of travel and exploration is madness; and what chronicles we have of the Brazilian exploits of, among others, the Pizarro brothers, Francisco de Orellana, and Lope de Aguirre during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries certainly support the poem’s contention. More recent accounts of excursions into the Amazon Basin also confirm Bishop’s observations regarding desire. Simon Schama recalls a boyhood fascination with fluvial origins and El Dorado:

Had I reached back further in the literature of river argosies, I would have discovered that Conrad’s imperial stream, the road of commercial penetration that ends in disorientation, dementia, and death, was an ancient obsession. Before the Victorian steamboats pushed their way through the scummy waterweed of the Upper Nile and the Gambia, there had been Spanish, Elizabethan, and even German craft, adrift up the Orinoco basin, pulled by the tantalizing mirage of El Dorado, the golden paradise, just around the next bend. (Schama 5)

In *Amazon Beaming*, which documents Loren McIntyre’s 1968 discovery of the true source of the Amazon River, Petru Popescu describes how the rainforest has lured travelers for centuries:

He dreamed that he was airborne—not in a plane but hovering by himself, like a balloon, above a vision of jungle and mountains looking like an oversized map. It was a dream, and in his dream he knew it. A vast stretch

of jungle spread out beneath him, emanating a rich phosphorescence, as if lit from underneath. That phosphorescence was the jungle's own richness. The intricacy of its life-forms. That was why Pizarro and Orellana and so many others had feverishly searched here. It was all here, that treasure. Generations of predecessors had simply misnamed it, but in his dream McIntyre recognized it instantly. It suffused the greenness of the jungle, while the distant mountains blew their godlike breath on it. An invisible force swelled up the mountains from within, making them pregnant with a captive message.

What Popescu alludes to is, again, the rampant eroticism of the Amazon jungle, which in the sixteenth century began to be the object of desire for European explorers. These early Spanish and Portuguese explorers created images to evoke the forest's vitality, make it concrete in their own most basic terms, and so we have legends of Amazon women and lost cities of gold.

In "Santarém," gold is mentioned four times as Bishop remembers her visit to the town of that name at the "conflux of two great rivers, Tapajos, Amazon" (*CP* 185). In the poet's memory, Santarém becomes the apotheosis of desire: "That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther." Here again Bishop takes us backwards in time, except that now it is personal history that is being explored, and she finds herself recalling, and alluding to, various forms of treasure, all of which make her want "to stay awhile." Bishop remembers "a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds, / with everything gilded, burnished along one side." More explicitly, here are streets of gold:

The street was deep in dark-gold river sand
damp from the ritual afternoon rain,

and teams of zebus plodded, gentle, proud,
 and *blue*, with down-curved horns and hanging ears,
 pulling carts with solid wheels.
 The zebus' hooves, the people's feet
 waded in golden sand,
 dampered by golden sand,
 so that almost the only sounds
 were creaks and *shush, shush, shush*.

Published posthumously in 1979, "Santarém" recounts the fulfillment of desire according to memory. In effect, what is described is the kind of sacred site sought after in the early "Over 2,000 Illustrations" and alluded to with a wistful, half-humorous question in "Arrival at Santos." Here Bishop states: "I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place." She even makes a fleeting comparison to the Garden of Eden before realizing that Eden had "four [rivers] / and they'd diverged. Here only two / and coming together." As Bonnie Costello notes, "Bishop insists this is *not* Eden, even as she makes the comparison" (Costello 173). In addition, Bishop twice replaces the word church with the more majestic and pontifical Cathedral, as if to underscore the significance of the town of Santarém. Indeed, the Cathedral is seen as the epicenter for the miraculous:

A week or so before
 there'd been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral'd
 been struck by lightning. One tower had
 a widening zigzag crack all the way down.
 It was a miracle. The priest's house right next door
 had been struck, too, and his brass bed
 (the only one in town) galvanized black.

Graças a deus—he'd been in Belém.

Bishop also takes into account historical facts, facts which would seem to support her image of Santarém as a unique place. Parenthetically, she inserts:

After the Civil War some Southern families
came here; here they could still own slaves.
They left occasional blue eyes, English names,
and *oars*. No other place, no one
on all the Amazon's four thousand miles
does anything but paddle.

Finally, brilliant colours accompany the remembered gold of the town. The “stubby palms” have “flamboyants like pans of embers”; there are also “buildings one story high, stucco, blue or yellow, / and one house faced with *azulejos*, buttercup yellow”; the zebras are blue, as are the “occasional blue eyes” and “the blue pharmacy,” and on the river is a “schooner with raked masts / and violet-coloured sails.”

Bishop, however, knows that the town of Santarém cannot, in the final analysis, be objectified as a sacred site. It is the poet's perspective rather than the place itself which is extraordinary, and Bishop makes this distinction clear by prefacing her description of the town with a disclaimer: “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?” From the outset, the town is viewed as a place that is lost in time, an El Dorado; and like El Dorado and other legendary places reputed to exist in the Amazon

River Basin, Santarém takes on mythical qualities as the traveler recalls her visit there. “Gilded” and “burnished” by the effect of time, Santarém remembered becomes like the holy places illustrated in the large Bible of Bishop’s childhood. Here, near the end of her life, she indicates how memory continues over the years to become charged with desire, so that Santarém attains the same status as the big pictures emblazoned across the pages of her grandfather’s Holy Book. But Santarém’s sacred quality cannot be assumed or taken for granted, although the poem offers less of the cutting irony found in “Over 2,000 Illustrations.” If “Santarém” begins with a disclaimer, it also ends with an admission of subjectivity that furthers the tenuous condition of Bishop’s memory and thus of the poem itself:

In the blue pharmacy the pharmacist
 had hung an empty wasps’ nest from a shelf:
 small, exquisite, clean matte white,
 and hard as stucco. I admired it
 so much he gave it to me.
 Then—my ship’s whistle blew. I couldn’t stay.
 Back on board, a fellow-passenger, Mr. Swan,
 Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric,
 really a very nice old man,
 who wanted to see the Amazon before he died,
 asked, “What’s that ugly thing?”

Like the other poems discussed so far, “Santarém” describes the traveler’s desire for what the Canadian writer Maria Campbell calls “power

places”²⁷—places that invoke the past, with its “old dream of wealth and luxury”; that give answer to “immodest demands for a different world”; or that beckon us to look “our infant sight away.” But each of these possibilities proves, in Bishop’s poems, consistently elusive; and “Santarém” is no exception, even though it may seem to indicate more fulfillment than the earlier poems.

But to a poet so preoccupied with detail, such an experience would surely be put to the test, and this is what Bishop does here, or rather what Mr. Swan does for her. Besides the “question of travel” that prefaces the poem—that, indeed, clearly signals Bishop’s doubt and uncertainty about her own experience—there is also one that provides an epilogue, so that “Santarém” as a whole is sandwiched between questions concerning fallibility. Bishop appears to be asking what we often must ask of travel narratives regarding accuracy and embellishment. Hence the wasps’ nest, which evokes Bishop’s desire for home and which she remembers as “small, exquisite, clean matte white, / and hard as stucco,” is to another traveler a puzzling and “ugly thing.” Mr. Swan travels because he too is propelled by desire, “want[ing] to see the Amazon before he died,” yet he questions the validity of the poet’s “golden evening” by interrogating the very thing she carries away from it as a

²⁷ In conversation with the writer, July 1990, Nistowiak Falls, Saskatchewan.

keepsake or memento. After that question, the wasps' nest will represent doubt as well as verification, and as uncertainty becomes part of the whole experience Bishop necessarily includes it. From another angle, we might say that Bishop's experience becomes less concrete once she boards her ship and that Mr. Swan, while "really a very nice old man," is a metaphor for the mundane, the pragmatic, and the commercial, as opposed to "Two rivers full of crazy shipping."

Bishop's doubts about ever satisfying the desire that motivates travel are also expressed in another late poem, "The End of March," which appears in *Geography III* (1976). Here, rather than carry away a wasps' nest, she walks along a beach in order

to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of—are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.) (CP 179)

Like the nest, however, the house possesses unique characteristics that simultaneously attract Bishop's attention and arouse her native scepticism.

The house has what Bonnie Costello calls "The end-of-the-road quality," indicated by the railroad ties that "[protect] it from the spring tides" (Costello 170). Although Bishop implies having been to the house before, the cold

weather prevents her from revisiting it: “And that day the wind was much too cold / even to get that far, / and of course the house was boarded up.” Hence, as in “Santarém” she cannot verify her memory of the place, and her trip along the beach becomes analogous to the seemingly endless “wet white string,” which finally does end as

a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
 rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
 falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost. . . .
 A kite string?—But no kite.

Not surprisingly, then, Bishop’s description of the house and of what she would do were she able to live there has a dreamy quality next to the chilly beach where “Everything was withdrawn as far as possible, / indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken.” Indeed, it is no accident that she twice uses the word dream to describe this tantalizing, idiosyncratic place, or that she sees it in bright, primary colours, like Santarém, in contrast to the “thick white snarl,” the dark water, and darker sky—“the colour of mutton-fat jade.”

Moreover, what Bishop imagines doing in this house is sharply dissimilar to the laborious activity of travel evoked and described in so many of her poems. Correlating to her odd dream house (and contrasting acutely with the kind of life signified by Mr. Swan), she imagines a state of mere being, of rest and contemplation, which seems always out of reach and yet always drawing her on, like the “lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white

string” or, as at the close of the poem, “the lion sun,” which momentarily appears and makes “the drab, damp, scattered stones . . . multi-coloured.”

I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
 or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
 look through binoculars, read boring books,
 old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
 talk to myself, and, foggy days,
 watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
 At night, a *grog a l'americaine*.
 I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
 and lovely diaphanous blue flame
 would waver, doubled in the window.
 There must be a stove; there is a chimney,
 askew, but braced with wires,
 and electricity, possibly
 —at least, at the back another wire
 limply leashes the whole affair
 to something off behind the dunes.
 A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.

Unlike the coils of string, the electrical wires would, in this “proto-dream-house,” connect Bishop to a power source “off behind the dunes,” giving her “A light to read by.” Light and vision, in fact, inform the poet’s depiction of life in this house more than anything else. Here she would “look through binoculars” and “watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.” These images of light, together with that of the “lovely diaphanous blue flame,” evoke a spiritual and creative refuge from the mundane and the workaday, a sacred site not unlike the others discussed thus far.

Finally, besides the string, Bishop also notes “a track of big dog-prints (so big / they were more like lion-prints).” By the end of the poem, these two images are conjoined with that of the sun—the ultimate source of light and life—to create a myth of fulfillment in keeping with Bishop’s contemplative ideal. She imagines

a sun who’d walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

Like the house, however, such a vision is perfect but impossible, so that “The End of March” closes with an image of mythopoeic happiness that, typically for Bishop, can never be fulfilled.

To find such a place, where one can contemplate the minutiae of existence and “write down useless notes,” is also the object of travel in “Questions of Travel,” probably Bishop’s most definitive poem on the subject. Appearing immediately after “Brazil, January 1, 1502” and chronologically preceding “The End of March” by a decade, “Questions of Travel” indirectly links the two with its allusion to the seventeenth-century philosopher and scientist, Blaise Pascal. “I have often said,” wrote Pascal in his *Pensées*, “that all men’s unhappiness is due to the single fact that they cannot stay quietly in a room. If a man who has enough upon which to live knew how to live pleasantly at home, he would never journey abroad, either

on the sea or to besiege a fortress” (Pascal 70). Here and elsewhere in *Pensées*, Pascal argues that humans require distraction, which they find in travel, because they cannot tolerate being alone with their own thoughts, which inevitably turn towards misery and death.

At first glance, Bishop appears to take issue with Pascal on the meaning of travel: what is for him a flight from an unbearable reality is for her a quest for an unattainable ideal. Yet if travel, according to Pascal, is motivated solely by the need to escape the angst of loneliness, it is, according to Bishop, fuelled by the desire to experience “a sudden golden silence,” which amounts to the same thing. With its oblique reference to gold, “Questions of Travel” hints at what the conquistadors might really have sought after, however mistakenly they may have behaved. At the same time, it also anticipates the “proto-dream-house” of “The End of March,” in which the speaker longs to live alone in quietude even though she, like Pascal, knows this is difficult. Thus, in the final analysis, Bishop and Pascal do not diverge as abruptly as they initially seem to: both, in fact, point to travel as a metaphor for the act of searching for that “something, something, something” which proves consistently elusive.

Travel as an act of questing also helps to answer the poem's central question, "Why don't we stay at home?" "Questions of Travel" paraphrases this question in a variety of ways:

Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?
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?

To be sure, the issues here are potently similar to those raised by Anne Bradstreet in "A Dialogue between Old England and New." Like Bradstreet, Bishop tries to imagine her situation from the point of view of home: "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? / Where should we be today?" For both writers, such questions are in part caused by the stresses and discomforts of visiting strange terrain. As she does in "Arrival at Santos," Bishop expresses uncertainty, except that here her doubt is due to a glut of stimuli and movement rather than a "meagre" coastline and port: "There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams / hurry too rapidly down to the sea." Just as the barren scene in "Santos" propels a drive into the interior, so the flux here invokes the more comforting thought of stasis signified by home, even as it perhaps makes doubtful the possibility of destination:

and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
 makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
 turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.
 —For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny tearstains,
 aren't waterfalls yet,
 in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
 they probably will be.

To the beholder, only the mountains, which “look like the hulls of capsized ships,” remain static; everything else, including Bishop, keeps “travelling, travelling” such that her habitual sense of time is affected.

From this unfamiliar scene of constant movement, Bishop, like Bradstreet, turns her thoughts homeward in order to sort out the connection between here and there. In contrast to Bradstreet, however, Bishop is not concerned with shrinking distance. The “long trip home” does not daunt her. Rather, she wishes to know what it is that prevents her from staying home and whether, in Pascalian fashion, she should not have stayed home in the first place. The desire that moves Bishop to travel seems insatiable, almost greedy, and of course here again Bishop links herself to the conquistadors and thus to an older conception of travel: “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too? / And have we room / for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?” Indeed, Bishop is well aware that what motivates travel is often the questionable desire to possess and to penetrate that which is “inexplicable and impenetrable,” and that there is infantile pleasure involved in discovery—

what is “instantly seen and always, always delightful.” Not just the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors but also the New England pilgrims and, later still, Charles Darwin felt the need to push the boundaries of the known in order to gather and possess land, gold, lumber, knowledge, and so on.

Hence, Bishop feels the enormous weight of Pascal’s admonition to stay home, not because, as Thoreau would say (Thoreau 342), home contains the world in small and therefore makes travel unnecessary, but because travel stems from unhappiness and therefore inevitably involves intrusion and destruction. Yet Bishop travels nonetheless, partly because the notion of home is itself implicated in her questions, especially the last one: “Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?” Home for Bishop is dislocated and ambiguous even more than it is for Bradstreet; there is no “sitting quietly in one’s room” as far as Bishop is concerned because she has yet to find one in which to sit. Perhaps “Questions of Travel” finds its power and eloquence in the fact that Bishop seems to see home in macrocosmic terms, which would place her at the other end of the continuum from Thoreau and, more recently, Annie Dillard (Dillard 74-5).

If the dimensions of home are global for Bishop, then her connections backwards in past time, as well as outward in present, are all the more intensified. Human history is, in point of fact, a mere snapshot in “a quick

age or so, as ages go here,” and thus Bishop’s reasons for travel, transformed from her questions of travel, are casually given in notebook-like fashion. Almost like the longed-for, imaginary existence in the “crypto-dream-house” of “The End of March,” travel itself contains unexpected, fragmentary moments which are later connected by the writer’s dashes on the page:

But surely it would have been a pity
 not to have seen the trees along this road,
 really exaggerated in their beauty,
 not to have seen them gesturing
 like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
 —Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
 the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
 of disparate wooden clogs
 carelessly clacking over
 a grease-stained filling-station floor.

* * * * *

—A pity not to have heard
 the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
 who sings above the broken gasoline pump
 in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
 three towers, five silver crosses.

—Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
 blurr’dly and inconclusively,
 on what connection can exist for centuries
 between the rudest wooden footwear
 and, careful and finicky,
 the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.

—Never to have studied history in
 the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages.

Although these remembered moments are all that travel can offer, they are sufficient. Although sacred sites and holy places remain elusive, such moments, unexpected and often beautiful like “the trees along this road,”

may make the journey itself a sacred one. As in “Sandpiper,” Bishop finds herself making do with the various, seemingly insignificant details along the way, all of which she is happy to have noticed.

Like the imagined experience of living in her “crypto-dream-house,” there are also moments of illumination that spark creativity, such as the “sudden golden silence / in which the traveller takes a notebook.” What the poet on her journey “writes,” however, is inconclusive, except that the choice of where to go “*is never wide and never free. / And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*” Such a question, I would contend, could not have been asked by an Anne Bradstreet or a Charles Darwin, both of whom could, and did, satisfactorily measure their experiences against more stable textual and cultural standards. By Bishop’s time, such standards, religious and even scientific, had deteriorated. Hence, she is left to ponder “blurr’dly and inconclusively.” The “connection” she makes in “Questions of Travel,” “between the crudest wooden footwear / and, careful and finicky, / the whittled fantasies of wooden cages,” is crucial to our understanding of her position because it is here that she points out the age-old way in which travel is connected to, and informed by, myth. Here, indeed, is history, since so much of it has been made by the men in “wooden clogs” who revamped and contained what they found in the New World

according to the designs they brought with them: “a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque.” Viewed thus, the connection between cages and clogs evokes the kind of question asked consistently by Bishop throughout her work as more than a mere personal quirk: her central question—whether to stay home and “[whittle] fantasies” or to don clogs and venture forth—carries an historical weight that transcends quirkiness. Her poems account for how such “whittled fantasies” have taken shape and imbedded themselves historically via the actions of other travelers; yet they also take note of how culture intersects with, and ultimately tries to possess, the natural world. Bishop herself follows in these older footsteps with a sense of irony, the irony of one accompanying a Miss Breen or a Mr. Swan: not to conquer and possess, but rather to sift through the details of other journeys and, with that, to weigh the desire that made them happen. Although the teleology of travel has changed radically by her time, Bishop nevertheless feels the tug of the old objectives.

Chapter 3

Amy Clampitt “Distance is dead”

In an interview, Amy Clampitt describes herself as “a poet of place,” a remark that she rapidly qualifies:

T.S. Eliot was born in St. Louis and settled in London. Marianne Moore was born in St. Louis and settled in Brooklyn. Elizabeth Bishop began life in Nova Scotia (if I’m not mistaken) and can hardly be said to have settled anywhere. I feel a certain kinship with her nomadism, if that is what it is: though I’ve been based in New York for many years, I feel less and less as though I really *lived* anywhere. Is that kind of uprooting possibly an American tradition? . . . The more I think about this question, the more intriguing it becomes. Whatever answer there may be, I suspect, will have some relation to being native to the Midwest—and having left it. And then looking back. (Clampitt, *Predecessors* 163-64)

Aside, first of all, from the issue of whether dislocation is *generally* an American tradition, Clampitt’s question provides a starting point for realizing her connections backward in time to Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Bradstreet. Certainly a specific tradition of uprootedness can be traced through these women, who are, to use Clampitt’s word for the title of her only volume of essays, among her *predecessors*. But just as important is the fact that Clampitt’s preoccupation with flux and the loss of cultural memory—or, more precisely, the loss of cultural awareness of memory, since memory for

Clampitt always seems to reassert itself, however disguised—places her on the edge of the modernist camp.

Even more so than either Bradstreet or Bishop, Clampitt sees herself and her own personal migrations and meanderings in the context of vast historical movements—or processions, to use another of her terms—whose significance is threatened by the present age: “All that we know, that we’re / made of, is motion” (*CPAC* 339). For Clampitt, as for both Bradstreet and Bishop, a strong sense of personal rupture, loss, and exile accentuates the need to understand the notion of the past with all its predecessors, and to hold it consistently in the current of her own time where it can be examined at will. This is what she calls “the livingness of the past,” without which “it’s hard to see how the world we live in can have any meaning, and if one cannot find meaning in the world, it seems to me that living in it at all is no more than just bearable” (*Predecessors* 3). Like the immigrants she describes, Clampitt’s poetry has “The look of exile / foreseen, however massive or inconsequential”: it “hurts the same; it’s the remembered / particulars that differ” (*CPAC* 126).

The resemblance in Clampitt’s work to Bradstreet’s urge to collapse time and space can be seen in the former’s focus on what she calls “westward-trekking transhumance,” poetically surveyed from a broad range of vantage

points (*CPAC* 22). More than three centuries after Bradstreet, Clampitt sees the ongoing, still-fluctuating aftermath of a huge westward movement of humanity begun millennia before the voyage of the *Arbella*. In the image of a lighthouse on the eastern seaboard, she observes “a point of view / as yet unsettled,” and still therefore backward-looking: “you might suppose / the coast of Maine had Europe / on the brain or in the bones, as though / it were a kind of sickness” (*CPAC* 107). Like Bradstreet, Clampitt displays a certain homesickness, a longing for ancestral homelands, although this leads her through a far more convoluted backward-looking process than that undertaken by Anne Bradstreet.

But to look backward is Clampitt’s forté; her great poetic virtue lies in her ability to go beyond nostalgia—for her own childhood, for instance—to examine the historical processes that brought her family to the American mid-west. Doing this from a wide variety of perspectives (the road, the air, rail, the terminal) and locations (from Greece to Great Britain to Maine and California), she also takes note of the altered nature of travel itself.

Although still arduous at times, even in the bus that follows a walking tour taken by Keats (“it’s still no picnic”), erasing distance is no longer an act solely of the poetic imagination, a kind of wish-fulfillment. It is a fact that now must be accounted for. In the poem containing the allusion to Keats,

actually the title poem for the 1990 volume *Westward*, Clampitt contemplates “the collapse of distance” brought on by technological change (CPAC 297). With this, she points out “the flyblown exotic place, / the heathen shrine exposed.”

John Livingston describes this effect in terms that include the biological when he writes:

There is abroad in the biosphere a growing, creeping and crawling *sameness* that is the utter antithesis of ecological and evolutionary process. The natural singularity and unique identity of the several continents are fast dissolving; it is becoming one homogenous world. (39)

Likewise, in the late poem “Hispaniola,” Clampitt imagines the spread of homogeneity beginning with Alexander the Great, that accomplished traveler and progenitor of Western culture:

the rumor
brought to Alexander
of, in India, a reed
that brought forth honey
sans the help of bees
began it a topography
of monoculture
blackening the Indus
Tigris-Euphrates
westward-spreading
molasses stain
island plantations
off the coast of
Africa leapfrogging
the Atlantic
Hispaniola
Spanish Mexico

Peru Paraguay
 along the Amazon
 the Portuguese
 the Dutch the British
 Barbados Antigua Montserrat
 Jamaica huger and huger
 deforestations
 making way for
 raising cane to be
 holed planted cut
 crushed boiled
 fermented or
 reduced to crystalline
 appeasement of mammalian
 cravings slave ships
 whip-wielding
 overseers world-class
 indignity (CPAC 366)

Here, of course, Clompitt also intersects with Bishop, whose “Over
 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” juxtaposes the old ideals
 assumed in travel with the modern inescapable reality: “Thus should have
 been our travels: / serious, engravable.” Clompitt sees in her own immigrant
 ancestors a yearning “for the pristine, the named, the fabulous, / the holy
 places” (CPAC 299), and she approaches the gradual disintegration of this
 ideal of the far-off with a casual irony that pays tribute to Bishop without
 mimicry: “Oh, / we know nothing / of the universe we move through!”
 (CPAC 132-33). In the age of the machine, transhumance—a term
 borrowed from Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean
 World in the Age of Philip II*—has become “anonymous of purpose,” like the

westward crawl of traffic on a mid-western American freeway (*CPAC* 21); or as evoked from the view from any number of buses in what I call the Greyhound poems, all of which arguably take their cue from Bishop's "The Moose." Clampitt, one might say, continues the work of Bishop, taking up where she left off in her poetic anatomy of travel.

But true as this might be, Clampitt cannot be said to be a mere student of Elizabeth Bishop, as she certainly parts company with Bishop in her use of language. Despite occasionally resorting to a casual idiom, Clampitt's voice is distinctly her own, her language more dense and formal than Bishop's. Although Clampitt's view is shaped by modernism, particularly in its penchant for the past, it is not constrained by the "conciliatory impulse" that Seamus Heaney sees as Elizabeth Bishop's signature:

This conciliatory impulse was not based on subservience but on a respect for other people's shyness in the face of poetry's presumption: she usually limited herself to a note that would not have disturbed the discreet undersong of conversation between strangers breakfasting at a seaside hotel. Without addressing a question as immense and unavoidable as whether silence rather than poetry is not the proper response in a world after Auschwitz, she implicitly condones the doubts about art's prerogatives which such a question raises. (Heaney 101)

For Clampitt, this reticence in poetry is the legacy of T.S. Eliot, or, rather, the legacy of two world wars and numerous other fragmenting traumas given memorable expression by Eliot: as a result of which "an entire

generation of poetic arbiters took it as their function to insist on our not insisting" (*Predecessors* 20). Yet she notes Eliot's own urge towards transformation:

From the diffidence of J. Alfred Prufrock he had come round unmistakably to wanting, like old Wordsworth, to fill a room. Could he do it? Could it be done? Or are we all condemned to go on twittering in the hedges, hoping somebody will be kind enough to pause and listen? (21)

Clampitt's answer to these questions, with which she concludes the essay "T.S. Eliot in 1988," is "I think we still don't know" (21).

With the death of Clampitt in 1994, and the publication of her *Collected Poems* in 1998, it is quite possible that we do now know the answer at least to the last question. For what little has been written about Clampitt to date points to the fact that her *oeuvre* constitutes no "twittering in the hedges." As David Perkins describes her in *A History of Modern Poetry*:

She is not a poet of penetrating single insights but of lavish ongoingness; one thing leads her to another; or, more exactly, she has several things in mind at once and they all evolve simultaneously. She is a poet of wit, fecundity, and rich ornament, and her chief defect is the excess of her virtue, for she can overburden her syntax, losing momentum in amplification and decoration. (632)

Hence the modernist period, in Clampitt's view, is only to be encompassed by a much wider historical picture, one which allows her to choose from a broad, rich linguistic marketplace. Not that she views words as commodities made for consumption, though she knows that *ipso facto* they

are: but in this, the “age of information,” language for Clampitt has become deregulated, accessible. Thus she uses the disparate languages of entomology, botany, biology, zoology, history, philosophy, technology, and commerce, as well as the words of predecessors, even though at times this becomes a “grope” and at others signals decadence: “The exotic is everywhere, it comes to us / before there is a yen or a need for it” (*CPAC* 331 & 339).

“Clampitt, who grew up a Puritan and can still sound like one,” writes one reviewer, “recoils from this unmerited glut (‘we are not entitled’)” (Morrison 30). True as this is, Clampitt’s diction can be said to be as historically broad, dense, and embracing as the various vantage points taken in her poems, recalling Eliot’s remark in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” about the ability of the major poet to make associations between seemingly incongruous things (Eliot 1063). Consciously composing in the context of her predecessors, Clampitt sees travel in terms of mass migrations of peoples and their concomitant cultures, and she habitually does this from her seat on a bus, train, taxi, or plane, or while simply strolling down a street in Manhattan. Her tendency to juxtapose now and then, to put a contemporary hook in the history of travel, recreates the modernist sense of loss, for the ironies are inescapable. Yet Clampitt translates the legacy of the modernists via transhumance, a concept open to the charge of obscurity were it not for

her detailed awareness of specific historical trends such as the westward one from eastern Europe and the Mediterranean over the last two millennia. And certainly by placing herself and her own family history in the foreground, she avoids the merely academic.

Modernism, again, becomes in Clampitt's view a recent facet of the historical backdrop, a segment in time of the westward coursing of humanity, and therefore voices but one period of loss and alienation among others. "A Procession at Candlemas," one of the seminal poems in the breakthrough volume of 1983, *The Kingfisher*, which catapulted Clampitt late in life on to the American literary scene, opens with an expression of loss that is at once personal, intimate, yet poised for the historical and even the transcendental:

Moving on or going back to where you came from,
bad news is what you mainly travel with:
a breakup or a breakdown, someone running off

or walking out, called up or called home:
death in the family. (CPAC 22)

The passage that follows immediately places the familiar, stated in the second person, in the context of transhumance, which Clampitt wastes no time in making concrete:

Nudged from their stanchions
outside the terminal, anonymous of purpose

as a flock of birds, the bison of the highway
funnel westward onto Route 80, mirroring

an entity that cannot look into itself and know

what makes it what it is. Sooner or later
every trek becomes a funeral procession.
The mother curtained in Intensive Care—

a scene the mind leaves blank, fleeing instead
toward scenes of transhumance, the belled sheep
moving up the Pyrenees, red-tasseled pack llamas

footing velvet-green precipices, the Kurdish
women, jingling with bangles, gorgeous
on their rug-piled mounts—already lying dead,

bereavement altering the moving lights
to a processional, a feast of Candlemas.

Here already is the articulation of what for Clampitt is arguably *the* American problem: that America is cut off from the past even as the past is incessantly re-enacted—that America's inheritance is one of ignorance, because the forces that went into its creation are also the ones responsible for rewriting history, as can be seen vividly in a late poem like "Matoaka" where Clampitt exposes "the shadowy predatory tentshow / we know as history" (CPAC 375). At the same time, however, this dilemma is not so much a specifically American one anymore, as one America most typifies, since during this century it has been disseminated right across the globe largely with American help. In the midst of a technological explosion, the old pastoral dreams to which the poet's mind reverts, cannot even said to be lost, since even the sense of loss itself is now largely gone: one cannot, in this new

world “anonymous of purpose,” lose what one never really knew one had.

The past therefore becomes an absurdity invoked by the corpse of a “mother curtained in Intensive Care,” dead in a sterile environment, even as “the bison of the highway [that] funnel westward” are a part of the past without their passengers knowing it. The rupture is simply that great, but only the speaker, asking “Where are we?,” seems to grasp it.

The speaker (and it is reasonable to assume she is Clampitt), in fact, is a passenger aboard one of these bisons of the highway, resting for the moment by “a Stonehenge / of fuel pumps . . . drinking.”

The sleepers groan, stir, rewrap themselves
about the self’s imponderable substance,
or clamber down, numb-footed, half in a drowse.

The sleepers’ hobbled consciousness presents itself as bewilderingly incongruous next to the speaker’s acute awareness of both them and herself, and of the context in which they all take their journey together. Clampitt is an alien here—her mind first “blank” in its reluctance to look at what it sees, then bound by fear as well as horror of the abysmal ignorance around her. Yet she displays no hint of arrogance either: she just knows what she knows.

And what she knows at this point, while waiting for her bus to refuel, is that it is Candlemas, February 2nd, which the other passengers on the bus will know as Groundhog Day. Understanding Candlemas is essential to

understanding this poem, and what it is that Amy Clampitt wants to evoke, what she calls “the fabric of the backward-ramifying / antecedents.”

Candlemas by itself is backward-looking by its very nature, although at the same time it also appropriates and buries older traditions. Cosmologically, it falls on a cross-quarter day midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Prior to the spread of Christianity, the date was known as *Imbolog* or *Imbolc*, as it was called by the Celts. The Greeks called it *Thesmophoria*. To the Celts, especially the Irish, *Imbolc*, meaning “in the belly,” came at the onset of the month of cleansing (www.erols.com/bcccsbs/candelma.htm), while for the Greeks the date was associated with the myth of Persephone and Demeter. In any event, February 2nd was seen as a watershed day when the darkness of the passing winter was put behind one, and spring, with its promise of returning light, could be anticipated again.

The advent of Christianity and the Christian calendar saw the replacement of the pagan *Imbolc* with Candlemas, commemorating the meeting of the Christ child with the old man Simeon in the temple, after Mary’s requisite purification (Luke 2:26). With the presentation of Christ in the Temple of Jerusalem, a new age is announced, the meeting between the infant and the old man, called *HYPAPANTI* by the Greeks, marking “the

encounter between the passing heathen world and the new beginning in Christ" (Ratzinger, www.cin.org/candlema.html). Co-opting the meaning and even some of the rites of *Imbolc* (and other pagan rituals associated with February 2nd), Candlemas begins to evoke not just these older rites of passage, nor the New Testament ones involving Mary, Christ, and Simeon, but *change* itself: becoming, evolving, succession, memory, and amnesia are all built into Candlemas. Joseph Ratzinger, a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, writes:

Accordingly this day was made into a feast of candles. The warm candlelight is meant to be a tangible reminder of that greater light which, for and beyond all time, radiates from the figure of Jesus. In Rome this candlelit procession supplanted a rowdy, dissolute carnival, the so-called *Amburbale*, which had survived from paganism right into Christian times. The pagan procession had magical features: it was supposed to effect the purification of the city and the repelling of evil powers.
(www.cin.org/candlema.html)

Thus Candlemas casts off the old ways by conquering them, even as the day itself, with its ancient cosmological significance, is about casting off, purification, rekindling, and is today unwittingly acknowledged when the status of the groundhog's shadow is sought every February 2nd.

If Candlemas be fair and bright,
Come, winter, have another flight.
If Candlemas brings cloud and rain,
Go, winter, and come not again.

What is viewed as lost in “A Procession at Candlemas” is the ability to remember, with Candlemas itself invoked as the watershed of loss, even as the processions that have traditionally preserved memory are carried on unconsciously. Clampitt sees “A Candlemas of moving lights along Route 80; / lighted candles in a corridor from Arlington / over the Potomac,” but whether these lights carry with them the hope traditionally associated with spring remains to be seen, and is doubtful. For now there is only the resting bus and the loss it presupposes, what she calls “The lapped, wheelborne integument, layer / within layer, at the core a dream of / something precious, ripped: Where are we?” The rituals of the past continue to be enacted but only to embody “the pristine seductiveness of money,” the old god Mammon, even though of course none of this is known. Again, it is the notion of change itself, the knowledge of flux, as an ineluctable part of existence, and with that the awareness of the old in the new, that is lost.

Clampitt juxtaposes old and new in the contrasting images of the terminal’s name, Indian Meadows, and its cafeteria showcase with its glittering jellies, “gumball globes, [and] Life Savers cinctured / in parcel gilt.” The latter “plop from their housings / perfect, like miracles.” This “nowhere oasis” marked by absence and “without inhabitants” still has a history in its name, albeit one that is anglicised and pregnant with “sorrow.” The same

cultural forces that, deeply imbedded with Christian thought, have created
 “bisons of the highway,” have also caused the flight of peoples native to
 North America:

The westward-trekking
 transhumance, once only, of a people who,

 in losing everything they had, lost even
 the names they went by, stumbling past
 like caribou, perhaps camped here. Who

 can assign a trade-in value to that sorrow?²⁸

This is the third of six questions posed by the speaker, the poem’s two
 sections of twenty-four tercets each dividing the set of questions equally.

They are:

1.

Where are we?

What is real except what’s fabricated?

Who can assign a trade-in value to that sorrow?

2.

Who can unpeel the layers of that seasonal returning to the dark where
 memory fails, as birds re-enter the ancestral flyway? [emphasis mine]

²⁸ Livingston describes the massive impact of “westward-trekking” when he states: “The white invaders distributed through the world not only their exotic diseases and their exotic domesticated animals, but also their home-grown orthodoxies and heresies and other dogmas. They distributed gimmicks and gizmos and gadgets and techniques and technologies and the ideologies appropriate to sustain them. They brought the undiluted contents of their particular cultural prosthesis, and they broadcast them both by persuasion and by force” (Livingston 56).

Where is it?

Where, in the shucked-off bundle, the hampered obscurity that has been for centuries the mumbling lot of women, did the thread of fire, too frail ever to discover what it meant, to risk even the taking of a shape, relinquish the seed of possibility, unguessed-at as a dream of something precious? [emphasis mine]

The first question is posed in the context of the moving traffic, its metaphorical and historical implications discussed here already (although it is interesting to foreground the modernist context a little). The second comes between the two images of “a Stonehenge / of fuel pumps” and “the cafeteria showcase,” adding a teleological dimension. And the third follows the naming of the terminal, Indian Meadows, and the loss that it implies. Against this Clampitt posits another image at the end of section one: “The monk in sheepskin over tucked-up saffron / intoning to a drum,” which “becomes the metronome”

of one more straggle up Pennsylvania Avenue
in falling snow, a whirl of tenderly
remorseless corpuscles, street gangs

amok among magnolias' pregnant wands,
a stillness at the heart of so much whirling:
beyond the torn integument of childbirth,

sometimes, wrapped like a papoose into a grief
not merely of the ego, you rediscover almost
the rest-in-peace of the placental coracle.

Here indeed is a whole range of images that are difficult to sort out: the monk, the drum, the metronome; the diaspora up Pennsylvania Avenue; the oxymoronic snow; street gangs among magnolias; childbirth, a papoose, the placenta seen as a wicker boat. If Clampitt's point is to call confusion into the reader's mind and so recreate contemporary experience, she does a good job as she brings the poem's first movement to a close. The metronome of Christianity, of Candlemas, contrasts with the "straggle" and "whirl" of the current age, when street gangs run "amok." Christianity, it seems, continues to preside over history with all its fabrications, even though it is one of them.

Over against this human activity is the natural world, offering a possible refuge from the dispersals of the human condition. But this is also "backward-ramifying," or at least what Clampitt finds as she moves "beyond the torn integument of childbirth" to "the rest-in-peace of the placental coracle" is a biological reversal that only "almost" takes her out of the "whirling." In the final analysis, she cannot quite get to that tranquil state, the *before* to this scattered *after*. She appears to assume its real existence as a non-ego, non-historical objective reality, though one that "sometimes . . . you rediscover almost" It is outside time; hence, it cannot quite be articulated. As Eliot would write in *Burnt Norton*, "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden" (Eliot 194).

Clampitt's fourth question, "Who can unpeel the layers . . . ?," follows her return to history and memory in a backward thrust to the Greek classical myths and rituals pre-dating Christianity. This too, she acknowledges, is difficult:

Of what the dead were, living, one knows
so little as barely to recognize
the fabric of the backward-ramifying

antecedents, half-noted presences
in darkened rooms: the old, the feared,
the hallowed. Never the same river

drowns the unalterable doorsill.

The allusion to Heraclitus' doctrine of flux clarifies the extent of the problem, since all human activity, no matter how far back in time one travels, includes the backward look to "the old, the feared, / the hallowed." On one level, the fourth question seems to ask, "Was it ever any different?" Even the ancient Greek cults faced this question, of origins, of stepping out of time and whether it could be done by humans. "Athene, who had no mother, . . . had her own wizened cult object." But around Athene, attending to the idea inherent in her character, was also the annual procession: "to whom, year after year / the fair linen of the sacred peplos / was brought in ceremonial procession." Marija Gimbutas points out in her seminal study of the goddess in prehistorical times that even Athene—indeed, *especially* Athene—conceals

earlier female figures: “Most strikingly visible is the conversion of Athena, the Old European Bird Goddess, into a militarized figure carrying a shield and wearing a helmet. The belief in her birth from the head of Zeus, the ruling god of the Indo-Europeans in Greece, shows how far the transformation went—from a parthenogenetic goddess to her birth from a male god!” (Gimbutas 318).

The fourth question is asked in this context, abruptly dividing the time of the Greeks from that of modern America:

Who

can unpeel the layers of that seasonal
returning to the dark where memory fails,
as birds re-enter the ancestral flyway?

In contrast to this darkness, and as though to answer the question posed in the poet’s mind during the night of travel, there is

Daylight, snow falling, knotting of gears:
Chicago. Soot, the rotting backsides
of tenements, grimed trollshapes of ice

underneath the bridges, the tunnel heaving
like a birth canal.

The “fair linen of the peplos,” the sacred robe offered annually to the wooden image of Athena, is set against “wall-eyed TV receivers, armchairs / of molded plastic” in another terminal where the bus comes to rest temporarily. Likewise, “wildflower- / hung cattle” have been reduced to “feedlot cattle,”

and the “nubile Athenian girls, [and] young men / praised for the beauty of their bodies” are, in this distant era, “unloved, the spawn of botched intentions.”

The modern landscape, as Clampitt sees it from her place on the bus, lies dormant, if not outright dead: “gray,” “cadaverous,” “frozen,” “dragnettied in ice.” The sight of this terrain precipitates the final pair of questions: “Where is it?” and the convoluted

Where, in the shucked-off
bundle, the hampered obscurity that has been
for centuries the mumbling lot of women,

did the thread of fire, too frail
ever to discover what it meant, to risk
even the taking of a shape, relinquish

the seed of possibility, unguessed-at
as a dream of something precious?

Syntactically, the subject of both questions is arguably “the thread of fire,” which of course refers the reader back to the beginning of the poem, with its allusions to “the feast of Candlemas” and its procession of lights: “to carry fire as though it were a flower, / the terror and the loveliness entrusted / into naked hands.” The appropriation of history entrenched in Candlemas, and what that has meant for women—“such a loathing / of the common origin”—, is also paramount in the final interrogative. Their “seed of possibility,” set aside as a result of the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition,

can only be wondered at and grieved over—like “the westward-trekking” native Americans whose cultures and languages are, in many cases today, irrevocably lost.

But for Clampitt, despair cannot be the final word. She sees in her own “long-unentered nave of childhood” a microcosm of women’s history. In her own memory, which she calls “that exquisite blunderer, stumbling”

like a migrant bird that finds the flyway
it hardly knew it knew except by instinct,

she locates “the untouched / nucleus of fire.” Regarding the term *instinct*, John Livingston quotes Gregory Bateson, who calls it an “‘explanatory principle’ which explains everything and nothing. . . . Wild, whole beings would appear to have full sensibility not only to local signs, but also to the greater orchestration which they themselves will now perform. It may not be preposterous to suggest a consciousness of biospheric self” (Livingston 116). This for Clampitt, at any rate, is “the lost connection,” which she finds in the memory of “a small / stilled bird, its cap of clear yellow / slit by a thread of scarlet.” It is only in this personal recollection that the poet—who finds similar evocations of meaning in the image of the bird in several other poems, most notably “The Kingfisher” and “Sed de Correr”—can resolve and restore the loss indicated by both the “the wizened effigy” and “the mother /

curtained in Intensive Care.” Her memory hallows both, and therefore must suffice for the still-lost macro memory of women in general.

In “The Quarry,” found in the same volume as “A Procession at Candlemas,” Clampitt returns to the theme of westward movement. Here she sees “the stagecoach laboring” in the context of prehistory found in the rock faces of an abandoned quarry.

Fishes swam here through the Eocene
too many fathoms up
to think of without suffocation. Light-years
of ooze foreshortened into limestone
swarm with starfish
remoter than the antiquated
pinpoints of astronomy
beneath the stagecoach laboring,
when the thaws came, through mud
up to the hubs. (*CPAC* 55)

Covering vast periods of geological time in the opening of this poem, Clampitt makes the westward movement of humanity appear as what it is: a piece of minutiae, a “pinpoint.” And only from such an extreme point of view, beginning outside, and prior to, human history, can she reveal the actual absurdity of the objectives and aims held by the progenitors of westward trekking.

Unlike “A Procession at Candlemas,” there is no lamentation in this poem, but rather a dazzling, and rather sardonic, inspection of western

culture in the context of geological time. Even the image of the stagecoach, given at the outset of the poem, is seen as absurd in its arrogance and presumption: unwittingly, it labors “through mud / up to the hubs” where fishes swam “through the Eocene.” As in the Candlemas poem, stasis is assumed when the only constant is change. This Clampitt calls

a flux
that waterlogs the mind, draining southeastward
by osmosis to the Mississippi,
where by night the body of De Soto,
ballasted with sand—or was it armor?—
sank into the ooze, nudged by the barbels,
as it decomposed, of giant catfish.

The “flux” becomes a metaphor for the imagination’s attempt to grasp, to cope with, the idea of prehistorical time: “No roads, / no landmarks to tell where you are, / or who, or whether you will ever find a place / to feel at home in.”

Hernando De Soto, also discussed here in Chapter Five in the context of Elizabeth Bishop’s “Florida,” is one of two central historical figures in “The Quarry,” the other being Lyman Dillon. Like Dillon, who “drove a plow southwestward / a hundred miles—the longest furrow / ever,” De Soto represents the thrust westward from Europe. Searching for gold and the lost city of El Dorado on behalf of seventeenth-century Spain, he typifies the reasons behind the earliest European forays into the Americas. Clampitt

calls it the “corrupt obsession,” passed on to others in the wake of De Soto’s death by drowning in the Mississippi, his corpse fouling the waters in more ways than one before being “Flushed finally / out of the heartland drainpipe.” Culturally and historically, the flushing is open to question, perhaps here a wish rather than a statement of fact.

Will

some shard of skull or jawbone, undecomposed,
outlast his name, as the unquarried starfish
outlast the seas that inundated them?

For now, ironically, Clampitt remembers and preserves the name De Soto as a landmark to help tell us who and where we are.

The tripartite structure of “The Quarry” reflects Clampitt’s repeated attempts to dig through the layers of history and prehistory. As in “A Procession at Candlemas,” it is only in the context of historical and prehistorical time that flux becomes, if not comprehensible, coherent and meaningful. Hence, each of the three passages in “The Quarry” begins with the Clampittian reach backward. At the outset of the poem, “Fishes swam through the Eocene.” This is followed by the opening words of the second paragraph: “No roads, / no landmarks to tell where you are.” Finally, the third begins,

Think back

a little, to what would have been,
without this festering of lights at night,

this grid of homesteads, this hardening
 lymph of haste foreshortened into highways:
 the lilt and ripple of the dark,
 birdsong at dusk augmented by frog choirs
 already old before the Eocene.

Each initial posing of the prehistorical gives way to the more recent human story. The image of the stagecoaches moving through the heartland like “prairie schooners” provides the foreground to the Eocene. Eastward and earlier than the stagecoach era is De Soto’s decomposing corpse, leaving a legacy, his name a landmark. Likewise, the third and final verse paragraph moves through time once more, as though to scan it yet again. Frog choirs give way to “wickiups / now here, now there,” as the aboriginal peoples are “edged westward / year by year, hemmed in or undermined, / done in finally by treaties.” This, in turn, gives way to the figure of Lyman Dillon (complementing De Soto in the previous paragraph) who

starting at Dubuque, drove a plow southwestward
 a hundred miles—the longest furrow
 ever, straight into the belly of the future,
 where the broken loam would soon
 be mounted, as on a howdah, by
 a marble capitol, the glister
 of whose dome still overtops
 the frittered sprawl of who we are,
 of where we came from,
 with its stilted El Dorado.

Prehistoric past meets “belly of the future” in the marble dome of the capitol at Des Moines, Iowa, quarried somewhere, though Clampitt is careful

to point out in an endnote that the original capitol at Iowa City was made of native limestone (CPAC 437). In the poem's final three lines, past and present are juxtaposed in the context of the overtopping dome, and the lost city of gold, precipitating so much travel, remains undiscovered.

In the "Heartland" section of *The Kingfisher*, where "The Quarry" is found, "Imago" extends the preoccupation with human movements and their consequences in time. Here Clampitt ponders her own evolution and ancestral background filled with "Nomads," from whom she inherits her penchant for moving on:

"But it has no form!" they'd say to
the scribbler whose floundering fragments
kept getting out of hand—and who, either
fed up with or starved out of
her native sloughs, would, stowed aboard
the usual nomadic moving van, trundle her
dismantled sensibility elsewhere. (CPAC 59)

Even here, among such memories, she alludes to her fascination with the prehistoric, in this case a "chipped flint" found in a furrow: "a nomad's artifact fished from the broth . . . hard evidence / of an unfathomed state of mind."

The sense of exile is also given direct, autobiographical reference in "Black Buttercups," which appears in Clampitt's second volume, *What the Light Was Like* (1987), where the month of March is "the farmer's month /

for packing up and moving on” and “the verb *to move* / connoted nothing natural.” Here Clampitt is ten years old, and

last summer’s
 nine-year-old sat crying on the window seat
 that looked into the garden, rain
 coursing the pane in streams, the crying
 on the other side and it one element—and sits
 there still, still crying, knowing
 the first time forever what it was
 to be heartbroken.

The look of exile
 foreseen, however massive or inconsequential,
 hurts the same; it’s the remembered
 particulars that differ. (CPAC 125)

Related memories appear in “Urn-Burial and the Butterfly Migration,” where the flux of the living is given a Keatsian juxtaposition with the repose of a dead brother, who “fed milkweed caterpillars / in Mason jars, kept bees, ogled / the cosmos through a backyard telescope.”

But then the rigor
 of becoming throttled our pure
 ignorance to mere haste
 toward something else.

We scattered. Like the dandelion,
 that quintessential successful
 immigrant, its offspring gone
 to fluff, dug-in hard-scrabble
 nurtured a generation of
 the mobile, nomads enamored
 of cloverleaves, of hangars, of
 that unrest whose home—*our*
 home—is motion. (CPAC 132)

quest for the American Dream given within the structure of what would follow back in Europe, that is, the *modus operandi* of Eichmann's Final Solution—is disturbing, and no coincidence. Despite the freedom Clampitt's grandparents had to “go anywhere at all,” their story is qualified by the construct of other journeys, also by rail, which saw the Jews almost destroyed by Germany. Certainly both stories find a common progenitor in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, Portugal, France, Holland, and England, and the European lust for gold and space: this latter what Hitler would come to call *lebensraum*, a “living space” for the German people in the vast areas of Eastern Europe, the Ukraine, and Russia.

The dual themes of the westward and the backward, with both poet and reader looking east to understand them, are also prevalent in Clampitt's final two volumes, *Westward* (1990) and *A Silence Opens* (1993).²⁹ “Westward,” the seminal poem of the 1990 volume, provides a striking addition to the exploration of distance undertaken by both Anne Bradstreet and Elizabeth Bishop. Bradstreet's need, as discussed in Chapter One, to collapse the vast

²⁹ Of the former, the British critic, Blake Morrison, writes:

Westward, like her earlier three books, is forever turning up connections and continuities [between the Old and New Worlds]: between the European skylark and the North American meadowlark; between a New England violet and a field pansy in Holland; between Scottish heather and blueberries in Maine; between the history of Virginia and the mockingbirds and warblers who move through the state's colonial habitats unheedingly. (Morrison 30)

distance between England and New England becomes for Clampitt a *fait accompli* as she travels across the English countryside on her way to the isle of Iona, where the sixth-century monk, Columba, founded a western outpost for Christianity. The opening sentence of the poem abruptly puts Bradstreet's dilemma in stark perspective: "Distance is dead" (CPAC 297). For Clampitt, indeed, there are new dilemmas now, brought on by the sudden technological advancements in travel, and the consequent acceleration of the cultural conquest underway during Bradstreet's era. That "A generation / saw it happen" requires close scrutiny.

Clampitt's own westward journey by rail takes her from an airport (she mentions both Gatwick and Heathrow, it being unclear from which she has come) "Bound for Iona in / the Western Isles, doleful, unlulled / by British Rail." The trains at Euston station are "the big-eyed, spindling / overleapers of the old slow silk route." The rapidity of technological change has changed everything else along with it. As in the earlier "A Procession at Candlemas," Clampitt is again brooding over the loss of origins—a similar problem to that faced by Bradstreet and the early colonists, but now on an endemic scale and brought on by "manglings, accelerated trade routes / in reverse." While for Bradstreet there was the constant presence of England to the east, with its powerful cultural codes, for Clampitt there are now "the latest émigrés / of a

spent Commonwealth” crowding the station in “knotted queues”: “so many, / drawn toward what prospect, from what / point of origin?”

“[The] old assumptions,” based on the idea of the marvellous destination, “Proust’s paradise of the unvisited, / of fool’s-gold El Dorado,” are no longer tenable. As the speaker travels by rail to Iona, “where St. Columba made his pious landfall,” she ponders “the collapse of distance,” a fact of life that no longer requires an imaginative leap.

Rain seeps in;
past the streaked, streaming pane,

a fir-fringed, sodden glimpse, the
verberation of a name: Loch Lomond.
“Really?” The callow traveler opposite

looks up, goes back to reading—yes,
it really is Thucydides: hubris,
brazen entitlements, forepangs of

letting go, all that.

Again for Clappitt, as in “A Procession at Candlemas,” history is layered, a series of accretions, most of which make the current one seem ironic. In this case, the Greek Thucydides, whom Macaulay judged the greatest historian ever to have lived, provides the ironic backdrop as Loch Lomond is fleetingly glimpsed from the passing train. Of Thucydides, one twentieth-century commentator writes:

The assumption of the uniformity of history is by all odds the most important assumption in Thucydides' work. But it does not exclude enormous change. And the change is more than technical. Under the benign influence of security, comfort, wealth, freedom, man himself acquires new "turns" or modes of character, becomes complex, versatile, paradoxical, a new and higher kind of human being. (MacKendrick and Howe 232)

Along with Thucydides, Clampitt also imagines Keats, St Columba, and the westward-trekking emigrants of the last three centuries. Indeed, as she reaches Iona, first by train, then bus and boat, she reverses Anne Bradstreet's backward and eastward gazing. More than three centuries after Bradstreet, Amy Clampitt returns the look: to regard the very pioneers who, like Bradstreet herself, alternatively longed for and reviled what they had left behind. "From this island," she writes, "the prospect is to the west." Contemplating the mirror of her own history ("an eyeblink of reflection"), Clampitt sees

the pioneers, the children's
children of the pioneers, look up from

the interior's plowed-under grassland,
the one homeland they know no homeland
but a taken-over turf: no sanction, no cover

but the raveled sleeve of empire: and yearn
for the pristine, the named, the fabulous,
the holy places.

The "backward-looking" poet compares herself to her predecessors," the "forward-slogging with / their hooded caravels," and discovers that what

drove them westward was not so much religious doctrine as the desire for epiphany, the “opening / at the water’s edge: a little lake, / world’s eye, mind’s counterpart.” In the unnamed reaches of the prairie more than a century before, the pioneers whom Clampitt now considers stood “at the brim of an illumination”

that can’t be entered, can’t be lived in—
you’d either founder, a castaway, or drown—

a well, a source that comprehends, that
supersedes all doctrine: what surety,
what reprieve from drowning, is there,

other than in names?

This she calls “The prairie eyeblink,” which she sees “rimmed by the driftwood” of history: “of embarkations, landings, dooms, conquests, / missionary journeys, memorials.” The very longings that propelled her forebears into the heartland of North America also moved Columba and his religious brethren, with their woven boats, to travel westward from Britain and found the colony, now famous, on the island of Iona. But this in turn had its own progenitor in earlier journeys from the east. It is “the braided syntax / of zeal ignited somewhere in the east, / concealed in hovels, quarreled over, / portaged westward.” And so it is also “a basket weave, a / fishing net, a weir to catch, to salvage / some tenet, some common intimation for / all flesh.” In a review of *Westward*, Helen Vendler aptly observes that it is here,

from this perspective, that Clampitt's imagination finds "an anchor": "Facing both ways, back to Europe and forward to the New World, Clampitt imagines the dogged wanderings of what one can only call the Western religious imagination, guarding something that will be of use and solace to everyone (as art is not, as sexual identity is not, as even the beauty of the earth is not)" (Vendler 109).

The form of "Westward," finally, like the metaphors Clampitt employs to evoke history, takes its cue from Dante's *Divine Comedy*—the tercet resembling the "routes, / the ribbonings and redoublings, the / attenuations, spent supply lines," all of which "bear witness" to the common desire for what is essentially spiritual and inarticulate.

As Clampitt states in "My Cousin Muriel," also found in *Westward*, "it's my function / to imagine scenes, try for connections" (CPAC 331). Here she makes the general contemplative nature of "Westward" specific and personal: a recollection of her cousin Muriel, now dying in a hospital in California.

Clampitt recalls their shared childhood "From Manhattan, a glittering shambles / of enthrallments and futilities"—"the *punto in aria* / of hybrid pear trees in bloom," literally a pattern in the air outside her window, acting as the visual metaphor precipitating memory, like the basket weave, fishing net,

coracle, and weir visualised in “Westward.”³⁰ The blossoming tree blurs her view of the city “shambles”: with “no troublesome / fruit to follow,” the “childless spinner of metaphor” reaches out to her cousin “by way of switchboard and satellite”:

mother of four, worn down by arthritis,
her kidneys wasting, alone in a hospital
somewhere in California: in that worn voice,
the redhead’s sassy timbre eroded from it,
while the unspeakable stirs like a stone.

The fact of their disparate personal histories—with one going west, the other east—prompts Clampitt to examine “the long-drawn larger movement”

that lured the Reverend Charles Wadsworth
to San Francisco, followed in imagination
from the cupola of the shuttered homestead
in Amherst where a childless recluse
on a spring evening a century ago, A.D.
(so to speak) 1886, would cease to breathe
the air of rural Protestant New England—

an atmosphere and condition which
by stages, wagon trains, tent meetings,
the Revival, infused the hinterland
my cousin Muriel and I both hailed from.

While Clampitt is certainly no recluse, she draws an obvious parallel here between her early life with, and feeling for, Muriel, and the relationship a century before between Emily Dickinson and her beloved friend, Charles

³⁰ Clampitt herself glosses *punto in aria*: “The needlepoint lace known as *punto in aria*—literally, ‘a stitch in the air’—originated in Venice, according to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, as laceworkers

Wadsworth. Both Wadsworth and Muriel, and even Muriel's faithless husband, Dorwin, are "part of the larger movement" pulling the masses inexorably westward. The prairie heartland is "evangel-haunted," as much as the Old England of Anne Bradstreet's time, restlessly prodding believers to move on, settling and resettling.

Some stayed; the more intemperate of us
 headed east—a Village basement, uptown
 lunch hours, vertiginous delusions of
 autonomy, the bar crowd; waiting for
 some well-heeled dullard of a male to
 deign to phone, or for a stumbling-
 drunk, two-timing spouse's key to turn
 the small-hour dark into another fracas—

others for California: the lettuce fields,
 Knott's Berry Farm, the studios; palms,
 slums, sprinklers, canyon landslides,
 fuchsia hedges hung with hummingbirds,
 the condominium's kempt squalor: whatever
 Charles Wadsworth, out there, foresaw
 as consolation for anyone at all—attached,
 estranged, or merely marking time—little
 is left, these days, these times, to say

when the unspeakable stirs like a stone.

The attempted "raid upon the inarticulate" (Heaney 170), with the Yeatsian image of the stone thrice repeated, evokes the mystery of flux and stasis, linking the poem again to "Westward" with its invocation of the

ventured beyond purely geometric designs on a ground of netting to freer ones with no ground at all" (CPAC 455).

unsayable: “There at the brim of an illumination / that can’t be entered, can’t be lived in” (CPAC 300).³¹ The poet recalls her youth with Muriel, visiting “the state fair campground” where they witnessed “a man shot from a cannon,” constituting a rite of initiation: “O dread and wonder, O initiating taste / of ecstasy.” It is a “*punto in aria* of sheer excitement” for the cousins who now, via their telephone call,

suspend, uprooted from the hinterland,
this last gray filament across a continent
where the unspeakable stirs like a stone.

This adumbration of the inarticulate is also found in “Iola, Kansas,” one of the Greyhound poems. Like “Gradual Clearing” and “Marine Surface, Low Overcast,” “Iola, Kansas” marks the ongoingness of experience with one elaborate sentence, though here the experience of travel through different mid-western states is partly evoked as well by the poem’s quatrains, as opposed to the stitch-like and stichic form of “Gradual Clearing” or the formal ebb and flow of “Marine Surface” (CPAC 8 & 13). And as in “Procession,” the flux—“Riding all night, the bus half empty, toward the interior”—provides the context in which a rest-stop is described:

we’re in Kansas now, we’ve turned off the freeway,
we’re meandering, as again night falls, among farmsteads,
the little towns with the name of a girl on the watertower,

³¹ In the long poem *The Prairie*, at the end of *Westward*, Clampitt writes of her father’s father “alone in the vast stammer of the inarticulate” (CPAC 348).

the bandstand in the park at the center, the churches

alight from within, perpendicular banalities of glass
candy-streaked purple-green-yellow (who is this Jesus?),
the strangeness of all there is, whatever it is, growing
stranger, we've come to a rest stop, the name of the girl

on the watertower is Lola: no video, no vending machines,
but Wonder Bread sandwiches, a pie: "It's boysenberry,
I just baked it today," the woman behind the counter
believably says, the innards a purply glue, and I eat it

with something akin to reverence: free refills from
the Silex on the hot plate, then back to our seats,
the loud suction of air brakes like a thing alive, and
the voices, the sleeping assembly raised, as by an agency

out of the mystery of the interior, to a community—
and through some duct in the rock I feel my heart go out,
out here in the middle of nowhere (the scheme is a mess)
to the waste, to the not knowing who or why, and am happy.³²
(CPAC 291)

The poem examines the dichotomy between exterior and interior,
surface and core, in ways that, again, create reverberations with other
poems—not just Clampitt's but also Bishop's:

Westward toward the dark,
the undertow of scenes come back to, fright
riddling the structures of interior history.
("A Procession at Candlemas")

Here at the raw edge

of Europe—limpet tenacities, the tidal

³² See also "Witness" (CPAC 128) for an earlier minor poem treating the theme of travel by bus in a single syntactical structure.

combings, purplings of kelp and dulse,
the wrack, the blur, the breakup

of every prospect but turmoil, of
upheaval in the west—the retrospect
is once again toward the interior.

(“Westward”)

We leave Santos at once;
we are driving to the interior.

(“Arrival at Santos”)

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
tiny as nails, and glinting,
in creaking armor, came and found it all

* * * * *

they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself—
those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it.

(“Brazil, January 1, 1502”)

As Bishop does in “Brazil,” Clampitt in “Iola, Kansas” indicts the
exploitative greed of transplanted European culture, what she calls the
“homunculi swigging at the gut of a continent.” Her little men correspond
neatly to “those maddening little women” chased down by the conquistadors
in Bishop’s poem.

For Clampitt, the quest for an interior translating into something like
the epiphany desired by her forebears—now, however, gone awry—constitutes
the focus of her poem. The phraseology bears this out: “toward the interior,”
“the gut of the continent,” *“heart like a rock,”* “the bandstand in the park at

the center, the churches / alight from within,” “the middle of nowhere.” The interior is a “mystery” sought out by the speaker aboard her bus, even though the vehicle meanders, “the scheme is a mess,” and every interior she locates is trivialized, degraded, and altered by layers of history, like the interior lights of the churches filtered by their “perpendicular banalities of glass / candy-streaked purple-green-yellow (who is this Jesus?).” To the parenthetical question, Clampitt gives us *her* answer in an essay on St. Paul:

Who was he? A Jew with no plans to found a new religion, who simply *was* what he proclaimed—that the Kingdom of Heaven is here and now. I think of modern Thessalonica, where the authentic residues of a Byzantine past amount to little more than a glimmer of mosaic, defaced, covered over and uncovered, further defacement being the price of salvaging anything at all. (*Predecessors* 105)

And what is salvaged, finally, as the bus pulls in to Iola, at the heart of the North American continent, is fresh boysenberry pie, “the innards a purply glue”: “I eat it / with something akin to reverence.” This sacramental moment is like another Clampitt recalls, also in the essay on St. Paul:

Of the immediate particulars, I recall mainly that on a Sunday afternoon I had wandered into the museum familiarly known as The Cloisters, where in the midst of listening to a piped-in motet, for an unasked-for moment all habitual concerns gave way to a serenity so perfect that it amounted to a lapse of consciousness—or perhaps it is clinically more accurate to speak of a lapse so complete that it amounted to perfect serenity. The event was so totally unasked-for, and the lapse so infinitesimal, that it passed almost unnoticed. It was only later, in astonished retrospect, that I found a word for what by then felt like an intervening flood. The word was Grace. (*Predecessors* 103)

Likewise, “Iola, Kansas” describes an epiphany, albeit an odd one. Epiphany, however, must be said to be odd by definition, since it comes unexpectedly—as this one does, with the consumption of the “innards” of something so profane, and yet so connected to the proverbial American Dream, as pie. It is so unexpected a moment as to be silly, a cliché, like that described by Bishop in “Filling Station”: “Somebody loves us all.” Everything for Clampitt becomes transformed by the eating of boysenberry glue, the boysenberry itself the fruit of a hybrid bramble bush, like the hybrid pear tree in “My Cousin Muriel.”³³ By taking pie and coffee, the sleepers on the bus are “raised,” an “assembly” now, “to a community”; and the speaker knows a moment of grace such that “through some duct in the rock I feel my heart go out, / out here in the middle of nowhere.” Hence it turns out that it is Clampitt’s own heart that provides the sought-after experience of interior, one which reaches out specifically “to the waste” and makes of Iola a place. She hints, as she more forthrightly states in other poems, that it is only through such experience that we can orient ourselves, make sense of the environment, whether it’s the heartland of De Soto’s time or the current “homunculi swigging at the gut of a continent.” Clampitt notably does not remove herself or withdraw from the inane and lost culture she so acutely identifies

³³ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* calls the boysenberry “a hybrid of several species of bramble” named

and even accuses. She is, finally, like both Bishop and Bradstreet, a member of the community, however frightening, fragmented, and wrong-headed it has been all along, and however ambivalent she might be about such a prospect.

The irony of westward transhumance, whose dimensions Clampitt so painstakingly draws, is that it could result in something as glib and culturally impoverished as the general landscape seen from her seat on a bus. One wonders why the poet's interior should have to provide what seems like the sole stay against a culture's interior confusion, its waste. In the long poem, *The Prairie*, Clampitt quotes Emerson: "*The country's mind, / aimed low, grows thick and fat*" (CPAC 350). And citing another poet, the Russian writer Joseph Brodsky, she expands the meaning of *West* into its common geopolitical sense—"A West that proved . . . to be, essentially . . . / *Essentially a customer,*" which Brodsky stipulated has nothing to offer. Still, Clampitt makes plain the fact that this is her subject, her "epic theme":

One comes to terms, in the long-drawn-out

shadow-war against the old ones: comes
to terms, if one lives long enough, with places
that go strange, that vanish into something else:

is ready to go back, at last, to gravesites, headstones,
the fenced grassland where so many forebears' bones
are boxed and labeled, my grandparents' among them,

my father's and my mother's ashes too. A tranquil
place, unfrightening, now that they rest there:
one comes to terms there, almost, even with dread.

To be landless, half a nomad, nowhere wholly
at home, is to discover, now, an epic theme
in going back. The rootless urge that took

my father's father to Dakota, to California,
impels me there. A settled continent: what
does it mean?³⁴

Here Clampitt echoes, of course, Elizabeth Bishop's sifting questions in
"Questions of Travel": "*Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may
be?*" Like Bishop's reference in "Arrival at Santos" to Miss Breen's home,
"when she is at home," Clampitt's question suggests that the accepted notion
of settlement is really transitory, an interim moment that constitutes, in fact,
the exception to the rule of movement.

The "travail" behind such questions is relentlessly confronted by
Clampitt in one of her last poems, "Sed De Correr," appearing in the final
volume, *A Silence Opens* (CPAC 420). This poem, too, is finally about
"coming to terms"—with what America has become, with the exiled self
dwelling within the layered, repelling entity of the city—which Clampitt
frankly states has not been an easy task: "shades drawn against being seen,

³⁴ Livingston describes what may be viewed as the "settled continent" as follows: "In any modern city, homogenous stands of identical apartment houses, condominiums, row houses, town houses, and suburban boxes, with their identical interiors, bespeak placelessness, rootlessness, and minimal

against systems, / from bohemia's sempiternal cocoon, the hallways / smelling of cat piss and mildew I was too much afraid." And indeed, there is much to fear as Clampitt holds the reader's head at the window of her apartment "overlooking the eyesore / of real estate that is Harlem," where earlier in the century the Spanish writer Federico Garcia Lorca also gazed, indignant and angry, spurred into writing *Poet in New York*:

escape, the urge to disjoin, the hunger
to have gone, to be going: *sed de correr*:
Vallejo in Paris writing (*me alejo todo*)
of fleeing, of running away from what made one,
from everything: Lorca, a stranger
to Morningside Heights, looking out from
that ridge above Harlem.

Lorca, the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, as well as Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Gregor Samsa, and the painter, Jan Muller, comprise the cadre of predecessors looked to in this poem. "Sed De Correr," in fact, is constructed as though on staggered terraces overlooking the cultural landscape, which is the city, inheritance of the West. From each terrace (built on a colon), one of the cadre is invoked until the poem builds to a crescendo of migrations, dispersals, arrivals, and—that twentieth-century phenomenon—refugees:

Refugees:

individuality. We willingly pick up stakes and move; the new site, most probably, will be an inorganic fabrication indistinguishable in an environmental sense from the one we left" (33).

it was with a refugee I'd venture,
 just once, into Harlem: Jan Muller, who'd later,
 vividly, paint his way through an insomniac
 excess while he died of it, like Kafka. Refugees:
 from the songless amputated tree
 Lorca wrote of: leaves fallen, adrift,
 the great trunk lost sight of, the stasis
 of such scattering, such dispersals.

The image of the tree, of such import to Clampitt in "My Cousin Muriel," is one which, in this poem, she shares in a much darker sense with Lorca.

With the axe "laid at the root," it becomes a metaphor for the loss of personal and cultural memory inherent in "westward trekking."

The poem opens with a passionate straining to recall a moment in childhood: "Caught on the move—no knowing what year it was— / through the leaves of the ash tree outside the schoolroom." As in "A Procession at Candlemas," memory is also evoked by a bird, whose "streakings / and shadings, the fluttering fan of it" typify its elusiveness, and with which the child is identified. The adult mind, inclined to list and categorize everything, cannot name the species and proceeds to differentiate the bird from the remembered ash tree, which has its own inner chemistry and movement. If the child is "Caught on the move," the bird is

uncaught by the impeding
 rigors of the vascular, the cambium's moist secrets
 locked between xylem and phloem, the great, growing
 trunk of it hardening, the mass, the circumference,
 the unhurried, implacably already

there, that's to be escaped from.

This is the moment when childhood ends, when “the urge to disjoin” begins: the “running away from what made one.”

What Clampitt does here is to put her finger on the general human ambivalence toward origins. So the personal wish to flee becomes one with the cultural wish to disperse, move, “the hunger / to have gone,” to travel. Yet, inevitably, what is found and experienced propels one backward again: hence Clampitt refers to “the botch / of being young,” just as in the seminal Candlemas poem she calls memory

that exquisite blunderer, stumbling

like a migrant bird that finds the flyway
it hardly knew it knew except by instinct,
down the long-unentered nave of childhood.³⁵

The significance of reaching backwards is more than personal for Clampitt: it is a crucial cultural act, the work of the poet that needs doing despite Auden's dictum that “poetry makes nothing happen” (Auden 82). For Clampitt, poetry overcomes fear, maps out boundaries of the self, of history, and

³⁵ Writing about the connection between memory and migration, biologist Lyall Watson remarks: “No individual zebra or wildebeest inherits a route map for the awesome annual migration across the plains of Serengeti. The movement to ancestral feeding grounds along traditional paths is a pattern of group behaviour, a kind of social memory that gets passed on down through all the generations. This is cultural inheritance, which has nothing to do with the genes, though it may serve their purpose by enhancing chances of survival” (Watson 236).

questions the “systems gone rotten” that have created places such as Harlem.

She would have agreed with Seamus Heaney:

Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed. (*The Government of the Tongue* 107)

This writing in the sand, an allusion to the gospel story of Christ’s response to the woman taken in adultery (John 8), which Heaney carefully explicates, is not unlike Clampitt’s bird which she waits to witness again in the context of “This arson.”

What
my ears awaited, out past the suicidal refuge
of a fire escape on West Twelfth Street,
was the all-but-inaudible, the lisped *tsip*,
in a back-garden catalpa, the fluttering fan
of a warbler on the move: spring or fall,
that glimpsed inkling of things
beyond systems, windborne, oblivious.³⁶

If there exists here a wish for transcendence, it is qualified by the preceding passage, where Rilke is also invoked: “Not those great wings. / I was too much afraid.” The bird and the tree in Clampitt’s myth-making imagination

³⁶ There is also something akin here to James Merrill’s “A Tenancy,” in which he recalls waiting

In my old clothes, in the first of several
Furnished rooms, head cocked for the kind of sound
That is recognized only when heard. (Merrill 116)

are of this world, of its past, its “backward-ramifying / antecedents” (*CPAC* 23), though they also hint at another world in which Clampitt is no less interested. What is here and now, however, is “The moving vehicle. The estrangement.” And

On West Twelfth Street, the tree is dying:
the rough, green-napped, huge heart shapes,
the cigar shapes, the striations at the throat
of the ruffled corolla, year by year, are
expiring by inches. The axe is laid
at the root of the ash tree. The leaves of dispersal,

the runaway pages, surround us. Who
will hear? Who will gather
them in? Who will read them?

Clampitt alludes at once to her own earlier questions in “A Procession at Candlemas” as well as to Elizabeth Bishop’s “fat brown bird” in “Questions of Travel” and the exotic, diverse foliage in “Brazil, January 1, 1502”:

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
every square inch filling in with foliage—
big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
blue, blue-green, and olive,
with occasional lighter veins and edges,
or a satin underleaf turned over;
monster ferns
in silver-gray relief,
and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—

purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,
 rust red and greenish white;
 solid but airy; fresh as if just finished
 and taken off the frame.

In this poem, too, there are birds, “big symbolic birds” with “beaks agape” that are, however, silent. And if Bishop creates a portrait of the explorers who “ripped away into the hanging fabric,” Clampitt describes how their work has fared: how “the tree is dying,” how the Indians of Bishop’s poem, “those maddening little women,” have

from the canefields’ coridored, murderous green,
 caught up in the windborne roar, the breaking
 wave of displacement—so many injunctions
 in need of translation—translated here, to
 the crass miracle of whatever it is that put up
 the South Bronx.

Part II

Culture in Nature: A Bulwark Never Failing

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
—Martin Luther

Chapter 4

Anne Bradstreet “Contemplations” and the Problem of Nature

I.

As we have seen in the first chapter, Anne Bradstreet gave priority to the needs of her family and community. “The family,” writes Cheryl Walker, “was the unit of political power for the Puritans. Doors to politics opened from the inside. For a time it was even illegal for individuals to live outside of the family structure and those arriving without connections were assigned to family units” (Walker 257-58). Bradstreet’s most ardent readers were, in fact, her husband, Simon, and her father, Thomas Dudley, both of whom eventually became governors of their communities.³⁷ Like other Puritans in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, Bradstreet acquiesced to the communal demand for solidarity, even though such submission would result in noticeable undercurrents of doubt and even rebellion throughout much of her poetry. As Ann Stanford has observed, “Rebellion and a struggle for or against conviction form a pattern which runs through her writing. . . . [But] because she did observe in her conduct an exact conformity to the mores of

her community, Anne Bradstreet was able to continue to write though the practice of writing by women was disapproved of by many in the community and by the governor himself" (*CEAB* 77 & 79).

As we turn in this chapter to "Contemplations," long regarded as Bradstreet's best poem, we will witness how the pattern of doubt and submission outlined by Stanford and other critics makes itself apparent; but more than that, we will also notice how the issue of audience again makes itself felt, this time in connection to the colonial perception of nature and landscape in New England. Like "A Dialogue between Old England and New," "Contemplations" sees an ultimate capitulation to Puritan dogma, but what makes "Contemplations" a better poem than the earlier one is its attempt to make a passionate utterance from what Yeats, in a very different century, called "the deep heart's core" (Yeats 44). Because, however, this heartfelt expression is quelled, "Contemplations" is also a poem that contains a measure of pathos, and it is this quality which has yet to be fully surveyed in the text of the poem. "Contemplations" is, in the final analysis, pathetic because, while there undoubtedly exists in it a "clash of feeling and dogma" (Stanford *CEAB* 87), this conflict is one in which the former (which is great and stems from the mind of a sensitive individual) is contained and

³⁷ See the Introduction to *The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet*, xi-xxii.

eventually nullified by the latter (which is banal and stems from the ethos of the community).³⁸ What we return to is, again, the conflict between the individual and the community in Puritan New England. At the same time, “Contemplations” derives its power from this conflict: from its recognition of personal aspiration coupled with an acute awareness of how such desire must remain restricted. Hence, at certain key points in the poem, the speaker can be accurately described as frustrated, and the poem as a whole can be seen as a recapitulation of Anne Bradstreet’s personal and artistic struggle.

In addressing a patriarchal readership bent on subjugating and reforming the wilderness, Bradstreet’s speaker in “Contemplations” becomes “mute, can warble forth no higher layes” than “the merry grasshopper” and “black clad Cricket,” who “glory in their little Art” and “resound their makers praise.” The speaker castigates herself for her inability to lavish melodious praise on God and nature, and denounces herself for what she calls her “imbecility”:

My humble Eyes to lofty Skyes I rear’d
To sing some Song, my mazed Muse thought meet.
My great Creator I would magnifie,
That nature had, thus decked liberally:
But Ah, and Ah, again, my embecility! (CW 169)

³⁸ Lyall Watson takes up the word *pathic*: “Pathos is the opposite of ethos, which deals with nature, character and community, giving rise to ‘ethics’ and ‘ethology.’ . . . I choose to revive and use *pathic* and *pathics* here in a more general, direct and active sense, to identify the study of that in nature which represents a loss of character and community, leading away from rather than towards natural cohesion” (Watson 26).

Yet the fact of “Contemplations” itself as song contradicts the speaker’s avowal of dumbness, leaving the reader to question the extent to which the Puritan ethos compelled Bradstreet to delineate a patriarchal, theocentric world view about which she had real misgivings. Walker, for one, argues that “Bradstreet, and later women poets, seem to feel that they must express the views of the patriarchy even when such views diminish the status of their own sex.” Bradstreet, in Cheryl Walker’s estimation, is “caught between her patriarchal text and her sex” (Walker 256-57).

Walker’s recognition of Bradstreet’s precarious position as a female poet who was also a Puritan contrasts with the contradictory stance taken by a critic like Wendy Martin. Although Martin acknowledges that “The Puritan social order was achieved by subordinating the individual to the community and emphasizing the necessity for traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity” (65), she also insists: “Unlike the Puritan fathers, Bradstreet does not seem to have felt the need to impose sacred order on the landscape. Instead of trying to reform nature, she appreciates its cyclicity and diversity. Perhaps the tradition of female receptivity and nurturance freed her from the need to rigorously control her environment” (46). Martin also claims that after the death of Thomas Dudley in 1653 Bradstreet’s “poetry is deeply personal, even sensuous” (32). In other words,

Martin argues that, despite the enormous influence of the Puritan community in general and of her father in particular, Anne Bradstreet was able to write relatively freely about nature from her own perspective as a woman; the fact that she was also a Puritan is therefore of secondary importance. Upon the death of her father, moreover, Bradstreet is, according to Martin, further liberated to express her viewpoint, one which decidedly goes against the grain of her patriarchal culture.

I agree with this in a qualified sense. My analysis of "Contemplations," however, contradicts Martin's argument, particularly her assumption of Bradstreet's perspective after 1653.³⁹ Composed in the mid-1660s, over a decade after her father's death, "Contemplations" was (like "Dialogue") written in and for a patriarchal community. So while I agree with Martin about the import of Dudley's death, I think she is trying too hard to be consistent. If Bradstreet writes freely in "Contemplations," she writes freely not about nature but about her lifelong dilemma. As such, this poem does not try to render a realistic, let alone exclusively feminine, portrait of nature in the New World. Rather, it employs what Leo Marx, in his analysis of culture and nature in early America, calls "ecological images . . . displaying the essence of a system of value" (Marx 42); and the poem goes on

to interpret these images in terms of the reformed Judeo-Christian myth.

“Contemplations” argues that the Biblical God is the source of order, meaning, and history, and that the natural world, whether beneficent or hostile, reflects His presence and omnipotence.

Furthermore, in setting forth a predominantly masculine world view, Bradstreet relinquishes her own aspirations as a woman poet. Although the song of the female bird Philomel represents a kind of art that is free from Puritanism’s monolithic expectations, Bradstreet’s speaker cannot, in the end, liberate herself to sing with Philomel. And while it is undoubtedly significant that Bradstreet at least evokes the importance of the personal in “Contemplations,” it is equally significant that she recognizes its impossibility and consequently stifles it for a practical poetic craft that would serve her struggling community.

Martin’s argument is typical of a fairly common critical position regarding Anne Bradstreet, one in which she is seen as an early feminist rebel trying to subvert Puritan ideology. Taking such a view, critics like Martin often proceed to interpret Bradstreet as a predecessor of the Romantic poets vis-à-vis nature. Martin, as we have seen, asserts that Bradstreet felt no “need to impose sacred order on the landscape.” Josephine K. Piercy feels

³⁹ Indeed, the marriage poems, which are obviously personal and sensuous, were probably written

that the Romantics must have read "Contemplations," and she goes on to make connections where she can between Bradstreet and Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Emerson. "The important thing," writes Piercy, "is that Anne Bradstreet, Puritan poet, felt and wrote as they [the Romantic poets] did about nature and about themselves" (Piercy 101). Robert D. Richardson, Jr., although he views Bradstreet not as an early Romantic but as a Puritan poet with specifically Puritan aims, calls "Contemplations" "a demonstration, in the form of a recorded experience, that nature itself generates belief." According to Richardson, Bradstreet in this poem attains

that ideal but rare state of Puritan consciousness, a carefully reasoned and emotionally convincing resolution of the problem of how to live in the world without being of it. "Contemplations" spans both worlds. It accepts both worlds, perceives their connection, and acquiesces in that connection. (Richardson 114)

Thus, while he also takes note of the uneven quality of the writing, Richardson apparently recognizes no struggle in "Contemplations," no "clash of feeling and dogma." Alvin H. Rosenfeld, on the other hand, after recapitulating much of the controversy surrounding this poem, tries to run the gauntlet between the two conflicting positions, one which sees Bradstreet as a Romantic and a rebel, the other which sees her as a full-fledged Puritan: "if it is finally unfair to throw Anne Bradstreet fully into the camp of the

Romantics, so too is it unfair to cast her completely as a traditionally believing 'Puritan' poet." Rosenfeld finds "In 'Contemplations' . . . the war of the contraries everywhere," coming closer than any other critic to acknowledging the poem's pathos (Rosenfeld 128). Finally, even though he misses the import of both the sun's masculinity and Philomel's important status in "Contemplations," Rosenfeld rightly makes much of Bradstreet's sun worship, stating:

The defeat of Phoebus meant the defeat of Anne Bradstreet's creative imagination in "Contemplations," but that is a price she apparently felt she had to pay, even at so high a cost to her poetry. The imagination is always virgin, after all, and although mythical Leda might be ravished by the heavenly swans, that was no sport for a Puritan lady poet living and writing in the New England of the Mathers. (Rosenfeld 132)

II.

In contrast to what I maintain is the inhibited position taken by the speaker in "Contemplations," Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses," which will be examined in more detail in the following chapter, explicitly relinquishes the patriarchal burden of the past, even though the poem is not a counter-argument specifically directed at Bradstreet. That Bishop's speaker sings Martin Luther's famous battle-hymn to a curious seal is, however, important in the context of this chapter, for the hymn also evokes the "ecological images" that stimulated the colonization of New England. These

images have been widely discussed,⁴⁰ but for my own purposes here I will refer to them as the cultivated garden and the hideous wilderness. As Marx, Canup, and others have shown, these often contradictory images of order and chaos possessed the Puritan imagination both before and long after initial transplantation to the New World (Marx 42). A line from Robert Frost—"The land was ours before we were the land's" (Frost 348)—suggests how the Puritan colonists could imaginatively appropriate an uncharted territory prior to a solid peopling of and identification with it.⁴¹

Unlike "Contemplations," Bishop's poem refuses to exalt or make absolute any sort of construct, even a poetic one. With its ironic, yet delicate handling of the themes of continuity and community, "At the Fishhouses" is typically modernist; but it so qualifies the idea of tradition that it distinguishes Bishop not only from Bradstreet but also from the great male modernists immediately preceding her: Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Pound.⁴² If Bishop's speaker holds on to anything, however provisionally, it is to the minutiae detected by her senses as "flowing and flown" in a setting that is

⁴⁰ See John Canup's *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of an American Identity in Colonial New England* (1991).

⁴¹ The rest of this well-known poem confirms the sense of the first line, i.e., "She was ours / In Massachusetts, in Virginia, / But we were England's, still colonials"

⁴² Marianne Moore is quite arguably one of the great modernists immediately preceding Bishop; it is, however, crucial to my argument in the next chapter to show how Bishop writes against the tradition represented by these male poets. "At the Fishhouses" certainly constitutes a departure from the more detached perspective on nature and culture offered, say, by Wallace Stevens in "Anecdote of the Jar" or part two of "The Auroras of Autumn."

personal. The attempt to gather up details while intimating their impermanence is the only “bulwark”—to use an image from “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”—that “At the Fishhouses” has to offer. Indeed, the poem sees the community as gaining a more authentic sense of unity by acknowledging its own mutability and by realizing its origins—and thus its history—in nature itself.⁴³ Unlike “Contemplations,” “At the Fishhouses” therefore overturns the colonial vision of nature as inviting relentless exploitation. And by drawing on “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” as an especially important link between these two poems, I am attempting to clarify just how we might read not only Bishop but Clampitt as well in terms of the religious ethos of Bradstreet’s time.

Luther’s hymn would certainly have focused the Puritan colonists’ express need to protect themselves from the unbridled, malignant forces perceived to be at work in the wilderness. In an essay called “The Idea of the Wilderness of the New World,” George H. Williams lists some of the adjectives used by the Puritans to describe their environment: “‘dark,’ ‘desolate,’ ‘horrible,’ ‘horrid,’ ‘howling,’ ‘mighty,’ ‘squalid,’ ‘terrible,’ ‘vast,’

⁴³ “Contemplations,” to be sure, does give prominence to the theme of impermanence, but it does so in order to highlight the Christian concept of the immortality of the human soul. I am indebted to Guy Rotella’s suggestive reading of “At the Fishhouses.” Rotella, however, goes no further than to demonstrate that the poem—in terms of a religious tradition—is ambiguously mystical and that it “recalls” an older order of “religious and transcendental poems” (223). To be sure, Rotella’s reading of “At the Fishhouses” invites just this kind of analysis (Rotella 220-223).

‘waste,’ and ‘wretched.’”⁴⁴ I can also add “raw,” “roaring,” “forlorne,” “poore,” “remote,” “mean,” “vacant,” and “uncouth.” “To be wild,” writes John Livingston, “is to be ungovernable, which means uncivilized” (5).⁴⁵ With the wilderness and its native inhabitants all around them, the early colonists gathered in the crude meeting-houses that Daniel Boorstin tells us “had no artificial light and no heat” (Boorstin 14).⁴⁶ Unlike the Plymouth pilgrims, the people of the Winthrop Fleet generally came from higher social spheres in England, and we know that many of them found the colonial experience much harsher than they had imagined it would be. Having camped the first year in crude shacks and earthen dwellings dug out of hillsides, many colonists quickly succumbed to the effects of weather, disease, and malnutrition. During their first year in the New World, Thomas Dudley sent word back to England that “we yet enjoy little to be envied, but endure much to be pitied in the sickness and mortality of our people” (Carroll 53).

⁴⁴ Taken from the preface to *Magnalia Christi Americana*, ed. Kenneth B. Murdock (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977), 50.

⁴⁵ And yet Lyall Watson has written a book about evil in nature. One statement in particular echoes that of Puritan clergyman, Thomas Hooker, who advised against the “study of curiosity,” pitting “garden knowlege” against “wild knowledge,” which is where the next chapter begins. Watson writes: “Nothing is necessary to study such things but curiosity and a willingness to concede that nature has a dark side that deserves as much attention as we already lavish on wildflowers, butterflies, rainbows and sunsets” (Watson 4).

⁴⁶ Boorstin’s description of what the 17th-century New England landscape must have been like contrasts with the ornate character of “Contemplations”: “To reach these inhospitable meeting-houses, the early New Englander often had to pick his way, sometimes for miles, across landscape without anything that could be dignified as a road. In winter he went plunging through drifts; in the spring and fall he was deep in mud” (15).

Hence, whether or not the Puritans were familiar with Luther's hymn, it genuinely expresses their world-view in the face of the wilderness:

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper he amid the flood
of mortal ills prevailing.⁴⁷

According to Ian Bradley, "Ein' feste Burg" "was first translated into English by Miles Coverdale in 1538 (as 'Oure God is a defence and towre')." But both Bradley and Armin Haeussler emphasize that the hymn remained largely unknown to the English-speaking world until the mid-nineteenth century, when Thomas Carlyle and the American, Frederick H. Hedges (whose translation Bishop uses), produced popular English versions.⁴⁸ Saturated with the sense of the demonic, the hymn emphasizes the reality of evil in order to make God, as conqueror, appear omnipotent: "And though this world, with devils filled, / Should threaten to undo us; / We will not fear, for God hath willed / His truth to triumph through us."⁴⁹ In this respect,

⁴⁷ See The Harvard University Hymn Book (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1964), #190 for Frederick H. Hedges's 1852 translation. "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott" conveniently follows Hedges's version in the hymnal.

⁴⁸ See Ian Bradley, *The Penguin Book of Hymns* (London: Penguin, 1989), 5-8; and Armin Haeussler, *The Story of Our Hymns: The Handbook to the Hymnal of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1952), 312-316.

⁴⁹ Haeussler states: "The historian Leopold von Ranke speaks of this hymn as 'the production of the moment in which Luther, engaged in a conflict with a world of foes, sought strength in the consciousness that he was defending a divine cause which could never perish.' 'Living dangerously' was not a mere catch-phrase for Luther; he knew what it meant at first hand" (312).

“Ein’ feste Burg” would certainly have been attractive to the people of Bradstreet’s community.

As “Bulwark never failing,” the Puritans’ God would, to use a seventeenth-century metaphor, form a protective hedge around His people to shield them from the forces of evil (Carroll 87-88, 111-112). Indeed, hedges, fences, gardens, and orchards served as popular tropes to console homesick pilgrims and to motivate them to reform the environment, to Anglicize it, as swiftly as possible. Back in England, these metaphors were employed by pamphleteers to encourage would-be colonists to emigrate to a world where all would be as it was in the beginning. In keeping with the Puritans’ interpretation of Genesis, “plenty would emerge only from subduing the earth” (Carroll 53). The onus, in other words, would be on the settlers to transform the wilderness into a New England that would be representative of the first garden.

The 1677 John Foster map of New England helps us to clarify this vision of a civilized New World. According to Cecilia Tichi, the Foster map (the first cut by a colonist) makes remote settlements look as large and populous as those around Boston, while

the formidably mountainous Berkshires appear as hillocks, and the forest is reduced to a few clusters of shrubs interspersed among the settlements. Only north of the Merrimack in the Maine region . . . does the map maker acknowledge the actual wilds. There the verdure is larger, and wild animals

(rabbit, bear, wolf) are drawn in, in addition to two Indians, who more resemble sporting nymphs than the satanic agents whose barbarities are set forth endlessly in the volume [William Hubbard's *Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians*] in which the map is bound. (Tichi 13-14)

In a very real sense, then, the wilderness in Bradstreet's era was transformed, brought to heel.⁵⁰ Garden, in Marx's words, "stands for a state of cultivation, hence a less exalted estimate of nature's beneficence" (42).

Like Foster's map, Bradstreet's "Contemplations" constitutes a highly-wrought portrait of the early New England landscape, one which stylizes the wilderness and thus anticipates (and participates in) its domestication, transforming it into something like an Old World garden:

Sometime now past in the Autumnal Tide,
When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed,
The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,
Were gilded o're by his rich golden head.
Their leaves & fruits seem'd painted, but was true
Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hew,
Rapt were my senses at this delectable view.

To be sure, the hideous wilderness is not altogether concealed. At certain points, "Contemplations" acknowledges the vulnerability of the settlers to the elements: the sun has "scorching force," winter and night must be endured,

⁵⁰ Writing about the domestication of wild animals, John Livingston makes a statement that could also be applied to the landscape:

To domesticate some non-human being, literally, is to bring it into our house. It is to amputate its wildness, to tame it; to train it or otherwise coerce it into living with us and being of use to us; to make it part of our infrastructure. On a wider scale, we may see domestication as our forcing some accommodation to our wishes upon phenomena that are wild and not human. You can

and “a storm spoiles all the sport” of the mariner. More importantly, the garden/wilderness paradox in “Contemplations” falls under the rubric of the Puritan ideal of covenant with God, an ideal which would bind the colonial group together. In similar fashion to Luther’s hymn, then, the poem envisions the Christian God as the absolute protective force in the New World. At the same time, He is also the moulding and shaping power who works through the Puritans to fashion a landscape that, as Stanford states, “is orderly and clearly divided into its separate parts” (*Worldly Puritan* 103). Like the buildings, orchards, farms, fields, and roads that the Puritans worked to create out of the raw wilderness, “Contemplations” stresses order and utility, and the poem’s structure, with its ababccc rhyme scheme and alexandrines, supports such concepts.⁵¹

Addressing the sun by its classical name, the speaker perceives it as playing a pre-eminent role in the cosmos or *natura*, what the ancients referred to as the order of things; with that, she attributes to the sun certain powers, most notably the power to make the trees appear “gilded o’er” and “painted.”

domesticate a plant by taking it home and causing it to grow around the house, and you can remove an entire forest or prairie so as to substitute domesticated plants and animals. (Livingston 15)

⁵¹ Stanford argues that even certain suggestions of wilderness—such as stanza eight’s “pathless paths”—are part of the garden paradigm: “In the great gardens of the Italian Renaissance, for example, the formal sections were given contrast by *boschetti*, little woods criss-crossed by meandering paths to suggest wildness” (“Anne Bradstreet’s Emblematic Garden” *CE* 245). And Livingston writes, “One feature of the domesticated condition is of particular importance: the absence of ecologic place for the species, its separation from Nature. Indeed, were it not for human

Nature is portrayed in Edenic terms as the speaker also finds in “the glistening Sun” an image of the numinous, which she calls “Soul of this world, this Universes Eye.” The sun is “as a Bridegroom” or “as a strong man,” who

joyes to run a race,
The morn doth usher thee, with smiles & blushes,
The Earth reflects her glances in thy face.
Birds, insects, Animals with Vegative,
Thy heat from death and dulness doth revive:
And in the darksome womb of fruitful nature dive.

Thy swift Annual, and diurnal Course,
Thy daily streight, and yearly oblique path,
Thy pleasing fervor, and thy scorching force,
All mortals here the feeling knowledg hath.
Thy presence makes it day, thy absence night,
Quaternal Seasons caused by thy might:
Hail Creature, full of sweetness, beauty & delight.

Yet, even though the sun plays a considerable role in Bradstreet’s stylized portrait of nature, it also swiftly becomes indicative of less restrained desires and aspirations. Rosenfeld’s thesis that here Bradstreet engages in a kind of sun-worship which will be ultimately defeated by the claims of Puritanism is significant and worth noticing. When the speaker says to the sun, “No wonder, some made thee a Deity: / Had I not better known, (alas) the same had I,” she suggests (to use Thoreau’s expression regarding life by Walden

domestication there would *be* no ‘Nature,’ no ‘other,’ no concept of wildness. There would be no one and no reason to conceive of them” (Livingston 36).

Pond) an underlying desire “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life” (Thoreau 172).

The parenthetical “alas,” countering all the admonitions of a Puritan upbringing contained in “Had I not better known,” seems especially to point to the pathetic in “Contemplations.” Eliminating any hint of self-righteousness that this line might otherwise suggest, the speaker’s “alas” instead discloses both urgent desire and quiet resignation, which are given expression in the stanzas that follow (two of which are quoted above). These stanzas constitute a passionate articulation of the speaker’s yearnings, yearnings which are then neutralized or checked by a conventional didactic apostrophe:

Art thou so full of glory, that no Eye
Hath strength, thy shining Rayes once to behold?
And is thy splendid Throne erect so high?
As to approach it, can no earthly mould.
How full of glory then must thy Creator be?
Who gave this bright light luster unto thee:
Admir’d, ador’d for ever, be that Majesty.

Here Bradstreet’s speaker engages in a common meditative technique which, as Richard Baxter, a Puritan minister, put it, constitutes

yet another way by which we make our senses serviceable to us; and that is, By comparing the objects of sense with the objects of faith; and so forcing sense to afford us that *Medium*, from whence we may conclude the transcendent worth of Glory, By arguing from sensitive delights as from the lesser to the greater. (Stanford *Worldly Christian* 94)

In the light of Baxter's statement, it can be seen how the paean to Phoebus in "Contemplations" reveals a practical motive, and thus we as readers are brought back to the poem's preoccupation with order and utility. The speaker's utterance of delight and desire is used in the end to serve a particular aim that goes beyond the merely personal; or, to use Baxter's words, the speaker's senses are made "serviceable to us . . . By comparing the objects of sense with the objects of faith; and so forcing sense to afford us that *Medium*, from whence we conclude the transcendent worth of Glory."

The whole argument regarding Bradstreet's sun-worship can be qualified by the observation that Phoebus also evokes the Old World order, one which the Puritans, with all their classical learning, were keen to impress on the "hideous" wilderness. Thus, even the speaker's desire to break free from the constraints of the Puritan belief system is conditioned and limited by the patriarchal, European establishment out of which that belief system grew. Stanford, in fact, locates a probable source of the image of the sun as "this Universes Eye" in Raleigh's *History of the World*, which "has at the top center of its frontispiece an eye surrounded by flames, labelled 'Providentia,' which hovers just above a globe of the world" ("Anne Bradstreet's Emblematic Garden" *CE* 240). Indeed, from the perspective of Leo Marx's study of the pastoral ideal and its invasion by a counterforcing machine, the

Judeo-Christian myth can be viewed as constituting the machine in Bradstreet's garden. Marx's claim that the machine "invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape" has particular applicability to the metaphor of "dark-some womb" penetrated and fertilized by "this Universes Eye" (Marx 25 & 29).

Perhaps nowhere in "Contemplations" does the Christian machine, or counterforce, make itself more strikingly apparent than in the reiteration of the Genesis account of Cain and Abel. In terms of Bradstreet's personal yearnings as a woman writer, this legend of fratricide and of subsequent division and alienation within the community signifies the force of her need to avoid subversion.⁵² Born of Adam and Eve after their exile from Eden, Cain and Abel come to sacrifice,

Fruits of the earth, and Fatlings each do bring,
On Abels gift the fire descends from Skies,
But no such sign on false Cain's offering;
With sullen hateful looks he goes his wayes.
Hath thousand thoughts to end his brothers dayes,
Upon whose blood his future good he hopes to raise.

Having murdered his shepherd brother, Cain the farmer is "Branded with guilt," and wanders the earth until eventually he "A city builds, that wals

⁵² Lyall Watson sees the Biblical Cain as a signature for evil within nature itself (see his Chapter Six, "The Mark of Cain: The Identity of Evil" in *Dark Nature*).

might him secure from foes.” In *The Changes of Cain* (1991), Ricardo Quinones points out how this original fraternity—defined as “that which is proper or belonging to brothers”—is “potently and insistently subversive of the ideals of unity and community” (Quinones 3 & 5). According to Quinones, the legend

bears in its background the dream of the human family, the pastoralism of the heart, a vision of unity and concord and cooperation so basic that it can only be summarized in the unconscious innocence of siblings. And yet cutting across this unity it brings difference, discord, and division; the Cain-Abel story represents a shattering reminder of the fragility of the human compact. In fact, the great purpose of the Cain-Abel story has always been—whatever its guise—to address a breach in existence, a fracture at the heart of things. (Quinones 3)

The pattern of self versus community that is central to the Cain myth was, in fact, constantly being played out in Anne Bradstreet’s community. Deviations in behavior threatened group unity—and, indeed, community leaders often described such behavior in wilderness terms.⁵³ Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Allan P. Robb, the editors of the 1981 edition of Bradstreet’s works, note a pattern throughout her writings of “self-assertiveness or religious ‘rebellion’ [followed by] reconciliation with God.” At the same time, McElrath and Robb reject the pathetic image of Bradstreet “as both a cultural and religious Job-figure,” arguing that “After all,

⁵³ Like Cain, transgressors were often branded, and certainly, in contradistinction to the Massachusetts Law Code of 1648, based on “humanitie, civilitie and christianity” (Canup 46), they were made outcast and looked on as beast-like. See Canup’s chapter two, “The Disafforestation of

Bradstreet was not censured, disciplined, or in any way ostracized for her art, thought, or personal assertiveness. . . . Rather, she was praised and encouraged; and there are no indications that the males in her life treated her as ‘property’” (“The Introduction,” vii-viii & xvi-xvii). I suggest that Bradstreet was praised and encouraged, not so much because she was an exceptional woman writing poetry in a male-dominated culture but because she tried to avoid becoming a Job or a Cain-figure by reconciling herself to her community’s God. Had she made another, more subversive poetic offering, it would certainly have been rejected, like Cain’s is in the Biblical narrative.

Throughout “Contemplations,” then, the speaker’s senses are compelled by the Christian machine to serve its purposes; they are repeatedly turned from delight for its own sake to some kind of ideological conclusion. This pattern is made clear at the outset, when the speaker, having just declared her “Rapt . . . sences,” states: “I wist not what to wish, yet sure thought I, / If so much excellence abide below; / How excellent is he that dwells on high?” The “stately Oak” whose existence she contemplates prior to Phoebus is, like Phoebus, ultimately interpreted in terms of Christian belief. “Eternity,” says the speaker, “doth scorn” the oak’s “strength, and

stature.” Farther on in the poem, although the elements seem “insensible of time,” especially in comparison to “Man’s” ephemeral earthly existence, the speaker makes sure to qualify her ode to nature by contrasting it with the Puritan concept of eternity. In the twentieth stanza, she asks:

Shall I then praise the heavens, the trees, the earth
Because their beauty and their strength last longer
Shall I wish there, or never to had birth,
Because they’re bigger, & their bodyes stronger?
Nay, they shall darken, perish, fade and dye,
And when unmade, so ever shall they lye,
But man was made for endless immortality.

Like others in the poem, this stanza provides a good structural example of how Bradstreet’s speaker persuades herself to lay aside personal desire in favour of a theological idea. The first four lines of the stanza present a question, with an underlying wish, concerning the enormous power of nature that the speaker herself has witnessed. This desire is then obviated by the concluding triplet in which the natural world is literally put in its place in the Puritan cosmos. Nature is something that will be “unmade,” and if it is to be *decreated* by God at some point in the future, then it follows that it can, in the meantime, be seen “as another field for the exercise of power” (Marx 43).⁵⁴

(Livingston 55-56).

⁵⁴ Marx makes this point while discussing the “hideous wilderness.” The term *decreation* is coined and used by Simone Weil in her essays on God and suffering (Weil 92).

In the four stanzas that follow, the speaker continues to interpret the natural world in terms of religious dogma. Having subordinated the existence of oak and sun to that of the Biblical God, she now sits “by a goodly Rivers side” and sees in it an emblem of life and death:

Nor is't enough, that thou alone may'st slide,
 But hundred brooks in thy cleer waves do meet,
 So hand in hand along with thee they glide
 To *Thetis* house, where all imbrace and greet:
 Thou Emblem true, of what I count the best,
 O could I lead my Rivolets to rest,
 So may we press to that vast mansion, ever blest.

Marx reminds us that “Among the more effective of the traditional counters to the idyllic dream have been certain stylized tokens of mortality” (Marx 25), and here the speaker certainly prevents her own idyllic desires from taking shape by envisaging natural processes—in this case, a river and its tributaries flowing inexorably to the sea—as symbols of mortality. Indeed, she perceives even the migrating instincts of fish as a kind of metaphor for the human journey from this world to the next: “In Lakes and ponds, you leave your numerous fry, / So nature taught, and yet you know not why, / You watry folk that know not your felicity.”

Knowledge and felicity are important tenets of Puritan thought, and clearly the speaker interprets nature with such tenets in mind. Although the fish have no conscious knowledge of their behavior, they are seen as creatures

who are instinctively faithful to the divine order of things. At the same time, however, it is not clear that the speaker's knowledge—what nature has taught her—reflects the pure, unwavering felicity that she sees in the fish.⁵⁵ To some extent, she does know why things are the way they are, and such knowledge, limited as it is, does not always jibe with belief. Her felicity is therefore qualified, even though she continually reaffirms it and, in the end, nullifies the yearnings that would contradict Puritan belief. The speaker's ambivalence, which is seen throughout the poem in the regular pattern of rejecting and affirming orthodoxy, is thus apparent in the contemplation of the river.

Then, in the twenty-fifth stanza, Bradstreet's speaker appears to set aside her interpretation of nature as death-trope in order to praise it more for its own sake; in order, that is, to express her delight in nature without the pressure of the Puritan belief-system:

Look how the wantons frisk to task the air,
 Then to the colder bottome streight they dive,
 Eftsoon to *Neptun's* glassy Hall repair
 To see what trade they great ones there do drive,
 Who forage o'er the spacious sea-green field,
 And take the trembling prey before it yield,
 Whose armour is their scales, their spreading fins their shield.

⁵⁵ Whose purely instinctive nature anticipates Amy Clampitt's bird in the last chapter, and Elizabeth Bishop's seal in the succeeding one.

Having just described the fish as creatures who are faithful to, and thus determined by, a higher order of things, the speaker now sees them as wild and unrestrained. As “wantons [who] frisk to task the air,” the fish are of a separate, aquatic world, and yet have the strength and vigour to make spontaneous momentary forays into the speaker’s world. Connoting both abandonment and withdrawal, the word *wanton* primarily evokes sexual instinct, a kind of instinct that would not have a readily acknowledged place in the Puritan cosmos. The *OED*, in fact, gives an obsolete definition of the noun *wanton* as one who is rebellious and unmanageable. Hence, these “wantons” quite literally “task” the speaker’s “air” or ethos, as suddenly she recognizes in nature an order of things alien to her own and outside the jurisdiction of New England Puritanism.

But the speaker is not sure how to take this insight, or what to do with it, and so she again projects Old World concepts on to what she otherwise has trouble understanding. To this aquatic *other* world she applies the concepts of “hall” and marketplace: down below are “great ones” who “trade” and barter. More important, perhaps, is the speaker’s pastoral vision of life in the depths of the river, as she imagines how the fish “forrage o’re the spacious sea-green field, / And take the trembling prey before it yield, / Whose armour is their scales, their spreading fins their shield.” Here is a place where there is plenty,

a submarine cornucopia—in fact, a visionary, paradisaal locus that is free of the encumbrances of Puritan dogma; and it is no surprise that at this point in the poem, the speaker breaks into a climax of revery and liberation as her meditation on the fish is interrupted by the song of a “merry Bird,” who

chanted forth a most melodious strain
Which rapt me so with wonder and delight,
I judg’d my hearing better then my sight,
And wisht me wings with her a while to take my flight.

The speaker now turns her attention away from the aquatic world, which clearly represents her own desire for freedom, to the natural world above, which, as we shall see, rapidly becomes an apotheosis of desire. Indeed, Bradstreet’s curbed poetic aspirations are now given obvious expression by the speaker’s rapture at what she calls “The sweet-tongu’d Philomel perchd ore my head.” In the twenty-seventh stanza, the speaker quickly perceives and describes Philomel’s nature:

O merry Bird (said I) that fears no snares,
That neither toyles nor hoards up in thy barn,
Feels no sad thoughts, nor cruciating cares
To gain more good, or shun what might thee harm
Thy cloaths ne’re wear, thy meat is every where,
Thy bed a bough, thy drink the water cleer,
Reminds not what is past, nor whats to come dost fear.

Free of the constraints of the past and oblivious to the future, Philomel is identified as female, and undoubtedly, in the speaker’s estimation, as representative of true poetic expression (in contrast to a kind of *poesis* that is

compelled to represent a certain body of ideas and beliefs). Yet little or no critical commentary has been directed toward the fact that the speaker's desire for "wings with her a while to take my flight" indicates Bradstreet's yearning for escape from the pressures and confines of Puritanism, even though it is at this point more than any other in "Contemplations" that Bradstreet makes her personal dilemma clear. The speaker's classical "said I" itself points to the magnitude of this moment in the poem. Although the parentheses might seem to imply her wariness, they also reflect the speaker's need to make a personal utterance; she is stating, in effect, that here she speaks for herself rather than for her community.

For a moment the speaker can disengage herself from cultural concerns and revel in the bird's autonomy, in Philomel's ability to sing her own song and not someone else's:

The dawning morn with songs thou dost prevent,
Sets hundred notes unto thy feathered crew,
So each one tunes his pretty instrument,
And warbling out the old, begin anew,
And thus they pass their youth in summer season,
Then follow thee into a better Region,
Where winter's never felt by that sweet airy legion.

What Bradstreet portrays here is a community of singers that practises a form of democracy. No divine Governor is described or alluded to in any of the stanzas concerning Philomel; instead, as we see here, each member of the

community “tunes his pretty instrument / And warbling out the old, begin anew.” In another context, John Livingston describes what occurs when a cardinal breaks out in song:

The songbird's existence has miraculously become hugely greater than himself, incorporating as it does plants, animals, micro-organisms, soil, water, and sunlight into his total being. We may take this even farther. The bird has himself become a community of existences, and at the instant when he sings, the momentary (once only) event of that song is numinous. The numen is not, of course, a presiding spirit of that place, external to the songbird; the numen arises from the mutuality or the complementariness of the bird and his co-participants. (Livingston 96)

Bradstreet's speaker tells us, however, that much as she might wish to join this group, she is forced to remain a member of her own. In the ancient mythological depiction, Philomela has her tongue cut out by King Tereus, who, wishing to marry her when he has already wed Philomela's sister, Procne, must find a way to silence her. Philomela, however, communicates with her sister by embroidering the truth into a robe which she sends to the banished Procne. When Tereus discovers this, he attempts to kill the sisters, who are transformed, along with the king, into birds. The gods thus intervene on Philomela's behalf and change her into a nightingale before Tereus can murder her. The parallel with Bradstreet herself seems obvious. She will continue to be “Subject to sorrows, losses, sickness, pain” in a world where a struggle exists between an aggressive culture (with its preconceived notions and prosthetic devices) and things as they are (where winter is felt),

but she weaves an underlying message into the fabric of her best poem. While the constant struggle serves to unify a patriarchal community, it also severely limits Bradstreet to an exclusively masculine language. The speaker cannot, in the end, let loose the “thousand fancies buzzing in [her] brain.” Even the story of Cain and Abel, with which she might identify, is that of a fraternity.

Unable to leave her community, Bradstreet’s speaker therefore turns to its belief-system for some kind of hope and comfort; and, of course, the most significant hope and comfort offered is the Christian belief in “divine Translation” from this world to the next. Hence she loyally returns to the issues found in the first part of her meditation on the river, and with that she also returns to images of order and chaos in the natural world. Nature ceases to represent freedom, becoming instead a paradoxical image in which wilderness and garden are once again in conflict with one another. “The Mariner that on smooth waves doth glide” is seen as the “great Master of the seas,” until

suddenly a storm spoiles all the sport,
And makes him long for a more quiet port,
Which ‘gainst all adverse winds may serve for fort.

Nature is viewed as unpredictable and dangerous, as something that therefore needs to be controlled. “Port” and “fort” again signify the speaker’s capitulation to metaphors of vigilance against the forces of nature.

In the final two stanzas of “Contemplations,” the speaker’s submission to Puritanism becomes complete. What some critics see as resolution is actually a mere articulation of conventional religious wisdom, the main source of which is found in the Book of Proverbs. Like stanza seven, where the speaker nullifies her “sun-worship” with a didactic summation, Bradstreet concludes the entire meditation by stating commonly-held Christian beliefs, all of which amounts to acquiescence rather than resolution. In the penultimate stanza, she rails against “this world of pleasure” and against the “Fond fool, [who] takes this earth ev’n for heav’n’s bower” even though she herself has just finished savoring the life of fish and the numinous song of Philomel. In keeping with orthodox Puritan thought, the speaker now moralizes on the dangers of worldliness and of trusting too much in the illusion that nature is beneficent: “Here’s neither honour, wealth, or safety; / Only above is found all with security.”

Finally, Bradstreet’s speaker closes “Contemplations” with an apocalyptic eight-line stanza, in which she delineates the Puritan belief in the end of history, when not only nature but New England culture will fall before “Time the fatal wrack of mortal things”:

That draws oblivions curtains over kings,
 Their sumptuous monuments, men know them not,
 Their names without a Record are forgot,
 Their parts, their ports, their pomp’s all laid in th’ dust

Nor wit nor gold, nor buildings scape times rust;
 But he whose name is grav'd in the white stone
 Shall last and shine when all of these are gone.

Unlike the fleeting glory of Philomel, however, this promise is inextricably bound up with the patriarchal community and the Judeo-Christian myth. In contrast to the city founded by the exiled Cain, the New Jerusalem comes “down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev. 21:4). Moreover, while the notion of flux is found in other bodies of thought, most notably that of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, it is here obviously drawn from Biblical sources, i.e., the Old Testament prophets and the Revelation of St. John. The end of the culture that has so limited this poet’s expression is therefore viewed in its own terms, terms which emphasize a new beginning and the ultimate triumph and glorification of Puritan belief.

Chapter 5

Elizabeth Bishop Garden Knowledge; Wild Knowledge

I.

If, according to Peter Carroll, the Puritan thinker Thomas Hooker “distinguished between ‘a gracious and a sanctifying knowledge, garden knowledge,’ . . . and ‘a wild and common knowledge’ which directed the behavior of hypocrites” (Carroll 113), then Elizabeth Bishop’s speaker in “At the Fishhouses” has aligned herself with that which is “wild and common.” With self-conscious irony, she not only relinquishes the cultural burden of the past but also deflates the colonial tendency towards absolutism by pointing out how all our making—whether of fishhouses or apocalyptic myths—is “flowing and drawn.” At the same time, Bishop’s poem also reveals a reverence for the exact details of these passing things, and in its attempt to gather up these details it tenuously draws the community together. Bishop accomplishes this without sacrificing her own voice; on the contrary, it is precisely what James Merrill calls her “quirkiness of mind” that enables

her to envision the community as humbly unified in its recognition of itself as yet another incidental thing.⁵⁶

“At the Fishhouses” is, as Ann Stanford would say of “Contemplations,” a composition of place and, like Bradstreet’s poem, it moves from the evidence supplied by the senses to a kind of resolution, albeit not Bradstreet’s forced metaphysical one (*The Worldly Puritan* 96). Just as “Contemplations” stresses the autumnal colours, the powers of sun and ocean, or the song of Philomel, Bishop’s poem constantly appeals to the senses. In this setting, “it is a cold evening,” “the heavy surface of the sea” is silver, and

The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with small iridescent flies crawling on them. (*CP* 64)

Indeed, the title itself suggests a certain powerful aroma: “The air smells so strong of codfish / it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water.”

Unlike Bradstreet’s orderly imagistic feast, with its gilded trees and painted “leaves & fruits,” Bishop’s composition of place clearly tries to ground itself more authentically in the physical world. While Bradstreet’s speaker

⁵⁶ Merrill writes: “I was talking about Elizabeth Bishop and wondering what sets her apart from the male giants—Eliot, Pound, Wallace Stevens—who seem in their life’s work to transcend human dimensions: somehow wondering whether the light that philosophy casts made a greater shadow on

responds to her “delectable view” with rapt senses, in order to argue from the excellence of creation to its more excellent Creator, Bishop’s speaker describes both the beautiful and the repugnant in nature. She describes “beautiful herring scales” as well as “small iridescent flies.” Admittedly, “Contemplations” portrays human vulnerability in the face of natural forces, but it does so only to remind the reader that “man was made for endless immortality.” “At the Fishhouses,” on the other hand, while it also deals with metaphors of garden and wilderness, order and chaos, stresses the transience of figures and myths and, in fact, implicitly criticizes what Guy Rotella calls the “destructive illusion” of permanent structures (Rotella 223). Livingston particularly stresses this point, calling the nature/culture paradigm “the most overwhelmingly important myth in our cultural inheritance,” and he quotes Northrop Frye: “mythology is not a direct response to the natural environment; it is part of the imaginative insulation that separates us from that environment” (Livingston 141). Hence, to use Hooker’s metaphor, garden knowledge must take into account how, in the poem’s terms, it is “flowing and drawn, and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown” (CP 66).

the wall behind them. I kept clinging to the idea of Elizabeth with her sanity and levelheadedness and quirkiness of mind” (Merrill 9).

“At the Fishhouses” begins by describing and juxtaposing the interacting forces of nature and culture. The old man who “sits netting, / his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,” does so even though “it is a cold evening.” “The five fishhouses [with] steeply peaked roofs,” “The big fish tubs,” “the wheelbarrows,” “an ancient wooden capstan,” and the old man with his “shuttle worn and polished” are situated between “the heavy surface of the sea” and “the wild jagged rocks.” Here is a fragile place of order and industry, where “narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up / to storerooms in the gables / for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.” The old man, we are told, “has scraped the scales, the principal beauty, / from unnumbered fish with that black old knife, / the blade of which is almost worn away.”

The wilderness, on the other hand, is also at work: “an emerald moss” grows on the “shoreward walls” of the fishhouses, while the capstan is “cracked, “bleached,” and stained with something “like dried blood, / where the ironwork has rusted.” With “sequins on his vest and on his thumb,” the old man is depicted as weathered and worn. He is as subject to entropy as the artefacts around him. The speaker states: “He was a friend of my grandfather. / We talk of the decline in the population.” Even the community, where the speaker has familial roots, has withered. Like the old man’s net, it has become “almost invisible.”

Yet the speaker's sense of loss in this first part of the poem, her resignation to the inevitable erosion of human patterns of meaning, is qualified by her sense of humour, which Rotella astutely sees as "one of several strategies by which the poet restrains her desire to transform the events she describes into a familiar poetic pattern, a transcendent moment discovering comforting truth" (Rotella 220). Rotella points to the double effect of the "Lucky Strike" line, but does not take his analysis any further. In the midst of so much decomposition, Bishop tells us, "The old man accepts a Lucky Strike." Sandwiched between descriptions of rusting ironwork and "the decline in the population," the brand-name of a cigarette not only acts as a kind of benediction on the old man, it also resonates with the crass ethos of a commercial society. The structure and wording of "The old man accepts a Lucky Strike" accentuates his passive relationship to the outside world—he accepts what happens to him, whether it is the offer of a smoke or the swelling over of the sea. What the speaker sees in the scene before her—not to mention what she cannot see—constantly subjects any sense of loss to the kind of tough-mindedness that is also apparent in her comic moments. There is something unmistakably arbitrary about "the benches, / the lobster pots, and masts, scattered / among the wild jagged rocks." The scene is dishevelled—or better yet, messy—like the dirty, oily

scene in “Filling Station.” The absence of a clear, ordered distinction between nature and culture is part of what Tom Paulin sees as

Bishop’s gay refusal to take the idea of natural purity seriously. That refusal is a form of radical camp, which unpicks the cultural complacencies that produce images of “embroidered nature” in European painting and poetry. By dissenting from this manner of viewing the natural world, Bishop refuses to align [herself] with a dominating acquisitiveness. Very subtly, she questions the power politics that the Western aesthetic tradition so often conceals.⁵⁷

Bradstreet’s “darksome womb of nature” and Bishop’s “opaque” sea do not envision nature as concealing and relinquishing meaning in the same way. Bradstreet’s passive, orderly landscape is penetrated, illuminated, and fertilized by the masculine sun, that symbol of a pagan sky god transformed into an omnipotent, patriarchal deity. Bishop’s wilderness, on the other hand, is both more and less threatening as the personified sea swells “slowly as if considering spilling over.”⁵⁸ Further on in the poem, the sea becomes “absolutely clear,” not because of some transcendent agency but because of the poet’s understanding of its essential indifference to the human enterprise. Nature is neither God’s nor the devil’s, and as such it stands apart from concepts of good and evil.

⁵⁷ “Dwelling Without Roots: Elizabeth Bishop,” *Grand Street*, Fall (1990), 102. The essay can also be found in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber, 1992), 190-203.

⁵⁸ As Rotella points out, the speaker “gives the sea consciousness and takes it away with ‘as if,’ [suggesting] a swelling to significance that may be nothing more than an indifferent tidal swing” (220). It may also be a recognition of the “other” in nature.

“At the Fishhouses” is similar in this respect to the characteristic work of Eliot and Stevens, who describe our alienation from nature and expose the fictions that we create to alleviate that sense of alienation. It seems to me that Stevens in particular is preoccupied with the fictions that we create vis-à-vis what he calls “The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation” (Stevens 471). But Stevens probably would not say, “The old man accepts a Lucky Strike. / He was a friend of my grandfather.” “Anecdote of the Jar,” for instance, describes the placing of “a jar in Tennessee” to demonstrate the transformative power of culture: set on a hill, the jar “[makes] the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill” (Stevens 76). But “Anecdote of the Jar” does not evoke the personal details that Bishop’s poem does. Stevens is more like his Professor Eucalyptus—“[standing] / On his balcony, outsensing distances” (483). This distinction does not make Bishop’s a better poem; it merely serves to point out her own poetic strategy.

In a vitriolic essay entitled “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” Robert Bly criticizes “At the Fishhouses” because “The facts of the outer world push out the imagination and occupy the poem themselves. The lines become inflexible. The poem becomes heavy and stolid, like a toad that has eaten ball bearings” (Bly 26). The simile is revealing but true to only part of the poem, to what Heaney calls its “Fastidious notations which log the

progress of the physical world, degree by degree, into the world of the poet's own lucid but unemphatic awareness" (Heaney 102). Bishop does not merely bog the poem down in details either. She is preparing, on the contrary, "to dare a big leap" (Heaney 105). And, in point of fact, the details of the physical world operating in the poem are viewed as fleeting, so much so that the poem itself seems bird-like, preoccupied with surface details.

The "thin silver / tree trunks [that] are laid horizontally / across the gray stones, down and down / at intervals of four or five feet" describe gestures towards connection that ultimately disappear in that "Cold dark deep . . . element bearable to no mortal, / to fish and to seals." The speaker goes on to describe

One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Comic pathos again precludes epiphany, putting it off for the time being: "the habit of observation did not promise any irruption of the visionary. Yet here it is, a rhythmic heave which suggests that something other is about to happen—although not immediately" (Heaney 105). The lines of Luther's hymn that portray God as "bulwark never failing" and "helper he amidst the flood" become particularly ironic here, where there is so much dilapidation

and decline. The Puritan legacy itself appears to have dwindled into a parody of the Genesis-based mandate to subdue the earth and replenish it, as the speaker describes how she has turned her back on “a million Christmas trees [that] stand / waiting for Christmas.”

In contrast to Bradstreet’s Philomel, the seal signifies no potential escape from the world, with its hardships and oppressive cultural paradigms. Instead, the speaker knowingly invests this creature with human qualities; the seal examines her “with a sort of shrug / as if it were against his better judgment”: “He was interested in music; / like me a believer in total immersion.” Tongue-in-cheek, the speaker projects her own cultural heritage (which seeks and celebrates transformation in rites like baptism) on to the seal; but in doing so she also playfully implies a subtle distinction between herself and the wilderness. Although she obviously alludes to the New Testament tradition of baptism into the Kingdom of God,⁵⁹ she is also referring to a total immersion in that “element bearable to no mortal.” So she teasingly gestures towards identification with the seal but at the same time suggests that this is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Bishop realizes the otherness of nature and yet accepts that fact cheerfully and without fear.

⁵⁹ The poem arguably distinguishes between the Baptist and Lutheran traditions in the “total immersion” section. Admittedly, I am passing over this distinction as my interest here is to read “At the Fishhouses” in the context of early American Puritanism.

The speaker's stance therefore encompasses both difference and tenuous correspondence, evoking the kind of paradox often felt by distant relatives on meeting one another. Indeed, it is the speaker herself who becomes the meeting point, the "middle landscape," between nature and civilization. Again, the passive syntax of "element bearable to no mortal"—like "The old man accepts a Lucky Strike"—simply promotes a wise acquiescence to the limits of the human condition. The fact that the sea is an "element bearable to no mortal" suggests, however, that it is bearable to one who is immortal—to the God who is a mighty fortress. But, Bishop implies, we can know nothing for certain about this God. We have no evidence that He exists or intervenes on our behalf. There are only traces of our own now decadent traditions—"a million Christmas trees stand / waiting for Christmas."

The speaker believes in "total immersion" in the often unforgiving, harsh details of the world because they are real, and so she says of the sea: "If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately, / your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn." In fact, there is no revelation offered here, but rather the results of repeated experience: "I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, / above the stones and then the world." Increasingly, the speaker appeals to the senses to attempt to evoke raw physicality; and, yet,

even the language of sensory experience seems too limited. The more she refers to the senses, the more she uses conditional language, until, in the penultimate section of the poem, the ability of language to describe the details of experience appears finally limited: "If you tasted it [the sea], it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue." Whether we are makers of fishing nets, gardens, or poems, we draw patterns that are impositions on nature—and if we should touch or taste or in any way immerse ourselves in the wilderness itself, we will come up against the transience of our patterns. "The ocean mother of 'At the Fishhouses,'" writes Marilyn May Lombardi, "is coolly indifferent to our sufferings" (Lombardi 98).⁶⁰

Bly again criticizes poets like Eliot and Pound for their puritanic fear of "All animal life and sexual life," and he accuses them of transmitting this disdain to the poets of Bishop's generation (Bly 21-22). Certainly this criticism is one that in Bishop's case simply does not stick. "At the Fishhouses" is, if nothing else, a discarding of the old puritanical fears of the hideous wilderness. Although, as Heaney points out, this last part of "At the Fishhouses" recognizes "a knowledge-need which sets human beings apart

⁶⁰ And she goes on to remark, "the poet knows better than to believe in the uncomplicated vision of women and nature promoted by the romantic tradition" (Lombardi 98-9). Bonnie Costello also sees a reversal of conventional notions of the earth mother: "Against the 'small, old' fishhouses and even

from seals and herrings, Her scientific impulse is suddenly jumped back to its root in pre-Socratic awe, and water stares her in the face as the original solution" (Heaney 106). Further to that, it is not only the Darwinian, empirical impulse but also the Puritanical, religious fear which Bishop bypasses in the moment of lyrical truth that Heaney justly and eloquently finds here.⁶¹

Facing old fears, however, may be painful and threatening. We still live in a culture that has aggressive designs on nature and that takes its own constructs as absolute mandates preordained by God. In the final passage of "At the Fishhouses," the ungovernable, constantly moving sea itself becomes an emblem of the community's store of knowledge and of its traditional ways of building and making:

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.

the mighty fortress of religion, Bishop provides us with an image of mother earth, as an unprotective source and destiny" (Costello 115).

⁶¹ Livingston addresses such experience: "We call such experiences 'peak' because of both their rarity and quality. Magnificently performed music may occasionally induce it in some of us. . . . Some of us are similarly transported by the spring songs of birds, the fall grunting and whistling of wapiti, the staccato of raindrops on lily pads, the cracking of lake ice. The sound of winter wind in the leafless aspens is the experience of being-the-whole. The smell of skunk-cabbage is good too" (Livingston 117).

This tentative likening of the sea to “what we imagine knowledge to be”—“derived from the rocky breasts / forever”—would have been anathema to the Puritan colonists. Indeed, the sea was to them a spiritual metaphor for the “disorder and unrestraint . . . of unregenerate man,” that is, a type of the wilderness, where, as Thomas Hooker states, “curiosity is not studied” (Carroll 83). To study curiosity would entail accepting the wilderness on its own terms, which is exactly what the Puritans, with their divine mandate for land reform, could not do.⁶² As Rotella says of the final section of “At the Fishhouses”: “It recalls religious and transcendental poems in which reconciling and mediating truths are discovered in a natural world originally inscribed by God. But it denies the analogy on which such discoveries are made” (Rotella 223).

Unlike Bradstreet’s malleable landscape, Bishop’s is hard and rocky, offering sustenance but not yielding to relentlessly exploitative ideas and ideals. In “At the Fishhouses,” it is the all-too-human realm of knowledge—or what we imagine is knowledge—that, like the sea, is in constant flux above the world and that, again like the sea, must be approached with caution. By

⁶² Cecilia Tichi discusses John Winthrop’s distinction between “carnal naturalism and cultivated civility”: “Puritan planters [justified] appropriation of New World lands on the basis of aboriginal failure to improve it Failure to make a civilizing impress upon the land they claimed would cancel their self-defined, biblically interpreted rights to those lands” (9 & 11). See *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans through Whitman*, New Haven:

deflating some of our cultural paradigms, the poem reverses the traditional deployment of power in the relationship between nature and culture.

Recognizing that culture originates in nature, it obviates a destructive and erroneous polarizing of the two and rightly insists that we pay closer attention to what nature is constantly telling us. As Bishop says in a different context in “North Haven,” her elegy for Robert Lowell:

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the White-throated Sparrow’s five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.

“At the Fishhouses” envisions a community that, attending to the voices of nature and acknowledging its own limitations and uncertain status, comes together to reiterate its history and traditions, and “revise, revise, revise.”

II.

As we have seen in the first chapter, Anne Bradstreet’s “A Dialogue between Old England and New” constituted a poetic shrinking of the 3,000 miles separating England and its colony. As such, this poem became an analogue for a map. Orienting its readers to their new place in the world, it salved homesickness and dispelled uncertainty. Similarly, in the chapter preceding

this one, we have seen how “Contemplations” became the textual site on which Bradstreet tried to come to terms with nature in the New World. The Puritan community of which she was a part was motivated to Anglicize the wilderness as quickly as possible, perhaps as a consequence of its felt need to overcome the distance between itself and England. Read in this context, Elizabeth Bishop’s early poem “The Map” illuminates the similarities between poetry and cartography as well as the intersections between culture and nature. Reading “Dialogue,” for instance, Bradstreet’s fellow colonists might, in Bishop’s words, “take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods” (Bishop 3). Like “Fishhouses,” “The Map” describes how we decide the relationship between land and sea, and thus how we attempt to make ourselves at home in nature. In the final analysis, the act of reading a map—which is what this poem describes—becomes a metaphor for setting forth a world view. Or as Anne Colwell states:

both mapmaker and historian, as human individuals, possess the same gift and curse as the poet: whatever they look at wears the mark of their looks. Both delicately transform and give human meaning to apparent chaos, and both cannot help but distort and limit, and perhaps make accurate knowing impossible. (Colwell 38)

Here Bishop's questions of travel, like Bradstreet's, are about managing distance and difference so that "North's as near as West." But in contrast to the Puritan poet's endeavour to negotiate a relationship with England as well as with a strange new landscape, Bishop is more interested in describing how maps make such negotiations possible in the first place. Since "Topography displays no favorites," it permits any number of perspectives and is essentially wide open to interpretation by way of names, colours, boundaries, etc. Hence "The Map" begins with basic aspects of cartography by outlining the relationship between land and sea—"Land lies in water; it is shadowed green"—but it also quickly proceeds to reveal ambiguities in "the simple blue from green" by asking questions which point to the equivocal nature of map-making and -reading and, finally, of acculturation:

does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging at the sea from under?

Increasingly, "The Map" moves from geographic to political cartography and, as it does so, begins to disclose greater complexity. Like the wasps' nest in "Santarém," a map can be approached and described from various, and even opposing, vantage points: "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.”

A map also invites the reader to see the familiar in the strange and thus to domesticate it; or, as David Leed states, “Travel in general, and ‘exploration’ in particular, may be motivated not by love of the strange and unfamiliar but by the desire to reduce, by active and aggressive means, the uncertainty implicit in the strange and unfamiliar” (Leed 68). Having been placed behind glass or in “a clean cage,” the bays lose their wildness and can be stroked. Likewise, “These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.” Once land has been possessed, its contours begin to reflect the ideological contours of the makers and readers of maps. Through naming, maps permit further familiarization with terrain that might otherwise remain unknown, and Bishop’s poem reveals how place-names appear to subdue territory and how the act of naming confers a creative power which is liable to become bombast:

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.

According to “The Map,” colours also allow the reader to order and rationalize the world. Yet the poem’s last (rather comic) question—“Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?”—is concerned with agency,

which underscores the existence of various, possibly conflicting interpretations of land and sea. Maps, says Bishop, necessarily reflect decisions and compromises about relationships between global constituents, otherwise they could not do their job: to render a reading of the world that is ordered and familiar.

In the much later poem, “Crusoe in England,” Bishop again comes to grips with the relationship between culture and nature. In many respects like the speaker of “At the Fishhouses,” “Crusoe’s” speaker is a solitary observer who meditates for twenty-eight years on the sea- and landscapes of the island where he had formerly been shipwrecked; or as Bonnie Costello calls him, “a desperate Darwin, trailing off into the unknown. Perhaps the ultimate breakdown of empiricism and its legacy of logical positivism occurs in Crusoe’s temporal displacement” (Costello 203). Using Defoe’s retrospective narrative technique in *Robinson Crusoe*, Bishop explores the themes of regret and longing for home as found in the novel. While *Crusoe* sees its narrator splitting his perspective between England, which represents the domesticated past, and the wild, unnamed island where he has been shipwrecked alone, Bishop’s speaker emphasizes how his island eventually became home even as England gradually became an alien place. After his long solitude, Bishop’s Crusoe finds himself dislocated in England, “another island, / that doesn’t

seem like one, but who decides?" As in "The Map," the question evokes the poem's central issue of how culture and nature intersect in the mind of one whose very sense of self has been both shaped and threatened by solitude.

This issue is evoked in the title of the poem as Crusoe, Defoe's famous character, is thrown back into English society after having been changed by the natural circumstances of his exile. Consequently, the sense of home that is so important to the novel is turned upside down in the poem as Crusoe becomes nostalgic about his "poor old island." And when he juxtaposes volcanoes and newspapers in the opening lines, emblems of nature and culture become readily apparent:

A new volcano has erupted,
the papers say, and last week I was reading
where some ship saw an island being born:
at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—
rose in the mate's binoculars
and caught on the horizon like a fly.
They named it.

Having lived so long in the natural world, Crusoe now gains his perspective through the opaque medium, and media, of English culture. The first pair of lines seems to separate for a moment the disparate worlds of Crusoe's experience. He knows that "A new volcano has erupted," but his knowing stems from his reading of what "the papers say" and the reference to "last week" places him firmly in the frame of western culture. Yet the first line

also brilliantly evokes the creative power found in nature, and the fact that Crusoe immediately sees this power in the context of a containing and naming culture is ironic. Like "The Map," "Crusoe in England" views the act of naming as potentially both arrogant and naively playful, and like the earlier poem it explores the relativity of scale. As Lorrie Goldensohn writes concerning scale in "The Map": "Bishop exploits the distortion of scale, the slippage between mediums of representation" (Goldensohn 106). Indeed, Crusoe himself has "time enough to play with names" and, of course, this pastime stems from his cultural background. Hence the "island being born" is witnessed via "the mate's binoculars" just as the new volcano is reported by a newspaper. Seen from the binoculars, the birth of an island is objectified: it is "a black fleck" that is "caught on the horizon like a fly" and then named.

A sense of loss, not so much the loss of his wild island home as that of uninterrupted propinquity to nature, pervades the viewpoint of Bishop's Crusoe as he begins his monologue, which in no way spares his tortuous coming to terms with wilderness. Although he misses his island, Crusoe remains European and is thus divided at points over what to make of his own experience, one which involved the earlier loss of English society. That his "poor old island" remains "un-rediscovered, un-renamable" implies satisfaction as well as loss: satisfaction because his island has been spared the

attention of an objectifying, cataloguing culture; but also loss because Crusoe himself discovered, named, and possessed the island, and “None of the books has ever got it right.” Unlike what “the papers say,” Crusoe knows from experience that the tomes written about his island are erroneous; he suspects, therefore, that a disjunction exists between his culture’s view of the world and what the world constitutes in his own experience. Hence, what “the papers say” is also subject to doubt, especially since there are no alternative sources of information besides Crusoe’s memory. To be sure, “None of the books has ever got it right” could also allude to Defoe’s novel (itself based partly on the life of Alexander Selkirk), thus placing *Robinson Crusoe* among the propagators of the Western myth of exploration and possession.

Certainly this myth is one in which Bishop’s Crusoe finds himself entangled, but “Crusoe in England” is, in large part, about such entanglement, and the narrator evinces an acute awareness of his predicament. His awareness is revealed throughout the poem as Crusoe describes the evolution of his life in the island from a raw, confusing existence in nature to a gradual, albeit incomplete, re-orientation in a self-made culture taken roughly from his English upbringing. So in the second verse paragraph of the poem, Crusoe returns to his volcanic imagery to evoke the wilderness where he struggled to retain his sense of self:

Well, I had fifty-two
 miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
 with a few slithery strides—
 volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
 I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
 and count the others standing up,
 naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.

In contrast to the containment of nature found in England, Crusoe finds himself overwhelmed by the scale of things on his island. Here nature seems totally out of his control, although he tries vainly to obtain it by counting volcanoes.

At this juncture especially, Bishop makes one important result of shipwreck on a deserted isle much starker than Defoe does—that is, the near decimation of the self, arguably a cultural artifact in its own right.⁶³ If culture provides a sense of proportion and of place, Bishop's Crusoe reveals their loss:

I'd think if they were the size
 I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
 become a giant;
 and if I had become a giant,
 I couldn't bear to think what size
 the goats and turtles were,
 or the gulls, or the overlapping rollers
 —a glittering hexagon of rollers
 closing in and closing in, but never quite,

⁶³ "The concept of 'self,'" writes John Livingston, "is an expression of dualism. It dichotomizes our world by requiring the additional concept of 'other.' The twin notions are mutually reinforcing. They are analogous if not identical to the conceptual human/Nature dichotomy. Both are part of the greater cultural tradition under which we labour, part of the prosthetic device which provides and sustains our ideologies" (Livingston 100).

glittering and glittering, though the sky
was mostly overcast.

In fact, if “The Map” analyzes the manipulation of scale and perspective for the purpose of orientation (personal, cultural, ideological), Defoe’s Crusoe describes a sense of disorientation from which Bishop’s character can never fully recover. Defoe’s Crusoe puts it this way: “so I ventured to make to the coast, and come to an anchor in the mouth of a little river, I knew not what, or where; neither what latitude, what country, what nations, or what river” (Defoe 46). Similarly, the great unhappiness of Bishop’s speaker stems from the sudden loss of distance between nature and himself. Eventually, through his experience, Bishop’s Crusoe becomes aware of how human culture is essentially chimeric. He loses what Bradstreet retains, however ambivalently, in “Contemplations,” the belief in the ability to examine nature from a distant, culturally-anchored vantage point.

The loss of such belief threatens Crusoe’s sense of himself as human and set apart from other animals. Consequently, having nearly lost his humanity, Bishop’s Crusoe “with a few slithery strides” climbs the volcanoes’ sides. Yet, like some kind of crude Pythagorean, he also counts volcanoes in what seems like a losing attempt to retain a familiar sense of scale. Bishop’s language reveals how unacceptable this loss of proportion is, as Crusoe describes “volcanoes dead as ash heaps” that are “naked and leaden, with their

heads blown off.” Like Swift’s Gulliver, Crusoe cannot place himself in his new surroundings without becoming overwhelmed: if the volcanoes seem too small, the goats, turtles, and gulls seem too big, just as Crusoe himself seems out of proportion. From his perch on the highest volcano, Crusoe is uncomfortably besieged by “a glittering hexagon of rollers / closing and closing in, but never quite.” Like the “absolutely clear” sea in “At the Fishhouses,” the ocean here provides a continual reminder of the ephemerality of culture. Land meets sea as it does in both “Fishhouses” and “The Map,” yet in “Crusoe” it evokes none of the solidity and stability gained through naming. Rather, land on the island reflects a primal world of flux: “The folds of lava, running out to sea, / would hiss.” Such “running out to sea” differs from that found in “The Map,” where “The names of seashore towns run out to sea.” If the earlier poem describes how culture displays and exhibits itself to the point of seeming to run roughshod over nature, “Crusoe” describes a very different interaction between land and sea, one in which land represents neither control nor containment.

However, like Defoe’s character, Bishop’s alleviates homesickness by making and naming things—in short, by creating his own rough culture, replete with “home-brew”:

I’d drink
the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff

that went straight to my head
 and play my home-made flute
 (I think it had the weirdest scale on earth)
 and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats.
 Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?

Here Crusoe describes a nascent pastoral that parallels, albeit less soberly, Bradstreet's "Contemplations." Like the Puritans, he is driven by loneliness and alienation to try to replicate his own culture even though he admittedly suffers from a lack of knowledge, which results not just in bad beer and idiosyncratic flutes but in "a miserable philosophy" as well. Crusoe's question about being "home-made" points to the fact that all culture is taken from the raw stuff of nature; likewise, every scale is weird in the beginning. This truth becomes obscure over time, however, and is replaced by the notion that culture is *ipso facto* something unto itself which exists separate from nature and, indeed, has a claim over it. Thus Crusoe's ignorance in the face of the wilderness, his lack of a cultural standard held up by community, is exposed by his complete isolation and becomes in the end his central dilemma:

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

The quote, taken from Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," rivals Bishop's opening lines in its indication of the contrast between illusion and reality in the mind of the speaker. While Crusoe's experience in nature is anything but romantic, his educated mind nonetheless recalls a fragment of a poem that celebrates solitude and union with nature. Yet if Wordsworth makes, even in the title of his poem, a virtue of wandering by oneself, he does so in the context of the English countryside. As Aldous Huxley states, Wordsworth "asks us to make [a] falsification of experience" by assuming that nature is "that chaste, mild deity who presides over the *Gemüthlichkeit*, the prettiness, the cozy sublimities of the Lake District":

A few weeks in Malaya or Borneo would have undeceived him. Wandering in the hothouse darkness of the jungle, he would not have felt so serenely certain of those "Presences of Nature," those "Souls of Lonely Places," which he was in the habit of worshipping on the shores of Windermere and Rydal. (Huxley 1-3)

In Huxley's words, Crusoe has been "undeceived" by his experience of shipwreck and exile, and his expression of disillusionment clearly contrasts with Wordsworth's cultivation of communion with a benevolent nature. In contrast to Wordsworth's daffodils, Crusoe's "iris-beds" are actually snail shells whose occupants "crept over everything, / over the one variety of tree, / a sooty, scrub affair." Reciting to these "flowers," of course, elicits the fragment of Wordsworth's verse as well as the question, "The bliss of what?,"

which Crusoe cannot remember until he investigates on his return to England.

Although Crusoe conceals the sought-after missing word, “solitude,” the context of the poem provides an incisive critique of the Wordsworthian viewpoint. Next to Crusoe’s snails creeping over and lying under the island’s “one variety of tree . . . in drifts,” Wordsworth’s daffodils are “A host” that are “Continuous as the stars that shine / and twinkle on the milky way”:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company. (Wordsworth 191)

For Wordsworth’s speaker, this “jocund company” will later “flash upon that inward eye” as he recollects his experience, and the poem ends with an affirmative recollection of solitude in nature: “And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils.” Here land and sea, in the Wordsworthian view, affably compete to celebrate their co-existence. While Wordsworth’s speaker recounts experience from his couch, Crusoe recalls grappling with his alienation from nature “With [his] legs dangling down familiarly / over a crater’s edge.”

What, then, is this fragment of Wordsworth's poem doing in Bishop's poem, besides acting as a Romantic foil to Crusoe's experience? Besides that, which is much, Wordsworth evokes yet another cultural representation of nature that is opaque, yet another form of media, in the face of Crusoe's difficult and undeniably real experience. According to Bishop's Crusoe, solitude in nature is not pleasureable but arduous, resulting in "a miserable philosophy." This philosophy stems, it seems, from his not knowing enough—that is, from the fact that Crusoe as a cultural creation largely falls apart once he is alone in the wilderness: "The books / I'd read were full of blanks." The question, "Why didn't I know enough of something? / Greek drama or astronomy?," obviously points to the identity crisis in which Crusoe finds himself, yet on another level it ignores what he really does know: that nature itself cannot be accurately described by words such as "fluttering" or "twinkle" (Wordsworth 191) when it requires terms like "erupted" and "naked" and "hissing." Likewise, the sea does not "sparkle," it "glitters"; and clouds do not "float on high o'er hills and dales," they hang "above the craters—their parched throats / . . . hot to touch." More importantly perhaps, Crusoe the writer and poet learns to see himself for what he is: not a cultivator of words and landscape—not, in other words, a creature of culture—so much as an animal among other animals, an organism in a

frightening and complex world of other organisms: "The goats were white, so were the gulls, / and both too tame, or else they thought / I was a goat, too, or a gull."

But the goats and gulls are not tame; Crusoe is half-wild, and the new knowledge and consciousness he has acquired are of wildness. As he comes to realize, such knowledge, difficult as it is to come by, does not wither or erode once he returns to England. On the contrary, it drives him to write, not only about his experience in exile but also about his inability to reabsorb things English. The act of writing for Crusoe, however, is completely unlike Wordsworth's "recollection in tranquillity." If Wordsworth expresses a cultural wish about the nature of nature, Crusoe exposes it by describing his experience *in* nature. Unlike both Bradstreet and Wordsworth, Bishop has, through the character of Crusoe, evoked experience in the natural world that is as free as possible from the insularity provided by culture and myth-making.

Obviously Bradstreet encountered real wilderness but, as we have seen already, she was part of a community that feared and rejected such encounters; and Bradstreet's "Contemplations" reveals just how important culture became to the New England pilgrims as they attempted to counter the threat posed by uncultivated nature. Although fishes and birds tempt

Bradstreet to stray from the tenets of Puritanism, they do not, in the end, cause her to backslide. Her version of the landscape in seventeenth-century New England is, finally, ornate and controlled. Bishop, on the other hand, as we have already witnessed in “At the Fishhouses,” simply describes the intersection of culture and nature. As a poet, she sidesteps the task of becoming a verbal landscaper or gardener; instead, she takes the role of acute observer, one who recounts the relationship between humans and their environments. Hence the seal in “Fishhouses” is seen as mysterious and inhuman at the same time as the speaker realizes her position between land and sea and that, moreover, she shares the world with both the seal and the old fisherman mending his nets.

Crusoe, likewise, describes his encounters with the animals he meets on the island. As we have already seen, these creatures—goats, turtles, gulls—seem out of proportion because Crusoe has lost his bearings. The animals he meets are, even more than the seal in “Fishhouses,” baffling and unapproachable: “The turtles lumbered by, high-domed, / hissing like teakettles. / (And I’d have given years, or taken a few, / for any sort of kettle, of course).” The simile highlights Crusoe’s longing for cultural reminders of his humanity, and it is ironic that an animal that threatens his humanity should also remind him of it. Indeed, after a time, Crusoe makes a point of

projecting his longings and cultural repertoire on to the goats, even though he finds them alienating:

I'd heard of cattle getting island-sick.
 I thought the goats were.
 One billy-goat would stand on the volcano
 I'd christened *Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*
 (I'd time enough to play with names),
 and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air.
 I'd grab his beard and look at him.
 His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up
 and expressed nothing, or a little malice.
 I got so tired of the very colours!
 One day I dyed a baby goat bright red
 with my red berries, just to see
 something a little different.
 And then his mother wouldn't recognize him.

Crusoe's need to project extends also to Friday, the human animal whose very name indicates scales and standards of measurement. Contradicting Defoe, whose Crusoe discovers the presence of other humans on the island with great trepidation, Bishop's character claims, "Just when I thought I couldn't stand it / another minute longer, Friday came." The "nightmares of other islands" that have come to plague Crusoe's imagination are placed in a time-frame in which he counts minutes as though they were volcanoes, until the welcome arrival of Friday: "Friday was nice." The sexual interest in Friday—"he had a pretty body"—also contrasts with Defoe's account, but this too manifests Crusoe's need to replicate the culture he has left behind: "I wanted to propagate my kind, / and so did he, I think, poor

boy.” Crusoe takes this, perhaps, from the Genesis mandate to “be fruitful and multiply,” although he simultaneously clusters Friday together with the baby goats: “He’d pet the baby goats sometimes, / and race with them, or carry one around.”

Once Crusoe and Friday are returned to England, Crusoe finds himself “bored.” Ironically, the nightmare of monotony that compelled him to paint a baby goat red, for instance, clings to Crusoe as he finds himself “surrounded by uninteresting lumber.” The poem’s implication, that the drive to make and live in culture is finally inescapable, is made clearest in terms not so much of created things—utensils, lumber, trousers, and so on—as of concepts such as scale and standard. Friday’s name constitutes one important indication of what I mean, in terms of the measurement of time, as does the past, the retrospective view of the whole poem. Crusoe’s monologue demonstrates how kinds of measurement, whether of minutes or musical notes or volcanoes’ heads, are the inherent bases of culture out of which material things are made. Hence he constantly measures time and, consequently, locates meaning in the past where he has come close to experiencing first-hand the natural origins of culture:

The knife there on the shelf—
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
It lived. How many years did I
beg it, implore it, not to break?

I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
 the bluish blade, the broken tip,
 the lines of wood-grain on the handle ...
 Now it won't look at me at all.
 The living soul has dribbled away.
 My eyes rest on it and pass on.

Only in the context of wilderness does the knife “[reek] of meaning, like a crucifix.” In that world, Crusoe’s eyes intimately know and count “each nick and scratch . . . / the bluish blade, the broken tip, / the lines of wood-grain.” In a real sense, he becomes an animist. “We are born animists,” writes Lyall Watson, “happy to believe that everything we encounter is alive, just as we are, and that all objects are equally able to encounter us, for good or evil”:

It is a fortunate disposition, a time in both personal and human history when we are closest to nature, most easily touched by mystical experience, most accessible to a connection that provides a real sense of the presence of power around us. (Watson 241)

On the domesticated English island, Crusoe’s “eyes rest on [the knife] and pass on,” indicating not only loss of meaning and consequent boredom but also the loss of life itself. As Crusoe himself states, “I’m old And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March.”

This last pair of lines, where “Crusoe in England” ends, have caustic implications for the culture in which, after nearly three decades of longing, Crusoe finds himself dying almost literally of boredom. A culture that categorizes, names, and measures everything wants, of course, “the flute, the

knife, the shrivelled shoes, / my shedding goatskin trousers” as museum pieces. And Crusoe’s final question, “How can anyone want such things?,” implicates the compulsion to count even as Crusoe himself counts the years since Friday’s death. Culture appears, in the final analysis, to be a dis-ease as surely as the measles that have killed Friday.

“Crusoe’s” view of Western culture vis-à-vis nature appears in a less developed form in “Florida,” where “the careless, corrupt state” is viewed in the context of the ecosystem, represented metaphorically as “the Indian Princess.” Nature, in this early poem, is constituted by a swirling Stevensian cycle of life and death that proceeds in spite of the state, which is alienated from that cycle. Over the course of the poem, the term *state* begins to reflect not only the political entity called Florida, which the speaker calls “the poorest / post-card of itself,” but the general human condition itself, set against what is seen as a rampant natural order requiring containment. Here, at the outset of her career-long interest in geography, Bishop describes the counterfeit relationship between European culture and nature:

The state with the prettiest name,
the state that floats in brackish water,
held together by mangrove roots
that bear while living oysters in clusters,
and when dead strew white swamps with skeletons,
dotted as if bombarded, with green hummocks,
like ancient cannon-balls sprouting grass.

Like “Crusoe in England” and “The Map,” naming is central to the cultural agenda. In this case, “Florida,” derived from the Spanish *la flor*, indicates the European acknowledgement of the area’s lush beauty; but seen in the context of the rest of the poem, which actually describes nature rather than the state, the name evokes both cynicism and loss. Moreover, against the historical backdrop of Spanish exploitation and decimation of the aboriginal population, signalled by the references to “ancient cannon-balls” and Pocahontas’ death (also represented by “buried Indian Princess”), *The Flowery Land*, “held together by mangrove roots,” takes on a bitter irony.

Such irony is apparent in even a cursory glance at Spanish action in Florida in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ronald Wright, for instance, like Amy Clampitt, chronicles the deeds of Hernando De Soto, described as “the last outsider to see this part of North America in anything like its pre-Columbian state.” Wright states further that:

Soto’s men had little interest in nature; it is hard to reconstruct the landscape in front of their hungry eyes. Their vocabulary for the Appalachians is the same as for the Andes—“very high,” “difficult,” “very cold,” and so forth—like the jottings of a dull schoolchild on holiday. One hardly knows whether they are marching across hot savannas or beneath the shade of mossy oaks. . . . Their accounts come to life only when they mention something of material value—temples and storehouses, caskets of pearls, a whiff of gold. (Wright 86)

Obviously, aboriginal culture, particularly the Cherokee nation, thrived in this part of the continent. As Wright puts it, De Soto found “a landscape

profoundly changed by culture" (86), but this culture was one that converged with nature rather than conquered it, and that existed in syncopation with the ecosystem.

Bishop's "Florida" makes explicit the aboriginals' relationship to nature in its references to the Indian Princess, whose skirt, "a gray rag of rotted calico," holds the "fading shells" that ornament the Floridian coastline. Although she employs the pathetic fallacy perhaps partly in order to reveal the grievous loss of habitat, Bishop also humanizes nature by conjoining its existence with that of the buried Princess, whose remains have mingled with earth and swamp and the attendant life-and-death cycle which proceeds endlessly. Thus the oysters "while living" are borne "in clusters / and when dead" are strewn in the swamps and "Enormous turtles . . . die and leave their barnacled shells on the beaches," all of this together with "the buried Indian Princess":

The palm trees clatter in the stiff breeze
like the bills of the pelicans. The tropical rain comes down
to freshen the tide-looped strings of fading shells:
Job's Tear, the Chinese Alphabet, the scarce Junonia,
parti-coloured pectins and Ladies' Ears,
arranged as on a gray rag of rotted calico,
the buried Indian Princess's skirt;
with these the monotonous, endless, sagging coast-line
is delicately ornamented.

The Princess is mentioned again at the end of the poem, where “The alligator, . . . whimpers and speaks in the throat / of the Indian Princess.” If the landscape here is ornamented, it is done in such a way as to complement nature, achieving what Livingston calls “a human/Nature Camelot”:

Then, with the advent of sixteenth-century navigational techniques, came the era of the intercontinental warlords . . . up until this time some human races had achieved at least a modest equilibrium with what remained of the prehuman natural communities of the world. The intercontinentalists changed everything forever. (Livingston 54)

Montaigne, in his essay “On the Cannibals” written in the sixteenth century, says of the putative barbarians of the New World that “They are still governed by the laws of Nature and are only very slightly bastardized by ours,” and he wishes they could have “been discovered earlier, in times when there were men who could have appreciated them better than we do.”

They could not even imagine a state of nature so simple and so pure as the one we have learned about from experience; they could not even believe that societies of men could be maintained with so little artifice, so little in the way of human solder. (Montaigne 10)

That the legacy of the “intercontinentalists” constitutes much of the matter of current experience is subtly narrated by the speaker of “The Moose,” where the orderly world of modern travel is witnessed and celebrated until a moose, symbolizing something apparently untamed, intrudes on the poem and literally ends it. Here Bishop anticipates the “westward-trekking” and “transhumance” that make up Amy Clampitt’s “epic theme,” moving

westward “From narrow provinces / of fish and bread and tea” on the eastern seaboard. The poem’s movement towards the interior recalls not only Bishop’s earlier “Arrival at Santos” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” but also repeats the historical pattern of mass migration westward, the Manifest Destiny of the early European explorers and pioneers.

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides,
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,
sometimes the sun sets
facing a red sea,
and others, veins the flats’
lavender, rich mud
in burning rivulets;

on red, gravelly roads,
down rows of sugar maples,
past clapboard farmhouses
and neat, clapboard churches,
bleached, ridged as clamshells,
past twin silver birches,

through late afternoon
a bus journeys west,

the windshield flashing pink,
 pink glancing off of metal,
 brushing the dented flank
 of blue, beat-up enamel;

down hollows, up rises,
 and waits, patient, while
 a lone traveller gives
 kisses and embraces
 to seven relatives
 and a collie supervises. (*CP* 169-70)

The first six stanzas, constituting a single, ballad-like sentence, set up the relationship between land and sea that Bishop delineates in other poems such as “Florida,” “The Map,” “The End of March,” “At the Fishhouses,” and “Crusoe in England.” The subject of the sentence, “a bus journeys west,” is qualified by the natural forces of tide and river that have their own rhythms and interact with each other, described via a tripartite structure of “wheres” that evokes the daily tidal swing and its relation to fish, river, and sun. From the primordial sea and its endless cycles, the bus (with its “dented flank / of blue, beat-up enamel”) leaves “on red, gravelly roads,” setting up the cultural dynamic of sugar maples, farmhouses, and churches, past which the moving community travels intact within the bus. As Victoria Harrison puts it so well:

The bus meets the well-prepared scene, teeming with the life of nature’s cycles and with human beings’ civilizing structures. But as the bus gathers the people, who, we assume, fill the houses, cook the fish, and serve the bread and tea, it resets them, including them in its own small, traveling

world, removed just enough from home that they can reflect on it.
(Harrison 199)

In contrast to the long, complex interactions built into nature, the bus's stops and starts are abrupt and simple: "Goodbye to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog. / The bus starts." And farther down the road:

One stop at Bass River.
Then the Economies--
Lower, Middle, Upper;
Five Islands, Five Houses,
where a woman shakes a tablecloth
out after supper.

A pale flickering. Gone.

The prosaic language employed to describe the banality of stopping and starting, as well as the mundane activities—the goodbyes and the greetings—, is juxtaposed with a lyricism that hints at the mysterious otherness of nature, the fog, the changing light.

Its cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens' feathers,
in gray glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences;
bumblebees creep
inside the foxgloves,
and evening commences.

Against this is the litany of place names: Bass River, the Tantramar marshes, Boston, the New Brunswick woods. These and the fences and garden string, as well as “a ship’s port lantern,” make the passing landscape, the flux, more recognizable and secure.

As the light of day fades and gives way to moonlight, the passengers are oriented by the familiar road and a barking dog. Even the bus’s entry into the woods of New Brunswick, now dominated by moonlight, is assuring, although the forest is “hairy, scratchy, splintery,” alluding vaguely to old human fears, the memory of the wilds on this eastern coastline, or what Simon Schama calls one kind of arcadia, “a place of primitive panic” (Schama 517). Nevertheless, the woods catch both “moonlight and mist,” and the simile is comforting: “like lamb’s wool / on bushes in a pasture.” The passengers can “lie back” and take their rest, sleep the sleep of the innocent like characters in *The Tempest*.

Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy divagation
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination. . . .

In the creakings and noises,
an old conversation—
not concerning us,
but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents’ voices

uninterruptedly
 talking, in Eternity:
 names being mentioned,
 things cleared up finally;
 what he said, what she said,
 who got pensioned.

Bishop's use of *divagation* signals the dream-like bucolic state identified by Schama as the antonym of "primitive panic," with its "gentle, auditory" spell reminiscent of Caliban's admonition: "Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not" (Shakespeare III.ii.131-2). The voices that alternately wake and lull Caliban on Prospero's enchanted isle are evoked by the "Grandparents' voices / uninterruptedly / talking, in Eternity," waking and lulling the speaker and other passengers aboard the dented bus whose schedule and route along the road operates in a different time to the dream time within. Although there are no "thousand twangling instruments" here (III.ii.133), there are "creakings and noises." And as in the play, the quotidian gives way to hints of the supernatural, the ancestral world:

He took to drink. Yes.
 She went to the bad.
 When Amos began to pray
 even in the store and
 finally the family had
 to put him away.

"Yes . . ." that peculiar

affirmative. "Yes . . ."
 A sharp, indrawn breath,
 half groan, half acceptance,
 that means "Life's like that.
 We know *it* (also death)."

Talking the way they talked
 in the old featherbed,
 peacefully, on and on,
 dim lamplight in the hall,
 down in the kitchen, the dog,
 tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now
 even to fall asleep
 just as on all those nights—
 Suddenly the bus driver
 stops with a jolt,
 turns off his lights.

Like "At the Fishhouses," where the seal interrupts and transforms the narrative, precipitating the speaker's delving beyond the surface world of appearances which she heretofore has hesitated to do, a moose jarringly intrudes on the dream-state of the community aboard the moving bus. As the bus stops and the lights are turned off, leaving the occupants in total darkness, the darkness of the moose's world, the flux that has so far dominated the poem is replaced by a momentary stasis: "A moose has come out of / the impenetrable wood / and stands there, looms, rather, / in the middle of the road." In the moment of interaction between moose and machine, as the animal "approaches" and "sniffs at / the bus's hot hood," the

poem portrays a direct meeting of culture and nature, which, according to the poem's dictum, are seen as separate yet married. The moose is "grand, otherworldly" as "she looks the bus over"; she is "Taking her time"; yet she is also "homely as a house / (or, safe as houses)." And the moment—the shared time of moose and humans—is epiphanic for the passengers, who "exclaim in whispers, / childishly, softly, / 'Sure are big creatures.' / 'It's awful plain.' / 'Look! It's a she!'" Like the numinous moment of encounter between Bradstreet and the bird she calls Philomel, this *time* brings a fleeting clarity to both individual and group: an "Awareness of self [that] is emotional, not rational. It is an event, not a construction. It is experienced, not known. It is lived, not abstracted. It is received, not perceived. It is a gift, not an accomplishment" (Livingston 117). Hence, the poem asks a question that encompasses the communal and alludes to the inarticulate, that which cannot be said but can be addressed with a question: "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" The poet carefully repeats the first-person plural pronoun and adds "all," to stake out the "civilized" human response to such moments.

And yet there is a problem here: following the question so typical of Bishop is a remark by "our quiet driver," "Curious creatures," about which Lorrie Goldensohn uncovers a striking—and I would argue, disconcerting—

gloss in a letter by Bishop to Marianne Moore describing “a dreadful trip” by bus:

. . . just as it was getting light, the driver had to stop suddenly for a big cow moose who was wandering down the road. She walked away very slowly into the woods, looking at us over her shoulder. The driver said that one foggy night he had to stop while a huge bull moose came right up and smelled the engine. “Very curious beasts,” he said. (Goldensohn 252)

What Goldensohn puts a finger on here is Bishop’s “early decision” (the poem took twenty-six years to complete) “to elide the driver’s mention of the bull moose encounter and to take his ‘curious beasts’ to refer only to the cow moose at hand, . . . making explicit the poem’s embrace of a benevolent female Nature” (253). While the word *curious* recalls the seal gazing at the speaker of “At the Fishhouses,” it also invokes Thomas Hooker’s injunction against “the study of curiosity.” The decision on Bishop’s part to leave out the fact of the potentially malevolent bull in order to focus solely on the apparently gentler female contradicts the view of nature given at the close of “At the Fishhouses.” If it was the more aggressive male of the species that, in point of fact, sniffed at the engine, why change it? One wonders whether the fact of the male, known to be frightening, aggressive, and potentially dangerous, would preclude the experience of “joy” that “we all feel,” whether the question the poem asks would not therefore be rendered specious by the overwhelming feeling, rather, of impending threat and brutal animal power.

Bishop here wants, it seems obvious, to have it both ways: to be able at once to trigger the experience of awe and domestication, and to be sane and civilized about it, even about the mingled “smell of moose” and “acrid / smell of gasoline.”

James Longenbach, in “Answer to a Question,” a poem published in *The Yale Review*, pointedly addresses the problems apparent in Bishop’s question, which reappears as the poem’s epigraph.

Because our being in the world is not
A busride through darkest night unless
We stall midway with our ambivalence,

A stuttering, fortitude disrupted
As the wind dispels our diesel spume.
Because no one deserves another home.

Because by asking we assure ourselves
The answer’s plain, as children entertain
Themselves with riddles that can’t be solved.

There is also, says Longenbach, “a longing / To revoke the question posed” (Longenbach 62).

In Act IV of *The Tempest*, to return to that play for a moment, it is Caliban who interrupts Prospero’s masque, suddenly dispelling the romantic illusion, which in turn precipitates Prospero’s famous speech to Ferdinand. Bishop’s moose, I would suggest, constitutes a device that likewise functions to interrupt the masque-like journey of the passengers on the bus, and vex

their minds; but the moose does not threaten them with disorder and death. Reality of some kind is implied, but Bishop evades the complete truth; and her question, I argue, amounts to a capitulation to the urge to order found in Bradstreet's "Contemplations," surrendering to the opaque cultural media that her own Crusoe looks through, giving way to the bliss that, in fact, her other poems question. In this poem, at any rate, she wants, in the words of Simon Schama regarding the intention behind his *Landscape and Memory*, "to show . . . that the cultural habits of humanity have always made room for the sacredness of nature. All our landscapes, from the city park to the mountain hike, are imprinted with our tenacious, inescapable obsessions" (Schama 18). So too this oft-read and commented-on poem by Elizabeth Bishop appears imprinted with like-minded obsessions. But it bends the knee to its own artifice, like a park, like the moose it asks us to revere. It makes a union of culture and nature but on the former's terms, something which Bishop manages admirably to avoid in, say, "Crusoe in England." Even though the battered bus wends its way inland from the sea, there is a puzzling absence of the recognition that culture originates *in* nature, and that nature is indifferent, cool to that fact. Here, instead, is a nature that is gentler, more approachable, precipitating joy, *for* us, *for all* of us. It implies, as Schama seriously argues, that we do not have "to trade in our cultural legacy

or its posterity,” which is fine as far that goes, but the danger is one Schama recognizes as well, that this might entail a “facile consolation” (Schama 18).

Chapter 6

Amy Clampitt “Let There Be Sundews”

We have already noticed, in Chapter Three, Amy Clampitt’s “conversion of energies,” her experience of Grace so that she “was now a churchgoer,” the way having been “prepared by exposure to music and painting, as well as to the writing of the likes of Dante, Donne, Hopkins, and (I dare say) T.S. Eliot” (*Predecessors* 103). Not just Eliot, but other twentieth-century poets had also returned to institutional Christianity—most notably perhaps, W.H. Auden. For Clampitt, as for Auden (C.S. Lewis also comes to mind), this conversion was not merely a gesture, but rather a confirmation of what she had already begun by tracing and plumbing “the sorrow / of things moving back to where they came from” (*CPAC* 25). Simply to look behind her was not enough; she wanted also to *be* there as far as she could, to write from the point of view of the “landscapes of untended memory” (*CPAC* 43). Christianity, she conceded readily, had “its institutional horrors” but it nonetheless bore witness to what for Clampitt was fact: “that what is most

real is the incorporeal,” which is “here and now” (*Predecessors* 106).⁶⁴ She took note of the modern physicists bearing this out in science (106), even as she was translating Canto IX of Dante’s *Inferno* and, in the same volume, which would be her last, wondering about the “uncodified,” her term in one late poem, “Bayou Afternoon,” for that which lies beyond nature (*CPAC* 393).

For a twentieth-century Christian believer to be curious about such things is, one would think, a little risky, yet Clampitt followed her instincts. To delve “beyond / the surf-roar on the other side of silence / we should die of (George Eliot / declared) were we to hear it” is to risk finding nothing, especially when one is already cognizant that “Many / have already died of it” and that, on top of this, nature itself contains horrors (*CPAC* 108). In various places in her poems, Clampitt makes this latter fact abundantly clear, from the “Serengeti lions” of “Good Friday” looking up from their bloody kill, to the “forked lightning’s split-second disaster” found in “Meridian” (*CPAC* 68 & 18), both early poems but still true to Clampitt’s refusal to romanticize nature. Going into and then beyond nature is a central task for Amy Clampitt. It is found everywhere in her poetry. It is ubiquitous; it is

⁶⁴ Or, as Helen Vendler observes, “Clampitt, while recognizing the same tyrannies and historical corruptions in the pursuit of the absolute which so dismay Bidart, preserves a sense of the undamaged conscience reborn among human beings” (Vendler 111).

what she does, and it is ironic that she does it at all, since she never comes back from her forays and explorations preaching a gospel. What, instead, she appears to invoke time and again is what Robert Bly admires in Lorca, and what Lorca called *duende*, “the sense of the presence of death”:

Duende involves a kind of elation when death is present in the room. It is associated with “dark” sounds; and when a poet has duende inside him, he brushes past death with each step, and in the presence associates fast . . . (Bly 49)

Clearly this is what Clampitt does as well (and is something she shares with Anne Bradstreet) perhaps in part because of her advancing age at the time her poems began to appear in public.⁶⁵ And by the time she was writing “Sed de Correr,” Lorca was weighing on her poetic imagination, Lorca who (as Bly quotes him) remarked, “The magical quality of a poem consists in its being always possessed by the duende, so that whoever beholds it is baptized with dark water” (Bly 50).

This is an apt image for what Clampitt does, especially in her final volume, *A Silence Opens* (1994), where at least half of the twenty-eight poems attempt the depths of nature’s dark water, invoking *duende*. Death, writes J.D. McClatchy, is “the subject that has consistently animated [Clampitt’s] work” (McClatchy 312). If in an earlier piece like “Savannah,”

⁶⁵ And as she told Patricia Morrisroe in 1984, “I have to make up for lost time . . . Younger poets have several decades to produce their life’s work. I don’t” (Morrisroe 47). J.D. McClatchy adds:

she could write of “A stillness / out there . . . a dim, large, / smothering, / incessant shrug” (*CPAC* 318), she would in her last work return fearlessly to this theme again and again. In “Bayou Afternoon,” watching a bird “called the spoonbill, back from / a rim known as extinction,” she sees

the airs and
vapors had grown monumental,
their huge purple a flickering

testament to, at the rim we
necessarily inhabit, a happenstance
still brimming, still uncoded. (*CPAC* 393)

In “Eighty-Nine,” she has “inklings / of undoing . . . having made one’s peace with / whatever the elements can do.”

Or almost.
For beyond that peace is the shape of
calamity nobody is ever
ready for. (*CPAC* 408)

And in “Homeland,” a remembered storm cellar called “the Cave” was “witness . . . to unmitigated terror,” brought on by the howling gale outside (418).

Yet by attempting forthrightly to investigate nature, and with that the Christian hope of transcendence, Clampitt also delineates the parameters of human culture and history, consistently finding their roots in the very

“She was born in 1920, and even in a country with many famously belated debuts (by Whitman, Frost, Stevens), hers at sixty-three seemed remarkable” (McClatchy 311).

mystery she sets out to explore. “[A] wilderness swallows you up,” she writes in an early poem about the carnivorous plant, the sundew, although she does not, like Bradstreet, try to control the experience via poetic form or ideology (CPAC 15). Instead, Clampitt allows such experience to shape form and encounter faith, without throwing away either.⁶⁶ Simultaneously, she neither overturns the old creeds of the Church or attempts to revise what she finds in nature, making it acceptable to her or to her audience. What she does do, however, is to uncover questions about how things specifically human—things as various as remorse, barbed wire, landfill, and syntax—are related to, rather than separate from, nature, and how this fact needs to be *remembered*. History does not exist in some absolute textbook; it is, rather, “the shadowy predatory tentshow” (CPAC 375) that has risen within us, and which we conjure out of our botched memories and imaginings of the past, our predilection for telling stories.

In this chapter, then, the project is threefold: first, to set forth Clampitt’s approach to the natural world, particularly in the poems with which she opens *The Kingfisher*, poems that constitute not only approach, but reapproach and walking in, and that announce a pattern found throughout

⁶⁶ In this, J.D. McClatchy is right when he states: “she is not, strictly speaking, an overly ‘formal’ poet One gets the sense from Clampitt’s poems of both attention paid and amplitude given” (McClatchy 314).

her body of work; second, to notice the human artifacts that, for Clampitt, find both their source and end in nature, undermining the notion that the human world, with its “winking imaginary map that leaps / from the minds of the computer programmers” (CPAC 137), is an unrelated entity, and not “fabricated through accumulating tradition to stand in the place of natural, biological, inherent ways of being, those ways having been abrogated by the culturing process” (Livingston 10); and, finally, to observe and analyze Clampitt’s theology, what J.D. McClatchy calls “Her religious temperament, which seeks both to accommodate the world and transcend it” (McClatchy 312), noticing how she brings both God and nature to the poetic table, and hence closes in on the problems faced by Anne Bradstreet and Elizabeth Bishop.

I.

Approach to nature is central to “The Cove,” the first poem in *The Kingfisher* (CPAC 5). Here Clampitt acknowledges her predecessors and proclaims her major themes: westward movement and the dynamic relationship between nature and culture. If the import of Mozart and Marianne Moore is made explicit in the opening lines, the influence of Elizabeth Bishop is made hardly less unequivocal in the portrayal of setting: “the snug house” next to “a

pavement of ocean, at times / wrinkling like tinfoil, at others / all isinglass flakes, or sun-pounded / gritty glitter of mica." These are lines that clearly give the nod to poems such as "At the Fishhouses," "The End of March," and "The Fish." The setting is, however, all Clampitt's. She begins the poem, and hence the whole of her *oeuvre*, "Inside the snug house" to which Bishop, in "The End of March," imagines retiring, and it is from this place that Clampitt studies the natural world, working outwards from the civilized interior:

Inside the snug house, blue willow-ware
plates go round the dado, cross-stitch
domesticates the guest room, whole nutmegs
inhabit the spice rack, and when there's fog
or a gale we get a fire going, listen
to Mozart, read Marianne Moore, or
sit looking out at the eiders, trig
in their white-over-black as they tip
and tuck themselves into the swell, almost
as though diving under the eiderdown
in a *gemütlich* hotel room at Innsbruck.

This is no "crypto-dream house," boarded-up and viewed wistfully from the outside, its interior a matter for conjecture, but a real one where Clampitt and company relish the details of domesticity, cheerful and cozy as an Austrian hotel room. The opening stanza is replete with the civilized, the modern urbanity of the eastern seaboard, extending the *gemütlich* of the Old World. Clampitt uses the same word Huxley does in his scathing criticism of

Wordsworth's view of nature, except that she employs the word to describe the view from the civilized interior. Every object and action within the house has its niche, from the plates encircling the top of the wall to the activities scheduled during inclement weather.

The second stanza, however—and also the second sentence—turns this world abruptly on its head:

At dusk we watch a porcupine, hoary
 quadruped, emerge from under the spruce trees,
 needle-tined paddle tail held out straight
 behind, as though the ground were negotiable
 only by climbing, to examine the premises,
 and then withdraw from the (we presume)
 alarming realm of the horizontal into
 the up-and-down underbrush of normality.

Here Clampitt signals her roller-coaster ability to realign her sensual perspective, suddenly and without warning, with what she approximates in nature. The field of vision of the human world she inhabits, the relative normality that she ushers us into quite comfortably in the first stanza, is abruptly abolished to be replaced with the porcupine's prickly, vertical world view, which in turn gives way to that of a turtle "as it hove eastward, a covered / wagon intent on the wrong direction." The turtle, observed now "From the sundeck, overhung by a gale- / hugged mountain ash, limbs blotched / and tufted with lichen," reinforces the non-human perspective as Clampitt playfully projects on to it a common American motif.

The poem's four stanzas, each one constituted by a single sentence, transfer spatial perspective from "Snug house" to "spruce trees" to "sundeck" and then, finally, to "the rocks" on the shore at "low tide." The outward thrust into the cove itself brings point of view to bear on the sea, presaging the poet's "epic theme," her backward and eastward gaze. The language also indicates that nature has its own culture: that indeed nature is always organizing itself into patterns, albeit patterns on which humans project the designs with which they are most familiar. Hence, says "The Cove," when we look, we domesticate, we "bring [nature] into our house" (Livingston 15), or vice-versa—we bring our interior, domesticated world with us into nature. So, in the final stanza, we see "a pavement of ocean, at times / wrinkling like tinfoil." But then Clampitt carefully proceeds beyond the Bishopian imagery to something that "can't be looked at," though the sea is still initially likened to the familiar: "a curtain wall just frescoed / indigo." The indigo, however, becomes "so immense a hue" it surpasses restraint and cannot be observed, while the lighthouse that "pulses, even / in daylight," can nonetheless, it is implied, still be seen. The final two lines, "in daylight, a lighthouse, light- / pierced like a needle's eye," emphasize the brightness of the lighthouse standing over the cove; but even this condensation of light, with the word *light* thrice repeated in the penultimate line, does not preclude observation.

Three more sentences make up the respective three stanzas of “Fog,” which follows “The Cove” and whose subject literally envelopes the former light and “immense” blue down by “the rocks”: “A vagueness comes over everything, / as though proving color and contour / alike dispensable.” The lighthouse is now “extinct,” the “houses / reverting into the lost / and forgotten.” The fog is “the / universal emulsion” that takes everything into itself, changing even the ocean, formerly “like tinfoil” or “all isinglass flakes, or sun-pounded / gritty glitter of mica,” to a different order of sensory experience: an Emersonian “mumble.” Again Clampitt disorients by revealing how the usual markers of experience get obviated or confused, as Melville does in the Mast-head chapter in *Moby-Dick* or as Bishop does in the dizzying dream reported at the close of “The Unbeliever”: “The spangled sea below wants me to fall. / It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all” (CP 22).

Here Clampitt not only reverts to the tactile and auditory, she grafts vision on to them, creating out of fog a form of synaesthesia. Next to the ocean’s “mumble” are “panicked / foxtail and needlegrass, / dropseed, furred hawkweed.”

Opacity
 opens up rooms, a showcase
 for the hueless moonflower
 corolla, as Georgia

O'Keefe might have seen it,
 of foghorns; the nodding
 campanula of bell buoys;
 the ticking, linear
 filigree of bird voices.

Far from limiting experience, fog “opens up rooms,” providing a “showcase” in the now figurative inner house of experience that has been subtly transposed from the “snug” one of the previous poem. The moment approaches the transcendental, the poet imagining how O'Keefe might paint the sound of foghorn as the inner whorl of a flower without hue, replacing the immensity that “can't be looked at.” Associating fast, Clampitt couples “nodding” with “campanula,” “ticking” with “filigree,” and thus also condenses not only sense experience but nature and culture: bell buoys become bell-shaped flowers; bird voices evoke the delicate tracery of gold and silver.

If “Opacity / opens up rooms” in “Fog,” the return of light in “Gradual Clearing” reveals “a texture / not to be spoken of above a whisper.” In a single sentence, Clampitt completes the opening trilogy of poems about facing eastward toward the Atlantic, each with its own outward-thrusting movement from the known to the unknown. Point of view in this poem is towards “the half-invisible / cove” as “the fog / wrung itself out like a sponge / in glades of rain.” As the fog gradually lifts, and vision is restored,

perspective, signalled by the use of metaphor grounded in the human world, is also regained, but only to be taken away again. The fog lifts in “wisps and scarves”

disclosing
 what had been wavering
 fishnet plissé as a smoothness
 of peau-de-soie or just-ironed
 percale, with a tatting
 of foam out where the rocks are.

Using syntax that mimics the pucker and “tatting” of experience, Clampitt relies on exotic textile metaphors to correlate to restored vision: “plissé,” “peau-de-soie,” and “percale” provide an alliterative trio of materials that evoke the slow smoothing out caught by the female eye. Ironically, however, this moment in which vision is regained is also one where the tactility invoked in “Fog” is inexorably lost in the inarticulate:

a texture
 not to be spoken of above a whisper,
 began, all along the horizon,
 gradually to unseal
 like the lip of a cave
 or of a cavernous,
 single, pearl-
 engendering seashell.

The end of “Gradual Clearing” and the beginning of “The Outer Bar,” which follows, naturally merge with one another. As the former poem closes with an opening into both the unknown beheld in nature and the

historically-known found on the eastern horizon, it also constitutes a natural segue into the poet's account of an offshore foray. The image of "the lip of a cave" anticipates exploration of the unknown just as the alternative lip "of a cavernous, / single, pearl- / engendering seashell" recalls the line with which Bishop paradoxically closes "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance": "—and looked and looked our infant sight away." And indeed, the act of entering, of stepping into, the unknown is what "The Outer Bar" begins with:

When through some lacuna, chink, or interstice
in the unlicensed free-for-all that goes
on without halt out there all day, all night,
all through the winter,

one morning at low tide you walk dry-shod across
a shadow isthmus to the outer bar.

As Clampitt observes in a note on the poem, the bar refers to "a bar island off the coast of Maine" precariously attached by a reef to another, inner bar. She quotes Louise Dickinson Rich: "But you can't stay very long. The minute the tide turns you have to start back" (*CPAC* 435). Hence, "lacuna [the empty spot in bone or tissue], chink, or interstice" constitute the figurative, transient portals for the poet's venture beyond shoreline and inner bar, and into "the unlicensed free-for-all," the oceanic ditch that so troubled and entranced the settlers of Anne Bradstreet's era.

This is a poem replete with Lorca's *duende*, with the ominous side of American Transcendentalism found in Herman Melville. Crossing the "shadow isthmus to the outer bar," the poet becomes a pilgrim who, on entering the wilderness, knows that, except for a few artifacts, she leaves the human world "Back in the village." The speaker's world is relinquished at the "shadow isthmus" with its "dry-shod" crossing, after which "you find yourself, once over, sinking at every step / into a luscious mess—"

a vegetation of unbarbered, virgin, foot-thick
velvet, the air you breathe an aromatic
thicket, odors in confusion starting up,
at every step like partridges,

or schools of fishes.

The poet/pilgrim now finds herself in the thrice-repeated "out there": "an element you swim through / as to an unplanned, headily illicit / interview." This is an order of things utterly other than, and indifferent to, the human one, as evidenced by the fate of the made objects found by the speaker: the "familiar portents" that constitute an alien "rim" of reminders, reminders of just how fragile culture is.

So the scene becomes one in which the human is incidental and history is easily obliterated. The "silhouetted shipwreck" foregrounds "The light out there, gashed / by the surf's scimitar," which "is blinding, a rebuke—Go back! Go back!" The warning, of course, is also entirely human,

a projection of panic buttressed by the fact that the shipwreck's history is unknown—"Back in the village / nobody can tell you"—and the speaker's queries go unanswered. Likewise, "the bell buoy hunkering knee-deep in foam" is "a blood-red-painted harbinger" of the "lawless" cosmos "out there."

How strange
a rim, back where you came from,
of familiar portents

reviewed from this *isola bella*, paradise
inside a prison rockpile—the unravished
protégé of guardians so lawless, refuge
moated up in such a shambles!

The irony for Clampitt, as her "mind keeps turning back to look at them," is that ship and buoy are transfigured by the forces of nature into guardians of that order. Established thus in a kind of natural hell, they are "chain-gang archangels" damned to eternal repetition. Borrowing almost directly from Hopkins' "The Windhover," Clampitt describes the "prismatic frenzy" of human artifacts as they "fall, gall and gash the daylight / out there, all through the winter."

The destiny of human culture is stressed again in "Beach Glass" (CPAC 11), a present-tense account of a walk on the beach that not only extends Clampitt's exploration of the limn between land and sea but reflects Elizabeth Bishop's concerns in poems such as "At the Fishhouses" and "The End of March." Both poets stress nature's indifference to human existence

using oceanic imagery. If the sea in “Fishhouses” is “icily free above the stones, / above the stones and then the world,” in “Beach Glass” it “goes on shuffling its millenniums / of quartz, granite, and basalt”:

cumbered by no business more urgent
than keeping open old accounts
that never balanced.

For Bishop the “indifferently swinging” sea becomes a metaphor for “what we imagine knowledge to be,” while in similar fashion Clampitt sees the ocean’s “random impartiality” as signifying

an intellect
engaged in the hazardous
redefinition of structures
no one has yet looked at.

And both poets discover the flotsam and jetsam of human culture—the “lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string” in Bishop’s case; and, in Clampitt’s, a wider array of what she calls “the permutations of novelty— / driftwood and shipwreck, last night’s / beer cans, spilt oil, the coughed-up / residue of plastic.” Bishop’s “over and over” phrase, describing the action of water on these vestiges of civilization, which she uses in both “Fishhouses” and “The End of March,” is itself repeated by Clampitt: “turning the same thing over and over, / over and over.” The territory is so obviously Bishop’s that, like the plethora of empty “mussels and periwinkles / . . . abandoned” on the beach Clampitt walks, “it’s hopeless / to know which to salvage.” She

takes her cue from the ocean, however, for whom “nothing / is beneath consideration,” and finds her motif in “beach glass—“

amber of Budweiser, chrysoprase
 of Almadén and Gallo, lapis
 by way of (no getting around it,
 I’m afraid) Phillips’
 Milk of Magnesia, with now and then a rare
 translucent turquoise or blurred amethyst
 of no known origin.

This passage gives Clampitt her tack, allowing her to veer into her own territory, away from the unique brand of anti-Romanticism created by Bishop—and apparent in a poem like “The End of March” with its cold wind, fickle “lion sun,” and boarded-up “crypto-dream-house” whose bare interior she can only imagine. It is the “process” that Clampitt, by contrast, wants to get to, the thing that “goes on forever,” chewing up the artifacts of human history, if not history itself, and spewing them out again:

they came from sand,
 they go back to gravel,
 along with the treasures
 of Murano, the buttressed
 astonishments of Chartres,
 which even now are readying
 for being turned over and over as gravely
 and gradually as an intellect
 engaged in the hazardous
 redefinition of structures
 no one has yet looked at.

The “process” constitutes the poet’s agenda as well, her “hazardous / redefinition of structures,” her willingness to tread and sift through the same sand Bishop has, yet go beyond the “thick white snarl” of string, the “sodden ghost,” to explore that further. Like the story behind the worn, animistic knife in “Crusoe” or the hymns sung in “Fishhouses,” both of which Bishop more readily and powerfully develops, Clampitt’s beach glass connotes the origin and destiny of culture, and at the same time manifests her own poetic voice and thematic concerns. She is, in a real sense, serving notice: she will follow the wire Bishop sees attaching her dream house on the beach “to something off behind the dunes.”⁶⁷

II.

For Amy Clampitt, this “something off behind the dunes” is God, a God not unlike the transcendent deity worshipped by the settlers of Anne Bradstreet’s era.⁶⁸ The “hideous wilderness” that the seventeenth-century Puritans maintained was in moral opposition to the divinity, and that in Bradstreet’s best-known poem, “Contemplations,” has pattern and embroidery imposed on it from without, is unflinchingly examined by Clampitt. And much like

⁶⁷ J.D. McClatchy sees a strong connection also to Marianne Moore’s “A Grave,” arguing that Clampitt’s use of the word *gravely* is not an accident either: It “is her nod to Moore’s poem; and her sense of intellectual ‘redefinition’ is both a tribute paid and a sly statement of her own terms” (McClatchy 318).

Elizabeth Bishop, Clampitt finds in nature evidence not only of beauty but of the repugnant, the indifferent, even the malevolent—in other words, “the twin oceans of horror and beauty” described by Clampitt’s contemporary and compatriot, Annie Dillard (Dillard 69). Yet Clampitt goes beyond overturning the nature/culture dichotomy, daring to bring the whole problem of wilderness and culture, which so reverberates throughout American history and literature, full circle, back to the “inklings of an omnipresence” (CPAC 292) cast out, lost, or (by some) sorely missed in the twentieth century.

Hence, the two poems that follow “Beach Glass” constitute the endgame of Clampitt’s opening announcement of her own *poesis*, replete with predecessors, which she achieves by portraying her pilgrimage into the elemental stuff of nature. After the prognosis for civilization given in “Beach Glass,” she turns to describing the ocean itself, attending solely to its surface. “Marine Surface, Low Overcast” is another poem comprised of one sentence—one where appearance is reality or, rather, a series of realities, and surface (which continually reflects, refracts, and filters light) becomes depth. The surface of the sea is

a stuff so single
it might almost be lifted,
folded over, crawled underneath
or slid between, as nakedness-

⁶⁸ But also just as obviously connected to, and influenced by, nineteenth-century Transcendentalism.

caressing sheets, or donned
 and worn, the train-borne
 trapping of an unrepeatable
 occasion. (CPAC 13)

But it is also multivarious in form and texture: among other things, a reflection of sky (“this herringbone of albatross”) as well as “a suede of meadow,” “laminae of living tissue, / mysteries of flex, / affinities of texture.” Still, the first six stanzas, tour-de-force that they are, are no mere celebration of the sea, or of its mystery, but an argument with a single point whose force gathers with the momentum of the poem/sentence, and is then released. The ever-changing oceanic qualities are those which, finally,

no loom, no spinneret, no forge, no factor,
 no process whatsoever, patent
 applied or not applied for,
 no five-year formula, no fabric
 for which pure imagining,
 except thus prompted,
 can invent the equal.

Clampitt again uses the word *process*, but this is a different kind of process than the natural one described in the preceding poem. The marine process “goes on forever,” while the human one of manufacturing—of making things—is of another, imitative, and thus limited order, although Clampitt excepts the *artistic* process, making a high claim for its abilities and possible reach.

Its opening lines hinging on the close of “Marine Surface, Low Overcast,” “The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews,” which follows, completes the former poem’s argument regarding the creative forces found in nature, but only to take the reader into what seems a new problem and yet another argument. Instead of surface that becomes depth, this poem details depth with millions of interior, reflective surfaces:

A step
down and you’re into it; a
wilderness swallows you up:
ankle-, then knee-, then midriff-
to-shoulder deep in wetfooted
understory, an overhead
spruce-tamarack horizon hinting
you’ll never get out of here.

The insoluble problem—“you’ll never get out of here”—is not new; it amounts, rather, to the old Puritan dilemma over what to do about wilderness, what to make of nature at its rawest and most unconstrained and all-encompassing: how best to account for it and yet maintain—or in Clampitt’s case, regain—a God worth believing in: “a not-yet-imaginable solstice / past that footstone (O terror) / the unsupported senses cannot cross” (*CPAC* 292). The Thoreauvian Annie Dillard, writing about Tinker Creek, puts a finger precisely on the issue:

I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down.

Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin's—or even the barnacles'. We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit. It looks for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Is human culture with its values my only real home after all? Can it possibly be that I should move my anchor-hold to the side of a library? This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness. Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak. (Dillard 176-77)

Dillard, not wanting to choose the first option, ambiguously settles for the second: "I must go to the creek again. It is where I belong" (179).⁶⁹ The problem here is that Dillard cannot entirely escape the first alternative, that the world is a monster—"I bring human values to the creek, and so save myself from being brutalized" (179)—and this inevitably brings her right back to all the potential for destruction inherent in the West's attitude towards nature. The circle is clearly a vicious one.

Clampitt tries to avoid this, even as she gets further into "this bog full of sundews, sphagnum- / lined and shaped like a teacup," finding in it an ominous reflection of the world above, a reversal of the convention that art holds the mirror up to nature. Here, on the contrary, nature holds the mirror up to the artist; and Clampitt makes herself part of the reflected world she discovers in the sundew:

⁶⁹ Like the Puritans, Lyall Watson clearly chooses the first option in his book, *Dark Nature*.

down there among the sundews,
 there is so much light
 in the cup that, looking,
 you start to fall upward.

Nonetheless, from the dual action of rejecting what she calls the “impassivity”⁷⁰ of Natural Selection and falling upward into the light-filled cup of the world at her feet, it follows that Clampitt also accepts that the First Cause, from which both nature and culture derive their existence, must also “assume responsibility” for the horrors found in nature. The phrase necessarily entails more than making a case against arbitrariness. And this, in a real sense, constitutes part of the “trap” set by the sundew’s millions of mirrors, where the either/or is found—which helps to explain why Dillard calls these alternatives “The Horns of the Altar”:

The creator is no puritan. A creature need not work for a living; creatures may simply steal and suck and be blessed for all that with a share—an enormous share—of the sunlight and air. There is something that profoundly fails to be exuberant about these crawling, translucent lice and white, fat-bodied grubs, but there is an almost manic exuberance about a creator who turns them out, creature after creature after creature, and sets them buzzing and lurking and flying and swimming about. (Dillard 233-34)

Clampitt shares this uneasiness about the nature of the creation. “[S]he is not,” as one early reviewer observes, “merely a ‘nature poet’” Clampitt is concerned with what it takes to survive in the natural world [Her] voice is at once that of a frail creature buffeted by natural forces and

that of a scientist trying to analyze and transcend those forces” (Morrisroe 45). In “Good Friday,” she ruminates more thoroughly on the fact of depravity built into nature itself, and thus, inevitably, into culture as well:

Think of the Serengeti lions looking up,
 their bloody faces no more culpable
 than the acacia’s claw on the horizon
 of those yellow plains: think with what
 concerted expertise the red-necked,
 down-ruffed vultures take their turn,
 how after them the feasting maggots
 hone the flayed wildebeest’s ribcage
 clean as a crucifix. (*CPAC* 68)

The mystery, then, lies in the just-as-real fact of remorse: how did remorse grow out of all this?—indeed, “what barbed whimper, what embryo / of compunction, first unsealed the long / compact with a limb-from-limb outrage?” In her extensive endnote to the poem, Clampitt explains her preoccupation with both Christianity and Darwin’s theory of Natural Selection, “which for many nowadays has acquired an almost theological authority” (*CPAC* 439). Despite—or perhaps because of—the flaws inherent in both systems of thought, Clampitt gravitates towards the claims of both: they take “suffering seriously,” attempting to grapple with the question of evil precipitated by nature, where “silence / still hands down the final statement.”

⁷⁰ See Clampitt’s endnote to “Good Friday” (439).

Yet both also demonstrate the “limb-from-limb outrage” that they try to explain and resolve: “the evolving ordonnance of murder” seems to be as imbedded in systems of thought and belief as it is in the food chain. Religion (capitulating to the state’s penchant for war) and science (passive about such matters) are vulnerable to becoming tools for inflicting the very evils they claim to want to understand: hence Darwin’s “more-than-inkling of the usages / disinterested perception would be put to”; and Good Friday’s role, two thousand years after the death of Christ, “as a therapeutic outlet,” a complex, ritualized means to inoculate that mysterious thing called conscience with “an ampoule of gore, a mithridatic / ounce of horror.” So one mystery, the “remorse in the design of the things,” leads to another, “the iron / of a righteousness officially exempt / from self-dismay.” “Good Friday” begins and ends like *The Kingfisher* begins and ends: on one side with a portrait of nature and, on the other, with the tangled, horrific fact of human society gone awry, which in the poem’s portrayal is first instigated by some prehistoric “innovator . . . unsatisfied perhaps with even a lion’s / entitlement.”

Think, whatever
rueful thumbprint first laid the rubric
on the sacerdotal doorpost, whose victim,
knowing, died without a murmur,
how some fragment of what shudders,
lapped into that crumpled karma,

dreams that it was once a tiger.

Reading into Amy Clampitt's poetry about nature necessarily involves running headlong into the enigma of human culture. Again and again, she puzzles over its existence in the face of nature, finding some emblem of the human that begs definition no less than the emblems of nature—"a lighthouse" ("The Cove," "A Baroque Sunburst"), "bell buoys" ("Fog" and "The Outer Bar"), broken glass ("Beach Glass"), garbage ("Salvage," "The Reedbeds of the Hackensack"), grief ("Camouflage"), "this grid of homesteads" ("The Quarry"), "a chipped flint" ("Imago"), "hydrocarbon" ("Or Consider Prometheus," "The Dahlia Gardens"), a town ("What the Light Was Like"), shopping malls ("Urn Burial"), language ("Losing Track of Language," "Syrinx"), etc.

In "The Woodlot," "Barbed wire / kept in the cattle but would not abrade / the hide or draw the blood / of gales" (CPAC 57). Barbed wire imposed "the surveyor's rule" on the prairie landscape, but proved no barrier

Against
the involuted tantrums of spring and summer—
sackfuls of ire, the frightful udder
of the dropped mammocumulus
become all mouth, a lamprey
swigging up whole farmsteads, suction
dislodging treetrunks like a rotten tooth.

Typically reaching back in time before “the spread” of barbed wire “across a continent,” Clampitt finds in the cellarholes that gave shelter in such storms “the earliest memory,” a vestigial trace of early humans huddling against the elemental forces. This she calls “a blue cellarhole / of pure astonishment” that precedes not only barbed wire but “I/you, whatever that conundrum may yet / prove to be.”

The human scene becomes much darker in other poems, such as “Berceuse” and “The Dahlia Gardens” (*CPAC* 95-96), where Clampitt meditates more explicitly on the horrors of culture in the twentieth century, extensions, it seems, of barbed wire. In the former poem, she sardonically ponders the role of art after the Nazi concentration camps, coupling the act of listening to a cradle-song by Chopin with the now-extinguished “furnaces of Auschwitz,” which tourists visit: “The purest art has slept with turpitude.” The berceuse becomes apocalyptic, and sleep synonymous with moral decay. In “The Dahlia Gardens,” commemorating the self-immolation of Norman Morrison in front of the Pentagon in 1965 (endnote, *CPAC* 441), Clampitt juxtaposes the two systems of nature and culture fallaciously separated in and by a society whose existence absurdly hinges on petroleum. The flowers in the garden, past which “File clerks / debouch into the dusk,” are “parts of a

system that seems, on the face of it, / to be all waste, entropy,
dismemberment," but which is

enjambed

without audible clash, with no more than a whiplash
incident, to its counterpart, a system
shod in concrete, cushioned in butyl, riding
chariots of thermodynamics, adept with the unrandom,
the calculus of lifting and carrying, with vectors,
clocks, chronicles, calibrations.

Nature, argues Clampitt, will continue on completely indifferent to whatever
enterprises humans care to carry on: it will "continue neither / to own nor
altogether to refuse the burning filament / that runs through all our
chronicles, uniting / system with system one terrible mandala."

III.

In the seminal "What the Light Was Like" (CPAC 119), an elegy for Edward
Woodward, a lobsterman, Clampitt extends her reach even farther out beyond
the shore—the "out there" envisioned in the opening poems of *The
Kingfisher*—imagining the lobster grounds as a place outside the pale of
human existence:

maybe, out there beside the wheel, the Baptist spire
shrank to a compass-
point, the town an interrupted circlet, feeble as an apron-
string, for all the labor
it took to put it there, it's finding, out in that ungirdled
wallowing and glitter,

finally, that what you love most is the same as what you're
 most afraid of—God,
 in a word.

This constitutes the farthest point out, the poem having already chronicled the journey “past first the inner and then the outer bar.” The lobstermen are portrayed as mystics of the deep who work in “the core of that / day-after-day amazement,” described at the core of the poem itself. It is only from this far-flung point of view, where *duende* reigns supreme, that the fragility and limitations of human culture become most obvious. Here, indeed, Clampitt implicitly reaffirms the Puritan settlers’ anxieties, their fearsome sense of dislocation, as well as the practical desire to return to the created place called home:

Out there, from that wallowing perspective, all comparisons
 amount to nothing,
 though once you’ve hauled your last trap, things tend to wander
 into shorter focus

as, around noon, you head back in.

The homeward journey towards comfort and order creates an emotional reversal to the outward one, which the lobstermen know so well, into the unknown, where the onset of panic is never far off.

The “out there” takes on greater intensity and depth as the narrator of “What the Light Was Like” reveals how Edward Woodward fails to return

with the other boats that “had chugged back through the inlet.” As the poem elegizes the death of this lobsterman who is finally found, Christ-like, “on the third day” in a “restricted area, off limits for / all purposes but puffins’,” it simultaneously establishes and fulfills Clampitt’s metaphor for poetry’s purpose and destiny:

I find it
tempting to imagine what,
when the blood roared, overflowing its cerebral sluiceway,
and iridescence

of his last perception, charring, gave way to unreversed,
irrevocable dark,
the light out there was like, that’s always shifting—from
a nimbus gone beserk
to a single gorget, a cathedral train of blinking, or
the fogbound shroud

that can turn anywhere into a nowhere. But it’s useless.

The singularly (for Clampitt) simple sentence—“But it’s useless”—emphasizes both the futility and impracticality of trying to imagine what it is like to die, that ultimate “out there” that we must all one day know for ourselves.

As Clampitt cites Emily Dickinson in an epigraph for *A Silence Opens*, “The Outer—from the Inner / Derives its Magnitude—.” “Syrinx,” the first poem in this last volume, re-establishes (as I have already remarked) Clampitt’s precognitive attempt to assail *duende* (CPAC 363). Syrinx,

defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as “panpipe; . . . narrow gallery cut in rock in ancient Egyptian tomb; lower larynx or song-organ of birds,” evokes the inarticulate, the magnitude of the “out there,” as Clampitt compares it to the articulated, describable order apparent in syntax:

Syntax comes last, there can be
no doubt of it: came last,
can be thought of (is
thought of by some) as a
higher form of expression:
is, in extremity, first to
be jettisoned: as the diva
onstage, all soaring
pectoral breathwork,
takes off, pure vowel
breaking free of the dry,
the merely fricative
husk of the particular, rises
past saying anything.

Like poetry at its best, the aria constitutes the exception to the rule of human culture—the ability to reach “those last-chance vestiges / above the threshold, the all- / but dispossessed of breath.” In Homer, it is the “gibbering / *Thespesiae iache*,” which Clampitt glosses in an endnote as a quotation from A.T. Murray’s translation of *The Odyssey* (XI: 34-43) where Odysseus invokes the dead, “thronging in crowds about the pit from every side, with a wondrous cry.”⁷¹ Clampitt also finds such vestiges in nature, especially (as

⁷¹ (CPAC 456). Ennis Rees translates “wondrous cry” as “the weirdest of wails and shrieks, and I turned / A ghastly pale olive with fear” (Rees 174), while E.V. Rieu renders it “a moaning that was

she demonstrates repeatedly) “in the throat of a bird”: “the aeolian / syrinx, that reed.” Here is “air / in a terrible fret, without so much / as a finger to articulate / what ails it,” as Clampitt invokes the widespread, ancient association of both wind and bird with death. What precisely the archetypal bird sings is, to use a postmodern cliché, a “construct,” an imposition of structure:

Is it *o-ka-lee*
or *con-ka-ree*, is it really *jug jug*,
is it *cuckoo* for that matter?—
much less whether a bird’s call
means anything in
particular, or at all.

Syntax comes last, there can be
no doubt of it.

Apart from the obvious avian influences of Keats, Eliot, and Bishop, Clampitt also revisits Bradstreet’s yearning for escape represented by Philomel in “Contemplations,” unconsciously acknowledging how birdsong precedes and presages language (and thus culture with all its constraints and agendas); how language (and with that, again, all things cultural) originates in the inarticulate, which may or may not mean “anything in / particular, or at all.” In the earlier “Notes on the State of Virginia,” the mockingbird

horrible to hear. Panic drained the blood from my cheeks” (Rieu 172). Virgil describes the entrance to the underworld as “a cleft in the flank of the Euboean Rock forming a vast cavern. A hundred mouthways and a hundred broad tunnels lead into, and through them the Sibyl’s answer comes forth in a hundred rushing streams of sound” (Virgil 148).

sings in all weathers, gives no
 heed to the accustomary collection
 of bones, and deposition of them,
 in barrows (since obliterated)
 by parties moving through the
 country, whose expressions were

construed to be those of sorrow:
 ignorant of royal grants, crests,
 charters, sea power, mercantile
 expansion, the imperative to
 find an opening, explore, exploit,
 and in so doing begin to alter,

with its straking smudge and smear,
 little by little, this opening in
 the foliage, wet brink of all our
 enterprise. (CPAC 282)

Perhaps, as Annie Dillard suggests, it is not so much what birdsong “means”
 as what it invites us to ask that is important:

It does not matter a hoot what the mockingbird on the chimney is singing. If the mockingbird were chirping to give us the long-sought formulae for a unified field theory, the point would be only slightly less irrelevant. The real and proper question is: Why is it beautiful? . . . Beauty itself is the language to which we have no key; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code. And it could be that for beauty, as it turned out to be for French, that there is no key, that “oui” will never make sense in our language but only in its own, and that we need to start all over again, on a new continent, learning the strange syllables one by one. (Dillard 106-07)⁷²

A new continent of beauty is, indeed, the subject of “Discovery”
 which, following “Syrinx,” sees Clampitt continuing to reach into the “out

⁷² Thinking along similar lines regarding Clampitt’s “The Field Pansy,” Helen Vendler, in a review of *Westward*, writes, “It seems to Clampitt that some beauty-diffusing impulse in the universe itself

there”—“the actual going invisible”—and juxtaposing that with the familiar, “the cozy mythologies we’ve / swindled ourselves with” (*CPAC* 364). The juxtaposition here is of Walt Disney with manatees, “come upriver / to Blue Spring,” but complicated by both the present and the past: by the liftoff of the space shuttle *Discovery* as well as by Juan Ponce de León’s “discovery” of Florida in 1513. Like the seal in Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses,” which the speaker half-jokingly perceives as liking old hymns, the manatees, inevitably it seems, invoke old stories and images:

As they came up for air,

one by one, they seemed numb,
torpid, quite incurious. No
imagining these sirenians
dangerously singing. Or
gazing up yearningly. (So much
for the Little Mermaid.) True,
the long-lashed little ones
might have been trademarked
Cute by the likes of Walt Disney.

The voice bristles with anger and amazement at the literal world “over that way,” the amusement park whose images (delineating what is attractive and what is not) have been stamped on much of nature, and whose myth of “taking things easy” has a lineage going back to Columbus’s comrade, Ponce

de León, who found the Floridian coastline by way of searching for the fountain of youth.

Yet the poet also wonders whether technology might make “the cozy mythologies” come true: “sun-kissed nakedness / on the beach, year-round, guilt-free / hibiscus and oranges, / fountains welling up through the limestone.” “[W]e keep[/ looking up” to what the celebrated spaceshuttle astronauts might find, just as renaissance Europe created myths of exploration and colonization—El Dorado, the Fountain of Youth, the Northwest Passage. Clampitt wonders whether these are placebos or part of reality. The astronauts—“out of their / element, jacketed, lolling / and treading, the discoverers / soar, clumsy in space suits”—are not unlike the manatees, “lolling, jacketed, elephantine, / on the weedy borderline / between drowsing and waking, / breathing and drowning.” The implication, again, is that culture *is* nature rather than *over against* it. Like the lobstermen in “What the Light Was Like,” the astronauts are priestly and mystic, venturing into the ocean—this time of space—in a craft that Clampitt calls “the fabulous itself”:

the fabulous itself could be seen
unwieldily, jacket by jacket,
in the act of shedding, as
a snake does its husk, or
a celebrant his vestments:

the fiery, the arrowy tip of it,
 of the actual going invisible,
 trailing its vaporous, ribboning
 frond as from a kelp bed,
 the umbilical roar of it
 stumbling behind.

But, by comparison, the manatees cannot be less, and Clampitt's question—"What are we anyhow, we warmth- / hungry, breast-seeking animals?"—rhetorically discards the fallacy that humans are somehow different, or above, the natural order. The poem ends with an image of one of the manatees reaching out "across the wet, warm, / dimly imaginable tightrope," to "let itself be touched," suggesting that there is but one cosmos and not a bifurcated dual order of things or a hierarchy with humans near the top. The image holds out hope, but without the danger of a "facile consolation" implicit in the end of Bishop's "The Moose." Besides the fact that here Clampitt is careful to note that it is a single manatee who reaches out to "discover" the canoe, the poem resonates with enough disturbing truth about nature and culture to obviate any easy conclusions.

"Matoaka," the fifth poem in the collection, continues Clampitt's meditation on Western technological culture, this time casting an eye backwards to the now legendary Matoaka: "A woman's name, though / not the one we know her by, / or imagine we do Pocahuntus, well formed but / wanton, still a child" (CPAC 369). Clampitt's use of the word *wanton*,

like her use of both aboriginal and English place names, highlights again America's genesis in cultural imperialism and genocide (Horowitz 94-95); but it also recalls Bradstreet's subversive use of the same word in "Contemplations" to describe the lives of fish as wild and ungovernable (see 166). The names and stories surrounding and attached to Matoaka, argues Clampitt, "keep changing": from "A king's / daughter as advocate . . . from which / we've since recoiled / (we being history) in favor of / the hidden, discreditable motive, / the flagrant fib." The fib is found in John Rolfe's marriage to Matoaka, which David Horowitz describes as "a political stroke for the colony": "The wedding was followed by a series of treaties between the colony and the Powhatan tribes, signifying their submission to King James and his Virginia deputy" (Horowitz 95). It is no coincidence, Clampitt implies, that John Rolfe "planted the golden weed that one day / would amount to money." Taken to England, Matoaka, "renamed in Christ, / Rebecca," was the "chief showpiece / of colonial bravado."

Beyond this tracing of events, however, Clampitt finds silence in the place names of Virginia and England: and "There in London / a silence opens," this the silence of Matoaka "brought face / to face with majesty, / with empire," acknowledging only Captain Smith, "and Jamestown":

as for his countrymen (in what tone
and with what gesture?), they were a people

that often lied.

Details are few. At Gravesend, readying
for the crossing, aged twenty-one,
she seemingly abruptly
sickened and died.

Clampitt's unmistakable sarcasm finds its height in her indictment of "the shadowy predatory tentshow / we know as history," against which she finds only "Awe," which "is finally / what's durable." Whoever Matoaka was, finally, cannot be recovered: her character is as buried in the accreted layers of "the stories / we tell ourselves" as her bones are in "The chancel of St. George's, Gravesend." Calling this accretion "the omniprevalence of error," Clampitt ends the poem with one of her characteristic rambles:

to stroll
beyond the commemorated
names of Brafferton,

Blair, Wythe, Ewell, past
Crim Dell, down to where
mere water, rippling, preserves
the name of one—

her true, her secret name perhaps,
but that's surmise—the world has heard of,
of whom we know so little: to stroll thus
is to move nearer,

in imagination, to the nub,
the pulse, the ember of what she was—
no stranger, finally, to the mystery
of what we are.

Clampitt's final poem, "A Silence," appropriately completes her brooding over transcendence and *duende* (CPAC 432). The "out there" experienced at the moment of death, as she imagines it, in "What the Light Was Like," is here given the sole focus, as though the speaker herself stands at the terrible limn, ready to describe what before she has heretofore merely pointed towards: "a limitless interiority" that Clampitt associates with T.S. Eliot's epiphanic experience at the age of twenty-one (see her endnote to the poem, CPAC 458) and that Harold Bloom says "seems to have arisen from Clampitt's impulse to converse with T.S. Eliot at his poetic origins" (Bloom 182). Bloom, in fact, points out how "A limitless interiority" "engages the Western trope of the ever-growing inner self" and sees the poem "locat[ing] itself in the blank between "(we shall be changed)" and "a silence opens," calling "A Silence" "the crown of Clampitt's poetic life's work" (Bloom 181-82).

The poem, uncharacteristically lacking Clampitt's usual deployment of the conventions of syntax and rhetoric, reaches intensely for a way to articulate what is "past parentage or gender / beyond sung vocables." Hence it begins with an utterance like the Homeric one Clampitt refers to in "Syrinx," like the underworld she translates in "The Underworld of Dante," or like the "fabrications" interrogated in "Brought From Beyond," where the

poet asks the magpie and the bowerbird, “O Marco Polo and Coronado,”
 where the shapes and forms of existence come from:

where do
 these things, these

fabrications, come from—the holy places,
 ark and altarpiece, the aureoles,
 the seraphim—and underneath it all
 the howling? (*CPAC* 377)

As she also asks in “A Procession at Candlemas,” “What is real except /
 what’s fabricated?” Such questions, for Clampitt, indicate rhetorical
 openings, gestures implying her willingness to believe in the transcendence—
 “a limitless / interiority”—that her last poem explicitly embraces:

beyond the woven
 unicorn the maiden
 (man-carved worm-eaten)
 God at her hip
 incipient
 the untransfigured
 cottontail
 bluebell and primrose
 growing wild a strawberry
 chagrin night terrors
 past the earthlit
 unearthly masquerade

 (we shall be changed)

 a silence opens

This unusual—for Clampitt—open form contains within it another
 parenthetical text that imitates the metamorphosis observed in nature, the
 “transient / greed to reinvest”:

(man-carved worm-eaten)
 * * * * *
 (we shall be changed)
 * * * * *
 (revelation
 kif nirvana
 syncope)
 * * * * *
 (George Fox
 was one)

The parenthetical subtext, where I would argue the poem really locates
 itself, creates a spiritual parallel to the biological transformation of “the larval
 feeder / naked hairy ravenous / inventing from within / itself its own / raw
 stuffs’ / hooked silk-hung / relinquishment,” while the familiar nod to Bishop
 via the word *isinglass* signals another vital subtext, first introduced in “The
 Cove,” which Clampitt is saying, here at the end, has not been forgotten.
 “[K]if,” as Bloom explains, “mean[s] either Indian hemp or the pleasure
 caused by smoking it” and is conjoined with “revelation,” “nirvana,” and
 “syncope” to try to grasp what Clampitt anticipates in her own death. If
 change in nature now becomes an emblem for transcending nature, the legacy

of Elizabeth Bishop remains firmly in place.⁷³ And the “pursuit of the absolute,” to quote Helen Vendler, becomes for Clampitt “a bulwark against the ultimate insufficiency of beauty and history alike” (Vendler 111).

⁷³ “A Silence” also recalls Bishop’s last Poem, “Sonnet,” with its “creature divided” (*Complete Poems* 192).

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