EXILE AND THE NARRATIVE/POETIC IMAGINATION
Edited by Agnieszka Gutthy
Exile and the Narrative/Poetic Imagination

Edited by

Agnieszka Gutthy

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................. vii

Introduction
Agnieszka Gutthy ............................................................................................................. 1

Part I: Exile and the Poetic Imagination

Ovid in the “Wilderness”: Exile and Autonomy
Juliane Prade .................................................................................................................... 7

The Veiled Forms of Absence
Héctor Dante Cincotta ...................................................................................................... 19

Part II: Exile and Identity

Difference, Displacement, and Identity: Three Egyptian Writers of the Diaspora
May Telemissany ................................................................................................................ 27

The “Frightened Smile” of Elie Wiesel’s Narrative Imagination: Jewish Identity and Diaspora
Dana Mihăilescu .................................................................................................................. 41

The Complications of Exile in Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises
Jeffrey Herlihy .................................................................................................................... 51

Fugitive Visions: Exile, Silence, and Song in Li-Young Lee’s “Furious Versions”
Marc Malandra .................................................................................................................. 61

Part III: Exile and Loss

Exile and Maternal Loss in the Poems of Patricia Jabbeth Wesley
Carol Blessing ..................................................................................................................... 77
Table of Contents

Wither Forgetting? Longing and Loss in the Poetry of Tenzin Tsundue
Isabella Orner ................................................................. 93

The Exile at Home: Elizabeth Bishop and the End of Travel
Mary Goodwin............................................................... 103

Part IV: Exile and Loneliness

Exile, Desire, and Loneliness: Harold Norse (of course)
Douglas Field ............................................................... 121

Exiled in the Garden of the Wild Iris
Jennifer Carol Cook........................................................ 135

Part V: Exile and Memory of Trauma

The Language of Exile: From Traumatic Memories to Placebo Histories.
Magical Realism as Therapeutic Narrative in Caribbean Fiction
Eugene Arva ................................................................. 153

Hakob Asadourian: The Armenian Who Always Wanted to Be Armenian
Margarit Tadevosyan Ordukhanyan ....................................... 165

Contributors ................................................................. 181

Bibliography ................................................................. 185

Index of Names ............................................................. 197

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my assistant editor, Tim French for his invaluable help in editing this book.

Permission to reprint the following texts is gratefully acknowledged:


Excerpts from Becoming Ebony, Copyright © 2003 by Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, reprinted by permission of Southern Illinois University Press.

Excerpts from The River is Rising by Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, Copyright © 2007 by Patricia Jabbeh Wesley. Reprinted by permission of the author and Autumn House Press.


Excerpts from Kora. Stories and Poems by Tenzin Tsundue, Copyright © 2002 by Tenzin Tsundue. Reprinted by permission of the author.
Elizabeth Bishop was not at home in the world, but not for lack of places to go. From childhood, the poet was in perpetual transit. Following the death of her father when she was an infant and the permanent institutionalization of her mother several years later, Bishop was shuttled between relatives’ homes in Nova Scotia and New England. Thereafter she spent most of her life on the move, living at various times in New York, Florida, Europe and South America, with a fifteen-year stay in Brazil. In her work she demonstrates an intimate awareness of the subtle or wrenching difference between being home—“wherever that might be”—and being “at home,” however and whenever that might occur. In her “questions of travel” the poet frequently addresses themes of relocation and exile as a way of coming to terms with the past, and the memory of the original home.

“Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be?” Bishop’s reluctant tourist asks in “Questions of Travel,” echoing Pascal’s reflection on the futility of travel. In Bishop’s travel poems, both home and destination are elusive; the reader cannot easily tell where her speakers come from, or where they are headed. But if in her work the experience of travel at once destabilizes and reflects an inherent instability, the matter of home is for Bishop an even more unstable quantity. Her houses are disturbing in their pieced-together nature: for the losses they enclose and seem to make inevitable, and for their sad inability to provide refuge or shelter. The inhabitants of these houses huddle together in incomplete family units. The point of view is often that of children who are abandoned or who experience some inscrutable loss.

Home is for Bishop in fact the beginning of the end, a potent memento mori even in infancy, like “the scream” that hangs over her prose memoir, “In the Village.” If Bishop learns strategies of artistic control through travel, she first learned about loss of control from the experience of home, with its absences, isolation, and grief. Where in travel poems like “Over
The speaker desires to recover the vision of infancy in age—a new nativity for the desiccated heart—in these home poems the inverse prevails: childhood bears within itself the seed of mortality, the weight of age, and the shadow of death.

In “Jeronimo’s House,” an early poem from North and South, home is a “fairy palace,” a “perishable clapboard” affair, insubstantial, fanciful, but strangely inhuman:

my gray wasps’ nest
of chewed-up paper
glued with spit

This might be where Bishop’s Man-Moth would live, if he dreamed in color. Apparently abandoned, this house is no shelter from the storm. When Jeronimo needs to leave—presumably when he is forced out, by hurricane or other impending natural disaster—he takes the trinkets and the bric-a-brac, the “left-over Christmas / decorations” and “the voices of / my radio / singing flamencos,” but “not much more.” Although the speaker/singer chants in a singsong meter of a family with children, no people actually appear in the poem. The furnishings of this home, designed for the absent inhabitants, are odd, fanciful and tenuous:

four blue chairs
and an affair
for the smallest baby
with a tray
with ten big beads.

The solid human element is missing, as though the house could not sustain real life; although the fancy is fed with “wooden lace” and “pink tissue- / paper roses” and “flamencos,” it is neither warm nor strong nor particularly safe. Despite Jeronimo’s insistence that it is “his shelter from / the hurricane,” the place seems flimsy. At night, he says, “you’d think / my house abandoned” but what is discovered on close inspection are not human inhabitants, but the tools of the imagination: “the writing-paper / lines of light / and the voices of / my radio.” What feeds the artist’s soul or imagination’s soul apparently lacks the power to protect the body from disaster.

A different sort of tenuousness disturbs “Squatter’s Children,” from the later collection Questions of Travel. As the poem’s title makes clear, the inhabitants here have only the weakest purchase on the place they inhabit, and the squatter’s children have the weakest claim of all: they will likely inherit only the wind. Here although the children are playfully defiant, laughing at the gathering storm, oblivious to misery and to the voice of their mother, “ugly as sin,” the tenuousness of home is presented—displayed, a “city on a hill”—as a melancholic example of social destitution, rather than the fanciful, carefree site of childhood. Here the insignificance of this family and their vulnerability are reinforced with a description of the children as “speck-like,” tiny, remote, alongside a “speck-like house.” As Shira Wolosky points out, the poem establishes a site that is “domestic and alien, both homelike and homeless” (13).

Their home only a “little, soluble, / unwarrantable ark,” the squatter’s children are destitute of a spiritual inheritance as well. A home more substantial, “whose lawfulness endures,” is not within possibility. Their hold on the world is as tenuous as is their inheritance in this world and perhaps in the next. This ark is no refuge and the “many mansions” promised in their Father’s house likewise prove no shelter from the elements—these offer only an illusion of home. At the harsh mercy of social and meteorological circumstances, these children are “wet and beguiled,” inheriting only “rooms of falling rain,” an unprotected, unsheltering place in the world.

In “Sestina,” also from Questions of Travel, home is as “inscrutable” as are the houses that the child in the poem draws in the kitchen with her grandmother. The family is incomplete, consisting only of a grandmother and child, missing an essential care-taking generation. The house itself is incomplete, reduced to the kitchen.

The title of the poem announces not a confession of painful childhood memories but rather a verse exercise, a formal undertaking. The sestina is an exacting and repetitive form, well suited to issues that obsess. As has been noted, Bishop often used “tight” forms when confronting difficult personal experience, as with the villanelle “One Art.” David Lehman remarks that the success of this poem may be “measured by the poet’s skillful handling of the villanelle’s intricate form in the face of all that militates against order and arrangement” (146).

In “Sestina” the form and the title are the same: a chant, a charm, a stay perhaps against confusion, according to Robert Frost’s definition of poetry; but always with the focus of obsession. The repetitive and hypnotic magic of the fairytale spell is a melancholy litany here—the memento mori that is the child’s inheritance of loss. This is seen in the choice of words repeated at the end of each line in the six stanzas (and then woven together in the envoi) required by the sestina form: “house, grandmother, child, stove, almanac, tears.” Considering Bishop’s diction in this poem, Helen Vendler points out that: “The components are almost entirely
The Exile at Home: Elizabeth Bishop and the End of Travel

innocent—a house, a grandmother, a child, a Little Marvel Stove, and an almanac. The strange component, which finally renders the whole house unnatural, is tears." (97).

In this poem, age and infancy communicate in the language of a sad secret knowledge, inscrutable but potently affecting. Indeed the atmosphere is suffused with tears: the rain on the roof, the grandmother’s weeping, the equinoctial tears (also used for a violent rainstorm that takes place at the time of the equinox), the hard tears of the teakettle, the tears to be planted as foretold by the almanac. But the young drawer of houses neither weeps nor speaks, covering every reaction with drawings of more inscrutable houses. And yet the house is itself alive with secret knowledge—objects like the stove and almanac are preternaturally aware. But no one speaks directly. Communication is roundabout, in the obsessively circular pattern of the sestina. In its injunction to silence and the obsessive repetition of its form, this poem seems to simultaneously uncover, and cover up questions of home, as occurs in the “inscrutable” dialogue of the objects in the kitchen: “/ was to be, says the Marvel Stove. / / know what I know, says the almanac.”

What absences are revealed in these silences? In this poem there are too many houses but no access to them—no communication. At center, they remain empty or barred. It is the infinity of islands that Bishop’s Crusoe fears; an endless repetition of isolating circumstances that are no less lonely despite their relentless multiplication.

In “First Death in Nova Scotia,” following “Sestina” in Questions of Travel, the home seems the domestic realization of Bishop’s earlier “Imaginary Iceberg” in its cold formal beauty. At the center of this home is a “cold, cold parlor,” in which death is on prominent display, with a stuffed loon frozen in death on a “white, frozen lake, / the marble-topped table,” and the dead, white child in his frosty coffin. Here the cost of realizing this perfect calm and quiet stillness is a life; Arthur must die to join the royal family members frozen in portraits above his coffin, just as the loon becomes in death an object of beauty “much to be desired.”

Home in the poem is the site and altar of death. As in “Sestina,” youth is fixed in a paralysis of mortality and sadness. And this is only the “first death” with the promise of more to come. As with the royal portraits on the wall, the realization of an “imaginary iceberg” in a human community provides aesthetic pleasure, but surely no home. The family in the portrait seems to offer a warm welcome to the dead child to join them as “the smallest page at court.” As Steven Axelrod points out, “The family in the portrait is more vital than the real family” (279).

But it is only an illusion of life, not real life. The child in the coffin is unable to make the journey, “his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow.” The second child frozen in this mortality lesson is invited to “come and say good-bye” to her cousin—in effect, to “look and look her infant sight away” in witness to this strangely picturesque memento mori. Here the formal aesthetic perfection of the iceberg reaches its logical, pitiless, conclusion: it is indeed a place unfit for human habitation.

In a poem from Geography III, “In the Waiting Room,” an unremarkable domestic setting widens into a site of universal alienation as a child named Elizabeth reads a travel magazine. And as the familiar collides with the absolutely strange, a child is again made to assume the burden of age, to suffer the harsh and heavy lesson of life’s essential loneliness. The “waiting” begins in childhood; the “end” of waiting, in the “cold, blue-black space” of existential isolation.

The scene is a dentist’s waiting room in Worcester, Massachusetts, with its familiar lumpy residents. In this poem the family structure is again incomplete, with only the child waiting for an aunt. As the child waits, she “travels” to alien vistas through the portal of a National Geographic magazine, and comes face to face with racial “Others” from distant places. But this encounter is no source of wonder or pleasure. The images she views are grotesque and fearful in their suggestion of pain:

Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire.
Their breasts were horrifying.

At the same time there is a sudden cry of pain near her, apparently from her aunt in the dentist’s chair:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
—Aunt Consuelo’s voice—

But in this instant her aunt’s likely discomfort and the painful looking images she has witnessed in the magazine converge in her own throat:

[... ] What took me completely by surprise was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Realization of the common experience of pain—her own, her aunt’s, that of the natives in the magazine—does not, however, engender in her sympathy for the human condition. Rather, this sudden understanding estranges her from others, even from her own body: she cannot trust her own voice.

As frequently occurs in Bishop’s poetry, the potential for greatest instability and isolation lurks in places generally considered sheltering and safe. Home is a place where one is most radically alone. Its embrace fails to shield the child from the “strangest thing that has ever happened.” In this apparently secure place, a plank of reason breaks—not even gravity can be depended upon—and the child falls off the spinning globe into blue-black space. No place is safe; no identity is solid.

In another poem from *Geography III*, “The End of March,” one of her last poems on the subject of home, Bishop’s speaker is something of a sandpiper, strolling and searching along the beach toward another inscrutable house—her “crypto-dream-house”—in which she fantasizes she might be perfectly alone: “I’d like to retire there and do nothing, / or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms.”

The poem contains nostalgic traces of other dreamed retreats. As Lloyd Schwartz puts it, “‘The End of March’ is a Crusoe fantasy of independence and isolation, contented self-containment” (51-52). It also has the suggestion of a Walden retreat, in the speaker’s recitation of its humble, functional qualities. C.K. Doreski calls it “the ultimately heartless fantasy of self-exile. A painfully Thoreauvian kind of imagined luxury” (151). The speaker would spend her days in spartan contemplation and “useless” study:

look through binoculars, read boring books, old, long, long, books, and write down useless notes, talk to myself...

This poem from the end of her career seems a bookend to the earlier “Jeronimo’s House”—less fanciful and fey, but similarly insubstantial, even unreal. Despite the unglamorous nature of this abode, it occurs to her even while planning her occupation of the place that it may be only an illusion: “(Many things about this place are dubious.).”

It is a room, or “two bare rooms” of her own—an escape; a solitary retreat; an absence from the world. It is as prosaic a fortress as one could imagine. A fantasy made minimal beyond objection—perhaps in defense against losses; perhaps as a space to be filled only with imagination.

But even this spartan retreat is out of reach—literally. It is too far away and the day is too cold, and, in any case, the house is not open. After dreaming a space, she acknowledges that for her this “proto-dream-house” is—perfect! But—impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold

even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

And thus we have the trip out, and the trip back: the home the traveler flees and the poet seeks to re-enter. But if a dream so mundane and carefully reduced remains inaccessible, the poem seems to signal the end of nostalgia, and the end of romantic notions of solitude and the search for home. The homes that the poet projects are unattainable. The homes that she remembers were damaged, inadequate, drenched through with sadness.

For Bishop, the end of travel is not home, which may appear “perfect! But—impossible.” Home is more often the dead or empty center which her speakers circle. The center is frozen in memory and inaccessible.

**The Exile at Home**

Questions of home and travel converge in Bishop’s powerful evocation of the exile, a figure embodying both the perils of voyaging beyond the point of no return, and the impulse for homemaking even at the very edge of the world. The exile is a synthesis of the traveler in Bishop’s poems who can imagine no end to travel, and the homebound seeker who finds no solace in the homes she has known.

In the long, late poem “Crusoe in England” from *Geography III*, Bishop’s castaway cannot reconcile himself to the places he occupies, at “home” or elsewhere. Joanne Feit Diehl observed that Bishop converted “the impetus of exile [...] into the vocation of the traveler, whose powers of observation acquire acuity through estrangement” (“Bishop’s Sexual Poetics” 17). It would follow that the greater the “estrangement,” the greater the acuity of vision, and that estrangement is greatest in the experience of exile.

The commonplace that distance enables a truer perspective than, say, proximity—that you need to get away from a thing in order to know it well—has an ironic application in “Crusoe in England,” where the distancing is not merely geographical, and the final result is something other than clarity. In alluding variously to eighteenth-century colonial ambitions, to the Romantic enthusiasm for discovery and solitude, and to
modern disillusionment with the nineteenth century's easy confidence in progress, Bishop distances Crusoe from all of these traditions. The condition of exile thus saturates the spatial, temporal, and psychological dimensions of the poem. Crusoe is not at home on either island; neither is he at home in history.

In “Crusoe in England,” Bishop uses Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Most Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* (1719) as a vehicle for meditation on exile in the colonial adventure tradition. In Bishop’s re-telling Crusoe speaks again from exile, but not on his desert island. He has since returned to England, his “other island,” his native place and putative home, now to him as isolating as the desert island he had washed up on.

Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe is the picture of the confident eighteenth-century adventurer, swiftly mastering his exile as any efficient colonial governor might. The end of the world holds no terror for the ambitious European; it is a testing ground, a site of enterprise. The moment Robinson Crusoe’s feet touch the beach he pours himself into ceaseless activity, building shelter, accumulating a stock of goods, calculating future returns in his ledger books, maintaining his calendar. Self-sufficient, a true believer in the home-instilled notions of authority and social hierarchy, he takes as his natural due mastery of Friday, his “man”—not friend—and the other castaways who wash up on his island. Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism* a parallel between the rise of the novel in England and the rise of England’s colonial empire, pointing to Defoe’s novel as having a central role in both events:

> *Robinson Crusoe* is a work whose protagonist is the founder of a new world, which he rules and claims for Christianity and England [...] Crusoe is explicitly enabled by an ideology of overseas expansion directly connected in style and form to the narratives of the 16th and 17th century exploration voyages that laid the foundations of the great colonial empires.

But Bishop immediately dismantles this tradition of might and bluster by stripping Robinson Crusoe of half his name: In her poem he is only Crusoe, not quite himself, less pretentious, more familiar. In other ways too, her exile resists the tradition represented by his namesake. He is fed up with naming, for one thing, and comments on the arrogance and uselessness of it. Crusoe recognizes the proprietary advantages of naming, but he is not enthusiastic about acquiring new property by “calling” it. Remarking on a newly discovered island he has read about, he says:

> They named it. But my poor old island’s still un-rediscovered, un-renamable.
> None of the books has ever got it right.

Robinson Crusoe, who had the determination to maintain a calendar even years into his island exile, famously names Friday after the day on which the younger man arrives. But in the poem Crusoe merely observes that “Friday came”; thereafter he is simply called “friend.” Crusoe does not use his authority to confer identity or labels or to divide reality into personal claims. Friday simply arrives with his identity apparently already intact.

Crusoe is no enterprising colonial master. A bit of an idler, he is prone to self pity and boredom. He never attempts to build anything useful and what he does manage to pull together is purely for his own amusement. With a homemade flute and berry home-brew, he stages a wild Dionysian rite among the goats:

> [...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?

The pagan feel of this drunken celebration contrasts sharply with Robinson Crusoe’s conservative Christian perspective. Convinced that the missionary effort—part and parcel of the effort to spread Western civilization in European colonies—would be one of his proudest achievements, Robinson Crusoe prays for guidance in instructing Friday in Christianity, asking to be “made an Instrument under Providence to save the Life, and for ought I knew, the Soul of a poor Savage, and bring him to the true Knowledge of Religion” (Defoe 220).

In dismantling the colonial mission, Bishop eliminates the most overt traces of Christianity from her poem. When asked in an interview about her decision to use Defoe’s novel, she said that she “re-read it all one night. And I had forgotten it was so moral. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to re-see it with all that left out” (Starbuck 88). If her castaway has any religion, it is that of a bacchanalian pre-Christian.

At dinner with his animal subjects lined up at table, Robinson Crusoe speaks of himself as “absolute Lord and Law-giver...How like a King I
look'd” (Defoe 241). Crusoe by contrast has no authority among the island’s animals; the goats ignore him, “or else they thought / I was a goat, too, or a gull.” His attempts at interacting with the animals prove disastrous, as he discovers when out of boredom he makes over a baby goat:

I got so tired of the very colors!
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.

In his dreams there are hints that his presence on the island is destructive, and that his placid nature masks aggressive tendencies. There is an unexamined undercurrent of menace in *Robinson Crusoe* as well, with the castaway often in danger of his life but also capable of posing a threat to others. Seamus Deane maintains that there is an equation between the imperial enterprise and the adventure genre: “To disguise its essentially rapacious nature, colonialism has been represented in literary, historical, and political discourses as a species of adventure tale” (354). In Crusoe’s experience, his small amusements prove destructive to the island ecology. After the baby goat’s mother rejects it; Crusoe has a nightmare:

Dreams were the worst. Of course I dreamed of food
and love, but they were pleasant rather
than otherwise. But then I’d dream of things
like slitting a baby’s throat, mistaking it
for a baby goat.

Crusoe is an incompetent colonial master, unwilling or unable to bestir himself to conquer and rule. Querulous, doubtful, temperamentally unsuited to command, Crusoe can’t manage to make a place for himself on either island. But where Bishop shows Crusoe to be out of step with the colonial adventurers of Robinson Crusoe’s era, the poet further removes Crusoe from his original source with anachronistic references to English Romantic poetry.

On the matter of the acuity gained with distance, “Crusoe in England” makes an interesting comparison with Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” In likening intellectual awakening to the discovery of new worlds, Keats draws heavily on the romance of imperial adventure. His Cortez commands the grandeur of height and distance, silently surveying a new world from a remote and majestic peak. We are reminded of other Romantic poets like Wordsworth and especially Shelley, who had a fascination for mountains and scaled the heights in order to marvel at distance reaches.

...I 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 word he cannot recall is “solitude,” a romanticized version of the mood that mocks Crusoe’s real experience of solitude as isolation, harsh and dull. His solitude was certainly not blissful, but the irony is that Crusoe needs to return to England and the company of books and libraries in order to find the key to the line, as Goldensohn points out: “Crusoe cannot verify that solitude is bliss until he returns to human society” (251).
In Crusoe’s misgivings about the value of knowledge, Bishop seems to signal a turning away from modern ambitions as she had from colonial and romantic. Crusoe’s anxious relationship with language stems from his disillusionment with his own store of knowledge, and his suspicions that “facts” are in fact unreliable.

Because I didn’t know enough.
Why didn’t I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I’d read were full of blanks.

From Crusoe’s perspective, all claims to truth and certainty are suspect: “None of the books has ever got it right,” he says about his island; “Accounts of that have everything all wrong,” he says of his relationship with Friday. Michael Seidel claims that the only book that got it right was Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (26), but the sense from Bishop’s poem is that not even that book got it right. On his island where language was useless to him, Crusoe developed a profound skepticism about the value of language and intellectual pursuits. Where language was useless, he heard only questions:

The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies
over a ground of hissing rain
and hissing, ambulating turtles
got on my nerves.

It mystifies Crusoe that people elsewhere remain dedicated to the collection and categorization of information. Upon his return to England his compatriots want his island tools for a museum display, but Crusoe wonders “How can anyone want such things” now that “the living soul has dribbled away.” These artifacts are useless as a display of human experience once the purpose of that experience has disappeared. His tools were valuable in real time, but museum time is not real time. The modern penchant for capturing and classifying experience serves only to commodify the superficial habits of human life. Seamus Deane argues that the modern museum has developed from this same compulsion to accumulate quantities of materials and data as substitutes for a more profound understanding of the world. Deane remarks on this habit as he saw it manifested in the works of Yeats, Pound and Eliot:

The whole world culture is ransacked by them for representative images that are deliberately displaced and relocated in the foreign environment of modernity. This procedure is akin to that of the great American collectors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who scoured the world—particularly the European world—in a mania for “culture” and its artifacts in collections that eventually became the core of America’s great museums. The Museum and its commercial cousin, the supermarket, are two of the most characteristic institutions of postmodernism; but they were initially two of the most characteristic images and emblems of modernism. (358–359)

Where Robinson Crusoe finds occupation and solace in the making of lists and catalogues as a method of regularizing experience through language, Crusoe fears endless catalogues as a perpetual torment. A catalogue is language without meaning, lacking human interaction in conversation. He has nightmares of “infinities of islands,” in which he will have to catalogue all the flora and fauna. Bishop comments on the self-referential aspect of this fear in responding to an interviewer who asks if she had intended “to suggest the poet’s duty or his burden”: “I’m not sure. It’s true that many poets don’t like the fact that they have to translate everything into words. There is a certain self-mockery, I guess.” (Johnson 102).

Crusoe plays with words, creating paradox and uncertainty in christening his volcano both “hope” and “despair” (“Mont d’Espoir or Mount Despair”). But his anxieties about language are best displayed in his inability to speak about Friday. Crusoe has had moments of wit and clever insights, but words fail him almost entirely in speaking of his friend. What he manages finally to deliver is unembellished, halting, certainly unpoetic: “Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends.”

The choice of such simple words like “pretty” and “nice” seems to suggest that Crusoe has formed an emotional attachment with Friday that goes deeper than words can reach. Helen Vendler points out that when Friday arrives.

Speechless with joy, Crusoe can speak only in the most vacant and consequently the most comprehensive of words [...] Love escapes language. Crusoe could describe with the precision of a geographer the exact appearances of volcanoes, turtles, clouds, lava goats and waterspouts and waves, but he is reduced to gestures and sketch before the reality of domesticity. (106)

The linguist Otto Jesperson, whose tract on women’s use of language made him unpopular among feminist scholars, maintained that women tend to use words like “pretty” and “nice,” and that that these words, often considered vague and trite, reflect women’s lack of intellectual sophistication and weaknesses of character. But Bishop’s deliberate use...
of such language could be read as both defiance and evasion, particularly in its use by a male speaker. These simple words are evasive in that they constitute silence in the face of overwhelming emotion. Such evasiveness may be necessary, of course, as a defense against "unnamable" homoerotic feelings. The "blanks" that occur in his description of his relationship with Friday may result from frustration and hesitation. Crusoe is neither able to speak of Friday in complex terms, nor speak to Friday; no dialogue is recorded in the poem. Their relationship is not, apparently, built on a basis of language, unlike Robinson Crusoe's command-rich interaction with his man Friday. Nor does he allow others to speak with authority on the subject of Friday and their relationship: "Accounts of that have everything all wrong."

As Crusoe's perspective broadens, his exile enlarges to include not only geographical isolation but historical as well. The question remains as to where, or when, Crusoe was ever at home. One of the most puzzling statements in the poem is Crusoe's offhand remark about his "home-made" instruments: "Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?"

This seems equal parts irony and despair. If we take Crusoe at his word it's an ominous statement, given Bishop's poetic oeuvre on the subject of home as well as her biographical circumstances. Crusoe is both homemade and homeless, a home-made exile. Is it that circumstances beyond our control—the family or state we are born into, for instance—render us either able to make a home in the world, or permanent exiles? Here as elsewhere in her poetry, Bishop seems to suggest that homemaking is a compulsive human tendency, yet a futile one. The occupation of travel can be pleasant and instructive and may even yield material for poetry, but home itself is undiscoverable, near or far. The world is no home. One is never guaranteed a safe house, nor protection against loss. Crusoe's last words are of Friday: "—And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March."

The last refuge of the homeless is in love but if that too is lost, exile is complete, and all meaning "dribbles away." The best one can manage, Bishop suggests elsewhere in poems like "One Art" and "Sonnet," is to reconcile oneself to inevitable solitariness. To apprentice oneself to loss as if it were an art, and to convince oneself, as "The Gentleman of Shalott" manages so cheerfully, that "Half is enough."

---

Notes


3 At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." John 14:2-6, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Herbert G. May et al., eds. (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 1308.


5 According to Deborah Cameron, Jesperson's "notorious" chapter on "The Woman" in Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin "encapsulates, albeit with a scholarly gloss, the received wisdom amassed over more than a century. Its main motifs will be depressing familiar: women speakers and writers are, it appears, conservative, timorous, overly polite and delicate, trivial in the subject matter, and given to simple, repetitive or incomplete/illlogical sentences structures." "Introduction," The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader (London: Routledge, 1990) 22.
Baldwin for the Writers and Their Work series (Northcote House Publishers). He has published articles on American literature and culture in Callaloo, Literature and Theology, Genre and the Guardian.

Mary Goodwin is an Associate Professor of English at National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei, where she teaches courses in American literature, the history of Western literature, the novel and travel literature. She is currently working on a book length project on expatriate Western writers in Asia.

Agnieszka Gutthy is a Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Southeastern Louisiana University. Her research interests include comparative literature, literature in exile, European minority languages and cultures. She has published essays on Polish, Kashubian, Spanish, and Basque literatures. Her most recent publication is Literature in Exile of East and Central Europe (Peter Lang, 2009).

Jeffrey Herlihy holds a doctorate from Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Puerto Rico. His current research investigates the role of place in expatriate and immigrant life, literature, and the arts, with particular emphasis on the psychological implications of social displacement.

Marc Malandra received his education in the College of Creative Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, U.C. Davis, and Cornell University. He has published poetry in over two dozen journals, including Pacific Review, Poetry Northwest, and Puerto del Sol, in addition to articles on Li-Young Lee and Elizabeth Bishop. He is currently and Associate Professor of English at Biola University, where he teaches American literature and critical theory.


Isabella Ofner is a Doctoral candidate at the Centre of Postcolonial Writing at Monash University, Australia. Her fields of research include postcolonial studies and South Asian literature with particular focus on Tibetan diasporic writing. Her dissertation examines the issues of memory, nationalism and the sacred as represented in Tibetan diasporic female autobiographies.

Juliane Prade is a Ph.D. candidate as well as faculty member in the Department of Comparative Literature at the J.W. Goethe Universität, Frankfurt. She is working on a dissertation about philosophical and literary autobiographical language in Aristotle, Augustine, Benjamin, Joyce, and Nabokov. Her further research interests include literary exiles, the relation between poetic language and its conceptualization in rhetoric.

May Telmissany is an Egyptian-Canadian novelist and Assistant Professor of Arabic Studies at the University of Ottawa. She has published novels and short story collections in Cairo and Beirut, some of which were translated into English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, and Dutch. Her novel Duniazad won the State Prize for the novel in Egypt in 2002. The English translation by Roger Allen was short listed for the British Independent Prize in the same year. Her scholarly work includes numerous publications on the representation of the popular neighborhood in cinema, Egyptian film and literature, and the artistic productions of the Arabs of the Diaspora.

Margarit Tadevosyan Ordukhanyan holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from Boston College. Born in Yerevan, Armenia, she is the author of numerous essays on bilingualism and exile in literature as well as hyphenated cultural identities in literature. She lives in New York, where she teaches English and Comparative Literature.