

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

P.O. Box 138, Great Village, Nova Scotia B0M 1L0

Volume 8, Issue 1

NEWSLETTER

Spring, 2001

Editorial

Here are two gifts at parting. Perhaps they will suggest or add to our reading of two of Bishop's poems.

The first involves that marvelous stove in "Sestina". In an earlier *Newsletter*, we found a possible illustration of it, and proposed that Bishop's "Marvel" is at least as literal as it is literary. Here is another illustration. In 1940, the Canadian painter, Carl Schaeffer, received a Guggenheim Fellowship (the first to be awarded to a Canadian). He spent his Guggenheim year, 1940-1941, in Vermont. Among the works he did there are two versions of watercolours he entitled "Farmhouse Stove in Mrs. Robert's Kitchen, Beaver Meadow, Vermont". They depict a nineteenth-century baroque wood stove, with side hot water tank, embellished with cast iron intricacies of sun-rays and flourishing vines. On the oven door are the words "Paris Marvel". One of Schaeffer's watercolours of this stove is in the collection of the Hopkins Center Art Gallery at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.¹

The second of my gifts involves Bishop's "Sandpiper" and Northrop Frye. We know Bishop and Frye had lunch together at Harvard on May 1, 1975. Frye was there to deliver one of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures, which he later published as *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. "The two immediately took to each other," writes Brett Millier, "and Elizabeth considered paying him a visit in Toronto."² One wonders whether a strangely serendipitous or deliberate allusion in "Sandpiper" entered their thoughts or conversation: "in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake". Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*,

published in 1947 ("Sandpiper" was completed in 1962), contains this sentence: "No student of Blake can fail to be deeply impressed by the promptness with which Blake seizes on the machine as the symbol of a new kind of human existence developing in his own time."³ The chapter from which this quote is taken is entitled "The City of God". Bishop's sandpiper very obviously both is and is not *Actitis macularia* (Linnaeus), which, as Frank Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America* tells us, "winters southward to Brazil". Among other identities, it may, therefore, even share one with Northrop Frye.

My two gifts have their purposes (gifts usually do). I hope they make you smile. But I also hope they help to confirm a couple of the principles upon which the first fourteen issues of the *Newsletter* have been based. The first is that Bishop's work is part of a border-crossings culture in which Canadian and American fact and feeling meet, contradict, or confirm each other in most complex and subtle ways. Any interpretation of Bishop's work which is slovenly or superficial about its Canadian sources and aspects is at best a diminished, at worst an inaccurate, interpretation. The second principle is that Bishop's work must not be subjugated to the fashionable templates of industrialized reading (especially the academic varieties with their heavy machinery of brand name critics, their self-congratulatory niche markets, and their technocratic vocabularies of authoritarianism, evasion, and dismissal). Bishop wrote to Randall Jarrell in 1950: "...I am so sick of Poetry as Big Business..."⁴ Familiar and welcome to her on the other hand, I believe, would be the fact that most of the Nova Scotian activity concerning her work has been impelled by non-academics,

by people who find her work to be an illumination and transfiguration of their own places and times; and if, for them, those places and times as treated by Bishop reach somewhere that resembles eternity, so much the better.

Perhaps these two principles will be as useful to my editorial successor or successors as they have been to me. I have decided to step down. It is the right moment to move on and allow the *Newsletter* to be re-thought. I am deeply grateful to Sandra Murphy, who, until being transferred to another part of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College, served as secretary of the former Humanities Department (now subsumed into the Business and Social Sciences Department), and who also acted as the *Newsletter's* layout and editorial assistant for six years. I thank associate editors Jeffery Donaldson and John Barnstead, whose articles, advice, and friendship have always been among the great delights of being editor. My final thanks are to all the other *Newsletter* contributors and to the members of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia for their support, trust, and enthusiasm. Because of the Society, Bishop's place in Canadian letters has been recognized, and Great Village and Nova Scotia have discovered what almost slipped away. That also is a marvel.

Peter Sanger

1. M. Gray, M. Rand, and L. Steen. *Carl Schaeffer*. Gage Publishing, Toronto, 1977. One of the watercolours is illustrated on page 25.
2. Brett C. Millier. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 101.

3. Northrop Frye. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1947, p. 359. The question is, of course, whether the phrase "student of Blake" entered the drafts of "Sandpiper" before or after 1947. Perhaps good writers simply overhear one another.

4. Elizabeth Bishop. *One Art: Letters*. Selected and edited by Robert Giroux. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1994, p. 202.

* * * * *

News and Information

We are delighted to include in this issue of the *Newsletter* an advertisement for *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place*. It is the long-awaited volume which collects essays originally presented as papers at the Bishop Symposium held at Acadia University in autumn, 1998. The volume will be published in September of this year. Gaspereau Press is presently circulating final proofs, and the book will proceed to press immediately after all of them are returned.

Congratulations to Society member Michiru Oguchi, whose translations of Bishop's selected poems into Japanese were published earlier this year by Doyo Bijutusha Shuppan Hanbai (Saturday Art Publications), 3-31-8 Shinjuku-ku, Nishi-Waseda, 169-0051, Tokyo, Japan (Fax 03-52850732). The book's acknowledgments section thanks many people who are familiar to those who treasure Bishop's work. Michiru's friends in Nova Scotia are

particularly happy that her long and diligent task has reached such a splendid conclusion.

A regular meeting of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia was held in Great Village on Saturday, April 28. Among the main items of discussion was the issue of constructing an E.B.S.N.S. website, possibly as part of an existing website run by Sandra Barry. There was also discussion about the appointment of a new editor and the finding of a new venue for the *E.B.S.N.S. Newsletter*. Members decided that all these matters should appear on the agenda of the next Annual General Meeting. The date of the A.G.M. was set for Saturday, June 9, at 1:30 p.m. in the Royal Canadian Legion Hall in Great Village. Following the A.G.M., at approximately 2:00 p.m., Brian Robinson, Sandra Barry, Deborah Stiles, and Padraig O Siadhail will make a joint presentation entitled "The Road to Londonderry", which will be concerned with Londonderry, Colchester County, its history, and the experience of Londonderry as Bishop knew it.

* * * * *

Two Arts
by
John Barnstead

[John Barnstead is a member of the Russian Department at Dalhousie University. He is well known as a translator of Russian poetry.]

"Poetry is what is lost in translation", Robert Frost remarked slyly, but for someone of my generation and national origin, poetry can sometimes seem to be Frost in translation. Perhaps it seemed so, or came to seem so, to Elizabeth Bishop in 1927, when she wrote "To a Tree". Had she seen, one wonders, the July issue of the *Yale Review* that year, and been moved to respond to Frost's "Tree at my Window"? Or did she learn of its existence only after writing her own poem?

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

For me, who stand behind its framework stout,
Full of my tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves,
To lean against the window and peer out,
Admiring infinites'mal leaves.

* * *

Tree at my window, window tree
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me.

Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
Not all your light tongues talking aloud
Could be profound.

But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swept
And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.²

What a windfall this juxtaposition would be for the poetics of coincidence! Is the grotesquerie of 'grieves' as a pun on 'greaves', for example, to be taken as a criticism of the ambiguities of Frost's 'sash', -- just a saucy sixteen-year-old sassing an elder? Or is this one of those archetypal encounters Poetry is so fond of: two looks... Two Look at Two... two poems translating each other...

Bishop translates Frost again in the very first letter we have [August 14, 1947] from her correspondence with Robert Lowell. She breaks off mid-sentence because she has been called away to see a calf being born in the pasture beside the house. "You come, too", that letter never quite says; instead, it ends by telling Lowell (and us, now) what Frost does not: "The calf's mother has started to moo, and the cow in the next pasture is mooing even louder, possibly in sympathy. It seems that if they take the calf away immediately, then they don't have the trouble of weaning it. It will drink out of a dish, says Mr. McLeod; he has promised to call me when they try it the first time."³

There are some who would say that translators are Mr. McLeods, but I think it is both kinder and more accurate to call them cows in the next pasture. The metaphor is refined by considering other cows in Bishop's poetry: the cow standing in the dugout in "Santarém", say, "quite calm, chewing her cud while being ferried, tipping, wobbling⁴, somewhere, to be married," keeping the Tapajós and the Amazon from intermingling in their dazzling dialectic. Or the tiny cows in the

water meadow in "Poem", two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows, munching their way ever nearer to that crisp and shivering iris - is it shivering with cold, or with fear of being devoured? Frost has his bovinities as well. Any translator on the prowl for those lovely windfall poems that seem at the touch of a pen to have dropped effortlessly from the branch of one language to the stubbled field of another, -- even harder to find than, say, Capote's windfall pecans ("among the concealing leaves, the frosted, deceiving grass")⁵, -- has a visceral understanding of the Cow in Apple Time.

Both Frost and Bishop, I suspect, would object to being called Wobblers, but it is the calm confidence that both display when oscillating between two enormities which is one of their chief affinities as poets -- Frost the poet of the semi-revolution, climbing black branches up a snow-white trunk toward heaven, till the tree will bear no more but dip its top and set him down again, the poet who comes to recognize himself, perhaps, (in "On Being Idolized") in the tottering of that new-born calf, and makes the poem containing it the introduction to his collected volumes; -- Bishop the poet of shadows taken for shallows, mammoth man-moths, the compass needle wobbling and wavering, undecided. Only when they come to death do they diverge: Frost may return if dissatisfied with what he learns from having died, while Bishop's rainbow bird, freed from the narrow bevel of the empty mirror, flies wherever it feels like, unimpressed by the ambiguities of the word 'bound' in Frost's line "I'm bound - away!"

Bishop gives her most detailed characterization of Frost in a letter to Randall Jarrell (February 25, 1965):

[...] I think, if you will take it the way I mean it, that you are the real one and only successor to Frost. Not the bad side of Frost, or the silly side, the wisdom-of-the-ages side, etc. - but all the good. The beautiful writing, the sympathy, the touching and real detail, etc. Also your psychology is, of course, much in advance of Frost's! Not his kind of idealized "lost world" of the small farmer at all - which may look as if it leaves me with nothing much of him left, and yet it does, and if I were a more skillful critic I think I could really write quite a piece on this. You're both very sorrowful, and yet not the anguish-school that Cal seems innocently to have inspired - the self-pitiers who write sometimes quite good imitations of Cal! It is more human, less specialized, and yet deep.⁶

On the other hand, she is not above a wicked epithet: in a letter to Robert Lowell (October 30, 1958) she writes "Frost - the Bad Gray Poet." Her sharpest gibe, though, is tied again to the nature of what is lost in translation. She reassures Lowell about his potential Brazilian audiences (March 30, 1959):

One good idea I think is to have the poems you intend to quote or read mimeographed, to hand out to the audience. They are amazing linguists, of course, but poetry is hard to get the first time. Just the poems - not the lecture itself. Spender made that mistake - gave them the whole lecture to read while he read it and the audience felt quite insulted. I suppose one should just speak a bit more slowly and clearly than usual. (Frost did marvelously, of course - *the Brazilians got his every joke.*)⁷ [My italics]

Bishop's "One Art" is, in its own way, a poem about translation. Here are two Russian versions (one could characterize the differences among Bishop, Frost, and Capote by the differences in the trips to Russia each of them made), followed by back-translations as literal as I can make them:

Простая наука

Забвенье – как проста наука эта!
Предметы исчезают – сами будто,
И их уход еще не гибель света.

Теряй всегда. Смирись со всем.
Пусть где-то
Утерян ключ, истрачена минута, --
Забвенье – как проста наука эта!

Теряй быстрее, больше, и совета
Послушай: позабудь пути-маршруты
Далекие: они не драма света.

Дома последнего моего лета,
А может предпоследнего – падут. О,
Забвенье! Как проста наука эта...

Теряла города и лица: нету
Вселенных и миров; ищу их всюду,
Но и они все ж не источник света.

--И даже ты. (Шутливостью согретый
твой жест люблю.) Тебе я лгать не
буду:

Забвенье – не сложна наука эта,
Хотя и кажется: она – погибель
света.⁸

A Simple Science

Oblivion - how simple this science is!
Objects disappear - as if by themselves,
And their departure is still not the end of the world.

Lose always. Become reconciled with everything.
So what if somewhere
A key is lost, a minute is spent, --

Oblivion - how simple this science is!

Lose faster, more, and listen
To advice: forget ways, distant
Routes: they are not the world's drama.

The houses of my last summer,
Or perhaps the one before - fall. Oh
Oblivion! How simple this science is...

I lost cities and faces: gone
Are universes and worlds; I seek them everywhere,
But even they are nevertheless not the source of
light.

--And even you. (I love your gesture,
Warmed by joking.) I won't lie to you:
Oblivion - this science isn't complicated,
Although it seems: it is the end of the world.

* * *

Одно искусство

Потерь искусство не замысловато;
такое множество вещей изнемогало
потерянными быть, что не беда
увидеть их утрату.

Теряйте каждый день. В темпе
топкаты
потерянных дверных ключей тот час,
где время застывало;
потерь искусство не замысловато.

Потом терять беритесь больше и
быстрее во стократно:
места, и имена, и то, куда
предназначалось
вам отправляться. Ничто из этого
не принесет утрату.

Я потеряла матери часы. И
посмотри! Куда-то
последний или предпоследний дом из
трех домов любимых сник;
потерь искусство не замысловато.

Я потеряла пару городов, мне
милых. И когда-то

присвоенные мною царства, также
две реки и материк;
скучала я по ним, но это не была
фатальная утрата.

И даже потеряв тебя (шутливый
голос твой и мимику,
которую люблю), все сказанное
остается в силе. Ты уже привык
к тому, что потерять – искусство н
е замысловато.

Хотя, заметь, потеря может быть
похожей на фатальную утрату.⁹

One Art

The art of losses is not intricate.
such a multitude of things have grown faint
in being lost, that it is no misfortune to see their
loss.

Lose every day. At the tempo of a toccata
of lost door keys is the hour where time froze;
the art of losses is not intricate.

Then undertake to lose more and faster by a
hundred times:
Places, and names, and where it was
You were to go. Nothing of this will bring loss.

I lost Mother's watch. And look! Somewhere
The last or next to last of three loved houses
vanished;
The art of losses is not intricate.

I lost a pair of cities, dear to me. And a realm
Once acquired by me, also two rivers and a
continent;
I missed them, but it was not a fatal loss.

And even having lost you (your joking voice and
the mimicry
Which I love), everything said remains in force.
You are already used to
Losing - the art isn't intricate.

Although, take note, a loss can look like a fatal
loss.

* * *

Native speakers of English can see, I think, the cost in translation, although the precarious purchase gained can be clear only to someone who knows Russian. Whether one totters on a brink with the generalities of the first, clinging to the beauty of наука ['science'] with its allusion to Osip Mandelstam's "Я изучил науку расставанья" ["I have studied the science of parting"] in his poem "Tristia", or wobbles in the direction of the greater detail of the second (sometimes too great a detail, for the translator, forced to specify the gender of the 'You' of the poem, has chosen the masculine form), gasping at the many different words Russian has to convey the nuances of what we have only the word 'loss' to express, or grasping at them like straws, one cannot but admire the balancing act.

There is a second art, though - not the juxtaposition of "equivalents", as Bishop's and Frost's tree poems might be taken to be, but the one Bishop pursued in her first letter to Lowell. This is the art at work in Uruguayan writer-in-exile Cristina Peri Rossi's short story "El arte de la pérdida"¹⁰, which combines "One Art" with "In the Waiting Room" and takes a quick trip beneath the trans-gendering rainbow (I shall resist the temptation to refer to it as the "Bi-Frost Bridge", and trust readers are correspondingly grateful) to examine the anxiety of the masculine. Peri Rossi, by grasping the nature of the loss of identity in "In the Waiting Room" in the gasped 'oh!', moves beyond the concerns of the word-by-word to those of the Secret that sits in the middle and knows.

Only four of Bishop's poems have been translated into Russian, as far as I have been able to determine: "Armadillo", "Insomnia",

"Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance", and "One Art". An image from the first of these may serve as well as any to represent a last correspondence of the two arts, of writing poetry and translating it:

"the paper chambers flush and fill with light that comes and goes, like hearts."

Why not pair them, as they steer between the kite-sticks of the Southern Cross, with Truman Capote's "...I keep searching the sky. As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven."¹¹

1. Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 192.

2. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 251.

3. Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 147.

4. "Santarém" can be considered a kind of translation of Bishop's remarks in that first letter to Lowell: if we let the calf be the matte white wasps' nest, then Mr. McLeod is Mr. Swan...

5. Truman Capote, *A Christmas Memory*, (New York: Random House, 1956), 15.

6. Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 432. Anna Akhmatova was also put off by what she termed Frost's "farming streak", while Frost thought her "very grand and very sad".

7. Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 370.

8. Translated by Boris Leivi [<http://spintongues.vladivostok.com/Bishop.html>]
9. Translated by Anna Zhdanova [<http://annaz.newmail.ru/LIB/bishop.htm>]
10. Cristina Peri Rossi, *Una pasión prohibida*, (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986), 129-142. English translation: "The Art of Loss" in Cristina Peri Rossi, *A Forbidden Passion*, (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1993), 105-114.
11. Truman Capote, *A Christmas Memory*, (New York: Random House, 1956), 45.

* * * * *

**"My house, my fairy / palace, is ...":
Notes on Bishop's Paintings, "Nova
Scotia Landscape" and "Landscape
with Gray Hills".
by
Peter Sanger**

Emulating Bishop in all her arts, let us begin with apparently limited, literal fact, and see where it takes us. In William Benton's fine book of Bishop's paintings, *Exchanging Hats* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, New York, 1996), there are two reproductions of a watercolour and gouache entitled by Benton, "Nova Scotia Landscape". A reproduction of the entire landscape, measuring only 5¼ x 8 inches in the original, appears on page 17. The second appearance of the landscape, this time a partial one constituting only the right-hand side (from the viewer's perspective, which I will use throughout this essay), appears as the frontispiece of *Exchanging Hats*. This frontispiece also reproduces the right-hand margin and

underneath-the-image portion of the sketchbook page not occupied by Bishop's small landscape. The right-hand margin is illuminated by the strokes of Bishop's trying out various colours, by cloudy hazes where she blotted dry her brush, and by the abrupt scribble of her signature, "Elizabeth". Page 17 offers the work. The frontispiece offers something of the workplace. We will consider both in what follows.

Like all Bishop's paintings, "Nova Scotia Landscape" charms, partly because of its attractive subject, partly because of the joyful naivete which we perceive to be its technique. In the foreground is a stretch of water upon which float two empty, anchored small boats. Rising from the water into a middle foreground is a slope of unkempt, summer-dry pasture grass, about five acres, partially fenced by barbed wire loosely looped from fence posts whose inclinations have started to become entirely horizontal. Spruce trees have just started to invade the pasture. They have already won the field at the slope's crest and the landscape's background. Towards the upper part of the slope, on the viewer's left, is a gray-painted wood church with white trim. Its steeple, built from the ground and part of the church's main entrance, is capped by a distinctive four-sided roof which somewhat resembles a bishop's mitre. At the top of the slope, to the right of the landscape's centre, are a house of white-painted wood and a white barn trimmed with red; both buildings are partially hidden by the way the land lies and by spruce trees. On the far right of the landscape, down by the water's edge is a fishhouse, a roughly built shed used to store nets, traps, other fishing gear, small boats, and whatever catch might be salted down, curing, or drying. Made of unpainted grey boards and shingles, with its eaves and corner trim painted red, the fishhouse in

"Nova Scotia Landscape" could readily serve as an illustration of any one of the five sheds in Bishop's poem, "At the Fishhouses".

This is a landscape of minute particulars, as my description is meant to show. There are even several more particulars I have had to omit for brevity's sake. Despite the primitive, almost childish style of the painting, its particulars are so persuasive that we have no choice except to believe that "Nova Scotia Landscape" depicts a real place. Our first questioning of the painting is: "Where?" Our second is: "When?" For most of us, whatever sophistication we may have acquired and reasoned ourselves into concerning the relationships between life and art, between content and form, between reality and fiction, gives way, in the instance of this picture, to the same response of belief with which children listen to fairy stories which must have happened. We are disarmed into a response which is not pre-modern, modern, or post-modern. It simply is. The triumph is Bishop's. (It may also be ours.)

Where and when, since we insist on knowing, was "Nova Scotia Landscape" painted? In his brief commentary on the painting, Benton notes that it is undated and describes the picture's foreground of water as a "lake". He offers no suggestions as to the lake's location. What he has missed is that the boats on this "lake" are odd ones for lake usage. One of them is a Grand Banks dory; the other, the black one, is an open cockpit trap-skiff, probably with an inboard make-and-break engine, a skiff of the kind commonly used on the Nova Scotia south shore for lobster and other fishing between the First World War and the 1950's. As for the fishhouse depicted in the lower right of the painting, there is no fresh water

commercial fishery in Nova Scotia which would have used such a building. For these reasons alone, Benton's "lake" can only be the sea.

But where? But when? The church steeple in the painting helps us. Its distinctive cap is typical of churches built in the nineteenth century along the south shore of Nova Scotia, from Lunenburg traveling westerly. (The baroque origins of this steeple cap, incidentally, are ones which the exterior and interior architectural paintings of Bishop show she took a particular delight in.) Of the numerous trips Bishop made to Nova Scotia after the breaking up of her Bulmer grandparents' home in Great Village in the early 1930's, there is one during which we know she spent a significant amount of time on the south shore. In July and August, 1946, she stayed at the Ragged Island Inn in Allendale, Nova Scotia. At the Inn she wrote a letter to Ferris Greenslet of Houghton Mifflin, the three parts of which are dated July 24, 26, and 30, 1946.¹ It was at the Inn that she received her first copy of *North and South*.²

Early this May I drove to Allendale. It is about 200 kilometres southwest along the Atlantic shore from Halifax. The nearest large town to Allendale, some seven to ten kilometres south of it, is Lockeport, which we know Bishop also visited. Modern Allendale is a string of fifteen to twenty or so mainly nineteenth century wooden houses of simplicity and dignity, interspersed by several more recently built homes, some of them obviously planned for summer vacations or retirement. The buildings of the village are spaced along both sides of the paved road which is Route 3 for the span of a couple of kilometres. Houses along one side of the road overlook Ragged Island Bay. When Bishop stayed in Allendale in

1946, the community's main livelihood was associated with fishing, largely the catching, processing, and shipping of herring and lobster. Fishing was complemented by mixed farming, lumbering, and activity associated with the railway. Allendale had its own railway station. Bishop probably reached the village by rail. There were direct connections with both Halifax and Yarmouth (the terminus for the Boston ferry). The railway, like many Nova Scotian railways during the last thirty years, has since been dismantled. The Allendale wharf, once served by a spur line and a busy place during the 1940's, has fallen into partial disuse and disrepair. And the Ragged Island Inn no longer exists as a business. It has become again what it originally was in the nineteenth century, a family home. It is now owned by Mr. Ben Pooley, who operates an electronics business in a small industrial building off to one side of the old house.³

Allendale has changed so much, on the outside at least, since the 1940's, that driving through it quickly offers few indications of its connection with "Nova Scotia Landscape". It is only when one walks out on the eroding wharf and looks back towards the shore facing northwest that some semblance of the shoreline and slope in Bishop's painting starts to appear. But that slope is now covered with spruce trees. There is no fishhouse in sight. There is no grey-painted church with distinctively capped steeple. Only by showing "Nova Scotia Landscape" to several local people was I able to confirm its setting.

My main source of information was Mr. Russell Wamback, who has lived in the Allendale area all his life (he is in his early fifties), and has built a house on the small peninsula which Bishop's landscape depicts at its starting point where the fishhouse

stands. Mr. Wamback immediately identified the church in the painting as the United Baptist Church which was built in 1878. He remembers its grey paint and unusual steeple. Locally the church is still called "Gertie's Church", in fond memory of Mrs. Gertie Leslie, organist and choir leader, who kept the church going by main strength of will for many years as its congregation dwindled. The church was torn down in the 1970's. Now only the cement steps up to its entrance and the stones of a small cemetery remain. I had seen them when I first drove quickly by. Mr. Wamback also remembers the fishhouse Bishop depicted. Its former location is now part of his own land. The fishhouse was starting to fall down during the 1950's when he was a small boy. The house and barn in the upper right-hand part of the painting were identified by Mr. Wamback as having belonged to the late Seldon Hupman, from whose daughter Mr. Wamback purchased his own peninsula property. The Hupman house still stands. The Hupman barn has disappeared.

As we examined "Nova Scotia Landscape", Mr. Wamback suddenly said, "She wouldn't see the landscape like that." I had been trying to work out with him where Bishop might have been situated when she painted, and was coming to the conclusion that it could only have been in a boat placed more or less midway between the Allendale wharf and Mr. Wamback's peninsula. "She drew from memory," he said. And he demonstrated that even if the land were cleared of its present stands of spruce, the elevation of the bare slope climbing up from the sea would still have prevented a viewer from seeing all that Bishop's landscape indicates, the full form of the church in particular. Mr. Wamback also pointed out that Bishop had eliminated two old houses which stood to the left and just below the

church in the 1940's. She also had omitted the road, the present Route 3, which had been paved as early as the mid-1930's. It ran directly in front of the church steeple and main entrance. The church was located on one side of this road, the Hupman house and barn on the other. Finally, Bishop's version of the Hupman house omits a small, square, double-storied, gabled entrance tower, which is still centred on the house's long-side, sea-facing wall, the legacy of a time when what happened at sea was more important than what happened on land.

Matched to reality, therefore, "Nova Scotia Landscape" quickly shows as no naïve, casual, exact transcription. As Mr. Wamback and I spoke, especially at the moment he said, "She drew from memory," I kept trying to remember Bishop's lines in "Poem", "life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other. Which is which?" In "Nova Scotia Landscape", life has indeed become memory, with all the fidelities to the real, and deviations from it, which memory seems, of its own will, to impose. Memory has become the art of memory; that is, it has become a painting Bishop composed, not the artifact of passive record which its idiom of primitiveness suggests. It becomes a painting we can read, just as we read the implications and ambiguities of Bishop's poems.

By excluding two houses which should realistically have been in the upper left of the painting, for example, Bishop emphasized the isolation and solitude of the Hupman house and the church. They are poised strangely in tenuous relationship which is both independent and interdependent. By suppressing the road in front of the church and behind the Hupman house, Bishop left open the question of how people

came to or left either structure, and suggested, in fact, that both had been abandoned. Yet the boats on the water (and a third drawn up on the shore by the fishhouse) imply that people are about somewhere. Perhaps they walk so lightly that they need no road, nor leave pathway trace of passage. They are people as light as the glance of the artist's eye and as light as our own glance when we accede to her eye's direction.

I am writing with a certain sense of enchantment. Admittedly, "enchantment" is not in the lexicon of permitted response among contemporary literary critics (although, ironically, it is allowable to scientists who write books on subjects like fire ants and jellyfish). But alternate responses do not take us very far into the heart of "Nova Scotia Landscape". For example, talking about Bishop's state of mind and health in 1946, her alcoholism, and the perhaps entirely irrelevant coincidence that Dorothy Arnold, the proprietor of the Ragged Island Inn, had worked as a nurse in the United States before returning home to Allendale in the mid-1940's, may tell us something about the circumstantial context of the painting, but it does not account much for our immediate response to it. Similarly, neither does speculation about whether Bishop attended Sunday services in the United Baptist Church (her Bulmer grandparents were Baptists), about whether she saw and heard Mrs. Gertie Leslie, or her predecessor, trying to encourage a dwindled congregation, and about whether Bishop depicted the church accordingly in a state of isolation and abandonment.

If the biographical has such limits when explaining our response to "Nova Scotia Landscape", so does a response conducted

through the disciplines of art history. The useful and entertaining selections from Bishop's prose with which Benton ends *Exchanging Hats*, and various passages in Bishop's published letters, give some of the names we might play in counterpoint to Bishop's paintings: Gregorio Valdes, Vuillard, Bonnard, Chirico, Rousseau, Miró, Vermeer, Gauguin. To them I would add Utrillo. In addition, there are the artistic effects of Bishop's long, close friendships with contemporary painters, Margaret Miller, Loren MacIver, and Kit Barker, and of her companionship with Louise Crane, whose mother's involvement in the founding and running of the Museum of Modern Art in New York must have helped Bishop acquire the ease, knowledge, and self-confidence about painterly matters her letters often show.

I do not mean to underplay the importance of these influences and contacts. ("Nova Scotia Landscape" might quite reasonably be spoken of as an early Chirico painted by Gregorio Valdes.) But the eagerness of commentators to demonstrate connections although something more subtle is at work can easily lead to overplaying them. In one of the most extraordinary passages in her prose, a passage which should be engraved in the memory of every critic who reads it, Bishop wrote towards the end of her essay on Gregorio Valdes: "Ancient heroes often have to do penance for and expiate crimes they have committed all unwillingly, and in the same way it seems that some people receive certain 'gifts' merely by remaining unwittingly in an undemocratic state of grace. It is a supposition that leaves painting like Gregorio's a partial mystery. But surely anything that is impossible for others to achieve by effort, that is dangerous to imitate, and yet, like natural virtue, must be admired and imitated, always remains

mysterious."⁴ If I had to choose words not my own to describe the enchanting effect of Bishop's "Nova Scotia Landscape" (and several of her other paintings and all her greatest poems), I would use some of Bishop's own from this passage. The effect is ultimately the result of a "mysterious ... undemocratic state of grace". It is a state which may or may not have much to do with the actual morality of an artist as a person. It has everything to do with the essential innocence of the art she or he professes. It makes do with his or her artistic understanding of whatever glimpse of essential innocence mysterious grace may give.

There is another painting in *Exchanging Hats* which might confirm what Bishop said about Gregorio Valdes. "Landscape with Gray Hills" on page 81 depicts a solitary old house of unpainted, weather-beaten shingles standing on a small field's plateau of straw-coloured pasture. The background to the house is of softly rounded but high evergreen-clad mountains (not "hills", as Benton's title names them). The painting is in the collection of Loren MacIver. It is undated, and there is no record of where it was painted. No Nova Scotian can look at "Landscape with Gray Hills" without thinking it depicts a place in his or her province. The architecture of the painting's house is completely in accord with that of houses built by immigrant highland Scots in northeastern mainland Nova Scotia and in Cape Breton in the early to mid nineteenth century. The pattern of the rail fence Bishop depicts partially surrounding house and pasture is typical of early settlement in Cape Breton. And the gray, evergreen-clad mountains are characteristic of terrain throughout the northern part of Cape Breton. Of course, there are other places in North America with similar terrain where a house

of similar (but not, I think, identical) architecture might have been Bishop's subject, perhaps Maine or other parts of the American northeast, perhaps Québec or even parts of North Carolina, all of them places which Bishop visited. But I am convinced that "Landscape with Gray Hills" is set in what Bishop in her first letter to Lowell called the "beautiful mountainous scenery" of Cape Breton.⁵ If it was, it was painted during the six week vacation Bishop shared with Marjorie Stevens in Breton Cove (not "Briton Cove", as Bishop's letter to Anny Baumann is headed in *One Art*), Cape Breton, in July and August, 1947.

But the possibility that "Nova Scotia Landscape" and "Landscape with Gray Hills" may share a province of origin is not, in the end, as significant as their pairing in other ways. Both are painted in the same naïve, primitive way, so reminiscent of the kind of illustrations used as exemplars in public school drawing books during the 1890's and throughout the early part of the twentieth century, illustrations which showed tables, vases, bottles, books, chairs, plums, pears, kittens, and houses in the splendid isolation of squared-off frames, with a blank space for copying underneath. Pictorially, both paintings are organized in the same basic way, with articulated levels of foreground, middle ground, and so on. To come closer to the heart of their similarities, both paintings are lovingly concerned with buildings. Buildings and the interiors of buildings are by far the most common subjects of the paintings in *Exchanging Hats*. And both paintings portray these buildings in the same curious way. Just as in "Nova Scotia Landscape", so also in "Landscape with Gray Hills", all trace of path, track, or road has been suppressed. There is no way, except by crossing an untrodden pasture, to get to the house in

"Landscape with Gray Hills". It stands distanced from us and the artist in a stubborn, ramshackle self-sufficiency, with two chimneys smoking. (Yes, heat is often necessary in Cape Breton houses in August. There is always an August frost.) The house has the uncanny, ambivalent presence, both cozy and somehow threatening, both welcoming and excluding, both always known and never known, of any isolated house in the wild and forested mountains of any fairy story. We are looking at a Cape Breton version, I think, of "Jeronimo's House", for it also is a "fairy palace", a "love nest", a "shelter from the hurricane". It may even be the "lordly pleasure house" of Tennyson's "The Palace of Art" which echoes as a sub-text, I believe, to many of Bishop's poems. And without path, track, or road leading to it, it stays enigmatically unreachable.

But let us end as we began with apparently literal, limited fact. On the Bishop side of her ancestry, a side which scholarship has tended to neglect, patronize, and take very much at Bishop's own valuation, she was related to makers of buildings. Her grandfather Bishop was a major building contractor. Her father was a construction estimator who worked with Bishop's grandfather. If we are prepared to say that Bishop inherited part of her artistic abilities from her maternal great-uncle, the painter George Hutchinson, and that she was probably encouraged, perhaps even taught to draw and paint by her great-uncle's niece, Aunt Maude Shepherdson, herself George Hutchinson's pupil, then we should also be prepared to consider that some of Bishop's sense of visual form and her fascination with the languages of interior and exterior architecture came to her through her father, William Bishop. Not only in Bishop's paintings, but throughout her poems there

echoes the theme of the lost house, the unattainable house, the house at the end of the beach which offers and withholds peace. That house Bishop knew very early in her life. It is the “rigid house / and a winding pathway” which is drawn by the child in “Sestina”. To the houses they draw, children always put in a path or a road.⁶ Ask any primary teacher. It is adults who forget them. Invisible also in “Nova Scotia Landscape” and “Landscape with Gray Hills” is the “man with buttons like tears” whom “Sestina”’s child carefully adds to her picture. But he is there in Bishop’s two later landscapes, watching, unseen, part of the difficult grace Bishop was given. We are all orphaned by Eden.

1. Elizabeth Bishop. *One Art: Letters*. Selected and edited by Robert Giroux. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1994, pp. 137-138.

2. Brett Millier. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 180.

3. For information about Allendale in this and subsequent paragraphs, see Virginia Allen Atkinson’s *A History of Allendale*, 1989. A typescript of eleven pages available from the Shelburne County Museum. P.O. Box 39, Shelburne, N.S. B0T 1W0. A facsimile of a postcard of the Ragged Island Inn, dating probably from the 1940’s, is also available from the Museum.

4. The passage is quoted in *Exchanging Hats*, pp. 89-90. It also appears in Elizabeth Bishop. *The Collected Prose*. Edited and introduced by Robert Giroux. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, New York, 1984, pp. 58-59.

5. *One Art: Letters*, p. 147.

6. The work of the Nova Scotia primitive painter, Maud Lewis (1903-1970: a painter who

was primitive by fate, not by choice), also adds a path or a road or both to any house depicted. See Lance Woolaver. *The Illuminated World of Maud Lewis*. Nimbus Publishing Limited / Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, 1996.

* * * * *

Membership in the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia is available for \$8 per year or \$20 for three years (Canadian funds). Either membership entitles the holder to take full voting part in the Society’s deliberations and to receive the Newsletter for free.

The EBSNS Newsletter is published twice yearly in the spring and fall. Publishing history: 1 (1) Fall 1994; 2 (1) Spring 1995; 2 (2) Fall 1995; 3 (1) Spring 1996; 3 (2) Fall 1996; 4 (1) Spring 1997; 4 (2) Fall 1997; 5 (1) Spring 1998; 5 (2) Fall 1998; 6 (1) Spring 1999; 6 (2) Fall 1999; 7 (1) Spring 2000; 7 (2) Fall 2000; 8 (1) Spring 2001.

Subscription is by membership in the Society or \$5 Canadian per year, made payable to the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia.

*Editor: Peter Sanger
Associate Contributing Editors: Jeffery Donaldson and John Barnstead
Phone: (902) 261-2150*

* * * * *



Divisions of the Heart

ELIZABETH BISHOP AND THE ART OF MEMORY AND PLACE

Sandra Barry, Gwen Davies, Peter Sanger, editors

In the fall of 1998, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, hosted a symposium on the life and work of Pulitzer-prize-winning writer Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979). This book collects 25 of the essays that were presented at the conference, as well as over 40 black and white reproductions of photographs relating to Bishop's life.

Contributors include:

Crystal Bacon, Marian Bannerman, Sandra Barry, Brian Bartlett, Neil Besner, Theodore Colson, Barbara Comins, Gwen Davies, Jeffery Donaldson, Patricia Dwyer, Lilian Falk, Andre Furlani, Gary Fountain, Glen Robert Gill, Lorrie Goldensohn, Michael Happy, Kathleen Johnson, Ross Leckie, Elizabeth McKim, Laura Jehn Menides, Sara Meyer, Roger Moore, Brian Robinson, Camille Roman, Peter Sanger and Anne Stevenson.

CND \$32.95 / 1-894031-31-8

TRADE PAPER / FRENCH BINDING / AUGUST 2001 RELEASE

To order contact:

GASPEREAU PRESS

POST OFFICE BOX 143

WOLFVILLE, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA, B0P 1X0

BOOK_SALES@GASPEREAU.COM

TOLL FREE: 1-877-230-8232

**Running to
Paradise**

**a play about
elizabeth bishop**

by Donna E. Smyth

\$ 9.95 [pbk] ISBN 1-894031-13-X
\$39.95 [hbk] ISBN 1-894031-21-0

Donna E. Smyth's one-woman play, *Running to Paradise*, was staged in Wolfville and Halifax in the fall of 1998 by The Studio Group.

About the Author

Donna E. Smyth lives on an old farm in Hants County, N.S. As well as publishing numerous short stories, poems, and non-fiction pieces, Donna E. Smyth has published three novels: *Quilt* and *Subversive Elements*, and a young adult novel, *Loyalist Runaway*, which won the 1992 Dartmouth Fiction Award. Her previous plays include *Giant Anna* and an adaptation of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

Gaspereau Press
P.O. Box 143, Wolfville, N.S. B0P 1X0
www.gaspereau.com
Tel: (902) 681-1551
E-mail: editor@gaspereau.com