Inversion and the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty
of the Department of English
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
with Honors in English

Jeanne Margaret Dillon

Washington and Lee University
Lexington, Virginia
May, 1996

On my honor I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this paper.

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Introduction:
Bishop, Freud, and the Poetics of Inversion

> We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love objects they have taken as a model...their own selves.
>
> -- Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*

The longest and most significant relationship in Elizabeth Bishop's life began in Brazil in 1952 and continued for fifteen years until her lover's apparent suicide in 1967. Before Bishop's relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares, her poetry reflects covert anxiety about her lesbianism. Living in a culture saturated with Freudian concepts about sexuality and femininity, Bishop was discernibly affected by social perceptions of homosexuals, commonly called "inverts." Her early work also seems to indicate Bishop's doubts about ever managing to sustain a healthy lesbian relationship as well as her fears about whether or not Freudian assertions about homosexuality were certain. "Chemin de Fer," "The Gentleman of Shalott," "The Man-Moth," "The Weed" and "The Unbeliever," published in Bishop's *North and South* in 1946, are all examples of the poet's nervous relationship with her homosexuality. In all of these poems, Bishop incorporates both her scepticism and, on the other hand, her inability to ignore culturally constructed notions of homosexuality. She is concerned with Freudian notions that were popularly connected to same-sex love: social deviance, narcissism, and inversion.

"The relation of homosexuality to narcissism, and the relation of narcissism to psychosis" is a "common theme" in some of Freud's case studies on homosexuality and narcissism (Sega and Bell 152). In "On Narcissism: An Introduction" Freud himself says,

"Psycho-analytic observers were subsequently struck by the fact that individual features of the narcissistic attitude are found in many people who suffer from other *disorders* -- for instance...in homosexuals [emphasis mine]" (73). For Bishop, who certainly could not have been immune to Freud's overwhelming influence which began in the early twentieth century, these connections are, simultaneously, problematic and impossible to dismiss. In her earlier poetry, she works to overcome the cultural perversity of obscure or *inverted* creatures without divorcing her subjects from the difficulties of social deviance. Her subjects and speakers are often outcasts, trapped or dangerously suspended in confining worlds which do not suit them.

Lillian Faderman's explanation of lesbianism in the early and middle part of the century may shed some light on Bishop's texts of surreptitious homosexuality. Faderman explains:

> Viewed from the outside the lesbian was either sick or sinful, and no one would want to be considered one. There was little public dissent over those images of her....As would be expected, under such circumstances a lesbian subculture could not proliferate very rapidly in the light of day. It was invited into darkness and secrecy, so that the dismal popular images were more likely to become self-fulfilling prophecies than if such a subculture could have developed without fear and shame. (105)

The darkness of Bishop's many night poems and the underground subcultures found in "The Man-Moth" and "The Riverman" suggest Bishop's preoccupation with these lesbian-associated themes. Her off-balance characters like the Gentleman of Shalott and the Man-

Moth can also be read as anomalous, almost monstrous symbols of the lesbian in society. Faderman says:

> Perhaps the monstrous lesbian images proliferated during the 1930's not only because they mirrored a moralistic disapproval of lesbianism which seemed decadent during grim times, but also because this extreme depiction afforded the distraction of the bizarre and the exotic to a drab and gloomy decade. (101)

Whatever the reason, lesbianism was often seen as vampiric, monstrous, and even predatory. Bishop alludes to some of these socially deviant qualities in her work, creating characters that often possess traces of such features, especially in relation to the *night*. Many of her subjects and speakers are night creatures, suggesting the secrecy, inverted living habits, and even monstrousness which has been strongly associated with lesbianism.

This paper aims to examine several such texts in order to discover how and to what extent Bishop encodes homosexuality into her poetry. In fact, Bishop struggles to resolve social definitions of homosexuality as *narcissistic* and disorderly. The myth of Narcissus, or at least his mirror, surfaces throughout her work and threatens her subjects with homosexual self-recognition which (in the tradition of Narcissus) leads to self-destruction. Dangerous mirrors, narcissism, inversion and deviant subjects are all parts of Bishop's subversive homosexuality. These images are also indicative of Bishop's tension between her own lesbianism and her disapproving culture. She is haunted by Freud's interpretation of homosexuality as narcissistic, as well as society's definition of the lesbian as a creature of darkness -- a monster and an "invert." Faderman says:

> In Post-World War II America, psychoanalysis generally employed Freudian

> language and twisted Freudian theory to insist, with far greater certitude than Freud himself ever mustered and with much more vehemence than in the 1930's, on the sickness of lesbians, which they saw as being responsible for their "antisocial" behavior. (131)

It was not until 1973 that "the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders" (Faderman 132). Bishop lived and wrote with an ever-present understanding that her sexuality, like that of all *inverts* in the early and middle part of the century, was a threat to her identity. Unless closeted, and for all intents and purposes she was, her mental and emotional health would be publicly challenged.

This is not to say that Bishop's work reflects sexual shame or self-loathing: she feels restricted by cultural definitions of sexuality and it is apparent in her work. I do not suggest that Bishop *believes* that she is narcissistic or mentally sick. I do suggest, however, that Freudian theories and public opinion about lesbianism certainly influences the way she writes about sexuality and self-discovery.

In regard to Bishop's poetics, my paper relies on the identification of the poet with her liminal and often inverted subjects. She is often hiding in her texts, closeted like her subjects and speakers, wishing for escape. As Lorrie Goldensohn says:

> Elizabeth Bishop's reticence about the erotic romantic did not leave her with a wholly impersonal poetry; but while the speaker of the poem can frequently be matched to the poet herself, self remains a creature only partially and tantalizingly glimpsed in the staging area of the poems. (53)

A covert and often cross-dressed Bishop can be found flitting in and out of poetic

character throughout her work, refuting Freud, avoiding Narcissus, and searching for a sexually liberating "world inverted."

Chapter One: The Lady's Gentleman

In her poem "The Gentleman of Shalott," Elizabeth Bishop flips Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" on its head. She reverses the gender of this citizen of Shalott and paints an obviously humorous portrait of her Gentleman. As Susan McCabe tells us, Bishop "in one of her rare direct allusions to another literary text, does so in order to subvert it" (73). While I agree with this suggestion, I will add to it by suggesting that Bishop intends not only to subvert Tennyson's work in certain ways, but to build on his Lady's dilemmas. She preserves the traps which Tennyson creates in "The Lady of Shalott" and she refers to Tennyson's Lady's restrictive (and then liberating) situation in much of her other work as well. The Lady of Shalott's predicament resurfaces in Bishop's "The Gentleman of Shalott." In her poem, Bishop alludes to two Tennysonian conflicts: the Lady's perception of herself as opposed to the public's perception of her, and her oppressive but safe "half-life" as opposed to her unknown and then destructive freedom.

Another aspect of "The Lady of Shalott" which surfaces in Bishop's work is the Lady as an artist -- a weaver. Through her allusions to the Lady's situation, Bishop presents what McCabe calls the "liberating and confining aspects" of an artist restrained (80). The Lady of Shalott weaves under a spell which confines her to a "half-life" of reflections. Her web is created and exists only while the spell holds the Lady captive. Bishop, as a poet confined by social restrictions in regard to her sex and her homosexuality, is also creating in an inhibiting environment. Rarely did Bishop publicly

address the ways in which her gender affected her life and work, and she did so only toward the end of her life. As Lorrie Goldensohn explains:

> Very gradually, in her last years, it became permissible to speak publicly of herself as a feminist; and in a late interview with George Starbuck she displays this candid bleakness about the influence of gender on her life: "I wish I had written a great deal more. Sometimes I think if I had been a man I probably would have written more. Dared more, or been able to spend more time at it." (*The Body's Roses* 62-63)

If Bishop barely felt at liberty to speak about the limitations of being a female in her lifetime, the possibility of speaking publicly about the ways in which her lesbianism affected her life must have been unfathomable. As Goldensohn says, "During her lifetime her homosexuality surfaced nowhere in print; yet her sexual preference seems an inseparable if mostly puzzling part of the other factors she herself named as determinant: her 'era,' her 'sex,' her '*situation*,' and 'education' [italics mine]" (63). While her era, sex and education seem to determine her "situation" in themselves, Bishop still mentions this vague, extra noun which seems to be an indication that there is an unusual and significant issue which affects her life on top of these other normal factors. This I take to mean her *sexuality*. Because of her inability to identify herself publicly as a lesbian, and perhaps because of her aversion to "being ghettoized as a woman" (Goldensohn 63), Bishop identifies with both the Lady and the Gentleman of Shalott. She uses the tenuous situation of both subjects as a symbol for her own dilemma as a woman and as a lesbian, writing in an unwelcoming and restrictive society.

In order to explore Bishop's connections to Tennyson's poem in "The Gentleman of Shalott," I will begin with Tennyson's Lady. The original ending to "The Lady of Shalott," published in 1832, is significantly different from Tennyson's revised publication of the poem ten years later. Originally, the final stanza read as follows:

They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,
Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire and guest,
There lay a parchment on her breast,
That puzzled more than all the rest,
The well-fed wits at Camelot.
'The web was woven curiously,
The charm was broken utterly,
Draw near and fear not -- this is I,
The Lady of Shalott.'

After a disapproving review from John Stuart Mill, Tennyson changed this stanza. As Matthew Rowlinson says, "The irony of this ending, of the writing announcing the presence of the woman on whose corpse it is inscribed, was pronounced by John Stuart Mill to be 'lame and impotent'" (79). Rowlinson suggests that the new ending was Tennyson's attempt to "supply the lack Mill discerned in the original version by replacing the Lady's text with the spoken comment of Sir Lancelot" (79). In supplying Mill's lack, however, Tennyson denies his Lady a voice, or rather an *emancipated* voice. She can no longer tell the story explaining who she is now that she is free: "The web was woven curiously,/ The charm was broken utterly." Without this assertion of her identity, "this is

I,/ The Lady of Shalott," in the final stanza, the only words Tennyson's Lady speaks are those expressing the burden of her curse. All four parts of the poem end with a human voice (Ricks 74), and twice the voice is that of the Lady. Her complaint, "'I am half-sick of shadows'" (l. 71) ends part II, and her cry, "'The curse is come upon me'" (l. 114) ends part III. Like her "song that echoes cheerily" from inside her tower (l. 30), and the "magic web...she weaves by night and day" (ll. 37,38), the Lady's words are products and reflections of her confinement. Thus, without her final words, with which she proclaims her identity outside of her oppressive tower-top room and her life of "shadows," Tennyson's Lady appears to be incapable of any kind of creation outside of a restrictive environment.

The Lady's complaint at the end of part II, "'I am half-sick of shadows,'" reveals the way the curse affects her sense of self. She can only experience a "half-sickness" because she is only half alive. She is split between her body and her mirror, between her physical existence and her power of perception. The half of her which cannot feel this sickness lies in her mirror, through which she watches life in Camelot without physically participating in it. As Rowlinson says, the Lady obviously "experiences a division in the place from which she speaks" because even her emotions are halved (80). Bishop then creates her Gentleman as an actual, physical embodiment of this division by making him "half looking-glass." Like the Lady, whose other half can be found in her mirror, Bishop's Gentleman depends on reflection to complete his existence. While attached to these mirrors, both subjects remain safe. When the Lady leaves her glass, however, her destruction suggests that a real life, as opposed to a life of reflections, is not available to

her. Reality is not available to Bishop's Gentleman either. While we are privy to the repercussions of the Lady's escape from her mirror, Bishop keeps her Gentleman connected to his reflection throughout her poem. We never see the consequences, though they are implied, that would befall this Gentleman "if the glass slips." In this way, Bishop does differ from Tennyson in her use of a split subject because her Gentleman never attempts to free himself from his mirror. She certainly preserves Tennyson's assertion that to escape Shalott's mirror is to be destroyed, however, by making it physically disastrous for the Gentleman to part with his mirror.

In fact, the Gentleman never risks destruction and unlike the Lady who is "half sick of shadows," Bishop's subject is reported to be "resigned" to his half-life. As Bonnie Costello says, "He might better seek his other half in the world as the Lady did, though that positive encounter with the real destroyed her" (28). This "encounter with the real," the Lady's departure from her mirror in order to look at Lancelot or seek her "other half," is positive in that it liberates her from her life of shadows. Her desire for a physical relationship with Lancelot is the final temptation that moves her to leave her mirror. She is driven by sexual yearning and in order to show this, Tennyson definitely emphasizes Lancelot's sexual allure:

> The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
> And flamed upon the brazen greaves
> Of bold Sir Lancelot.
> A red cross knight for ever kneel'd
> To a lady in his shield,

That sparkled on the yellow field,

Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,

Like to some branch of star we see

Hung in the golden Galaxy,

As he rode down to Camelot.

And from his blazon'd baldric slung

A might silver bugle hung,

And as he rode his armour rung,

Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather

Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,

The helmet and the helmet feather

Burn'd like one burning flame together,

As he rode down to Camelot.

As often thro' the purple night,

Below the starry clusters bright,

Some bearded meteor, trailing light,

Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;

On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;

From underneath his helmet flow'd

His coal-black curls as on he rode....(ll. 75-103)

The hanging "might silver bugle" is phallic, reminding the reader of Lancelot's mighty masculinity and sexual power. Every part of Lancelot is sensually emphasized. His "thick-jewell'd...saddle-leather" shines in the light of the brilliant day and his shield sparkles "on the yellow field." His "armour rung" and, as we learn earlier in the stanza, his "bridle bells rang merrily/ As he rode down to Camelot" (ll. 85-86). The Lady can see Lancelot's radiance and she can hear his musical, pleasing presence as well. He is tempting her senses with sight and sound, and she soon longs to see more than his reflection. She desires a relationship with him that would involve every sense, not only these distant echoes of sight and sound. Lancelot's glowing "broad clear brow" and "coal black curls" are illustrated to remind the reader of his appealing body which is only available to the Lady as an image in her glass. His body is out of her reach.

Lancelot is also constantly compared to fire and light. He is a blaze that "flash'd into the [Lady's] crystal mirror" (l. 106). The cold, glassy, crystallized existence of the Lady is contrasted with Lancelot's burning presence in her mirror. Her dark life of shadows is jolted by Lancelot's brilliance and he enters the poem in the same manner the "dazzling sun" breaks through the trees of Camelot. The sun "flamed" upon him, suggesting that Lancelot is on fire -- he is as dazzling as the sun. He shines, sparkles and sings his presence and his "helmet" and his "helmet-feather/ Burn'd light one burning

flame together." Finally, he is compared to "some bearded meteor, trailing light" which "moves over *still* Shalott." Lancelot is in a constant state of burning motion, making his dazzling entrance and continually riding "down to Camelot." The stillness of Shalott is in direct contrast to this man of action. For the Lady, Shalott is simply a cold and silent world of shadows until this sexually charged and tempting Lancelot appears. Only then does she defy her spell to find him because she wants him for a lover.

The Gentleman cannot seek "his other half" in this way, because is in incapable of perceiving the world from any angle aside from his own. He cannot become interested in a lover because he is occupied entirely with himself. He is satisfied by the fact that:

> ...while he stays put
> he can walk and run
> and his hands can clasp one
> another.

This idea that he is content to "clasp" his own hand, or the hand of his own reflection, reminds the reader of Tennyson's "In Memoriam." Because Bishop is already alluding to "The Lady of Shalott" here, I suggest that she is making a connection to another area of Tennyson's work. In "In Memoriam," a poem written for Tennyson's close friend Arthur Hallam, the speaker discusses a great deal of hand clasping. He remembers the hands he clasped many times while the subject of his lamentation was alive, and bemoans the impossibility of touching those hands again:

> Doors where my heart used to beat
> So quickly waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more --

Behold me, for I cannot sleep,

And like a guilty thing I creep

At earliest morning to the door... (VII)

In other instances, the poem contains images such as "hands so often clasped in mine" (X) "where warm hands have pressed and closed" (XIII), and "strike a sudden hand in mine" (XIV). All of these images of a hand in a hand are presented in relation to the author's love for the deceased: the speaker longs to "reach a hand thro' time to catch/ The far off interest of tears" (I), to clasp the hand of his dead love. In yet another reference to hands, the speaker compares himself to "A hollow form with empty hands" (III), grieving for the deceased by pointing out his abandoned hands.

Because Tennyson repeats images of hand-clasping to such a great extent in "In Memoriam," Bishop's choice to satisfy her Gentleman with the ability to clasp his own reflected hand is significant. It suggests that she is in fact making another reference to a specific Tennysonian text (though not as obviously as in her allusion to "The Lady of Shalott"). Bishop's allusions to Tennyson make sense in regard to her subject's self-absorption which becomes strikingly clear when her Gentleman is compared to Tennyson's subjects. Reading Tennyson's desire for Hallam as sexual rather than platonic in "In Memoriam," this hand-clasping becomes metonymic for sexual union that cannot be verbalized (see page 29). The Gentleman's *clasping* of his own hand reflects his self-interest: he loves himself in the same way that Tennyson's speaker loves the subject of his lamentation. He seeks out his mirrored hand in the same way the Lady seeks her

passionate Lancelot, as well. His ability to search for "his other half," a lover, is being hindered by the fact that his intense, yet restrained passion is directed toward himself.

Not only is Bishop's Gentleman intensely self-interested; his view of himself is entirely subjective. He cannot see himself objectively because that would mean separation from his reflection. The safety of his situation or "arrangement" depends on the fact that it is physically impossible for him to see his complete image in his mirror. He cannot look at his reflection head-on. Bishop begins the poem with "Which eye is his eye?" This tells the reader that both eyes are on either side of the Gentleman's mirror and non-mirror self. His mirror would have to move or "slip" from the innocuous position it holds beside him, "down the edge," in order for the Gentleman to look at himself from the outside. This would split him in half, however, destroying him, which implies that the Gentleman is not able to inspect himself from the outside. His self-survey is feasible exclusively from the inside. As Bonnie Costello says, "By contemplating himself in this way, the Gentleman evades the impact of the actual mirror on the self. He avoids recognizing his existence in the world" (28). In this way, Bishop's Gentleman is an impaired informant. She emphasizes the Gentleman's inner perspective by consistently reminding her reader that her speaker is presenting *his* thoughts on his situation:

> He felt in modesty
> his person was half looking-glass,
> for why should he be doubled?
> The glass must stretch
> down his middle,

or rather down the edge.

But he's in doubt

as to which side's in or out

of the mirror.

There's little margin for error,

but there's no proof either.

And if half his head's reflected,

thought, he thinks, might be affected.

She repeats "he felt," "he's in doubt" and "he thinks" which are indications that these perceptions are coming from the Gentleman's affected head. He cannot even determine which part of him is reflection -- "which side's in or out." There is a good deal of estimation in the presentation of his organization. The speaker says, "The glass must stretch/ down his middle," and then changes her assumption about its location to "or rather down the edge." She seems to be guessing, just as the Gentleman is "in doubt" about the specific nature of his half-reflected existence.

Separation from his mirror, because of his "economic design," would free the Gentleman from his uncertain identity, but there seems to be no desire on the Gentleman's part to change his plight. Unlike the Lady, he is content to exist as a split being. But Bishop undercuts his judgment, as mentioned above, which leads the reader to question whether the Gentleman's final quotation, "Half is enough," is sound. His satisfaction with his shallow self-perception and his physical situation can be read as a response to the way in which Tennyson denies his Lady a liberated voice in his poem. Unlike Tennyson's final

version of "The Lady of Shalott," in which he removes the Lady's words and replaces them with those of Lancelot, Bishop allows her Gentleman to "be quoted." She places the only direct quote from the Gentleman at the end of the poem, mirroring the way in which all sections of "The Lady of Shalott" end with quotations. Her introduction to his quote, however, suggests again that the Gentleman is not entirely rational:

> ...The uncertainty
> he says he
> finds exhilarating. He loves
> that sense of constant re-adjustment.
> He wishes to be quoted as saying at present,
> "Half is enough."

All of these aspects of the Gentleman are underlined by the fact that they are what "he says he" feels or is. The symmetrical structure of that very line "he says he" reminds the reader of the Gentleman's half-reflected head and "affected" thoughts. The speaker does not seem to be advocating this "Half is enough" quote; she is simply reporting what the Gentleman "wishes to be quoted as saying." This is bothersome in that it leaves the reader unsure of what the Gentleman *actually* says as opposed to what "he wishes to be quoted as saying at present." The way she sets it up, Bishop's Gentleman seems to have constructed his "quote" in order to appear content and balanced. Bishop's added "at present" suggests the possibility that at some *later* date, the Gentleman may not wish to be reported as satisfied with his situation. Just as his identity is based on allusions, his satisfaction seems to be false or at least "affected." By undermining her Gentleman's

judgment, Bishop implies that the Lady of Shalott makes a more reasonable and respectable choice, even though it destroys her, by escaping her mirror.

The Gentleman's obviously misguided view of himself is important in terms of Bishop's use of the mirror in her poem. He is completely consumed with self-analysis and unaware of any kind of outside perception. He is also, as noted previously in relation to his hand-clasping, in love with his own reflection. In order to see the ways in which Bishop undermines the Gentleman's self-analysis with narcissistic implications, it is important to explore the connection between Narcissus and the Lady of Shalott.

Both the Lady and the Gentleman are involved in an exploration of identity. The original version of "The Lady of Shalott" that ends with "*Draw near and fear not -- this is I,/ The Lady of Shalott*," as she floats into Camelot, reflects "the lament arising from Narcissus's crisis of understanding -- 'I am he' ('iste ego sum')" (Enterline 1). In the introduction to her book *The Tears of Narcissus,* which focuses on several early modern texts, Lynn Enterline explains that there seems to be an overwhelming literary connection between self-destruction and this kind of narcissistic self-discovery:

> This book tries to account for the intimate relationship between two desperate yet puzzlingly intertwined figures in several prominent Renaissance texts: images of self-reflection and images conveying a sense of loss that exceeds all compensation. It investigates why encounters with a mirror frequently and abruptly give way to expressions of the self's utter diminishment, to signs of irreparable sorrow as small as tears, moans, sighs, or as large and the roar of the wind and the sea. (1)

Enterline explains that "it is Narcissus's tears, disturbing the pond as the fall, that draws our attention to his reflection. This *troubled surface* [italics mine] provokes a peculiarly destructive form of self knowledge..." (1). The Lady's inscription, the parchment stating "this is I," is made while she is floating on the river to Camelot, just before her death. This assertion of her identity (although it is only in relation to Shalott) upon the troubled surface of the river which will ultimately kill her, places her in direct company with Narcissus. She attains a form of self-awareness that is connected necessarily to her destruction. Ironically, the Lady seems able to assert her identity with this inscription on the boat only after she parts with her mirror. Her mirror does not reflect her own image; it reflects the outside world so that she avoids self-realization or analysis while she is in her tower. Her contact with the river, however, brings her to a written expression of identity.

While Tennyson makes no direct mention of the Lady's reflection in the water, the similarity of her fate and the fate of Narcissus are enough to suggest an allusion:

> As Narcissus bent over a clear pool for a drink and saw there his own reflection, on the moment he fell in love with it. "Now I know," he cried, "what others have suffered for me, for I burn with love of my own self -- and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see mirrored in the water? But I cannot leave it. Only death can set me free." And so it happened. He pined away, leaning perpetually over the pool, fixed in one long gaze. They say that when his spirit crossed the river that encircles the world of the dead, it leaned over the boat to catch one final glimpse of itself on the water. (Hamilton 88)

Both the Lady and Narcissus are fated to die after coming into contact with this "troubled surface." The destructive quality of the river's surface in both cases, however, lies in the fact that it offers both subjects contact with their own reflections. The Lady is safe until she is placed upon the river where, because of the similarities to the myth of Narcissus and his watery mirror, it can be assumed that she sees her own reflection at last. This act of looking at her own reflection, or simply of coming into contact with the river, is what dooms the Lady. Like Narcissus, who is free until he looks at his reflection and sees himself as others do, the Lady dies after she makes contact with the river. She remains safe while she is bound to the mirror in her tower because that mirror does not reflect the Lady herself, it reflects Camelot. Also, she is isolated from society in her tower and has no way of knowing how society identifies her. In fact, at the end of Part I, she is referred to as "'the *fairy/* Lady of Shalott [italics mine]'" (l. 35). showing the public's perception of her as possibly fictional. She does not exist in society until she breaks from the mirror, which causes her destruction. The impact of realizing a social perception of oneself then seems to be directly connected to annihilation and the myth of Narcissus.

The threat of annihilation due to contact with his reflection is the unspoken danger which looms over the Gentleman's head. As discussed earlier, Bishop's subject does not progress far enough and is not brave enough to come into direct contact with his reflected image. In fact, Bishop makes it physically impossible for the Gentleman to do as the Lady does on the river and actually look at his reflection. In addition to the physical challenge of looking at his reflection, the Gentleman enjoys his existence next to and not in front of his mirror: "He is resigned to such economical design." To observe himself from the

standpoint of a "stranger," which would mean letting the glass slip so that he could look into it, is out of the question for Bishop's Gentleman. Also, of course, if the glass were to slip so that he could see himself, he would see only the part of his person that is not reflection. Then his half-ness would be painfully clear. For now, though, he can appear whole and normal to the outside eye:

> Which eye is his eye?
> Which limb lies
> next the mirror?
> For neither is clearer
> nor a different color
> than the other,
> nor meets a stranger
> in this arrangement
> of leg on leg and
> arm and so on.

While he is connected to his reflection, no one can see that he is abnormal. Each "eye" and "limb" matches exactly on either side of the mirror, making his reflected side undetectable. His true identity is invisible to both society and to himself. His "arrangement" appears real upon contact with a "stranger," even though he is actually defective. Thus, the Gentleman is safe in the eyes of society as long as he can keep his mirror in place. The constant threat, however, is that of a sudden divorce from his glass, which would result in a stranger's recognition of his deviant construction. Thus, the

physical destruction ("if the glass slips") which threatens the Gentleman is directly connected to a public perception of his abnormality. It is also connected to the possibility that if the mirror were to move from its place next to the Gentleman, he might catch a glimpse of himself. Like Narcissus, the Gentleman's destruction is tied to visual contact with his reflection. Unlike Narcissus, however, the Gentleman never sees himself from an outsider's perspective, and therefore is not destroyed.

The fear of losing physical contact with this mirror and being revealed (to himself and to others) as only half of a person is evidently too much for the Gentleman to face. This is where we can see Bishop's identification with the Gentleman's predicament and the strong homosexual undertones which are present in her poem. Bishop's lesbian identity is invisible to the outside eye just as the Gentleman's "half-ness" is undetectable. If the "fix" into which Bishop writes her Gentleman is that of a homosexual in a heterosexist world, and if the Gentleman's existence depends on his appearing whole, then the threat of destruction for the homosexual Gentleman comes "if the glass slips" -- if society recognizes him as a homosexual. The potentially self-destructive aspect of this situation is that if the Gentleman were to look at himself from an objective position, he would see himself as society perceives a homosexual. His own ideas of himself, as he is closeted and securely attached to his mirror, are not dangerous. If he were to come into contact with the way in which society would perceive his homosexuality, however, he would be destroyed. It is the doomed realization of Narcissus (as quoted earlier): "Now I know what others have suffered for me, for I burn with love of my own self," which means: "Now I see myself as others have seen me, and I feel toward myself as they have felt

towards me." For the defective Gentleman, to see his reflection would mean just this: to feel toward himself as society would feel toward him as a homosexual -- deviant, narcissistic and disfigured. The fear of this kind of realization keeps him from any attempt to reveal his true identity. To avoid direct visual contact with his reflection then, is to avoid annihilation.

To read Bishop's Gentleman as specifically homosexual we must have reason to believe that Bishop identifies with her subject. Marilyn May Lombardi discusses "the young writer's anxiety about social and artistic deviance" (53):

> Increasingly, the hermaphrodite and other liminal beings, came to represent aspects of Bishop's own sense of sexual difference. Though scrupulously hermetic, or abstruse, in their effects, many of the poems that make up Bishop's first collection hint at her fascination with "thirdness" as an alternative to sexual conformity. These early parables are given over to beings who, like the title character of her poem "The Gentleman of Shalott," struggle to balance their self-image with their reflection in the *cultural mirror*.
>
> (53) [italics mine]

In this particular poem, however, Bishop's Gentleman seems preoccupied with conformity even though he is, as Lombardi suggests, one of Bishop's "liminal beings." Even though she mocks him and undermines his judgment, we see that her Gentleman (who can be identified with the poet) enjoys his strained predicament: "He loves/ that sense of constant re-adjustment." Mentally cracked or not, Bishop's Gentleman delights in the craft of his confinement. If we read Bishop into the poem as identifying with the Gentleman's

"exhilarating" restraint, then she seems to be encouraging his superficial existence on some level.

This support for the Gentleman makes sense in relation to Bishop's situation as a lesbian poet. Susan McCabe links Gentleman's situation to Bishop in her discussion of the final stanza:

> If the glass slips
> he's in a fix --
> only one leg, etc. But
> while he stays put
> he can walk and run
> and his hands can clasp one
> another. The uncertainty
> he says he
> finds exhilarating. He loves
> that sense of constant re-adjustment.

McCabe says, "Bishop refers to her own design, her own slender line, and her own fear, possibly of poetic imbalance and precarious sexual identity. The terminal words keep us on the move, "slips" restrained by "fix," and "stays put" overruled by "run" (74). That "constant readjustment" and "uncertainty" in which the Gentleman delights can be read as Bishop's own delight in her hidden meanings and delicately woven traces of her own homosexuality in her poetry. She says of her Gentleman's fragile construction, "There's little margin for error,/ but there's no proof either" and she is saying the same about her

writing. Like the Lady of Shalott (on whom this Gentleman is based) who "still delights to weave the mirror's magic sights" (ll. 64-65), Bishop weaves her "situation," or her curse (homosexuality), into her work. Just as the Lady's art represents that which restricts her, Bishop's does the same. She carefully avoids direct mention of her sexuality just as she keeps her Gentleman cautious and closeted.

The Lady's final words, which are eventually removed from the poem, are an inscription on her corpse. The action of writing her existence instead of speaking it is important in relation to Bishop's identification with both citizens of Shalott. Not unlike her web and song, her inscription is yet another example of the Lady as an artist. This final work, however, is most directly related to Bishop who never writes out her identity as the Lady does. Bishop seems to remain locked in the shadow-land of Shalott in order to preserve herself. She avoids destruction by covertly weaving the reflections of her curse into her poetry. She is not willing to reveal her true identity to the world in the destructive way that the Lady reveals her story to Camelot.

If Bishop identifies with her Gentleman and his delight in constantly re-adjusting himself can be read as Bishop's satisfaction with her continual need to code the language of homosexuality into her poetry, why then does she make a mockery of her self-absorbed and narcissistic Gentleman? Why does she use a male subject when Tennyson has already provided a female subject, which would be more appropriate for Bishop? Part of the answer lies in Bishop's attempt to distance herself from a personally revealing subject. In order to code her own fears and her own sexuality issues into her work, she uses this comically narcissistic, *male* subject. She may identify with him, but she makes a clear

distinction between her subject and herself for obvious reasons. Her homosexual undertones cannot be realized publicly.

Bishop deliberately inverts the gender of the original citizen of Shalott in order to create a male subject. The gender barrier between subject and poet is perhaps the most obvious way in which she distances herself from the Gentleman. It is appropriate, however, because homosexuals were inverts in the eyes of society, during the time in which Bishop wrote. Homosexuality was diagnosed as a psychological abnormality called "inversion," due to the attraction to the same sex as opposed to the opposite sex. If we do read her Gentleman as a closeted homosexual, the fact that he is the poet inverted makes sense. As McCabe says, "Bishop can maintain an inconclusive disposition in poems such as 'The Gentleman of Shalott'... and write herself in as ostensibly male in order to reveal at once the liberating and constraining aspects of this transembodiment" (80). She is forced to shroud the homosexual issues in her work, but she does not refrain from including them. Bishop speaks through her male subject, paralleling the revisions in "The Lady of Shalott," in which the Lancelot speaks for the Lady: "'She has a lovely face;/ God in his mercy lend her grace,/ The Lady of Shalott'" (ll.169-170).

Bishop keeps her distance through her mockery of the Gentleman as well. This poem, which can be read as a kind of black comedy, is humorous at the expense of the silly Gentleman. Costello agrees that Bishop "clearly mocks him for his narcissistic self-absorption (touted as modesty)" (28):

> He felt in modesty
> his person was half looking-glass,

for why should he

be doubled?

His "arrangement" is wittily called "economical" and the potential for the "fix" he will be in if the mirror "slips" is also made light of : "only one leg, etc." All the while these clever jokes are being made about this silly superficial Gentleman who is satisfied with his half-life (unlike the tragic Lady of Shalott), the possibility of annihilation looms overhead. The humor in this poem comes from that ever-present hazard -- a slip of the mirror -- which would destroy the Gentleman.

While Bishop invokes amusement at the Gentleman's expense, there is an undeniably un-funny undertone here because in the literary sense, to be narcissistic means to be as Narcissus is: doomed. The blackness beneath the comedy of "The Gentleman of Shalott" reveals Bishop's anxieties about her art and her sexuality. It also hints at her fears concerning the psychological ramifications of homosexuality being tied to narcissism. Bishop, in a sense, undermines her own decision to speak through an inverted male subject. She questions her own mental and emotional health in creating this Gentleman who has a half-reflected head. She fears the strong association of homosexuality with narcissism, which is a clearly tragic and lonely condition. This is why she keeps her Gentleman, as well as herself, away from following Narcissus's path to annihilation. That she will not allow him to view himself as defective, or to be revealed as such to others, shows her unwillingness to recognize her own existence -- publicly -- as a lesbian.

Chapter Two
Avoiding Narcissus: Bishop's Dangerous Mirrors

Bishop uses mirrors throughout her work to represent the tension between the longing for homosexual love and the danger this desire poses. Whether her subjects are avoiding their reflections, as her Gentleman does, or coming into contact with some kind of reflective surface, as Tennyson's Lady does, Bishop's "troubled surfaces" remain treacherous. In many of her poems the threatening reflective surface (like Narcissus's pool) is a body of water. In "Pleasure Seas" and in "The Unbeliever" the sea becomes a predatory mirror. Bishop uses the reflective power of water in "The Weed," in "Pleasure Seas," and in "Chemin de Fer" in order to show how love, in particular, can be destroyed by reflection. In "Pleasure Seas," love is personified and, not surprisingly, gendered male. This is typical of Bishop's work. The poet often writes herself into her own work as a male subject, like the inverted *Gentleman* of Shalott, avoiding, rejecting, or trying to resolve the Freudian, narcissistic implications of her own homosexuality.

The fact that Bishop uses a watery surface in order to destroy her characters is appropriate in relation to Narcissus and the Lady of Shalott. In the tradition of the early modern texts in which Lynn Enterline finds destructive reflections, Bishop creates mirrors that are capable of providing annihilation. Enterline explains:

> Indeed, when the mirror becomes an instrument of reflection that produces an image like the viewer, it produces startling images for a kind of sorrow that impoverishes the self and for which there seems to be no compensation. (8)

Bishop often creates these impoverishing images by reflecting her subjects -- whatever they may be -- through the surface of a body of water. Many times these sea-mirrors, or simply watery reflections, are deceiving as well as destructive.

In "The Unbeliever" Bishop uses the sea to create this kind of unreliable and dangerous mirror. Her description of the Unbeliever's precarious situation is followed by a description of a foolish "cloud":

> He sleeps on top of a mast
> with his eyes fast closed.
> The sails fall away below him
> like the sheets of his bed,
> leaving out in the air of the night the sleeper's head.
>
> Asleep he was transported there,
> asleep he curled
> in a gilded ball on the mast's top,
> or climbed inside
> a gilded bird, or blindly seated himself astride.
>
> "I am founded on marble pillars,"
> said the cloud. "I never move.
> See the pillars there in the sea?"
> Secure in introspection

he peers at the watery pillars of his reflection.

The cloud believes he is grounded in one place because his reflection in the deceptive sea follows him. The "watery pillars of reflection" remind the reader of the sea's power to distort images, as the soft, unstable cloud can appear as "marble pillars" on the surface of the ocean. The pillars are called "watery," however, when the poem's speaker comments on what the cloud is actually seeing. Even though the cloud believes he is seeing his *stable* foundation in the water, Bishop weakens his vision by calling it "watery." This gives these already imaginary pillars a loose and unsteady quality. This information only adds to the sea's deceptive surface as clouds become pillars, and then these pillars become "watery." Bishop paints an unreliable mirror on which images appear altered and ambiguous.

Later in the poem, this sea-mirror is shown once again to be unreliable, and it also becomes dangerous. The Unbeliever remains fixed above the sea:

> But he sleeps on the top of his mast
>
> with his eyes closed tight.
>
> The gull inquired into his dream,
>
> which was, "I must not fall.
>
> The spangled sea below wants me to fall.
>
> It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all."

By comparing the sea to diamonds, Bishop suggests a kind of rigid, warped mirror. Just as the surface of the water deceives the cloud in the third stanza, this diamond sea would distort any image that might come into contact with its surface. Along with being

deceptive, the sea-mirror becomes rapacious in this final stanza. The Unbeliever dreams that the sea wants him to fall and shatter on her rock-hard surface: "It wants to destroy us all," in fact. Not only is this mirror threatening and corrupt, it is predatory. The Unbeliever remains "on the top of a mast," however, "with his eyes fast closed" (and "closed tight"), determined not to open them. His dream, "I must not fall," is coupled with another fear, "I must not wake." If he were to open his eyes, he would see his reflection in the diamond surface of the sea. Bishop brilliantly unites the Unbeliever's fear of falling with his firm resolve not to look down at the poisonous surface of the water in order to suggest that just as physical contact with this mirror means destruction, visual contact means the same.

Like the sea in "The Unbeliever," the water's surface in "Pleasure Seas" becomes a potentially dangerous vehicle for reflection. Bishop sights the "water's heavy sheet/ Of glass above a bas-relief" and then continues to use glassy imagery in relation to the sea's surface:

> The water is a burning-glass
>
> Turned to the sun
>
> That blues and cools and the afternoon wears on,
>
> ...It glitters rhythmically

Bishop compares the ocean's surface to cooling and melting glass. The shimmering surface above a bas-relief suggests the surface's reflective qualities and separates the top layer of the sea from what lies beneath it. By isolating the glossy skin of the ocean Bishop highlights the particular reflective power of the water.

Bishop then continues to describe how the water's surface handles certain emotions:

> Pleasures strike off humming, and skip
> Over the tinsel surface: a Grief floats off
> Spreading out thin like oil. And Love
> Sets out determinedly in a straight line,
> One of his burning ideas in mind,
> Keeping is eyes on
> The bright horizon,
> But shatters immediately, suffers refraction,
> And comes back in shoals of distraction.

She calls the surface of the water "tinsel," which indicates the silvery color and shiny surface of a mirror. Pleasures skip off and over the surface of the water, while a Grief separates slowly over the surface and seems to disappear -- it "floats off." This mirror dissolves grief and ignores pleasures. They bounce over the surface freely and carelessly, but they do not penetrate the mirror-surface of the sea. The ocean's surface reacts differently to the Love, however. Love shatters because the sea acts like a mirror and the bright horizon on which Love keeps his eyes is the sea's *reflection* of a sunset or a sunrise. While he attempts to fly in a straight line toward that horizon, the reflection of the sun and the actual horizon are blurred and he crashes into the surface of the ocean. This parallels the deceptive and destructive sea-mirror in "The Unbeliever."

The fact that it is Love in particular that crashes into the mirror is significant. Because a subject's contact with his reflection symbolizes the destructive recognition of his homosexuality, Bishop's use of the personified Love as the victim of this destruction is entirely appropriate. Love, with "one of his burning ideas in mind," is not simply unsuccessful in his attempt to satisfy his desire, but he bashes into his own image and bursts apart. In this way, he is destroyed because in his attempt to realize one of his burning ideas (which means: in his attempt to put himself into action, in order to *do* what he *is,* in order *to love*) he runs into his double. He is narcissistic, and therefore is destroyed upon contact with his own reflection. Bishop's personification of Love is not simply the personification of any kind of Love, but of homosexual Love. The shattering and refracting of this Love is an illustration of the twenty-eight year old poet's inability to resolve the tension between her precarious sexual identity and the narcissistic and psychologically negative associations attached to homosexuality.

Another interesting aspect concerning the choice of emotions with which Bishop works in "Pleasure Seas" has to do with Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam," which is dedicated to the poet's late friend Arthur Hallam. When examined in relation to "In Memoriam," Bishop's Love can be read as specifically homosexual. In "Pleasure Seas," Bishop uses precisely the same emotions found in Tennyson's poem. In the first section of "In Memoriam," Tennyson mentions both Love and Grief: "Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown'd" (l. 9). Both Love and Grief are threatened by water -- "lest both be drown'd" -- in Tennyson's poem, just as the sea dissolves and shatters these same emotions in "Pleasure Seas." Tennyson is discussing both the Love and Grief that he feels for his

deceased friend Arthur Hallam. Due to the intensity of their friendship and Tennyson's strong feelings for Hallam, the exact nature of Tennyson's Love has been questioned. Jeff Nunokawa explains:

> "Descend, and touch, and enter; hear/ The wish too strong for words to name" (In Memoriam, 93. 13-14). It is difficult for a contemporary audience to read these lines, in which Tennyson prays for Hallam's embrace, without thinking that the wish too strong for words to name is the love that dare not speak its name. (427)

Nunokawa continues to discuss the critical controversy that surrounds reading Tennyson's love for Hallam as homosexual as opposed to platonic. He says:

> The invitation to matrimony that Tennyson excised from the manuscript version of section 93 ("Stoop soul and touch me: wed me") has been taken by various readers, including, perhaps, Tennyson himself, as a figure of homosexual desire. (428)

Whether Tennyson's Love for Hallam is purely platonic or subtly sexual, "In Memoriam" is still an intense and highly imaginative tribute from one man to another. Bishop's biographical information leads the reader to assume her identification of Tennyson's love as potentially, if not definitely, homosexual in nature. After all, she, like all contemporary readers, was reading Tennyson's texts "in an age steeped in Freud" (Nunokawa 427). Her work reflects both her reading homosexual desire in Tennyson's text, as well as her inability to ignore Freudian notions about homosexual Love.

In "Pleasure Seas," Bishop's homosexual "Love" is the only emotion that seems to affect the water's surface. The sea violently alters Love by shattering and refracting him, but he returns as a "distraction" -- as "shoals." By returning in the form of shoals or sand-bars, Love has the potential to disturb the glassy surface of the ocean. This would account for the distracting presence of the remaining parts of Love, after he has been smashed to pieces. But if the reader imagines these shoals as submerged, which is another possibility, then Bishop is offering Love a different, but equally destructive fate. If her Love-shoals end under water (submerged), then her Love behaves as Tennyson fears his Love will behave in "In Memoriam": he drowns. Either way, Love is unsuccessful and seriously altered, if not destroyed, after contact with this destructive sea-mirror.

Bishop refers to the threatening surface of the water as "poisonous" early in the poem:

> But out among the keys
> Where the water goes its own way, the shallow pleasure seas
> Drift this way and that mingling currents and tides
> In most of the colors that swarm around the sides
> Of soap-bubbles, poisonous and fabulous.

Jeredith Merrin examines this particular word choice and suggests that it may be tied to the young poet's sexuality: "The word 'poisonous,' though, in the playful emotionally reticent context of this early poem, is so emphatic, so dire, that we are provoked into wondering about its cause" (156). She says that "the answer to [this] question of motivation may be located in frustrated sexual desire" (157). Merrin is not explicit about

this desire. She does not address it as specifically *homo*sexual, which would explain the frustration. She does go on to say that "the speaker's mind is threatened by something 'poisonous,' we may suppose, by some unhappiness, at the same time that is capable of manufacturing its colorful fictions that are "fabulous" (156). This paradox, the sea's poisonous and fabulous colors, reminds the reader of the Gentleman of Shalott's dangerously positioned, but "exhilarating" glass. If this sea-mirror is the vehicle for the realization of homosexual identity, then this paradoxical mirror articulates the young poet's dangerous and yet "fabulous" situation. Although this sea provides a hostile environment for Love, he cannot be put into action without recognizing his dangerous reflection. The realization of homosexual identity requires this violent contact with one's own image. Unfortunately for Bishop, at this point in her life this realization is inseparably connected to the devastatingly negative and threatening Freudian *disorders* of "inversion" and narcissism.

Bishop's sea is not simply poisonous, however, and its fabulousness must not be ignored in the face of its danger:

> Across it a wide shadow pulses
> The water is a burning-glass
> Turned to the sun
> That blues and cools as the afternoon wears on,
> And liquidly
> Floats weeds, surrounds fish, supports a violently red bell-buoy
> Whose neon-color vibrates over it, whose bell vibrate

Through it. It glitters rhythmically

The sea is delight. The sea means *room*.

It is a dance-floor, a well ventilated ballroom.

In contrast to the "walled off swimming pool" where "the water is perfectly flat," Merrin observes that "this other unconfined water evokes a mind unconstrained -- a good thing, surely. This...suggests the young poet's artistic independence as well as possibly hinting at her sense of social and sexual difference" (156). The sea offers the possibility, destructive or not, of recognizing and exploring sexuality. This is a liberating but, simultaneously, a frightening and dangerous place for Bishop and her speaker. The ability to understand her homosexual identity in the abstract is liberating, but to act on this realization is frightening. The sea offers the speaker room to dance, to breathe, and to explore her sexuality, but challenging the hostile environment of the sea requires courage. Unless the one escaping dares to leave "the walled off swimming pool," which symbolizes a space of social restraint, and enter the poisonously colorful world of this ocean (where Love is shattered and destruction seems to hover), she is denied these sensual pleasures. "The sea means delight," and locked in this sea of violence and danger, we find pleasures, rhythm and electric colors. It offers "neon" colors, reds and blues, "clay-yellow coral and purple dulces," greens and vibrations of electricity. Bishop is saying that the sea means freedom to *feel.* She reminds us that the sea supports "weeds" and sustains "fish" showing that this space is also providing room to live. The consequences of liberation -- of experiencing what the sea offers -- may be terrifying, as they are for Love, but without the danger the exploration of these sensual pleasures is not possible.

Merrin says that "the irregular couplet form of this poem -- with jagged line-lengths and frequent slant rhymes -- may remind us of the sea's lapping waves, while it evokes both freedom and constraint, singularity and sameness" (156). This idea of a confining liberation is, of course, Bishop's dilemma. Her freedom lies in her ability to explore her sexuality through poetry, but she must alter her language in order to avoid public scrutiny. More importantly here, however, her personified "Love" does not accomplish his mission. She seems to be saying, he is free to act (to love), but this action is tied directly to self-destruction. Naturally, her speaker is distanced from this passionate water as she comprehends the annihilation of homosexual Love, which, personified, is the annihilation of the homosexual *lover*. To exist without the marvelous, sensual pleasures found in the sea is to be restrained sexually, but to experience sexual freedom, once again, seems to demand the shattering of the lover -- or of the self.

The poem ends with an out of reach and lonely happiness:

> Happy the people in the swimming pool and on the yacht,
> Happy the man in the airplane, likely as not --
> And out there where the coral reef is a shelf
> The water runs at it, leaps, throws itself
> Lightly, lightly, whitening in the air:
> An acre of cold white spray is there
> Dancing happily by itself.

As Merrin bluntly explains: "Everyone and everything except myself is "Happy" the speaker seems to say with mixed self-pity and self-exhortation" (159). She continues:

> But then it is also impossible to read these last three especially lyrical lines without thinking that what is "Dancing happily by itself " is not merely external to the speaker, the water in the Florida keys, but also inside her, the solitary poet's psyche or (as Keats would have it) "working brain" that has endeavored to remain cheerfully dispassionate or "cold" like the sea spray, to find in solitary observation sufficient enjoyment....(159)

Beneath the "sufficient enjoyment" of this "observation" lies the inability of the speaker to act on that which her "solitary (poet's) psyche" experiences mentally. This freedom and happiness is "out there where" contemplating the coral shelf opens the poetic speaker to brilliant, imaginative ways in which to explore her passions, but physically diving into the reef will destroy her.

This cold, lonely feeling of paralyzed Love returns in "Chemin de Fer" as Bishop presents yet another instance in which the surface of a body of water fails to sustain Love successfully. In the last two stanzas, Bishop's pond absorbs a gun shot as well as the words of a hermit. These lonely, violent noises are the only sounds we imagine as we read this otherwise quiet piece:

> Alone on the railroad track
> I walked with pounding heart.
> The ties were too close together
> or maybe too far apart.
>
> The scenery was impoverished:

scrub-pine and oak; beyond
its mingled gray-green foliage
I saw the little pond

where the dirty hermit lives,
lie like an old tear
holding onto its injuries
lucidly year after year.

The hermit shot off his shot-gun
and the tree by his cabin shook.
Over the pond went a ripple.
The pet hen went chook-chook.

"Love should be put into action!"
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo
tried and tried to confirm it.

There is no noise at all until the last two stanzas. Until then Bishop gives us only the "pounding heart" of the speaker, alone in a deserted, "impoverished" wood. Finally, when we hear something, it is the dirty hermit's gun. The shot makes the pond ripple, shakes the tree by the lonely house, and spurs the hen to "chook." The choppy explanation of these

short, quick noises leaves us with a moment of silence again before the hermit's cry. In contrast to the clean, quick, and immediate reactions to the gun-shot, there is no answer to the old man's complaint, save an impotent, almost non-existent trace of an echo. Bishop's pond resembles her other water-mirrors, although in this case the pond is supposed to be the vehicle for the reflection of a sound instead of an image. Nevertheless, like the sea in "Pleasure Seas," the water's surface cannot confirm the hermit's words. He says: "Love should be put into action!" Love in "Pleasure Seas" is unsuccessful when he puts himself into action, and here we have another instance in which Bishop undermines the possibility of Love at work. The lonely hermit's desires cannot be met and they disintegrate "across the pond." With his plea, Love, in a sense, dissolves as well, and we are left again in silence.

The strange comparison in the third stanza of the pond to "an old tear/ holding onto its injuries/ lucidly year after year" is related to another poem containing reflective waters, "The Weed." The hermit's pond, likened to a tear, contains lucid reflections of the "injuries" suffered throughout the years. Bishop suggests that the pond in some way holds the pictures of the old man's sad and lonely life (in which love is *not* put into action) with her word choice, "lucidly." The visual representation of these "injuries," she suggests, is clear on the water's surface. Then Bishop encloses these suggested pictures in a single tear, a drop of water, which comes to symbolize the hermit's loveless life alone.

In "The Weed," Bishop also describes pictures or reflections contained in a body of water:

> The rooted heart began to change

(not beat) and then it split apart

and from it broke a flood of water.

Two rivers glanced off from the sides,

one to the right, one to the left,

two rushing, half-clear streams,

(the ribs made of them two cascades)

which assuredly, smooth as glass,

went off through the fine black grains of earth.

The weed was almost swept away;

it struggled with its leaves,

lifting them fringed with heavy drops.

A few drops fell upon my face

and in my eyes, so I could see

(or, in that black place, thought I saw)

that each drop contained a light,

a small, illuminated scene;

the weed-deflected stream was made

itself of racing images.

(As if a river should carry all

the scenes that it had once reflected

shut in its water, and not floating

on momentary surfaces.)

The "rooted heart," which is described as "cold" and "stiff" at the beginning of the poem, is not revived by this weed; it is "split apart." The important image here, in relation to Bishop's use of watery reflective surfaces in order to alter or destroy love, is this river of "illuminated" scenes. Bishop's speaker says that the river's cascades are "smooth as glass," reminding us again of the mirror-like qualities of the water's surface. Instead of actually reflecting these scenes, the river is presenting reflections of pictures once bounced off its surface. Now, like the hermit's lifetime of "injuries" enclosed in his pond (or tear), the water seems to house these illustrations. They, like the hermit's injuries, are pictures of the speaker's life. She is dead, or sleeping (like the Unbeliever), and these images pouring out of her chest are unfrozen thoughts breaking out of her heart. They are not reflections from the outside because "All this was in the dark." Bishop's water provides the speaker a way in which to examine the heart's thoughts that have been frozen for "a year, a minute, an hour," and it allows her to see in a place of complete darkness.

What is she *seeing* or understanding in this out-pouring river of thoughts? The speaker's frozen final thought, which remains "drawn immense and clear," reminds the reader of the hermit's final and only articulated thought which hangs in the air at the end of "Chemin de Fer." In "The Weed," the speaker's final thought is imprisoned in her *heart*, which relates to the hermit's call for love in "Chemin de Fer." A thought originating from and entrapped in the heart, the reader assumes, is related to the heart's mission: to love. This weed then, "prodding" the speaker from "desperate sleep" (not unlike the Unbeliever's *determined* sleep) brings a river of contemplation about love:

The weed stood in the severed heart.

"What are you doing there?" I asked.

It lifted its head all dripping wet

(with my own thoughts?)

and answered then: "I grow," it said,

"but to divide your heart again."

The water houses and provides the vehicle for the speaker's understanding of herself as a lover. Like Bishop's Gentleman, though, she is divided by this reflective surface. While the river provides her with illumination and imagination, it severs the speaker's heart. The hurtful weed's purpose here, in fact, is to do just this -- to break the speaker's heart apart, symbolizing lost or failed love. This watery surface, then, complete with the reflective possibility of self-realization, damages and denies the lover once again. Bishop's bodies of water consistently split, refuse, and threaten the selves of her subjects and they do so in a ways that threaten the subjects as lovers specifically.

Chapter Three: Weaving a "World Inverted"

As I discussed earlier in relation to "The Gentleman of Shalott," Bishop's techniques of inversion are suggestive of her own precarious identity as an "invert," or lesbian. In her poem "Insomnia," Bishop's desire for inversion and homosexual freedom is perhaps most clearly articulated. This blatant longing for love leads Susan McCabe to call this poem "one of Bishop's most vulnerable" because of its "abrupt, almost incidental" (122) ending, "and you love me." It is, in fact, one of the rare works in which Bishop's longing for unrestrained love is openly pronounced. McCabe's reading compliments my assertion that Bishop's attraction to inversion suggests encoded homosexuality. This poem is one of Bishop's most vulnerable not simply because her speaker yearns openly for an unreachable or lost love, but because she longs for an unspeakable, lesbian love. In fact, Bishop's speaker wishes for a entire community in which homosexual love can exist freely, an impossible "world inverted." Bishop leaves her speaker vulnerable in that she is destined for disappointment.

In order to understand this love as homosexual and specifically lesbian, however, Bishop's symbolically loaded language must be decoded. In the early and middle part of the 20th century, homosexuality was commonly called *inversion.* Charles Socarides writes, "Freud first coined the term 'contrary feelings,' the word 'invert,' and designated the practice of homosexuality as 'inversion'" (22). In 1968, well after the publication of *A Cold Spring* in which "Insomnia" appears, Socarides explains, "[Freud's research] still remains the departure point for all subsequent explorations" in homosexuality (22). In

much of her work, Bishop is clearly aware of her identity (or would-be identity) as an "invert" in the eyes of society. Her speakers and/or subjects, like the Gentleman, are often lonely outcasts, incapable of finding love. Bishop's sensitivity to the loneliness attached to homosexuality is embedded in "Insomnia." In fact, in this poem she makes reference to a famous lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness,* which deals with the despair, hopelessness, and sickness -- the "insane passion for unmitigated anguish" (Faderman 102) -- attached to lesbianism. Written in 1928, Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* "popularized [the] assessment of sexual inversion" (McCabe). Lillian Faderman explains that with its publication, "there was suddenly a great interest in the lesbian as a sexual freak, and the floodgates opened" (101). McCabe explains that while Bishop's "well," in "Insomnia," is a well of loneliness, "it also becomes a resource, the transformative potentiality existing beneath and within the sorrowful and longing voice of the insomniac suffering an unrequited love" (121). Bishop is certainly not unmindful of the tradition of "unmitigated anguish" throughout lesbian literature. In her work, however, she retains only slight traces of characteristics that have been associated with lesbians since the 1930's: lesbians as vampires or monsters, vicious and carnivorous (Faderman 100). Her liminal characters and repressed speakers lose the rapaciousness of monstrous, twisted lesbians in earlier literature and popular culture. They remain outsiders, though, in search of a world to meet their unconventional desires.

In "Insomnia," Bishop explores the possibility of creating a symbolically homosexual world, a "world inverted," where *inverts* would no longer be monstrosities. Marilyn Lombardi says, "In private musings, the poet identifies for a time with the

insulting association linking the lesbian and the monster, both of whom flaunt their deviance before flying into invisibility" (54). She explains that "Bishop's evocations of an inverted and underground existence align themselves with the vampiric or hermaphroditic representations of lesbian love so popular in the twenties and thirties" (54). As McCabe suggests in reference to "Insomnia," Bishop's inverted world is also a potential haven for her inverted subjects. In creating this world of opposites, she is calling for a universal cure for "inversion," not an individual one. Bishop's subjects are incurable inverts attempting to survive in an oppressive society and her work reaches for another world in which her inverted subjects would be free to love without opposition or social restraint.

This "world inverted" is necessarily tied to Bishop's fascination and preoccupation with reflective surfaces. Her dangerous mirrors, so often represented by bodies of water, provide the symbolic medium through which her subjects might achieve homosexual salvation. All of this, of course, rests on the conditional *might* because Bishop's mirrors consistently threaten those who contact them directly. She explores the act of flaunting deviance, or simply recognizing the self as deviant, just before annihilation. As in "Pleasure Seas" and "The Gentleman of Shalott," Bishop's subjects are constantly threatened with self-destruction if they recognize, let alone flaunt, their deviance by making direct contact with their reflections in society's mirror. Again, Narcissus is not forgotten, though Bishop constantly attempts to escape or alter his legendary fate.

Though her speaker is unable to achieve it, Bishop most clearly articulates the imaginative potential for a self-preserving, unobstructed lesbian union in "Insomnia":

The moon in the bureau mirror

looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, as herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she's a daytime sleeper.

By the Universe deserted,
she'd tell it to go to hell,
and she'd find a body of water,
or a mirror on which to dwell.

Bishop alludes to Tennyson's Lady of Shalott here with her introduction of the moon. Her speaker sees the moon through the medium of a bureau mirror, showing that she is trapped in her bedroom in the same way that Tennyson's Lady is enclosed by her tower-top room and her mirror. Bishop also recreates the act of looking at the outside world by means of an inside mirror. She makes it possible to identify the moon with Tennyson's Lady too, because she has her moon looking out "far and away beyond sleep." This reflects how the Lady "weaves by night and day/ A magic web" containing the reflected images of Camelot (ll. 37-38). Tennyson's Lady is herself an insomniac, working through the night on her web.

The web, the Lady's sole concern during her imprisonment, finds its way into Bishop's poem as well with "so wrap up care in a cobweb." Tennyson writes, "She knows not what the curse may be,/ and so she weaveth steadily,/ And little other care hath she"

(ll. 42-45). Because there are many references to the Lady's web throughout Tennyson's poem, and in light of Bishop's more obvious allusion to this poem in "The Gentleman of Shalott," I suggest that she is alluding to the Lady's "web" and "care" in her poem "Insomnia," although she uses them differently. There are overwhelming connections between Freud's discussions of feminine sexuality and weaving, which may help us to understand why Bishop re-invents the Lady's *web* and *care*. Tennyson's poem adheres to the phallocentric, Freudian notions about weaving exactly, and can be analyzed in perfect harmony with Freud's assertions. In his late essay "On Femininity," Freud explains:

> It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions on the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented -- that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. (Freud 132)

Freud continues, saying, "If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idee fixe*, I am of course defenseless" (132).

Tennyson's poem, in fact, makes the same connections Freud does. In his analysis of "The Lady of Shalott," Matthew Rowlinson explains, "Freud represents the woven fabric as the material form of shame, a characteristic that is itself ambiguously natural to

women ("a feminine characteristic *par excellence*") and an instance of cultural determination ("far more a matter of convention than might be supposed") (75). Freud suggests that "shame...has as its purpose, we believe, concealment of genital deficiency" (Rowlinson 74). In reference to the Lady of Shalott, Rowlinson explains:

> Western narratives about women have compulsively reproduced the motif of weaving as a form of women's work that at once compensates for or conceals their castration and at the same time renders it legible. Such narratives always invoke woven fabric for the purposes of unravelling it, or more strictly imagine it as self-unravelling, as always inevitably undoing its own effects....the Lady of Shalott's tapestry may be read as an instance of this structure. (77)

When the Lady finally leaves her loom, in an attempt to satisfy her sexual, and therefore shameful, desires, the web unravels. Unguarded passion leads to her destruction. At the moment she breaks free from her cursed and closeted existence in her room, she abandons her loom. The web relaxes, loosening the Lady's work and opening her up to sexual visibility. "Out flew the web and floated wide" (l. 114) suggests that it is no longer tightly woven and concealing, but full of gaps through which the Lady's sexuality is visible. The Lady's creation comes from a life of repressed desire. She is unable to act on her physical urges from her little room without facing the unknown consequences of her "curse." Thus, when the curse comes upon her, the Lady's web has failed and becomes useless. She has already been recognized as a sexual being and she can no longer hide behind her work.

For Bishop, however, Freudian explanations of femininity and homosexuality are problematic. Like the Lady, who weaves reflections of the physical world from which she is forbidden into her web, Bishop carefully weaves the coded language of homosexual desire into her poetry. Instead of abandoning the Lady's careful work, Bishop calls attention to the "care" and the "web" by preserving them. She re-names the web a "cobweb" into which she wraps "care," sending them both into a world of inverted freedom:

> So wrap up care in a cobweb
> and drop it down the well
>
> into that world inverted
> where left is always right,
> where shadows are really the body,
> where we stay awake all night,
> where the heavens are a shallow as the sea
> is now deep, and you love me.

Bishop wants to preserve the Lady's work as a transparent cobweb. In direct conflict with Freud's notions of women's creations as the visible manifestations of shame, Bishop wishes to cover her "care" without concealing it. This care, though vague and ambiguous, is multifaceted. It is the labor of feminine creation associated both with the Lady's weaving while sexually repressed, and with Bishop's carefully coded poetics of inversion and homosexuality. It is also the longing for love and sexual union and, in Bishop's case,

lesbian union. It can even be read as homosexual love itself, and all the anxieties and concerns attached to that "inverted" desire. Finally, it suggests the shame associated with feminine sexual desire and also with homosexuality. Bishop manages to preserve the Lady's creation without covering her sexuality. Feminine creation, which comes from repressed sexual desire, becomes a delicate source of protection and is no longer merely a carefully constructed shield for feminine shame. Because Bishop places her "care" -- her subversive homosexual themes and desires -- into a "cobweb" (animal-made), instead of an artistic (human-made) web, she seems to be saying that her art, though it encompasses repressed feminine desire, is *not* the material manifestation of sexual shame. Further, a spider's cobweb is certainly immune to Freudian interpretation, unlike a woman's weaving. Socially constructed notions of gender and sexuality, of course, do not apply to insects and animals. They are governed purely by nature, not by society.

Bishop takes the Lady's veil and makes it transparent and naturally feminine (as opposed to socially feminine), but she does not abandon the creation completely. Bishop uses this new version of Tennyson's Lady's web in order to make a complete and successful journey into an imaginary world of freedom. For Bishop, the care taken by the Lady in terms of her artistic creation is valuable enough to preserve upon escape. For Tennyson, however, it is not. While the web becomes most important when Tennyson's and Bishop's subjects are on the threshold, just before they escape, it functions differently in each poem at these points of departure. In Tennyson's poem, the web and the Lady are destroyed when she finally frees herself from her enclosed existence. In "Insomnia," however, Bishop's speaker wishes to take the web with her, "into that world inverted."

Care (homosexual desire) is carried into a world of sexual freedom, shamelessly protected by, and visibly wrapped in the labor of feminine creation (the cobweb).

In Bishop's world of inverted sexual union, the Lady's desires could be met. It is a world "where we stay awake all night," which fits the nocturnal Lady's lifestyle. It is also, more importantly, a world "where shadows are really the body." This is perhaps yet another direct reference to Tennyson's text. The Lady's only utterance, aside from "the curse is come upon me" (l. 116), is "I am half-sick of shadows" (l. 71), which comes directly after she sees the reflections of "two young lovers lately wed" (l. 70). It precedes the appearance of the sexually charged Lancelot, as well. The Lady's only source of human contact is through *shadows*, as Tennyson calls them. He does not refer to her visions as reflections; instead he writes, "And moving thro' a mirror clear/ That hangs before her all the year,/ Shadows of the world appear" (ll. 46-48). In Bishop's imagined world inverted, these "shadows of the world" become tangible. It is the Lady's carnal desire for Lancelot's shadow which destroys her. If his reflection were really his body, she would have been cured, in a sense, of her "half-sickness," without suffering the destructive consequences of liberation from her curse.

Chapter Four

Dickinson's Influence:
A Conditional Resurrection of the Melancholy Moon

Bishop's speaker in "Insomnia," though she is capable of imagining this sexually liberating "world inverted," is bound by the Lady's legacy. This is to say that while she can express the need for such a place, she seems to be living like the cursed Lady. Even though Bishop's poem ends with the idea of a world in which homosexual love can exist, the speaker imagines this world is possible for the moon, not for herself. The speaker develops an illusory world of inversion but, like the Lady of Shalott, she never departs from her bureau mirror. It is also important to note that the speaker does not use the bureau mirror in order to look at her own reflection. She is looking at the moon's reflection, and the moon "looks out a million miles." This mirror, therefore, is like Tennyson's mirror in "The Lady of Shalott." It limits the speaker to a world of reflections or shadows, just as the Lady's mirror traps her. From her sheltered position, Bishop's speaker is seeing the sky through a confining medium. Her mirror creates a framed, enclosed picture of the moon. Nevertheless, the restrictive mirror is also the medium through which the speaker sees at all. By describing the moon in this way, through her speaker's closeted position, Bishop suggests the great distance between the world of the speaker and that of the personified moon. The speaker misses the visual impact of the moon in her element -- the unending, open night sky. This shows not that the moon is somehow confined by the speaker's vision, but that the speaker can see freedom only from a position of confinement.

By itself, Bishop's poem can be read as an extreme desire for emancipation from this confining existence in front of the bureau mirror. Remembering Narcissus and the Lady, however, Bishop's poem becomes a more complex desire for homosexual liberation which is hindered by an unspoken, but ever-present danger. The destruction that follows the Lady of Shalott is implicit in "Insomnia," as is the legend of Narcissus because Bishop's speaker imagines the moon's emancipation but dares not contemplate her own. The reader assumes the female speaker's identification with the moon, and the female poet's identification with the speaker. Still, Bishop's speaker does make a clear distinction between her potential for the freedom and the moon's:

> By the Universe deserted,
>
> *she'*d tell it to go to hell,
>
> and she'd find a body of water,
>
> or a mirror, on which to dwell.

The italicized "*she*" forces the reader to scan the beginning of this line as spondaic. Bishop is calling attention to what the moon could or would do, as opposed to the speaker. Bishop is even careful not to stress the contracted verb ('d); she italicizes only the feminine moon (*she*).

Bishop's lines "she'd find a body of water,/ or a mirror on which to dwell," show that the moon's freedom would be found upon contact with a reflective surface. Reading Bishop's mirrors, so often represented as bodies of water ("The Unbeliever" and "Pleasure Seas"), as dangerous vehicles for homosexual realization, the moon's ability to escape can be read as her ability to escape to *homosexuality*. Remembering what the sea-mirror does

to the personified "Love" in "Pleasure Seas," however, the speaker's resistance to this kind of escape is understandable. Like the Lady and Gentleman of Shalott who must avoid looking at their reflection or risk self-annihilation, Bishop's speaker is safe peering indirectly into her bureau mirror. She too is trying to avoid or reject a narcissistic fate. The "body of water," or other mirror, however, is reserved for the immortal moon, who seemingly would be able "to dwell" in or make contact with her reflection without worrying about the destructive effects of accepting, or publicly recognizing, her homosexual (inverted) identity. The moon may even be able to look at her reflection in the bureau mirror without self-destructing, which is a concern for many of Bishop's other subjects. Bishop's moon in the speaker's bedroom mirror "looks out a million miles/ (and perhaps with pride, at herself...)". The speaker imagines that the moon might be capable of seeing herself "with pride," without the fear of self-discovery or realization of social deviance. This idea of untouchable, immortal feminine pride can also be read in conflict with Freud's notions of feminine shame. The speaker imagines the moon, though she never shows it ("she never, never smiles"), as the ideal feminine "invert," secretly proud of her sex and of her homosexuality.

Bishop's feminized and powerful moon is not unlike the moon in many of Emily Dickinson's works. Both poets explore sexual desire by using the moon as an illustration of feminine passion. This sexually charge moon differs from the *human* women in both poet's works, however, and the representations of mortal women in these poems show that they are in fact bound by social regulations concerning feminine sexuality. Still, by painting the moon as a powerful, sexually liberated, female force, both poets present a

feminine ideal. The presentation of this ideal in the form of the immortal moon, and as an impossibility for mortal women, suggests that both poets are voicing the need for a place in which the expression of female sexuality is no longer curbed by social limitations of femininity.

In her poem #429, "The Moon is distant from the Sea --," Dickinson presents a controlling, feminine moon and submissive, masculine sea.:

The Moon is distant from the Sea --
And yet, with Amber Hands --
She leads Him -- docile as a Boy --
Along appointed Sands --

He never misses a Degree --
Obedient to Her Eye
He comes just so far -- toward the Town --
And just so far -- goes away --

Dickinson emphasizes the moon's control over this boyish sea by reminding the reader of the immense distance between them and its insignificance in relation to the moon's power. Her moon appears goddess-like with her all-seeing "Eye" to which the sea adheres precisely, and also by nature of her heavenly and "distant" position in the sky. In the third and final stanza of the poem, however, she inverts genders and the speaker, whom we assume is female, becomes "the docile boy":

Oh, Signor, Thine the Amber Hand --

And Mine -- the distant Sea --

Obedient to the least command

Thine eye impose on me --

Curiously, Dickinson does not capitalize the Signor's "eye" in the last line of the poem. Perhaps the divinity of the moon is not completely transferable, even for the sake of metaphor? Nevertheless, Dickinson's inversion, while it reinforces the submissive nature of feminine love in human form, does suggest the fluidity of gender in this relationship. The gendered, but inhuman moon also gives her a vehicle for expressing domineering, feminine power in a clearly male/female relationship without literally breaking the codes regulating feminine behavior in the society in which she writes.

It is perhaps the same moon which Bishop employs in "Insomnia." She too uses the moon as a vehicle for a specifically feminine expression of passion which could not be described in literal terms without significantly disturbing social norms. This feminine desire, however, is socially disturbing on two levels. Like Dickinson's feminine desire, Bishop's speaker's longing for love runs contrary to expectations of women's sexual submission and threatens social codes of behavior in this way. Because her speaker's desires can be read as specifically lesbian, however, they are even more atypical than Dickinson's speaker's fantasies. I have already associated the desire for an inverted world with the desire for a homosexual haven. Bishop connects the moon's potential to find love to a "mirror" or "body of water," paralleling her other mirrors in which homosexual subjects understand themselves as such in the eyes of society. With this in mind, I suggest that the longing for love in "Insomnia" can be read as specifically lesbian.

Evidence for this assertion appears in Bishop's allusion to Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness.* Bishop writes "drop it [care] down the well," using the well of loneliness as a vehicle for transformation, as Susan McCabe has argued. Bishop calls it "the well," not "a well," which suggests that she has a specific "well" in mind, perhaps Hall's. Other evidence that Bishop's speaker desires a lesbian love lies in the traditional gendering of the sea as female, not as male. The speaker, who desires a world "where you love me," where love is possible, imagines the liberated moon seeking sexual union with the sea. Also, the monthly cycles of the moon and the sea's tides mirror biological monthly cycles of women -- menstruation and ovulation. These feminine associations with the sea and the moon suggest an ideal lesbian relationship.

In regard to this immortal moon, however, Bishop's speaker uses the conditional "she'd." The speaker imagines that the moon could or would free herself from the universe to find an inverted love, but she does not imagine her actually *doing* it. Also, we learn in the first stanza of "Insomnia" that the moon "never, never smiles." Both Bishop's use of the conditional "would" in reference to her moon, and her speaker's description of the moon as perpetually grave, are remarkably Dickinsonian. Bishop's melancholy moon resembles the one in Dickinson's poem #737, "The Moon was but a Chin of Gold":

> The Moon was but a Chin of Gold
> A Night or two ago --
> And now she turns Her perfect Face
> Upon the World below --

Her Forehead is of Amplest Blonde --

Her Cheek -- a Beryl hewn --

Her Eye unto the Summer Dew

The likest I have known --

Her Lips of Amber never part --

But what must be the smile

Upon Her Friend she could confer

Were such her Silver will --

In yet another poem, Dickinson almost deifies the moon, describing her "perfect Face" looking down "Upon the World below." The third stanza's description of the moon, "Her Lips of Amber never part --/ But what must be the smile" parallels Bishop's "but she never, never smiles," in "Insomnia." The conditional, "But what must be the smile/ Upon Her Friend she *could* confer/ Were such her Silver will," matches Bishop's moon who *would* tell the universe "to go to hell" and escape to her "body of water."

Bishop leaves her speaker, just as Dickinson does in poem #429, with a longing for feminine sexual emancipation that remains unsatisfied but possible, if only in the abstract, for the immortal moon. Why then are these liberating possibilities not realized by the transcendent moon? And why the sad face? My answer would have to be that both poets are illustrating what Susan McCabe would call "the liberating and constraining aspects" of being a female poet, and in Bishop's case, a lesbian, writing in an unwelcoming and therefore restrictive environment. The moon reserves her actions and emotions though

she knows full well that she is capable of sexual emancipation and, in "Insomnia" specifically, escape and inversion. The poets, like the reserved moon, keep these unconventional ideas of femininity abstract and imaginary by attaching them to the inhuman moon. In this way, they can be free to discuss the possibility of female sexual liberation and power without laying it out literally in human terms. While the speakers in Dickinson's "The Moon is Distant from the Sea" and Bishop's "Insomnia" can imagine the actions of the moon, they cannot conceive of witnessing the results of such a liberation. This leaves the reader to imagine and perhaps to desire a new kind of femininity -- one that mimics and reflects that of the moon. On the other hand, it also reminds us that, like their speakers, these poets are mortal women, ultimately incapable of divorcing themselves from society's narrow definition of the feminine.

Though her speaker is unable to transcend social codes and run to that inverted world in which she would find love, she does her best to follow the criteria she establishes for her imaginary land of freedom. Bishop constructs a world for her mortal speaker that is compiled of aspects which are mostly out of her reach:

> ...that world inverted
> where left is always right,
> where shadows are really the body,
> where we stay awake all night,
> where the heavens are as shallow as the sea
> is now deep, and you love me.

The speaker cannot reverse left and right and she cannot create matter from shadows. As for the heavens and the sea, these are immeasurable abstracts, impossible to reverse, let alone fathom. It is obvious then that the speaker's love is not going to happen. The only thing she can do is "stay awake all night" in an attempt to remain conscious while the moon resides over inverts with reversed sleeping patterns. The night-time world is the closest she can come to that ideal "world inverted" because it is governed by the sexually unrestrained and seemingly divine invert, the moon.

Chapter Five

Luna's Territory: The "Queer Light" of the Moon

Bishop's liminal subjects appear throughout her work as citizens of the night. Like the speaker in "Insomnia," her subjects are often insomniacs who have little choice but to function nocturnally. In "The Riverman," "Sonnet" (1928), and "The Man-Moth," Bishop presents subjects who thrive during the moon's period of rule. They are inverts attempting to flourish in the night-worlds to which they have already escaped. They have accepted their own deviance, or at least have realized it, and are in the process of feeling out and confirming their deviant lives. In reference to Bishop's "At the Fishhouses," Carole Doreski says, "The uneasy confirmation of the self involves risk of immersion, an affirmation of faith...." (19). Her assertions can be applied to the above mentioned poems, as well. In these three works, Bishop's subjects bathe in the "queer light" of the moon (Bishop's ideal invert). Their desire for complete physical union with the moon suggests their desire for an inverted *sexual* union which would lead to confirmation of the self as homosexual. The poet conceals her identification with her unusual subjects and speakers by gendering them male. Since her subjects are male, their desire for the feminine moon is also less overtly homosexual.

Finally, Bishop's subjects long for immersion into a world where inverts would be not be considered abnormalities. The Man-Moth, the Riverman, and the speaker in "Sonnet" (1928) yearn for the moonlight to envelop them and send them into "that world inverted," which Bishop describes clearly in "Insomnia." Unlike the sheltered speaker in

"Insomnia," however, these three subjects do experience physical union with the moonlight. Their contact with the moonlight is experienced in different ways, of course, suggesting each subject's respective level of homosexual self-recognition. The intensity of submersion into the moon's light corresponds to the subject's level of understanding and acceptance of his or her social deviance. Further, Bishop uses bodies of water in two of these poems in order to symbolize this symbolic union with the moon. The Riverman plunges mystically uninjured into "Luandinha's" river "every moonlit night" and continues to make a life for himself in her underworld; the speaker in "Sonnet" finds eternal relief on the surface of her "moon-green pool." Bishop denies her Man-Moth such comfort, however. He remains yearning for the moon's caress.

Written in response to a newspaper misprint for *Mammoth* (Bishop's note), "The Man-Moth" is perhaps one of Bishop's most obscure character sketches. Based on a mistake, he is a misfit and most obviously marginalized. He is certainly another one of her inverts:

> Here, above,
> cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.
> The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
> It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
> and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
> He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
> feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
> of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth

pays one of his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,

the moon looks different to him. He emerges

from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks

and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.

He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,

proving the sky quite useless for protection.

He trembles, but must investigate as far as he can climb.

Up the facades,

his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,

he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage

to push his small head through that round clean opening

and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.

(Man standing below him, has no such illusions.)

But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although

he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

As he is half-moth, the Man-Moth is naturally attracted to the moon's light and wishes to immerse himself in the queer brightness. The image of his "small head" pushing through the "round clean opening/ and [being] forced through" clearly suggests passage through a birth canal* (see page 79). He wishes to be born into the moon's queer world, though he fears the attempt, and inevitably fails. It is clear that he feels he is already part of the

personified moon's body as he imagines himself her unborn child. Here Bishop suggests the Man-Moth's mystical union with the moon, though his physical union never comes to fruition.

The night-time world in which the Man-Moth exists must not be confused with the queer world into which he wishes to be born. Without the aqueous representations of the moon's warmth (found in "Sonnet" and "The Riverman"), Bishop's Man-Moth cannot quite wrap himself in the moon's reflection. While he is underground, where he seems to spend most of his time, he has only a taste of her "queer light on his hands." In fact, "He does not see the moon" herself, only "her vast properties." He does not fully comprehend the effects of the moonlight, either. It is a "queer light...neither warm nor cold,/ of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers." Bishop's use of "queer" to describe the moonlight is significant. Queerness, of course, is synonymous with homosexuality and has been since the early 20th century (see page 75). Thus, Bishop is calling attention to the moon's homosexual qualities, as well as the Man-Moth's inability to determine exactly how these properties feel -- he cannot interpret them. The moon's light is present on the Man-Moth's hands but it is still abstract and intangible, just as the Man-Moth's queerness (or homosexuality) is detectable, yet unrealized.

These indefinite, fragmentary traces of her otherwise "vast properties" are not enough to satisfy the Man-Moth's desire for physical union with the moon. For this reason, he "visits the surface," where he obviously does not belong. In "Man's" territory, he is oafish, naive and confused. "The Whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat" suggests either the Man-Moth's distorted view of man or his disproportionately large size

in relation to the rest of society. Either way, Bishop uses "Man," with its traditional capacity to suggest the universal (Mankind), in contrast with her exceptional subject. "Man," sans "Moth," has neither the attraction to the moon nor the faith in her transformative potential that the Man-Moth has. The latter remains below, driven by the "Moth" half of himself, sporadically attempting to reach the light. Like the Gentleman of Shalott, the Man-Moth is a split subject. His moth-like attraction to the "queer light" of the moon can be read as his unspeakable homosexual desire. If he were simply a normal "Man," he would "have no such illusions."

Bishop's Man-Moth cannot reach the moon, however, and never achieves homosexual union: "But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although,/ he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt." Like a moth who will destroy himself flying into a flame, the Man-Moth must climb toward the light. His Man-ness, however, keeps him from the fearlessness of an insect, and he seems to understand that his attraction is dangerous. As discussed before, Bishop often couples the homosexual self-confirmation, realization, or desire with the threat of self-annihilation. The Man-Moth's fear can be read in this way as well. Because he does not succeed in making contact with the moon, he avoids destruction.

After his failed attempt at physical union with the moon, the Man-Moth returns underground:

> Then he returns
> to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
> he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains

fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,
without a shift in gears of gradation of any sort.
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must
be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.
Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie
his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window,
for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,
runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease
he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

The Man-Moth "calls" the unwelcoming "pale subways of cement...his home." Bishop's description of this environment, like the "terrible speed" of the trains, does not comfortably fit her subject. His true home would be "through that round clean opening" of the moon, but this underground world will have to do. He is always "facing the wrong way" on the trains and travelling backwards at indeterminate speeds. This suggests, again, his desire for inversion. Though he tries to surround himself in a world of opposites, he is still at odds with Man's world. It does not "suit him." It is not enough to invert the conditions under which he lives, he needs another world -- a "world inverted."

The Man-Moth's aversion to looking "out the window" suggests his homosexual tendencies as well as the danger associated with recognizing these desires. Like the speaker in "Insomnia" and Bishop's Gentleman, the Man-Moth avoids his reflection. His vision of the third rail out the window of the subway is potentially overlaid by his own image in the glass. As it is naturally darker outside of the train than on the inside, the window acts like a mirror. The Man-Moth cannot look at the window because he will be tempted to grab the deadly third rail and end his life. These would-be suicidal tendencies are directly related to the Man-Moth's possible contact with his reflection. Like all of her other poems in which collision with a "mirror" will result in annihilation of the subject reflected, the Man-Moth's doom lies in beholding his own image. He would understand himself as others see him, which would lead to self-destruction. The subway window, therefore, is yet another one of Bishop's potentially deadly mirrors representing the subject's realization of a socially deviant identity.

In "Sonnet" (1928) and in "The Riverman," however, Bishop's subjects seem to find comfort upon contact with what would also be a reflective surface. In both poems, bodies of water, which are so often especially threatening in Bishop's work, act as mediums for immersion into a world of "moon-green" self-confirmation, sensual escape, and relief for their subjects. In her later poem, "The Riverman," Bishop's use of water to suggest immersion into the moon's world, or the queer light of the moon, is much more obvious than it is in "Sonnet." Still, in the latter, very early poem, there are traces of the relief and sensual satisfaction that the moonlit water provides years later for the Riverman.

After longing for the watery embrace of music that would "flow over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips" in the octave, Bishop's speaker seems to find her much needed "spell of rest":

> There is a magic made by melody:
> A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
> Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
> To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
> And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
> Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

The speaker in this poem is an insomniac, another invert, in need of a "spell of rest." The soothing melody and magic music desired by the speaker is compared to the comfort and healing powers of the moon-lit sea. The "heart that sinks through fading colors deep" falls far into the sea's embrace and finds eternal comfort in "the arms of rhythm and of sleep." This comfort relies on the physical contact between the poem's subject and the moonlit water. Her subject's salvation comes from mystical, physical union with the moon's reflection in the water. Unlike the Man-Moth, her speaker understands the touch of the moon's light as she imagines herself engulfed in the moon's aqueous "arms."

The magic attached to the moon-green pool in "Sonnet" re-appears in "The Riverman." Bishop's Riverman is mystically joined with Luandinha, "a river spirit associated with the moon" (Bishop's note). The Riverman travels "through the window naked...down to the river/ and the moon was burning bright." Luandinha's Dolphin beckons him and he follows it into her world. He says:

I heard the Dolphin sigh

as he slid into the water.

I stood there listening

till he called from far outstream.

I waded into the river

and suddenly a door opened inward...

Like the underground travelling of the Man-Moth, the Riverman's journey takes him beneath the river's surface. The door to this kind of inverted world even opens "inward," suggesting that the Riverman is being swallowed into Luandinha's territory. Unlike the Man-Moth's man-made underground world, however, Bishop's Riverman's subaqueous country is also Luandinha's home. She is a form of the moon incarnate, or at least represented as a definite female form. She is also the governess of this mystical land. The Riverman seems to achieve what the Man-Moth longs to do. He is physically engulfed by the moon's kingdom.

The Riverman only travels into the river on moonlit nights. Bishop reminds the reader of the moonlight on the water six different times throughout her poem, suggesting the necessity of the moon's presence in order for the Riverman to submerge himself in Luandinha's river. Physical union with the river-moon spirit Luandinha suggests mystical union with the moon. His description of Luandinha reflects his physical union with her:

Then a tall, beautiful serpent

in elegant white satin,

with her big eyes green and gold

like the lights on the river steamers--

yes, Luandinha, none other--

entered and greeted me.

She complimented me

in a language I didn't know;

but when she blew cigar smoke

into my ears and nostrils

I understood, like a dog.

Luandinha's cigar smoke fills the Riverman's ears making him understand something he cannot put into words. This mystic communication symbolizes the inexplicable confirmation of his attraction to Luandinha. He begins to understand her "language" only through immersion into her world. His comprehension represents self-confirmation, paralleling Doreski's assertions. He satisfies his desire for the moon to saturate his body through his connection with the female river spirit Luandinha, and validates this union with an unspeakable understanding of Luandinha's underworld. Her masculine (and possibly phallic) cigar suggests that she is not bound by traditional gender codes either, and could be read as another one of Bishop's inverts.

Luandinha's exotic language, Amazonian river home, and her masculine trait (the cigar) links Luandinha with Bishop's Brazilian lover Lota de Macedo Soares. The Riverman's experience in this foreign place can be read in relation to Bishop's life in Brazil: as an outside observer of Lota's society who is eventually adopted by and integrated into Brazilian culture. Lorrie Goldensohn points out the most compelling

evidence for this connection by offering a quote from Bishop that echoes "The Riverman:"

> There is a texture to this moment [the Riverman's language barrier in Luandinha's world], both comic and touching, which also resembles a feeling of Bishop's own, at an American distance from the governing language of Brazil. When asked by Ashley Brown in 1966 about the influence of Portuguese on her English, she merely replied: "I don't read it habitually -- just newspapers and some books. After all these years, I'm like a dog: I understand everything that's said to me, but I don't speak it very well." (214)

In this interview, Bishop's identification with her Riverman is clear. She compares her understanding of Portuguese, just as she compares the Riverman's comprehension of Luandinha's language, to that of a dog. The Riverman's attraction to Luandinha's beauty, her "big eyes" and "elegant white satin," also parallels Bishop's love for Lota. Luandinha's welcomes the Riverman with an initial "compliment," not simply a greeting, suggesting the subtle, ineffable attraction between them. This inexpressible enchantment can also be read in connection to Bishop's love for Lota. Because Bishop never clearly articulates lesbian love in her work, her love for Lota can also be seen as unspeakable. The problematic nature of language, in regard to Bishop's own homosexual desire, is reflected in "The Riverman."

The more times the Riverman travels into the river and meets with Luandinha, the more he learns about her world. As he grows to understand this place, he adapts to it:

> Three times now I've been there.
>
> I don't eat fish any more.

There's a fine mud on my scalp
and I know from smelling my comb
that the river smells in my hair.
My hands and feel are cold.
I look yellow, my wife says,
and she brews me stinking teas
I throw out, behind her back.

The Riverman becomes less and less human as his connection to Luandinha becomes more intense. He is turning into a river-creature, split like the Man-Moth between his Man-ness and his River-ness.

Unlike the Man-Moth, however, the Riverman is looking for a mirror in which to see himself. He says:

I need a virgin mirror
no one's ever looked at,
that's never looked back at anyone,
to flash up the spirits' eyes
and help me recognize them.

His search for the perfect mirror fits nicely into Bishop's use of reflective surfaces throughout her work. He wants a pure image of himself, in which he will be able to "recognize" the eyes of the river's spirit within him. He does not want a mirror that has been tainted by human society. As Goldensohn says, the "quest...for...the [mirror's] power to confer not only identity but connection to the larger, sought host of the spirit world...is

clouded by exasperating images of an intervening humanity" (215). Because mirrors are merely reflections of the physical self and are often a symbol of the subject's self as others see him, the Riverman searches in vain for that "virgin mirror." He says:

> each time I picked one up
> a neighbor looked over my shoulder
> and then that one was spoiled--
> spoiled, that is, for anything
> but the girls to look at their mouths in,
> to examine their teeth and smiles.

He cannot escape his "neighbor's" view of him. Without this neighbor-free look at his reflection, he cannot recognize his newly baptized, spiritual self. As Goldensohn explains, "Bishop's riverman, and no doubt Bishop herself, wish to survive their literal defacements, to escape the exasperating confinements of the body, and to dissolve within a larger community of spirits" (215). The storekeeper's mirrors become tools for comparisons between the surface of himself and that of others. The "girls" look at their "smiles," examining themselves for social purposes. In these "spoiled" mirrors, the Riverman can only see what the other see -- that he is a liminal being, almost half-fish by now, and certainly a social outcast.

Nevertheless, the Riverman's physical immersion into Luandinha's world suggests his fearless determination to understand the water spirits, regardless of his increasing liminality. He must travel into the river, instead of looking at another reflective surface, in order to find the *spirit* of the Luandinha. In this poem, Bishop de-emphasizes the

threatening aspects of the Riverman's reflection in society's mirror by coupling his cultural deviance with his mystical marriage to Luandinha. Unlike the speaker in "Insomnia" and the Man-Moth, he is able to escape from one unwelcoming society into a world that suits him. His understanding of his social identity -- an insomniac, an invert, and an liminal creature -- is not capable of destroying him because he has confirmed his unusual desires. He has met Luandinha, and has been surrounded by her magic moonlight. Unlike the Man-Moth, who fears and does not understand his attraction to the "queer light" of the moon, the Riverman says, "I knew what I was doing." He consummates his longing for Luandinha with his naked immersion into her world. This is an act of self-confirmation which leaves him free to pursue his underground lifestyle.

Conclusion

"The Riverman" is a dramatic monologue, a style which seems to give Bishop more artistic freedom. This poem, while it includes traces of her earlier works, moves beyond the social constraints which are apparent in her other poems. The Unbeliever's sea-mirror, the ocean's poisonous surface in "Pleasure Seas," the Gentleman of Shalott's potentially destructive glass, the insomniac's confining bureau mirror in "Insomnia," the hermit's inadequate pond in "Chemin de Fer," and the heart-splitting river in "The Weed" are all indicative of Bishop's use of reflective surfaces to hinder her subjects' ability to love. These poems' "mirrors" fail to satisfy their subjects' need for immersion into a world of homosexual love because, while they often offer the *possibility* for inversion (homosexuality), they also threaten their subjects with annihilation. The subject's choice to make contact with these potentially liberating reflective surfaces seems to be indispensably tied to self-destruction, suggesting the devastating affects of cultural and psychological definitions of the homosexual -- the *invert.* "The Riverman," however, moves beyond the danger of realizing an inverted identity. Goldensohn agrees:

> Unlike the space of her earlier fantasy poems, in which her projected speaker is suspended above or below or at some barrier before the medium in which a tantalizing and fuller life is being enacted, in "The Riverman" she achieves entry. In this poem, she is not suspended from the Man-Moth's of the Unbeliever's height, or trapped...; instead, she finally penetrates the remote class of the Other. The narrative of the poem is naturalized and in Brazilian as well as American

> voice, the dreamer-swimmer in it deploys his imaginative citizenship differently....(210)

Bishop finally presents a subject who is baptized into an underground community, greeted by the female moon-spirit Luandinha.

The moonlit river is indicative of a world of inversion: it is a space governed by and infiltrated with the moon's power. Bishop's moon, like Dickinson's, is presented throughout her work as an ideally feminine sexual force. In "The Riverman" as well, her moon is emblematic of an underground, night-time world in which the Riverman and Luandinha can connect, regardless of their cultural differences. In fact, the Riverman casts off the influence of his own society in order to meet Luandinha:

> I threw off my blanket, sweating;
> I even tore off my shirt.
> I got out of my hammock
> and went through the window naked.

As Goldensohn points out, "stripped of his sheathing of human culture, naked, and unaccommodated man goes to join a fluent world in which there is no discontinuity between the human and the sacred, the living and the dead, or the human and the animal" (212). This "fluent world" is also a place in which the moon blends with the water, represented by Luandinha who embodies the spirit of both the river and the moon. Bishop blurs gender lines with Luandinha's "cigar," as well. Luandinha symbolizes the possibility of fluidity in regard to spirit, language, and gender. She can communicate without a

concrete language. She is feminine, yet powerful and somewhat masculine, and her "spirits" reach beyond cultural boundaries to beckon and teach the Riverman.

In "The Riverman" then Bishop succeeds in pushing past some of her embedded resistance to the narcissistic implications of homosexuality. She allows her inverted self, represented by the male Riverman, to unite with Luandinha and flourish in her fantastic river -- the moon's territory. In order to do this, however, her Riverman must move away from the uncomfortably confining aspects of his (and Bishop's) culture. This only reinforces Bishop's desire for a less stifling world in which homosexual identity would not be tied to narcissism or *inversion* and seen as a sickness or a disorder. Bishop's ability to distance herself from her subjects, while remaining undeniably connected to them, is perhaps most clearly realized in "The Riverman." She speaks through the voice of her Riverman, and yet her own voice lies below the surface of the text. This dramatic narrative lends itself to a kind of poetic freedom because Bishop is finally able to liberate her subject, immersing him in that queer world which is not available to the Man-Moth or to the speaker in "Insomnia." Goldensohn tells us that when Bishop was asked, "'What do you think about dramatic monologue as a form -- you know, when the poet assumes a role?'" Bishop replied, "'I suppose it should act as a sort of release. You can say all kinds of things you couldn't in a lyric. If you have scenery and costumes, you can get away with a lot'" (222). In "The Riverman" Bishop "gets away with" writing herself into the poem, cross-dressed and *inverted*. In this poem she also manages to encode the wonder and beauty of realizing, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, a homosexual identity. Without this successful narrative monologue, readers might find overwhelming evidence in

Bishop's poetics of inversion that would suggest her insurmountable reticence in regard to her own inverted (lesbian) identity. The narcissistically doomed characters in her early poems suggest Bishop's own fear of mental or emotional instability because of her precarious sexuality. In "The Riverman," however, she overcomes these concerns. She allows her subject to consummate his inversion by creating an imaginative fantasy world in which humanity's threatening associations of homosexuality with sickness and perversion have little or no influence over him. Instead of simply calling for a moon-ruled "world inverted," as her speaker does in "Insomnia," Bishop creates one in "The Riverman."

Throughout Bishop's work, the reader can often find textual evidence of a homosexual subculture. The "queer light" in "The Man-Moth," the "queer cupids" in "Love Lies Sleeping," and even the "silver gay" voice in a very early poem "Imber Nocturnus" are woven into Bishop's poetics, suggesting her subversive homosexual themes. It is difficult for contemporary American readers to read these little words, "queer" and "gay," without connecting them to (now quite common) slang terms for homosexuality. Homosexual subculture, and even parts of heterosexual culture, did begin to use such terms to describe homosexuality in the early part of the century, however, and Bishop must have been aware of their connotations. Lillian Faderman tells us that "by 1922...such women [lesbians] were already calling themselves 'gay,' as homosexual men were" (67). She also makes it clear the "queer" also already used to describe homosexuals in the 1920's. By 1979, the year in which Bishop's late "Sonnet" was published, "gayness" was certainly publicly associated with homosexuality. This poem, with its little last exclamation, "gay!", expresses the poet's un-anxious sexual freedom:

Caught -- the bubble
in the spirit-level,
a creature divided;
and the compass needle
wobbling and wavering,
undecided.
Freed -- the broken
thermometer's mercury
running away;
and the rainbow-bird
from the narrow bevel
of the empty mirror,
flying wherever
it feels like, gay!

Bishop recalls images of earlier poems in this late work. A disconnection with a "mirror" means freedom here, as it does (or would) in "Insomnia," "The Gentleman of Shalott," and "The Riverman." An "empty mirror" suggests liberation from the cultural mirror, like the storekeeper's mirrors that do not satisfy the Riverman. It suggests divorcing the self from public perception in order to fly "wherever/ it feels like, gay!" The additional tiny adjective "gay" at the end of this poem, of course, implies emancipation into homosexual behavior. The "creature divided" resembles the Gentleman of Shalott, the Riverman, the Man-Moth, and even the speaker in "Insomnia." They are all "caught," as the "wobbling

and wavering/ undecided" subject of Bishop's "Sonnet" is initially. The broken thermometer reminds the reader of that immeasurable warmth or coolness of the moon's "queer light" in "The Man-Moth." The freedom in "Sonnet" breaks the thermometer, sending "mercury/ running away."

There is no way to define or measure "gay" liberation because it is necessary to escape social order, the constructed rules and definitions of society, in order to realize homosexuality. Without that kind of escape, threatening social perceptions of homosexuality will not disappear. In this late poem Bishop finally comes to a point in her poetics where "wobbling and wavering" are replaced with unmitigated and almost overt homosexual freedom. Like the Riverman who travels without hesitation into Luandinha's subaqueous culture, quenching his thirst for initiation into a more natural and comfortable culture, Bishop's "creature" (once divided) is finally allowed to fly away from culture's mirror, intact, unencumbered and complete.

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