CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Continent, city, country, society:

the choice is never wide and never free.

And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,

Wherever that may be?” [CP 94]

Elizabeth Bishop was an immensely admired twentieth century American poet whose fame touched the zenith of literary work due to her simple and bold poems. With travel as a major metaphor, Bishop’s poetry and life were directed towards the search for home, literally and figuratively. Her subjects mostly are the immediate geographical surroundings and life of people inhabiting them. Bishop’s fastidious eyes inspect with precision the physical world and appreciate it through her poetry. A poet with great literary calibre, Bishop couldn’t achieve much popularity as a poet in her life time, though she was highly appreciated in literary circles. Bishop’s journey as a writer was slow but made her presence felt gradually. Usually, a poet’s posthumous star dims for a while, but Bishop’s has risen steadily, and has itself become a subject to study, in critic Thomas Travisano’s word, “a phenomenon.”

HOME IN ELIZABETH BISHOP’S POETRY

Bishop’s life was a journey of losses and throughout her life she strived towards healing these wounds. She lost her father when she was only eight months, mother to insanity thereafter, and later had to leave her loved ones. Along with the loved ones, Bishop had to leave her much intimate space on the geography of the earth and that was her Nova Scotia home of her childhood to which she was deeply attached and it was the place where her memories of impressionable age got stuck. Initiating from her childhood, Bishop’s life was a catalogue of losses leading to a lifetime restlessness which got reflected in her search for regularity, intimacy and privacy of domestic life in her work. Home, for Bishop, is not only a structure but a symbol of love, warmth, peace and security. Her poems are investigations of the concept of home, which was
an unfathomable dream for her throughout her life. Bishop’s endeavours were, in her life time as well as in her poetry, to create enclosures symbolising homes, and homes whose very nature seem to be fragile. For Bishop, dwellings were not to be created in cities burning “guilt” of progressive life but in the provincial places near to sea, where life is experienced to its utmost naturalness. Home in her poetry is symbolic of beauty, warmth, security and peace like her Nova Scotia home, in the midst of nature near to the sea, filled with the warmth of her loved ones. Bishop in her lifetime tried to establish various homes on the image of her childhood abode – her first house in Key West, Florida; her Samambaia house in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and her Casa Mariana home in Ouro Preto, Brazil – which were lost to her, still she made a last attempt to make her home by purchasing a condominium in Lewis Wharf apartment in Boston. The loss of home was a significant loss of Bishop’s life. Bishop spent her entire career thinking about how best to dramatise and frame her investigation of different abodes in her art. Her distinction as a poet is her making of the home within the framework of language through the routes of memory lanes, travelling, describing and loving it. Bishop raises questions in her writings; they are the “questions raised by the breaking down of the self or the home or the everyday.” Unaware about the ways to compensate her various losses and to achieve her dream house, Bishop took to travelling and writing poetry, in order, to soothe her mind and keep her search ongoing.

From so many tragedies, one would expect more cries, more volcanic intensity, more tears than her poems offer. But Bishop’s is a quiet voice. It is raw and smouldering with pain and loss, but it never screams. Bishop never tried to quiet down her feelings, on the contrary she kept them behind a windowpane, behind the lens from where she observed them and took precise, powerful and yet, restrained pictures of them into her poetry. With such an irretrievable journey of losses, life would have been unbearable for Bishop had art not come to her rescue. Art for Bishop is a way to make life comprehensible and meaningful than it normally seems. Bishop intensified her search through her art and realises how unfathomable is the loss. Art for Bishop is a medication for her wounds, a kind of catharsis not an escape. To Bishop, art is a kind of home. She makes her accommodations with an
assurance which are full of risks. The readers are asked to witness her self-recoveries, which has the quality of shared premise. Art, for her is rather a means of making life bearable- of never making unbelievable whole. Her writings are new, distinguished, and inexhaustibly fresh.

Reticent as she was, still Bishop wrote several autobiographical pieces in which she testified to a lifelong sense of dislocation. Bishop explores not only the nature of external existence but also the way to interpret it. She implies that complete objective writing is impossible. Although, a work of art may not necessarily be about human consciousness, it always pertains to it and hence any work of art is an interpretation. Because she has been able to describe her feelings so precisely, her poems are personal.

This study is an attempt to understand and explore Bishop’s concept of home with the help of her poetic oeuvre. In order to unleash the complex concept of home, it is necessary to study her work in an autobiographical light. There is an attempt to unfold the deeper recesses of Bishop’s mind attempting to create enclosures resembling home in her poetry. Home, for Bishop, is a peaceful place filled with love and security but unaware she tends to create places which are no better than prisons which essentially are due to the pressure of loss of home in her life and the stress to achieve it in her poetry. While creating such enclosures, Bishop’s poetry transcends from the world of reality to the world of unknown, the mystic, the surrealist world. Home, for her is a memory resembling her childhood images from the provincial Nova Scotia.

Bishop’s life and her art is an odyssey in search of what she has lost in her childhood, her most loved Nova Scotian home. Bishop’s poems evoke houses and rural dwellings, like that of Robert Frost. Bishop wrote to Anne Stevenson in 1964, “Frost is a complicated case – a lot of what he wrote about was just homely to me, after my Nova Scotia days,” invoking the sense of “homely” as associated with home, suggesting that the familiar scenes in Frost’s poetry appeal to her because of her rural childhood. Bishop also shared with Frost a habit of imaginative and actual property speculation. For Bishop, as for Frost, the appeal of the abandoned farmhouses and rural dwellings had much to do with an idealised home and her own rootlessness and lack of family
connection. Ranging from Canada to Europe to South America, Bishop often travelled farther than Frost, looking an idealised home of her childhood. Bishop’s imaginative preoccupation with the idea of home was arguably one of her main inheritances from childhood. Her poems, as Adrienne Rich once recognised, are full of outsiders for whom the idea of home is precisely that – only an idea, like in the poem “Squatter’s Children” the “specklike children” waiting for the rain to wash away their “specklike house.” Bishop’s imaginative attachment to her “three loved houses,” mentioned in the poem “One Art,” is akin to Frost’s reverence for memories of the Derry farm. Her preoccupation with travel enhances her feeling of homelessness and a need to search what is lost.

ELIZABETH BISHOP’S POETIC STYLE

Elizabeth Bishop’s poems are not only sparkling with the affirmatives from her immediate surroundings but are also stoical due to the impressions of her personal trauma. Her poems affirm that nothing can be affirmed beyond what can be known through observation. For Bishop, observation was the only means to comprehend the intricate patterns of her life and also a necessary condition for creativity. In a famous “Darwin letter” addressed to Anne Stevenson in January 1964, Elizabeth Bishop wrote that “lack of observation seems to [her] one of the cardinal sins, responsible for so much cruelty, ugliness, dullness, bad manners-and general unhappiness, too.” In this quote, Bishop contemplates upon the importance of observation in her poetry and in life in general. Details in her poems are real and not imaginary; looking is the test of thinking which enhances understanding of the surroundings. And surrounding is an immediate home for Bishop. In her poems, Bishop uses a lot of images from her surroundings. Landscapes and geographical phenomena are frequently referred to in her poems. Her poems are extremely perceptive, beautifully executed evocations of places and the feelings she had about them. Her choice of subject matter is drawn repeatedly upon her feelings for the sea and the coastline, and the figures in her poems are natural and unsophisticated people whose lives contrast with nature but never violate it.

Man’s position in Bishop’s poems is absurd, impermanent and precarious, against not the inhuman forces, but the unhuman forces of nature. These
unhuman forces reduce everything to a level of absurdity and there is no escape from them; there are only alternate illusions of safety. In spite of the gay tone of her work, the experience of art, like that of life, is serious one for her. She tries to resolve the question of reality through art. Bishop has poems in which she combines the formal, rhyming verses with apparently trivial subjects. Whimsy and serious elements are usually combined for the purpose of parable or satire. The comic and cosmic, the human and mechanical are at times kept identical in her poems.

Bishop’s profound engagement with reality also works paradoxically at suggesting what lies beyond the physical experience. She was drawn as well to marginal figures (the lone, grotesque animal, for example) and she looked to surrealism early on in her career. She was particularly interested in visual surrealism, notably influenced through the work of Klee and Ernst. And their influence resulted in Bishop’s strong dream imagery and a propensity to modify shapes (magnifying and miniaturizing, among others). In this spirit, Bishop invests the territory of dreams as it seems to be a zone of in-between, a zone where concrete and abstract, reality and imagination meet in the strange formation of images that defy laws of perspective, scale and time. In this sense, a lot of Bishop’s poems redefine surrealism and its powers by establishing a bridge of imagination between dream and reality. She doesn’t use the bridge to cross from one field to another but rather to linger; a buffer zone from where the poet struggles and observes, from where shadows become tangible and memories are relived. Bonnie Costello notes in “Questions of Mastery” that “Bishop’s details are embedded in human perspective; they neither rise to the status of pure metaphor nor bare themselves as objective reality.” In other words, Bishop uses dreams as a rhetorical device. They are images that allow her to illustrate a point and are not explored as a reality. Art, for Bishop is a way of reconciling the two worlds of reality, which Bishop has experienced and expressed in her poems, the rational and irrational, the waking consciousness and dream experience, and the psychic and physical experience. In contrast to these poems, in which Bishop has conciliated the experiences of two different realities, there are poems which consider these occurrences as a continuum process. Bishop’s art
lies in multiplicity, a seeming inexhaustibility of meanings. The perfectly useless concentration of Darwin, and the case of solid observations are built up to a point at which the poet sails off to the unknown. Bishop’s reliance on dream experiences is not entire, for she too has practical and common-sensical side in her makeup, the New England yankee side of her character. Hence, she is not a complete surrealistic writer. All her life, Bishop was aware of both the worlds, the everyday world of the rational and the dream world of extra-rational. The tension that she has felt between these two worlds is considerable; and because she has refused to relinquish either of them, there is a problem of reality in her work. The natural, not the supernatural miracle, is expected; happiness consists of knowing and living with what one has: this may be the moral perhaps she intends. Bishop pays more attention to the particular and the definite which makes her poetry both more traditional and more realistic. Marked with a pictorial, lucid and extremely detail descriptions in Bishop’s poems, simplicity is deceptive. Her poems give the impression of outward simplicity; they have severe, puritanical starkness.

Bishop writes poetry in an easy, conversational vein and with an assimilative eye. Language, for Bishop, is primarily a means of description, although it is not only that. She uses words without fear of triteness and to be explicit about her experiences without becoming florid or ecstatic. Her command of metaphor is sophisticated but accurate. Her poems are built out of images which are usually interpreted or presented in a way that is consistent with a distant vision. Bishop is modern in the sense that she does not state the subject of her poems. Bishop, in her long poems, avoids obscurity by relating different images in such a way that a tension between the precision i.e. the accuracy of the poem and the resonance i.e. the images having multiple meanings, is maintained. She makes no concessions to accepted cliches, preferring to see for herself. She rarely forces her comparisons beyond the limits of credibility. She is capable of using metaphors very delicately and suggestively.

Elizabeth Bishop compared to her contemporaries, who were using complex and new forms of writing, seem to be very light, for she did not seem to be setting forth a message or criticism. Such disinterestedness in writing
was wholly original of Bishop. For Bishop, the picture, the image, the formal arrangement of words and rhymes in a poem exactly balances the emotional elements. Unlike Marianne Moore, she had not tried to invent new forms in poetry. Bishop found traditional forms satisfactory, had developed them in her own way, and trusted her eyes and her ears for the rest. Her free verse seems to come naturally to her and does not strain to be novel.

**DISPLACEMENT IN ELIZABETH BISHOP’S LIFE**

Bishop was fascinated by movement so as to achieve stasis in life. Entire life, she lived a traveller’s fate, searching her lost home and her Nova Scotian childhood. Most of Bishop’s poems highlight contrasting locations that are based on her multiple images of travels, and various places she lived in, like – Worcester, Massachusetts; Great Village, Nova Scotia; Poughkeepsie, New York; Key West, Florida; Rio de Janeiro, near Petropolis, Brazil; Ouro Preto, in the mountains of Minas Gerais, Brazil; and Boston. Her volumes of poems are full of geographical images and places she travelled, and, are also named after them: “North & South,” “A Cold Spring,” “Questions of Travel” (Brazil and Elsewhere), and “Geography III.” When she accepted the Neustadt International Prize for Literature at the University of Oklahoma in the spring of 1976, she spoke about how all her life she had;

“lived and behaved very much like . . . [a] sandpiper - just running along the edges of different countries and continents, “looking for something.”

Her poetic style focuses on the creation of a conscious spatial interpretation that considers surfaces and depths in order to achieve different dimensions and meanings. As the critic Lorrie Goldensohn comments on the importance of space in Bishop’s poems which are motivated with, “the urge to move and see around a thing in context, to place and measure through multiplying perspectives.” In other words, Bishop’s poetic vision intends to emphasize the ordinary conception of the world through displaying the imperceptible characteristics of things by the multiplicity of perspectives. By means of observations, Bishop creates in her poems different levels of space and understanding that guide the reader from a new inventive universe to the actual earthly perception or vice versa.
MEANING OF DISPLACEMENT

Poetry is a mirror for Bishop, to see her life and the surroundings into it. Through poetry, Bishop tries to find her lost home. In order to perceive and capture images of such a home in her poems, she had to be on move, travelling from one place to another. This movement is also perceived in Bishop’s art in the form of various displacements. Displacement, according to Webster Dictionary is “the act or process of displacing: the state of being displaced” or “the redirection of an emotion or impulse from its original object (as an idea or person) to another”. Displacement necessarily means movement from one place, set of emotions or state to another place, set of emotions or state. Hence displacement can be physical, psychological or temporal. The present study, intends to explore the theme of displacement and search for home in the light of Bishop’s poems. It tries to reveal different shades of displacement in Bishop’s poetry. Bishop’s displacement is necessarily directed towards her search for home.

For the convenience of the study of “The Theme of Displacement and Search For Home,” Bishop’s work can be divided into three phases namely – ‘American Phase’ spanning from the year 1911 to 1950; ‘Brazilian Phase’ covering the period of Bishop’s life from the year 1951 to 1969 and ‘Search For Home’ extending from the year 1970 to 1979.

Chapter II of this study entitled ‘American Phase’ explores Bishop’s first book of poetry “North & South” which was published in the year 1946, consisting of emblematic poems. In this phase, Bishop spent a life of nomadic wandering from place to place. There was something about her work, for which elegantly standard literary analysis was not prepared. Critics were nervous about analysing Bishop’s work due to her apparent lack of insistence on meanings beyond the surface of the poems. There was something personal, quirky, about her apparent straightforward descriptive poems which was hard to identify. Bishop’s poems, in this phase, are marked by an unusual amount of common sense, a kind of realism in which the poem is always responsible to the observable, a factual world. Her poems, in this phase, have surreal flavours and use of questioning technique in order to build enclosure symbolising home in the poems. The theme of displacement into the geographical world and
displacement into the surreal world are explored along with the theme of search for home pertaining to Bishop’s poems published in this phase.

Chapter III entitled ‘Brazilian Phase’ explores Bishop’s stay in Brazil from 1951 to 1969 and the literary works during this phase namely her two volumes of poetry, “A Cold Spring” published in the year 1955 and “Questions of Travel” published in the year 1965. Later, a collection of new poems “Uncollected Work” was published in the year 1969, which was incorporated in “The Complete Poems” which is also included in the study of this phase. The poems, written in this phase, reflect her love for Brazil and are also filled with the sense of nostalgia for the past, especially, her childhood days at Nova Scotia. Her poems are descriptions and comparisons of the flora and fauna of Nova Scotia and Brazil, with travel as a major theme, and are written with deeper meanings and layers to it. The Brazilian poems are model of how – with difficulty and pleasure, pain and precision – Bishop reintroduces herself to the world.

Chapter IV covers Bishop’s life span extending from the year 1970 to 1979 under the section ‘Search for Home’. In this period, her literary output was one book of poetry, “Geography III” published in year 1976. After the loss of Brazil, Bishop came back to America; it was a home coming for her. In her earlier works, her personal losses were not directly addressed, but in this phase her writings were more bold and direct. She directly addressed her losses in her poems. “Geography III” is Bishop’s tribute to her real-life relocation and deep acknowledgement of the roots of these poems in childhood memory and loss. The time and the space these poems lay claim to are more particularly Bishop’s own- less geographical, less historical, less vastly natural; her poems are more openly inner landscapes than ever before.

At the time of her death in the year 1979, Bishop’s place among poets was less certain. She had won many prizes: the Pulitzer, two Guggenheims, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, Brazil’s Order of Rio Branco and so on. The author of four volumes of poetry comprising of 110 remarkable poems and a number of distinctive short stories, she had translated poems in three languages, as well as prose, notably the “Diary of Helena Morley”, a memoir of a girl growing up in the
inland mountains of Brazil. Unfortunately, in her lifetime Bishop was overshadowed by more prolific and recognised contemporaries, even though they held her in high esteem, as, in Ashbery’s words, “a writer’s writer’s writer.”

MAPPING OF BISHOP’S LIFE

“Happiness does not consist in worldly goods but in a peaceful home, in family affection, in a simple life without ambition—things that fortune cannot bring and often takes away.”

Elizabeth Bishop dedicated her poetry to tell “what really happened,” yet what really happened in the life of one of the twentieth century’s finest and most beloved American poet gives us an understanding why her poetry allude glancingly, through ironic veils of fable and allegory, to her homosexuality, her alcoholism, her paralyzed depression, her lost home and lost relations, leading to an extensive displacement in her life. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on 8th February 1911, to William Thomas Bishop and Gertrude May Bulmer, Elizabeth Bishop was the only child of her parents. For the first few months of her life, Elizabeth Bishop experienced the deep warmth of her parents who were quite in love with each other and with their new daughter. Bishop had a secured home in Worcester, filled with the love of her parents and their security. In a letter dated 12th February, to his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Hutchinson Bulmer, an exuberant and patriotic William Bishop wrote:

“Dear Ma Boomer - Enclosed is a bunch of hair Gertrude wanted sent you, cut from the head of the most wonderful baby born in America. She is a Yankee, pure Yankee. Has blue eyes and black hair. This morning she said “Daddy” and tomorrow will set up in her high chair at table. Took her picture this morning and if it turns out well will send you one. Gertrude is fine, and can probably write you herself in a day or two. George & Maud are so sore they won’t speak to us anymore. But of course they could not expect to keep up
with we Yankees. Give my regards to grandpa Boomer and Aunt Mary and Grace and I trust you are...all getting along as nicely and happily as we are just now.”[VSC. X, 78.4]

The happiness lasted only until 8th October 1911, when Bishop’s father died of Bright’s disease. The impact of his death was devastating on Gertrude. It is generally stated by Bishop’s scholars that Gertrude’s emotional and mental instability began at this time and resulted in a series of breakdowns - leaving Elizabeth Bishop virtual orphan and homeless - resulting ultimately in Gertrude’s hospitalization in the Nova Scotia Hospital in 1916. It appears that Gertrude Bulmer Bishop was well and caring for her daughter until June 1914 when she was hospitalized for several months for depression in a sanatorium in the United States. Between the year 1912 and 1914, Gertrude and Elizabeth visited Great Village, Bishop’s maternal grandparents’ home in Nova Scotia. However, in 1915 they came to Great Village to stay. Elizabeth Bishop herself summarized events in her autobiographical prose poem “In the Village”(1953):

“First, she had come home, with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again”.[CPr 63]

This passage provides an exact chronology of the events of her life between April 1915 and May 1916. Gertrude, increasingly unstable during the first half of 1916, suffered a serious breakdown in June - to which Elizabeth Bishop was an eye witness and had a deep impact of it throughout her life. Bishop’s diary entries of 1960 reveal that she would ask her beloved grandmother every day before she would go to school to “promise me not to die before I come home.” Bishop, at such a tender age was unable to understand her mother’s mental illness in psychoanalytical terms and was left with childhood frustrations reflected in the cross out passages such as this one:

“In the night she began to cry very gently and complainingly like a good child that’s stood all it can. She made little imploring noises, asking someone for something. I sat up & pulled my boots on & took the stick from under the window & shut that, then I sat on the edge of the bed waiting for Aunt Grace. She began to cry louder.”
This passage portrays a child, frightened but strangely matured, burdened by an unquestioned responsibility of mother. Bishop recognises that something was going wrong and this wrongness, in her poems, denies the memory of a dependent mother. On 20 June 1916, Gertrude was hospitalized voluntarily in the Nova Scotia Hospital. She remained there until 29 May 1934, when she finally died. Elizabeth Bishop — who never saw her mother again — remained in Great Village with her Bulmer grandparents. She found comfort in the provincial village life of Nova Scotia but with overtones of sorrow in her life, represented in her poem “Sestina”:

“September rain falls on the house,
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.”[CP 123]

These were the best days of Bishop’s life filled with love of Bulmer grandparents and the beautiful fascinating landscape of Nova Scotia which she frequently alluded to in her poems. In October 1917, Bishop’s paternal grandparents removed her from the care of her maternal grandparents and from her most loved home of Nova Scotia and took her back to Worcester where they believed she would have more advantages. This removal - or “kidnapping” as Bishop called it in her prose reminiscence “The Country Mouse” - was the second major trauma of her childhood. In this book, Bishop writes:

“I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism”\(^{18}\)

There, in isolated wealth, Bishop keenly felt her lack of relations and developed a strong sense of captivity leading to a search for home all her life. She wrote,
“I felt myself aging, even dying. I was bored and lonely with Grandma, my silent Grandma, the dinners alone.... At night I lay blinking my flashlight off and on, and crying.”[PPL 425]

Uprooted from Nova Scotia, Bishop fell ill; she now suffered from eczema, asthma, St. Vitus’s dance and nervous ailments that made her nearly too weak to walk. Bishop’s feeble physical health alarmed her grandparents, who finally farmed her out to a maternal aunt, living in modest circumstances in Boston.

Bishop’s mother’s sister, Aunt Maud Bulmer Shepherdson, rescued Bishop in May 1918 even her paternal grandparents’ saw that their “experiment” had failed. Aunt Maud and her husband George Shepherdson, resided in Revere, Massachusetts. Bishop was more than happy with this release from the Worcester home, which was nothing more than a prison for her. An unpublished manuscript, “Mrs Sullivan Downstairs,” recounts Bishop’s love for this new neighbourhood. Bishop began to write poetry, influenced by Aunt Maud’s love of literature. The time between 1919 and 1930 saw Bishop make yearly visits to Great Village, in Nova Scotia, at first with her aunt and then by the late 1920s on her own. Her poem “In the Waiting Room” captures the child's dawning recognition of herself among relations and in the world:

“you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.

Why should you be one, too?”[CP 160]

Due to frequent illness Bishop had little formal education during her early adolescence years. Bishop’s earliest memories were of learning to read and write, of discovering literature, poetry, art and music, with the help of her maternal grandmother and Aunt Maud. Her first encounter with formal pedagogy was in the Great Village School, an experience she recounts in her delightful prose memoir “Primer Class.” Bishop’s precocious mind was shaped by the sights and sounds and experiences of rural Great Village and the immigrant suburban communities of the Boston area. She went to the Walnut Hill School in Natick, Massachusetts and learnt music there. Her first poems in
school were published in a student magazine by her friend Frani Blough. In the year 1923, at the age of twelve, Bishop won an American Legion Prize for an essay “Americanism”. At times, she wished she was a painter, and, off and on throughout her life, made casual sketches and water colour paintings. It is worth noting that Bishop was drawn to painting and did some herself. A collection of her paintings (mostly friends, loved ones, and familiar places) was put together in a book: ‘Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop Paintings.’ Although one probably would not go as far as calling her a painter, she writes in a letter to Anne Stevenson (who wrote two critical studies of her work) that she often thinks she has missed her vocation. Wallace Stevens writes in a text concerning the imaginative process and aesthetics "that there seems to exist a corpus of remarks in respect to painting, most often the remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters."  

In the year 1930, she entered Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York and thought of becoming a music composer. But she quitteed music due to terror of performance and took English where she chose subjects like 16th and 17th century literature and the novel. Bishop’s work got published in “The Magazine” when she was in her senior year. In 1933, she became cofounder of “Con Spirito” which was a rebellious literary magazine at Vassar accompanied by writer Mary McCarthy, Margaret Miller, and the sisters Eunice and Eleanor Clark. The year 1934 was a watershed year for the young poet as her mother died. But in the same year, Bishop graduated and was introduced to Marianne Moore by a librarian at Vassar. Bishop got too much influenced by Marianne Moore, and throughout her life she shared a mother-mentor relation with Moore.

After graduating, Bishop took an extended period of restless travelling which lasted nearly two decades. Bishop, who was independently wealthy and didn't need to earn a living, moved unhappily among hotels in New York City and travelled in Europe and North Africa. She never settled anywhere for long - she lived in New York, Key West, Paris, Mexico and other places, as if trying to search a place for herself called “home.” She began to suffer from increasingly frequent illness, caused by chronic asthma and an intensifying
alcoholism due to frequent bouts of depression. She spent a significant amount of time in hospitals.

In the month of July 1935, Bishop left for Europe aboard, accidentally, on a Nazi freighter Konigstein, with her college friend Hallie Tompkins. On the German speaking ship, Bishop and Hallie were outsiders. Bishop was heading from the unknown to the unknown with fifty passengers, being very shy and introvert Bishop would retreat to her notebook to record her impressions. The feeling of being at the sea and the sensation of water captured her attention and she penned:

“The horizon seems to be boat shaped .... There were large round bodies, orbs, of phosphorescence in the water, whirling up from under the ship and slowing fading out in the smothering foam .... a true leap in the dark, like spirits- The water was perfectly black, then it showed its level and gave us our...”

Travelling from “home” towards a destination, knowing that what is left behind and what one is heading towards brings stability in travelling but Bishop’s was a travel in search of something she aspired and trying to figure out the unknown. She noted in her diary that “I twist like a button on a string, stretched between New York and somewhere in Europe.” Extensive travelling brought in her the feeling of homesickness:

“Twice now, both time at the table I have been overtaken by an awful, awful feeling of deadly physical and mental illness- something that seems after me.... when this feeling comes I can’t speak, swallow, scarcely breathe. I knew I had had it once before, years ago, & last night, on its 2nd occurrence I place it as “homesickness.” I was homesick for 2 days once when I was nine years old; I wanted one of my aunts. Now I really have no right to homesickness at all.”

The child’s homesickness is due to the uncertainty of security of home; but the child with no right to homesickness suffers a lot in life. Bishop’s restoring to intellectual analysis is the means of distancing herself from the strong feeling of loss of home or no home to go to. Hallie and Bishop spent a few days in Paris and visited Versailles before installing themselves in a Hotel de l’Europe in Douarnenez, France, a fishing village on the coast of Bretagne, near Brest. The town delighted Bishop; she was fascinated by the rituals and customs of
the Breton people. Everything she saw in the place was a fuel for writing. Her notebooks are suddenly lively with plans and drafts for her next-to-write poems and stories. She enjoyed Douarnenez so much that when Hallie left in September she stayed on alone until her classmate at Vassar, Louise Crane, who was a paper-manufacturing heiress joined her after three weeks later. Bishop began translating French poetry, especially Rimbaud, as a way of disciplining her own verse. This was her first intimate acquaintance with the French surrealists, an important influence on her early poems especially those she wrote in France. She was also acquainting herself with the technique of Henry James’s short stories. Louise and Bishop extended their travel to Paris via Saint-Malo and Mont-Saint-Michel. In Paris both the woman settled for a three-month stay in a lovely seven-room apartment on a seventh floor along with the antique collection of the owner’s collection of clocks, which figured largely in Bishop’s first French poem titled “Paris, 7 A.M.”

“I make a trip to each clock in the apartment:

some hands point historically one way

and some point other, from the ignorant faces.”[CP 26]

Bishop was beginning to make a place for herself in the literary world. In 1935, three of Bishop's early poems, “The Map,” “Three Valentines” and “The Reprimand” appeared for the first time in the anthology “Trial Balances,” introduced by Moore. Moore, on the other hand, took deep interest in Bishop’s work and also at one time dissuaded Bishop from going in Cornell Medical School, when Bishop was not very sure about her literary abilities. In November 1935, “The Man-Moth” was accepted by “Life and Letters Today” for March 1936 issue and the literary journey of Bishop began though slow but with assured perfection of work. All four of these published poems show Bishop at her competent best, clever and share the coolness and reticence for which she was known throughout the early part of her career.

Elizabeth and Louise left Paris for England in 1936. But within four days they realised that they hated England, they left for Gibraltar by boat. Brett Millier quote Bishop’s letter to Frani where she expresses her dislike for the urban setups, “Yr. Fondness for England has made me feel a little suspicious
of you.” Bishop all her life hated the urban setups and urban living. Her memories seem to have got stuck to the images of her childhood Nova Scotia which keeps reoccurring in her work. Her life is thus an odyssey in search of something that has lost and she seems striving hard to regain it. Over Christmas 1936, Bishop sailed on a charter boat to Key West, “a place that had never ever entered my consciousness until I got there” said Bishop. For the next fifteen years the place scarcely left her consciousness. On first sight, Bishop was mesmerised, “The water is the most beautiful clear pistachio color, ice-blue in the shade.” Bishop left for New York with a vow to return back. In New York, she stayed in various hotels for several years. Meanwhile she also planned a European trip with Louise. They left for Cork on the SS Britannica, paradoxically making her more at home when at sea. Seeking a drier climate for betterment of Bishop’s asthma they headed towards Rome accompanied with Bishop’s nurse and friend Nina Maximoff. Bishop liked the country but unfortunately once again they found the country on the verge of war. Bishop noted “every 3rd man is in uniform.” Bishop travelled from church to church, taking photography and making sketches of the scene and taking its details. “I took a lot of photographs on the portico of the Temple of Faustina- cluttered with feet, hand, torses, segments of pillows, etc.” In all her travels in Catholic regions- Spain, Southern Florida, Italy, Mexico, Haiti, Brazil- she was fascinated by the crudely fashioned objects of faith, the representational offering to the virgin in hopes of a remedy, the altar constructed in a wine bottle, the carved saints. They interested her as folk art but also as the earnestly offered products of a sensibility so different from her own- faithful, fatalistic, optimistic, and impractical. From Rome they went to Naples then to Paestum, Salerno, Amalfi, Ravillo then to Florence where the three of them had a feast of oysters and fell sick. Dropping Nina to Genoa, they headed to Boston.

At Boston, she met Uncle George Shepherdson, who took her home to Aunt Maud for the Christmas holidays. Amongst her relatives she spent a happy Christmas but returned to New York to a two dollar hotel room. But in couple of days, Bishop rejoined her Aunt Maud and Uncle George who had decided to move their house to Key West. Bishop settled just a few blocks
away from Aunt Maud in a boarding house run by Mrs. Pindar. The real character appeared in many of Bishop’s poem which she would call her Key West poems. Mrs. Pindar along with her circle: Miss Lula and her servant Cootchie, and Mr. Gay, Josh (Jeronimo) feature in Bishop’s poem. “Cootchie” and the informal portrait of Mrs. Pindar’s religiosity appear in “Sunday at Key West.” She often mentioned these people in her letters as if blackness itself was a new phenomenon for her. She regaled Moore with stories about Hannah Almyda, Cootchie, and a carpenter- “a ‘chieftan’ type”. During her periodic stay in New York, her Key West friend Marjorie Stevens kept her abreast of the lengthy anecdotes about Hannah Almyda and Faustina.

In March 1938, Louise Crane arrived and together they headed back to Key West. Bishop and Crane grew to love the place. Later both bought a house at 624 White Street in Key West, Florida. The Key West house – wooden and painted white, with dark shutters – resembles the two white clapboard houses of Bishop’s early childhood in Great Village, Nova Scotia, and Worcester, Massachusetts. Bishop settled into the first of the “three loved houses” which Bishop described almost forty years later in her poem “One Art” as “lost.” It was a large two storey building with a wide porch and a garden with big trees in it. Bishop was enamoured with the house and also with Key West for it soothed her nervous. She wrote to Frani, “One of the reasons I like Key West so much is because everything goes at such a natural pace.” But unfortunately it was one of many indefinite homes where, over the course of her life, Bishop did not stay long. Like Nova Scotia, Key West gave Bishop settings for her imagination and the environs of a number of notable poems, including “The Fish,” and “The Bight,” the last lines of which were to become her chosen epitaph: “All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful.” Mobilization for war turned the funky fishing village into a military encampment. In this charged atmosphere, Bishop felt displaced and resumed her fitful travels, north and south, with brief residence in Mexico. Although, she returned to Florida for a time at war's end, but for her Key West wasn't the same.

The post-war year, in 1946, Bishop underwent psychoanalysis. One of the results of this therapy was a pilgrimage to Nova Scotia in that year - her first visit in over 15 years. Her first book of poetry ‘North & South’ was published
by Houghton Mifflin in the same year. Bishop was in Nova Scotia the day the
book of poem was published returning south by bus to Boston, the journey that
later became the setting for one of her greatest poem, “The Moose.” Marianne
Moore suggested Bishop’s name for the Houghton Mifflin Prize for poetry in
1946 and then she became its receiver too. In the year 1947, Bishop got
introduced to Robert Lowell by Randall Jarrell. “I loved him at first sight,” she
admitted, “my shyness vanished and we started talking at once.”[WA 809]
The two influenced each other’s poetry. She enjoyed a lasting friendship with
poet Robert Lowell. Also, one of the last published poems of Bishop, “North
Haven” was written in Lowell’s remembrance in the year 1978. Bishop felt
adrift later in life, never ever happy living in New York City, she tried stays at
an arts colony, drank heavily, and with great reluctance accepted appointment
as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in the year 1949. A notation
on her calendar for the year 1950 read: “Just about my worst so far.”

Bishop made another visit to Nova Scotia in the year 1951 - this time to
visit Sable Island where the family believed her maternal great-grandfather
Robert Hutchinson had been shipwrecked in the mid-1860s. She wrote to her
friend and colleague, the poet Robert Lowell, about this trip:
“If I am not fulfilling my destiny and get wrecked, too, I think I can turn it into
an article or maybe a poem or two.”[OA 221]

These pilgrimages were important for her psychologically and artistically. For
the first time in her adult life she faced her past directly. Returning to her
“motherland,” as the biographer Brett Millier calls it “Bishop’s Nova Scotia,”
she reclaimed it as subject matter in her poetry. These trips did, in fact,
produce major works: “At the Fishhouses,” “The Moose,” “Cape Breton,”
“The Prodigal,” and several other poems emerged from these visits.

In the year 1951, Bishop received an award from the American Academy
of Arts and Letters and the first Lucy Martin Donnelly Fellowship of $2,500
from Bryn Mawr College. In the same year she was privileged to spend time as
an invited guest at Yaddo, the writers’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York.
But by fall of 1951, she was undecided about where to live, and, worse,
indecisive about what to do next. On November 10, 1951 she left New York
on the SS Bowplate, resolved to travel by a freighter heading for Tierra del Fuego, with the intention of eventually circling the globe. This came as a relief to her, as an escape from New York. The ship’s stop in Santos, Brazil gave Bishop an opportunity to visit an acquaintance Mary Stearns Morse in Rio de Janeiro. By fortuitous misfortune, Bishop was stricken with a severe allergic reaction to the fruit of the cashew nut which delayed her departure causing her to miss the date of her ship’s departure — a delay that amazingly stretched into a stay for eighteen years in Brazil. Bishop, for her prolonged illness, came under the maternal care of the lively, cosmopolitan, well-connected Maria Carlota Costallat de Macedo Soares, a Brazalian, known to all as Lota. Lota had the enthusiasm, dynamism, and excitement that the frequently depressed and lonely Bishop felt she herself lacked. It can be argued that, among many other complex factors, one of the reasons for this geographical displacement to Brazil was because she felt at home there. Brazil and the life she could lead there reminded her of Nova Scotia - the Nova Scotia of her childhood. It was the first real home she had known since her childhood. Many years later, she stated her own conclusion about this experience in a letter to Robert Lowell:

“What I am really up to is re-creating a sort of de luxe Nova Scotia all over again, in Brazil. And now I'm my own grandmother.” [WA 676]

She resided in Rio de Janeiro, near Petropolis with architect Lota who was from an eminent and famous political family and, moreover, Lota's wit and eclectic knowledge of the arts and architecture made Bishop love her company. There was a fairy-tale intensity to the women's romance, which began when Lota’s nursing Bishop back to health. In Lota, she had found the most profound love of her life. From early childhood, homelessness had been Bishop’s condition, and it also became a subject of her poems. When Lota invited Elizabeth to live with her in Samambaia, and offered to construct a studio for her behind her house, she said, “It just meant everything to me.” The couple nested happily together, spending much of their time in the ultramodern home Soares had designed in Rio de Janeiro, nearby Petropolis, called “Samambaia”- Bishop's second loved house from the “three loved houses” mentioned in her poem “One Art” was with Lota – overlooking Copacabana Beach in Rio. During her initial years in Brazil, her lesbian relationship with
Soares gave her life stability and love. Bishop experienced the longest stretch of happiness, in her otherwise restless life in Brazil. Much of their relationship was documented in Bishop's extensive correspondence with Samuel Ashley Brown which accounts as a proof to their full blown relationship. Bishop, on September 16, 1952 wrote to her beloved physician Anny Baumann, a kind of her mother psychiatrist, “the drinking and the work both seem to have improved miraculously. Well no, it isn’t miraculous really – it is almost entirely due to Lota’s good sense and kindness.” This message shows the sentiments Bishop nurtured while staying in Brazil which directed greatly to the literary experience she had during this period.

Brazil extended Bishop's south far beyond the Key West of her first book of poems, and brought forth a large correspondence with friends in the north. Her unmistakable voice is heard everywhere in her letters, an impressive addition to her poems and stories. Brazil provided both a new subject for poems and distance that allowed a gathering of childhood memories to enter her work. The centrepiece of her Brazilian oeuvre is a long story, “In the Village”(1953), recounting the child's response to her mother's decline into madness. During her stay in Brazil, she received the Pulitzer Prize in year 1956 jointly for “North & South” and her second volume of poetry “A Cold Spring.” In the year 1965, bishop’s third book of poems “Questions of Travel” was published reflecting the influence of Brazil in her life and her nostalgia for Nova Scotia. She also gained great interest in the languages and literatures of Latin America. Bishop translated into English and took deep interest in the works of South and Central American poets, also Mexican poet, Octavio Paz and Brazilian poets Joao Cabral de Melo Neto and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. She translated “The Diary of Helena Morley” by Alice Brant in year 1957 and was the co-editor and co-translator of “An Anthology of Brazilian Poetry” with Emanuel Brasil published in year 1972. Bishop once accepted about translation- “it is impossible to translate poetry, or perhaps only one aspect can be translated at a time, and each poem needs several translations” and this is exactly the case about Bishop’s own poems which invites multiple readings and have various interpretations.
In mid-1960s, life in Brazil grew difficult for Bishop. Lota de Macedo Soares, involved in the politics of Rio, had taken charge of a public parks project that absorbed her time and attention. The park devoured Lota's attention as she was undermined by opposition and resistance at every turn. As the political situation worsened, Bishop felt more uncomfortable in her Brazilian home. Elizabeth was obliged to spend more time in Rio and felt neglected. Always susceptible to collapses of morale and the temptation of alcohol, she began to drink heavily. Lota, distracted and by disposition impatient, grew angry. In one of her letter to Dr Baumenn, Bishop confesses her alcoholic and depressive regressions and seems continually in need of absolution and reassurance – needing a mother who could accept her, faults and all. By the mid 1960s, “Rio,” Bishop remarked, “was getting on my nerves badly.” Her Samambaia home was too lonely without Lota. Bishop was drawn to the slower pace of the old colonial town of Minas Gerais. Her search for her Nova Scotian home and her growing uneasiness in Rio took her to Ouro Preto, a town in the mountains of Minas Gerais, in the interiors of Brazil. Bishop loved country life, rural people and folk traditions, and was charmed by the natural beauty of the terrain. Ouro Preto, which meant Black Gold, was the capital of the state till about 1900, it was then abandoned and was difficult to reach but was finally rediscovered. Ouro Preto was a splendid repository of late-Portuguese baroque built during a period of wealth. Bishop often visited Ouro Preto, even when reaching to the place was not easy. Her host, at Ouro Preto, was Lilli Correia de Araújo, the Danish widow of one of Brazil's finest painters, Pedro Correia de Araújo, and a well-known intellect. Bishop liked her host and stayed at times at her inn, Chico Rei, but longer at Lilli’s old four square colonial house on the road to Mariana. Bishop developed affinity towards Lilli and had a year’s affair with her from 1964 to 1965, which was a stressful period in her relation with Lota. Bishop bought a home from Lilli “Casa Mariana” in Ouro Preto, her third loved house of “One Art”. Bishop’s brief, giddy infatuation with Lilli is reflected in her two unpublished private poems for her “Darling Dane,” and “Dear Aurora Borealis.” Under the spell of her “dearest blue eyed fair-headed” Lilli, she composed and illustrated two versions of “Dear, my compass still points north,” enumerates nostalgically their shared northern roots. The second poem, “Close close all night” from
this time and mood, is intimate but ambiguous as to the sex of the closely entwined lovers. The interlude of relief and renewed happiness, in Ouro Preto, proved fleeting.

Bishop’s third collection of poetry “Question of Travel” appeared in year 1965. Striped out of cash by the end of 1965, Bishop departed for her first teaching job and spent two semesters as poet in residence at the University of Washington, over Lota's vociferous objection. Returning, she made a trip down Brazil’s largest river, the Sao Francisco, and afterward wrote up a glum report of the experience and derived a dream joy from the trip, which she projected in her poem “Santarem.” Bishop went to Washington, began an affair with a young woman in Seattle, Roxanne Cumming, which was clumsily concealed, and of course, soon Lota discovered and returned to Brazil with more misery. Bishop returned to Rio in the hope of re-establishing her life there with Lota. But, Lota's health had become perilous, made worse by her struggle to build the park. She fell ill; Elizabeth drank and fell ill. Both Bishop and Lota suffered physical and psychological distress and were hospitalized in Brazil. Doctors recommended that Elizabeth withdraw from the country, hoping that a separation would allow Lota to recover. When Bishop grew stronger, she left for New York with the expectation that Lota, as soon as she was well enough, would join her. Against medical advice, Lota determined to follow her arrived in New York on the afternoon of 19 September 1967 and later that evening took an overdose of tranquilizers and died at age fifty-seven. The love affair which began blissfully ended in sorrow: alcoholism, depression, adultery and, finally, suicide. Restlessly, Bishop moved for a time to San Francisco and back to Ouro Preto, then after the breakup of the affair with Cumming, moved back and forth between Boston and Ouro Preto. On one such visit to Brazil, Bishop was further devastated to find that some friends blamed her for Lota's death, and that Lota's sister was attempting to break the will, and confiscate Samambaia from Bishop. After several listless years of uncertainty, she realized that Brazil and her much loved home was lost to her, and moved north for good.

Bishop returned to the United States in the fall of 1970s. After a brief time in San Francisco, she moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, invited by Robert
Lowell to teach his courses at Harvard while he was on leave. Harvard was putting her up in a barely utilitarian apartment in Kirkland House, where Alice Methfessel was the house secretary, and soon they became friends and partners. Although, she harboured great reservations about teaching, she did teach, at Harvard and elsewhere, compelled by the need to earn a living. With equal reluctance, she began to give readings, and gradually her literary profile grew. Finally, settling in Boston in 1970, Bishop was back home in America; and felt it was a kind of full circle – but she seemed unable to get any further north, at least permanently. She met Alice Methfessel again in August; in Quito for a long planned trip to the Galapagos Island and Machu Picchu they developed a deep affinity and love. Bishop at the age of sixty-three, in 1974, once again tried to establish a last home for herself by purchasing a renovated top-floor condominium at Lewis Wharf, in Boston. Bishop’s home in Boston resembles her prior homes in Brazil, Samambaia and Casa Mariana. From the narrow balcony of the condominium she had the view of the harbour. Bishop kept a ship’s log besides the window, documenting the vessels that come to port and thinking it “curious” that ship from Nova Scotia must have docked there, perhaps even her great-grandfather’s. From 1970s onwards, however, Bishop once again began to make nearly yearly visits to Nova Scotia which shows her never ending search for home continued till the last breath of her life. By the end of her life, she had been the recipient of many honorary degrees, and in the year 1976 became the first American and the first woman to receive the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

In Cambridge, Bishop met the last love of her life, Alice Methfessel, who became the dedicatee of her fourth volume of poetry “Geography III,” published in the year 1976 and the immediate subject of Bishop's masterful villanelle of loving and loss, “One Art,” which culminates:

“Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.”[CP 178]
For years, Bishop hoped to pull together her prose writings about Brazil, and she worked at an elegy for Lota, but these, sadly, remained unfinished. In the last decade of her life, Bishop become friends with Frank Bidart, Octavio Paz, Lloyd Schwartz, and Helen Vendler, poets and scholars who kept her reputation buoyant in the immediate aftermath of her death. In May 1979, just a few months before her death, Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, gave her an honorary degree. It was her last visit to Nova Scotia. She died of a brain aneurysm alone in her Lewis Wharf apartment on 6th October 1979 and a distinct poetic voice was lost forever leaving a treasure of writings for generations to read.
AWARDS AND HONOURS RECEIVED BY
ELIZABETH BISHOP

1945:  Houghton Mifflin Poetry Prize Fellowship

1947:  Guggenheim Fellowship


1953:  Shelley Memorial Award

1954:  Elected to lifetime membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters

1956:  Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

1960:  Chapelbrook Foundation Award


1969:  National Book Award

1969:  The Order of the Rio Branco (awarded by the Brazilian government)

1974:  Harriet Monroe Poetry Award


1978:  Guggenheim Fellowship
ELIZABETH BISHOP’S LITERARY OUTPUT


10. An Anthology of Twentieth Century Brazilian Poetry edited by Elizabeth Bishop and Emanuel Brasil, (Wesleyan University Press (1972).


ELIZABETH BISHOP AND THE TRADITION OF AMERICAN POETRY

The twentieth century is characterised by the booming industry and material prosperity in contrast with a sense of unease and restlessness underneath; a decline in moral standards described as a spiritual poverty; the impact of war - feelings of fear, loss, disorientation and disillusionment. In the era – when the footprints of World War I were still fresh and its after effects were brutally felt; the countries were again standing on the verge of another savagery in the form of World War II; there was rise of anonymity and consumerism in a mass urban society; the protest movements of the 1960s; the decade-long Vietnam conflict; the Cold War; environmental threats – the catalogue of shocks to American culture is long and varied. But in the years leading to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, in the war years themselves, and in the decade that followed, the United States increasingly became more integrated politically, economically, and artistically into world, particularly European countries. The change that most transformed American society, however, was the rise of the mass media and mass culture. American poetry was directly influenced by the mass media and electronic technology. Traditional forms and ideas no longer seemed to provide meaning to many American poets. Events after World War II produced for many writers a sense of disillusionment and discontinuous history: Each act, emotion, and moment was seen as unique. The writings capture the restless, pleasure-hungry, defiant mood of the 1920s. Style and form seemed to be provisional, makeshift, and reflexive of the process of composition and the writer's self-awareness. Familiar categories of expression were suspect; originality was becoming a new tradition.

Due to the widespread unrest and disillusionment, there was a temptation to exaggerate the importance of newness in art. The general state of mind of twentieth century that gave birth to a modern outlook in art is well described by Professor Eric Heller in his introduction to study of Thomas Mann, “It reflects the deep disturbance of the age itself, at least in so far as it is presented by its literature. The traditional order of things fall apart, and their meanings
lay buried under the fragments. Elements, once bound together to make a world, now present themselves to the poet in monstrous separateness. To speak of them coherently at all would be to speak untruthfully. The common place phrases of the daily round of observations seem all of a sudden insoluble riddles.” For artist, this release from tradition was a source of tremendous freedom. What perhaps was most characteristic of early modern art - what bound the arts together and gave them an almost messianic seriousness - was their overwhelming need to define new concepts of reality. Unsatisfactory philosophers, unsatisfactory moral codes and unsatisfactory artistic rules had to be abolished.

The new art was not a decorative art nor was it an impressionistic art. It was entirely devoted to the study of external and internal nature; it was entirely consecrated to the truth. Amidst this tremendous challenging situation where newness was expected and amongst the contemporaries, immediate and slightly earlier ones, like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevenson, Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore, it was no longer possible to write easy poetry. But Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry transcends even those excellence of form and images for which the period was admired. Bishop stood securely in the tradition of American poetry that began with Emerson and Emily Dickinson and culminated in the aspect of Robert Frost, as well as Wallace Stevenson. Bishop’s is a unique voice whose unpretentiousness of form is appealing. Her whole oeuvre is on the scale of a human life; there is no oracular amplification, she doesn’t go on stilts to make her vision wider. She doesn’t need that for her poetry is wise and humane. Pound writes or at least tries to write like God; Elizabeth writes like an angel.

In twentieth century, experiments in language were perhaps more temporary, and yet James Joyce and Gertrude Stein were testing language as a medium for art at the same time that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was demonstrating possibilities and limitations for a systematic analysis of language. G.S. Fraser in his essay “Some Young American Poets” contrasted Miss Bishop’s diction with that of her American contemporaries and came to conclusion that she has willingly surrendered a certain polish in order that she might more clearly say what her poems wanted to say. Bishop experiments
with language by handing over the responsibility to comprehend to the critically cooperative audience; for her voice was never sufficiently distinctive to be clearly heard. The contemporary women poets were inventing new forms of constitutive identity, in remaking language they were re-inventing themselves. Wittgenstein writes, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life,” this form of life, in literature was a masculine one. Dickinson is the first woman poet to attempt a transformation in poetic language so as to establish an individual identity in poetry and its powerful contemporary display is seen in the works of Elizabeth Bishop. In response to Emerson’s vision of poet as a central man, Dickinson puts her psychodynamics of poet’s authority over experience. Dickinson conceived the process of poetic influence in both homo- and heterosexual terms. This transference of gender identity ensures an independent place for the women poets. Dickinson envisions the masculine as imposing a threat to what the feminine offers in poetry. This legacy of the counter-sublime challenges the very tenets of syntax, the development of poetics that fractures so as to bestow meaning. On the other hand, Bishop defends against the challenge to her poetic autonomy by the erasure of the sexual dialectic. Bishop yields to an asexual self making possible to free the poetic outcome from the gender determined roles. Bishop evades being diminished, exiled or isolated from the tradition by sidestepping the distinctions imposed upon poetry by stalwarts like Emerson. Her poems became a means of re-establishing woman’s unmediated relationship to the world. To Americans, the new alternative poetry seemed more relevant than before: it offered people a way to express their subjective self.

Post-World War II, American poetry was decentralized, richly varied, and difficult to summarize. For the sake of discussion, however, it can be arranged along a spectrum, producing three overlapping camps – the traditional on one end, the idiosyncratic in the middle, and the experimental on the other end. Critics have tried to categorize Bishop into one school or the other, but through her unique art she escapes any formal categorization and at the same time her art reflects shades of all and this is perhaps her triumph. Traditional poets have maintained or revitalized poetic traditions. Traditional writers include acknowledged masters of established forms and diction who
wrote with a readily recognizable craft, often using rhyme or a set metrical pattern. Richard Eberhart and Richard Wilbur; the older Fugitive poets John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren; some accomplished younger poets such as John Hollander and Richard Howard; and the early writings of Robert Lowell are examples of the traditional style of writings. Many poets, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, and Robert Penn Warren, began writing traditionally, using rhyme and meters, but abandoned these in the 1960s under the pressure of public events and a gradual trend toward open forms. The most influential poet of the period, Robert Lowell, began traditionally but was influenced by experimental currents. Lowell fits the mould of the academic writer: like many poets after him, accepted the challenge of learning from the rival tradition in America - the school of William Carlos Williams. Among the post-modern American poets, Elizabeth Bishop stands as a unique poetic voice. In the poetry produced in the second half of the twentieth century, the Bishop style, which is characterized by precision, objectivity and delicacy, represented a tradition.29

Idiosyncratic poets have used both traditional and innovative techniques in creating unique voices. Poets, drawing on tradition but extending poetry into new realms with a distinctively contemporary flavour were categorised in this camp. In addition to Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, include John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Richard Hugo, Philip Levine, James Dickey, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich were the patrons of this school. Plath's early poetry is well crafted and traditional, but her late poems exhibit a desperate bravura and proto-feminist cry of anguish. Sexton's confessional poetry, with powerful emotion, is more autobiographical than Plath's. Among women poets of the idiosyncratic group, Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich have garnered respect in recent years. Bishop's crystalline intelligence and interest in remote landscapes and metaphors of travel appeal to readers for their exactitude and subtlety. Like her mentor Marianne Moore, Bishop wrote highly crafted poems in a descriptive style that contains hidden philosophical depths. The description of the ice-cold North Atlantic in "At the Fishhouses" could apply to Bishop's own poetry:
"It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free."[CP 66]

Bishop’s writings reflect some of the best qualities of her favourite writers like Chekhov’s tolerance and understanding, George Herbert’s honesty and stunning clarity of details, Darwin’s endless heroic observation, and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s timing his sense of ‘mind in action’. Bishop’s free will, innocent eye, and sharp mind take witty and unexpected turn and make her art baffling and evasive.

Experimental poets have courted new cultural styles. The force behind Robert Lowell’s mature achievement and much of contemporary poetry lies in the experimentation begun in the 1950s by a number of poets. Inspired by jazz and abstract expressionist painting, their poetry is daring, original, and sometimes shocking. In its search for new values, it claims affinity with the archaic world of myth, legend, and traditional societies.

The story of American poetry in the twentieth century begins with the dominance of one region and the legacy of one tradition – New England, and English Romantic verse. But by the end of the century one of the major characteristics of American poetry was its geographical diversity. Eminent writers of twentieth century were American expatriate in other countries. Gertrude Stein was an expatriate in Paris; Ezra Pound, born in Idaho but wrote in Europe; T.S. Eliot was an expatriate in London; and Sylvia Plath wrote her best-known work in England – these are few examples of the poets whose works show a multi-ethnic influence on their writings. Pound and Eliot’s poetry are highly allusive and complex in forms. Stein, Pound and Eliot, along with Henry James before them, demonstrate the growth of an international perspective in American literature, not simply because they spend long periods of time overseas but because they were deeply rooted in America. Elizabeth Bishop is one such expatriate writer of twentieth century who made a special place for herself in the tradition of American writers. As an untiring traveller, arrival and departure is a significant metaphor in her writing. An expatriate to Brazil still she was deeply rooted in Nova Scotia which is reflected in her work by an overshadowing of both the panoramas. Her literary pen-pictures
are marked with the theme of constant displacement and search for home. The international scope of the academic world meant that poets can live and work on different continents but leading to complex and multiple cultural influences. The expatriate writers also raised the complex issue of literary nationality. Further complication arose due to the multiple cultural voices in US as a result of post-war immigration in the last decades of the century, and by the parallel rise of the poetry of ethnicity.

The 1930s saw the rise of the group of poets centred in the South America, including Allen Tate, John Crowe, Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, who argued for a return to the virtues of a more rural way of life and a poetry that in its content and craft reflected that order and its disciplined moral focus. The claims for rural virtues were in part a response to the perceived failure of cities, industries and the complex economic developments that had produced the depression. Poets like Eliot advocated this movement which was later articulated by American poets like Robert Lowell and many others including Elizabeth Bishop. The settings of many of Bishop’s poems are provincial atmosphere, based on her childhood’s Great Village, in Nova Scotia. Poems like “The Man- Moth,” “Love Lies Sleeping,” “Night City” and in many other poems Bishop projects the cities in a very detrimental way.

The Imagism in American poetry was demonstrated in the work of H.D. and Pound. Its emphasis upon non-traditional rhythms, the primacy of the moment, free verse, and economy of expression also made the legacy of English verse largely irrelevant. The manifestos of imagism invoked modern painting as a parallel. Elizabeth Bishop may not be an Imagist, but her poetry owes much to those poets who developed in America an idea of Imagism into modern poetry. In their different ways, Marianne Moore, William Carlos William, Wallace Stevenson and Elizabeth Bishop have inherited the Imagist’s preoccupation with the physical world- their intense concerns for “the earthly and definite.” But the poet who was perhaps most responsible for earthiness of these poets was undoubtedly Ezra Pound. Bishop’s debt to Pound and to his kind of Imagism is as great as that of any other poet of her generation. Stylistically, she profited from his example and learned to write in form without depending on it - and without abandoning her own intuitive sense of
rhythm. Her diction is spare, her ear sure, her standards of craftsmanship high. Like Pound, she has borrowed from many sources. As a girl, she was passionately fond of Whitman and later of Hopkins. She admired Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Apollinaire, and Lorca among modern Europeans; but her delight in paradox has given her a special affection for English lyricists of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Along with this learning Bishop has her own distinctive style of poetry, due to the accuracy of her perception. To be a good imagist feeling for details was required and Bishop had them in her poetry. Her images tend to be clear pictures and have peculiar force of a process of cognition. Bishop’s poems are for the most part modern in the sense that ‘The Waste Land’ is modern, but are not so complex.

In twentieth century, art was an object of worship. Form, beauty and emotion seemed to be the only certain truths in a world in which humanity was diminished and humiliated. Artists were taking over, with some modifications and adjustments, the theories of Freud and Jung and regarded the subconscious as the only source of reality. The Surrealist painter, Giorgio di Chirico, rejected rationality altogether. A work of art must escape all human limits, and common sense must not interfere. Once these barriers of common-sense are broken, it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream. Hegel believes that everything has two aspects: the current aspect which we see nearly always and which ordinary men see, and the ghostly and metaphysical aspect which only rare individuals may see in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction. The political disruption in 1930’s brought European artists to New York and these refugee artists on the east coast were prominently the Surrealists. The Surrealists emphasizing upon the vocabulary of the subconscious and the unmeditated expression of the subconscious in artistic expression laid their influence on the American literary scenario. Elizabeth Bishop’s writings exhibit to some extent the traits of Surrealism. Elizabeth Bishop came to Paris when Surrealism was popular among artists, and it is certain that it influenced her a great deal. Surrealism expresses the unconscious through vivid dreamlike imagery. Like most sensitive, imaginative people, Bishop had lived a great deal in a dream world. She did not need Surrealism to show her that this world was indeed real – real in the
sense that it could be experienced by the imagination. All her life she has been aware of both worlds – of the rational and the extra-rational, of the everyday and the dream. The tension, or contradiction, that she has felt to exist between them is considerable; and, because she has refused to relinquish either one, the problem of reality has been an especially obsessive one for her. Bishop told Ashley Brown, “I was much interested in surrealism in the ‘30’s” adding that, when in France, “I had read a lot of surrealist poetry and prose.” She came upon surrealism earlier than most American writers of her generation, but it would be a mistake to label her as an orthodox surrealist. Muller has rightly suggested that while a fascination with dreamlike state is the main interest Bishop and the surrealists have in common, there are some fundamental differences in the way Bishop handles dreams. According to Mullen, “She does not seek to subvert logical control and she refuses to accept the ‘split’ between the roles of conscious and unconscious forces in our perception of the world.” John Ashbery was an early fan of her writing, praising the Surrealism of her early books. May Swenson, a close friend and another lifelong correspondent, was drawn to the erotic nature of her middle phase surrealism.

Surrealism contributed to the climate that produced the Confessional poets of the 1950’s. Critics have repeatedly focused on Bishop’s relationship to the overwhelming popularity of “Confessional poetry” from the early 1940’s to the early 1970’s. Confessional poetry gave poets an outlet to express their personal experiences or emotions. Poet-critic Jonathan Kirsch writes, “The motive for confession is penitential or therapeutic - by speaking openly about his guilt and suffering the poet hopes to make them easier to hear”. While confessional poetry existed before 1956, critics often refer to Robert Lowell’s Life Studies as a benchmark in the development of modern confessional poetry. In this compilation, Lowell depicts a raw and honest look into his life and exemplifies the candid autobiographical expression of the confessional movement. Bishop’s poetry, however, does not fall neatly into this category of “confessional” because she does not immediately place herself into her poetry, even though “connections between Bishop’s themes and images, and her autobiography, are obvious to anyone who reads her letters or visits the
Bishop adamantly opposed confessional poetry throughout most of her career, but one sees her reliance on personal experiences as subjects in much of her poetry. From chronicling her experiences and travels in foreign lands to reminiscing about her childhood in Nova Scotia, Bishop could not avoid her personal life from seeping into her poetry. She is the ‘autobiographer without ego’.

In 1950’s America, there was unrest amongst the poets against the prevailing political conservatism arguing overtly for a different set of values associated with the suburban, materialistic lifestyle produced by America’s post-war wealth, and foregrounded in the growing medium of television and by the popular magazines of the day. There was a rejection of the highly specific gender roles of popular post-war culture and helped to produce the sexual frankness and open homosexual themes of a poet like Ginsberg. Sexual frankness and the questioning of gender roles became even more central to the work of the Confessional poets, some of the most important of whom were women. Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are most associated with the style, and the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and the later work of Adrienne Rich show affinities with it. These poets rejected many of the attitudes associated with the claims of male authority, as well as, in various ways, the conventions of literary decorum and romance. Male poets who adopted characteristics of the style were Robert Lowell, whose “Life Studies” in 1959 marked a major change of direction in his writing, and John Berryman in his “Dream Songs.”

In 1980’s there were feminist concerns in poetry, most centrally voiced in Adrienne Rich, following in the tradition of poetry of H.D., Bishop, Sexton and Plath. The community addressed here was women denied by male centred conventions and social mores the opportunity to experience the real power of motherhood, to freely love another woman, and to discover and live by values other than those praised in the conventional rhetoric of politics, economics, history and romance. Adrienne Rich’s 1983 review of Bishop’s Complete Poems was one of the first feminist readings of Bishop’s life and art, connecting ‘her experience of outsiderhood’ with ‘the essential outsiderhood of lesbian identity’. But other poets disagreed with Rich’s assessment – notably Alicia Ostriker characterised Bishop in 1987 as one of those ‘poets
who would be ladies.\textsuperscript{38} Ostriker’s analysis of Bishop’s work laid the groundwork for women poets’ re-reading of Bishop in the 1990s as a more sensual and sexual writer than had previously been thought. The poetry of Deryn Rees-Jones in England, Caitriona O’Reilly in Ireland, and Sandra McPherson in America, all owe something to Bishop’s understated, almost invisible, focus on the human body. Bishop’s work accounts both for the influence of gender and the importance of tradition in her work, her awareness of origins and origins of her difference make her an unparallel writer in her own way.

In the late twentieth century, another important group of poets who sought to distance themselves from the actions and authority of establishment were poets of the Black Art’s movement. Le Roi Jones was the most prominent voice in Black poetry in 1960s and into the 1970s. These poets had a role in connecting to and giving voice to a much neglected community, and in insisting upon the community’s place, rights, and needs in America. Though not a racial poet, Elizabeth Bishop in her poems voiced the essential concerns for the black community, “The Song for the Coloured Singer” is a “prophesy, or prayer, that justice will eventually triumph for the Negro in the USA”\textsuperscript{39} and “Faustina, or Black Roses” raises her racial concerns.

Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry also exhibits the basic ideas and doctrines of the New England Transcendentalism a system developed by Immanuel Kant, based on the idea that, in order to understand the nature of reality, one must first examine and analyse the reasoning process which governs the nature of experience. Transcendentalists were – nonconformists people who do not conform to a generally accepted pattern of thought or action; believed that for every person there exists a private relationship between the self and the universe; following an intuitive thought, which is the ability to know something through instinctive feeling rather than conscious reasoning; and they valued simplicity, a life not bound to material possessions, self-reliance, and openness, openness to the beauty of the world. As the main exponents of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau have become the leading “Men Thinking” whose voices have never gone out of fashion. In poetry, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were poets whose names could
not be separated completely from the New England Transcendentalism. Elizabeth Bishop has made herself a descendent from that great tradition, Bishop’s deep concern with herself as an individual at all costs, her constant preoccupation with and sympathy for nature, and the haunting mysterious temperament of her poetry actually make her a distant descendent from the transcendentalist tradition, an acknowledgement made by Miss Bishop herself. In a wryly discursive letter to Anne Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop directly comments upon her relationship to the American literary tradition. Bishop writes, “But I also feel that Cal (Lowell) and I in very different ways are both descendant from the Transcendentalists.”

Elizabeth Bishop stands humble as a mid-twentieth century American poet, whose influence has been felt among several subsequent generations of poets. Bishop was highly regarded by critics such as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler. Elizabeth Bishop was one of the most praised poets of her generation. Confessional poets, particularly Plath and Sexton admired her. They sent ‘fan letters’ as did John Ashbery. Other New York School poets, chiefly James Schuyler, similarly loved her work. Thom Gunn and Robert Duncan both enjoyed her company in late 1960s, as did Seamus Heaney, James Merrill, and Octavio Paz in 1970’s. Anne Stevenson, who wrote the first book-length study of Bishop’s poetry in 1966, may not have become a poet without her. May Swenson, Frank Bidart, Jane Shore, and others have also benefited from her. Bishop’s rising reputation rested on the admiration of poets, of whom she was a favourite poet, as diverse as Paul Muldoon, Jorie Graham and Louise Glück, Lavinia Greenlaw and Jo Shapcott. Seamus Heaney has also been a prominent advocate of Bishop’s poetry, praising her ‘ultimate fidelity to the demands and promise of the artistic event.’ Other poets have stressed her fascination with science (Jo Shapcott), her interest in Surrealism (Mark Ford and Jamie McKendrick), and again and again, her sense of being in exile. Michael Donaghy makes a recognition of Bishop’s ‘exile’ accent. Eavan Boland, for instance, sees in Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’ and ‘A Cold Spring’ the index of the ‘true exile, the inner emigre, who sees them for the first time and may not see them again.’

while Tom Paulin praises her fondness for ‘makeshift,
temporary dwellings" which he sets in opposition to the ideological dangers implicit in being rooted in one place.

Bishop was always admired among her peer group. Her first book of poems, “North & South” was ecstatically reviewed by Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore, all of whom were close friends and regular correspondents. Influence worked both ways. The Bishop-Moore relationship, for example, is one of the most keenly debated literary friendships in the twentieth century. Lorrie Goldensohn, Victoria Harrison, and others, see Moore’s role as that of a mentor-mother to Bishop’s student-daughter. According to this interpretation, Bishop learnt how to become a poet from Moore having grown up as a writer in the older poet’s shadow. Moore in one of her correspondence with Bishop wrote that:

“Continuously fascinated as I am by the creativeness and uniqueness of these assembling of yours—which are really poems”[OA 391]

Moore perhaps was the most incisive critic of Bishop. Some even see Bishop as providing Moore with poetic examples to follow in her later writing. Whatever one borrowed from the other, their friendship clearly nourished each other’s ego, providing Moore with the sense that her poems were still being read by a younger generation, and Bishop with the reassurance that she could actually write. For most of Bishop’s life, readers heard of her through Moore. She was admired for coming after Moore, for writing in what critics saw as a continuation of the elder poet’s Modernist style. The reverse is now the case, in spite of the recent publication of Moore’s Complete Poems. Moore is now known as the addressee of Bishop’s poem, ‘Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore’, or as the eccentric subject of her memoir, ‘Efforts of Affection’. One can only imagine both poets’ feelings of amusement at this state of affairs, conscious as both were of the vagaries of literary taste. Bishop’s borrowings were probably less than has been assumed, just as Moore’s were probably greater. If contemporary poets are imitating Bishop now, they are perhaps imitating a little of Moore through her. One of Bishop’s specialities: enumerate descriptions which can be easy and compact in contrast to Moore’s verisimilitude that avoid embarrassing direct descriptions. Bishop sacrifices dignity for exactness. Art, for Bishop, which can cut its facets from within can
mitigate suffering, can even be instrument of happiness and also of forgiveness. Marianne Moore is more synthesized, has a collector’s approach where as Bishop’s is linear and exploring one. For Bishop, there is no conflict between inner and outer reality. It is rather a question of deciding how much the outer reality is our reality, how far can we advance into it and still keep a toe hold on the inner or private reality. The inclination of modern and post-modern literature has long been to communicate individual vision rather than abstract truth. Bishop takes on her task enabling us to see as she sees. Many of Bishop’s poems evolved towards what James Joyce thought of as epiphanic visions. Elizabeth Bishop seldom violates objects by imposing on them preconceived definitions, a prior interpretation, or sentimental descriptions. But even then she looks at things with the exactitude and tenacity of a naturalist.

Bishop's influence on Robert Lowell took time to make it felt and is still something of a well-kept secret. Much has changed since the 1980s. Bishop, rather than Lowell, is the poet new writers usually cut their teeth against. We can see Bishop-Moore relationship similar to that of Bishop and Lowell literary compatibility. Revising the way we think about their relationship revises the way we think about the development of American poetry in general. For many years, the idea of a breakthrough narrative dominated discussion of post-war American poetry. According to the majority of critics, Lowell was the main transitional figure in this story. His single collection of poems, “Life Studies” was credited for bridging various disparate schools and traditions under one banner: the Age of the Confessional (or, as Bishop nicknamed it, the ‘School of Anguish’). This type of narrative obviously privileges certain kinds of poetry above others. In terms of Confessional poetics, the life of the poet becomes the main object of attention. Political engagement is preferred to political detachment, sexual frankness to sexual reserve. There is no place in this kind of tradition for poets like Bishop who always made a point of effacing their lives from the work. Since Lowell’s death, the extent to which he himself borrowed and stole from other artists has become more apparent. In the case of “Life Studies” in particular, he relied on both the practical advice and writing example of Bishop who was then in
Brazil and had just published her autobiographical story, “In the Village,” and her second collection of poems, “A Cold Spring”. Lowell versified the former as ‘The Scream’ and was inspired to begin work on autobiographical prose himself. His own childhood memoir, “91 Revere Street,” is very different in tone from “In the Village”, though both address the role of childhood memories in forming the artist. ‘Skunk Hour’, one of the signature poems in “Life Studies” is also a sort of tribute to Bishop’s poem, “The Armadillo”. Bishop thus freed Lowell to write autobiographically rather than the other way round. This undermines the idea that Lowell is responsible for a sudden breakthrough in American poetry or even that there was one at all. The grandiloquence of Lowell is obviously no longer fashionable. In the 1960s and 1970s, he straddled American poetry like a Colossus, absorbing and reshaping whatever historical or personal crisis passed his way. Yet there is a less egotistical side to his work that reminds us of Bishop. The same could be said of the way her reputation has shifted. For most of her career, the conversational intimacy of her poems and stories was misunderstood for a lack of intellectual scope. This same voice is now being read for its nuanced take on the ethics of travel and the politics of gender. Yet there remains a trace of egotism to her work that is reminiscent of Lowell. There are differences also between Bishop and Lowell. Whereas the majority of Bishop’s poems float free of conventional categories, Lowell’s nearly always operate within recognisable boundaries and registers.

There can be two opposing ways of reading Bishop’s poetry. One group of critics focuses solely on the formal and technical precision of her poetry - the qualities of Bishop’s poetry most similar to Moore’s poetry. In nearly all of Bishop’s poetry, she relied on creating perfectly constructed scenes in order to connect with her readers. However, these critics do not focus on what is beneath the scenes. The other group of critics advocate a confessional reading of Bishop’s poetry - rendering Bishop a poet more similar to that of Robert Lowell. These critics focus on the raw emotions that Bishop confessed through her poetry. Bishop falls somewhere, in the middle of these two groups of critics. The value of her poetry extends far beyond the pristine settings and meticulous details, but she never divulges raw, explicit emotions in a fully
confessional sense. Her response to this tension resulted in the creation of her own style of writing, one that satisfies both Lowell’s “confessional nonsense” and Moore’s “meticulous conservatism.” Her uncollected poetry only highlights the two opposing styles of her poetry and her desire to maintain a balance of both facets of her work. Bishop’s brand of poetry helps her to reconcile the tension between the styles of the two people most influential on her poetic career. She extends the use of Marianne Moore’s poetic techniques to help her fulfill her desire to write like Robert Lowell. Ultimately, however, she swerves away from Lowell’s path towards morbidity and rawness to fulfill her desire to remain somewhat reticent and avoid explicitly autobiographical inquiry. Bishop’s uncollected work shows readers that her poetry was a harmonious blending of these elements. Through this blending, Bishop wrote in a way suitable to herself and was able to find a true sense of her poetic voice.

Bishop had many new things to offer to the literary tradition; among them is her methodical oblique way, her evasiveness in poetry. There is difference and vigilance in Bishop’s writing, and for that she is indebted to John Donne and G. K. Hopkin. Her imitations of Donne and Hopkin are askance but it has value—the avowed humility and originality underneath. Bishop went through more phases than she probably completed poems. In her teens and twenties, she went through a W. H. Auden phase; in Key West she imitated Wallace Stevens, in New York and Washington Dylan Thomas; in Brazil she translated poems by Manuel Bandeira, Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Vinicius de Moraes. Aside from the debts to Moore and Lowell already noted, she was an avid reader of baroque prose and Metaphysical poetry. Her favourite poets were Charles Baudelaire, George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Emily Dickinson. These were the voices in which she found the “use of homely images and . . . solidity,” that is, an attention to the peculiarities of the concrete that finds expression in a peculiarity of phrasing. All these poets could be read as, in some sense, devotional poets. George Herbert is remembered primarily as such, of course, and it is to Bishop’s appropriation of that legacy. All evidence indicates that Bishop saw the moral seriousness in Herbert amid the homely and solid phrases from the beginning. In particular,
Herbert’s constant self-scrutiny regarding his sinfulness, his forgetful “unkindness” to God, and his miserable waiting for the rewards of salvation that seem almost infinitely deferred; he was Bishop’s companion, she wrote, “almost all my life.” His poems are rooted in Christian devotion and take the salvation of the soul in Christ for subject; they always speak from the side of our shared human experience as uncertain, reflective, and rational animals in search of the truth to whose light we would conform our desires. These “moral and universal” concerns in Herbert’s work should not, therefore, be alien to the non-Christian, even as the non-Christian will by definition refuse the end that guides Herbert’s reflections. Bishop’s work demonstrates that Herbert’s method of reflection is eminently adaptable to any poet concerned with the moral and the universal, and it is Herbert’s method of reflection that guided Bishop in general as she slowly worked at her meditative, self-scrutinizing, and morally strenuous poems. To invoke Baudelaire was to conjure thoughts of moral seriousness. And so, all four of Bishop’s personal favourites wrote, in some sense, meditative lyrics in which the upward movement from the concrete “solid” image to Christian moral understanding is obvious. On the whole, Bishop absorbed the formal structures and thematic emphases of their poems. In this respect, she stands athwart the practice of many of her and our contemporaries, who often indulge in the Celtic alliteration, syntactical play, and internal rhyme of Hopkins and Dickinson without retaining the more substantive features of their poetry. Moreover, she adapts these structures to her own agnostic sensibility. Despite her inability to share in the theistic beliefs of her favourite poets, she sensed that those beliefs had given birth to a marvellous technique of introspection and moral analysis. It is this aspect of Bishop’s writings above all that has made her such an influential figure among contemporary poets. Even Philip Larkin had heard of Bishop and appreciated her writings. After Bishop’s four collections of poetry gained recognition from her peers in the form of various fellowships and prizes, this acclaim did not immediately translate into much academic interest or popular success. At the time of her death there was just a single critical book on her work, a short introductory study by the poet Anne Stevenson. The phenomenon of Bishop’s rising reputation has been attributed to many causes,
one of which is Robert Pinsky’s recent study related to the impersonality of her poetry, suggesting that;

“hers was a pure reputation based upon the quality of her work.”[OB 351]

She is one of the American poets to make sense to British and Irish writers, the only American poet of the last fifty years to be read and liked by almost all of her contemporaries. Her place in the canon of American poetry is secure and unparallel.
CHAPTER I

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