A Semanalytic Approach to Modern Poetry: Examining Elizabeth Bishop Through the Theories of Julia Kristeva

Brandy Michelle Wilson

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English Literature

Robert Siegle, Chair
Janell Watson
Katy Powell

April 14th, 2008
Blacksburg, Virginia

Key Words: Julia Kristeva, semiotic, symbolic, signifying process, the subject

Copyright 2008, Brandy Michelle Wilson
In utilizing Kristeva’s psychoanalytic discursive theory of identity-formation within literary symbolic structures, my thesis seeks to follow the ontological processes involved in identity and signification in “subversive” signifying practices. Specifically, I’m interested in the ways modern poetry (such as Elizabeth Bishop) defies traditional patriarchal discourse as dominant literary devices while embracing plurality and inherent virtues of the female voice. My project will trace Kristeva’s semiotic/psychoanalytic evolution from linguistic models of the signifying process, to particulars of her psychoanalytic/linguistic theories, and finally, will attempt to construct a space within modern poetry, where it can be said, the subject (poet) remains on trial/in crisis, and poetic expression reveals the “jouissance” or unspoken voice of repression.

Bishop’s poetry constantly questions reality, knowledge, sexuality and the self. I strive to expose how Bishop’s poetry performs Kristeva’s theory of the self in writing; her poetry puts at the core of the self a sense of loss in her attempts to express herself in language. I offer close readings of “The Fish,” “Questions of Travel,” and “One Art,” to show how Bishop’s self exposes the unconscious process of poetic activity. Kelly Oliver articulates Kristeva’s contributions to linguistics and psychoanalysis quite succinctly, “When we learn to embrace the return of the repressed/the foreigner within ourselves, then we learn to live with, and love, others” (14).
I thank my partner for his extreme tolerance of my endless spells of silence spent writing and thinking. It was because of his understanding and love that I was able to sustain myself during this project. I would also like to thank members of my committee, Dr. Robert Siegle, Dr. Janell Watson and Dr. Katy Powell for their assistance and support. Finally, I would also like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement.
Table of Contents

Introduction.........................................................................................................................1

Chapter One: Subject in Process..........................................................................................7
  Kristeva and Linguistics.....................................................................................................8
  Kristeva and Psychoanalysis...........................................................................................10

Chapter Two: Kristeva’s Pre-symbolic Language: Elizabeth Bishop.................................14
  “The Fish”.......................................................................................................................15
  “Questions of Travel”.....................................................................................................23
  “One Art”.......................................................................................................................34

Conclusion.........................................................................................................................40

Psychoanalytic Terminology.............................................................................................42

Bibliography.......................................................................................................................45
Introduction

In applying Kristeva’s semiotic theory of signification to interpret Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry, I will be drawing heavily from *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974), partially translated by Margaret Waller as *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), as well as Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* (1981). These seminal works are a collection of Kristeva’s early essays on ‘semiology’ and ‘semiotics’; Kristeva uses semiotics to analyze language from the perspective of a speaking subject, whereas semiology focuses on systemic linguistic codes of a language. For Kristeva, semanalysis is a signifying practice that forces the writer to constantly analyze her own discursive position in relation to the literary field, effecting renewed creativity and daring rhetorical practices. Semiotics operates on a general principle that a social law exists in language, and every social practice offers a specific expression of that law.

In contrast to the rule-governed applications of semiology, the study of semanalysis introduces desire and agency into language by immersing the speaker into the rhetorical space of the text. A critique of desire in poetic practice is made possible by investigating the writer’s position in relation to her signifying practice. Instead of interpreting poetry as a system of rules and literary devices, I’d like to look at the ways in which Bishop’s writing distorts the notion of a unified self. In terms of Kristeva’s work, I want to explore Bishop as a divided subject (conscious and unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operations characteristic of the two sides of this split, thereby exposing them to semiotic or bio-physiological process (drives), and on the other hand, to social
constraints (family, society, etc).

Central to Kristeva’s understanding of literary transgression in poetic practice is the idea of *semiotic disposition*, or the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language: fantasy, syntactic irregularities, and shifts in phonetic sound-production, etc. The occurrence of transgression is the pivotal moment in signifying practice, establishing new traditions which fracture and challenge existing literary codes. Poetry introduces desire into language and the social order, transforming and revolutionizing conservative traditions of linguistic and personal expression. Often associated with the pre-oedipal child, poetic language is initially shunned and ostracized by patriarchal discourse. Kristeva explains that poetic language is:

> A language in which the writer’s efforts are less to deal rationally with those objects or concepts words seem to encase than to work, consciously or not, with the sounds and rhythms of words in transcendent fashion (in Ossip Brik’s phrase) and effecting what Victor Schklovski called “semantic displacements” such as Shakespeare, Racine, Mallarmé, Marquis de Sade, Antonin Artaud, and Louis Wolfson. (Revolution in Poetic Language 2-3)

In order to assert itself at the beginning of the early 19th century, poets had to synthesize “madness” and “logic” (*Desire in Language* 73). Late nineteenth century poets faced the conflict of expressing identity and sustaining the validity of semiotic expression as a signifying practice against “[…] the machine, colonial expansion, banks, science, Parliament--those positions of mastery that conceal their violence and pretend to be mere legality” (*Desire in Language* 83). To be accepted as a valid symbolic representation, poetry has to assert itself according to literary devices of the Romantic period in order to subvert the patriarchal order
of the symbolic regime. In understanding the ways which Bishop cracks and challenges poetic codes, I will apply semiotics to “The Fish,” “Questions of Travel,” and “One Art.”

Bishop’s loss of her father to death and her mother to insanity prepared her for a lifetime of loss and homelessness; her poetics became influenced by an intimate knowledge of instability and flux. She was born on Feb. 8th, 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts and died on Oct. 6th, 1979. Her father died of Bright’s disease when she was an infant and her mother was institutionalized for mental illness when Bishop was five. She was taken in by her grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia for a couple of years, which would later become the setting for her short story “The Village.”

She attended Vassar College in 1929 and met the confessional poet Marianne Moore, who would become Bishop’s lifelong confidante. As an adult, she was perpetually on the move, traveling to New York, Paris, Spain, Florida, Mexico and Boston. Her first book *North and South* was published in 1946, producing 1,000 copies. “The Fish” appears in *North and South* and is one of 30 poems written before WWII. Critics praise *North and South*’s naturalism, often referring to Bishop as a “landscape poet” (Ellis 4).

At the time Bishop wrote *North and South*, her influences were George Herbert, Gerard Hopkins, William Wordsworth, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens—her poetry resists the confessional mode of her female contemporaries and the masculine, modernist poetic techniques of the male poets. *North and South* attempts to define the kind of aesthetics that Bishop refines in her later
poetry; she wants both to be part of a tradition, yet unique in her own way. The modernist tradition, exemplified by Eliot’s “The Wasteland” (1916 to 1925) and Pound’s Guide to Kulchur (1938) placed emphasis on the masculine; in order to be accepted within the tradition, women writers at the time such as Marianne Moore and H.D. Lawrence practiced poetics of politeness and restraint. Hence, Bishop adopts similar tactics of decorum and propriety, her poetry resisting overt displays of emotion or confessional characteristics. Her unique poetic style in North and South reveals the oppression of the woman writer embedded in the modernist tradition and her desire to separate from such strict binaries. Her struggles to be independent from her female contemporaries, yet part of a poetic tradition, results from being a lesbian woman writer post WWII. “Questions of Travel” and “One Art” show to a greater extent than “The Fish” a fracturing of the self resulting from her effort to be covert about her sexuality so she could fit in.

In 1951 Bishop received a 2,500 dollar fellowship from Bryn Mawr College and set off to go around South America by boat. By a series of bizarre events, she ended up living in Brazil and having a relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares for 15 years. The Brazil landscape provides most of the material for Bishop’s Questions of Travel (1965). After Soares committed suicide in 1967, Bishop came back to America where she met Alice Methfessel who became her partner and literary executor. “One Art” was written after Lota’s death and is an emotional poem in which she confronts lack and dislocation when art and language fail to make sense of her world.

Bishop’s poetry constantly questions reality, knowledge, sexuality and the
self. I strive to expose how Bishop’s poetry performs Kristeva’s theory of the self in writing; her poetry puts at the core of the self a sense of loss in her attempts to express herself through language. Chapter 1 explains Kristeva’s model of language, of how sense and meaning emerge only in the spaces created through severance of the symbolic. Chapter two offers a close reading of Bishop’s “The Fish,” “Questions of Travel,” and “One Art.” In Chapter 2, I show how Bishop’s sense of self can never be fully be pinned down and how in “The Fish” and “Questions of Travel” her sense of self is connected to nature and the environment. In “One Art” writing becomes a means of mourning, creating a fluid self. I attempt to show how Bishop’s retrieval of the self through rhyme and figurative language serves as a method of bringing up the passage of language from the semiotic through the symbolic. Kristeva’s semiotic is “inseparable from a theory of the subject that takes into account the Freudian positing of the unconscious” (Revolution in Poetic Language 98). Bishop’s self, more the idea of a self, exposes the unconscious processes of poetic activity. Her continual return to her past (done through repetition and metonymy) as a source for poetry becomes a method for transgressing symbolic signification, through the signifiers of loss.

Bishop’s poetry undermines the notion of a traditional self as it confesses to a multiple self, and it is her constant re-examination of the self that makes a Kristeva-Bishop connection possible. She problematizes the self, gender, and sexuality with the way she weaves loss in her language and representation of the self. The act of writing, for Bishop, gives her a medium to create an authentic
historic and novel identity, and enables her to experience multiple selves, desires, and voices. Freedom of expression involves separating masculine fears of lack from the feminine unconscious and celebrating the gift of giving a new history and voice to women. Bishop writes poetry that transforms loss into love, and lack into multiplicity.

As Bishop's personal life and poetry testify to, identification with a mother makes for a more multiple and plural self; Kristeva refers to this as “questionable subject in process” that “exists through the poles of the semiotic (associated with the unconscious, the maternal, the disruptive) and the symbolic (responsible for the rational, the paternal, the systematic)” (Revolution in Poetic Language 146). She considers such movement “poetic language,” which through its “signifying operations, is an unsettling process—when not an outright destruction—of the identity of meaning and the speaking subject,” and links the feminine with poetry, or with the disruption it produces (Revolution in Poetic Language 210). While Kristeva does not explicitly label her own writing as feminist, she concedes: “It is probably necessary to be a woman […] not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits” (quoted in Guberman 105). Psychoanalytic terminology used in Kristeva’s theories is explained at the end of my thesis.
Chapter One: Subject-in-Process

Benefiting from her linguistic studies of Strauss’s “genetic structuralism” (analyzing interacting consequences of genesis, history, and subject); Kristeva formulates a novel term, semanalysis, which she describes as a “critique of meaning, of its elements and its laws” (Oliver 3). Initially, Kristeva primarily utilizes semiology (science of signs) as a transdiscursive mechanism in studying the subject in signifying discourses. While Kristeva was a faculty member at the University of Paris, Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories became more influential in her own work, which had previously been influenced by Marx, Engels, Saussure, Jakobson, Benveniste, Chomsky, Pierce, and Bakhtin. Kristeva feels that the dual forces of the conscious and unconscious in psychoanalysis makes it possible for semanalysis to become a theoretical tool for the critique of meaning. She explains, “It is what enables instincts to challenge authority without producing anarchy--what enables authority to contain instincts without resorting to concentration camps” (Guberman 114).

Kristeva believes that feminism is a negative counter-struggle against sexism; so instead, she focuses upon semiotic and symbolic relations between maternity and language. Castration, which occurs during Lacan’s mirror phase enables a child to fuel primitive drives or semiotic rhythms into symbolic or linguistic structures. For Kristeva, castration “detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother, and the perception of a symbolic function […] which posits the gap between the signifier and the signified as an opening towards every desire but also every act […]” (Grosz 156). Thus, she centers her
investigation to the realm of semanalysis, or the study of identity
construction/deconstruction in language.

Kristeva explores a split “speaking subject” on conscious and unconscious
levels through the signifying process of semiotic and symbolic realms. Semiotic
desires originate from within the maternal chora, a term Kristeva borrows from
Plato, who describes it as, “an invisible and formless being which receives all
things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most
incomprehensible, “ (Desire in Language 6). Kristeva exercises semanalysis in
two theoretical paradigms: linguistically and psychoanalytically. First, she seeks
to investigate the developmental process of language acquisition and the
speaking subject’s entry into social spheres. Specifically, Kristeva emphasizes
language acquisition, or signification existing in a child prior to Lacan’s mirror
phase. This stage introduces a lack or void formerly filled by the mother and
marks an incremental awareness between a subject (self) and object (others).
Whereas Lacan presents the mirror stage as a developmental phase which leads
access to signification, Kristeva advocates the importance of language
acquisition prior to the mirror stage (Oliver). Discourse which Kristeva considers
a threat to identity formation includes poetry, maternity, and psychoanalysis.
Kristeva explores the relationship between identity and language in such works
as Revolution in Poetic Language, Powers of Horror, Tales of Love, Black Sun,
and Strangers to Ourselves (Oliver).

Kristeva and Linguistics

Kristeva criticizes modern linguistic theorists such as Hjelmslev for their
failure to consider a subject’s semantic contributions to the linguistic process. According to Kristeva, Hjelmslev operates on a phenomenological principle of language, believing that every signifier contains an innate/inherent meaning understood across all linguistic/signifying modalities. In essence, she argues that Hjelmslev analyzes linguistics in terms of content and expression, avoiding underlying processes and motivations the subject incorporates within signification. Consequently, linguistic theorists like him ignore aesthetic signifying practices produced by subjects, such as art, poetry, and literature, which do not adhere to language-object classifications. Kristeva identifies two fundamental constraints linguistic theorists present to signification, involving the evolution and complexity of language as a meaning system. In articulating these complexities, Kristeva explains:

These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse involved; in other words, so-called ‘natural’ language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and symbolic. (Revolution in Poetic Language 24)

Linguists who perceive language as a simultaneous and uniform birth of production lacking historic evolution strips human contribution to linguistic structures. Specifically, Kristeva articulates semantic evolution of language from primitive semiotic drives of the pre-oedipal subject. Secondly, Hjelmslev’s categorization of language in terms of semantic hierarchies relegates linguistics to a uni-dimensional realm impervious to the multi-dimensional nature language possesses as a signifier/signified in varying discourses. Linguistic theorists fail to consider the central role the subject inhabits in semiotic expression within
symbolic representation. Alternative critical tools to linguistic models such as psychoanalysis are necessary to provide sufficient criticism of the aesthetic creation of identity within alternative artistic discourse, namely that of poetry.

**Kristeva and Psychoanalysis**

Differing from a traditional linguistic conceptualization of the semiotic as a mark, sign, etc., Kristeva’s semiotic refers to drives of primitive energy and desire. The maternal chora fosters semiotic desires of the pre-oedipal child, an imagined space within the mother’s body that is inhabited by semiotic drives. The chora simultaneously attempts to regulate and rupture semiotic desires of the pre-oedipal subject, serving similar functions of the ego which monitor irrational desires of the child’s id in order to conform to demands of reality and the superego. Thus, the mother’s chora establishes fundamental socio-historic constraints against the destructive death drive (or oscillating semiotic desires) which threaten to consume the child. Ultimately, the child leaves the maternal chora in order to acquire a speaking position within the symbolic regulatory order. Kristeva specifies the realm of the symbolic:

We shall call *symbolic* the logical and syntactic functioning of language and everything which, in translinguistic practices is assimilable to the system of language proper. The term *semiotic*, on the other hand, will be used to mean: in the first place, what can be hypothetically posited as preceding the imposition of language, in other words, the already given arrangement of the drives in the form of facilitations or pathways, and secondly the return of these facilitations in the form of rhythms, intonations and lexical, syntactic and rhetorical transformation. If the *symbolic* established the limits and unity of a signifying practice, the *semiotic* registers in that practice the effect of that which cannot be pinned down as sign, whether signifier or signified. (quoted in Grosz 152)
Biological and social constraints propel the subject from the maternal chora, yet alternative patterns occur, such as those of the fetishist. Occasionally semiotic expression breaks through the symbolic order, when the fetishist embraces the phallic mother and refuses to sever ties from the maternal chora. This fragmented subject rebels against Freud’s patriarchal father and the social order, performing fetish-like behavior within the sensory confines of the maternal chora (“The Semiotic Chora” 25-30).

Kristeva marks the thetic phase as a crucial developmental pathway from the semiotic maternal chora to social symbolic positioning. Thetic mastery involves the moment in which the child recognizes an object as separate from the child’s self. A child subject to the thetic phase undergoes initial attempts at verbal language manifest in gestures, vocal emissions such as “pa” and “da” which separate an object from the subject. The thetic stage occurs between Lacan’s mirror stage and phallic identification or castration, enveloping a multiple stage of identity formation as a process of social-acculturation, linguistic articulation, and object awareness comprising the thetic phase as a signifier for the symbolic realm (“The Thetic” 43-62).

For Freud, castration of the phallic mother epitomizes a natural phase of the signifying process. Lacan expounds upon this process as an interaction of needs, drives, and desires between subject, object (other), and third figure (Other), in a meaningful linguistic structure. A child desires the Other to satisfy all his needs and to recognize his demands. Not only are semiotic desires manifest in symbolic and linguistic structures, but also familial and cultural
contexts. Gender inscribed codes of identity and behavior are bound in what Freud terms the Oedipus complex. Pertaining to both genders, the oedipal complex validates patriarchal structures for fear of “castration” or mutilation of one’s sexuality. The father as authoritative figure induces the male to reject affection from the mother to retain masculinity. In contrast, the daughter internalizes characteristics of being “castrated” and seeks attention from her father or future lover. In other words, the oedipal stage validates an individual’s sexual and thetic competency in a familial/cultural setting (Grosz 24-80). Psychoanalytic scrutiny of the linguistic process refutes the “poetic” symbolic representation in semantic systems.

In other words, Kristeva believes that the poet risks representation in order to produce a book, or the "object." The poet risks representation in the sense that "textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social--that which is exploited by sociality but which elaborates and can go beyond it, either destroying or transforming it" (“The Unstable Symbolic Substitutes” 67). Poets retain fetishist obsession for objects, simultaneously revoking a symbolic voice while ejecting semiotic desires within the maternal chora. Hence, the poet embraces the phallic mother and denies the Law of the father, implying that the thetic phase occurs inside the chora. In A Feminist Introduction Elizabeth Grosz states that with the death drive the subject’s “compulsion to repeat emerges and threatens to engulf the subject, to reduce it to the inertia of non-existence” (151). Confined within the maternal chora, the death drive catapults the artist into aesthetic expression as a protective shield against overwhelming catatonia.
Risking death and destruction of identity, the artist dares semiotic expression in a narcissistic fashion, spurning traditional symbolic expression typical of patriarchal discourse (“The Unstable Symbolic Substitutes” 63-85).
Chapter Two: Kristeva's Pre-symbolic Language: Elizabeth Bishop

Bishop personifies Kristeva’s avant-garde resistance to stifling symbolic/literary traditions. Sojourning across physical, emotional, and literary realms in pursuit of acceptance, understanding, and belonging, Bishop emerges serenely disconsolate, subtlety conveying tensions of estrangement and displacement through exploration of the natural world. Ostracized from the spheres of a loving family, blooming health, and geographic roots, Bishop seeks solace in an objective landscape vividly captured with brilliant displays of figurative language. Prevalent themes in Bishop’s poetry include: geography and landscape, human connection with the natural world, questions of knowledge and perception, and the ability or inability of form to control chaos. Literary devices utilized by Bishop to encapsulate barriers of “self” versus the “other” (or human versus nature) consist of: sensory images and color, images of water and the sea, similes and metaphors and attention to the processes of language. Language is typically used as a metaphor for the ability of art to control nature, yet close analysis of “The Fish,” “Questions of Travel,” and “One Art,” reveals the failure of language to break down the obstacles between nature and man, or self versus the other. Careful critique of Bishop’s use of figurative language in three separate poems regarding the natural world reveals recurring patterns of alienation, displacement, and estrangement.

Resisting the “double-edge power in language, the power to define,” (Gardner 216) Elizabeth Bishop embraces libidinal forces as liberating weapons struggling for expression amidst the soul-draining vacuous conformity imposed by Lacan’s
symbolic father. Bishop espouses descriptive allusions to the natural world, raging against an oppressive imperialistic society wallowing in historic and alienating prisons. Kristeva’s theory of semanalysis, or the study of identity construction and deconstruction in language, portrays the avant-garde’s subjective artistic identity as one torn between socio-historic reality and revolutionary reform. At the precipice of identity-formation, the artistic ego fails symbolic representation of semiotic energies searching for transcendence, truth, and spiritual enlightenment. The fragmented subject rebels against Freud’s patriarchal father, performing fetish-like behaviors within the sensory confines of the mother’s chora. Jorie Graham perceives Bishop’s poetic landscape as “[…] a different notion of reality and of your role in it” (cited in Gardner 231). A third element of language is necessary to transcend beyond the limitations in understanding the mother/child dyad—the love bestowed by Kristeva’s imaginary father (distinct from Lacan’s symbolic Father).

“The Fish”

Bishop’s frequently anthologized poem “The Fish,” from the collection North and South, was written between 1939 and 1940 when she lived in Key West, Florida. She favored living near coastal areas, strangely finding comfort at the sight of the sea and the endless sky-line. Most of Bishop’s poems in North and South revolve around places or animals native to Florida or people who lived there. The poem reads as an experiential-based event, actively unfolding like a story. The first-person narrator in “The Fish” establishes a self versus “the other” relationship to nature. The narrator utilizes a tremendous amount of semiotic
energy to create a coherent relationship to symbolic representation, which in this poem represents nature, Bishop’s absent mother. This poem introduces Bishop’s self as a “subject-in-process” whose psychic identity is put into question as Bishop constantly re-defines her self in relation to the fish’s gaze. For Kristeva, the “subject-in-process’ occurs in the moment of crisis “in which a creative identity is destroyed and a new, plural identity is constructed” (Guberman 189). The novel identity of the self appears as fragments or parts of a self. Kristeva continues to explain:

We must be able to be reduced to zero, to the state of crisis that is perhaps the necessary pre-condition of aesthetic pleasure, to the point of speechlessness as Freud says, of the loss of meaning, before we can enter into a process of free association, reconstitution of diverse meanings, or kinds of connotations that are almost indefinable--a process that is a re-creation of the poetic text. (Guberman 190)

Bishop’s self comes up against the limitations of transcendence into nature (the mother), forcing Bishop to readjust her representation of the fish and her self in relation to the fish.

I caught a tremendous fish and held him beside the boat half out of water, with my hook fast in a corner of his mouth. He didn’t fight. He hadn’t fought at all. He hung a grunting weight, battered and venerable And homely. Here and there his brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper, and its pattern of darker brown was like wallpaper: shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of line,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening fills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly— (Part of “The Fish”, Bishop 42)

Bishop’s poetry predominantly explores signification of a self striving to reconcile a lack or void between a subject (self) and object (others), an object-awareness that occurs during Lacan’s mirror phase. The first-person narrator in “The Fish” establishes a self versus “the other” relationship to nature. The poem above opens with, “I caught a tremendous fish,” indicating the pride the speaker feels in dominating and conquering nature (Bishop 42). James McCorkle, a contemporary poet whose work has appeared in the Colorado Review, Green Mountains Review, New England Review, and Postmodern Culture, observes that in this poem, the “I” refers to “the realm of the unseeing self” (Parker 5). Bishop’s “I” designates a self, a person, and the self that sees. The narrator presents two points of view of the fish: an objective perspective and an anthromorphological one. The fish is further presented as having human-like characteristics in a series of two complete sentences, alluding to the sheer exhaustion and acceptance of the fish to being caught, “He didn’t fight. / He hadn’t fought at all” (42). As an observer of nature, the speaker denotes the ugliness of the fish in an aesthetic series of similes and metaphors that lend the fish beautiful qualities: his “brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper,” and
“its pattern of darker brown was like wallpaper” (42). The similes also create an unusual relationship between the narrator and the fish. The narrator compares her domesticity to the decay of the fish’s peeling skin by repeating the wallpaper simile.

I thought of the coarse white flesh packed in like feathers, the big bones and the little bones, the dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails, and the pink swim-bladder like a big peony. (Bishop 42)

Bishop ascribes an almost animalistic beauty to the fish, describing him as having on him “tiny white sea-lice” and “rags of green weed,” which is somehow aesthetic. Repulsion and fear allows her vision to sharpen--she conveys these emotions with dashes that indicate the mortality and danger of animals in captivity, “the frightening gills, fresh and crisp with blood, / that can cut so badly” (43). At this point, the narrator recognizes that she wields the power to give the fish life or death. She begins to re-define her self as one initially separate from the fish to a self existing on a continuum with the fish, as a perpetual movement back and forth between being an observer or a kindred spirit. Similes and metaphors intertwine and incorporate with the domestic (such as comparing the fish to wallpaper) in an attempt of the speaker to unsuccessfully identify herself with nature. A transition from “I caught” at the beginning of the poem to “I thought,” portrays a shift from an active process of domination (similar to the role of patriarchal discourse) to a passive and introspective immersion of the observer in nature.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
The mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw. (Bishop 43)

This transition in tone indicates a focusing of vision into the human
characteristics of nature. Kristeva terms this phase “thetic,” indicating a crucial
developmental pathway from the semiotic maternal chora to social symbolic
positioning. This movement into the fish initiates an interrogation of both the
narrator and the fish. The narrator stares into the fish's eyes, only to have the
fish “not / return my stare” (43). She (I'm assuming the narrator is the same
gender as the author unless the poem gives me reason to think otherwise) sees herself and the fish as two beings rather than a subject and an object. The fish’s eyes are described as “tarnished tinfoil,” “old-scratched isinglass,” “irises backed and packed,” elements thwarting clarity of sight of the speaker as her language fails to capture the essence of the fish, “[…] then I saw / that from his lower lip / if you could call it a lip” (43). These metaphors of imperfect vision are filled with the strain of seeing; in this moment of painful insight, the narrator discovers the difference between herself and the fish. In other words, she is able to see beyond the physical boundaries of his flesh to the psychological suffering of his life: “I admired his sullen face, / the mechanism of his jaw, / and then I saw […]” (43). James McCorkle relates language to the narrator’s relationship to the fish:

The fish mediates between the narrator and a language with which she can picture herself. The description of the wallpaper, the flower imagery, and the metaphors of ornament and clothing comprise a taxonomy that composes the speaker and creates the mystery of the speaker’s presence. She is both present in these details and absent, in that the details are metaphors whose other terms are left unstated. (Parker 5)

Figurative language becomes the meeting grounds of expression for the speaker’s fragmented self and the fish’s humanity. Bishop increasingly focuses her vision and utilizes language to express this re-focus by the correction of the line “five--old pieces of fish-line” to “or four and a wire leader / with the swivel still attached. She doubts the ability of language to accurately reflect her vision, again trying to describe her renewed perspective of the fish: “with their ribbons / frayed and wavering” to “a five-haired beard of wisdom / trailing from his aching jaw” (43).
The longer she stares at the fish, the more his appearance changes. His appearance was initially described as “battered” “venerable” and “homely,” now he is has become “sullen” and “weapon like” (Bishop 43). Evidence of past encounters: “[…] where he broke it, two heavier lines, / and a fine black thread still crimped from the strain and snap / when it broke and he got away”--tells of a different fish. Earlier described as “battered and venerable / and homely” the fish now assumes the role of tribal elder and hero. The speaker commemorates the valor and struggle of the fish to survive in a world imposed upon by human exploitation, “I stared and stared / and victory filled up / […] where oil had spread a rainbow […] (43).

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go. (End of “The Fish,” Bishop 42-43)

The speaker fails to establish a shared thetic connection with the fish and nature (symbolic order), as the fish fails “to return my stare” (43). By invoking the spirit of the fish, the narrator confronts the moments of loss of meaning Kristeva finds inherent in the maternal, which here is nature (the fish); meaning offers the narrator comfort, and at the same time, faces risk and loss of the self in the event of nonmeaning. Garbage, waste, and pollution of human intervention upon
mother earth (“pool of bilge” and “oil had spread a rainbow”) create a false sense of beauty, undermining the speaker’s attempts at forging a connection with the natural world. Repetition of “stared” and “stared” elicits a fetishist’s desire and stubborn resolve to view the world through the lens of the fish. Immersion into nature becomes impossible because of human exploitation, indicated by the “small rented boat,” “pool of bilge,” and “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow” (Bishop 43). Throughout the poem, Bishop builds upon metonymy and synecdoche, describing the fish in pieces and parts. She is continually focusing her vision until her vision explodes and the fish contains all the language the narrator is capable of producing. The rainbow of oil leaking into the water perpetuates semiotic discourse, displacing discourse from the fish to a rainbow. The narrator’s “moment-of-crisis” sustains itself throughout the poem through musicality, rhythm, and alliteration—Bishop’s attempt to grasp the semiotic and confront her self with the object of loss. Language again fails, indicated by the repetition of “rusted” in two successive lines. Bishop emphasizes the failure of language to express the self and in the process, forecloses the symbolic. The narrator descends into the depths of semiotic expression, pursuing a psychic journey to understand her self. The final line of the poem “And I let the fish go” is a final narrative “working out of the self”; Kristeva explains that a narrative inclusion ruptured and broken by poetry is “also a defense and consolidation of the self in relation to its experience of crisis” (Guberman 196). She cannot respectfully eat the fish after marveling in his terrible beauty, longevity, and power; her inability to establish a relationship with nature emphasizes a lack of
social acculturation into the sphere of the other. Humans possess the ability to appreciate, marvel, and observe—but can never fully or completely immerse themselves into nature. In the end, the speaker is alienated by the beauty she attempts to control and understand.

“Questions of Travel”

Likewise, “Questions of Travel” explores the dichotomies between the familiar and the exotic, resulting in alienation catalyzed by the overwhelming and destructive powers of nature and the symbolic father. Unlike “The Fish,” the speaker experiences an increased sense of alienation and estrangement from symbolic representation and the Law of the Father within the maternal chora: throughout the poem she is directly questioning her presence in Brazil. The speaker of the poem voices both trepidation and desire for an entry-point into another world (the symbolic), and the anxiety of possible dangers she may encounter (death). The rhetoric of the poem is sometimes digressive and rambling, travel becoming a metaphor for consciousness and writing. Travel becomes a way of life, a perpetual urge to revel in the semiotic and the signifying process. The speaker in “The Fish” attempts to establish a relationship or marriage between the exotic and an object of nature, while the speaker in “Questions of Travel” seeks to establish similarities and common characteristics of the self to nature through the signifying process. Prominent images of travel, homelessness, and displacement in a foreign land emerge in this poem. Through the use of consonance, alliteration, colorful imagery, similes, and metaphors, Bishop utilizes pre-symbolic language as a fluid movement tinged
with hesitation and doubt.

Bishop’s unique relationship to Brazil provides the speaker of the poem with a unique position of knowledge, experiencing both the opportunity to observe, and be observed. At the age of 40, Bishop decides to travel around the world and due to an unforeseen turn of events, she spends over a decade living and loving in Brazil. Kim Fortuny, a Bishop scholar and author of *Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Travel*, depicts Bishop’s relationship to Brazil: “Overwhelmed by the attention and generosity of her hosts and drawn to the satisfying eccentricities of the landscape, Bishop would fall in love with Brazil, and what was to have been a brief stopover lasted 15 years” (62). While in Brazil, Bishop attempted to familiarize herself with Brazilian poetry and experimented with alternative artistic voices. She began translating Portuguese poetry which heightened her sense of humility toward Brazilian culture. In *The Body and the Song, Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics*, Lombardi expresses how Bishop’s views of authorship and ownership were affected: “The act of translation, however, compelled or seduced Bishop into expanding her emotional repertoire as she toyed with the Brazilian voice, projecting a confidant sensuality and emotional bravado alien to her own recognizable genre and style” (138). In some ways then, “Questions of Travel” is an experiment with identity, a way to connect with the exotic without consuming one’s sense of identity with the foreign. Robert Parker, author of *The Unbeliever*, implies that travel becomes for Bishop an evasion of a stable sense of the self. He writes:

> Against that threat, an ideology of exotica lets us imagine that the things we share with other people were never a part of ourselves in
the first place. To expel and confine the threatening likenesses and differences helps us forget that by some scales we do not see or refuse to see the things we reject and feel attracted to as foreign might seem in some critical way our own. (74)

Travel then, becomes both a way for Bishop's speaker to "other" and make foreign what she doesn't understand, and a means to define herself in relation to a novel landscape:

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams hurry too rapidly down to the sea, and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion, turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.
—For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains, aren't waterfalls yet, in a quick age or so, as ages go here, they probably will be. But if the streams and clouds keep traveling, traveling, the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ship, slime-hung and barnacled. (opening to "Questions of Travel" Bishop 93)

The speaker's voice begins questioning and seeking answers; she is almost frightened by the complex, sensory-filled details of the Brazilian landscape. Images of water pervade the beginning of the poem, evoking a desire to travel to other places, aboard ships, anywhere but the speaker's current location. The speaker feels displaced in this foreign, exotic land, and struggles internally within the maternal chora to seek a comfortable refuge, a place to call home. This sentiment is obvious in the following line, "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theaters?" (93). Although one perceives her place in this unfamiliar realm as uncertain and transitory, one gathers that she also appreciates the beauty and nature around her. The sunset is described as
“warm” and “impenetrable,” alluding to the mystery and elusiveness of the other, the natural world.

As in most of her poetry, the speaker in “Questions of Travel” adopts a second-person limited omniscient point-of-view and utilizes free-verse iambic pentameter in order to include the reader into the tourist perspective of traveling. In this poem, Bishop strives to “embrace the return of the repressed/the foreigner within ourselves, then we learn to live with, and love, others” (Oliver 14). The speaker addresses the reader, “should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” The first stanza utilizes assonance to convey a seemingly peaceful, flowing imagery of this exotic land: “waterfalls,” “streams,” “sea,” and “soft slow-motion” (93). Nature is such an overwhelming, grand, and consuming force that it is difficult to comprehend. The landscape’s utopian lure assaults her senses and understanding of nature’s limitations, indicated by her protest that, “There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams hurry too rapidly” (93). The song-like language created by compound nouns and dactyls stumble along “waterfalls” and “mountaintops” reinforce the rapid movement, which keeps “traveling, traveling” (93). Dashes prevalent throughout the poem introduce separate thoughts regarding the simultaneous characteristics of the mutability and oscillating effects of nature, the consequences of human intervention, and tourism marring the beauty of nature. At first, the world seems indifferent to the cultural expectation of the speaker, of her desire for permanence and stability. Bonnie Costello interprets this disjunction to “force her imagination to work against desire, to speed up rather than halt the flux. Metaphoric imagery
emphasizes temporality and catapults her forward in time” (153). Kristeva’s inclusion of the semiotic within the symbolic abounds rampantly in this poem. For Kristeva, semiotic rhythms appear as poetic devices, performing psychic functions closer to the unconscious. Charged by life and death drives, the language of semiotic signs appear in grammar and logic. Once the semiotic enters into the symbolic, a moment of distortion of the self occurs, particularly in poetic language. Bishop experiences this moment of distortion in her vivid and othered perception of the Brazilian landscape. Kristeva implies that in this moment of self distortion, the individual becomes articulate in communicating desires. She says:

This is for me an instance of both a subjective crisis and an amplification of the register of expression, since repression is overcome and the individual is exposed to his passions, while, at the same time, he becomes able to formulate them and to communicate to others. (Guberman 212)

In her effort to understand the Brazilian landscape as a foreigner, Bishop tries to adjust it to her own image of what she finds familiar. Oscillating between being a distant outsider or too much of an insider, Bishop adopts brilliant and colorful language in order to communicate the crisis that her self undergoes.

Movement is accelerated by enjambed lines and repeated words. As time hastens, “streams” become “seas” and “streaks” are transformed to “waterfalls.” Time and distance is portrayed as “mile-long,” and “in a quick age or so, as ages go here,” recognizing the effects aesthetic beauty has on warping time in a fleeting manner; nature is so captivating and ethereal, time almost does not exist (nature as oblivious to the effects of time). The simile of mountains to “hulls of
capsized ship, / slime-hung and barnacled,” reveals the continuity and seamless infinitude of nature (93). Costello interprets the mountains as providing the speaker with an anchor, a tangible force against the “flow” of streams and waterfalls (154). The semiotic natural rhythms and chaos of the first stanza elicit the child-like vision evident in the second stanza. The speaker invokes child-like vision, embodying Kristeva’s notion of transference or “the sense of repetition, of regression, of the unconscious, of the most archaic elements: fear, passion, abjection […] it is also the elaboration of the archaic material in an outlook of revolt, in submission, and defiance” (Guberman 215). Her questions become a longing invocation that acknowledges the compulsion to project her fantasies onto the world and possess them. The narrator has an apprehension of beauty to her surroundings, bringing her in closer connection with the landscape. Kristeva relates that transference can be favorable if the individual undergoing crisis is favorably accepted with understanding. As the subject-in-crisis and the foreigner, Bishop is constantly being reminded that she is American, that she is different, and that maybe she should have stayed at home. As the speaker resists the urge to appropriate her surroundings, her ability to absorb and immerse herself into nature increases:

Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
In this strangest of theatres?
What childishness is it that while there’s a breath of life in our bodies, we are determined to rush to see the sun the other way around?
The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?
To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,
  at any view,
instantly seen and always, always delightful?
Oh, must we dream our dreams
  and have them, too?
And have we room
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm? (Bishop 93)

Alternatively, the second stanza provides a bridge between the exotic to characteristics of home. At this point, Bishop’s ego revels in pre-oedipal linguistic discourse as an alternative pathway to creative expression, attempting to elude exhaustive libidinal depletion. Referring to herself in first-person, the speaker grounds herself back into reality and questions the validity of location. Rhetorical questions are raised that makes home the center point of comparison for other experiences, such as: What makes one place better than another, a feeling of belonging? She brings up questions of reality versus the imagination, “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” (93). In order to answer these difficult questions, the speaker must probe her personal and historical consciousness. She switches to the perspective of a child in order to distance herself from the weight of these questions and as a way to re-experience the world around her. By switching perspectives Bishop is able to forget for a while that she is a foreigner, that she is different from the others there. In order to express oneself as a foreigner, Kristeva explains, a whole new set of expressions and language is required to communicate. Bishop adopts fragile harmonizing tendencies of a child to positively transfer as a foreigner into the environment. Like a child, she lists wonders around her, taking a delightful indulgence in the colorful geography. The exotic, mysterious, and unique are innocently expressed
as “strangest of theatres,” “the sun the other way around,” “the tiniest green hummingbird” and “inexplicable old stonework” (93). She is also in a “rush to see” things, not completely understanding everything in complete detail. Alienation of the childish ego in a foreign symbolic order is evident in adjectives used, such as: “strangest,” “childishness,” “tiniest,” “inexplicable,” “impenetrable” and “delightful”. This usage connotes a sense of isolation, lack of social acculturation, naiveté, and ignorance to the culture, society, and environment surrounding her. In opposition to the sense of change and movement in the first stanza, the second stanza portrays nature as “inexplicable” and “impenetrable”, depicting nature as ambivalent to her efforts at intimacy and enlightenment. She retains hope for herself that by using her imagination and memory to build a home-like reality-- “We must dream our dreams / and have them too” (93). Kim Fortuny explains the speaker’s unique vision: “Our capacity for empathy is proportionate to our desire to read or interpret the most insignificant details a place might offer. And uncertainty can lead to knowledge when the traveler looks at the particulars of the world with the subtle eye of a would-be artist” (63).

Bishop depicts a rustic Brazil:

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the tree along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
—Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.
(In another country the clogs would all be tested. Each pair there would have identical pitch/)
—A pity not to have heard
the other, less primitive music of that fat brown bird
who sings above the broken gasoline pump
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
three towers, five silver crosses.
—Yes, a pity not have pondered,
blurr’dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasy of wooden cages.
—Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages.
—And never to have had to listen to rain
So much like politicians’ speeches:
Two hours of unrelenting oratory
And then a sudden golden silence
In which the traveler takes a notebook, writes: (Bishop 93-94)

The third stanza offers a contrast from the sensory-laden landscape to
concrete historical particulars of an authentic Brazil. Bishop catalogues or lists
domestic details of forgotten topography of this rural geography, hoping to
capture a part of the traveling experience with her imagination. Robert Parker
comments that:

Her goal is to present Brazil with a kind of imagination that can be
reached through projecting her experiences with a sort of subjective
interpretation without being colonial or appropriative, hence the
more mature Bishop seeks to imagine the public Brazil of
geographers, rather than, putting it figuratively, the lonelier Brazil of
the mind that erupted with a private strangeness in poems like “The
Weed,” “The Man-Moth,” or “The Unbeliever.” (74)

Bishop begins the third stanza with a series of present perfect statements, which
serves to frame the state of the speaker’s dream-like memory (“to have seen,” “to
have had to stop,” “to have heard,” “to have pondered”) (93-94). The present
perfect tense also creates a sense of an eternal present, emphasizing the
strange importance the filling-station has for the speaker. For some reason, she
wants to convey the sudden note of the “wooden clogs” with their “two-noted
wooden tune” as sad, but not as sad as a tuneless pair of “tested” ones with
“identical pitch”. To heighten this sense of isolation, strange metaphors
comparing unlike images to one another, “sad two-noted wooden tune / of
disparate wooden clogs” and “crudest wooden footwear […] whittled fantasies of
wooden cages” (94). Kim Fortuny argues that the connection between “the
crudest wooden footwear” and “the whittled fantasies” lies in Brazilian class
history (74). Portuguese immigrants arrived in Brazil in 1862, taking up blue-
collar jobs like pushing handcarts around the city to delivery supplies. Fortuny
describes them as wearing “wooden clogs, wide trousers, undershirts and large
floppy berets” (74).

In an effort to understand Brazil from the past, to re-enact a historical moment
or experience, the speaker shifts from an abstract vision to a concise and
concrete one. A landscape once foreign, like “the strangest of theatres” is now
lined with trees “like noble pantomimists” (94). Ethereal streams and waterfalls
are replaced with familiar “gasoline pump(s)” and references to history (“wooden
clogs”). A scene of typical travel scenery is resurrected, with a strange emphasis
on “a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque: / three towers, five silver crosses,”
perhaps in an effort to domesticate or make homelike the unknown. In this
snapshot the lines between reality, fantasy, travel and dream become blurred. At
this point, the speaker needs to ground her sense of self in relation to travel and
history. These images emphasize the exotic feel of the land and discomfort the
The speaker feels there, despite the fact that she possesses the ability to revel in the foreignness around her.

“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come to imagined places, not just stay at home? Or could Pascal have been not entirely right about just sitting quietly in one’s room?

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?” (Bishop 94)

The last two italicized stanzas bring attention to the act of writing and rhetoric to convey the hesitation, doubt, and unease the speaker feels. The speaker acknowledges her own sense of rootlessness, “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places […]” (95). The prose becomes exceedingly formal, adopting an aaba ccac rhyme scheme. It’s as if the speaker’s discomfiting self-questioning has brought about the realization that home is a state of mind, not a physical locality. As the details of travel recede from her mind, the speaker reaches “a sudden golden silence” where she reflects on free will and choice. The allusion to Pascal’s statements about sitting “quietly in one’s room” is answered with a tentative “No” (94). The speaker asks, “[…] the choice is never wide and never free […] / should we have stayed at home, / Wherever that may be?” (94). She is pondering whether foreign realms will provide the individual with enlightenment or fulfillment that is missing from one’s life, or if traveling serves this function at all. The speaker juxtaposes macrocosm to microcosm, comparing “continent” to “city” and “country” to “society,” questioning
credibility of the macrocosm to instill purpose and understanding to the individual who is asking, “Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be?” (94).

The feeling of emptiness that the speaker is left with results from the crisis of suffering that the foreigner goes through. Kristeva believes that women are in a permanent crisis, one in which:

“[…] the other is in me. It is my unconscious. And instead of searching for a scapegoat in the foreigner, I must try to tame the demons that are in me. ‘Hell’ said Sartre, ‘is other people’. Perhaps, but because hell is my unconscious and I do not recognize it. Therefore recognizing what is not doing well in myself--my death drives, my eroticism, my bizarreness, my particularity, my femininity, all these uncoded marginalities, that are not recognized by consensus—I would tend less to constitute my nemesis from those phenomena, which I now project to the exterior, making scapegoats of others.” (Guberman 41)

“One Art”

Finally, “One Art” captures jouissance absent in “The Fish” and “Questions of Travel”; Bishop’s ego transcends limitations of the signifying process, ending the artist’s frustrating journey toward spiritual enlightenment and symbolic representation, marking the complete metamorphosis of semiotic and libidinal forces. The title “One Art” implies that poetic control is a way to gain mastery over love and loss. The speaker of the poem is a survivor of loss and love; as a fragmented subject-in-process, the speaker lists a series of losses in an effort to convince herself that the self will not become lost in the process of writing it. The crises behind this poem are multiple: the breakup of Bishop and Alice Methfessel (her companion caretaker and secretary for the last 8 years of her life) and the deaths of Macedo Soares (1967) and Marianne Moore (1972) (Lombardi 234). For Bishop, the process of losing requires an active memory to
convey the emotion brought forth from lived experience.

Kristeva believes that a female’s relationship to love and loss is different than a man’s because of her relationship to her mother. A daughter’s relationship with her mother allows for a more multiple and plural self. Sadly, Bishop was denied a relationship to her mother, which intensified her lack of a unified psychic identity. Kristeva believes that a fractured and fluid identity results from a lack of a mother-daughter relationship. As a substitute for the maternal, Kristeva says:

Female creators need at least some degree of female homosexuality, whether it exists in reality or in fantasy. In order for my mother to become an erotic object that I can eventually master, abandon, and replace with other objects, I must somehow assume a phallic and manly pose that imitates a father or an authoritarian male figure. At that point, I can participate in another mimetic system and another indemnificatory game involving falseness and an identification that is impossible, yet manifested an imitation, a supplement, and a fetished use as a substitute. (Guberman 63)

“One Art” is about the process of mourning, and is Bishop’s way of displacing emotion from the loss of her mother to the loss of her lover. Kristeva believes that writing can provide a substitute for the maternal relationship, but the identity that emerges through such writing “is inhuman […] if you look beneath the surface however, as analysts do, you will find a dependency and a secret mother that provides a bedrock for this sublimation” (Guberman 65).

Bishop’s poems subvert the forms they employ, especially “One Art” by projecting itself backwards and forwards in time, testing the limits of mastery and pain, and exposing the self as changing and flexible, it displaces what it names by exposing the presence of loss. Bishop employs the formal villanelle, rhyming, dashing and parenthesizing to undermine the exhausting and emotional intensity
of loss. The villanelle provides the form, loss is the subject, and writing provides the tool to express Bishop’s fluid self that took 17 drafts to articulate. The form of the villanelle mimics the tendency of mourners to repeat and perform ritualized behaviors as they strive to find a substitute for their lost love. In Bishop’s poem the tension between mastery and loss leaves us with language. Kristeva’s model of language as a medium through which the self is constituted makes sense in Bishop’s reliance on form as setting the boundaries for her fragile sense of self:

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is not disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

—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. (Bishop 178)

The first stanza philosophically ruminates upon the ramifications of loss, which foreshadows the progression of ultimate loss, “[…] so many things seemed filled with the intent […]” to the natural inclination of human affectation to spiral toward doom, death, and destruction. The beginning of the poem lists daily
losses (keys, time) and utilizes syntactic parallelism to relay losses that are not equivalent in emotional anguish. Repetition of master, loss, and disaster interlaced with negations and adverbs such as, “there is no disaster,” “losing isn’t hard to master,” “none of these will bring disaster,” “but it wasn’t a disaster,” and “losing’s not too hard to master,” reveals a tentative attempt by the speaker to come to terms with the trauma of her loss. The act of writing and language as a cathartic release and exit from these raging emotions of fear, pain, and loss are conveyed by the expression of jouissance of poetic language, “It’s evident / the art of losing’s not […] though it may look like (Write It!) like disaster” (178). Freud insists that language relies upon presence but always keeps loss in sight through its movement; ultimately it cannot hold back the fluid self and reminds us of the spaces left between us and our words (McCabe 30). Later, Lacan builds upon the relationship between language and loss, theorizing that the experience of loss and emergence of identity is attained through mastery of language. Such an understanding of language and identity as grounded in loss is central to Bishop’s attempt to undo fixed identity.

The second stanza provides visual cues the first stanza presents. Loss is presented as a pervasive part of our lives; loss begins at small inanimate objects and progresses to extensions of ourselves shared with the land and others. She juxtaposes “master” to “disaster” as she loses her mom’s watch, houses, cities, two rivers, a continent and a lover. She balances mastery and disaster by casually relaying loss through pain and defiance. The items lost become increasingly personal, with the ultimate loss being postponed through language.
The middle line endings allude to ultimate loss: “evident” loss, — “intent” / “spent,” “meant” / “went” (Bishop 178). She initially tells us to “lose something every day” and in the third stanza to “then practice losing farther, losing faster “ (178). Alliteration of “losing farther, losing faster” denotes the realization that possessions, emotions, and friends the speaker has lost in life can never be replaced. A transition from the objective, structured layout of disaster in the first couple stanzas shifts in the fourth stanza to a more personalized losing of a catastrophe, “I lost my mother’s watch” (178). This assertion introduces a relationship between the living and the dead. The speaker then calls attention to the very act of writing with an exclamatory, “And look!” (178). By inviting the reader to share in recognition of loss, Bishop achieves thetic fulfillment and hope that coping may enhance the healing process.

Loss and love are bound in the last stanza. The poem has been struggling with smaller losses to prepare for the ultimate loss. The split of “a gesture / I love” across two lines enable the “I love” to refer back to the gesture or the person making the gesture. Now we no longer have an object standing in for a person but a voice and a gesture. Here, metaphor and metonymy comprise pieces of Bishop’s memory striving to signify meaning to her reality. The parentheses both contain and express emotion. Addition of “it’s evident” and the adverbial “too” (It’s evident / the art of losing’s not too hard to master”) increases the desire to repeat the refrain of the poem while doubting it’s validity. The final quatrain introduces a second party, “you,” with personal remembrances of endearing characteristics of her beloved set off in parenthesis, “the joking voice,
a gesture I love” (178). The speaker forces herself to write disaster, admitting the tremendous amount of energy it requires to control the chaotic forces of nature. Writing reveals a doubleness: language to gain mastery, but expressing loss. It is only in the process of writing it that Bishop can come to terms with her loss and end the painful journey of the subject-in-process. Ultimately, Bishop practices forfeiture, a recognition of human limits and imperfection, and therefore, also a potentially freeing activity. Like “The Fish” and “Questions of Travel,” Bishop attempts to immerse herself in the realm of the other, and through the signifying process she achieves a greater enlightenment and understanding of herself.

Bishop conveys varying themes of geography and landscape, human connection with the natural world, self versus the other, questions of knowledge and perception, the ability or inability of form to control chaos through her pre-symbolic figurative language, similes, and metaphors. She chooses to find comfort in objects and elements of the natural world in order to better understand herself and her role in the world. She explores the barriers of self and the other by utilizing first-person omniscient narrations, images of the water and sea, and attention to the processes of language. Kristeva’s imaginary father (any figure bestowing love) enables Bishop’s artistic spirit to escape the oppressive bindings of Lacan’s symbolic order into a rhizomatic line of flight. The imaginary father represents redemptive love, holy vision, transcendence, tolerance, peace and unity. Bishop’s ego acquires a speaking position within patriarchal discourse, representing successful resolution of semanalytic processes overcoming
oppressive regimes with triumphant displays of poetic voice.

**Conclusion**

Kristeva provides a model of language that links language and feminism in a way that liberates the voices of writers such as Bishop who are threatened into silence by the limits set by a predominantly male poetic tradition. I chose Kristeva as a lens to read Bishop’s poetry partly because she recognizes patriarchy as a systematic repression and underrepresentation of women’s sexuality and turns to the female body as a means of locating a new writing not regulated by masculinist thinking. Bishop and Kristeva intersect in subverting patriarchal binaries; they emphasize a mode of loving that unhoards and they celebrate the precarious position of being marginalized writers.

Kristeva is interested in the borderline situation of language, where language reaches its limits. Throughout Bishop's poetry, specifically in “The Fish,” “Questions of Travel,” and “One Art,” language breaks down and fails to express desires of the self, resulting in alienation, displacement and estrangement. Kristeva identifies two borderline states where language either does not yet exist or has ceased to exist: a child’s acquisition of language and psychosis. In “Questions of Travel,” Bishop’s narrator adopts the perspective of a child because the language of the foreigner becomes too paralyzing to maintain.

Kristeva’s “subject-in-process” submits to the law of communication. Those who do not entirely submit are always in a state of contesting the law “either with the force of violence, of aggressivity, of the death drive, or with the other side of this force: pleasure and jouissance” (Guberman 26). In Tales of Love, Kristeva
comes closest to identifying how Bishop contests the law. Kristeva declares that love is the site where meaning is most troubled because love is between two subjectivities, so it is difficult to know if there is any equivalency between the two. Kristeva says, “The ordeal of love puts the univocity of language and its referential and communicative power to the test,” and she implies that this test results from the “abyss separating the sexes” (101). Bishop surrounds us with borderline language of repetition and parataxis, phrases spilling over and merging into others in an effort to meet her landscape as a lover. My analysis of Bishop through Kristeva reveals how Bishop creates an intimacy between her self and whatever she is describing (object, lover, and landscape) as she describes it.

Bishop is very aware of the transient nature of things, so she does not propose limiting answers or a system of beliefs that would give ultimate meaning. She resists closure and ultimacy, constantly re-defining her self in relation to questions of epistemology and ontology. She pays special attention to nature, interrogates gender categories, and complicates definitions of the self in its different placements of home and travel--loss is a motivating theme and personal loss becomes directly connected to her idea of self. She affirms life and living in the face of loss, providing her with an affirmation rooted in compassion for suffering. Her poetry reveals multiple selves without letting one dominate the other; instead her loving self provides a balance for the self suffering loss and death.
Psychoanalytic Terminology:

**dialectic**: (dialectique) Marxist theory referring to a contradiction inherent in all things which results in a cleavage, a struggle between the two elements of the contradiction. Elimination of the weaker element and then, within the victorious one, there is a contradiction, etc.

**drive**: (pulsions) instinctual rhythms Kristeva coins “energy discharges”.

**intertextuality**: (intertextualite) French word introduced by Kristeva. Refers to transformation (which occurs within signifying practices) of one or more systems of signs onto another, altering enunciative and denotative meaning.

**jouissance**: (jouissance) enjoyment. Totally joy or ecstasy. Combines simultaneous elements of Lacan’s usage of jouissance as sexual, spiritual, physical, and conceptual joy.

**materialism**: (materialisme) Marxist context: dialectical materialism of authentic Marxism; and mechanistic material.

**mechanistic materialism**: related to determinism, argues from cause to effect in linear, nonreversible fashion, and is sometimes called vulgar Marxism.

**negativity**: (negativite) A Hegelian concept. Kristeva defines negativity in *Poetic Language* as “the mediation, the supersession of the ‘pure abstractions’ of being and nothingness in the concrete where they are both only moments” (17).

**other vs. Other**: (autre, Autre) “other” exists as an opposite of, or excluded by, something else. “Other” refers to a hypothetical place/space, that of the pure signifier, rather than a physical entity or moral category. Lacan: “The unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other versus the “Other” is, therefore, the place in which is constituted the I who speak with him who hears” (Desire in Language 17).

**Process**: (process) conveys two meanings. 1) A continued forward motion possibly accompanied by transformations. 2) A legal meaning that has remained prevalent in French (process: a legal suit or proceeding), while in English surviving mainly in a few phrases such as “due process: or “process server”. In Kristeva’s literature, the word incorporates several nuances according to context, sometimes referring to a “process” itself, or referring to an “unsettling” and “questionable”- especially when the subject is on “process”. For the subject is “questionable” (in the legal sense) as to is identity, and the process is undergoes is “unsettling” as to its place within the semiotic or symbolic disposition. (Desire in Language)
**semiotic vs. Semiotics:** (semiotique) “Semiotics” is the science of signs. “semiotic” refers to the actual organization, or disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives (semiotic disposition) as they affect language and its practice, in the dialectical conflict with the symbolic. See semanalysis.

**Significance:** (significance) also synonymous with significance. Refers to operations that are both fluid and archaic. The work performed in language (through heterogeneous articulation of semiotic and symbolic dispositions) that enables a text to signify what representative and communicative speech cannot say.

**Signifying practice:** (pratique signifiante) Kristeva “I shall call a signifying practice the establishment and the countervailing of a sign system. Establishing a sign system calls for the identity of a speaking subject within a social framework, which he recognizes as a basis for that identity. Countervailing the sign system is done by having the subject undergoes an unsettling, questionable process; this indirectly challenges the social framework with which he had previously identified, and it thus coincides with times of abrupt changes, renewal, or revolution in society”. (Desire in Language 18)

**Symbolic:** (symbolique) domain of position and judgment. Occurs on a developmental timespan later than the semiotic, the identification of subject and it’s distinction from objects, and the establishment of a sign system. Synchronically speaking, it is always present, even in the semiotic disposition, which cannot exist without constantly challenging the symbolic one.

**Subject:** (sujet): the thinking, speaking, acting, doing, or writing agent.

**Semanalysis:** to dissolve. Dissolving the sign, taking it apart, opens up new areas of signification. The study of the processes which break down or subvert the production of meaning. The study of the simultaneous production and subversion of subjectivity in discourse.

**Thetic:** phase in the signifying process establishing the identification of the subject and its object as preconditions of the propositionality.
Bibliography


Secondary Works Cited


Guberman, Ross, Julia Kristeva Interviews. New York: Columbia University
Press, 1996.


http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bishop/fish.htm
