



A map of the Midwest published by famous cartographer James Monteith in 1884

The Complicated Spiritual Vision of Elizabeth Bishop

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I. INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bishop begins *Geography III* (1976) with a page of questions and answers out of *First Lessons in Geography* from “Monteith’s Geographical Series, A. S. Barnes and Co., 1884.” The first two read,

What is the Earth?

The planet or body on which we live.

What is the shape of the earth?

Round, like a ball. (Bishop, *Geography* [viii])

These direct questions and correct answers demonstrate, as do similar ones which follow, a modern objectivist approach to knowledge about the world. But they contrast in content and form with Bishop’s own deeper questions and more poetic answers. Richard Wilbur explains that “[w]hen she looked in her poetry for ultimate answers, [Bishop] generally expressed the search in the key of geography, of travel. And she always reported that such answers were undiscoverable” (265). A

textbook statement that the earth is “[t]he planet or body on which we live” completely misses the experience of those living on the planet, the experience of tension between interconnection and alienation. A textbook statement that the earth is “round, like a ball” conveys *accurate information* about the “shape” of the earth as far as primary school geography goes, but it fails to convey *spiritual truth* about the “condition” of the earth. In her own poems later in the book, Bishop approaches just such truth when she describes, for instance, “the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space” (“In” 5–6). While Monteith models a way of knowing through directness and correctness, Bishop models ways of knowing through metaphor, imagery, and sound—ways of knowing akin to those of religious faith.¹

Considering both poles in this juxtaposition simultaneously, one can read the pattern of this extended epigraph both as a critique of strictly rational and material ways of knowing, the “question and answer” framework of “the post-war culture of denial,” and as an invocation of more relational and musical ways of knowing, the “call and response” rhythm of religious litany. Beginning with such a tension between critique and praise, Bishop explores what is perhaps the same paradox faced by all serious spiritual thinkers from Job to John of the Cross; she lays out a vision in *Geography III* of a complicated spirituality, able to face alienation and pain while maintaining hope.²

As both poet and person, Bishop knew about both alienation and the hope of spiritual connectedness. She knew about alienation from personal experience. Her father died the year she was born, and her

mother went into permanent care at a psychiatric hospital when she was five.³ As a child, she lived alternately with her grandparents in Nova Scotia and Worcester, Massachusetts, and her aunt near Boston. As an adult, she lived through two world wars and into the Cold War. She struggled with her sexual orientation and addiction to alcohol, keeping both hidden. Though Bishop never became a Christian, she knew about the hope of spiritual connectedness largely from her intense reading of Christian spiritual writers, including Ignatius Loyola, Simone Weil, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and George Herbert. At times, she would insist that she could read only Herbert’s work and nothing else. In her favorite poem, Herbert’s “Love III,” Love or Christ insists that the hesitant speaker sit with Him and eat (316). One can imagine Bishop imagining herself in a similar position when she spoke of her own doubt in a famous letter to Robert Lowell: “I also wish I could go back to being a Baptist!—not that I ever was one—but I believe now that complete agnosticism and straddling the fence on everything is my natural position—although I wish it weren’t” (qtd. in Walker, *God* 17).

As a modern poet who lived into the postmodern period, and who, though secular and skeptical, faced the conditions of life in a spiritual rather than objectivist manner, Bishop provides unique insights into modern and postmodern spirituality. Her poetry leaves a deep, complicated expression of spirituality which, though not specifically Christian, can be read from a Christian perspective.

II. READING ELIZABETH BISHOP AS A RELIGIOUS POET

Because of what is known of Bishop as a religious skeptic, reading her work as the expression of a spiritual vision may seem odd. Scholars note her spirituality and religiosity often enough, however, if typically only in passing. Thomas J. Travisano suggests that “[f]or Bishop, beauty and spirituality . . . are woven into [the] very fabric” of “everyday experience” (90). Wilbur mentions both her lack of

¹Portions of this essay were presented at a conference on “The Poetics of Conflict and Reconciliation,” hosted by the Conference of Christianity and Literature in Bridgewater, Virginia, on October 17, 2008. I thank James Applewhite, Rickey Cotton, Thomas Lisk, and Christine Corrigan for helpful discussions of Bishop’s work and concepts discussed in this essay. Applewhite also coined the term, “the post-war culture of denial.”

²Following in the tradition of many classical examples, miscellaneous contemporary instances of theologians who explore the intersections of darkness and hope include Walter Brueggemann, Miroslav Volf, and Belden C. Lane (*Solace*).

³Details here of Bishop’s life derive from accounts by Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, Laurel Corelle, and Cheryl Walker (*God*).

“orthodox convictions” and her abundance of “religious concerns and habits of feeling” such as “compassion” (265). Bonnie Costello goes so far as to comment that “[r]eligious rhetoric of the soul and of divinity haunts Bishop’s poems” (91). Some critics, such as Bishop’s friend, Marianne Moore, engage the spiritual dimension of her work in a more sustained manner. In a review of Bishop’s first book, Moore notes that “Bishop’s speculation . . . concerning faith—religious faith—is a carefully plumbed depth” (408). Citing Moore, Corelle connects Bishop to the “Christian literary tradition” by finding “sources” for her poetry in the Bible, Dante, and Milton.⁴ More than any other scholar, though, Cheryl Walker has written substantially about Bishop’s work from a spiritual perspective.

Thomas Merton proposes that “the true poet is akin to the mystic because of [a] ‘prophetic’ intuition”; the poet “sees the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object” which “makes it *a sign of God*” (Hart 345). In the perspective of current literary theory, everything is involved in a system of symbols. In a spiritual perspective, these symbols all point beyond signification to mystery. All poems, then—exploring symbol and invoking mystery—can be read as poems about God. All poetry can be understood to have a “spiritual” quality. Moreover, to read Bishop’s poems in a spiritually minded way seems particularly apt since, as Dana Gioia argues, they are particularly open to a variety of readings: she has a “remarkable,” “miraculous, indeed Pentecostal” “ability to engage very different audiences often in very different ways” because her poems “leave enough space for each reader to bring his or her life experience into the text” (23, 26). Such self-implicating scholarship, as this essay aims to be, is not without precedent. As mentioned already, Walker also uses such an approach in her work on Bishop: “I . . . want to [read] Bishop because of the interest a religious person might take in her work” (“Reading” 166). Further, she explains that “[i]t is quite possible to

⁴Though not particularly focused on spirituality, studies by Ben Howard and Brett Millier on Bishop in regard to Herbert and Hopkins and by Elisa New regarding Calvinism are related to this approach of tracing the influences of the Christian tradition in Bishop’s work.

give a religious reading to a text that wasn’t written to make a religious point as long as one doesn’t do violence to the conventions of informed reading, which are based primarily on the connotative and denotative possibilities of language”; religious readings require “a certain degree of *playfulness*” (God 40).⁵ Though certainly serious at times, these readings aim to undertake such play.

For those who look, spiritual themes surface throughout Bishop’s work. Consider, for example, the overt spiritual possibilities in the following lines which alternately prod religion lightheartedly, imply harsh critique, and offer serious positive reflection. In “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” Bishop teases, “angels all riding / on the broad black brim of your hat . . . Manhattan / is all awash with morals” (82). In “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” she raises the dark history of the conquistadors: “the Christians, hard as nails, / tiny as nails and glittering, / in creaking armor, came and found it all” (92). In “Seascape” she observes that “[h]eaven is not like flying or swimming, / but has something to do blackness and a strong glare” (40). In “Letter to N.Y.” someone takes “cabs in the middle of the night, / driving as if to save your soul” (91). In “Chemin de Fer” a dirty old hermit, living by a pond past the train tracks fires a shotgun, screaming, “Love should be put into action!” An echo tries and tries “to confirm it” (8). And in the final line of “Filling Station,” seeing a plant living in a filthy gas station, the poet concludes that “[s]omebody loves us all” (128).

Such compelling and meaningful lines also mark poems in *Geography III*. Published in 1976, three years before Bishop’s death, *Geography III* represents her most mature poetic statement of spirituality because it serves as a collection of nearly final reflections on her life in retrospect, reflections which show, on one hand, an awareness of loss and alienation and, on the other, a depth of spiritual presence. Three of ten poems in the book—“In the Waiting Room,” the first

⁵Though Walker is a pertinent model of self-implicating scholarship concerning Bishop, there is also substantial other precedent for this kind of approach (see Olivia Frey, Nancy Sommers, and Jan Zlotnik Schmidt). For a discussion of this sort of approach in the particular context of discussing spirituality, see Lane (“Writing”).

poem, "Night City," from the middle of the collection, and "Five Flights Up," the concluding poem—provide a close look at the central themes and complications of Bishop's spiritual vision.

III. INTERCONNECTION AND ALIENATION IN "IN THE WAITING ROOM"

"In the Waiting Room" is narrated by seven-year-old Elizabeth. She tells about a dark winter afternoon in New England when she "sat and waited" for "what seemed like a long time" during her Aunt Consuelo's dental appointment (3). The speaker is at least partially autobiographical. Bishop did live with her aunt in New England as a child, but her aunt's name was not Consuelo. This invented name highlights a particular tension in the poem: "consuelo" means comfort, but the speaker clearly feels uncomfortable with the setting, a room of "arctics and overcoats" and "lamps" (3).

Elizabeth characterizes the "grown-up people" (3) in the waiting room as distant and stuffy by noting only their "shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boots / and different pairs of hands / lying under lamps" (6). She says nothing about their faces which would have been more personal, perhaps more personally welcoming or more personally threatening. She buries herself in an issue of *National Geographic*, perhaps to avoid speaking with these adults or making eye contact with them. But the magazine does not allow her the escape from discomfort she might have hoped for. She describes the figures inside the magazine with as much disdain or fear as she describes those with her in the waiting room. Yet she finds these images much more engaging because they are frightening and mostly violent. The adults in the waiting room simply make her uncomfortable; those in the magazine disturb her at a deeper level. The images she chooses to mention point to an unsettling awareness of violence: a spilling volcano, famous explorers, a dead man to be eaten, ritually disfigured babies, and, most significantly,

black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying. (4)

Though unsettled by these images, Elizabeth stays fastened to the magazine, "carefully / stud[ying] the photographs" (3). "I read it right straight through," she confesses; "I was too shy to stop" (4).

Perhaps she feels "too shy" because in a childish way she imagines that all the adults, inside the room and inside the magazine, might be watching her. Perhaps she feels "too shy" because in a much more mature way she is aware of the tension of being both repulsed by and drawn to images of humans in contexts of violence. Either way, the magazine compels her focused attention, so she takes it in, absorbing even physical details—"the cover: / the yellow margins, the date" (4). This absorption in the magazine positions Elizabeth as both separate from those in the room and partially connected to those in the magazine. She turns her mind from the waiting room to the magazine. The pages of the magazine stand as an almost physical wall between her and the people in the waiting room, and her physical proximity to the images brings her close to those in the magazine.

Elizabeth expresses a sense of separation and distance from both the adults in the room and the adults in the magazine, but she also expresses a sense of inexplicable connection and implication with those in the magazine. Both sensations are profoundly uncomfortable for her, the sense of connection more so than the sense of separation. These discomforts combined with her intense absorption with the images in the magazine build inside her body to produce "[s]uddenly, from inside," an involuntary yell, a short "oh! of pain" in her mouth (4). When at first she mistakes this yell as "Aunt Consuelo's voice," crying from the dentist's chair, Elizabeth notes that she "wasn't at all surprised" because "even then I knew [my aunt] was / a foolish, timid woman" (4-5). But when afterward she realizes that the sound came from her own mouth, she comments that she was "completely surprised" (5). Her belief that she is not like her aunt and that she is separated from her aunt by her aunt's foolishness and timidity suddenly gives way to a realization that they are indeed like each other and are connected to each other in at least one significant way. Her voice is similar enough to her aunt's to mistake the two.

An actual or imagined out-of-body experience immediately follows this revelation:

I might have been embarrassed,
 but wasn't. What took me
 completely by surprise
 was that it was me:
 my voice, in my mouth.
 Without thinking at all
 I was my foolish aunt,
 I—we—were falling, falling,
 our eyes glued to the cover
 of the *National Geographic*,
 February, 1918. (5)

This dizzying, unavoidable, and unwanted realization of connectedness disorients her. Then her identification with her aunt expands quickly to include all those in the room *and* those in the magazine. Something, she realizes with a kind of terror, “[holds] us all together” and “[makes] us all just one” (7).

This first poem in *Geography III* establishes the spiritual content of the book by introducing its major themes: alienation and interconnectedness. One sees from the perspective of prepubescent anxiety a tempered vision of modern alienation, distance, and dis-ease. And then in the context of this discomfort and disconnect, one also sees an equally profound vision of connectedness. At seven years old, an unusually sensitive and perceptive child expresses surprise and wonder at this “unlikely” condition: “I knew that nothing stranger / had ever happened,” she tells the reader, “that nothing / stranger could ever happen” (6).

Realizations and experiences of connectedness have met theorists and mystics alike with a similar sense of surprise. Judith Butler suggests that radical interrelation is fundamental to the formation of personhood: “one might say, reflectively, and with a certain sense of humility, that in the beginning, *I am my relation to you*” (81). From this paradigm, one can see that Bishop’s poem describes a psychological event. Infants discover their own subjectivity in the mirror stage, and small children realize the subjectivity of others. While anxious, among other things, about her sexual development into a woman,

like her aunt, like the tribal women in the magazine, and like other women in the waiting room (those “horrifying” breasts and “different pairs of hands” [6]), Elizabeth rediscovers herself in the poem as a subject among subjects, irrevocably “one of *them*.” Thus, she relates that “I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*” (6).

Something like this psychological explanation is almost certainly the case. But that does not mean that Elizabeth’s experience in the poem is *simply* psychological; after all, what happens, Elizabeth explains, happens without her “thinking at all.” If one accepts that the subconscious and the spiritual may be partially inclusive of each other, as William James suggests, then Elizabeth’s experience with connection could spring from subconscious *and* spiritual levels.

Indeed, Elizabeth describes it in terms similar to those often used by mystics to describe visions, scenes, and sensations of spiritual unification of various kinds common in mystical experience. William James observes that “[i]n Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note . . . the unity of man with God” (457). Ursula King describes the highest stage in a spiritual journey as “the *unitive life*, the ultimate goal of loving union with God, an ecstatic experience of overwhelming joy” (22). In the first lines of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Whitman says, “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (26), and he later adds, “I am large. . . . I contain multitudes” (85). Closer to Bishop’s time, Allen Ginsberg, repeating, “I am with you in Rockland!” over and over, demonstrates a solidarity with Carl Solomon which can be seen to have a spiritual edge (“Howl” 19–20).

One example of such a spiritual experience which closely parallels Bishop’s poem comes from Merton. “In Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut,” he relates in his autobiography, “I suddenly realized that I love all the people and that *none of them were, or could be, totally alien to me*”; it was “[a]s if [I were] waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness, of the ‘special’ vocation to be different” (qtd. in Elie 254, emphasis added). Though Merton’s experience is particularly similar to Elizabeth’s in that he undergoes a sudden realization in the middle of a typical enough activity—walking down the street—all of these examples share an understanding of interconnectedness as a

spiritual dynamic which is useful to emphasize the spiritual dynamic of Elizabeth's experience.

But while these examples describe experiences and understandings which closely parallel Elizabeth's, hers diverges from them in at least one significant way. For Elizabeth the dissolution of boundaries is not an "ecstatic . . . overwhelming joy" but a terrifying accident. The connections between "In the Waiting Room" and these scattered examples are nonetheless useful, then, both because they highlight the spiritual character of Elizabeth's experience and establish this point of contrast which uncovers an important aspect of that experience and the spiritual vision expressed in Bishop's poems. If one can accept Elizabeth's experience as spiritual through comparing it to these others, then the fact that *unification is not joyful for her* demonstrates a spirituality that, however unwillingly, squarely faces up to the pain and alienation of modernism. Though Elizabeth falls "into" the magazine, into the world, into identification with others across the world, what she feels in pain and surprise is

the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold blue-black space. (5, emphasis added)

Though it is clear that she resists this realization of "oneness with the world," one needs to speculate about her reasons for resisting. One can see in the tone she uses to describe the scene in the waiting room and the scenes in the magazine that she feels repulsed by the adult world and, particularly, by adult sexuality, sensing perceptively that they are full of pain and alienation. Upon her dizzying experience, she refuses to see the faces of the adults in the waiting room: "I couldn't look any higher" than a "sidelong glance" (6). It seems that she is resisting identification with her world because she knows that it is a world full of alienation. Ironically, however, in resisting identification with this world, she demonstrates that she has already internalized its habits of disconnection. By telling herself that she is almost grown up ("three days / and you'll be seven years old" [5]), she positions herself as one of the adults with whom she does not want to identify. Being caught in such a predicament

makes even the war seem to her a relief. Thus, Elizabeth sighs at the end of her experience in the waiting room:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918. (7-8)

As Elizabeth dramatizes the conundrum of inescapable alienation, she asks a series of questions which serve to comment on the place of pain and the possibility of hope in this world. These questions hold beautiful insights into Bishop's complicated spiritual vision, both in the answers they imply and in the underlying, spiritual realities they presuppose:

Why should [I] be one [of them], too?
.....
Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us all just one?
.....
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't? (6-7)

Implied or presupposed in these questions are that all are "just one"; that all share subjectivity and occupy comparable subject positions in

a modern world of alienation; and that both pain and grace are the primary characteristics of oneness—"a cry of pain that could have / got loud and worse but hadn't." It is not that Elizabeth consciously thinks these presuppositions. Of course not. She is three days younger than seven years old. But, more importantly, she experiences them and articulates questions from that experience.

Through a perspective informed by Christian tradition, one recognizes these implications and presuppositions as spiritual and primary. In Christian spirituality all people are understood to be interconnected both through imperfection and perfection, through imperfection in that all are in the same boat as wrongdoers and through perfection in that God is the ground of being for all. As Paul puts it, "[i]n [God] we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Implied in connectedness is, as Butler explains, "[o]ur responsibility . . . not just for the purity of our souls but for the shape of the collectively inhabited world" (110). Regardless of the pain one faces or *because of* the pain all share, all are responsible for each other, implicated in otherness. In the second to last stanza of "In the Waiting Room," before escaping outside into the snow, Elizabeth relates that

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another. (7)

Perhaps the "big black wave, / another, and another" represents these same spiritual realizations made real to Elizabeth through an experience she does not understand.

IV. DARKNESS IN "NIGHT CITY"

Though Bishop introduces pain in the first poem of *Geography III*, she balances it with ample hopefulness, framing it with the perspective of a child, an almost seven-year-old who feels grown up and yet fears growing up, and exploring it in a situation that in the end could be understood as comic, a dentist's office. In "Night City," Bishop

takes a much harder, more direct, more sustained, and more adult look at darkness. Watching from the window of an airplane, the speaker of "Night City" tersely describes a scene of destruction, a surreal, utterly urban dystopia, with image after image of darkness—asphalt, broken glass, spilling chemicals, an "[i]ncandescent" skyscraper with dripping wires (20). Everything burns, melts, or oozes.

Brief declarative sentences tightly structure the poem's ten compressed stanzas, conveying awe or numbness at the horrors described. One stanza (of seventeen syllables) sounds like a nightmare haiku:

A pool of bitumen
one tycoon
wept by himself,
a blackened moon. (20)

A few sentences give only four one-syllable words, such as "[t]he city burns tears" and "[t]he city burns guilt" (19). The shortest sentence exclaims one word: "Look!" (20).

The human body appears several times in "Night City" in or near pain. The foot appears in danger in the first line with flaming broken bottles that "[n]o foot could endure" (19). One can read this image with a rather intimate connotation if one considers that feet are a very personal part of the body—they are for washing, kissing, and walking. Walking is certainly more intimate than being transported by city machines. Less intimately but more intensely, the goriest aspects of this poem are the unsettling lines which tell of gushing bodily fluids: "Diaphanous lymph, / bright turgid blood / splatter[ing] outward / in clots of gold" (20). The spiritual alienation of this city affects people deeply and personally in their bodies. Where the poem notes that "[t]he city burns tears"—not just trash—it further evokes human suffering. Even inhuman "tycoons" are humanized when, through their weeping and crying, the human face is invoked: "A pool of bitumen / one tycoon / wept by himself. . . . Another cried / a skyscraper up" (20). The violence of this scene is set against a melting infrastructure, against a polluted environment, and against bleeding, mourning human citizens.

Though one can feel the poet invoking the burnt shells of Hiroshima, Berlin, or Dresden and can see a vision of something like a riot scene, a toxic waste dump, or a radioactive fallout in the future of some other major modern city, perhaps Boston or Worcester, one does not need to identify the melting infrastructure with any particular city or catastrophe. The city in this poem fits what Walker describes as Bishop's "metaphysical surrealism" where the landscape of the city corresponds to spiritual-psychological conditions ("Metaphysical" 46). As such, though the poem can serve as social commentary, warning against socioeconomic injustice, environmental destruction, and war, it seems primarily to be a spiritual exercise of the poet herself, a blunt engagement with vice and violence, with alienation more generally, an embrace of pain, in the city and in herself; even though she watches from a plane in the sky, the speaker implicates herself in the death she sees below by saying that "[t]he sky is dead" (21). By extension, this can serve to emphasize that this violence, this atmosphere of deathliness, implicates everyone—observers and citizens of the city, poet, speaker, and reader. This poem undertakes the spiritual act of facing darkness in the world and in oneself. While there are several other aspects of the poem which could be considered as spiritual, there is first this darkness.

What perhaps makes one think of the poet facing darkness and implicating herself as a spiritual activity—as opposed to a masochistic act or an act of plain despair—are parallels among the poem, James's idea of the "Sick Soul," and Merton's comments on "the moonlit cemeteries of surrealism" (Hart 333). Sick souls, James explains, are those who feel compelled by the substantiality of evil to face "the burden of the consciousness of evil" (145). "The normal process of life," he continues,

contain moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily life. . . . Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. (182, 183)

Sick souls are acutely aware that "evil" pervades the world and, furthermore, that they are implicated in it.

For these people, the results of such conditions of existence are melancholy, self-debasement, and despair. In "Night City" the shortest sentence—"Look!"—is the poem's one imperative, the rest of the poem being only description. The poet knows that with technology, economy, and humanity failing, one can do nothing else. The poet offers no resistance against the wash of destruction. The scope of violence so numbs the speaker that she can describe it only "[f]rom the Plane" (19), as if with some measure of objectivity. But even though one can only "look" as technology, economy, and humanity fail, one must look, the poet insists.

Paralleling James, Merton explains that poets in a self-destructive world "like ours" are

driven crazy in . . . search for the vital symbols that have been buried alive under a mountain of cultural garbage . . . [a]nd [this] is why some of the best poets of our time are running wild among the tombs in the moonlit cemeteries of surrealism. Faithful to the instincts of the true poet, they are unable to seek their symbols anywhere save in the depth of the spirit where these symbols are found. These depths have become a ruin and a slum. (Hart 333)

While Merton may or may not have Bishop in mind with this description, his assessment is exceptionally relevant to her poetry, for the kind of surrealism he writes about accurately describes the speaker in "Night City." The city in the poem is a ruined slum through which the speaker plumbs, seeking symbols for the spirit.

Merton and Bishop emphasize the relationship between the slums and the spirit not because the slums are pleasant or despair is fashionable, but because they find that they must be honest with themselves. Denying the slums, denying the darkness of the given present situation, serves no spiritual use. Merton explains that "[t]o live in constant awareness of [pervasive alienation] is a kind of living death. But to live without any awareness of it at all is death pure and simple—even though one may still be walking around smelling perfect"

(Hart 328). For Merton, alienation is a metonym for the whole cascade of evil and despair. Such an awareness of this darkness is exactly the condition of the speaker in "Night City." For Bishop, as for James and Merton, acknowledgment of evil is an essential spiritual posture. Only after coming to grips with the darkness in this poem can one more fully appreciate the several other spiritual themes which emerge in the darkness and are made meaningful because of it: guilt, repentance, and something like hope.

A sense of guilt may either contribute to spiritual darkness or work against it. On one hand, guilt may be experienced as a useless sense of being blamed or as a sense of self-blame which moves people towards excusing themselves and blaming others or towards condemning themselves. Guilt in these terms has nothing to do with facing darkness spiritually but with perpetuating it. On the other hand, guilt may also be experienced as an open and humble response to actually being guilty, as an acceptance and awareness of specific personal responsibility leading toward change. Guilt in these terms, which may include acknowledging and rejecting the other type of guilt, is one step onward from acknowledging the general implication of the self in the darkness of the world. Both kinds of guilt appear in "Night City," perhaps mixed together. A stanza after saying "[t]he city burns tears," the poet reports that

The city burns guilt.
—For guilt-disposal
the central heat
must be this intense. (19)

On one level Bishop's image of a municipal furnace for "guilt-disposal" comments ironically on the modern cultural obsession with guilt which helps drive progress. However, it seems also likely to be a genuine statement of sorrow and personal responsibility, implied in the recognition of guilt's "central" place in society and in the expressed desire to be free from it through "intense" "heat."

James describes the sick soul's feelings of responsibility in comparable terms:

We strew [the world] with our blunders, our misdeeds, our lost opportunities, with all the memorials of our inadequacy to our vocation And with what a damning emphasis does it then blot us out! No easy fine, no mere apology or formal expiation, will satisfy the world's demands, but every pound of flesh exacted is soaked with all its blood. (155)

In the Christian tradition, which both James and Bishop are engaging with these confessions, no amount of good works, simple "healthy-mindedness," or ritual "start[ing] the clean page" can undo either one's general implication in the pain of the world or the specific wrongs one has committed (145). Full-wrought repentance—acceptance, humility, sorrow, a desire to change—is called for.

In many cases repentance can be implicit in the recognition of both the horror of evil and the holiness of God. One sees this kind of implicit repentance, for instance, in a vision described by Isaiah. Seeing a smoking altar, a shaking temple, and a throng of shouting "seraphs" and finding himself before God, he cries out, "Woe is me! . . . I am undone. . . . I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips . . . [and] mine eyes have seen [God]" (6:5). This dramatic vision leads Isaiah to this personal and communally implicated sense of guilt, which in turn leads to sorrow and is accompanied by recognition of the holiness of God. While one cannot draw strict parallels between Isaiah's vision of heaven and Bishop's vision in "Night City," the theological content of Isaiah's vision can definitely be applied to "Night City." With Isaiah's vision in mind, one can see repentance as implicit in Bishop's poem. Without needing to decide whether such a reading can be considered biographical, an epistemology of humility and implicit repentance can be appropriately read into the poem without doing the poet violence. Not only does Bishop or the speaker recognize the horror of badness and feel the remorse of being implicated, she even seems to have a sense of the holiness of God or something similar to such a sense.

The final spiritual theme that rises out of the darkness of the poem, then, is the hope of redemption. Immediately following Bishop's statement that "[t]he sky is dead," the concluding stanza offers some

consolation for or qualification of the darkness of the preceding nine stanzas:

(Still, there are creatures,
careful ones, overhead.
They set down their feet, they walk
green, red; green, red.) (21)

Apparently supernatural beings, perhaps angels or the dead, these "careful ones" defy the destruction spilling through the city. They walk overhead even though the speaker says twice that walking isn't possible: "Over those fires / no one could walk," and "No foot could endure it, / shoes are too thin" (19). But they defy destruction cautiously. Perhaps literally lights on a building or radio tower, even lights on the plane itself, the repeated "green, red" invokes a traffic signal. These creatures parallel Isaiah's seraphs. They are also like Ginsberg's "Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated" ("Howl" 1). While one is reading from a religious perspective, one can even bring to mind Christ as the angel of God. However this may be, in these creatures walking one can see hope. In these creatures walking one can see the possibility for the recognition of God, the other part, along with the acknowledgment of darkness, of repentance.

As with James and Merton, close parallels also exist between Ginsberg's "Howl" and "Night City" that can help elucidate the significance of Bishop's "creatures." Among these are Ginsberg's descriptions of the city. Consider the pain and destruction he describes: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked" (1); "Moloch whose blood is running money . . . [and] whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!" (17); "rivers of tears under the streets!" ("Footnote" 21). These surreal images pair well with Bishop's. Most significant, however, are the parallels between the last stanza in "Night City" and the poem appended to "Howl" called "Footnote to Howl." In "Footnote to Howl," Ginsberg calls everything "Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!" in an expression of the transcendent unity of everything, which parallels the unity realized in "In the Waiting Room." Most dramatically, he men-

tions "the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!" (22). But this hymn of unrestrained praise comes after the destruction described in "Howl" as a footnote, a situation which is as dramatic as the poem's unrestrained praise. Calling it a "footnote," Ginsberg situates the hope of his hymn only following and textually subordinate to the despair of "Howl." As the parallel goes, if the creatures in "Night City" are supernatural—if they represent hope, however faltering—then it is important that they are mentioned at the end of the poem, situated in parentheses as an afterthought or, at least, as a subordinate thought. One finds this expression of hope valid because it is not overstated and an authentic acknowledgment of evil precedes it. In this way, Bishop's hope is not a cheap negation nor a denial of evil; it is authentic for having faced darkness.

Speaking still of the "depths of the spirit," Merton asserts that "poetry must, and does, *make good use* of whatever it finds there: starvation, madness, frustration, and death" (Hart 333, emphasis added). To face darkness and, specifically, to face darkness in oneself should not ultimately mean sitting in despair or walking in self-absorbed guilt. Thus, the speaker in "Night City," while acknowledging her implication in the darkness of the "night," says hardly anything else about herself but allows herself to be present in the sky with the creatures walking overhead; Merton concludes that whoever "sweats under [the] mask, whose role makes him itch with discomfort, who hates the division in himself, is already beginning to be free" (Hart 381); and James explains that religions with "pessimistic elements" are "essentially religions of deliverance: [one] must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life" (184).

The move in the final lines of "Night City" towards transcendent hope transforms in retrospect the encounter with darkness that necessarily comes beforehand. Looking forward in *Geography III*, one will find that though hope must initially be a footnote, it can also, ultimately, be the final word. Still in the middle of the book in "Night City," hopeful elements are underplayed. One must look squarely at the present darkness of night before one can look forward to the light of morning.

V. SPIRITUAL HOPE IN "FIVE FLIGHTS UP"

If "In the Waiting Room" introduces the dual themes of spiritual interconnection and modern alienation, and "Night City" intensely explores the pain of an alienated modern society, then the aubade "Five Flights Up" that ends *Geography III* acts as a spiritual reversal of alienation in favor of hope and connectedness. This reversal is not a denial of the pain explored in the preceding poems but a spiritual resolution nonetheless.

Set at the open window of a fifth-floor apartment, "Five Flights Up" begins early enough for it to be "[s]till dark" outside (49). A dog and a bird sleep comfortably, stirring gently in their respective places, the dog in a yard below and "[t]he unknown bird . . . on his usual branch" (49). The light of the rising sun casts shadows on the branches, revealing the tree in particular detail to the observing speaker, "gray light streaking each bare branch, / each single twig, along one side, / making another tree, of glassy veins" (49). A little while later, the bird and dog wake up. The bird "seems to yawn" (49), and the dog "bounces cheerfully up and down" and "rushes in circles in the fallen leaves" (50). Then as a disruption to the scene, his owner scolds him. As the narrator tells this simple story, she weaves into her narrative comments about the simplicity of the events, which bring to the surface the spiritual import of the scene.

The most central of these lines of commentary comes in the first stanza. When the animals stir in their sleep, the narrator speculates that their stirrings might be questions that might be answered by the simplicity of morning. Calmly, she notes,

The little dog next door barks in his sleep
inquiringly, just once.
Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
once or twice, quavering.
Questions—if that is what they are—
answered directly, simply,
by day itself. (49)

These inquiries at the end of both the poem and the book and the answers to them contrast fully with the questions and answers in the catechistic geography lesson at the book's beginning. These latter questions ask for something different from information or facts. Asked by the bodies of calmly sleeping creatures who are about to wake up, these questions ask for truth.

"Day itself" can be an answer to these kinds of questions asked after the experience of night. Day as a direct answer is certainly a spiritual theme, as the Psalmist knows: "look to the hills [where the sun will rise]; where does my help come from?" (Ps. 121:1). Day is spiritual hope. This kind of answer to this kind of question cannot be explained in language, as answers to questions asked in language may be answered sometimes. One can only talk around what this kind of answer means. One cannot say this kind of answer, since it is not in the order of words. As the "answer" is "day itself," this can be read as a poem of spiritual immanence, a poem about the always already immanence of God (49). Thus, the poet calls this an "[e]normous morning, ponderous, meticulous" (49).

The complications of earlier poems in the collection are not ignored in this poem. But compared to the spiritual immediacy and presence of "day itself," those modern and human complications are not as overwhelming as they were; they even look somewhat silly. So the narrator of "Five Flights Up" tells that when "[t]he little black dog" creates a ruckus in the yard, "His owner's voice arises, stern 'You ought to be ashamed!'" (49). In return she asks of herself and the reader, "What has he done?" inferring, of course, that the dog has done nothing to be ashamed of, that running, barking, and bouncing cheerfully are a sound response to the answer of "day" (49). Bishop jokes, "Obviously, [the dog] has no sense of shame" (50). This is "obvious," for one, because dogs presumably cannot have a sense of shame. It is obvious, also, even if one imagines for the sake of the poem that animals could have shame, because, through the directness and simplicity of the answer of "day," the dog and the bird know "everything is answered / all taken care of" (50).

In making light of the dog owner's scolding, the poem puts those people who trade in alienation, which is almost everyone in an

alienated society, in a new light. Though not blamed for buying their own wares or having their own wares sold to them, as the case may be, the dog's owner and by connection the adults sitting stiffly in the "waiting room" can be seen as something like shame mongers, as brokers of alienation. Because of the answer of the light of day, the perceived mentality of the neighboring pet owner and of the adults in "In the Waiting Room," a mentality which terrified Elizabeth earlier, can now be responded to as illogical or even silly. Such dismissal certainly implies critique of those people who are caught up in darkness and perpetuate it by internalizing it and projecting it, but it does not imply condemnation. They—or others, as the case may be—are not the real end cause of darkness. Thus, in "Night City" one is left with a desolate city in which even the tycoons are crying, humanized. In dismissing such people or their actions as silly in the light of day (even as they were given serious attention during the night), there is a measure of compassion and grace.

"Five Flights Up" also addresses darkness more generally, darkness in the abstract which cannot be located in particular persons but which is felt concretely. Since it is set in the morning, it takes place following the nighttime. One can understand the "questions" of the sleeping animals as prayers that begin as part of the night and can see that night is not forgotten, as the last lines of this poem speak to it directly. The speaker ends the poem by saying that, because there is "no need to ask again" (50), she can find

—Yesterday brought to today so lightly!

(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.) (50)

The darkness and implicated-ness of "In the Waiting Room" and especially "Night City" are answered in "Five Flights Up." Night is not forgotten, not denied, but transformed, the memory of it as well as the meaning of the experience of it. In a striking reversal Bishop uses parentheses in the last line of "Five Flights Up," as she previously does in the last stanza of "Night City," to show that in the end despair, not hope, becomes the footnote. Such a reversal recalls Julian of Norwich who acknowledges evil as "the greatest pain the

soul can have" but still can say, "All is well, and every kind of thing will be well" (qtd. in King 128). As King explains, Julian so comments because she is "[p]rofoundly aware of God's love" (128).

After this reversal which ends *Geography III* and transforms what comes before, it seems that the speaker could go back and sit in a waiting room, realize again that "we are all just one," and be content with such a realization. Also, after this reversal it seems that perhaps those careful creatures above "Night City" were part of a hidden daylight all along.

VI. CONCLUSION

Though religious or spiritually minded readings of Bishop are marginal in terms of the overall scholarship on her work, her poetry abounds with spiritual themes for those who read for them. When Bishop engages the modern situation of alienation and other kinds of pain by critiquing and moving beyond those ways of knowing which are based solely on mental certainty and thus the denial of mystery, humanity, universal connectedness, and pain, she does so by moving into ways of knowing broadly enough to allow a kind of spiritual awakening. The ways of knowing that allow one to understand the world in terms of "falling off" of it or "falling into" it, as opposed to simply charting it, are ways of knowing steeped in the characteristics of religious faith, which are ways of knowing that may or may not be connected to any particular religious tradition. In Bishop's case the spiritual engagement is connected strongly to the Christian faith, though she writes as an outsider deeply involved with Christian spiritual writers.

Bishop's spiritual vision can prove useful to believers and nonbelievers alike. Her personal religious skepticism only increases the integrity of the spiritual vision in her poetry precisely because she, on one hand, avoids entrenched answers about the spirit, and yet, on the other, sees a way into perceiving darkness, moving through darkness, and moving into light. This is a way which, as expressed in the poems considered here, is clearly involved with and guided by the spirit. Bishop's complicated spiritual vision begins in waiting and then,

through the waiting, turns to awakening. Both waiting and awakening are ancient spiritual themes implying hope and present pain, invoking a spirituality that combines Weil's *Waiting for God* (1951) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955). From these, the vision moves to watching, watching an intense expression of pain and alienation, watching human causes and effects on terse display in the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4). Then, having faced this darkness, the vision moves from night into "day itself," into an "enormous morning," even upward into "flight." The "answer" she rests in at the end of the final poem of *Geography III*, though direct, is an answer beyond expression: "day itself"; it is the inexpressible spirit, simple enough and complex enough to embrace the complicated realities and mysteries of interconnection and pain. While the three poems examined here present the arch of this complicated vision, similar elements exist in all of the poems in *Geography III*; consider, for instance, the resounding loss in the villanelle "One Art," the depth of spiritual presence in the narrative poem "The Moose," and the surreal landscapes in bizarre longings in the masterpiece "Crusoe in England."

Wilbur surmises that "Elizabeth Bishop's poetry perceives beauty as well as absurdity . . . and embodies compassion; though her world is ultimately mysterious, one of its constants is sorrow, and another is purity or splendor which, though forever defiled, is also . . . perpetually renewed" (266). As Wilbur observes, one can find in her work beauty and absurdity, sorrow and splendor, purity and defilement, compassion and renewal. Reading with a perspective derived from spiritual tradition, one can also see the spirit of God sitting with Elizabeth in the waiting room and walking with the speaker over the smoldering city of night. And, just as Christ embraces the speaker in Bishop's favorite poem, George Herbert's "Love III"—"Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back. . . . You must sit down, says Love . . . So I did" (316)—one can even see God welcoming her, welcoming the birds, dogs, and trees of the morning, even welcoming her readers, with wide arms, bidding all to rest in the enormous light of sanctified, renewed, spirit-drenched, ordinary "day itself."

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