

Joanne Feit Diehl: On "Crusoe in England"

If "In the Village" sketches a psychically successful journey from mourning to reparation, "Crusoe in England" delineates a similar trajectory with a more somber outcome. Like "In the Village," "Crusoe in England" describes a site of loss, but here invention, while it can temporarily stave off loneliness cannot survive the return home. What constitutes the difference between the losses suffered in the story and poem is that Bishop, while she can constitute a world of meanings where human craft conspires with nature to create a safe haven for art, cannot constitute a world of sustained human relationships. Friday's loss proves irreparable because in this poem of unreconciled mourning, no other object comes to take his place. The haunting singularity that marks Crusoe's island speaks to Friday's reality as well, for he can neither be forgotten nor replaced. Reparation here would mean the internalization of Friday into the self and substitution for him in the external world. But neither internalization nor substitution occurs; instead Crusoe is left at home with loss. That "In the Village" should represent a more successful mourning process, that here reparation should discover itself in art, reveals the efficacy of Bishop's transformation of feelings from the lost mother to the regenerative father, from the world of women to the craft of men. The scream, if it is stilled, loses its power, as I have suggested, through the force of an alternative collaboration of male-identified reality and the natural sphere. Whereas the narrator in "Crusoe in England" assumes a male persona, that of Crusoe himself, and while what is mourned is therefore a homoerotic relationship, the masculinized provenance does not save the loss from being irreparable. What remains with Crusoe is the fact of Friday's death which echoes with all the plangency of sorrow. On the other hand, what both "Crusoe in England" and "In the Village" attest to is the importance of the process of mourning for Bishop. Our sense of ourselves and of the world comes, object-relations theorists would argue, from that earliest originary relationship of the infant-mother dyad. If, as in Bishop's case, that relationship is marked by disruption and abandonment, is it any wonder that all the inventiveness in Crusoe's possession cannot redress his subsequent loss? If the power of art to find reparation through mourning exists in Bishop, it may be found in the merger of a male-identified craft and attentiveness to the external world, for it is here, amidst the assurance of such an alternative place, that Bishop discovers the power that mitigates grief.

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