Susan McCabe: On "Crusoe in England"

Bishop's rewriting of Defoe's story reflects multiple concerns that exceed the issue of economic control, and her Crusoe does become a kind of visionary, instead of the colonizing figure from the novel. She places her figure in England reviewing his past; her Crusoe feels, paradoxically, more of an exile at home than in the one he had to create from imagination, a familiar predicament from *Questions of Travel*. As castaway, Crusoe's survival demands ingenuity, but the utilitarian considerations of Defoe's character are not in Bishop's: survival, for her character, is a matter of the imagination. Bishop envisions the return of Crusoe to England as a loss of poetic power and her character mourns losing the immaterial "home," her Crusoe undergoing a kind of crucifixion:

[lines 158-169]

Defoe would never describe a knife with such intimate lovingness, but Bishop's poetics require that "the living soul," or the memory of one, make objects lively and interactive. Even as Crusoe's is an art similar to the Riverman's (who rejects the "stinking teas" of land) this poem must be about losing art, returning to "real tea."

Crusoe's survival here becomes also, of course, an emotional kind. As elegy, the poem is told in a kind of double recollection: at first the retrospective seems to account for everything, but the impetus behind memory?both permitting and blocking it?hinges upon the arrival of Friday, an event given seemingly only the perfunctory attention of a single, rather short stanza. In a quite compelling article on augury and autobiography in the poem, Renee R. Curry provides explicit and convincing correlatives between the poet's life and "Crusoe in England." She decodes the narrative's subtext as "the muted story tells a tale of Lota de Macedo Soares and Elizabeth Bishop's lesbian relationship, de Macedo Soares's suicide, and Bishop's emotional life after the death" (74) and helpfully reminds us, "The 'now' of the Defoe Crusoe tale, presumably happens back in England after the twenty-eight years spent on the island. The 'now' of Bishop's life occurs in the mid 1970s, not yet a decade after de Macedo Soares's suicide" (88). Such a timeline should show how strenuous "now" can be, and show how imperative it is to read this poem as one of mourning, a mourning that sees no definite end (Bishop, Millier records [538], was working on an elegy for Lota in the last few years of her life); the details of overcoming the environment in a parable of economic victory are not so important for Bishop as the incoming of grief, the processes of a memory in recuperation.

Bishop nevertheless uses "Crusoe" to explore her relationship to tradition, as well as her experience of personal loss and exile, which in effect becomes the discovery of the absence of a fully usable literary past. But after all, which is which? to take a question from "Poem." Bishop's muted connection to tradition mirrors her silenced lesbian relationships, along with their eventual loss. The poem has its quiet debts. of course: aside from Defoe and the Wordsworth to be discussed later. Darwin and Jonathan Swift also figure significantly. Goldensohn reminds us that Darwin's "notes on the Galapagos, backed up by [Bishop's] own visit to the premises" (54) informs much of Bishop's description. And certainly *Gulliver's Travels*
has parallels to Bishop's poem: both narrators' island displacements and the playing with misproportions in the landscapes. These debts notwithstanding, the poem recommends the "home-made," the reliance upon personal resource and experimental readiness. Her character revels with his "home-brew," a concoction derived through experience and not acquired by tested or recorded knowledge:

[lines 76-85]

Defoe models the self-made man, the new Adam, with no need of forefathers. What Bishop's Crusoe likewise prides himself on is the way the island has become his own project, especially now that he must remember it. From the very opening, with its "new volcano" reported in the paper, and the hearsay of an island's birth, the poem mocks the Adamic role of phallocentric naming:

[lines 1-8]

That naming follows such an uncertain gestation; does the island, after all, just exist in "the mate's binoculars"? Or is it a flyspeck just looking like a volcano? Naming never occurs as an original, inimitable event, but in a past act of personal possession, viable only as elegiac material; Bishop's Crusoe must confess:

But my poor old island's still un-rediscovered, un-renameable.
None of the books has ever got it right.

As Bishop even revokes Defoe's power to "get it right," she suggests the endlessness of taxonomy since there is always "one kind of everything." The registrar may never exhaust the possibilities of discovery: records erode, not the recording process or impulse to memorialize. When Crusoe describes his naming strategy for a volcano?"I'd christened [it] Mont d'Espoir or Mount Despair / (I'd time enough to play with names)"?Bishop refers to her own wordplay, her geography of erasure and reinscription, and to the doubleness of her own voice, woman impersonating a male narrator.

In spite of Crusoe's gender?indeed, because of it?the poem comments upon the position of the lesbian writer, castaway from the mainstream tradition, thrown upon her own resources. By revealing lesbians as silenced and made unnameable by tradition, Bishop refutes the new Adam and inscribes the absence that books have not gotten right. (Later, of Friday's coming, she will reiterate, parenthetically, that "[a]ccounts of that have everything all wrong.") And it is the absences in her Crusoe's own accounting that direct us to a muted past, tragic because recorded in uneasy tranquillity. Crusoe explains that he cannot produce the monumental because of cultural deprivation or amnesia:

[lines 90-99]

Such forgetting is, however, a way of remembering the homemade. Crusoe's looking up the blank leads us to do the same. Not only do we face "solitude"?the very state that made the
line invisible and erased? but also what the poem at this moment confesses lies beneath blanks.

Bishop's choice of the recalled fragment is deliberate: the lines not only concern the consolatory aspect of memory, which makes absent objects present; they also appear in Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," as an acknowledged appropriation of his wife's words, which William defended as the poem's "best lines." A finely textured palimpsest appears: Mary Wordsworth speaks through William in a poem responged by a Defoe character whose words Bishop dictates. Only in the arena of Wordsworth's poem can Mary find her outlet. Repossessed by Bishop, she finally speaks through the absences in Crusoe's literary memory, a kind of hidden mothers garden. Within these spaces resides the repressed feminine; homemade lyric? and Mary's solitude and mutation within the male community. Though Mary is not, assuredly, a prototypical lesbian, she alerts the attuned, remembering reader of literary suppression. Inasmuch as Bishop dismisses Defoe as unreliable and conveniently omits Crusoe's first name, the "I" of the poem is not Robinson but can be interpreted as feminine maker of the self and world as home. Creativity, this poem confirms, does not emerge from comfortable acknowledgment of past traditions but from an exile's imaginings and re-creations.

What is absent or omitted? or rather embedded? deserves as much notice as what flashes on surfaces. "Solitude" is the missing word, and becomes, in opposition to our initial expectations, perhaps, not the state idealized by the poem: Crusoe functions creatively while alone, but suggests that Friday's appearance as other "saves" him, permits him to remember at all. Instead of the slave Defoe makes of him, Bishop makes him desired other, and subversively refers to homosexual passion by Crusoe's hoping Friday were a woman. The loss of the island, or the loss of "living soul," ultimately, does not devolve upon their rescue from this landscape. Friday's significance cannot be too much overplayed as Bishop always discards authority and tradition in favor of human relationship. The first introductory dashes regarding Friday forewarn his importance: "Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body. / And then one day they came and took us off." How long Crusoe has been in England is not here indicated (so careful as her Crusoe is about most numberings), but he measures his time, his life, as the last jolting two lines indicate, by his loss of Friday: "And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March." We depend upon irretrievable others, upon absences, as they motivate us to reconstruct our pasts, even as memory cannot bear it.

As I have demonstrated, Bishop criticizes, through irony and polyphony, a silencing tradition. In the process, she discovers a dependency upon the personal forces in her own history only increasing over time, yet her poems postulate more and more a disunified ego, an acknowledgment, finally, of the power of the unconscious to disrupt surface cohesiveness. Her homemade, then, represents the remakings of a shipwrecked self. Because we do not have complete control over our identities or over the contents of our knowledge, we suffer slips and draw blanks, remembering this and forgetting that. We become like Bishop's Crusoe, in his self-questioning and partial amnesia; at one point, he recalls his self-pity with a confusion over the extent of his free-will:

[lines 56-64]

In misquoting a cliché, he makes himself more "at home," and at the same time, he recognizes the limitations upon his self-knowledge in lines resonant of these in "Questions of
Travel": "Continental, city, country, society: / the choice is never wide and never free." What constrains and liberates us in any place, whether traveling or at home, is those things we can tell or omit to tell ourselves, the homemade we construct from what we dimly misremember.

The processes of unknowing, then, become as important as those of knowing, since it is absences our consciousness slips upon and holds itself up against. Julia Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic as "a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process," a "rhythmic space, which has no thesis and position" (more noticeable and marked in poetic language), and the symbolic, the realm of law, of theses and positions, seems useful here. Texts operate with a "genotext" that includes the semiotic and "can be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation and rhythm)," and a "phenotext," aligned to the symbolic:

The phenotext is a structure (which can be generated, in generative grammar's sense); it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee. The genotext, on the other hand, is a process; it moves through zones that have relative and transitory borders and constitutes a path that is not restricted to the two poles of univocal information between two fully fledged subjects. If these two terms?genotext and phenotext?could be translated into a metalanguage that would convey the difference between them, one might say that the genotext is a matter of topology, whereas the phenotext is one of algebra. ("Revolution and Poetic Language," 120-21)

One could postulate this dual structuring in any signifying system?in any poem, in any sign, but it has more relevant application in appreciating the processes within texts committed to undermining thetic and symbolic knowledge or propositioning. While Bishop does not utilize "genotext" in ostentatious rebellion against "phenotext," she foregrounds "topology," the play within "relative and transitory borders," the only kind of home she can envision, and continues to posit the self as ephemeral and riveted by unconscious dislocatory processes, as when her Crusoe dreams of "things / like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it / for a baby goat." Such mistakes appear to characterize Crusoe's waking life as well: "The goats were white, so were the gulls, / and both too tame, or else they thought / I was a goat, too, or a gull." "Baa, baa, baa and shriek, shriek, shriek, / baa . . . shriek . . . baa . . . I still can't shake / them from my ears." With the island's transitory borders of phonemic reiteration and even primal rhythms, of the "questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies," self remains in the process of remembering.

The dilemma of identity is linked in this poem with a painful solitude, interrupted by the arrival of a proto-lover. Apparently Friday cannot solve Crusoe's desire to reproduce: "I wanted to propagate my kind, / and so did he, I think, poor boy." Bishop shows her character caught in a paradox of kin. To achieve difference, one propagates: but the fallacy of this, she points out, is its result in "kind." The poem works through an anxiety over reproduction: first, by dyeing a baby goat "bright red" so "his mother wouldn't recognize him," and then, through a nightmare of murdering a child, mistaking it for a goat. Because of the singleness and uniqueness of everything on this island?"one kind of everything," and the limitless expanse of isolated islands?Crusoe craves the difference, the self, that emerges through relationship. But since connection can only be remembered by Crusoe's mourning, selfhood is shown as re-created, moment by moment, through memorial sacrifice.