

ABSTRACT

HELM, DANIEL JOSEPH. Elizabeth Bishop's Quest for the Ordinary. (Under the direction of Nick Halpern.)

Poetry by Elizabeth Bishop is filled with issues of domesticity and belonging, intimacy and loss, as well as transparent language and local scenes, all of which are types or expressions of ordinariness. Building from the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell proposes that ordinariness – both ordinary language and everyday life – presents the greatest challenge to philosophical skepticism. To Cavell, skepticism threatens us with doubt and the inhumanity of disconnection from life and the world. In *In Quest of the Ordinary*, Cavell describes a significant challenge to the skeptical threat as the resettling of the everyday, a domestication of skepticism that makes life a livable place. Cavell's sense of a need for opposition to skepticism that makes life livable is confirmed by readers of Bishop who find her handling questions, doubts, and the frustration of loss in a way that seems manageable and a way that also emphasizes the significance of ordinariness. Cavell's work is an opportunity to characterize the recurring patterns and themes as well as the contrasts and variety in Bishop's poems as a search for ordinariness. I claim that ordinariness in Bishop's poetry exists, as in Cavell, in dialogue with skepticism, so that Bishop's quest for the ordinary is a struggle to protect against as well as preserve skepticism. The quest, as both Cavell and Bishop depict it, is endless because ordinariness is elusive, but a struggle with and for ordinariness is appealing, both in Bishop's poetry and Cavell's philosophy, because it alternately allows hope and skepticism. Her poems are widely appreciated because, as Randall Jarrell said, they suggest "it is barely but perfectly possible" to live in the world.

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S QUEST FOR THE ORDINARY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction -----	1
1. Stanley Cavell: Skepticism and Ordinarity-----	9
2. Elizabeth Bishop and Skepticism-----	20
3. Elizabeth Bishop's Settlement of Skepticism-----	33
4. Elizabeth Bishop: (In)Quest of the Ordinary-----	42
Conclusion-----	56
Works Cited-----	60

Introduction

In this project, I suggest and explore a comparison between ideas of the ordinary in the work of Stanley Cavell, specifically *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, and certain major emphases in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, specifically her treatment of ordinary things and use of ordinary language. This comparison does not describe any direct influence, since Bishop almost certainly did not read Cavell, and nowhere does Cavell indicate Bishop's impact on his work. However, neither is their relation far-fetched given Cavell's detailed handling of American and English Romantic texts and the influence of the same on Bishop — at one point she says, "I find I'm really a minor female Wordsworth" (*One Art* 222). The later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein too is impetus for Cavell's work, and as early as 1966, in the first full book on Bishop, Anne Stevenson notes a similarity between Bishop and Wittgenstein (Stevenson 114-117). Bishop responds with, "Comparing me with Wittgenstein! I've never even read him. I don't know *anything* about his philosophy" (Wehr 43), though Brett Millier reports she proceeded to read him "haltingly but faithfully (366). A similarity between later Wittgenstein and Bishop is a fascinating topic, though it will not receive attention here except to say that Cavell's work with Wittgenstein is at least as different from logical positivist philosophy derived from him as Bishop's poetry is from "language poets," like Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman, whom Marjorie Perloff describes as also derived from Wittgenstein.

A discussion of Bishop's poetry within a philosophical frame should listen to Bishop's attitude regarding the discipline. For example, when George Starbuck says to her in an interview, "I admire the philosophy of the poems, the morals," Bishop's response is, "I didn't know there were any . . ." (86). She prefers the idea that "all art comes from art"

(Wehr 43). Of interest then is not what motivates Bishop's poetry, but what it seems to do and, more to the point, what it does consistently. Starbuck's comment, for example, sums up a common reaction to Bishop: the acknowledgment of philosophies and morals in her work that are also admirable. Randall Jarrell describes "a whole moral and physical atmosphere" in a Bishop poem ("Fifty" 198) and in another place calls her "morally attractive" ("Poet" 181). James Merrill likes "the way her whole oeuvre is on the scale of a human life," and describes her as "wise and humane" (28). Bonnie Costello comments that, among other things, "[t]o read Bishop's poetry is to be caught up in its ... psychological and philosophical wisdom" (3) while Anne Stevenson describes Bishop as "[m]orally...incorruptible and unquestioning...humane and sympathetic" (117). Willard Spiegelman titles his essay on Bishop (borrowing from Keats), "Natural Heroism" (154), and Mary McCarthy, longtime friend of Bishop's, goes so far as to say, "there is no one but her that I can truly wish to have been" (267). Comments like these appear to exist at nearly every corner of Bishop commentary and criticism. If the combination of her philosophy, morality, wisdom, and humanity do not actually make her a saint, they express her readers' desire to make her into one. Bishop may not intend philosophy or morality or wisdom, but they are in her poems, or there is something in her poetry that reminds readers of those things. My use of Stanley Cavell is in response to this aspect of her poetry, the way she reminds readers at least of something important about philosophy, which is its description of our relation to ourselves and the world.

It is not just that, in Bishop, a relation to the world or a philosophy exists, but that it is tremendously appealing and accessible. There is something poignant about it that critics and readers suggest makes life significant and known to us. "Her work is admired by many poets

who do not admire one another,” says David Kalstone (3). Her critics seem to notice and express very similar ideas as a result of a widely and deeply shared gratitude for the way Bishop represents life in her poems. Lowell has written of her poems that “at least nine-tenths of them fall into a single symbolic pattern. Characterizing it is an elusive business” (“Thomas” 186).

This paper is unique in applying the work of Stanley Cavell to Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry. It is not unique in finding issues of domesticity and belonging, intimacy and loss, as well as transparent language and local scenes in Bishop — things which I am associating with ordinariness — but critics often only discuss these things within more narrow contexts.

Bonnie Costello, for example, targets a sense of mastery in Bishop, describing Bishop’s “strange urge for order and dominance confronting a recalcitrant world” which she “tentatively orders and interprets” (2). In other words, order seems necessary but suspect, a description apt for defining ordinariness, which is that quality or class of things that seems necessarily to exist while evading our direct apprehension. If epistemological certainty (or any kind of certainty) is equated with mastery — as in, mastery of knowledge or mastery of doubt — then to my mind, questions of mastery become questions of certainty and so also questions of rest. I call this aspect of Bishop — her attempt to order, to master — her want to settle something, and I follow Cavell in calling it a desire to build a settlement, a home, to domesticate and inhabit the world, or at least to present a world thus inhabitable in her poetry. Her compulsion for settlement is in dialogue with the theme of homelessness in her work, which shows Bishop desiring a sense of home as well as thinking the idea suspect. The question of making a home is only one aspect of Bishop’s ordinariness (that of settling ordinary life). Other characteristics of her poetry — such as ordinary language and ordinary

scenes — work to make it a more central issue. Costello’s readings are admirable and insightful, but they are restricted to mastery and the painterly aspects of Bishop.

Helen Vendler’s essay, “Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly,” comes closest to describing what it is I notice in Bishop because of Cavell. I agree with Vendler that Bishop’s work “[vibrates] between two frequencies” and that these are often “the domestic and the strange” (32). However, using Cavell’s terms, I prefer to call these frequencies skepticism and ordinariness. There is something ordinary about domesticity but not everything ordinary is domestic, which is to say that there is ordinariness in Bishop besides domesticity. There is strangeness, but there is also estrangement. Vendler talks about Bishop’s need to “dismantle domesticity” (Vendler 41) but I think Bishop is equally attracted to ordinariness (Merrill has written of her “lifelong impersonations of an ordinary woman”) (121). Vendler says that Bishop’s “poetry of ...domesticity depends on apprehension of reserves of mystery” (48), but Cavell gives me opportunity to say that this mystery in turn depends on ordinariness to keep anxiety, as “In the Waiting Room,” from “spilling over / in rivulets of fire.” In other words, Cavell’s work is an opportunity to push Vendler’s ideas, which are good ones, even further.

What Bishop’s readers collectively find engaging about her poetry is that “the imperfect,” in the words of Wallace Stevens, “is so hot in us” (193). Her poems are attractive because, to quote Jarrell again, nevertheless they “show it is barely but perfectly possible” to live in the world (“Poet” 181). Those two themes, the pressure and immediacy of limits and the need to make life in the world livable, which are very human concerns (which is to say very normal concerns for humans) are equally and explicitly the subjects of Stanley Cavell. Cavell discusses these human limits in the context of philosophical

skepticism, as in, “the beginning of skepticism is the insinuation of absence, of a line, or limitation” (51). (Bishop critics may feel jealous of the phrase “insinuation of absence” since it describes the charged presence in the characteristic silence and clarity of her lines.) For Cavell, skepticism, beginning from human limits, threatens us with the inhumanity of disconnection from life and the world, not knowing the “world and I and others in it” (51). One critic says of Bishop that “she celebrates the separateness, the awesome detachment of the exterior universe” (qtd. in Harrison 2). But in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, Cavell describes challenging the skeptical threat with the resettling of the everyday, a domestication of skepticism that makes of our life a habitation, a dwelling, or a livable place.

The need Cavell sees for a challenge to skepticism that makes life livable is confirmed by readers of Bishop who find her handling questions, doubts, and the frustration of loss in a way that seems manageable, a way that also emphasizes the significance of ordinariness. Cavell writes — and the same is true for Bishop’s ordinariness — that “the ordinariness in question speaks of an intimacy with existence, and of an intimacy lost, that matches skepticism’s despair of the world” (4). Ideas of “intimacy” and “loss” are central to Bishop’s work (in fact, we have *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* and *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* by Victoria Harrison and Susan McCabe, respectively). Cavell is careful to point out that, in turning to ordinariness and ordinary language -- to lost or regained intimacy -- he is not defending “what may present itself as certain fundamental, cherished beliefs ... but, among other things, a contesting of that presentation, for, as it were, the prize of the ordinary” (4). The consequence is my observation that Bishop’s pervasive and enduring subject of belonging, her preoccupation with domesticity, and her choice of ordinary language are all part of her dissatisfaction with and contestation of such things. It is

as if she's jealous of ordinariness because it appears off limits to her yet she does not really believe in it either. What is characteristic of ordinariness is characteristic of what we find in Bishop, an insistence on dissatisfaction, so that what is presented as living one's dissatisfaction is something other than getting rid of it. Similarly, Cavell intends only to challenge skepticism, to give it a good fight; he does not want "to defeat the skeptical argument" but "to preserve it" (5).

It is true to my mind that Bishop's work is a "*Poetics of Intimacy*," a "*Poetics of Loss*," and is about "*Inscrutable Houses*," "*Restraints of Language*," and "Questions of Memory, Questions of Travel," as other critics' titles suggest, but I mean to show how all of these are included in thinking of Bishop's poetry as "in quest of the ordinary." Cavell's work gives a compelling significance to such a quest, and his work resonates deeply as it attempts to characterize the importance of efforts to defend against the inhumanity of our humanity, or the violence of our skepticism. Ordinariness is an elusive and nuanced subject, as elusive it seems as a characterization of Bishop's work. It is perhaps what Bishop critics have discussed for years without knowing it, intuiting a need to choose a less slippery subject, or even squeamish about ordinariness as a sufficient topic. Cavell's work suggests to me that it is a sufficient topic, an opportunity of characterizing the recurring patterns and themes as well as the contrasts and variety in Bishop's work as a search for ordinariness. It is a search that is definitively endless yet always too persuasively and too usefully present to abandon. This is why Bishop seems to find a home in travel, or why she does not find a home because of her travel in search of one. Bishop's poetry is appealing because it presents something more satisfying, because more realistic, than a sense of balance. It is instead a tension that does not break. Resolution of life's tensions is a dream perhaps, but it must only ever be a

dream. Ordinarity, in Bishop's poetry and Cavell's philosophy, is appealing because it presents something like hope, which is to say, because it persists ("a loose plank rattles / but doesn't give way"). In this sense, what appears to be hope can also seem a prison, and ordinarity is variably comforting and terrifying. When, in "Roosters," Bishop writes "There is inescapable hope," this is alternately reassuring and frightening. The dynamic of ordinarity then is attractive ultimately because it leaves us our hope and our skepticism, which may be to say that it leaves us our humanity.

The first chapter is about Stanley Cavell and his book *In Quest of the Ordinary*. It establishes the concepts and terminology relevant for my readings of Bishop's poems. Specifically, it explains Cavell's ideas about what skepticism is and why it requires us to struggle with it. It explains what Cavell calls a "settlement" or a "bargain," something he observes equally in Kant and Romantic poets in their attempts to bring peace to skepticism (31). It also explains what Cavell means by ordinarity, or ordinary things and language, and how it challenges skepticism without bargaining with it. Chapter two consists of readings of Bishop poems that demonstrate, consist of, or evoke skeptical thinking as described by Cavell. Chapter three reads poems that appear to try and "settle" with skeptical thinking, or to settle a life lived in skepticism, but in which the settlement appears unconvincing, unnecessary, and, overall, an unwelcome answer. Chapter four reads poems that challenge skepticism without bargaining with it, and so present a more livable life, which is perhaps dissatisfying for more palatable reasons. These poems do not attempt to settle the conflict, but defend against the threat. It looks something like finding one's home not as a nowhere but as a somewhere else, finding one's home in the search for a home. These poems exemplify a life and world of livable imperfection, or the "uncanniness of the

ordinary” (Cavell 154), another way of saying livable strangeness. A conclusion summarizes the main ideas and describes their significant implications. All quotations of Bishop’s poetry are from *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*.

1. Stanley Cavell: Skepticism and Ordinariness

The purpose of this chapter is to make clear what it is about Cavell that is useful for a reading of Bishop's work. I have said that it is Cavell's formulation of the problem of ordinariness, but here that problem is explained.

Following the publishing of *The Claim of Reason*, his early major philosophical work, *In Quest of the Ordinary* is Cavell's response to issues that emerged for him in writing *The Claim of Reason* that it either did not address or did not resolve. These derive from his repeated turn to Romantic texts while attempting to conclude a conflict with skepticism in *The Claim of Reason*. *In Quest of the Ordinary* is Cavell's attempt to explain his own experience, pursuing his intuitions about romanticism's response to skepticism, which is more generally literature's departure from philosophy. As a result, Cavell does not pose a problem and try to solve it with a series of arguments; rather, he reads (interprets) his experience by building a network or map of recurring ideas (14-15). The title of the book suggests at least two important characteristics: that the main landmarks the discussion keeps in view are skepticism and romanticism and also, in following "lines" and describing a "quest," the book uses or requires these landmarks.

In fact, Cavell may appear as ambulant as "lines" and "quest" suggest. At one point, he anticipates someone may ask him "what exactly" he means by an expression or "how [he] defines" another one, and then says, "The answer to the former question is, Nothing technical; the answer to the latter is, I don't," and continues, "I have no interest in their meaning anything, apart from their accuracy in wording an intuition" (53). In his words and ideas he counts on the persuasiveness of the cumulative picture, the worded intuitions. Consequently, when he is compelling, it is not because he builds rigorous proofs that elicit

one's trust, but because he seems to make sense, by which I mean that he elicits the response, "I know what you mean." Cavell's style then is part of his subject in so far he is as mystified by how language "works" as he is confident that it actually does. Likewise, Cavell resembles Bishop, whose poems curiously "work" for a variety of readers, because as she writes in "The Colder the Air," "She calls / on atmosphere for her result." We hear the same in Wittgenstein: "What is happening now has significance — in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance" (129-130). Bishop has admitted that she attempts to present something like a mind in action in her poetry (*One Art* 11-12). One critic says of her, "Bishop's finest poems almost always give the appearance of digressing or wandering while they accumulate elements that gradually acquire symbolic weight" (Travisano 198). This is similar to Cavell's very meaningful style of thinking out loud.

He deliberately and explicitly combines personal, philosophical, and literary contexts, but since philosophy is his primary business these intellectual modulations begin in and return to philosophy. Specifically, philosophical skepticism is his subject; in fact, he takes skepticism as the major subject of all philosophy so that when philosophy tries to refute skepticism — or end it — this results in bringing an end to philosophy itself. Philosophy's fear of its own end results in a major critique of Wittgenstein and of ordinary language philosophy — which can seem to attempt to refute skepticism by speaking outside of language games — expressed as the remark that they are not doing philosophy. Cavell writes, "My idea is that what in philosophy is known as skepticism is a relation to the world, and to others, and to myself, and to language, that is known to what you might call literature" (154-155). *In Quest of the Ordinary* reveals skepticism's emergence in literary texts and shows the opportunity literature has for presenting a challenge to it, the opportunity of

treating skepticism outside of a philosophy predicated on the skeptical argument. Directly to the point, to understand what Cavell means by the ordinary as well as to understand its significance, it is necessary to understand what he means by skepticism.

Skepticism is, basically, doubt about the “world and I and others in it” (Cavell 51). Cavell interprets this doubt as “a place ... in which the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed” (5). Skepticism is unnatural, Cavell says, because it “[repudiates] our criteria for applying the concepts of our language to anything” (147). In other words, skepticism prevents a relationship with the world (through language) that serves as a condition of human existence. Calling its denial a “human wish,” he suggests it is also an instance of our humanity, so that there is something inhuman about its absence as well as its consequences. It “begins in casualness but it continues in drivenness and hauntedness” (Cavell 147). In philosophy, skepticism is expressed in something like “the thing in itself is off the limits of human knowledge” (Cavell 53). In literature it shows up in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, as Cavell points out, as “Why, then the world and all that’s in’t is nothing / . . . / nor nothing have these nothings, / If this be nothing” (qtd. in Cavell 80), or as we’ll see in Bishop as “How — I didn’t know any / word for it — how ‘unlikely’ ...” as well as her “inscrutable houses” and “impenetrable wood.”

For Cavell, skepticism must exist — its end would mean the end of a measure of our humanity — since he calls skepticism an “argument internal to the individual” (5). However, as a “wish to deny the conditions of humanity,” however human a wish, it threatens the end of other aspects our humanity, namely our relation to the world and others. Leontes’ example in *The Winter’s Tale* expresses a threat of skepticism as “world-consuming doubt” (Cavell 176). The inability to know something — for Leontes whether a child is his or not

— rapidly turns into the inability to know anything (Cavell 80). It is an example for Cavell of how “our ordinary lives partake of tragedy in partaking of skepticism” (9). So then, though skepticism is not to be refuted, it poses a significant threat — specifically to our relation to the world — and requires contesting.

The problem that arises because of the need to contest skepticism without refuting it is the question of how to live with it. It is a problem because, as Leontes example shows, skepticism is instable (Cavell 148). But Leontes’ reaction is extreme and it is easy to feel that real people do not react like him; or, if some do, they are exceptional and limited knowledge generally means something other than grounds for nihilism. In other words, we are tempted, or feel pushed, to imagine a stable skepticism. The idea of stabilizing or “settling with” skepticism draws Cavell’s attention to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he claims is “the most stable philosophical settlement in the modern period” (31). Involving Kant, Cavell introduces the following idea: that attempts to settle skepticism, in fact, “bargain” with it, that is, they purchase stability with a price (31). For example, taking skepticism as the question of our knowledge of a thing, Cavell’s reading of Kant assures us we know that the thing exists, but forces us to give up knowledge of the thing itself (31). It seems like Kant has rescued us from world-consuming doubt, but he has also prevented us from knowing the world we know exists. In other words, Cavell suggests that Kant gives up intimacy in order to have certainty, which likely elicits the response, “[t]hanks for nothing” (31).

The measure of dissatisfaction with a settlement is a measure of its stability, and as one of the most stable, Kant’s is one of the most satisfying. Its persuasiveness gives it explanatory power. Cavell claims, however, that settlements or bargains such as Kant’s are

predicated on skepticism, so that their result does not escape skepticism's threat but re-directs it. In other words, acceptance of the settlement is acceptance of a different version or application of skepticism. An example is Kant's theory of two worlds, in which humans are pictured as alternating between Understanding and Reason, or a world in which we know (as if by intuition) and one in which we know that we don't know (through analysis) (32). The idea of two worlds is a compelling representation of the experience of constant craving and changing taste, i.e. we always want the other world, equally and alternately desiring excitement and security (32). Skepticism's threat resurfaces in the "two-world" explanation as the implication of a third world between the others, a "nowhere," suggesting estrangement, a lack of belonging, the sense of living "between worlds" (32).

Because Kant's settlement is the most stable, Cavell uses it as the representative of philosophy's answer to the skeptical threat. Cavell characterizes the Romantics as disappointed with philosophy's answer, and interprets them to have attempted their own in poetry (52). Romanticism's answer develops from its formulation of the threat, namely, that there is a world but that skepticism, by doubting it, has lost or killed it. The presence of doubt becomes a cause of the world's death. The task then, for the Romantics, is pictured as the recovery of the world. However, much of Cavell's work with Romantic texts goes to show how, in practice, Romanticism's challenge to skepticism is as much a bargain as Kant's settlement. He writes, "the questionable idea that keeps surfacing in romantic texts [is] that there is a life and death of the world" (68). In other words, believing in the world's recovery depends on believing in its death, which means that the solution derives from the problem pictured by skepticism. The skeptical argument defines its own refutation, and like Kant, Romanticism crafts the answer in skepticism's terms (Cavell 27). The results are

insufficient, the answer compromised. Where Kant sacrifices knowledge of the thing in itself, Romanticism “accepts something like animism, represented by . . . the pathetic fallacy” (Cavell 52-53).

Cavell also interprets animism broadly, as the belief in the animation of the world, of it having something like life and death. He is then able to contrast philosophy’s and Romanticism’s picture of skepticism as the uncertainty of knowledge versus the trustworthiness of the world (as if the world were like a person) (Cavell 55-56). Doubts about our ability to trust the world — its love for us or the intimacy of our relationship with it — Cavell wants to call jealousy. It is a way to describe the experience of skepticism as one of feeling wronged, of an injustice, but particularly a personal and intimate injustice. As a result, the response to this kind of injustice — the fact of skepticism, lost intimacy — is revenge. It is revenge for the wrong done by the very fact of life, human life. The words “jealousy” and “revenge” evoke for Cavell a “psychic violence” indicative of “skepticism’s annihilation of the world and of the wounded intellect’s efforts to annihilate skepticism” (94).

Cavell’s readings of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* are elaborate and fascinating, but too much to follow here point by point. Suffice it to say that, for Cavell, the Mariner represents revenge on life as the carrying in oneself the death of the world, while Leontes represents it as carrying in oneself the life of the world (Cavell 101). In both cases, the characters’ revenge is a defiant act (the Mariner’s killing of the albatross, Leontes not legitimizing his son). Facing an unexplained presence (either albatross or child), one annihilates the presence and the other refuses to acknowledge it, but in both cases it is not allowed to exist. This refusal of presence is the

violence provoked by skepticism: the move from limited knowledge to revenge on knowledge, which is also to move from frustration with life to revenge on life.

In Cavell's words, such defiance is "the failure of knowledge as a failure of acknowledgement . . . the result of the failure is not an ignorance but an ignoring, not an opposable doubt but an unappeasable denial, a willful uncertainty that constitutes annihilation" (88). The skeptical argument takes the opportunity to doubt, or the availability of uncertainty, and uses it to deny knowledge or certainty even when it may be present. Picturing the skeptic as the Mariner or Leontes, Cavell suggests that the skeptic will ignore what there is to be acknowledged. When what can be acknowledged is the presence of a world or I or others in it, or the opportunity for one's attunement with the world and others, skepticism's refusal of knowledge amounts to a denial of humanity. Again, as an expression of our humanity, skepticism also threatens us with the denial of our humanity. Accordingly, Cavell takes "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to present the moral that we need to accept the world. The recovery from carrying around the death of the world is acceptance of the "love of the world" (Cavell 101). Cavell's phrase "the love of the world" is reminiscent of what is distasteful about a bargain with skepticism. In order for such a recommendation to be of use, one has to grant that the world can or cannot love. Bishop experiments with this idea in "Filling Station" in the line "Somebody loves us all." Chapter three gives a more detailed reading of the poem, in which description insinuates a kind of love from the world that the last line seems forced to admit, as if unconvinced. Bishop's descriptions, her scrutinizing of the visible world, are easily interpreted as either intimate or detached, dependent perhaps on whether one thinks she describes or scrutinizes. When she describes, or says "what is the case," she is enacting either a distance or an intimacy with the world,

which, in Cavell's terms, betrays either her jealousy or her love. They are so similar that often both exist, and description is either an attempt at intimacy because of distance, or the reverse. In either case, Bishop's characteristic description is something like Cavell's theory of acknowledgement, and often appears as an attempt to accept the love of the world.

Cavell describes Leontes' recovery from skepticism as his acceptance of forgiveness, the forgiveness of debt, which he explains using ideas of breeding and counting that he finds in the play. "Breeding" is a way for Cavell to talk about separation, both of and from life and the world, and counting is a way he discusses participation with them. Cavell describes counting as an acceptance of our life and others, even a life of the world. It is called counting because it looks like adding up or compiling the things that matter. Cavell says this counting establishes the gift of our life, compounding our debt for the fact of our life by adding up what is valuable. Breeding or separation is the cause of indebtedness for the gift of one's life (which is unpayable). The debt incurred due to counting our life and deeming it meaningful feels unjust and produces revenge. Revenge means refusing to participate in life, which means a repudiation of attunement with others and the world. The life of the skeptic is pictured as a withdrawal from the world in revenge for the injustice of an unpayable debt. Recovery means accepting removal of the debt, instead of attempting to pay it off (impossible) or taking revenge on the world (nihilism). Again, contesting skepticism by accepting forgiveness requires that we must accept indebtedness as a picture of our relationship to our world. It is still to understand the answer in terms of the problem and remain within the bounds of skepticism.

The dissatisfaction with settlements or bargains with skepticism comes because they attempt to answer the problem set by skepticism itself, and as a result, they never get outside

the picture of the world that skepticism itself sets. Cavell explains that skepticism is then best contested by re-envisioning the world outside of skepticism. For example, instead of recovering from skepticism by accepting the world's forgiveness, the need even for recovery is removed if one simply does not accept debt in the first place. Then the world's forgiveness is not required. In Cavell's terms, this means refusing to "count" what matters, which may in turn mean a refusal to participate in life, and to again choose skeptical banishment (86). However, if one were to "count" things without judging that they "matter," then there is participation without accumulation of debt. One can participate in the world without the threat of skepticism if one can acknowledge things of no significance, which amounts to something like an embrace of ordinary things. Ordinary things then, are things that do not attempt to "mean" something, or another way of putting it is, they simply are, they exist, nothing more or less. Marjorie Perloff explains that "Wittgenstein's *ordinary* is best understood as...*that which is*, the language we do *actually* use when we communicate with one another" (57). Ordinary things are just within our vision, on the periphery, but just outside of our direct gaze, our particular scrutiny.

To say that the challenge to skepticism lies in a turn to ordinary things suggests that what skepticism has done in the first place is estrange us from what is familiar (Cavell 166). Therefore, contesting skepticism does not require that we solve its problems, but that we give it up and return to what is familiar. Likewise, a return to everyday and ordinary things becomes the greatest challenge to skepticism because it abandons skepticism altogether. Cavell interprets Wittgenstein to have taken "the drift toward skepticism as the discovery of the everyday, a discovery of exactly what it is that skepticism would deny . . . something that . . . the impulse to take thought about our lives inherently seeks to deny" (170-71).

However, Cavell explains that the familiar we return to “is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return,” which he says “means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same” (166). Returning to the ordinariness that skepticism lost for us does not find the ordinariness as it was. In other words, “[a] difference in which everything and nothing differs is uncanny” (166). An example of such “uncanniness of the ordinary” for Cavell is “the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by” (154). Or say, the uncanniness of the ordinary occurs when an ordinary thing is apprehended and then becomes no longer ordinary but the unique thing that I am now apprehending, which is to say it draws back, repudiates itself. When words are meant to apply *intimately* “to the things we have in common,” their application is disappointing. A striking example of this uncanniness, this “desire of ordinary language to repudiate itself,” is when Lear forces language to apply where it is heartbreakingly inadequate, saying “no, no, no, life?” (Shakespeare 5.3.307). The idea of language repudiating itself, of the capacity for ordinary things to give up or lose their ordinariness leads Cavell to use an expression like the “surrealism of the habitual.” It is an apt description of many Bishop poems (like “A Miracle for Breakfast” for example) in which repetition and stability breed strangeness.

As a challenge to skepticism, ordinariness is decidedly not a stable settlement. It is virtually as instable, as unlivable, as is skepticism. In fact, since anything ordinary loses its ordinariness under examination, it almost seems not to exist, except that describing the situation in such a way is to speak within skepticism. What is of importance is that, according to Cavell’s title (and consequently mine), ordinariness is something to look for, but

never specifically to find, much like skepticism is to be avoided sometimes, but not completely. The moral of skepticism for Cavell is that

the existence of the world . . . is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged. And now what emerges is that what is to be acknowledged is this existence as separate from me, as if gone from me. . . . the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone. (172)

Recovery from skepticism is required everyday, since recovery — a return to the ordinary — initiates the return of skepticism in “the uncanniness of the ordinary.” Skepticism then is included in everyday life, which is alternately familiar and strange, a thought which leads Cavell to explain that “there is nothing beyond the succession of each and every day; and grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task” (171).

The problem of skepticism is then almost equally the problem of ordinariness. Cavell discovers the problem of ordinariness — much like it exists in Bishop — in Thoreau as the “finding of one’s habitation, of where it is one is at home; you can call it one’s edification” (175). In Bishop’s poetry, as in *Walden*, “the proof that what you have found you have made your own, your home, is that you are free to leave it” (175). It is another way of saying that the ordinary, or the home that skepticism imagines for us, motivates a restless search. As the introduction states, I find Bishop struggling with just such a problem of ordinariness, the need for its existence as required by skepticism’s threat and its inevitable even characteristic dissatisfaction. Like Cavell, Bishop manages to represent life, or the life of a thoughtful person, as equally livable as it seems unlivable, both struggling with and submitting to “the succession of each and every day,” so that the tension of human finitude, “the imperfect,” is treated both as “hot in us” and manageable. The succeeding chapters explore Bishop’s struggles for and against ordinariness.

2. Elizabeth Bishop and Skepticism

The purpose of this chapter is to give readings of specific poems that show Bishop thinking skeptically. The reason for providing examples of skepticism is that Bishop's quest for the ordinary, as I see it, must include the need for the ordinary, which is the need for an escape from skepticism. An ordinary tension does not exist in every poem, but in her entire work, so that some poems mostly represent Bishop's lack of attunement, presenting the world as unknown, dead, incommunicative, or lost. This chapter happens to read poems chronologically, but not all chapters do. The poems here and in the remaining chapters were chosen because they best illustrated my point and because a more extensive reading of Bishop's work is unmanageable for the context.

Readings of "A Miracle for Breakfast" commonly acknowledge it as Bishop's self-named "Depression poem" (Brown 25). Critics also point out its religious dimension: for Costello the "miracle" references both the manna miracle and the Eucharist (98), and Travisano seems certain it's an allusion to Jesus' multiplication of loaves and fish (48). I stress its similarities to other poems Bishop sets in early morning or near dawn, a situation she uses to dramatize disappointment and express skepticism by means of a day's broken promise. The broken promise in "A Miracle for Breakfast" appears as an injustice, "as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony." The poem is very similar in content to "Five Flights Up," published in her last collection, *Geography III*, and Bishop even uses a portion of the line "It was still dark" in "A Miracle for Breakfast" as the opening line, "Still dark," of "Five Flights Up" (it also resembles "It got dark / early" of "In the Waiting Room"). The early morning setting is a way to express feelings of desertion, feeling left out of the promise a new day claims to bring. Miracles do not work, questions are not answered, and

ceremonies do not enlighten, not for the speakers of Bishop's poems. In "A Miracle for Breakfast" or "Five Flights Up," however, they are imagined to work for someone or something else, and so Bishop's skepticism appears not as world-consuming doubt, but as the world's lack of participation. She is excluded when things "work" or "make sense" — they never work for her — and what I call her skepticism takes on a quality of not belonging. In other words, Bishop's skeptical poems do not describe overwhelming emptiness so much as they describe barriers of participation, unapproachable presences. What critics call her reticence is an acknowledgment of things and people (the world) in her poems, together with uncertainty about the kind of relationship such acknowledgment establishes. Such reticence is like what Wittgenstein means when he says, "meaning something is like going up to someone" (112).

The beginning of the poem is expectant, "we were waiting for coffee," and certain, "that was going to be served from a certain balcony." Further explanation, "like kings of old, or like a miracle," reveals that both are built on trust, either in God's or one's own power. Doubt emerges, "seeing that the sun / was not going to warm us," and hope grows as compensation for it, "we hoped that the coffee / would be very hot." The expected miracle swells with this compensatory hope, "and that the crumb / would be a loaf each, buttered." The middle stanzas sound like allegory, giving attention to an unknown "man" of abundance who crumbs his role for unimaginable reasons, and doles out "one rather hard crumb." It is the climax of desire for coffee and the crumb, but the poem turns away from expectation to wonder at the man's strange actions. Expectation is lost a little in the mystery, and the anticipation ends without substantial fulfillment. "Some flicked [their crumbs] scornfully into the river," (like ingratitude for the gift of one's life, suicide) but the speaker waits and

with “one eye close to the crumb” imagines a more specifically luxurious world than the privileged but unknown “man on the balcony.” Ironically, the imagined picture is presented as the real miracle though the poem says explicitly that “it was not a miracle.” The lines, “my mansion, made for me by a miracle, / through ages, by insects, birds, and the river / working the stone,” is a transformative vision, life re-made beautifully and abundantly by a miraculous (but understandable) process, nature and the passage of time.

However, “seeing” is not the miracle, it is only what “can” be done while waiting for the miracle, which never occurs. In other words, satisfaction is only imagined, and so off-limits. Speaking epistemologically, this says that our expectation of knowledge (of things or the world) is never satisfied, and instead we only have, as in “At the Fishhouses,” “what we imagine knowledge to be.” McCabe usefully compares “A Miracle for Breakfast” to Stevens’ “Sunday Morning,” but Bishop’s poem does not, as McCabe says, “exult in the real of her own fictions and irrealities” (91). The descriptive vision is not a remarkable activity, only “what I saw next,” and though it is an optimistic vision, delightfully distracting even, it does not *do* anything else. Imagination does not substitute for a miracle. It is an inadequate replacement, and the poem ends, at best, still waiting for the miracle, and, at worst, having missed it. The miracle is off-limits, “across the river,” and the imaginary substitute is dubious. It is doubtful too whether the miracle is actually working across the river, just as in “Five Flights Up” it is doubtful that “everything is answered.” It is more likely that nothing is answered and no miracle works, but that what “can” be accomplished with the temporary distraction of imagination instead creates the sense of answers and miracles for others. The combination of skepticism and imagination turns the world from an inhabitable place into an inhospitable one, it creates an inaccessible habitat. A morning’s expectation — the promise

of something good — is disappointed, and as if to make it bearable, imagination creates a home that remains in the distance, out-of-touch. Instead of emphasizing what is questionable about expectation in the first place, the poem emphasizes exclusion from the (fake) miracle expected to happen.

The last poem of *North & South*, “Anaphora,” also begins in the morning, progressing through a day until its end. From the start, with “Each day with so much ceremony / begins, with birds, with bells,” Bishop uses both meanings of “anaphora” — as ceremony and repetition within a phrase — to emphasize the combination of drama and regularity in morning. It is reminiscent of early films, like Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, in which the city’s progress through a day is set to music, and daily life becomes an exciting and dramatic event. The ceremony in Bishop’s poem is mostly religious, with emerging day like a cathedral (“white-gold skies,” “brilliant walls”), with music as if from nowhere, meant for angels maybe (“The day was meant for what ineffable creature”). Like the “enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous” of “Five Flights Up” the ceremony does not last long. The “Oh” (“Oh promptly he / appears”) expresses disappointment that the “ineffable creature” is the sun, the same sun. This disappointment is with the fact that knowledge is not lacking, that, in fact, we know what the “creature” is and it is not so ineffable after all. The idea that there is something to learn, something new to be revealed, sustains hope, while the regularity of the sun results in the disappointment that more knowledge, more satisfying knowledge, does not exist. In other words, it is disappointment that our life does not merit the mystical significance it suggests. The promise of something new and grand, and life itself re-seen as new and grand, is a trick of forgetfulness. A day remains exciting for one who can forget the previous day(s) in the energy of the present one.

With the arrival of “memory” and its “long intrigue” — as normal and expected as “whistles from a factory” — comes “mortal fatigue.” “Mortal” here can mean the fatigue characteristic of humanity — Hopkins’ “all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil” (“God’s” 66) — or it can mean fatigue that threatens death, which only resolves in death. The ethereal music of birds and bells does not lift the weight of “mortal fatigue,” and any hope expressed by the day’s ceremony loses its grip. The rhyme of “intrigue” and “fatigue” is enough to recall Cavell and ideas of what it is like to “live our skepticism,” let alone the psychic violence of skepticism expressed by “victim of long intrigue,” which is similar to Thoreau’s “lives of quiet desperation” and, Cavell says, its expression of lived skepticism.

Fundamentally, “Anaphora” presents initial hope for each day, hope that its preparations “mean” something, and which is apprehended through the senses as if in direct participation with the world — again, Hopkins’ “the grandeur of God / ...like shining from shook foil” (66). However, the day is shown to “mean” only what we already know. The inevitable disappointment makes sensory participation dubious, its intimacy false, and though returning a kind of knowledge (of life as we knew it) disappointment also returns an emptiness from which the day’s beginning promised escape. Memory itself is a dubious kind of knowledge so that the most intimate, trustworthy participation in the world is through exhaustion, as if revising Descartes’ cogito as “I’m exhausted, therefore I am.” The result, in the poem, is a sense of “dreaming / squandered” and of “the drift of bodies,” and of the darkening sun who “suffers” and “sinks.” “The fiery event / of every day in endless / endless assent,” is the sun’s own acceptance of everyday life as only an arc moving from hope through disappointment into suffering, indifference, and finally desperation. The only hope is in the desperation of a beggar (“weary, without lamp or book”); escaping desperation

requires the forgetfulness that allows belief in promise of the next day. Ultimately, what rises is still the same sun which is “victim of long intrigue.” In “At the Fishhouses,” Bishop writes,

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.

In both poems, Bishop expresses dissatisfaction with knowledge, which is to say knowledge disconnected from the “ceremony” for which life and the world seem suited. Another way to say this is that what presents itself as “real” knowledge is the knowledge that the world does not live up to our expectations, that what we know as knowledge is the limits of knowledge.

Such skepticism is often felt or expressed as the world’s withdrawal. Limited knowledge of the world feels like lack of attunement with it, resulting in its distance. Withdrawal figures in these Bishop’s lines from “Insomnia”: “By the Universe deserted, / *she*’d tell it to go to hell.” The “she” refers to the moon, and that she is “in the bureau mirror” suggests the identification of moon with speaker. The moon’s personification is likely the speaker’s projection of herself so that the moon’s reflection dramatizes a sense of abandonment felt by the speaker. The moon is allowed to feel deserted by the “Universe,” but such terms can seem a little self-important for a person, or so it might seem to Bishop. It is an expression of a broken relationship — Marianne Moore called “Insomnia” a “cheap love poem” (Spires 122) — and as a love poem the speaker responds to a lost human relationship by imagining a break with the “Universe.”

The moon appears to “dwell” on the mirror, as a reflection, and the combination of dwelling and reflecting connects the idea of abandonment with that thoughtful attention. In

other words, the moon's reflection looks, to the speaker, as if the moon has chosen to live on the mirror now that it does not belong with the "Universe," suggesting, through a double meaning, that mental reflection reminds the speaker of feelings of abandonment. In response she means to "dwell" — both abide and belabor — in further reflection. Bishop represents the world's withdrawal due to thinking as well as the expectation of a new home, a new sense of belonging, found through more thinking. Costello makes the point that "the infinite well of reflection in which she plunges her cares becomes itself a kind of hell" (31). A hell of "infinite reflection" is a striking description of the torment of skepticism. The moon's imagined response is not only to find a new home, but to "tell [the Universe] to go to hell," which is to wish it harm, wish revenge for desertion. The moon looks for a new home as a way to make the "Universe" jealous. The italicized "*she'd*" means that the speaker cannot or does not respond like the moon to desertion, presumably because of the difficulty of finding a new place "to dwell." Her solution instead is to "wrap up care in a cobweb," and the line's sing-song moralizing tone ironically betrays her pessimism in the solution. Defiance and revenge don't work for her, so she tries distraction.

The title suggests that the poem itself takes place "where we stay awake all night" in "that world inverted." It is a world of opposites — "where left is always right" — but a pun on "right" suggests it is also where left is always correct, like a dog chasing his tail. Accordingly, the poem chases meaning, "the heavens are shallow as the sea / is now deep," so that we're not sure whether the sea appears shallow or the heavens appear deep until the words "shallow" and "deep" have no meaning in context, and the chase seems futile. That it is a place "where the shadows are really the body" emphasizes that it is a place where the chase is substantive. In other words where objects, images, even words don't correspond;

they only resemble each other. Reflection proliferates without resolution, like the skeptic's chase, for whom knowledge is sought for the sake of refutation. "That world inverted," is also the place where, "you love me." Love hidden at the bottom of a well, in an inverted world refers overtly to Bishop's lesbianism. It also demonstrates how a broken relationship with the "Universe," or a person, is restored by inverting the world and turning it from a world of abandonment into a world of attunement. In Costello's interpretation, the speaker disagrees with the moon's response to desertion, which deserts the world because the world deserted the moon (32). But the moon cannot really desert the world; it leaves only in reflection, which is to say retreat and defiance are only ideas and not viable solutions. The speaker realizes this, and thinks the best response to desertion is to throw "care" into a well of uncertainty, endlessly reflecting, in a place where "you love me" is as much a reality as "you don't love me."

A central problem Bishop presents in "Insomnia" is what to do when you can't just tell the world to go to hell, when suicide looks like an inappropriate response to feelings of severe abandonment. Bishop's conclusion is endurance, arranging loneliness in restless nighttime anxiety, where uncertainty and possibility bounce back and forth. Giving up on the Universe that has left you is what is done when someone cannot live with their skepticism, with a perceived lack of attunement. They must feel connected somewhere else with something else. Bishop, in "Insomnia," presents someone who lives skepticism more deeply — believes in lack of attunement — and does not attempt to end it but instead attempts to live with it. It is a pessimistic poem about having a time and place in life (at night in one's room) when relationships are seen for what they are, forever broken and unresolved, and nothing can be done about it except endlessly turn thoughts over and over. Cavell similarly

describes philosophy's fate, inevitably turning over a skepticism it doesn't really think will end.

Unlike "Anaphora," "Five Flights Up" begins before there is any chance for ceremony. The day begins with "mortal / mortal fatigue." The opening line "Still dark," implies ambivalence about whether it is day or night, one day or the next, and its similarity to "It got dark / early" of "In the Waiting Room" suggests lingering anxiety. The line's overall effect is to oppose motion — the kind that otherwise propels us into and through a day or a poem — and it evokes a sense of exhaustion. The "bird" that "sits on his usual branch" has a tenuous, impersonal, relationship with his resting place — it is a "usual branch" not a familiar one — and as "[t]he unknown bird," he has a similarly attenuated one with the speaker. Imagine this is the morning following "Insomnia" and the bird's independence and lack of belonging bear too much resemblance to the speaker for her to gain comfort from his presence. The dog is more at home — "the little dog next door" — but his bark ("inquiringly, just once") lacks exigency. Neither animal allows for restful distraction since they represent either too much similarity or too much difference. In an attempt to avoid anxiety she turns back to the bird, hoping to find, if no longer distraction, at least the comfort of sympathy. Imagining the bird's sympathetic questions ("Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires / once or twice"), instead of escaping from her anxiety she hears the feebleness and uncertainty of her own voice ("quavering"). The straightforwardness and restraint of language in "Five Flights Up" resembles Thoreau's "quiet desperation." The speaker is struggling for connection with the world through animals. Connecting or relating to the animals is for the purpose of participating in their world of simple questions and easy answers, and in the case of the dog, of a home. Her description of the animals subtly betrays

her wish for day to bring answers to her, a wish deriving from the insistence (“still dark”) of a skeptical anxiety.

The speaker tries to act expectant with, “enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous,” but instead of suggesting a satisfying order, “meticulous” draws her attention to the world of specific details. These details (“gray light streaking each bare branch, / each single twig, along one side”) coalesce to form an image of two trees — one shadowed, the other lit — stuck back-to-back. The image of contrasted light depicts one thing as two, or caught between two states. The emphasis is on the part of the tree touched by sunlight, which, because of “glassy veins,” is ghostly and hollow. Light is often evidence of morning and its presumed hope, but here it turns a real, opaque object into something transparent and spectral. The realization is too much for her and the line is broken off in ellipsis, which suggests she is cut loose from language.

Though there is temporary respite in the boredom and fatigue of the bird (“The bird still sits there. Now he seems to yawn”), the presence of the unconvincing and out-of-touch owner adds to the growing pile of things the speaker finds unsympathetic. The poem is so self-destructively quiet that it is a relief when the second to last line erupts in agonized astonishment with “Yesterday brought to today so lightly!” It is overwhelming for her just that yesterday turns into today. Not only is it difficult to settle with the past but difficult to place the present for the purpose of settling it. If exclamations are the response to such difficulty, there is perhaps some hope in the rest of utter exhaustion at the end of exclamation, but the speaker is too still for that. In fact, the intense interiority of the final line — “(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)” — makes it difficult to move past skeptical anxiety into whatever expectation a day may (or may not) be able to satisfy.

“Five Flights Up” is full of ordinariness. Its language is clear and straightforward, the tone is understated. It is an everyday setting with commonplace things. Ordinariness, however, is not the subject of the poem. Even more than the insufficiency of ordinary things, the poem deals with everyday fatigue. Since its exhaustion is a direct response to routine, it seems like the exhaustion and insufficiency of life in general. In other words, it is a skeptical poem because it repudiates the ordinary, repudiates the idea that questions are answered by the passage of time, which is to say answered because life keeps happening. The poem expresses tremendous resistance to the ordinary fact that time continues, finding such ordinariness oppressive.

Similar to “Five Flights Up,” it is perhaps counterintuitive to think of “In the Waiting Room” as an expression of Bishop’s skepticism, since the explicit major drama of the poem is persistent ordinary knowledge that the speaker is “an I,” “one of *them*.” Knowledge of her identity as a person is frightfully inescapable. However, her panic is generated because such knowledge is virtually unbelievable — “I knew that nothing stranger / had ever happened, that nothing / stranger could ever happen.” As knowledge of her humanity persists, suspicion does not relent, and her voice escalates into questions in which neither reality gets a final word. Proof of her humanity is terrifying because of how unpersuasive it appears — “boots, hands.” “In the Waiting Room” shows her attempting the peripheral vision, “a sidelong glance,” that helps Bishop’s sandpiper in another poem, but instead of a “sheet” of water that “glazes over dark and brittle feet,” as in “Sandpiper,” “In the Waiting Room” has her “sliding / beneath a big black wave, / another, and another.” It describes a young Elizabeth, before learning to “take for granted” the “roaring alongside, / and that every once in while the world was bound to shake.”

The panic of “In the Waiting Room” is an experience of the uncanny, what Cavell calls “a horrified vision of ordinariness, of the unremarkable other seen as just that unremarkable other” (158). Cavell describes uncanniness as “skepticism happening all at once” (158), and Bishop’s description of the panic attack as “the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space” describes what Cavell calls “the world’s withdrawal from [the skeptic’s] grasp” (88). Anxiety proliferates around a series of questions that seem to have no answer: “Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone,” “How had I come to be here?” In Cavell’s terms, these questions seek to “deny the conditions of humanity”, and specifically, the conditions of humanity as the relation to others, her existence as one among many (“you are one of them,” “What similarities / .../ held us all together / or made us all just one”).

In the introduction, the skepticism of “In the Waiting Room” is compared with the skepticism Cavell finds in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Leontes is an example of skepticism’s threat as nihilism, of insistence on “nothing,” threatening a violence that requires contestation. The panic and anxiety of “In the Waiting Room” is also an example of skepticism’s violence, not just its frustration and fatigue, and is perhaps a more common experience of skepticism as world-consuming doubt. Skepticism’s “violence is as casual as it is inevitable” (Cavell 145). Vendler calls it a “guerilla attack of the alien, springing from the very bulwarks of the familiar” (37). She says further: “[t]he child of “In the Waiting Room” discovers that she is in no intelligible relation to her world, and, too young yet to conceive of domination of the world by will or domestication of the world by love, she slides into an abyss of darkness” (39). Vendler suggests that there are solutions an older “Elizabeth” has yet to learn in order to secure a relation to her world. Following Cavell’s lead, I call these

solutions “settlements” of the skeptical threat, a word reinforced by Vendler’s terms, “domination” and “domestication,” which decidedly bring rest and peace to a relation. The question Vendler’s remark provokes is, does age — and presumably wisdom — really better equip her for establishing a settled relation to her world? The next chapter discusses whether it happens at all.

3. Elizabeth Bishop's Settlement of Skepticism

In the first chapter I explain Cavell's idea of bargaining with skepticism so that skepticism is prevented from destroying the world. In the case of Romantic writers, a bargain looks like recovering the world that skepticism has already destroyed, or bringing the world back from its death (Cavell 45). As a bargain, Cavell explains, such a recovery gives something up and forces the acceptance of something difficult to accept. In philosophy, the bargain looks like accepting that, though the world exists, it is unknown. In Romantic literature, the bargain looks like believing in a life and death of the world, or the pathetic fallacy. Cavell suspects that these bargains are dissatisfying because we want to know our world but find it difficult to believe it is alive.

The current chapter reads two poems, "Filling Station" and "Sandpiper," in order to show that, in response to what I call her skepticism, Bishop sometimes expresses bargains with it. In these poems, Bishop does not allow doubt, uncertainty, and a sense of estrangement to dominate. Instead, she presents either the domestication of skepticism or rigorous control of her response to it. I deviate from Vendler's terms, "dominate or domesticate," because in "Sandpiper" the bird does not dominate his world so much as he masters his response to it. The poems are bargains because neither presents a solution that is a tempting alternative to living skepticism. The poems do not recommend the successes with skepticism that they depict.

Although a "filling station" connotes a place of rest and replenishment, Bishop's "Filling Station" begins on a note of suspicion:

Oh, but it is dirty!
---this little filling station,
Oil-soaked, oil-permeated
To a disturbing, over-all
Black translucency.
Be careful with that match!

In Bishop's poetry, "filling" also nervously anticipates the "spilling" — as in "the heavy surface of the sea, / swelling slowly as if considering spilling over" or a volcano "spilling over / in rivulets of fire" — associated with anxiety. A "Filling Station" is a dangerous place, and "Be careful with that match!" explicitly expresses its volatility. It resembles "The Bight" with its gas flame, dry boats, and "pilings dry as matches." In both poems, the possibility of combustion creates a sense of averted disaster by the end of the poem. A threat lingering in a flammable environment is reminiscent of the imminent panic in "In the Waiting Room" as well as Cavell's "skepticism happening all at once." The caution about the station's instability suggests the instability of its promised refreshment, as if to say that whatever we are out of, in need of — say knowledge, comfort, or rest — that need is volatile and we should take care. The opportunity for violence in this case comes from the opportunity for receiving something needed, from filling up what is lacking.

The poem depicts an ordinary scene, made up of common people and common activity. It is interesting to note then that the place for filling up is also an ordinary place, an unappealingly ordinary one. The explicit subject of the poem is the station's modest embellishments. While "The Bight" presents a distinct scene in deceptively "sheer" language, "Filling Station" does nearly the opposite. Its questions and conspicuous (sarcastic) tone is a "black translucency." The voice of the poem is a voice with personality ("Why, oh why," "quite comfy") but it is slick, vague, and volatile.

Father wears a dirty,
Oil-soaked monkey suit
That cuts him under the arms,
And several quick and saucy
And greasy sons assist him
(it's a family filling station),
All quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?
It has a cement porch
Behind the pumps, and on it
A set of crushed and grease-
Impregnated wickerwork;
On the wicker sofa
A dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
The only note of color---
Of certain color. They lie
Upon a big dim doily
Draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
A big hirsute begonia.

Interpreting “comic books” as a pun on “comic,” Bishop’s “joking voice” does “provide / the only note of color,” but enjambling “They lie” suggests deception. The poem is playful and emphatic — compare “Oh, but it is dirty!” to “At low tide like this how sheer the water is” or even “In Worcester, Massachusetts / I went with Aunt Consuelo.” The point to Bishop’s emphasis is that this dangerous and dirty place needs a little decoration.

Unlike “At the Fishhouses” or “In the Waiting Room,” the speaker maintains control. The filling station seems like a necessary but awful place. Its usefulness is begrudged in spite of its filth, which is also to say that the poem’s optimism about “somebody” who “loves us all” is expressed despite the fact that it is a nearly indecent cliché. The filling station needs to exist and somebody has to live there. Consequently, it requires some domestication to make it livable. The speaker seems like the grown-up “Elizabeth” that learns to

“domesticate the world by love” (Vendler 39). The poem dresses up the scene as much with language — with a lively voice — as it does with the “big dim doily” in an attempt to turn such a filthy and dangerous place into a home.

“Filling Station” presents a bargain because such decoration is nothing more than decoration. It does not clean up the mess, and neither does the station go up in flames. The solution to the problem is built directly on top of the problem, in the problem’s terms. Even the plant, the poem jokes, is oiled instead of watered, and the voice of comfort “so—so—so” comes from the gas cans. Decoration allows for the interpretation that “somebody loves us all,” which is supposedly comforting, but it is not a satisfying answer to the initial questions “Why the extraneous plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?” Is the station decorated to court comfort from the possibility that decoration means love? What is the real comfort, the idea that somebody loves or that the station is a home? The station is not really made into a home as much it is made to look like one. Similarly, the reassurance of the last line is not really reassurance at all. It is sarcastic, only made to look like reassurance. The attempt to decorate the filling station is an attempt to turn it into something that, almost by definition, it is not, which is to say that decoration does not change the station but only elicits ignorance of the very thing that it is. In exchange for distraction from “a disturbing, over-all / black translucency” and relief for anxiety (“high-strung automobiles”), the poem forces us to accept that out of insufficient decorative details comes a vague and meager reassurance that “somebody loves us all.” Bishop’s irony and pleading questions about the reasons for such decoration betray dissatisfaction with such an answer to the need for settling an uncomfortable, threatening life. If the efforts at redemption in the poem are as earnest as the questions, then the conclusion reaches too hard, strains too much for satisfaction. Ultimately,

the world is not something to domesticate. The poem implies that decoration does not do the job well enough and the rest must be made up by interpreting, unpersuasively, a vague and impersonal love. It imagines a home and an intimate connection with the world that forces us to continue to live “quite thoroughly dirty.”

Bishop introduces “Sandpiper” by describing how intensity, “the roaring,” exists in the little bird’s periphery:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
And that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
In a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The ocean does not dominate his attention, though as something “[taken] for granted” it is not completely out of mind. The little bird is focused, intent on some activity, which we discover later in the poem is a vague and unsatisfying “looking for something, something, something.” His frenzy is not a response to the ocean or to the shaking world, but a function of his search. The intensity of the ocean appears tame compared to the intensity of the sandpiper’s monomania. The second half of the stanza even “shakes” rhythmically in contrast to the steady lines introducing the ocean’s presence. We are invited to wonder if it’s right that the sandpiper “takes for granted” such dramatic gestures in his life, if his attention is not a little misplaced, and if the drama of the ocean is not a more fitting, or worthwhile, object than whatever else he is after. But his position is precarious:

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
Of interrupting water comes and goes
And glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

Bishop reminds us that “water ... / ...glazes over his dark and brittle feet” which means that the sandpiper is as close to the ocean’s intensity as he can be without going under; it roars

and shakes his world as he runs just short of “total immersion.” His position does not allow the luxury of contemplating the scene, like the narrator, but he must run if he is to hold his position. Whatever he is looking for, it exists at this edge of his shaking world, where the ocean threatens, and where he survives decidedly by avoiding his much louder reality, instead “watching his toes. / —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them.”

Watching the ground, he remains as close as possible to the central drama of his life, but unable to look at it head on. The presence of the ocean in the poem suggests other things safe only from a distance, like skepticism, which when near-at-hand threatens with noise and vastness.

The sandpiper’s preoccupation, his ability to stay at the water’s edge, is relevant to Cavell’s description of ordinariness’s challenge to the skeptical threat:

---Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
Where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
Rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
He stares at the dragging grains.

The closer we approach skepticism and the more it shakes and roars and threatens, the more important ordinariness becomes — “the dragging grains,” “no detail too small,” — and the more ordinary life and language become necessary to prevent being swallowed up or immersed. In a letter about Darwin to Anne Stevenson, Bishop says about works of art (among other things) that they “catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important” (Stevenson 66). Her words describe precisely the situation between her sandpiper and the ocean. Though “enormously important” (the ocean is the reason “The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear. The tide / is higher or lower”) the ocean is not given a full-face look either by

the sandpiper or the poem. Like the bird, the poem concentrates not on what is “enormously important” but on holding a position directly alongside it. Peripheral vision is the best we can have of such things the poem seems to say, and it requires sustaining a “state of controlled panic.”

“The beach hisses like fat,” and “sheet” evoke a domestic space. The sandpiper appears at home where really nothing is settled, where “interrupting water comes and goes.” The shift from “roaring” to “hissing” is part of a diminuendo characteristic of Bishop that turns the little sandpiper from “a student of Blake” into someone merely “watching his toes.” It tells us he takes the ocean for granted as a habitual presence, domesticated and an assimilated part of his normal life spent searching the beach. The sandpiper’s success is the way he manages to survive a life of disruption and restlessness, the way he negotiates the precarious ground of the beach’s limit without either giving in to the ocean’s pull or giving up his search. In this poem, Bishop appears interested in what is necessary to tread such boundary. It is part of the central question that runs through her poetry: how is it one can live where nothing is settled, a space defined by restlessness? How can a home be made of a place that isn’t a home, which is essentially the question, how can a home be created at all?

Her sandpiper accomplishes it with “stares at the dragging grains.” A few lines down in the same letter to Stevenson, Bishop says:

But reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations . . . and then . . . one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (66)

The sandpiper just as easily represents Darwin as it does Bishop herself. In fact, the sense of her words in this letter as commentary on her own writing is striking and, I think, not a coincidence. The point is that observations are potentially “heroic” to Bishop, and endless. Compiling them is also strange business with its risks of “sliding off into the unknown,” but it is important that such sliding does not happen in “Sandpiper” (as opposed to “In the Waiting Room” or “At the Fishhouses”). In the sandpiper, Bishop represents “perfectly useless concentration,” exemplified in the intensely charged flatness of the final lines, “The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose, and amethyst.” These lines give an example of what obsessive concentration on “the dragging grains” sounds like, but they don’t seem to “do” anything else, like comment or make a point. The bird actually survives by focusing endlessly on the details (“no detail too small”). A “state of controlled panic” is sustained through preoccupation with details. Periodically, “the world is a mist,” and observations are difficult even impossible to make but, faithfully, it is eventually also “minute and vast and clear.”

The poem still does not sound triumphant, even congratulatory in tone, but instead the bird is pitied for his obsession. The mania of the final lines is an unattractive way to live.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
Minute and vast and clear. The tide
Is higher or lower. He couldn’t tell you which.
His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,

Looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
Mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

Like Cavell’s sense of a “quest,” the sandpiper turns his life into an endless search, but his search is a means of dominating his world. He does not dominate *the* world, only *his* world.

The search is pretense for control, so that he is forced to endure the inconsequence of the details. There is no meaning to the details for the sandpiper, only their use in keeping him from going under. It is like Cavell's description of Kant's settlement, in which the world is known to exist without particular knowledge of things in the world. For his existence the sandpiper exchanges meaningful knowledge of the world, "[h]e couldn't tell you" whether "[t]he tide / is higher or lower." He avoids the threat against his life, the "roaring and "shaking," by concentrating on something like ordinariness, "the dragging grains," but, if he were a person the way the poem describes him, he gets his life at the expense of his humanity. Cavell says settlements with skepticism fail because they only answer the question put by skepticism itself. In the case of the sandpiper, he lives by ignoring. His obsession with the "millions of grains" is not an obsession with what is the case, but with a restriction of what is the case. Consequently, he does fight skepticism, but also lives it as the terror of the larger world outside his control.

4. Elizabeth Bishop: (In)Quest of the Ordinary

For Willard Spiegelman, “[t]he highest value in Bishop’s work is a politely skeptical courage which neither makes outrageous demands on the world nor demurely submits to the world’s own” (154). I take him to describe how Bishop accepts that the world does not seem made for her yet labors to make it a place she can live with. She is equally a stranger in her home as at home in her strangeness. The poems in this chapter are examples of how Bishop resists the threat of skepticism and the dissatisfaction of a settlement with it by traveling “in quest of the ordinary.” Since the method is travel, and on an endless quest, when the poems approach ordinariness they do not linger on it, but move on, often using the experience of time (or a bus, as in “The Moose”) as transportation. She establishes a connection with people or the world only to disrupt it, and when approaching strangeness she then wants intimacy. These poems often present Bishop as a realistic poet in that she continually focuses on what is the case, which is alternately skepticism and the things and words we actually sense and use; and why, using Cavell, I insist she is preoccupied with ordinariness.

“The Fish” resembles Cavell’s characterization of the ordinary as both “the subject of a quest and the object of an inquest” (149) and something “subject at once to autopsy and to augury” (9). A temptation to read the poem allegorically or symbolically comes from the speaker’s attempt to make the fish — Bishop says she really caught such a fish in Key West (Wehr 42) — more than a fish. More accurately, the speaker attempts to see the fish better — more accurately, more completely — than one would normally see a fish, and the poem is largely about how an attempt to see the fish as it is, as “the fish in itself,” makes it seem more than just a fish.

Despite evidence of previous escapes, for Bishop the fish is an easy catch: “He didn’t fight. / He hadn’t fought at all.” The fish is caught by the second word of the poem (“I caught”), which is the only word addressing the act of catching him. When “victory” is mentioned, it is more because she “stared and stared” than because she “caught a tremendous fish.” The reason for catching the fish is not included — for sport? for food? for torture? — so that in the absence of purpose and struggle, it seems he is caught as a matter of course. In this sense, catching him is like running across something in everyday life, being struck with sudden awareness of something normally unnoticed. The fish is then held up and examined. The act of catching the fish resembles an epistemological struggle for “the thing-in-itself,” and accordingly he bears evidence of others’ failures to capture him (“five big hooks / grown firmly in his mouth”). Historically, he is elusive — even incorporating the weapons into his flesh — but Bishop has no trouble catching him. Bishop catches the fish the way Cavell suggests we “acknowledge” ordinary things, without fully knowing them. Bishop then does not haul her prisoner into the boat but keeps him “half out of water,” not entirely removed from his original context but partly exposed to new light and surroundings that show off his strangeness. In the line, “he hung a grunting weight,” not only is “grunting” a conspicuous and resonant word — the sound the fish makes, the sound the speaker makes lifting him, and more distantly, the sound of everyday work, the grumblings of fatigue and the burden of habit — but the line is also reminiscent of later Bishop poems that emphasize lifting, for example the dredge that “brings up a dripping jawful of marl” in “The Bight” or “A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift” in “Five Flights Up.” The fish is another (ordinary) weight it is a struggle to lift and hold.

He is initially domesticated with the description “battered and venerable” but the word “homely” makes him also familiar. His “grunting weight” sounds like G.M. Hopkins “sweating selves” (“I wake” 101). “Battered and venerable / and homely,” is reminiscent of John Donne’s “Batter my heart three person’d God” (314) and the homeliness of George Herbert (“But while [Death] thinks to spoil the room, he sweeps,” for example) (Herbert 183). That the fish can appear homely means not only that he is pulled out of his context and examined — is treated like an ordinary object subject to an analytic stare — but he is also described like an ordinary object. Suspended “half out of water,” the “tremendous fish” reminds the speaker of ordinary things and bears some relation to familiarity even if it is not his own (the fish knows nothing about “wallpaper” for example). He is neither wholly strange nor wholly familiar, and though he is “tremendous” he is not entirely extraordinary. We see Bishop’s fascination with ordinariness as a fascination with someone else’s ordinariness, however extraordinary it is to her. Her use of words like “homely” and “wallpaper” confuses the issue of familiarity, and makes ordinary and extraordinary characteristics of the same thing. Travisano notices such confusing simultaneity in other aspects of the poem: “the tone is matter-of-fact, the subject plain, the imagery startling” (65).

“The Fish” is widely anthologized, it seems, because it is a good example of descriptive details loaded with significance, exemplifying how interpretation shows up in description. Bishop includes a “swim-bladder / like a big peony,” “frightening gills,” “lenses / of old scratched isinglass,” “his sullen face,” hooks “like medals with their ribbons / frayed and wavering,” all of which are attempts to “see” or “know” the fish. The varying interpretations evoked by her description do not harmonize with each other. The fish is like one thing then like another, and the poem is compelling because it keeps shifting its vision.

The picture of the fish is complete, but like a collage, with boundaries between component images. In this way, as I have said, Bishop does not know the fish completely, but only acknowledges it. She knows it by way of her interpretation of it, and that knowledge is suspect but is a more honest knowledge than any claim to *really* know it, in-itself.

Acknowledgment in this case looks like accepting what interpretation says about the object instead of trying to see through interpretation, and acknowledgment in “The Fish” does not, as in “Sandpiper,” mean a bargain that sacrifices mental health. She ultimately lets the fish go because keeping it would kill it, and because Bishop is not Captain Ahab.

In part, the speaker examines the fish to find out how and how much he belongs in the world, and in which world he belongs: that of the speaker, or a different one. Scrutinizing the fish’s place in the world requires that he be seen outside of his original context.

Familiarity is imposed on him and it looks stilted and strange (fish scales are creepy wallpaper). As vision shifts he is alternately familiar, frightening, and suffering, all of which suggest new dynamics of resemblance and estrangement between him and the speaker.

Shifting her vision of him prevents the burden of conclusions, and letting the fish go is a way of ending the questions themselves, of removing the object of the inquest in order to begin another quest. Bishop manages a knowing vision of the world without either killing it or getting weighed down in its implications. She simply looks, lets go, and moves on.

The final lines of “The Bight” sum up its central subject, “All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful.” It is a touch dramatic to think of untidiness as “awful,” and we do not normally think of something awful as also “cheerful.” The coexistence of “awful” and “cheerful” resembles, at the beginning of the poem, the water “turning to gas” as easily

as “turning to marimba music”, and if one has to be Baudelaire to hear marimba music, as Bishop says, we may also have to be Bishop for what is awful to cheer us.

There is uncertainty in the poem about how to take things, how to sense and make sense of them. The tone of the first line, “At low tide like this how sheer the water is,” is very difficult to place. Bishop is not always shy when it comes to exclamations (for example, “Oh, but it is dirty!” or “Yesterday brought to today so lightly!”) so the tone of voice of the line is like “the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.” Its muted emphasis underscores that the expression is a question, a rhetorical one. The line is reflexive, wondering just how clear is the meaning of her words when simple and unaffected, at “low tide.” If her tone is at “low tide” and Bishop is amazed at how “sheer” words are, then as the poem relates the bight’s “untidy activity,” it also describes the untidiness of ordinary language, which, to follow her pun on “low tide” and “untidy,” is language at “low tide.”

Describing the scene — of “outsized” birds and “frowsy sponge boats” and “jackstraw gaffs and hooks” — the poem identifies with the “little ocher dredge” as it “brings up a dripping jawful of marl,” which is to say it holds untidiness up to our observation. The description of the dredge as “dry perfectly off-beat” is a fitting description of the speaker’s tone of voice. In Bishop, birds often get the attention other poets give to people, and the pelicans crash into the bight like someone scrutinizing ordinary life or language looking for something substantial, “unnecessarily hard,” “like pickaxes, / rarely coming up with anything to show for it.” Meaning is very elusive but very present in the poem. Costello notes how “instead of ordering the scene into a metaphoric pattern Bishop allows a psychic symbolism to emerge suggestively within the immediate description” (184). She seems to say that the presence of symbols is felt without also the apprehension of their meaning, which means

symbol and referent are sensed without their union, “like torn-open, unanswered letters.” Bishop’s pelicans are like readers who expect a “metaphoric pattern” where there is only an untidy scattering of “old correspondences.” Contrasting the pelicans are the “man-of-war birds,” who “soar / on impalpable drafts,” in poses alternately representing violence or fate (“tails like scissors,” or “like wishbones”). If these birds are also like people, they are readers who follow the drift of ordinary language, without analysis, looking only for whatever they get or whatever they can take. Both analytical and incidental meanings are part of a scene “littered with old correspondences.” The poem evokes broken or almost-meaning in both image and tone. We are shown things with their meanings “not yet salvaged,” and Bishop is unsure “if they ever will be.”

Nonetheless, in a letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop says about the actual bight, “It reminds me a little of my desk” (qtd. in Costello 186). The poem does more than that, but it *at least* does that and Bishop ultimately shows how “at least” manages quite a bit. A poem comparing a bight with a desk, commemorating her birthday, in turn remembers what is dirty and awful about her connections and disconnections with people (letters), with her life and world in language (poems). It is not an optimistic poem about what language can accomplish (it certainly can’t keep the place clean) but nonetheless, the poem is filled with attempts. What is cheerful is that the work continues, “Click. Click. Goes the dredge.” It may be awful and untidy, but it is part of life in the bight. For a young Robert Lowell, “All discussions / end in the mud-flat detritus of death” (“Colloquy” 11) whereas Bishop “brings up a dripping jawful of marl.” The discussions, the correspondences, don’t end and they don’t signal death, but they are a part of life as normal. There is something awful about this, as other poems of hers bring out, but where untidiness is awful, the fact that it “continues” is of some

comfort. It would go too far to call “The Bight” a hopeful poem, but it is at least a reassuring one. It is relieving even to think of something awful belonging to the everyday world. It is a very different end than “Five Flights Up,” which contains echoes of “The Bight:” “sheer” water versus “glassy veins,” birds that “tremble” and a bird “quavering,” boats like “obliging retrievers” and an actual dog that “bounces cheerfully.” Everyday activity in “The Bight” is cheering, and though there are “unanswered letters,” those seem manageable. In “Five Flights Up,” Bishop is amazed at “Yesterday brought to today so lightly!” and unlike the “jawful of marl” there is “A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.”

In “The Bight,” though sense is confused and activity is both awful and cheerful, the inability to tie up and make sense of immediate experience, to extract meaning from it, does not turn frustrating or desperate because its participation in everyday activity seems to sanction it, whether or not it makes sense. “Unanswered letters” will either be answered eventually (probably not) or, the poem says, it is all right (or at least manageable) for them to remain unanswered. Bishop uses “sheer” language as a response to language’s untidiness in an attempt to clean it up, and it only draws attention to the untidiness and awfulness of the rest of the world. Everyday activity surrounds awfulness and untidiness, incorporating, settling, domesticating them, and removing their threat, so that language too benefits from the cheering. “The Bight” is a settling, or re-organizing of everyday that, unlike “Filling Station,” is not strained. It does not need to conclude that “Somebody loves us all,” only that there is something “cheerful,” and it allows for awfulness too. It is not a world re-made, or a home re-made perhaps, but one in which just a little straightening is enough. Bishop does not give up her skepticism and she does not place demands on “somebody” to love her, yet,

acknowledging the half- or almost-meanings of “torn, unanswered letters” she manages cheerfulness, like “The Gentleman of Shallot”:

...The uncertainty
He says he
Finds exhilarating. He loves
That sense of constant re-adjustment.
He wishes to be quoted as saying at present:
“Half is enough.”

In her poem “Questions of Travel,” the first line, “There are too many waterfalls here,” anticipates the poem’s final question, “Should we have stayed at home?” which is to say that the poem begins in disappointment. Or, rather, it continues the disappointment that began in “Arrival at Santos,” the first poem of the collection:

“here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
impractically shaped and — who knows? — self-pitying mountains,
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery”

The “questions” pursued in “Questions of Travel” are in response to the tourist’s “immodest demands for a different world, / and a better life.” The demands are “immodest,” Bishop says, but does that mean instead we should “have stayed at home and thought of here?” This is the question, in contrast to settling skepticism, of how to make modest demands for a different world. Bishop does not know which dissatisfaction to prefer, the yearning of imagination or the grief of reality.

The beginning of the poem is perhaps a little disappointing for readers who enjoy the dense description of Bishop’s “Florida” or “Cape Breton,” and who want something exotic and exciting from the abundance of “too many waterfalls” and “crowded streams.” The speaker of “Questions of Travel” is not interested in the setting as much as she is burdened by it. “Pressure” — as in “the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops / makes them

spill over the sides in soft slow-motion” — is emotionally resonant, both conspicuous and appropriate, because of the strong correspondence it draws between what the speaker sees and what she feels. In many poems, Bishop expresses a mounting emotional anxiety about the threat of things “spilling over” (volcanoes, the ocean), but here, at the beginning of the poem, the clouds already “spill over the sides” and not in “burning rivulets” like “In the Waiting Room” but in “soft slow-motion.” In other words, she is not anxious but grieving, already disappointed and sad, the dense clouds like welling tears that under pressure are “turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.”

It is a poem about not having “room” for such scenes (“And have we room / for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?”), about an overabundant reality crowding out the imagination. Description, evocative language, is used in the first stanza to grieve. The poem suggests that imagination thrives on absence, so that the presence of things — dreaming our dreams and having them too — reminds us that they are unavoidably unsatisfying and hope is brought to grief. Bishop has found strangeness — “watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres” — and found it disappointing, which is to say found it no different from what is familiar.

As an alternative to considering what is immediately in front of her, the speaker suggests that she “[t]hink of the long trip home.” The line contains four of the most important words to the poem. Juxtaposed, thinking sounds like a trip as much as trip (or travel) sounds like a kind of home, even a home made by thinking, and “long” contains a melancholy overtone of “longing.” The line, together with the one that follows, “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” represents the central dynamic of the poem, which is to make a suggestion and question it, like an inverted catechism. Questions keep the

speaker's head above water, mentally and emotionally, by keeping her in motion. Her uncertainty is useful because it prevents settled disappointment and dread. Questioning the usefulness of visiting such a place stays a step ahead of the disappointment such a place causes, and neither does the question annul the value of "trees along this road / really exaggerated in their beauty." Traveling prevents a physical place from becoming boring. In other words, questions are a way to travel and traveling is a way to question. Even the fulcrum "of," about which the title balances, suggests derivation, separation, and distance, as if the questions come from travel like someone coming from their hometown or, Cavell might add, like being born.

Questions and travel then involve the grief of separation, the separation of life from life, person from place, knowledge from certainty. Cavell says this grief is something like feeling indebted to life for the gift of one's life, and disappointment is grief that the debt is unpayable (92). The poem ends up continuing to question and continuing to travel. In Cavell's terms, this is like never assuming responsibility for the debt owed for one's life, the consequence of which is that the debt is perceived -- as a burden one can take on, maybe even should -- but uncertainty prevents a final acceptance of one's debt. "Questions of Travel" represents questions and travel as versions of one other, both of which manage not merely to avoid disappointment, but to accept it without also assuming its burden, it's "mortal fatigue." Bishop shows how disappointment kept in motion, never sure of itself, remains livable. Travel, questions, an ever shifting grief and dissatisfaction are all made into a home. The question, "Must we dream our dreams / and have them too?" is answered with a no and "must" ultimately exchanged with "should."

“The Moose” begins with a domestic description of “narrow provinces,” a “home of the long tides.” These provinces recall “peninsulas ...like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods” from “The Map,” much like the peninsulas of Nova Scotia where Bishop began “The Moose” in 1946 while visiting her relatives (Millier 182). There are simple amenities — “fish and bread and tea” — and a daily schedule in which “the bay leaves the sea / twice a day,” is either “coming in” or “not at home,” and the “herrings long rides” are like a commuter train. The consistency of “a wall of brown foam” means that conflict, as much as peace, is part of the routine. In other words, the “home” in the poem is flux; the “home of the long tides” is a home in movement (Costello 163). The first four stanzas are preparation for the bus ride, for the rest of the poem’s presentation of movement, restlessness, as an answer to instability — like fighting fire with fire -- and of finding comfort in the settlement of travel.

The sun, “silted red,” either illuminates the sea in a glowing unison of red — like the unison of “s” sounds in “silted,” “sometimes,” “sun,” “sets,” “facing,” and “sea” — or, Vendler might say, it produces an “otherworldly” contrast on land. This double effect recalls “gray light ... making another tree, of glassy veins” from “Five Flights Up,” as well as the ominous and anxious “rivulets of fire” from “In the Waiting Room.” The “home” that Bishop is presenting here equally includes consonance and dissonance, light and dark, stability and instability. There is room and precedent early in a Bishop poem for anything to upset the balance, or snap the tension. Elsewhere in her poetry, “rivulets” has turned into “the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world” and “veins” into “a yesterday I find almost impossible to lift,” but an ominous “black translucency” has resulted in “somebody loves us all.” The fourth stanza confirms what the poem foreshadows by its length, long first

sentence, and enjambed lines: the poem is predominantly about traveling (“roads”), specifically “down,” “past,” and “through.” Anxiety and turbulence, like the “wall of brown foam,” are not overpowering and unconquerable, but instead, as in “Sandpiper,” taken for granted.

In fact, a comparison of the “The Moose” with “Sandpiper” makes sense out of Doreski’s otherwise curious comment that “the poem drifts through a narrative of peripheral glances, partial appreciations” (48). The continuous motion of a bus prevents a lingering stare at something “enormously important” out of the window. The sandpiper has the burden of providing busyness himself and his consequence is obsessive compulsion, but the speaker of “The Moose” trusts disruption of her vision to the movement of the bus. Her look, not rigorously fixed, is like the pink of the sun, “flashing,” “glancing,” and “brushing,” and prevented from frightening preoccupation. So when “the fog, / shifting, salty, thin, / comes closing in,” and we expect mounting anxiety as in “At the Fishhouses,” we soon get “and settle / in the white hens’ feathers.” Similarly and more conspicuously reassuring are the lines “An iron bridge trembles / and a loose plank rattles / but doesn’t give way.” Doreski calls the sestets of the poem “vaguely reassuring,” and there is a great deal of reassurance in the poem in general.

Harrison writes that in this poem Bishop “discovered how to balance her defiance and acceptance” (197), and Anne Colwell writes, “this balance and movement [of/from loss and recovery, connection and isolation] ... finds perhaps its most complete expression in “The Moose” (219). However, Bishop herself called it an “old-fashioned umpty-umpty nostalgic poem” (Harrison 201), and Brett Millier reports “she said several times over the following summer [after completing “The Moose”] that she ‘hated’ the outcome” (466). It is also a

poem Bishop spent twenty-six years completing, evidently either a difficult or doubtfully worthwhile poem to finish (Millier 463). And it is often and widely considered among her best. It is the poem that Bishop writes is “about the only poem of mine that branch of my family has really taken to.” (Millier 471). Yet, it prompts her in a letter to Robert Lowell to say, “I’m sick of being simple” (qtd. in Harrison 201), which furthers the understatement of the poem. Like ordinariness, “The Moose,” though it *is* a terrific poem, provokes a measure of dissatisfaction in Bishop. The poem is like the moose it is about, eliciting exclamations as it “looms” and “sniffs at / the bus’s hot hood,” and it almost says of itself, again in a tone hard to place in, “It’s awful plain.” It is variously a compliment, criticism, or expression of the uncanny, which Cavell describes as “a horrified vision of ordinariness, of the unremarkable other seen as just that unremarkable other” (158).

In fact, “The Moose” comments on itself more than once, creating its own “gentle, auditory, / slow hallucination.” While in “Five Flights Up” there is the frustration that questions are not answered “simply / by day itself,” in “The Moose” we get “things cleared up finally.” These things are cleared up in the context of a “dreamy divagation” and “voices / uninterruptedly / talking.” The length of the poem, and its “umpty umpty”-ness, to use Bishop’s description, enact this uninterrupted talking, and though it is a conversation “not concerning us,” Bishop describes it as “recognizable, somewhere.” Similar to the peripheral acknowledgement of the speaker’s vision, there is no anxiety about being left out of the conversation, it is enough that it is recognizable. There is reassurance in the poem because there is understanding in it, “that peculiar / affirmative.” Bishop represents and includes ordinariness as a “half groan, half acceptance, / that means, ‘Life’s like that. / We know *it* (also death).” When the poem asks, “Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet/

sensation of joy?" it is suspicious of common experience, but accepts it. Bishop is not championing ordinariness, or simplicity, but using it to coax a "curious creature" from "out of / the impenetrable wood," and, like one rider's voice in the poem, assure us "[p]erfectly harmless." Critics use the word "balance" to describe "The Moose" because Bishop does not decide what is reassuring and what is threatening, whether the moose or the landscape or the conversation, but allows any and all of them to be either. Ultimately, "The Moose" is a poem of ordinariness given up only to come back again, a poem of bus stops and continual motion that is "safe as houses" while it takes its time, looks over our travel through time and finds it "grand, otherworldly."

Conclusion

I have attempted to show how Bishop's use of ordinariness challenges, but does not destroy, the capacity to doubt and accompanying feelings of estrangement. This is to say that she relies on the capacity to doubt in order to contest it; that ordinariness is both useful and dissatisfying, inviting doubt about its completeness and sufficiency. Her use of ordinary language gives her readers the impression that they understand her. In this way, Bishop's poetry agrees with readers about what "sense" is. It is an agreement in our "criteria for what is worth saying, hence intelligible" (Cavell 127). Her description of places, including intimate and sometimes domestic details, is a chance to agree with readers about what the world is like, what it looks like or what kinds of things exist in it. The sense of home, or lack of one, which is a large presence in her work, is then easily subject to the sympathy of a wide audience. In these ways, Bishop's poetry demonstrates a connection to the world and to people.

She takes the opportunity of such a connection through the presence in her poetry of ordinary language and ordinary things to then address disconnection and strangeness. The consistent presence of some type or version of ordinariness in her work makes it a place suitable for challenging what is we know, or what we find satisfying about what we know. Skepticism requires ordinariness and ordinariness in turn becomes an opportunity for skepticism. They are "locked in an unearthly dance" (Cavell 167). I have mentioned that Cavell speaks of skepticism's "threat" because the existence of skepticism is not the problem, but that skepticism takes occasion to "deny the conditions of our humanity." Likewise, a discussion of ordinariness, Bishop's ordinariness, centers around skepticism because instead of receiving answers to nagging questions, the most believable (say, least suspicious)

comfort, and so the most valuable, is affirmation that doubts and questions exist and that they in fact do not disqualify me from my humaneness. Bishop is ultimately so appealing and powerful because not only is the ordinariness in her poetry enticing to a doubting, uncertain, skeptical reader, but such a reader also finds her poetry sympathetic.

In January 1964, Bishop admits:

My outlook is pessimistic . . . I think we are still barbarians, barbarians who commit a hundred indecencies and cruelties every day of our lives . . . but I think we should be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy — to make life endurable and to keep ourselves “new,tender,quick.” (qtd. in Millier 352)

It is part of Bishop’s appeal that she makes life seem endurable. In fact, Bishop’s poetry allows us speak in such terms without too much embarrassment or self-pity. She convincingly represents life as nearly unendurable so that sympathetic readers are relieved to find ordinariness in Bishop as something beyond exhaustion and doubt, and relieved when persistent questions are shown to keep her from the burden of suggested answers. It is the kind of reassurance that those skeptical of reassurance can appreciate, not that “everything is answered / no need to ask again,” but that there is time and courage enough to ask again.

Such thoughts suggest, through Cavell’s ideas, that in turning to ordinariness to contest skepticism and using ordinariness to allow for skepticism, that Bishop is rescuing the humanity of skepticism from its inhumanity. I suggest that Bishop attempts to make life livable, attempts to build a home in response to her homelessness (which ends up as a home of homelessness). Cavell thinks that “the building of home...is about what you might call edification. Edification might also be a reasonable term for ... therapy” (20). Cavell’s thought suggests, by extension, that Bishop’s work is an example of therapy and my thoughts imply that it is, in fact, in some way therapeutic for many of her readers. It is probably more

accurate to speak of a therapeutic effect, which Bishop's poetry may have as a result of its creation of poetic spaces in which to confront, establish, or grieve disconnection or connection with people and the world. This concluding section is not the proper place to confront the problems of and potential for treating poetry as therapy. I mean only to suggest that the nature of the contest between skepticism and ordinariness and the picture of life's frustrations and relief which such a contest dramatizes, in both Bishop and Cavell, gives therapy some relevance to the discussion. Cavell writes,

if you conceive of philosophy and poetry and therapy in ways that prevent you from so much as seeing their competition with one another then you have given up something I take as part of the philosophical adventure, I mean a part of its intellectual adventure. (12)

I would add that it is part of the poetic adventure too, and mentioning therapy here is a way of gesturing again to Bishop's appeal.

Her appeal is due in large part to her poetry's strong connection to the world in which readers live. Her poetry is intimate, therapeutic, and presents something like philosophy by giving us a compelling description of a world, her world, not as any "true" picture of the world but as a picture of a person's interaction with it. It is compelling, accessible, a picture of our world that is uniquely another's picture. As with the appeal of the ordinary and the temptation of a quest for it, Bishop's poetry presents her as someone to want to be, as Mary McCarthy said, but not someone to ever actually be. Readers are more taken with her "impersonations of an ordinary woman" than they would be with an actual ordinary woman. What is successful about such impersonations, even the impersonations of ordinariness in her very exceptional poetry, is their presentation of a life lived as a complete and enduring immersion in the world. Like "inescapable hope" and like ordinariness, such immersion is

alternately appealing and distasteful, or enticing and frightening; it can seem either for better or for worse. The ultimate appeal of Bishop's poetry comes from the way it evades favoring one such interpretation over another. She eventually always gives up one in order to continually, alternately have both, which is her "art of losing."

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