



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

European Joint
Master's Programme in
English and American
Studies

Ca' Foscari University of Venice
Karl Franzens University of Graz

Final Thesis

**From Drifting
Grounds**

Revisiting the Human/Nature
Relationship in Gary Snyder
and Elizabeth Bishop

Supervisor

Professor Gregory Dowling

Second Reader

Dr. Gabriella Vöö, University of Pécs

Third Reader

Dr. William Boelhower, Louisiana State University

Graduand

Jacopo Aldrighetti
Matriculation number
861702

Academic Year

2021 / 2022

Abstract

North American nature writers often ground their environmental thought on the assumption that Western civilization constitutes a means through which human beings have detached themselves from more natural ways of living. According to such views, a discourse between civilization and nature appears to be impossible due to the essential lack of shared traits that is attributed to them. In reason of the acceptance of a divide between Western civilization and nature, poets such as Gary Snyder embrace the notion of primitiveness, that is, the idea that primitive people were more attuned to nature and in themselves more natural than technologically advanced societies. In Snyder's work, this belief leads to a conflicted poetics that bestows innate goodness to certain primitive or indigenous human cultures, which are often imbued with an aura of mysticism, and demonizes the products of industrialized civilization. Elizabeth Bishop's work, however, provides us with a fresh outlook on the human-nature relationship. Although the conflict between civilization and nature is present in her work too, Bishop manages to merge the two worlds successfully. In fact, by using images that mingle the human and the natural milieus—such as the presence of human-made elements within the natural environment and her focus on both domesticated and wild animals—Bishop often turns human contamination into epiphanic elation, thus suggesting that coexistence between civilization and nature constitutes both a possibility and a factual necessity.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Table of Contents.....	2
1. Introduction.....	3
2. Gary Snyder: Primitiveness, Self-Sufficiency, and Anthropocentrism	6
2.1. Primitiveness in Gary Snyder's <i>Turtle Island</i>	8
2.2. Primitiveness as the Key to Understand Nature's Self-Sufficiency.....	17
2.3. The shortcomings of Snyder's approach.....	25
2.4. Conclusion.....	31
3. Elizabeth Bishop: The Interrelatedness between the Human and the Natural Worlds	34
3.1. Singleness and the Individuality of the Self.....	36
3.2. Human-made and Natural environments: Signs of Conflict and Communion	39
3.3. Wild Animals and the Daydream	47
3.4. The Indexicality of Gasoline in the Context of the Human/Nature Relationship	50
3.5. Conclusion.....	57
4. Conclusion	61
5. Bibliography	63

1. Introduction

In his long autobiographical poem “Song of Myself” from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman declared that he “could turn and live with animals” for “they show their relations to me and I accept them, / They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession” (“Song of Myself” 32.1, 9-10). Animal life acts for him as an Emersonian correspondence of sorts, related to his own human animality: the vestige of a natural world that stands apart from civilized society. Indeed, it is within—and against—the lingering influential frame of the old Jeffersonian idea of a frontier between civilization and wilderness that Whitman operated. By the time Turner published his seminal essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” an understanding of wilderness as a place of spiritual perdition and savagery that must be counterbalanced by human industriousness, independence, and self-reliance had already been circulating and widely accepted for “well over a century” (Cronon 13). Moreover, to continue such an “expansion westward” (Turner 3) was to broaden God’s earthly kingdom the Pilgrim Fathers intended New England to be, thus adding an aura of biblical semantics that still pervades the very idea of wilderness.¹ However, by the end of the 19th century this perception of wilderness had shifted, finally giving way to the now popularized view of the Romantics who saw in its aesthetic, numinous, and potentially menacing qualities the source of the sublime—which had been previously theorized by 18th century philosophers such as Kant and Baumgartner. According to Cronon, the “sources of this rather astonishing transformation . . . can be gathered under two broad headings: the sublime and the frontier” (9).

Whitman experienced these transformations and, in view of them, he could not avoid being influenced in his understanding of the natural world. Nature represents to him, as to

¹ As Cronon points out in his discussion of the qualities Western culture historically attributes to the word wilderness, prior to Romanticism “many of the word’s strongest associations . . . were biblical, for it is used over and over again in the King James Version to refer to places on the margins of civilization where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair” (8).

Thoreau and Emerson, a “retreat into the primitive” (Silva 2, 7). Wild animal life, perceived as immediately and more directly connected to nature than humans, stands for a “token” of human beings’ own animality, for their own intimate naturalness. Whitman understands that “when [man] is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar” (Berger 14). The familiarity of the human-animal relationship helps the former’s definition and apprehension of nature. It acts as a medium between the human and the natural worlds, which are often considered as two realities standing apart from each other—perhaps only weakly linked—in Whitman’s times as well as in ours. Under this perspective, Thoreau’s belief that the products of industrialized human societies are inherently alienating with respect to their relationship with nature (Ma 381) has been so influential that we can read it in Cronon’s description of a popular view of human civilization and nature that sees them as separate and distinct:

. . . wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge . . . (7)

By positing such a clear and final divide between human and nature, the former explicitly alienates itself from the latter as if no common ground between the two were possible and a communion neither desirable nor beneficial. According to such a view, a discourse between civilization and nature cannot find its voice.

To tackle the numerous issues concerning the relationship between the human and the natural milieus in Gary Snyder and Elizabeth Bishop it is necessary to avoid a black-and-white perspective that fundamentally separates these two milieus. While discussing the concept of wilderness as “nature in a pristine state” (506), Keeling decidedly opposes this

conflicting view. Disavowing this rather outdated definition of wilderness, he claims that it is paramount to consider humankind and nature as deeply connected entities. It follows that it would be a grave mistake to “presuppose that nature and human artefacts belong to mutually exclusive ontological categories” (506). It is for this reason that Robles’ suggestion of a “spectrum of naturalness” (24) based on the degree of human influence on the environment can be of help to grasp the differences in Snyder’s and Bishop’s respective approaches. Originally, Robles’ spectrum is a working concept aimed at evaluating the level of naturalness of the various ecosystems on Earth. However, it also introduces the idea that humankind and nature are intimately connected. In fact, they are part of the same spectrum and ultimately influence each other.

Before we delve into my analysis of Snyder’s and Bishop’s respective works, I should briefly note that it is not the intention of the present dissertation to enter the philosophical environmental debate concerning theories such as those of Cronon, Chase, and Callicott, who see the idea of wilderness merely as a social construct, as opposed to those who, like Willers, Cafaro, and Taylor among others, criticize them for not taking into account its “biological and evolutionary significance” (Willers 264). It is useful, however, to bear in mind the cultural—and literary—implications informing the notion of wilderness in Western society, for it is within the cultural and literary traditions of their respective times that poets such as Walt Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop had to operate. By acknowledging the literary and historical echoes concerning the significance attributed to wilderness, we may better understand the ways in which Bishop managed not only to relate to the tradition that preceded her but also to reinvent and innovate altogether our understanding of both the inherent tension and kinship between human and animal, civilization and nature.

2. Gary Snyder: Primitiveness, Self-Sufficiency, and Anthropocentrism

One of the most meaningful stances acknowledging the divide between humankind and nature can be found in Gary Snyder's prose and verse. In his work, a perceived conflict between these two spheres is apparent since humankind is often portrayed as potentially dangerous and alien to the nonhuman. Nevertheless, there are significant elements that suggest the possibility for coexistence and communion between the human and the natural worlds since Snyder appears to embrace the notion of primitiveness, which embodies "an earlier, a simpler and . . . a happier state of society" (Smith 124). In order to achieve such a communion, humankind must let go of civilization by embracing more primitive ways of living and "get in touch" with the land (Folsom 103) since, as Nash puts it, "Civilization severed the web of life as humans distanced themselves from the rest of nature" (xii). The native land that has been lost due to the activities of industrialized society is "A virgin / Forest / . . . ancient; many- / Breasted" ("Climax" 85) that Snyder believes can be regained by drawing on the knowledge of the primitive peoples who once inhabited the planet.

Snyder does not resort exclusively to the notion of primitiveness. In fact, another major theme that characterizes *Turtle Island* is the fundamental self-sufficiency that Snyder attributes to the natural world. My claim is that Snyder's most relevant achievement lies in the agency through which he portrays nature and, most importantly, the way he perceives nature to have value in itself. Unlike previous representations and interpretations of nature—such as those of Thoreau and Emerson—that attributed significance to the natural world according to what humans could gain from it in terms of knowledge or insight, in Snyder the nonhuman milieu does not exist for the exclusive benefit of humankind and, therefore, is not considered in merely anthropocentric terms. The notion of primitiveness constitutes a poetic instrument through which nature can be described according to its "biological and evolutionary significance" (Willers 264). For this reason, he recognizes that both the human

and the nonhuman spheres intrinsically share values that establish a kinship between them, while Western civilization, being “the locus of chaos and disorder” (Garrard 92), constitutes an obstacle to such kinship. Snyder’s attempt to adopt a geocentric point of view entails that human beings are part of the natural world. In view of this, hierarchical categories between different forms of life on Earth have no place in his poetics; at their essence, humans are ontologically equivalent and in no way superior to other living beings, who are people of the land too:

. . . Tree People!

Flying Bird People!

Swimming Sea People!

Four-legged, two-legged, people! (“Mother Earth: Her Whales” 48)

However, this attempt to embrace a non-anthropocentric standpoint is seldom successful in Snyder’s poetry. In fact, despite his efforts to avoid the intrusiveness of first-person speakers in most of his poems—especially in the volume *Turtle Island*—thus providing them with a matter-of-fact tone that is enhanced by the descriptiveness that characterizes them, Snyder ultimately fails to detach himself from the poetic canons of Western culture.

Indeed, what strikes most about his poetics is not necessarily its originality in terms of themes or form. On the contrary, it is the patent clash between the alleged novelties of his approach and the shortcomings of these resolutions, since the thread that links Snyder’s poetics is, from a technical point of view, transposition instead of creative invention. That is, Snyder tends to replace the names used in Western societies to refer to ideas, things, and places by employing terms belonging to primitive and indigenous cultures in order to detach himself from Western civilization, which he considers to not be in touch with the natural environment. Albeit commendable, this vocabulary replacement constitutes but a cosmetic

transposition, a rather superficial linguistic change that shows both arbitrariness and a subtle enactment of the imposition of hierarchies Snyder claims to be determined to avoid.²

2.1. Primitiveness in Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*

The themes of transposition and primitiveness converge conveniently in Snyder's book *Turtle Island*. The title of the book itself is rather telling with regard to the role of these two concepts in his work. In Snyder's words, Turtle Island is "the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millennia, and reapplied by some of them to 'North America' in recent years" ("Introductory Note" 1). Thus, Snyder's proclivity toward embracing the notion of primitiveness is made explicit from the very beginning of the book. By employing the name Turtle Island instead of North America, Snyder enacts an attempt to detach himself and his work from canonical Western tradition by means of a descent, as Folsom rightly suggests, into the Native American culture that preceded the arrival of the pioneers (103). In this fashion, the land is stripped of its superimposed and culturally-induced connotations since "The 'U.S.A.' and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions of what is really here" ("Introductory Note" 1).

Instead of relying exclusively on the writings of authors who preceded him and are well-established within the Western literary canon, the main source of Snyder's poetry in *Turtle Island* is Turtle Island itself, "The stored energy of the native continent" (Folsom 121), as well as the knowledge of the native peoples that preceded industrialized societies, "American Indians, and a few Buddhist priests in Japan" ("The Wilderness" 106). The primitive ways of these peoples allow for the much-needed end of relations between humans

² Snyder's will to rename things, whether they be abstract ideas or concrete parts of the environment, is in itself another rather meaningful element that intimately binds him to Western civilization. For proof of this one should look no further than Genesis 2.19-20.

and civilization, which, according to Snyder's poetics, can ensure a meaningful and lasting connection with the rest of the natural world. By naming his volume *Turtle Island*, Snyder implies that a return to primitiveness is the only possible way human beings have left in order to connect with nature. Therefore, primitiveness constitutes the central theme of the book and provides the reader with an invaluable interpretative key through which the poetry contained in *Turtle Island* can be analyzed.

In addition to the introduction of the notion of primitiveness it entails, the replacement of the place name North America with Turtle Island constitutes a remarkable example of transposition. In fact, the name Turtle Island, which Snyder adopts without hesitation, belongs to the "many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millennia." Similarly to a label that adds no significant content to the object it intends to represent, Snyder switches the toponym of the North American continent arbitrarily, shunning the linguistic heritage of Western culture and embracing the creation myths of some of its unspecified indigenous people. Nevertheless, the name Turtle Island constitutes, to a degree, an imposition of sorts over the land that Snyder does not acknowledge. According to his belief that indigenous cultures share an intimate connection with the natural environment, employing terms that belong to such cultures might be a way to avoid such an imposition in view of their symbiotic relationship with the land.

It is not by chance that the first poem of the volume is called "Anasazi." The term Anasazi refers to "the aboriginal, pretribal natives, the cliff-dwellers" (Folsom 115), who inhabited Turtle Island long before the arrival of European colonists. Therefore, they represent one of the "uncontaminated group of peoples" Abulafia refers to when discussing indigenous cultures in the New World (49). The Anasazi are the natives of Turtle Island and Snyder recognizes their mythical significance by invoking them:

Anasazi,

Anasazi,

tucked up in clefts in the cliffs

growing strict fields of corn and beans

sinking deeper and deeper in earth

up to your hips in Gods

your head all turned to eagle-down

& lightning for knees and elbows

your eyes full of pollen

the smell of bats

the flavor of sandstone

grit on the tongue. (“Anasazi” 3)

In itself, beginning a poem with an invocation does not amount to a meaningful achievement in terms of originality. However, the peculiarity of Snyder’s approach lies in the fact that, instead of invoking the Muse, which is a typical feature of Western poetry, he decides to invoke the Anasazi, human beings of a different kind, a more primitive people whose living habits are closely bound to nature. They do not reside in artificial houses or shelters, they are “tucked up in clefts in the cliffs.” Their interconnection with nature is intimate to such a degree that the syntax is decidedly ambiguous throughout the poem and it is unclear whether the following sentences refer to the Anasazi or to the fields of corn and beans, “sinking deeper and deeper in earth / up to your hips in Gods.” This syntactical ambiguity suggests that there is an innate communion between the Anasazi and the natural environment. This communion is strengthened by the fact that although their eyes “are full of pollen,” there are not any hints of blindness or incapability of experiencing the natural surroundings that are

described in the poem. On the contrary, this situation seems to allow the perception of other sensorial cues, “the smell of bats. / the flavor of sandstone / grit on the tongue.” This mingling of senses echoes the interrelatedness between the Anasazi and nature. So much so that the poem ends on an almost purely sensorial note:

trickling streams in hidden canyons

under the cold rolling desert

corn-basket wide-eyed

red baby

rock lip home,

Anasazi (“Anasazi” 3)

A prominent sense of movement characterizes this final scene. However, there is no main verb to support the whole sentence other than the gerunds “trickling” and “rolling” referred to the streams and the desert respectively. Here, Snyder generates movement in an unusual way, that is, by providing details of the scene so that they follow each other like the very running water evoked by the “trickling streams in hidden canyons.” Moreover, the meter, albeit loose, successfully conveys rhythm. In fact, the first two lines of this final passage are irregular tetrameters, which are followed by two dimeters, then the triple-stressed line “rock lip home” that provides a brief pause and momentarily stops the movement before Snyder introduces the final trochaic dimeter that solemnly ends this invocation, “Anasazi.” By treating the poem as if it were a prayer or a rite, Snyder hints at the Anasazi’s capability to grasp and take part in the “sacramental interchange of a shared universal energy” (Altieri 763), which denotes the “sacramental value” of wilderness (Garrard 66).

As we have seen in “Anasazi,” Snyder descends “into the dim reaches of pre-history on the continent . . . beneath the artificial, superficial, forcefully imposed top layer” since he “seeks the true thing lost under a borrowed name” (Folsom 114). The scene described in “Anasazi” is syntactically ambiguous yet somewhat idyllic. It shows the harmony that characterizes the relationship between nature and the native people of Turtle Island in a fashion that makes the two hardly distinguishable. In “The Dead by the Side of the Road,” this harmony disappears as Snyder “emerges from the past into and onto the American present” (Folsom 116). Instead, it is replaced by conflict, which is blamed on human civilization. The scene portrayed in the poem is rather dreary since it relies upon the taxonomic descriptions of animals killed either directly or indirectly by human activity for trivial and selfish reasons:

How did a great Red-tailed Hawk
 come to lie—all stiff and dry—
 on the shoulder of
 Interstate 5?

Her wings for dance fans

Zac skinned a skunk with a crushed head
 washed the pelt in gas; it hangs,
 tanned, in his tent

Fawn stew on Hallowe'en
 hit by a truck on highway forty-nine
 offer cornmeal by the mouth

skin it out.

Log trucks run on fossil fuel . . . (“The Dead by the Side of the Road” 7)

Wild animals are, much like the Anasazi, the native people of the land. Particularly so, if we understand the land as being, as Aldo Leopold puts it, a “biotic community” (173). However, in the poem, human beings are oblivious to this notion of community and needlessly kill the hawk, the skunk, and the fawn. The speaker feels an affinity with these animals, as we can infer from the fact that he or she uses the personal pronoun *she* when referring to the “great Red-tailed Hawk,” in addition to the capitalization of her name. But the concrete of “Interstate 5” and “highway forty-nine” are alien to the nonhuman world and pose a significant threat to the connection between the human and the nonhuman spheres. In the poem, wild animals who enter in contact with civilized places are killed either on purpose, as is the case with Zac who “skinned a skunk,” or by mistake, “hit by a truck on highway forty-nine.” Moreover, we are told of animals not only being killed directly but also indirectly since the speaker abruptly states that “Log trucks run on fossil fuel.” This very meaningful line provides a brief shift in perspective from the particular to the universal, from the killing of individual animals to the large-scale harm perpetrated by human beings to the detriment of the whole planetary ecosystem, the “biotic community.” Then, the speaker witnesses a doe bleeding to death after being hit by a gunshot, which inspires a soft prayer in name of the victims of civilization:

Pray to their spirits. Ask them to bless us:

our ancient sisters’ trails

the roads were laid across and kill them:

night-shining eyes

The dead by the side of the road. (“The Dead by the Side of the Road” 8)

The speaker invokes “our ancient sisters’ trails” as the only source of hope, once again drawing on the notion of primitiveness, which appears to provide the only way out of civilization. The speaker strives to connect with the natural world on a spiritual level without mediation, “Pray to their spirits. Ask them to bless us.” In this respect, the ancient trails might provide a path to follow. But similarly to the animals that feature in the poem, these trails too have been annihilated by human-built roads. The roads belong to the civilized world, which is characterized by the artificiality and syntheticity of fossil fuels. In a way, the poem attempts to portray how industrial civilization, symbolized by “the side of the road,” constitutes the place where nature dies.

As Buell points out, both natural and human-built elements compose what we call *environment* although “Human transformations of physical nature have made the two realms increasingly indistinguishable” (3). Despite this epistemological ambiguity, Snyder’s sensitivity toward the divide between industrial civilization and nature allows him to perceive the fundamental differences that stand between them. To Snyder, civilization is a “cancer / [that] swells against a hill” (“Front Lines” 18), a disease plaguing the natural world, the “hill,” which is a symbol of fertility that embodies the motherly breast of nature (Folsom 113). The land, inhabited and exploited, is a “ripped-off land” (“Steak” 10) that can be reclaimed only by drawing on the remnants of the knowledge of primitive cultures that preceded industrialized society and knew how to live in harmony with—and within—nature:

And around the curve of islands
 foggy vulcanoes
 on, to North Japan. The bears
 & fish-spears of the Ainu.
 Gilyak.
 Mushroom-vision healer,

single flat drum,
from long before China.

Women with drums who fly over Tibet.

Following forests west, and
rolling, following grassland,
tracking bears and mushrooms,
eating berries all the way.

In Finland finally took a bath

.....

all the Finns in moccasins and
pointy hats with dots of white,
netting, trapping, bathing,

singing holding hands . . . (“The Way West, Underground” 4-5)

Snyder follows the history of different primitive peoples around the world according to a westward movement, “The Way West.” After the incipit of the poem, which briefly sets the scene in Oregon (4), we are told of the Ainu, the original inhabitants of Japan. Then the poem’s gaze shifts westward, toward China and the Gilyak, another indigenous people of Asia. Then, after Tibet is mentioned *en passant*, Snyder focuses on Finland. Here, he shows us an idyllic scene with people “singing holding hands,” thus enacting an explicit apology of human primitiveness. In the poem, primitive people all around the world undertake activities that are closely related to the natural world, “tracking bears and mushrooms, / eating berries all the way,” or “netting, trapping, bathing.” Once again, as was the case in the poem “Anasazi,” the syntax is ambiguous since the subject of certain clauses is not specified and it

painted in caves,

Underground.³ (“The Way West, Underground” 5)

The extensive use of assonances characterizes this final passage of the poem and provides it with a distinct feeling of interrelatedness. Cave paintings—the artistic product of a primitive people—are, in fact, directly connected with nature since the latter constitutes the object of their representation. Therefore, “Red mushroom labyrinths” and “lightning-bolt mazes” are not only “painted in caves” and, thus, objectified; in Snyder’s eyes, these paintings are the remnants of the knowledge primitive peoples once had. They pulse with the life of the natural world that lies outside the caves, which allows Snyder’s poetic imagination “to project a goal for human society” (Altieri 772) – that is, to attain the primitive knowledge that has now been lost.

2.2. Primitiveness as the Key to Understand Nature’s Self-Sufficiency

The poems I have hitherto analyzed belong to the first part of *Turtle Island*, which is called “Manzanita.” As we have seen, here Snyder establishes the relevance of the notion of primitiveness since it constitutes a central theme of his poetics. Nature has been portrayed so far as a living being that is partially subject to human activity and in constant danger of being overwhelmed. Allusions to war and urgency characterize the poems in “Manzanita” more than in the other sections of the volume. Primitiveness, however, allows Snyder to show the reader a way out of this war. By accepting more primitive ways of life, humankind can welcome “the call / of the wild” without fear, which might lead to a more profound geocentric understanding that the human and nonhuman worlds are interconnected since they embody different expressions of life on the planet, of the “living flowing land” (“By Frazier

³ In the text, this final line is followed by a cave painting that portrays a human foot.

Creek Falls” 41). Therefore, Snyder perceives nature to be valuable in itself, a large and complex organism whose value is, as Freyfogle puts it, “intrinsic” and not bound to its instrumental use with regard to “the promotion of human welfare” (1165). In fact, when discussing the alienation from the natural world caused by civilization, Snyder disregards anthropocentric terms and acknowledges that nature consists of “self-contained, self-informing ecosystems” (“The Wilderness” 106).

The poem in which Snyder embraces and attempts to portray such a geocentric view at the best of his abilities is “Mother Earth: Her Whales,” which is located in the second section of the volume, “Magpie’s Song.” Conflict is still decidedly present in the poem. Nevertheless, now nature appears to be portrayed with an agency of sorts:

An owl winks in the shadows
 A lizard lifts on tiptoe, breathing hard
 Young male sparrow stretches up his neck,
 big head, watching—

The grasses are working in the sun. Turn it green.
 Turn it sweet. That we may eat.
 Grow our meat. (“Mother Earth: Her Whales” 47)

Notice the verbs in the active form that Snyder employs to describe the animals and the grass in the incipit of this poem. The scene seems to portray some sort of awakening, with the owl winking, the lizard that “lifts on tiptoe,” and the sparrow stretching up its neck. The actions of these wild animals provide the poem with a sense of calmness. Similarly, the grasses “working in the sun,” are just as active as the wild animals, if not more. In fact, their activity suggests the self-determination of the natural world. Although the expression “working in the sun” is, to a degree, an instance of anthropomorphization of the vegetal world, Snyder

manages to convey an idea of nature as a self-sufficient organism that lives off itself, undertaking activities that are not necessarily human-related.

On the contrary, it is humankind that is strongly dependent on nature, “Turn it sweet. That we may eat. / Grow our meat.” These two lines introduce the human element of the poem and foreshadow the human-nature conflict:

Brazil says “sovereign use of Natural Resources”

Thirty thousand kinds of unknown plants-

The living actual people of the Jungle

sold and tortured—

And a robot in a suit who peddles a delusion called “Brazil”

can speak for *them*? (“Mother Earth: Her Whales” 47)

Being a product of industrialized civilization, Brazil is nothing but “a delusion,” a culturally-bound contrivance that disposes of the natural world in an authoritarian way. It is not the citizens of Brazil who are the people of the land they inhabit, it is the plants, “The living actual people of the Jungle.” By capitalizing the noun *jungle*, Snyder makes it a specific place-name, thus conferring relevance and dignity on it and establishing a powerful identity marker. Inversely, the Brazilian politician—presumably the president of Brazil—is devitalized and dehumanized. Snyder portrays him as a “robot,” a metonymical epitome of human technology that is utterly ignorant of the natural world and its “Thirty thousand kinds of unknown plants.”

Then, the whales appear, offering once again a nonhuman point of view. Their metaphorical significance is exemplified by the title of the poem itself “Mother Earth: Her Whales.” As Buell writes, “Whales anciently seemed to partake of ocean’s mysterious, radical, ambiguous otherness: to symbolize divine power, whether benign or threatening” (203). Moreover, “size alone makes whales easy to envision as planetary microcosms” (202).

The use of the noun *people* is telling with regard to Snyder's aims in these lines. Here, he claims that the world belongs to nonhumans as well as humans. The names of all of these different kinds of people are capitalized, which strengthens even more this very idea of belonging within a community that is deprived of traditional hierarchical structures since all beings are, to Snyder, "people!"

Finally, the poem ends with a change of scene, showing us again the owl, the lizard, and the whales. Here, there is a word-for-word repetition of the initial lines as the animals perform the same actions that were described at the beginning of the poem. Thus, the natural scenery suggested by this portrayal of the animal world allows the poem to reach closure—particularly so, if we consider the metaphorical relevance of whales since they are, as I have already discussed, signifiers of the planetary ecosystem,

An Owl winks in the shadow

A lizard lifts on tiptoe

breathing hard

The whales turn and glisten

plunge and

Sound, and rise again

Flowing like breathing planets

In the sparkling whorls

Of living light. ("Mother Earth: Her Whales" 49)

By ending "Mother Earth: Her Whales" with a scene that evokes a sense of circularity and closure, Snyder seems to imply that the natural world will keep on living despite harmful human activities. However, although these lines consist of word-for-word repetitions of lines

that can be found at the beginning of the poem, some cuts have been made. In fact, now only the owl, the lizard, and the whales take part in the scene, while the sparrow and the grasses are not mentioned. Such an omission shrouds these lines with a feeling of loss and, at the same time, suggests the idea of change as well as survival. The natural world will live on regardless of human activity but will not remain untouched by their actions. On the contrary, the lack of the grasses and the sparrow in this final scene decidedly implies that some of the earth's "Fading living beings" will be left behind and perish. Therefore, being a self-sufficient organism, "Mother Nature" will survive despite the changes determined by the loss of some of her animal and vegetal species.

Similarly to "Mother Nature: Her Whales," in the poem "By Frazier Creek Falls" Snyder establishes once again that the themes of nature's self-sufficiency and that of kinship between all living beings constitute a major feature of his poetics in *Turtle Island*. Here, Snyder portrays a natural scene that is only partly tainted by human presence. The tone is mainly descriptive and manages to convey a sense of movement to the nonhuman beings in the poem:

Standing up on lifted, folded rock

looking out and down—

The creek falls to a far valley.

hills beyond that

facing, half-forested, dry

—clear sky

strong wind in the

stiff glittering needle clusters

of the pine—their brown

round trunk bodies
 straight, still;
 rustling trembling limbs and twigs

listen. (“By Frazier Creek Falls” 41)

Snyder’s use of words such as “bodies” and “limbs” when referring to the pines in the scene constitutes an attempt to humanize them. Much like the grasses “working in the sun” in “Mother Earth: Her Whales” (47), this process of anthropomorphization does not result in a purely anthropocentric description of the natural scene. Instead, it provides a sense of connection between the human and the nonhuman worlds, suggesting their fundamental likeness. In addition to this, as was the case with the wild animals and the grasses in “Mother Nature: Her Whales,” here too the description of the nonhuman protagonists of the poem is characterized by the use of active verbs. The rock is “looking out and down,” while the creek “falls to a far valley,” and the hills are “facing” the blowing wind. The isolated verb “listen” is ambiguous and serves multiple purposes. Firstly, from a syntactical point of view, we can interpret it as referring to the “rustling trembling limbs and twigs”—which constitute a metonymical reference to the pines. In this case, the pines too, similarly to other natural elements, are provided with agency by Snyder and partake in the general self-sufficient movement of the scene—that is to say, a natural movement that does not instrumentally occur in relation to human needs. At the same time, considering both its isolation and Snyder’s tendency not to conform to conventional syntax and punctuation, the verb “listen” might refer to the human beings that are unobtrusively observing the scene.

In fact, this verb introduces the final section of the poem, which is, essentially, an ode to Gaia or “Mother Nature,” as Snyder often calls it. Here, Snyder introduces images of the

natural world's self-sufficiency as well as of communion between the human and the nonhuman milieus, both of which are informed by the notion of primitiveness:

This living flowing land

is all there is, forever

We are it

it sings through us—

We could live on this Earth

without clothes or tools! (“By Frazier Creek Falls” 41)

In these lines, the world appears to be fundamentally interconnected. Human beings are people of the earth just like every other living being and, in themselves, are an expression of nature. Similarly to the howling of the coyote that the speaker perceives as a form of “singing” in “The Call of the Wild” (21), here too nature sings and, most importantly, “it sings through us” since, in a world untouched by civilization, human beings are capable of living as part of the natural world. The land moves like the natural elements in the first part of the poem, “living” and “flowing.” In this regard, the verb “flowing” appears to be particularly meaningful⁴ since it reminds the reader of water, which is considered to be the essential source of life by many primitive cultures (Witzel 18-19) as well as by modern science (VanCleave 161). Hence the powerful closing claim that human beings should forsake civilization and embrace the knowledge of these primitive cultures, “We could live on this Earth / without clothes or tools!”

⁴ Snyder’s use of “flowing” might also be reminiscent of Emerson’s description of a river in his essay “Nature,” where he claims to be reminded of “the flux of all things” (17).

2.3. The shortcomings of Snyder's approach

Numerous features of Snyder's poetry hint at the fact that he tries to adopt a geocentric standpoint in many of his poems. His speakers are mostly descriptive and detached, and the scarce use of the personal pronoun *I* provides the poem with a rather impersonal tone. Snyder challenges the canons of Western tradition by drawing from literary and philosophical sources that do not belong to the West and by attempting to place nature at the center of his poetics and make it the lens through which his speakers observe the world and ascribe meaning to things. In essence, Snyder's poetry provides us with an ecologically-oriented axiology where humans and nonhumans are fundamentally alike since they are equally part of the living environment.

However, Snyder ultimately fails to attain his poetic goals. Both Western tradition and anthropocentrism seem to be ever-recurring elements in his poetry despite his commendable efforts to shun and replace them. The first poem we have analyzed in this chapter devoted to the analysis of Snyder's poetry is "Anasazi," which provides a telling instance of Snyder's incapability to be faithful to his poetic ideals. Being the first poem in the volume, "Anasazi" acts as an introductory piece of writing that sets the tone for *Turtle Island*. As we have seen, it begins with an invocation to the ancient people of the same name and the syntactical ambiguity that characterizes the poem strongly suggests a communion between the Anasazi and their surroundings. Thus, a sense of togetherness and lack of superimposed hierarchies decidedly imbues the poem.

Snyder does not consider the Anasazi in historical or secular terms. Instead, he employs them as metaphorical tokens of the intimate connection between indigenous cultures and the natural environment. The Anasazi are a mythological people whose connection with nature ensures them quasi-supernatural powers, being "up to your hips in Gods" ("Anasazi" 3). However, Snyder's newly-found mythology in the history of Turtle Island constitutes the

prime example of transposition in his work. Whereas previous poets in Western literary tradition invoked the Muse, Snyder invokes the Anasazi. This invocation decidedly undermines the ecological originality of the poem, which I discussed earlier. In fact, Snyder merely replaces the Muse with the Anasazi, thus operating a rather cosmetic change that does not result in a genuinely original attempt to change the structure of the poem differently from most other instances of Western poetry. Although the names may differ, the Muse and the Anasazi serve the same purpose from a poetic point of view, which raises questions over the extent of the originality of Snyder's approach.

Moreover, it should be noted that the Anasazi are humans. This apparently trivial remark becomes meaningful once we realize that instead of invoking natural elements or Gaia, Snyder invokes humans instead. In virtue of their privileged condition, the Anasazi are closely bound to the natural world. As we have seen, they are attuned to it to such an extent that the syntax changes in an ambiguous way, which makes it unclear whether certain adjectives or verbs are referred to the Anasazi or other nonhuman elements in the poem. Nevertheless, this indigenous people of Turtle Island still belongs to the human milieu. Therefore, Snyder's invocation implicitly denotes a standpoint that is tainted by anthropocentrism. If we take this anthropocentric view into account, we can see how the shadow of human-based hierarchical structures looms over the poem "Anasazi" despite Snyder's efforts to cast off views that see the human and the nonhuman as distinct and belonging to a hierarchy of values that is essentially not egalitarian.

As we have seen, "The Dead by the Side of the Road" is a poem characterized by conflict. Here, the human and non-human spheres clash in a fashion that suggests the impossibility of their communion. The poem denounces abuse and exploitation of the animal world by portraying animals skinned, shot, or simply lying dead on the road, like the "great Red-tailed Hawk" (7). The presence of humankind can be found in synthetic elements such as

“sulphuric acid pickle” and “fossil fuel” (7). Indeed, Snyder suggests human presence by portraying certain polluting elements of civilization instead of accurately describing specific groups of people. This technique allows him to generalize humankind and portray a faceless industrial civilization, whose presence is denoted by the metonymic relevance of synthetic pollutants.

However, the last stanza of the poem subtly attempts to provide a solution to this conflict: “Pray to their spirits. Ask them to bless us” (8). The solution is phrased in the form of yet another invocation, a dialogue between the living and the dead. In “The Dead by the Side of the Road”, the issue concerning primitiveness is similar to the one I discussed in “Anasazi”. Here, Snyder draws from an unspecified pre-industrial human tradition and has his speaker pray to the spirits of the dead animals. The ability—and willingness—to pray for their spirit^[1] denotes the affinity between the speaker and the natural world. But seemingly, the distinctness between the human and the natural spheres is an issue Snyder cannot overcome. His need to draw from an indigenous, albeit unspecified, human tradition in order to achieve a connection with nature in this poem strongly opposes a geocentric interpretation of this poem. Despite his attempts to use a nameless narrator that could imbue the poem with an external and objective point of view, the focus of the poem is not necessarily on animals and the environment as it might seem at a glance. Instead, the speaker’s eye is looking at humankind itself, at its overwhelming presence within the environment, and at pre-industrial civilizations whose attunement to nature was greater than modern civilization’s.

The poem “The Way West, Underground” provides us with yet another example of the shortcomings of Snyder’s geopoetics. Early in the poem, primitiveness plays a predominant role. The speaker introduces the natural scenery of forests, islands with “foggy volcanoes,” and grasslands. As we have seen, the humans portrayed in the first few stanzas of the poem are the indigenous inhabitants of the land. The Ainu and the Gilyak are not

mythical peoples in themselves. Instead, they are the peoples whose presence on certain territories preceded the superimposed labels of “North Japan” and “China.” However, in the poem Snyder avoids any kind of realism in his depiction of indigenous life. His poetic spirit strives for the essential communion of humankind and the natural world. This poetic need leads him to portray the native people of Finland in a rather naïve fashion:

All the Finns in moccasins and
pointy hats with dots of white,
netting, trapping, bathing,
singing holding hands, the while

see-sawing on a bench, a look of love . . .” (“The Way West, Underground” 5)

In addition to being stereotypical, this description of the Finns comes across as clumsy and naïve. The lack of details generates a sense of blurriness in the scene; the speaker deprives the Finns of any kind of meaningful identity and individuality. The first two lines of the passage above denote this: “they wear moccasins and pointy hats with dots of white;” this is the extent to which Snyder is willing to provide us with details. Although such blurriness may enhance the sense of belonging shared by the Finns within the natural world as if they were just another element of the environment, this portrayal does not provide the reader with a tangible perception of the Finns—thus, instead of becoming a symbol of kinship between humankind and nature, this indigenous population is an undetailed blurry image that lacks identity, individuality, and uniqueness.

The speaker’s description of people “singing, holding hands” while carrying out different activities is overly romanticized to say the least. Its idyllic tone and its meter filled with internal rhymes and assonances is reminiscent of nursery rhymes, which strengthens the argument that Snyder is looking for a way to portray the communion between the pre-

industrial Finns and their environment. However, there is no attempt at objectivity in these lines. Here, the past is idealized in a crystallized image of cheerfulness and epiphany that avoids any kind of realism. The extremism, as it were, of Snyder's approach is characterized by an absence of shades, of in-betweens and intermediary points. "The Way West, Underground" constitutes a prime example of Snyder's ideology weakening his poetry, which means that the environmental message his poetry carries does not support his ideology to the degree it potentially could.

Similarly, in "By Frazier Creek Falls," we are told that humans "could live on this Earth / without clothes or tools!" The epiphany experienced by the speaker while observing Gaia, the "living flowing land" leads him or her to this conclusion. Moreover, we can find again the theme of singing since the earth "sings through us" (41). This epiphany too, however, appears to be imbued with a good deal of naivety and as was the case with the Finns in "The Way West, Underground." In the speaker's dreamy vision of primitiveness, humankind should renounce not only industrialization but also everything else that might differentiate them from other animals: clothes and tools. But this strongly clashes with previous appraisals of native peoples such as the Anasazi, the Ainu, and the Finns, which provided virtuous examples of living in communion with the environment. For instance, in "The Way West, Underground," we are told that the Finns wear "moccasins / and pointy hats" while they are "netting," which is in itself an activity aimed at the production of a tool, or "trapping," which likely requires a net or other kinds of handmade tools.

Snyder's tendency to anthropomorphize the natural world constitutes another problematic point in his poetry. In fact, anthropomorphization denotes a standpoint that is by all means human. Although it provides a fascinating way to bring together humankind and nature, it prevents poems such as "Mother Earth: Her Whales" to encompass the human and the natural worlds in a way that does not presuppose a hierarchical scale of values.

Ultimately, anthropomorphization implicitly shifts the attention from nature to humans. When the speaker talks of “grasses . . . working in the sun”, he is already answering the urgent question that will follow later in the poem: “IS man most precious of all things?” But if it is by anthropomorphizing plants that Snyder attempts at portraying the communion between the human and the nonhuman, he overlooks the fact that this rhetoric means puts the former in a dominant hierarchical position over the latter.

Unlike his prose, Snyder seldom resorts to ecological or biological jargon in his poetry. Instead, he talks about “brothers” and “people” when referring to either plants or animals, possibly in an attempt to generate empathy in the reader. As McClintock puts it, Snyder is attracted to “biological-ecological views because they are accounts of phenomenal nature . . . but he is also attracted to their social, political and cultural implications” (81). However, the attention given to the social, political, and cultural issues related to the relationship between humankind and the environment in “Mother Earth: Her Whales” provides us with an example of the limited scope of the poem since Snyder implicitly constrains it within the boundaries of a strictly anthropocentric perspective. The impersonal and objective descriptiveness of the first stanza—which is a leitmotiv in poems from *Turtle Island* that often suggests a nonhuman standpoint—is replaced by an anthropocentric point of view that, at times, attempts to provide objective historical accounts: “The forests of Lo-yang were logged and all the silt & / Sand flowed down, and gone, by 1200 AD” (“Mother Earth: Her Whales” 47). Such an alternation between objective description and poetic anthropomorphization constitutes a meaningful clash in the poem and undoubtedly lessens the comprehensiveness of its ecologically-oriented nature by embracing a merely human perspective that anthropomorphizes the nonhuman world.

2.4. Conclusion

Ultimately, Snyder's poetics in the book *Turtle Island* draw heavily on the notion of primitiveness, which is a prominent feature in North American nature writers such as Thoreau and Emerson. However, Snyder's originality lies in the fact that he employs primitiveness as an essential interpretative key through which the natural world can be seen as self-sufficient and valuable in itself regardless of its utility to the welfare of human beings. Thus, Snyder attempts to shun a hierarchical view that sees humankind as the "most precious of all things" ("Mother Earth: Her Whales" 48). Instead, his poetry constitutes an effort to posit the essential interrelatedness and kinship of all living beings since, similarly to authors such as Aldo Leopold and James Lovelock, he understands that life on Earth as a whole constitutes a self-sufficient organism and community. In order to portray these ideas in his poetry, he employs rhetorical instruments such as the capitalization of nouns and the use of personal pronouns when referring to wild animals and plants, which are tokens of the natural environment.

Moreover, although in the first section of *Turtle Island* Snyder establishes the dangers and harms caused by industrialized societies and occasionally portrays nature as passive and in need of protection, in the poems "Mother Earth: Her Whales" and "By Frazier Creek Falls," the natural world is characterized by the activity and agency of its various components. Therefore, Snyder suggests that nature will survive humankind despite the changes caused by the latter and regardless of whether human beings will eventually manage to live "without clothes or tools" ("By Frazier Creek Falls" 41) within nature. Snyder's poetry recognizes the intrinsic value and self-sufficiency of the natural world and attempts to relate to it in non-anthropocentric terms by rejecting the dogmas of civilization and embracing primitiveness, thus reconciling the human and the nonhuman spheres.

However, this approach is mostly unsuccessful due to Snyder's use of rhetorical elements such as invocations and anthropomorphization, and his tendency to draw subtly from Western literary tradition. The invocation of the Anasazi is telling with regard to anthropocentrism in *Turtle Island* since the Anasazi are humans and, despite their intimate connection with the natural world, they implicitly suggest the predominance of anthropocentrism over geocentrism. As we have discussed earlier, this invocation is a prime example of what I called in this chapter transposition. By beginning his book with a poem that contains an invocation to a mythic people, Snyder employs "Anasazi" as a proem of sorts where instead of invoking the Muse, he invokes the Anasazi, thus bounding *Turtle Island* to the canon of Western literature and undermining its originality.

Also, Snyder's tendency to anthropomorphize the natural world strengthens the argument in favor of the predominance of anthropocentrism over geocentrism in *Turtle Island* despite Snyder's many attempts to embrace a geocentric point of view. In fact, the anthropomorphization of animals and plants in poems such as "Mother Earth: Her Whales," "The Dead by the Side of the Road," and "The Way West, Underground" denotes the Snyder's fundamental incapability to detach his speakers from the all-too-human standpoint he harshly criticizes both in his poetry and prose. Although he does acknowledge the self-sufficiency of the natural world, in *Turtle Island* the environment is perceived in relation to humans even when the speakers provide what at a first glance appear to be impersonal descriptions of scenes and events from the poems. The matter-of-fact tone employed by Snyder, which should act as a rhetoric instrument allowing nature to express itself in his poems, clashes with the anthropocentrism disclosed by Snyder's anthropomorphic portrayals of wild animals.

Ultimately, Snyder's poetic approach with regard to the exploration of the relationship between humankind and the natural environment is unsuccessful due to the very

shortcomings of an approach that is rather simplistic. The extremism embraced by Snyder, which is certainly bound to his political beliefs, leads him to simplify a complex issue such as the problematic relationship between humankind and nature. *Turtle Island* is a work of either-or where there is no possibility of finding a middle ground, a book of black and white where we are not capable of discerning different kinds of nuances. The spectrum of Snyder's poetry is made of polar opposites: the utterly demonic industrial civilization finds itself in conflict with the idyllic natural environment and virtuous pre-industrial human cultures. Primitiveness is the prime mover of *Turtle Island*, but Snyder's approach prevents communication between these two spheres. Unlike Elizabeth Bishop—whose work I will discuss in the next chapter of my dissertation—in Snyder the communion between the human and the natural milieus lies in a long-lost past that has been buried under millennia of human history and of which we only perceive faint and naïve echoes of indigenous people “singing holding hands” (“The Way West, Underground” 5), or dreamy and unrealistic visions of life “without clothes or tools” (“By Frazier Creek Falls” 41).

3. Elizabeth Bishop: The Interrelatedness between the Human and the Natural Worlds

As opposed to Gary Snyder, Elizabeth Bishop's work constitutes one of the most poignant and meaningful arguments opposing a "dualistic" vision that sees modern civilizations and nature as fundamentally divided (Cronon 17). However, scholars have too often neglected or simplified the role the natural and human-made worlds play in her work. The dynamics that govern their relationship have seldom been a primary object of analysis with the exception of a focus on the human-nature conflict. My claim is that both in her poetry and prose are to be found elements that suggest the coexistence and communion between the human and the natural. Bishop appears to see them neither as wholly distinct nor feebly linked. Instead, she understands their essential interrelatedness. In this chapter, I will investigate the interrelatedness of natural and human elements in the poems "The Moose," "Under the Window: Ouro Preto," "Filling Station," "The Fish," "At the Fishhouses" and in the autobiographical short story "In the Village." For Bishop, it is true that elements of nature often offer a soothing embrace that "allow[s] some traumas to rest" (Hughes 159). But it is also true that human activity and even various kinds of objects can serve a rather similar purpose in her work. This is so because Bishop recognizes that both the human and the natural intrinsically share values that establish a kinship between them.⁵

In the poems "The Moose," "The Fish," and "At the Fishhouses" Bishop explores a theme that plays an essential role in her poetics. The problematic relationship between nature—exemplified by the presence of wild animals such as the moose and the fish in the homonymous poems and the natural element of water in "At the Fishhouses"—and human

⁵ Similar claims can be found in Cook, Kalstone, and Hughes. However, they ascribe the comforting virtues of the human to either a need for an alternative "normal reality" after the institutionalization of Bishop's mother (Cook 34) or to the psychological aid it provides—in the form of ordinary objects, in the case of Kalstone—with regards to "absorb[ing] numbing or threatening experiences" (*Becoming a Poet* 220) and "allow some traumas to rest" (Hughes 159). Although perceptive, I wish to push these interpretations further by introducing in my reading of Bishop's work the idea that there is an essential likeness between the human and the nonhuman that she often hints at.

will constitute the key to my interpretation of these three poems. In addition, I will consider a number of collateral motifs from “Under the Window: Ouro Preto,” “Filling Station,” and the short story “In the Village” as they throw further light on the interplay between the human and the natural in a variety of settings. I will also discuss the importance of the notion of *singleness in Bishop’s work—stunningly exemplified in “In the Waiting Room”*—along with that of the individual distinctness of the self that derives from it.

My analysis is also crucially bound to John Berger’s essay “Why Look at Animals?” and Gaston Bachelard’s *La Poétique de la Rêverie* from which I derive and employ the notion of daydreaming or reverie. Reverie, which is caused by the human observation of wild animals and more in general, nature, informs a number of Bishop’s poems. In her work the human and the natural often coexist beyond the ordinary world of facts; the human and the natural partake in a communion and belong to one another.⁶ I argue that Bishop’s most relevant achievement, particularly in the eye of the present-day reader, lies in the fact that she either showed or suggested that the human and the human-made can find their place in the natural world in a way that does not necessarily involve an idea of abuse or contamination. By doing so, she successfully managed to detach herself from the atavistic dichotomy that sees the human and the natural as separate entities, where the former has dominion over the latter.⁷ Most importantly, she renovated the Romantic and Transcendentalist views that saw in nature the primitive sources of the natural within the human, thus dismissing the products of human civilization by labelling them unnatural. Bishop’s sense of belonging encompasses both the human—and human-made—and the natural, and at times is equally drawn by primitiveness (Millier 162) as well as civilization.

⁶ This is not to say that Bishop’s work does not present instances of either explicit or underlying conflict between human and nature. Nevertheless, the attitude showed toward such clashes is of acceptance as opposed to despair or zealous criticism of human activities within nature.

⁷ To find meaningful examples of this view one needs look no further than, for instance, Genesis 1.28 or *The Epic of Gilgamesh* Tablet I.

3.1. Singleness and the Individuality of the Self

The notion of singleness lies at the heart of Bishop's poetry. It consists of one's awareness of his or her own single and distinct identity. It is "the idea of the lone self, the single eye, the single voice, the single memory" (Tóibín 10), which leads to a sense of the existential and apparently inescapable solitude of the self. Similar to a rite of passage, this awareness marks the end of the innocence proper to childhood in which the child enjoys a non-mediated communion with their surroundings and the natural environment. In the poem "In the Waiting Room," Bishop recounts this turning point as the speaker experiences it at seven years of age:

But I felt: you are an *I*,
 you are an *Elizabeth*,
 you are one of *them*.

 I scarcely dared to look
 to see what it was I was.
 I gave a sidelong glance
 —I couldn't look any higher—
 at shadowy gray knees,
 trousers and skirts and boots
 and different pairs of hands
 lying under the lamps.
 I knew that nothing stranger
 had ever happened, that nothing
 stranger could ever happen. (60-62, 64-74)

Such an experience, being able to utter “you are an I,” and from this standpoint perceive and relate to the other beings and objects in the room as “different” from that very I is “something obvious to the world but utterly odd to the child” (Tóibín 12). This understanding projects the child into the otherness constituted by the world, the very existence of which was unknown prior to the revelation of the self. In this moment of revelation and detachment that follows Aunt Consuelo’s scream of pain from inside the dentist’s office, “the child . . . finds unexpectedly that she is prey to it [i.e. pain] herself at the moment which sentences her adulthood” (Kalstone, “Questions of Memory” 176).

According to Bachelard, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood consists in a shift from the child’s intuition of “an existence without limits” (“une existence sans limites”; 85)⁸ to a fall into the world of familial, social, and psychological conflict (92). It is indeed a sense of falling that pervades the speaker in Bishop’s poem:

I was my foolish aunt,
 I—we—were falling, falling,

 I was telling it to stop
 the sensation of falling off
 the round, turning world
 into cold, blue-black space. (49-50, 56-59)

By discovering her own individuality and distinctness, the child automatically understands that her condition is not exclusive to her as it does not constitute an exceptional state of affairs. Instead, she sees that others, embodied by her aunt, share her same fate. She is not falling alone, “we were falling.” The plural personal pronoun “we” is telling with regard to the sense of communal belonging that arises from the poem. As Hollister points out in her

⁸ All the translations from Bachelard’s *La Poétique de la Rêverie* are mine.

discussion of Bishop's relationship with society, "her first person plural shows thoughts of a shared condition" (Hollister 403).⁹ It follows that for Bishop singleness constitutes a starting point, a departure from an early, more immediate and homely consciousness to one that is aware of the distinctness of its natural surroundings.

This distinctness owes much to the cultural traditions of the society to which Bishop belonged, which saw the human and the natural as detached. For this reason Longenbach claims that "the child is learning that whatever sense of selfhood she possesses is a precarious social construction"¹⁰ and, by the end of the poem, she acknowledges the "certainty" of the outside world (481) despite her apparent inability to establish an "intelligible relation to her world" (Vendler 25). Thus, the child "is stuffed with sociality" ("On le bourre de socialité"; Bachelard, 91), which suggests that such a detachment between the outside world and Elizabeth the child constitutes a rite of passage into adulthood—a form of knowledge that is culturally mediated and based on her momentary identification with her aunt and the community to which both of them belong.¹¹ The cumulative description of objects in "In the Waiting Room" and disclosure of the specific issue of the *National Geographic* the child is reading¹² serve to "root" the poem in its "time and place," as many of Bishop's poems are (Cook 24). In this way her sense of always "being in geography" is accentuated and accounts

⁹ Although "In the Waiting Room" appeared in Bishop's last book of poetry *Geography III*, it proves a posteriori the claims made by Goldensohn with regard to Bishop's shift from a more recurrent use of *we* in her earlier poems—which suggests a greater interest and sense of belonging in a community—as opposed to the more self-oriented *I* that appears more frequently in the ones written after the death of her life-long partner Carlota de Macedo Soares in 1967 (Goldensohn xiii, 235).

¹⁰ To argue, as Longenbach does, that the sudden awareness of the speaker's selfhood in Bishop's poem essentially consists of an artificial social construction is debatable as there is not enough evidence in Bishop's work to support this argument successfully, despite the efforts of ideology-driven scholars such as Lee Edelman (see Edelman 97-98) or certain views exposed in *The Geography of Gender* edited by Lombardi. Nevertheless, it is beyond any reasonable doubt that the awareness and understanding of Bishop's idea of self in "In the Waiting Room" is at least partly mediated and influenced by the culture she lived in. This is important to keep in mind for my discussion of the human-nature relationship in her work.

¹¹ According to Longenbach, Elizabeth's identification is also enhanced by her recognition of "her own destiny in the racial and sexual otherness of the African women" she sees in the magazine (480).

¹² "Our eyes glued to the cover / of the *National Geographic*, / February, 1918" ("In the Waiting Room" 51-53).

for the communal feeling that “one is always in geography . . . among others, a ‘we’ of some kind” (Hollister 426, 420).

3.2. Human-made and Natural environments: Signs of Conflict and Communion

“In the Waiting Room” explores the passage from childhood to adulthood, which originates from the speaker’s awareness of her own singleness and her relation with other human beings. In the poem “The Moose,” the theme of departure is elaborated in the incipit. This time, however, the idea of departure and passage is of a different kind: it is not psychological but physical. In the first two stanzas, the constant and recurrent movement of the tides and, specifically, their moving away from the bay, makes for a sense of loss and longing:

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,

the bay not at home; (1-12, emphasis added)

These first two stanzas, in addition to the third one, are for the most part descriptive. They portray a visual scenery observed by the poem’s speaker. The object of her gaze is nature.

Recalling Whitman's rendition of nature by means of lengthy lines that seem to emulate the breath of natural things,¹³ here Bishop elegantly employs one lengthy sentence¹⁴ filled with images that sketch the natural environment in which the poem is set. The dominating feeling that transpires is one of comfort, as nature's presence appears to be somewhat "reassuring" in the eyes of the speaker (Kalstone, "Questions of Memory" 180). The description is carried on by the speaker's calm, lulling tone so that the lines move in a "rocking, recursive motion" (Goldensohn 257). It is also marked by the unobtrusive and natural-looking alliterative use of the adverbial function words *from* and *where* at the beginning of each stanza.

As a result, the speaker's consciousness is slowly and serenely eased into a state of seemingly passive receptivity. Only after these three stanzas does the poem introduce us to the "bus journey[ing] west" (26), thereby introducing a shift from a purely natural landscape to one that is partly human-made, comprised of human-made objects,

on red, gravelly roads,
 down rows of sugar maples,
 past clapboard farmhouses
 and neat, clapboard churches,
 bleached, ridged as clamshells,
 past twin silver birches,

 through late afternoon
 a bus journeys west,
 the windshield flashing pink,
 pink glancing off of metal,

¹³ "Language itself is envisioned by Whitman as obeying [the] projecting forces that move things forward according to natural growth laws" (Shurin 123).

¹⁴ It is a sentence that "builds like a Latin sentence, with the main clause deferred until line 26 and the preceding lines all dependent phrases and clauses" (Cook 230).

brushing the dented flank
of blue, beat-up enamel;

down hollows, up rises,
and waits, patient . . . (18-32)

In these three stanzas focusing on the human-made elements of the environment surrounding the westward-bound bus, the tone of the description does not change despite the shift in content. As with the poem's first three stanzas, each of the following three is introduced by a prepositional or adverbial function word—*on*, *through*, *down*—that marks the unhurried rhythm pervading the six-stanza-long introductory part of the poem.¹⁵

This inclusive embrace of both the human and the nonhuman spheres suggests their interrelatedness and implicitly avoids framing them in a hierarchical scale of values. If the first three stanzas – with their “long tides,” and “river,” and “bay” – are presented as comforting and reassuring, the same is true of the “gravelly roads,” the “farmhouses,” and the “churches.” Just as the “all-encompassing rain, mist, and vegetation” equally embrace human and natural elements in “Song for the Rainy Season” (Fast 29), so do the function words and the slow-paced rhythm they introduce pervade both the human and the natural in “The Moose.” Such an embrace indicates a meaningful connection between these two dimensions and indicates that they belong to a shared sphere of significance, perhaps with only different gradations of a same spectrum. As Cook points out, the speaker attributes to the bay “coming in . . . not at home” human traits so that an “impersonal geographical metaphor is quickened into a literal human home,” while the bus is similarly personified, having its flank brushed by the sunlight (231). In addition, the six stanzas share the same space in the poem¹⁶ and, in their

¹⁵ Even the structure of the sentence is extremely similar as the lengthy introductory sentence runs through more than one stanza.

¹⁶ As I have already mentioned, both the nature-related and the human-related sections of the incipit are comprised of three stanzas with an equal number of lines. It is difficult to overlook this formal nuance when

continuity of form, they suggest the fundamental interconnection and likeness of the human-made and the natural: the presence of the “gravelly roads” is not lesser than and does not lessen that of “the bay not at home.”

Then, like a gradual perspective zoom-in, at the end of the sixth stanza and the beginning of the seventh the speaker introduces the first human beings, a family that seems to be physically enacting a departure that is similar to that of the tides described in the second stanza. Such a deductive approach to description—from general to particular, from natural to human-made and finally to human—is emphasized by the following lines expressing the speaker’s farewell to Nova Scotia: “Goodbye to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog” (37-38).¹⁷ For it is the togetherness of all these elements that constitutes the Nova Scotia landscape’s geocultural identity and significance for the poem’s persona. In this respect, the figure of the dog is emblematic. Throughout the poem, this animal is referred to three times and seems to be strictly related to humans, always showing itself either near them, as part of the familial nucleus—as is the case with the “collie supervis[ing]” (36) and the dog “down in the kitchen, / Tucked in her shawl” (125-126)—or near at hand, as a constitutive part of the human milieu—when the bus passes by the port and “A dog gives one bark” (74).

Indeed, in view of the metonymic farewell of the speaker to the dog, instead of explicitly addressing the family, the persona implies that the dog is not merely related to the human world, but is an intimate part of it. This is particularly true if we consider Berger’s thoughts on pets: “It [i.e. the pet] is part of that universal but personal withdrawal into the private small family unit . . . The pet *completes* him [i.e. the owner] . . . in this relationship the autonomy of both parties has been lost” (25). Likewise, the dogs in “The Moose” are not only family pets kept for leisure. They are farm dogs, which means they play an active and at

discussing, as I do here, the lack of clear suggestions regarding the presence of a hierarchical dominance between the human and the natural.

¹⁷ Here, it should be noted that the lines are divided: the first one indicates the purely natural world while the second one points to elements of the human one.

times fundamental role in a family's life and economy as well as in those of a community.

Bishop was undoubtedly very much aware of this. Perhaps this is why in her short story "In the Village" the importance of Jock, an old dog owned by one of the villagers, is made clear in both his owner's and the speaker's words:

"He hasn't hardly a tooth in his head and he's got rheumatism. I hope we'll get him through next winter. . . . We'll be lost without him." Mr. McLean speaks to me behind one hand, not to hurt Jock's feelings: "*Deaf as a post*. . . . He used to be the best dog at finding cows for miles around. People used to come from away down the shore to borrow him to find their cows for them. And he'd always find them. . . . Effie used to say, 'I don't know how we'd run the farm without him.'" (*The Collected Prose* 263-264)

Dogs often have a primary role within the human community. For example, farm dogs are an essential part of farming life, as the following passage from "In the Village" indicates: "We'd be lost without him . . . 'I don't know how we'd run the farm without him.'" Dogs are also full-fledged members of the family, so much so that Mr. McLean hides his mouth and possibly lowers his voice "not to hurt his [i.e. the dog's] feelings." The dog is treated with the same respect as humans and properly referred to by the personal pronouns *he* and *his*. Once they are domesticated, dogs and other animals often "complete" the human being affectively and ontologically. As Berger rightly points out, animals can also help man economically and practically, as is the case with the farm dog in "In the Village" and the dogs featured in "The Moose." In both cases "the autonomy of both parties has been lost." In the farm scenes of Nova Scotia described by Bishop in "In the Village" and the metonymic use of the dog in the speaker's farewell in "The Moose," the dog is an intrinsic part of the human world without which the idea of human would be lessened.

While the speaker in “The Moose” proceeds to describe the landscape, the communion of human and nonhuman that has characterized the poem so far encounters the images of a trembling iron bridge and a rattling plank, suggesting the presence of a conflict between nature and the human-built environment. But these new images also indicate traits of resilience that could be attributed to both:

A pale flickering. Gone.
 The Tantramar marshes
 and the smell of salt hay.
 An iron bridge trembles
 and a loose plank rattles
 but doesn't give way. (61-66)

Although the plank and the bridge do not “give way,” we have a sense of danger overcome. In fact, this rather casual phrasal verb is actually quite meaningful inasmuch as it carries within it the notion of conflict but also of ordinariness. Indeed, like all man-made objects, sooner or later, the bridge will fall and the plank break. The “persistent presence” of the natural landscape (Hughes 160) in Bishop’s poetry contrasts with the transiency and “frailty . . . of human observation and contrivance” (Kalstone, “Questions of Memory” 174). This apparent conflict in Bishop’s work has attracted the interest of scholarship,¹⁸ although little to no attention has been given to the possibility that the human-nature relationship is not merely conflictual in essence.

To return to the idea of ordinariness mentioned above, Bishop offers images of human-nature communion as well as conflict in her work and it is not possible to establish a

¹⁸ There is a plethora of critical commentary concerning the human-nature conflict in Bishop’s verse and prose and the convergence of interpretations is almost one-dimensional. Most scholars embrace a duality that sees nature, in Giragosian’s words, as “entirely non-human, independent of human design and meaning” (“Elizabeth Bishop’s Geopoetics” 235). Similar claims can be found in Hollister, who sees in Bishop’s nature an element that obscures human presence (412); Boschman reads Bishop’s nature as superethical (257), while Fast emphasizes its “destructive power” (24), to cite a few.

hierarchy between them in any way other than imposing it through an ideology-driven reading of her writings. Such a postulative impossibility is strengthened at its very core by Bishop's descriptive narrative style, which relies upon an "aggregation of observed details" (Mullen 64). This "aggregation" enriches her descriptions with countless details and, at times, overloads it. As Rosenbaum rightly suggests, her attention to detail "creates confusion about visual hierarchy and significance" (80). Even more so in view of Bishop's appreciation of Charles Darwin, her "favorite hero" (*One Art* xxii), who advocated for no absolutes. Instead, he "determined meaning as he proceeded" (Giragosian, "Elizabeth Bishop's Geopoetics" 244). In such an ambiguous and transformative context marked by her "poetics of process" (Hollister 410), attributing deeper meaning and value to perceptions of conflict as opposed to those of communion—or the other way around, for that matter—tells more about the interpreter's ends than those of the work itself.

The appearance of the moose constitutes the pivotal point of the poem. A wild animal seemingly not tainted by the presence of human beings, it emerges from "the impenetrable wood" (134), suggesting the logical unintelligibility of nature in the speaker's eyes.¹⁹ In the first stanza that introduces its entrance in the scene, the moose is characterized by its menacing traits. Looming in front of the bus, it is perceived as potentially menacing in view of its very presence and distinct otherness:

A moose has come out of
 the impenetrable wood
 and stands there, looms, rather,
 in the middle of the road.
 It approaches; it sniffs at

¹⁹ We should keep in mind, however, that the same adjective is used by Bishop in "Questions of Travel" in relation to "some inexplicable old stonework / inexplicable and impenetrable" (22-23). It follows from this adjectival interchangeability that the natural and the human are not as distinct as a superficial reading of her work might suggest.

the bus's hot hood. (133-138)

Indeed, the moose's otherness is highlighted by the initial use of the impersonal pronoun *it*. The subtle fear it seems to inspire is reminiscent of Romantic tropes concerning the sublime: "For the early romantic writers and artists who first began to celebrate it, the sublime was far from being a pleasurable experience" (Cronon 10). In these lines, Bishop suggests an affinity towards the tradition that "began with Emerson, Very, and Dickinson" (Bloom 1) and its meaningful connection with her work. But as the description of the moose unfolds, the speaker's point of view progressively broadens. Initially threatening and fear-inducing, it is transformed into an image of familiarity and homeliness. The speaker shifts her tone by appealing to the semantics of religion and in the process imbues this central event with a sense of solemnity:

Towering, antlerless,

high as a church,

homely as a house

(or, safe as houses).

A man's voice assures us

"Perfectly harmless . . ."

Some of the passengers

exclaim in whispers,

childishly, softly,

"Sure are big creatures."

"It's awful plain."

"Look! It's a she!"

Taking her time,
 she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.

Why, why do we feel
 (we all feel) this sweet
 sensation of joy? (139-156, emphasis added)

In this passage, Bishop draws on the traditional biblical associations of the notion of wilderness (Cronon 8)—which the moose represents in its undomesticated wildness and otherness—in addition to the subtle allusions to Romanticism showed in the stanza analyzed in the previous paragraph. Although “otherworldly” and nonhuman, here the otherness of the moose is scaled down and perceived in a more serene way. Particularly so in view of one of the passenger’s surprised discovery that the moose is “a she!” This revelation of the animal’s gender effectively reduces the gap between her and the passengers in the bus, indicating a transformative act of partial domestication. Like the anthropomorphized bay and the animalized bus in the incipit of the poem, the moose undergoes a shift in the traits attributed to her. Thus, the speaker says “she” is “homely as a house (or, safe as houses).”

3.3. Wild Animals and the Daydream

Unlike the bay and the bus, whose metamorphoses are stylistically characterized by the use of synesthesia, the description of the moose is marked by similes, which underline her otherness in addition to the religious allusions that characterize these stanzas. The emblematic solemnity of the passage is emphasized by the attitude of the people in the bus, whose conversations are heard and recounted by the speaker since they are told to whisper in the presence of the “grand, otherworldly” moose—as if they were churchgoers. These whispers are described as childish. Discussing Buffon, John Berger writes that “the animal seems to

him to enjoy a kind of innocence” (21). The moose’s “innocence” and purity indicate a connection between the natural environment and the human, a common ground for the expression of what Gaston Bachelard called “psychic primitiveness,” a trait proper to childhood (“primitivité psychique”; 89).²⁰

Furthermore, the moose’s presence arouses in the passengers a shared emotional experience. With regard to the relevance of childhood in the poem, this collective feeling could indeed be interpreted as an effect of the speaker’s return to a child-like state that, as we saw in “In the Waiting Room,” allows the child to ignore the ideas of individual consciousness and self, thus allowing her to be one with her surroundings according to an ontological and biological continuity. Suddenly, the speaker voices the emotions felt by the people in the bus by asking, “Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?” Berger provides a possible answer by introducing the notion of daydream, which consists of a state of wonder and understanding following upon the vision of a wild animal embedded in its wilderness milieu, which Berger infers from Lukacs’s discussion of nature and human:

. . . nature is also a value concept . . . opposed to the social institutions which strip man of his natural essence and imprison him . . . “[Nature] can be understood as that aspect of human inwardness which has remained natural, or at least tends or longs to become natural once more” [This is a quote Berger takes from Lukacs]. . . the life of a wild animal becomes an ideal . . . *The image of a wild animal becomes the starting-point of a daydream.* (27, emphasis added)

In effect, this appears to capture the kind of experience the speaker and the people in the bus undergo in their encounter with the moose. The wild animal, more directly and

²⁰ From a merely diegetic point of view, the use of the adverb “childishly” referred to the whispering of the passengers can be read in view of the “switch into her [i.e. Bishop’s] own grandparents” previously in the poem (Goldensohn 258) dictated by the speaker’s memory, which leads her to compare the chattering in “the back of the bus” to “an old conversation . . . Grandparents’ voices” (“The Moose” 95, 92, 96).

immediately connected to the natural world than the passengers in the bus, constitutes an emblem of what Bachelard called the “primitive world” (“monde primitif”; 88) of the human, which makes it possible for the occurrence of a “natural onirism” (“onirisme naturel”; 90), a state proper to reverie or the daydream. In Bachelard, the idea of childhood is strictly related to that of nature. According to him, childhood is a form of “psychic primitiveness.” For this reason, the child is considered to be closer to nature and to the wild animal than the adult. The child stands for the human’s “vegetal profoundness,” while a child-like state, characterizing reverie or the daydream, is imbued with “the vegetal power of childhood” (“la force végétale de l’enfance subsiste en nous . . . Le secret de notre végétalisme profond est là”; 117) that allows for a momentary vision of a communion with nature. The ecstatic feeling of joy in the poem is interpretable as the sudden experiencing of a daydream on the speaker’s part. It is a joy that appears to break the boundaries of individuality and selfhood.

The feeling lingers in the scene and sets the tone for the last stanza of the poem in which the dreamy view of the moose “on the moonlit macadam” (165)²¹ slowly fades as the bus continues on its journey. But its “dim / smell” (166-167) lingers and softly contrasts with the “acrid / smell of gasoline” (167-168) released by the bus’s engine. These lines have been interpreted as proof of the presence of the human-nature clash in the poem. For instance, Parker writes that “Bishop . . . fancies some special contact with it [i.e. the moose], but soon . . . she returns to the mechanical, synthetic world of ‘gasoline’” (126), which means that, similarly to the trembling iron bridge and the rattling plank, this odorous clash posits a conflict between nature and human, which goes unresolved. The plank and the bridge seem to

²¹ Although it could be explained with merely physical reasons related to the position of the speaker’s seat in the leaving bus, it is interesting to notice that, in order to see the moose, the speaker needs to “cran[e] backwards” (163). This stretching motion necessary to see the moose might subtly suggest the broader and more compelling difficulty of being connected with nature. In fact, we should keep in mind that the moose comes out of an “impenetrable” wood.

be in the hands of the “destructive power” of nature (Fast 24).²² Such a conflict plays an important role in Bishop’s poetics. However, I challenge these views since, to a closer analysis, in the last stanza the natural and the human mingle again as it was the case in the introductory stanzas of the poem. Thus, the poem achieves closure and the conflict resolves.

Despite the dominant smell of gasoline, the moose’s stink is still present and not at all annihilated. This constitutes a reversal of the dynamics suggested by the frailty of the plank and the bridge. Both the human and the natural spheres in the poem are transient. At times, they undoubtedly conflict, while at other times they peacefully coexist. The plank and the bridge might be overwhelmed by “the sweep and violence of encircling and eroding geological powers” (Kalstone, “Questions of Memory” 173), while the “smell of moose” might eventually be overwhelmed by that of gasoline. Nevertheless, in between these clashes, the “moonlit macadam” provides the speaker with a visual frame for the moose. In this frame, the “synthetic” and the natural worlds are connected and interrelated, which ultimately shows the continuity between the human—and human-made—and the natural. Once again, Bishop prevents the reader from establishing a hierarchy of any kind. In the poem’s description flow, the various objects are presented with equal relevance and dignity in their contrasts as well as their togetherness.

3.4. The Indexicality of Gasoline in the Context of the Human/Nature Relationship

Gasoline is a recurring element in Bishop’s work and intimately belongs to her poetics. In “The Moose,” it is mentioned at the very end of the poem, during the speaker’s daydream-like experience caused by the vision of the wild moose. In “Under the Window: Ouro Preto,” the speaker observes the city and the people of Minas Gerais from under the window, as the

²² As Tóibín points out, in Bishop’s poems the landscape—even the natural one—often presents one or more disturbing elements. In “The Bight,” for instance, “even the birds are given an edge of violence. The pelicans crash into water ‘unnecessarily hard / it seems to me, like pickaxes’” (73, 75).

title suggests. In the words of Gomes, “these images are in motion, everyday actions constantly changing that flow before the gaze of the poet” (“Essas imagens estão em movimento, ações do dia-a-dia que, em constante mudança, passam . . . diante do olhar fixo do poeta”; 63),²³ which embodies Revell’s belief that “attention . . . is how a poem begins” since “the eye is married to motion” (96, 114).

The action in the poem revolves around a source of water in Ouro Preto that “used to be / a fountain” (8-9). Humans and animals progressively populate the scene. First, the speaker introduces “women in red dresses” (3), then, “donkeys . . . and dogs,” as well as “bottle-green swallows” (17-18). Humans and animals are bound together by their silent agreement concerning the coldness of the water that sprouts from the source’s iron pipe. Particularly relevant here is the addition of the swallows to the brief list of animals partaking in this communion for, as we have seen both in “In the Village” and “The Moose,” dogs—and, similarly, donkeys—naturally belong to the human world. The swallows’ presence suggests that the natural and the human spheres are intimately intertwined in this communion, as the bird’s very color also hints at, it being described as “bottle-green.”

Then, an “old man” joins the action, followed by a “black boy” (19, 24) until the image of gasoline arises from such a motion. It is first preannounced by the arrival of a “big new truck, Mercedes-Benz” (31). Then “another, older truck grinds up / in a blue cloud of burning oil” (38-39). As the gasoline clouds the scene, we are subtly reminded of the encompassing presence of mist in many of Bishop’s poems,²⁴ a mist that embraces both the human and the natural spheres. Therefore, the epiphanic ending of the poem does not come as a surprise, as the gasoline undergoes a metamorphosis in the speaker’s eye:

The seven ages of man are talkative

²³ Translation mine.

²⁴ See, for instance, “Song for the Rainy Season” and “Cape Breton.”

and soiled and thirsty.

Oil has seeped into
the margins of the ditch of standing water

and flashes or looks upward brokenly,
like bits of mirror—no, more blue than that:
like tatters of the *Morpho* butterfly. (46-51)

As Longenbach points out, “Bishop transforms contamination into an emblem, beautiful and natural, for the mingling of differences” (477). Although it is true that this metamorphosis transforms the human into the natural and gasoline into a butterfly, the presence of the former does not necessarily constitute a contamination of the latter. Here the epiphanic moment is accompanied by the voices of the people around the water source, reminding us of the choral response of the passengers in “The Moose.” Moreover, the wild swallows “taste” the water just as the donkeys, the dogs, and the humans do. In this context, gasoline does not function merely as a pollutant. It stands for the presence of the human and the human-made within nature, thus suggesting their clash as well as their communion.

Another such example can be found in the poem “Filling Station.” At first, the “oil-soaked, oil permeated” station is described as “disturbing” in its blackness (3-5). Nevertheless, much like the domesticated animals in “The Moose,” “In the Village,” and “Under the Window: Ouro Preto,” “Filling Station” betrays signs of domesticity as the speaker claims, in brackets, that “it’s a family filling station” (12). Thus, the speaker dignifies the station. Despite the contrasting elements that are part of the “oil-soaked” scenery—both natural, like the “extraneous” begonia, and such human-built elements as the “taboret” and the “doily” (28-30)—its reality is softened by the daydream-like suggestion of care and affection that permeates the filling station, which culminates in the speaker’s recognition that

“Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant . . . / Somebody loves us all” (34-35, 41). Giragosian’s claim that Bishop’s “animal poems include an ethics of care for the marginalized and the oppressed” (“Elizabeth Bishop’s Evolutionary Poetics” 482) also embraces the human-built and gasoline-permeated worlds depicted in “Under the Window: Ouro Preto” and “Filling Station.”

As is the case in “The Moose,” in “The Fish” a wild creature seems initially menacing since it is described as being “a tremendous fish” (1). However, this view rapidly changes after the appearance of the adjectives “venerable / and homely,” following the patterns of initial estrangement and eventual reconciliation we have seen in “Filling Station” and “The Moose”—where from “loom[ing]” and “towering,” the moose becomes both “homely as a house” and “grand, otherworldly.”²⁵ This ambivalent attitude²⁶ builds upon the leitmotif constituted by the contrast between human and nature. Adjectives such as “frightening” when referring to the fish’s gills (24) and the description of its “lower lip” as “grim, wet, weapon-like” (48, 50) constitute further markers of the human-nature conflict in the poem. As in “The Moose,” the uneasiness that the fish inspires in the speaker is due to its seemingly unfathomable nature, which Berger calls “the abyss of noncomprehension” between the human and the animal (14). The speaker observes the fish but is not able to draw any inference or conclusion from it, as if it were some kind of alien object beyond human understanding. The observer admires and is fascinated by the fish’s mysteriousness:

They [i.e. the fish’s eyes] shifted a little, *but not*

to return my stare.

—It was more like the tipping

of an object toward the light.

²⁵ The duplicity of this view is reminiscent of Romantic poetry and the idea of sublime, although Bishop avoids its sentimentalizing (see Parker 126-127).

²⁶ Quoting an entry from Bishop’s journal, Hughes states that she “long[s] . . . for a landscape that is ‘natural & artificial’—for a place that is natural and wild yet at the same time distinguishable, mappable” (152).

I admired his sullen face,
 the mechanism of his jaw . . . (41-46)

At first, the speaker feels distant from the fish and they do not appear to be connected in any particular and meaningful way. The fish shows a lack of interest and does not look back at the speaker, which highlights their distance. Bishop scholars have fruitfully compared “The Moose” and Frost’s “The Most of It” in order to highlight their different approaches to nature.²⁷ “The Fish” provides an even more telling comparison than “The Moose” in view of the fish’s very indifference—his eyes “shifted a little / but not to return my stare”—which echoes that of the buck, who “forced the underbrush—and that was all” (“The Most of It” 20). On the contrary, the moose shows signs of curiosity as she is said to be “sniff[ing] at / the bus’s hot hood” (“The Moose” 138).²⁸ But as was the case with the moose—who is a *she*—in this passage the speaker’s use of the personal pronoun *he* to refer to the fish eventually bridges the gap between human and animal. This anthropomorphization of the wild animal brings it within the sphere of the speaker’s world and stands for their interrelatedness. To emphasize this connection by way of contrast, the animal is first described as practically a senseless inanimate object, which hints at the theme of the human-nature conflict on a purely linguistic level:

I caught a tremendous fish
 and held him beside the boat
 half out of water, with my hook
 fast in a corner of his mouth.
 He didn't fight.
 He hadn't fought at all.

²⁷ See Cook 233 and Vendler 28.

²⁸ For a more comprehensive comparative analysis of Bishop and Frost, see Parker 21-26.

He hung a grunting weight,
 battered and venerable
 and homely. Here and there
 his brown skin hung in strips
 like ancient wallpaper . . . (1-11)

The anaphoric use of the personal pronoun *he* builds up the tension implicit in the passage since this identity marker is always followed by verbs that state its object-like passivity—almost as if the fish were not interested in what is happening, even if it is its own death he is facing, “. . . breathing in / the terrible oxygen” (22-23). This can be taken as evidence of the speaker’s incapability to understand the wild animal even at the moment of death, which, according to Berger, constitutes the only point of convergence between animal and human life (15).

The fish is described as an object, a piece of machinery, until the end of the poem, when his jaw is said to be “aching” (64). This attribution is the first explicit indication that the poem’s persona is aware of the fish’s vitality other than the description of its gills taking in oxygen—which instead subtly suggests a dissipation of life. This acknowledgment of the fish as a living being comes across as a sudden intuition after the terse lines describing its body and leads to an even more attentive annotation. The final epiphany—the vision of a rainbow—culminates in the speaker setting the fish free:

I stared and stared
 and victory filled up
 the little rented boat,
 from the pool of bilge
 where oil had spread a rainbow
 around the rusted engine

to the bailer rusted orange,
 the sun-cracked thwarts,
 the oarlocks on their strings,
 the gunnels—until everything
 was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
 And I let the fish go. (65-76)

The description is “filled with the strain of seeing” (Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* 87) and the in-depth observation of the speaker, who “stared and stared” at the fish, the wild animal, while the mingling of oil and water allow for the occurrence of a daydream, an “imaginative transformation of oil to rainbow” (Giragosian, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Evolutionary Poetics” 479). At first, the “rainbow” is attributed to the oil spreading “around the rusted engine” until it reaches every part of the boat, from the internal bailer to the external gunnels—implicitly suggesting that the oil eventually spreads to the water surrounding the boat. Hence the speaker’s exhilarated exclamation “. . . everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” expressing a sort of reverie or daydream.

The rainbow is partly human-made. It is the result of the mingling of the human and the natural. As we have seen in “The Moose,” “Filling Station,” and especially “Under the Window: Ouro Preto”—where the epiphany springs from the union of water and gasoline—the human, here in the form of oil, hints at something more than a mere pollution of the natural. It points to their connectedness and commingling since, as Cook points out, from a biblical point of view the rainbow is “a sign of covenant” (152). Thus, the rainbow signifies the communion of the human and the natural. Indeed, the religious imagery suggested by the presence of the rainbow begs us to consider the human-nature communion more attentively, since Bishop seems quite conscious of its broader implications. She seems fully aware of the fine balance between them and their occasional clashes. In fact, biblically speaking, the

rainbow is not only a sign of covenant but also functions as a reminder for human beings of God's almighty power. It represents one of his many weapons and, as such, entails the ideas of threat and struggle. After the Flood, "The rainbow arcs like a battle bow hung against the clouds. (The Heb. Word for rainbow, *qeshet*, is also the word for a battle bow)" yet at the same time "The bow is now 'put away,' hung in place by the clouds, suggesting that the 'battle,' the storm, is over. Thus the rainbow speaks of peace" (Walvoord and Zuck 40). In effect, the epiphanic vision of the rainbow at the end of "The Fish" stands for the coexistence of conflict and communion between the human and the natural, as is the case of their interaction in "The Moose" and "Under the Window: Ouro Preto."

3.5. Conclusion

The singleness of the self that was first introduced in "In the Waiting Room" can now be viewed in contrast to the continuity within nature. Transient and feeble, the human and the human-made shiver in front of the non-human and are subject to it in the same way as the iron bridge and the plank in "The Moose." Nevertheless, the vision of the wild animal deeply moves the self. Its singleness is suddenly shaken and leans towards the pre-conscious condition it once knew, that of being one with the world and knowing no *otherness*. By means of reverie, the self rediscovers this condition through contact with the animal and thus re-experiences the "psychological primitiveness" postulated by Bachelard. In "At the Fishhouses," the daydream takes the form of an epiphany of knowledge or rather, of a profound yet vague understanding of what knowledge is. This time the vision is not caused by the presence of a wild animal but by the most intimate element of nature: water—specifically, seawater. The initial inescapable detachment between the speaker and nature is exemplified by the fact that she cannot physically touch the water, as if it were in essence beyond her (unlike the seal, who is continually bobbing up and down in it):

If you should dip your hand in,
 your wrist would ache immediately,
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire

If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
 then briny, then surely burn your tongue. (71-74, 76-77)

Direct contact with seawater, with the natural world, proves unbearable. The only way the speaker finds to get in touch with the “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear [water], / element bearable to no mortal” (48-49) is to refrain from seeking a complete, physical communion with it. Instead, she simply observes it, recognizing that a physical communion with it is apparently not possible. However, keeping a distance from it allows the speaker to be moved by that part of the self that, in Berger’s words, “tends or longs to become natural once more.” By introducing earlier in the poem a line that identifies the old man who “down by one of the fishhouses . . . sits netting” (2-3) as a family friend,²⁹ Bishop provides the poem with a biographical element that is fundamental to a more comprehensive understanding of its ending. It highlights the notion of singleness and that of its necessary transiency, which is also proper to human knowledge, as the speaker, perhaps reminiscent of Emerson’s “Nature,” “is reminded of the flux of all things” (17):

It [i.e. water] is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
 drawn from the cold hard mouth
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since

²⁹ “He was a friend of my grandfather” (“At the Fishhouses” 33).

our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (78-83)

These rather Heraclitean lines emphatically end the poem on a note of contrast between the eternal reality of nature, from whose ahistorical “rocky breasts” humans—not existing collectively but as an agglomeration of individual selves each of which is distinct and reciprocally *other*—derive a kind of knowledge that is bound to history and, therefore, destined to be continuously gained and lost, “flowing, and flown.”³⁰ And yet, the speaker sees in the flowing water an image of knowledge, thus relating it to the human world. This vision constitutes the experiencing of a daydream. The biographical connotations of the poem might lead one to interpret these final lines as a sign of human detachment from nature. In truth, the speaker acknowledges the motherly “rocky breasts” from which the water sprouts, thereby recognizing the bond between the human and the natural. In the words of Bachelard, “in the daydream there is no not-I anymore. In the daydream the *not* has no more purpose: everything is welcomed” (“dans la rêverie il n’y a pas plus de non-moi. Dans la reverie le *non* n’a plus de fonction: tout est accueil” 144).

Evidence of the intimate mingling between these two elements in the poem can be found in its first forty-line long stanza where, as in “The Moose,” the description embraces the human and the natural alike so that they are depicted as intertwined and coexisting components of the landscape. In fact, the human and the human-made—the “old man,” the “net,” the “fishhouses,” and the “fish tubs” (4, 9, 21)—are juxtaposed to the natural—the smell of “codfish,” the “moss,” and the “grass” (7, 19, 27)—in a way that suggests the lack of hierarchical dominance between them, as was the case in the first six stanzas of “The Moose.” “The air smells so strong of codfish / it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water” (7-8), which reminds us of the “acrid smell of gasoline” at the end of “The Moose.” The dynamism of Bishop’s descriptive style and the interchangeability of the elements it depicts

³⁰ See Cook 139-140 for an interpretation of Bishop’s use of *flown* as past participle of *to flow*.

suggest an attempt on her part not to impose a subjective and human-centered hierarchical authority on these very elements. The smell of codfish in “At the Fishhouses” constitutes a reversal of the dynamics suggested by the smell of gasoline in “The Moose”—which itself offers just as meaningful a contrast to the rattling plank and the iron bridge—thus hindering the interpretative path that leads to a distinctness and imposition of hierarchical values between the human and the natural spheres.

Finally, have seen how the awareness of one’s singleness, which marks the passage from childhood to adulthood, allows for the distinction I-other, human-nature. This sense of otherness induces the speakers in Bishop’s poems to daydream when looking at wild animals or other natural elements such as water. In Bishop’s work, the human and the natural are not perceived as distinct. Although, as we have seen in “The Moose” and “The Fish,” the presence of wild creatures is initially met with reticence, the use of personal pronouns eventually marks a moment of epiphanic togetherness between human and nature that culminates with the daydream, in which the human, the human-made, and the natural become equally relevant elements. As opposed to the scholarly views that see in her poetry a clash in the representation of human activity within nature—which entails a hierarchical overlap that favors the natural over the human-made—I argue that Bishop welcomes a mingling of nature and civilization and embraces a world where gasoline and water represent conflict as well as indissoluble communion.

4. Conclusion

Despite the similar themes and general interests of their respective works, Snyder's and Bishop's approaches could hardly be more different. As we have seen, Snyder has not come to terms with Western civilization, and more in general with technological advanced societies. His belief that technology and capitalism pose a divide between humankind and nature often lead him to demonize the former, while portraying the latter as a pristine and rather defenseless entity at its mercy. In Snyder, nature is under the everlasting threat of being wiped out by humans. The products of humankind are industrial pollutants, and more in general the abuse of the natural world is a necessary element of human economy. Even human institutions are mechanized and considered somewhat unnatural, as we have seen in "Mother Earth: Her Whales" when the speaker talks about countries as "robot nations" (48).

To oppose such conflict, Snyder resorts to the notion of primitiveness. Indigenous peoples are the only humans in Snyder's work that are spared from the caustic critiques and accuses that are typical of his approach. These native peoples are usually portrayed as human beings of a higher kind who are capable of living in harmony with the natural environment. Thus, he idealizes the ancestral past of human history in a rather naïve way, as we have seen in "The Way West, Underground" with the Finns "singing, holding hands" (5).

Unlike Snyder, Bishop understands the numerous subtleties that characterize the human-nature relationship. In her work, she embraces conflict as well as communion, which denotes the maturity of her poetry. Instead of undermining her poetic achievements, contradictions and troubling images—such as the ambiguous scenes where the gasoline polluting the water in "Filling Station" and "The Fish" leads to moments of epiphany—ultimately elevate and enrich her poetry, thus making Snyder's work appear bare in comparison, lacking detail and depth. Bishop manages not to trivialize the human-nature relationship by not offering easy solutions that demonize the former and idealize the latter.

She intimately understands that they are ontologically alike and part of a spectrum, which makes them profoundly connected despite their clashes. Ultimately, the comprehensiveness and environmental understanding of Bishop's poetry allows her to portray conflict and communion alike, mingling them in a way that shuns simple answers or interpretations and. Instead, her poems invite the reader to wonder about the complexity of the relationship between humankind and the environment, while suggesting that their coexistence is a concrete possibility.

5. Bibliography

- A Bíblia Sagrada* [The Sacred Bible]. Edited by João Ferreira de Almeida, Sociedade Bíblica Trinitariana do Brasil, 1994.
- Abulafia, David. *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus*. Yale University Press, 2009.
- Altieri, Charles. "Gary Snyder's Turtle Island: The Problem of Reconciling the Roles of Seer and Prophet." *Boundary 2*, 1976, pp. 761-778.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *La Poétique de la Rêverie* [The Poetics of Reverie]. 1960. Presses Universitaires de France, 2018.
- Bak, Hans, and Walter W. Hölbling. "*Nature's Nation*" Revisited: American Concepts of Nature from Wonder to Ecological Crisis. VU University Press, 2003.
- Berger, John. *Why Look at Animals?* Penguin Books, 2009.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *One Art: Letters*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1994.
- . *The Collected Prose*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.
- . *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. Hogarth Press, 1984.
- Boschman, Robert. "Anne Bradstreet and Elizabeth Bishop: Nature, Culture and Gender in 'Contemplation' and 'At the Fishhouses.'" *Journal of American Studies*, 1992, pp. 247-260.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Clark, Gary. "History and Ecology: The Poetry of Les Murray and Gary Snyder" *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2003, pp. 27-53.
- Cook, Eleanor. *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*. Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Cronon, William, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History*, 1996, pp. 7-28.

- Cronon, William, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin. *Under and Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1992.
- DeMello, Margo. *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*. Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Edelman, Lee. "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room.'" Lombardi, pp. 91-107.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. Penguin Books, 2008.
- Fast, Robin Riley. "A Daughter's Response: Elizabeth Bishop and Nature." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 1988, pp. 16-33.
- Folsom, Edwin. "Gary Snyder's Descent to Turtle Island: Searching for Fossil Love." *Western American Literature*, 1980, pp. 103-121.
- Freyfogle Eric T. "Wilderness and Culture." *Environmental Law*, 2014, 1149-1176.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2012.
- Giragosian, Sarah. "Elizabeth Bishop's Evolutionary Poetics." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 2016, pp. 475-500.
- . "Elizabeth Bishop's Geopoetics." Hicok, pp. 227-246.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Goldensohn, Lorrie. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Gomes, Renata Gonçalves. "Murilo Mendes e Elizabeth Bishop: Poesia Abstrata em Ouro Preto" [Murilo Mendes and Elizabeth Bishop: Abstract Poetry in Ouro Preto]. *Boletim de Pesquisa NELIC*, 2010, pp. 61-69.
- Hicok, Bethany, editor. *Elizabeth Bishop and the Literary Archive*. Lever Press, 2019.

- Hollister, Susannah L. "Elizabeth Bishop's Geographic Feeling." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 2012, pp. 399-438.
- Hughes, Charla Allyn. "'I Miss All That Bright, Detailed Flatness:' Elizabeth Bishop in Brevard." *Hicok*, pp. 151-171.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. Penguin Classics, 2020.
- Lovelock, James. *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Ma, Junhong. "Life and love: Thoreau's life philosophy on man and nature in the age of industrialization." *Neohelicon*, 2009, pp. 381-396.
- McClintock, James I. "Gary Snyder's Poetry & Ecological Science." *The American Biology Teacher*, 1992, pp. 80-83.
- Nash, Roderick F. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- Kalstone, David. *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*. Noonday Press, 1989.
- . "Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Memory, Questions of Travel." *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery*. Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Keeling, Paul M. "Does the Idea of Wilderness Need a Defence?" *Environmental Values*, 2008, 505-519.
- Lombardi, Marilyn May, editor. *Elizabeth Bishop the Geography of Gender*. University Press of Virginia, 1993.
- Ma, Junhong. "Life and love: Thoreau's life philosophy on man and nature in the age of industrialization." *Neohelicon*, 2009, pp. 381-396.
- Millier, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. University of California Press, 1993.

- Mullen, Richard. "Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Inheritance." *American Literature*, 1982, pp. 63-80.
- Page, Barbara. "Off-Beat Claves and Oblique Realities: The Key West Notebooks of Elizabeth Bishop." Lombardi, pp. 196-211.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop*. University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Revell, Donald. *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye*. Graywolf Press, 2007.
- Robles, Raquel. "Just Visiting: Working Concept of "Wilderness" for Environmental Ethics and Ordinary Language." *Stance*, 2016, pp. 17-25.
- Rosenbaum, Susan. "Elizabeth Bishop and the Miniature Museum." *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2005, pp. 61-99.
- Shurin, Aaron. "From Out of Me: Whitman and the Projective." *Roots and Routes: Poetics at New College of California*, edited by Patrick James Dunagan et al., Vernon Press, 2020, pp. 121-136.
- Silva, Reinaldo Francisco. "Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: Immigration, Ecocriticism, and Otherness." *Anglo Saxonica*, 2020, pp. 1-12.
- The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Edited by Andrew George. Penguin Books, 2000.
- Tóibín, Colm. *On Elizabeth Bishop*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. 1920. Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1962.
- Vendler, Helen. "Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly." *World Literature Today*, 1977, pp. 23-28
- Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Victor Books, 1983.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: The "Death-Bed" Edition*. Modern Library, 1993.

Witzel, Michael. "Water in Mythology." *Daedalus*, 2015, pp. 18-26.

Willers, Bill. "The Postmodern Attack on Wilderness." *Natural Areas Journal*, 2001, pp. 259-265.

Silva, Reinaldo Francisco. "Henry David Thoreau's Walden: Immigration, Ecocriticism, and Otherness." *Anglo Saxonica*, 2020, pp. 1-12.

Smith, Henry N. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. 1950. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Snyder, Gary. *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Counterpoint, 1996.

---. *Practice of the Wild: Essays*. Counterpoint, 2020.

---. *Turtle Island*. New Directions, 1974.

Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*. Penguin Classics, 2016.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1962.

VanCleave, Harley J. "Water and Life." *Bios*, 1950, pp. 161-170.

Willers, Bill. "The Postmodern Attack on Wilderness." *Natural Areas Journal*, 2001, pp. 259-265.