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Surrealist Dislocation and the Challenge to Maritime Literary Regionalism in the Works of Elizabeth Bishop

SUSIE DE COSTE

AMERICAN MODERNIST POET Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79) is associated with a number of distinct international places throughout North and South America, yet her poetry and prose set in the Maritime region allow for an examination of her writing as “regional” Maritime literature. When read as regional, Bishop’s work provides an opportunity to consider the complexities of regional literary theory in relation to surrealist dislocation and juxtaposition. Contemporary with an emerging celebration of regional Maritime writers whose works describe identifying features of one geographical region in isolation from and opposition to others, Bishop’s oeuvre offers an account of a different emergent regionalism, one that develops both through travel and through the sustained juxtaposition of Nova Scotia with places completely unlike it, such as Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Through analysis and exploration of spatial perspectives and regional identity in Bishop’s poems “The Monument” and “Poem,” and her prose memoir “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” I argue that her regionalism makes its defining feature not a particular place but the speaker’s perspective on place from her ever-changing position between that local place and the wider world.

Many critics argue that Bishop and her work share complex and fascinating connections to the region that warrant examination of her writing within Canadian and Maritime literary contexts. In the first piece of criticism to consider Bishop as a Nova Scotian writer, and the only piece to do so during her lifetime, Victor Chittick contends that his admiration of her work stems from her rendering of a place that he knows and loves in her short story “In the Village.” In a 1955 article published in the *Dalhousie Review*, he writes, “I know of nothing else written that conveys with such an impact of nostalgia the essential Nova Scotianness of Nova Scotia — or at least those aspects of it manifest along the inner reaches of the Bay of Fundy during the years of my boy-

hood there” (153). Chittick uses the vocabulary and sentiment of contemporary and prevalent essentialist Maritime regionalisms to establish her connection to place that he claims Bishop can conjure up in fiction clearly, bringing him imaginatively back to his childhood. However, the description of her connection to Nova Scotia is characteristic of the type of regionalism that her work counters through her use of shifting perspectives. Although Chittick’s assessment is problematic and risks defining the region too narrowly, his emphasis on Bishop and Nova Scotia as a place is significant because the vast majority of her critics at the time — before the publication of her second collection — most often focused on her use of modernist aesthetics or similarities with Marianne Moore (Bogan; Jarrell; Lowell; Mizener) rather than on her interest in place.

As Sandra Barry points out, Bishop’s maternal family connections in Great Village, Nova Scotia, where her mother grew up, and where Bishop spent time as a child, catalyze her connection to Maritime place. Barry outlines how familial relationships influence Bishop’s writing in her biography *Elizabeth Bishop: Nova Scotia’s “Home-Made” Poet* (2011), a detailed study of Bishop’s historical and material connections to Nova Scotia, as well as in *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia* (1996). Barry maintains that Bishop’s Maritime travels — excursions to Cape Breton and Sable Island in particular — were motivated primarily by her mother’s and great-grandfather’s personal histories and travels (*“Home-Made” Poet* 74, 77-78). She also contends that her mother was the “most important influence on Elizabeth Bishop during the first decade of her life” (*“In the Village”* 107) and that Bishop depicts Nova Scotia according to her affiliation with and relation to her extended maternal family. In poems and prose pieces set in Nova Scotia such as “First Death in Nova Scotia,” “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” “At the Fishhouses,” “Filling Station,” “Sestina,” “Gwendolyn,” “Primer Class,” “Cape Breton,” and “In the Village,” Bishop’s speakers offer constructions of Nova Scotian people and customs and affiliate themselves with that place.

Although critics link Bishop to the Maritimes through her family, they also note that she developed a connection to the geography and topography of Nova Scotia throughout her life and writing by visiting the area frequently as both a child and an adult. She spent two years and several summers of her childhood in Great Village with her grandpar-

ents and attended her first year of school there. David Kalstone suggests in his posthumous critical study of her work that her continued visits to the Maritimes, especially the trip of 1946 to Cape Breton, Great Village, and Lockport, “would reverberate over the rest of her writing life” (118). His research was based upon her letters, at the time unpublished and available only through library and personal collections. Kalstone was therefore among the first to discover how “details that first turn up in the letters of the 1940s . . . are slowly absorbed into her work” (118). A letter that Bishop wrote about her departure from Nova Scotia toward Boston in 1946 was the foundation of her poem “The Moose,” published nearly three decades later. Letters from this trip to Nova Scotia in 1946, her first visit there in sixteen years, made material available to her during her time in Brazil. “What was missing in her Northern landscape poems of this time,” Kalstone suggests, “and what became fully available to her in the stories of 1953 written after she’d settled in Brazil, was the remembered recuperative power of village life” (122). In fact, Bishop mentions in a letter her memory of Nova Scotia resurfacing when she was in a place distant from it: “It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia — geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even” (*One Art* 249). Her childhood and adult memories of Nova Scotia, combined with the power of her distance from the place, characterize a complex connection to the region.

Rather than make a case for Bishop’s “essential Nova Scotianness” (Chittick 153), scholarship by Peter Sanger, Carole Kiler Doreski, and Brian Robinson points to the complexity of her allegiances as a writer highly attuned to place in all of her work, whether set in Nova Scotia or not. Sanger, Doreski, and Robinson treat Bishop provisionally as a Maritime writer, examining her work in a Maritime or Canadian literary context while acknowledging her far-reaching and multiple allegiances to many places. In assessing the possibility of Bishop as a regional writer, Robinson argues that “It is not necessary to place Bishop in some regional canon. As her surreal city poems attest, her poetry resists being tied down, even by ‘geographies’ she has become famous for” (131). Robinson believes that her writing resists placement in a regional canon because of the many separate regional geographies that it imagines; certainly, her numerous geographical identities challenge the definition of regional writers who dominate discussions of Maritime regionalism. Yet, rather than reject regionalism altogether, it is time to reassess Bishop’s

espousal of many place-based identities and to reject the definition of regionalism as a category of writing that limits geographical representations to one place.

The implications of Bishop's approach to regionalism have not been fully explored, and they should be, considering that Bishop wrote at the same time that writers and critics were establishing the more received narratives of regionalism in the early and mid-twentieth century. Northrop Frye's notion of the "garrison mentality" provides a useful framework for an understanding of region prevalent in regional literary discourse during that period. The mentality that Frye describes stems from the colonial past and settler history of Canada; a garrison is an enclosed space that needs to be defended, like the actual garrisons and fortresses built by the first settlers. In the maintenance of what lies inside the boundaries of a garrison, inhabitants fear the unknown that lies outside them. Analogously, the topocentric regional writer wishes to focus attention solely on his or her community and avoid what lies beyond it.

Many definitions of literary regionalism from the mid-twentieth century forward reproduce the analogy of regions as autonomous and clearly demarcated fortresses. David Jordan defines regionalism in the Americas as beginning with "an author's privileged access to a community that has evolved through generations of interaction with a local environment, and whose identity is defined in opposition to a larger world beyond regional borders" (8-9). Writers with such a connection to local place could thus impart, as Eric Sundquist puts it, "an accurate, . . . unromanticised observation of life and nature" (502) of that place to the outside world. Jordan claims that this treatment of place in regional literature therefore "seeks to empower literature with the truth claim of the natural sciences" (52). Writing in the early twentieth century, John Crowe Ransom claimed that regionalism is a "reasonable" position, "for it is . . . natural, and whatever is natural is persistent" (47). However, there are consequences of seeing topography as the source of a culture's character and as the basis of an opposition to the rest of the world. As Roberto Dainotto argues, "To claim that culture springs from a place means, after all, to naturalize a process of historical formation," which thereby tries to substitute one "tool of analysis — history — with an allegedly natural one — place" (2). These definitions of regionalism as objectively descriptive writing about one particular place that notes its

distinctions from other places conceive of regions as clearly bounded spaces detached from history.

Understanding regions as single units of geography that differ in vital ways from what lies outside them can lead to the conflation of regionalism with environmental determinism and, as Janice Fiamengo points out, the problematic assumption that “specific landscapes determine particular imaginative responses rather than themselves being constructed by stories, myths, tourism, and political discourse” (245). Lisa Chalykoff notes that, in approaches to regionalism informed by this idea of space as natural and determining, “spatial divisions are not believed to be produced at all, but are rather thought to be ‘found’ in ‘nature’” (161).

This position on the relationship between regional writing and local landscape is prevalent in mid-twentieth-century criticism of Canadian Maritime literature. During this period, many critics value writing set in a recognizable local place, written by authors with “authentic” connections to the region. Verisimilitude is important to these critics; the description of one region should be accurate so that it can be differentiated from descriptions of other Canadian regions. A review of Charles Bruce’s 1952 novel *The Channel Shore* published in the 1954-55 issue of the *Dalhousie Review* illustrates this critical sensibility that an author’s ability to portray a region accurately is vital to the success of a literary work as regional literature:

Nova Scotia has shown her power to impress upon her writers — whether native or adopted residents or expatriates — the resources of a self-contained area providing, in unity but with variety, a rich historical background, scenery which, if never spectacular, is seldom devoid of strength or charm, and clearly defined areas of population each with its distinctive marks of character, outlook, and personality. Far from all of the small province has been covered, but portions of the tapestry have been woven by Thomas Raddall, Hugh MacLennan, Ernest Buckler, Will R. Bird, and E.M. Richardson, each with a sympathetic approach to a familiar locality and its people. (Bennett 319)

Note the inherent garrison metaphor for regional writing: the region is a “self-contained area” with “distinctive marks of character” and “clearly defined areas of population.” According to the review, regional authors

can cover the land with accurate representations of “a familiar locality and its people.” Under this set of guidelines, the region is a distinct, stable unit of geography and topography that regional writers can communicate through their literary works.

Unlike many of her contemporaries in and of the Maritime region, Bishop conceives of and relates to the region in ways different from those contained in regional identity as defined by the Euro-settler experience. Her oeuvre provides a way to rethink mid-twentieth-century Maritime regionalism through her use of modernist aesthetics, in particular her creation of a constantly shifting individual, subjective perspective. The perspectives that Bishop unfolds through her poetry and prose neither reject the region as parochial nor accept that it has a fixed opposition to the nation or other regions; rather, they raise questions about the relationship between the speaker’s specific locality and the rest of the world. Rather than affirm the absolute uniqueness or superiority of the region, her aesthetic asserts its distinctiveness through the speaker’s unique, highly individual, subjective view while locating the region within a larger global context. The example *par excellence* of this type of juxtaposition can be found through an analysis of her prose memoir “Memories of Uncle Neddy.”

This memoir provides a literary illustration of her connection to Nova Scotia that Bishop draws as simultaneously near and far in time and space. My reading of her regionalism in this memoir is a matter not of the place names or local settings that she uses but of the movement between at least two geographically distant places, a movement that becomes visible via the narrator’s changes in perspective on those places. Rather than see herself as belonging to a small Maritime village, the narrator shifts between two locales — Rio de Janeiro and Great Village — unlike each other in many vital respects.

“Memories of Uncle Neddy” contemplates two painted portraits that Bishop receives in the mail from her aunt in Nova Scotia while she is living in Brazil. The portraits depict her uncle Arthur, or “Artie” (*One Art* 406-08), whose name she changes to Edward, or Neddy, and mother respectively as small children. Bishop focuses on the many ironies in the images: the children’s demeanour and appearance, the portraits themselves, and her possession of them. For instance, everything about Neddy has “an extraneous look”: his clothing, his setting, his image’s presence in Brazil, and his depiction as a child at an age when Bishop

could not possibly have known him. His face, even, “could almost have drifted in from another place, or another year, and settled into the painting” (*Prose* 148). Everything about the image is unfamiliar even though it depicts a person who was beloved to her when she was a child and as an adult. Other details include the way that “His semi-disembodied head seems too big for his body; and his body seems older, far less alive, than the round, healthy, painted face which is so very much in the present it seems to be taking an interest in it, even here, so very far away from where it saw such a very different world for so long” (*Prose* 148). In repeating “very” to emphasize “much,” “far,” and “different,” this passage highlights the distinctions between Neddy’s former home and the irony of his portrait’s location in Brazil. The two local places that connect through the portrait are distant from one another: when one place is close, the other is far away; however, for a moment while contemplating the picture of Neddy in Brazil, to Bishop the Maritimes seem to be simultaneously near and distant. “Uncle Neddy,” she says from Brazil, “that is, my Uncle Edward is *here*. Into this wildly foreign, and, to him, exotic setting” (*Prose* 146). Thus, “Uncle Neddy will continue to exchange his direct, bright-hazel child’s looks, now, with those of strangers — dark-eyed Latins he never knew, who never would have understood him, whom he would have thought of, if he ever thought of them at all, as ‘foreigners.’ How late, Uncle Neddy, how late to have started on your travels!” (*Prose* 161). Another irony that Bishop points out in the passage is that Uncle Neddy might not have left his home community during his lifetime. When she sees her uncle’s portrait in this new context, however, as Brazilian people, and even a Brazilian cat, gaze at it, it estranges her uncle, making her see him anew. Through telling the story of Neddy’s “late travels,” the memoir puts the Maritime region into relationship with Rio de Janeiro so that regions previously unknown to one another introduce themselves to each other.

The ironies that Bishop addresses in her meditation on her uncle are just as easily applied to her own position in Brazil; she too is far away from the childhood home that she knew for a brief period with her maternal grandparents in Great Village, from where the portraits were sent. The significant distinction between her and her uncle is that her constant travel meant that in many ways she was always far from home. Even when she was not abroad, Bishop was constantly on the move, travelling from Florida to Maine to Washington, DC, to Boston

and often back to Nova Scotia. Her constant travels suggest that her notion of home might indeed have been to remain in motion, continually gaining juxtaposing perspectives on one home from the location of another. Bishop once remarked in an interview that she felt neither homeless nor “particularly at home. I guess that’s a pretty good description of a poet’s sense of home. [She] carries it with [her]” while on the move (*Conversations* 102). The fifteen years of her life that she spent in Brazil comprised the longest period of time that she resided in one place. In contrast, Neddy stayed in one place for his entire life; as she notes in her memoir, “I don’t believe that Uncle Neddy ever went anywhere in his life except possibly two or three times as far as Boston after his daughters had moved there and married, and I’m not sure of that” (*Prose* 161). “Memories of Uncle Neddy” introduces and endorses belonging to more than one place: the portrait of her uncle belongs in its new Rio de Janeiro home with Bishop as well as in Great Village. The narrator also belongs to two separate places, and her Maritime identity becomes informed by Rio de Janeiro. Bishop, her narrator, and Uncle Neddy’s portrait retain multiple, distinct perspectives of the region rather than a single one.

Such multiple perspectives on home and region can best be understood not by studying the Nova Scotian set pieces in isolation from other work by Bishop but by considering her regional Maritime affiliation in the context of her oeuvre. One significant motif is that of a speaker’s movement in space, especially when that movement creates corresponding shifts in perspective for the reader. Readers are offered a perspective on a space from an elevated vantage point that renders aspects of the scene described in small scale. Bishop’s dramatic descriptions of objects as though they are in constant motion from one place or time to another emphasize speakers’ and readers’ changing relationships with space and place. The spatial and geographical perspectives in her poems often zoom in and out between a global view and a local one; by extension, the “regions” in her oeuvre come to consist of ever-shifting perspectives on place that travel between these two poles. Her interest in the miniature and her juxtaposition of perspectives emphasize a sense of unlimited possibilities, yet her simultaneous interest in depicting clear, detailed images through precise descriptions also emphasizes a distinct, nuanced particularity. These juxtapositions challenge the idea of regional literature and criticism contemporary with Bishop in the Maritimes

by introducing the idea of relativity. The idea of a regional distinctiveness remains intact, but that distinctiveness, rather than “isolation” or “opposition” (Jordan 8), becomes an exploration through Bishop’s work of how places relate to one another.

Bishop’s regionalism, then, is contingent on the constant, extreme shifts between distance and proximity in her poetry and prose. Her poem “12 O’Clock News” (*CP* 174-75) provides an apt illustration of these contrasting perspectives through its arrangement on the page. The poem consists of sections of prose describing the top of a desk, sections that double as an episodic newscast. In the left-hand margin beside each stanza of prose is the name of a corresponding ordinary desk item. The words “Typewriter eraser” appear beside the passage that reads

At last! One of the most elusive natives has been spotted!
 He appears to be — rather, to have been — a uni-
 cyclist-courier, who may have met his end by falling
 from the height of the escarpment because of the
 deceptive illumination. Alive, he would have been
 small, but undoubtedly proud and erect, with the
 thick, bristling black hair typical of the indigenes. (175)

All of the images in the stanza invoke comparisons with the typewriter eraser, and these comparisons constantly shift the reader’s perspective from a close-up view to a distant one. The poem allows readers to interpret one object of the stanza as both a typewriter eraser and a unicyclist courier. When the image of the human being is offered, he suddenly falls a great distance, and Bishop claims that he would have been “small” if he were alive. The newscast voice of “12 O’Clock News” says of an ashtray, “From our superior vantage point we can clearly see / into a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a ‘nest’/ of soldiers. They are heaped together” (175). Readers do not know whether they are meant to see the ashtray or the soldiers’ dugout because they are told that it is both. The news anchor speaker is trying to “spot” this “elusive” “indigene”; the “deceptive illumination” and the height of the escarpment suggest that the given view is merely one of many available perspectives, and it is just as incomplete as any other. The typewriter eraser is placed within a network of desktop items — ashtray, ink-bottle, envelopes — and their accompanying descriptive stanzas, and this further complicates the topography of the desktop and readers’ relationship with

it. The poem contains many references that make it difficult for the speaker to locate a single vantage point: the “visibility is poor,” there is a “deceptive illumination,” and there is an “undisclosed distance” that make locating one’s place increasingly difficult if not impossible (*CP* 174). To settle on one relationship with a space, one needs a consistent perspective between the viewer and the viewed. In shifting between two vantage points, “12 O’Clock News” asks readers to consider the desktop imaginatively from above and from below simultaneously.

The shift of focus from close by to far away and the corresponding gaze at more than one geographical and culturally disparate region are contingent on Bishop’s juxtaposition of objects, which finds its roots in the aesthetics of surrealism. One facet of surrealism, what André Breton calls “systematic moving out of place,” is “the marvellous capacity to grasp two mutually distant realities without going beyond the field of our own experience and draw a spark from their juxtaposition” (underline in original; qtd. in Ernst 77). Many critics have correctly pointed out that Bishop differs fundamentally from the surrealists in her approach (Mullen 64; Pickard 38-57; Stevenson 58) in that she does not necessarily separate ideas of consciousness and unconsciousness; as Anne Stevenson puts it, Bishop’s poems might be more surrealist-like than surrealist (58). However, such critics have not given proper attention to how Bishop’s work is greatly influenced by the surrealist aesthetic of juxtaposition. Robert Lowell’s comment in his review of *North & South* that “[t]here are two opposing factors” (186) in each poem is a claim about the recurring combination of two “distant realities” (Breton, qtd. in Ernst 77) in Bishop’s work. Her dramatic descriptions of objects that seem to move from one place or time to another emphasize constantly changing relationships to space and place.

In her poem “The Monument” (*CP* 23-25), Bishop juxtaposes two different subjective perspectives and their corresponding interpretations of an object that produce a surrealist “spark.” The two speakers provide the distant and near points of view as well as the literal and abstract perspectives of the monument. “The Monument” sets up a dialogue between two speakers who gaze at a physical structure and debate its meaning as a monument. One speaker begins the poem by asking “Now can you see the monument?” and, after some description of the angles of boxes sitting on top of other boxes, says

The view is geared
 (that is, the view's perspective)
 so low that there is no "far away"
 and we are far away within the view. (23)

This speaker describes a curious view that shifts from the monument itself to a view that brings both the monument and the gazer into view from far away. In this moment, the speaker is far off from where she currently is but simultaneously, paradoxically, apprehends herself in that far-off place from a distance. In the line "far away within the view," the speaker reflects on her position as both the observer and the observed. She is both outside the scene described, observing it, and inside it, one of the objects being observed. This imaginatively challenging exercise requires readers to reflect on the incompatible spatial positions of simultaneous proximity and distance. The challenge overwhelms the second speaker, who would rather make sense of a precise physical location and what she is doing there. The second speaker continues to ask questions that require tangible answers:

Why does that strange sea make no sound?
 Is it because we're far away?
 Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor?
 Or in Mongolia? (23)

The second speaker cannot fathom the simultaneous perspectives that the first speaker describes and is mentally stuck on the concept of "far away." In her confusion, the second speaker perhaps stands in for readers; her task, like that of readers, is to grasp the first speaker's more abstract, less literal, interpretation of the monument.

Both speakers continue to disorient readers throughout the poem by describing the monument in different ways. Bonnie Costello refers to the conversation between these speakers as "the dialogue of art in the poem. Art exists in a process, to which certain attitudes are preliminary. . . . The monument exemplifies the artichoke-like unfolding of the life of a work, its making, its beholding, and its history" (219). Indeed, the unfolding process of shifting the scene and location performs the surrealist's juxtaposition of discrete entities. There is not one way to interpret the monument partly because there are two different speakers engaged in its description and partly because there is a process of

interpretation, a process that requires the comparison of at least two perspectives.

Bishop's letters and notes to the poem suggest that "The Monument" takes its inspiration from the "frottage" technique created by the early twentieth-century surrealist visual artist Max Ernst (1891-1976). A frottage is made by rubbing paper with black lead to reproduce a textured imprint of the surface under the paper; viewers can interpret the patterns or images that arise within the texture. Frottage, when translated into a poetic technique, thereby places meaning in the hands of the reader and takes that power away from the poet. Jonathan Ellis's archival research of Bishop's papers uncovered a notebook that Bishop took to France in which she drew a sketch of boxes along a seashore — which he interpreted as "the monument" depicted in the poem — in the middle of a page accompanied by the note "take a frottage of this sea" and an early draft of the poem (67). Bishop also mentions Ernst in letters to Stevenson in the early 1960s. In one of the letters, she claims directly that "THE MONUMENT was written more under the influence of a set of frottages by Max Ernst I used to own called Histoire Naturel [sic]" (*Prose* 393). Ellis argues that,

While Bishop was obviously attracted to Ernst's theories about creating art, it seems unlikely that she would even want to give up "mental guidance" of the poem [as Ernst believed the frottage technique would do for a work of art]. What we find in "The Monument" is not the loss of "conscious . . . guidance" but the conflict between two perspectives, two ways of approaching the same thing. (67)

Although Ellis does not believe that Bishop adopts all of the invocations of a true frottage, he does believe that she emphasizes at least one surrealist trait in the poem: the juxtaposition of two distinct and seemingly conflicting points of view. In the poem, we can see the differences between these perspectives in how the speakers approach the monument and in the line "far away within the view," in which readers are asked to contemplate two divergent perspectives on an object, one from a single, literal distance — the viewer's physical distance from the object — and one from the multiple distances that her imagination suggests to her.

With this combination of perspectives that recurs in Bishop's works, there is a sense of difficulty in gaining a fixed viewpoint, a consistent vantage point, between the viewer and the viewed. Bishop's later poem

“In the Waiting Room” (CP 159-61) taunts readers by beginning in a specific local place easily located on a map in fixed relationships with other places: “In Worcester, Massachusetts.” In the poem, as the six-year-old speaker sits in a dental waiting room while her aunt endures an appointment, a *National Geographic* magazine and its photographs of people and places from around the world lead the child speaker to the realization that “I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was” (CP 160). During this disorienting moment, she must talk to herself and hold the magazine to prevent the sensation of losing her sense of fixed local geographical perspective; she describes “the sensation of falling off the round, turning world into blue-black space” (CP 160). Her ground has suddenly shifted; she does not know who or what she is because she has not negotiated her relationship with a world of such scale. As the magazine leads the child speaker to see a miniaturized “round, turning world” (CP 160), Bishop sees herself as a miniature woman on that world, again “far away within the view” (CP 23). As she suddenly sees the world itself in miniature, at the same time this world is also “cognitively gigantic” (Stewart 63). In Susan Stewart’s study *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, dollhouses are similarly gigantic because they are small but represent something large; in the mind, a dollhouse is larger than life. Like Stewart’s description of the dollhouse, the world that Bishop apprehends in “In the Waiting Room” is at once miniature and gigantic. The task of orienting herself in such a world is daunting because she sees herself at once distant and near. This experience favours the individual perspective and denies that there can be any one governing perspective from which to view a specific place or the entire world.

As large and small scales shift in the perception of the child speaker, she needs to name herself through specific material and measurable locators. She makes observations such as “three days and you’ll be seven years old” and “The waiting room was bright / and too hot” (CP 159, 161). The poem ends in the specific, local place that it began, in Worcester. Time and space are mapped out to organize Bishop’s speaker’s relationship with the immediate geographical world at the close of the poem. But that seemingly stable relationship in the end is a provisional one requiring that she see her world from simultaneous and dynamically shifting local and global perspectives. In his discussion of “In the Waiting Room,” Jahan Ramazani puts it this way:

In Worcester, Massachusetts, . . . the young girl suddenly finds herself travelling imaginatively to a place visited and photographed by the explorers. . . . Elizabeth's encounter with alien bodies and "disembedded" cultural practices . . . shocks her into the recognition not only of sameness but also of difference, destabilizing the naturalness of her own cultural world, which suddenly shrinks into one among an indefinite array of contingent possibilities. Her vertiginous [fall off the planet in the poem] is in part due to her initiation into becoming a global subject, once anchored to part of the world by the illusion of its completeness, but now unmoored and floating free among cultural and racial differences. (63-64)

Ramazani emphasizes the important connection between overthrowing space and "destabilizing the naturalness of her own cultural world" (63). The unmooring is not a permanent and default position of abstract placelessness; rather, it encapsulates the short period during which the perspective shifts between two definite points.

The point of view in Bishop's "Poem" (CP 176-77) shifts between two such definite points as the speaker describes a painting of a Nova Scotian landscape from another location. "Poem" shares many affinities with "Memories of Uncle Neddy"; both negotiate relationships to space, place, and family from a distance and through the speaker's engagement with a painting. In the case of "Poem," a piece of artwork has travelled from Great Village to share its "look" with Bishop's speaker and help her to look anew at that Maritime place. Because the speaker interacts with the place from afar, Bishop constructs the art object and the shared "visions" that it symbolizes in relation to a second local allegiance, forging a relationship over a great distance. She does not claim to depict Great Village in its current stable state because, as the speaker declares, "it must have changed a lot" (CP 177).

After a description of the landscape depicted in the painting, a landscape that she concludes "must be Nova Scotia," the speaker exclaims in recognition, "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!" (CP 176). Bishop's descriptions of the scene suggest her "*belonging to place*," what Canadian literary critic W.H. New describes as "an attitudinal identification with a particular locale, a determination of self through a relationship with site, and potentially with land" (117). But that "particular locale" is far away rather than immediate. Bishop indeed affirms her relationship and identification with a place through distance in space and time rather than through proximity. Her memories of Uncle Neddy

are rooted in one community, but they are recalled and experienced from another place. Her relationship with her uncle and her care for him connect her to Nova Scotia and connect him to Brazil. Like her and the painter of the dollar-bill-sized painting in “Poem,” she and Neddy also share “two looks”:

. . . We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart . . .

. . .

Our visions coincided — “visions” is
too serious a word — our looks, two looks . . . (*CP* 177)

These “two looks” characterize Bishop’s sense of regions well. Bishop never offers just one “look” in her Nova Scotian works, or throughout the rest of her oeuvre, because even from a distance a speaker’s perspective can be informed by a second region and a second vantage point.

Labelling Bishop a regional writer challenges inherent problems within regional studies, and her works contradict certain mid- to late-twentieth-century definitions of regionalism, such as the idea that regions are distinct communities in isolation from others, because she identifies both with communities in the Maritimes and with communities “beyond regional borders” (Jordan 9), such as her long-term home in Brazil. As Herb Wyile suggests,

regionalism can play an important role if it is denaturalized and recognized as a critical construct, and if it is used in a provisional, nuanced, modulated fashion in conjunction with other terms — for instance, place, locality, anti-centrism, topography, province, etc. — rather than in an essentializing fashion to assert autonomous, integrated discursive formations. (274)

Through an examination of Bishop’s simultaneous engagement with divergent geographical affiliations and identities, I have attempted in this essay to challenge concepts of twentieth-century regionalism in the productive ways mentioned by Wyile. Bishop does not place her identity in opposition to extra-regional identities; instead, in her work and life, she identifies with communities on both sides of Maritime regional borders.

In his discussion of twentieth-century Maritime literature, Wolfgang Hochbruck notes that critics of modern literature usually avoided regionalism, for good reason, in their considerations of texts: “In the aggregate literary modernism (cum post-) period, regionalism usually ran the risk of being either rejected because it did not comply with the internationalism that tended to be identified with modernity, or else it was lumped together with provincialism and ‘folk’ culture” (15). Bishop, however, is a modern writer who might indeed link regionalism and internationalism in Canadian literature. In her work, modernist aesthetics inform the focus on regions, a focus that shifts between close and distant vantage points. In her experience of a world made up of the many local places that she has visited, and in the corresponding experience of each local place, her speakers’ perspectives shift from a local view to a global view so that aspects of the world appear to shift constantly between large and small, distant and near. This shifting perspective suggests that there is not a governing or fixed connection between the viewer and the viewed; instead, that connection is made by the experiencing subject, the person who travels and inhabits spaces and who continues to move. As such, “Memories of Uncle Neddy” and “Poem” offer a version of Maritime regional identity but not one that sees itself as strictly belonging to Nova Scotia; instead, these works make up a version of regionalism that focuses on a perspective that shifts among many locales. This model of regionalism breaks away from the idea of a geographical region as a group of local places close to one another. The adoption of distance, the disorientation created in both speakers and readers when Bishop combines distance with proximity, and the use of multiple perspectives in her poetry and prose all help to establish an ever-present and ever-changing relationship between local places and the global world.

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