

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "CRUSOE IN ENGLAND"

ESPERANZA CERDÁ REDONDO

Universidad de Alcalá

(Resumen)

La poesía de Elizabeth Bishop muestra su fascinación por los viajes, la geografía y la experiencia humana en general. En *Geography III*, y más específicamente en "Crusoe in England", uno de sus últimos poemas, Bishop trata estos temas bajo el prisma de la memoria. Apropiándose del personaje de Defoe, Bishop cuestiona su lugar en la sociedad, en el mundo, y su propia existencia, así como la memoria con el recuerdo de su relación con Lota de Macedo Soares, el suicidio de esta última y lo que sería su vida después de la desaparición de de Macedo, una vida llena de soledad y recuerdos.

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Elizabeth Bishop's narrator, Crusoe, describes his solitary life now past. He gives details of his island, its animals and plants, his inventions, and the many activities he was engaged in. He tells of a long gone experience through memory and imagination back in England, his island part of his memory.

Now I live here, another island.
that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?
My blood was full of them; my brain
bred islands. But that archipelago
has petered out. I'm old.
I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,
surrounded by uninteresting lumber.

Defoe's Crusoe is a doer, he is essentially a survivor. His experience on the island is not a sad one, for he has been rewarded with material riches. He has found his place in life when he returns to England as a rich man; he rationalizes his imprisonment and finds, through Christianity, the reason for his present life and how he managed to survive. Defoe's Crusoe is the representative of capitalist ideology, driven to acquire, control, and dominate. First he dominates himself, then the island, and finally others (even Friday is considered as part of his possession and Crusoe does not even remember him when he returns to England.) He represents the economic man (the individual who builds his own enterprise from the exploitation of his own resources) and the rise of economic individualism. Everything is measured from the rational, asocial, and antitraditional standards of individual self-interest. On the other hand, he is a man intent upon discovering his ultimate limitations by seeking spiritual and divine pattern in his life.

Bishop wrote her Crusoe leaving aside the Christian dogmas. Defoe's Crusoe did not question his existence but reinforced the idea of salvation through God, whereas Bishop's questions his existence as a human being and his place in the world. Bishop's Crusoe is a thinker, a skeptic: "Because I didn't know enough. / Why didn't I know enough of something?" He is not interested in material possessions but in friendship, love and his place in the world - Friday represents that friendship and love and, ultimately, the reason for Crusoe's place in the

world and salvation. In harmony with Defoe's Christian faith is his faith in Enlightenment principles of reason and empirical knowledge. His Crusoe is sustained by the memory of his culture, reaffirming not only spiritual laws but scientific methods. Since knowledge is expressed in the form of sensible images, the increase of sensible experience would lead to an increase in knowledge. But empirical knowledge is not present in Bishop's Crusoe, and sensory experience heightens the sense of unreality. The scientific look depends on memories which do not fit the reality he confronts.

Well, I had fifty-two
 miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
 with a few slithery strides -
 volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
 I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
 and count the others standing up,
 naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.
 I'd think that if they were the size
 I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
 become a giant;

Bishop's Crusoe can be said to have a scientific mind - he counts the volcanoes, tries to account for the rain, registers the flora and fauna. But this does not prove to be useful knowledge as it does for Defoe's Crusoe.

Bishop's Crusoe is not interested in material possessions, he does not pursue the domination of the landscape as Defoe's did, the island is just a means of understanding his own existence and a link to memory. Bishop's Crusoe becomes a sort of visionary instead of the colonizing figure from Defoe's novel. She places her Crusoe in England remembering his past: her Crusoe feels more of an exile at home than in the one he had to create from imagination. As castaway, Crusoe's survival is a matter of imagination, of being able to live the past through memory. Bishop's hero questions himself on his own existence: "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must. / I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there / a moment when I actually chose this?" He does not question himself on the act of survival but on what is now left from his experience on the island: solitude and loss.

Bishop engages the issues of same-sex friendship and life on an island where biological reproduction is impossible. What distinguishes Crusoe's island is its deep sexual and geographical isolation. When Crusoe begins to recount Friday's appearance, he remembers Friday is not with him

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
 another minute longer, Friday came.
 (Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)
 Friday was nice.
 Friday was nice, and we were friends.
 If only he had been a woman!
 I wanted to propagate my kind,
 and so did he, I think, poor boy.
 He'd pet the baby goats sometimes.

and race with them, or carry one around.
-Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.

"Crusoe in England" is rather complex when dealing with answers, speaker, self, and the imagination. This poem about solitude, the remembrance of a happy time when Crusoe and Friday were together, and the listing of survival tools, which seem no longer important, shows the false discourse of memory. Material possessions have neither interest nor meaning for Crusoe anymore. The knife in the poem was an important instrument of survival in his past experience on the island, so important that it is even described as something almost sacred - symbolizing his pain. Once it served its purpose, its meaning is lost:

The knife there on the shelf -
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
It lived. How many years did I
beg it, implore it, not to break?
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
the bluish blade, the broken tip,
the lines of wood-grain on the handle...
Now it won't look at me at all.
The living soul has dribbled away.
My eyes rest on it and pass on.

Crusoe is silent on the details of his relationship with Friday until the poem's close when all the survival tools of his experience on the island seem useless, except his memory of Friday. Crusoe's survival becomes emotional, the poem is told in a kind of double recollection, at first the retrospective seems to account for everything, but the emotions behind memory depend on the arrival of Friday. Bishop asserts that Friday's company and love, not Crusoe's tools, enabled Crusoe to survive. All these tools have been asked to be kept in a museum, but company and love cannot be taken there. Company and love are part of his memory, of his experience kept in silence. Homosexual company and love, in particular, should also be kept in silence. "Crusoe in England" questions what the real world, that which does not belong to imagination, refuses to reveal, what the self fears to reveal and should elucidate, and finally what a poem cannot reveal. The mask of Crusoe allows Bishop the privacy she needs to reveal her experience, her real self, her lesbian identity, without really stating it. Bishop uses Crusoe to explore her relationship to tradition, as well as her experience of personal loss and exile, which in effect becomes the discovery of the absence of a literary past, that of lesbian identity as a writer. Bishop's silent connection to tradition mirrors her silenced lesbian relationships, along with their eventual loss.

The dilemma of identity is linked in this poem with a painful solitude, interrupted by the arrival of a lover. Apparently Friday cannot solve Crusoe's desire to reproduce - this representing Bishop's homosexuality, thus her own imposed inability to propagate. The poem works through an anxiety over reproduction: first, by dyeing a baby goat "bright red" so "his mother wouldn't recognize him," and then, through a nightmare of murdering a child, mistaking it for a goat.

Dreams were the worst. Of course I dreamed of food
and love, but they were pleasant rather

than otherwise. But then I'd dream of things
like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it
for a baby goat.

The return to England and the failure of Friday to reproduce (he dies of a European disease) leave Crusoe in a world of empty symbols and paralyzed memories.

Throughout the poem, Crusoe cherishes the memory of his island. But after the break in his narration, his possessions and his memories become diminished things and we are left with the magnitude of his emptiness. The loss of Friday gives way to the present, where the museum's attempt at preservation is a sad substitute for his memories: "The local museum's asked to / leave everything to them:" only to remember Friday again in the last two lines of the poem. Friday's memory, rather than fading with time, will, in Crusoe's imagination, expand through it.

Through the narrative use of a male voice, a voice that describes an asexual world where the self longs to preserve its imaginative life, Bishop is questioning her sexuality and desires and evokes an equivalent world to that of her own imagination - Bishop's Crusoe differs from Defoe's in that the latter makes no reference whatsoever to female love and sexual relationships. The geographical use of the island thus serves different purposes: a means of acquiring material possessions for Defoe's and a means of establishing an imaginary bond between Bishop's self and her place in the world, as well as her own existence as a lesbian writer. The poet seeks the explanation of her own exile through the use of words that will enable her to see this isolation as a relationship between self, words, and the world, to identify an island, within herself, made for both poetry and friendship. What Bishop is trying to find is a place of solitude in which she can build up a world of meanings where she could feel safe, although she cannot create a world of sustained human relationships.

Friday's loss proves irreparable because in this poem of unreconciled mourning, no other object comes to take his place. The haunting singularity that marks Crusoe's island speaks to Friday's reality as well, for he can neither be forgotten nor be replaced. Instead, Crusoe is left at home with loss. The mourning process proves to be able to be kept alive only in the imagination of the poet. Bishop commemorates the pain and sorrow caused by the impossibility to replace or forget what is only kept alive through imagination. The idea of overcoming the environment in a novel of economic victory is not so important for Bishop as the grief she feels in the poem, facing mourning and trying to recuperate from it. Memories inevitably bring mourning for the poet: memories which are difficult to overcome as they form the basis which holds the whole poem together. Through her mourning, Bishop will construct her own memory and existence, as well as that of others and her relationship with them.

Because of the uniqueness of everything on this island "The island had one kind of everything," and the limitless expanse of isolated islands, "I'd have / nightmares of other islands / stretching away from mine, infinities / of islands," Crusoe establishes the difference, the self, that emerges through relationship. But since connection can only be remembered by Crusoe's mourning, the self is shown as re-created, moment by moment, through the sacrifice of memory. Bishop uses memory to settle her self-questioning and uncertainty.

The poem is a spatial rendering of accumulated memories. Crusoe's memory of Friday, "And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March," might be interpreted as Bishop's memory of Lota de Macedo Soares, her lover during the seventeen years she spent in Brazil. The two women met in New York in 1942 and lived

together from 1951-1967 mostly in Petropolis, Brazil, and in Rio de Janeiro. During a trip to visit Bishop in New York in 1967, de Macedo Soares committed suicide.

Throughout her life Bishop always felt tempted by a desire to withdraw from the world, either into her imagination or into a physical place where she could find protection from a frightening world; in fact, she is remembered as "a thing apart" by some of her classmates. In her everyday life she made no secret of her lesbianism, but in her poems she rejected it with the most intense discretion. Although in her writing Bishop was true to self-experience, she nevertheless rejected stating things as they were. "Crusoe in England" is one of her most personal poems. Bishop questions herself on her lesbian identity, she is no longer so afraid of the world around her. At the writing of the poem, Bishop sustained a relationship with Alice Methfessel. This relationship probably gave her the necessary strength to face her relationship with and the death of de Macedo Soares; only by being emotionally balanced and secure could she look at the past and speak of her real identity.

In this poem, Bishop examines, analyses and faces the world without Lota de Macedo Soares as well as the imagination that makes her memory still be alive in her. To live according to society's rules is undoubtedly a comfortable and secure choice of existence for some human beings, and the outside world, the marginal world, may in fact be the chosen way of life for others. But seclusion to island areas by force or through having been taken there, as in the case of Crusoe, constitutes an unchosen state, and it is this unchosen state (her lesbianism) that she questions and tries to find its place in the world.

The island, the isolation, and the final arrival of company from the same sex offers Bishop the opportunity to ask herself on her personal lesbianism as well as that of living a marginal lifestyle. The masking technique of using a man to figure for a lesbian allows her to hide any autobiographical statements, but it also forces her to tolerate society's rules about homosexuality, though this does not mean she agrees with them. Bishop's masked attempt describes the pain that marginality brings and asks whether she deserves this pain or not. She feels desperate for not being able to state facts the way they are in her poetry, "One billy-goat would stand on the volcano / I'd christened *Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair* / (I'd time enough to play with names):" and she hides the truth about her homosexuality in the poem by not even being able to name the island, her own island, her own self, "But my poor old island's still / unrediscovered, un-renamed." Not only does she feel desperate, but self-pity as well, "I often gave way to self-pity," for she is likewise repressed by society's imposed rules. Bishop would appear to use autobiography to write most of her poems. In fact, when once asked how to write poetry, she said to always use that which you have lived and experienced. When she began writing, she did so about her childhood in Nova Scotia. Throughout her stay in Brazil, she wrote autobiographical poems in order to be able to understand her past and that which had exiled her. She felt the urge and need to travel, looking for something she probably never found but which enabled her to acquire enough experience to continue searching by means of her own writing.

During her teaching career she taught the letters and autobiographies of others. Although Bishop's study of other writers' lives was more intense during her stay in South America, she also began to think more about her own past and personal resources, about the meaning of origins and home. She probably needed to forget her tradition and write from the experiencing self. The need to cast off and turn to the interior, results, in part, from her isolated position as lesbian writer with minimal confirmed literary heritage. A feeling of loss, of not belonging, is present in most of her poetry - in her earlier poetry as well as in her last writings. That sense of loss, of not finding her own identity as a lesbian writer, a need to find a home

where she could feel safe and loved, accompanied her throughout her poetry. Yet she never stated things so plainly as she does in this poem.

In spite of Crusoe's gender, the poem comments the position of the lesbian writer, castaway from tradition, thrown upon her own resources. By revealing lesbians as silenced and made unnameable tradition, Bishop describes the absence that books have undergone in not including this tradition. "None of the books has ever got it right." And it is the absences in her Crusoe's own accounting that takes us to a silenced past. Crusoe explains that he cannot produce this literary tradition because of cultural deprivation or amnesia:

Because I didn't know enough,
 Why didn't I know enough of something?
 Greek drama or astronomy? The books
 I'd read were full of blanks,
 the poems - well, I tried
 reciting to my iris-beds.
 "They flash upon that inward eye,
 which is the bliss ..." The bliss of what?
 One of the first things that I did
 when I got back was look it up.

Such forgetting is a way of remembering, because Crusoe's looking up the missing blanks leads us to do the same. There is relief in memory as it makes absent objects present. The author is reminding the reader of literary suppression, the absences in Crusoe's literary memory must be replaced. The allusion to Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" affect Crusoe differently from Wordsworth, for whom memory bears the power of imagination with heart's pleasure. For him, loneliness is a place where powerful memories form to provide the bliss of solitude. Crusoe's loneliness, on the contrary, never becomes an ideal solitude and memory forgets more than it fills in, probably for its painful connotations.

Although Bishop dismisses Defoe as unreliable and conveniently omits Crusoe's first name, the "I" of the poem can be interpreted as feminine maker of the self and world. Creativity does not emerge from comfortable acknowledgment of past traditions but from an exile's imaginings and re-creations. Crusoe's time on the island was also a time of creativity and passion. He celebrates his "home-made" world and identity and establishes his own values based on memories. Yet this is not a story of a shipwrecked man nostalgic for home, but of someone who has returned to England, nostalgic for his former island exile and all it implies. What Crusoe remembers most about the island is his nostalgia for England. The poem reinforces the idea that memory is inevitable, that one always remembers the past from a present position. The apparent opposition between the island and England, between past and present, is undermined.

Thinking about the past back in England, Crusoe cannot find real value in what represented his island experience, they no longer have meaning. The knife, the parasol, the goatskin trousers are symbols of culture, they have no meaning because they fill no absence - the cultural absence of a literary tradition. The invented objects of the island, though based on memory, had a vital importance for the present as they established a thread of life. The museum is the symbol for the past; the objects in it have no present value. Only Friday's memory is alive, only human relationships have value and represent something in Crusoe's

memory and present life. Friday is the link between past and present, that which connects memory to life, making it alive.

What is absent or omitted deserves as much attention as what is clearly stated. "Solitude," is the missing word - as Wordsworth's poem reads.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude.

Again the poem confirms how Friday's appearance saves Crusoe and allows him to remember. Instead of the slave Defoe makes of him, Bishop makes him desired, and refers to homosexual passion by Crusoe's hoping Friday were a woman. The loss of the island, or the loss of "living soul," ultimately, does not fall on the act of having been rescued from the island. Friday's importance cannot be too overplayed as Bishop always discards authority and tradition in favor of human relationship. The first words that speak of Friday tell of his importance, and, though we do not know how long Crusoe has been in England, we can see that Crusoe measures his time, his life, as the two last lines of the poem indicate, by his loss of Friday.

While on the island, Crusoe's memories of England seem a real consolation and he transforms the objects of the island landscape into figures of the past. We depend on others, on absences, to reconstruct our past, even as memory cannot sometimes bear it and plays tricks with us causing some sort of amnesia. We may only find our identity through our past and our past through the identity and significance of other human beings or of things which have a meaning in our lives. It is through some acts, through the very act of forgetting even, that we may suddenly encounter our past.

As Bishop criticizes a silencing tradition, she discovers, in the process, a dependency upon the personal forces in her own history which increase over time, though her poems propose an acknowledgment of the power of the unconscious. Her home-made represents the construction and identification of a lost self. Because we do not have complete control over our identities or over the contents of our knowledge, we suffer slips and draw blanks, remembering some things and forgetting others. We become like Bishop's Crusoe, in his self-questioning and partial amnesia: at one point, he recalls his self-pity with a confusion over the extent of his free-will and, as stated before, of his own existence:

I often gave way to self-pity,
 "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.
 I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there
 a moment when I actually chose this?
 I don't remember, but there could have been."
 What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?
 With my legs dangling down familiarly
 over a crater's edge, I told myself
 "Pity should begin at home." So the more
 pity I felt, the more I felt at home.

The search for home is also patent in "Questions of Travel." "Continent, city, society: / the choice is never wide and never free. / And here, or there ... No. Should we have

stayed at home. / wherever that may be?" The processes of unknowing, then, become as important as those of knowing, since it is absences our consciousness slips upon and holds itself up against.

A literary tradition is not enough, and in Bishop's last works, she returns to the self and its primary resources, not to be clearly limited. Although her insistent return to early childhood as a source of poetry becomes a method to symbolize the significance of loss and desire for home, her poems in *Geography III* question the ability to remember, and become commentaries upon the processes of memory and the attempts to construct a self through it. "Crusoe in England" explores memory in a number of different ways. As a poem of travel, it takes up the problem of the beholder whose cultural inheritance no longer fits the modern and alien world he confronts. The Cristian faith in God's wisdom and Enlightenment confidence in reason, which shaped Defoe's Crusoe, fail Bishop's Crusoe, for they cannot explain human consciousness linked to memory, which establishes our own existence. Yet memory, and the desire it excites, do inspire creativity on the island. It is only in England that memory becomes a force of repetition. Bishop's Crusoe discovers memory as a constant of human consciousness.

For Bishop, "Crusoe in England" provides an opportunity to face the past; it allows her to see her self and her work at an older age, her sense of life, her homelessness, loneliness, longing for children, sexual joy and despair, homosexuality, longing for a literary tradition in which she could find her place as a lesbian writer, her quest for an answer to existence, human relations and love, all are expressed in this poem. It is a poem about the nature of memory as both personal and cultural and an explanation of the act of being.