

LIQUID REFLECTIONS: WATER IMAGERY AND THE POETIC SELF IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S WORK

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ABSTRACT

In Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, the pervasive sense of non-belonging – marked by the absence of a fixed home and the poet's positioning between places – is expressed through distinctive strategies. Among these, water imagery stands out, particularly in poems with a dream-like atmosphere, serving as a symbolically rich vehicle for self-revelation. This study examines Bishop's use of aquatic imagery across her work, highlighting its shifting representations, interpretive possibilities, and contribution to an oneiric ambiance. The analysis considers water's significance within individual poems and its broader role as a medium through which aspects of the poet's innermost self are projected and refracted.

KEYWORDS: Elizabeth Bishop; Poetry; Water; Symbolism; Dream-like atmosphere.

INTRODUCTION

The present study examines the recurrent figuration of water in Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, situating its appearances within the textual and thematic contexts in which they emerge. Rather than interpreting these occurrences as merely ornamental, the analysis seeks to interrogate the symbolic economy of such imagery, exploring the interpretive possibilities it opens both within individual poems and across Bishop's work as a whole. In this sense,

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water functions not only as a mutable poetic motif but also as a privileged site for the projection, negotiation, and displacement of the poet's subjectivities, thereby revealing the tension between concealment and self-revelation that underpins her work.

Bishop's poetry is distinguished by the richness of its imagery, many of which appear not as isolated figures but as recurrent motifs that traverse her writings. When emphasized or reiterated, these images often acquire symbolic resonance, transcending their literal significance to embody more complex meanings. Importantly, such transformations do not necessarily arise from deliberate authorial intent; rather, they frequently reflect unconscious choices that, nonetheless, reverberate symbolically in the text. Critics have noted Bishop's poetic practice as a meticulous "investigation" of the surrounding world, an "inspection of the physical world through poetic eyes" (Ferguson, 2005, p. 2130). While her poetry refrains from overt confessionality, it can nonetheless be read as a form of "self-writing," insofar as it transforms experiences of loss, displacement, and intimacy into images of subtle but profound autobiographical depth (Brito, 2006, p. 9).

The sense of estrangement in Bishop's poetry extends beyond the psychological to the formal level. Her work often rejects confessional modes, favoring an observant, precise, and restrained voice. As Martins (2006, p. 23) notes, Bishop employs "masks" to stage her existential dramas, reflecting her position as an outsider in both life and literature. This aesthetic of displacement mirrors her personal trajectory, marked by extensive travel, exile, and long periods abroad, including her years in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares, which ended tragically with Soares's suicide (Ferguson, 2005, p. 2078). As Leckie (2003, p. 187) observes, "almost all Bishop's writing about Brazil is about the problematizing of being a permanent tourist in an adopted home," while Glissant (1997, p. 108) emphasizes that "the exigency for exile does not abdicate being... the poet, in the margins of the world, recreates the world." Rich (1983, n.p.) further underscores the tension inherent in such a position: "To know yourself as an outsider... and to try to live, and love, in two worlds, is to dream of the impossible safe place." These reflections illuminate how Bishop's poetic consciousness continually negotiates duality, displacement, and the quest for belonging.

Within this context, water emerges as a central and polyvalent image, carrying profound symbolic weight. Its recurrence across Bishop's poetry reflects notions of

transition, fluidity, dissolution, and renewal, while simultaneously enacting the poet's negotiation between intimacy and distance, presence and absence, belonging and exile. As a site for the projection, displacement, and writing of the self, water operates as a lens through which both individual poems and the broader dynamics of Bishop's literary project can be understood, offering readers insight into the interplay between her poetic form, her subjective experience, and her enduring search for equilibrium and identity.

THE MANY "SHAPES" OF WATER

The watery element holds deep symbolic meaning. It is the *prima materia*, chaotic and generative, the source of life. Baptismal water symbolizes spiritual rebirth, purification, and intuitive insight, encompassing the paradox of death and life renewal inherent in baptism as exemplified biblically: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4, KJV). Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols* deepens our understanding of the symbolic layers embedded in the image of water:

Its predominant characteristics are: (i) it fertilizes; (ii) it purifies; (iii) it dissolves. These three qualities have so much in common that their relationship can be expressed in a variety of ways, although one constant factor always emerges: the suspension of form – that is, the lack of any fixed form (fluidity) – is bound up with the functions of fertilization or regeneration of the material, living world on the one hand, and with the purification or regeneration of the spiritual world on the other. It is this bond which helps to explain the vast symbolism of water, appearing in the midst of solid areas of the cosmos, with the power of destroying the corrupt and of initiating a new cycle of life – the latter meaning is one that extends to the zodiacal signs of Aquarius and Pisces, and confirms the words of the

Psalm: 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint' (Psalm xxii, 14) (Cirilot, 2001, p. xxxviii).

Water is also the symbol of transition because it is the element between the ethereal (fire and air) and the solid (earth); it carries, at the same time, the powers of life and death, creation and destruction. Water may stand for refreshment and joy, or, conversely, falseness and inconstancy. It can represent the knowledge and memories stored in the unconscious. Additionally, water may serve as a mirror of the soul, so that looking into it invites inward contemplation.

Rivers and seas are generally seen as the power of a country (to be dried up by the Lord: specially the sea of Egypt and the rivers of Babylon). They also embody the idea of circulation, and consequently, irreversibility. The modern psychological interpretation of water is of doubled significance: it is the clearest mother-symbol and it is also the unconscious – in which monsters may be lurking to attack one's rational (safe) self. The unconscious is the informal, dynamic and feminine part of the spirit. From the waters and from the universal unconscious derives every living thing, as from the mother.

A secondary amplification of this symbolism is the assimilation of water and wisdom (intuitive). Also, according to Freud (1920, p. 136), "birth is regularly expressed in dreams by some connection with water; one plunges into the water, or comes out of the water, which means one gives birth to, or is born." The mythical expression saved from the waters symbolizes fecundity and is a metaphorical image of birth (parturition).

In *Water and Dreams* (1999), Gaston Bachelard argues that water, like many other elements in the material world, is "nothing but a projection of a hidden soul" (p. 17). Because of its characteristics, it can be read as a metaphor for fluidity, depth, and hiddenness. Moreover, it evokes an oneiric, dream-like atmosphere. When one gazes into the waters of a lake, for example, the self tends to leave the real world and explore distant places in imagination or in the unconscious. This is why water can lead to introspection and transformation. Its reflective surfaces summarize the mirror image – facilitating self-contemplation, self-awareness, and inner reflection.

In Bishop's work, water functions not merely as a physical element but as a versatile symbol, connecting natural, psychological, cultural, and mythic registers. This network of imagery enriches the interpretive possibilities of her poetry, revealing its depth and complexity. It functions as a multilayered motif. Its symbolic force emerges most fully when examined alongside related "minor" images, which together form a network in which water serves as the central organizing element. Some of these secondary images are subtle, detectable only through close analysis, and their connections are shaped not merely by physical resemblance but also by the textual and thematic contexts of the poems.

Many manifestations of water are immediately recognizable in nature – drops, rivers, streams, seas, oceans, cascades, and floods. Clouds, transformed by sunlight, bring rain, while humidity signals water's presence in smaller forms, sustaining moss and lichens. Other related images, such as tears, reflections, and the moon, demand more scrutiny. Tears, as human life-giving fluids, connect to water biologically, yet they differ from their natural manifestations. Reflections, by contrast, are generated through water: they encompass both the reflection of images – linked to the mirror motif and the act of contemplation – and the reflection of light, which is more impersonal. The moon, frequently intertwined with water and light, further enriches this imagery by invoking cultural and mythological associations – such as Venus's birth from the sea – that connect water to emotion, imagination, and creation.

Through this intricate interplay of major and minor images, Bishop's water imagery emerges not as simple description but as a symbolic framework that sustains her poetic vision. The element of water, in its many manifestations – from tears and reflections to rivers and seas – encapsulates a range of cultural, mythological, and emotional resonances. It becomes a privileged medium through which the poet negotiates displacement, articulates longing, and reflects upon the self. In this sense, water constitutes one of the most fertile symbolic matrices in Bishop's work.

WATER, IDENTITY, AND SELF-PROJECTION IN BISHOP'S POETRY

The interplay between water imagery, identity, and self-projection in Bishop's poetry reveals a remarkable richness. What is particularly compelling is how these images and their

symbolic resonances function within Bishop's writings, that is, how their significance emerges and is validated within the poems themselves. The interpretive potential of water arises not in isolation but through the relationships and interactions that the poems establish among these images.

To explore these dynamics, a selection of Bishop's poems has been chosen: *The Gentleman of Shalott*, *The Man-Moth*, *The Weed*, *The Unbeliever*, *At the Fishhouses*, *Insomnia*, *Brazil, January 1, 1502*, *Questions of Travel*, *The Burglar of Babylon*, and *Santarém*. These works were selected for their rich engagement with water imagery and its connections to questions of selfhood, identity, and the projection of the poetic self. They serve as exemplars through which the symbolic presence of water – and its implications for identity and self-projection – can be traced both within individual texts and across the selected corpus. By examining water in relation to these themes, the study highlights how Bishop's poetry constructs a fluid, reflective space in which the self is continuously negotiated and projected.

DIVISION & INTEGRATION

In the opening stanza of *Questions of Travel*, a poem in which the poet – as the title suggests – interrogates the implications of exile, the reader is immediately immersed in an expansive watery landscape. This environment, defined by monumental proportions, is at once formidable and unruly, yet it pulsates with motion and vitality. Bishop's imagery conveys not only the physical vastness and indomitability of water but also its symbolic resonance: a mutable, dynamic space that mirrors the uncertainties of human experience, the fluidity of identity, and the processes of self-reflection and projection. In this way, the watery realm operates simultaneously as a literal setting and as a metaphorical register through which the poet explores the complex interplay between environment, subjectivity, and the condition of displacement.

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams

hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very own eyes.
- For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
Aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.
But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled (p. 93).

Bishop engages directly with her status as an outsider, questioning the legitimacy of inhabiting a foreign landscape and observing it through “the eyes of an outsider, the eyes of a critical observer” (Rich, 1983). This reflection is embedded in a vividly watery environment, where grandeur, dynamism, and immensity underscore both the physical and symbolic centrality of water in her poetry. As Rich observes, outsiderhood is a condition that individuals often expend great effort attempting to mitigate through assimilation or protective strategies, including artistic expression. Poetry, in this sense, functions as a form of “protective coloration,” allowing the poet to negotiate the tensions between internal experience and external observation. Bishop’s experience in Brazil – a multi-racial yet socially stratified society – further enriched her understanding of cultural difference, historical legacy, and social fragmentation, informing her nuanced and symbolically charged depictions of water.

Early in her career, Bishop’s poetry was frequently associated with imagism and surrealism, movements that emphasized visual precision and the uncanny dimensions of everyday experience. As Przybycien (2015, p. 108) notes, Bishop’s early work demonstrates a remarkable visual acuity, the celebrated “famous eye,” which dramatizes the act of seeing. This visual sensibility, combined with surrealist techniques, enables her to capture peripheral, fleeting, or unexpected aspects of reality (Bishop, 2014, p. 286).

In *Questions of Travel*, water operates both sensorially and symbolically. Its movement is described with contrasting tempos: "...the crowded streams/ hurry too rapidly down to the sea," yet "...spill over the sides in soft slow motion" (p. 93-94), conveying simultaneity, overflow, and vitality. The transformation of streams into waterfalls and the anticipation of tearstains becoming them convey abundance and fluidity: "...the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops / makes them spill over the sides (...) turning to waterfalls... for if those (...) tearstains / aren't waterfalls yet, / in a quick age or so (...) they probably will be." This imagery parallels *At the Fishhouses*, where "the heavy surface of the sea / swelling slowly as if considering spilling over" (p. 64), evoking both deliberation and expansive force in nature. These motifs resonate with *The Weed*, often cited for its surrealist qualities. Here, a dream narrative presents the persona lying "dead, and meditating, / lay upon a grave, or bed," only to have a weed intrude upon her "desperate sleep," growing in the region of the heart and splitting it:

The rooted heart began to change
(not beat) and then it split apart
and from it broke a flood of water.
Two rivers glanced off from the sides,
one to the right, one to the left,
two rushing, half-clear streams,
(the ribs made of them two cascades)
which assuredly, smooth as glass,
went through the fine black grains of earth (p. 20-21).

Both poems exemplify Bishop's extraordinary capacity to weave visual precision, imaginative transformation, and symbolic resonance, positioning water as a site of perceptual, emotional, and existential overflow. In these works, water operates as a dynamic medium through which perception, identity, and self-projection intersect, illuminating the interplay between observation, embodiment, and imaginative engagement that characterizes much of her poetic practice. Readers are invited not merely to see and feel the water but to

inhabit its movement, power, and abundance, evoking a dream-like fluidity that mirrors the poet's negotiation of outsiderhood and the continual projection and reshaping of the self within a vibrant, transformative environment. The symbolism of the flood resonates with that of baptism on a cosmic level, suggesting an implicit longing for renewal, freedom, and integration of identity. This is not a religious quest but an intensely personal one, one that remains unresolved, as the growth of the weed ultimately divides the heart.

This idea of division provoked by the two rivers flowing into two contrary directions, "one to the right, one to the left", establishes a parallel with another poem, *Santarém*, in which the poet remembers one evening many years ago:

That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;
more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile
in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajos, Amazon,
grandly, silently flowing, flowing east (p. 185).

Here there is a convergence of waters that contrasts with the dividing waters in *The Weed*. This contrast, as well as its implications, is not difficult to interpret because it is clearly stated in the poem:

I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung
from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
and they'd diverged. Here only two
and coming together. Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations
such as: life / death, right / wrong, male / female
– such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
in that watery, dazzling dialectic (p. 185).

Waters symbolize joy and refreshment. They also represent transitions. In the poem, water seems to carry both emotions and movement with it. The poetic persona is immersed

in this atmosphere in which all dichotomies are resolved, allowing her to feel whole and integrated, rather than divided as in *The Weed*.

LIFE AND DEATH

It has already been established that water, in various contexts, may evoke the paradox of life and death. Life proceeds from water but it may also be taken by it. Baptism and the flood are external signs of death – of old and undesirable things or vices – and of rebirth. These concepts appear throughout Bishop’s work. In some poems, the interplay between life and death mediated by water is explicit, while in others it surfaces more subtly, conveyed through delicate imagery and metaphor. In *At the Fishhouses*, for instance, the poet is seen observing, and singing to a seal:

He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment (p. 65).

The movement described by the seal is the representation of the religious belief in baptism by total immersion. The passage can be read and understood as a projection of the persona’s beliefs onto the animal. She interprets his movements according to her cultural and religious background. A symbolic desire for new life and freedom might be inferred from these references. However, within the context of the poem it does not seem to be fulfilled. Bachelard’s reflections illuminate this paradoxical quality of water:

Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away. Daily death is not fire's exuberant form of death, piercing heaven with its arrows; daily death is the death of water. Water always flows, always falls, always ends in horizontal death. In innumerable examples, we shall see that for the materializing imagination, death associated with water is more dream-like than death associated with earth: the pain of water is infinite (Bachelard, 1999, p. 6).

Similar connotations of baptism may be suggested in *The Weed* through the flood of water that bursts from the persona's heart. This interpretation is supported when we consider that the flood functions as a metaphor for baptism – with its implications of death and rebirth – in a universal context. The images suggesting the movement of birth in *The Man-Moth* may also convey a desire for renewal, the need to be born again, to become a new creature freed from his own weaknesses and from the prejudiced eyes of others:

Up the façades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light (p. 14).

Water is implicit in this metaphorical birth. A child is involved in the amniotic water inside the womb, the place where life originates, a place of security and warmth. Leaving such a comfortable and sheltered place it is neither easy nor desirable: "But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do" (p. 14-15).

In *The Unbeliever* water is not this place of security but it is a menace to life. It stands for death and fear: "I must not fall. / The spangled sea below wants me to fall. / It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all" (p. 22). The instinct for the preservation of life is beautifully expressed here. The sea is in many contexts – as in this one – a metaphor of life.

To be alive is to be constantly afraid of death. That is the paradox explored in the poem. Water serves as a fluid intermediary between the ethereal and the solid, bridging life and death. As Bachelard (1999, p. 8) observes, it “undergoes something like a loss of impetus, a loss of life; it becomes a sort of plastic mediator between life and death.” This dual quality allows it to symbolize vitality in some poems and mortality in others.

The same feeling concerning water is conveyed by the “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, the clear gray icy water” (p. 65) in *At the Fishhouses*. Again, water does not stand for life in the poem. Quite on the contrary it is an “element bearable to no mortal”. Another suggestion of death and its inexorability is transmitted by the image of “A million Christmas trees stand waiting for Christmas”. The association between water and death becomes clear in the poem:

[...] The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
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
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue (p. 66).

The watery scenery described in this poem is very different from many others. The icy water cannot provide any kind of protection. It does not imply the idea of fecundity, of life. It is as if the persona were observing, contemplating, playing with death. This contemplation of death relates this poem to *The Burglar of Babylon*. Micuçu foresees his death while observing the sea and the sky:

Below him was the ocean.
It reached far up the sky,
Flat as a wall, and on it
Were freighters passing by,

Or climbing the wall and climbing
Till each looked like a fly,
And then fell over and vanished;
And he knew he was going to die (p. 114-115).

It recalls the ancient tragedies in which the character was not the master of his own destiny, which was controlled and shaped by the gods. As in many other poems, the persona tries to survive and to fight against death, but in this case, he already knows that he is going to lose the battle.

KNOWLEDGE & MEMORY

The recurring presence of water may symbolize, among other things, the knowledge and memories stored in the unconscious. In a psychological context, it may even stand for the unconscious itself. Such ideas are illustrated in some of Elizabeth Bishop's poems. In *The Weed*, flashes of memory are perceived by the persona through drops of water.

A few drops fell upon my face
and in my eyes, so I could see
(or, in that black place, thought I saw)
that each drop contained a light
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed deflected stream was made
itself of racing images.
(As if a river should carry all

the scenes that it had once reflected
shut in its waters, and not floating
on momentary surfaces) (p. 20-21).

The images rise to the surface as if emerging from the unconscious to a state of consciousness. They were hidden in this unconscious and presumed lost as the images reflected in the waters of a river. *At the Fishhouses*, water function as a symbol of knowledge:

It 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
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown (p. 64-66).

Such knowledge is not presented as something pleasant and alive. Perhaps this negative connotation is connected to the poet's puritan upbringing. She refuses to shape her life according to such cold and austere principles.

MOSS & LICHEN

The presence of moss and lichen in some of Bishop's poems does not carry pejorative connotations. In *At the Fishhouses*, their apparent translucence is compared to "the small old buildings with an emerald moss / growing on their shoreward walls." Similarly, in *Brazil, January 1, 1502*, the description suggests a positive attitude toward these elements: "The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts / splattered and overlapping, / threatened by moss / in lovely hell-green flames" (p. 223).

Moss and lichen can only thrive in the presence of humidity. While they are generally associated with unpleasant connotations – such as dirtiness or age, things that must be

cleaned or discarded – Bishop reverses these associations in her poems. The descriptions confer on them a positive value, rendering them desirable rather than signs of decay. Metaphorically, they may contrast with the Puritan background in which the poet was raised, where excessive cleanness was valued. Here, however, the humidity signaled by moss and lichen conveys a sense of fulfillment that mere neatness cannot provide.

REFLECTION: LIGHT & IMAGES – MIRROR & SOUL

Water may function as a mirror of the soul, its surface inviting a turn toward inner reflection. The soul represents the emotional dimension of the self, which establishes a symbolic connection with the moon, traditionally associated with both water and emotion. Several of Elizabeth Bishop's poems exemplify these relationships. In some, light is reflected; in others, images are reflected, and sometimes both occur simultaneously. The moon is a central element, frequently mirrored in the water and serving as a source of both light and attraction. Bachelard's observation highlights why water, more than a conventional mirror, allows for a freer, dream-like engagement with one's inner self:

First, we must understand the psychological advantage of using water for a mirror: water serves to make our image more natural, to give a little innocence and naturalness to the pride we have in our private contemplation. A mirror is too civilized, too geometrical, too easily handled an object; it is too obviously a dream device ever to adapt itself to oneiric life (Bachelard, 1999, p. 21).

The reflection of light is recurrent in many poems. In *The Unbeliever*, for example, the poetic self is "secure in introspection" as "he peers at the watery pillars of his reflection" (p. 22). The drops that fall on the persona's face and eyes, in *The Weed*, "contained a light / a small, illuminated scene". Here there is a combination of images and light: both are reflected together in the little drops of water. The "heavy surface of the sea" in *At the Fishhouses* is all silver suggesting the presence of moonlight.

The concept of reflected images – evoking the idea of a mirror – is developed with skill in several of Bishop’s poems. Two of her works illustrate the notion of a mirrored reality: *Insomnia* and *The Gentleman of Shalott*. In the former, a dizzying atmosphere is created by the context. The moon, deserted by the Universe would “find a body of water, / or a mirror, on which to dwell. / So wrap up care in a cobweb/ and drop it down the well.” Here, three elements – the moon, the water, and the mirror – are brought together through these striking images. Yet, what is even more compelling are the consequences of this connection:

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me (p. 70).

Such inversion appears to be the only escape from an unpleasant and undesirable reality. It becomes the sole means which the persona can feel loved rather than merely the one who loves. It may also suggest an attempt to flee from the pressures imposed by the real world.

This game between reality and imagination is also played in *The Gentleman of Shalott*. A man is contemplating half of his body on a mirror. This “mirrored reflection” of a “half looking-glass” although undoubtedly playful is the source of important philosophical considerations.

But he’s in doubt
as to which side’s in or out
of the mirror.
There’s little margin for error,
but there’s no proof either.
And if half his head is reflected,
thought, he thinks, might be affected (p. 9).

The uncertainty provoked by this game is something “he finds exhilarating”. Since reality is often unbearable, manipulating it becomes thrilling. This playful distortion provides a means of escaping the pressures that reality imposes:

He loves
that sense of constant re-adjustment.
He wishes to be quoted as saying at present:
“Half is enough” (p. 10).

The powerful images of the mirror in these two poems seem to demonstrate an attempt to find an essence, an identity that, if not lost, is hidden somewhere inside us. More than an outward contemplation, it may be a desire to see the inner-self – probably standing for the authentic self. A desire to contemplate our own soul.

The soul, this inner self, must be very precious, for it represents authenticity. It is a treasure precisely because it is so difficult to attain. Perhaps it is this treasure that the Man-Moth is ready to offer to sympathetic eyes:

If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It’s all dark pupil,
an entire night itself whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee’s sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you’re not paying attention
He’ll swallow it. However, if you watch, he’ll hand it over,
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink (p. 15).

This strange creature, drawn to the moonlight, is not integrated into the reality that surrounds him. The poem suggests that he is aware of this condition. He does not want to disturb others or to call attention to himself; yet he is ready to offer “his only possession” to anyone who notices him; he is ready to offer his emotions, his very soul.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

All the poems analyzed convey – in one way or another – an atmosphere that is not entirely naturalistic. In other words, they immerse the reader in an oneiric atmosphere, at times bordering on the surreal, thereby reinforcing the interplay between reality and imagination. In *The Weed*, for instance, the speaker begins: “I dreamed that dead, and meditating, / I lay upon a grave, or bed” (p. 20). The poem unfolds as a dream in which a weed attempts to prod the speaker “from desperate sleep.” Darkness predominates, and visibility is possible only because the events take place within the dream world.

Similarly, in *The Man-Moth*, after one of his rare visits to the surface, he “returns / to the pale subways of cement he calls his home” (p. 14-15). The poem is suffused with surrealist features, and each night “he must / be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.” In *The Unbeliever*, the protagonist “sleeps on the top of a mast / with his eyes fast closed” (p. 22). The precariousness of this image conveys a sense of imbalance. He sleeps while speaking to a gull that probes “into his dream.” More than a dream, however, the poem suggests a nightmarish atmosphere, as the sea appears threatening and his position leaves him constantly at risk of falling to his death.

Insomnia likewise presents a dizzying mood. The speaker interprets the moon as “far away beyond sleep, or / perhaps she’s a daytime sleeper.” Perceiving the world through a mirror, she sees an inverted reality “where the shadows are really the body, / where we stay awake all night” (p. 70). In *The Gentleman of Shalott*, the interplay between reality and imagination is once again mediated by the mirror, which reflects only half of reality. In *At the Fishhouses*, the lyrical self sings Baptist hymns to a seal – imagined as a believer in baptism by total immersion, like herself. Although the poem makes no explicit mention of dreams, it nonetheless frames experience in a manner reminiscent of dream logic, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination.

In *Brazil, January 1, 1502*, after the detailed description of the landscape, the tone shifts: “Still in the foreground there is Sin: / five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.” The Christians had dreamed of such a place, “an old dream of wealth and luxury / (...) wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure” (pp. 91–92). In *Questions of Travel*, by comparing the foreign landscape to a theatre, the speaker once again stages an interplay between reality and imagination: “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them too?” (p. 93–94). As LaFemina (2017, p. 12) observes, “[t]he structure of *Questions of Travel*, which was written over the course of Bishop’s first nine years in Brazil, tells us much about how she ordered that personal chaos.” This period may well have been the first in which Bishop experienced genuine happiness. In contrast, Micuçu in *The Burglar of Babylon* is not dreaming but caught in a nightmarish situation as he flees the police. Looking at the sea and sky, he foresees his death.

Finally, in *Santarém*, although no dream is directly mentioned, the poem opens with a tone of uncertainty and freedom akin to dream experience: “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after – how many years?” (p. 185–187). Nothing here can be taken as entirely certain; more important than factual accuracy is the intensity of the emotions recollected.

Taken together, these excerpts illustrate the pervasive presence of the oneiric in Bishop’s poetry. Considering both the poet’s context and the thematic role of dreams, the analysis gains depth. Dreams resist rational control; they function as liberators of the mind from daily pressures and taboos. Though rooted in real experience, they reconstruct reality in imaginative and original ways. In Bishop’s work, dreams may thus function as a form of liberation – a means of loosening both personal and social constraints.

Dreams often symbolize birth through the presence of water, the archetypal maternal element. Amniotic fluid constitutes not only humanity’s first environment but also its first source of sustenance, warmth, and protection. Birth entails the loss of these conditions, replacing equilibrium with the disorientation of a new world. Read in this light, Bishop’s poetry may reveal a desire for protection, warmth, and balance, as if pointing to a symbolic return to the womb. In Bishop’s poetry, the recurrent figuration of water emerges as more than a motif; it becomes a symbolic space for the projection, negotiation, and writing of the

self. Within the textual and thematic contexts of her work, aquatic imagery reveals the delicate tension between concealment and self-revelation, blending dream-like and paradoxical elements. Through the symbolism of water these recurring images articulate the poet's enduring quest for equilibrium and, ultimately, for an integrated, coherent sense of identity.

REFLEXOS LÍQUIDOS: A IMAGÉTICA DA ÁGUA E O EU POÉTICO NA OBRA DE ELIZABETH BISHOP

RESUMO: Na poesia de Elizabeth Bishop, o persistente sentimento de não pertencimento – marcado pela ausência de um lar fixo e pelo posicionamento do eu poético entre lugares – é expresso por meio de estratégias distintas. Dentre elas, a imagética da água se destaca, especialmente em poemas de atmosfera onírica, funcionando como um veículo simbolicamente rico para a autorrevelação. Este estudo examina o uso de imagens aquáticas por Bishop ao longo de sua obra, destacando suas representações mutáveis, possibilidades interpretativas e contribuição para a construção de uma atmosfera onírica. A análise considera tanto a importância da água em poemas individuais quanto seu papel mais amplo como meio de projeção e reflexão do eu mais íntimo da poetisa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Elizabeth Bishop; Poesia; Água; Simbolismo; Atmosfera onírica.

REFLEJOS LÍQUIDOS: LA IMAGINERÍA DEL AGUA Y EL YO POÉTICO EN LA OBRA DE ELIZABETH BISHOP

RESUMEN: En la poesía de Elizabeth Bishop, el persistente sentimiento de no pertenencia – marcado por la ausencia de un hogar fijo y por la posición del yo poético entre lugares – se expresa mediante estrategias distintas. Entre ellas, la imagería del agua destaca, especialmente en poemas con una atmósfera onírica, funcionando como un vehículo

simbólicamente rico para la auto-revelación. Este estudio examina el uso de imágenes acuáticas por parte de Bishop a lo largo de su obra, destacando sus representaciones cambiantes, posibilidades interpretativas y contribución a una atmósfera onírica. El análisis considera tanto la importancia del agua en poemas individuales como su función más amplia como medio a través del cual se proyectan y reflejan aspectos del yo más íntimo de la poeta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Elizabeth Bishop; Poesía; Agua; Simbolismo; Atmósfera onírica.

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