

*Sandra Barry*

**Shipwrecks of the Soul: Elizabeth Bishop's Reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins\***

"O I admire and sorrow!"<sup>1</sup>

*Gerald Manley Hopkins*

During the night something had happened to the snow which had been spread with such perfect whiteness and smoothness over the hills the day before. As I walked I noticed that the whole surface of the snow seemed to be separating from the underneath part, like a semi-clear rind on a fruit. There were large . . . yellow blotches and where the underneath snow had been gullied out by the trickle of water it had the appearance, through the crust, of bluish veins running a loose unhealthy network. (Bishop, "Reminiscences" 22)

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The haunting, corporeal imagery of this passage belongs to Elizabeth Bishop's memories of her childhood spent in Nova Scotia. It was there that Bishop began to learn the realities of the "surface" and the "underneath"—how they are at one and the same time separate yet inextricably linked; how without a healthy underneath the surface will not hold one up. In an unpublished poem-fragment, also about her childhood, Bishop wrote

The snow had a crust, they said, like bread—  
 only white—it held me up but it would not hold her  
 she fell through it  
 and said she'd go home again for the snow-shoes—  
 and I could slide in shine and glare while she  
 stepped wide  
 on the. . . . (Spires 67)

The tragedy of Elizabeth Bishop's childhood was that the surface had not supported "her," namely, Bishop's mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, who suffered a mental collapse in 1916, of which Bishop witnessed, and who was hospitalized in the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth until her death in 1934. As Bishop grew out of childhood into adolescence and young adulthood, she began to explore the surface and sub-surface of life in poetry, her own and that of other poets. A 1934 journal entry takes the literal observation of the prose quotation above, written, in fact, around the same time,<sup>2</sup> and draws it into the realm of the aesthetic and metaphysical:

It's a question of using the poet's proper materials with which [s]he is equipped by nature, i.e., immediate, intense physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything—to express something not of them—something I suppose, spiritual. But it proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place. Sometimes it cannot be made to indicate its spiritual goal clearly (Some of Hopkins', say, where the point seems to be missing) but even then the spiritual must be felt.<sup>3</sup> (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 65)

The "spiritual" for Bishop was not an idyllic, ethereal realm, but the dark places "underneath." Her sense of this reality was doubtless intuitive-

ly formed during her childhood, when she so early encountered the painful knowledge of loss and learned how the sense of loss is often buried deep beneath the surface. In her life the spiritual goal was not always clearly indicated, especially during those early traumatic years of growing up. However, when she began during young adulthood to read the religious poetry of George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the relationship between "surface" and "underneath" began to enter her consciousness to imprint itself indelibly on her artistic imagination.

Elizabeth Bishop once claimed, "My three 'favorite' poets—not the best poets, whom we all admire, but favorite in the sense of one's 'best friends', etc., are Herbert, Hopkins, and Baudelaire" (Spires 62). How one poet influences another is a complex, alchemic process not to be easily separated into its constituent elements. Elizabeth Bishop wrote and spoke occasionally in letters, articles and interviews about the poets whom she liked and who had influenced her in varying degrees. Bishop's unique, idiosyncratic style reveals generally that such influences were not dominant—inasmuch as she did not imitate anyone; yet she incorporated a wide variety of perspectives and stylistic techniques (from the surreal to the lyrical) into her own poetic vision. This article aims to examine the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry on Elizabeth Bishop and to demonstrate that Bishop's sense of Hopkins as a "best friend" reveals not only a significant poetic but also a profoundly personal connection and debt.

Several recent critics have written ably and astutely about the nature of Bishop's relationship to Hopkins's prosody (Millier, "Modesty" 47-56; Goldensohn 85-94). I shall but summarize these critical analyses because my interest here is in what I term "pre-literary" correspondences. My hypothesis is that Hopkins affected Bishop initially in an intensely personal way. That he influenced her artistic formation is not in question, but this influence evolved over years of reading and study as Bishop matured both as a person and as a poet. This influence has been perceptively analysed by Goldensohn, Millier and others, and I generally concur with the scholarly consensus. However, I also contend that Bishop first apprehended Hopkins as speaking directly to her tragic childhood experience. It was this personal recognition which first drew Bishop into Hopkins's poetry where she witnessed the process by which emotion—especially pain—is transformed into art: poetry as alchemy.

An analysis of the Hopkins-Bishop relationship must begin at the outer layer—the surface—of Bishop's poetry. Elizabeth Bishop used epigraphs sparingly. Whether this practice enhances or diminishes their significance is, perhaps, a moot point. Yet in an analysis of Bishop's poetry they must be seen as not mere "decoration," if for no other reason than Bishop's meticulous attention to detail: words, images, phrases never appear accidentally. By its very presence an epigraph becomes an integral part of the pattern of the whole poem. As with titles, epigraphs offer the reader a way into Bishop's poems, suggesting theme and organic order and revealing aesthetic forces, both personal and literary, at work on the poem and the poet. On one level, epigraphs reveal deliberately chosen affinities that Bishop incorporates, even cultivates, in the development of a specific poem and in her work in general. On another level, epigraphs function as private incantations for Bishop, embodying moments of epiphany or painful recognition, or simply echoing the essence of what is understood and created.

For "A Cold Spring" Bishop chose an epigraph from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring," a poem celebrating "the earth's sweet being in the beginning."<sup>4</sup> Bonnie Costello observes that "it is tempting to read the epigraph from Hopkins . . . ironically, given the title and the series of inauspicious beginnings which follow it" (Costello 67). What concerns Bishop is not so much the beginning, the birth (which Hopkins viewed as an Edenic, pristine moment), but the "after-birth" and the process of absorbing and transforming the startling, sometimes disturbing, often beautiful body of the earth, "stretching miles of green limbs from the south" (*Complete Poems* 55). Bishop had foreshadowed this seasonal metaphor with more sombre colors in the unpublished "Reminiscences of Great Village": "The thaw made all the air a thick pearl gray. The trees dripped and the roads were long brown stains trailing off across the hills" (22). Costello nevertheless foregoes the ironic reading by concluding that in the poem "Bishop achieves a vision of generation and decay which is indeed beautiful" (70). The epigraph creates tension between itself and the title even before the reader enters upon the text, a tension which reflects Bishop's complex envisioning of spring and which can be seen as a metaphor of all beginnings, including her own. Elizabeth Bishop chose Hopkins in order to establish this tension, because she had discovered



from her first readings of his poetry a direct connection between his experience of beauty and pain (generation and decay) and hers.

The focus of this article is principally on pain: how Bishop saw her pain reflected in, even explained by, Hopkins's poetry. How Bishop and Hopkins understood beauty—the aesthetic issue is related—must form the subject of another article. However, a curious correspondence in their perception of the "beautiful," too delightful to omit, also reflects in miniature the larger concerns of "A Cold Spring" and "Spring." In *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, Robert Bernard Martin observes:

Hopkins's perception of beauty was certainly not conventional, nor did he divide experience into the beautiful and the ugly. Once, during a cold snap, when part of his duty was to clean the outdoor water closets, he wrote in his journal, "The slate slabs of the urinals even are frosted in graceful sprays." Such a slight remark indicates how unconsciously he inhabited a world quite different from that of his fellows, one that could seem almost comic in its distance from their reactions. (190)

In a brief fragment of the "Reminiscences of Great Village," Bishop observes a similar facility, albeit with a darker, more ominous tone: ". . . and the two holes of the privy were two eye-sockets looking vacantly down into depth and decomposition" (2). The "underneath" was a mysterious place both intriguing (fertilizing) and unnerving (decaying).

In a 1966 interview with Ashley Brown, Elizabeth Bishop stated:

When I was thirteen, I discovered Whitman, and that was important to me at the time. About that time I started going to summer camp and met some more sophisticated girls. . . . One of them gave me Harriet Monroe's anthology of modern poets. That was an important experience. . . . I remember coming across Harriet Monroe's quotations from Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" for one. I quickly memorized these, and I thought, "I must get this man's work." In 1927 I saw the first edition of Hopkins.<sup>5</sup> (6)

Furthermore, in a 1977 interview with George Starbuck, Bishop reiterated and expanded the point:

When I was given that anthology when I was twelve or thirteen, in the introduction to it, Harriet Monroe, I suppose it was, talked about Hopkins,

and quoted an incomplete fragment of a poem—"tattered-tasseled-tangled," and so on. I was immensely struck by those lines, and then when I went to school, in 1927 or 1928, the second Bridges edition of Hopkins came out and a friend gave me that. I wrote some very bad imitation Hopkins for a time, all later destroyed—or so I hope. (11-29, qtd. in Schwartz and Estess 321-2)

The copy of Hopkins's poems which Bishop saw in 1927 would have been the first edition, edited by Robert Bridges, published in 1918. If, in fact, it was the "second Bridges edition of Hopkins" which she says she received (in the Starbuck interview), the date would have been 1930 at the earliest, the year the second edition was issued. The quotation in Harriet Monroe's anthology, "Tatter-tassel-tangled and dingle-a-dangled / Dandy-hung dainty head" (xlvi), differs somewhat from the original Hopkins poem, "The Woodlark," which reads, "Tatter-tangled and dingle-a-danglèd / Dandy-hung dainty head" (Gardner, *Poems* 177). Monroe renders *in toto* "God's Grandeur," while the opening sequence of "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo," with its recurring "beauty, beauty, beauty" and "despair, despair, despair, despair," articulates concepts which would have spoken to the adolescent poet. Furthermore, Lorrie Goldensohn observes that Bishop linked Emily Dickinson and Hopkins ("internal exiles") in a "poem-idea" never realized (60). Perhaps the origin of this link came from Monroe, who conjoined both "singularly reticent" poets in the *Anthology's* introduction, quoting a passage from Dickinson which has remarkable resonance for the current discussion:

The difference between despair  
 And fear, is like the one  
 Between the instant of a wreck  
 And when the wreck has been! (xlvi)

What is clear from all the above is that Bishop was intimately acquainted with Hopkins's poetry by the time she was in her twenties. Furthermore, she had read G. F. Lahey's biography of Hopkins (Kalstone 14)<sup>6</sup> and Ignatius Loyala's *Spiritual Exercises* (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 64), and would go on to read editions of Hopkins's letters and journals, holding true to her belief that "the only real way to understand poetry is to know the life and beliefs of the poet" (Bishop, "In Appreciation"). As Thomas Travisano has pointed out, this comment is a variation on the

theme of "total immersion" (39-40). Bishop's interest in Hopkins was keen enough to spawn a remarkable essay on the poet's metrical innovation of "sprung rhythm," which was published in *The Vassar Review of Under-graduate Studies* in 1934 (Bishop, "Gerard Manley Hopkins" 5-7). Hopkins's technique had also influenced another essay published in *The Vassar Review*, entitled "Time's Andromedas" (102-20).

In *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, David Kalstone writes that Bishop was "teased by the possibilities she heard in Hopkins," which were subtler than mere "smart alliteration, [and] the gnarled syntax" (38-39). She was attracted to Hopkins because his poetic technique heralded "a new rhythmic freedom and variety" (38). The creative permutations seemed potentially infinite.

A more complex analysis is given by Lorrie Goldensohn in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. Examining Bishop's Vassar essays, "Time's Andromedas" and "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry," Goldensohn argues that Bishop oriented herself within, and drew elements from, Hopkins's poetry in several ways. In "Time's Andromedas," Bishop's preoccupation with "the relationship between chaos and order, fixity and flux in nature" is established (Goldensohn 86). Unlike Hopkins, however, "in place of the order of religion, Bishop calls on the balance of natural science, always more attractive to her as a born literalist of the imagination" (85). The striking metaphor of the flock of birds which structures the essay exhibited Bishop's sense that "birds stay birds" and do not "become stand-ins for something else, such as light-winged Dryads of the trees, blithe spirits, or scorners of the ground" (86).

Ultimately, Hopkins's example served to shape Bishop's instinctive need to "spatialize temporality." Goldensohn writes:

By spatializing time, though, Bishop posits a control over the safe passage of her life and work: time's dismaying dissolutions can be stopped first by being fixed in language; second, by positioning, or deployment in space; third by allowing the body to mimic that flux through motion, through a kind of sympathetic magic, as her hurrying, soon-to-be compulsively travelling body mimed and neutralized the endless motion of the clock by literally running it down. (92)

In combination with this sense of overall form, it was "Hopkins' system of sprung rhythm, with its rove-over, enjambling feet, and outriding

syllables plunging in at the heads of lines, . . . [creating] . . . momentum and immediacy" (91) which appealed to Bishop's poetic instinct. In her analysis of the "Gerard Manley Hopkins" essay, Goldensohn points out Bishop's fascination with Hopkins's baroque qualities of "a mind thinking"—in the act of creating (the moving target and moving marksman metaphor)—which for Bishop included the fusing of "both subjective and objective truths" (inner and outer worlds), preventing "ecstatically transcendental" flights of fancy "that she instinctively mistrusted" (93-4). Goldensohn concludes that Bishop's "poetry took decades to catch up to what her theory cut out for it" in these early essays (96); the encounter with Hopkins's innovative metrical forms nevertheless shaped her nascent and developing sense of how the mind apprehends the world.

In an article in *The Kenyon Review* entitled "Modesty and Morality: George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Elizabeth Bishop," Brett C. Millier describes Bishop's debt to Herbert and Hopkins as one of "moral vision" (48). According to Millier, similarities in their careers "show what she learned from them or affirmed in herself by their example: the small corpus of poems, the distinctly modest voice . . . , the subordination of human desires to a larger power . . . , [and] an ambivalent relationship to the idea of fame" (49). From this identification came her frustrations with the overdone morbidity and "grand all-out efforts" of her contemporaries—their too easy reliance on catastrophe as an allegory of the self and the world (56). Like Goldensohn, Millier observes that Hopkins's poetic technique impressed on Bishop the power of the sense of "timing" or "sprung rhythm" in poetry, and "how it allows the poet to apply stresses according to sense, not according to an arbitrary pattern" (56)—this process incorporating the baroque idea of the "mind thinking," which Bishop believed was clearly presented in poems such as "The Wreck of the Deutschland." For Millier, however, the essential debt is a catalogue of virtues: modesty, humility, unpretentiousness, consciousness of one's limitations—characteristics which were more than personality traits for Bishop. They were the basic elements of life and art. Millier argues that in combination with innovations of technique, these elements formed Bishop's inheritance from Hopkins as they directed her towards the achievement of "moral truth" (56).

These critical assessments are based on the poet's relatively mature works and a comprehensive knowledge of the entire Bishop *oeuvre*.

Bishop was in her early twenties when she wrote the Vassar essays. She had known Hopkins's work for nearly five years. Certainly, the essays supply ample evidence for positing his influence. But they are not the only evidence. What about those even earlier readings of Hopkins's poetry by the adolescent Bishop? However precocious she may have been, it is unlikely that she initially confronted his words with a conscious, intellectual understanding of sprung rhythm and inscape. Even for literary critics and editors, Hopkins is not easy. Apart from the essays Bishop spoke rather superficially about what Hopkins "meant" to her: "But I got more from Hopkins and the Metaphysical poets than I did from Stevens or Hart Crane," or "I'm not religious, but I read Herbert and Hopkins with the greatest pleasure" (Interview, Bishop by Brown 9, 11). It is likely, based on her own comments previously quoted, that Bishop first read the bulk of Hopkins when she was in her late teens.<sup>7</sup> For all her fascination with his poetic technique, those first moments with Hopkins must have been uncanny for Bishop. It must have seemed to her that the priest-scholar, dead in 1889 but risen again as a living poet in 1918, to paraphrase W. H. Gardner (*Poems* xiii)—when Elizabeth Bishop herself was a young child—knew her life story.

The unpublished "Reminiscences of Great Village"<sup>8</sup> exhibits references to Hopkins's poetry related not to poetic technique but to the personal circumstances she was experiencing as she read him for the first time. She wrote the "Reminiscences" in the mid 1930s,<sup>9</sup> at about the same time as she was writing the Vassar essays. Even the Vassar essays, written as assignments, hint at the profound personal connection Bishop had with Hopkins's poetry. While it is risky to speculate about unrecorded events and perhaps impossible to return to those first moments of encounter, nevertheless Bishop extracted remarkable autobiographical literary allusions from Hopkins's poetry and wove them into her work. I argue, then, that this process conspicuously distinguishes her affinity with the poet.<sup>10</sup>

The title-page of the unpublished "Reminiscences of Great Village" bears only the epigraph "Enough: corruption was the world's first woe," underlined and followed simply by the letters "G. M. H." This quotation is taken from Hopkins's unfinished poem, "On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People: A Brother and Sister." In oversimplified terms, Hopkins's poem "Spring," from which Bishop derived a later epigraph,

deals with the innocence of the "girl and boy" before it "sour[s] with sinning" (*Poems and Prose* 28). "The Portrait" poem deals with the "after-cast" (or the "after-birth" as Bishop terms it)—the way in which the world, "the wild and wanton work of men," corrupts the souls of the brother and sister in spite of the goodness of God and the truth of Christ (84). R. B. Martin argues that in his poetry Hopkins continually confronted one of "the central mysteries of Christianity, the reason for the existence of suffering in a world created by a beneficent God" (250).

Elizabeth Bishop was familiar with actual portraits of a brother and sister. In fact, she wrote about them in her memoir "Memories of Uncle Neddy." The portraits were of her maternal uncle, Arthur Bulmer, and her mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop. They hung for years in the parlor of the Bulmer family home in Great Village.<sup>11</sup> In 1957 Aunt Grace sent them to her in Brazil. In this memoir Bishop chose to focus on Uncle Arthur. She did so because in prefacing the unpublished "Reminiscences" with the Hopkins epigraph, Bishop indicated that it was to be the word-portrait of her mother (incorporating as well the published version, "In the Village").<sup>12</sup> "Memories of Uncle Neddy" explores the corruption of the brother/uncle. Bishop did not use "father," of course, because her own father had died when she was an infant; yet she identified sufficiently with Arthur to make the brother/uncle paradigm a powerful substitute. The "Reminiscences" and "In the Village" explore Bishop's perception of the suffering of the sister/mother. These portraits ultimately reflect and define her own experience of corruption and suffering.

Bishop's explanation of all the tragic events surrounding her mother's breakdown and subsequent institutionalization occurs during a conversation between her grandmother and her Aunt Grace<sup>13</sup> in the "Reminiscences":

"It's the hand of God," said my grandmother. "The hand of God." Aunt Grace bit her lip & said "don't be silly mother. Lucius, don't pay any attention. Nobody knows what makes things like that happen."<sup>14</sup> (14)

For Hopkins, it was "through suffering [that] man arrives at knowledge and final bliss" (Martin 250). His strict, Catholic-convert religion forced him thus to attempt to justify the existence of pain; to construct a theodicy. Bishop was not so optimistic or certain. Hopkins's acceptance of the inevitability of suffering disturbed her. Her use of Hopkins

suggests that she saw the tragedy of her mother in terms of mystery; but it was not Hopkins's religious beliefs to which Bishop turned in order to understand the pain in her life, it was to his faith in poetry as a process or system whereby pain can be entered, explored, overcome or even transformed.<sup>15</sup>

R. B. Martin describes a quality and process in Hopkins which could just as accurately be ascribed to Elizabeth Bishop:

One has only to be familiar with the whole body of Hopkins's poems to recognize how often he dealt with pain in his own life by imaginatively re-ordering it into poetry, although sometimes he was apparently unconscious of the dependence of one level of experience upon the other.  
(105)

Hopkins spoke first to Bishop about the beauty and pain of her mother and all the suffering which ensued. His poetic faith, perhaps unconsciously at first, offered her a way of understanding and transforming the suffering, of mastering the loss.<sup>16</sup> Instead of burying the pain in the dark places underneath the surface, which was in many ways the example given to her by the adults with whom she lived, who kept silent about Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, Elizabeth Bishop apprehended in Hopkins an example of how to keep the underneath from being eaten away by the acid of pain. The epigraph from "The Portrait" poem provides an *entrée* into the text of the "Reminiscences" and embodies a conscious literary affinity; but most importantly, it suggests the moments of epiphany and painful recognition Elizabeth Bishop experienced when she found herself not only reading Hopkins's poems, but also being read *by* his poems. Bishop's earliest artistic efforts to explain the tragedy of her mother's illness and its impact on her, (as well as later, mature work), were grounded in her first encounters with the cry of Hopkins's own shipwrecked soul.

The full circumstances of the life and death of Gertrude Bulmer Bishop are not known. She was born on 13 August 1879 in Great Village, the third child of William Brown and Elizabeth Bulmer (née Hutchinson). According to the Great Village Women's Institute's *History of Great Village*, she had training both as a teacher and a nurse (35, 37).<sup>17</sup> She married William Thomas Bishop of Worcester, Massachusetts, on 22

June 1908.<sup>18</sup> Their daughter Elizabeth was born on 8 February 1911. William Bishop died in October 1911. In light of her eventual breakdown, it is reasonable to suppose that his young widow may never have fully recovered from this loss. However, it was not until 1914 that her condition warranted hospitalization, first in Deaconess Hospital in Brookline, Massachusetts, and then in Dr. Norton's private sanatorium in Norwood, where Gertrude was hospitalized for approximately three months.<sup>19</sup> During this time Elizabeth was cared for by Gertrude's sisters, Maud Shepherdson and Grace Bulmer, who also lived in Massachusetts.

In spite of the enforced temporary separation in 1914, Bishop spent a good deal of time with her mother until June 1916 when Gertrude was hospitalized for the last time, in the Nova Scotia Hospital. Although specific details and an exact chronology are wanting,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that Bishop knew her mother; they, in fact, had a significant, continuing relationship. The full meaning of this relationship remains to be explored, but Bishop certainly remained aware of her mother until Gertrude's death on 29 May 1934. This fact explains the apparently anachronistic statement in the "Reminiscences": "It was May she went away in" (20).<sup>21</sup>

Without a doubt, Bishop had not put her mother behind her. Being circumstantially involved in the aftermath of Gertrude's death, because she was the sole heir-at-law, all the painful memories were stirred up in this young woman who was not yet even a university graduate, as she signed the probate documents and settled outstanding matters relating to the administration of the estate.<sup>22</sup> That Bishop grieved for her mother and herself at this time is evidenced not only by the writing of the "Reminiscences," but also by the poem "The Reprimand," dated 1935, which Kalstone calls "a sonnet about tears, imitating Hopkins" (40).<sup>23</sup> (Fortunately, not all the "bad imitation Hopkins" was destroyed.)

If you taste tears too often, inquisitive tongue,  
 You'll find they've something you'd not reckoned on;  
 Crept childish out to touch eye's own phenomenon,  
 Return, into your element. Tears belong  
 To only eyes; their deepest sorrow they wrung  
 From water. Where wept water's gone  
 That residue is sorrow, salt and wan,  
 Your bitter enemy, who leaves the face white-strung.

Tears, taster, have a dignity in display,



Carry an antidotal gift for drying.  
 Unsuted to a savoring by the way,  
 Salt puckers tear-drops up, ends crying.  
 Oh curious, cracked and chapped, now will you say,  
 Tongue, "Grief's not mine" and bend yourself to sighing?

(*Complete Poems* 228)

Superficially, Bishop was attempting to achieve "Hopkinsesque" qualities. "Where wept water's gone," "Tears, taster" and "Oh curious, cracked and chapped" were her own versions of the "tattered-tasseled-tangled" assonant parallelism which so intrigued her. However, the deeper levels of the poem reveal a more personal response. The "Terrible Sonnets" or "Sonnets of Desolation" (1885-89)<sup>24</sup> are, according to W. H. Gardner, "Hopkins's crowning achievement. They are the work of a man who, while putting the whole of his "sad self" into a poem, could still preserve the sensitivity and control of the artist" (xxx). R. B. Martin observes that "these frightening sonnets are the expression of a doubt so profound that it can often find comfort only in the belief that death may be not eternal salvation but utter and welcome annihilation" (382).

Intense emotion contained within the immutable sonnet form was the quality which Bishop was trying to emulate. Hopkins's Petrarchan sonnets (both early and late) do not always strictly conform to traditional metrical, stanzaic and rhyming patterns. "The Reprimand" also does not adhere entirely to the "classical" form. It may be closer in style to Hopkins's earlier, more loosely crafted, more hopeful sonnets such as "God's Grandeur," "Spring" and "In the Valley of the Elwy"; but the emotions motivating the poem are more akin to Hopkins's spiritual crisis in the dark sonnets—in particular, "My own heart let me more have pity on," where the comfortless sense of those left behind echoes "The Wreck of the Deutschland" and where the speaker chastises himself to "let be" his "tormented mind."<sup>25</sup> Probably Hopkins's sonnets were not the first which Bishop had read. Sonnets were not unique to Hopkins, but his manipulation of the genre was. At a moment in her life when she had to face the tragedy of her mother all over again—when the loss was irreversible—Bishop made Hopkins's sonnet the model for her attempt to hold "explosive emotions in check" (Martin 383). She chose to imitate Hopkins in this early poem about grief because when she had first read not only his sonnets but also his highly idiosyncratic, spiritually

autobiographical poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," she heard him speaking directly to her about her mother.



*The North Star on the Rocks*

[Yarmouth County Historical Society]

Two curious autobiographical details of Bishop's life provide an illuminating context for her first encounter with the shipwreck poem. On 8 August 1919, the steamer *North Star* "came to grief on a ledge of Green Rock, off Yarmouth, [N.S.] in the fog. Passengers and cargo were taken off but the ship was lost" (*Boston Advertiser* 9 Aug. 1919). On 13 August 1919 the *Truro Daily News* reported, "Miss Grace Boomer and friend Miss Richards and little Elizabeth Bishop all of Boston arrived home the latter part of last week. . . . These young ladies were passengers on the ill-fated Steamer *North Star*, which was wrecked on the voyage from Boston to Yarmouth" (7). While not so tragic and dramatic a shipwreck as the *Deutschland*, to an eight-year-old this experience must have been adventurous and frightening. Perhaps it made Bishop think about her own maternal great-grandfather. Robert Hutchinson "master-owner of a bark in the West Indies trade . . . [who] wrote a small text on navigation . . . was lost at sea [in the mid-1860s], with all hands, off Sable Island" ("Autobiographical Sketch" 2). The family tradition<sup>26</sup> relates how Robert's wife, Mary E. Hutchinson, later Mrs. Thomas Gourley, greeted her children one morning with the news that their father would not return home as he had been shipwrecked. Asked how she knew, she replied that she had heard three distinct knocks in the night, a portent of death. Bishop knew this eerie tale well. The shipwreck which happened during a "famous storm" so intrigued her, moreover, that she made a trip to Sable Island in 1951.<sup>27</sup> She wrote revealingly to Robert Lowell of her reasons for going: "if I'm not fulfilling my destiny and get wrecked, too, I think I can turn it into an article or maybe a poem or two" (qtd. from Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 234).

Before her pilgrimage to Sable Island she did some research at the "Archives building of Dalhousie University in Halifax," i.e., the Public Archives of Nova Scotia then located on the Studley campus of Dalhousie, searching out information about this place which had claimed so many lives including her great-grandfather's. There she found "a map of the island, published by the Department of Marine in 1882, entitled 'Known Wrecks on Sable Island.'" In an unpublished article which she began to write shortly after her visit but never finished, her description of this map of wrecks resonates with haunting imagery of "surface" and "underneath":

The narrow sand-bar is completely outlined by little black silhouettes of schooners, barques, brigs, & steamers—all heading straight into Sable Island from either side. It looks like a limp worm being viciously attacked by black insects; &, since the eastern & western points where the reefs reach far out under the water are indicated by speckled shadings,—a worm with its head & tail already eaten off. It is also a starving worm, with the long deflated stomach of Wallace Lake down its middle; & its sides are sadly nibbled at.<sup>28</sup> ("Deadly Sandpile" 1)

Combined with her own experience on the *North Star* (a name not without its own symbolic resonance in view of Bishop's north-south orientation), it is reasonable to suppose that "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*" would have engaged her attention simply on these grounds. Ultimately, however, the poem spoke to her of a very different kind of wreck:

When I put away the long purple dress, I folded it in three lengths; then I bent the sleeves over. I noticed a bit of paper stuck into the gold binding on the tight cuff. It was folded & folded and dirtied, and it said, in pencil:

Easter

Easter

Easter ("Reminiscences" 6)

Anyone who has read Elizabeth Bishop's masterpiece of transfigured childhood pain and lost innocence, "In the Village," will understand the significance of the dress and the dress-making incident. Apparent even in the above brief and isolated fragment from Bishop's lengthy unpublished draft of the prose poem is the writer's meticulous attention to detail. In but a few words the reader learns a great deal about the style of the dress and the care with which it is put away. Also apparent is the technique of focussing on the "material" or external world—a mechanism to distance oneself from, and transform the underlying pain, a quality which is brilliantly achieved in the published version. What is most curious about this passage, however, is the final resonating echo.

Throughout the unpublished "Reminiscences," Bishop refers to her mother as "Easter"—("Easter—her name"). The reason for this remained elusive for a long time. The obvious association is with the Christian festival, but I have found no evidence in the Bishop-Bulmer chronology

to substantiate any such connection; although the motifs of sacrifice, and even crucifixion and resurrection can be related to the personal tragedy of Gertrude and Elizabeth Bishop.<sup>29</sup> The precise key to solving the problem lies in Bishop's first comprehensive experience of Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland":

She was first of a five and came  
Of a coifed sisterhood.  
(O Deutschland, double a desperate name!  
O world wide of its good!  
But Gertrude, lily, and Luther, are two of a town,  
Christ's lily and beast of the waste wood:  
From life's dawn it is drawn down,  
Abel is Cain's brother and breasts they have sucked the same.)  
(Gerard Manley Hopkins 19, Stanza 20)

The *Deutschland*, "Sitting Eastnortheast, in cursed quarter, the wind" (16, Stanza 13), foundered taking the sisterhood with it. All Maritimers know an east wind is a storm-wind. It is called an "easter." Hopkins himself used the term in his concluding annunciation of and propitiation to God:

Dame, at our door  
Drowned, and among our shoals,  
Remember us in the roads, the heaven-haven of the  
Reward:  
Our King back, Oh, upon English souls!  
Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be  
a crimson-cressed east,  
More brightening her . . . (24, Stanza 35)

That the words "Gertrude" and "easter" should appear in the same poem explains Bishop's use of the latter as a "cipher" (19, Stanza 22) for the former. For Bishop, Gertrude was certainly the "first of a five and came / Of a coifed sisterhood," which included all the Bulmer women: Elizabeth Hutchinson Bulmer, Maud Bulmer Shepherdson, Grace Bulmer Bowers, Mary Bulmer Ross, and Gertrude Bulmer Bishop. Although not nuns, these women functioned not only as guardians (mothers, aunts and sisters) but also as Muses, Graces—even the Moirai—for Bishop throughout her life.

The difficult and destructive force of Gertrude's breakdown and illness haunted all the Bulmer women. The web of pain woven around this "wreck" remained one of the most powerful and private emotions of Bishop's life and art. It is not surprising that in young adulthood, looking back at those days of her own "famous storm," she turned to Hopkins's great poem and extracted from it a noun turned verb and enacted a healing process by naming her mother herself, calling her the east wind.<sup>30</sup> One hears Hopkins speaking directly to the young Bishop:

Well, she has thee for the pain, for the  
 Patience; but pity the rest of them!  
 Heart, go and bleed at a bitterer vein for the  
 Comfortless unconfessed of them—  
 No not uncomforted: lovely-felicitous Providence  
 Finger of a tender of, O of a feathery delicacy, the breast of the  
 Maiden could obey so, be a bell to, ring of it, and  
 Startle the poor sheep back! is the shipwreck then a harvest,  
 does tempest carry the grain for thee? (22, Stanza 31)

What about "the rest of them," who were still alive at the time of Bishop's first reading? What about those who lived long after Gertrude's death? Were they comfortless?

The hardest thing about it now—the sadness of it must be borne, of course—but harder to *do*—is to realize that it has happened. Sad things[,] sudden things, awful things—seem always, a minute afterwards, so unnecessary, so unreasonable. What I had done before, & have done since, and what has happened to us all—it is understandable—if you think about it long enough it makes sense and you feel, like a light moving behind a window pane at night, a certain reason, to it—an illumination—or like an inscrutable aloof face, lit up by a smile. But this—what happened to her—throws the picture all off . . . the music all out of key—spoils the answer to every question. Gran, at the end of her life, thought suddenly it had all been wrong—and Aunt Grace could look ahead thinking whatever came would be all wrong. Just things with an awful gray between—yet both us. Grandpa thought God might step in between.<sup>31</sup> ("Reminiscences" 10)

For Hopkins the harvest of "the tempest"—the shipwreck—held "the grain for thee": the way to God and redemption. It also was the way to

translucent poetry (articulated finally in the actual composition of "The Wreck of the Deutschland"). For Bishop, however, the issue was not so clear. Her mother's breakdown distorted the possibility of understanding the illumination—the inscrutable aloof face. The mystery seemed "all wrong." Yet, from Hopkins she learned that the harvest of the wreck could be transformed into poetry. That is how "God might step in between" and maybe make it seem less "unreasonable"—confer meaning on the apparently meaningless.

Then there is the "bell"; the "ring of it":

*Clang.*

And everything except the river holds its breath.

Now there is no scream. Once there was one and it settled slowly down to earth one hot summer afternoon; or did it float up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky? But surely it has gone away, forever.

It sounds like a bell buoy out at sea. (Bishop, *Collected Prose* 274)

Bishop wrote the above lines long after first reading "The Wreck of the Deutschland," but its resounding "anvil-ding" echoed in her mind for a lifetime. Hopkins himself linked the anvil's clang to a scream in one of his dark sonnets:

Woe, wórd-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing—  
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked "No ling-  
gering! Let me be fell: Force I must be brief."

(*Gerard Manley Hopkins* 61)

Haunting images from "The Wreck of the Deutschland" appear throughout the poetry and prose which Bishop wrote of her Nova Scotia childhood. She knew the "scythe," "a prophetess," "whirlwind-swivellèd snow," "lightning . . . rod" and "lamb's fleece." She knew "the woman's wailing, the crying of child." The thirty-five stanzas of this two-part poem must have felt like chapters from her life.

In the Vassar essay of 1934, "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry," Bishop wrote,

A poem is begun with a certain volume of emotion, intellectualized or not according to the poet, and as it is written out of this emotion, subtracted from it, the volume is reduced—as water drawn off from the bottom of

a measure reduces the level of the water at the top. Now, I think, comes a strange and yet natural filling up of the original volume—with the emotion aroused by the lines or stanzas just completed. ("Gerard Manley Hopkins" 6)

Of all the arguments in this essay, the above passage strikes one most forcefully; another version (written concurrently, but recalling an even earlier time) appears in the unpublished "Reminiscences" and takes the aesthetic principle back into personal experience:

When a certain feeling has been built up over a long period of time it creates a space for such feeling—a large space which must be filled and as the original excitement or emotion goes away another must come or be made to come, to fill it. Only by a gradual shrinkage can the excitement ever die down.

"If it isn't one thing it's another." (18)

By 1953, when "In the Village" was published, Bishop had travelled far from the days of her mother's breakdown and death, and far from those first readings of Hopkins's poetry. However, the residual force of those initial moments of epiphany and painful recognition was near enough to be felt, and resonantly spoken in her seamlessly woven memoir, as well as in its unpublished antecedent. While Lorrie Goldensohn may be correct in her belief that the point of the above passage in the Vassar essay is that "Bishop sees emotion free of idiosyncrasy as a necessity of form" (91), I believe that Bishop, within the structure of a perceptively written treatise on prosody, reveals that idiosyncratic emotion is, to paraphrase Darwin out of context, the origin of the species. At the root of the higher evolution (poetry) is the pre-literary pain, a mystery which cannot be escaped, only confronted. Hopkins spoke to Bishop about the origin of her pain—her mother as storm, victim and wreck—and offered her a process by which to accept and refine the pain without recourse to self-pity.<sup>32</sup> This process reflected Bishop's own intuitive and emergent poetry. She was attracted to Hopkins because he seemed to share her assumptions.

The above characterizations of emotive and poetic flux resemble tide and tidal action. Elizabeth Bishop came from the land of "the highest tides." Bishop described this "strange and yet natural" phenomenon, which she found exemplified in Hopkins, as "a continual flowing



fullness" ("Gerard Manley Hopkins" 6). She was fascinated by the technical aspects of the process, even though she did not follow Hopkins to the letter. R. B. Martin observes that for most young poets Hopkins was essentially "an inspiration but seldom a direct model" (256). What affected Bishop more fundamentally, however, was Hopkins's empathy, extending not only to her physical world, which possessed similar pastoral qualities to his, but also to her psychic life: her "inscape." (It was this empathy which she reproduced more closely in her own work than any other "Hopkinsesque" quality.) Time and space must indeed have coalesced, as Bishop found herself being read by the dead poet's living poems, experiencing the truth of the natural but still uncanny Hopkins aphorism: "What you look hard at seems to look hard at you" (Martin 203). There is, of course, no unit by which such influence can be measured. It simply becomes interwoven in a matrix of life like the scraps of fabric embroidered with names and sewn together by Grandmother Bulmer into a quilt; like the strange planetary tinware (the North Stars) hanging in the night sky of "Uncle Neddy's" shop; like the home-made flute with its weird scale and the shrieking goats that offer the shipwrecked Crusoe hope and despair.

When Elizabeth Bishop wrote her Vassar essay she defined the priest-poet Hopkins suggestively as "the most intricate of poets technically and most taxing emotionally" ("Gerard Manley Hopkins" 5). Sprung rhythm and other technical innovations of language and metre created an intricate, multi-layered exterior landscape which belied the dark, painful, sometimes raging inner emotions of loss, doubt, abandonment and grief. The "surface" and the "underneath" revealed their inextricable interconnection in Hopkins's poetry. Hopkins sought his own way of articulating his inner life, a lesson which Bishop learned well. Hopkins's poetry revealed that life is not separated from art. Bishop understood this intuitively, knowing that even when the underneath is eaten away, as if with acid, the space created must be filled again—a continuous process. The crust of snow will collapse into meaningless chaos without the layered fullness underneath, without the terrible and beautiful ("awful but cheerful") inner life of memory and dream.

In numerous, interconnected ways (and not only "by 'and' and 'and'"), Elizabeth Bishop created metaphors of the inner and outer worlds which are the stuff of great poetry and great art generally. The search for

interconnections began early in her childhood when she witnessed her mother become both victim and enemy. As the tall nun, Gertrude, was sinking beneath the surface of the sea on the deck of the *Deutschland* she cried out to Christ. Gertrude Bulmer Bishop herself screamed beneath those sea-blue skies of Great Village pierced by the steeple of a house of God. As the young Elizabeth Bishop read Hopkins's masterpiece, the words must have clanged like an anvil, a ringing which finally subsided into the pulse of an indrawn "yes" (the "Slp" of the "glassy-ridged" river) that remained forever a painfully beautiful question:

She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly  
 Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails  
 Was calling "O Christ, Christ, come quickly":  
 The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst  
 Best.

The majesty! what did she mean? (20, Stanzas 24-25)

#### NOTES

1. From "On The Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People" (83, first stanza, first line). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of Hopkins's poetry are taken from the Penguin Classics edition, edited by W. H. Gardner.
2. In her recent critical biography, *Elizabeth Bishop*, Millier established that the unpublished "Reminiscences of Great Village," (essentially a first draft of "In the Village") was written in 1934-5 (6).
3. In the same entry Bishop continues, "It came to her suddenly in the morning, just as she was pulling her mind up to the surface for the day—like a bucketful of water out of a well—that part of the mind she'd use for that day—then dumped in again at the night, with the addition of whatever soluble things it had met during the day."
4. The epigraph reads: "Nothing is so beautiful as spring—Hopkins."
5. That first edition, of course, was *Bridges* (1918).
6. E. B. to M. M. 19 Mar. 1934 "I think you said you had not read the life of [GM] Hopkins by Father Lahey so I am taking the liberty of sending you my copy of it. . . The portrait is very strange" (*One Art* 20).
7. The discrepancies in editions noted earlier make dating Bishop's first full reading of Hopkins difficult. She may have been sixteen or nineteen when she first read him. It appears in any case that she did not read "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*" until this time.

8. As noted earlier (*supra*, note 2), The "Reminiscences of Great Village" was written in 1934-5 and is an early draft of "In the Village."
9. Millier 6 "In 1934-1955, as Elizabeth began to plan for a novel about her childhood. . . ." Letter to Fani Blough 1 April 1934 "I want to get that done, and polish up the sections of the 'novel' to sell to the magazine as stories. . . ." (*One Art* 22). The GMH Vassar essay was published in the *V.R.* Feb. 1934, *Time's Andromeda's* in 1933.
10. An attempt to chart these original experiences is not irrelevant as they form part of the entire map of Bishop's life: "the land tugging at the sea from under" (*Complete Poems* 3).
11. The portraits are in the possession of Alice Methfessel, Bishop's literary executor. A photograph of Arthur Bulmer, from which his portrait was painted, is owned by Phyllis Sutherland (née Bowers), who is Bishop's first cousin. The photograph of Gertrude Bulmer Bishop is lost.
12. "In the Village," of course, is also the portrait of the child herself. I would argue that mother and child are artistically inseparable and that to separate them, as was done in reality, distorts the natural configuration. "In the Waiting Room," recalling February 1918—not even two years from the time Bishop had last seen her mother, is a stunning account of the child exploring and discovering "identity." She substitutes "my aunt" for "my mother," but the "cry of pain" makes the association obvious. The child tries to separate herself from "them," in order to establish a strong independent self, but she cannot.
13. Grace Bulmer Bowers, Bishop's favorite aunt and dedicatee of "The Moose." She died on 20 August 1977.
14. "Lucius" is the name which Bishop gives to her impersonator—a young boy—in the "Reminiscences."
15. For various reasons, over the years Bishop alternately wanted to be a musician, a doctor and a painter—at one point in her thirties almost abandoning her "career" as a poet in order to study medicine. She did do some teaching later in life but was never a "working academic" like most of her contemporaries. Her commitment to poetry was vocational—"religious." Her experiences with poets such as Hopkins and Herbert reinforced and affirmed this "faith." Hopkins was more than a "phase"—as Browning and Shelley had been.
16. That Bishop ever felt as though she had mastered the loss is another matter. The opening line of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," "Thou mastering me," may reflect, more closely, the reality of her struggle.
17. Such training was not uncommon. Her sisters Grace and Mary received similar instruction. Although at present it is not known exactly where Gertrude taught and nursed, Elizabeth Bishop believed her mother taught at one time in Cape Breton. Her 1947 trip to Cape Breton may have been motivated, in part, by a desire to see where her mother had taught. Her poem "Cape Breton" emerged from the experience (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 191).
18. Millier gives a brief profile of William Bishop:

William Bishop and Gertrude Boomer met in 1907 and were married at New York's Grace Church in June of the following year. They honeymooned in Jamaica and sailed to Panama before returning to Massachusetts to set up house at 875 Main Street in Worcester. Elizabeth spent the earliest part of her life in wealthy circumstances in this house. Her father was a frank and cheerful man who wrote to the Boomers four days after Elizabeth's birth that her mother "has more milk than she knows what to do with, so we shall make butter probably. We started to have twins and when we changed our minds forgot to cut off half the milk supply." His pleasure in his daughter was sadly brief; he died of Bright's disease on 13 October 1911, when Elizabeth was eight months old. He had been ill, off and on, for six years. A *Worcester Magazine* obituary described him respectfully as a "well-read," and "deep student," and "a self contained man" and lamented that "his love of home and quiet environment kept him from becoming very well known socially." (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 3)

19. "After her husband's death in 1911, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, under the care of her devoted sister, Grace, was taken to McLeans Sanitarium on the outskirts of Boston for treatment. Her condition did not improve there, however, and she returned in 1916 to her home and family in Nova Scotia. . . . Her final breakdown occurred that summer . . ." (Stevenson 28). Stevenson's information came from Bishop herself, but the above statement, carrying the implication that Gertrude was ill from the end of 1911 to 1916, does not correspond with information found in Gertrude's Nova Scotia hospital case file. In addition Brett Millier found no record of a stay by Gertrude Bishop at McLean's (*Elizabeth Bishop* 11).
20. My article, "The Art of Remembering" (2-37), begins to address the issue of how well Bishop knew her mother and offers a chronology of their activities during the late 1910s and early 1920s.
21. Gertrude was hospitalized in June 1916.
22. Gertrude left no will; nor had her husband.
23. According to Kalstone, "The Reprimand" precedes "the first poem in what was recognizably her own voice. It was 'The Map'."
24. I borrow these terms from Martin's biography (382).
25. It is also noteworthy that in this sonnet Hopkins uses the word "Elsewhere," perhaps an unconscious influence on Bishop's choice of title for the second part of *Questions of Travel*. Bishop's imitation is not by any means exact reproduction. She knew that no poet could exactly reproduce Hopkins, just as we know that one cannot exactly reproduce the mature Bishop. "The Reprimand" may not possess the stunning evocativeness of Hopkins's later sonnets, but the basic intention corresponds. The mature Bishop realized that she had to write according to her own natural rhythms rather than fit her words into pre-established forms.
26. This story was told to me by Phyllis Sutherland who is Elizabeth Bishop's first cousin and daughter of Grace Bulmer Bowers. At the time of Robert Hutchinson's death the family lived in Glenholme, a few kilometres southeast of Great Village.

27. The unpublished "Autobiographical Sketch" records that Bishop made the trip to Sable Island in 1942 or 1943. However, letters to Robert Lowell, 11 July and 19 August 1951, indicate it was made almost ten years later. Millier writes of this voyage (*Elizabeth Bishop* 234-5). I am indebted to Brian Robinson for a more perceptive reading. The Lowell correspondence is in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
28. The Public Archives of Nova Scotia still holds the items Bishop used and mentioned in her projected article on Sable Island. Brian Robinson has also uncovered Bishop's interest "in the legendary abandoned ship, Mary [sic] Celeste. . . . She knew it had been built in Nova Scotia, but she hoped to discover that it was from her mother's village. She realized the looseness of the connection and admitted that she was surprised it meant so much to her" (123). The ship was built at Spencers Island, about 100 kilometres west of Great Village, in 1861.
29. The strong Baptist ambience of Bishop's childhood home might provide a clue or context for the use of such a name, but even this possibility seems too tenuous and speculative to pursue.
30. Naming her mother thus made Gertrude both cause and effect—storm and wreck (verb and noun). "Naming" is recognized by many diverse experts, from psychologists to storytellers, as a powerful (power-engendering) process. "Naming a force, creature, person, or thing has several connotations. . . . In the naming we discover personal and hidden meanings" (Estés 122-3).
31. William Brown Bulmer died on 5 February 1930. Elizabeth Hutchinson Bulmer died on 9 April 1931. Maud Bulmer Shepherdson died on 3 October 1940. Mary Bulmer Ross died in September 1970. Grace Bulmer Bowers died on 20 August 1977.
32. According to Gardner, "underneath the despair and complaint [in Hopkins] the note of willing self-surrender to the higher necessity is always implicit" (xxx). Bishop was never a passive observer; nor was Hopkins, Catholic renunciation aside. There exists in both poets a tension between acceptance (mere recognition) and understanding (re-creation).

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