INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUES:
POETRY OF ELIZABETH BISHOP AND WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Malgorzata J. Gabrys, M.A.

****

The Ohio State University
2000

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Jeredith Merrin, Adviser
Professor Jim Phelan
Professor Jessica Prinz

Approved By:

Jeredith Merrin
Adviser

English Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

Examining the poetic oeuvres of Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) and her Polish contemporary, the 1996 Nobel prize winner, Wislawa Szymborska (1923-), in the context of their respective cultures, this dissertation reveals various correspondences between Bishop's and Szymborska's writing, undermining the traditionally assumed binarism between the Western democracies and the Eastern dictatorships and so between Western and Eastern cultures. Critics such as Edward Hirsch or Stanislaw Baranczak have already made a connection between the two poets without, however, offering any scholarly accounts of Bishop's and Szymborska's affinities. My dissertation investigates and interrogates this intellectual terrain. Since the poets did not know each other's writings and direct influence was not possible, I have adopted the method of cultural criticism, reading their poems in multiple contexts: literary, historical, and feminist, as well as in the contexts of the visual arts and political discourse.

My dissertation fulfills several purposes: it accounts for the close correspondence between Bishop's and Szymborska's writing, examines major overlaps between Polish and American cultures, and shows how different cultural, historical, and political forces can manifest themselves in texts through similar poetical and rhetorical strategies.
My research, then, contributes to the contemporary field of cultural scholarship; it constitutes a unique analysis of Bishop's work in contexts other than English and American literature; and it will contribute to familiarizing the American readership with the wryly philosophical poetry of Szymborska.
In memory of my parents

Danuta & Wieslaw Gabrys
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to express my gratitude to my adviser, Jeredith Merrin for her invaluable assistance, encouragement, and patience at all stages of this project. I wish to thank the other members of my committee, Jim Phelan and Jessica Prinz who were always ready to read my work and discuss diverse problems I explored in my dissertation.

I am also much indebted to those who were not on my committee but who read portions of my dissertation and offered valuable suggestions: Dick Davis, Tom Gardner, Anne Knee, Karen Kovacik, Ester Richey, Steve Weninger, and Steve Yao. In addition, I wish to thank David Citino and Barbara Rigney for their constant encouragement of my work.

I wish to thank Stanislaw Baranczak for sending me the manuscript of his and Clare Cavanagh's translations of Wislawa Szymborska's poems.

My deepest thanks to Tammy Birk and Ken Petri for their unfailing support and valuable advice during my work on this project.
My special thanks to Jim Bracken for his invaluable assistance in getting hold of critical and other materials I needed for my research.

I am grateful to many others for the help that made my research possible, in particular to Basia Bakowska, Joasia Banach, Basia and Jacek Bohr, Witek Gabryś, Alicja Gorecka, Wiktor and Maryla Kunczewicz, Ludmila Nanke, Joanna Rakowska, Waleria Rakowska, Cristina Rotaru, Jola Wylesinska.

Finally, I greatly appreciate the love, patience, and understanding of my sons Maciek and Mateusz Rakowski. Without their support, I would never finish my dissertation.
VITA

April 26, 1956.......................... Born - Gliwice, Poland

1982..............................M.A. English, Warsaw University

1989..............................M.A. English, Virginia Polytechnic
                             Institute & State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Transatlantic Dialogues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Poetry: The Risk of Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Between the Boudoir and the Waiting Room</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Poetics of Unscripted History</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Poetry and Politics</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The growing scholarship on the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) in the United States as well as equally growing Polish criticism on the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska (1923-), the 1996 Nobel prize winner, examines these poets' oeuvres primarily in the context of their respective cultures. At the same time, critical comments on Szymborska's poetry often associate her work with Elizabeth Bishop's. Seamus Heaney writes that "Szymborska reminded [him] a bit of Elizabeth Bishop, since her poems (even in translation) can seem like a cleansing system for language and consciousness" (17). Edward Hirsch observes, "Szymborska is roughly comparable to, say, Elizabeth Bishop--a writer for whom reticence seems to come naturally, whose modesty belies her literary ambitions, and who has quietly blossomed into a major twentieth-century poet" (102). Moreover, one of Szymborska's translators, Stanislaw Baranczak, has referred to Bishop in his article "The Szymborska Phenomenon." Although Baranczak mentions only the poets' "slim collections" of poetry (255), I suggest that he has made the connection between the two women not only because of the similar volume but also because of the similar character of their work. Since Bishop and Szymborska neither met nor read each other's poems, their strong resemblances are puzzling. My dissertation investigates and
interrogates this intellectual terrain. If we accepted Helen Vendler's claim of Szymborska's "universality," the affinities between Bishop's and Szymborska's art could be easily explained in terms of the culture-transcending, universal appeal of ars poetica. However, reading the two women's poems in the multiple contexts of literary, historical, feminist, political, and visual arts discourse, I expose the distorting and reductive nature of the universalist paradigm. At the same time, revealing a number of correspondences between Bishop's and Szymborska's literary output, I undermine the traditional binary between the West and the East.

My first chapter, "Poetry the Risk of Questioning." examines poems by both writers concerned with the representation of poetry and the poet in the context of some major American and Polish presuppositions about the nature of poetry in the twentieth century. Bishop and Szymborska consistently refused to align themselves with any literary group or school, but their works were of course not created in a vacuum. Thus although, as David Kalstone has observed, Bishop "has always been hard to 'place'"(13), a number of American critics have often discussed the traces of poetical influences in her work. Bonnie Costello reads Bishop's poems in the context of the "devotional, romantic, and modern [traditions] out of which Bishop wrote" (2); Jeredith Merrin explores the ways Bishop as a woman poet "made use of the Anglo-American literary tradition" adopting and revising a tradition which was predominantly male (1); similarly reflecting on the significance of gender in American culture, Joanne Feit Diehl reveals 2
how Bishop's "work derives from that early manifestation of American self-consciousness known as transcendentalism" (91). A number of other American scholars have also revealed Bishop's use of the renaissance and romantic traditions or treated the links between her poetry and symbolist, surrealist, and imagist movements. In the first chapter, I am focusing on the main strategy Bishop employs to relate to literary trends and movements, namely, her art of asking questions. For Bishop, the use of poetic traditions is usually equivalent to questioning their main paradigms. For Szymborska poetry also becomes the art of questioning, and she also challenges the dominant paradigms. Stanislaw Karasek observes that Szymborska questions everything she initially asserts (195), and Baranczak points out the interrogative nature of her poems. Thus, to elucidate the connections between Bishop's and Szymborska's work as well as expose the intersecting moments of the Polish and American literary cannons, I am exploring the nature of questions the two women poets pose in their writing. However, while examining Bishop's and Szymborska's questions undermining the traditional notions of are poetica, we need to remember that these notions emerged in different social and historical circumstances. When Bishop questions the transcendence of art, she undermines the Anglo-American Romantic and Modern concepts of poetry, evoking William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson or T.S. Eliot. Szymborska's poetical challenges of art's transcendence bring to mind the messianism of the Polish romantics and the movement of "Young Poland." Thus, various correspondences between Bishop's and Szymborska's poetry discussed in
this dissertation should not be understood as identical and interchangeable qualities of their art.

The second chapter, "Between the Boudoir and the Waiting Room," exploring the impact of gender on the concept of vision in Bishop's and Szymborska's writings, attends as well to the ways gender categories function in Polish and American cultures. Since both women not only resented the category "writing by women" but also considered such categorization as absurd and discriminatory, this chapter goes against the tenor of the poets' convictions. Yet, juxtaposing a number of Bishop's and Szymborska's poems, I reveal the poets' challenge to the dominant concepts of vision developed in Western patriarchal culture. Both women expose the inadequacy of vision, undermine its false claim to objectivity, and dismantle static representations of the real, founded primarily on the images generated by a disembodied, monocular eye with its controlling, and predominantly masculine, gaze (Jay 54-5).

In dismantling the dominant status of vision, however, the poets use different strategies. Szymborska is often preoccupied with the visual representation of women as shaped by male desire or with the dynamics of male and female looks. Bishop, herself a lesbian, frames her poetical disputes of Western notions of vision outside the context of heterosexual relationships. My discussion reveals that for that purpose, she aligns her poetry with nonperspectival, map-like paintings, characteristic of seventeenth-century Northern European artists. While neither Bishop nor Szymborska is preoccupied solely with the function of the male gaze, each undermines idealized notions of
vision confined within a fixed frame. In Bishop's and Szymborska's work, what is seen depends on a beholder; like their language, vision in these poets' works is provisional and transient; dynamic rather than static; fluid rather than solid; consequently, it is always multiple. My readings of the two poets' writing demonstrate how they dismantle the often assumed transcendental character of vision.

The third chapter, "Poetics of Unscripted History," examines Bishop's and Szymborska's reflections on history. Juxtaposing several poems, I reveal the poets' preoccupation with the incompleteness of historical records. Szymborska often investigates the nature of exclusions in documents, paintings, and historical narratives, exposing their fragmentary character. At the same time, her attention to what has been left out has a sense of moral urgency, since in Communist Poland historical documents were often purposefully distorted. For Bishop, historical and political issues are not as obvious and urgent, but she still questions the reliability of historical records. Deeply aware of the colonial past, she reflects on the traces of colonialism in her culture.

Thus, in their different manners, both Szymborska and Bishop challenge the traditional concept of history as an ordered narrative in a way not unlike the challenges of poststructuralist scholarship. Like postmodern critics, they query the concept of historical fact, undermine the traditional hierarchy of what is historically significant, and challenge the causality and linearity of historical narratives. For Bishop and Szymborska, historical knowledge is
provisional and fragmentary.

In my dissertation I demonstrate that while exploring the fields of literature, history, or visual arts, Bishop and Szymborska often attend to the marginal and the excluded, and both favor tentative, unstable positionings. Scholars most often interpret such positionings in terms of feminist or postmodern modes of discourse. In my fourth chapter, "Poetry and Politics," while supporting the validity of such interpretations, I examine the ways Bishop's and Szymborska's poems enter the political discourse of their time. I argue that although they both poets resent the fusion of poetry and politics, their poems do partake in twentieth-century political debates. My fourth chapter, then, elucidates Szymborska's and Bishop's attitudes toward politics, connecting my discussion to the analysis of literary, gender and historical issues developed in the preceding chapters.

My dissertation, then, examines several issues: it explores the close correspondence between Bishop's and Szymborska's writing, reveals major overlaps between Polish and American cultures questioning and undermining the traditional East/West binary, and shows how different cultural, historical, or political forces can manifest themselves in texts through surprisingly similar poetical and rhetorical strategies. My research, then, contributes to the contemporary field of cultural scholarship; it constitutes a unique analysis of Bishop's work in contexts other than English and American literature; and it will contribute to familiarizing the American public with the wryly philosophical poetry of Wislawa Szymborska.
CHAPTER 1

POETRY: THE RISK OF QUESTIONING

"Whatever she asserts is almost immediately called into question" writes Stanislaw Karasek about Szymborska's art (195). Discussing Szymborska's poems, Stanislaw Baranczak develops Karasek's comment further:

Szymborska's poems are indeed based, as a rule, on the structural model of a question, inquiry, or sometimes even quite literal interrogation-like questioning. The principal tenet of her individual poetics is...to bring up this or another assertion or opinion that is dogmatic, sanctified, widely accepted, and never put in doubt--and to ask a well-aimed NAIVE QUESTION that, in its ultimate consequences, forces the dogmatic pseudo-truth to reveal its own shakiness or downright falsity. ("The Szymborska Phenomenon" 255)

The poet herself emphasizes the significance of incessant interrogation in her Noble lecture, when she claims, "Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous 'I don't know!'" (Poems New xiii), and she adds that in contrast to poets "All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues [...] know [...] They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish the force of their arguments" (xiv).

When reading Bishop's poetry, we could make similar observations: like Szymborska, the American poet takes the risks of asking questions.
Bishop's assertion "Land lies in water" ("The Map") turns into a question: "Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under?". When she "walks" "on the railroad track" she cannot decide if "[t]he ties [are] too close together/ or maybe too far apart" (Chemin de Fer); and when looking at her uncle's painting ("Poem") she wonders, "A specklike bird is flying to the left/ Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?" It is significant that, as Jeredith Merrin observed, Bishop's "questions remain unanswered and unanswerable" (63). Even in those poems in which she does not ask "this or that" questions, she makes human perception unreliable. In "The Man-Moth," for instance, the subject's rational vision comes across as limited and inadequate, and Bishop's modern Crusoe stranded on an island cannot map out his world. What cannot escape us when reading Bishop's as well as Szymborska's poems is not only their incessant interrogation but also the nature of their questioning: they often investigate what seems rather commonplace, ordinary, or perfectly obvious, and so their questioning is of a philosophical nature. Bishop and Szymborska reveal that human interpretation of the world, shaped by the dominant narrative of a particular culture, constitutes only one of many possible interpretations. The two women repeatedly question and thus undermine the dominant modes of narration.

The sources of their interrogations are complex. Bishop lived at the time when the Modern poets such as T.S. Eliot, Yeats, or Pound had become "canonized revolutionaries" and so "haunting figures." (Breslin 2). At first, modernism was a revolutionary movement—"'Nothing is good
save the new,' Williams declared, and Pound demanded that writers 'Make
It New' (Breslin 10). Breslin explains:

Among literary movements modernism is unique in defining itself not so much as a new world view ("romanticism") or as the revival of an ancient one ("neoclassicism") but as an absolute break with the past, including its own past.... The modernist thrust in all the arts derived from a shared sense of cultural crisis, the collapse of all systematic explanations of the world and the consequent questioning of all established ways of "forming experience." (10)

However, as Merrin has observed, "In order to ['make it new']..., the poet must have some sense of the literary tradition; he or she must have some idea of what the 'it' is" (37). An absolute break with the past is not really possible. Discussing the Modernists' aspirations to create "new" poetry, Margaret Dickie writes:

The new as avant-garde—as an active and antagonistic movement against the traditional—was linked for the American Modernist poet in a way not fully acknowledged to something not new, but renewed or restored, and so not antagonistic. For example, "Invent (if you can) discover or/ nothing is clear," is the advice given to the poet in Williams' poem. He means that term invent both in its modern meaning of making something new as well as in its archaic meaning of discovering what is already there and renewing it. (149)

According to Dickie, although the major Modernists intended to break from the tradition, they were both mourning and renewing it. Thus in a number of ways, they were still working within the Romantic-Symbolist paradigm.

For instance, as Dickie points out, "the long poem is one project that the American Modernists took over from the Romantics" (149) At the same time, since they were writing poems about "the city and its history," they had to come up with new forms (Dickie 149). We need to be aware,
though, that "these new forms were efforts to make old subjects new and
new conditions responsive to traditional values" (Dickie 149).

The Modernists' formal experimentation, however, could not remain
innovative forever. One of the later poets W.D. Snodgrass wrote:

that originally revolutionary movement had become something
fixed, domineering and oppressive. We had come to have a
tradition of academic experiment, experiments using thoroughly
predictable materials and reaching thoroughly predictable
answers. (qtd. in Breslin 3)

The poets of the younger generation often felt that "'All of the major
poetic discoveries and innovations had been accomplished'" ( qtd. in
Breslin 3). Those frustrated poets, however, were mostly male. Female
writers were in a somewhat different situation, since they could
distance themselves from both the Romantic and modern literary
traditions shaped predominantly by male artists. Not so overwhelmed by
the heritage of their forefathers, women writers would challenge the
traditional Western poetic paradigms as well as the notions of poetry
and the poet. Jeredith Merrin, for instance, discusses Bishop's
subversion of the romantic paradigm:

...Elizabeth Bishop...revises [Wordsworth's] gendered agenda,
replacing the Romantic poet's resounding certainties with
dubiety, doubleness, radical ambiguity. Throughout her work, she
subverts the conventional Romantic trope of world-as-woman by
insisting upon the indeterminate nature of nature--now female,
now male, now ungendered other. (97)

In the course of this revision, Bishop develops an incessant flow of
questions. Bishop's poetic explorations, though, like her Polish
contemporary Szymborska's, never lead to final conclusions but rather
trigger more questions. Such open or implied interrogation becomes the
driving force behind Bishop's and Szymborska's work. To put it simply, for both women writers, the poet is someone never tired of asking questions and never satisfied with answers, including the ones concerning ars poetica.

Bishop's long poem "Crusoe in England," exploring a wide range of problems related to our existence in the twentieth century, may be read also as a series of her reflections on the nature of poetry and the poet, and, according to Jeredith Merrin, in particular as her revision of the Romantic poetic paradigm (103). The title of Bishop's poem suggesting Defoe's novel as its main source may be misleading since the poem is not only a response to Defoe's narrative. Bishop herself explained that she "wanted to re-see it [Robinson Crusoe] with all that [Christianity] left out" (Starbuck Conversations 88). Moreover, in the poem she engages in a debate with romantic as well as modern poetics. As J. Hillis Miller observes, critics have frequently considered "twentieth-century poetry [as] merely an extension of romanticism" (1). Within this framework, then, Bishop would pose a challenge not only to the main romantic paradigm, but also to the mainstream twentieth-century poetics. However, Miller also argues that while twentieth-century poetry grows "out of romanticism," it goes beyond the romantic. He explains:

Romantic poetry, like idealist philosophy, had been based on an opposition between the inner world of the subject and the outer world of things. Since the world is other than the self, that self can ground itself on something external. (288)
Following this original binary, though, the romantic poets manage to execute the reunion of the subjective and the external, objective sphere through their poetry (Miller 2, 288). Bishop, however, as well as Szymborska, always reminds us of the gap between the human and the external world. Both poets are deeply aware that the human universe emerges in the collective use of language, and thus it is neither stable nor eternal. Consequently, poetry may offer only one of many possible, momentary glimpses of the world, but never a transcendent vision.

Bishop makes that point clear in "Crusoe in England" when she alludes to Wordsworth's lyric "I wandered lonely as a cloud."

Commenting on Bishop's poem, Merrin writes:

...Bishop manages to conform to nineteenth-century Romantic values and to undo them as well. On the one hand, she demonstrates her own literary and historical connection with Romanticism by making her Crusoe more sensitive to natural phenomena, more introspective, more emotionally vulnerable and expressive than Defoe's original. On the other hand, by selecting as her persona this shipwrecked sailor, irremediably and painfully isolated in bleak, unyielding nature..., Bishop ironizes Wordsworth's consoling myth of responsive, nurturing Nature. (103)

Stranded on an island, Bishop's Crusoe, unlike the Wordsworthian poet, cannot recreate the past through his memory or imagination, and Crusoe's past experiences never constitute any direct interactions with the world but are mediated through language. As Wordsworth's lyric opens, the poet hovers above the world, then fuses with nature, and imaginatively recreates it:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'over vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (191)

While the poet becomes like "a cloud," the landscape is humanized: flowers turn into a dancing "crowd," and even "[t]he waves beside them [dance]." In such circumstances, the "poet [can] not but be gay," and he "gazes" at the nature's celebratory dance, unconsciously absorbing its spirit: "I gazed--and gazed--but little thought/ What wealth the show to me had brought." It is only later that he realizes exactly the nature of this "wealth:"

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Eventually, then, the poet's experience turns into the eternal dance which he can evoke and reenact in solitude. For Wordsworth, the world of nature is not alienating but accommodating, and as he embraces nature, he is embraced as well. Consequently, the poem itself undermines the poet's statement of loneliness; first, his loneliness of a wanderer vanishes in the "jocund company" of daffodils, and later his meditative solitude is dispersed by the pleasurable memory of the flowers when, on the spiritual level, he again partakes in nature's dance. Clearly, Romantic imagination transcends the limits of the material world, reaching the eternal sphere of the absolute.

In "Crusoe in England," a much longer and more complex poem, "With her ironically incomplete quotation from 'I Wondered Lonely as a
Cloud', [Bishop] punctures her Romantic predecessor's inflated notion of 'the bliss of solitude'" (Merrin 103). Wordsworthian solitude engendering transcendental vision turns into a nightmare of isolation breeding endless hallucinatory images: Wordsworthian romantic bliss becomes Bishop's curse (cf. Costello 204-5). While Wordsworth's solitary wanderer speaking from his spiritual heights simultaneously experiences his communion with nature, Bishop's Crusoe is always alienated. Even when he acknowledges the beauty of waterspouts which "advancing and retreating, their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches/ of scuffed up white" evoke Wordsworth's flowers, he can never join in the dance, only sadly admits,"Beautiful, yes, but not much company" (163). Bishop, then, undermines the romantic belief in the possibility of human reunion with the natural world, and she suggests that such a reunion is always illusory, occurring only on the level of language as we project the human world onto the natural.

The poem opens with an image suggesting that the world as we know it is rooted in language.

A new volcano has erupted,
the papers say, and last week I was reading
where some ship saw an island being born:
at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
and then a black fleck--basalt, probably--
rose in the mate's binoculars
and caught on the horizon like a fly.
They named it.

The lines, evoking the biblical scene of creation, become a metaphor for the birth of the human world, fusing it with the birth of language. It is only when the volcano's eruption enters the sphere of language
and the island is named that its presence can be acknowledged. Since this acknowledgement is immediately qualified by Bishop's comparison of the new island to "a fly," suddenly the whole human world becomes much smaller. However, Bishop's Crusoe, the embodiment of the poet herself, realizing the limited scope of the human sphere still wants to become part of it. Recalling his stay on an island, he complains, "But my poor old island's still/ un-rediscovered, un-renamable."

Significantly, Bishop does not talk here about "discovering" and "naming" but "rediscovering" and "renaming," thus exposing the relative notion of the discovery. After all, she must have been aware of the questionable nature of geographical discoveries, in particular, of the "New" World. Also, since any discovery within the human universe is tantamount to naming what already exists, human discovery is never original. Even within the human sphere, we can assume that what emerges within the horizon of our consciousness has been already present in the consciousness of another. For Bishop, then, a discovery as an act of renaming becomes a revision of the current language paradigm. Within this paradigm the island is not simply "un-renamed" but "un-renamable," as the language at the moment provides no means to "rename" Bishop's island. At the end of the first stanza, she reinforces the necessity of language revision complaining that "none of the books has ever got it right."

As the poem develops, Bishop becomes concerned in particular with the discourse of poetry. Yet characteristically for Bishop—and as I will show later, for Szymborska—while "Crusoe in England" undermines
traditional notions of poetry and the poet, it does not offer any solutions. Bishop leaves the issue open, since although she challenges tradition, she does not want to replace the poetic paradigms of the past with a new one; rather, she endeavors to create some discursive space for a number of different paradigms.

Crucial for understanding "Crusoe in England" in terms of its explorations of the nature of poetry is the stanza located at the very center of the poem, in which Crusoe in his attempt to order and comprehend the world around him resorts to the texts he was familiar with in the past:

Because I didn't know enough.
Why didn't I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I'd read were full of blanks;
the poems—well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
"They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?
One of the first things I did
when I got back was look it up. (164)

Commenting on the lines, critics usually interpret Crusoe's complaints about the fragmentary character of his knowledge as complaints about his memory. After all, he cannot recall the crucial word in Wordsworth's lyric. However, Crusoe's insufficient memory represents also the insufficiencies in the collective memory of humankind embodied in the existing texts. Bishop's Crusoe cannot recall the texts not simply because he forgot the words, but because the texts he read do not correspond adequately to his current condition. If he is going to experience "the bliss," it can no longer be the Wordsworthian "bliss
of solitude." And even if Crusoe tells us that he "looked it [the missing word] up" when he "got back," he never cares to give us the answer, since at the present moment, it is of no use. If twentieth-century poets are looking for "the bliss," they have to find their own path toward it instead of following the Romantics. Moreover, Bishop also implies that this incomplete phrase which turns into a question "The bliss of what?" lies at the center of twentieth-century poetic discourse. It is not the answers embodied in transcendental visions, but discursive blanks turned into questions that become simultaneously the driving force behind twentieth-century poetics and the central symbol of human universe inevitably fragmentary, provisional, and changeable. Such a universe defies the traditionally elevated position of the human.

Bishop's Crusoe, unlike the Wordsworthian poet, does not "[float] on high" or admire "steep and lofty cliffs,/ That on a wild secluded scene impress/ Thoughts of more deep seclusion" (Tintern). Instead, he assumes a rather precarious, uncomfortable position "on the edge of the highest [volcano]" already qualified as "miserable," "small," and "dead;" later, we learn that his legs, in a funny way, are "dangling down familiarly/ over a crater's edge." The island itself is described as "a sort of cloud-dump." The whole landscape with Crusoe's solitary and rather funny figure becomes a deeply ironic representation of the traditional romantic poet. Bishop, however, engages not only in a symbolic dialogue with Wordsworth and the Romantics, but also with the advocates of high modernism such as T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.
Although the modernist universe is alienating and poets can never experience a blissfully romantic, spiritual reunion with nature, they still occupy a lofty, though at the same time often tragic, position symbolically represented by the main figures in their poems. The despair of Eliot's *Gerontion*, a little old man, over his vacant universe, corresponds to the despair of great tragic heroes, and the multiple voices in *The Waste Land* become the voices of prophets. When in one of Pound's Cantos the poet-pilgrim stands at the symbolic entrance to hell, between the two towering mountains, he becomes a potential savior of the corrupted twentieth-century world (Canto XVI). For Wallace Stevens poetry as "a supreme fiction" manifests the power of imagination which goes beyond ordinary human rationality (Miller "William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens" 988). Tellingly, Bishop's "miserable," "dead volcanoes" stand in sharp contrast with Stevens's Vesuvius, the embodiment of the sublime and the beautiful in the first section of his "Esthétique du Mal:"

He was at Naples writing letters home
And between his letters, reading paragraphs
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned
For a month. It was pleasant to be sitting there
While the sultriest fulgurations, flickering,
Cast corners in the glass. He could describe
The terror of the sound because the sound
Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.
The volcano trembled in another ether
As the body trembles at the end of life. (252)

While in Steven's poetry as well as behind modernist poetics we can perceive the poets' yearnings for the lost tradition— the unifying
discourse of Western mythology—and their endeavor to recreate the myth, Bishop reveals both the diminishment and inadequacy of such unifying mythical paradigms in the twentieth-century.

For Bishop, poets are neither prophets nor visionaries whose imaginative power can transcend the material and the temporal. They are patient and rather humble beholders of the world who endeavor to record their observations, aware all the time of the limitations of their art. Bishop neither claims that her way of seeing is the only one nor that it is the adequate one. She never forgets that she presents only one of many possibilities. Moreover, the poet's perception and art are in great measure contingent upon actual social circumstances. Alone, Crusoe in vain endeavors to estimate the size of the volcanoes or his own:

I'd think that if they were the size
I thought volcanoes should be, then I had become a giant;

Thus, what in a social environment is obvious, without any social frame of reference becomes an insoluble dilemma. Such prospects are even more horrifying in the context of Crusoe's futile endeavors to "register" "the geography" of his island: "[t]he folds of lava" suddenly "prove to be more turtles;" later, "[s]nail shells" look like "beds of irises" and he cannot determine if "the goats" and "the gulls" are "too tame, or else they [think]/ [he is] a goat, too, or a gull." Crusoe's solitude (and by extension the poet's) stalls not only artistic creativity but also all endeavors to order the world in a meaningful
way, and since no one can confirm Crusoe's perception, his isolation
dooms him to a sadly delimited cognitive perspective:

The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun
rose from the sea,
and there was one of it and one of me.
The island had one kind of everything:
one tree snail
with a thin shell, crept over everything,
over the one variety of tree,
a sooty, scrub affair.

The passage ascribes the "one kind of everything" in the island's
natural environment to the homogenous perspective of a single beholder.
The image may be read as an ironic revision of various symbolic
gardens—versions of the Garden of Eden—of the Romantics. While in
their solitude the Romantics could spiritually experience the bliss of
paradise, Crusoe experiences the symbolic curse of expulsion:
abandonment and alienation. Alone, he is neither able to turn the
island into his new home, nor to return home in his imagination. His
predicament not only challenges, as Costello observes, the romantic
notion of memory, but it also reflects the predicament of Bishop as
a twentieth-century poet, in exile.

Reflecting on the poem, Costello observes: "Yet this is not the
story of a shipwrecked man nostalgic for home, but of someone returned
to England, nostalgic for his former island exile" (206). However,
while it is true that in England Crusoe also feels alienated and
recalls the island with nostalgia, when on the island, he suffers from
nostalgia as well, and he uses a number of strategies to make himself
feel at home. He makes a connection between the past and his current
predicament, locating it within the context of Western ethics and, consequently, considering it as a form of punishment, "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must." Then, in an attempt to gain some control over his fate, he suggests that he himself could have made a choice to live on the island:

................. Was there
a moment when I actually chose this?
I don't remember, but there could have been.
And when he admits, "I often gave way to self-pity," he concludes, "'Pity should begin at home.' So the more pity I felt, the more I felt at home." Moreover, as much as he can, he tries to reconstruct some traces of the world from his past. He makes "home-brew," constructs a "flute," and "dances." However, in the company of the goats, without any social context, he can never transform the island into a homely territory, and he complicates the very notion of home. Particularly significant is his reflection on the "home-made flute," "Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?" The question suggests that our identities and thus our sense of home is rooted in the past. Crusoe's conviction that his flute's scale is "the weirdest scale on earth" reveals that he considers the kind of Western harmony he experienced in the past as natural and perceives a different scale as "weird." As his isolation continues, he makes constant endeavors to translate the island's environment into the homely and the familiar:

When all the gulls flew up at once, they sounded
like a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves.
I'd shut my eyes and think about a tree,
an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere.
Significantly, Crusoe's romantic solitude does not so much stimulate his poetic imagination as bring it to a standstill. Although he admits, "I'd time enough to play with names," the results of his language games reflect his frustrations as well as stifled creativity: his uncertainty about the name of a volcano, "Mont d'Espeir or Mount Despair," betrays his ineffective struggle to overcome despair, and in contrast to the romantics, he never experiences illuminating visions, but only meaningless, endlessly reiterative images. He recalls:

I'd have nightmares of other islands stretching away from mine, infinities of islands, islands spawning islands, like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs of islands, knowing that I had to live on each and every one, eventually, for ages, registering their flora, their fauna, their geography.

He is liberated from his nightmarish existence only when Friday's sudden appearance breaks the spell of isolation. And yet the impossibility to "propagate [their] kind" that could form a larger community still makes home unattainable. However, Crusoe's experience on the island transforms his perception and sensibilities significantly enough to estrange him from his native land. Back in England, and so supposedly at home, he feels "surrounded by uninteresting lumber," and he cannot understand why the local museum would want "the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes/ [the]...goatskin trousers/...[or] the parasol---the paraphernalia that have lost their meaning. As Bonnie Costello (as well as other critics) has observed, for Crusoe "England is no more "home" than the place of
miserable empty volcanoes" ("The Impersonal and the Interrogative" 125). For Bishop, then, the poet never feels at home, and she implies that home, located somewhere in the past has been already lost—like the Garden of Eden—without the possibility of return.

The condition of Bishop's poet may evoke the figure of the Blakean poet behind his "Songs of Experience" who cannot go back to the "garden" of "Songs of Innocence." However, while the Blakean poet still retains his prophetic grandeur, Bishop's figure is a rather ordinary human being, and while both Romantic as well as modern poets contemplate the world from above, attending to the grand problems of humanity, Bishop's poet, perplexed and confused, asks questions about supposedly insignificant details, and is usually unable to provide answers. When Crusoe wonders, "why sometimes the whole place hissed?" he only makes some tentative suggestions about the hissing rain, the hissing turtles, or his imagination responding to "[t]he questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies" of the gulls and the goats.

Reading Bishop's other poems, we soon realize that her whole poetic oeuvre is infused with such "questioning shrieks" to which replies are inevitably "equivocal." Her poetics certainly reflects the condition of the twentieth-century human being for whom even science, ever since Heisenberg came up with the famous principle of uncertainty, can no longer provide any absolute framework. However, at the same time such "poetics of uncertainty" becomes a source of poetic energy and movement. Although questions trigger both desire and a search for answers, Bishop's poetics implies that the ultimate answers would stall
the movement, thus stifling poetry. Thus, as Jeredith Merrin explains,-
-"what she [Bishop] wants to hold on to is flux" ( "Gaiety, Gayness,
and Change" 168).

For that purpose, Bishop frequently introduces figures who do not
fit our usual categories. Gentleman of Shalott's identity is split by
his mirror reflection; her aunts and uncles defy gender labels, and in
one of her early poems, the Man-Moth blurs the borders of the real and
the imaginary.

The opening image of "The Man-Moth" presents a rather dark,
bizarre and flawed city landscape with "cracks in the
buildings...filled with battered moonlight" (14). The only figure in
the scene, an anonymous Man, makes this opening image even more
alienating since he resembles an inanimate object rather than a human
being:

The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
He does not see the moon;

The lines clearly emphasize the Man's limited perception: he cannot
even "see the moon," but he thinks he is in control of the universe,
and he puts himself at the center. However, the Man's universe does not
go beyond the circle marked by his hat's shadow, and his position is
controlled by the moon he does not even see. Ironically, it is the
weird Man-Moth "emerg[ing]/ from and opening under the edge of one of
the sidewalks" who acknowledges the vastness of the universe, and
although his image of the world is more imaginative than realistic, strangely enough it is much more enlightening than the Man's:

But when the Man-Moth pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface, the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings. He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky, proving the sky quite useless for protection. He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

As the Man-Moth arrives, he immediately humanizes the landscape—suddenly the buildings acquire "faces"—and the so-far motionless scene becomes dynamic. The creature's emergence from a hole suggesting his birth, then, coincides with the dynamic of the re-birth of human universe which cannot be confined within the Man's marked circle. Such imagery questions both the adequacy and accuracy of knowledge gained purely from rational measurements and suggests a different mode of perception functioning beyond the borders of the rational.

At the same time, however, this other mode does not coincide with the traditional concept of transcendental visions; rather, it opens a different cognitive perspective which stems from imagination. The Man-Moth's investigations of the landscape make him perceive the moon as "a hole...[in] the sky" which inevitably exposes the human world to danger. On a symbolic level, then, the Man-moth's representation of the world is much more accurate than the Man's: after all, the universe does not constitute a whole neatly arranged in a circle, and it is this full-of-holes, unsymmetrical universe that the Man-Moth has to explore:

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.
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

The Man-Moth's drive toward "the light," characteristic for moths, constitutes also a metaphor of human thirst for knowledge, suggesting that such new knowledge brings about a new epistemological perspective. Consequently, the world becomes "re-born" and its recorded representation requires rewriting in "black scrolls on the light." Bishop emphasizes that the potential re-birth of the world and the revision of its record happen together with the potential rebirth of her Man-Moth. Significantly, this fusion blurs the clear-cut division between the subject and the object, between the observer and the observed. Yet, Bishop's challenge of traditional Western categories of cognition does not come from the rational Man but from an irrational, marginal creature—the Man-Moth. Clearly the emblem of a poet, the creature, however, does not reach his goal—"he fails."

The moment marks both Bishop's departure from, and ironic attitude toward the Romantic and Modern visions of a poet who, even when failing, remains an elevated figure. The Man-Moth's quixotic efforts to reach the moon, reflecting the poet's creative endeavors, are not only heroic but grotesque. If the Man-Moth does not reach the moon, his failure, like any quixotic enterprise, never turns into a tragedy: "he returns/ to the pale subways of cement he calls his home."

And yet, calling the subways "home" does not make the Man-Moth feel "at home." Constantly maladjusted, he "cannot get aboard the silent trains/
fast enough to suit him", and "[he] always seats himself facing the wrong way." Such journeys, the symbolic challenges of the culture's mainstream, question commonly accepted epistemological paradigms, yet without offering any alternatives which could turn into the answers to the posed questions. After all, Bishop does not want to replace one stable paradigm with another; rather she insists on questioning commonplace ideas, notions, or convictions, although such practice may be psychologically disturbing:

Each night he must be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams. Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window, for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison, runs there beside him..........................

..........................He has to keep his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

The Man-Moth's experience does not transcend time, and he needs to re-enact his travels "each night." Also, the Man-Moth embodies "the other" and does not merge with his environment. He is an eternal misfit who unlike the Wordsworthian poet never merges with his environment. However, it is precisely this maladjustment that is the sine qua non of the Man-Moth's power: after all, it is the Man-Moth and not the Man who has a potential for quenching the human desire for illumination.

In the last stanza of "The Man-Moth," there is an abrupt shift in both the poem's tone and its narrative structure. For the first time Bishop addresses the readers directly:

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.

While earlier in the poem, Bishop watches the Man-Moth's explorations with sympathy accompanied by ironic detachment, in the last stanza, she gives up on both and the Man-Moth turns into an almost Christ-like martyr whose suffering becomes a potential source of spiritual rebirth. Such a shift, however, does not mean that eventually Bishop embraces the Romantics who tend to fuse a spiritual rebirth with a sudden, illuminating vision. In fact, she inverts one of the most powerful symbols of the American poetics, the Emersonian poet who at the moment of his poetic illumination declares:

I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages...[I]n the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature (Emerson 189).

At an analogous moment, the Man-Moth's pupil embodies "night" and the symbolic illumination comes as the creature "close[s] up the eye" letting out one tear. Certainly, this tear does bear the traces of the Emersonian "transparent eyeball" but the tear is significantly different: fluid and provisional as well as directed toward others, it never elevates the poet's status.

Thus, Bishop revises the notion of the American sublime in a way which significantly overlaps with Patricia Yaeger's claim that women resist "the old-fashioned sublime of domination, the vertical sublime
which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others" and offers instead "a horizontal sublime that moves toward sovereignty or expenditure, that refuses...phallic fight to death with the father, but expands towards others, spreads itself into multiplicity" (qtd. Wilson *American Sublime* 321). In Bishop's poem, the Man-Moth's potential offer reflects his expansion toward others, yet the nature of this expansion is rather troubling: the Man-Moth's tear, suggesting his suffering and the aggression necessary to trigger his offer, betrays the creature's ambivalent attitude toward any expenditure. Such an ambivalence implies the poet's simultaneous, conflicting movements toward "sovereignty" and "expenditure" and their always uncertain, provisional outcome. But Bishop's Man-Moth never comes close to the Emersonian poet who soars above others, detaching himself even from "the nearest friend." If the Man-Moth lives alone, it is not because he "detaches" himself, but rather because his very body does not concur with the commonly accepted categories. Bishop's poet, then, occupies an unstable, shifting terrain that unsettles the established status quo.

Strangely enough, there is a significant overlap between Bishop's Man-Moth, a rather clumsy and maladjusted figure, and Szymborska's acrobat. "The Acrobat," the poem in which with her usual subtlety, Szymborska implies an analogy between a trapeze performer and a poet, the seeming effortlessness and grace of their arts mask the underlying struggle and the risk of failure. Although in "The Acrobat" Szymborska never even mentions a poet, both the structure of her verse and her rhetoric makes the two figures merge. The opening lines in particular
reflect the tensions of the creative process as well as the significance of its precision:

From trapeze to
to trapeze, in the hush that
that follows the drum roll's sudden pause, through
through the startled air, more swiftly than
than his body's weight, which once again
again is late for its own fall. (101)

Szymborska perceives poetry as the art of language acrobatics which requires her attention to the smallest particular, since even a slight negligence may damage the verse. Both the acrobat and the poet constantly stretch the margins of the possible and struggle to overcome their own limitations. Moreover, the acrobat as a metaphor of the poet reveals the tensions between the poet's private and public sphere and challenges the seemingly easy opposition of the public and the personal. Even if Szymborska does not mention the acrobat's audience, this audience is always present, and yet the acrobat performs alone.

Solo. Or even less than solo,
less, because he's crippled, missing
missing wings, missing them so much
that he can't miss the chance
to soar on shamefully unfeathered
naked vigilance alone. (101)

While the word, "solo" reminds us that the gymnast performs in public, in the Polish original, the repetitive "sam" (alone, by himself) emphasizes the acrobat's isolation in the midst of his performance. Both versions, though, reflect the tensions between the private and the public sphere of art as well as the interdependence and inseparability of the two dimensions: the acrobat's art acquires significance in the context of a public display.
In the poem Szymborska also undermines the myth of artists flying on the wings of imagination: since Szymborska's acrobat "misses" his "wings" and is "crippled," his art turns into a struggle against his own body.

Arduous ease,
watchful agility,
and calculated inspiration. Do you see
how he waits to pounce in flight; do you know
how he plots from head to toe
against his very being; do you know, do you see
how cunningly he weaves himself through his own former shape
and works to seize this swaying world
by stretching out the arms he has conceived—

beautiful beyond belief at this passing
at this very passing moment that's just passed. (101)

Qualifying the acrobat's "inspiration," "ease," and "agility" in a way that questions the conventional meaning of these notions, Szymborska undermines the traditional romantic vision of artists flying effortlessly on the wings of inspiration and offers instead the image of an acrobat whose performance requires an enormous effort and who constantly risks a failure. For Szymborska, poetry is a species of language acrobatics which, inevitably risky, involves "plotting" "against [the poet's] very being." Just as the acrobat challenges the limitations of his own body, the poet interrogates the limitations of language, and for that purpose, they both use their imaginations. The acrobat can grasp the world only with the arms that "he has conceived." But such imaginative acts are as transient as the acrobat's jumps "from trapeze to trapeze." Szymborska suggests, then, that a poet, like the
acrobat, can "seize" the world for a moment only and such a moment constitutes the poet's provisional claims which inevitably generate new questions.

Symborska's acrobat, though different from the Man-Moth, still shares a number of features with Bishop's figure. While the overlap between the two characters further confirms the discussed affinity between Bishop's and Symborska's poetic enterprises, the contrast between them reveals the nature of the poets' differences. Both the acrobat and the Man-Moth cross the borders of common, everyday experiences, thus questioning the validity of such borders; both the acrobat's and the Man-Moth's enterprises involve the use of their bodies. However, while the acrobat stays within the boundaries of the real, and, even if for a moment only, becomes the master of his body-art, the Man-Moth's very body blurs the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and unlike the acrobat, he cannot control his body. Thus, the acrobat's otherness is rooted in his exceptional control of his art, while the Man-Moth's stems from his unusual maladjustment. Also, while both poets locate their symbolic artists on the margins, Symborska's acrobat chooses this marginal space himself, and Bishop's Man-Moth cannot make such choices: his very body exiles him onto the margins. Yet, this marginal territory of the hybrid creature is more homely and inviting than the space occupied by a Man. Significantly, both the Man-Moth and the acrobat reveal artistic enterprise as transient rather than transcendent.
Szymborska challenges the eternal nature of art and locates it within a temporary framework again in her poem about Isadora Duncan—"Frozen Motion." While looking at Duncan's photograph, the poet reveals the unbridgeable gap between the dancer and her picture:

This isn't Miss Duncan, the noted danseuse? Not the drifting cloud, the wafting zephyr, the Bacchante, moonlit waters, waves swaying, breezes sighing?

Standing this way, in the photographer's atelier, heftily, fleshily wrested from music and motion, she's cast to the mercies of a pose, forced to bear false witness. (135)

The natural phenomena that Szymborska evokes in memory of the dancer represent light, graceful movements, the essence of Duncan's art. However, instead of capturing the dancer's art, her photograph exposes the unbridgeable gap between the actual dance and its "frozen" representation. Szymborska, then, clearly goes against the tradition of poetic complaints about the passing time. After all, the flow of time and a constant change become both manifestation and affirmation of life.

In one of her early reflections on the flow of time, "Nothing Twice," Szymborska's similar emphasis on the fusion of life with change is even more pronounced:

Even if there is no one dumber, if you're the planet's biggest dunce, you can't repeat the class in summer: this course is only offered once

No day copies yesterday, no two nights will teach what bliss is in precisely the same way, with exactly the same kisses. (20)
Questioning the very possibility of repetition and so dismantling the framework of the routine, Szymborska emphasizes the significance of a single moment. We can see in the above lines a distant echo of the Horatian *carpe diem* motif which, constantly reoccurring in Western literature, has been quite worn out. Szymborska's take on it, though, surmounts the cliche ring. Her verse is not so much a call for enjoying the present moment as a humorous reflection on the constant change which turns the present troubles into the past: in the untranslated poem, Szymborska appreciates the passing of the "evil hour" (*Wolanie do Jeti* 14), inverting the motif of *carpe diem*.

Reflecting on her own writing, Szymborska is always aware of its provisional character. As Joanna Gradziel observes, even in "The Joy of Writing," Szymborska's claim about the power of poetry to arrest the moment becomes questionable. Gradziel writes that although Szymborska defines poetry as "a form of rebellion against the limitations of human nature" and "a form of victory over time because it may preserve what passes," her "definition lacks the unambiguous, assertive power of complete sentences" (73). And Gradziel adds, "the earlier lines, expressing disbelief and doubts, undermine the definition with questions and irony" [translation mine] (73).

In the course of the poem Szymborska constantly reminds us that the world where "Not a thing will ever happen unless I say so" is only imagined, and, as Gradziel aptly remarks, this world does not go beyond the written page (74). Moreover, the poet never forgets that her writing does not so much capture the real as, in some manner, represent
it. We know that the doe and the woods have been "written," and that the hunters who "surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns/...forget that what's here isn't life" (67). Szymborska further emphasizes the gap between life and poetry when she qualifies the supposedly "endless existence" of the poetic art. In the opening stanzas, she admits that the doe's legs are only "borrowed from the truth," revealing such a loan as temporary. Further on, she adds, "Other laws, black on white, obtain" on the page, implying that language always distorts what it represents: it divides and entraps the continuous spectrum of life within the discontinuous categories of discourse. With her characteristic ironic humor, Szymborska reveals the violence of discourse:

Lying in wait, set to pounce on the blank page,
are letters up to no good,
clutches of clauses so subordinate
they'll never let her get away.

Each drop of ink contains a fair supply
of hunters, equipped with squinting eyes behind their sights,
prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment,
surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns. (67)

Not only does the above analogy disclose the aggressive nature of discourse, but also it marks all language use with an inevitable loss: the poet is aware that the writer's "power of preserving" does not preserve life but only some of its traces. However, for Szymborska the awareness of such shortcomings does not turn writing into a random enterprise. The "letters up to no good" may "kill" not only the "written doe" but the poet's art as well, and as much as the deer may fail to flee the hunters, the poet may fail to create her art.
In fact, "The Joy of Writing" suggests that the poet's position is as precarious and uncertain as the doe's, since while the animal's fate depends on the poet's art, her art—and thus her claim to be a poet—depends on the "written doe." The image of the poet's vulnerability seems less ambiguous in the Polish original than in the English translation since the presence of the doe in the second stanza is not at all clear, and the poet herself comes across as "hunted:" Szymborska admits that the letters "may arrange themselves inaccurately" and qualifies sentences as "encircling," even "ensnaring." But even in the English version, the line, "[clauses] they'll never let her get away" refers to the doe as well as to the poet herself. Interestingly, then, we can see an overlap between the figure of the poet and the hunted deer: both are immersed in language and both depend on language. Also, Szymborska never gives any affirmative answers to her own questions about the poet's power. She only asks:

Is there then a world
where I rule absolutely on fate?
A time I bind with chains of signs?
An existence become endless at my bidding? (67)

Most probably, the poet cannot answer these questions even for herself; besides, Szymborska's joking, ironic voice qualifies the potential "yes" as rather naive. What follows the questions, then, is a break between stanzas, a space open for reflections. Consequently, the closing lines are not so much assertions as suggestions of the issues to explore.
The joy of writing.  
The power of preserving.  
Revenge of a mortal hand. (68)

In the context of the whole poem, the joy of writing has no overlaps with any form of an easy game. Paradoxically, the joy is related to the unpredictable result of the poet's enterprise: she does not know what will come out of her pen. Her artistic endeavor involves taking risks: she has to assume the responsibility for the outcome although she cannot foresee it; she can also experience failures. Moreover, Szymborska's poem focuses not on the completed poem, but on the process of writing. Thus, when in her effort to support the claim of "the joy," she lists "the power of preserving" along with "revenge of a mortal hand," she also challenges the usual understanding of such statements. After all, she locates art within a temporal framework undermining its alleged a-temporal, transcendental nature. Art may seem eternal, but only if juxtaposed with human mortality. Thus, when Szymborska asserts that writing may become a source of joy, she complicates the very notion of joy, fusing it with doubt, uncertainty, and thus with the risk of asking questions and an intense intellectual discomfort.

Thus, Szymborska could never accept the idea that people could find fulfillment living in Utopia. Her poem entitled "Utopia" inverts the myth of the ideal island: emphasizing the fusion of life with change, the poem constructs an analogous fusion of life with an interrogative mode of thinking. Szymborska's Utopia--"Island where all becomes clear (173)," turns out to be a symbolic deadland. As certitude erases questions, it erases what constitutes the human. The poet argues
that the mode of truly human existence is inevitably bound with the interrogative mode of language.

If we juxtapose Szymborska's utopian island with Bishop's "poor old island," we see how human presence engenders uncertainty, doubts, and questions. Bishop's reinstallment of Crusoe on the island undermines the already existing representations. Bishop says, "None of the books has ever got it right," and later, as Friday appears on the scene, she repeats "(accounts of that have everything all wrong.)" Bishop's and Szymborska's texts, then, undermine both the Romantic and Modern ideas of transcendental visions, offering instead provisional, momentary glimpses of reality.

All these qualities come across clearly in Bishop's "Poem" from *Geography III*, a text challenging the traditionally elevated status of art. In "Poem" Bishop locates art within the ordinary and the everyday since she describes her uncle's painting which, as Merrin points out "is artistically unremarkable, monetarily worthless, and minuscule...--a distinctly minor work" (88). Bishop opens the poem emphasizing both its miniature size and insignificance:

> About the size of an old-style dollar bill, American or Canadian, mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays --this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?) has never earned any money in its life. Useless and free, it has spent seventy years as a minor family relic handed along collaterally to owners who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to. (176)

In her analysis of the poem, Merrin emphasizes its Wordsworthian characteristics:
First, we can notice how Wordsworthian this poem actually is: all about the re-collection of experience through memory and art; about spontaneity in art (the small sketch "done in an hour, "in one breath'"'); about the love of nature; about looking or gazing; about capturing, in common speech, common life. (88)

Yet, Merrin adds, Bishop revises Wordsworth and her "revisionism is so often a matter of scaling down proportion and diminishing expectations"...(89). As I will show later, while Szymborska does not undertake any revisions of Wordsworth, Merrin's comment about Bishop's "scaling down proportion and diminishing expectations" describes the Polish poet's work as well.

Moreover, Bishop's parenthetical comments and side remarks disrupting the flow of the verse generate a sense of conversational immediacy and provisionality, the characteristics usually associated with prose. In Bishop's work (and as my discussion will show--Szymborska's) the borderline between poetry and prose is constantly shifting, and this instability undermines the traditionally elevated status of poetry. Also, in Bishop's and Szymborska's work the territory of art is contingent on social and material circumstances. In "Poem," for instance, Bishop puts art in the context of economic transactions. Commenting on this context, Costello claims:

Commerce, as a relation of buying and selling, means more in Bishop's poetry than monetary relations. It includes the impulse of conquest...[However], This picture is neither comprehensive nor consoling... Not only the diminutive size but the status of the work as a sketch reduces the magisterial claims of art. It offers no recuperation of lost worlds, no glimpse of eternity. (227)

Further on, she adds that since the painting is "Not worth the dollar... [it] is "Useless and free":

39
...Bishop emphasizes the value of freedom over that of mastery and textual captivity. It is free in requiring no purchase, something "that we get for free,"... the life of the work...is not bound, like our own lives, to obligation and demand, or to necessity. It allows us to dwell in a free aesthetic space of imaginative extension, but not of mastery. (227)

Yet, while Bishop does designate a separate artistic terrain, it is never autonomous, but, as Costello observes, "historically contingent" (228). Consequently, the space of art defies any rigid boundaries, and although Bishop implies the existence of artistic values, she never defines them. We may surmise, though, that these values are flexible and shift as the economic, social, and political systems change since art's freedom depends on its location on the periphery of the mainstream.

Later, when Bishop wonders if the "little painting" was supposed to be "a sketch for a larger one," she explicitly denies the transcendental nature of art, emphasizing both its incompleteness and transitoriness. As Costello observes, "the diminutive size and careless history of the work make clear that this is no immortal monument" (227). The transience of art becomes so pronounced in "Poem" because Bishop reveals its dependence on the process of the creative reconstruction of artworks. The painted landscape emerges as Bishop recreates it, and she implies that it can re-emerge again and again in the process of other imaginative reconstructions. Such processes depend on their complex material contexts. Bishop, for instance, locates the painting in the context of her memory of the landscape. When she claims: "It must be Nova Scotia", she explains: "only there/ does one
see gabled wooden houses/ painted that awful shade of brown" (176).

Bishop's recreation, however, is never complete; there are always some moments of doubt, and some pictorial space is left undefined:

The other houses, the bits that show, are white. Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple --that gray-blue wisp--or is it? (emphasis mine)

A specklike bird is flying to the left. Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird? (176)

Bishop never answers these questions, and in her poetry, such unresolved issues replace the claims of art's transcendence: while traditional art was supposed to transcend material and temporal circumstance, Bishop's undefined moments resist any final closure; thus, since they may be reinterpreted again and again, they defy time without claiming art as immortal.

Even the moment of Bishop's recognition of the painted landscape does not resolve all the doubts but raises further questions:

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it! It's behind--I can almost (emphasis mine) remember the farmer's name. His barn backed on that meadow. There it is, titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple, filaments of brush-hairs, barely there, must be the Presbyterian church. Would that be Miss Gillispie's house? Those particular geese and cows are naturally before my time. (176-7)

Never elevating art above the material world, Bishop also shows that art can never replace the real and she constantly reminds us of the gap between art and the real: she mentions "two brushstrokes," "a half inch of blue sky," "a wild iris, white and yellow, fresh-squiggled from the tube," or "filaments of brush-hairs." Significantly, such phrases
become not only a reminder of the picture's artificiality but also of the past process of painting. Never forgetting the intersecting levels of the landscape's realm—the landscape during the time of painting, the painter, the process of painting, Bishop’s memory of the landscape, and her imaginative reconstruction of it—Bishop explores a range of tensions between these levels. Costello comments:

Bishop presents a pluralistic, time critical, reciprocal notion of representation. The work of art establishes a repository for memories. In it one finds the place depicted, the painting's own making and history, and even the particular history that brought it serendipitously to this threshold of contemplation. The separation of the real, compositional, and imaginative space allows for creative new connections, and the linear sense of time yields to coincidence. (231)

Such multiple levels of the landscape, however, open new creative possibilities not only because of their plurality but also because of their provisional character. Neither Bishop’s memory of the place, nor the picture, nor the poet's reconstruction of it is complete, and while such blanks invite questions they defy final conclusions. In "Poem," then, Bishop poses questions about the nature and meaning of art and undermines the traditional notion of art's transcendence:

I never knew him. We both knew this place, apparently, this literal small backwater, looked at it long enough to memorize it, our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved, or its memory is (it must have changed a lot). Our visions coincided—"visions" is too serious a word—our looks, two looks: art "copying from life" and life itself, life and the memory of it so compressed they've turned into each other. Which is which? Life and the memory of it cramped, dim, on a piece of Bristol board, dim, but how live, how touching in detail—

42
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be dismantled elms, the geese. (177)

Discussing Bishop's challenge of the traditional romantic paradigm,
Merrin compares "Poem" to Wordsworth "Tintern Abbey" emphasizing in
particular the poet's replacement of the romantic "visions" with
"looks:"

This refusal of lofty diction ("lofty" itself a Wordsworthianism
foreign to Bishop's vocabulary) is connected with other, larger
refusals. When Bishop replaces the exalted "visions" with the
matter-of-fact "looks," she turns with that small gesture from
Romantic poetry, with its emphasis on soaring subjectivity,
toward a modern poetry of more minutely observant objectivity.
(89)

Moreover, confined to a particular observer, Bishop's "looks," unlike
romantic "visions," never transcend the material world: the poet's
recognition of the landscape painted by her great-uncle cannot suddenly
make her "know" the relative, and her remark "I never knew him"
remains valid.

In fact, the painting triggers more questions than answers.
Bishop's rejection of "visions," then, is contingent on her defiance
of answers and represents her turn toward questions. When she wonders
about the nature of a connection (or connections) that the painting
creates between herself and the uncle, she finds it "strange." Also,
she declares that their uncle's "looks" "coincided" rather than "fused"
or "merged;" these "looks," then, never turn into "one image" but
constitute a palimpsest of images which generates more questions on the
ways art relates the present to the past. Even if Bishop claims that "life and the memory of it.../...have turned into each other," she cannot decide "Which is which?" And yet while she acknowledges that the territory of art is "dim," she pronounces her belief in art's value: 
"--the little that we get for free/...About the size of our abidance."

Clearly, Bishop reverses here the romantic claim of art's power to raise the human spirit above the transience of common life, and she locates art within the boundaries of the human, suggesting that it is precisely the contingency in human affairs that makes art significant. In the poem, her uncle's representation of the landscape differs from her reconstruction of it since the context of each situation is different. Never trying to establish a new master paradigm of art, Bishop proposes plurality.

"Poem," however, not only explores the concept of art but, indirectly, the relationship between its two branches: painting and poetry. Interestingly, unlike Bishop's much earlier "Large Bad Picture," the generic title "Poem" does not suggest ekphrastic writing. Yet, since Bishop's main focus is the painted landscape, the title refers both to her writing and her relative's picture. Thus, Bishop blurs the borderline between poetry and painting, since she not only probes the ways poetry can come close to visual arts but also reflects on poetry embedded in the visual and wonders in what sense a painting can overlap with a poem.

On the one hand, such reflections stem naturally from Bishop's own interest and experience in painting--her poetry has always been
noted for her rendition of the visual detail, and, as my next chapter demonstrates, Bishop's whole poetic oeuvre can be read as her exploration of the relation between poetry and painting. However, her deliberate blurring of the borderline between the verbal and the visual is yet one more consequence of Bishop's art of asking questions. Her constant interrogation destabilizes notions, categories, or divisions commonly taken for granted, and her poetics dissolves the certain.

In her work, in a way similar to Bishop's, Szymborska undermines the ideas that people assume without questioning. Significantly, however, she never even tries to replace these commonplace ideas with new ones. Thus, when she explores the notion of poetry, she never tries to redefine it; instead, with subtle irony, she ridicules still common preconceptions of the divine character of ars poetica.

In Polish literature, such ideas were particularly strong during the romantic period. Since with the 1795 partition Poland disappeared from maps, literature, and poetry in particular, became significant Polish spiritual territory. One of the romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz, defined a poet as a "ruler of souls" (Carpenter xiii). In a number of Mickiewicz's as well as the other romantics' works, the poet appears as a god-like figure, often alone on a mountain peak, high above the common crowd. According to Bogdana Carpenter "[t]he messianism of the great romantics had continued to the movement of Młoda Polska or 'Young Poland'...the Polish equivalent of symbolism" (xiii). Further on, she adds:
Influenced by the two philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Frederich Nietzsche, the poets of Young Poland proclaimed art to be a reflection of the absolute and the highest religion, while the artist was a priest communicating with metaphysical forces and interpreting them for ordinary men. (xiv)

Clearly, we can see an overlap between the divine figure of the artist in Poland and the Emersonian ideal of the poet soaring high above the common men and communing with God.

Although such an idealized vision of the poet was strongly challenged by the next generation of the Polish poets belonging to the very diverse Avant-Garde movement, the exalted ambience still surrounded the figure of the poet. Thus, when in "Stage Fright" (Poems New and Collected 1957-1997 179-80) Szymborska reflects on the nature of poetry, she plays with such pretentious notions. In the first two stanzas, she reveals the inadequacy of the traditional division of literature into poetry and prose:

Poets and writers.
So the saying goes.
That is poets aren't writers, but who--

Poets are poetry, writers are prose--
Prose can hold anything including poetry,
but in poetry there's only room for poetry-- (179)

Challenging the prose/poetry binary, Szymborska proposes a rather flexible notion of her art. Analysing the poem, Edward Balcersan observes that Szymborska defies traditional restrictions imposed on the poetry and poets, demanding the same "rights" for prose in poetry as there are for poetry in prose ("W szkole swiata" 42); later, Balcersan adds: "this demand of equal treatment [of poetry and prose] overcomes the poet's aversion to manifestoes" (42).
I think, however, that "Stage Fright" cannot really be thought of as Szymborska's manifesto but rather as her anti-manifesto. After all, the poem moves from one question to another, and even its final line asks yet one more question. Far from turning into a manifesto, the poem reflects Szymborska's resistance to any final definitions which, on a different occasion, she expressed in prose:

"Look how many ends that stick's got!" exclaimed once Montaigne. I couldn't care less if he said that in poetry or prose. It's enough to know he found words you couldn't forget. (qtd. in Balcerzan 42 trans. mine)

As Szymborska continues to develop her reflections, she ridicules the cultural myth of the elevated and the divine nature of poetry.

In keeping with the poster that announces it with a fin-de-siecle flourish of its giant P framed in a winged lyre's strings
I shouldn't simply walk in, I should fly--

And wouldn't I be better off barefoot
to escape the clump and squeak of
cut-rate sneakers,
a clumsy ersatz angel--

If at least the dress were longer and more flowing
and the poems appeared not from a handbag but by sleight of hand,
dressed in their Sunday best from head to toe,
with bells on, ding to dong,
ab ab ba--

On the platform lurks a little table
suggesting seances, with gilded legs,
and on the little table smokes a little candlestick-- (179)

Szymborska evokes the past literary trends with their prescriptive concepts of ars poetica, and she defies all such prescriptions. Her comments on the poster with "a fin de siecle flourish" become an ironic critique of Polish postsymbolist poetry with its "heavily ornamented
and convoluted style identified in Poland with the movement "secesja" and related to the French art nouveau, to the English Pre-Raphaelites (Carpenter 73).

Yet, just as Szymborska does not accept pretentious ornamentation, she does not want to assume any airs of "peasant freshness," an idea that in various guises appeared in Polish art both during the Young Poland period (which started about 1890) and the Avant-Garde movement (1918-1930s). Szymborska, then, ridicules the possibility of her own appearance as a barefoot poet. For Szymborska, artistic programs turn into dogmatic frameworks which she systematically dismantles, and she exposes the incompatibility of her own human persona with the pretentious vision of the poet evoked through the traditional emblems of poetry:

I've got to read by candlelight
what I wrote by the light of an ordinary bulb
to the typewriter's tap tap tap--

Without worrying in advance
if it was poetry
and if so, what kind--

the kind in which prose is inappropriate
or the kind which is apropos in prose--

And what's the difference,
seen now only in half-light
against a crimson curtain's
purple fringe? (179-800

Clearly, Szymborska's challenge of the prose/poetry binary concerns not only the issue of literary forms but of content. In Western culture, "prose," associated with the monotony of everyday life, has been set in opposition to poetry: "prosaic" means "tedious," "unimaginative" and

48
"unpoetical." Szymborska's poem, however, locates the very process of artistic creation within a rather prosaic everydayness. She does not experience a sudden inspiration, poetic illumination, or heightened awareness but patiently types her verse "by the light of an ordinary bulb." Thus, in "Stage Fright" and in many other poems, the act of writing poetry becomes a rather "prosaic" enterprise.

However, it would be wrong to say that Szymborska supports the claim: "Poetry is like prose." As Stanislaw Baranczak has already observed, the phrase, 'All right, but...' embodies Szymborska's rhetorical strategy. Baranczak continues:

[The phrase "All right, but," implied rather than spoken ] is the crucial part of every poem of Szymborska. It functions as a logical and rhetorical link between the (expressed openly or, more frequently programmed into the "naive question") generally accepted belief or opinion and the rest of the poem which presents, as it were, evidence to the contrary.

Thus, when in "The Stage Fright" Szymborska announces that: "Poetry is like prose," she does qualify her statement with a subtle "but," thereby opening a vast range of possibilities for making distinctions between prose and poetry, the distinctions that Szymborska wants to explore without, however, defining them.

In fact, tensions between prose and poetry become one of the major marks of Szymborska's oeuvre, and Ryszard Matuszewski considers the prose-like character of Szymborska's poems as a quality that attracts common readers:

... Szymborska's poems are never boring, even for those who are not particularly sensitive to the so called "pure lyricism." I would say her poems have interesting plots, or rather, they fuse the idea for a plot with an intellectual concept. As a result,
the poem turns into a kind of an essay if not a short story, and it is usually read in a way different than most contemporary verse by other poets inspired by a particular vision or emotion....(248)

It should be emphasised here that Szymborska's poems do not draw the audience primarily through their "plots" but through developing these plots around the common problems that the readers can share. Such a focus on the everyday and the common also contributes to the prosaic mode of Szymborska's verse.

As Czeslaw Milosz has pointed out, Szymborska creates her art along the borderline between poems and essays (11). The very titles of her poems often suggest a prose piece rather than verse. "Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition," "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo," "Bodybuilders' Contest," "The Railroad Station," "A Film from the Sixties," "Hitler's First Photograph," "One Version of Events" and others could be very well used for newspaper articles or reports.

Such titles retain the traces of the post-war period in Poland during which poems regularly published in newspapers were supposed to target average readers raising their consciousness about building a new socialist state. The public press, then, was supposed to educate Polish citizens. As Jacek Lukasiewicz observes, at that time people often read poems as part of daily news, and "[a]t times a poem becomes a substitute for a column or an advertisement" (23). Continuing his comments on newspaper poems, Lukasiewicz writes:

Because of the symmetry of verse, poems in newspapers introduce the atmosphere of order. In some measure, they always create a holiday atmosphere balancing the everyday and the present.
Frequently accompanying recurring holidays and events, then, poems propose the order in opposition to chance. (trans. 24)

While appealing to everyday readers, a number of poets presented the common issues in a rather simplified manner, and the poetic form invested these issues with more than common significance. Moreover, the already mentioned emphasis on order combined with educational goals of the press contributed to the common use of a collective persona "we" rather than "I," a strategy that Szymborska adopted at that time. It is later, in her mature poems that she discards the collective persona and speaks "herself," qualifying her view, though, not only as limited but also as one of many possible views.

Such a rhetorical stance leaves Szymborska room enough to articulate her individual position without ever imposing it on others. Even the poems whose titles still bring to mind public affairs and daily news undermine Szymborska's post-war poetics of collectivism. "Snapshot of a Crowd" well reflects her critique:

In the snapshot of a crowd,
my head's seventh from the edge,
or maybe fourth from the left,
or twenty-eight from the bottom;

my head is I don't know which,
no longer on its own shoulders,
just like the rest (and vice versa),
neither clearly male nor female;

whatever it signifies
is of no significance,

and the Spirit of the Age
may just glance its way, at best; (122)
The text clearly reveals the dangers of collectivist discourse: to embody the crowd and to construct individuals as "equals," the discourse works at such a distance from its subject that it overlooks the particular and eventually the human. Losing their specific personas, people turn into easily interchangeable objects. The described photograph of a crowd represents society as dehumanized machinery rather than as an assembly of its individual members:

- my head is statistical,
- it consumes its steel *per capita*
globally and with composure;

- shamelessly predictable,
- complacently replaceable;

- as if I didn't even own it
- in my own and separate way;

- as if it were one skull of many
- found unnamed in strip-mined graveyards
- and preserved so well that one
- forgets that its owner's gone;

- as if it were already there,
- my head, any-, everyone's-

- where its memories, if any,
- must reach deep into the future. (122)

In fact, erasing the particular, the collectivist discourse does not so much include as alienate all individuals. Just like the poet, others would not be able to recognize themselves in the "snapshot of a crowd." The photograph of people impossible to identify reminds Szymborska of death: the skulls in graveyards, like heads in the picture, bear no individual traces. The poet implies, then, that a genuine involvement in human affairs requires "close-ups" and thus a careful attention to
individuals. Yet, she realizes that such a "close-up" perspective is at the same time exclusive: while it includes some particulars, it leaves out much more.

Szymborska's constant awareness of all that has been left out, combined with an implied question "what to include?," underlies most of her poems. Trying to resolve this dilemma that, as she knows well, cannot be really satisfactorily resolved, Szymborska attends to what was neglected or absent in the arts and literature of the past. Paradoxically, such exclusions affect primarily the common, everyday affairs, so eventually Szymborska explores the problems that, though central in everyday life, have been pushed to the cultural and artistic margins as simple, prosaic, and so not worth attention. Consequently, as Baranczak has aptly observed, Szymborska's questions may seem "naive" ("The Szymborska Phenomenon" 254) and her poems quite simple (257). However, he explains, "Szymborska is clearly a poet for whom language is not just a transparent pane in a window opening to some outside view but a "question" or problem in its own right" (257). Szymborska's apparent simplicity stemming partly from her focus on commonly shared ideas and partly on her conversational tone maybe somewhat misleading. Baranczak, for instance, points out that some may be tempted to read Szymborska's "Coloratura" as "merely a parodistic imitation...of the operatic bel canto" while the poem goes much beyond this parody, asking questions about the sense of art.

Just as Baranczak warns us against reading Szymborska's writing as "simple" and "not complex," David Kalstone alerts the readers to
"the deceptively simple surface of Bishop's work" ("E. B. Questions" 4); he explains: "Critics have praised her descriptive powers and treated her as something of a miniaturist. As mistakenly as with the work of Marianne Moore, they have sometimes asked if Bishop's is poetry at all" (4). Critics could raise such questions not only because of Bishop's painterly descriptions but also because of the poet's focus: Bishop, like Szymborska, often attends to matters that traditional poets or artists would consider too "ordinary." Thus, for instance, she describes a map ("The Map"), a painting of poor quality ("Large Bad Picture"), her visit at the dentist's office ("In the Waiting Room"), or a gas station ("Filling Station"). Commenting on the poems such as "Large Bad Picture," "Poem," and "The Monument" Costello points out that "[t]he poet raises the difficult questions of art's ontology within the humblest of contexts. Works minor in scale, achievement, or ambition...draw her attention rather than monumental works" (215). At the same time, Bishop's detailed descriptions of objects that may seem unworthy of attention endow her poetry with some qualities of prose.

Moreover, Bishop blurs the traditional borders between poetry and prose by her play with meters. Penelope Laurans observes that the poet frequently introduces "some variations" of regular meters. Then, she adds:

[Bishop] specializes in borderline meters: two stress, three stress, and four stress lines that might also be called modified diameters, trimeters, and tetrameters, since they break back and forth between the two meters ("Jeronimo's House," "Night City," "First Death in Nova Scotia,"...)[...]

In the end, it seems fair to say that Bishop finds loosened meters more congenial than strict ones, shorter lines more
arresting than longer, and stanzas with variable meters more appealing than stanzas with a consistent pattern. (94)

Such disruptions of metric regularity contribute to prose-like qualities of Bishop's poems which often dominate some stanzas. Discussing such stanzas as "prose passages" of Bishop's poems, Laurans claims that "[i]n "The End of March,"... fully one third of the poem is prose arranged in verse lines" (90). And she explains:

Prose passages are hardly new in Bishop's poetry; they have been there almost from the beginning in poems like "The Bight," "At the Fishhouses," "Cape Breton," and "Manuelzinho." In *Geography III*, however, these passages grow more frequent, conveying the impression that as Bishop's security as a poet has solidified... she has felt free to include more of these prose passages in her poems. (90)

Of course, Laurans's use of the term "prose" here could be questioned. After all, we can always identify some metrical patterns underlying such prose. Thus, when later Laurans discusses the "prosy" part of "The End of March," she refers to "the most neutral, prose-like [emphasis mine] writing..." rather than "prose," and she quotes passages from the longest central part of the poem:

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house, my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box set up on pilings, shingled green, a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener (boiled with bicarbonate of soda?), protected from spring tides by a palisade of--are they railroad ties? (179)

...There must be a stove; there is a chimney, askew, but braced with wires, and electricity, possibly --at least, at the back another wire limply leashes the whole affair to something off behind the dunes. (180)
Laurans also points out "[the] ordinariness" and the "prosy, conversational sound and flow [of the poem], as if Bishop were simply talking to the reader" (91). Again, then, we can see a significant overlap between Bishop's and Szymborska's poetic voices—their conversational tone.

Although in contrast to Bishop's poetry, Szymborska's work could never be called "painterly"—she uses descriptions rather sparingly—the poets' conversational tone as well as their focus on "the ordinary" brings them close together. Reading Bishop's or Szymborska's poems, we get the impression that they are talking to us; consequently, we have the illusion of both spatial and temporal immediacy.

In fact, reading Szymborska's and Bishop's poems, we see that for both women the embracing of poetry has become an embracing of uncertainty. While neither Bishop nor Szymborska is able to define poetry, both pronounce their faith in ars poetica and interrogate its possible meanings. When in her poem "Some People Like Poetry," Szymborska reflects on the significance of such a predilection, she never comes up with a resolution:

Some people--
that means not everyone.
Not even most of them, only a few.
Not counting school, where you have to,
and poets themselves,
you might end up with something like two per thousand.

Like--
but then, you can like chicken noodle soup,
or compliments, or the color blue,
your old scarf,
your own way,
petting the dog.
Poetry—
but what is poetry anyway?
More than one rickety answer
has tumbled since that question first was raised.
But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that
like a redemptive handrail. (227)

Interestingly, the poem undermines any notions of poetic grandeur since
even if just a few "like poetry," they are hardly the elite: Szymborska
probes their "liking" in the context of our predilections for
particular dishes or colors. Yet, just by locating the verb "like" in
different contexts, Szymborska suggests that its meaning changes:
"liking poetry" refers to a different kind of perception than "liking
chicken-noodle soup." While acknowledging such differences, Szymborska
does not try to establish any hierarchy or privilege the intellectual
or the aesthetic over other spheres of human perception. Instead, she
reflects on the capacity of language to make sense of the world,
revealing both its flexibility and limitations: while language can
represent a multitude of phenomena, such representation is never
complete.

Szymborska, then, cannot answer the question "what is poetry?"
and she "keeps on not knowing." Paradoxically, though, for Szymborska,
such a position of "not knowing" becomes "a redemptive handrail." After
all, any conclusive answer to Szymborska's question would limit the
poet's creativity by imposing rigid borders onto the field of poetry:
to trespass these borders would mean to reject poetry. It is the never-
resolved question "what is poetry?" that releases the poet's creative
potential, turning the poet's work into a quest for ars poetica. In
fact, Szymborska's poem becomes one instance of such a quest in the
course of which a short prose statement ("Some people like poetry")
turns into a poem as each word becomes an opening line of a stanza
followed by the poet's tentative reflections on its meaning.

Szymborska's strategy here brings to mind Bishop's patient and
never-resolved quest for adequate words, her constant wavering between
"this or that," inviting her audience to search for other alternatives.
Both Bishop and Szymborska practice poetry as the art of questioning.
For Bishop, this questioning is frequently triggered by her struggle
to render adequately the visual details; her interrogation is embedded
within her descriptive, painterly rhetoric. Szymborska's questions,
posed usually in a more direct manner than Bishop's, constitute a part
of what Edward Balcerzan called her "rhetoric of education and
explication" (45). Significantly, though, just as Bishop's painterly
images never turn into idealized "visions," Szymborska's explanatory
endeavors raise still one more question.
NOTES

1. Other critics also discussed Szymborska's art of asking questions. See Joanna Gradziel, "Swiat w pulapce wiersza" [The World Trapped In Poems] in Radosc czytania Szymborskiej. [The Joy of Reading Szymborska], pp.175-190; Stanislaw Balbus, "Wislawa Szymborska czyli Pytanie w Odpowiedzi na Pytan"e" ["Wislawa Szymborska or a Question In Answer To a Question"], pp. 278-286; S. Balbus, "Wszelki wypadek" [Could Have] [The Joy...], pp. 343-346; Ryszard Matuszewski, "O wierszach Wislawy Szymborskiej" ["On Wislawa Szymborska's Poems"] [The Joy...] pp. 242-243; other critics writing on Szymborska's poetry usually mention her constant interrogation even if they focus on different issues.

2. In his study of the Romantic Age, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature, M. H. Abrams explains: "A conspicuous Romantic tendency, after the rationalism and decorum of the Enlightenment, was a reversion to the stark drama and suprarational mysteries of the Christian story and doctrines and to the violent conflicts and abrupt reversals of the Christian inner life, turning on the extremes of destruction and creation..." (66). Later, Abrams gives a review of the systems based on classical mythology that the main Romantic poets wanted to create to embody the spirit of the age. Blake's Los, for instance, "declared that he 'must create a system' or be enslaved by the ready-made system..."(67). John Keats "undertook to project his own 'system of salvation' in the form of the modified classical myths of Hyperion and the Fall of Hyperion.[...]. Contemporary writers in Germany also announced the need for what Friedrich Schlegel called a 'new mythology' to be formed 'out of the uttermost depth of the spirit,' which would serve as the unifying ground for all modern poetry;[...]Friedrich Schelling agreed that at the present moment 'each truly creative individual must invent a mythology for himself" (67).

3. Costello comments, "Romanticism's view of memory itself as a form of transcendence and compensation makes it especially suspect. Crusoe finds no real consolation in memory" (203). And later she adds, "In Wordsworth, experience is typically fulfilled in memory's afterimage......[In Bishop] [m]emory erases more than it fills in" (205).

4. Discussing the American Modernists in A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers, Hugh Kenner claims that America "got, want it or not, its own modernism, a homemade variety" (xvi)....[The American Modernists] "shared hidden sources of craftsmanship, hidden incentives to rewrite a page, which we can trace
to a doctrine of perception—the word valued both in itself and in its power to
denote—very evident when we watch a second generation of poets (Open, Zukowsky)
work out themes that seem shared by both Hemingway and Williams. That doctrine
of perception, like general semantics, seems peculiarly adapted to the American
weather, which fact helps explain why, from Pound's early days until now, modern
poetry in whatever country has borne so unmistakably American an impress.

So writers of three overlapping generations, Williams' of the 1880's,
Faulkner's of the 1890's, Zukofsky's of the 1900's, rethought and altered,
perhaps permanently, the novel and especially the poem. Yet the homemade world
of American Modernism terminates not in climactic masterworks but in an "age of
transition"—we live in it—where the very question gets raised, what the written
word may be good for" (xvii-xviii). Bishop also raises this question in "Crusoe
in England."

5. Further on Costello writes, "Clearly, Bishop does not believe in settling down.
We never 'find ourselves' in any stable location, but rather in transit. As all
her critics point out, travel is her natural, dominant metaphor for the human
condition. Even dreams, which we associate with wish-fulfillment, are, in
Bishop's poetry, revelations of our homeless nature" (126). I would add here that
this homelessness is in particular a condition of a poet.

Also, commenting on Bishop's letter about "homesickness," David Kalstone
observes, "reconstructing the world was a way to combat or express what in 1935
she [Bishop] identifies as 'homesickness'—a homesickness particularly remarkable
because at this stage there is no image of home attached to it" (Becoming a Poet
21). As he points out "Anne Stevenson...is quite right in saying that Bishop's
poems are not conventional travel poems and have much more to do with re-
establishing the poet's own sense of place" (Becoming a Poet 22).

6. I discuss "Utopia" in detail in the fourth chapter "Poetry and Politics."
Neither Elizabeth Bishop nor, I suspect, Wislawa Szymborska would want to be yoked together in a critical discussion primarily on the basis of their gender. Both poets consistently took issue with the very label "writing by women," and although they could not know each other's comments, their views on the relevance of gender in writing bear a striking resemblance. In her often quoted interview with George Starbuck, Bishop recollects:

When I was in college and started publishing, even then, and in the following few years, there were women's anthologies, and all-women issues of magazines, but I always refused to be in them. I didn't think about it very seriously, but I felt it was a lot of nonsense, separating the sexes. I suppose this feeling came from feminist principles, perhaps stronger than I was aware of. (322)

Bishop must have feared that contrary to their purpose, women's anthologies could only diminish the status of women writers at the time. As Lloyd Schwartz recalls, for Bishop "[i]n the 1930s...being in a woman's anthology was a form of segregation" (Remembering 330) After all, there is always a danger of reinforcing the existing gender boundaries by essentializing the male/female binary in the process of dividing literature on the basis of the writers' sexes. Bishop, then,
insisted on being "a poet, plain and simple" and not "a woman poet" (Penelope Laurans Fitzgerald Remembering 329). In her interview with George Starbuck, she confessed, "Most of my writing life I've been lucky about reviews. But at the very end they often say 'The best poetry by a woman in this decade, or year, or month.' Well, what's that worth?" (324).

While Bishop rebels against being put in what she perceives as a gender trap, Szymborska, similarly, does not want to be locked in some outdated "woman's boudoir." She declares:

I think that dividing literature or poetry into women's and men's poetry is starting to sound absurd. Perhaps there was a time when a woman's world did exist, separated from certain issues and problems, but at present there are no things that would not concern women and men at the same time. We do not live in the boudoir anymore. (Perlez B 10)

Such a pronouncement could easily be interpreted as Szymborska's dismissal of the significance of gender in writing, especially since her poetry, like Bishop's, does not comply very well with what has been often identified as "feminist writing." Neither Bishop nor Szymborska engages directly in a critique or subversion of gender constructions in the West, and neither claims to speak specifically for women.

In the case of Szymborska, such a vantage point may be related to her disillusionment with communism in which she initially believed. Stanislaw Baranczak sees the traces of this disillusionment in her 1957 volume of poetry, Calling Out to Yeti:

The youthful self confidence of the first book’s title [That’s What We Live For, 1952] gives way to self-doubt; perhaps most
significant, the plural "we" is replaced with the singular "myself." (The New York Times Book Review "The Reluctant Poet" 51)

Probably, just as she does not want to speak for "humankind," Szymborska also resents speaking for "womankind." Usually those who have experienced the totalizing mechanism of communism have become deeply suspicious of all other "isms." In her witty review of a collection of American feminist writers, for instance, Szymborska's attitude toward the women's movement is rather skeptical. She writes:

> The dreary litany of hardships in the woman's life, of taxing roles thrust upon her, of constant fears, constraints and denials includes many that also afflict the man. After all, the ordeals of existence do not grow out of the patriarchy only but lie at the core of our human condition. (Lektury Nadobowiaskowe [Extra-curricular Readings] 222) [translation mine]

Szymborska is clearly afraid of any totalizing potential of the feminist movement, and she is resentful of lumping all women together while glossing over the complexities of their lives under the rubric of patriarchal oppression. For Szymborska such a perspective is disturbingly reductive. Besides although unlike Bishop Szymborska does not speak directly about "segregation," her comments in the quoted passage do imply that she is suspicious of the feminists' separatist bias. At the same time, she pokes fun at the feminist practice of using grammatically masculine forms of nouns while referring to women: ironically, such practice privileges patriarchal patterns. With her distinctive humorous sarcasm, Szymborska remarks:

> At the end, let me just add that all these essays were produced by the prominent, I am tempted to say, anthropologesses, biologesses, sociologesses and psychologesses. Oh! I know what has annoyed my readers. I attempted to form the feminine names

63
of the professions although the practice has long been dropped. But actually, I wonder, why. In the past, when coy and obedient, the women stayed at home, when only a few ventured additional employments, language was more accommodating. That is why waitresses, hostesses, actresses, or even poetesses have survived. Today, when the feminists have been both heard and listened to, when more and more women undertake challenging professions, the language tends to go backwards. It refuses to let in "engineeresses" or "psychiatresses," privileging instead engineers and psychiatrists in bras. Obviously, only masculine forms have become the commonly acknowledged certificate of professional expertise. (222) [translation mine]

In fact, these half-serious comments point to some truths about Polish gender stereotypes. Considering the issues of women writers, Jerzy Jarniewicz has aptly observed:

In Polish literary criticism, the term "women's poetry" often has a belittling, patronizing connotation..... A male critic, writing about the work of a woman and trying to be appreciative of her writings, proclaims--what to him seems a word of praise--that she is far from "so called women's poetry." (47)

In 1995, when the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan awarded Szymborska the honorary doctorate, Michal Glowinski, expressing his admiration for her literary work, used the masculine form of the Polish noun, "poeta" (poet) instead of the feminine "poetka" (poetess). He claimed that was the only way to do justice to Szymborska's achievement since, in contrast to its feminine analogue, the masculine form applied to both men and women, "and [was] thus universal" (11). Szymborska, then, has very good reasons to be concerned, just as was Bishop in the 1930s, that any labelling of artistic production in terms of gender involves the inscription of inferiority on women's art. Her witty, even comical argument for using the feminine terms of professions reflects her desire to detach gender markings from any evaluative judgements.
I would argue, however, that Szymborska's determined rejection of gender-oriented divisions of literature manifests, at the same time, her preoccupation with the position of women in Western culture. As I will show, in quite a number of poems, she does raise gender issues in the manner aligning her poetry with the disputed "women's literature." However, exploring the province of gender dynamics, Szymborska usually develops her reflections alongside her investigations of the significance of vision in the West: when she is concerned with the representation of women in art, she also probes into the very nature of representation or the complex relationship between representation, perception, and human knowledge of the world. Gender almost never becomes the sole focus of her poems.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Szymborska's critics have generally played down the role of gender in her work. In their "Translator's Afterword" (1981), for instance, Krynski and Maguire state:

> In all of Szymborska's work there are perhaps only two poems which could be called mildly "feminist." "Portrait of a Woman" is a celebration of feminine strength, adaptability, and versatility. The persona of "Still Alive" has unmistakably predatory inclinations, but chooses not to gratify them, for the moment at least. By and large, however, "gender" simply does not matter: life itself is Szymborska's main concern. (227)

Szymborska herself seems to support their statement in her review of Spotkania s Csecbowicsem (Conversations with Csecowics):

> Even a graphomaniac is an extremely complicated person (...). Meanwhile, the fact that with one writer, the words fall together into units that are alive and enduring and with another, they do not, is decided in a realm that's not easily comprehensible to anyone. I suspect that this is a realm upon which the
vicissitudes of life and the intensity of experience no longer have any influence. (quoted in Krynski and Maguire 217)

Szyborska, however, clearly does not mean, as Krynski and Maguire imply, that personal experiences (which in large measure are dependent on gender) do not affect the poet's work, but rather that the depth and complexity of those experiences are not sufficient for creating good poetry (217).

But even in the U. S. where critics have become sensitive to the issues of difference and thus to gender, Helen Vendler, in her 1996 review of Szyborska's translated poems, links the poet's "universality" with her supposedly unconcerned attitude toward gender:

[Szyborska's poems] are ... resolutely "anonymous:" their speaker is identified only rarely by gender, and never by age or nationality or ethnicity or local habitation. No lyric writer has ever been more confident of the universality of human response. Szyborska writes not for Poles alone, nor for women alone, nor for the twentieth century alone: she believes fiercely in a common epistemology and a common ethic, at least within the Western culture she writes from and to. (36)

While it is true that Szyborska may appeal to a broad audience, her poetic project includes the challenge of what has been often considered "universal," and her Eastern European experience has clearly had a major impact on her poetry. In his comment on Szyborska's Nobel prize, Robert Hass sees her ironic tone as typically Eastern European (2). The gap between the communist regimes' propaganda after the World War II and the hardships of everyday life was often a source of despair. But almost as often, it was a source of laughter—a peculiar, ironic laughter which could turn the despair into a kind of philosophical detachment. Such laughter became a powerful weapon to
confront the dreary existence, not only for writers but for common people. Szymborska's writing in great measure reflects this ironic survival tactic; and it is probably the detached, dry, ironic tone combined with her witticism that sets her poetry apart from what critics usually perceive as "feminist writing." Szymborska never follows any obvious feminist political agenda in the manner of Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde; neither does she write in the tradition of some confessional American women poets such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, or Sharon Olds. Apparently, she does not fit into a standard feminist frame.

Although in comparison with Szymborska Bishop often reaches a more personal level, her poetry still communicates a kind of emotional distance that has made her early critics ignore the feminist concerns of her writing. And yet any explorations of Bishop's and Szymborska's work divorced from the questions of gender erase a large sphere of the both poets' concerns. Even if Elizabeth Bishop wanted to keep her life private and did not reveal much of it directly in her writing, it would be naive to claim that her poetry was not shaped by her life in a significant way, and that meant, among other things, living a life of a lesbian woman in the larger, homophobic culture. And even if Szymborska has always resented explaining her poetry in terms of her life, this life of a woman in communist and post-communist Poland is certainly the major source of her poetry.

Although in Bishop's and Szymborska's work gender problems are often veiled, we can still see their persistent endeavors to disrupt
or at least destabilize gender categories. Their refusal to adopt language claiming "objectivity" and "universality" is, at least partially, related to the conditions of women in Euro-American cultures. As Barbara Johnson has observed the "urge to unify and simplify is an urge to resubsume female difference under the category of the universal, which has always been unavowedly male" (165-6). Thus a poetical challenge of the universal constitutes in large measure a challenge of the totalizing maleness, and it calls into question various universalizing principles. As I mentioned earlier, such challenges stand out in Bishop's and Szymborska's work. Their language, for instance, does not coerce particulars or details into a system of binary oppositions, but reveals, at times in a playful way, the limitations of the system itself. It is the language of transience rather than permanence, of approximation rather than assertion—a language suspicious of itself. For both poets this language of fluidity, change, and doubt has become a particularly useful means to undermine the Western matrices of gender; moreover, such a language allies their work with what in Western culture has been marked as a traditionally feminine discourse. While during the last decade, with the advance of feminist scholarship, gender-oriented studies of Elizabeth Bishop's writings have been flourishing in American academe, gender issues in Bishop's published work are in fact much less obvious than in Szymborska's. Still, once we recognise Bishop's indirect way of dealing with often painfully personal matters of her lesbianism, we
can see her persistent endeavors to disrupt or at least destabilize gender categories. For that purpose, she employs a number of strategies.

As Goldensohn and others have observed, in Bishop's prose and poetry, the poet's "projected identity is [usually] not with the female speaker, but with the male" (204). For instance, in "Crusoe in England," she assumes the persona of Defoe's hero; in "The Prodigal," which, as several critics have pointed out, can be read as an autobiographical poem, she explores her own personal dilemmas through a male figure of "a distancing myth" (Goldensohn 174); in still another poem, "Cirque d'Hiver" her sympathies are clearly with the little circus horse and not with the female dancer on his back. Bishop, then, repeatedly subverts gender boundaries through a symbolic gesture of cross identification with the opposite sex, and her poem "Exchanging Hats" with humor and irony directly addresses the issue of gender crossing ascribing to all of us a "slight transvestite twist" (200).

At the same time, however, the male figures with whom Bishop aligns herself never purely embody what in Western culture is considered as representative of masculinity. Bishop's Crusoe on his island with "fifty-two/ miserable, small volcanoes..."sit[ting] on the edge of the highest one/ and count[ing] the others standing up," recalls Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's hero, the little prince who watches sunsets (25) on his tiny planet with two active volcanoes and an extinct one (32), rather than Defoe's independent and enterprising castaway. The prodigal, another character in exile, is an alcoholic
whose own lifestyle is beyond his control. In fact, almost all Bishop's male characters are vulnerable, maladjusted, located on the margins of society. One of the most memorable male misfits is Bishop's quixotic Man-Moth. Only half human, living underground, "emerg[ing] from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks" and "always seat[ing] himself facing the wrong way" (14) he does not come close to any traditional representations of masculinity. Yet it is the Man-Moth and not the rational Man in the poem who has something to offer, whose tear, "pure" and "cool as from underground springs" can quench the human thirst.

Bishop's women are not typically feminine either, and they can manage without men. Miss Breen from "Arrival at Santos" "is about seventy, a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall;" Marianne Moore in Bishop's poetic invitation to her "mentor poet" can "[mount] the sky with natural heroism" (83). Other women inhabiting Bishop's verse, such as Cootchie in the poem under the same title or Faustina from "Faustina, or Rock Roses" are presented in their relationships with females rather than males. Even if in these poems, Bishop deflects her explorations of gender onto the class and race dynamic within master/servant relationship between well-to-do white women and their maids, her characters, taken out of the traditional heterosexual matrix, undermine the validity of the matrix itself.

Szymborska also challenges the traditional constructions of gender, but her challenge comes from the inside of the established heterosexual matrix, and while she questions the apparently obvious
male/female binary, she is making use of it as well. Her love lyrics— for instance "Over Wine," "Golden Anniversary," "No Title Required," or "True Love"— always involve male and female figures. In her other poems, Szymborska seems generally uninterested in relationships between women.

The two poets, then, though engaged in the same project of disrupting traditional gender boundaries, adopt different strategies. Szymborska assumes the heterosexual matrix; Bishop endeavors to locate her gender inquiries outside that dominant matrix, and her women, with a few exceptions—for instance, the ones from "The Songs for a Colored Singer"— do not get involved with men. I would suggest that this strategic difference stems, at least partly, from the poets' different sexual orientation. In contrast to Bishop who most of her life was involved with women, Szymborska was married twice and experienced her life as a heterosexual woman.

Merging her explorations of gender with philosophical reflections on the significance of vision in the West, Szymborska is often preoccupied with the visual representation of women as shaped by male desire or with the dynamic of male and female looks. Since one of the most conspicuous features of Bishop's poetry is its visual appeal, her gender investigations also necessarily overlap with her reflections on the adequacy of visual representation. Bishop herself emphasizes her visual sensibility:

I think I'm more visual than most poets. Many years ago, around 1942 or 1943, somebody mentioned to me something that Meyer Shapiro, the art critic, said about me: 'She writes poems with
a painter's eye.' I was very flattered. All my life I've been interested in painting. Some of my relatives painted.....I'd love to be a painter (Brown [in Schwartz] 296).

Overall, Bishop's poems are much more descriptive than Szymborska's. Even if the Polish poet attends to the particular, and often composes long lists of small, insignificant objects, she does not describe them in detail. Bishop, on the contrary, almost always explores the minutest visual characteristics of the objects she writes about, such as their size, shape, color, or texture. And yet, as I hope to show, both Bishop and Szymborska challenge the dominant concepts of vision related to the traditional privileging of sight over other senses in Western culture.

The reign of vision in the West, inherited from classical Greek culture, is an enormously complicated issue discussed in volumes of historical and philosophical studies, and it is beyond my capacity as well as beyond the purpose of my argument to outline it in detail. I want to focus on those aspects of vision which Szymborska and Bishop explore in their poetry alongside their investigations of gender. I will demonstrate that their texts nevertheless do revise those aspects of vision which have been rooted in the patriarchal patterns of the West. In different ways both poets challenge the often-assumed purely spatial character of vision, its atemporality, and its supposedly inherent distancing capacity.

The presumption of the time-transcending power of vision has been crucial for the Western concepts of immutable, eternal Being. In his article "The Mobility of Sight," Hans Jonas claims:
Only sight...provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive the idea of the eternal, that which never changes and is always present. The very contrast between eternity and temporality rests upon an idealization of "present" experienced visually as the holder of stable contents as against the fleeting sensation of nonvisual sensation. In the visual presence of objects the beholder may come to rest and possess an extended now. (145)

According to Jonas, this visually engendered privilege of static being over dynamic becoming, combined with the apparently distancing and thus detached or neutral character of seeing, is closely related to the notion of objectivity. First, since "the simultaneity of image allows the beholder to compare and interrelate: it not only offers many things at once, but offers them in their mutual proportion,...objectivity emerges preeminently from sight" (Jonas 144). This idea of objectivity is enhanced even more by the apparent absence of any interaction between the observer and the observed; the thing, then, may be thought to exist in itself, independent of the spectator (Jonas 146-7).

Jonas's speculations on objectivity as a product of the dominant status of vision are somewhat analogous to John Berger's reflections on perspectival painting, the practice "unique to European art," which "makes the single eye the center of the visible world" and which presumes to yield an adequate, objective representation of reality (16). Further elaborating Burger's argument, Martin Jay explains:

If the beholder was now the privileged center of perspectival vision, it is important to underline that his viewpoint was just that: a monocular, unblinking fixed eye...rather than two active, stereoscopic eyes of embodied actual vision, which give us the experience of depth perception. This assumption led to visual practice in which the living bodies of both the painter and the viewer were bracketed, at least tendentially, in favor of an eternalized eye above temporal duration. (55)
"The monocular eye," then, has been disembodied and in this way apparently de-gendered. However, the way it has been used in European visual arts, especially in the painting of female nudes, has constituted it primarily (though not solely) as a projector of the controlling male gaze aspiring to confine the reality within one fixed frame. We can see, then, that there is a partial overlap between the monocular eye with its gaze authorizing a single, static vision of the world and Jonas's beholder who, suspending time, constructs the objective representation of the real. This overlap illustrates how in Western culture idealized, stable, disembodied visions of the world have been located primarily within the masculine domain.

While neither Bishop nor Szymborska is preoccupied solely with the function of the male gaze, each undermines idealized notions of disembodied, transcendent vision confined within a fixed frame. In Bishop's and Szymborska's work, vision depends on a beholder; it is provisional and transient; dynamic rather than static; fluid rather than solid; consequently, it is always multiple. Although there is nothing inherently feminine about such dynamic representations, in the mainstream culture of the West, fluidity, mutability, or multiplicity have been usually marked as feminine. While challenging the dominant static patterns of visual representations, these poets also, then, are revising the masculine notion of idealized vision.

In "Portrait of a Woman," a poem which cannot be ignored in any discussion of her gender interests, Szymborska does not attend in an obvious way to the problems of vision, yet she shrewdly investigates
the relationship between vision and gender. The first word in the title, "portrait," comes from the field of visual arts and suggests a deliberate transformation of picture into words. To be sure, poetry and fine arts in the West have often encroached upon each others' territories and consequently, as Andrew Sprague Becker has stated, 
"[e]kphrasis...has been treated as a symbol of a fundamental goal of poetry: an attempt to represent in words the physical presence, the natural resemblance to its referent, and the still moment of the visual arts" (5). Although linguistic imagery has to develop in time, and consequently it can never reproduce stillness or spatial relations of a painting,' ekphrastic language still privileges vision. And even if poetic portraits are not necessarily intended to immortalize appearances but rather to reflect personalities, they are based on the assumption that a mind can be captured through an appearance (Heffernan 92).

Szymborska's "Portrait of a Woman," however, poses a challenge to this traditional assumption. Confounding our expectations, the poet avoids visual metaphors and resists confining the woman within a framed picture. By dismantling the painter's frame, Szymborska sets the portrait in motion: it becomes dynamic, fluid, and, consequently, multiple. At the same time, her portrait constitutes a playful though disturbing review of commonplace and often contradictory ideas about women:

She must be willing to please.
To change so that nothing should change.
It's easy, impossible, hard, worth trying.
Her eyes are if need be now deep blue, now gray, dark, playful, filled for no reason with tears.
She sleeps with him like some chance acquaintance, like his one and only.

She will bear him four children, no children, one.
Naive, yet giving the best advice.
Weak yet lifting the weightiest burdens.
Has no head on her shoulders but will have.
Reads Jaspers and ladies' magazines.
Doesn't know what this screw is for and will build a bridge.
Young, as usual young, as always still young.
Holds in her hands a sparrow with a broken wing, her own money for a journey long and distant, a meat cleaver, poultice, and a shot of vodka.
where is she running so, isn't she tired?
Not at all, just a bit, very much, doesn't matter.
Either she loves him or has made up her mind to.
For better, for worse, and for heaven's sake. (187)

Even if Szymborska did not think of any American poets while writing the above poem, her title "Portrait of a Woman" echoes Ezra Pound’s "Portrait D'Une Femme" as well as William Carlos Williams’ "Portrait of a Lady"—poems which, for all their differences, represent female personae as rather disconcerting figures: the women resist the male poets' endeavors to contain them within the symbolic frames delineated by the poets' language. For Pound, the sought for frame seems to be a statement that would capture the woman's personality. But from the very beginning he is in trouble when he states: "Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea" (16). The Sargasso Sea is not only impossible to contain, but due to its abundance of seaweeds, treacherous. Yet Pound cannot resist the urge to put the woman within the frame of his assertive statement to reassure himself that, after all, he does know the woman. Thus, the last line of the poem reads, "Yet this is you" (17). That the pronoun "this" in the poem's context is somewhat
ambiguous does not stop Pound from making his assertion. Neither does Williams' woman fit in any rigid pictorial frames. The poet tries to put together the image of her body, but he ends up with fragments only—the inadequate representation of her thighs or knees. The woman, like Szymborska's female character, remains forever elusive, escaping the framework of the poet's metaphors.

In contrast to Pound or Williams, Szymborska has no desire to enclose the woman within her poem, and she playfully disrupts the portrait's potential frames. The original title "Portret kobiecy," which can be roughly rendered as "feminine portrait," ascribes the creative agency to a woman and suggests that the artifact itself bears feminine traits. Already in the title, then, Szymborska subverts the opposition between the active male and the passive female. As the poem develops, she takes issue with a number of stereotypes about women, all skillfully incorporated into the overarching stereotype of female instability. However, while traditionally such instability has implied capriciousness, flightiness, or disloyalty, in Szymborska's poem it is redefined in terms of mobility and versatility, thus setting the woman's image in motion and wrenching it out of any static pictorial frames. Apart from her eyes, the woman's face, the traditional focus of portraits, remains a blank that is never filled in. But even her eyes—"now deep blue now gray,/ dark, playful, filled for no reason with tears"—in their constant transformation defy traditional portraiture.
Szymborska's portrait is not meant to recreate an individual woman, but rather to present an unidentified, abstract female whose multiple personae both challenge and fuse usual representations of women. The poem's opening in Polish is more disturbing than in English, as Szymborska's wording suggests that the woman has to embody a product satisfying the man's needs. Following his desires, she changes her eye colors, enacts and suppresses her motherhood, or embodies both whore and virgin. Thus ingeniously satirizing the traditional roles imposed on women, Szymborska still insists that the woman does not passively yield to male desires but is versatile enough to accommodate them. The poem, then, redefines traditional female instability in terms of feminine resourcefulness. As the woman plays with male urges, she exposes their contradictory nature and dismantles the traditional fusion of the irrational with the feminine. But Szymborska does not resort here to a simple reversal of gendered traits, and so irrationality never becomes solely masculine. Rather, both male desires and the female endeavors to fulfill them are fraught with contradictions.

Szymborska makes use of contradictions not only to question feminine irrationality but also to challenge other gender stereotypes. Her woman, though naive, gives "the best advice"; though intellectually simplistic, she is able to "read Jaspers;" weak, she is yet capable of "lifting the weightiest burdens" and constructing bridges. Yet while her abilities may appear admirable, her enterprise becomes more and more questionable. After all, the woman's enactment
of male desires does not bring about an intimate relationship with the man but rather an utter isolation. Setting out for "a journey long and distant," the woman is alone. Still, she ironically equips herself with "a meat-cleaver, poultice, and a shot of vodka," always ready to attend to the man. Although at this point it may be tempting to deplore the woman's plight, Szymborska refrains from such comments; neither does she offer any way out of the woman's predicament. She only asks, "Where is she running so, isn't she tired?" and then answers herself "Not at all, just a bit, very much, doesn't matter." Szymborska thus closes the poem with reflections couched in the language that, by merging apparently contradictory assertions, embraces the woman's world.

At the same time, the woman departing on her journey also departs from the text. Szymborska's poem, then, may be perceived as her witty game with a number of assumptions underlying traditional portraiture. The scarcity of visual metaphors, the incessant subversion of what has just been stated, and a near disappearance of the woman whose face is hardly even sketched stand in sharp contrast to the framed, immortalized, immutable figures of traditional portraits.

A poem in which Szymborska combines the issues of vision and gender in a more obvious way is her short love lyric "Over Wine," included in 1962 volume Salt. The female speaker recalls her excitement at being recreated in her lover's eyes:

   His eyes offered me more beauty
   so I grasped it as my own:
   happy--seized my lucky star.
And I let him reinvent me
as my image in the mirror
of his eyes.

The table is a table, and wine is the wine
in the glass which as a glass
stands standing on the table.
But I am imaginary
imagined beyond belief
imagined in flesh and blood.

Identifying with her reflection in the lover's eyes, the woman is always aware that the image is a projection of her lover's fantasy. Still, this fantasy transforms her whole being, and unlike "the table" or "wine," the woman is not identical with herself; her selfhood hinges on the other. The lover, then, becomes analogous to the Lacanian mirror, since his imaginary recreation of the beloved constitutes her identity and effects its split. Thus reborn, but constantly aware of her role, the woman turns her involvement with the man into a theatrical performance staged with a great dose of humor and ironic detachment:

I tell him what he wants: that ants
under the wisher-stars
are dying of love.
I swear that, sprinkled with wine,
a white rose can sing.

I laugh, carefully tilt my head,
as if I were trying
a new device. I dance, dance
in my own astonished skin, in his embrace
which creates me.

Celebrating her symbolic rebirth in a dance with the lover who continually recreates her being, the woman recalls the mythical births of other female figures.

80
Eve—of Adams' rib, Venus—of the foam,
Minerva—of Jove's head
were much more true.

The poem fuses love with both the mythical and the imaginary. Such an amalgam, however, does not suggest that love is simply fictional and therefore irrelevant, but rather that human consciousness together with gender consciousness is deeply rooted in myth.

While the mythical fantasy clearly privileges vision since the lover recreates the beloved primarily through the power of his gaze, the poem's ironic tone undermines this privilege. Even the final erasure of the woman's identity in the absence of male vision is not a result of her yielding passively to the lover's gaze, but rather an effect of her engaged and playful response. Still in spite of Szymborska's ironic wit and the woman's conscious performance, the closing lines of the poem remain disturbing:

When he doesn't look at me,
I look for my reflection
on the wall. The painting taken off,
I can only see a nail.

It is true that the image may be read as a manifestation of the myth of love binding the lovers so strongly that the one fades away without the other, but in "Over Wine" it is the woman only who disappears outside the borders of her lover's vision. The man's being never hinges on the female vision, and the dynamic of gaze in the poem lacks reciprocity.

While Szymborska's poems which combine her challenge of visual and gender frameworks frequently raise the issue of the male gaze,
Bishop's poetry hardly ever attends specifically to this problem. A painter herself, Bishop endeavors to recreate visual aspects of the world, exploring the painterly potential of language, and so she examines visual representations from a perspective different than Szymborska's. In spite of this difference, though, she poses similar challenges to the male associated ideal of a static, transcendent vision of the world. Bishop has aligned her poetry with nonperspectival, map-like paintings, characteristic of the Northern European artists. In his review of Bishop's poetry in 1963, for instance, Randall Jarrell writes:

Her best poems—poems like "The Man-Moth," "The Fish," "The Weed," "Roosters," "The Prodigal Son," "Faustina, or Rock Roses," "The Armadillo"—remind one of Vuillard or even, sometimes, of Vermeer. The poet and the poems have their limitations; all exist on a small scale, and some of the later poems, especially, are too detailed and objectively descriptive. (198 Schwartz)

Edward Vuillard, is of course, a French, not a Northern European painter, but, like Bishop, he is often concerned with small, everyday, insignificant details. But it is Jarrell's perception of an analogy between Bishop's poetry and Vermeer's art that seems particularly fruitful in any exploration of the ways gender marks the visual in Bishop's work. Bishop was delighted with the Vermeer analogy, writing to Jarrell, "it has been one of my dreams that someday someone would think of Vermeer, without my saying it first" (Letters 312).

Vermeer is a representative Northern European painter of the seventeenth century Dutch art. In her discussion of gender inscriptions in Western painting, Svetlana Alpers argues:
Northern art [not only] represents a different way of perceiving or looking at the world but "it constitutes a different relationship to the world, a different mode of art." In the place of an artist who frames the world to picture it, the world produces its own image without a frame. The Northern image calls to mind Vermeer's View of Delft. In Vermeer's painting, Delft seems neither ordered nor possessed, it is just there for the looking. The Dutch offer their pictures as descriptions of the world seen, rather than as imitations of human figures engaged in significant actions. A pictorial image is not a window, but a mirror, or a map laid out on a flat surface. This is an art of replication and of repetition. Multiples are the normal condition of Dutch pictures. (187-8)

As I have mentioned earlier, there is nothing inherently feminine about visual art which dismantles frames and privileges the world rather than the artistic creator. But, as Alpers argues, "the Italians in the renaissance had difficulty dealing with Northern art and, significantly, one way in which they expressed it was to dub Northern art an art for women." Consequently, in the seventeenth century, Dutch painting was pushed to the margins of Western visual arts dominated by the Italian perspectival framed image. Thus, in comparing her work with Vermeer's art Bishop aligned herself with the map-like trend of European art labeled as "feminine." Read in this light, Bishop's poem "The Map," with which she chose to open her first volume of poetry and The Complete Poems acquires a new significance.

Bishop's critics often read this poem in terms of the poet's privileging spatial representations over temporal ones, but as Thomas Travisano and Bonnie Costello have pointed out, such interpretations are too literal, and they do not take into account Bishop's engagement in the poem with history as well as topography.
Some feminist critics read "The Map" also in terms of Bishop's masked lesbianism, pointing both to the images which resist the traditional gender patterns of the passive feminine and the active masculine, and to the erotically colored language. One could always argue, however, that both visually and phonetically the "peninsulas" in Bishop's poem belong to traditionally phallic imagery, and the land's "profiles investigating the sea" can be read in terms of heterosexual penetration, especially since in the Western tradition, the sea has been used as a trope for the female. Still, Bishop's comparison of peninsulas to women's fingers touching the fabric undermines these traditional heterosexual associations. Moreover, since in the poem "Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is, the mapped land becomes water-like and thus feminized, while the water becomes land-like. Such a reversal of usual images for the flux and the stasis challenges the traditional gender tropes.

But "The Map" may also be read as a challenge to the kind of representation related to the central tradition of European visual arts rooted in the Italian Renaissance art with its ordered, framed, perspectival paintings, as defined by the Italian painter Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise "On Painting" (1435-6). Such art privileges the painter who encloses the world within the pictorial frame. Alberti explains, "I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint" (56). Bishop's very choice to focus on a map as a visual representation of the world rather than to reflect on a traditional
painting goes against the grain of Alberti's rule according to which
the painter occupies the center of the world. Such a challenge aligns
Bishop's poetry with Dutch art which according to a continental
Renaissance perception was feminine and inferior (Alpers 194-5).

Discussing the link between Dutch art and Bishop's poetry, Bonnie
Costello observes: "If there is a visual analogue to Bishop's "The
Map,' it should be Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*..., which is similarly
concerned with the relations between history, topography, and
representation" (238). Further on, Costello adds: "Vermeer's painting
absorbs a complex world into a form of spatial knowledge. Bishop's "The
Map," and her poetry generally, continually intercept that knowledge
with the sense of unmasterable flux and plurality" (238). While
Vermeer's "spatial form," discarding the centrality of the artist,
relinquishes the mastery of the world (Alpers 187), it still
immobilizes that world. But Bishop's poetry not only resists the urge
to master; it also sets her representations in motion. While the
primary concern of Vermeer's art is a detailed description of the
visible that is static, Bishop endeavors to make her descriptions
dynamic. Her dynamism, however, does not diminish her desire to achieve
a descriptive accuracy, and Bishop herself marks this minute visual
attentiveness as feminine:

> It is my chief complaint against the opposite sex, anyway--with
the exception of poets and painters--they don't see things. They
are always having ideas and theories, and not noticing detail at
hand.....[women] have to see the baby's ear; sewing makes you
look closely. (Harrison 227)
Representations based on such assumptions, like the map in Bishop's poem, do not impose the frames which would order the world according to the artist's assumed hierarchy of significance. Thus, as Jeredith Merrin has observed, Bishop's statement from the last stanza of the poem—"Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West"—could constitute not only an apt description of "The Map" but also of the whole body of her work, since in poem after poem, she attends to the minutest details of the world, whether North, South, East, or West (Merrin 60-61). Her poems, like maps, reproduce the surrounding world spread, so to speak, on a "flat surface," and so like the Dutch non-perspectival pictures, they do not develop around a fixed center. Map-like representations with their diffused centers suggest the arbitrary character of all centers, orders, and hierarchies.

In the opening passage of "The Map" Bishop exposes the tentative nature of order when she asks "does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,/ drawing it unperturbed around itself?". The use of the word "draw," signifying deliberate pull while also suggesting the activity of sketching, reveals that the center is imposed in the course of constructing representations and does not inhere in the reality.

If such decentered representations privilege anything, it is epistemological uncertainty, the feature that Alpers perceives as a characteristic also of Dutch painting. She writes about Vermeer that "[he] places before us the ungraspable nature of the world seen" (193). Alpers' remark on Vermeer's paintings is equally suitable as a description of Bishop's texts in which the poet repeatedly questions
her perception. In "The Map," though, this questioning has a double or layered significance, since the poet is not looking at the world but rather at its topographical reproduction.

In a manner also typical for Szymborska", Bishop begins her poem with an apparently obvious assertion, only to undermine it in the next few lines:

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf is the land tugging at the sea from under?

Reflecting on the map rather than the world and thus fusing knowledge with the medium, the poet claims that knowledge can never be direct. Thus Bishop's epistemological dilemma concerns not only seeing or perception, but also the adopted medium. As perception depends on the medium and the medium is never adequate, our knowledge can only be tentative. It is impossible to settle the question if the "land lies in water" or "lean[s] down to lift the sea." As Jeredith Merrin has observed Bishop wonders here if "reality determine[s] our perceptions, or [] our perceptions determine reality. Bishop's poem raises these questions, which it must decline to answer" (61). "The Map" and Bishop's other texts are permeated with such uncertainties, which characterize Dutch pictures, and which, according to Michelangelo "will appeal to women" (quot. in Alpers 194).
While the implied claim of the Italian perspectival art is the containment and the mastery of the world within the imposed frames, the Northern visual art does not make such presumptuous claims. Neither does Bishop. From the very beginning of "The Map," her rhetoric emphasizes the obliqueness of the medium. The image of land, not simply "colored" but "shadowed green" with possible "shadows" "at its edges" forestalls the treatment of the topographical representation as a straightforward mirror-reflection of the world.

The second stanza of the poem again opens with "The shadow of Newfoundland" (3). The poet's perception of the charted lands as shadows turns the whole map into a kind of shadow. The image has various implications. It undermines the commonplace association of knowledge with light, metaphorically locating it within darker terrains, and thus questioning the reliability of vision. What we see is never unambiguous, never precise, and never sufficient, but is contingent on our interpretation. As a result, each image carries within itself a number of images--it is multiple. Thus the same picture can be seen as "Land [lying] in water" and "the land tugging at the sea" (3). However, this indeterminacy of the visible does not mean that the visible is relative or arbitrary. In Bishop's poetry, knowledge is never a purely imaginative construct, but the perceived image is related to what it represents in a shadow-like manner. In other words, no representation is identical with what it represents, but like a shadow which changes its shape depending on the location of both an object and an observer, the representation changes depending
on the perspective assumed to construct it. Consequently, although it is always multiple, it always embodies the traces of its referent. Bishop's "The Map" develops as her exploration of such multiple representation.

Each stanza of the poem reenacts in some manner the gesture of dismantling fixed frames. The static image of land lying in water is quickly followed by that of the land pulling at the sea. While Newfoundland is "flat and still," the names on the map start "running," and Norway turns into a running hare. The fluid, and even (to borrow Bishop's word from "The Bight") "untidy" imagery in the poem complicates also a traditionally established borderline of land and sea. As Bishop's reflections develop along the seashore, she destabilizes the boundary between land and water and subverts the notion of maps as fixed grids that control and contain the world. And even though in the second stanza we can see the poet's impulse toward control, she quickly abjures it:

We can stroke these lovely bays, under a glass as if they were expected to blossom, or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish. The names of seashore towns run out to sea, the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains --the printer here experiencing the same excitement as when emotion too far exceeds its cause. These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

We can read the speaker's desire to caress the landscape as metaphorically reflecting the poet's desire to caress the world through her poems. Bishop's vision in the poem, then, becomes a form of touching, and representation--a kind of erotically colored caress. But
her touch, like her vision, is mediated; it does not provide a direct access to the world: the speaker can "stroke" the bays "under a glass" only.

As the speaker's desire for unmediated touch and so for unmediated access to the world is frustrated, it is for a moment transformed into a desire to lock it in the symbolic "clean cages." This image may also reflect the poet's endeavors to turn her poems into "maps" which would constitute such "clean cages." But this idea of the world's imprisonment within a medium is immediately subverted--as the names of towns and cities "run," the imagined cages fade away. Neither maps, then, nor poems turn into cages; the world is always slipping away. And although as Bonnie Costello has noticed, Bishop's poems often reveal her "desire for mastery," they also subvert any strategies geared toward achieving this mastery. In "The Map, then, while through the image of peninsulas taking the water, Bishop suggests the possibility of controlling the world through the medium, she immediately undermines it since "yard-goods can be formed to almost any contour" (Costello 236). Besides, even the women's gesture of taking and thus possessing turns into "feeling" and so, again, becomes a form of a caress. Thus, in contrast to American poets who in a Whitmanesque manner endeavor to capture the world in a symbolic (but still possessive) embrace, Bishop does not attempt an embrace but rather a less intrusive, delicate caress. And she generally refrains from grand gestures, grand imagery, or grand language choosing instead, as has been frequently noted, the common, the unimportant, the everyday.
Bishop's choice of "The Map," then, as a poetic introduction to her work may also be significant as it creates a connection between her poetry and a matter-of-fact craft and so it removes her art from the lofty heights of the Romantics. Evoking the figure of a printer who, while working, experiences a kind of emotional intensity that has been often ascribed to artists, Bishop blurs the line between art and craft in a manner reminiscent of Northern painters. Alpers explains:

Northern artists not only depicted landscapes but also served as mapmakers, executed topographical views and made maplike landscapes. The distinction between an image functioning as a map and one which we would be more likely to consider a work of art is not easily made. This is related to the fact that the painter remained a craftsman who insisted on the role of craft in his representation" (188).

Thus, while elevating the printer's craft to the level of art, Bishop simultaneously challenges the traditionally elevated status of art, and in what can be taken for a somewhat humorously deflating allusion to the romantics, she states that the craftsman's "excitement" is "the same"... "as when emotion too far exceeds its cause."

In the final stanza, foregrounding the issue of the gap between the world and its topographical reproduction, Bishop reveals that the map still has its source in the real.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is, lending the land their waves' own conformation, and Norway's hare runs south in agitation, profiles investigate the sea, where land is.

As I have said earlier, the map may reverse the dynamic of land and water, but this reading of the map as an inversion is possible only in terms of its relation to the world, and thus it reveals a connection
between the world and its topographical reproduction. The questions that follow emphasize this connection, suggesting that the act of mapping constitutes an ethical problem. Bishop muses: "Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?—What suits the character or the native waters best." The lines suggest that representations are never neutral, and the ethical problem in constructing representations stems from the fact that they affect the world. Bishop's concern about the best possible colors manifests not only her desire to approximate the real through her art, but her awareness that the imposition of colors would be a possessive imperial gesture.

In the above context Bishop's closing statements—"Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West/ More delicate than the historians' are the map makers' colors"—(3) suddenly become even more complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, in contrast to historical records of European conquests which commonly elevate the West, topographical representations erase such distinctions. On the other hand, what seems to be erased may in fact be concealed. Topography, then, may mask what it privileges and such masking may be easier for map-makers than for historians because the "mapmaker's colors are "more delicate."

Musing on the countries' involvement in "pick[ing] up the colors," Bishop inevitably evokes historical dilemmas of imperial conquests. If the colors have been imposed, such an imposition suggests colonial usurpation of the foreign lands. Thus, the delicacy of the
map-makers is in fact a contested claim rather than a given in the poem. Aware of the latent colonialism of maps, and aware of the map's history as an artifact of discovery and colonization, Bishop does not want to privilege the mapmaker—the figure that also represents herself; instead, she wishes to celebrate the world. Bishop's meditations on the map, then, bring her close to the perspectiveless art of Northern Europe, the art which as Alpers has suggested, the Italians in the Renaissance regarded as representing an inferior and feminine mode of relating to the world. It was only later that painters such as Vermeer were truly appreciated. Alpers quotes Lawrence Gowing's comment from 1970 edition of his book Vermeer:

Vermeer stands outside our convention [of art, he means, which we can read as Italian art] because he cannot share its great sustaining fantasy, the illusion that the power of style over life is real. However an artist love the world, however seize on it, in truth he can never make it his own. Whatever bold show his eye may make of subduing and devouring, the real forms of life remain untouched. (quot. Alpers 197)

Bishop's poetry, like Vermeer's painting, defies the illusion of the power of art: while turning her topography into a form of feminine caress, at the same time she unmasks the imperial potential of maps.

"The Map" is a complex, layered poem in which Bishop explores a number of issues, only some of which are related to gender. In contrast to many American women poets, then, such as Adrienne Rich or Anne Sexton, neither in "the Map" nor in her other poems, does Bishop follow an overt feminist agenda, and her subversion of the Western mappings of gender compliments her challenges of the commonplace or the obvious.
It would not be easy to find any overt agendas in Szymborska's poetry either, but like Bishop she often asks questions about apparently obvious issues. Such a dismantling of the obvious becomes the main theme in Szymborska's "Sky," the poem opening her 1993 collection, *The End and the Beginning*. Although the text does not seem to raise any gender issues, it belongs to those "modes of making" (Alpers 198) which in the West have been labeled as feminine. Like "The Map," Szymborska's poem goes against the grain of the traditional perceptual paradigms, in particular those which are related to the privileged status of vision. As my analysis will show, Szymborska undermines Alberti's concept of the picture which, as Alpers has observed, embodies the masculine mode of art privileging form and order. Alpers comments:

Painting, and beyond that the fresco, is the ideal form. It is a unique, unreplicable creation as contrasted, for example, with prints. It is conceived of as a window onto a second world...The framed rectangle on the wall which became the basis of the art of painting in the West is distinct from the painted walls of Egypt, the scrolls of China, the pages of India or even the panels of Byzantium. The frame has priority in the ordering of the image which thus lends itself to formal (stylistic) analysis in its relation to its rectangular surround. Sight or vision is defined geometrically in this art (185, 7).

In Szymborska's poem "Sky," the traditional window--"the framed rectangle"--turns into an opening with no boundaries and so it defies both form and order:

I should have begun with this: the sky.
A window minus sill, frame, and panes.
An aperture, nothing more,
but wide open.
The boundless sky "should have" constituted the beginning, since possibly such a beginning would not have cramped the experience. The implication of a loss related to the setting up of clear-cut cognitive frames is much stronger in Polish since "niebo" means both "sky" and "heaven." In the stanzas that follow, then, Szymborska develops a series of reflections on the frame-free sky/heaven. As it cannot be contained, it becomes omnipresent:

I don't have to wait for a starry night,
I don't have to crane my neck
to get a look at it.
I've got the sky behind my back, at hand, and on my eyelids.
The sky bonds me tight
and sweeps me off my feet.

While poets have only too often contemplated the sight of the "starry" sky, distant and unattainable, Szymborska ponders over the sky that envelops her. Since such a sky cannot be watched, she can only sense it "behind [her] back," or "on [her] eyelids," transforming the distancing gaze into touch. In Szymborska's poem, then, the non-visual, ever-changing experience of presence, traditionally ascribed to women, substitutes for what (according to Jonas) constitutes "an idealization of 'present' experienced visually as the holder of stable contents" (145).

The remaining stanzas of the poem reveal both the arbitrariness and the limitations of our cognitive mappings of the universe, as they systematically dismantle commonplace binaries such as top/bottom, plenitude/scarcity, liquid/solid, inside/outside, sky/earth.

Even the highest mountains
are no closer to the sky
than the deepest valleys.
There is no more of it in one place
than another.
A mole is no less in seventh heaven
than the owl spreading her wings.
The object that falls in an abyss
falls from sky to sky.

Grainy, gritty, liquid,
inflamed, or volatile
patches of sky, specks of sky,
gusts and heaps of sky.
The sky is everywhere,
even in the dark beneath your skin.
I eat the sky, I excrete the sky.
I'm a trap within a trap,
an inhabited inhabitant,
an embrace embraced,
a question answering a question.

Division into sky and earth--
it's not the proper way
to contemplate this wholeness.
It simply lets me go on living
at a more exact address
where I can be reached promptly
if I'm sought.
My identifying features
are rapture and despair.

Szymborska's topography of the sky which dissolves commonplace
distinctions recalls Bishop's observation in "The Map" that "North's
as near as West" and her claim, "topography displays no favorites."
Bishop makes her remark in the course of her meditations on our
mappings of the earth, while Szymborska constructs her topography
reflecting on the universe; but both poems challenge our signifying
paradigms. For both poets, signification, including language, becomes
provisional; it has no power to "capture the world." Even if like
Bishop in "The Map," Szymborska attempts to capture the world through
a poetic embrace of the sky, instead she herself is embraced. Like
Bishop, Szymborska, then, assumes what Alpers has identified as the feminine mode of experience, "giving in and adapting to the world rather than seizing it and making one's own" (198).

This inescapable immersion in the cosmic matter constitutes a radical challenge of the possibility of entirely objective knowledge, since such a possibility is based on the assumption of a complete detachment of the investigating subject from the investigated object. "Sky" collapses the very distinction between subject and object. In the absence of objective perception, all answers turn into questions, and the speaker herself becomes "a question answering a question."

As Szymborska reveals the hypothetical nature of epistemological paradigms, recognizing the inadequacy of dividing the world into earth and the sky, she neither discards those paradigms nor bemoans their limitations, but simply recognizes their limited usefulness. In spite of their provisionality, cognitive mappings enable her to locate herself both geographically and socially.

But notwithstanding this apparent pragmatism, Szymborska is not a sanguine utilitarian. Closing her poem, she reveals "rapture and despair" as her "identifying features." What is more, she has chosen "despair" as the final word. It seems that the "wholeness" of the world and her fusion with it takes place only from the perspective of the entire universe. And although the division into "sky" and "earth" is valid within the narrow limits of the earthly perspective, the speaker who inhabits the earth is affected by this division. On the psychological level, then, she does not blend in with the universe, and
while its vastness and ever-changing nature spark rapture, its otherness may also be alienating.

While Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room" does not display any obvious affinities with "The Map" or Szymborska's "Sky," Bishop's concerns in the poem overlap with the issues that are raised in these two poems. On various levels, "In the Waiting Room" reflects Bishop's explorations of mappings. Both the title of the volume (Geography III) which includes "In the Waiting Room" and Bishop's epigraph taken from 1884 Monteith's Geographical Series "First Lessons in Geography" suggest a strong connection of all the poems in the volume with geography. Bishop's choice of the epigraph seems particularly deliberate, as the answers to the questions included in the quoted lessons only lead to other questions, and she closes the epigraph with Lesson X whose questions are never answered. The lessons also emphasize the significance of Bishop's exact description: geography is defined as "[a] description of the earth's surface."

I think, though, that there are other important details in the epigraph that make it relevant for Bishop's poetry. Although the quoted definition of geography implies that it is a scholarly discipline concerned with a precise, so to speak, "transparent" description of the planet, the answers provided to the various questions challenge the supposed scientific transparency. The statement that the Earth is "The planet or a body on which we live" is strongly marked by indecision, calling to mind Bishop's symbolic mappings of body and gender in her work. The subsequent comparison of the Earth to "a ball," revealing
both the imprecision of science and its dependence on language typically associated with poetry undermines the commonly assumed division between the two disciplines. As many critics have observed, similar disciplinary challenges constitute a recurring theme in Bishop's writing. Thus, geography with its focus on charting and so dividing the planet becomes a particularly fertile field for Bishop's endeavor to dismantle traditional distinctions and unmask the provisional if not arbitrary character of borders used to orient ourselves in the world. Moreover, since the history of colonial conquests links the practice of setting up borders to the masculine, Bishop's reflections on geography usually work on a double level: while attempting to generate geographical descriptions which would include the smallest particulars, the poet simultaneously investigates gender constructions in the West.

The first line of "In the Waiting Room" identifies the poet's place of childhood—Worcester, Massachusetts. It may at first seem that such an emphasis on the location reflects Bishop's insistent claim that her poetry is a faithful record of the real world or the actual experience. While, indeed, "In the Waiting Room" explores the poet's childhood experience, at the same time it reflects her adult concerns about Western mappings of gender.

The poem opens as an already adult speaker retrieves her childhood memory of accompanying her aunt for a dentist's appointment:

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
eyearly. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.

Initially, the young Elizabeth is able to map her world in time and
space with accuracy. She easily charts her universe employing age as
her yardstick: she is a child, different from her aunt and other adults
in the room whom she lumps together with the surrounding objects. 20
As the poem develops, however, the girl's chart dissolves.

My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
---"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.

While in the opening section, time and space appear as distinct
categories, later the girl cannot hold onto the distinction: "My aunt
was inside/ what seemed like a long time." Also since she is uncertain
if her waiting has actually been or only seemed long, time loses its
objectivity and becomes internalized. Consequently, the boundaries
between inside and outside begin to dissolve until the opposition collapses with the image of a volcano's inside "spilling" outside."

This fusion upsets the signifying systems used to map the world. Thus, while reading *National Geographic*, Elizabeth can make little sense of a photograph of a dead man followed by the caption "Long Pig." Language does not seem to match the image. Yet neither the picture nor the discrepancy affects the girl much and she keeps on stolidly browsing through the magazine. What does shock her, however, and brings her to a halt is the image of mothers whose necks are trapped in wires, with babies whose heads are "wound...with string." Most disturbing are the women's breasts—they horrify the girl. The dead, hanging man, however, could be more unsettling. The girl's shock seems triggered by a sudden recognition of herself in the image of women of another race and from another continent. At this moment the geography of continents is subsumed by the geography of gender, and the spatial distance no longer separates Elizabeth from the photographed women. It is not a coincidence that the "horrifying breasts" belong to mothers since motherhood constitutes the strongest marker of womanhood. Moreover, since the mothers' necks wound with wire and resembling "the necks of lightbulbs" suggest not only an imprisonment but also a strangulation, the young Elizabeth perceives her gender as a form of entrapment.

The passage initializing the child's gender awakening in the waiting room is somewhat analogous to a section from Szymborska's poem, "A Moment in Troy," which I discuss below. In both poems the girls
construct their gender identities while looking at the images of female bodies: Szymborska's girls watch their reflections and the young Elizabeth looks at the photographs. And although in Bishop's poem the pictures are not actual mirror reflections, since the girl subconsciously identifies with the photographed women these photographs do constitute a form of reflection. In both poems, then, the girls' constructions of gender identities recalls Lacan's claim about the child's development of his or her identity through the mirror-stage. Lacan writes: "the mirror stage [is understood] as an identification,...[which is] the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (2). This assumption of the image takes place when the child is "still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence" (2). In such circumstances the child creates what Lacan calls the form of Ideal-I. And he continues, "the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction" (2). In Szymborska's poem the girls embrace their gender identity through fiction and escape from their own reflections because these reflections do not match the image of the "beautiful Helen." The young Elizabeth, however, wants to flee her gender because she perceives it as a form of stifling imprisonment.

At first, in her attempted flight, she behaves as if nothing happened and reads the magazine "straight through." As the strategy apparently does not work, the girl tries to control her gender by confining it within the frame of the yellow margins under the
magazine's cover." But the magazine's "inside" spills over just like the volcano's and the original map of Elizabeth's world disintegrates.

Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me completely by surprise was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover of the National Geographic,
February, 1918 (160).

While initially thinking of herself as "I" and her aunt as "she," the girl sets herself apart from the adult woman who, for her, embodies the Other, later she collapses this distinction and turns "I" into "we."

This shift in her thinking, triggered by the intrusion of the Other reflected in the girl's repressed identification with the photographed women is completed with the girl's psychological fusion with her aunt. The Other becomes a kind of a vortex drawing the girl in, in spite of her desire to reconstruct her world according to her old "map":

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?

103
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps. (160)

Gender awakening dismantles Elizabeth's former self and estranges her from herself. Now, her effort to recover her former identity through holding onto some unquestionable facts such as her age proves useless. She is still "falling off...the [familiar] world" and finds herself in an unmapped, dark territory of "cold, blue-black" space, where she experiences herself as the Other: as "an I," "an Elizabeth," and "one of them," and where she seems groping blindly for a word which could fuse her shattered self. Yet none of the language markers she knows and repeats--"I," "you," "Elizabeth," or even "it,"--is sufficient, and the girl's inability to come to terms with the notion of all people as gendered contributes to the fragmentation of Elizabeth's universe. Instead of seeing men and women, she now perceives: "knees,/ trousers and skirts and boots/ and different pairs of hands" (160). Moreover, probably afraid to see others perceiving her as a woman, she does not dare to raise her eyes.

As the poem develops, then, the initially static, centered self of the young Elizabeth, stemming from her perception of others as objects, is transformed into a fluid, dynamic self, uncomfortably hinging on the perception of others. This new relation between the self and the Other reflects, in fact, Sartre's well known revision of the
most frequent philosophical description of the relation between the subject and the Other which suggests that "the primary relation by which the Other is discovered is object-ness;... as if the Other were first revealed--directly or indirectly--to our perception" (340). Refuting this model, Sartre claims:

[the primary relation in the act of discovering the Other is the relation] between my consciousness and the Other's. This relation in which the Other must be given to me directly as a subject although in connection with me, is the fundamental relation, the very type of my being-for others. (341)

Although Bishop's poem is primarily an exploration of gender awakening and its consequences, it is also a reflection on the relations between the self and the Other. When Elizabeth realizes that as a female she is "one of them," she has to change her perception of others as objects and acknowledge them as conscious subjects. Since such a recognition involves the awareness that others constitute the centers of worlds different from the world in which her self is the center, her world slowly falls apart. Sartre observes: "the appearance among the objects of my universe of an element of disintegration in that universe is what I mean by the appearance of a man in my universe " (343). In Bishop's poem the appearance of women in the girl's universe causes a kind of disintegration. However, while Sartre implies that the process of disintegration is universal and that gender is not an issue, Bishop's text suggests that gender awareness does enter into the process.

Both in Bishop's poem and in Sartre's text the disintegration of the subject's world stems from the fact that the consciousness of the
Other creates a kind of a vortex which pulls in the elements of the subject's universe. Sartre comments:

The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds...to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting. But the Other is still an object for me. [Yet] it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through the hole. (343)

For Sartre, then, the emergence of the Other drains the subject's universe, but it never pulls in the subject himself. Eventually, the subject reconstructs his universe and regains the perceptual control: "The universe, the flow, and the drain hole are all once again recovered reapprehended, and fixed as an object" (343). In Bishop's poem, however, the speaker experiences a sudden "flowing off" not only of her universe but also of her own identity. In fact, this moment in Bishop's poem may be read as an unconscious commentary on Sartre's text. Although Sartre develops his analysis of the relations between the subject and the Other within a supposedly ungendered framework, his language betrays the Western impulse to mark the Other as feminine. And although there is nothing inherently feminine in fluidity, the image of the world disappearing into a drain hole is inescapably feminine. I would suggest, then, that gender dynamic does underlie Sartre's text, and that the subject capable of fixing as an object the flow and the drain hole becomes implicitly masculine. Bishop's speaker, however, cannot reapprehend her world in this way. Her old grids--the cover of the magazine, her age--prove ineffective in her endeavor to stabilize her universe, and she keeps on "falling off" (160). As the spatial and
temporal frames of her universe fall apart, she finds herself pushed into a new gender frame that she has no control of, and that she wants to resist. For that purpose she asks a series of questions which she hopes to answer, and in this way either acknowledge the new frame through an insight that would give her some control over it or discard it:

Why should I be my aunt, 
or me, or anyone? 
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How--I didn't know any
word for it--how "unlikely"...
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud or worse but hadn't?

Instead of answers, however, each question generates more questions. And the young Elizabeth realizes that she is not the one who maps the world, but she is being mapped: the girl, her aunt, and other women are "held together" by the symbolic "breasts." As gender collapses the former borders of culture, race, nation, or age, the girl needs a new language map. Although at the beginning of the poem she boasted of her language mastery--she could read--now she cannot find any words to describe her new predicament; consequently, her universe is flowing off: "The waiting room was bright/ and too hot. It was sliding/ beneath a big black wave, another, and another." And when at the very end of the poem, the girl in Sartre's manner tries to reapprehend the world,
she never fixes it as an object. Her language is ambiguous:

Then I was back in it.  
The War was on. Outside,  
in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
were night and slush and cold,  
and it was still the fifth  
of February, 1918.

In spite of claiming to be back, the girl occupies a space which she cannot map, and so tentatively she calls this space "it" without any clear reference. She cannot reconstruct the inside/outside boundary, and suddenly the War invades her universe. Significantly, she becomes aware of the War, an aggressive attempt to remap the world, at the moment the boundaries on her old "map" have dissolved. To situate herself in some way, she relies on the stability of the time frame and resorts to the date. But as the poem closes at this moment, the reference to the temporal framework only exposes its arbitrary character. The girl seems to wonder that the date has not changed in spite of the dissolution of her former universe. The new awareness of her gender, then, transforms significantly the girl's mode of perception.

Bishop's fusion of the young Elizabeth's gender awakening with her symbolic travel to another continent recalls Szymborska's "A Moment in Troy" which combines the "little girls'" construction of their gender with travel. However, while in Bishop's text Elizabeth struggles against being affiliated with womankind, Szymborska's heroines willingly embrace such affiliation; while Bishop's girl at the dentist office is horrified at the prospect of being "one of them,"
Szymborska's girls enjoy the idea; while Bishop's girl falls "into cold, blue-black space," and hardly "dare[s] to look" (160), Szymborska's, "taken off to Troy" become "Triumphant. Sated with the view" (12-13).

Szymborska's preoccupations with gender come to the foreground later in the poem. At first she is concerned primarily with vision as constitutive of human presence in the world:

Little girls--
skinny, resigned
to freckles that won't go away,

not turning any heads
as they walk across the eyelids of the world,

looking just like Mom or Dad,
and sincerely horrified by it-- (12)

The girls who, like their parents, are located outside the scope of the world's vision, seem hardly to exist. But as it is precisely the part of reality bracketed out of the visual perspective that Szymborska opens her poem with, she questions the reliability of visual perception. In her text, vision never yields adequate, permanent representations of the world but only transient and discontinuous ones. Thus, in contrast to perspectival vision which privileges "an eternalized eye" (Jay 55), the world's sight in Szymborska's poem does not transcend time. The eyes of her world, equipped with the eyelids, resemble the "stereoscopic eyes of embodied actual vision" (Jay 55) rather than "a monocular, unblinking, fixed eye" (Jay 55). Moreover, the image of the girls "walking across the eyelids of the world" reveals the limitations of vision: although so close to the eye, the
girls cannot be seen. The symbolic eyelids, bringing to mind the constant opening and closing of eyes, disrupt the apparent continuum of the visible, thus forestalling any possibility of conflating seeing with being. At the same time these moments of disruption open up a door to another kind of vision—the imaginary and mythological:

in the middle of dinner,  
in the middle of a book,  
while studying the mirror,  
[the girls] may suddenly be taken off to Troy.

In the grand boudoir of a wink  
they all turn into beautiful Helens. (12)

Though this imaginary vision emerges out of the girls' adolescent fantasies, it has its source in the Trojan myth. Overpowering the girls' imaginations, the myth "takes them off to Troy." Interestingly, the "abduction" of Szymborska's girls parallels the young Elizabeth's "falling" in Bishop's poem. Both images may be read as gendered variations on the Sartrean model of the interaction between the subject and the Other. In both poems the intrusion of the Other—the naked women in Bishop's text and the mythical Helen in Szymborska's—creates a kind of whirlpool which pulls the girls out of their everyday world. Also both poems reveal the inescapably social construction of identities. In "A Moment in Troy," the fusion of individual fantasies with Greek myth reveals the hold of tradition over humankind, and in particular its significance in constituting human subjectivity. The girls experience themselves as subjects when they move from their location on the "eyelids of the world;" transforming the Trojan myth
into the Lacanian mirror, they become the visual center of the universe.  

However, this acquired subjectivity has a double edge. As the metamorphosed girls are transported from "the world's eyelids" to the center of the Greek realm of vision, they slowly turn into the objects of the male gaze.

They ascend the royal staircase  
in the rustling of silk and admiration.  
They feel light. They all know  
that beauty equals rest,  
that lips mold the speech's meaning,  
and gestures sculpt themselves  
in inspired nonchalance.

Their small faces  
worth dismissing envoys for  
extend proudly on necks  
that merit countless sieges. (12-13)

The poem, however, never turns into an overt protest against visual objectification of women, and, though preoccupied with the ways in which the male gaze may affect women, it does not present women as victims of that gaze. Rather, it playfully problematizes the whole process of visual objectifying. As mythical Helens the girls finally become the objects of the male gaze, but they are by no means passive embodiments of feminine beauty who quench male desires; instead, while putting themselves in the center of vision in an exhibitionistic gesture, they also watch the men. And as they watch, they seem to avenge themselves in particular on those men who push them to the visual periphery in everyday life—the men who do not turn their heads to look at them. It must be emphasized, though, that Szymborska does
not identify with the girls and presents their problems with her
typical humor, irony, and detachment, even when she presents a violent,
bloody potential of the war:

those tall, dark movie stars,
their girlfriends' older brothers,
the teacher from art class,
'alas, they must all be slain.

Little girls
observe disaster
from a tower of smiles.

Little girls
wring their hands
in intoxicating mock despair. (13)

All the victims here are men, particularly those who work within
the culture's visual domain—the art-class teacher, and the movie
stars. Finally, as the girls assume the sole control of vision, the
whole Trojan war becomes a spectacle within which they act out their
revenge. With pleasure hidden behind the empty gestures of despair,
they watch the men die, and they reduce the spectacular devastation
of the war to an ornamental setting embellishing their beauty:

Little girls
against a backdrop of destruction,
with flaming towns for tiaras,
in earrings of pandemic lamentations.

Pale and tearless.
Triumphant. Sated with the view.
Dreading only the inevitable
moment of return. (13-14)

In the above stanzas, Szymborska merges her exploration of the male
gaze with her investigations of the Western privilege of vision over
other senses. As the whole world is dominated and subsumed by vision—
while "destruction" turns into a pictorial "backdrop," lamentations congeal into "earrings"—the girls are finally "sated" with the view. The image implies that such an absolute reign of the visual precludes any empathetic engagement with others. Within the girls' fantasy, vision creates a distance between the seer and the seen; literally and metaphorically, then, the girls are "out of touch" with the tragic consequences of the battle. Such a distance provides a space for the release of brutal, even sadistic urges, and although the bloodshed of the war belongs only to the fantasy of the adolescent girls, this fantasy still establishes a link between vision and violence.

This connection has been studied by scholars such as Lacan, Foucault, or Althusser, for whom the source of violence could at least partly be explained in terms of the dominion of the eye to the exclusion of other sensual experience. But in Szymborska's poem the destructive power of vision comes to the foreground in the particular context of the girls' illusory revenge for their invisibility in everyday life. Szymborska implies, then, that vision does not have to be exclusively distancing and objectifying; it can also be affirming and confirming of the presence of others. And while it is true that "A Moment in Troy" reveals primarily the significance of male vision for the constitution of the girls' selves—they want to be the center of that vision because they grow up in a culture where the male desiring gaze is a source of feminine self esteem—the poem has also broader philosophical implications.
As I have mentioned above, Szymborska's "A Moment in Troy," like Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" suggests that a self-conscious subject emerges in the process of interaction with others, and both poets, even if unintentionally, seem to revise Sartre's concept of the supposedly gender-free dynamic of the look between the subject and the Other. Moreover, Szymborska's notion of subjectivity recalls the Hegelian concept of human self-consciousness in particular as interpreted by Alexandre Kojeve:

Therefore, man can appear on earth only within a herd. That is why the human reality can only be social. But for the herd to become a society, ... the Desires of each member of the herd must be directed--or potentially directed--toward the Desires of the other members. If the human reality is a social reality, society is human only as a set of Desires mutually desiring one another as Desires. (6)

While it is true that Szymborska's poem focuses on male/female relationships--the girls' frustrated desire is directed primarily toward men: they want to see themselves as desired by the men. However, it also implies that to construct one's identity it is not sufficient to identify in isolation with a symbolic mirror-image. If that were enough, the girls could simply imaginatively transform their reflections and admire themselves in isolation. What they need, however, is to see themselves seen as Helens by others. Metaphorically, then, within the girls' fantasy others become mirrors, and their desiring gazes return the girls' reflections. However, such gratifications through fantasy are only momentary, and so after only "a moment in Troy" the imagined world yields to the ordinary. The poem,
then, comes full circle, closing with the image of "Little girls/returning" (14) to their everyday world of social invisibility.

Like most of Szymborska's poems, "A Moment in Troy" seems a simple and straightforward account of—to borrow the poet's phrase—"an insignificant event" ("No Title Required" 175); but for all its unassumingness, it explores a broader philosophical terrain where gender issues appear intertwined with the poet's investigations of human subjectivity in a culture that privileges the power of vision and marks it as masculine.

In poems that can be read as female attempts to reclaim the visual field, Bishop as well as Szymborska engages in revisions of traditional mythologies and texts. For instance, she responds in a half-mocking way to Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" in her "Gentleman of Shalott." Both poems explore Western mappings of gender on the level of visual representation. However, while Bishop is primarily preoccupied with the notion of an essential, culturally unadulterated, gendered self, Tennyson incorporates his gender dilemmas into his explorations of the significance of art—the main theme of the poem.

For Tennyson's Lady art becomes a form of imprisonment isolating her from the human world:

Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle embowers
The Lady of Shalott. (1942)

Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle embowers
The Lady of Shalott. (1942)

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colors gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot. (1943)

As the poem develops, Tennyson reveals the illusion of the transcendental power of art, exposing the artist's detachment from the real world as a disabling trap, and the art created in such a detachment as an inadequate means to contain and master the real. At the same time, while he marks the real as a male territory (the social world of Lancelot), he locates the Lady in the gap dividing this world from its reflection:

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.

																																																																																																																																													

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,

Goes by to towered Camelot; (1943)

Although placed in front of the Lady, the poem's cultural and social mirror does not reflect her own image but rather the life bustling around "towered" and so symbolically phallic, Camelot. The mysterious curse which keeps the Lady from "look[ing] down to Camelot" becomes a symbol of the patriarchy condemning the feminine to the perpetual exile from any kind of social sphere. Deprived of her reflection, the lady fails to construct her own identity and weave herself into the social fabric. She is the Lady, the exiled feminine, not an individual with a name like the knight. At the same time, although the male dominated culture erases the woman's presence, she becomes the culture's
indispensable tool to reassert and confirm itself: the Lady immortalizes Camelot through her art. However, she cannot even look at the town directly and recreate it from her own perspective. Instead, she has to weave its image mediated through the patriarchal mirror.

As long as the woman occupies her culturally prescribed position, the balance of the social structure is preserved. The moment, however, when "half sick of shadows" she ventures an escapade into Camelot, the balance is ruptured: the social mirror cracks. Although at this point, the crack in the mirror seems to open up some space in Camelot's social space that could accommodate the Lady, this accommodation never takes place: such an intrusion of the feminine would clearly deprive the patriarchy of its essential means to assert itself. Consequently, the Lady has to perish. Although at the end of poem the initial order is disturbed, since the Lady dies, Tennyson's poem implies the restoration of the status quo, with its fixed frames separating the masculine from the feminine territory.

From the very beginning of "The Gentlemen of Shalott" Bishop takes an issue with such clear-cut distinctions.

Which eye's his eye?  
Which limb lies  
next the mirror?  
For neither is clearer  
nor a different color  
than the other,  
nor meets a stranger  
in this arrangement  
of leg and leg and  
arm and so on.  
To his mind  
it's the indication  
of a mirrored reflection
somewhere along the line
of what we call the spine. (9)

While in Tennyson's poem the reflection can never be taken for the real, Bishop's text not only blurs this distinction, but questions the very status of the real. Moreover, while the cracked mirror in Tennyson's text represents the mediated and thus counterfeit nature of its reflections, in Bishop's poem the notion of unmediated reality itself is in question. Bishop's text reclaims the Lady's mirror and revises Tennyson's divided universe. The figure of Bishop's Gentleman, who is unable to distinguish the real from the reflected, suggests that knowing is always embedded in a medium. Thus, while Tennyson eventually abandons the mirror and sanctions the unmediated present, and so the male universe, Bishop retrieves this mirror, pointing out that what is accessible to us is always a form of cultural reflection.

With wit and humor, Bishop introduces her Gentleman to replace not only Tennyson's Lady, but even more significantly, Camelot, and her text in various ways explores the Tennysonian world after the death of the Lady. Suddenly, the supposedly obvious distinction between the reality and its mirror image disappears. Bishop's poem implies that the distinction has been predicated on the woman's cultural exile. In the context of "The Gentleman of Shalott," Tennyson's feminine space in between Camelot and its reflection in Bishop's poem becomes a mere crack in the mirror. The Gentleman's query, "which eye is his" and which one is reflected, stems from the false assumption that there is
an original eye/I. But as the text suggests that "I" itself materializes in the cultural mirror, the Gentleman's dilemma is a mere delusion.

Obviously poking fun at her character, Bishop discredits the patriarchal version of vision with its presumptuous hold on the real through its fixed, totalizing frames. And since the gentleman exposes the inadequacy of such frames and embodies a substantial revision of the monocular beholder, Bishop sympathizes with him, uncovering the apparent logic behind his conundrum. In fact, since the opening line may be read as a search for the origin of identity, it may apply to everybody. How do we know where to locate "I"? Which features of our identities, if any, originate within us and which are socially imposed from the outside? But as in "In the Waiting Room" where the young Elizabeth cannot answer such questions, the Gentleman remains perplexed about his identity. Both poems suggest that the borders of identity are not stable, and the Other partakes in the construction of subjectivity.

Moreover, while the first line of "The Gentleman" with its inescapable pun, "eye"/ "I," emphasizes the significance of vision in the emergence of identity, it also challenges the reliability and stability of visual perception, undermining the idea of a unified and stable subject. The very notion of wholeness is put in question and the second stanza reveals the arbitrary character of the notion even more.

He felt in modesty
his person was
half looking-glass,
for why should he
be doubled?
The glass must stretch
down his middle,
or rather down the edge.
But he's in doubt
as to which side's in or out
of the mirror.
There's little margin for error,
but there is no proof either.
And if half his head's reflected,
thought, he thinks, might be affected.

Endeavoring to map his identity, the gentleman does not know how to
draw its borders. Although he assumes that his real body constitutes
a half of what he sees, he still tends to think about his "edge" as
"his middle" and worries about having a half of the head only.

While the Gentleman with his seemingly absurd identity dilemmas
is a comic character, he does expose the arbitrariness of commonplace
binaries, an issue that Bishop raises in many of her later poems. He
challenges the opposition between inside/ outside; middle/edge;
center/margin; single/double; subject/ object, male/female, and finally
the real versus the represented. Such an unsettling of binaries, as the
Gentleman fears, does affect thought: assertions become suppositions
and certainty turns into doubt. However, although the Gentleman's
universe appears provisional, this instability becomes a source of
pleasure rather than existential despair:

But he's resigned
to such economical design.
If the glass slips
he's in a fix--
only one leg, etc. But
while it stays put
he can walk and run
and his hands can clasp one
another. The uncertainty
he says he
finds exhilarating. He loves that sense of constant re-adjustment. He wishes to be quoted as saying at present: "Half is enough." (9-10)

Advocating his pleasures of "constant re-adjustment" the Gentleman discards any possible desire for permanence. And the closing lines of the poem emphasize even more the temporal character of traditional frames, in particular those related to vision. While in the earlier sections, Bishop's mirror never turns into a framed image, it still appears to be a constant feature of the Gentleman's universe. At the end, however, the mirror itself becomes a slippery construct which can suddenly vanish.

Like most of Bishop's poems, "The Gentleman of Shalott" exposes the illusion of the transcendental quality of vision which, as I mentioned earlier, lies at the basis of the traditional Western privilege of static being over dynamic becoming. Commenting on Bishop's work, Bonnie Costello writes:

Emerging from a tradition of seeing that idealizes it to Vision, Bishop's is a poetry of looks. She dismantles the transcendent gaze of Romanticism and relaxes the immanentist gaze of objectivism, offering in their stead a temporal, particular glimpse in which imagination plays a crucial but not a hierarchical part, expressing itself as peripheral rather than centered. (...) The glimpse, concerned with transient things, is more visual than the penetrating or transcendent gaze of mental mastery. The visual was always displaced in Romanticism by a supersensible voice or mind; Wordsworth and Coleridge showed disdain for the merely visual. (6)

Thus, while in her work Bishop follows the traditional Western practice of privileging sight over other senses, she still reconceives the practice, binding it with the material and the transient. Her poetic
images, then, seem analogous to the mode of painting which Norman Bryson calls "the painting of the glance" which is dynamic and temporal, as opposed to the transcendental "painting of the gaze" (94). In this way, Bishop is also fusing the visual with what has been traditionally labeled as feminine. In many of her other poems, Bishop dismantles the often assumed atemporal framework of the image. When she contemplates her uncle's painting ("Large Bad Picture"), suddenly "the small red sun goes rolling, rolling" (11), and when she ponders the neat arrangement of biblical illustrations ("Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"), she transforms the immutable, transcendent visions into the perishable traces of the past.

The fusion of transient materiality with the notion of vision clearly marks Szymborska's writing as well. In the discussed above "A Moment in Troy," the very title foregrounds the momentary character of the Trojan vision; the indivisibility of the temporal and the visual comes across even stronger in the opening lines of "Travel Elegy:"

Everything's mine but just on loan,
nothing for the memory to hold,
though mine as long as I look.

But Szymborska's most powerful challenge of the transcendental nature of vision comes with the poem "Lot's Wife," which is developed as a catalogue of the wife's possible motifs behind her stolen look back. Significantly, Szymborska assumes the persona of the biblical woman. Thus, although she does not overtly follow any kind of feminist agenda, she does align herself with the feminist project aimed at
recovering the suppressed or lost voices of women from the past, and in particular, she joins other women poets engaged in revising the Bible. This revisionist project has become significant in the work of Jewish women poets such as Shirley Kaufman, Zelda, Helen Papell, Lillian Elkin, or Mindy Rinkewich. In addition, Anna Akhmatova and Kristine Batey should be mentioned here since they reflect on the Biblical woman turned into a pillar of salt in their poems entitled, like Szymborska's, "Lot's Wife." In spite of their different takes on the Biblical story, all three poets question God's justice, juxtaposing Lot's abstract dealings with the almighty, eternal God with the wife's tangible attachments to those about to perish. In Batey's poem, "[w]hile her husband[Lot] communes with God/she tucks the children into bed." Later on, Batey states: "It is easy for eyes that have always turned to heaven/ not to look back." Akhmatova also emphasizes the gap between Lot's unwavering decision to follow God's commands and his wife's doubt. She writes:

And the just man trailed God's messenger,
His huge, light shape devoured the black hill.
But uneasiness shadowed his wife and spoke to her:
'I's not too late, you can look back still

At the red towers of Sodom, the place that bore you, (55).

Szymborska, then, joins both Batey and Akhmatova in their challenges of Lot's supposed righteousness, revealing his departure from the doomed city with his eyes "turned to heaven" as merciless. The poets identify with the wife who out of her despair over the doomed city embraces it through her glance backward. In their turn, the poets
embrace Lot's wife through their revisions of the tale, a kind of writing back.

As the Bible has it, Lot's wife, for violating God's command not to look back at sin-ridden Sodom and Gomorrah was turned into a pillar of salt. In the Bible the woman's fate is summed up in one sentence, and her story passed over in silence (Genesis:19:26). As Szymborska, like Batey and Akhmatova, identifies with Lot's wife and assumes her persona, she fills in this silence. At the same time, the poet explores the significance of vision and challenges its supposedly spatial, atemporal nature, while undercutting our assumptions about the inevitably distancing and objectifying gaze. Thus, at the end of the poem, the Biblical motionless image of the woman as a pillar of salt turns into a dynamic dance of despair, and her earlier looking back becomes a means of connection rather than detachment. Lot's wife's gaze, then, is in its very nature different from the already discussed revengeful look of the little girls in their Trojan phantasy. The poem suggests that, after all, gazing in itself is not necessarily objectifying, although that has been its primary import in male dominated Western culture. In "Lot's Wife," the female vision undermines the distancing faculty of the eye and confronts the male vision.

Lot's wife's defiant glance manifests her rebellion against the sanctioned hierarchy of values and so against the law of Judeo-Christian God. In the Bible, she cannot speak, but in Szymborska's work she not only looks back but also speaks back. The poem opens with the
wife's assertion: "They say I looked back out of curiosity, but I could have had other reasons." While Lot's wife does not deny being inquisitive (in the Polish version this admission is even more clear), she does indicate that her curiosity is not primarily responsible for her transgressive glance at the ruined cities. Curiosity implies a rather detached observation, an objective look, and Lot's wife neither can nor wants to master such detachment. Moreover, insisting on the plural rather than singular nature of human motivations, in the Biblical fashion, she presents a whole catalogue of possible and, from her point of view, valid reasons for her insubordination.

I looked back mourning my silver bowl. 
Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap. 
So I wouldn't have to keep staring at the righteous nape 
of my husband Lot's neck. 
From the sudden conviction that if I dropped dead 
he wouldn't so much as hesitate. 
From the disobedience of the meek. (101)

Lot's wife's looking back, then, is a gesture of manifold significance. It manifests her despair not only over the irrevocably lost past but also over the necessity to erase the traces of it if she is to go on following her husband's as well as God's relentless commands. Just as Lot's "righteous nape" encapsulates for her the abstract notions of good and evil, the symbolic "silver bowl" encapsulates her past which constitutes part of herself. And while Lot's world belongs to the grand scheme of the Lord with no meaningful place for her--the wife's death would not even disturb him--her world embraces the minute, concrete particulars of everyday existence.
Nothing, then, but Lot's wife's empty stare at her husband's neck—a
telling emblem of their relationship—connects them.

Thus, although her momentary glance backwards is ultimately self-
destructive, it is also liberating as it disrupts the deadness of
staring at the patriarch's back. Lot's loyalties belong to his God;
hers, to the place she is leaving. Since she cannot look toward the
future while denying the past, she looks back, "Struck by the silence,
hoping God had changed his mind" and spared the world she can identify
with. Within Lot's universe ordered by the law of God she feels
alienated:

Our two daughters were already vanishing over the hilltop.
I felt age within me. Distance.
The futility of wandering. Torpor.
I looked back setting my bundle down.
I looked back not knowing where to set my foot.
Serpents appeared on my path,
spiders, field mice, baby vultures.
They were neither good nor evil now—every living thing
was simply creeping or hopping along in the mass panic.
I looked back in desolation.
In shame because we had stolen away.
Wanting to cry out, to go home. (101)

Lot's wife predicament clearly questions God's justice. The terrible
awareness of the fate of those who stayed behind turns the whole
deliverance into a nightmare. While in following God's commands Lot
has a sense of mission, she feels guilty of treachery and cowardice,
and while Lot aligns himself with transcendental and eternal God, she
holds onto the transient and earthly. Consequently, she embraces her
femininity which in Western tradition is usually associated with
change, materiality, and transience. The wife's moral code is not
abstract, but it is deeply rooted in the material world; the all-encompassing terror of destruction erases for her any distinction between good and evil.

At the same time, Lot's wife is constantly aware of the possible judgement of others. She seems to care more about how she looks in the eyes of those left behind than in the eyes of God. Thus, it is when she envisions herself being watched that she cannot resist looking back:

Or only a sudden gust of wind
unbound my hair and lifted up my robe.
It seemed to me that they were watching from the walls of Sodom and bursting into thunderous laughter again and again.
I looked back in anger.
To savor their terrible fate. (102)

Leaving her city, Lot's wife experiences a wide range of emotions. At the moment when she looks back in anger, out of her desire for revenge, she resembles God whose fury wrecks Sodom and Gomorrah, and this resemblance exposes God's supposed justice as a merciless act of revenge. But as was clear in my earlier comments, Lot's wife primarily identifies with the victims. And she is punished not for her momentary anger, but rather for her empathy with the doomed, for her despair over the ruin, and for her own confusion in the midst of the disaster. Toward the end of the poem, her explanation, "I looked back for all the reasons given above" is immediately put into question as the woman considers still other possible explanation of her act:

I looked back involuntarily.
It was only a rock that turned underfoot, growling at me.
It was a sudden crack that stopped me in my tracks.
A hamster on its hind paws tottered on the edge.
It was then we both glanced back. no, no. I ran on,
I crept, I flew upward
until darkness fell from the heavens
and with it scorching gravel and dead birds.
I couldn't breathe and spun around and around.
Anyone who saw me must have thought I was dancing.
It's not inconceivable that my eyes were open.
It's possible I fell facing the city. (102)

While for most of the poem, Lot's wife provides the logical explanation of her look back, listing the motives that she can understand and control, toward the end of the poem she loses this kind of control. At the beginning she comes across as a rebel; toward the end, she is more of a victim. She becomes like one of the fleeing creatures, like a hamster she identifies with, not understanding what is going on around her and what is happening to her. Even her look back is put into question--it is "possible" and not "inconceivable," but it is not a reliable fact. The ending of the poem, then, emphasizes that the whole text is only a speculation about the past, offering a possible account of what transpired.

This emphasis on uncertainty has various implications. While it reveals the tentative character of all reconstructions of the past, it still valorizes such endeavors. Although Lot's wife can never really speak for herself, we can understand her better through Szymborska's poetic rendition of the Biblical event. In this way, the poet also shows that imaginative recreations of the past are part of knowledge. Imagination has a power to mediate between the past and the present and so it connects us, however tenuously, to the past. Moreover, the very ending of the poem also reveals that even the accounts of eyewitnesses are dubious. Lot's wife's desperate spinning around which the observers
take for a dance opens up a gap between the seen and the real. In its final movement, then, the poem dissolves the illusion of the transparent character of vision and undermines the reliability of sight. Szymborska's poetic gesture of imaginatively reclaiming one woman's history becomes yet another exploration of the functions of vision. While in the Bible Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt, Szymborska's text with its finale-dance sets this frozen image in motion. As this movement retrieves the temporal dimension of the image, it fuses the visual with the temporal. Moreover, in the context of the whole poem, Lot's wife's stolen look backwards may be seen as a gesture of a feminine reappropriation of sight.

Szymborska's preoccupation with gender and vision comes to the foreground again in her poem "Rubens' Women" in which describing the painted women, she begins to imagine those he did not paint. As in "Lot's Wife," then, the poet engages in reconstructing the past record, musing on what has been left out. Her text, then, becomes also a critique of Rubens' art and a reflection on the exclusive nature of art and all representation. The poem opens with the image of overabundant female bodies which is underscored even more by Szymborska's excessive use of figurative language. Overabundance of flesh matches the overabundance of language.

Titanettes, female fauna, naked as the rumbling of barrels. They roost in trampled beds, asleep, with mouths agape, ready to crow. Their pupils have fled into flesh and sound the glandular depths from which yeast seeps into their blood. (21)
Szymborska’s description, then, reflects the representation of women in Rubens’ paintings which reduces them to mere flesh. Such a reduction deprives women of any individual traits and as a result they become a "female fauna," a lascivious heap of bodies. Reflecting on the animalism of Rubens’ representation, Szymborska describes the women in terms of animals: they "roost" in beds and crow rather than speak. They are purely sensual, inarticulate creatures, and just as they are deprived of language, they are deprived of sight. In their sleep, the women’s eyes become physiological organs necessary to trigger sexual urges. Displayed in "trampled beds" with their mouths open, the women are easily accessible for both visual and sexual penetration. The men, only an implied presence in the poem, are never in danger of being "looked at," and so, according to Sartre’s theory of the look, they can never become objects within the female visual field. By disposing of women’s vision, men endeavor to constitute themselves purely as subjects, but this manoeuvre has a double edge, since women who cannot look at the men can never "discover [themselves] in the process of becoming a probable object" for other subjects (Sartre 345). It seems that contrary to male expectations, the objectified women cannot confirm men as subjects. However, men, never risking the possibility of becoming objects, hold on to their imaginary construction of passive femininity. In Szymborska’s poem, the women embody projections of male sexual fantasies: sexually loaded images suggest that the women’s only role is satiation of the male libido.
The poem, then, becomes Szymborska's variation on a traditional theme of men watching sleeping women, the objects of the desiring or consummating male gaze. Szymborska's text, though, verges on a parody of the theme as the women reduced to pure flesh turn into one of "the courses" in the approaching feast. With "yeast seep[ing] into their blood," the "daughters of Baroque" seem to grow in their beds like dough rising in troughs. Szymborska's poem, like Rubens' paintings, conflates feasting with sexual orgy:

...baths steam, wines blush,
cloudy piglets careen across the sky,
triumphant trumpets neigh the carnal alarm.

O pumpkin plump! O pumped up corpulence
inflated double by disrobing
and tripled by your tumultuous poses
O fatty dishes of love. (21)

Finally, the imagery acquires a powerful flavor of both culinary and sexual excess that is evocative of Dionysian festivals. Once this scene is set up and the female bodies are about to be consumed, Szymborska shifts her focus, reflecting on the thin women left out of Rubens' painting:

Their skinny sisters woke up earlier,
before dawn broke and shone upon the painting.
And no one saw how they went single file
along the canvas's unpainted side.

Exiled by style. Only their ribs stood out.
With birdlike feet and palms, they strove
to take wing on their jutting shoulder blades.

The thirteenth century would have given them golden haloes.
The twentieth, silver screens.
The seventeenth, alas, holds nothing for the unvoluptuous. (21-2)
Initially women are presented as "fatty dishes of love," but Szymborska makes it clear that such women, dehumanized and deprived of any agency, belong to the world of male representations. And Szymborska juxtaposes them with those unpainted women to whom, as if compensating for Rubens' exclusion, she ascribes agency. The skinny women are not just left out of the canvas, but they leave by themselves, striving to "fly off." Notwithstanding this redemptive fantasy, however, Szymborska's text does suggest that the women "exiled by style" have in fact been "exiled" by men. "Style" in the poem does not come across as a gender free category; while men internalize style and thus partake in shaping the world, women primarily yield to it. In Szymborska's text, Rubens' women embody male sexual desires which reflect the baroque stylistic excesses, but they are never themselves desiring. Although the representation of the whole world depends on style, the baroque sky "bulges," the angels are "pudgy," and the god--"chubby," the representation of women hinges on the style-shaped male desire. Phoebus's chubbiness in the painting is not clearly connected to female yearnings, but fleshy women do reflect male sexual cravings: "Phoebus [is] riding straight into the seething bedchamber" (22) to quench his desire. If the Baroque privileges excess, men want to possess it and women to embody it. Thus, as Szymborska suggests, in the more ascetically oriented thirteenth century, when the restraint of carnal urges is advocated, the representation of women in art reflects such restraint. With their bodies lean and desexualized, they become idealized, saintly virgins. Such a representation, however, seems
dehumanizing as well: while Rubens' women are reduced to their flesh, the saintly women, alienated from their bodies, seem alienated from the world as well.

Like feminist writers, then, Szymborska reveals the male tendency in Western culture to represent women either as whores or virgins rather than complex human beings. When she claims that the twentieth century "would have given"... "the silver screen," to the ectomorphic women excluded from Rubens' art, the context of the whole poem suggests that these women would have been set up primarily for men's visual consumption. Szymborska fuses here the public sphere of life with the masculine, implying that women's entrance into that sphere depends on men's approval of female bodies. Consequently, for women male disapproval equals exclusion. Like the little girls from "A Moment in Troy" they become invisible, located on "the eyelids of the world." Reflecting, then, on Rubens' painting, Szymborska endeavors to restore the presence of the women who have not fit in the painter's frame.

Still, while challenging Rubens' painting, Szymborska develops her gender investigations within the heterosexual paradigm, and neither in "Rubens' Women," nor in her other poems does she undermine the paradigm itself. In contrast, Bishop's poetry does constitute a challenge of the dominant heterosexual matrix. Considering gender itself as an unstable category, Bishop exposes it as a cultural practice rather than a fixed marker of identity. Usually, however, Bishop's challenges are masked, and they appear as an underground current in her texts. Her 1956 verse, "Exchanging Hats," published
posthumously, is one of very few poems in which Bishop openly if
playfully investigates and challenges the dominant heterosexual matrix.

Unfunny uncles who insist
in trying on a lady’s hat,
--oh, even if the joke falls flat,
we share your slight transvestite twist

in spite of our embarrassment.
Costume and custom are complex.
The headgear of the other sex
inspires us to experiment.

Anandrous aunts, who at the beach
with paper plates upon your laps,
keep putting on the yachtsmen’s caps
with exhibitionistic screech,

the visors hanging o’er the ear
so that the golden anchors drag,
--the tides of fashion never lag.
Such caps may not be worn next year

Or you who don the paper plate
itself, and put some grapes upon it,
or sport the Indian’s feather bonnet,
--perversities may aggravate

the natural madness of the hatter.
And if the opera hats collapse
and crowns grow draughty, then, perhaps,
he thinks what might a miter matter?

Already in the first two stanzas, Bishop destabilizes gender categories
and dismantles the commonplace distinction between sex and gender,
dismissing what can be perceived as a traditional model in which gender
becomes a visible cultural manifestation of the underlying and
uncontested sexual essence. Instead, assuming again that "topography
displays no favorites," Bishop locates both sex and gender on a flat
surface of the cultural map. Consequently, just as in the opening poem
it is impossible to decide whether "land lies in water" or is "tugging
at the sea from under?," in "Exchanging Hats" it is impossible to determine the exact relationship between sex and gender; in fact, the very boundary between the two seems a fairly provisional arrangement. The image of exchanging hats, then, as well as the poet's deliberate choice of words constitutes a decisive subversion of both sex and gender matrices. Marilyn May Lombardi observes:

"Aunt" and "uncle," after all, were well-known code words throughout the first half of this century for men and women who remained maids and bachelors on the margins of the bourgeois family and always, for that reason, suspect....[In the poem], we can see that their capers expose "the slight transvestite twist" that we all share, despite our well-practiced normality. (66)

It is important to remember, that although "aunt" and "uncle" signified a suspect sexuality, the words only implied but did not unequivocally denote gay or lesbian disposition. Moreover, the symbolic of transvestism introduces even more ambiguity into the poem. Commonly associated with gays and lesbians, transvestism has never been quite synonymous with homosexuality. Since transvestism resists the established categories of sex and gender, it constitutes a radical challenge of all established sexual and gender codes. Marjorie Garber states:

"...the borderline between gender and sexuality so important to much recent feminist and gender theory is one of many boundaries tested and queried by the transvestite. The cultural effect of transvestism is to destabilise all such binaries: not only "male" and "female," but also "gay" and "straight," and "sex" and "gender." This is the sense--the radical sense--in which transvestism is a "third."" (133)

I have mentioned earlier that the challenge of supposedly obvious binaries is one of Bishop's primary concerns, and as a number of
critics have suggested, this challenge is often related to Bishop's endeavors to create language accommodating her lesbianism. In her analysis of the poet's work, Jeredith Merrin argues:

Bishop relies throughout her career... on specific organizing tropes identified here as "inversion" and "thirdness"—powerful patterns of mind or psychological gestalts that convey her multivalent response to her sexual disposition. (154)

"Exchanging Hats," through its light, witty variations on the traditionally comic motif of transvestism, belongs to those poems in which Bishop fuses the two tropes. As critical writings on transvestism demonstrate, cross-dressing signifies not only "thirdness" undermining sex and gender binaries, but it also constitutes a form of inversion. In "Writing/Transvestism" Severo Sarduy argues that transvestism is an "inversion carried to its limits" (Garber 150). "Exchanging Hats," then, is yet another poem in which Bishop investigates the gender-based limits and borders informing our thinking. At the same time, the poem clearly reveals that in her challenges she refrains from setting up alternative patterns. Thus, although transvestism suggests a construction of gender other than feminine or masculine, this third option, the "transvestite twist" is immediately ascribed to all of us. And while Bishop's writing can well be described in Irigaray's words--"Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating. Blurring" (112)--she dismisses any essentializing notions of specifically "feminine writing." "Exchanging Hats" makes this stance particularly clear since Bishop conflates the sphere of sexual desires with "costume and custom" in a
way that precludes any essentializing gender patterns. It is not so much the body of the other sex but "the headgear" that arouses our desires "inspir[ing] us to experiment." The sexuality of the cross-dressing game is further emphasized as the aunts put on "the yatchmen's caps/with exhibitionistic screech," suggestive of an orgasmic release. But again, noting that "the tides of fashion never lag," Bishop puts an emphasis on the culturally conditioned character of sexual desires. Through the image of the yachtsmen's caps with the unsecured anchors that "drag" and thus allude punningly to our shared transvestism, the poet unmoors the commonplace idea of determined, stable sexuality. With such free floating desires, the text turns into a liberating carnival, which, like "the mad tea-party" in Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, exposes the social construction of supposedly "natural" behaviors. Consequently, all norms are constantly questioned, and as gender becomes as exchangeable as hats, the distinction between sex and gender becomes tentative as well. After all, Bishop's aunts and uncles are "in drag" not only in terms of clothing but also, it is suggested, in terms of their sexuality. And it is impossible to determine if their desires trigger the clothing games or the games arouse the desires.

In the carnivalesque atmosphere of the middle stanzas, the unsettling of gender is accompanied by the disintegration of male power. The game of exchanging hats exposes the arbitrary character of power hierarchies, and as Bishop locates the emblems of masculine power--an "Indian's bonnet," "a crown," and "a miter"--on the level of collapsing "opera hats," the poem takes on a revolutionary flavor."
However, as the revolution is contained within the carnival, at the end of the poem the status quo of gender, its "costume and custom" are restored. Thus, while in the opening stanza the uncles seem "unfunny," since their cross-dressing games exposing the commonality of transvestism make the audience uneasy, in the penultimate stanza, the "fun" is over, and the uncle in his traditionally male "headgear"—"black fedora" is not even playing anymore. The poet, then, wonders:

Unfunny uncle, you who wore a
hat too big, or one too many,
tell us, can't you, are there any
stars inside your black fedora?

Aunt exemplary and slim,
with avemal eyes, we wonder
what slow changes they see under
their vast, shady, turned-down brim. (200-1)

Although as Bishop turns to one man only, her tone becomes more personal, the consistent use of the plural "we" rather than the singular "I" merges the personal perspective with the social. Thus, in the context of the preceding passages in which hats represent traditionally male authoritative roles, the image of an "uncle" with his "hat too big" or "one too many" not only reinforces the idea of masculine domination, but also suggests its limits: such an excessive power does not befit the man.

Bishop, however, does not offer any solutions for the gender problems raised in the poem, and she does not pretend to know what the future may bring. After all, the symbolism of the hypothetical "stars" is deeply ambiguous. While those emblems of the destiny and the future might be a guiding lights on the course to the uncharted waters of
gender-free "tides of fashion," they may as well turn against "us"—in
the poem, those from the cultural margins. Thus, in the last two
stanzas, with the return of the convention, a rather gloomy darkness
displaces the carnivalesque frenzy." The uncles behind their "black
fedoras" offer little hope for a change. And within the current
patterns of "costume and custom" the aunts' vision of even "slow
changes" is marked as infernal; assuming the mask of feminine
propriety--"exemplary and slim," the aunts' potentially subversive
vision has to be hidden "under their vast, shady, turned-down brim."
Such a closure could have grown out of Bishop's personal experience
since, in the culture which has consistently marked homosexuality as
a form of disease, perversion, or even crime, the poet had to keep a
large portion of her life "under....[a] turned-down brim."

For all its half-serious and playful tone, the poem concludes in
a rather melancholy minor key. In fact, reading Bishop's poetry we can
usually detect a somber undercurrent behind an apparent joke." For
instance, in "Gentleman of Shalott," discussed above, the light-hearted
pronouncement, "half is enough," may be seen as a resigned recognition
that to desire more is hopeless. Although such humorous, ironic
detachment in Bishop's poetry is not as strong as in Szymborska's, both
poets avoid displays of personal tragedies. In her often quoted
statement on confessional poets, Bishop says:

Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world,
and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an
allegory of the world.... The tendency is to overdo the
morbidity. You just wish they'd keep some of these things to
themselves. (Schwartz and Estess 303)
For Szymborska, as for Bishop, even if the world is terrifying, it is also enchanting, and so their poetry can never be described as "morbid." Szymborska's memorable lines from "Sky," the poem discussed above, "My identifying features/ are rapture and despair" may be considered a variation on Bishop's closure of "The Bight," (with her note "On my birthday"), "all the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful." This poetic embrace of "rapture and despair" or "the awful but the cheerful" becomes at the same time a feminine gesture which fuses the commonplace opposites and defies all too easy, clear-cut mappings of the universe.

Both Bishop's and Szymborska's poems create rich textures into which the artists have woven a broad range of issues. Since such semantic compression makes it virtually impossible to find a poem which does not go beyond thematic concerns of gender studies, initially Bishop's critics dismissed gender as an appropriate category for the analysis of her poetry. However, while during the last decade Bishop's writings have been discussed by a number of feminist critics, Szymborska's work has not been of much concern to feminist scholars. What is repeatedly emphasized is a universal appeal of her poetry—universal at least within the culture of the West. Such a critical stance, however, implies that universality necessarily excludes preoccupation with gender. However, Szymborska, like Bishop, clearly investigates the province of gender, in particular, its relevance for the notions of vision. And as in their poems sight loses its
traditionally privileged status, visual representations are no longer purely spatial and eternal, but rather temporal and provisional.
NOTES

1. Since in Polish the feminine nouns for a "psychologist" or an "anthropologist" do exist, my translation changes Szymborska's text. In Polish, she does not try to construct the feminine forms, only uses them. Also, Szymborska lists different professions talking about those which preserved their feminine versions; there are no English equivalents for a couple of them.

2. In *Becoming a Poet*, David Kalstone writes that the poem "reflects on the tension she [Bishop] must have been feeling between her Key West life and the newly awakened memories of Nova Scotia. (...) 'The Prodigal' is suspended between revived childhood memory and what adult life offers as if randomly, aimlessly" (126, 129). Lorrie Goldensohn sees the poem as one in which Bishop "[deals] with her own problems with alcohol through the distancing frame of parable" (170).

3. Some critic has already made this association—find which one.

4. Jeredith Merrin points out that "Bishop invents or adapts dramatis personae who provide at once an opportunity for discretely disguised autobiography and for the evocation of various alien or auslander positions. With the adoption of these personae... Bishop shows her affinity for the perplexed and in one way or another 'peripheral' male figure" (142).

5. again check a critic on master/servant relationship.

6. In his imposing study of Western oculacentrism, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martin Jay argues that "[although] the Greek celebration of sight was more equivocal than it is sometimes claimed, it must still be acknowledged that Hellenic thought did on the whole privilege the visual over any other sense" (28).

7. As Martin Jay points out, although both atemporality and distance ascribed to vision were challenged by a number of philosophers, these aspects of vision have been essential in the history of Western culture.

8. The issue of the male gaze has become a frequent focus of study of many feminist scholars working within the field of visual arts. In her already classical article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1973) Laura Mulvey discusses the impact of the gaze on the mainstream Hollywood film. Svetlana Alpers examining European painting in her article "Art History and Its Exclusions" (1982) also reflects on the significance of the male gaze. Commenting on Durer's woodcut, *Draughtsman Drawing a Nude*, she observes "The attitude toward women in this art--toward the central image of the female nude in particular--is
part and parcel of a commanding attitude taken toward the possession of the world' (187). She also points out that there were in Europe alternative modes of painting exemplified by the Dutch art which did not privilege the single perspective of a central viewer. That art, however, was considered aesthetically inferior and feminine (194).

9. Edward Balcerzan, for instance, claims that ekphrastic poetry bears a close similitude to a theatrical spectacle (204).

10. In his famous essay "The Mirror Stage," Lacan locates the constitution of a unified self within the sphere of the imaginary. Such a self, then, may be considered fiction.

11. In her collection Shift, Jeredith Merrin has written a poem for Bishop called "Dream-View of Delft" in which she reflects on the relationship between Vermeer's painting and Bishop's writing.

12. In Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development, Thomas Travisano observes that "These critics tend to overstress Bishop as 'mapmaker' and to understress Bishop as 'historian.' I will argue that the poem is really poised ambivalently between the attractions of the abstracting, fiction-making functions of the mapmaker and the more matter-of-fact observation and judgement of the historian" (40). Bonnie Costello in Elisabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery, claims that "A Careful reading of "The Map" reveals how fluent, uncertain, and even historical the map and the poem can be" (234), and later she adds, "The map's orders do not exclude the process which is the usual domain of the historian" (235).

13. In Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy, for instance, Victoria Harrison writes: "To envision relationship as a haven where partners "spread[] out," "lie[] in," "hang," "lean down to lift," "draw[] around," "tug[] at from under," "run out," "lend[]" is to constitute sexuality as an intimacy of shared and exchanged subject positions. Bishop's move is radical precisely because she posits intimacy without a phallus" (45).

14. Alberti writes: "First of all about where I draw. I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint. Here I determine as it pleases me the size of the men in my picture.[...].Then within this quadrangle, where it appears to me, I make a point which occupies that place where the central ray strikes. For this it is called the centric point. This point is properly placed when it is no higher from the base line of the quadrangle than the height of the man I have to paint there. Thus both the beholder and the painted things he sees will appear to be on the same plane" (56). In another part of his treatise, he stresses the transcendental nature of painting: "Painting contains a divine force which not only makes absent men present,[...]but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive" (63). And he continues further on: "...painting contains within itself this virtue that any master painter who sees his works adored will feel himself considered another god.[...] It is scarcely possible to find any superior art which is not concerned with painting" (64).
15. Alpers writes: "...in the absence of the prior viewer, we lose that scale or proportion of figures in the work which is basic to Italian perspectival making. Without a human figure providing prior measure, the entire epistemological issue of how we know or how we relate to the world is made uncertain" (193).

16. In his article "The Szymborska Phenomenon," Stanislaw Baranczak has made a similar observation: "The principal tenet of her individual poetics is, in nearly every poem she has written, to bring up this or another assertion or opinion that is dogmatic, sanctified, widely accepted, and never put in doubt--and to ask a well-aimed NAIVE QUESTION that, in its ultimate consequences, forces the dogmatic pseudo-truth to reveal its own shakiness or downright falsity" (254-5).

17. In her discussion of northern European art, Svetlana Alpers notes: "To want to possess meaning is masculine, to experience presence is feminine. This sexual designation is, however, not biologically determined but rather a matter of culture....It is not the gender of makers, but the different modes of making that is at issue" (198).

18. As Costello observed, the movement of the epigraph toward questioning reflects Bishop's bias for asking questions in her poetry rather than providing answers (116-17).

19. Bishop claims, "I always tell the truth in my poems. With The Fish, that's exactly how it happened. It was in Key West, and I did catch it just as the poem says. That was in 1938. Oh, but I did change one thing." (qtd in Lee Edelman "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room'" after Wesley Wehr, "Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes" 91)

20. Although discussing the opening of the poem Bonnie Costello does not speak in terms of mapping the world, she also comments on the stability of the image: "The consciousness that initiates 'In the Waiting Room' organizes experience in terms of stabilities of place, time, name. Bishop begins rather disinterestedly, lumping objects and people together" (120)

21. A number of critics pointed out to the poem's subversion of the inside/outside boundaries. Commenting on another section of the poem Bonnie Costello writes: "This sound [oh] is assigned to Aunt Consuelo and comes 'from inside' the dentist's office. Yet 'inside' itself has become a place without boundaries and is difficult to distinguish from outside. Inside now includes, through an act of empathy or even introjection, the beholder's own mouth and later the entire waiting room, which becomes the inside of a volcano spilling over. the center is everywhere and nowhere, pressuring the steady beat of the trimeter lines" (122). [quote other critics]

22. In his article "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room,'" Lee Edelman interpreting "In the Waiting Room" as a poem about reading makes a similar point about the girl's attempt to "frame" her experience. He observes, "If the necks of the women in these photographs are bound by these
wires 'like the necks of lightbulbs,' then what they illuminate for 'Elizabeth' is her fate as a woman, her necessary implication in the system of signs she had thought to master by being able to read. Now for the first time, she reacts to the text,... [Then] [s]he studies the cover, the margins, and the date in order to construct a frame for her reading experience that will circumscribe or contain it" (103-4). Also Bonnie Costello remarks, "She tries to avert her gaze by looking "at the cover:/ the yellow margins, the date" as if to remind herself that what she sees has boundaries that separate her from it" (121)

23. The girls' metamorphosis through the identification with the mythical Helen also corresponds to Lacan's claim concerning the fictional construction of the unified subject. He writes: "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification....: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image...This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infant stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form,... This form would have to be called the Ideal-I....But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction...

24. In Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought, Martin Jay gives a brief synopsis of Lacan's study of paranoid psychosis of the infamous sisters Christine and Lea Papin who murdered and mutilated the bodies of other two women. Apparently, the analysis of the crime was crucial for Lacan's postulation of the mirror stage and his claim that there is "a universal stage through which all humans pass, a stage displaying marked similarities to the pathological crimes of specular violence committed by the Papin sisters..." (336-346). Jay also discusses the link Louis Althusser made between his crime, the murder of his wife, and his privileging of the eye over other senses (378-379).

See also Michel Foucault's work Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, especially chapt. 3 "Panopticism" in which, among other things, he describes the penal system based on the power of the gaze.

25. Jean-Paul Sartre investigates the dynamic of looks among the human beings as constituting them both as subjects and objects. He writes: "if the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject." (344-5).

26. Szyborska's critics often emphasize her deceptive simplicity and even an apparent transparency of her poems. For instance, in his article "Mozartian Joy: the Poetry of Wislawa Szyborska," Krzysztof Karasek remarks that "she is a poet of material objects, of insignificant everyday events, commonplace conversations, everyday reality"(193); however, Karasek continues, "On the canvas of this ordinariness Szyborska builds her extra-ordinariness, her nonordinariness, her
strangeness" (197). Stanislaw Baranczak discusses the complexity and "the enormous scope" (257) of Szymborska's poetry which at the same time asks "naive questions" (260); and Jerzy Kwartowski in his introduction to Szymborska's selected poems in 1977 writes: "...Szymborska conceals the philosophical depths of her poems. She pretends to write about the everyday concerns" [translation mine] (15).

27. In Elisabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy, Victoria Harrison perceives the lady's desire to go to Camelot as if imposed on her against her own will. "...Tennyson's lady of Shalott, whose attention is drawn as if despite her will from her weaving mirror to the life out her window..." (47). Although the lady's desire to abandon her weaving does not seem a conscious decision, I read it more in terms of her rebellion against patriarchy which keeps her "imbowered" on "the silent isle" (1942). When she claims "I am half sick of shadows" and travels to Camelot, she challenges patriarchy and has to die.

28. Harrison claims that "...— Tennyson gives his heroine a mirror that reflects only other things—her art or her lover and the world beyond—though surely she, too, would be reflected in her weaving mirror if she were to shift her perspective" (47). My point is, however, that she has no power to change this perspective.

29. Discussing the erasure of boundaries in the poem Victoria Harrison asks: But which eye, indeed, is his own eye? From which do his own perceptions and judgements derive? Is there such a subjective eye in the first place, or are both eyes so busy mirroring each other that subjectivity dissolves along with objectivity?" (48-9). Thus, Bishop also dissolves the basic Western dichotomy between subject and object.

30. In Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze, Bryson states: "Painting of the glance addresses vision in the durational temporality of the viewing subject; it does not seek to bracket out the process of viewing, nor in its own techniques does it exclude the traces of the body of labour....Elimination of the diachronic movement of deixis creates, or at least seeks, a synchronic instant of viewing that will eclipse the body, and the glance, in an infinitely extended Gaze of the image as pure idea: the image as eidoion" (94). Further, in his analysis of Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne, Bryson explains: "What is removed from the world is its duration: the bodily postures and gestures are frozen at points which normal vision in unable to immobilise, which can never be seen by the glance; a maximum of distance is introduced between the disorderly, rhythmical, dionysian vision of the dancers, of Bacchus, of Ariadne, and the cold, synchronic, omniscient gaze of the painting's founding perception. the term shed in that separation is precisely the body, as source of a possible troubling of the panoptic, split-second clarity the image seeks: vision as it unfolds before the participants in the scene is the corporeal, spasmodic vibrancy of flux; vision as it is presented to the viewer is that of the Gaze victorious over the Glance, vision disembodied, vision decarnalised" (95).
31. Bonnie Costello aptly observes: "From the world of the biblical concordance with its rigid, arid orders, she moves to the world of flux and vitality held in memory."

32. In her study of feminist biblical interpretations, But SHE Said, Elisabeth Schussler Florenza identifies three feminist approaches: "A first approach in feminist biblical interpretation has both a remedial and a revisionist aim. [...] This first approach..., however, not only seeks to recover forgotten traditions about women, but also remove the layers of centuries of androcentric interpretation that cover up the supposed original meaning of the biblical text. [...] A second approach in feminist biblical interpretation is concerned with the androcentric character of biblical texts and discusses their proper translation. [...] A third approach...is not so much concerned with biblical language and translation. Instead it is interested in personal identification and biblical imagination. This strategy not only focuses on the women characters of biblical stories, but also imagines women characters in so-called "generic" stories that do not explicitly mention women but allow for their presence. For instance, it might make explicit in storytelling...that the audience of Jesus' preaching included not only men, but also women" (21, 23, 24, 26). Szymborska's imaginative recreation of Lot's Wife's persona, then, certainly belongs to the first approach in feminist biblical interpretations.

33. For a discussion of those and other poets revising the Bible, see Claire R. Fried, Breaking the Silence: Women Poets Rewrite the Bible, a master's thesis, the Ohio State University, 1993.

34. Grazyna Borkowska comments "The unpainted side of the canvass clearly uncovers the deficiencies of Rubens' paintings, the kind of images he avoids, and it reveals what lies behind his art" [(rough) translation mine] (147).

35. Also, see the note no. 7.

36. See, for instance Wendy Steiner's discussion of the theme in her book Pictures of Romance: Form against Context in Painting and Literature, especially her analysis of Keats's Eve of St. Agnes in the context of the myth of Psyche and Cupid (67-9), as well as her discussion of sleepwatching in Picasso's paintings (131-133).

37. Writing about transvestism, Marjorie Garber notes: The story of transvestism in western culture is in fact...bound up with the story of homosexuality and gay identity... No analysis of cross-dressing that wants to interrogate the phenomenon seriously from a cultural, political, or even aesthetic vantage point can fail to take into account the foundational role of gay identity or gay style....[However] to restrict cross-dressing to the context of an emerging gay and lesbian identity is to risk ignoring, or setting aside, elements and incidents that seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display. (4-5)
38. Bonnie Costello writes: "Her [Bishop's] subversion of various forms of masculine power (metonymically shown as Indian's headdress, monarch's crown, bishop's miter) can be heard in the alliteration ('what might a miter [meter] matter?')" (84).

39. Bonnie Costello reads the poem's ending in the context of Bishop's personal experiences: "The carnival hysteria reaches a pitch in stanza six and turns somber as it moves toward the singular, personal, and retrospective. Uncle Neddy and Aunt "Hat," remembered as devils in "Memories of Uncle Neddy," are alluded to here: the man who could never establish a successful identity but with whom the poet feels a strong affinity, the "exemplary" woman who dominated, scowled, and disapproved. These dead now wear the figurative hats of darkness ("black fedora" and "shady, turned-down brim"). The poet wonders about the uncle's aspiration ("are there any/ stars inside your black fedora?") and about the aunt's judgement of history ("what slow changes"). These stanzas, like the dream of the grandparents in Eternity in "The Moose," take Bishop outside the anxious experimentations of the world she lives in, but without providing any solace" (84-5). While Costello's interpretation reveals insightful connections between the text, the poet's life, and her earlier writings, I think that it unnecessarily shifts the speaker's affiliations. In the poem, especially toward the end, the speaker identifies more with the aunts than the uncles: the women's vision, however tenuous, seems to offer more hope.

40. See Jeredith Merrin's discussion of Bishop's poetry in "Elizabeth Bishop: Gaiety, Gynness, and Change." Merrin writes: "In shifting critical attention from Bishop's frequently cited 'ruefulness' or 'poignancy' to her playfulness and wit, I would like to bring into focus a new, more complex, image of the poet" (153).
While Bishop's and Szymborska's preoccupations with history are more pronounced than their reflections on gender, their positions toward the dominant historical narratives parallel their take on gender construction: the women pose a number of questions challenging these narratives. Both of them undermine the principles and hierarchies assumed in the construction of historical accounts and question the tacit assumptions underlying the work of historians. Even if Szymborska frequently alludes to major historical events, she still ponders over their apparently trivial aspects. As my discussion will show, both poets tend to focus on issues that for traditional historians may seem minor if not entirely negligible. Moreover, Bishop's and Szymborska's repeated reflections on the misrepresented, underrepresented, or the excluded involve a number of questions about the adequacy of historical records. They put pressure on the assumption of historical "fact," and by undermining the traditional hierarchy of what is historically significant, they engage in constructing counterhistories.

We need to remember, however, that Bishop and Szymborska construct their "counterhistories" in different historical and
political contexts. Until 1989 Szymborska had spent most of her life in a Poland controlled by the Communist regime imposed by the Soviet Union. Consequently, Polish historical narratives published after World War II had to confirm the communist ideology and people were expected to accept them. Szymborska's challenges to the dominant historical discourse frequently stem from her awareness of ideological construction of that discourse. Bishop's reflections on history reveal that she is also aware of the biased nature of historical narratives. She started her life in Canada, a British dominion, and later moved to the U.S. Although Bishop lived in the U.S. long after the collapse of the British empire, she still inherited the colonial past, and her reflections on history challenge the colonial discourse. Thus, in their poetry, Bishop and Szymborska both probe the impact of dominant ideologies on the reconstruction of the past. Their counterhistories suggest the diversity and multiplicity of historical narratives thus challenging the assumptions of linear historical developments.

Discussing the circumstances in post-communist Europe, Katarina Gephardt shows that they are similar to the conditions of colonized countries (1). As Gephardt points out, Anne McClintock has already observed this analogy in her comments on imperial colonization. McClintock explains:

*Imperial colonization ... involves large-scale, territorial domination of the kind that gave late Victorian Britain and European 'lords of humankind' control over 85% of the earth, and the USRR totalitarian rule over Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century.* (295)
McClintock's claim that the Russian and the British dominations of other countries were forms of imperial colonization undermines effectively the often assumed binarism between the Western democracies and the Eastern dictatorships. After all, the past always affects the present, and the colonialism of the nineteenth century still shapes the conditions of both the former colonial empires and the colonies. McClintock, for instance, argues:

the "term 'post-colonial'... is haunted by the very figure of linear'development' [of history] that it sets out to dismantle. Metaphorically, the term 'post-colonialism' marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from 'the pre-colonial', to 'the colonial', to 'the postcolonial'--an unbidden, if disavowed, commitment to linear time and the idea of 'development' (292). Discussions of the post-communist or post-Soviet era in Eastern Europe are also based on the analogous assumptions of the linearity of history. A careful analysis of Bishop's and Szymborska's explorations of history will reveal the ways in which the poets undermine the assumptions of linear time; moreover, while indicating a number of parallels between the Soviet subjugation of Eastern Europe and the European powers' colonization of other countries in the nineteenth century, such an analysis will contribute to the dismantling of the conventional West/East binarism. This erasure, however, will not necessarily lead to the fusion of East and West but to the recognition of more complex and adequate representation of history.

Since colonial empires belong to a more distant past, Bishop's reflections on the traces of colonialism do not convey the sense of urgency which pervades Szymborska's investigations of Polish history.
In Poland, Szymborska experienced the calamities of World War II; afterwards, she lead her life in communist Poland under Soviet totalitarian rule. Bishop could investigate colonial oppression, but she did not experience it directly. Also, during World War II, for Bishop the war front was far away. Thus, even in her comments on the war Bishop could afford much more distance than Szymborska, in spite of the fact that Bishop wrote her poems such as "Roosters" as a protest against the war still going on, and Szymborska composed hers after 1945 as poetic records of a historical disaster.

Born in 1923 in Poland, as a young woman Szymborska witnessed one of the worst traumas in European history—World War II—and, as other Polish writers of that time, she had to come to terms with the burden of both a witness and a survivor. Reflecting on the connections between history and Szymborska's poetry, Czeslaw Milosz writes:

Links between the word and historical experiences can be of various kinds, and there is no simple relationship of cause and effect. And yet a certain fact is not without significance: Szymborska, like Tadeusz Rozewicz and Zbigniew Herbert, writes in the place of the generation of poets who made their debut during the war and did not survive. (17)

Elizabeth Bishop never experienced such catastrophic pressures of history. The war was going on primarily on the other side of the Atlantic. Even though Bishop spent most of the war years at Key West, a U. S. naval base, and in 1941 she experienced the turmoil of the Pearl Harbor attack aftermath, the war did not have a major impact on her life. In a letter to Marianne Moore, she writes:

...I am rather depressed about Key West--and my house--just now. The town is terribly overcrowded...and not a bit like itself. It
is one of those things one can't resent, of course, because it's all necessary, but I really feel that this is no place to be unless one is of some use....I haven't given up the idea of South America. I'm not a bit sure of the ethics of it all--what do you think? If the government stops issuing passports, I guess I'll stay here... (One Art 104-5)

Even at this moment, the war for Bishop does not turn into an everyday horror; since she does not consider herself as "being of use," she implies that she is apart from the war, and so she can afford thinking about passports and travels. In occupied Poland, there was no space left for such considerations--the war engulfed the world.

Thus, explorations of Bishop's and Szymborska's strikingly similar challenges to the dominant historical narratives need to be qualified by the contexts of their different historical circumstances. With such qualifications, however, these challenges imply a number of analogies between cultural, political and social mechanisms that have shaped historical records in Eastern Europe and in Western Europe or the U.S. Also, the analysis of Bishop's and Szymborska's poetical writing of history reveals the significance of historical records for the recognition of the existing power structures. Thus, traditional historical narratives confirm these structures.

Bishop and Szymborska frequently attend to what traditional historians would consider "marginal" or even "negligible." Interestingly, their concerns reflect the recent changes in the forms of traditional historical narration. Reflecting on this change, Roger Chartier writes:

It [the change] had to do with the preference accorded lately to certain forms of narration at the expense of other, more
classical, forms. For example, the interwoven biographical narratives of microhistory do not deal with the same figures or the same constructions as the great structural narratives of global history or the statistical narratives of quantitative history. (17)

This turn to microhistories runs parallel to the shift in the social structure of the Western academe. New generations of scholars emerging from social or racial groups previously denied participation in constructing global history, and whose representation in traditional historical texts was either marginal or nonexistent, began to work on filling in the gaps and attending to the margins. Moreover, those intellectuals who resisted identifying themselves with any school, trend, or even specific field, and consequently occupied the professional margins themselves also explored the outskirts of classical history. The disruption of the traditional center/margin binary was initiated by those who for various reasons found themselves on the margins. Since scholars such as Walter Benjamin and Micheal de Certeau belong to that group, it is worthwhile to present their work before discussing Szymborska's and Bishop's investigations of history.

If Walter Benjamin with his meticulous exploration of seemingly negligible events may seem at first not to fit into the category of "the scholars from the margins," since he does not represent those for whom universities in the past were closed, we only need to remember that he was a German-Jewish writer, and Jews in Europe were always pushed to the margins. Also, while Benjamin engaged in translation, literary criticism, and historical scholarship, he was neither a translator nor a literary critic nor an historian. Such undetermined,
tentative position in the sphere of poetry characterizes Bishop's and Szymborska's work as well—neither of them ever aligned herself with any trend or school. Benjamin's project to work on "capturing the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were," could constitute a particularly apt motto for Bishop's and Szymborska's poetical investigations of such "scraps."

Writings of Michael de Certeau similarly correspond to Bishop's and Szymborska's poetry. De Certeau claims that "[e]ven while setting in motion the machines of the time, the historian remains a prowler...who haunts the margins and the marches" (Chartier 43). While such explorations characterize the oeuvres of both poets, de Certeau's "haunting ground" overlaps in particular with Bishop's. Like Bishop, he was an avid traveler and his journeys included a trip to Brazil, Bishop's adopted country. Moreover, his Christian faith parallels Bishop's Christian (Baptist and Presbyterian) background; and if in contrast to de Certeau she is not a believer, she still confesses to "singing Baptist hymns" in her endeavor to please a seal "interested in music" ("At the Fishhouses" 65). As Jeredith Merrin has pointed out, Bishop's skeptical poetry is nevertheless permeated by Christian imagery. All these correspondences between Bishop's and de Certeau's experiences may at least partly explain their similar takes on history.

De Certeau's investigations, developed from the multiple perspective of a traveler, a Christian, and a historian, make him turn toward the issues of difference and otherness which are also at the
center of Bishop's work. In his discussion of de Certeau's writings, Chartier explains:

For de Certeau, of all the humane sciences history was the most apt, by its heritage or by its program, to represent difference and portray otherness. Hence it retained something of the quest for the word of the other that was the passion...of the ancient Christians whose historian he had become, and something of the encounter with foreignness he had felt with each discovery of a new world, from Brazil to California. (39)

Such multiple perspective in Bishop's writings is also related to her "quest for the word of the other" which in her case becomes primarily a quest for language embracing her own otherness. Yet, since in the West the label of "the other" has been applied to diverse phenomena that did not belong to the main streams of Western culture, Bishop's otherness coincided with the colonial other.

As Marylin May Lombardi has noted, already in her childhood Bishop experienced being different from other children and this experience had a significant impact on her writing. Suffering from a severe asthma, Bishop was often confined to bed and isolated from her peers (Lombardi 46-69). In addition, her father's sudden death which triggered her mother's mental illness turned Bishop into an exile of a kind--she could never be quite at home. Later her life in Brazil, though personally and socially satisfying, still constituted a form of exile and a multiple encounter with difference. On the one hand, Bishop was an outsider among Brazilians but on the other, as an American poet writing in Brazil, she was an outsider among the American poets. But probably the strongest mark of Bishop's otherness in both countries was her lesbian orientation which pushed her beyond the margins of what the
two cultures sanctioned. Thus, Bishop's experience of herself as "the other" must have driven her toward poetical explorations of cultural and historical margins.

Reflecting on an analogous focus in de Certeau's work, Chartier writes:

For de Certeau, the most interesting questions that quantitative history raises come precisely from its inverse and are connected to the welling up of the singular, the exception, and the gap: If historical 'comprehension' is not enclosed within the tautology of legend or has not taken flight into ideology, its primary characteristic is not making a series of data understandable..., but rather never denying the relation that these 'regularities' keep with the 'particularities' which escape them. (43)

Investigations of "the singular, the exception, and the gap," then, create ruptures within the dominant interpretive models of the world thus undermining their universality. Such ruptures of the universal unsettle the supposedly stable binary between the center and its margins, that is between what de Certeau calls the "regularities" and "the particularities;" they also constitute major safeguards against the imposition of any totality--be it ideological or political. Bishop's poetry, then, like de Certeau's scholarship, resists any kind of totalizing impulse by preserving tensions between the rule and its exceptions, between the universal and the particular. And so Bishop's poetical investigations of colonial history both expose and disrupt some totalizing principles of the colonial discourse still functioning in the postcolonial world.

A similar resistance to totalizing principles becomes a significant feature in Szymborska's work: she also "haunts the margins"
and explores the relationship between the commonly accepted patterns and what escapes them. In Poland, however, the communist discourse was not so much rooted in Polish history, but suddenly imposed by the Soviet regime. In this situation, traditional Polish historical narratives had to be replaced by narratives in support of communist ideology. Consequently, some of the past records were hidden, damaged, or censored and so not available to the public. The regime hoped that with time people would absorb the implemented misrepresentations of historical records and would not ask about the deleted pages. To help people forget the history they were not supposed to remember, the regime resorted not only to propaganda and censorship but also to persecution of those who were ready to challenge the official history. In communist Poland, then, historical investigations could be a dangerous form of political activity.

As I explain in the next chapter, Szymborska at first believed in communism and so must have practiced a form of self-censorship to be published. Later, when she rejected the communist ideology, she began undermining it in her poems. Her initial commitment to communism and her close encounter with censorship, however, must have been crucial in developing her sensibility to various forms of misrepresentations. When she reflects on history, she reveals the biased nature of historical narratives and she alludes to the purposeful erasures of records undermining the imposed communist ideology.
Dorota Wojda has observed that Szymborska's poetical language frequently evokes silence and she has discussed this language in the context of the twentieth century "aesthetics of silence." (31). In "Museum," for instance, Szymborska mentions "silent triumphs"; in "An Unexpected Meeting" people "fall silent in mid-sentence (20)"; when she reflects on the nature of water, she observes, "I would have to name you in every tongue,/ pronouncing all the vowels at once/ while also keeping silent--for the sake of the lake/ that still goes unnamed (28)"; and, finally, in "A Large Number," she admits, "I whisper my reply to my stentorionic calling./ I can't tell you how much I pass over in silence" (95). Wojda gives many more examples of Szymborska's poems dealing with stillness, calmness, silence, quietness, or whispering (32). She also brings to our attention the poet's propensity for using phrases that suggest silence without actually employing the word. For instance, in "The Rest" from Salt, Szymborska alludes to Shakespearean phrase "The rest is silence," and in "Coloratura," she closes the poem pronouncing "And we're all ears" (24). In many other poems, she starts a sentence and does not finish it, or she assumes a deeply ironical point of view, thus not really saying what she means. Szymborska's poetry, then, may be seen as an art of silence which in Szymborska's case is related not only to the aesthetic trend of silence but also to Polish history and politics.

This poetics of silence marks Elizabeth Bishop's work as well. For Octavio Paz, for instance, the exceptional appeal of Bishop's poetry stems from its moments of silence. He writes:
We have forgotten that poetry is not in what words say but in what is said between them, that which appears fleetingly in pauses and silences...the enormous power of reticence—that is the great lesson of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop" (Schwartz & Estess 213).

We must not forget, however, that Bishop did not develop her art of silence in a vacuum, but in a specific social and historical environment. In Bishop's personal experience, "pauses and silences" enveloped her family tragedies—her father's death, her mother's mental breakdown, her alcoholism, and finally her own lesbian identity. Thus, although Bishop lived in very different circumstances than Szymborska, and never wrote under the pressure of an official political censorship, she must have keenly felt the burden of the suppressed, the erased, and the unsaid. During her childhood years, her mother's mental disease became a sinister taboo. Bishop's story "In the Village," a reminiscence of her mother's psychological disintegration after her father's death, reflects her family's endeavors to protect the girl by not speaking about her parents. The girl adopts the same strategy herself, and when her mother is placed in a mental institution, she only observes:

Every week my grandmother sends off a package. [...] Every Monday afternoon I go past the blacksmith's shop with the package under my arm, hiding the address of the sanatorium with my arm and my other hand. (Collected Prose 272, 273)

The symbolic concealment of the mother's address and the denial of her mental condition turn the absent woman into a haunting presence in the girl's life. The most obvious manifestation of this presence is the
mother's muted scream—the girl is aware of the scream though she can no longer hear it.

While in her childhood Bishop suppressed the awareness of her mother's mental illness, and in this sense practiced a form of self censorship, in her mature years, she felt she had to censor her own lesbian sexuality. Yet, although Bishop's self-imposed constraints functioned primarily on a personal level and so were of a different nature than the communist censorship experienced by Szymborska, these personal constraints were obviously rooted in socially sanctioned practices and conventions. Bishop herself recognized the powerful hold of her "era," her "sex," her "situation," and "education" over her work (Goldensohn 63); and these particular circumstances led the poet toward her poetics of silence. When she investigates history, she reflects on what was erased from or distorted in the preserved narratives.

Like Szymborska, Bishop creates moments of silence, attending to the unsaid, or using the words that evoke silence. In "The Map," for instance, "waters are more quiet than the land is" (3); the sky in "Large Bad Picture" is "still" (11); Bishop's Man-moth travels in "silent trains" ("The Man-Moth" 14); the poet recalls that watching biblical illustrations, she "[a]lways [felt] the silence" ("Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete concordance" 57), and in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," "the big symbolic birds keep quiet" (91). At the same time, however, Bishop usually focuses more on the lost visual traces than the lost historical voices. Thus she observes "unseen hysterical birds" ("Florida"), writes about the house "hidden/in the high fog" ("Song for
"The Rainy season" 101), or the world enveloped in "moonlight and mist" ("The Moose" 171). At times she also combines the loss of vision with the loss of sound. In "The End of March" (179) "everything [is] withdrawn;" the wind "bl[ows] back the low, inaudible rollers/ in upright, steely mist/," and a kite string misses the kite; in yet another poem, "Crusoe in England" (162), the island is "un-re-discovered, un-renamable."

In Bishop's poetry, as in Szymborska's, silent moments assume various forms—unfinished sentences, implied but invisible objects, implied, but never said words—and serve a number of different purposes. They expose the limitations of human perception, foreground the gap between language and the material world, reveal the inevitably fragmentary nature of knowledge, and finally direct our attention toward knowledge that has been deliberately suppressed or erased. Consequently, when Szymborska and Bishop develop their poetical reflections on the past, they make it clear that all historical records are full of gaps and holes, and so history can never become a complete, all encompassing narrative. Clearly, in their poetry Bishop's and Szymborska's poetic challenges of history and historical narratives are parallel to the challenges of postmodern historians.

Bishop frequently fuses her challenge of traditional historical narratives with meticulous explorations of landscapes; consequently her critics perceive her as a "geographer" rather than an "historian." In fact, Bishop herself has contributed to such perception. Unlike Szymborska who spent most of her life in Cracow, Bishop, who often
traveled and lived abroad, presented herself as a geographer. The very titles of the three volumes of her poetry: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*, as well as the opening of both *North & South* and *The Complete Poems* with "The Map" betray the poet's fascination with geography. But, as Thomas Travisano has pointed out, Bishop's interest in history can be traced in her early geographical poems, and in the last two volumes of her poetry it comes to the foreground.\(^7\) Travisano claims further that critical interpretations of Bishop's work based on her symbolic persona of a "map-maker" are too limited. He writes:

Many critics incautiously regard it ["The Map"] as the key to all Bishop's writing, treating an ambiguous line from a tensely balanced early poem ["More delicate than the historians are the mapmakers colors"] as if it were a bold sign pointing down a straight road. These critics tend to overstress Bishop as "mapmaker" and to understress Bishop as "historian." ... [T]he poem is really poised ambivalently between the attractions of the abstracting, fiction-making functions of the map-maker and the more matter-of-fact observation and judgement of the historian. (40)

Yet acknowledging this ambivalence of Bishop's phrase, Travisano still sees the activities of a "mapmaker" and a "historian" as separate: while the "map-maker" constructs abstract "fictions," the historian produces "the matter-of-fact" judgements. Bishop's poem, however, calls into question the very division between history and geography. In the final stanza, the poem implies that both historians and topographers produce forms of discourse different from the non-discursive nature of the real world. Moreover, history and geography become indelibly intertwined. The colors on the map refer, even if indirectly, to the
countries' national colors. The poem's question: "Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?" (3) brings to mind colonial conquests imposing imperial flags over the vanquished territories. In this context, the often-quoted line, "Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West" acquires a deeply ironic flavor: suddenly, the maps seem to represent not so much "[w]hat suits the character or the native waters best" (3), but rather what suits the colonizer. Even if Bishop claims that "the map-makers' colors" are "[m]ore delicate than the historians,'" the delicacy of the colors does not preclude the brutality that underlies them. While focusing on the map, the poem still reveals the intertwinings of history and topography, blurring the clear-cut distinction between them. Historical events are always geographically located, while maps emerge from history and reflect particular historical moments.

In a number of poems, Bishop fuses the perspective of a geographer with that of a historian, and re-charting the maps of history she explores the blank spaces of the past. Her most famous poetical exploration of history, "Brazil, January 1, 1502," compresses also two different temporal frameworks: the moment of Bishop's own arrival to Brazil, and the arrival of the Portuguese explorers. Although, atypically for Bishop, the poem focuses on a militaristic and "major" historical event, it still examines what has been misrepresented or ignored in the traditional records. As Bishop said in her letter to Robert Lowell, working on the poem, she used "the cliche about the landscape looking like a tapestry"; the ways she
employs this cliche reveal how a Western vision inscribes its own seductive images onto the Brazilian landscape in order to subsume and destroy the foreign.

As the poem opens, Bishop provisionally conflates the Western twentieth-century perception of Brazil with the colonists' perspective: "Januaries, Nature greets our eyes/ exactly as she must have greeted theirs." This greeting, however, becomes highly ambivalent when the colonists/travelers watch "giant leaves," "giant water lilies," and "monster ferns." Such visual perception of the monstrous immediately exposes the Western impulse to demonize what cannot be contained within occidental cultural grids and to conceive the strange in terms of the West: Nature, always already feminine, in Brazil becomes also monstrous. The strange is thus familiarized, while it is still held outside of what the colonists' culture legitimizes. Eventually, however, the illegitimate is restored to the culture through its aesthetic recreation into the object of art. In the poem, the Brazilian landscape, suddenly "fresh as if just finished/ and taken off the frame" is trimmed down to match the size of European tapestry, and thus securely anchored in Western art.

The next image in the poem reinforces the aesthetically alluring vision of the land where "big symbolic birds," [their] "beaks agape," "keep quiet." In the landscape thus muted, Europeans inscribe the fundamental narrative of their culture--the Bible. However, as Bonnie Costello has noticed, in their efforts to recreate the dreamed-of paradise, they ironically reenact the story of the fall: "Still in
the foreground there is Sin:/ five sooty dragons near some massy rocks." With the emergence of Sin, the poem's rhetoric becomes more violent and its imagery reflects the struggle for domination:

The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts splattered and overlapping threatened from underneath by moss in lovely hell-green flames, attacked above by scaling ladder vines...

And yet even as Bishop reveals the violence, she still preserves the aesthetic appeal of the landscape: the "flames" may well be "hellish," but they are still "lovely," at least for the Western eyes. But such fusion of the brutal with the aesthetic undermines the traditional European notion of transcendent beauty. In Bishop's text, beauty rooted in the material world never goes beyond the boundaries of that world, and the realm of aesthetics never subsumes ethics. In fact, as all images in Bishop's poem are worked out within the human world, all carry ethical overtones. Even a seemingly innocent verbal "love-game," "one leaf yes and one leaf no (in Portuguese)" turns into the culminating though at the same time suppressed image of rape and violence. It is first introduced in the erotically colored world of Nature:

The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes are on the smaller, female one, back-to, her wicked tail straight up and over, red as a red-hot wire.

The image, an obvious inscription of the colonizer's appetites onto the landscape, reveals the bias of the new-comers' very perception: they see their own desires. The sexually charged tension is carried over

166
into the last stanza to be finally released through the image of rape as the Christian explorers, "hard as nails"..."rip away into the hanging fabric, each out to catch an Indian for himself."

Bishop's fusion of the colonial enterprise with sexual violence worked out within the "tapestried landscape" not only marks the colonists' brutality as masculine but also exposes the violence permeating the Western sphere of art. Kandinsky's comment on his painting process confirms Bishop's perception of art as a potential cover for brutality:

Thus I learned to battle with the canvas, to come to know it as a being resisting my wish (dream), and to bend it forcibly to this wish. At first it stands there like a pure chaste virgin... And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist." 

Although most probably Bishop did not read the painter's observation, she seems to revise and challenge it. While in the course of his "battles" Kandinsky fills in his empty canvas, Bishop reverses the process. The colonists' invasion tears apart the embroidered fabric and exposes the colonial crime behind the "tapestried landscape" (91). Suddenly, the new territory becomes like Kandinsky's unpainted canvas; the invaders have no power to "bend it forcibly to [their] wish[es]," and the Indian women, "retreating, always retreating behind [the fabric]" remain inaccessible, while their language merges indistinguishably with the birds' calls. On the one hand, the closing image reveals the colonizers' practice of conflating other cultures
with nature in order to exploit them, but on the other it exposes the limitations of Western discourses.

Dismantling the colonial vision of the exotic land, Bishop never assumes the voices of Indian women, and so she unmasksthe limited, fragmentary nature of Western discourse that cannot adequately come to terms with experiences outside its own frame of reference. This gesture of respectful silence seems particularly significant in the poem which fairly consistently uses gender division to mark the colonists as male and the colonized as female. Bishop, however, refuses to gloss over cultural differences with gender categories since she is aware of her own historical and artistic heritage which includes the conquest.

In the first two sections of the poem, the steady gaze of the male explorers scrutinizing the exotic land merges with the ungendered gaze of "our eyes." The minute descriptions of the scenery bring to mind the cinematic technique of the close-up and create the impression of the overwhelming presence of Nature. In the last section, though, in which the description turns into an historical narrative of the invasion, the spatial distance between the viewer and the scene increases considerably. As Travisano has noticed, the Christian invaders, "tiny as nails," are "really an affront to the landscape [which] in magnificence ...dwarfs them."13 Turned into small, puppet-like figures, the Christians are located outside the narrative of the glorious conquest. At the same time, the unrelenting retreat of the chased women leads them into the dark, uninscribed territory where Western vision fails. In its final movement, then, the poem deprives
the colonists of that vision which, as Edward Said has observed, has become a powerful means for the West to confine other cultures within one fixed perspective. Embodying this fixed perspective in an art object, Bishop's poem not only exposes the capacity of European art to master the foreign but it also undermines the very concept of pure aesthetics. Bishop weaves in her symbolic tapestry Christian and imperialist ideology of the invaders, revealing the political underpinnings of a work of art. Later, tearing the canvas, she unmasks the colonial brutality enveloped in the tapestry's bright colors.

Clearly, in Bishop's poem, all claims to the universal character of Western vision fall apart. At the center of the Western perspective, there is a yawning chasm which can neither be filled in nor illuminated. Any insight into the uncharted territory would depend upon the perspective of the colonized, embodied in the poem by the chased Indian women. In this context, the implied rape of Indian women works on a literal as well as a symbolic level: while it awakens the memory of the atrocities accompanying the supposedly glorious conquest, it also presents the colonial enterprise as a rape of another culture.

The colonists, however, would discard Bishop's rendition of their conquests since they acknowledge the Western perspective and Western discourse only. Bishop's poem, then, not only questions the adequacy of Western historical records but also exposes the totalitarian character of Western discourse with its claim of universality carried out through distortions or erasures of any circumstances that bear a potential to undermine such claims.
In her writings, Szymborska, like Bishop, often challenges established views of the world and questions the adequacy of historical records, including art objects. Her poem "A Medieval Miniature," transforms the description of a painting into the poet's reflections on the representation as well as its omissions. From the very beginning of the poem, in an apparently simple image of a duke and his entourage moving through the serene landscape toward their castle, Szymborska draws our attention to the painterly medium itself. With her ironic sense of humor, the poet uses ungrammatical forms of superlatives in phrases such as "the verdantest of hills" or "the silkiest of cloaks," thus bringing to the scene a theatrically comic quality. Moreover, as these superlatives distort language, Szymborska dispels any illusions about its transparency. Her rhetorical strategy, then, parallels the painter's, strongly implying that representation—be it linguistic or visual—does not provide immediate access to the world it presumes to reflect, but rather reconstitutes and restrains it, like Bishop's tapestry. The poem, then, encourages us to look behind the painted screen, especially further on, where Szymborska explicitly comments on the world which has been left out:

Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary, crosseyed and out at elbows, is most manifestly left out of the scene.

Even the least pressing of questions burgherish or peasantish cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.

And not even the eaglest of eyes could spy even the tiniest of gallows—nothing casts the slightest shadow of doubt.
Thus they proceed most pleasantly through this feudalest of realisms.

These lines allude to various forces operating in culture that resulted in the exclusions in the medieval miniature and that most likely affect other kinds of representation. In the Middle Ages, the belief in the omnipresent beauty and harmony of the universe—the material expression of God's absolute perfection—constituted one of the dominant philosophical tenets. The fusion of the beautiful with the godly meant also the fusion of the beautiful and the good (Eco 22). Consequently, a medieval work of art was supposed to constitute a harmonious whole merging beauty with goodness. The idea of such harmony is at least partly responsible for omissions of any disruptive elements in the miniature painting Szymborska examines in her poem. The image of "gallows" as well as of the "downcast and weary" would unsettle the flawless harmony of the scene, turning it into a rather ominous, dissonant vision of the world.

This exclusionary and harmonious representation of the world, however, does not stem solely from the medieval theories of art. Szymborska makes it clear that the whole field of aesthetics is powerfully influenced by social and political systems whose preservation depends in large measure on the erasure of any doubts about their efficacy. In "A Medieval Miniature" the representatives of the aristocracy who wield power are highly idealized, and their image—aesthetically appealing like the world they appear in—is free from any antagonisms. And yet the very form of the painting betrays the limited
scope of its record: the miniature dwarfs the powerful and suggests that the painting includes only a minor fraction of the actual world. Moreover, all too aware from her own early experience that political regimes translate their ideologies into art, Szymborska sarcastically calls this kind of representation the "feudalest of realisms," and emphasizes the significance of ideology again in the final stanza of the poem:

This same, however, has seen to the scene's balance:
   it has given them their Hell in the next frame.
Oh yes, all that went without
   even the silentest of sayings.

The above lines suggest that representational exclusions manifest themselves in another form. The suppressed horror of the actual world is transformed into the image of hell which, according to Christian belief, awaits the sinners. On the surface, then, the poem comes to an end with an apparently easy resolution of meted out justice. However, since Szymborska undermines the reliability of the miniature's representation, sarcastically qualifying its "realism" as feudal, the concluding vision of Hell is neither more real nor less feudal than the preceding images. The poem, then, invites us to explore the exclusions of the underprivileged, to question what is included, to look behind the mask of representation, and finally, to examine various forces operating in social structures that participate in shaping historical records.

Such reflections on the past and on the dubious, fragmentary nature of its traces constantly recur in both Bishop's and Szymborska's
work, even though, as I mentioned earlier, in Szymborska's writings, they are much more pronounced. "A Medieval Miniature" belongs to a much larger body of Szymborska's poems, such as "Still" (16), "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo" (42), "Vietnam" (90), "Hitler's First Photograph" (196), explicitly investigating textual representations of the past and exposing either ideological distortions of historical records or their incompleteness. Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502," though, constitutes one of very few poems with an historical event at its center, and since two of those poems—"A Miracle for Breakfast" and "Roosters"—reflect Bishop's political position, I will discuss them in the next chapter on poetry and politics. But even in the poems not focused on a particular historical event, Bishop frequently reflects on the past examining the ways the dominant ideology is woven into the fabric of history, and, like Szymborska, she also challenges traditional constructions of history.

Yet, Bishop and Szymborska undermine totalizing historical narratives in a somewhat different fashion, with Szymborska focusing primarily on the exclusionary nature of representational frameworks, and consequently developing her poetical debates on a more abstract level than Bishop. Even when she contemplates the medieval miniature, she does not endeavor to "re-paint" the image in language, but instead creates catalogs of things located within the frame and those left out. Bishop's language is of a painterly nature: she attends more to the texture than the frame of representation, and reveals its oblique character. Like her symbolic Brazilian tapestry, representations embody
specific desires, beliefs, values, and ideologies; they are never neutral or transparent. Such a concept of representation significantly shapes Bishop's investigations of history which she frequently fuses with her broader reflections on the capacity of human knowledge.

This fusion characterizes Bishop's travel poems which critics most often interpret psychologically, claiming that in these poems Bishop is projecting her personality onto the external world. Lorrie Goldenshn, for instance, sees Bishop's landscape as "the outward semblance of the self" (8). But as Bonnie Costello has observed, Bishop's travel poems, "are not only psychological and epistemological but political, especially for the North American" (139). I would only add here that they are also historical. One of these poems, "Cape Breton" inquires into a complex amalgam of forces, including history, that shape human knowledge. Composed after her 1948 trip to Nova Scotia, the poem reveals the futility of human endeavors to translate the landscape into a coherent narrative or a complete image, with subtle implications that such translations would have to include the region's history. Characteristically for Bishop, her vantage point in this poem belongs to the margins. As the poem opens, Bishop contemplates the borderline between the land and the sea, her often used symbol of other boundaries and margins.

Out on the high "bird islands," Ciboux and Hertford, the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand with their backs to the mainland in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff's brown grass-frayed edge, while the few sheep pastured there go "Baaa, baaa." (Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)
Opening her stanza with "out," Bishop moves away from the mainland, and as in her other poems, she reverses the commonly assumed hierarchy of significance. The image of the birds turning their backs to the mainland—the embodiment of the human world—suddenly dwarfs this world and reveals the vastness of the beyond. Human affairs appear not only provisional and fragile, but also insignificant. They deserve no more than a parenthetical remark, just like the frightened sheep stampeding to their death. The other, larger, non-human universe comes to the foreground. But such a foreground is hardly satisfying: as it cannot be contained within the human signifying systems, it can be neither comprehended nor domesticated. The water's apparent "weaving" never turns into a meaningful narrative. In "Cape Breton," then, unlike in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the landscape (which is never covered by an accommodating tapestry) preserves its otherness. As the omnipresent mist enshrouds the scenery "drift[ing]" like "the ghosts of glaciers," it evokes the land's distant past. The allusion to the ice age affects the poem's temporal framework, diminishing the history of humankind to a minute mark in broader history, and by the end of the second stanza, the whole human world becomes marginalized. Once the story of humanity is engulfed within the history of the universe, the whole concept of history as an ordered, linear narrative becomes highly questionable. Thus, when in the third stanza Bishop turns to our human world, she cannot construct a coherent narrative that could represent it adequately. The scattered imprints of human life do not yield a satisfying story:
The wild road clambers along the brink of the coast. On it stand occasional small yellow bulldozers, but without their drivers, because today is Sunday.

Bishop's text develops along the margins of narration just like the road that follows the borderline between the land and the sea, leading to unspecified destination. The bulldozers serve no purpose, and the comment "because today is Sunday" does not explain anything. The scenery becomes even more complex with the subtle intrusion of the past upon the poet's contemplations of the landscape:

The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills like lost quartz arrowheads.

With the allusion to American Indians, the simile weaves the past into the present, stirring the delicate undercurrent of history behind Bishop's contemplations of the scene. Aware of the purposeful erasures of Indian history from the narratives of the West, in a symbolic gesture of protest, Bishop reinscribes the Indian relics onto the Christian churches, thus foregrounding the traces of the Indian past. However, she leaves us with these fragile traces, the mark of her simile rather than the landscape, and does not attempt to script the Indian past. Such a restraint implies the poet's acknowledgement of her own imprisonment within the epistemological grids of the West that cannot deal adequately with the history of other cultures.

Further on, Bishop's meditations on the unbridgeable gap between the human and the non-human world acquire a delicate historical slant:

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned, unless the road is holding it back, in the interior where we cannot see,
where deep lakes are reputed to be,
and disused trails and mountains of rock
and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones--
and these regions now have little to say for themselves
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets.

The landscape's withheld meaning belongs not only to the impenetrable world of nature", but also to the unscripted history of American Indians. The image of the regions articulating themselves through the singing birds foreshadows the Indian women from "Brazil, January 1, 1502" who call each other in bird-like voices. Significantly, in both texts Bishop reveals how Europeans would fuse other cultures with nature for their own political purposes. In "Brazil..." she exposes this fusion as a colonial means to justify the Western invasion and exploitation of the discovered lands. In "Cape Breton" she implies that the Western practice of merging other cultures with nature stems in great measure from the limitations of Western discourses that cannot yield an adequate rendition of any other discursive modes.

Bishop's poem, then, constitutes also an exploration of the limits of our discourse. Thus, Marilyn May Lombardi's comment that in "Cape Breton" Bishop is "transmuting the natural world into script" should be qualified. While the comparison of "burnt forests" to "admirable scriptures" may reveal Bishop's desire to script the landscape, this desire is never fulfilled. Her language shows that the external world cannot be adequately "transmuted into script:" as Bishop's text implies, such a transmutation would have to include not
only a complete description of the natural landscape—in itself, an impossible task—but also the region's history, the current affairs, and the life-stories of villagers. Bishop's poetic script, then, discloses only partial images of nature, alludes to the traces of the past, and catches momentary glimpses of the inhabitants' lives; but it neither weaves the landscape's complete image nor translates it into an organized narrative. The two final stanzas emphasize this fragmentary nature of representation even more, referring to what cannot be seen and foregrounding the gap between the continuity of the verse and the discontinuity of the descriptions:

A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes, packed with people, even to its step.
It passes the closed roadside stand, the closed schoolhouse,
It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water.

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.

The bus's route, only a thin trail in the landscape, parallels the poem's narrative line which does not provide an access to the surrounding world: the roadside stand as well as the schoolhouse remain closed, and the man's house invisible. The observed incidents constitute a rather haphazard list, and the final image with the spreading mist and "dark brooks" becomes an inversion of any clarifying
vision. The whole poem constitutes a rather fragmentary palimpsest which by its very nature resists all totalizing forms of representation.

Bishop again juxtaposes the ordered patterns of meanings and the messy clutter of life in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"; as in "Cape Breton," she reveals the futility of any endeavors to "transmute the world into script." The poem develops in three movements, exploring three distinct spheres of human experience: the first one focuses on the engravings representing the ancient monuments and the biblical world; the second presents the memories of the poet's travels, and the shortest, third movement imaginatively recreates the biblical Nativity scene. Yet as the poem develops, the clear-cut division between the three sections becomes questionable. The travel experiences intrude upon the poet's reading of the Bible as much as the biblical text shapes the experience of her travels, and the imaginative recreation of the Nativity scene hinges both on the Bible and the travels. Moreover, Bishop's poetic exploration of the relationship between the text and the memories of actual experiences includes a subtle commentary on the traditional concepts of history. After all, the driving force behind the whole poem is the Bible which constitutes the prototype of History in the West.

The poem opens with Bishop's regretful observation, "Thus should have been our travels: serious, engravable" (57). These words imply that browsing through the engraved illustrations the poet is frustrated by the gap dividing the world of lived experience and its textual
representation. Yet as the text with its order still offers some means
to chart the poet's travel memories, she begins to explore the text.

The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
innumerable, though equally sad and still,
are foreign.

Significantly, the introductory image of the Seven Wonders does not
quite fit the poem's title: after all the Wonders embodying the
outstanding achievements of the ancients do not belong to the biblical
world. Commenting on this inconsistency in one of her letters, Bishop
observes: "...and I really shouldn't have used that title if I wanted
to drag in the books we had with the Seven Wonders of the World in
them, too" (Letters 307). Yet, even if the supposed inadequacy of the
title was not intended, its effects on the text are too significant to
be ignored. The biblical narrative opens as the material, temporal
world is created and closes with the death of this world which
symbolically opens the gates to the eternal. According to the Bible,
History which encompasses the whole world develops toward its closure,
the transcendent telos endowing History with meaning. However, Bishop's
initial image of the ancient monuments disrupts the narrative continuum
of the Bible, exposing its supposed totality as fiction and so
questioning the whole paradigm.

Such an opening recalls "Cape Breton," which from the very
beginning investigates the terrain that does not belong to the
mainland. In both poems, Bishop, like de Certeau's exemplary historian,
"haunts the margins and the marches" still preserving the tension
between the main paradigm and what escapes it. Moreover, the poet locates herself on the textual outskirts. In "Over 2,000 Illustrations" she identifies with the world that is not included within the dominant narrative of the West: in contrast to the "foreign" scenes from the Bible, the Seven Wonders ("tired" and "familiar") have a domestic touch. Yet, as Bonnie Costello has observed, Bishop does acknowledge the Bible as a script of "her cultural inheritance" (133) and she shifts her attention away from the Seven Wonders, exploring the Bible instead. The biblical narrative, however, has already been disrupted, so the poet's meditations are marked by an unresolved tension between the Bible and the intrusion of other narrative possibilities. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, Bishop's reflections are clearly affected by her adult experiences of a traveler:

Often the squatting Arab,
or group of Arabs, plotting, probably,
against our Christian Empire,
while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand
points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher.
The branches of the date-palms look like files.
The cobbled courtyard, where the Well is dry,
is like a diagram, the brickwork conduits
are vast and obvious, the human figure
far gone in history or theology,
gone with its camel or its faithful horse.
Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds
suspended on invisible threads above the Site,
or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by threads.

Not only does the poet describe the pictures she remembers, but she also provides a commentary that locates the Bible within history and politics. Her ironic comment on the Arabs' conspiracy against "our Christian Empire" (emphasis mine) exposes the Western construction of
the Arab as a major threat to the West, the construction grounded in the implied we/they binary; as much as we, the Westerners are naturally honest, just, trustworthy, and overall ethical, they, the Arabs, turn out to be treacherous, corrupt, or devious. Edward Said summed up the problem in a brief observation: "...if the Arab occupies space enough for attention [in the West], it is as a negative value. He is seen as the disrupter of...the West's existence" (Orientalism 286). But it is precisely the Arab as a disrupter and so a threat to the West who constitutes one of the major drives behind Western politics to dominate the Arab world as well as to wedge political campaigns against the Orient. Translated by Western culture, the Arab becomes a backdrop against which the West can valorize and confirm itself. Bishop's poem alludes to this dependence of the West on the East in the image of the Arab who "points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher," the central symbol of Christianity as well as of History's telos.

But in spite of such an emphatic assertion of the symbol, in the course of the poem the Biblical paradigm of history disintegrates. While the emphatic assertion of the central symbol pointing to the Christian as well as historical telos manifests its powerful hold on Western culture, this emphasis becomes also a symptom of the uncertain nature of the telos and a need of its continual re-assertion. The precise geometry of the images is unreliable as well. Bishop cannot resolve if the absent human figure is "far gone in history or in theology," and so she cannot decide if the Bible should be read in terms of theological or historical discourses. Thus, the poet's
attention drifts toward her chaotic world of travel even though she is still contemplating the Scripture:

The eye drops, weighted, through the lines that burin made, the lines that move apart like ripples above sand, dispersing storms, God's spreading fingerprint, and painfully, finally, that ignite in watery prismatic white-and-blue.

Bishop's "eye" no longer traces the biblical patterns but instead "drops" "through the lines" reinscribing the Bible within the temporal framework while she begins contemplating her travels.

In the second section of the poem, Bishop endeavors to organize her memories in the biblical fashion, but the Bible appears useless to chart the actual experience. In the place of ordered images, the poet can only offer rather chaotic recollections: "the touching bleat of goats; (57) the marching Collegians; "the dead man...in a blue arcade;" "the dead volcanoes" and other, equally disjointed images. There is a discrepancy between the implied progress and continuum of the poet's journey and the discontinuity of the recalled images. But the main difficulty in imposing any order onto the travel memories stems not from this lack of narrative continuity--after all the biblical illustrations are discontinuous as well--but from the lack of an ordering center--the biblical "Tomb" "the Pit" "the Sepulcher." The poet's travels, then, turn into her failed quest for such a center, the end and the telos of her journey, with her sudden confrontation of an empty grave.

183
I saw what frightened me most of all:
A holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin
open to every wind from the pink desert.
An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
with exhortations, yellowed
as scattered cattle-teeth;
half-filled with dust, not even dust
of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.
In a smart burnoose Khadur looked on amused.

The poet becomes disturbed at the sight of a grave, more desecrated
than holy, emptied of both the dust of the prophet and a possible
meaning. The grave "open to every wind," its carved inscriptions
eroded, undermines the biblical symbolism of the Tomb as the container
of the transcendental telos, essential for ordering and making sense
of history in Western thought. The prophet's grave, immersed in
history, and still in the process of disintegration, challenges that
paradigm of making sense without offering an alternative. Moreover, the
image of the grave, which unlike Christ's Tomb, is only "one of a
group," defies the imposition of one center-oriented order on the
experience. As the cluster of graves suggests multiple, flexible
possibilities of ordering and a diversity of historical narratives, the
traditional Christian as well as Hegelian concepts of history as
totality fall apart.

Significantly, the development of Hegelian approaches to history
constituted the major trend in historical studies during early
Modernism, particularly in France. Thus, the poem's implication of a
number of potential orders, rather than one--and so a number of
histories, rather than one all-encompassing historical narrative--
manifests a collapse of Modern paradigms with their claims of universality. The collapse of universal orders, in particular the biblical teleological paradigm, is emphasized further by Khadour who in contrast to the disturbed poet is merely "amused" as he is watching the travelers. Khadour embodies what Said identified as the Western construction of the Arab: "the disrupter of...the West's existence" and consequently of Western paradigms. Moreover, Khadour's amusement makes us aware that the traveler's unsettling experience is mediated through the Bible. It is not so much the empty grave that frightens her, as the unbridgeable gap between the grave and the Tomb. The gap erases the possibility of ordering the poet's excursive experience in a coherent cause-and-effect fashion; she concludes, "Everything only connected by "and" and "and." Commenting on these words, Bonnie Costello has observed, "parataxis (the long scheme of enumeration and sequence as opposed to hierotaxis or subordination) is, of course, the major syntax of the Bible itself" (135). Yet, within the biblical framework with its transcendental telos, such enumerations are eventually arranged in a meaningful hierarchical order, and so frustrated by her experience, Bishop turns back to the Bible in hopes to regain the lost world:

Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen this old Nativity while we were at it? --the dark ajar; the rocks breaking with light, an undisturbed, unbreathing flame, colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw, and, lulled within, a family with pets, --and looked and looked our infant sight away.

While in the previous section Bishop has been looking for the sense of her journey from the point of its end, in the third stanza she shifts
her attention away from the end to the symbolic beginning. Suddenly, the grave's darkness, frightening and alienating, is set "ajar," disclosing the familiar Nativity scene, homely and inviting. But the poet never loses the awareness that her sense of reunion with the world is imaginary as she cannot erase the experiences belonging to her history. Thus, just for a moment, using her imagination, Bishop defies history to feel at home in the world.

In spite of Bishop's challenge of Hegelian paradigms of history, her ideas still partially overlap with the concepts of some Hegelian thinkers, such as Jean Hyppolite, Eric Weil, or Alexadre Kojeve who consider history the prime cause of human alienation from the world. Yet they still believe that at the end of history, this alienation will be overcome. Bishop's poem, however, undermines the idea of history as progress which separates human beings from the world only to reinstate the final reunion on a higher level. For Bishop, history becomes a disjointed collection of occurrences defying hierarchical orders and consequently undermining the idea of progress. Moreover, with the collapse of order and progress, the traditional center/margin binary collapses as well. Bishop's travel records, then, include incidents that because of their supposed marginality would never enter traditional historical narratives. Such records not only disclose gaps in traditional history but also implicate other narrative possibilities.

In many other travel poems Bishop continually exposes the limitations of Western paradigms of history that cannot accommodate
histories of other cultures. In "Questions of Travel," for instance, she cannot come to terms with what she perceives as the excess of impressions, so she complains:

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams hurry too rapidly 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 eyes.

But Bishop does not end up her reflections with complaints about the foreign lands. Rather, she acknowledges the limitations of her own perception, and she emphasizes the provisional nature of all historical reconstructions:

But surely it would have been a pity

[...]

--Yes, a pity not to have pondered, blurr'dly and inconclusively, on what connection can exist for centuries between the crudest wooden footwear and, careful and finicky, the whittled fantasies of wooden cages. --Never to have studied history in the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.

Challenging traditional historical discourse, Bishop also endeavors to trace history by attending to seemingly insignificant objects or by insistently disclosing and then exploring the holes in the narratives of Western history. Such limitations of Western discourses and paradigms become particularly pronounced when in the course of her travels Bishop attempts to make use of them in the context of other cultures.

Although Szymborska does not develop her historical investigations within the framework of travels to foreign lands, as I have already
pointed out, she frequently raises issues analogous to Bishop's concerns: she questions the linearity of historical narratives, reveals their incompleteness, and exposes their political bias. These analogies can be explained partly by the parallel hierarchies of significance underlying both Western and Eastern dominant historical narratives and thus undermining the traditional West/East binary. For instance, within both Western and Eastern paradigms of history, violence becomes a necessary component of historical progress.\textsuperscript{13} In her poems Szymborska, like Bishop, questions the necessity of violence and undermines the commonly assumed hierarchies of significance. Unlike Bishop's, however, Szymborska's reflections on the process of constructing historical narratives are often explicit. In "No Title Required,"\textsuperscript{14} a poem from her 1996 volume \textit{The End and the Beginning}, she records a serene incident from her own, apparently negligible experience and juxtaposes it to the events historians examine:

\begin{quote}
It has come to this: I'm sitting under a tree, 
beside a river 
on a sunny morning. 
It's an insignificant event 
and won't go down in history. 
It's no battles and pacts, 
where motives are scrutinized, 
or noteworthy tyrannicides.

And yet I'm sitting by this river, that's a fact. 
And since I'm here 
I must have come from somewhere, 
and before that 
I must have turned up in many other places, 
exactly like the conquerors of nations 
before setting sail.
\end{quote}
The initial acknowledgement of traditional historical narratives is challenged already in the first stanza as it is colored by Szymborska's subtle ironic touch. The opening statement, "It has come to this," implying that the poet will reveal a critical situation, is immediately undermined by her description of a pleasant morning she spent by the river. At first, typically for Szymborska, she states the obvious: her experience "won't go down in history" since "It's no battles and pacts." She seems to accept the assumption that the events irrelevant to battles are irrelevant to history as well. But then she immediately questions this postulate in an attempt to dissolve the traditional fusion of historical significance with violence. Thus, in the second stanza, she uses the rhetoric of an historian, identifying her experience as "a fact" and attempting to explain this fact in terms of its causes. In these lines, however, the poet not only separates historical discourse from the discourse of violence but also she questions the adequacy of narratives explaining historical events in terms of linear cause-and-effect. With her typical use of irony, she points out that it would be rather absurd to treat the past episodes from her life as the causes of her restful moment by the river. Indirectly, she also undermines the accuracy of historical narratives which impose a cause and effect order on the past events. Such an order depends on the conviction that historical developments follow the principles of logic and on the assumed hierarchy of significance. Szymborska questions both: logic as the main principle behind historical developments--wars cannot be accounted for adequately as the
logical outcomes of the past events—and violence as the fundamental mark of significance. Thus, she promotes the construction of more complex and diverse historical records including the particulars that disturb the logic of narratives and the life that goes on outside the battlefields. Consequently, she writes:

Even a passing moment has its fertile past,
its Friday before Saturday,
its May before June.
Its horizons are no less real
than those that a marshal's field glasses might scan.

Comparing everyday "passing moments" with the moments of military actions, Szymborska implies that the latter are not the only ones worth studying. The inclusion of other than military perspective will open new horizons enriching our understanding of the complex relations between the current world and the past. Thus, although she undermines the adequacy of the cause-and-effect explanations, she still suggests that the connection between the past and the present is not random since the past is "fertile":

This tree is a poplar that's been rooted here for years.
The river is the Raba; it didn't spring up yesterday.
The path leading through the bushes wasn't beaten last week.
The wind had to blow the clouds here before it could blow them away.

And though nothing much is going nearby
the world is no poorer in details for that.
It's just as grounded, just as definite
as when migrating races held it captive.

The above stanzas bring to mind Bishop's frequent explorations of landscapes holding traces of the past and current human activities. In "Cape Breton," for instance, she wonders about the ancient "disused
trails" (68) and about the road "abandoned" during the weekend (67). Bishop muses over the unrecorded Indian history and the current life on the former Indian territories, and she implies that this relation could not be accounted for in terms of causes and effects. At the same time, she implies a gap between the human world and nature. She may be concerned about the past but her concerns are irrelevant for the birds that "keep on singing" or for "the dark brooks." Szymborska's musings develop along similar lines. Reflecting on the "races" "migrating" through the land centuries ago and the current "path leading through the bushes," she thinks about the landscape as if it were an historical record. But like Bishop, she is aware of the discrepancy between the human and the natural world, implying the infinitely larger dimensions of the latter. Through her juxtapositions of the human and the natural, Szymborska reveals that the human world seems of primary importance from our point of view only, and within this world all hierarchies depend on political and social contexts. Further on, she collapses the traditional opposition between the significant and the trivial continuing to question hierarchies operating in our culture:

Conspiracies aren't the only things shrouded in silence. Retinues of reason don't trail coronations alone. Anniversaries of revolution may roll around, but so do oval pebbles encircling the bay.

The tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense. Ants stitching in the grass. The grass sewn into the ground. The pattern of a wave being needled by a twig.

Szymborska's observations on "conspiracies" may refer to various political plots. In the context of Polish history, however, they bring
to mind the underground activities of those who worked to preserve Polish language, history and culture during the partitions (from 1772 to 1918) and of those who organized the underground opposition movement in communist Poland, especially during the imposition of martial law. But Szymborska's historical reflections have a philosophical dimension as well. She muses over the significance of "pebbles," "ants" and "grass," and she again questions a cause-and-effect development of history with her ironic remark about "retinues of reasons." She suggests that a more intricate, tapestry-like-pattern would be more adequate than a linear, hierarchical one to represent the world.

Interestingly, Szymborska's image of "the tapestry of circumstances" brings to mind Bishop's "tapestried landscape" in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," but the women use that image for different purposes: while Szymborska's tapestry dismantles hierarchies, Bishop's tapestry represents a Western cover for Indian culture. Yet, it is worth noting that both poets use the feminine metaphor of tapestry to undermine the traditional linear model of history.

In the final section of her poem, as in the opening stanza, Szymborska reflects on the present moment:

So it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through the air on wings that are its alone,
and a shadow skims through my hands that is none other than itself, no one else's but its own.

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure that what's important is more important than what's not.
The poet can only record what she perceives at the moment but she cannot find any rational pattern underlying this experience. She "happens" to "look" and "a butterfly" happens to "flutter" for no particular reason. Szymborska is aware, though, that this moment will not repeat itself; and so she records some fragments of her experience, and closes the poem being "no longer sure/ that what's important/ is more important than what's not." While such a closure restates the poet's doubts about any hierarchical arrangements of history, it also alludes to political hierarchies affecting historical narratives.

In her work, Szymborska repeatedly brings up the issue of purposeful distortions and suppressions of history in communist regimes. Such distortions are not only the result of the official politics, but also of often-practiced self-censorship. When in "The Great Man's House" she reflects on the past life of the proprietor, she observes:

> He still made confessions in letters
> without thinking they'd be opened enroute.
> He still kept a careful diary
> knowing it wouldn't be seized in a search.

In communist regimes people cannot feel safe writing such letters as the privacy of correspondence has been violated.

Aware of the impact of censorship on what gets published, Szymborska becomes sensitive to other factors shaping historical records. In a number of poems, she questions the Western fusion of violence with significance. In "The End and the Beginning," for instance, as she describes the period after the war when people worked
very hard to restore the ruins, she points out that, for all its necessity, the process of restoration will not become a part of history since "All the cameras have gone/ to other wars." Challenging the official "cameras," Szymborska stays to watch and record the process of restoration. In still another poem, "Reality Demands," while she mentions the famous battlefields (Cannae or Borodino), she does not evoke the bloody images from the past, but reflects on everyday life going on at present on these battlefields.

All three poems ("No Title Required", "The End and the Beginning," and "Reality Demands") reflect Szymborska's explorations of the principles underlying the construction of historical narratives; thus they may be considered a form of poetical metahistory. Such poems in which Szymborska is not interested in linear reconstructions of the past are at times interpreted in terms of her diminished interest in history for the sake of a more personal sphere. Czeslaw Milosz, for instance, writes:

What does the poetry of Szymborska, marked as it is by such a lightness of touch, skeptically smiling, playful, have to do with the history of the twentieth, or any other, century? In its beginnings, it had much to do with it, but its mature phase moves away from images of linear time rushing toward utopia or an apocalyptic catastrophe, as the just-ending century liked to believe. Her dimension is personal, of one person who reflects on the human condition. ("On Szymborska" 17)

I would argue, however, that this moving away from temporal linearity does not mean that Szymborska turns her attention away from history but rather that her mature poems, with a layered rather than linear temporal framework, more metahistorical than historical, challenge
traditional linear representations of the past. Even if Szymborska abandons linearity, that does not mean that she is not concerned with history but rather that she questions the adequacy of linear historical narratives and endeavors to construct counterhistories.

"Hitler's First Photograph" included in her 1986 volume *The People on the Bridge*, and thus certainly one of her mature poems reveals Szymborska's continuing preoccupations with history. The poem does not include the images of linear time, and Szymborska deals with the figure of Hitler in an unconventional way; namely, she recreates the moment of Hitler's first birthday during which his relatives take the first picture of a little Adolf and speculate over his undoubtedly bright future. Her ironic tone notwithstanding, Szymborska's poem may be particularly disturbing especially in Poland where people experienced and witnessed horrors of the war: bombings, ruins, concentration and extermination camps. While Hitler's name instantly evokes death, Szymborska envisions him as an infant and so evokes his birth. The poem's imagery as well as the poet's use of language constitute chilling inversions of the historical horrors. The poem opens with a series of questions implying a gathering of women engaged in a rather conventional baby talk:

And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?  
That's tiny Adolf, the Hitler's little boy!  
Will he grow up to be an L.L.D.?  
Or a tenor in Vienna's Opera House?  
Whose teensy hand is this, whose little ear and eye and nose?  
Whose tummy full of milk, we just don't know:  
printer's, doctor's, merchant's, priest's?  
Where will those tootsy-wootsies finally wander?
To a garden, to a school, to an office, to a bride?
Maybe to the Burgermeister's daughter?

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honey bun.
While he was being born, a year ago,
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky:
spring sun, geraniums in windows,
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper.
Then just before the labor his mother's fateful dream.
A dove seen in a dream means joyful news--
if it is caught, a long-awaited guest will come. (196)

Although Szymborska does not write here about the Holocaust, her
description of Hitler as an infant immediately brings to mind children
who perished in the Nazi death camps. As the poem depends on a double
temporal framework--the days of Hitler's childhood and the period of
World War II--the serene mood of the textual surface has an ominous
undercurrent. We might want to study Hitler's childhood in an attempt
to find some explanations for his becoming a Nazi dictator as an adult.
Szymborska's poem reveals, however, that any attempts to explore
Hitler's childhood to understand the war are futile. There is no
logical connection between Hitler's birthday and the war, and there is
nothing that we could claim to have learned investigating Hitler's life
to prevent future disasters. It is only now that we can see the
mother's prophetic dream as a sign of endangered peace, since in the
context of the poem "A dove" immediately evokes the ravages of war and
the supposedly welcome "guest" suggests the German invasion. But such
interpretations are possible only when we already know what has
happened and arrange the past events, assuming the rational patterns.
Further on, Szymborska implies that we all might have the potential to turn into Hitler-like figures; after all, his first photograph looks like photographs of other children:

A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib, our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well, looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket, like the tots in every other family album. Sh-h-h, let's not start crying, sugar. The camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunen. And Braunen is a small but worthy town--honest businesses, obliging neighbors, smell of yeast dough, of gray soap. No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps. A history teacher loosens his collar and yawns over homework. (196-5)

Szymborska's description of Hitler as a baby may be frightening because it erases the difference between the future dictator and other babies, thus revealing the unpredictable character of the future. Since Hitler's future is already the past that we know, its context changes the meaning of each line. The apparently neutral image of "gray soap" instantly reminds us of the Nazis use of human bodies in soap production. But it is clear that at the time of Hitler's childhood, "[n]o one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps". The poem with its ominous ending suggests that the idea of history as progress toward a brighter future cannot be confirmed by past events. And the most telling events of the past for Szymborska's generation--the ravages of war--could extinguish any belief in the meaningful development of history.
Notwithstanding such a bleak vision, however, as a witness and a survivor of the war, Szymborska felt ethically responsible for preserving the memory of those who perished. Yet each time she writes about the war, she implies that it is not possible to articulate in our language the full scope of disasters. Thus, she presents some fragmentary sketches of people's lives in the occupied territories, making us aware of the horror in between the lines or even words. Her poem "Still" on the transportations of Jews to extermination camps represents the tragic fate of the prisoners with a restraint that only deepens the tragedy. We learn that "sealed boxcars are carrying names," and since Szymborska mentions "Nathan," "Isaac," "Aaron," "Sarah," we know that they are Jewish. Further on the poet implies that the previous transports were exterminated and the same fate awaits those in "sealed boxcars":

Clouds of people passed over this plain.
Vast clouds, but they held little rain—
just one tear, that's a fact, just one tear.
A dark forest. The tracks disappear.

That's-a-fact. The rail and the wheels.
That's-a-fact. A forest, no fields.
That's-a-fact. And their silence once more,
that's-a-fact, drums on my silent door. (16)

Haunted by the horrors of the Nazi camps in Poland, Szymborska assumes some responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people, and she implies that passive witnessing of the transportations of Jews becomes a silent agreement to the Nazi extermination campaign. Overwhelmed by the tragedy the poet confronts a disturbing silence.
In yet another poem "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo," Szymborska endeavors to record the terrible conditions at the camp, but she finds no means to construct an adequate account of the prisoners' ordeal. The title refers to a Nazi camp in Szebnie, located about ten kilometers east of Jaslo. Little information is available on the life of prisoners in this camp since almost all of them perished (Jaslo Prosecutes 81). We know, however, that the history of the camp can be divided into three stages. During the first one, between fall, 1941 and spring, 1942, the prisoners were primarily from the Soviet Union; during the second, between spring, 1943 and winter, 1944, the prisoners included Poles and Jews, and in the final period between spring and summer of 1944, the prisoners, again, were Russian (Jaslo Prosecutes 81). Szymborska's reflections in the poem seem to concern the first stage of the camp's operations, since she includes the image of "blackened icons" and a "glistening sickle," the symbols of Russia and the Soviet Union. In the fall of 1941, the Nazis brought a few transports, approximately five to seven thousands, of Soviet prisoners of war. The camp had some barracks on the terrain fenced with barbed wire. Toward the end of November, about one hundred prisoners died every day. A month later, due to the typhus epidemic the number of dead grew to two hundred every day. Under these circumstances, the Nazi supervisors put all sick prisoners in separate barracks and starved them to death. When the epidemic was over, there were only two hundred prisoners left. Historians estimate that between the fall of 1941 and the spring of 1942 about six thousand prisoners perished. Although it is known that
they were starved, tortured, murdered, and many died of exhaustion (*Nazi Camps in Poland 1939-1945* 490-1), there are almost no records of the fate of individual prisoners. Thus, while Szymborska feels under pressure to write about the ordeal of particular individuals, she finds the task impossible to fulfill:

Write it down. Write it. With ordinary ink on ordinary paper: they weren't given food, they all died of hunger. All. How many? *It's a large meadow. How much grass per head?* Write down: I don't know. History rounds off skeletons to zero. A thousand and one is still only a thousand. That one seems never to have existed: a fictitious fetus, an empty cradle, a primer opened for no one, air that laughs, cries, and grows, stairs for a void bounding out to the garden, no one's spot in the ranks.

It became flesh right here, on this meadow. But the meadow's silent, like a witness who's been bought. Sunny. Green. A forest close at hand, with a wood to chew on, drops beneath the bark to drink--a view served round the clock, until you go blind. Above, a bird whose shadow flicked its nourishing wings across their lips. Jaws dropped, teeth clattered.

At night a sickle glistened in the sky and reaped the dark for dreamed-of loaves. Hands came flying from blackened icons, each holding an empty chalice. A man swayed on a grill of barbed wire. Some sang, with dirt in their mouth. *That lovely song about war hitting you straight in the heart.* Write how quiet it is. *Yes.* (42-3)

The poem implies that Szymborska went to Szebnie to examine what was left of the camp in hope to recover more data, but she could not find
more information than had been included in history books. Scholars investigating Nazi crimes explain that currently (in the sixties) there were only a few traces left of the Szebnie camp: some remnants of the barbed wire and a concrete platform close to what used to be the main entrance (Jaslo Prosecutes 80). Moreover, the uneven ground of the current farmland indicates the location of some barracks only since the farmers evened out their fields (Jaslo Prosecutes 80-81). Seeing these few marks of the past, the poet cannot write in specific terms about the prisoners' hardships, and so throughout the poem she confronts the blank pages of history since "the meadow's silent" (42). Also, she turns her attention to those whose traces disappeared since "History rounds off skeletons to zero" (42). Attempting to understand how starved the prisoners were, she thinks of their "chew[ing] on" wood or drinking the drops of water hidden "beneath the bark," and she realizes that the extreme hunger could make the prisoners see their environment as a form of nutrition—some even kept "dirt in their mouths" (42). Szymborska's few remarks already imply the unimaginable ordeal of the prisoners, but she emphasizes that she knows very little. As the green grass in the field covered the history, she can only "Write how quiet it is" (42).

Szymborska's "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo" particularly in its closure bears a striking resemblance to Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502." Both poets endeavor to reconstruct the past which due to particular historical circumstances—colonialism or World War II—has been excluded from historical accounts. Yet reflecting on these
historical tragedies neither Bishop nor Szymborska assumes she has a
right to speak in the place of the victims. Prisoners of war in
Szymborska's verse keep silent; and "little [Indian] women" in Bishop's "are always retreating" behind the symbolic tapestry. Yet in
Szymborska's poem unlike Bishop's, there is a sense of high urgency:
after all, Szymborska, like the prisoners, lived during the war.

As she witnessed the senseless waste of human life, the ruin and
the devastation of the country, she lost any faith in progress. And so
in her poem with the telling title "The Century's Decline"(198) Szymborska explicitly denies any claim of historical progress: "Our
twentieth century was going to improve on the others./ It will never
prove it now," she declares (198). In Szymborska's poems, the future is dark; she repeatedly challenges the concept of historical progress;
and she never accepts violence as a necessity in the development of
history.

Both Bishop and Szymborska, then, repeatedly question traditional paradigms of history, unmasking the fragmentary nature of past records and exploring the forces which contribute to such fragmentariness. And while both poets point to the political or ideological sources of a number of historical gaps, they also place their observations within the broader context of epistemological issues. They both question the adequacy of representations based on the narrow principles of logic. Their poems reveal that the power of logic in Western discourses, manifesting itself in continual endeavors to explain the world in terms of clear-cut cause-and-effect patterns, necessitates the exclusion of
anything that does not fit the patterns. Both poets are aware that no knowledge can be complete. Bishop, who perceives knowledge as "historical, flowing, and flown," dismantle stable concepts of knowledge and marks any kind of knowing with loss. Szymborska, in turn, locates all unquestionable meanings in Utopia, an island which "is uninhabited,/ and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches/ turn without exception to the sea." Such preference for tentative, unstable positionings as well as insistent attention to the marginal and the excluded belongs also to the postmodernist practice of "'Focusing on the process of epistemology rather than on achieved knowledge [and] portray[ing] the mind engaging itself in the world and attending to events, without imposing fixed interpretations on that experience'."28

However, neither Bishop nor Szymborska ever assumes the relativist position of those postmodern thinkers who argue that there is no essential difference between historical and fictional narratives. As Roger Chartier explains, one of the sources of this dramatic epistemological shift was the emerging awareness of the unstable, narrative character of historical records (7-8). David Harlan, for instance, claims:

The return of literature has plunged historical studies into an extended epistemological crisis. It has questioned our belief in a fixed and determinable past, compromised the possibility of historical representation, and undermined our ability to locate ourselves in time. (quot. in Chartier 13).

For Harlan "the return of literature" is the return of history to the form of narrative. In the 1960s and 1970s with the development of
structural history which consisted largely in detailed analyses of social relations and institutions independent of subjective consciousness, historians believed that they left behind the narrative reconstructions of history. Yet as Chartier points out, this departure was only illusory:

All history, even the least "narrative" even the most structural, is always constructed according to the same formulas that govern the production of narratives. The entities that historians manipulate (society, classes, mentalities, etc.) are "quasi characters" implicitly endowed with the properties of the singular heroes and the ordinary individuals who make up the collectivities designated by the abstract categories. Moreover, historical temporalities remain largely subservient to subjective time. (16-17)

Thus, a number of scholars conclude that if history cannot escape from narration and historical discourse does not provide a direct access to the past, "all distinction between history and fiction must be swept aside, since history is merely a 'fiction-making operation,'" as Hayden White put it" (Chartier 25).

While in Bishop's and Szymborska's poems historical discourse is never transparent, and there is always a gap between the material past and its discursive representation, history never becomes merely a "fiction-making operation." In their poetical investigations of history, Bishop and Szymborska assume the perspective of historians such as Chartier who insist that, in contrast to fiction, history constitutes a form of knowledge. Yet the colonial discourse of the West and the totalitarian of the East was used to construct one fixed historical narrative. However, Bishop and Szymborska undermine the
adequacy of one dominant version of history and promote instead the plurality of parallel narratives, even if unstable and uncertain.
NOTES

1. In her seminar paper "Postcolonial Theory and the 'Other' Europe," Gephardt writes: "...the developments in Eastern Europe have not been compared to the decolonization of 'Third World' countries. The parallel with the postcolonial conditions is striking, but Eastern Europeans put faith in the teleological promise of 'returning' to Europe" (1).


3. Jeredith Herrin discusses Bishop's fascination with and adaptation of the Christian poetry of George Herbert: in one of her talks Bishop says, "Herbert has always been one of my favorite poets, if not my favorite" (40). As Merrin observes, "Although by her own description 'not the slightest bit religious,' Bishop was, like George Herbert who announced his dedication to religious poetry ..., dedicated to a poetry of spirit from the outset of her career" (57).

4. In her article "The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art," Lombardi explores in detail the influence of Bishop's asthma on the images in her poems. Moreover, she also emphasizes the significance of Bishop's otherness as a lesbian.

5. In Polish the phrase is different, but it also brings to mind the silence. Szymborska plays at the end with a couple of Polish sayings, and in particular with what could be rendered in a literal translation as "it's quiet as if poppyseeds got shed." The phrase refers to an unusual silence, especially when many people are gathered, and nobody speaks a word. Szymborska changes the idiom, saying "and it sounds as if light got seeded" (cf. Wojda 33).

6. In Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), Susan McCabe discusses various features of Bishop's poetry often associated with the concept of postmodernism, such as "play, chance, anarchy, silence, absence...indeterminacy" (xiv).


10. See Helen Vendler's article "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly."


16. In her analysis of "Cape Breton," Bonnie Costello writes: "Bishop's search for hidden meaning in the obscure regions of the landscape meets an impasse: 'Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned, unless the road is holding it back, in the interior, where we cannot see.' The poet goes on to guess at what mystical signs might be written in nature's hidden regions.... The poet seems to scan the landscape for a point of penetration, but satisfies herself, in the end with an abstract image of flux" (103-4).

David Kalstone reading the passage and several lines that follow observes: "Everything seen and heard in these lines is in fact unseen and unheard, imagined from the merest hints of what is 'reputed to be.' Bishop gives us an odd troped version of what separates us from natural experience--odd because her tropes, a simile and a metaphor, dramatize what is hidden in terms of humanizing activity, creations, a primitive alphabet, song" (120).


18. In her reading of the poem, Bonnie Costello observes, "...within this simple opposition [of text and travel]...the poem allows both an integration of text and travel and an understanding of what each has to offer the imagination" (132). Still later, she adds "...the opposition between the two stanzas is not absolute, and the very forms that were undermined reenter in a new way. Each scene from memory is a parodic reflection of some biblical episode; the old schematic meanings are comically released into a life heartily indifferent to them (135).

19.---------, *The Complete Poems*, 93-4.

20. Michael Roth points out, for instance, that "Kant...configured violence as being in the service of progress, not as reason's self-unfolding but as realization of man's natural ends" (155n).

Also, in his discussion of Kojève's concept of history, Roth writes, 'History [for Kojève] is, in large part, "the story of bloody struggles for recognition (wars, revolutions)," and it is always written by the (ultimate) winners of these struggles" (106). But Roth also observes, "Kojève's--even Hegel's--claim that the origin of the human is to be found in bloody confrontation is hardly original.
The most important predecessor is Hobbes, whose idea of the state of nature as a war of all against all is surely a point of reference for Hegel's master/slave dialectic" (103). Such ideas obviously lead to the conclusion that, at least during some stages of historical development, violence is inevitable.

Also, we need to remember the significance of Hegel's notion of historical progress with its necessity of violent confrontations on Marx's theory. Although Marx's and Lenin's theories of social development are significantly different, there is "a connection between Lenin's theory and the spirit of Marxism, namely, the connection between his idea of the party's total control over a spontaneous mass movement and the communist idea of emancipation as a conscious control, as master over people's collective fate ... True ... Marx ... was [not] thinking ... of the present tasks of a revolutionary movement; he meant the control over economic forces exercised by emancipated humanity ... [However] ... it should be stressed that Lenin's conceptions were not unconnected with Marxism" (Walicki 300)

22. -------------, A View With a Grain of Sand, (manuscript, 101).
23. -------------, 178-80.
Since both Bishop and Szymborska reflect on history, we may assume that they encroach upon political terrain as well: after all, not only does politics constitute part of history, but also it shapes its course and its records. Yet, the acknowledgment of such close relations between the two fields does not mean that history and politics overlap completely: such a claim would make the distinction between history and politics pointless. And after all, in Western culture, texts can be classified as historical or political depending on what kinds of issues they deal with. Such classifications, however, are always disputable, always provisional, and never absolute. As my explorations of Bishop's and Szymborska's work will show the provisionality of the notion "politics," at the same time I will develop my comments on the assumption that while historical writings focus on the past, political texts emphasize current social issues, movements, strategies, and ideologies that have an impact on both current and future social relations, conditions of living, and divisions of power on both national and international levels. I am aware that this assumption is provisional as well. Depending on political conditions in a given
region, issues that in other circumstances are not thought of as political may acquire a political significance. For instance, before World War I, when Poland was partitioned, studying Polish history or reading Polish literature was perceived as a political activity. At present, such occupations may have little to do with politics. Or in 1955 in the United States, Rosa Parks' staying in her seat on a bus instead of giving it up to a white passenger manifested her political protest against segregation. Today, such a behavior would have little if any political implications. If we keep in mind all these reservations, reading Szymborska's work we will still see the poet's engagement in political disputes even without considering the obviously political poems from her early communist phase. And even if, as Marian Stala observes, Szymborska's poems always go beyond politics (97), as my analysis will show, some of her poems do focus on political problems. Although in Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, political issues hardly ever become central, politics is not absent from her writing. Thus, juxtaposing Bishop's and Szymborska's poetry, I will reveal the different meanings and different implications of the notion of politics in the U.S and in Eastern Europe, with emphasis on (although not limited to) the communist era. The awareness of these differences is significant for American readers to understand a number of texts written in Poland and other Eastern European countries before the collapse of communism as well as at present. Also, readers in Eastern Europe should be aware of the different implications and associations of the term "politics" in the U.S.
At the same time, I will also explore the troubled relationships between poetry and politics in Western culture. In his introduction to *Poetry and Politics: An Anthology of Essays* entitled "The Imprisoned Imagination," Richard Jones observes that the very "phrase 'poetry and politics'" is "vague and controversial"(9). He explains:

Since World War II, the consensus of writers and critics has been that poetry and politics, acknowledged or unacknowledged, simply don't mix. The political role of the poet in society has dwindled, reduced now to that of the occasional spokesperson for this or that issue--civil rights, women's rights, the Vietnam War. Today [1984], a discussion of poetry and politics is often divisive rather than informative .... Aesthetically, we seem comfortable only with discussing the tension between the personal poem and the political poem, applauding apolitical mimesis or denouncing the didacticism and self-aggrandizement inherent in bearing witness. At its worst, contemporary discussion falls into moralistic name calling on one hand and political grandstanding on the other. (15)

My analysis of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Wislawa Szymborska as well as of the critical discussions of their work will reveal that this controversy stems primarily from different assumptions that poets or critics make about the meanings of the word "political." Moreover, depending on a particular time or culture, notions of politics vary significantly, and assumptions about the territory of *ars poetica* change as well.

In one of her lectures from 1975, Denise Levertov explains that in the twentieth century, critics often assume that genuine poetry stems from personal experience. She writes:

The suspicion with which political or social content is often regarded is a modern phenomenon and arises from a narrow and mistaken idea of the poem as always a private expression of emotion which the reader is permitted to overhear, and that therefore the hortatory or didactic is an unsuitable mode of
address for poets.... [Moreover,] [m]any writers of political poetry persist in supposing the emotive power of their subject alone is sufficient to make their poems poetic. This accounts for a lot of semidoggerel. (173-4)

Although both Levertov and Jones made their comments some time ago, and although currently (1999) both American libraries and bookstores offer anthologies of poetry acknowledged as "political," the term is still "vague and controversial." It is always easy to find what Levertov labeled as "semidoggerels" published in support of some political causes and to claim that such poems represent the low quality of political poetry.

Also, while the New Critical theory of a poem as a self-contained artifact reigned in the U.S. from the mid 1930s until the 1960s, it still affects the current writings on poetry. Although most scholars no longer consider poems self-sufficient, complete, changeless works of art, in their interpretations they often downplay the significance of the social and the political. As I have already mentioned in the second chapter, one of the most prominent American poetry critics, Helen Vendler has labeled Szymborska's poetry as "universal," implying little need if any for social or political contexts to understand Szymborska's work.

The first generation of critics who attend to Elizabeth Bishop's work usually adopt this traditional approach so that the political sphere of her poems seems virtually nonexistent. After all, Bishop herself encouraged such an approach since she believed that politics
had a negative impact on *ars poetica*. In her oft quoted interview with Ashley Brown (1966) she says:

I was always opposed to political thinking as such for writers. What good writing came out of that period ["the Marxist '30's"], really? Perhaps a few good poems; Kenneth Fearing wrote some. A great deal of it seemed to me very false. Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked "social conscious" writing. (Brown 22)

Recently, however, in spite of this declaration various critics present Bishop as a political, socially conscious poet. John Palattella, for instance, argues that by "political thinking as such" Bishop referred to "a politics committed to a cocksure, dogmatic ideology that squelches speculation;" at the same time, though, she "explored how poetry could engage with social conditions without adopting politics as such" (20). Later, he adds:

Unlike Auden or Pound, Bishop asserted that while poetry alone couldn't provide the miraculous solutions to the decade's material poverty, it could provide a critical understanding of the decade's conflicts and the solutions to the decade's problems other artists proposed.

According to Palattella, then, Bishop's poetry is politically engaged.

Another scholar, Betsy Erkkila, emphasizes the political character of Bishop's poetry even more. First, she points out that in their attempt to undermine the early "objective" approaches to Bishop's work, some critics "have erected 'subjectivity,' 'self-expression,' and the 'private poet' as the true badge of Bishop's seriousness, worth, and status as a major poet" (284-5); Erkkila goes on to argue:

Though she set herself against both the mythic narratives of literary modernism and the grand political narrative of the
American Left, Bishop was deeply affected by the literary and political radicalism of the 1930s. Her insistence on the technical qualities "necessary to any art to me" (qtd. in Millier 413) and the essential distinction between "politics" and "good poetry" (Millier 301) has kept us from recognizing how often her poems—even her more aestheticized and abstract early poems—take as their subjects class consciousness, race and gender struggle, the culture of the commodity and the machine, the relations of capital, property and hopelessness, and the conflict between the dominant narratives of the West and the "others"—women, lesbians, blacks, Cubans, Indians, the lower classes, the body, nature—that those narratives subjugate and colonize. (285)

Erkkila published her article in 1996—three years after Palattella's—suggesting that in her writing Bishop frequently focused on political issues. Thus, with the development of various trends of Marxist, social, and cultural criticism in the United States, literary scholars began to reinterpret Bishop's works focusing primarily on their political content. Erkkila presents Bishop as a leftist, socially conscious poet whose writings reveal class struggle as well as race and gender issues; and both Palattella and Erkkila claim that they have finally given Bishop long overdue recognition as a political poet. However, revealing the ways politics enters Bishop's poetry is different from presenting her as a political poet. In other words, I would argue that claiming that Bishop is a political poet is as misleading as insisting that her writing is apolitical.

Bishop herself acknowledged politics as just one of many factors shaping human perception:

Physique, temperament, religion, politics, and immediate circumstances all play their parts in formulating one's theories on verse. And then they play them again and differently when one is writing it. No matter what theories one may have, I doubt very
much that they are in one's mind at the moment of writing a poem or that there is even a physical possibility that they could be. (Schwartz & Estess 281)

Significantly, she points out that most poets are not really conscious of the impact of politics on their writing, and as they create they do not follow any political agendas. The comment suggests, then, that while composing her poems, most of the time Bishop did not intend to support or criticize any political perspectives, positions, views, or programs. Thus the political content in her poems results primarily from the fact that politics encroaches upon all spheres of our lives. In their analyses, then, critics need to make a distinction between the texts affected by politics but not intended to explore political issues and the texts focused on political issues. Palattella and Erkkila, however, do not make such a distinction, and while their analyses reveal the so-far neglected political content in Bishop's writings, they imply that politics constitutes Bishop's primary concern. We need to remember, though, that for Bishop politics had a particularly negative affect on the quality of poems.

Bishop's writings reveal that in her poetry she had problems not only with, as Palattella claims, "dogmatic ideology" but also with assuming a more social perspective and speaking for others. As Lorrie Goldensohn points out Bishop never wanted "to assume school or class membership" (285). Commenting on Bishop's "second wave" of poems in Brazil, Brett C. Millier observes:

Her [Bishop's] false starts [of some poems] are interesting. Bolder and more overtly political than the poems she finished and
published, they show her attempts at and her frustrations with trying to speak in poetry about Brazil as a political entity.

To illustrate the problem, Millier quotes Bishop's incomplete and unpublished verse "Brasil, 1959." In this draft, Bishop assumes a social point of view, suppressing the personal or the private. For instance, she writes: "The radio says black beans are up again. That means five hundred percent" (qtd. in Millier 300), or "Send trucks. Why doesn't the army send us trucks?" (Millier 301). Yet, Bishop never finished the draft and never published the poem. Millier explains that in 1970 preparing for an interview with Denise Levertov, Bishop wrote: "'When has politics made good poetry?'" (301).

For Bishop, only in rare cases could politics make good poetry. The draft of a political poem quoted by Millier is not the only one that Bishop did not send for publication. Erkkila gives other examples of such unpublished poems: "Suicide of a Moderate Dictator," "A Trip to the Mines," "Capricorn," or "A Baby Found in the Garbage." She argues that these poems challenge critics' claims that Bishop's writing is apolitical:

While Bishop did not publish her poems on Vargas's suicide, slavery in the mines, or social conditions under Juscelino Kubitschek's government, she did, in fact, write them. And it is simply not true to say that Bishop did not "speak in poetry about Brazil as a political entity [Millier 300]." (300)

However, while these poems reveal Bishop's interest in politics especially during her stay in Brazil, the fact that she could not bring herself to finish or publish them suggests that she did not consider them good enough. In other words, Bishop's conscious attempts at
writing what she would consider political poems usually ended in failure. It is significant, though, to see that if she did try to compose such poems, she must have tried to change her approach to politics as well as to what for her was problematic—the fusion of poetry and politics. Her unpublished political poems evidence Bishop's struggle to bring poetry and politics together. Since such poems come primarily from the period of her stay in Brazil, we may assume that with time, as she stated herself, she developed more interest in politics and consequently became more involved. Even this involvement, however, could not convince her that the conjunction of poetry and politics could be for her genuinely fruitful.

She did not have such reservations, however, about prose, and in one of her juvenile stories "Then Came the Poor," published in a Vassar journal *Con Spirito* in 1933, she presents the consequences of a revolution. Both Palattella and Erkkila consider this story significant since it manifests Bishop's political views at the time, and since the traces of these views appear in the poet's later work. Palattella sees the story as Bishop's "ironic jab at a popular left-wing perspective" of the college girls at Vassar who did not have much understanding of social and economic problems (22). Moreover, he claims that Bishop makes a similar point to Kenneth Burke who "advocated revolution, [but] he also recognized that bourgeois intellectuals couldn't organize a revolutionary social movement if they didn't acknowledge how class differences would have already structured it" (22-3). In her commentary, Erkkila suggests that Bishop's story reflects a "vague
yearning for communality and an alternative social order" as well as
the "simultaneous fascination with and withdrawal from the redemptive
possibilities of social revolution." She concludes: "the story
characterizes the class perspective and ambivalence about class
struggle that would inform Bishop's verse" (280). However, I will
argue that both Palattella's and Erkkila's conclusions go too far.
While, as Palattella points out, it is quite possible that Bishop makes
fun of the rather immature female students, she is very far from
advocating revolution. While Erkkila emphasizes Bishop's "vagueness"
and "ambivalences"--characteristics of Bishop's mature work--at the
same time, she does not seem to notice the narrator's distrustful if
not condescending attitude toward the rebelling poor.

Moreover, reading the story as well as her other writings, we
need to remember that Bishop frequently felt pressured to assume a
political position. In her 1966 interview, reflecting on her college
years, she observes:

The atmosphere in Vassar was left-wing; it was the popular thing.
People were always asking me to be on a picket line, or later to
read poems to a John Reed Club. I felt that most of the college
girls didn't know much about social conditions. (Conversations
22)

At Vassar, Bishop's friends tried to push her to assume a political
stance, and at first, we could assume that she distanced herself from
the "politically active" girls not so much out of her resentment of
politics but because she perceived their social engagement in terms of
an intellectual fashion rather than a genuine concern: in contrast to
her, they were rather ignorant of the impact of the Great Depression:
I was very aware of the Depression—some of my family were much affected by it. After all, anybody who went to New York and rode the Elevated could see that things were wrong. But I had lived with poor people and knew something of poverty at first-hand. About this time I took a walking-trip in Newfoundland and I saw much worse poverty there. I was all for being a socialist till I heard Norman Thomas speak; but he was so dull. Then I tried anarchism, briefly. I'm much more interested in social problems and politics now than I was in the '30's. (22)

Since Bishop herself experienced poverty and was more "aware of the Depression" than her friends, she sympathized with socialist trends. Mary McCarthy, for instance, who was "very much to the right," recollects: "Strangely enough, Bishop wasn't exactly a socialist, but she was closer to their point of view than I" (Fountain, Brazeau 48). Yet neither her socialist sympathies nor her awareness of the economic crisis turned Bishop of the '30's into a political poet. Even in her writings about poverty, she focuses on her personal experience rather than on the larger social dimension of the issue. As a schoolmate from Vassar, Eleanor Clark Warren, observes: "Bishop was wildly unpolitical in a completely political time, the depth of the depression. She never had anything to do with politics on campus. Neither did her friends" (Fountain, Brazeau 48). In fact, although the story "Then Came the Poor" deals with politics, it still reflects Bishop's detachment from any organized social movements.

"Then Came the Poor" in a humorous way presents a rather absurd outcome of the social revolution, showing that such revolutions neither resolve social conflicts nor create better political systems. Significantly, Bishop composed the story before her experience in Spain in 1936, but the text already reveals her skepticism toward any
revolution of the working classes. Thus, her 1936 trip to Europe and her first-hand observations of the Spanish Civil War did not so much, as Millier suggests, trigger her abhorrence of communism and her distrust of social revolutions so much as confirm her long-held suspicions. In a letter to her friend Hallie (Harriet Tompkins Thomas) from April 11, 1936, Bishop wrote, "If you really want to see what the Communists are up to, what beautiful things they have ruined, you should come here. The prettiest Baroque chapel in Seville has just been saved from burning up—the ceiling all scorched" (Millier 97-8). Millier explains in her comment that, "in four months of Popular front rule in Spain, four hundred twenty-one churches were fully or partially burned, though not necessarily by Communists" (98). At the time, however, Bishop was not aware that Communists were not the only party responsible for the destruction; in addition, she was so horrified by the damages which ruined art monuments she admired that she seemed unable to perceive the fires in a broader social or economic context. Despairing over the destruction of the churches, she does not reflect on the possible causes leading to the revolutionary crisis and the burnings and the complexity of the political circumstances. Focusing on the beauty of the sacral architecture, she fails to consider the churches as the symbolic representation of oppression. Her 1936 experience only deepens Bishop's anti-revolutionary views that she expresses in "Then Came the Poor." In this early text Bishop criticizes the indifference of the rich to the conditions of the
workers while at the same time she presents the working classes as incapable of taking care of themselves.

The story opens in the middle of the night as the narrator's wealthy family gets a phone call about the approaching revolution. They learn that many servants of the rich have "gone Red," and "[are] turning every minute" (106). Also "'the Slaters [another wealthy family] are all murdered... They [the Reds] set fire to their house" (106). In such circumstances, the family decides to take the most valuable belongings and move to Canada. Bishop's description of the family members' packing up what they can reveals that their main concern is their property. The narrator observes: "Mother was tying up the green felt rolls of silver in a precise, rhythmical way, and didn't even look at me" (106). The family relationships appear to be defined by their material possessions, rather than by any genuine care for each other.

However, the narrator, in spite of growing up among the rich is different from the other members of his family: he does not want to leave his home. On the one hand he seems emotionally attached to the place rather than to his family, and on the other, he is full of curiosity: "I wanted to see what they'd do to the place, the three thousand who were coming" (107). Thus, he decides to risk the encounter with the workers in spite of family's warnings that he'd "be shot, stabbed, crucified" (107). Notwithstanding parental warnings, the narrator still manages to stay at home when a sudden explosion nearby puts the family in panic and disarray. The narrator explains: "I
suppose each of them thought I was in another car, and I hid myself quickly behind a pillar of the porte-cochere" (107-8).

The conduct of all the members of the family, including the narrator, reveals the immense gap between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, the workers are perceived as blood-thirsty savages, and on the other, as an entertaining, curious kind of species. The narrator assumes the latter position: he thinks of the rebellious workers as creatures who might provide some diversion: he is not in the least interested in the conditions they live in or in the causes of their revolution. He prepares to welcome them as if they were coming to a party:

I wandered around the house, turning on all the lights and putting up all the window shades in the thirty-nine rooms. "Pardon me if my preparations are rather hasty," I addressed the approaching three thousand. (108)

And in fact, the narrator's preparations do affect the rebels. When after a night in the fields, dressed as a country boy, he comes back home, he sees "A wild magnificent lawn-party" (108). The workers do not come across as people fighting for the establishment of a new social system, so much as a bunch of irresponsible children acting as if they were adults:

In the hall two women were fighting over the remains of a roasted chicken, both pulling. The marble floor was greasy and muddy;... In the drawing room an old lady sat on the floor in a ring of dirty petticoats. She was carefully unhooking the glass pendants from the chandelier.... she...then hung them on some part of her clothes or person. She was bedecked from top to toe. On mother's French bed, canopied with lime-colored satin, someone had put two filthy babies to sleep... (109)
Granted, Bishop meant to write a humorous, satirical story; however, much of the humor here depends on the discrepancy between the narrator's and the workers' behavior and perceptive abilities. The narrator—a child of wealthy parents—has no problems deceiving the workers about his social class and the workers take him for one of them. The narrator, though, is a smart young man who thinks that living with the workers "may be sort of fun for a while" (110). Thus, even if he is supposed to represent the Vassar girls who may have had "sort of fun" playing the leftist, the speaker's condescending attitude toward the workers is never questioned. On the one hand, then, the story makes fun of the "soft-hearted" leftists who were rather ignorant of the real conditions of the working classes as well as of the impact such conditions could have on the workers' awareness of social injustice and their perception of the rich; but on the other hand, it reveals Bishop's own distrustful and suspicious view of the poor and uneducated laborers.

In the story, then, Bishop does not so much advocate revolution as defy it: the revolution cannot really resolve social conflicts since the working classes are not mature enough to establish a well functioning social system. Thus, while both Palattella and Erkkila argue that the story reflects Bishop's awareness of class differences and attacks the rich, they do not notice that it presents the working classes from a rather stereotypical bourgeois perspective: the workers are not responsible enough to assume leadership since they get drunk and party instead of working on a new social order.
Of course, we should bear in mind that Bishop wrote the story when she was only 22 years old, and so the piece does not represent the political attitude of her more mature period. Later, Bishop was more interested in the social and the political. Still, some of Bishop's views, especially her "ambivalence about class struggle" (Erkkila) reflected in the story appear in Bishop's later work. However, I think that it is even more significant to see that the story's development sets up a pattern that can be traced in Bishop's other writings touching upon the political terrain: just as the youthful narrative turns a social revolution into a leisurely garden party, in some of her later poems, Bishop resolves political tensions with a sudden shift into a different sphere of myth and imagination.

"A Miracle For Breakfast" is highly representative of such poems. Bishop herself saw the poem as one of her few political texts. In 1966 she referred to it as her "Depression poem:") "It was written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples, around 1936 or so. It was my "social conscious" poem, a poem about hunger" (Conversations 25). But even such a "social conscious" poem suggests that Bishop does not want to focus on politics only. In "A Miracle," she relieves the high social tension of the approaching revolutionary explosion through an escape into her own fantasy and her imaginary gratification of thirst and hunger.

Bishop starts the poem alluding to the passages from the Bible which present God as a provider for the hungry. In her analysis of the poem, Bonnie Costello writes:
"A Miracle for Breakfast"..., Bishop's poem on the Depression... takes the Eucharist as its metaphor. The poem also invokes those antecedents to the sacraments, the Old Testament story of manna from Heaven and the New Testament story of the loaves and the fish. (98)

Reflecting on the power of the Christian religion in the past, Bishop tries to find an analogous source of hope and relief from suffering:

At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee, waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb that was going to be served from a certain balcony, --like kings of old, or like a miracle. It was still dark. One foot of the sun steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.

The first ferry of the day had just crossed the river. It was so cold we hoped that the coffee would be very hot, seeing that the sun was not going to warm us; and the crumb would be a loaf each, buttered, by a miracle. At seven a man stepped out on the balcony.

He stood for a minute alone on the balcony looking over our heads toward the river. A servant handed him the makings of a miracle, consisting of one lone cup of coffee and one roll, which he proceeded to crumb, his head, so to speak, in the clouds--along with the sun.

Was the man crazy? What under the sun was he trying to do, up there on his balcony! Each man received one rather hard crumb, which some flicked scornfully into the river, and, in a cup, one drop of coffee. Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle.

In the poem the New Testament miracle cannot take place. Instead of Christ, a son of a carpenter who identified himself with the poor, the people see a man "on the balcony" who, unlike Christ with his "heart [going] out to" the people (Matthew 14), is "looking over [their] heads" and treating them in a condescending manner: the hungry become an inconvenient disturbance of his mourning routine. The man still
hypocritically poses as a generous provider, and throws crumbs at the gathered—not, however, to feed them but to get rid of them. Bishop shows the unrealistic expectations of the crowd presenting their hopes for a loaf of buttered bread with an ironic humor. At the same time, she reveals the gap between the upper and the working classes not only by locating the rich man on the balcony but also by envisioning his head high above, "along with the sun," and so along with God's son, Jesus Christ. Bishop's allusion to Christ is deeply sarcastic, since the man seems to be Christ's antithesis. The text implies that as the poor cannot count on any help from the rich, soon they will stop waiting and start acting. We can already see the seeds of a possible revolution in the workers' rebellious gestures of discarding the crumbs. The atmosphere becomes tense: people do not disperse but stay together, disappointed and angry; some are still "waiting." Such a tension could well ignite a social revolt. However, Bishop does not develop the revolutionary implications any further, but instead dissolves the social tension through a sudden shift of the poem's domain from the public to the private, from the industrial to the natural, and from the real to the imagined. Bishop no longer articulates her experiences as "we," but as a single individual "I," and imaginatively transmutes the world around her:

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.
A beautiful villa stood in the sun
from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
added by birds, who nest along the river,
---I saw it with one eye close to the crumb---
and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
working the stone. Every day, in the sun,
at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

Bishop fuses the spheres of art and nature to relieve the social
tension of the preceding stanza, and so she displaces the miracle and
reenacts it imaginatively. As Bishop's "mansion" merges with the
evolving nature, the poet can relax, put her "feet up" and drink coffee. Although the imagined fusion of art and nature is only
momentary, it is enough to extinguish any sparks of possible revolution:

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.
A window across the river caught the sun
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

While Bishop cannot stay in the imaginary universe and returns to the
gathered crowd, the people, still hungry, give up their hopes for a
social progress. The rebellious tension of the fourth stanza is gone,
and people humbly though bitterly "lick up the crumbs," thus seeming
to accept not only the idea that miracles do not happen but also that
social revolutions with a positive outcome do not happen. Although
Bishop is very aware of the economic crisis, she neither seems to
believe in any revolutionary solution nor does she propose another
course of action, and at the crucial moment she escapes into art.

After all, in her "social conscious" poem Bishop explores not
only, as Erkkila suggests, "the class struggle and hunger of the
depression," but also the relationship between art and life. And
"hunger" in the poem functions on a literal level, referring to the lack of food and starvation, as well as on a metaphorical level, implying human needs for other, spiritual, and in particular, artistic ideals. And as in her other poems concerned with art more directly, in "A Miracle For Breakfast" Bishop undermines the transcendental nature of art. The poetic imagination transports her into a sphere of aesthetic concerns for a moment only and does not help solve any social problems. However, while Bishop never fuses art and life or the aesthetic and the social, she still suggests a connection between the two spheres. Indirectly, the poet's humorous vision reflects the economic crisis as well as reduces the critical tensions and delays the potential outbreak of the revolt. Thus, while Bishop was fully aware of the Depression—indeed, it would be rather strange if she were not—she did not see a revolt as a viable solution to the crisis, and she rejected communist ideas.

As Millier points out, Bishop's revulsion at communism merged with her hatred of fascism since "she did not distinguish between communists and fascists" (98). Although it is possible to argue for various overlaps between communism and fascism, the differences between the two systems are undeniable. Considering, then, Bishop's usual attention to details, her disregard of the differences between communists and fascists suggests that she was not interested in politics enough to explore the two movements thoroughly. Bishop's political views were often shaped by her personal experience and her own perception of the political state of affairs. And some of these
views were so firm that, what was unusual for her, Bishop did not question them. She was adamant, for instance, in her refusal to compose a poem commemorating Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's execution in 1953; she stated:

I believe that the Rosenbergs were a wretched pair of dupes and traitors, and that the hysterical and hypocritical excitement whipped up by the Communist party about their trial and deaths was just one more example, a particularly unsavory one, of the aims and methods of that party (qtd. in Millier 98).

Thus, when Bishop rejects communism, this rejection does not happen in the process of investigating communist principles and ideals from different perspectives or in different geopolitical circumstances. As Millier observes, Bishop's views "stemmed from her naive experience of the likes of burned churches," and later from her experience in Brazil (98). What Bishop primarily associates revolutionary movements with, then, is a senseless destruction. She knows that revolutions involve the united actions of a crowd, and she sees the potential dangers of such a totalizing power at the price of the individual. While on the one hand this awareness makes her turn away from actively supporting political causes, on the other it helps her criticize institutions based primarily on their totalitarian power. Bishop's anti-war poem "Roosters" with her sharp critique of military power is particularly effective.

Bishop included this poem in her collection North & South. Since at the time a number of poets focused on the horrors of war, Bishop—whose poetical attention was not so focused and who did not want to be accused of indifference to such a world crisis, on January 22, 1945
wrote a letter to Ferris Greenslet, the general manager of the trade book department at Houghton Mifflin, and asked him for a disclaimer:

The fact that none of these poems deal directly with the war, at a time when so much war poetry is being published, will, I'm afraid, leave me open to reproach. The chief reason is simply that I work very slowly. But I think it would help some if a note to the effect that most of the poems had been written, or begun at least, before 1941, could be inserted at the beginning... (One Art: Letters 125-6).

The note reveals Bishop's insecurity about the thematic concerns of her poems: although "Roosters" represents her anti-war attitude, her reflections are not "direct" enough. Thus, she is afraid of being misunderstood especially that in "Roosters," she shifts her attention from the predominantly political sphere to explore the symbolism of religion, myth, and art. She was probably afraid, then, that her readers would judge the poems in North & South— even "Roosters"— as too detached from the tragedy of the war. We need to keep in mind that although Bishop composed "Roosters" and sold it to The New Republic in 1940 (One Art 97), she was going to publish North & South in 1945, already four years after the Japanese bombs destroyed Pearl Harbor in December, 1941. At the time, then, the U.S. was already involved in the war, and the people were much more preoccupied with military fronts than when the war began in 1939 in Europe.

The predicament of people in the U.S. even after 1941 was very different from the situation of people in Europe. The war never devastated the U.S. as it did the countries in Europe. For instance, it is hard to imagine a person in Europe who did not suffer a loss of a close relative or a friend; the horrors of the war affected Europeans
in a much more personal, painful and traumatizing way than Americans in the U.S. In the fall 1939, when Poland was already occupied, people in the U.S. could still follow their daily routine. Thus, in October, 1939, Bishop herself was able to plan her stay in Key West to relieve her asthma. Preparing for the trip, she wrote to her Floridian friend, Charlotte Russell:

I'd adore a trip through the islands—do you suppose I could paddle my own weight? [...] I have the clavichord here and am taking a few lessons—that's really why I stayed on—before I bring it to Key West. The Lindsey house is amazing—[...] All that bothers me is the crumbs I make and can't get out of the carpet... (One Art 83-4)

Yet in the fall of 1940, when she had already moved to Florida, the war for Bishop was no longer as distant as to many other Americans since one of the naval bases was located at Key West. Consequently, disturbed by the military operations, she wrote "The [war] news seems to fill me with such frantic haste and I am so worried about what may become of Key West" (One Art 93). Later, when in a letter to Marianne Moore, she describes the impact of the Pearl Harbor attack on the daily life in Key West, she complains:

The town is terribly overcrowded and noisy...and not a bit like itself. It is one of those things one can't resent, of course, because it's all necessary, but I really feel that this is no place to be unless one is of some use. They are talking of evacuating the civilians. I don't believe they will, but still, what I want to do is to rent the house again and to go somewhere. I haven't given up the idea of South America. I'm not a bit sure of the ethics of it all—what do you think? (Letters 104-5)

While she knows that she "can't resent" the crowds, at the same time she can't help resenting them and wants to leave the area especially since she cannot think of herself as "being of use." Such a task would
require her interactions with the crowds, an activity Bishop is too shy to undertake. Thus, she considers a journey to South America. Aware of the ethical dimensions of her leaving the country, though, Bishop has somewhat ambivalent feelings about the potential journey herself and to resolve the dilemma, she asks her friend for advice. At that time (1941), then, Bishop acknowledges the possible implications of her leaving the country as she experiences the presence of the war. And yet we need to realize that four years later this presence was certainly felt even more by the American people. It had lasted long enough to make them experience its effects even if the military front lines did not move across the homeland. Thus, in 1945 Bishop thought that her readers might accuse her not only of writing too little about the war but also of turning her attention away from the war even in a poem such as "Roosters."

Yet, in the first part of "Roosters" Bishop's attack on militarism as a primitive and destructive force comes across powerfully. Her famous letter to Marianne Moore also reveals that the poet's political intentions motivated her particularly conscious choice of words which Moore considered inappropriate:

I cherish my "water-closet" and the other sordities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. In the first part I was thinking of Key West, and also of those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland and Norway, when the Germans took over, and their atmosphere of poverty. That's why...I want to keep "tin rooster" instead of "gold," and not use "fastidious beds." And for the same reason I want to keep as the title the rather contemptuous word ROOSTERS rather than the more classical THE COCK; and I want to repeat the "gun-metal." (I also had in mind the violent roosters Picasso did in connection with his Guernica picture.)
About the "glass-headed pins": I felt the roosters to be placed here and there...like the pins that point out war projects on a map...And I wanted to keep "to see the end" in quotes because...I have always felt that expression used of Peter in the Bible to be extremely poignant.... I can't bring myself to sacrifice what (I think) is a very important "violence" of tone. (Letters 96)

The letter shows that aware of the calamities of the war, Bishop did not want to take Moore's advice to make her poem "elegant" since such revisions would ruin her harsh critique of military structures; she was determined to unmask "the essential baseness of militarism." But in the second part of the poem, she changes her focus reflecting on the multiple symbolism of roosters. Alicia Ostriker argues that Bishop's shift in focus spoils the political protest of the poem:

as the speaker shifts the burden of her attention from one rooster (the living creature, labeled as 'very combative' by the Greeks) to another (the Christian emblem), she also clearly shifts allegiance from one emotion (anger) to another (forgiveness) and from one frame of reference (brute life) to another (sacred art). (qtd.in Herrin 130)

Disagreeing with Ostriker's claim, Jeredith Herrin quotes Susan Schweik's critique:

"Roosters" does not end, as Ostriker suggests, with a pietistic affirmation of Christian orthodoxy, a neat turning of the other cheek. The poem concludes, reduplicating its original dialectical dynamic in miniature, with a choice of similes, neither of which holds privileged status. (qtd.in Merrin 130)

Merrin considers Schweik's interpretation "more consistent with Bishop's work as a whole" (130) since, typically, the poem "engages in a kind of inconclusive musing associated with the liminal state between waking and sleeping" (131). Reading the poem, I would add that Bishop
comes to the point of her "inconclusive musing" by shifting her attention from politics to religion, art, and finally to philosophical reflections.

The first part of "Roosters" starts with a series of images displaying the crudeness and brutality of patriarchal systems, exposing violence as their essential principle, and thus implying that patriarchies generate wars. The roosters' sharp crows turn the world into a battlefield: the early morning is engulfed "in the gun-metal blue dark," and the window turns "gun-metal blue." The stanzas that follow reveal further that militarism valorizes aggression and cruelty. As "the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare/ with stupid eyes," they let out "the uncontrolled, traditional cries" (35). Significantly, men not only control the military system but also mindlessly act out the roles assigned by the system: we learn that their cries are both "traditional" and "uncontrolled." Moreover, as Merrin points out, women contribute to uphold militarism as well. The wives admire their husbands' military spirits although they "lead hens' lives/ of being courted and despised." Their consciousness, however, the product of patriarchy, makes them accept the military ideology dominating all spheres of their lives.

Locating her symbolic roosters on the top of churches, Bishop reveals the power of militarism. As Bonnie Costello observes, the roosters "divide up the world into domains of power, each seeing the world in terms of his own interest and authority, 'each one an active/displacement in perspective' rather than a tolerance of many
perspectives" (65). This lack of tolerance combined with the desire for an absolute control over the mapped territories eventually turns the champions of militarism into their own victims:

Now in mid-air
by twos they fight each other.
Down comes a first flame-feather,

and one is flying,
with raging heroism defying
even the sensation of dying.

.....................
............ He is flung
on the gray ash-heap, lies in dung

with his dead wives
with open, bloody eyes,
while those metallic feathers oxidize.

Bishop suggests that military authorities exploit and distort the traditional codes of ethic to implement their dictatorial strategies. The blind rage stimulates their supposed heroism bringing about death and destruction. Eventually, they destroy themselves, and their earlier elevated position "over [the] churches" turns into the "ash-heap" and "dung."

Confronting such a total devastation, Bishop endeavors to find some potential means of redemption and she evokes the scenes from the Bible representing St. Peter's spiritual fall: his betrayal of Christ. However, Peter suddenly comprehends his dismal sin of a traitor as he hears the rooster's crows, and since he becomes deeply repentant, Christ forgives him. Thus, as critics have already observed, Bishop emphasizes the double symbolism of the roosters: on the one hand, the embodiment of combat and aggression, on the other, the sign of
forgiveness. Yet, Bishop does not close the poem with the latter, but reflecting on the nature of symbols she begins to perceive the morning from a painter's perspective:

    In the morning
    a low light is floating
    in the backyard, and gilding

    from underneath
    the broccoli, leaf by leaf;
    how could the night have come to grief?

    gliding the tiny
    floating swallow's belly
    and lines of pink cloud in the sky,

    the day's preamble
    like wandering lines in marble.
    The cocks are now almost inaudible.

Bishop's choice of words in her description of the morning turns her into a painter: she "gilds" the broccoli and the bird as well as draws "lines of pink cloud" and compares the early morning to "wandering lines in marble." Characteristically, the lines are not static, for as in many other poems she undermines the static nature of visual representation. Thus, following Merrin's observation about Bishop's "inconclusive musing" toward the end of the poem which reflects "the liminal state between waking and sleeping," we can interpret this musing in terms of Bishop's explorations of borders not only between sleeping and waking, but also between art and life: Bishop's "lines" are "wandering," and the cocks, though "almost inaudible," can still be heard. As Bishop's critics have pointed out on various occasions, such explorations are characteristic of Bishop's poetry.
But "Roosters" does not close at this moment either. With the final stanza Bishop directs her attention to the borders of meaning:

The sun climbs in,
following "to see the end,"
faithful as enemy, or friend.

Commenting on this closure, Merrin points out that it is "wary of anthropocentric metaphor" (131). In her interpretation, Costello suggest: "The Christian meaning, which supplanted the military meaning of the poem, is now in turn supplanted by the noniconic force of nature" (67). Bishop's ending, then, implies the necessity of cultural contexts for constructing any meanings or interpreting any symbols, and she suggests that the limits of culture constitute the limits of meaning. As the poem develops, Bishop's attention turns from her critique of militarism to her reflections on Christian symbolism which, leads her to think of the non-religious symbolism in art. Finally she closes the poem implying that as all symbols and meanings are deeply embedded in culture, being both unstable and provisional. While the sun itself, beyond human culture has no meanings, cultural contexts can turn it into a symbol of an "enemy or friend."

At the end of the poem, though not really turning, as Ostriker suggested, to the Christian idea of forgiveness, Bishop moves from the political territory of the first part of "Roosters" into a more reflective and philosophical sphere. And while "Roosters" constitutes Bishop's powerful protest against militarism, this political protest becomes somewhat tempered by her philosophical reflections. In
"Roosters," then, Bishop shifts her attention in a similar way as in "A Miracle for Breakfast."

Later, in her career, Bishop endeavored to compose politically engaged poems without shifting her attention to non-political issues; however, as Millier has pointed out Bishop never published or even finished these poems since she considered them poetically inferior to her other work (300). It was hard for her to find adequate means to express overtly political messages without violating her own poetic sensibilities. Yet, she discovered the political potential of the metaphor of carnival and used it in "Pink Dog," her pointed critique of the Brazilian politics and social injustice.

"Pink Dog" is not the only poem in which Bishop uses a carnival setting. Interpreting "The Armadillo," Costello points out the significance of the carnivalesque imagery in the poet's work:

It is not surprising that Bishop should choose carnival as the scene of several poems. Carnival is that state or domain in which the norms of culture are violated or inverted and in which repressed anxieties find expression.... A space of metamorphosis, rebellion, inclusion and inversion, heightened community and heightened eccentricity...it is a site of both moral and aesthetic contradiction. Carnival is Dionysian in an agonistic as well as in an ecstatic fashion. It is, as Bakhtin saw, a space of grotesque realism.(76)

Further in her discussion, Costello adds "The carnival setting...admits... disparate impulses" (77). Bakhtin's analysis of carnival indicates that the ceremony's "borderline" position between "art and life" (Rabelais and His World 7) is significant. Such a position opens up space for Costello's "disparate impulses."

238
Bakhtin traces carnival back to a group of laughter rituals in medieval Europe that challenge the existing norms. Bakhtin writes:

these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition...were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapoliical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less... (6)

Bakhtin emphasizes that during carnival there is no "distinction between actors and spectators...Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it"(7). Further on he adds:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. (10)

It is precisely because carnival erases the border between the stage and the real world that people can enact their challenge of accepted norms and hierarchies. Thus the carnival setting in "Pink Dog" provides a space within which Bishop feels comfortable to raise political issues: while her poem does not have to be bluntly political, it can still be politically engaged.

Bishop finished and published "Pink Dog" in 1979 when she was already in Boston, but the text "dates from the Carnival season of 1963 and expresses her growing disaffection with Brazil's poverty" (Millier 343). At the time, Brazilian political turmoils affected Bishop's life since her partner Lota de Macedo Soares was preoccupied with politics in Rio, especially that her close friend Carlos Lacerda, a
journalist and a politician, was active in the opposition against President Getulio Vargas and his oppressive government (Fountain 167). Although Alastair Reid who visited Bishop in 1964 claimed that "she was not at all interested in politics" since she "tuned out" during his talk with Lota about the political situation in Brazil," I think that his perception was not quite adequate. After all, through Lota Bishop was exposed to political life in Brazil, and she was interested in that life enough to support particular political agendas. For instance, she defended the 1964 military coup in Brazil (Fountain 186) and resented the criticism of the American politicians (185). In the context of her "Pink Dog" Bishop's views may seem bizarre; we must remember, though, that Lota and Lacerda supported the coup as well. Moreover, as David Weimer observes, Bishop's political stance was not uncommon:

I talked to a lot of middle-class Brazilians who welcomed the military coup...because Brazil really was moving toward a kind of anarchy at the time. There was a broad spectrum of Brazilian opinion that held [that the military revolution in 1964 was good because it freed Brazil from the communists. Elizabeth's believing this was] not an unreasonable position at the time and doesn't necessarily point to her social elitism. (Fountain 186)

While in Brazil Bishop's political judgement was rather commonplace, it stood in disagreement with the persona emerging from her poetry: a poet who undermined what seemed obvious and certain to reveal the multiple potential of provisional assumptions. Military regimes, however, far from endorsing provisionality, impose rigid social hierarchies. Bishop's political position, then, was not consistent: while she declared her support for the military regime, at the same time in "Pink Dog" she championed anarchy and recommended a rebellion.
As the poem opens Bishop undermines the commonly assumed opposition between nature and culture:

The sun is blazing and the sky is blue. umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue. Naked, you trot across the avenue.

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare! Naked and pink, without a single hair... Startled the passersby draw back and stare.

Blurring the borders between nature and culture, Bishop juxtaposes the festive and the disturbing aspects of the city's life. Her sky is serenely blue, but the sun scorches the ground, and the hairless dog disrupts the apparently joyous festivities, exposing the city's social problems. Bishop's dog which is "a nursing mother" who "look[s] intelligent" blurs the distinction between the human and the animal world. The dog, a representative of the poor, has left her children in a "slum" to "go begging." Bishop, however, warns the dog that walking around naked is dangerous since the government gets rid of the city's signs of poverty by drowning of the beggars:

Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers, to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars? They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.

If they do this to anyone who begs, drugged, drunk, or sober, with or without legs, what would they do to sick, four-legged dogs?

Bishop's scathing critique of the Brazilian politics reveals its inhuman character: those in power refuse democratic ideas of social progress that could improve the conditions of the poor. Instead they
impose a rigid social hierarchy which deprives the poor of their human rights. Classified as "parasites", they find themselves outside the Bakhtinian "officialdom" i.e. outside the borders of politically acknowledged human and social world. To reenforce such borders as well as to prevent any possibility of an intrusion of the poor, the regime tries to exterminate them under the cover of the night. In these circumstances, Bishop sees Carnival as a feast that may prevent such an extermination. Addressing the dog, she suggests:

Now look, the practical, the sensible

solution is to wear a fantasia.
Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-

n eyesore. But no one will ever see a

dog in mascaras this time of year.
Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.
What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?

They say that Carnival's degenerating
--radios, Americans, or something,
have ruined it completely. They're just talking.

Carnival is always wonderful!
A depilated dog would not look well.
Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!

Bishop's poem reflects Bakhtin's idea of Carnival as socially "liberating" since it upsets the "established order" and erases the border between the those whose presence is sanctioned by the establishment and social outcasts. As Carnival becomes all inclusive, it invites and protects the poor--they are no longer outcasts but join others in a festive dance. In the course of the poem, then, Bishop reveals the depravity and corruption of those in power, and through her embrace of Carnival, she advocates coup d'état. Significantly, though,
Carnival creates the circumstances opening a road for a non-violent, bloodless revolution giving birth to social justice.

Careful reading of Bishop's poems reveals the poet's changing and often ambivalent attitude toward the relationship between poetry and politics as well as toward the Left or Right. While, for instance, she recognizes the oppression of workers during the Depression, she does not see a workers' revolt as a viable solution: she cannot imaging the workers as efficient political leaders. Thus, even in her socially conscious poem on the Depression "A Miracle for Breakfast," she turns away from a possible revolution. Also, later in Brazil, more interested in politics, she could not bring herself to writing what she considered truly political poetry in which writers spoke as representatives of social groups. Even if she tried to compose such poems, she never finished them, as she felt comfortable only when she assumed a more personal, private stance. Erkkila points out that "Bishop's work problematizes the binarisms" (285) such as "modernism/leftism,..."public/private," and so personal/political as well. However, Bishop's questioning of such binary divisions and the presence of political strata in her writing do not immediately turn her into a political poet. After all, we need to keep in mind that language itself grows out of and functions in complex cultural circumstances and consequently, language itself cannot be free of politics. Thus, since no texts are politically free, all Bishop's poems can be interpreted in terms of their political content. However such readings do not turn Bishop into a political poet--we could claim as well that all poets are
"political" and so turn the word meaningless. I think poets can be called political if their work privileges political issues, and if their poems address political problems of their time. In some of her poems, as the ones discussed above, Bishop focuses on political issues, but, as my discussion in other chapters shows, most of Bishop's poetry foregrounds other problems.

While American critics who see Bishop as apolitical feel obliged to find convincing excuses for her attitude in order to confirm her status as a significant poet, and others for the same purpose claim Bishop's political engagement, Polish critics would not have such problems: after World War II, the label "political" was long used primarily to indicate that text had little literary value since the term "political" referred to essentially different ideological and material circumstances from those in the United States. Discussing that period, Edward Balcerzan points out that some Poles thought about the end of the war in terms of "a victory," some considered it "a liberation," some a "salvation," and still others—another "Soviet occupation" (Balcerzan 59). Although the list includes a number of viewpoints, and we could probably find even more, these views reflect in the main two different political positions: one which wanted to rebuild Poland as a sovereign country, independent from the Soviet Union, and one which was committed to communist ideas and emphasized the advantages of Poland's recognition of the Soviet leadership (Balcerzan 59-60). Eventually, those who claimed Polish sovereignty
were denounced as "right wing nationalists" and the communists with the support of the Soviet Union gained power (60-1).

This fusion of communism with power had an immense impact on economic, social, cultural, and, of course private or personal spheres of life. Politics, i.e. communist politics, became omnipresent and communist ideology required. During that time, the majority of writers joined the so called Professional Union of the Polish Writers (Zwiazek Zawodowy Literatow Polskich); during their conferences, the representatives of the Union would delineate new directions in the development of Polish literature. Obviously, the "new directions" had to fit in the post-war pro-Soviet Polish politics. Consequently, within the political discourse, the notion of "an individual" was associated primarily with private businesses or with capitalist owners exploiting the workers; thus, the communist challenge of capitalism included the ideological erasure of the notion "individual" and its replacement it the notion of "class." Citizens were supposed to think not in terms of any individual profit, but in terms of social contribution. This erasure of the significance of individual causes eventually led to the "erasure"--i.e. suppression and oppression--of individual dissidents for the sake of the common cause. In the context of the enforced communist regime, then, the defense of the rights of an individual belonged to the politics of the underground opposition against the communist oppression. Thus, it is significant to remember that whenever we try to compare political movements of the time in the U.S and in Poland different political contexts affect the meanings of various
concepts. For instance, the slogan "the personal is political" could be liberating for women in the U.S. while people in Poland would not really understand such a slogan without exploring the contexts of American political circumstances. In the Polish context, the phrase would simply be a mark of communist oppression. The challenge of this oppression involves thinking in terms of the personal and paying attention to an individual. Szymborska's poetical challenges to totalizing principles constitute also her political protest against communism.

Juxtaposing Szymborska's and Bishop's writings, then, we can see that Szymborska's bear a clearer imprint of politics than Bishop's. This difference is quite understandable since, unlike Bishop, Szymborska was a survivor and a witness of the war. Her poems from that period, such as "Krucjata Dziecieca" ("The Children's Crusade"), as well as her whole 1949 collection of poems, constitute a particularly terrifying reflection of the war. The collection, however, never appeared in print. With the establishment of the Stalinist communist regime, the poetry, "morbidly obsessed with the war and inaccessible to the masses," was pronounced "unpublishable" (Hirsch 35).

Szymborska, then, directly experienced the totalitarianism of the communist ideology with its claim to universality buttressed by methodical erasures of anything that did not fit in the system. In the process of fusing the whole culture with the imposed ideology, all potential publications had to be approved by a censor. The slightest departure of an article, a poem, or a story from the official political
agenda made the piece dangerous to the communist cause and so obviously unfit for publication. In such political circumstances, a decision to write, as Milosz says, "in the place" of those who perished was tantamount to a decision not to ever be published. Consequently, Szymborska decided to erase her "morbid obsessions" and "[write] for the masses." Her other choice was the so called "writing for the drawer," the strategy adopted by Zbigniew Herbert, Miron Bialoszewski, and others who in this way resisted communist oppression. But at that time Szymborska was a believer in the communist doctrine, since it did seem to offer some hope for rebuilding the world which would accommodate all people.

Already during the pre-war period, intellectuals, not only in Poland but all over Europe, aware of the terrible conditions of the masses, were attracted to Marxist ideology, which held the promise of putting an end to the exploitative character of the capitalist economy. In good faith, Szymborska joined the ranks of Polish Marxists, and in 1952 became a party member. During that time, she also worked on poems in the spirit of Socialist Realism supported by the regime. In 1952, she managed to publish her first book of poetry, *That's What We Live For*, which two years later was followed by another collection, *Questions Put to Myself*. Both volumes reflect the poet's commitment to the socialist cause and the devastating effect of this commitment on Szymborska's art.

In his article "The Reluctant Poet," Stanislaw Baranczak writes about Szymborska's communist phase:

247
In one of the very few interviews Ms. Szymborska has given in the course of her career, she said that in her early writing she tried to love humankind instead of human beings. One might add that the esthetics of Socialist Realism demanded love for nothing less than humankind while at the same time, ironically, narrowing the multidimensionality of human life down to just one, social, dimension.

I would add here that Socialist Realism as an ideological agenda not only narrowed down human life to "one, social, dimension" but it reduced the diverse, multiple character of the social also to narrowly defined class struggle. Szymborska, with her sense of the real as diverse, multiple, and always beyond the poet's grasp, must have suffered from the stifling constraints imposed on her own writing, and her poetry suffered even more. No wonder Szymborska's critics and translators skip this first stage of her writing and concentrate on her later poetry, incomparably more complex both poetically and philosophically. Szymborska herself has never had any desire to republish her socialist verse. And even if, as Stanislaw Balbus observed, some of these early poems, such as "The Banal Rhymes," "Circus Animals," "The Angry Muse," or "The Questions Put to Myself," (8) reveal an irony, auto-irony, and humor characteristic of the later Szymborska, and they "could well be included in any contemporary anthology of the post-war Polish poetry" (8-9), Szymborska never tried to republish any of these early poems: first, she probably wanted to reject her early political stage; second, even the poems bypassing the communist commandments fall short of her more mature verse.

Yet I would not want to erase these poems from the historical record, even those which quite obviously reflect communist propaganda.
While they may be of little poetical value, they constitutes a significant record of the politically correct art of that period; they both represent the imposed ideology and expose its damaging effects on language. The erasure of ideologically incorrect phraseology eliminates the possibility of creating complex linguistic representations. Even considering the fact that representations by their very nature are incomplete and never politically free, the strict enforcement of the communist agenda in the sphere of art had a predominantly deleterious effect. The world constructed in terms of a single binary opposition of evil imperialists and good communists is not only flat and colorless but also blatantly false. After the war, in the country where thousands, even millions of people died, where towns and cities were in ruins, the easy optimism of socialist propaganda jarred with the omnipresent traces of the war. And yet the communist vision, though a political sham, was enticing: the erasure of the tragically complex offered a much desired hope.

During her communist phase, Szymborska could never admit, as she did in her much later poem "Sky," "My identifying features/ are rapture and despair" (174); she could afford only "rapture." Thus, in That's What We Live For, if people die for a cause, death is no longer tragic. The last wish of the commander Zajcew to die as a communist turns his death into a communist manifesto ("Dowodca plutonu cekaemow--Zajcew" [Zajcew--The Machine-Gun Commander of the Platoon]); in another poem, an anonymous soldier is only too willing to die for a cause and scorns any poetic epitaphs mourning his death ("Pocalunek nieznanego
zolnierza" ["The Kiss of an Unknown Soldier"]; in yet another verse, the tank soldiers die proudly, singing "The International" (Komendant Zalogi Czolgu--Jambekow). There is never any doubt that dying for a patriotic, communist cause is right, noble, and even desirable: such death is the source of pride not only for those who die but also for the survivors. To compose such poems, Szymborska must have drastically revised her earlier "morbid obsessions with the war."

But even at such an early stage, this utopia betrays its totalitarian edge as it erases all differences: individuals fighting for the common cause fuse with their fellow communists and dissolve in the masses. In this way, they become replaceable. It was precisely under the banner of the masses that the communist regimes could easily get rid of any inconvenient individuals.

This privilege of the collective is clearly reflected in Szymborska's first published volumes of poetry. In the first one, "That's What We Live For" (emphasis mine), Szymborska advocates the communist cause speaking as much for herself as for others; in these poems, she never doubts the legitimacy or adequacy of her words. A number of her poems in the volume constitute an enthusiastic welcome of the new socialist world and its doubtlessly bright future. This new world, founded by Lenin--the symbolic Adam ("Lenin")--is guarded against the hating imperialists' by peace-loving workers. The future "city of happy fate," is, of course, "the socialist city" ("Na powitanie budowy socjalistycznego miasta," "A Welcome To the Development of the Socialist City"). The crude binarism of ideas
forestalls any poetic complexity. Such poetry constitutes a virtual antithesis to Szymborska's later work, which undermines uniformity, explores multiple facets, and reveals the provisional nature of truth. It suffices to read one stanza from ("Mlodziezy budujacej Nowa Hute") "To the Young People Building a New Steelwork District" to see the gap:

The class with the false memory dies.
We choose the memory of trust:
like a book it opens before us
on the pages with the most often read lines. [translation mine]

Like Szymborska's other poems written at the time, "To the Young People" reflects the communist regime strategy to implement its political agenda under the bogus banner of working classes. In the quoted poem, the past memory of imperialists together with their history is deficient, as it has excluded the workers. However, the "new" history, constructed supposedly to serve the working people and rooted in their collective memory, is reliable. Interestingly, Szymborska connects this memory to the most often read pages—another contrast with her later work in which she frequently reflects on what has not even been recorded, pondering rather over the blank or unread pages. Moreover, the self-confident speaker of "To the Young People" stands in sharp contrast to the tone of speakers in Szymborska's mature work, which is permeated by uncertainty and indeterminacy.

While Szymborska's socialist/realist phase may at first seem irrelevant to her later development as a poet, I would suggest that Szymborska's early self-censorship may be at least partly responsible for her later preoccupation with what has been overlooked, forgotten,
suppressed, and passed over in silence. Yet Szymborska does not simply fill in the blank pages of history. Rather, in meditating on absence, she develops her own poetics of silence. Commenting on this poetics, Dorota Wojda connects it not so much to Szymborska's experience of Polish history and politics as to the twentieth-century literary trend known as "negative poetics," "the literature of silence," or "the aesthetics of silence" (31). But if it is true that purely political interpretation of Szymborska's silent moments would not only be reductive but also misleading, the exclusion of political contexts from poetic interpretations would be equally inadequate. Reading Szymborska's silence, we need to keep in mind both the trauma of the war and post-war communist oppression. The horrors of the war seemed to have gone far beyond the grasp of language and for many poets silence became the only adequate means to face the war experiences. Later, with the establishment of strict communist censorship, historical events and cultural artifacts undermining the communist ideology were destroyed or relegated to oblivion. People who tried to defy the system were intimidated or liquidated. In the country thus oppressed, silence was telling. Moreover, in the first attempt to reduce censorship in Poland, in 1981 Solidarity made the government pass the law which required marking with dots and brackets those fragments of published texts which had been cut out by a censor. In the context of such circumstances, then, poetic images of silence were politically telling, as they alluded to various forms of censorship. Thus, as I observe in my first chapter, frequent moments of silence in
Szymborska's poetry points not only to the poet's philosophical reflections on the fragmentary character of human perception but also to her attention to what has been censored and deleted on purpose; that kind of attention immediately generates questions, and so Szymborska's constant asking questions constitutes also her challenge of censorship.

In his article "The Szymborska Phenomenon," Stanislaw Baranczak observes: "Symbolically enough, Szymborska's second collection, published in 1954, was titled Questions Put to Myself—and it is with this title's first word that the genuine Szymborska begins (253-4). Thus, although the volume belongs to Szymborska's Socialist-Realist phase during which she did not allow herself to doubt, she already seems to be on her way to challenging the communist ideology. Her actual rejection comes after the 1956 thaw with her 1957 collection Calling Out to Yeti. In "Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition"—the poem from that volume—Szymborska reveals communism as inhuman. The title of the poem suggests that when she supported the Communist system, she believed she partook in a noble, highly ethical enterprise, but she became aware that her perception of this "expedition" was only her fantasy. Edward Hirsch explains that "The figure of Yeti, the Abominable Snowman" becomes Szymborska's "metaphor for Stalinism" (104) whose central tactics was terror. In one of his letters, Lenin wrote, "The courts must not ban terror...but must formulate the motive underlying it, legalize it as a principle, plainly, without any make-believe or embellishment" (Walicki 352). Under Stalin, the politics of terror reached its climax, "physical
terror combined with organized ideological pressure pushed people not only into outward pressure but also toward deliberate attempts to force themselves into the mood of a total inner conformity" (Walicki 480). In her poem, Szymborska condemns the communist terror indirectly. As Hirsch observes, at first she "indicates that she did believe in Communism just as there were those who believed in the legendary snow creature from the north, but neither provided warmth or artistic comfort" (105). In the opening, Szymborska realizes that the Himalayan environment cannot accommodate human beings:

So these are the Himalayas,
Mountains racing to the moon.
The moment of their start recorded
on the startling, ripped canvas of the sky.
Holes punched in a desert of clouds.
Thrust into nothing.
Echo-a white mute.
Quiet.

The poem reflects the fiction of the communists' declaration to achieve a fulfilling life after political struggles that were supposed to bring people to a higher level of consciousness and erase the corrupt consciousness nourished by the capitalist system. For that purpose, communist regimes practiced not only strict censorship but also terror to enforce their ideology. Szymborska's images of the damaged environment--sky and clouds--reveal that the communist struggles bring destruction only and communist ideology turns the promised utopia into a deadland. The only figure in the empty kingdom is Yeti, the embodiment of Stalinism (Hirsch 105). Thus, addressing Yeti, Szymborska
challenges the communist ideals with an image of everyday life, certainly not utopian, but accommodating human beings:

Yeti, down there we've got Wednesday, bread and alphabets.
Two times two is four.
Roses are red there,
and violets blue.

Yeti, crime is not all
we're up to down there.
Yeti, not every sentence there
means death.

We've inherited hope--
the gift of forgetting.
You'll see how we give
birth among the ruins.

Yeti, we've got Shakespeare there.
Yeti, we play solitaire
and violin. At nightfall, we turn lights on, Yeti.

There is a sharp contrast between the elevated yet colorless, silent and so morbid kingdom of Yeti and the diverse, social world of common people. Significantly, Szymborska does not idealize the human world, since she acknowledges crime, destruction, and death. However, as diverse and changing, life is not only tragic but also joyful, as people enjoy music, literature, games and songs. While they die, others get born, and in this sense humankind is reborn. Yeti's territory--immune to change--provides no space for human needs.

Up here it's neither moon nor earth.
Tears freeze.
Oh Yeti, semi-moonman,
turn back, think again! I called this to the Yeti inside four walls of avalanche,
stomping my feet for warmth
on the everlasting snow.
Yeti's world cannot become meaningful since human language falls short of words to describe it—neither "moon" nor "earth" is adequate. Moreover, Yeti's territory brings to mind the Soviet labor camps in the north where people had to work in terrible conditions and often died from cold temperatures in which "tears [could] freeze." In his study of the Soviet prison system and labor camps after 1917, Michael Jakobson writes, "Mortality reached 30 percent in the northern camps, ten times the rate at prisons in Tsarist Russia and about four times the rate at...camps in central Russia" (40). Describing the conditions in one of the camps (Kholmogory, 1921) a former prisoner writes:

Of 1,200 [prisoners], 442 died from May to October [1921]...The mortality rate increased when the weather got colder. The deaths were caused no only by diseases but by lack of food and by cold weather. (Jakobson 41)

Szymborska not only presents communist countries as a snow covered, mountainous territory impossible to live in, but also as a form of imprisonment: the final stanza alludes not only to dissenters put in prisons but also to the stifling politics imprisoning human mind. Talking to Yeti, then, Szymborska articulates her protest against the communist terror, pointing out that although the Stalin regime seems "everlasting," it is not; the image of "avalanche" suggests its collapse.

Her later poem "Utopia" evokes Marxist ideas of communist state as an ideal, utopian society. Although Marx strongly criticized those who believed in utopian socialism and he claimed that the workers "have no ready-made Utopias to introduce...[by decree of the people]," in
fact his "thinking was strongly permeated by utopianism. In spite of
his denials, he was committed to a definite ideal for the future" (Walicki 89-90). Szymborska's poem reveals that a supposedly ideal
communist society is a form of prison. In the Polish original, the very
title alludes to death since the noun "utopia" resembles the verb
"utopic" ---"drown." Moreover, as Szymborska's Utopia is an island,
it alludes to the Soviet system of labor camps, referred to after the
title of Solzhenitsyn's work on the camps, The Gulag Archipelago
(Jakobson 124). In her poem, Szymborska unmasks the dangers of a
perfect utopian state, which as Marxist ideologues claim ensures
security and comfort:

Solid ground beneath your feet.
The only roads are those that offer access.
Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.
The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.
The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.
The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.
If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.
Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds
On the right a cave where Meaning lies.
On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.
Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

While the utopian "land of certainty" may be tempting, Szymborska's
description immediately undermines its supposedly edenic character till
the island becomes ominous. Each line of the poem becomes an assertion
followed by a blank line. Such visual arrangement implies not only the
incompleteness of the assertions, but also a purposeful erasure of what
might come in between. In the seventies in Poland, such erasures immediately bring to mind official censorship; however, even beyond the Polish borders, the blank lines suggest omissions, which in the context of assertive clauses can easily be ascribed to some kind of totalitarian control. The assertions, then, may trigger the reader's inquiry into what has been suppressed and why. Moreover, the utopian language of certainty comes across as maimed if not dead. The poem's implication that there is only one adequate arrangement of the world with the "cave [of] Meaning" "on the right" and "the Lake of Deep Conviction" "on the left" brings the whole utopian world to a standstill: nothing can undergo any kind of change since each change would ruin the ideal world. Consequently, the poem's Utopia turns into a multiple-level prison. By its very definition, the island does not provide much space and is cut off the world by the ocean; in the past, some islands were even used as prisons. Also the assertive language brings about both intellectual and emotional restrictions which, as Szymborska believes, would erase the human. Thus, she writes:

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited, and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

In the end, then, Utopia collapses into a form of Dystopia. Revealing the utopian land of certainty as incompatible with human life, Szymborska makes us realize that the sense of our existence comes from
its transformation and unpredictability. Human existence begins with the symbolic "plunge in the sea," and thus at the moment of the conscious rejection of certitude. Moreover, we become aware that eventually the unfathomable waters will take our lives, but paradoxically it is the transience that reaffirms the meaning of each moment. "Utopia" clearly reveals a political dimension of Szymborska's predilection for asking questions: since genuine questions stimulate intellect, totalitarian regimes replace them with ideologically correct answers. Szymborska addresses the issue of the communist attempts to restrain any intellectual activities in "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography" (Poems 208) included in her 1986 volume The People on the Bridge.

Reading this collection, we need to remember that at that time people in Poland experienced strict political restrictions due to the martial law imposed in December 1981 by General Jaruzelski. About a year earlier Polish workers in many cities organized strikes to protest against the increase of meat prices (Yoder 100). Moreover, the workers started organizing themselves:

In August [1980] representatives of twenty-one enterprises met in Gdansk to set up a strike committee to coordinate demands and actions. The name Solidarity was adopted for the movement, and Lech Walesa, a former electrician, who had been fired, was elected as chairman. (Yoder 100)

With the martial law, Jaruzelski "disbanded Solidarity, and Poland was placed under a strict Communist-military dictatorship" (Yoder 100). Although after a while the government loosened its dictatorial grip, it was not until August 1989 that the Communist party lost its power.
with the election of the first—after World War II—non communist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki (Yoder 101-6). Until that moment, the communist regime tried to control the intellectual life of the country. During the martial law, the militiamen had a right to surprise searches of people's apartments to arrest those who had any "politically incorrect" publications. Thus, people engaged in any activities undermining the communist ideology had to be on guard all the time. In her poem, Szymborska develops a sarcastically ironic commentary on these political conditions. To understand the extent of Szymborska's denunciation of the communist politics, American readers need to realize that in 1986 for people in Poland whose culture was not only controlled by communists but also deeply rooted in catholicism, pornography was a strictly "forbidden fruit" (Baranczak "Amerykanizacja..." 89). Szymborska’s claim that thinking for the communist regime is as unethical as pornography for the Catholic church reveals the extent of the communist suppression of any ideas that did not develop along the party line.

There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-borne weed
on a plot laid out for daisies.

Nothing's sacred for those who think.
Calling things brazenly by name,
risque analyses, salacious syntheses,
frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts,
the filthy fingering of touchy subjects,
discussion in heat—it's music to their ears.

Since the military regime enforces its ideology, those who do not accept it blindly commit the most serious crime--thinking--thus
becoming ideological sinners. What the "sinners" want, however, is the exploration of history and the actual political events that the regime wants to falsify or cover up. As it is impossible to unmask the communist politics of terror through the official mass media, the opposition needs to work under cover:

In broad daylight or under cover of night
they form circles, triangles, or pairs.
The partners' age or sex are unimportant.
Their eyes glitter, their cheeks are flushed.
Friend leads friend astray.
Degenerate daughters corrupt their fathers.
A brother pimps for his little sister.

They prefer the fruits
from the forbidden tree of knowledge
to the pink buttocks found in glossy magazines—
all that ultimately simple-hearted smut.
The books they relish have no pictures.
What variety they have lies in certain phrases marked with a thumbnail or a crayon.

It's shocking, the positions,
the unchecked simplicity with which
one mind contrives to fertilize another!
Such positions the Kama Sutra itself doesn't know.

During these trysts of theirs, the only thing that's steamy is the tea.

People sit on their chairs and move their lips.
Everyone crosses only his own legs
so that one foot is resting on the floor
while the other dangles freely in midair.
Only now and then does somebody get up,
go to the window,
and through a crack in the curtains take a peep out at the street. (208-9)

While for American readers the uneasy, tense atmosphere of the gathering may be quite puzzling, for Polish readers it evokes the only too-familiar events of the eighties: mass arrests and imprisonments—either in regular prisons or in camps—of the Solidarity activists,
frequent searches of the private apartments, confiscation of any publications that could be potentially subversive, and even random searches of the pedestrians who looked "suspect." The government implemented the politics of terror to subdue the opposition and make sure that the dissidents would have no chance to "lead [people] astray".

Moreover, Szymborska's representation of the underground intellectual and political activities in terms of pornography becomes her sarcastic condemnation of the communist erasure or distortion of facts through their deliberate misuse of language. The poem alludes to the communist practice of presenting dissidents as dangerous criminals and any other oppositional movements including strikes in factories as the rebellions of corrupted hooligans disrupting the peaceful life of the responsible Polish citizens. The adequate information on the development of political events belonged to "the forbidden tree of knowledge." And yet the communist terror did not suppress people's thirst for this knowledge; notwithstanding the danger of imprisonment, they explored and spread the news that the regime censored, thus "fertilizing" other "minds." Yet, as the involvement in any activities undermining the communist regime was dangerous--one could always expect a sudden search and an arrest--the opposition had to be particularly cautious; thus, as Szymborska points out "now and then" someone would "take a peep out at the street" to see if there is any suspect car parked outside or if the communist Security Service men are about to start yet another search and another series of arrests. After all, any
text deemed harmful to the communist system was a reason enough for an arrest. Thus, "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography" constitutes a biting critique of the regime's methods of oppression aimed at controlling people's minds and imposing the politically approved representation of the events.

We can see that Szymborska frequently links forms of oppression to attempts to assimilate the multiple, complex, and changing nature of the human world within one ideological framework. She alludes to such a framework in the three poems discussed above—"Notes from a Nonexistent Himalaya Expedition," "Utopia" and "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography." In yet another poem "Children of Our Age" (also from her 1986 collection), she exposes the use of a single political framework as reductive and senseless. Reading the poem in translation, American readers need to be aware of the different implications of the word "political" in poetry in the U.S. and in Poland: while in the U.S. it could have complex—often liberating—meanings, in communist Poland it carried primarily the pejorative sense of political repression. Thus, Szymborska's sarcastic censure of the Marxist reduction of the multiple to the political, especially in 1986, had different implications in Poland than in the U.S. where the text could be read as a criticism of the left on behalf of the right. We need to keep in mind that in Poland "politics" was appropriated by the regime: "political activists" always endorsed the system; those active in the opposition movement were "dissidents." The political position of liberal Marxists in the U.S. challenging the dominant power of the
system cannot be confused with the position of Marxists holding and endorsing the power in Poland. We can see the difference particularly well examining the cold war period. Andrzej Walicki observes:

> Whatever we think of the scholarly value of the totalitarian model, we should be aware of its functions in the political struggle. It is natural that in the period of the cold war, people committed to the same or similar values but living in different countries should see these functions in a different light: American liberals concentrating on combating McCarthyism, naturally differed from East European liberals, for whom enemy number one was the continuing and unbearably repressive Stalinist system. (400)

At the same time, however, we also need to keep in mind that totalitarianism in Eastern Europe did have its roots in Marxism. We can see this connection clearly as we read some of Marx's statements:

> Above all one thing must be made clear: freedom here does not mean the freedom of the individual. This is not to say that the fully developed communist society will have no knowledge of the freedom of the individual. On the contrary, it will be the first society in the history of mankind that really takes this freedom seriously and actually makes it a reality. However, even this freedom will not be the same as the freedom of bourgeois ideologists have in mind today. In order to achieve the social preconditions necessary for real freedom, battles must be thought in the course of which present-day society will disappear, together with the race of men it has produced....

> ...in contemporary bourgeois society individual freedom can only be corrupt and corrupting because it is a case of unilateral privilege based on the unfreedom of others, this desire must entail the renunciation of individual freedom. It implies the conscious subordination of the self to that collective will that is destined to bring real freedom into being...This conscious collective will is the Communist Party. (qtd. in Walicki 14)

Marx claims that the ideal society will come into being as people acknowledge one political ideology advantageous to the whole of humankind. Szymborska's poem reveals not only the fallacious but also dangerous nature of this claim based on an assumption of erasing
cultural and individual differences. Moreover, it is rather naive to believe that any political framework will open a way to create a conflict free society; rather, it may only contribute to the development of a more oppressive system. And so Szymborska writes:

We are children of our age,
it's a political age.

All day long, all through the night,
all affairs--yours, ours, theirs--
are political affairs.

Whether you like it or not,
your genes have a political past,
your skin, a political cast,
your eyes a political slant.

The text suggests that a solely political perception of the world is not only reductive, but also dangerous. Attaching the label "political" to matters that people consider private may become a useful tool for a totalitarian regime to justify brutal intrusion into people's lives including searches, arrests, and jail. Although Szymborska's poem does not include such specific examples, for Eastern European readers, her comments about interpreting all individual activities or personal features in terms of politics have a threatening ring as they evoke brutality of communist totalitarian regimes--for instance, the terror under Stalin in the Soviet Union. In the eighties, however, people in Poland had fresh in their minds the government's forceful suppression of the whole opposition movement in the name of communist political values. The third stanza of "Children of Our Age" brings to mind other
instances of political oppression directed against particular races or cultures.

Later in the poem, Szymborska's tone becomes even more sarcastic:

Whatever you say reverberates,
whatever you don't say speaks for itself.
So either way you're talking politics.

Even when you take to the woods,
you're taking political steps
on political grounds.

Apolitical poems are also political,
and above us shines a moon
no longer purely lunar.
To be or not to be, that is the question.
And though it troubles your digestion
it's a question, as always, of politics.

To acquire a political meaning
you don't even have to be human.
Raw material will do,
or protein feed, or crude oil,

or a conference table whose shape
was quarreled over for months:
Should we arbitrate life and death
at a round table or a square one.

While Szymborska's critique of the current overuse of the label "political" reveals its reductive as well as threatening potential, as the poem develops, the poet emphasizes the absurdity of purely political interpretations (97). At the same time, though, Szymborska implies that such an abuse of the meaning of politics produces distorted, reductive, and absurd representations of the human world as well as dissolves the meaning of "political." If the word applies equally to all aspects of the real, it erases the distinction between "political" and other issues. Consequently, politicians may spend their
time attending to trivial matters before they ever start discussing the problems affecting people's lives. Thus, it is an illusion that considering all issues in terms of political categories has significantly improved the existential conditions of human beings. Szymborska writes:

Meanwhile, people perished,  
animals died,  
houses burned,  
and the fields ran wild  
just as in times immemorial  
and less political.

While the discursive extension of "political" may fulfill the needs of politicians at their conference tables, it does not have much impact on resolving the problems or fulfilling the basic needs of common people. Szymborska's sarcastic critique of interpreting the world within one political framework only has several implications: it reveals the reductive even absurd character of such interpretations; it reminds the audience of its threatening potential—-in communist countries the brutal intrusions of the security service into people's lives could easily be made on political grounds; it undermines Marxists' claim of politics as the most important and all-inclusive sphere of human life; moreover, it reveals the gap between politics and life, between the concerns of politicians and the concerns of common people; finally, it shows the gradual dissolution of the meaning "political."

Szymborska has written a number of other poems which like "Utopia," "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography" or "Children of
Our Age" focus on political issues. And yet the label "political poet" for Szymborska would not be adequate. We need to remember that in Poland such a label would be not only reductive but also derogatory. As I have already mentioned, when Marian Stala wants to reveal the profound nature of Szymborska's poems, he emphasizes that she always goes beyond politics (97). But even if we do not consider "political" in the East European pejorative sense, I still would not classify Szymborska as a political poet but rather as also a political poet. Considering the thematic scope of her work, it would be better to call her a philosophical poet.

In comparison with Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, however, Szymborska's bears a much clearer imprint of politics: through the initial support of the communist regime's Marxist ideology in her poetry and later through her open rejection of communism Szymborska manifested her political position. At the same time, though, in communist Poland, the binary of politically correct communists versus hostile elements of capitalism dominated the whole system. It was difficult, if not impossible, to locate oneself outside of this binary, and we can see its traces in Szymborska's Nobel lecture in 1996 when she locates poetry outside official institutions:

...there are no professors of poetry. That would mean, after all, that poetry is an occupation requiring specialized study, regular examinations, theoretical articles with bibliographies and footnotes, and finally, ceremoniously conferred diplomas. And this would mean, in turn, that it's not enough to cover pages with even the most exquisite poems in order to become a poet. The crucial element is some slip of paper bearing an official stamp. Let us recall that the pride of Russian poetry, the future Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky, was once sentenced to internal exile
precisely on such grounds. They called him "a parasite," because he lacked official certification granting him the right to be a poet. ("The Poet and the World" xii)

To make Szymborska's reflections clearer, we should emphasize that Brodsky was a dissident poet:

In February 1964...[he] was tried in Leningrad as a "social parasite" who had corrupted young people with his 'pornographic' and anti-Soviet verse....Brodsky was sentenced to five years of hard labor in the Archangels region of the USSR... (Forche 141)

Clearly, Szymborska's inclusion of Brodsky in her speech manifests her support for communist opponents; at the same time, though, that support has different implications in postcommunist Eastern European countries than in Western Europe or in the United States. The political position of communists or Marxists in the U.S. should not be confused with the political position of dogmatic Marxist communists in Eastern Europe where they held the power oppressing and persecuting the slightest opposition. Talking about Brodsky, Szymborska emphasizes the significance of intellectual freedom, and alluding to the communist oppressive enforcement of a single dogmatic political framework, she advocates a wide range of choices.

In the U.S. the situation was different: communists had no power and were often persecuted especially during the McCarthy era, the period during which various intellectuals expressed their Marxist sympathies. At that time, Elizabeth Bishop consistently refused to assume and support a Marxist position in poetry in spite of her friends' pressure. Bishop's refusal may suggest that her political views overlapped with those of Szymborska after the Polish poet
rejected communist ideology. Keeping in mind different political circumstances in Poland and the U.S., we see that such a conclusion would be superficial: rejecting communism, Szymborska challenged the political power; Bishop's refusal to join Marxist activists involved no such challenges. At the same time, Bishop's attitude does not mean that she supported those in power, since we cannot see the political conditions in the U.S. in terms of a simple reversal of the communist systems. Even McCarthyism did not impose the binary division of political supporters versus opponents of the regime to an extend comparable to that in Eastern Europe. The multiplicity and diversity of American society opened some space outside a crude political binary—-for/against the regime—and so Bishop's refusal to support the Marxists did not manifest her support of the regime. Bishop felt that committing herself to a single political framework would be damaging to her poetry, and the multiple, provisional frameworks were essential for her art. Yet, as the above analysis of Bishop's poems has shown, while not any party member, on some occasions Bishop expressed her political views in poetry. Moreover, with time, she became more interested in politics, and during her stay in Brazil, she made attempts at composing what she considered "political poems," but she would never finish them; she could not put up with what she perceived as political constraints damaging to poetical sensibilities.

Critical analysis of Szymborska's and Bishop's poems in terms of politics brings to light the significance of political conditions in shaping meanings and functions of concepts—such as freedom or
democracy—that may be understood as "the same." My discussion has focused primarily on the notion of politics and the function of marxism in Eastern European countries and in the U.S. To make a meaningful dialogue across the Atlantic possible, it is necessary to be aware of these differences. Without realizing the mostly pejorative meaning of "political" in communist countries, American critics may not quite understand the reluctance of various critics from Eastern Europe to label literary works as political. It is also difficult for those who grew up in Eastern Europe to understand Marxists in the West since in communist--now, postcommunist--countries Marxist ideology has discredited itself irrevocably. But, again, we need to keep in mind different political conditions and different versions of Marxism in the East and in the West. It is worth recalling Walicki's comment:

It can be said that Marxism as a theory of communism is old-fashioned Marxism, dogmatic and utopian at the same time, sharply contrasting with the "living Marxism"--the scientific and critical part of Marx's legacy—that is, still a method of radically criticizing different aspects of capitalist system. [...] It is certainly possible to be a Marxist without being a dogmatic communist, or even a communist at all (as is usually the case with academic Marxists in the West), but adherence to noncommunist Marxism does not justify ignoring the Marxist roots of twentieth century-communism or treating the latter as a merely Russian or "Eastern" development. (2)

Walicki suggests that the relationship between Marxism in the West and in Eastern Europe cannot be perceived in terms of a simple binary opposition, but the relationship is much more complex and requires a careful study. Juxtaposition of Bishop's and Szymborska's work reveals some aspects of that complexity and invites more studies.
Moreover, discussion of the two women's poetry and of critical studies of their work make us at least partly aware why the phrase "poetry and politics" has become so controversial. Depending on social, political periodical and geographical circumstances, the label "political" has different implications. Thus, as I have pointed out, to emphasize the high value and significance of Bishop's poetry, some American critics privilege the political dimension of her work. In the case of Szymborska, for the same purpose, Polish critics emphasize Szymborska's going beyond politics.
NOTES

1. In his article "Radosc czytania Szymborskiej" ["The Joy of Reading Szymborska"], Marian Stala implies that political messages are damaging to the art of poetry. He emphasizes, then, Szymborska's going beyond politics. At the same time, however, he does admit that in her work Szymborska speaks in terms of "politics" (emphasis mine), "psychology," "biology," and "metaphysics (104)."

2. Discussing the poem, Palattella observes: "[Bishop's] comic vision keeps the miracle from expanding to a romantic vision of salvation. 'I sit on my balcony/with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee," she exclaims, but immediately undercuts these hints at transcendence in the sestina's envoy" (37).


4. Dorota Uojda, Milczenie słowa: O poezji Wislawy Szymborskiej, Krakow: TAiWPN Universitas, 1996 [The Silence of the Word: Poetry of Wislawa Szymborska]. In the conclusions following her analysis of Szymborska's poem, "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography," Hojda writes: One can expect similar patterns in other poems of the author of Could Have. As these patterns reveal, in a given poetical work, the silence serves a multiple purpose: it constitutes a basic constructional unit; a compositional strategy; a vacant space filled in gradually with the unravelling of the text; the surplus of meaning stemming from the interaction of different textual levels; and finally, as a suggestion of the adequate interpretive contexts not immediately present in the text" (114). My discussion focuses primarily on Szymborska's interest in what has been erased from or never included in various records of our culture.

5. The law was introduced on July, 31 1981. (Kontrola Publikacji i Widowisk art. 2, pkt. 3 Dziennik Ustaw nr 20, poz. 99)

6. The image brings to mind Czeslaw Milosz's work The Captive Mind.

7. Jakobson explains that "GULAG (Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei... meant The Main Administration of Camps), and the Agency became known by this name, especially after publication of Solzhenitsyn's trilogy, The Gulag Archipelago (124)."
8. In fact, a text could be always suspected as politically subversive. When in 1983 in Warsaw, I was stopped in the street and the security service searching through my bags found the underground press together with Joyce's *Ulysses*, I was interrogated about the connections between the underground publications and Joyce's novel. (Of course, one could always find such political connections).
CONCLUSION

In her Nobel lecture "The Poet and the World," Wislawa Szymborska observes:

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases such as "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of events." But in the language of poetry where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal.

Elizabeth Bishop would certainly agree with Szymborska; in one of her interviews she says:

I have a great respect...for what people call ordinary things. I am very visually minded and mooses and filling stations aren't necessarily commonplace to me. (100-101)

For Bishop's and Szymborska's readers the "ordinary things" turn into extraordinary, and "the ordinary course of events" becomes unique. This sudden metamorphosis of the commonplace into the exceptional has its source in the poets' art of questioning: they both investigate and interrogate what people perceive as obvious revealing the tacit assumptions underlying such perception. Questioning the obvious, Bishop and Szymborska explore a wide range of areas in their cultures including literature, visual arts, history, and the current social and political issues. Both poets make us aware of the ways cultures shape human perceptions of the world since they present each perception as one of many possible interpretations constructed within the dominant
narrative of a particular culture. In their poetry, Bishop and Szymborska attend to the cultural margins, undermining the dominant modes of narration.

Thus, as my discussion of the two women reflections on poetry shows, they constantly challenge the American or Polish poetic paradigms and undermine the existing concepts of poetry and the poet. American critics such as Bonnie Costello, Jeredith Merrin, David Kalstone and others reveal that Bishop repeatedly questions the elevated status of the poet. Since for Bishop this status has been constructed within the Anglo-American romantic and modern tradition, she frequently revises this tradition. Thus, if the Romantic poet such as Wordsworth is capable of transcending the material world and reaching the sphere of eternal art through his imagination, Bishop's poet offers only provisional imaginative reconstructions of the reality. And if Emersonian poet soars high above others as "a transparent eyeball" experiencing a reunion with the world through an illuminating vision, Bishop's poet may offer only provisional glimpses of the world mediated through language.

Bishop always emphasizes the gap between the human and the external world, revealing that this gap opens up space for imaginative creativity. It is because poetry can never contain or embody the world that innovative artistic trends become meaningful. At the same time, Bishop is deeply aware that all innovations stem from the past traditions. Thus, challenging the claim of Modernist poets to break with the past and "Make It New," Bishop proposes incessant
rediscovering and renaming of the surrounding world in the course of her poetical interrogations. To break with the past the poets would have to be godlike since they would have to create their art in a cultural vacuum. For Bishop, poets are only human.

Like Bishop, Szymborska questions any grandiose notions of poetry and the poet. For the Polish poet, however, this grandeur stems from somewhat different sources than for American poets. It was only in 1918 that Poland regained independence after the country had been partitioned for one hundred twenty three years. This period significantly shaped Polish culture. Carpenter writes:

For over a century political and moral concerns had dominated Polish literature and above all poetry, which was always the most representative and in quality the strongest of all genres in Poland. Stefan Zeromski's concept of literature as "the conscience of the nation" had been prevalent ever since romanticism and echoed Mickiewicz's image of the poet as a "ruler of souls." (xiii)

For a long time in Poland, the poet played a role of a Messiah who will eventually save the nation. Although when Szymborska started her poetic career, the romantic messianism belonged to the past, the poet was still soaring high above the others. My reading of Szymborska's poems reveals that with her ironic sense of humor, she repeatedly undermines the poet's elevated status. Just as for Bishop poets are neither prophets nor visionaries but patient beholders recording and at the same time questioning their observations, for Szymborska poets are neither "rulers of souls" nor moral leaders but individuals who are never tired of asking questions even if those questions seem naive. Szymborska claims:
Poets, if they're genuine, must...keep repeating, "I don't know." Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift, absolutely inadequate. So poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their "oeuvres." ("The Poet and the World" xiv-xv)

Szymborska's questions never lead to final answers, but rather to further questions. As Jeredith Merrin observes, Bishop does not come up with any conclusive answers either, and if she provides some solutions, they are only tentative, provisional, inviting other possibilities.

Both poets undermine what is taken for granted through their patient questioning and attention to minute details. Juxtaposing Bishop's and Szymborska's poems, I reveal their different understandings of such a strategy. When American scholars discuss Bishop's work, they emphasize the painterly character of her verse and in particular her detailed renditions of landscapes. Polish critics reflecting on Szymborska's poems also emphasize her inclusion of seemingly unimportant particulars. However, while Bishop describes her landscapes, she uses language as a painter's brush—after all Bishop herself practiced the art of painting—and so she renders shapes, shades, and colors. Szymborska's language is not so painterly, but it is still influenced by her interest in visual arts. Although not a painter, the Polish poet usually produced her own postcards cutting out some pictures and pasting her own witty scenes. In her writing Szymborska reveals the significance of details frequently creating
catalogs of diverse objects or sketching and outlining what she sees. Still while Bishop and Szymborska attend to details in a different way, they both imply that their poetic representations of the external world always exclude more than include.

In their poetic oeuvres, the two women are constantly concerned with various kinds of exclusions affecting the records of their cultures. Such concerns are at least partly related to the poets' gender, as in Western culture women could not partake in shaping the world around them in a way that men did. Yet to confront the traditional gender bias, Bishop and Szymborska try to undermine the significance of gender and so they consider the label "writing by women" as both condescending and nonsensical. Yet, as my readings of Bishop's and Szymborska's poetry reveals, the two poets still develop subtle explorations of gender frequently merging their reflections with philosophical investigations of the significance of vision in the West.

Szymborska often challenges visual representation of women as shaped by male desire and explores the dynamic of male and female looks. As my analysis of "Ruben's Women" or "A Moment in Troy" shows, while Szymborska undermines the traditional construction of gender and questions the apparently "natural" male/female binary, she is still making use of it, articulating her challenges from the inside of the established heterosexual matrix. Bishop's position, however, is different, since as a lesbian she stays outside this matrix frequently subverting gender boundaries. In a number of poems such as "The Prodigal" or "Crusoe in England" she assumes a male persona, and her
poem "Exchanging Hats" explores the issue of gender crossing and reveals a "slight transvestite twist" as typical for human beings. Moreover, while women in Bishop's poems are not traditionally feminine and do not appear to need men, the male figures in her poems never embody Western stereotypes of masculinity since they are vulnerable, maladjusted and usually located on the social and cultural margins. Since Bishop's characters are frequently taken out of the established heterosexual matrix, they undermine the validity of the matrix itself.

In the course of destabilizing gender categories, Bishop and Szymborska revise the concepts of vision which have emerged in the patriarchal culture. The dominant status of vision in the West is based on the assumption of its time transcending power, and, as Hans Jonas has suggested, has been crucial in developing the idea of objectivity. Examining the significance of vision scholars such as John Berger or Martin Jay reveal that in European perspectival painting, the monocular, fixed eye of the beholder becomes the center of the world, producing a supposedly objective representation of reality. As in the Western art, the beholder has been usually male, the controlling gaze of the monocular eye can be identified as a male gaze. Consequently, in Western culture idealized objective visions of the world have been located within the masculine domain. My analysis of Bishop's and Szymborska's poems demonstrates that although the poets do not focus on exploring the significance of the male gaze, they undermine the notion of a transcendent vision confined within a fixed frame. In our
culture, such stable, atemporal visions are usually the products of male gaze.

In her challenge of such visions, Bishop creates poetic images in a manner of seventeenth-century Northern European artists. Although there is nothing inherently feminine about these painters' nonperspectival art, in the seventeenth century Northern art was considered both feminine and aesthetically inferior since it did not produce ordered, framed images of the world but flat, map-like, decentered representations which defied all frames (Alpers 194-5). Thus the affinity between Bishop's poetry and Northern renaissance art links her verse with what Western culture marked as feminine.

In addition, as my dissertation has demonstrated, although it is only in "Poem" that Bishop explicitly replaces idealized visions with momentary "looks," such "looks" and glimpses consistently underlie her poetical images, which are never static but dynamic. In "The Map" as Bishop destabilizes the boundary between land and water and turns Norway into a "running hare," she undermines the traditional concept of maps as fixed grids containing the world. In other poems such as "In the Waiting Room" or "Gentleman of Shalott" Bishop persists in dismantling fixed frames and locating visual representations within the temporal material world.

Szymborska also emphasizes the material and transient nature of vision. And so in "Lot's Wife" the woman's momentary glance backwards disrupts her husband's vision of the absolute. While Lot holds on to the ideal, his wife embraces the material, concrete particulars of her
daily existence. In Szymborska's poem it is those transient images of common life that are of value rather than transcendental visions. When in "Travel Elegy" Szymborska reflects on her constantly fading memories, she writes:

I won't retain one blade of grass
as it's truly seen.

Salutation and farewell
in a single glance.

But it is precisely this transience of "a single glance" that makes the poet treasure it so much.

Exploring Bishop's and Szymborska's poetical investigations of the impact of gender on the concepts of vision, combined with their reflections on the complex relationship between representation, perception, and human knowledge, my dissertation reveals the poets' subversion of patriarchal patterns shaping our ideas about the world. Both poets undermine the privileged status of sight revealing temporal and provisional nature of visual representation. Moreover, their language unmasks the limitations of a Western system of binary oppositions. As I have emphasized, it is the language of transience rather than permanence, of approximation rather than assertion—a language suspicious of itself. Such a language defies all static representations. Just as the two poets open up discursive space for multiple poetic paradigms, they dismantle fixed visual frames inviting multiple representations of the real and replacing transcendental visions with looks and glances.
Reflecting on various spheres of their cultures, Bishop and Szymborska discover other "fixed frames" forming human knowledge such as, for instance, the principles and hierarchies underlying the construction of historical narratives. Both poets challenge these hierarchies and question the existing historical accounts thus constructing what can be perceived as "counterhistories." Yet, as my analysis of Bishop's and Szymborska's poems demonstrates, to understand the poets' counterhistories, we need to be aware of the differences between the historical, political and social circumstances that affected their lives.

Born in 1923, Szymborska started her career after World War II. Both a witness and a survivor of the immense devastation, Szymborska must have felt that she should partake in writing and preserving the records of the war. At the same time, she was deeply aware that the task was impossible to accomplish: all historical narratives always exclude more than include, and so the construction of an adequate, complete historical record is not possible. Also, historians usually claim they understand the events they write about; however, no one could truly comprehend the war. Thus, to understand Szymborska's poems such as "Still" or "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo," we need to put them in the context of World War II; and to grasp the meaning of Szymborska's preoccupations with inadequacy of historical narratives, it is necessary to remember that until 1989, she lived in communist Poland; since the regime controlled the mass media, all publications, including historical narratives had to confirm the communist ideology.

283
Thus, I argue that Szymborska's challenge of historical narratives stems in great measure from her awareness of ideological distortions of these narratives and purposeful exclusions of "ideologically incorrect" events. Consequently, as Szymborska has become sensitive to what is not represented, in various poems—for instance, "The End and the Beginning" or "No Title Required"—she challenges the traditional hierarchies of historical significance, and she attends to what has been neglected.

My reading of Bishop's poems reveals that in a way similar to Szymborska, she challenges the dominant historical narratives. Aware of the impact of colonialism on the existing historical records, she focuses on issues that for traditional historians are rather minor, and she reveals the traces of the colonial ideology within the current discourse. For that purpose, she explores the margins of history and reflects on historical events not from the symbolic center but from the very boundaries of the dominant discourse. In "Brazil, January 1, 1502" while she examines a major event of a colonial invasion, she focuses on what has been distorted or ignored in the traditional records.

In addition, Bishop's concern about historical gaps and margins goes together with her attention to what the mainstream culture labeled as "the other." Her concerns are triggered not only by an interest in colonial history but also by her own otherness. Since in the West a wide range of diverse phenomena located outside mainstream culture was classified as "the other" Bishop's otherness coincided with the colonial other, driving her toward poetical explorations of cultural
otherness. As Michael de Certeau, a traveler and a historian, observes, such investigations unsettle the dominant interpretive models of the world and undermine their universality. Thus Bishop's reflections on colonial history undermine totalizing principles of the colonial discourse still functioning in the postcolonial world.

Bishop's and Szymborska's poetical studies of historical exclusions also challenge the linearity of historical narratives as well as the idea of history as progress. For both poets, history becomes a disjointed collection of events rather than an orderly development, and the traditional center/margin binary is no longer valid. As the poets debunk the dominant models of history, they promote the plurality of historical narratives. Significantly, however, neither for Bishop nor for Szymborska does this plurality become an equivalent to relativity: they never assume the relativist position of scholars like Hayden White, for whom historical narratives constitute a mode of fiction. Both women poets present history as provisional and fragmentary, but never merely relative.

While Bishop and Szymborska are equally preoccupied with historical issues, their engagements in political disputes are more unequal. Although both women seem to resent the use of their art for political purposes, as my discussion demonstrates Szymborska frequently does focus on political issues. Such issues, however, never become central in Bishop's poems. Still, reading some recent studies of Bishop's poetry, we could assume that she is a more politically oriented writer than Szymborska. This impression would be related to
the different implications of the label "political" in Polish and American cultures.

In Eastern Europe the term was usually associated with the oppressive politics of communist regimes; in the U. S. it never carried such implications. Presenting Szymborska's writing as political could imply her support for the communist regime, but Szymborska resisted the communist power. Also, her themes are so diverse, that it is more adequate to see her as a philosophical poet, and only acknowledge the political sphere of her verse. Polish critics, however, tend to ignore this sphere to emphasize the significance of Szymborska's poetry. Since contemporary American scholars tend to consider political interpretations of literary texts of high value, recently American critics have begun privileging the political dimension of Bishop's work. Yet although in her writing Bishop raises some political issues, her engagement in politics is much less pronounced than Szymborska's. The Polish is poet more politically oriented. Bishop seems concerned about a potentially damaging impact of self-conscious politics on poetical creativity. Both poets, however, resent supporting dominant ideologies operating in their cultures.

In their poetry, Bishop and Szymborska are never tired of challenging and subverting the mainstream interpretive models. For that purpose, they ask questions about "the ordinary" and the "obvious" to expose the relative nature of such concepts. Significantly, they never try to replace what they subverted with new paradigms. If they respond to the questions they asked, they immediately undermine their own
answers, or they pose problems impossible to solve. Thus, both Bishop and Szymborska open up some discursive space to accommodate multiple and provisional paradigms to interpret the world.
WORKS CITED


Batey, Kristine. "Lot's Wife."


The Bible.


---. "Arrival at Santos."-----89-90.
---. "Brazil, January 1, 1502."-----91-2.
---. "Cape Breton."-----67-8.
---. "Exchanging Hats."-----200-201.
---. "In the Waiting Room."-----159-61.
---. "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore."-----82-3.
---. "Large Bad Picture."-----11-12.
---. "The Map."-----3.
---. "A Miracle for Breakfast."-----18-19.
---. "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance."-----57-9.
---. "Pink Dog."-----190-1.
---. "Poem."-----176-7.
---. "Questions of Travel."-----93-4.
---. "Roosters."-----35-9.
---. "Sandpiper."-----131.


---. "Frozen Motion."-----135

---. "Hitler's First Photograph."-----196-7.


---. "No Title Required."---225-26.

---. "Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition."---18-19.
---. "Nothing Twice."---20.
---. "The End and the Beginning."--- 228-29.
---. "Utopia."---173.
---. "Rubens' Women." ---.47.
---. "Sky."------223-4.
-----. "Some People Like Poetry."----227.
---. "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo."-----42.
---. "Still."------16
---. "Stage Fright."-----179-80.
-----. "Travel Elegy."------37

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "The Lady of Shalott."


