Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Cape Breton” describes the view from an uninhabited island off the coast of Nova Scotia:

The silken water is weaving and weaving, disappearing under the mist equally in all directions, lifted and penetrated now and then by one shag’s dripping serpent-neck, and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse, rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat.

(Complete Poems 67)

The speaker is alone in a landscape that she cannot see fully. As in many of Bishop’s poems, isolation from other people coincides with a sense of limited knowledge. Here, the features of the seascape—water and mist—conceal from the speaker’s sight as much as they reveal. She cannot see beneath the silken surface of the water (to the body of the serpentlike mass of vegetation), and the water itself disappears into the mist. Hearing a pulsing sound, she infers the passing of a motorboat and, more remotely from sense, the human presence it contains. These lines describe a hazy and

I thank Allen Grossman, Walter Benn Michaels, Matthew McGrath, Faye Halpern, Joanna Klink, and my anonymous readers at Contemporary Literature for their helpful comments.
shifting state in between ignorance and knowledge, a state of questioning and inference.

The project to understand Bishop as a postmodern poet has focused on her habitual expression of doubt about what can be known. The views attributed to her range from Jerome Mazzaro’s “relativism” (196), to Susan McCabe’s “rejection of any established reality” (xiv), to Victoria Harrison’s neo-pragmatist “abandon[ment of] all claims to truth” (3).¹ Mutlu Konuk Blasing and Margaret Dickie argue that her experiences as a woman, a lesbian, and a chronically displaced person position her to entertain doubts about the nature of reality and objectivity.² These critics’ work has corrected the view of Bishop as a describer of nature (in her own joking words, a “minor female Wordsworth” [One Art 222]), and deepened our understanding of how her epistemological interests may reveal an indirect social and political commentary.

The picture emerging from these explorations of Bishop’s work is one of a poet more concerned with the way subjectivity shapes our apprehension of the world than with what is out there to be apprehended and known. In placing Bishop in the pragmatist tradition in American letters, Harrison associates her specifically with the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty that denies the possibility of discoverable truths about the world. There are at least two distinct versions of pragmatism, however: Rorty’s antirealist pragmatism and a realist pragmatist philosophy committed to a model of knowledge based on scientific inquiry.³ Bishop’s poetry, I propose,

¹ McCabe: “We can never know—we can only compare and imagine” (xv). Harrison: “A pragmatic world, in which the relations between things are necessarily as real as the things themselves, is left with interacting subjects discovering the use or pleasure of any reality, without a higher authority—poet, God, language, science, encompassing and controlling the process” (3).

² For Blasing, Bishop examines “positions and constructions rather than nature and reified truths” (78). For Dickie, “Bishop’s interest in geography has always been an interest in representation. She is more often engaged in commenting on how a landscape is conceived than in looking at it directly herself” (143).

³ Nicholas Rescher distinguishes these two kinds as “subjective” and “objective” (710). For a fuller exposition of this basic difference, see H. O. Mounce, who clearly distinguishes C. S. Peirce’s realism, William James’s misunderstanding of Peirce, and Rorty’s appropriation of James’s incipient antirealism.
is more in keeping with this second—but historically first—kind of philosophy.\textsuperscript{4}

The American pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and the more recent Richard Rorty all are concerned with the provisionality of knowledge, but not all deny the possibility of mind-independent truths. Peirce and Dewey, particularly, identify the scientific method as the paradigm of knowledge. Under the scientific method, observations of and hypotheses about the world can be correct or incorrect, more or less accurate. For this branch of pragmatists, regarding our conclusions as provisional (more like hypotheses than like certain knowledge) acknowledges the difficulty of making contact with the world but also expresses the desire to discover what is really the case about that world. The scientific model of knowledge assumes that the result of or answer to an investigation is somehow out there, not simply an effect of our thinking. It is this version of pragmatism, and not the Rortian neo-pragmatism indistinguishable from relativism, that I see Bishop using.

I am particularly concerned with the role of the community in the Peirce-Dewey model of knowledge, and its relevance to Bishop's work. For Peirce, the mutual checking and confirmation carried out by members of the scientific community ensure the correctness of their investigative results. Following Peirce, Dewey generalizes this "community of inquiry" to include the larger social collectivity (in ways that I elaborate and document in section 2). For Bishop also, I argue, other people crucially intervene in one's attempt to know the world. In many of her poems, as in "Cape Breton," being alone coincides with not knowing enough, and inference from evidence seems to bring the speaker into closer contact with a social world (for example, the unseen motorboat). Bishop hangs fire about the causal connections between isolation and ignorance: am I isolated

\textsuperscript{4} Important work by Richard Poirier (particularly on Robert Frost), Frank Lentricchia (on modernism), and others has established the mutual influence of pragmatism and American poetry, but most of these studies have tended to conflate postmodern accounts of pragmatism with the original pragmatists' accounts of themselves. Patricia Rae valuably distinguishes between the two versions that I mention here and argues against the fully antifoundationalist, antirealist version as a credible model for the modernist poets.
from others by the private and limited nature of experience, or not able to know enough about the world because of the absence of other people who might be able to tell me more about it? It is clear, however, that inference is the first step toward contact with the world, including other people, and that other people’s testimony provides evidence to confirm or correct the truth of one’s inferences. Furthermore—a point not explored by the pragmatists—the promise of others’ companionship motivates and gives meaning to the search for accurate accounts of the world. For Bishop, knowledge is social, but not in the constructivist sense that we collectively agree on what will count as true; rather, others help me to find out more about the mind-independent world.5 She is a realist, with a tentative or provisional attitude toward knowledge: my reliance on others’ testimony to help me better know the world means that I must be willing to change my account of it as they present new evidence.

Bishop’s famous “Darwin letter” and her late dramatic monologue “Crusoe in England” (discussed in sections 3 and 4 below) beautifully explore this complex of ideas about knowledge and other people. In the letter, Bishop compares Charles Darwin’s hypothesis-formation to empathic contact with other people. In the poem, many of whose details correspond to Darwin’s diary entries about his trip to the Galápagos, she meditates on the difficulty of knowing anything in the absence of other people. On a formal level, Bishop engages with the social dimension of knowledge through the use of a dramatic speaker: Crusoe frames his attempts to know the world as speech to an audience, whose attention and ratification he seeks. In “Crusoe” and other poems (including “Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics” and “Poem,” discussed in section 5), the colloquy invoked by the dramatic speaker is an image of the community of inquiry. Getting a response from other people, these poems suggest, is fundamental to finding out what is true.

The following discussion brings together Bishop’s pragmatist orientation and her fascination with Darwin to propose a new un-

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5. Zhou Xiaojing’s recent work on Bishop identifies her poetry as “dialogic,” though not in the sense I intend here; for him, the dialogic element resides in her use of other poets and thinkers as sources as well as opponents in the development of her own ideas. This dialogism is an instance of the kind that takes place in her poems, according to my argument, whereby knowledge arises as a consequence of the interaction between minds.
derstanding of the poet’s habit of doubt and her practice of luminous description.

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“Cape Breton,” an early and relatively cheerful examination of the relation between isolation and knowledge, implies no direct causal connection between the presence of other people and the availability of knowledge, but more confident inferences consistently accompany evidence of human life. After the opening quoted above, the poem continues,

The same mist hangs in thin layers
among the valleys and gorges of the mainland
like rotting snow-ice sucked away
almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift
among those folds and folds of fir . . .

The problem on the mainland is the same as it was “out on the high ‘bird islands’”: mist hides the landscape from view, and though other people might exist, they do not appear. The interior instead is inhabited by “the ghosts of glaciers.” That compressed expression “ghosts of glaciers” names the obstacle to sight (mist) while using a term that refers to human absence (ghosts). Described this way, the mist seems to indicate the condition both of not being able to know fully because of the limitations on sight and not being able to know because of the absence of other people.

This epistemological double bind loosens only when the speaker turns to describe a landscape that shows signs of human habitation:

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

(67–68)
The speaker still knows very little: the road’s emptiness makes it “appear” abandoned (but is it really?); we “cannot see” into the interior. The driverless bulldozers, however, while reminding us of the absence of other people, also testify to the possibility of social activity, and as such they seem to produce the surprising introduction of the pronoun “we.” The “we” cannot see into the interior but possesses some kind of knowledge about it anyway: there “deep lakes are reputed to be.” Moving into the social world (the world of work, albeit temporarily suspended) permits a new kind of evidence, the testimony of others.

This possibility of better knowledge raised by the suggestion of contact with other people finds its most optimistic expression near the end of the poem, when a bus drives by, passing “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.

What is the status of the man’s “invisible house”? Has the speaker become so excited by seeing other people that her imagination has broken free of all responsibility to observed facts and invented a house for the man? In an early essay on Bishop, Marjorie Perloff suggests that at this moment, “what happens objectively is absolutely unimportant, but the poet’s imagination now creates a world” (189). If this is an instance of imaginative fantasy, though, we have to say for the speaker that she doesn’t stray very far from the facts: where else could a man with a baby be going? She does not know for sure, but her educated guess is that he’s going to his house. This inference is more daring than the one at the beginning that the motor she hears really is attached to a motorboat she can’t see, but still she is trying to say what is out there (what is “objective,” to use Perloff’s term).

“Cape Breton” offers a very tentative view of what we can know with any certainty and at the same time suggests that social life exists only precariously in the world: “The wild road clambers along the brink of the coast.” The moment when the speaker hesitates least to infer what exists beyond the reach of her senses is
also the moment of greatest contact with another person, and, as I have been suggesting, the conjunction of the two activities implies interdependence between them. At all times, however, Bishop insists on the provisionality of both knowledge and social contact. This insistence underlies the seemingly insignificant detail about the "closed schoolhouse, / where today no flag is flying / from the rough-adzed pole topped with a white china doorknob" (68). The little school that symbolizes both knowledge and the social world is itself symbolized by an absurdly makeshift object, what Bishop’s Crusoe will call the "home-made."

This aspect of Bishop’s thought—the provisionality of knowledge—places her in the pragmatist tradition.6 From Charles Peirce through to modern neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty, this philosophical tradition has emphasized the ongoingsness of inquiry and the centrality of practice to what we know. From what Bishop reveals in her letters about her intellectual life, it appears she had an interest in pragmatism: she read the works of William James and knew John Dewey through her close friendship with his daughter Jane. After meeting Dewey for the first time in 1939, Bishop writes to Marianne Moore, “Last night we had the honor of having Dr. [John] Dewey to dinner. Did I tell you that he stays here with his daughter [Jane]? . . . He is such a wonderful old man, and so cute. . . . I think I should like to read one of Dewey’s books—is there any one that you would recommend in particular?” (One Art 80).

Noting Bishop’s connection to pragmatism and particularly Dewey, Harrison reads her through the lens of Dewey’s chief contemporary champion, Richard Rorty. Harrison suggests that Bish-

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6. Following Anne Stevenson, who suggested to Bishop that her thought resembled Wittgenstein’s, some critics have associated her with Wittgensteinian philosophy (the “linguistic turn”) rather than pragmatism. Though Bishop replied to Stevenson that she was reading the philosopher at her biographer’s suggestion, she subsequently remarked to a student, “Some of our critics can find something in common between just about anything. Comparing me with Wittgenstein! I’ve never even read him. I don’t know anything about his philosophy” (Wehr 325).
op’s thought most resembles Rorty’s version of pragmatism—“a thorough-going abandonment of the notion of discovering the truth which is common to theology and science” (Rorty, Consequences 151). According to Rorty (in a view that Harrison sees Bishop adopting [6]), not only does the community decide what counts as valid knowledge, but also the community’s flourishing is more important than any concerns we might have about accuracy: “In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right” (166). The accuracy of our knowledge, then, doesn’t matter as long as it allows a sense of community. (For this reason, science and religion are poor models for the social world, whereas conversation offers a positive example of how we ought to found our relations with each other.)

Rorty attributes his view to Dewey, but the lineage of this social antirealism is disputed among philosophers. The dispute crystallizes around Dewey’s central concept of “warranted assertibility,” with which he designates the end of inquiry, as opposed to the more conventional “knowledge” (where knowledge means “knowledge of the truth”) (Dewey, Logic 15). At stake is the question of whether Dewey believes in the existence of a mind-independent truth at which inquiry aims. Bertrand Russell, for example, lambasted Dewey for circularly defining the goal of inquiry as the result of inquiry (Russell 821–26). Although Dewey’s defender rather than his antagonist, Rorty almost agrees with Russell when he describes Dewey as a “historicist” for whom expediency, not accuracy, serves as the criterion of “epistemic approbation.” (Rorty substitutes this term for “truth,” a word he can’t use because “no description either of nature or experience . . . is more or less accurate or concrete than some rival” [“Dewey” 4].) The alternative to historicism, according to Rorty, is scientism, or the doctrine that scientific inquiry brings us into more accurate contact with reality than other activities do. As Rorty’s commentators have observed, it is odd to classify Dewey’s thought as anti-scientistic given his insistence on the special efficacy of the scientific method, both for discovering the properties of the natural world and for understanding and managing social interaction (see Rorty’s commentators Lavine and Gouinlock).
In understanding Dewey’s philosophy of inquiry, it is important to recognize that he derived his concept of “warranted assertibility” from Peirce’s work. Peirce, who disavowed later, more antirealist versions of pragmatism, claimed that scientific inquiry leads inexorably to the truth, although the path might be long or the destination perhaps indefinitely postponed: “Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion” (Peirce 273). Warrant is a weaker version of what Peirce calls “predestinate opinion”; Dewey lays his emphasis on the convergence of opinion rather than stressing that opinion converges as it approaches a true account of reality. Peirce’s analysis shows, however, that this convergence would be meaningless if we didn’t believe it occurred because of the reality it revealed.

Although Dewey may doubt the existence of unrevisable truths, his approach by no means denies the possibility of accuracy. Science without the possibility of accuracy would be a pointless undertaking. Some theories “work” better than others because they predict natural outcomes better; their superiority has to do with the greater degree to which they enable us to predict and make use of the otherwise intractable material of the world. Our only access to knowledge about the world must be through our inferences from evidence, and we revise those conclusions as new evidence presents itself, but we would not engage in the whole attempt to know and to predict if it were the case (or we thought it were) that all descriptions “of either nature or experience” were equally valid. As one of Rorty’s critics remarks, the scientific method “is Dewey’s realism”; the idea of process does not dissolve its model, the scientific process itself, which he consistently offers as the one reliable route to knowledge (Lavine 44).

Bishop’s interest in Dewey, then, does not make her antirealist; on the contrary, the connection between philosopher and poet underscores in both the compatibility of realism with an interest in the social process by which knowledge is produced. Her emphasis in poetry and prose on “getting things right” and on “facts” is not simply rhetorical: in her view, persons are bound together by a shared commitment to the idea that a mind-independent world exists and can be known more or less accurately. When we describe,
we do so with the aim of getting at what is “out there” and making it known to other people (Rorty would instead claim that such talk is motivated by the desire for an acceptable consensus, and thus social harmony). Bishop is exceptionally, even painfully conscious of the unreliability of one’s own perceptions and the difficulty of communication with others. Her sensitivity to skepticism causes her continually to lower her expectations of what can be verified. Her basic attitude might be described as hopeful, rather than confident, with respect to verification by the community. Thus she expresses her knowledge as provisional, temporary, awaiting confirmation. Nevertheless, her view is essentially realist.

Bishop’s provisional-realist approach can account for her disarming insistence on the presence of “fact” in her poetry. She writes in various letters, “I can’t tell a lie even for art, apparently; it takes an awful effort or a sudden jolt to make me alter facts” (One Art 408); “The settings, or descriptions, of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts—or as close to the facts as I can write them” (621); “I always tell the truth in my poems. With The Fish, that’s exactly how it happened. . . . Sometimes a poem makes its own demands. But I always try to stick as much as possible to what really happened when I describe something in a poem” (Wehr 324). This defense of poetry as the repository of fact is a perplexing aspect of Bishop’s work, especially as she does not always stick to the facts as they can be independently ascertained. For example, noting that the particular issue of National Geographic that “In the Waiting Room” describes doesn’t actually have the contents Bishop says it does, Lee Edelman inquires about what her disingenuous assertions attempt to conceal (184).

Perhaps it is more important to focus on what Bishop’s claims to factuality tell us about her poetics in general. Her claims draw our attention to the centrality of “settings, or descriptions” in her work. Recent criticism has taken pains to point out that Bishop is not just a “naturalist” and her poems are about more than settings. To be sure, they are about a good deal more. They are about the relationship of “setting” or sensory experience to knowledge; they are about the attempt to develop a stable, verifiable account of the world. Her “settings, or descriptions” present sensory evidence for a conclusion that the poem draws, and it is our activity as
readers to judge that evidence against her conclusion. The claim that this evidence is *good* is her guarantee of the entire process of checking and confirmation, since we don’t actually have access to the scenes and objects she describes. If her evidence does not come from the world external to her (her claim suggests), then the whole process wobbles, threatens to become meaningless. Bishop’s insistence on her own factuality is an appeal to the existence of a mind-independent world and, at the same time, an appeal to the community, a vote of confidence for the existence of a common world.

Bishop reaches this position only gradually over the course of her career: the development of her mature descriptive style (the meticulous accumulation of sensory detail for which she is famous) matches her emerging insistence on the factuality of her poems. Early works like “The Map” (1935) and “The Monument” (1939) emphasize perspective and the subjectivity of experience. In “The Map” (*Complete Poems* 3), the speaker describes the materiality of the map she’s looking at (“These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods”) at the explicit expense of considering the map’s referential function. The purpose of this exercise is to distinguish a special kind of unmotivated, aesthetic looking from the looking we do when we wish to find out something about the world external to our minds. In this aesthetic looking, guesses serve to elaborate and extend the pleasure of the experience (“Along the fine tan sandy shelf / is the land tugging at the sea from under?”). It doesn’t lend itself to checking and confirmation by other observers, though such confirmation might actually occur. The second kind of looking—the ordinary way of consulting maps—implies ongoing work of verification directed toward an accurate account of the external world. “The Map” offers that first, more “delicate” kind of looking both as a model of what we know from experience (experience is private, subjective, individual) and of art (the purpose of art is to produce in us this imaginative reverie, not to give an accurate account of something). “The Map” associates imaginative reverie with free choice: “Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors? / —What suits the character or the native waters best. / Topography displays no favorites.” The value of the map is that it
pays respect to the countries’ preferences, just as the map itself is an occasion for preference, for the play of the reader’s fancy. This poem might be said to take a Rortian view of knowledge (no description of the world “is more or less accurate or concrete than some rival”) and of social life (our acknowledgment of the relativity of truth promotes the existence of the social world). Bishop subsequently reverses her position on the questions raised in “The Map,” however; “Crusoe in England” and other late poems pronounce strongly on the importance of checking the correspondence between experience and the world. Indeed, “Crusoe” revises “The Map” (much as “Poem” revises “Large Bad Picture”) by placing the speaker in a landscape that he must explore and “register” without the benefit of any previous mappings or accounts. There his inferences can be right or wrong, and his survival depends on his ability to describe the world accurately.

Bishop’s letter on Darwin (1966) shows her thinking about an experience similar to the one “The Map” describes, and asking what the relationship of this experience is to fact. How can contemplation engaged in for its own sake be true or false? She answers that unmotivated experience (“perfectly useless concentration”) is necessary for, though distinct from, the work of establishing facts about the world. The speaker in “The Map” makes guesses whose rightness could never be determined, but in the Darwin letter and in Bishop’s later poems, hypothesizing is an activity that leads to knowledge, although it may seem at the time to lead nowhere. The hypothesis is not so much the creative inspiration of the imagination as the result of observation and thought, with the presumption of later substantiation by more observation. Darwin hypothesizes about what is true in the world, though to reach the truth he must suspend his desire for an outcome. When experience looks most private it is most emptied out of subjective content, most directed at the external world.

7. See, for example, Sally Bishop Shigley, who cites this poem as a prime example of Bishop’s subversive feminist poetics: “Bishop questions the ability and the advisability of art or language to represent their referents. . . . What about all human observation?” (20).
Bishop first read Darwin’s *Diary of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle* when she moved to Brazil in 1952, and his appeal proved so lasting to her that twenty years later she writes, “[I] now read only Darwin (again, he is one of the people I like best in the world)”; “Darwin is my favorite hero, almost” (*One Art* 543, 544); and “My own favorite reading is Darwin” (Wehr 325). Bishop’s long-standing admiration for Darwin seems to issue from her sense of his capacity to combine open-minded curiosity with a dedication to accurate observation (and these are the same grounds on which Dewey makes Darwin a philosophical hero, in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* [1910]). In a letter to her biographer Anne Stevenson, Bishop describes creative activity by using the example of Darwin at work. She explains, in answer to a question from Stevenson, that “There is no split” between the conscious and the subconscious:

Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can’t believe we are wholly irrational—and I do admire Darwin—But reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.

(qtd. in Stevenson 66)

Responding rather obliquely to Stevenson, Bishop describes Darwin doing two different kinds of activities, first building the “beautiful solid case” and then “sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.” The first activity appears to be the more scientific and

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8. Also in 1953: “I’ve just finished Darwin’s *Diary on the Beagle* . . . and I thought it was wonderful. I think I’ll begin right away on all his other books. The pages about Rio de Janeiro are so true even today, and he’s such a hardworking young man, and so good” (*One Art* 257).
rational, and thus presumably is more "conscious" than the second (which is "forgetful"), but Bishop describes the first, building a "solid case," as "unconscious." The chief characteristic of Darwin’s thought, in both activities, is his attention to the facts of experience ("heroic observations" in the first case and "facts and minute details" in the second). Bishop’s account of Darwin thus actually refuses to recognize a difference between "conscious" and "subconscious" activity, and indeed seems to do away with Stevenson’s framework altogether: Bishop reframes the question in terms of knowledge. There are two aspects of Darwin’s thought, his experiences (observations, facts) and his encounter with the unknown. What Stevenson might want to call the conscious and subconscious activities of the mind are simply, in Bishop’s description, encounters with different proportions of the known (as made available by experience) and of the unknown.

The difference between building a “beautiful solid case” and “sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown,” then, is a difference between degrees of knowledge, or rather a difference between stages of inquiry into the truth: in order to build a case, Darwin must make an inference, a hypothesis, which itself seems to emerge out of a state of unformulated wonder or curiosity. It’s this early stage of inquiry that Bishop wishes to analogize to “dreams, works of art, glimpses of the . . . surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy,” and so on. All are examples of imaginative inferences, but about something suspected to exist. The significance of Bishop’s analogy rests on the relationship of Darwin’s “case” to his hypothesis: the validity of his case legitimates, retrospectively, the seemingly "useless" activity of directionless concentration. The case also shows the connection between those “facts and minute details” that Darwin contemplates as he sinks into the unknown; they’re the same facts as the “endless, heroic observations” that prove the case. Darwin proceeds from experience to a warranted conclusion; the validity of this outcome legitimates the imaginative leap he must make to get to his hypothesis in the first place. It’s Darwin’s “case”—his theory of the origin of species—that gives force to Bishop’s analogy between scientific method and works of art (and dreams, moments of empathy, etcetera). The success of Darwin’s speculations implies that the “peripheral vision of what-
ever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important" is a vision of something really there, and although it may ever be only partially visible, our accumulated sightings will add up to a fuller substantiation of its existence. Inference is a matter of groping for what can't be sensed but is suspected to have an existence that others could eventually substantiate.

Hypothesizing and proving are all part of the same work of knowing, Bishop insists; we go from observation to accurate knowledge without appeal to any authority outside of experience. In her remarks she both restricts what counts as a valid source of knowledge (sensory experience, not the subconscious) and at the same time refuses to take this restriction to mean that one person's knowledge would necessarily be inadequate because subjective. Darwin's knowledge is more than adequate: that's why she uses him as an example. His experience is enough to bring him into contact with an extraordinary knowledge (the partially seen, "enormously important" truth) that many have come to accept on the basis of his case and subsequent confirmations of it.

In comparison to the building of his "solid case," Darwin's contemplation of the unknown might seem self-absorbed, not outward-directed. Bishop's intent is precisely to show the continuity of these two states, though; when Darwin is "self-forgetful," he is lost in contemplation not of his own experience but of the possibility of what might be out there to see. His inquiry is "perfectly useless" in the same way that knowledge in "At the Fishhouses" (1947) is "utterly free": it is directed at no specific outcome. If his contemplation of the facts were not disinterested, his ensuing inference would be less likely to be true.

For the same reason, the self-forgetfulness of inquiry makes it lonely. That Darwin is a "lonely young man" indicates not that he can't share his experiences with anyone else, but precisely that he is reaching out for knowledge that could be confirmed by others. Darwin is alone socially (thousands of miles away from England and everyone he loves), but this condition is as much a symptom of his contemplation of the unexplored and unexplained as of his actual circumstances. The true loneliness for Darwin seems to arise not from the privacy of experience but from his dizzying contemplation of the unknown, the question of what lies beyond his expe-
xperience. What lies beyond is an explanation, a generalization that fits the facts; between the facts and the hypothesis stretches an empty space. Bishop suggests that Darwin's attempt to bridge this space is also an attempt to come into contact with others: his concentration is like a "moment of empathy," and it is a peripheral vision of what we cannot see "full-face." Bishop's comparison of empathy to scientific hypothesizing goes in two directions: inference brings us as close as we can get to knowledge of other people, and the truth at which inference aims is itself like a human face. Which comes first? Bishop resolutely refuses to pronounce on the question of whether we need facts in order to know people or, conversely, need people in order to know facts. She only pronounces on the interdependence of knowing and other people; they are necessary to each other in the same way that facts ensue from inference, and inference from facts.

"Crusoe in England" explores precisely this question: how involved are other people in our knowledge of facts? The speaker of this poem is another lonely man (no longer young), a man who is at once the fictional Crusoe, the actual Darwin, and Bishop herself. Unlike the Darwin we see in Bishop's letter, however, her Crusoe-Darwin undergoes an isolation more complete and prolonged, and the question his life poses becomes more seriously social: can we know anything at all without other people? In this late poem (1971), inference is the thin thread that links Crusoe to knowledge of the world and to other people, and his continued existence depends on the accuracy of his inferences; imaginative reverie without the intent to know the truth signifies madness and the collapse of his sense of a social world.

In the middle of his reflections on the years he spent stranded on his desert island, Bishop's aged Crusoe says, "I didn't know enough. / Why didn't I know enough of something?" "Crusoe in England" is a poem about not knowing enough—not being able to see well or far enough, not knowing how to do things well enough, not being able to distinguish between fact and fantasy, and not being able to remember. Something always seems to intervene
between what he knows (what he’s sure of) and what he would like to know, or suspects is out there to be known. He has moments, like Darwin’s meeting with the unknown, when he senses that there is farther to go than present facts and details can take him. And, like Darwin, Crusoe is lonely. When, reciting Wordsworth, he forgets the word “solitude,” he is telling us that loneliness has everything to do with the inadequacy of his knowledge:

The books
I’d read were full of blanks;
the poems—well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
“They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss . . .” The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up.

(Complete Poems 164)

For Crusoe, being alone is not a bliss but a blank; it is the absence of knowledge, not the Romantic solitude of communion with nature. Crusoe attempts to make contact with everything around him and with remembered knowledge, but precisely his aloneness prevents him. If Bishop’s Darwin letter points toward the possibility of knowledge and even shared knowledge, “Crusoe in England” is about how very little we can know without other people.

The first ten lines of the poem set out this problem with admirable succinctness:

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. But my poor old island’s still
un-rediscovered, un-renamable.
None of the books has ever got it right.

(162)

The scene opens with Crusoe now back in England, after the end of his adventures and the death of his companion Friday. The dif-
ficulties that constituted his life alone on the island still linger in his mind, and he's easily reminded of them. The newspaper article that inspires him to begin reminiscing about his adventures is also the occasion for him to contemplate the difficulty of acquiring accurate knowledge. Apparently, apprehending the world is fraught with obstacles: somewhere at a distance from the volcano itself, someone saw something through his binoculars, concluded it was an eruption, reported it, and that information made its way all the way to an English newspaper, where Crusoe read of it. If one person's perception is unreliable, how much more so this long string of inferences and secondhand accounts! And yet Crusoe does seem to accept the validity of the information; he adds his own inference—"basalt, probably"—as if to imply that his experience confirms the newspaper story.

The first thing Crusoe tells us, then, is that it is possible to give an accurate and reliable account of something in the world, even though our individual capacities to sense that world are limited (the mate needs binoculars). The combined efforts of all the people involved in the sighting—down to Crusoe himself, with his "basalt, probably"—substantiate the first observation. It is a fact subject to revision by new evidence, perhaps, but good enough for us to accept in the absence of any proof to the contrary. The second thing he tells us, however, is that he has knowledge of which no accurate account has ever been given ("But my poor old island's still / unrediscovered, un-renamable. / None of the books has ever got it right"). By "None of the books has ever got it right," does he mean that none of them ever could? C. K. Doreski, Anne Colwell, and other critics say "yes," but his implication rather seems to be that only he can give a right account of his island, because only he was there and experienced it. He justifies his speaking presence by claiming that all previous accounts have been wrong because unsubstantiated, and promising to give the right one.

The subject of his utterance is precisely the difficulty he experi-

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9. "Here the distinctions between ignorance and understanding, error and truth seem impossible to ascertain" (Doreski 61); "both Bishop and her character, Crusoe, try again to 'get it right,' to capture in language the felt experience of reality, an attempt that, like all such attempts, is doomed to failure" (Colwell 204).
enced when, living alone on the island, he tried to get his account of it right. He tells us that he began confident of his ability to apprehend and record the world around him, but loneliness gradually eroded this confidence and also sapped his desire to be right. This downward trajectory ends only when Friday joins him on the island. He continues,

Well, I had fifty-two
miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
with a few slithery strides—
volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
and count the others standing up,
naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.

The image of Crusoe sitting atop the highest volcano, counting off the others, resonates through the rest of the poem, in all the moments when we see him counting (he counts waterspouts, kinds of flora and fauna, imaginary islands, and years). Absurd as it is, the image gives us a touchstone for what knowing something accurately would mean. His knowledge seems accurate because it seems precise ("fifty-two," not fifty) and because counting is a kind of description that seems objective (more so than metaphor, like "heads blown off").

"Fifty-two" is not thick description, to be sure, but it has the feel of hard fact, a hardness similar to the intractable volcanic rock Crusoe feels underneath him.

The importance of this moment (as a demonstration of the possibility of fact) becomes more clear when we see that it is also the moment when Crusoe’s speech most resembles Darwin’s. Darwin’s description in his Diary of the Galápagos Islands is the source for many of Crusoe’s remarks and provides a counterpoint throughout the poem to Bishop’s more obvious borrowing from Defoe. Darwin complains about the ugly uniformity of the landscape, the hissing

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10. Why "fifty-two"? The obvious correlation is to weeks in a year, but why Bishop would want to make this connection is unclear, unless she just meant to emphasize the tedium of Crusoe’s existence. The other possible association is 1952, the year Bishop went to Brazil and met Lota de Macedo Soares (the autobiographical analogue of Crusoe’s Friday). Neither of these explanations adds much to our understanding of Crusoe’s observation, which seems simply to state a fact.
of the tortoises, the “naked” appearance of the lava flows, the continuous dripping of water from low-hanging clouds and even makes the startling comment that “the inhabitants here lead a sort of Robinson Crusoe life” (Darwin 336; elsewhere in the diary he also notes waterspouts and fields of blue shells). One feature of the islands that strikes particular wonder in Darwin is their strange volcanic topography: “A few leagues to the North a broken country was studded with small black cones, the ancient chimneys for subterranean melted fluids. . . . From one point of view I counted 60 of these truncated hillocks, which are only from 50 to 100 ft. above the plain of Lava” (334–35). Again, “small as the whole island is, I counted 39 conical hills, in the summit of all of which there was a more or less perfect circular depression” (337). Darwin with his eyes fixed on facts and details; Darwin counting volcanoes; Crusoe counting volcanoes; all these images have profoundly to do with each other in Bishop’s mind. The extent to which Crusoe’s words match Darwin’s meticulous observations indicates what Bishop wishes to convey about the possibility and desirability of having knowledge of the world, of having facts. Anyone can count: the enumeration of objects in a landscape is the easiest kind of observation to duplicate and confirm. Crusoe’s “fifty-two” makes a claim for the warrantableness of his knowledge (you, too, could count them if you were there) and also refers to another, real-life instance of warranted knowledge (Darwin’s observations). That is, the figure of Darwin standing behind Crusoe doubles that image of counting, and appropriately so, because counting produces easily replicated results. The count seems to be an exemplary kind of description: numbers are a way of talking about the world that everyone can understand, and anyone can verify. It is an exemplary activity in the same way that Darwin is exemplary, and Bishop associates both with the endeavor to be right.

Crusoe’s confidence about his knowledge only declines from this point, and indeed his grotesque metaphor for the volcanoes, “naked and leaden, with their heads blown off,” suggests as much. (Crusoe speaks of many objects as having heads or throats: “a breath of steam,” the “parched throats” of the craters, the waterspouts with “their heads in cloud,” and so on. He populates his empty world by using figurative language, and yet even in that
language his loneliness persists, since the heads of these objects are always inaccessible or nonexistent: he is the only thinking, speaking being.) If here we see him standing triumphantly over the headless volcanoes, bringing to bear on them his capacity for rational observation, later we see him lose his head too.

Crusoe's interactions with his environment take the form of inferences, better (like counting) or worse. About his little volcanoes, he says, "I'd think that if they were the size / I thought volcanoes should be, then I had / become a giant" (162). His use of the conditional implies that he has revised his original conception of what a volcano looks like, since he knows he isn't a giant. A grain of doubt persists, however, because there's nothing familiar on the island against which he can measure himself, particularly not other people, who would be the size he is. Though not absolutely necessary, their presence would help him with his inference. At first he's able to correct perceptual mistakes on his own; he notices, "The folds of lava, running out to sea, / would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove / to be more turtles" (163). He checks his first inference about what his senses tell him and revises with more evidence, until he's satisfied with the outcome ("they'd prove"). His investigations of the world, conducted methodically, seem to produce valid results, for example when he tests the "one kind of berry" on the island to see if it's poisonous: "I tried it, one by one, and hours apart. / Sub-acid, and not bad, no ill effects" (164). Inferring and checking seem to work for him, even if the products of his investigations are "home-made, home-made."

As he carries out his inquiries, however, Crusoe's loneliness gradually begins to mar his ability to observe accurately, and even to pervert his desire to know the facts. He continues to count but becomes obsessed with the number "one" ("The island had one kind of everything" [163]), because he can't stop thinking about being alone. He ceases to try to see the world as it is and imagines instead that he's at home in England, where there are other people: looking at piles of purple snail shells, he suggests that "at a distance, you'd swear that they were beds of irises" (a guess he knows isn't right). Similarly, he closes his eyes when he hears the gulls fly up, in order to imagine that he's hearing the sound of wind in a tree. Instead of counting volcanoes, he names and renames them,
in a parody of discovery: “the volcano / I’d christened Mont d’Es- poir or Mount Despair / (I’d time enough to play with names)” (165). His experimentation degenerates into “dye[ing] a baby goat bright red . . . / just to see something a little different”; he neither aims at nor cares about facts.

Crusoe knows what’s happening to him, and at night he dreams about what the final outcome will be: he has two nightmares, first of killing a baby, “mistaking it / for a baby goat,” and second of living on an infinite series of identical islands whose flora, fauna, and geography he must register. These are nightmares of trying to know without other people: making mistakes because there’s nobody around to check your observations, and having to carry out all the inquiry by yourself. That is, he dreams of fatally wrong and infinitely prolonged guessing without the benefit of the correction, confirmation, or aid of others. As in “Cape Breton,” where stupid sheep stampede terrified into the sea, the consequences of not knowing enough are violence and death.

These nightmares suggest a vision of the social world as a place where people help each other with their hypotheses, and the facts established through this collective effort are what they have in common. Ultimately “Crusoe in England” offers the same vision: we can’t know anything in the absence of other people. Just as importantly, we don’t care to know anything without the motivation of other people. Inquiry grows increasingly pointless for Crusoe: not only does he lack the opportunity to confirm his observations and hypotheses, but there is no one with whom to entrust his findings. If he were to die unrescued on his island, what would have been the point of registering anything at all about it? The pragmatists do not examine this aspect of investigation, the motivation supplied by the desire to contribute to the general store of knowledge or to have one’s contributions acknowledged. As Bishop recognizes, however, individual psychological motivation is as necessary to the process of finding out the truth as is the presence of a confirming community. Both aspects of the process point toward the inextricably social nature of knowing, without implying that knowledge is wholly “constructed” by the social context that encourages it to happen.

Bishop is also sensitive to the difference between value and
knowledge, and she distinguishes between the two kinds of communities that safeguard these precious (though abstract) possessions. The end of Crusoe’s monologue is dominated by melancholy and a sense of irony: though he has finally regained access to the larger community of knowers whose absence undermined his capacity to observe and reason during his long solitude, returning to England has meant the death of his companion Friday, who originally restored to him the desire to see (“Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body”). Friday supplied more than simply a means for checking facts. Crusoe takes stock of what he has to show for his life: some artifacts, whose “living soul has dribbled away.”

The local museum’s asked me to leave everything to them:
the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,
my shedding goatskin trousers[.]
. . . . . . . . . . .
How can anyone want such things?

(Complete Poems 166)

The museum, like the newspaper from which Crusoe learns about recent volcanic eruptions, assembles information for the public, and we consume it individually, without interacting with each other. Social contact is indirect; that is, it takes place through these shared sources of information. The museum and the newspaper are places (actual or virtual) where people correct, confirm, and increase their knowledge. These institutions, while they encourage and protect the development of knowledge, cannot supply value in the way that the intimate colloquy between Crusoe and Friday could. The museum and the companion constitute two very different kinds of community, and it is clear which one Crusoe finds more essential and life-affirming. Crusoe describes England as “uninteresting” and boring, though “real”: is this world of facts worth living in? It may not be, but the poem doesn’t offer much of an alternative. Crusoe concludes ruefully with a simple fact, a number, that can only gesture at the loss he feels: “And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March.”

Crusoe’s final, melancholic remarks might seem to undercut his
previous emphasis on the importance of having accurate knowledge of the world. Yet against his suggestion that value has been extracted from knowledge, we must balance the material fact of his utterance. What brings him to speech and keeps him going for so long, if not his desire to set the record straight? The mere length of the poem (Bishop’s longest) and the grounds on which Crusoe introduces his monologue argue for his continued belief that the public process of presenting and vetting evidence has value of its own and needs to continue.

Perhaps the strongest indication of Crusoe’s—and Bishop’s—commitment to the process of evidence confirmation that he sets in motion is the dramatic aspect of the poem. From his casual opening (“the papers say”) to his last sentence, which begins as though he were preparing to address Friday, Crusoe reminds us that he is speaking. Though Crusoe never explicitly addresses an audience, his language at every turn suggests speech to another, one of the characteristic features of the dramatic monologue. Beginning with “None of the books has ever got it right,” Crusoe presents his remarks not just as reminiscence, but as an attempt to set the public record straight. He uses the language of conversation, rather than the stream of his consciousness: “Well,” “you’d swear,” “But aren’t we all?” When his story reaches the point of Friday’s arrival, he reports almost nothing, protecting the privacy of that event, rather than dwelling on what he suggests was the happiest period of his life. On this subject, he has no desire to correct the record, though he notes again, “(Accounts of that have everything all wrong)” (165). The parentheses around this remark when it occurs for the second time distinguish what is of public concern from what is private. His care to distinguish between two audiences points to his consciousness of his speech as a communicative act that invokes a specific community of listeners. He invests responsibility in that community, his public audience, for fact-checking and safeguarding knowledge.

The dramatic monologue, unlike the “overheard” lyric, represents a social interaction; though the interlocutor may not speak back,
his presence is implied. The form of "Crusoe in England" reproduces and confirms the point that Crusoe makes during the course of his utterance: that the community is the necessary context for knowledge. It drives investigation, checks results, and receives them as fact after the appropriate probation. The dramatic monologue is, in its own way, a model of the community of inquiry.

One tends to think of Bishop as a poet who avoids dramatization, neither making use of personae nor drawing attention to herself as a character (in "Cape Breton," there is no "I" at all). Surprisingly, however, a number of her poems employ dramatic speakers, in epistemological situations similar to Crusoe's. In these poems, a dramatically situated speaker engages with someone or something in the attempt to get confirmation of her own observations. The social situation (or "setting") thus invoked offers an emblem of the process of observation, inference, and confirmation through others' observation that ideally takes place in the community of inquiry.

In the prose poem "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics" (1967), a giant toad, a strayed crab, and a giant snail each in turn describes his world. As in any dramatic monologue, each speaker begins by specifying his physical situation. The toad laments, "I am too big, too big by far" (Complete Poems 139); the crab boasts, "I am the color of wine. . . . I am dapper and elegant; I move with great precision" (140); and the snail explains, "My body—foot, that is—is wet and cold and covered with sharp gravel" (141). Each creature's sense of his world is shaped by the exigencies of his body, it is true: a rainy day means droplets on his back to the toad, a damp surface to the crab, and shiny streams of falling water to the snail. But the differences among their perspectives don't add up to three different worlds; what the creatures tell us is that they inhabit the same rainy world. There is a fact registered by each and confirmed by the others: rain.

Moreover, they acknowledge each other's presences. The stolid toad says, "Don't breathe until the snail gets by. But we go travelling the same weathers," and "Beware, you frivolous crab." The

11. This is a reference to John Stuart Mill's description of lyric poetry as overheard speech, in "What Is Poetry?" (1833). On the difference between lyric and dramatic monologue, see (among others) Langbaum and Tucker.
crab, who has the most lively interactions with the world, exclaims, “Cheer up, O grievous snail. I tap your shell, encouragingly, not that you will ever know about it,” and “I want nothing to do with you, either, sulking toad.” The aesthetically minded snail remarks, “That toad was too big, too, like me. His eyes beseeched my love,” and “What’s that tapping on my shell? Nothing. Let’s go on.” These interactions demonstrate what separate minds can contribute to each other’s knowledge of the world. The creatures don’t communicate their thoughts, exactly, but their contact is enough to confirm for them that they live in a common world. When the toad sees the snail, he acknowledges that they inhabit “the same weathers”; when the snail sees the toad, he recalls his sense of scale: “That toad was too big, too, like me... Our proportions horrify our neighbors.” Being in or out of proportion is only possible in a world where creatures of different sizes measure themselves on a standard scale.

Similarly, though the snail doesn’t see the crab, as the crab has correctly predicted, he does become more conscious of his shell when he feels the crab’s tapping, and he remarks lyrically, “Ah, but I know my shell is beautiful, and high, and glazed, and shining, I know it well, although I have not seen it.” Each of the creatures possesses knowledge that exceeds what he could know simply on the basis of his own observations, though getting access to it is not quite as simple as being told by another. “Rainy Season” exhibits the vagaries of point of view but adds up those views into a more complete account of the world. This comprehensive account is inaccessible to the animals, partly because they are animals, but nevertheless their interactions with each other permit some enrichment and refinement of their individual views.

A similar interaction of epistemological confirmation takes place in “Poem” (1971), this time between a dramatized (autobiographical) speaker and a little landscape painting. As the speaker examines the painting, noting the artist’s technique and the generic objects depicted—cows, geese, sky—suddenly she realizes that the picture corresponds to her own independent knowledge of a particular place: “Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!” (Complete Poems 176). The place is her childhood home in Nova Scotia. Her realization that the painting represents a real rather than invented
place causes her to acknowledge the identity of the painter, her
great uncle, a man whom she never met in life. Now she says,

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.

(177)

Her knowledge of the man appears to come about as a result of
her recognition of his painting as an act of testimony whose truth
she can verify from her own remembered acquaintance with the
place. Her act of recognition simultaneously confirms a particular
fact about the world—

It's behind—I can almost 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.

(176)

—and also confirms the existence of another person's mind ("We
both knew this place.... Our visions coincided" [177]). Her sudden
access into a definite reality seems both to cause and be caused by
her access to community. This community is constituted primarily
by her great uncle the painter, but before she mentions him she
experiences a flood of memories that essentially reconstitute an en-
tire community of fellow-knowers—the farmer whose house
backed on the meadow, "Miss Gillespie," and her aunt. Their fel-
lowship as a community is quietly indicated by the "hint of stee-
ple" of the Presbyterian church.

Significantly, the speaker's moment of recognition is also the oc-
casion of her emergence into dramatic situatedness: she refers to
herself, "I," for the first time. She becomes not just a discriminating
voice describing a painting to us but a person with relatives (an
aunt, a great-uncle) and a past (a childhood spent in Nova Scotia).
It is at this moment that the poem changes genres from a painting
poem, or ekphrasis, to a dramatic utterance. Though no audience
is present, the speaker's memory transforms the moment into a
colloquy, quoting her aunt's remarks about the painting:
Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A. . . . .

(177)

The aunt's words turn the speaker's private musing into a rich social texture of "I"s and "you"s, supplying the direct address that she herself cannot utter because, having been separated from the community, she has no interlocutor. Her memory of her aunt's address substitutes for an interlocutor and thereby brings or calls the poet into existence as a dramatic speaker.

At the same time, this passage describes the system of connections that structures the process of mutual checking and confirmation. These connections include kinship, personal acquaintance, and membership in formal institutions such as the Royal Academy. Bishop even formally unites dramatization and the checking of knowledge in the aunt's speech, by emphasizing her habit of self-correction: "your Uncle George, no, no mine." This habit is not limited to conversation, but characteristic of it. The speaker of "Poem" does it too: "a thin church steeple / —that gray-blue wisp—or is it?"; "It's behind—I can almost remember"; "Our visions coincided—'visions' is / too serious a word." These self-corrections help to make the speaker sound dramatized, sound like a particular person in a social situation; at the same time, they associate the act of correction itself with having a listener. When you talk to someone, correction happens.

Though the speaker lacks access to live interlocutors, she concludes that the painting itself, as an instance of testimony, can stand in for her lost fellow observers. She hastens to assure us that this remoter form of contact—comparison of representation and memory, rather than exchange of reports between observers—nonetheless constitutes real testimony:

Our visions coincided—"visions" is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself.[]

(177)
The much-noted correction of "visions" to "looks" indicates that she regards the painting and her own memory not as imaginative compositions but as forms of access to reality ("life"). Painter and poet both express their love of the place through the careful accumulation of detail ("how live, how touching in detail"), not through rhapsodic displays of emotion. She recognizes that she loves the place precisely because she finds that she "memorized" it correctly ("Life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other. Which is which?").

In this "Poem," "love" is dedication to an accurate account of some piece of the world, and shared love is a common dedication to the same object. As the title of the poem implies, and as Langdon Hammer has thoughtfully observed, "love" is a term of poetic theory for Bishop as much as it is a description of emotion. He understands "love" to signify Bishop's creation of a "third space" of intimacy and disinterestedness, in which poetic activity can go ahead under her terms. Yet for Hammer, the poem's commitment to the space of "love" is distinct and separate from Bishop's commitment to descriptive realism: "truth to objects is not the final concern of this art. Rather, the artist's relation to the world is the ground for an intersubjective relation—an intimacy—between artist and audience" (175). I would say that the intimacy invoked by dramatic means (the sound of talk) both provides the ground for and is grounded by Bishop's artistic aim of "truth to objects." Bishop establishes the relation between poet and painter on the basis of shared experience of a particular place; she establishes the relation between poet and audience on her assurances of the accuracy of her description. The confirmation she receives from the painting is the model of the confirmation she seeks from her audience. The two activities of description and confirmation are fundamental to knowledge, as they are to sociability.

Perhaps the best example of Bishop's dramatic practice and also its limit case are her letters, which constitute her greatest literary output in terms of volume. In these, she speaks as a person very specifically situated in place and time, to a particular addressee, about a world of common reference to speaker and listener, in expectation of a reply. Hammer, again, perceptively identifies her letters as exemplary instances of the intersubjective space she aims
for in her poetry. But intimacy is only one aim of these letters, which present themselves primarily as an exchange of information (detailed descriptions and questions). Colloquy, desirable for its own sake, is also the necessary precondition and the medium for the building up of a reliable knowledge of the world. Correspondence's slow back-and-forth is social and epistemological: "our looks, two looks" could be the motto for the pragmatists' community of inquiry.

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