

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

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NEWSLETTER

Fall, 2000

Editorial

Much of this *Newsletter* concerns memory. That is fitting, because we have reason, here, to remember Alan Bray, first president of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, who passed away suddenly on October 22, 2000. He served as president for two terms and subsequently became the Society's treasurer for several years. During his first term as president, Alan was a key figure in the complex negotiations with the Government of Nova Scotia which led to the Society's incorporation and to the generous government grant of initial funding which underwrote major activities throughout the 1990's. Alan and his wife, Lois, made their retirement home in Great Village a centre of hospitality for lovers of Bishop's work. If, as it should, a thorough history of Bishop scholarship with all its curious turns and recuperations is ever written, Alan and Lois's achievement in giving the Great Village part of it loyalty, fidelity and joy will be recorded. Alan was a civil engineer. To the founding and development of the Society he brought qualities of clarity, rigor, honesty and care for the quality of human life associated with his profession. His friends miss him dearly.

This issue contains three items which could all be seen as immediate offshoots of Brian Bartlett's fine article, "As If You Might Be Here": Poems Addressing Elizabeth Bishop," which was published in the last *Newsletter* (7:1). George Elliott Clarke contributes a letter to the editor which adds a writer to Brian's list of distinction and great interest.

Clarke has been a supporter of the Society since its inception. He was born in Nova Scotia. Recently he left a position at Duke University to become an English professor at the University of Toronto. He is a poet, playwright and anthologist. His most recent book is *Execution Poems* (Gaspereau Press, Wolfville, Nova Scotia: ISBN 1-894031-34-2, \$49.95). Brian Robinson, author of "Remember..." will be familiar to readers of the *Newsletter* for contributions in several previous issues. He is a professor of geography at St. Mary's University in Halifax. Born in Northern Ireland, he is particularly interested in the literary relationships between Bishop and Seamus Heaney. Brian Robinson is the new president of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia. The latest book by Peter Sanger, author of the notes on Mark Strand and Bishop in this issue, is "*Her Kindled Shadow...*" *An Introduction to the Work of Richard Outram*, which will be published by the Antigonish Review Press in March.

News and Information

Two meetings have been held by the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia since the issuing of the last *Newsletter*. The first was the Annual General Meeting held in Great Village on June 10, 2000. Officers for the Society were chosen. Peter Sanger, who had been president for two terms, stepped down. Brian Robinson was unanimously elected to take his place. Other officers remain the same:

Donna Smyth, Vice-president; Terrance White, secretary; Angus Chisholm, treasurer; Sandra Barry, Lois Bray, Art Chisholm, Ann Marie Duggan, Meredith Layton, Joy Graham, Ruth Peppard and Deborah Stiles, directors. Much of the rest of the meeting was taken up with discussion of the funding, design and quantity to be published of a proposed new brochure about Bishop and Great Village. A number of generous donations were pledged by several members present in order to ensure that enough of the brochures would be printed. This meeting was followed by a most interesting slide show and talk presented by Brian Robinson, Ann Marie Duggan and Sandra Barry concerning their trip to the Bishop Conference held in Brazil in May, 1999.

The second meeting of the Society was held on October 28, 2000. The meeting began with expressions of regret for the passing of Alan Bray. The Society decided to make a contribution of \$100 in Alan's memory to the St. James United Church Memorial Fund of Great Village. The new brochure, "Elizabeth Bishop & Great Village," was circulated for commentary among those present. Ann Marie Duggan, Sandra Barry and Brian Robinson, who oversaw its production, were thanked and praised. Three thousand copies have been printed. Ann Marie Duggan reported that Paul Tingley, owner of the Bulmer-Bishop house in Great Village, has embarked on the "extraordinary mission" of saving the outhouse formerly used at Great Village School. The outhouse was moved to Mahon Cemetery during the 1960's, where it was used as a storage shed. When Paul Tingley discovered that the Cemetery Committee no longer wished to use the shed and was offering it to whomever would move it, he arranged to have it transported to his own garden. Paul plans to

restore the structure to its former glory - with a few discreet innovations. The meeting also discussed updating the Society's webpage on the Vassar site. It was decided that updating and the associated question of whether the E.B.S.N.S. could construct its own web site should be taken under consideration by Brian Robinson, with the possible options of a St. Mary's University home page.

**Addendum to Bartlett:
A Letter from George Elliott Clarke
(September 5, 2000)**

Dear Editor:

Brian Bartlett's authoritative article, "'As If You Might Be Here': Poems Addressing Elizabeth Bishop" (*Newsletter*, 7.1, Spring, 2000) which catalogues and discusses a dozen poets' tributes to Bishop, omits one poet whom, it must be said, is often omitted. I refer to Gloria C. Oden (1923-), a wrongly neglected African-American modernist whose lyrics mark her as a confirmed Bishopite. In Arna Bontemps' classic anthology, *American Negro Poetry* (1963, pp. 1158-163), Oden is represented by a quartet of poems, including "A Private Letter to Brazil" (which seems to address Bishop) and "'...As When Emotion Too Far Exceeds Its Cause' - Elizabeth Bishop," whose subject is an anonymous "you." A third poem, "The Map," indulges one of Bishop's obsessions - geography - in distinctly Bishopesque terms. Born a minister's daughter in Yonkers, New York, during the Harlem Renaissance, Oden later became a professor at the University of Maryland. Strikingly, she is the only African-American poet to display an open adoration of Bishop (though traces of Bishop appear, *arguably*, in the great poet Robert Hayden [1913-1980] and the Pulitzer Prize-winning

Rita Dove [1952-]). "A Private Letter to Brazil," written in tercets, balances metrical liberty and the traditional demands of rhyme (slightly modified): "The map shows me where it is you are. I / am here, where the words **NEW YORK** run an inch/ out to sea, ending where **GULF STREAM** flows by.// The coastline bristles with place names. The pinch / in printing space has launched them offshore / with the fishbone's fine-tooth spread, to clinch // their urban identity. Much more / noticeable it is in the chain / of hopscotching islands that, loosely, moors // your continent to mine..." I hope this quotation has communicated some of the flavour of Oden's Bishopite verse: the pointillist-precise diction, the painterly imagery, the passion for description. I know of no published books by Oden, but two other lyrics by her appear in Michael Harper's anthology, *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945* (1995, pp. 60-62).

Yours truly,

George Elliott Clarke
Department of English
University of Toronto

P.S. Aldon Lynn Nielsen's *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Post-modernism* (1997) mentions Oden's two "almost universally unavailable books *Resurrections* and *The Tie That Binds*" (47). Nielsen provides no bibliographical information, but Bishop readers may find it intriguing that Oden calls herself a "Black Puritan" on the back cover of *Resurrections* (Nielsen 47).

Remember
by
Brian Robinson

What Elizabeth Bishop remembered was "boarded-up houses, boarded-up stores with rotting wooden sidewalks in front of them, and the many deep black or dark red holes that disfigured the hills."¹ She thought of Londonderry in Nova Scotia as almost a ghost town. What is left of it now amounts to little more than a village. There are just enough signs to indicate the former streets of the iron mining and steel manufacturing town, but the grid is set at such an acute angle to the main road that the few houses left seem to recede abruptly into the scrubby bush. It is difficult to reconcile such entropy with names like "Broadway." To coin a phrase from Elizabeth Bishop, "whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned."² Indeed Londonderry looks as if it had been forgotten several times over. When it was at its height during the boom period of the late nineteenth century, the town's name might have disappeared altogether, to be replaced by that of Siemens. And, if firsts are the stuff of heritage memory, it is perhaps by this inventor's name that North America's earliest open hearth steel furnace site should be remembered. But so little has remained of this industrial period that it seems appropriate that "Londonderry" is still on the map...just and no more.

It has not been for lack of effort that either Londonderry that was, or Siemens which might have been, is remembered. I am not thinking of the references in geography and history texts to either the period significance of the eighteenth century Londonderry settlement or nineteenth century abortive industrialization.³ Instead, what I have in mind is the

seemingly more dubious choices of heritage memory. Take, for example, the town's memorial. It is not even in the centre of town. That was devastated long ago on a fire (1920). Now the town is memorialized in a "square" which is beside the main tourist route before the place proper is reached. The nearby poster sign, which announces the town, promises more than can ever be delivered. Together the "square" at the side of the road, and the advertisement staring back out of town, seem to have distanced themselves from what they are supposed to be indicating. They are so spatially distinct that they are isolated from any sense of the place. Where the centre of town used to be has no public sense of memory whatsoever. The churches which used to dominate were swept away in the fire. Now this intersection of roads, close to the Great Village River and its bridge, seems to be the quickest way out rather than a focus for what remains. As a lure for tourists then, the new town's memorial "square" seems more indicative of failure. It is almost an admission that the town itself is inadequate as a site for memorializing.

However, whatever this package by the side of the road lacks in terms of site and monumentability, only adds to the sense of sadness of the "square" itself. Like the town, it is haunted by its own emptiness. It has two not unrelated functions, namely, that of museum and war memorial, to which has been added a stone commemorating the victims of mining accidents. The museum section is set a little way apart from the two memorial stones which, although they are side by side, are quite unlike one another. They are oddly contrasted in materials and style, but the attempt to bring them together seems appropriate in a town which has lost so much. Their almost naive design relationship is the

more moving because of their stark juxtaposition.

The "square" as a whole has the air of a minimal park. A few paths meet at right angles to set off some vestiges of the town's industrial history. The display's chief elements are two huge rusty machinery pieces and a small rail tub used to carry ore (complete with rusty looking iron ore). The machinery is apparently all that is left of the steel mill whose furnace fires were once seen from miles around. The two pieces are an enormous fly wheel with all the dimensions of outsize sculpture, and a boiler with few redeeming aesthetic qualities. The latter was retrieved from the Great Village River and brought to its present site as if scale itself could represent the brute metal monumentability inherent in Siemens' industrial ambition.

Altogether, the "square's" marginal situation outside the town and the site's homemade bricolage combine to give the memorial to both town and people a peculiarly local depth and appeal. Invoked in the sheer effort to bring the found boiler from the bed of the river, there is that physical sense of retrieval that is heritage's tribute to history. It is the same sense of strictly partial endeavour found in local histories of the area. Though they would never claim to be academic records, like the "square," they are acts of remembrance and they were produced by the same concerned sources.⁴

At which point I would like to reintroduce Elizabeth Bishop as a very different kind of source, one which the historians of Londonderry may not even consider relevant. And vice versa. While Bishop is normally thought of as being associated with Nova Scotia in general and Great Village in

particular, little mention is made of her references to the nearest place to Great Village which is Londonderry. True, in Bishop's oeuvre, Londonderry is a minor footnote. Indeed, Bishop does not even refer to it by its real name, preferring to give it the bog-Irish attributes of "Galway Mines" - a name which has the unfortunate effect of burying the place's true identity and origin. What then is the relevance of Bishop?

First of all, the point is not to document a relationship, but to achieve, what has become of less and less concern to cultural studies, an act of sympathetic imagination. For example, perhaps the final act in the demise of Londonderry was the breaching of a dam which led to a flood in the Great Village River that took several lives. As Bishop recalled, "the dam was really a mountainous slag heap, dead, gray, and glistening." It was also the bed of a railway track across the valley. But this multipurpose piece of ad hocery had been neglected and so one day, inevitably, it gave way. Fortunately, the danger was known and Bishop therefore correctly notes that "a warning had been given." Nevertheless, Bishop's grandparents' house "on the lower side of the village, near the river had been flooded" (as occasionally happens to the house to this day). Despite the warning "in the excitement of rescuing the older children, the clock, the cow and the horse, my grandmother forgot the latest baby (later my aunt), and my grandfather had dashed back into the house to find her floating peacefully in her wooden cradle bobbing over the kitchen floor."

Compare this extraordinary image with Bishop's references in the same piece ("Memories of Uncle Neddy") to the sinking of the *Titanic*:

It was obvious that Uncle Neddy had been strongly affected by the sinking of the *Titanic*: in his modest library there were three different books about this catastrophe, and in the dining room facing his place at the table, hung a chromograph of the ship going down: the iceberg, the rising steam, people struggling in the water, everything in full colour. When I was left alone in the parlour, an ear cocked for Aunt Hat, I could scarcely wait to take out the *Titanic* books... and look at the terrifying pictures one more time.

The *Titanic* conjured up the fears of an age. If not a precursor to 1914-1918, it was certainly a rupture in that era's apparently secure chronology, turning history as usual into obsessively worked over myth making. But, paradoxically, this figure for the disproportionate and unaccountable also ushered in an era which, because of the Great War, had to come to terms with the idea of remembrance itself. So institutionalized is memorializing now, we may have forgotten how forms to commemorate the Great War began during, rather than after, the war itself. It was as if remembrance were the reason why the war was being fought.⁵ Now it would seem history has been replaced by the claims of heritage memorializing which, in the case of the *Titanic* has become a tireless industry. It is, of course, unfair to think of Londonderry's "square" in the same unremitting terms. Instead, the comparison is a reference to how the retrieved scrap boiler is representative of so much that has been lost. As a found monument, it is as much about the fragments that are beyond retrieval, beyond words. Certainly, it seems inappropriate to think of it as a metaphor for the inevitableness of loss or change or being by-passed. Like Bishop's memory of the recovered child, we can perhaps simply think of it as having been

somehow suspended above the flood of forgetting and leave it in that more or less diluvial limbo.

References

1. Except where stated otherwise, all references to Elizabeth Bishop are to *The Collected Prose* Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, pp. 227-50.
2. Bishop "Cape Breton", *The Collected Poems* Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, p. 67.
3. See David Erskine, "The Atlantic Region" in J. Warkentin, ed., *Canada: a geographical interpretation* Methuen: Toronto, 1967, pp. 259-61. J. M. Murphy, *The Londonderry Heirs* Black Printing Co., Middleton, N.S. 1976.
4. See Trueman Matheson *A History of Londonderry Nova Scotia* published by Trueman Matheson and Lancelot Press 1983.
5. See Geoff Dyer *The Missing of the Somme* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1995, pp. 16-19.

Monumental Questions: Mark Strand and Elizabeth Bishop

by
Peter Sanger

- 1 -

For better or worse, truth is in the poem. It might also be engaged intermittently in the commentary.

- 2 -

"Art lives in the realm of ambiguity and suspense, and it is art only as long as the ambiguity is sustained" (Edgar Wind: *Art and Anarchy*: Faber and Faber, London, 1963: 25).

- 3 -

"Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais
sa borne
Aux noirs vols du Blasphème épars
dans le futur."
(Stéphane Mallarmé: Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe.)

- 4 -

In 1978, Mark Strand (American poet, short-story writer, art critic, translator, painter, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1999, born in Prince Edward Island in 1934, full-time Canadian resident until the age of four and a half, visitor to St. Margaret's Bay and Halifax, Nova Scotia, during the 1950's and 1960's, where his parents had retired, Halifax pedestrian with a notebook of poems in his hand as Douglas Lochhead, the Canadian poet who was, during part of that time, Chief Librarian at Dalhousie University's library now remembers), in 1978, Mark Strand published a tribute to his friend, Elizabeth Bishop, which took its title and used as the fulcrum of its meditation Bishop's poem, "The Monument." Biography has its own systems of imperialism. Where they end, poetry might begin.

- 5 -

With a self-mocking, self-distancing bravura typical of many passages in the book, Mark Strand's *The Monument* is dedicated "To the Translator of THE MONUMENT in the future." Its dedication page also carries the commencement conventional in many Latin epitaphs, "Siste Viator" - Pause Traveller - as if the Traveller, the Translator, were outward bound on the Appian Way of Strand's book and crossing the Elysian Fields, as if we were being advised to delay slightly arrival at our predestinations.

- 6 -

The Monument is made like a commonplace book. It consists of fifty-two short, numbered entries. Few are longer than half a page. Some are only two or three lines in length. All could fit on a 5 x 7 inch index card. Strand's parts of the entries are variously prose poems, loosely written observations, cryptic divagations, jokes, seeming non-sequiturs. Two entries, the fifteenth and sixteenth, offer two poems, both entitled "The Monument," which Strand immediately warns us are fraudulent. The book is a house of cards, perhaps assembled by the absent fifty-third card, the Joker. Perhaps if this house or, better, monument of cards fell, we might re-assemble its entries into another structure upon the level ground by Lethe.

- 7 -

Perhaps we could also translate the cards, as Strand's dedication suggests. We could translate from Bishop and from Strand into whatever language we invent. We could translate English into English.

- 8 -

Seventeen entries in *The Monument* begin with one or two or three direct quotations. All are in English. The fifty-second entry consists entirely of two quotations, with no gloss by Strand. The first is from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "...Oh, how do I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die now!" The second is Whitman's poem "Living Always, Always Dying" to be found in "The Whispers of Heavenly Death" section of *Leaves of Grass*. The most frequently quoted writers are Sir Thomas Browne and Whitman (four times each); Wallace Stevens (three

times); Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, Nietzsche and Miguel de Unamuno (twice each). Among the few others are Paz, Chekhov, Jiminez, Cioran and Suetonius. Bishop is not directly quoted and credited.

- 9 -

If quoting is an attempt to recreate creation or, putting the matter another way, an attempt to re-animate truth in language by re-enacting moments when it was closer in time to its origin, then the act of not quoting when the reader expects a quotation may suggest a silence which existed before language could be traduced and translated: a monumental silence.

- 10 -

Let us say that none of the texts Strand quotes are displayed for sale in the imperial arcades of America. Let us say that none of the texts originally written in languages too awkward for the educated have been translated. Let us say that those who compile books are not flâneurs who promenade the arcades making shopping comparisons. Let us say that Whitman stayed in Ontario to help Dr. Bucke and stopped writing *Leaves of Grass*. Let us say that Strand did quote Bishop directly in *The Monument* and listed her among the Acknowledgements. Let us say that her quoted words inevitably became *The Monument's* apex of sublimity. Let us say that the monument has collapsed.

- 11 -

Section thirty of *The Monument* is the only one where the unwary reader, ignorant of Bishop's "The Monument," might be compelled to pause. The section begins with a quotation from Book XIII of Wordsworth's

The Prelude (which we might remember is subtitled "Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind"): "...a Poet's mind/ Is labour not unworthy of regard." The Wordsworth quotation is followed by a passage from St. Mark 13:37: "And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch!" What else can Strand be proposing but that Bishop's "The Monument" is her *Prelude*, or that we may translate it as such if we are prepared to accede to the suggestion of her poem's last words and "Watch it closely."

- 12 -

If I tell you to watch it, you might need to look out. I might also be telling you not to look in.

- 13 -

"Sometimes," Strand continues in section thirty, "when I wander in these woods whose prince I am, I hear a voice and I know that I am not alone. Another voice, another monument becoming one; another tomb, another marker made from elements least visible; another voice that says *Watch it closely*. And I do, and there is someone inside. It is the Bishop, who after all was not intended to be seen. It is the Bishop calling and calling." Harold Bloom, one of the few critics to show ease or find pleasure with *The Monument*, calls this "the most charming moment of the book" (Harold Bloom: "Books Considered": *The New Republic*, July 29, 1978 (179):29-30). Bloom adds: "*The Monument* echoes D. H. Lawrence when it sees that the poetics of America must also be a poetics of death." What about a poetics of self-effacement?

- 14 -

There is something like watching which is not watching; and there is a watching like watching, just as there is a bird like a bird. If we watch without watching the front covers of both the hard and soft bound editions of *The Monument* we can see the puzzle of a collage made by Strand. A bollard-like shape of grey and white, apparently cut from a nineteenth or early twentieth century steel engraving, stands central. Over this shape is swathed loosely a pink scarf, drawn over the crown and across the place where a mouth might be if the bollard-like shape were a milliner's display mannequin and the mannequin were posed in the blowing sand of the Sahara. Loose ends of the pink scarf blow across *The Monument's* cover towards its fore-edge. As background there appears, at a distance, to be grey sky, which seems to resolve itself under near-sighted examination into the whorls and runs of a steel-engraving of the magnified grains of a weathered plank.

- 15 -

The grains of that plank may bring us closer to the wooden structure of Bishop's "The Monument" and its "sea of narrow, horizontal boards" - perhaps also to a sense of the wood-pulp paper out of which the fabric of modern literature has been constructed. Bishop's monument is made of wood because she knew, I think, the real properties of brass and marble. But the scarf? Isadora's? And the bollard-like shape? Is Bishop, by Strand's account, a milliner's dummy? Bishop's poem, "Exchanging Hats," was written in 1956. Strand could have seen it. But no, we are still not watching like watching. See this and translate it as such (no-one else has): the bollard-like shape may be a chess piece. It

might be the Bishop, with the slanting cut in its crown concealed by that pink scarf (instead of the doffed mitre) which also keeps a mouth mum. Like poetry, the Bishop moves on the diagonal. It moves, like Bishop's poems, obliquely.

- 16 -

Many readers of poetry are more comfortable with checkers than chess. Calvin Bedient wrote: "As for *The Monument*, it is marked by experimental flippancy... The volume consists of fifty-two brief badgering addresses to a future translator of its supposedly emptied out words. But the words are actually full of the intention to say little, and in this case less ... is not more; it is posturing. The book is stymied in self-reflectiveness, a monument to misguided minimalism" (Calvin Bedient: "Poetry Comfortable and Uncomfortable": The Sewanee Review, Spring, 1979, LXXXVII (2):298).

- 17 -

Good poetry tends to make fools out of fools. That is one of the main reasons why we spend so much time with bad poetry.

- 18 -

"The true Monument must survive, must stand by itself despite the possible survival of false monuments," writes Strand in the fifteenth section. Perhaps we could distinguish the false monuments, those which commemorate nothing unknown, if we labour to translate several true ones. Pause, for example, at the thirtieth poem in Book III of Horace's *Odes* (a poem surely familiar to Bishop from her high school studies). It begins: "Exegi monumentum aere perennius, / Regalique situ pyramidum altius."

In the nineteenth century, Conington tried: "And now tis done: more durable than brass/ My Monument shall be, and raise its head/ O'er royal pyramids." In the seventeenth century Milton made a truer translation in the epitaph, "On Shakespear 1630" which prefaces the second folio:

What needs my *Shakespear* for his honour'd Bones,
The labour of an age in piled Stones,
Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid
Under a Star-ypointing *Pyramid*?
Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
What need'st thou such weak witnes of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.
For whilst toth' shame of slow-endeavouring art,
Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,
Those Delphick lines with deep impression took,
Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving,
Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;
And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,
That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

- 19 -

Samuel Hazo's review of *The Monument* reads in part: "... the symbol of the monument strikes me as ambivalent enough to be at once intriguing and pretentious as a way of expressing a desire for endurance" (Samuel Hazo: "The Experience of an Idea": The Hudson Review, Autumn, 1978, XXXI (3):540-541). Another obedient calvinism in which no-one is really present, not Horace, Milton, Shakespeare - or Bishop. Perhaps to some of us they are no great loss, and yesterday does not precede tomorrow, and all poets do not write paradise lost, and Walden is never elsewhere. In Nova Scotia, a road sign indicates it is a few miles northwest of Mahone Bay.

- 20 -

In 1978, in the same year as *The Monument*, Strand published *The Late Hour*, a collection of poems. Three of its poems are set in Nova Scotia quite recognizably because of their use of place names: "Poor North," "Where Are the Waters of Childhood?" and "The House in French Village." The latter poem is dedicated to Bishop. In 1980, Strand published a *Selected Poems* which closes with a section of "New Poems," five in all, four of which are also set in Nova Scotia: "Shooting Whales," "Nights in Hackett's Cove," "A Morning," and "My Mother on an Evening in Late Summer." Strand wrote no poetry at all between 1980 and 1985. Not until 1990 did he publish another book of poems. He has published no other poems set in Nova Scotia since 1980.

- 21 -

Immediate madelaines are tasteless. Think of them poised among the ceramics in a souvenir shop. As for Proust's madelaine, it can taste like cornbread, gingerbread or the slice from a braided loaf still warm on a kitchen counter which no longer exists. Is that the taste of a monument? Is it what Wordsworth in his "Essay on Epitaphs" calls an "intimation or assurance within us, that some part of our nature is imperishable"? Is it our own experiences only we can translate when we read poetry? In autumn, 1999, Strand told Eleanor Wachtel in an interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's program, "Writers and Company" (aired June 29, 2000) that he "became bored" by the confessional poems set in Nova Scotia which appear at the end of *Selected Poems*. Those poems and their similars in *The Late Hour* bear strong traces of Bishop's Great Village poems. "Why live my

life all over again?" said Strand. Why live our lives all over again? Are those the lives which could fill the "temple of crates" out of which Bishop's monument is made?

- 22 -

There are translations like those in Lowell's *Imitations*, translations which are occupations, not emancipations. Under certain hospitable circumstances (Bishop's poetry is full of them), finding a place for one's voice marks the end rather than the start of audition. What if there is a conversation yet to be heard by us between Strand and Bishop, between us and Bishop, as complex and as inflected as the one between Bishop and Moore, between Bishop and Lowell, which David Kalstone helped us to overhear in *Becoming a Poet?* A conversation from which an impersonality unmediated by nostalgia or impersonation might ensue, which leaves in doubt whether the mask or the mime if speaking within the monument. "I guess my neighbourhood," said Strand to Eleanor Wachtel, "is the English language."

- 23 -

"We receive Bailey's paintings only as finished works, breathtakingly concluded. Their existence, since they appear without origin, is magical. Their secret is that their materiality is an illusion; they don't exist except as representations, realizations of an idea" (Mark Strand: *William Bailey*: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1987:10).

- 24 -

“Si traduire est, vraiment, trahir, oserai-je avouer que, pour mieux entendre Paul Celan, j’ai pris le chemin des trahisons? // Mais toute lecture personnelle, n’est pas, en soi, une trahison?” (Edmond Jabès: *La Memoire des Mots: Comment Je Lis Paul Celan*: Fourbis, Paris, 1990: 18)

“If translating is, properly speaking, traducing, can I dare the avowal that, in order to hear Paul Celan more clearly, I took the way of treason?// But is not all personal reading, in itself, treason?” (Edmond Jabès: *The Memory of Words: How I Read Paul Celan....*)

Try your own translation.

- 25 -

In 1968, ten years before the publication of *The Memorial*, an English translation of *Illuminationem*, a collection of Walter Benjamin’s essays, was published in New York. It contains “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin’s essay-introduction to his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*. It can only be, I think, to the kind of translator Benjamin describes that Strand dedicated *The Monument*. “It is the task of the translator,” wrote Benjamin, “to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language.” (Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations* (Ed. & intro. by Hannah Arendt, trans. By Harry Zohn): Schocken Books, New York, 1969:80)

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We are halfway there. Mark Strand said to Eleanor Wachtel: “Poetry is about time ultimately... poetry is measured in cadence... it’s an extended act of saying goodbye... poetry is a loss that one can retain.” *The Monument* was published in the spring of 1978. Elizabeth Bishop died in the autumn of 1979. The valedictions of poetry are not, in truth, about the past.

Membership in the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia is available for \$8 per year or \$20 for three years (Canadian funds). Either membership entitles the holder to take full voting part in the Society’s deliberations and to receive the Newsletter for free.

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**Running to
Paradise**

**a play about
elizabeth bishop**

by Donna E. Smyth

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Donna E. Smyth's one-woman play, *Running to Paradise*, was staged in Wolfville and Halifax in the fall of 1998 by The Studio Group.

About the Author

Donna E. Smyth lives on an old farm in Hants County, NS. As well as publishing numerous short stories, poems and non-fiction pieces, Donna E. Smyth has published three novels: *Quilt* and *Subversive Elements*, and a young adult novel, *Loyalist Runaway*, which won the 1992 Dartmouth Fiction Award. Her previous plays include *Giant Anna* and an adaptation of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

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