

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S SOUNDS OF SANITY

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Abstract:

In this article, I examine the implications of rewriting definitions of sanity and insanity through the use of noise, silence, and language, positioning Elizabeth Bishop's short story "In the Village" as a form of resistance against traditional readings of madness, logocentrism, and identity. I suggest that by writing her characters as undivided from the world of sound, Elizabeth Bishop's story shifts understandings of insanity, which is often conceptualized through denials of agency, allowing her characters to escape in noises and hesitations in language and communication. "In the Village" avoids silencing the "insane" mother through her placement in a caesura of sound and silence. This article avoids a biographical reading of "In the Village," which is often connected with her own mother's "mental breakdown," because Bishop's writing would have been as much affected by her conscious awareness of her past as it was by the unconscious impulses and histories of writing in the West. Rather, I take into account Bishop's own personal history as well as the repetitions that reflect a placement in a tradition appearing in the story itself. Using this particular lens, I believe a rereading of "In the Village" is in order, where the "mad mother" is not silenced by the oppressive social structures that control the "insane," but she instead finds escape in the multitudes of sounds that associate with her, erasing the power of language and opening a new world where agency exists in a scream or in a striking hammer.

Keywords: sound, language, Elizabeth Bishop, sanity, madness

Resumen:

En este artículo, yo examino las implicaciones de las definiciones de la cordura y la locura a través del uso de ruido, silencio, e idioma. "In the Village," escribió de Elizabeth Bishop, es una forma de resistencia contra las lecturas tradicionales de la locura, el logocentrismo, e identidad. Sugiero que ella escribiera sus personajes como indivisible con un mundo del sonido. Los cambios en la historia de la locura, que a menudo se conceptualiza a través de la negación de la agencia, lo que permiten a sus personajes para escapar a través de los

ruidos y las vacilaciones en el lenguaje y la comunicación. Los impulsos inconscientes y historias de la escritura en el Oeste habría sido afectados por su conocimiento y su consciente de el pasado. Más bien, tengo en cuenta la propia historia personal del Bishop así como las repeticiones que reflejan una colocación en una tradición que aparece en la historia en sí. Este uso es mi objetivo en particular. Creo que una relectura de “In the Village” está en orden, donde la ‘madre loca’ no es silenciada por las estructuras sociales opresivas que controlen las locas, pero en cambio encuentra escapar en la multitud de sonidos que se asocian con ella, eliminando el poder del lenguaje. Este artículo ofrece una relectura de “In the Village” donde la agencia es un grito o un martillo llamativo.

Palabras claves: sonido, lenguaje, Elizabeth Bishop, cordura, locura

I. Introduction

The first two words of Elizabeth Bishop’s “In The Village” prime readers for a story of sound(s), sounds which will match or mismatch the timbre of the village. The scream, emanating from the mother and through Bishop’s writing, exists at a moment of confluence in values: binaries of language/noise, sanity/insanity, masculine/feminine. By examining the psychosocial reflections of these binaries throughout the story as they arise through the recurrences of certain noises, words, and images, I believe a re-reading of “In the Village” will be in order. The anxieties of sanity and the subversions of language in the text function co-operatively to doubly imagine sanity, both as the patriarchal assumption that the mother’s grief is indeed madness as well as the more seditious interpretation of sounds that allows the uniquely female position of entrapment (in a mind, in a house, in an archetype) to reveal itself. That is, in each recurrent noise and its related metaphors, Bishop’s “mad” mother encapsulates *and* circumvents erasure, dwelling in the caesura of language and silence.

“In the Village” is a dense cluster of repetitions at thematic and auditory levels. Repeated sounds, like a striking anvil or a scream, permeate the story, but these sounds are also reflected and encased by other recurrences. The color black accompanies instances of noise, shadowing the story with “bloody little moons” and darkening the scream and the mother. Chronologically, the story progresses framed by the opening which portends the coming scream, but motifs and symbols recrudesce, conceiving order in themes of recurrences rather than across the temporal sphere. Reordering these symbols helps to discriminate areas of release from the oppressions of language and sanity, reinscribing at least some of the “insane” mother’s lost agency and self.

“Western literary history *is* overwhelmingly male – or, more accurately, patriarchal”

(Gilbert and Gubar 47). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar develop in *The Madwoman in the Attic* the notions of writing literally and fictively woman, examining how writing and language in the West function repressively. Western writing has been, and remains largely, a man's space; "the sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father to son" – defined, that is, explicitly in male terms (46). Literary critic George Steiner writes of this paternalistic prestige in language stating, "That articulate speech should be the line dividing man from the myriad forms of animate being, that speech should define man's singular eminence above the silence of the plant and the grunt of the beast...is classic doctrine well before Aristotle...the word having chosen the grossness and infirmity of man's condition for its own compelling life" (36). Though man is "gross" and "infirm," he was still selected by speech to record and recolor the histories of both man *and* woman (as well as the social deviant or cultural Other). Women through this literary paternity have historically been "written in" by men, archetyped and coded as necessary. "[I]n the same way an author both generates and imprisons his fictive creatures, he silences them by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life" (Gilbert and Gubar 14). Though it is woman who gives life, it has been man who has controlled the pen, and therefore the cultural images by which readers enact their lives. Until women like Bishop wrote fictively and personally the stories of themselves, they remained fictive, silenced characters of men.

Gilbert and Gubar dedicate much time and space to the examination of women as "angels" or "monsters" in Victorian literature, identifying these "eternal types" as standard historical creations by male writers as a way of possessing fictional *and* real women. These literary inheritances required female writers long after (and before) the hey-day of Victorian literature into the twentieth century to "have been especially concerned with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing...images of women inherited from male literature...Examining and attacking such images...literary women have inevitably had consciously or unconsciously to reject the values or assumptions of the society that created those fearsome paradigms" (76-77). "In the Village" mirrors as it rejects the angelic striking anvil and the monstrously "wrong" scream of the child's mother through the reflections of sounds, particularly as these sounds intimately relate to the sociocultural judgments that appear as part of the package.

J. Hillis Miller, in his text *Fiction and Repetition*, contemplates the use of repeated (or mirrored) language and imagery in novels, and here in short story, Bishop appresses her images so tightly as to coerce two seemingly disparate readings out of her text, such that even as she writes ostensibly a mother of insanity she redefines sanity itself. Thus, her mirroring images continually double back, reflexively examining each representation by intimately binding it with another sound, color, or word in the story.

II. Situating Sanity and Language

The cultural devotion to “soundness of mind” over and above deviant forms of behavior colludes with the polemical construction of language/silence or language/pure sound. Anthropologist James Wilce states in “Language and Madness,” “The ability to speak coherently enough to respond appropriately to, and help create, recognizable social contexts helps define our sense of full humanness” (415). Failure to create recognizable linguistic situations identifies one as less than human, without “full humanness.” Incoherency, silence, and pure sound, such as the mother’s scream, reside in an unthinkable context where meaning breaks down and the divine nature of language is questioned, subverted, or wholly discarded. The ravings or silences of a madwoman mark her “failure” to appropriately situate herself in language and in culture – as culture plays *the* role in determining acceptability. Thomas Szasz, a self-described anti-psychiatrist, writes of the very real cultural and moral judgments involved in determinations of sanity. “While it is generally accepted that mental illness has something to do with man’s social (or interpersonal) relations, it is paradoxically maintained that problems of values (that is, of ethics) do not arise in this process” (*Ideology and Insanity* 20). Functioning in “recognizable social contexts” through the use of language determines sanity – anything less is deviance. Furthermore, those subjects (the mother of “In the Village” for instance) who fail to “respond appropriately” are labeled as lacking in humanness, and their inability or refusal to engage in prescribed methods of interaction, depicted in literature often through babbling, screaming, or marked silence, removes the question of ethics from the table. What this means is that while one group maintains the divine presence – the essence of differentiation: language – while another does not, ethics are *unnecessary*, for how can those who lack the spark of the divine engage in ethics?

It is here at this interstice of language and sanity that “In the Village” immerses in the valued dualisms of language and sanity that are hand-me-downs and present realities of Western patriarchal culture. I wish to avoid a straightforward biographical awareness of Elizabeth Bishop’s circumstances as both the child of a “mad” mother and the friend of a mad poet as a lens for analysis of this story.¹ Literary critic Bonnie Costello presages against such readings, specifically of writing as nuanced as Bishop’s. “Bishop’s critics have celebrated her subversive relationship to ‘the Western tradition’ rather than emphasizing the many ways in which that tradition...might haunt and shape her, or recognizing how the ‘I’ of her poems might emerge as a site of cross-identifications and cultural yearnings rather than as a coherent self” (336). Bishop’s personal life, to some extent certainly relevant here, does not fully engage in the historical identities of language

¹ At the age of five, Bishop’s mother was committed to a public insane asylum and never returned home (Colwell). Public sanitariums also served to house the chronically ill, and the conditions of the hospitals were more often than not carceral rather than rehabilitative. “Bedlam 1946” by Albert Q. Maisel offers a starting point of examination into conditions of the time.

and sanity within which “In the Village” is situated. In order to read the story as more than an adult reflection of Bishop’s childhood recollections with her mother, I suggest that the repetitions of language, silence, and noise along with the associated imagery throughout the story create subversive eruptions of privileged polemics while operating in a somewhat patriarchal paradigm. Sociohistorical developments in writing, psychiatry, and femininity influence Bishop’s identification as a writer that sought, played with, and broke down the meanings of language. Importantly, the “insanity” of the mother of “In the Village” can be reinterpreted through these breakdowns as both a haunting of the Western tradition of the madwoman as well as a new form of resistance which seeks to rewrite, or perhaps re-sound, the dominance of language over sound and silence, of sanity over madness and transgression.

Other forms of writing seek out this re-sounding of the hegemony of the sound mind. Critic Seri Luangphinit, in his study of colonial and post-colonial madness, writes of the ways in which Pacific writers redefine sanity through writing. “[T]he body of Pacific writing brings us back to the caesura, to guide our attention to the corruption of order by multiple definitions of reality that continually compete with and occasionally displace the status quo” (62). Writing of a character’s attempt to cure his mental illness, Luangphinit notes that “[e]scaping from this psychological prison paradoxically lies in abandoning all attempts to find a cure” (73). It is no surprise that women’s literature often coincides with the resistances of colonized literature for “several feminist critics have recently used Frantz Fanon’s model of colonialism to describe the relationship between male (parent) culture and female (colonized) literature” (Gilbert and Gubar 74). Comparably to Luangphinit’s analysis, abandoning readings of the mother’s scream as an indicator of her madness discerns a form of sanity that stands outside of the “sanctioned self” of patriarchy.

The caesura, the dividing line as it exists in Luangphinit’s analysis of Pacific writings, resides in Elizabeth Bishop’s story as well. When the mother is denied agency and voice, she responds with one of the few weapons of the mad: screams. Yet the other sounds and silences of the story (un)mask the nuances of socially transgressive madness. In the noise of a scream or ring of an anvil, Bishop is able to simultaneously reveal and conceal the ethics of insanity, highlighting the fact that the mother is imprisoned by as she also manages to escape through sound. This short story, as Bonnie Costello points out of Bishop’s poems, not only “remind[s] us that we cannot know the self, [it] also remind us that the poem is a social gesture, not just an alienated critique” (340). In its gesturing, “In the Village” nods to the archetypes written by men while it attenuates the set of matrices embedded within those very archetypes in the first place.

In *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, Susan McCabe considers how Bishop utilizes language in order to engender an escape from the “emphasis [that] has been placed on the limitations imposed upon women in a language predominantly authored by

males rather than upon the ways women may use language for their own pleasures and needs" (11). The ways in which Bishop manipulates language *and* sounds not privileged in the Western literary tradition is a form of revising the self and the understanding of our relationship with reality (which previously remained exclusively logocentric). "Language insists upon presence but always keeps loss in sight through its movement; ultimately it cannot hold back the fluid self and reminds us of the space left between us and words" (McCabe 30). My line of thought deals directly with this fluidity – and fear – of silence, of noise, where language peters out and supposed "madness" and transgression seep in. It is here that the sounds of Bishop's story offer a resistance and an acquiescence to Western humanism and language, and we can, as Bonnie Costello suggests, "consider a lyric subjectivity taking shape in relation to the contradictory and unarticulated aspirations of the culture" (340). Undermining yet succumbing to the Western language hegemon, "In the Village" doubly subverts and denies simple readings of madness and noise.

III. Repetition and Sound

"In the Village" outwardly begins without a beginning. Though readers are prepared for sound, what Bishop does not write in is the origin of the sound (except that, we learn, it bursts forth from the mother). "A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies" (Bishop 62). Why is she screaming? We do not know. It is almost as if the story of the scream cannot be told because "no one hears it"; it is overlooked (as women are), yet it exists in the background, in the skies, darkening everything just slightly "a little more around the horizon – or is it around the rims of the eyes?" (62). The scream may darken the edges, but it remains "unheard" without a story, as a woman should be. Goethe, Hans Eichner argues, frames the perfect woman just this way – without a "real" life of her own. "She...leads a life of almost pure contemplation...in considerable isolation on a country estate...a life without external events – a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story" (Hans Eichner qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 22). Instead, the scream is "in the past, in the present, and those years between" (Bishop 62). Bishop, echoing the stories of the women before her, writes the beginning yet without prefatory background – the mother's grief comes from nowhere, and she has no story other than her monstrous scream. It is, as if, unmistakably without a man, she is in the transition from Gilbert and Gubar's "angel-woman" to "monster."² Though she is acceptable a woman with "no story," no background, she unacceptably asserts her vocal presence, staining the skies.

The only instance of the mother's scream is framed by this loaded imagery of angel and monster, non-being and being. In her ever-present scream whether heard or reverbe-

2 For an extensive discussion on this, read the first chapter "The Queen's Looking Glass" of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

rating, readers wait for the threads of the mother's mind to unravel, for the next piece of pure sound to reflect the mother's place in nonsense, the place from where words fail and screams emit. Bishop writes:

Clang.

Clang.

Oh, beautiful sounds, from the blacksmith's shop at the end of the garden! Its gray roof, with patches of moss, could be seen above the lilac bushes. Nate was there - Nate, wearing a long black leather apron over his trousers and bare chest, sweating hard, a black leather cap on top of dry, thick, black and gray curls, a black sooty face...

Clang.

The pure note: pure and angelic.

The dress was all wrong. She screamed.

The child vanishes. (63)

Just before the first clang, the child is watching her mother with the dressmaker. Her innocent imagination takes her away from the uncomfortable scene of her mother's forced exit from mourning (and black) and into a place where sound can represent memory, but the pure and angelic hammer can only temporarily grant the child a scene more real than the one in front of her eyes. The child, physically placed in a scene in which the mother is being moved away from black, visualizes herself in a scene instead *full* of black. Both places are characterized by their color and noise, yet imagination must give way to the terrible reality of unsound and sound combined, wordlessness and anguish, madness and refusal. In the face of the wrong sound, and not the angelic sound, the child must flee both mentally and physically. The two sounds superimposed on black dissolve each other and vanish.

After the only true sounding of the scream, the remainder of the story hinges on anticipation, waiting for the mother to once again step out of culture and into the screams of the wild thing. "We are waiting for a scream. But it is not screamed again, and the red sun sets in silence" (Bishop). This expectancy stylistically functions to assure readers of the mother's imbalance. Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 6 in the third movement famously contained three hammer blows in the original score, the final which he removed in an effort to generate anticipation. Mahler was known for "interruptions...such as the refrain from *Das Lied* and the hammer blows in the Finale of the Sixth, come in threes," though this time the third would be in silence (Kaplan 220). With the erasure of the third hammer blow, Mahler cleverly compels listeners to await a sound that never comes.³ Bishop actively employs this same method throughout "In the Village." The silence

3 This topic was presented at the University of Virginia's English Graduate Conference *Sound and Unsound: Noise, Nonsense, and the Unspoken*. Keynote speaker Daniel Albright of Harvard University suggested the similarity between Bishop's use of a single scream was strikingly concordant with Mahler's use of the hammer blow.

of the absent scream is patiently and distressingly anticipated throughout the story, positioning the mother into a place residing fluidly between sound and unsound. Rather than resounding the scream, Bishop instead reverberates the social fear of the scream through language and repetition (black and the angelic anvil).

Later, Bishop will again allude to the intimate relationship of the blacksmith to the mother. Amongst the mother's belongings are "[b]lack shoes with buckles glistening like the dust in the blacksmith's shop" (Bishop 64). Tied to the *blacksmith* by all of her belongings and by the very dust of the earth, the mother in her scream seems to be fighting, struggling for an audience, with the noise of the hammer.⁴ The blacksmith to whom the child psychologically and bodily flees must be read as a paternal figure, much like Bruno Bettelheim's reading of the huntsman in the fairy tale *Snow White*. Rather than existing to silence and reprimand the child, Bettelheim writes that he exists to control "the animal, asocial, violent tendencies in man" – recall Steiner's grunt of the beast and the "full humanness" in language of Wilce (205). When the mother's scream appears, the blacksmith's *clang* or the black and silver materializes to rescue the child from the "evil stepmother," that is, the mother who has transformed from one who successfully provides for her child to one who produces pure and terrifying noise.

In this sense, whenever readers hear the clanging of the blacksmith's anvil or read of the color black, an intimate association with the mother's transgressive scream ensues; as J. Hillis Miller explains, "one thing is experienced as repeating something which is quite different from it and which it strangely resembles" (8). In his chapter "Two Forms of Repetition," Hillis Miller reflects on the use of repeated language and imagery in novels. "In each case there are repetitions making up the structure of the work within itself, as well as repetitions determining its multiple relations to what is outside it" (3). Some of these repetitions and determinations of relationships I have already touched on, and more exist as the story continues. Neither the scream nor the clanging of the blacksmith's anvil are the primary source of the repetitions; rather, "[t]he trauma is neither in the first nor the second but between them, in the relation between two opaquely similar events" (Miller 9). Arguably when separated, both sounds function to relive the trauma of paternalism: a mother trapped by patriarchal notions of sanity (which are in themselves inextricably bound to her status as a widowed, disempowered woman) and a male blacksmith patently representing all that is good, "angelic," and right in culture. Combining the reverberations of the mother's scream within the striking of the anvil serves to remind readers that all is not well; the madwoman is still in the attic, and we should question just how she got there.

As if to provide the damning evidence of the mother's entrapment, Bishop *tout de suite* cages the mother. "She stood in the large front bedroom with sloping walls on either

4 The mother's buckles glisten like the dust rather than the dust glistening like the buckles. This ordering is incredibly important, indicating the momentary privileging of the order of the blacksmith (the man, Adam, the sounds of civilization) over the chaos of disorder and psychosocial rebellion (the woman, Eve, the dust of man) of the mother.

side, papered in wide white and dim-gold stripes. Later it was she who gave the scream” (Bishop 62). Thomas Gardner in *Regions of Unlikeness* contemplates the scream, writing, “That scream, of course, is her mother’s mad scream, which...has opened up a gap in daily patterns and changed everything...The entire village, all of its rituals and sounds and smells, seems eaten away by its mist; the scream is the village’s deep down pitch – its source of instability, but also of its uneasy life” (63). The scream, which Gardner paints it as a “deep down pitch,” is more akin to a background noise, without foregrounding, unheard, unanswered. Impossible now to have an eponymous story because there is no man, the mother can only shake the bars, “dim-gold stripes,” of her domestic cage with a scream. *The Yellow Wallpaper* antedates Bishop’s story but reflects similar cultural images of the trapped woman. “At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, / lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The / outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as / can be” (Gilman 22). Unlike Gilman’s character, Bishop’s mother screams at her bars, does not tear down the wallpaper but with her voice “she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” (Gilman 26). Much like Gilman’s woman, no one seems to hear the mother or see the source of her despair. Despite the time gap in the writing of the two women (some sixty years), Bishop’s character might also be unable to “climb through that pattern-it strangles so” (Gilman 26). Yet Bishop can free her, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, because “even when a supposedly ‘mad woman has been sentenced to imprisonment in the ‘infected’ house of her own body, she may discover that, as Sylvia Plath was to put it...she has ‘a self to recover, a queen’” (92).

Semantic confusions generate a kind of wallpaper that from a linguistic pragmatic standpoint further encase the mother. The child, watching her aunt and grandmother sift through the mother’s belongings, confuses “morning” with “mourning.”

“Here’s a mourning hat,” says my grandmother, holding up something large, sheer, and black, with large black roses on it; at least I guess they are roses, even if black.

“There’s that mourning coat she got the first winter,” says my aunt.

But I always think they are saying “morning.” Why, in the morning, did one put on black? How early in the morning did one begin? Before the sun came up? (64)

This is an instance of Bishop’s unique ability with repetition of images. Black, intimately bound with the mother’s illness and her scream, is confused with the beginning of the day – ironic, in that Bishop never writes or indicates a beginning to the mother’s story. There is, quite literally, no indication of the “morning” of the mother’s “mourning”; she remains defined by her absence. “Morning handkerchiefs” instead are only allowed to flutter over a breakfast table, the very shadows of a beginning.

Bishop then culturally Other’s the mother in black, placing a picture of the mother carefully amidst the failure to be productive, the failure to distinguish words, the failure

of her sound: "Another photograph – "Oh, that *Negro* girl! That friend"...She, too, is black-and-white, with glasses on a chain. A morning friend" (66). Though Bishop may not have been consciously aware of the connection, women and minorities were treated quite similarly by the psychiatric institution, meaning there was an inherent presumption of their insanity. This fact stands particularly true of British-colonized Africa, where the mother visited "that friend." British psychiatric "preoccupation was the identification and classification of madness in Africans" (Keller 305). Likewise, with the establishment of asylums in American territory (which became a US state in Bishop's lifetime) Hawaii, "it is significant to note that race and gender are the only markers of distinction employed in F B Hutchinson's report on the population of incarcerated psychiatric patients" (Luanghphinit 61). The connection, which cannot be postulated as purposeful, still certainly cannot be ignored. At the very least, the Other of Africa is enough to separate the mother from her family and Caucasian friends at home. Blackening her around the edges, the mother's scream now visually separates her from the other characters of the story as well.

The mother's own child, watching and narrating all of these interactions, must of course be intimately involved in the psychology of the story, both in language and in the psychological underpinnings of the female struggle. Her resistance to language throughout the piece is strong, with few lines of dialogue attributed to her, though the men and women around her maintain conversation. As she walks Nelly, the family cow, to a field, she stops to speak to one man, Mr. McLean, yet all of the dialogue belongs to him. "We talk a little" is the most credited to her at this point (Bishop 70). Then, she willfully avoids conversation altogether at the Chisolm's and particularly notes the cultural and religious judgments she is evading. "We wave, but I hurry by because she may come out and ask questions. But her questions are not as bad perhaps as those of her husband, Mr. Chisolm...One evening he had met me in the pasture and asked me how my soul was. Then he held me firmly by both hands while he said a prayer...I had felt I had a soul, heavy in my chest, all the way home" (71). Language, begetting Wilce's "divine essence" by imposing a soul onto the child, comes from a man and is a danger, confusing and heavy. On the way home from this very journey, the child stops at another neighbor's house, Miss Ruth Hill. Though the scene seems comforting, with chocolate and stories, the reminders of the mother's scream are evident in the conversation. The child is reminded when she sees "the summer shoes in Hill's" of the "unlovely gilded red and green books, filled with illustrations of the Bible stories" in which "people in the pictures wore clothes like the purple dress" (70; 62). Layering upon layering of images all echo and repeat back to this denial, this scream that the mother emits. The child, much like her mother, resists entering into conversation as a resistance to the larger social order.

Yet the child concomitantly embodies acquiescence to paternal authority (and subsequently to language). The anvil, already so intimately associated with man, social order, and the "right" or "angelic" noise, lulls the child in. Still able to reside in Gilbert and

Gubar's "angel" phase, where "women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power," (21) she is seduced by the pure note of man, calling her to "kill herself into art" (17). The only item the child verbally requests – though she is given quite a few – is from the blacksmith: "Make me a ring! Make me a ring, Nate" (Bishop 66)! The mother, having assumed the role of "evil stepmother" through her screams, the child in her innocence must now assume the vacancy of angel-woman (and wife). Despite her linguistic resistances, the child yields in the face of a direct paternal figure, even asking for a gift and for recognition. Yet, just like the mother, the child remains unnamed and therefore unrecognized in a story where even the cow, Nelly, has a name.

The closing of the story repeats ambivalent imagery of acquiescence and defiance to language and culture. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* argues that imperial language acquisition shows an internalization of dominant values, but, as Jennifer Poulos points out, "the category 'white' depends for its stability on its negation, 'black'". Similarly, the submission of insanity to sanity intrinsically depends on "insanity's" stable categorization; without a clear demarcation, the division is rendered permutable and loses its power to coerce. Bishop writes these binaries, as I have shown set up in elements such as sanity and insanity; male and female; language and noise, in order to blur the distinction between the two. In the following lines, I believe, as J. Hillis Miller writes of *Wuthering Heights*, "[e]ach element of these pairs is not so much the opposite of its mate as another form of it. It is a differentiated form, born of some division within the same" (60). Bishop's final clangs reflect how closely her opposites of language and sound/silence have now intertwined.⁵ A clang first interrupts the child's walk to the post office while she is "hiding the address of the sanitarium" on the package she carries for her mother (77). She paused to stare at trout in the river, "too smart to get caught," when the clang silences her world (77). Yet, as Bishop puts it, not everything is turned to silence – the "*slp*" of the river breaks through, and the clanging itself is married with the sounds of nature, "the elements speaking." Both the scream and the clang become part of earth and air, but the scream floats away while the clang transforms the elements into language.

Rather than speaking, the mother's scream, once pure noise, is now pure silence. She has failed, as Fanon writes, "to grasp the morphology of this...language," yet, I think, in the silence of her scream she avoids what Fanon argues it means to speak, "above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (17-18) in the voices of things "long, too mortal." Silence remains a most effective form of resistance, and its application here serves to undercut the ringing clang of the anvil. Thus, both sounds begin to split into each other *because* of each other, *slp* breaking through the silence as *clang* dominates. This indistinct separation, Hillis Miller claims, in "[t]he separated pairs, differentiations of the same rather than true opposites, have a tendency to divide further, and then subdivide again, endlessly proliferating into various nuances and subsets...as soon as there is a

⁵ See p. 77-78 beginning with *Clang!* through the end of the piece for this excerpt.

story to tell it has already occurred [the division]...it divides and subdivides perpetually in an effort to achieve reunification which only multiplies it in new further-divided life cells" (61). Once the binary of silence and sound is set up, of clang and scream, of sanity and insanity, the very presence of the duality engenders instead an endless multiplicity.

IV. Linguistic Deviancy and Agency

Names function as a crucial link to the engagement "In the Village" among polemics. Only characters named within and by language are semiotically recognized with a Self; the mother and child, as long as they remain the linguistic insurgents I have argued them both at times to be, function outside of the syntactical reference of other characters. This in turn necessitates that both characters, but particularly the mother, be denied the agency to affirm or reject any assumptions raised against them. This denial of agency, of choice, lies at the heart of psychiatric diagnoses among the mentally ill, generally because of cultural deviancy but specifically here because of linguistic deviancy. The mother unnamed is forbidden the choice to deny or affirm her "insanity" or her "illness" as legitimate, and furthermore, her most basic decisions in her life⁶ are arrogated by her family because of her disengagement with prescribed normative standards of speaking and behavior. Thomas Szasz, whose work I have briefly mentioned, maintains that in order to treat "insanity," one must "stop respecting the targeted beneficiary as a person and instead treat him [in this case her] as the member of a particular group (the insane)," which allows the person to "cease to be a moral agent and become the object of our benevolence" (*Cruel Compassion* 4-5). The mother is demeaned, marked without "full humanness," in the very ways Szasz argues a mad person *must* be marked by such an appellation. Her agency has been partially or even wholly diminished, making it difficult for her or denying her the option to make even the most basic of decisions.

As she works with the dressmaker for a new garment, it becomes quite clear that the mother neither requested the fitting nor is confident that she should be out of mourning. "She wasn't at all sure she was going to like this dress or not...Is it a good shade for me? Is it too bright? I don't know. I haven't worn colors for so long now....How long? Should it be black? Do you think I should keep on wearing black" (Bishop 62)? Her questions are all directed at the social group that judges her, hoping for a return to "normalcy." Yet, the mother can barely choose a color, wishing to return to her comfort in black. Her wishes synchronously emphasize her attempts at agency *and* her total dependence on relatives

6 The denial of agency to the insane likely would not have escaped Bishop's notice during her visits to Ezra Pound, committed for treasonous outbursts during World War II at St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Criminally Insane (Nadel). Brett Candlish Millier writes Pound "might have been the country's leading literary spokesperson instead of the possibly mad, supposedly traitorous, incarcerated genius. Pound still held court for his subjects at St. Elizabeth's but was no longer forced, *or allowed*, to make choices about the conduct of his life" [emphasis mine] (222).

who later will send her away and quite literally incarcerate or kill her (in the fictional sense of killing her story) because the mother's story *only* exists in the context of her family.⁷

In fact, indications of the "beginnings" of the mother's story, which I argued earlier were absent, are alluded to in reference only to the family. "The older sister had brought her home, from Boston, not long before, and was staying on, to help. Because in Boston she had not got any better, in months and months – or had it been a year? In spite of doctors, in spite of the frightening expenses, she had not got any better" (63). Bishop's markers of the mother's life signal both her fragility and dependence, especially her financial dependence. Szasz is particularly suspicious of the relationship between monetary dependence and diagnoses of insanity. He argues that the financial burden of socially deviant relatives can lead families to render "insane" members as wards of the state, as was likely the case of the mother in Boston (*Cruel Compassion*). Since women were more apt to be jobless and therefore financially burdensome, it stands to reason that female states of dependency and consequently incorrect diagnoses of insanity occur at a much higher rate (see Dohrenwend 1976).

The unnamed mother's insanity reflects the historical reality of many women trapped in the vicious circle of dependency that precluded women's ability to function in their own story, to function outside of the family. Szasz writes of the unique situation of adults diagnosed with mental disorders, specifically schizophrenia, pointing out that adults who fail to contribute as "productive" members of a group run the acute risk of being diagnosed as ill. Writing of children as dependents, he states, "they are tolerated, supported, and usually loved by their parents...such tolerance has limits and imposes deadline...the young person must learn to become useful to others and stand on his own feet. If he fails... he and his family...face serious difficulties, nowadays often conceptualized in psychiatric terms, typically...schizophrenia" (*Cruel Compassion* 144). In the case of the mother, she had already met her family's expectations to leave the family and become productive. It is the specific nature of her regression, "growing up" then returning to the family in an infantilized state that is rejected. The aunt and grandmother of the story, going through the mother's things, remark directly on her inability to produce. "'She did beautiful work,' says my grandmother. But look – it isn't finished'" (Bishop 66). There are other comments about the mother, her inability to keep up with friends, to maintain the china, that pervade the story. Above all else, the comments focus on her lack of productivity, and the story maintains its focus on what she is able to produce: a scream. Useful to no one except the mother, the sound does not contribute to the family in a meaningful way, rendering her wholly dependent on the family because they do not recognize her utility. This

7 Gilbert and Gubar extensively discuss female authors who felt that they had no story – consequently writing characters who reflect stories that only exist because of men. "Maria Edgeworth's persistent belief that she had no story of her own reflects Catherine Morland's initiation into her fallen female state as a person without a history, *without a name of her own*, without a story of significance which she could herself author" [emphasis mine] (146).

circumstance, unfortunately, was the case for many women of the early twentieth century and prior who lacked the economic independence to live as they saw fit. Conforming to the expectations of family in exchange for the monetary and social protection the family offered was more often than not the only viable choice.⁸

V. Conclusion

I am repeatedly struck by the gradations of associations between seemingly disparate images within "In the Village". The mother is both successfully controlled by the paternalistic overtures of sanity and language; she is required to submit to "treatment" and to the drowning out of her scream. Nameless, her story that is not a story is denied to her, yet in her resistances to logocentrism and cultural normativity, she successfully acts as an undercurrent of opposition. Simple readings of her sanity can and should be reread in a manner that re-center, re-sound, her agency away from her nuclear (and therefore patriarchal) family and back to her own identity. This not only repositions readings of this story, but on a larger scale, re-centers the insane and the noisily transgressive in such a way that undermines the legitimacy of denying agency to *any* person on, as Thomas Szasz pointed out, fundamentally socially-contingent norms. The child and future generations for that matter hold as much of a stake in the Western hegemony of binary, polemical hierarchies. Bishop's writing of this character specifically shows the inconsistencies and incompatibilities of pure dualities.

Literature of the mad both inculcates as propaganda while it draws essential attention to the dilemma of denying agency to any one human being on grounds that are ineludibly value-oriented. That is to say, our fictional judgments of the insane cross over into our real lives because of the values – ethical judgments – we are utilizing to make that diagnosis. These assumptions project a cultural, linguistic, and mental otherness onto people who, barring criminal activity, commit no other transgression besides behavioral deviancy. The essential attention, then, comes from a radical re-reading of the "insane." "In the Village," conceptualized as historically and linguistically situated in a Western tradition that predicates delineations of Self/Other, language/sound, sane/insane on a dividing, dualistic line, obliges an examination into the narratives of disempowerment. The mother's scream communicates powerfully her invisible, story-less life in the context of a culture that would value her conformity. Cultural and political readings of this sort hypothesize a difference based on plurality that avoids imposing judgment, a difference in which the "insane," linguistically deviant and otherwise, generate their own identities within their own contexts.

8 See Volume I, Part Two, Chapter 5 of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* for a brief historical outline of the economic hardships of women. One of her main arguments for the subjection of women, and I would argue is also a factor in the mental/institutional incarceration of women, lies in the denial of economic resources to women.

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