

"A Slur on the Divine of Our Nature:" Alcohol in the Lives and Literature of Marguerite Duras and Elizabeth Bishop

Julia Keeping

(Advisor: Dr Shoshannah Ganz)

Willing to sacrifice himself to an intoxicated oblivion in order to better serve his art, the brooding literary artist has been an all-too familiar archetype of popular culture. The idealized aesthetic of the "literary drunkard" has been fueled by the canonization and celebrity of figures such as Hemingway, Baudelaire, Fitzgerald, and Lowell. Most of the twentieth-century's great writers, of course, were not alcoholics; nevertheless, drinking and writing still occupy a close proximity in public consciousness. As Brett Millier notes, the relationship between alcohol and literature has received a good deal of attention in the last thirty years. Critical works such as Tom Dardis' *The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American Writer* (1989), Daniel W. Goodwin's *Alcohol and the Writer* (1988), and Thomas B. Gilmore's *Equivocal Spirits* (1987) have all sought to reveal a link between drinking and creativity. Moreover, continuing with an extensive list of studies, Millier draws attention to the fact—as I have also found in doing research for this paper—that many of these studies focus on the well-known struggles of male, canonical writers such as Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill and, more recently, John Cheever (2). What is notably lacking are studies similar to Millier's that explore the role of alcohol in the lives of women writers. The significant absence of inquiry cannot simply be attributed to a lack of occurrence. For writers such as Marguerite Duras, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Carson McCullers, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Dorothy Parker writing and drinking were integral components of their careers. Of particular interest to this study are Marguerite Duras and Elizabeth Bishop, who would drink incessantly to cope with the daunting task of writing and with the vicissitudes of their lives in general. Unlike the celebratory reception of Hemingway or Lowell, and regardless of the variation in their styles, subject matter, or personas, all three women would be subjects of shame and pity throughout their careers on account of their alcoholism. Moreover, because their critical reception differed dramatically, they would never quite reach the same stature in the public's eyes as their male counterparts. The effects of altered states of consciousness and creativity have consistently been a topic of literary

fascination from Bacchus to Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* to the Beat generation. Nonetheless, the allure of the intoxicated artist appears to be reserved for white male writers.

Marguerite Duras (1914-1966) experienced the prejudice of being both a woman and an alcoholic, prompting her to acknowledge "When a woman drinks it's as if an animal were drinking or a child. Alcoholism is scandalous in a woman....It's a slur on the divine of our nature" (17). Born in 1914 in Gia-Dinh during France's occupation of Vietnam, Duras would cycle through phases of increscent drinking and enforced sobriety until her death in 1996 of cirrhosis of the liver, a condition often sustained by excessive alcohol consumption. Duras' career was incredibly prolific, producing over fifty works from journal articles, essays, and novels, to plays and films. Nonetheless, her success was continuously marred by "the Academy's ubiquitous sexism" (Winston 469). Duras was a subject of much controversy during her heyday because of her polyamorous meanderings, alcoholism and activism. Leslie Hill suggests that some of the more polemical criticism of her work by French contemporaries was in part due to her unconventional private life (10). Acutely aware of the controversy she was causing, Duras discussed her alcoholism in notable interviews with Jerome Beaujour and Xaviere Gauthier, as well as in her meditation on the creative process titled *Writing*. Moreover, what Fernanda Eberstadt describes as the pervading atmosphere in Duras' work being one of "alcoholic lassitude, sloth, hypnotic passivity, boredom, and self pity—or, conversely, the *dolce far niente* that comes from feeling one has nothing left to lose" (79) speaks to Duras' familiarity with alcohol and the impact it had on the subject matter of her writing. Writing was an act of deliverance for Duras; she believed that writing could function as a saving grace if one were to find themselves "at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude" (Duras, "Writing" 8). Moreover, Duras insists "[i]f I hadn't began to write, I would have become an incurable alcoholic" (11).

Reticence is a defining characteristic of Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979). Bishop was careful to keep her personal life and career separate in the

public's eyes, and, unlike Duras, she has been shown more leniency in the way of critical battering. Regardless of Prohibition, in the early 1930s, Bishop and her literary friends at Vassar, would sit and discuss books and politics while drinking bad wine out of teacups (Millier, *Flawed Light* 129). Unfortunately, her time at Vassar would mark the beginning of her struggle with alcoholism and the great lengths she would go to hide it. Moreover, in a draft of her posthumously published poem "A Drunkard," Bishop aligns her "abnormal thirst" with a devastating fire she witnessed at the age of three, drawing attention to the relationship between childhood trauma and substance abuse:

But since that day, that reprimand . . .
I have...suffered from abnormal thirst —
I swear it's true, and by the age
of twenty or twenty- one I had begun
to drink, & drink – I can't get enough
and as you must have noticed,
I'm half-drunk now... (lines 39-45)

Bishop moved to Brazil from 1951 to 1967 partly to escape the guilt and shame she felt about her drinking, and the subsequent freedom from the self-hatred she associated with her alcoholism made it easier for her to drink moderately, and, with the help of her partner Lota de Macedo Soares and the prescription drug Antabuse, to not drink at all (Millier, *Flawed Light* 135). Her poem "The Prodigal," published shortly before her trip to Brazil, features a farm hand who has been hiding "pints behind a two by four" in a rotten pig sty wondering whether he will be able to endure "his exile yet another year or more" (Bishop, *Complete* 71). This poem parallels the disgrace and exclusion Bishop had been feeling on account of her drinking. However, only twenty-five years prior and published during the height of Prohibition, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* received rave reviews despite their romantic portrayals of heavy drinking. It was likely the romanticization of heavy drinkers found in the *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby* that, in turn, caused Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's heavy drinking to be romanticized. At the same time that the machismo Hemingway and Fitzgerald were celebrated for their rowdy and drunken lifestyles and novels, female writers such as Bishop felt they could not write openly about drinking without shame and fear.

Simply put, Bishop was a woman in a cultural climate that expected women to adhere to a fixed

set of roles. Against this repressive cultural climate, Duras and Bishop, in their respective works and lifestyles, challenged the prevailing schema of women perpetuated by patriarchal discourse. In "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" anthropologist Susan Ortner suggests that due to common feminine symbols of hostility (witches, the evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and transcendence (mother, goddess, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice) "found in every patriarchal society, women have been postulated as appearing both under and over, but ultimately outside of the sphere of cultural hegemony" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 814). In other words, the cohesive relationship between culture and society has formed a labyrinth in which women are permitted to navigate inasmuch as their disposition conforms to the patriarchal structure. Women who do not conform risk becoming entirely abject. For centuries, women writers have been excluded from the literary canon, exemplified in Harold Bloom's 1994 publication of *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*; out of twenty six writers listed by Bloom, three are women. Whereas the literary sphere has been dominated by men, for a woman to write anything at all becomes an act of resistance from the status quo. Moreover, in his application of Freudian structures to literary genealogies, Bloom considers the dynamics of literary history to be symptomatic of an "anxiety of influence:" a fear that the artist is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him assume essential priority over his own writing (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 46). Bloom proposes "that to better reflect his experiences and curate his own recognition in the literary canon, the male writer must somehow invalidate his 'poetic precursor' or 'poetic father' in order to redirect the literary legacies that eclipse him." In response to Bloom's lament for the struggles of the male artist, Gilbert and Gubar argue,

Unlike her male counterparts, then, the female artist must first struggle against the effects of socialization which makes conflict with the will of her male precursors, inexpressibly absurd....Her battle, however, is not against her male precursors reading of the world, but against the reading of her...Her revisionary struggle, therefore often becomes, what Adrienne Rich has called "Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old

text from a new critical direction...an act of survival." (49)

As Gilbert and Gubar explain, the difficulty of overcoming Bloom's "anxiety of influence" is twofold for the woman artist. Before it can be written, it must be thought. Writing is ultimately prefigured and sustained by spending time in one's own head. For this reason, it is a practice that requires an incredible mental fortitude on part of the writer. Ernest Lehman once declared, "Persons who live inside their heads as constantly as writers do are bound to awaken many sleeping dogs that lie there...Writers find it necessary to quiet that barking with alcohol" (qtd. in Millier, *Flawed Light* 8). In order for the woman artist to create, she must unpack and dissociate from the aesthetic ideals, those 'sleeping dogs' that are the obstructive feminine symbols of her culture.

For both Duras and Bishop, alcohol, helped foster their identities as authors by reinforcing their position as social outliers. The abject, defined by Julia Kristeva, is what disturbs identity, system, and order: "What does not respect borders, positions, and rules....The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (232). In other words, when we are propelled into the world of the abject the imaginary borders that serve to integrate us as subjects disintegrate. As Kristeva also explains, the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; it uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them (15). Therefore, Kristeva's theory of abjection can be applied to understanding Duras' and Bishop's alcohol consumption. Through the debilitating act of drinking, Duras and Bishop decentered their bodies in order to transgress conventions.

In *The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body*, Angela King draws attention to the ways in which "models of biological essentialist and determinist paradigms have defined women according to their reproductive physiology as receptacles for the desires of men and incubators for offspring" (31). For that reason, it is easy to see how alcoholism in a woman is particularly scandalous in a patriarchal society heavily invested in ensuring women's bodies are maintained and disciplined in order to reproduce a constant assembly line of able bodies. Moreover, Duras and Bishop were writing at time when the alarmist discourse of the Cold War had "positioned the middle class home as the key to the superiority of the nation" (Pollard 2), subjecting them to a bombardment of impositions upon their individual corporeal autonomy. The

discourse of the 1950s and 1960s legitimized women's subjugation by prescribing what activities women should engage in, what clothes they should wear in order to preserve appropriate "womanliness," and most importantly, their moral obligation to preserve themselves for child birth (King 31). Therefore, it is easy to see the attractiveness alcohol posed for Duras and Sexton because of its capacity to numb the parts of the mind that maintain social order, the seats of self-control and self-judgment. A woman's body under the influence of alcohol is a body severed from moral obligations a subversive body that refutes discipline. As alcoholic women, Duras and Bishop occupied an abject position because it challenged the pervading culture. Although harrowing at times, the abjection experienced by Duras and Bishop, informed and supplemented their writing. At the most basic level, it positioned them as observers of patriarchal culture, posited on the fringes with a strategic viewpoint for looking in.

In *Writing*, Duras explains why she feels that the person who writes books must always be enveloped by a separation from others:

The solitude of writing is a solitude without which writing could not be produced, or would crumble, drained bloodless by the search for something else to write. One must ask oneself what the silence surrounding one is—with practically every step one takes...real, corporeal silence becomes the inviolable silence of writing. (3)

Duras spent entire summers at her home in Neuphale alone except for drink. After writing *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* and *The Vice-Counsel*, in the solitude of her alcoholism and her summer home in Nephale, she was hooked (Duras 2). In *Practicalities*, Duras writes,

the alcoholic's body is like a telephone exchange, like a set of different compartments liked together. It's the brain first that affected first....First comes happiness through the mind. Then through the body, it's lapped around, saturated, then borne along....And after a time you have the choice—whether to keep drinking until you're senseless and lose your identity, or go no further than the beginnings of happiness....To die, so to speak, every day, or to go on living. (19)

In an interview with Jerome Beaujour, Duras remarked that she could not drink without thinking that she was killing herself—acutely aware of its adverse effects on the body: "living with alcohol is living with death at hand" (Duras, "Practicalities" 15). At night, Duras would hide her face when she went to bed because she was afraid of herself. Indeed, she was "drinking liquor in order to forget herself" so that she could sleep (Duras, "Practicalities" 12). Moreover, Duras insisted that she never drank alcohol in order to get drunk, but instead, for its capacity for abjection, to "withdraw her from the world—to make her inaccessible, but never drunk" ("Practicalities" 17).

Duras' desire to find means of untangling the relationship between her body and patriarchal discipline may be due to the fact that at a very young age, she learned of the ways in which women are dispossessed of their bodies. A work of autofiction, Duras' *The Lover* recounts her experience as an adolescent coming of age under France's colonial rule of Indochina during the early 1930s. Duras wrote *The Lover* while seeking disintoxication treatment for alcoholism and by the mid-1980s was a familiar, even overly familiar media presence (White). By the time *The Lover* was published, Leslie Hill suggests that the author herself had been for some time slowly transforming into a visual icon and was becoming increasingly inseparable from her own media representation (13). In her biography of Duras, Laura Alder ironically recounts the moment she asked Duras if she could write a book about her to which Duras, accordingly, "shrugged her shoulders and referred her back to her own books because, she hated people delving into her life, loathed that someone should write other than herself about her. It was not by accident that she had so skillfully hidden certain events...had so painstakingly created her own character" (6).

Jeffrey Stanley's and Laurie Edson's "Objectifying the Subjective; The Autobiographical Act of Duras' *The Lover*" suggests that *The Lover* should be read as a response to the fictions surrounding Duras, "who has always made a performance of a sort of refracted self" through her oeuvre and ambivalent public persona (292). Stanley's and Edson's observation is further illustrated by the opening scene of *The Lover*, where Duras provides a description of herself, not through her own narrative lens, but rather one that has been imposed upon her:

One day I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said "I've known you for years, everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged." (1)

Duras had to learn to dissociate from the abused body of her adolescent self and the consequential suffering of a life lived as an alcoholic left her with a "ravaged" exterior, she was still, although less conventionally, postulated as an aesthetic object. In the following paragraph, Duras subverts the man's commentary on her appearance, by informing the reader of the photo of her younger self at fifteen on a ferry crossing the Mekong river in a red silk dress, with a man's fedora and gold shoes...and a "face not yet ravished by alcohol" as "the only image of myself I like, the only one in which I recognize myself, in which I delight" (4). However, it was her childish appearance that made her appealing to predatory desire, therefore, Duras is not mourning the loss of adolescent beauty, but instead an innocence she once possessed prior to the affair with the lover that began on that very same trip. Duras establishes that the autobiographical act of writing *The Lover* will be an act of reclamation through the writing of her self as an autonomous subject, not as the product of the male gaze. Duras objectifies herself, as others have objectified in an attempt to delineate how she wishes to be perceived. As the affair unfolds between the adolescent Duras and the Chinese lover twelve years her senior, Duras reiterates the connection between corporeal autonomy as precursory to writing.

Duras' life in Vinh Long was marked by hardships. After her father passed away, her mother struggled to provide for her three children and was cheated into buying unworkable land by colonial officials, an act that spiraled the family into poverty. In *The Lover*, Duras presents her mother as mentally ill and her family as social pariahs who are not liked by others in the colony. Duras' mother is also ashamed of her daughter for being with the lover, at one point beating her for smelling "of Chinese" because it was looked down upon to have any relationship, especially sexually, with a non-white. France's occupation of Vietnam was dependent on the complicity of French women, who were seen as guardians of the race because of their reproductive capacity. Therefore, Duras' desire for her lover not only denies the

authority of her mother, but also transgresses the sexual moralities of her colonial counterparts. Duras' adolescent body was also seen as a commodity amongst the men in the colonies.

I'm used to people looking at me. People do look at white woman in the colonies twelve-year old white girls too. For the past three years, white men too, have been looking at me throughout the streets and my mother's male friends have been kindly asking me to have tea with them while their wives are out playing tennis at the sporting club. (19)

Duras once again, draws attention, to the male gaze and its often-unwarranted intrusion into her life. The sexual violence committed by the Chinese Lover is not an isolated event, Duras had been circumventing the advances of the white men of the colonies since the age of nine. Moreover, because Duras has set out to reclaim her subjectivity, she adopts the conventionally male role of the desiring object that has dominated cultural production for so long and as Karren Ruddy notes, continuously feminizes the lover as other men have feminized her: "The skin is sumptuously soft...the body is thin, lacking in strength, in muscle, he may have been ill, may be convalescent, he's hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex, he's weak, probably a helpless victim to insult, vulnerable" (38). Duras deliberately aligns herself with the masculine from the initial description of the young girl in the man's fedora and this stance is reiterated by the feminization of her lover. She therefore appropriates the male gaze in order to subvert its power to objectify her. It is Duras' helplessness as a young white girl barely thirteen stranded in a colony within a country not of her own that attracts the lover. An easy target for pedophilic desire, Duras' lack of agency, as well as her mother's suffering, implies the overall powerlessness of women in the colony. Moreover, the adolescent Duras possessed the foresight to understand that if she were to accept the advances of the white men of the colony, she would be fated to a life like the "very white" women in "upcountry," who do nothing but "just save themselves up, save themselves for Europe, for lovers, for holidays....They wait...they look at themselves in the shade of their villas...look at themselves for later" (19). After demonstrating her disdain for domesticity, Duras reminds the reader of the image of her younger self, but this time reveals her desire to become a writer: "And

then the clothes, the clothes that might make people laugh, but I don't. I can see it's all there. All there, but nothing yet done. I can see it in the eyes, all there already in the eyes. I want to write" (21). However, the mother once again attempts to inhibit Duras' desire: "I've already told my mother. That's what I want to do—I want to write....She's against it, it's not worthy, it's not real work, it's nonsense. Later she said, a childish idea" (21). Therefore, the significance of the image set to the backdrop of the Mekong river is more so influenced by the event that shortly follows, on that very same trip, when Duras will meet the lover, whose encounter will spark the processes of her autonomy from her family, from the colonial environment she lives in and outside of.

For Duras, corporeal autonomy and writing are fused. Stanley and Edson suggest that because sexual autonomy appears to configure Duras' access to writing, she had to claim her own subjectivity sexually before she could escape Vietnam and become a writer (294). However, because it was through the abuse Duras withstood from her mother and the lover that she learned her agency, her understanding of autonomy was ultimately born through the abjection of her body. In "Practicalities," Duras writes, "Alcohol is linked to sexual violence—it makes it glow. It's inseparable from it....Alcohol is a substitute for pleasure though it doesn't replace it" (16). It was through her alcohol consumption later in her life that Duras reworked the relationship between abjection and autonomy she learned as a young girl into a continued means of furthering her own subjectivity. Duras' appropriation and subversion of the male gaze in *The Lover* reiterates the autonomy that the pen represents for Gilbert and Gubar by highlighting the inherently voyeuristic and phallogocentric language imposed upon women by cultural production. Whereas pleasure and intoxication are considered transgressive acts for women, *The Lover*, written in the throes of alcoholism, is an attempt by Duras as she finds herself iconized as a result of fame, to define the terms of her consumption by objectifying herself through her writing.

In a letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop admires Lowell's poem titled "The Drinker" as ending "with a sense of release that only the poem, or another fifth of bourbon could produce" (Bishop and Lowell 333). Much like Duras, Bishop's early years were fraught with trauma that unfurled throughout her life and writing in different ways. Bishop's father died when she was seven months old and her mother was permanently committed to a mental institution when she was five, making the

traditional sense of home for Bishop a place marred by pain and loss. For this reason, as Brett Millier observes in relation to the despondent mother found in Bishop's "A Drunkard," the central ache at the heart of the poem is the distance between the child in her crib and the mother on the lawn (*Flawed Light* 130). "A Drunkard" recounts the night at the age of three when Bishop witnessed the infamous Salem fire of 1914. Bishop describes the fire as seemingly materializing both inside and outside of the home, casting both mother and daughter in a violent red ("on the lawn, my mother's white dress looked rose red" ("A Drunkard" lines 5-6) while simultaneously enveloping Bishop's white enameled crib with "red" making the "brass knobs" appear to be "holding specks of fire" (8). As the homes around her crumble, and as her mother's mental health deteriorated, no matter how hard she might have wanted it to stop, like the people who "were plaiting hoses on the roofs / of the summer cottages on Marblehead Neck" (11-12), she was a helpless observer. In the following lines, the speaker's attempt to attract her mother's attention is a futile one,

I was terribly thirsty but mama didn't hear
me calling her. Out on the lawn
she and some neighbors were giving coffee
or food or something to the people
landing in the boats—
once in a while I caught a glimpse of her
and called and called—no one paid any
attention—(22-27)

The speaker who "once in a while [catching] a glimpse of her" (27) calling and calling to no avail parallels the inaccessibility of Bishop's mother while she was suffering from mental illness. Susan McCabe suggests that here, when the mother ignores her requests and demands, is the moment where Bishop's object of lack becomes identifiable (216). Moreover, Bishop emphasizes the desolation left in the wake of her mother's departure, metaphorically represented by the fire, creating "Blackened boards, shiny black like black feathers" ("A Drunkard" 34) from the myriad of domestic signifiers, pieces of furniture and clothes. For both Duras and Bishop the domestic is a place of violence and loss, the memory of which influenced their writing; nevertheless, as is evident by their respective lifestyles, not a space where they felt they could develop as writers. Despite being still alive, Bishop's mother was already lost to her and like the mother who finally acknowledges the speaker, but only to reprimand

her for picking up a "woman's long black stocking," (36) stating sharply "Put that down!" (38) further illustrates the impenetrable distance that had already formed between them.

It is in the final stanza that Bishop attributes her "abnormal thirst" she now suffers from as an adult stemming from "that night, that, that reprimand" (39):

—and by the age
of twenty or twenty-one I had begun
to drink, & drink—I can't get enough
and, as you must have noticed,
I'm half-drunk now... (41-45)

Freudian analysts of alcohol addiction have argued that, in response to the trauma of loss, alcoholics adopt the melancholic-depressive solution by displacing their desire to regain the lacking object on to alcohol (Sweet 95). Therefore, because Bishop's tie with her mother was severed at a very young age, she was left with nothing but the vestiges of her existence, like the woman's black stocking. "A Drunkard" suggests Bishop's drinking was an attempt to extinguish the aching loss that remained following her mother's departure.

Much like the character of the speaker in Bishop's poem "The Prodigal," who has been exiled, Bishop was exiled following her mother's institutionalization, sent to live with relatives here and there. As Kathleen Spivack, who spent a fair amount of time with Bishop near the end of her life, notes Bishop was "condemned to wander, looking for maternal union forever" (102). In "The Prodigal," the farm hand, even in the solitary confines of the barn described as "rotten" (Bishop, "The Prodigal" line 3) and the walls "plastered halfway up with glass smooth dung," (4), reveals a pervading self-consciousness. As the speaker works "above moving snouts," the pig's eyes "Light-lashed, self-righteous" follow his every move (3-5). As her popularity grew, Bishop's alcoholism became much more difficult to hide and the inescapable "self-righteous eyes" of the public imaginably only served to augment her feelings of unease.

As Kristeva observes, in the melancholic-depressive scenario, the energy once spent in search of finding that missing "Thing" becomes reabsorbed into the melancholic's own self, which now identifies with the lost "Thing" (*Black Sun* 14). Like the sow who "always eat[s] her young" (Bishop, "The Prodigal" 6), Bishop's sense of self was engulfed by the loss of her mother and the desire to regain that loss was

displaced onto alcohol. Therefore the poem suggests that Bishop's search for the sense of cohesiveness she had prior to her mother's departure may have been the trigger that sent her spiraling into alcoholism. Accordingly, in following six lines of the stanza, Bishop once again draws attention to her association between fire and alcohol and the impact it had on her life,

But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
 (he hid the pints behind the two-by-fours),
 the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with
 red
 the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
 And then he thought he almost might endure
 his exile yet another year or more. (9-14)

Much like the vermilion ambience of Bishop's "The Prodigal," it takes a night of drinking for the speaker to be confronted rather than tormented by the red glazed barnyard and the red reflection in the "burning puddles." According to Kristeva, "The abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject...when the subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being" (232). For this reason, Kristeva explains:

A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger of the loss the pseudo object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved. ("Powers of Horror" 235)

Although Bishop mourns the loss of her mother, her alcoholism and the subsequent abjection it caused ultimately informed and fostered her ability to frame her own subjectivity through writing, which made her exile, like the speaker's, almost endurable.

In the final stanza, as night falls, the formerly deplorable barn suddenly transforms into a domestic refuge "safe and companionable" akin to Noah's Ark, where the pigs "now stuck out there little feet and snore." Where a "lantern—like the sun, going away—/laid on the mud a pacing aureole." (Bishop, "The Prodigal" 20-21). As the speaker's day comes to an end, displaying symptoms characteristic of inebriation, feeling the bats' "uncertain staggering" and "his shuddering insights" (25-27), beyond his control, touching

him like the painful self-revelations that Bishop's friends reported would often occur in her alcohol-induced "blackouts" (Millier 130). The speaker demonstrates an unwillingness to leave the domestic comforts of the barn, taking a long time to "finally make up his mind to go home" (Bishop, "The Prodigal" 28). Unlike the speaker, Bishop never had the opportunity to return home. As the poems suggest, drinking stood in for loss experienced by Bishop on account of her mother's absence. However, the abjection that resulted from Bishop's alcoholism, although enabling her subjectivity as a writer, seemingly only further inhibited her ability to find a place she felt at home.

In an interview with George Starbuck during the spring of 1977, Elizabeth Bishop was quoted as saying "Sometimes I think if I had been born a man I probably would have written more. Dared more" (Starbuck 184). When asked one year later by Eileen McMahon to elaborate on this statement, Bishop replied "Women's experiences are much more limited, but that does not really matter...You just have to make do with what you have after all" (108). Bishop certainly did make the best with what she had and has in recent years been considered one of America's most important poets. However, in the same interview with McMahon, although Bishop mentions that she considers herself to have been generally well received since the beginning of her career, she acknowledges that other women writers have not had the same privilege (108).

Many of Bishop's poems are picturesque in description and as Linda Anderson observes, some of Bishop's most famous poems have at their center a complex of emotions involving pleasure, fear or the strangeness of looking and being looked at (165). In "To Be Written on a Mirror in Whitewash," if we are to imagine the speaker as a woman, perhaps even Bishop, the concern of self as subject and object parallels Duras' premise for writing herself as both object and subject in *The Lover*. Bishop writes,

I live only here, between your eyes and
 you,
 But I live in your world. What do I do?
 —Collect no interests—otherwise what I
 can;
 Above all I am not the staring man.

(Bishop, "To Be Written" 1-4)

A subject of constant fixation and subsequent reflection—much like the speaker's identification with the mirror—women have continuously been used as a surface for men's projections, especially

in literature. As Bonnie Costello observes, because the speaker's identification of "here" is "in someone else's world, with no spatial register anchoring corporeality. . . . The I seems to only exist in the effect of the writing itself" (30). Moreover, the term "whitewash" is used as a metaphor for the "glossing over," or covering up of vices and scandals, or to exonerate on account of biased presentation of data. For this reason, Jacqueline Brogan suggests Bishop's use of "white or silent text as an ironic, if not perverse commentary on the way in which women efface themselves by being forced to adopt the dominant phallic perspective, learning to see themselves precisely as objects of reflection" (41). The speaker's desire for autonomy is expressed through the question of "what can I do?" However, in the following line the speaker links the accessibility to their "interests" as contingent on "Above all" not being the "staring man." In "To Be Written on the Mirror In Whitewash" Bishop establishes, as does Duras in *The Lover*, the necessity of breaking away from the oppressive gaze of a culture that continuously aims to marginalize women's voices. As their work suggests more generally, through the destructive act of drinking, Marguerite Duras and Elizabeth Bishop sacrificed their bodies to the abject because they felt that it was the only way to truly dissociate from the prescriptions of patriarchal discourse that inhibited their authorship.

Works Cited

- Alder, Laura. *Marguerite Duras: A Life*. Victor Gollancz, 1988.
- Bishop, Elizabeth, and Robert Lowell. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*. Edited by Thomas J. Travisano and Saskia Hamilton, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- . "A Drunkard." *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 1992, pp. 607-611.
- . *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1974.
- . "The Prodigal." *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974, p. 71.
- Costello, Bonnie. *Questions of Mastery: Elizabeth Bishop*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Duras, Marguerite. *Writing*. University of Minnesota, 2011.
- . *The Lover*. HarperPerennial, 1992.
- . *Practicalities*. Collins, 1990.
- Eberstadt, Fernanda. "The Obsessions of Marguerite Duras." *The New Criterion*, vol.31, no.8, 2017, pp. 78.
- Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2000.
- Hill, Leslie. *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*. Routledge, 1993.
- King, Angela. "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2004, pp. 29-39.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Columbia University Press, 1992.
- . "Powers of Horror." *The Portable Kristeva*. Edited by Kelly Oliver, Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Millier, Brett C. *Flawed Light: American Women Poets and Alcohol*. University of Illinois, 2009.
- . "The Prodigal: Elizabeth Bishop and Alcohol." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1998, pp. 54-76.
- McMahon, Eileen. "Elizabeth Bishop Speaks About Her Poetry." *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. Edited by George Monterio, University Press of Mississippi, 1996, pp. 107-110.
- Spivack, Kathleen. *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*. Northeastern University Press, 2012.
- Starbuck, George. "'The Work!' A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop." *Ploughshares*, no. 11, 1977, np. Rpt. in *Ploughshares*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 161-84.

Staley, Jeffrey S. and Laurie Edson. "Objectifying the Subjective: The Autobiographical Act of Duras' *The Lover*." *Critique*, vol. 42, no. 3, Spring 2001, pp. 287-298.

Sweet, Alistair. "Black Holes: Some Notes on Time, Symbolization, and Perversion in the Psychodynamics of Addiction." *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 2012, pp. 94-105.

White, Edmund. "In Love With Duras" *The New York Review of Books*, 26 June, 2008.

Winston, Jane. "Forever Feminine: Marguerite Duras and Her French Critics." *New Literary History*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1993, pp. 467-482.