

Jeredith Merrin: On "Crusoe in England"

Lacking the belief that there is a divine dispensation with which her own disposition might finally harmonize, she exposes irresolvable psychological conflicts, dubieties, gaps or ironies. In her longest and most ambitious poem, "Crusoe in England," for example, she evokes the uneasy relationship between self and other, delineating this familiar conflict in complicated terms. In one way, the objective world is Crusoe's island on which he is a sort of Adam, ascribing meanings and names. In another way, the volcanic island itself (meager and sustaining, boring and interesting, resented and cherished) becomes the inner, subjective world of the "single human soul," and England, to which Crusoe returns, becomes the other world, out there. Among other things, this poem is about social and antisocial impulses--those forces of affiliation and autonomy that clashed in "In the Waiting Room." On his island, "a sort of cloud-dump" where there is just "one kind of everything," Crusoe does not feel a Wordsworthian "bliss of solitude." On the one hand, he dreams "of food/and love," and when Friday finally arrives (still "one kind," one gender), he wishes for sexual union and procreation:

Friday was nice. Friday was nice, and we were friends. If only he had been a woman! I wanted to propagate my kind, and so did he, I think, poor boy.

On the other hand, Crusoe has dreams that suggest violent, antisocial impulses and anxiety about generation, endless reproduction:

... But then I'd dream of things like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it for a baby goat. I'd have nightmares of other islands stretching away from mine, infinities of islands, islands spawning islands, like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs of islands ...

(The passage, of course, evokes the anxieties and fatigues of artistic as well as biological generation.) Here and elsewhere in her poetry, Bishop reinforces complexity of view by using the psychoanalytically aware trick of sound association to effect a sort of dreamlike double take: "baby's throat . . . baby goat."

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