

**Diane Thiel**

**Lecture on Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" (for Longman Lecture Series)**

Part I

Read "One Art" in *Crossroads* or *Open Roads*

Part II

Elizabeth Bishop uses the form of a villanelle for this poem. The word villanelle comes from *villanella* — an old Italian folk song. There are six stanzas (5 stanzas of 3 lines and 1 of 4 lines) The first and last lines of the first stanza are repeated throughout the poem — in the intricate pattern of A<sup>1</sup>bA<sup>2</sup>/abA<sup>1</sup>/abA<sup>2</sup>/abA<sup>1</sup>/abA<sup>2</sup>/abA<sup>1</sup>A<sup>2</sup>. (The A<sup>1</sup> and A<sup>2</sup> refer to *repeated* lines and the a and b refer to *rhymes* with the repeated lines). The poem has a rhyme scheme of aba throughout, with a variation in the last stanza.

The pattern of repetition in the villanelle can create a cyclical, hypnotic effect, like a tide coming back in. The form also reinforces the ideas expressed in the poem.

Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," is a powerful example of the possibilities of the villanelle. In this poem, she is talking about loss, and the poem moves through the different kinds of loss one might experience. The subject is a good one for this form, in which the repetition has a deliberate function. Notice that she does not repeat the A<sup>2</sup> line exactly, but repeats its meaning. She also alters the A<sup>1</sup> line in the last stanza. The variation is enchanting.

The villanelle form is a good one as an exercise because it helps to hone the skill of using a repeated line, like the refrain of a song. In a case such as "One Art," it might allow one to explore the many layers which surround a single subject, such as loss.

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Your choice (or discovery) of subjects is one factor which will begin to define your voice as a writer. Often, our true subjects may very well be the wounds or difficulties we have undergone. In a way, your subject chooses you. You may not want a certain subject matter, but it is yours anyway, because it is something you may need to work through for a period of time, or even for the rest of your life.

Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, began dealing with the subject of lost things early in her life.

The use of the villanelle form for “One Art” is particularly intriguing, because the form of repetition lends itself well to subject matters that are in a way, one’s “obsessions.”

### III.

Elizabeth Bishop says she wrote this poem in two weeks. Yet even in her early journals, one can see the idea of her aptitude for losing things as a subject she wanted to write about. She had also wanted to write an elegy for Lota, with whom she had a long relationship during the time she lived in Brazil. This poem becomes, in a way, the elegy she never wrote for Lota, even as it is a kind of crisis lyric, written for the loss of a new love, Alice. The poem has an immediacy about it.

In some ways, the form of the villanelle allows the poem to feel like a rehearsal of things we tell ourselves in order to keep going, particularly in a moment of crisis. Note how ragged the poem becomes in the final stanza, with its parentheses. In the final lines, the words “I shan’t have lied” suggest that the speaker of the poem might well be lying now, as she works through this latest, huge loss. Perhaps the process of writing through the experience is a way to come to terms with (or “master”) such loss.

Bishop provides a wonderful example of the importance of revision in writing a poem. It is extraordinarily useful to examine a writer’s drafts of a particular piece, both to understand his or her progress and to help develop your own. Bishop left quite a paper trail and is known for spending decades to complete some of her poems. Her famous, “The Moose,” for instance, took about twenty years to complete. Her villanelle, “One Art,” Bishop has declared, was surprisingly easy, “like writing a letter”. And yet seventeen drafts exist of the poem. For Bishop, seventeen drafts was an *easy* process.

“One Art” is a great example of what can happen in the process of revision, and the discoveries which can be made in the process of the development of an idea. Brett C. Millier writes:

Elizabeth Bishop left seventeen drafts of her poem "One Art" among her papers. In the first draft, she lists all the things she's lost in her life — keys, pens, glasses, cities — and then she writes "one might think this would have prepared me / for losing one average-sized not exceptionally / beautiful or dazzlingly intelligent person... / But it doesn't seem to have at all..." By the seventeenth draft, nearly every word has been transformed, but most importantly, Bishop discovered along

the way that there might be a way to master this loss.

Take a look at the first draft of Bishop's poem. Compare this free-verse version to her final intricately crafted "One Art." Notice the compression which took place, as well as the change in thought process from the first to the final version.

### **Suggestions for Writing**

I.

Try a villanelle. You might choose a subject which has many angles to explore, so the repetition has a purpose and does not become tedious. Allow the form to work for you. Try to create movement within the poem by exploring different layers of meaning in the repeated line or by creating a narrative within.

II.

Notice how Bishop's "One Art" is developed via a "listing" effect. Make a list (of at least twenty lines) in your journals: ie: "things I should have said to him," or "bits of gossip." As you work with the list, see if a refrain begins to naturally emerge. As you discard or add, see how the drafts begin to change. Are there any discoveries you make in the process of re-working?

III.

Consider Bishop's dramatic revision from her first draft to her final one. Now choose a poem you have written in which the process of revision has been giving you difficulty. It may not have found its best form or incarnation. Put the poem aside, and begin again. Perhaps write the poem from a different viewpoint (ie: use the grandmother's voice instead of the father's. Or, decide to make it more of a narrative, instead of focusing on a lyrical moment. Or vice versa.)