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 **With Sabbath Eyes: The Particular and the Claims of
History in Elizabeth Bishop's "Poem"**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**With Sabbath Eyes:
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When the German philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote in one of his aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*: "The whole is the false" (50), he expressed his increasing disenchantment with the totalitarian claims of what he called the "moral terrorism" of politically motivated art ("Commitment" 98). "No gaze attains beauty," he adds in another aphorism, "that is not accompanied by indifference, indeed, almost by contempt, for all that lies outside the object contemplated" (*Minima Moralia* 76). The particular object is dialectically opposed to "all that lies outside." All that lies outside is the whole that is false. But the particular object, as I want to show in this essay, constitutes itself only in and through the lingering gaze of the observer who is thus implicated in a dialectic between the aesthetic and history.

Elizabeth Bishop's aesthetic exemplifies both Adorno's skepticism about totalitarian claims and his advocacy for the particular object. Like Adorno, Bishop admired the painter Paul Klee who, she points out in an interview, "didn't have a formulated myth to look to, apparently, and his accomplishment was very considerable. [. . .] I'm not interested in big-scale work as such. Something needn't be large to be good" (Schwartz and Estess 295). Even the furnishing of her house near Petrópolis in Brazil shows Bishop's preference for the particular over the large or general: "You will notice that the study turns its back on the view of the mountains—that's too distracting!" she explains. "But I have the intimate view to look at; the bamboo leaves are very close" (289). Bishop's "intimate view" is explicitly borne out in her poetry. In one of her poems, entitled "Poem," she contemplates a small painting "about the size of an old style dollar bill" (Bishop 176). The minute size of this painting **[End Page 49]** and the close, exclusive attention it demands suggest that Bishop's aesthetic is an aesthetic of the particular. The little painting in "Poem" appears thus as a corrective of a painting in an earlier poem, which bears the telling title "Large Bad Picture" (Bishop 11; see Schwartz and Estess 314).

The accidental but fortuitously complementary conjunctions of Adorno and Bishop, as I hope to suggest here, will reveal ontological and

ethical dimensions in a dialectic between what Adorno calls the particular and the universal. To exemplify this inquiry with a small painting in a brief lyrical poem is to find oneself at a specific location in this dialectical relationship. The particular, as Georg Lukács argues in his essay, "Specific Particularity," is the middle term in what he renames as the dialectic between the universal and the individual. Lukács here appears to echo the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who characterized the lyric as different from the epic in embodying a principle of "*Besonderung, Partikularität und Einzelheit*" (174) (uniqueness, particularity and singularity). According to Lukács, the focal point in the field of particularity determines the genre of a literary work: while drama is more universal (or symbolic), the epic or novel treats its subjects more individualistically. This latter characterization would appear yet more applicable to the lyric, which seems addressed in Lukács's observation "that the elevation of every individual detail to the level of particularity can only be accomplished by the intensification and concentration of its immediate sensible and perceptible character" (231). Such elevation of individual detail in the lyric eventually resulted in the elevation of poetry to ideology, or of the particular to privilege. In his essay "Poetry in a Discouraging Time"—whose title alludes to the rear guard action of unregenerate New Critics—Christopher Clausen characterizes poetry as "an essential form of knowledge because of its unique ability to embody the particular in subtle and powerful form; its comparative lack of generalization is in fact its main advantage." Poetic insights, he goes on to say, "are unique and cannot be the subject of theory without being generalized almost out of existence" (711). If Clausen's defensive title and his privileging of the particular over the general exemplify the conservative side...



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