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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English
Program in Comparative Literature

Dissertation Examination Committee:

Steven Meyer, Chair

Mary Jo Bang

Robert Henke

Ignacio Infante

Vivian Pollak

Vincent Sherry

The Foreign Ear: Elizabeth Bishop's Proliferal Wit & the Chances of Change
by

Kelly Barrett Brown

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
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requirements for the degree
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Abbreviations

- C *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. ed. George Monteiro. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1996.
- CP *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. Elizabeth Bishop. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.
- CPr *The Collected Prose*. Elizabeth Bishop. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.
- EAP *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*. Elizabeth Bishop, ed. Alice Quinn. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.
- FW *Finnegans Wake*. James Joyce. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- LM *Life and the Memory of It*. Brett Millier. Berkeley: University of California P, 1995.
- NA *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. Wallace Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.
- NY *Elizabeth Bishop and the New Yorker*, ed. Joelle Biele. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
- OA *One Art: Letters / Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.
- OP *Opus Posthumous*. Wallace Stevens. New York: Vintage Books.
- OED Oxford English Dictionary Online
- PP *Principles of Psychology*. William James, ed. Fredson Bowers. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.
- PPL *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose and Letters*. Elizabeth Bishop, eds. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz. New York: The Library of America, 2008.
- REB *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: an Oral Biography*, eds. Gary Fountain, Peter Brazeau. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994).
- V *The Varieties of Religious Experience, a Study in Human Nature*. William James. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1961.
- VSC Vassar Library Special Collections.

- SCP *The Collected Poems*. Wallace Stevens. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.
- WU Washington University Special Collections.
- WWJ *The Writings of William James*. William James, ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago
U of Chicago P, 1977.

...the bomb in it in a delicate way.
Robert Lowell on Bishop's "The Armadillo"

*Come closer. You
can see and hear
the writing paper
lines of light
and the voices of
my radio*

*singing flamencos
in between
the lottery numbers.*

-Elizabeth Bishop, "Jerónimo's House"

*I am thinking of joining the Anarchists, only I can't seem to locate headquarters where I can find
out exactly what their platform is. —Elizabeth Bishop to Frani Blough*

The Foreign Ear: Elizabeth Bishop's Proliferal Wit & the Chances of Change

Elizabeth Bishop has been widely celebrated for the utter absence of rhetoric stretched beyond the human scale, and the observations and descriptions of her remarkably vivid poems felt to be “devotional, anti-romantic ‘spiritual exercises’” that, “rather than elevating the ego” serve to discipline it, as Thomas Travisano considers, “devoting it to the stuff of external appearance, which permits self-forgetfulness and surprise.”¹ This is certainly right, and importantly draws out that quality, surprise, which she felt to be the one “indispensable” quality she sought in her poems, and enjoyed in those of others (C 104). Quirky and on the move, her images are one source of surprise, gaiety even, as Jeredith Merrin sees, how “everything is always turning into something else.”² My modest proposal is that her words are no less mobile, that they’re quietly geared to queer in transitional chances, and that in fact, in the (f)act of feeling them do so we more closely approach and participate in her experimental, experiential aesthetic.

It may be a tough sell as regards a poet we’ve come to believe “All Eye,” as David Kalstone crowned her, invoking that most noble, Platonically privileged of senses. At length, however, we’ll discover hers to be a project precisely split in competing registers, and expanding in the waking feel of that split, waves of peripheral, “proliferal” sensations and thetic extravagance.³ The affective taste, or physiological, “sensational *tang*,” as William James calls it in his chapter on sensations in his *Principles of Psychology*, are “*first things* in the way of consciousness,” differing from “‘*thoughts*’ (in the narrower sense of the word) *in the fact that nerve-currents coming in from the periphery are involved in their production,*” and “*only when*

¹ Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1988), 104-5.

² Merrin, “Elizabeth Bishop: Gaiety, Gayness, and Change,” in *Geography of Gender*, ed. Marilyn Lombardi (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993), 153.

³ Kalstone, “All Eye.” *Partisan Review* 38.2 (1970), 127.

new currents are entering” does it have “the sensational *tang*.”⁴ That *tang* is the difference for Bishop, as it is for James, between cold knowledge and the heat of having an experience, but also, for Bishop, between simply “seeing things”—which we’ll discover she felt a bit too closely allied with memory and identity—and meeting and making them. She dis-stills it quite in “The Weed” where a speaker morbidly ensconced with a timeless “final thought” finds

Suddenly there was a motion,
as startling, there, to every sense
as an explosion. (CP 20)

This first phenomenal hint of “a motion” jolts feeling into the scene, and, inescapably, through a reader’s hearing, which is to say tasting, “*emotion*,” draws on a visceral charge. It draws “sense” *ear*-rationally out from the experience of that audible wandering, a little shift going on, in the poem to vaguely awaken “the region of the heart” with a “gentle creeping” sign of time, and the matter of one’s accommodations to, and within, it.

This juicier “*having of experiences*,” a matter of passionate attention and utterly incommensurable with knowledge, Elisa New remarks as the Emersonian/Pragmatist challenge. “In the end, for James, as for Dewey and the more sapient Emerson,” she writes in *The Line’s Eye: Poetic Experience and American Sight*, “the great thing is this *having of experiences*, which—all concur—only comes to those who, like the artist, lend themselves as faithful and invested, rather than detached and disinvested, attendants on events.”⁵ Wonderfully, Bishop allows for a range of experiences, including the colloquial pleasures of her conversational, self-revising narratives, her always surprising, shifting images, and reflexive play with all aspects of

⁴ James’ exuberant emphases. (Continuing, I will note only *my own* additions of emphasis, if not self-evident in reiterating something already cited.) “Finding [this *tang*] stops discussion,” James adds. “Failure to find it kills the false conceit of knowledge. Only when you deduce a possible sensation for me from your theory, and give it to me when and where the theory requires, do I begin to be sure that your thought has anything to do with truth (PP 656, 652, 657).”

⁵ New, *The Line’s Eye: Poetic Experience and American Sight* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 13.

her words on the page and their etymological sub-surfaces, too, to name a few. A Bishop reader ranges naturally among such pleasures, but it is the sounding surfaces of her words, that not only have been the most neglected of the pleasures on hand, but what promise to expand the reader's horizon, or draw the horizon nearer in a certain sense. We will discover many, and "religiously" repeated ways that Bishop guides the reader from the line of sight to the rounding out of her sensorium, inviting richer, more surprising senses of a undergoing an experience, and asking those risky but rewarding investments observed by New.

"Each sexton has his sect," runs one of Wallace Stevens' versions of tolling this difference between knowing and experiencing in "The Old Lutheran Bells at Home," "The bells have none" (SCP 461), and that loosening of belief in ringing things, loosening images and words more strictly seen in these things' ringing, proposes one manner in which both poets adapted their Christian inheritance and provoked transitional challenges of passionate response. Bishop's early mentor, Marianne Moore, and certainly her closest reader then, heard these bells crisply ringing and noted their sensational effect, accenting Bishop's "musicianly" expertise in her handsome review of *North & South* (1946) in *The Nation*.⁶ She underlined her wide range of rhyme, non-rhyme, and slant-rhyme strategies, especially the "reiterated" or slightly altered word or phrase whose cumulative effect she found to keep the reaching after meaning as "a matter of cautious self-inquiry." Moore judged that such compositional strategies opened access to something "more difficult to capture than appearance," namely "sensation," which she found Bishop "objectified mysteriously well" (178). In her role as mentor she wrote to an editor at Harper and Brothers regarding the young poet, "She is interested in mathematics and in music and there are in her shaping of a poem curbs and spurts that could only be known to a musician" (LM 93).

⁶ Moore, "A Modest Expert: *North & South*," rpt. EHA 177-9.

Far from making more of these insights, critical interest in the poet as painter, photographer, geographer or naturalist, not to mention cloaked confessor, has tended to ignore them outright, edging aside the musician as quickly as Moore gave notice of her, to take up with the other, the “All Eye,” the one first set down by Randall Jarrell in his review of that astonishing first volume, finding there “all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*.”⁷ Jarrell was in part expressing a reservation, but this ocular quality of her poems has evolved into an unalloyed good, an expression of her empirical fastidiousness, subverting questions of language to the view. Sarah Riggs, for instance, recently argues that Bishop’s “elusive brilliance, while pretending to a modest, descriptive project, lies in her attempts to stretch poetry beyond its verbal limits,” finding her unique power in getting readers “to contemplate *what* we are seeing to the exclusion of the fact *that* we are seeing.”⁸ Many others casually deploying photographic analogies for these spotless “viewing optics,” as we’ll hear in Chapter Three, clearly agree.

But her challenge was transformation. Introduced by Robert Lowell for a reading at the Guggenheim in the spring of ’69 as “the famous eye,” she deflected Lowell’s comment (and the critical commonplace) upon taking the podium: ““the *Famous Eye*,”” she wryly remarked, “will now put on her glasses.”⁹ Apart from quietly gendering that eye, the quip catches at sight’s many mediations and translations: with imperfect eyes through lenses’ counter-distortion to words on a page, a seeing, moreover, subserving an oral/aural event, of reading print to be heard, a shared if asymmetrical affair of words fixed in print and as waving vibrations in air. Bishop dropped hints right and left that the experiential challenge of her proliferal aesthetic bends between them in a

⁷ Jarrell was in part expressing a reservation: “Her work is unusually personal and honest in its wit, perception, and sensitivity—and in its restrictions too; all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*” (“On *North & South*,” EHA 181).

⁸ Riggs, *Word Sightings: Poetry and Visual Media in Stevens, Bishop, and O’Hara* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 45.

⁹ The “famous eye” introduction reported in LM 415. Her response recalled by Lloyd Schwartz in conversation, April 2012.

kind of somatic re-writing accessed in riding these words in air. It revolves upon a proposition made most vividly by Gertrude Stein in her compact with the Jamesian “stream of thought,” that poetic genius is “most intensely alive,” as she famously claimed, “at the same time talking and listening”—and the corollary that the freer genius of reading, even and perhaps especially “silent” reading, thrives on this dual intensity too.¹⁰

Attending her poems with interest in this fuller sensorium returns her, I’m proposing, to the experimental, spiritual, and deeply witty basis of her proliferal project. The general critical consensus, however, points elsewhere. Zacariah Pickard expresses the common corollary to her supposed ocular emphasis, her orientation toward “things:” “When William Carlos Williams orders himself to ‘Say it, no ideas but in things,’” he writes in *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description*, “he is forcing himself [...] to give something up. For Bishop, there rarely seems to be any choice: there simply are no ideas but in things.”¹¹ But her challenge was definitively equivocal: “Pound out the ideas of sight” (VSC 72.A). It limns her wish both to keep ideas tied to sight—Williams’ “no ideas but in things”—weaving in and out of what one can see, *and*, quite contrarily (more with Herbert, Hopkins and Stevens than Williams, Eliot or Moore) lightly pounding them *out* in puns and phonic vibrancy, giving ideas over to a vaguer element of reading unpledged to the eye. She issued the challenge to herself just above her sketch of what we’re to “see” in the “The Monument,” placed at the center of *North & South*: stacked and turned, cracked and splintery boxes, “of wood.” Topping them off is “a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood,” “four-sided,” square, but in a momentary movement, rounding out as “foresighted” (did the poet plant it?) and to the point of this close but blindly roaming sounding power, “*force-sighted*” (CP 34). It’s homey, though, and dangles down “lines of vaguely whittled ornament”

¹⁰ Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 170.

¹¹ Pickard, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2009), 4.

that may vaguely, with a precise, sensational tang feel to be “*wit-tolled*” too (CP 23-5). “The Monument” is built upon a seething base of such re-markable moments, the challenging prerogative which she held firmly while still at Vassar; a stunning revision on Eliot, and an expressed wish to get “an intense feel of consciousness in the tongue,” that we take up in Chapter Two.

Reading her in with such split attentions returns her to her poetic goals in another way. So low-key is her wit that that we might be surprised to learn that being “funny” was one of her three chief goals as a writer. While still at Vassar, just months before graduating, Bishop sketched to Frani Blough this three-fold project: “to try to develop a manner of one’s own, to say the most difficult things, and to be funny, if possible” (OA 17). But the comic context better reveals her means of puncturing self-seriousness: “I know they’re not wonderful poems,” she wrote Blough, “but even so I think that to try to develop a manner of one’s own, to say the most difficult things, and to be funny if possible [...] is more to one’s credit than to go on the way all the young H&H [Harvard’s *Hound & Horn*] poets do with ‘One sweetly solemn thought’ coming to them o’er and o’er. Oh Hell—I thought I might get myself a new hat with the money at least” (OA 17). Such sagging solemnity bust up with “Oh Hell,” and admission of pragmatic, material interests, begins to sketch some of the larger arcs we will be following, as they blend with those “most difficult things” as well. Bishop’s wit often clears room for expansions of spirit, the two quite compatible partners for her, as the French readily grant, in senses of *esprit* that wander freely between.

Bishop’s object- and ocular-orientations are emphasized with detriment to her humor and her central and, we may fairly say, cherished, sense of the “spiritual.” a quality which, she held, must be *felt* in poetry. “It’s a question of using the poet’s proper materials, with which he’s

equipped by nature,” she wrote in an early notebook,” i.e. immediate, intense, physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything—to express something not of them—something, I suppose *spiritual*. But it proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform, and always kept in order, in its place. [...]

The other way, of using the supposedly ‘spiritual’—the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and *poetic*, to produce the *material*, is the way of the Romantic, I think—and a great perversity” (VSC 72.1). These obliquely buccal hints, of a thing “eaten out with acid,” like her mode of floating “Florida,” “The state with the prettiest name, / the state that floats in brackish water,” might begin to attune us to the things, the spirited transitional chances, that can flower there (CP 32). “It is a question of using the poet’s [read *reader*’s] proper materials.”

Bishop emphasized the physicality of the writing process, and a fatigue with criticism that did not operate from a more physical place of response. In response to a questionnaire submitted by John Ciardi for his volume *Mid-Century American Poets* (1950), she sniffed out a deadly theoretical bent. For the poet, she was concerned to be understood, “No matter what theories one may have, I doubt very much that they are in one’s mind at the moment of writing a poem or that there is even a *physical possibility* that they could be. Theories can only be based on interpretations of other poet’s poems, or one’s own in retrospect, or wishful thinking.”¹² And then she went on to answer what no question had asked:

The analysis of poetry is growing more and more pretentious and deadly. After a session with a few of the highbrow magazines one doesn’t want to look at a poem for weeks, much less start writing one. The situation is reminiscent of those places along the coast where warnings are posted telling one not to walk too near the edge of the cliffs because they have been undermined by the sea and may collapse at any minute. (EHA 281)

She sees such spoilsport criticism as not being *in*, or on, the edge of “the thin(kin)g” itself in a poem. One goal in what follows is to get closer to the crumbly cliffs, this undermining by “the

¹² Bishop, “It All Depends,” EHA 281.

sea” which is her most “religiously” repeated and thoroughly worked trope (most fully explored in Chapter Three) for the sensation-based oscillations experienced, both “vaguely” and acutely, in sounding a poem, bringing linear eyes into its rounder replies.

With another note of fatigue Bishop spoke specifically to one of “the usual concerns of the critics” in her 1958 review of *Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes and Poems for the Young of All Ages*. The editor (Walter de la Mare) of this moving, musical volume (“the best anthology” she knew of), “has some practical things to say about meters,” she finds “and even suggests how to read certain of the poems; but he never speaks directly of any of the usual concerns of the critics; for one, let’s say, ‘imagery. Instead, the old woman of the introduction tells the boy: ‘learn the common names of everything you see [...] and especially those that please you most to remember: then give them names also of your own making and choosing—if you can’” (PPL 700). “And wouldn’t that be imagery?” Bishop adds. It would be “imagery” of an intimate sort, even arising from its classical roots (L. *imago*) that include a “reflection of sound” to invert our general conception of precedence, and resonant also with Emerson’s sense in “Art” that we look to writing not for images of the self but for “signs of power,” “tokens of the everlasting effort to produce” (OED; EL 438). She suggests the volume edited by “de la Mare” (“of the sea,” it so happens), might make readers more aware of a “kind of random poetry” and a “lyrical confidence,” including a sensational responsiveness that opens out in the introduction’s last words, and nearly the last of her review: “I was but just awake: so too was the world itself, and ever is” (PPL 701). The “just awake” wakes (“just a wake”?) as does Emerson’s comment in “Experience,” “perhaps there are no objects” (EL 487). It would be, it seems, one of those “most difficult” things Bishop’s proliferal wit brings to bear, and in an Emersonian spirit.

A foreign ear may secure what a transparent eyeball cannot, and one might wonder, given her use of the phrase “random poetry” here, if the title of her first collection, *North & South*, was not meant to keep us crossing back and forth across the equator, “the equator of life” of which Emerson writes about in that same essay, a “belt” where “spirit and poetry” can “lay hold anywhere” (EL 480) This sense of the ever-beginning world, at any rate, is a Pragmatist hallmark whose challenge Bishop presented herself and her willing readers. In attending the interim of a gullible hum among her words’ fractious music, the chances of change are tremendous, and of an experience of the fiercely comic optative, the prerogative of which Harold Bloom traced to Emerson. In avoiding the “epistemological pitfalls that all tropes risk” Bloom writes that his is “An image of voice [in] a fine tangle, well beyond logic, but it can testify only to the presence of things not seen, and its faith is wholly in the Optative Mood.”¹³

One sense of her plain claim to be a “descendant of the Transcendentalists,” as I take it, is the need for inscribing new circles, of moving beyond the given range.¹⁴ When Bishop repeated the instructions of the old woman in de la Mare’s anthology to “learn the common names” “then give them names also of your own making and choosing—if you can,” she was endorsing in a more homespun way Emerson’s grander injunction at the coda to “Goethe; or The Writer” (1850): “We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world. The secret of genius is to suffer no fiction to exist for us; [...] and first, last, midst and without end, to honor every truth by use.” This passage opens Joan Richardson’s chapter on Emerson in her capacious *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein*, where she follows “moves in the American language game” as adaptive aspects of the

¹³ Bloom, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 52.

¹⁴ WU March 20, 1963. With her claim that Emerson “defines the power of the poet as exclusively male” Joanne Feit Diehl, a priori excludes all women writers, apparently, from an Emersonian tradition. Diehl, *Woman Poets and the American Sublime* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), xi. We’ll have occasion to adapt some elements of what she calls Bishop’s “Sexual Poetics.”

“fact of feeling” “grounded in the premise that both thinking and language are life forms, subject to the same laws as other life forms.”¹⁵

Bishop planted herself firmly in this living, moving tradition of transitional chances, and allied her own form of conversational description and fractious lyricism with words that wander, if given leave, a commitment she expressed in an unpublished poem on the supremely somatic Buster Keaton: “I will serve and serve / with lute or I will not say anything” (EAP 119). His feeling, “I was made at right angles to the world / and I see it so. I can only see it so” might speak to specular pressures, and the ocular gags of his art, but as feeling-readers we experience the sea-change where those sharp, “right angles” start to tangle, maybe even provide baroquely “wry tangles” as his antics so often do (EAP 119). Her invitation is clear: “*Come closer. You can see and hear / the writing paper lines of light...*”

Such recursive “wry tangles,” or the lift-off we may feel in “writing paper lines of (f)light,” or “lines (af)light,” have been dubbed by Garrett Stewart in his *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, a fascinating volume entirely devoted to the phenomenon, the “trans-segmental drift.”¹⁶ Essentially a subtler form of homophony, it re-writes lexemes against the graphic grain in the subvocal stream of reading. He describes how writing is received

first by the retina and then ‘copied,’ reconstituted as language, along the palpable surfaces of the vocal apparatus, however much inhibited by silence—and well before any secondary graphic recording that might follow. Reading is thus a transcoding, if not a transcription, of the graphic into the alphabetic, the scriptive into the morphophonemic—and all the while, of course, the linear into the syntagmatic. (21)

¹⁵ Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein*. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007), ix. She considers these moves evolved by a bewildering New World experience on “a form of thinking” brought by the Puritans, cross-bred from scriptural habit and the force of physical fact, ministerial purpose, and scientific experimentation, influencing the understanding and strategic deployment of language from Edwards to Emerson, James to Stevens and Stein. Others variously framing such a tradition include Richard Poirier, Jonathan Levin, and Giles Gunn, whom we will hear from below.

¹⁶ Although not engaged with Bishop’s work, Stewart’s *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) has proved so thoroughly illuminating regarding some games that Bishop plays that I have adapted my title, “The Foreign Ear” from his personal dedication in that book.

Such an understanding of reading casts it as more somatic than imaginary, less to do with the figurative “mind’s ear” than a bodily if “passive vocality,” which Stewart finds “invaluable in any full-scale phenomenology of the reading act,” and of which Bishop, reading Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, and Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* was made most viscerally aware (129). Her own hints suggest she was tracing the wandering contingencies of this stream even in her earliest readings, telling interviewer Sheila Hale, “I lay around wheezing and reading for years” (C 112).

Attending to the agitated resonances of these fluid surfaces of language releases, Stewart believes, its “deepest transformative logic” (102). This mode of accent on the reader’s sensorium renders particularly acute or extreme more standard poetic devices of rhyme, assonance, euphony, etc., that thrive on a kind of hovering aural dispersion of meaning. But these suppler, more subliminal under- and over-laps create a feel of more de-stabilized, eccentric reading. With Stewart I must say that, whatever evidence I amass, “these reading effects would still fall under the category of linguistic accident. The conceivably strategic effect is no more certain of reception than innumerable possible such distractions” (25) With any particular phonotextual manifestation, one may only be able to say, as Bishop has quoted Fats Waller,” “One never knows, do one?” (EHA 286). But we may at least be in the company of Bishop’s Love in “Pleasure Seas,” who

Sets out determinedly in a straight line,
One of his burning ideas in mind,
Keeping his eyes on
The bright horizon,
But shatters immediately, suffers refraction,
And comes back in shoals of distraction. (CP 195)

Taking up the risk, edging closer to the sea-sounds, which is to say the tide of breath as it washes through language, gets one closer to her material challenge of the spirit (*L. spiritus*, “breath”), and all that rides upon it. Its dilapidations provide micro-textual instances of her broader, more

obvious concerns with temporally revised perspectives, shifting edges and intervals, permeable borders, surprise shifts of scale, things “drifting, in a dreamy sort of way” and both liquidity and breath in general and throughout (“North Haven,” CP 188).

The continuity of Bishop’s poetry with a sense of everyday life is often commented upon, the feel of being in an environment, and as a matter of diurnal pattern and creative recurrence, recently stressed by Siobhan Phillips in *The Poetics of the Everyday*.¹⁷ But remarks tend not to draw down to the most everyday and essential of recurrences, breath, or breathed-reading, though she signaled her own attendance upon this most miraculous of ever-recurring patterns. In a “breathing plain of snow,” or “a sketch done in an hour, in ‘one breath’” or “the occasional sighing / as a large aquatic animal breathes”; in things perched so precariously “You’d think a breath would end them,” in “an expelled breath,” or things “darkened and tarnished / by the warm touch / of the warm breath, / maculate, cherished, / rejoice!” and the making with Nate’s breathy bellows in “In the Village,” it was a matter she would keep dearly near to “a mind thinking.”¹⁸ Consider Yeats’ vaunt, “I made it out of a mouthful of air” and then this sort of tentative care:

Beneath that loved and celebrated breast,
silent, bored really blindly veined,
grieves, maybe lives and lets
live, passes bets,
something moving but invisibly
and with what clamor why restrained
I cannot fathom even a ripple.
(See the thin flying of nine black hairs
four around one five the other nipple,
flying almost intolerably on your own breath.) (CP 79)

¹⁷ Phillips, *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012). He takes up four poets, Stevens, Frost, Bishop and Merrill, who “pay consistent attention to the potential of everyday patterns,” and find “daily life can be a vital form as well as a central subject” (1).

¹⁸ CP 4, 176, 11, 112, 102, CPr 257. James drew here, too: “I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing” (“Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” WWJ 183).

“Something moving grieves” would be the syntactic bones of this first sentence of “O Breath,” though the motion it lets us live with edges away from grief, to “maybe lives and lets / live, passes bets...” One good bet is that in our watery, “O Breath” things are always dawning (Fr.*eau / aube*), “and with what clamor.” That this clammy, rackety “clamor” carries a love (L. *amor*), is another one may take or leave, the strain of affection always catching, and catching in fringes of language. It was something Bishop was obliged to attend, and thought her readers might like to too: the sounds of life coming out of us, where we seethe and select.

Such transegmental play upon the breath’s measure is by no means our sole subject, but one of its more radical propositions. I more broadly trace a poetry of wordplay that is so subtle and neglected—but for a few puns writ large—that Christine Pugh treats its seeming lack as clear consensus: “[A]s we know,” she claims, “the ‘finished’ Bishop was not a poet of wordplay, though she was also not averse to playing occasionally with prosody.”¹⁹ She holds we may “learn much of her aural process of composition” through the “unfinished” Bishop we find in Alice Quinn’s volume of her drafts and fragments, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Jukebox*, however there’s no indication of how this same aural acuity hatches expanding agitations of waking wordplay (279). Bishop was, in addition, quietly polyglot, knowing French, Spanish, and Greek, and called herself “a fair Latin scholar once,” saying that translating Latin had been the best training for her poet’s career (WIA 616; REB 24). Apart from a clear dexterity in her etymological play, a comment of Frederick Ahl’s in his *Metaformations* regarding “soundplay and wordplay” in Latin seems important regarding her transegmental fluidity.²⁰ He stresses that the verbalized syllable, or *phoneme* is the basic unit of sense for the purposes of play in Latin,

¹⁹ Christina Pugh, “‘A Lovely Finish I have Seen’: Voice and Variorum in Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box,” *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century* (2012), 279.

²⁰ Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

whose “words are not self-contained sound units to the same extent as are words in English” (55). Her positively fractious, productive troubling of English lexical self-containment may owe something to that training, as well as the regular phonemic liaison of French, and certainly her own experience as a singer of the body as an organically deforming wind instrument.²¹

Bishop’s casual but consistent manner of adapting religious language to new, surprising environments, and quite often to liquidities of language, streaming and oscillating things, what she’d call “the motion church,” is another of the most curious and compelling features of her work. Though often read in light of a sentimental, unfortunate religious nostalgia, or being trapped in outmoded language, such gestures involve a fiercely determined effort to shift her inherited Christian language, its rites symbols, and spiritual imperatives, to unmoor them into questions of chance creations, things made in a sensational wave, an accident joyfully met. In this she forged a demythologized, prismatic experimental aesthetic of process and contingency deftly attuned to the adventures of an individual psychology and physiology, cut free from foundational systematic imperatives, and musically geared to sheer, to accent, her Darwinian understanding of chance, and change, proliferation, and pleasure. Left quite to the side are both the early Stevensian quarrels with God, certainly Eliot’s wasteland regret and hyperbole, and his later, consummate gestures of faith, his command in “Little Gidding” “to kneel / Where prayer has been valid.”

Bishop’s adaptations began quite early on. In a December 1928 prose piece, “Picking Mushrooms,” for her boarding school journal *The Blue Pencil*, the narrator glances past a picture linked with locked dogma on her way to more genial “commons” or “open uplands.”²² When the

²¹ In French these liaisons bend the phonic measure of lexemes: *Elysée*, for instance, solicits the silent *s* of *Champs* into sound for *Champs Zay-lee-zay*.

²² Thomas Travisano has reprinted several of Bishop’s earliest poems and stories including this one in “Emerging Genius: Elizabeth Bishop and *The Blue Pencil*, 1927-1930,” *Gettysburg Review* 5.1 (Winter 1992) 32-47.

speaker reveals the mushroom-promising “commons were just ahead” she points: “far to the left I saw a man with a few sheep, almost lost in the mist, looking like pictures from the big Bible with brass clasps.” A misty glimpse turns to certain material critique with those “brass clasps”—the *locked* commons, as it were—and notably “left” behind. But before crossing over she adapts a ritual drink of “a silent little stream,” “as if this were some part of the spell”:

At my feet, between the road’s edge and the embankment, ran a silent little stream over the grey pebbles. I must cross it to get on to the commons, but first I knelt down and put my face in the cold water, drinking a long icy drink, as if this were some part of the spell necessary before I could step across it and dwell for how many centuries in those open uplands, with these heavy shadows.

No mere escape, here we “see” “*those* open uplands” with “*these* heavy shadows,” and hear a shadowy eye-opening in this “long *icy* drink,” and hear its possibilities (throwing open those brass clasps), in the little slip of those “*open-up* lands”—offered as an updating of a faded faith. We will be dipping regularly into this shadowed stream (or “pleasure seas”) carrying brightest surprises. Just this little slippage that Bishop puts in tension with a nostalgic, photographic still, suggests what is troubling with discussions of Bishop’s exquisite visuality that are not complemented by her challenge of spirited action.

Regarding Bishop’s term, “proliferal,” that I have put at the center of this project, Gillian White has remarked: “Part peripheral, part proliferate, the word gives us an apt figure for Bishop’s somewhat surprising reimagination of the relationship between artist and audience during this era: the artist standing on a periphery, releasing the work of art into the world, and watching it proliferate readings she never intended.”²³ That it has. But when we shift the sense of “readings” from one of “interpretation” in the rarefied world of critical discourse, back down, *into* the moment-to-moment, physiological, spiritual-material *thing that we do* in reading, in

²³ White, “Readerly Contingency in Bishop’s Journals and Early Prose,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 55.3 (Fall 2009), 328.

tending words and our comically wandering engagements of them on the page, we get a better feel for what's at stake in her "proliferal" challenge. In honor of this art honored more in "the motion" or breach than the observance, we may pause to further unpack the agitations of that portmanteau. Its fecund fund of suggestion includes a *feral* aspect, "wild, untamed," a fractious force that's also "deadly." Yet it edges precisely into, or out of *life*—and we may press and parse the threshold again. For right where they overlap, what life and this wild/funereal feral happen to share, is a "faith," Sp. fe. "It's the 'proliferal' style, I believe," as she wrote to Blough (OA 71, and below). "Hazard has such accuracies," as Joseph Conrad's Hyers in *The Secret Agent* affirms—and desire does as well. A Pragmatist's "reality," like Stevens', "is not what it is," but "consists of the many realities which it can be made into." It hangs upon a contingent *if*—a purpose, or interest, crossed with chance, just what, in this dramatic (f)act, gathers the proliferal accent.²⁴ One's pleasure is part of its measure, and also one's patience for ranging and dispersal.

In announcing her "proliferal style" in a letter to Frani Blough of May 1938, four years after her Vassar graduation, Bishop stages it as a vivid and darkly comic opera of the erratic:

Lately I've been doing nothing much but reread Poe, and evolve from Poe—plus something of Sir Thomas Browne, etc.—a new Theory-of-the-Story-All-My-Own. It's the "proliferal" style, I believe, and you will shortly see some of the results. There was an indication of it in the March *Partisan Review* [her fable "In Prison"]. But now I have an idea that quite a nice little operetta, very slight, could be made out of the scene witnessed here every week when the fortune-teller comes to "cut the cards" for the landlady, Miss Lula. The landlady is very deaf, and sits up holding her little apparatus, which gives her a rather ecclesiastical look—the instrument is always going wrong, which might allow some effects of that wonderful loud *harshness* they have. [...] And a lot of nice songs could be made out of a book I'm (and everyone else in Key West's) reading, *Aunt Sally's Dream Book*. (OA 71)

²⁴ OP 202. Her "proliferal style" insinuates affinities with Joyce's *Wake* (as we take up Chapter Two), and its circulating word/world river, the *Life* (Gaelic spelling of *Liffey*) in all her murmuring plurabilities hides here too. Where Bishop's intentions end and mine begin in this Joycean neologism is entirely unfixable—and that is part of a fraying proliferal "point," not, certainly, to grimly "prove" to you what she "meant."

This strangest of domestic scenes folds Bishop's much noted wish to "portray not a thought, but a mind thinking" into the proliferal fringe of dream and au/oral error, chance fortunes in mysterious "cuts of the cards," and it draws down to what we may take as a liminal adaptation of William James' famous "stream of thought."²⁵ Thanks to Victoria Harrison's discovery in the Princeton archives of Bishop's letter to Kit and Ilse Barker (March 23, 1956), we know Bishop had "read both Jameses thoroughly" by the mid-30s and was re-reading the older brother in Brazil.²⁶ Consider the energies around this homey *and* oneiric "Aunt Sally's Dream Book," how in the phonotextual stream it slips easily into "Aunt Sally's (*St*)ream Book," or good old Aunt Sally may more wilder wander as "sallies:" sorties, "a sudden rush from a besieged place," and clanging "hand-stroke" of a bell (OED). It *is* a real book, too (or Bishop's canny adaptation of one) that helps gamblers bridge their conscious and subconscious worlds as does, if a bit differently, James' churning stream, and Bishop's poetry that is geared upon it. In it every "definite image in the mind" is awash, "steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it" and becoming "bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh."²⁷ In Bishop's, "nice little operetta" we may feel the slipperiness of *slits* and *lops* at the edges of lexemes hinting of a grimness (Sweeney Todd?)—grim, but no groaning: this too is a "religious" part of her waking aesthetic. This laughing lightness as regards even such "most difficult things" to face is one of the primary

²⁵ We take up "a mind thinking" below (p. 91), Morris Croll's description of baroque prose writers which had helped her describe what was unique in Gerard Manley Hopkins' aesthetic, as well as her own.

²⁶ Victoria Harrison, in *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) notes that, responding to the Barkers' query if she had seen Leon Edel's biography of Henry James, Bishop wrote that she had "read both Jameses thoroughly some twenty years before," and that, because "'Lota has a lot of Wm. James . . . I've been trying to cope with pragmatism again recently'" (4).

²⁷ First published in 1889, *Aunt Sally's Policy Players Dream Book* interpreted dreams not for "self-knowledge" but for gambling luck in an illegal lottery game invented by "Policy Sam" and flourishing at the turn of the century. See <http://www.luckymojo.com/auntsallys.html>. For a fuller glimpse of James' "stream of thought" flip to p. 167.

graces of her art, and she variously framed it as a question of manners, humor, and a happy lack of self-absorption.²⁸

What's "funny" in Bishop can't be split from what is most "serious" and "difficult" in her work. She takes Emerson's proposition of "Experience"—"We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorted lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects" (EL 487)—straight to the ears. And she might even have readers more congenially entertain "their errors" as "*air- or ear-ors.*" Her would-be prisoner of that proliferal fable charts the terms of his "authority" as "recognized but unofficial, on the conduct of prison life," including its fluid conductivity, and regarding his gamble for "*influence,*" adds "and this is what I dare to hope for, to find the prison in such a period of its evolution that it will be unavoidable to be thought of as an evil influence. [...]" Perhaps they will laugh at me, as they laughed at the Vicar of Wakefield; but of course, just at first, I should like nothing better!" (CP 190). And then? Is it the Emersonian thought that follows: "perhaps there are no objects"?

Rather than taking such laughable chances, in considerations of Bishop's wit, *distance* is often the operative word, the flip of her supposed "defensive" intent. In a telling instance of the "defense/distance" narrative, Ann Hoff suggests that Bishop engages in a "strict restraint of her reader": "We are helpless as a child kept in the waiting room of Bishop's memories [...]" the

²⁸ In complaining about the pretension of Orson Welles' *The Trial*, she tells Anne Stevenson, "in spite of the morbidity of Kafka, etc. I like to remember that when he read his stories out loud to his friends he used to have to stop because he got to laughing so." She continues: "I kept thinking that any of Buster Keaton's films give one the sense of the tragedy of the human situation, the weirdness of it all, the pathos of man's trying to do the right thing—all in a twinkling, besides being fun—all the very things poor Orson Welles was trying desperately to illustrate by laying it on with a trowel. I don't like heaviness—in general, Germanic art. It seems often to amount to complete self-absorption-like Mann, Wagner, I think one can be cheerful AND profound!—*or, how to be grim without groaning*" (WU March 6, 1964).

helpless antechamber of half-knowledge in which young Elizabeth sat so long.”²⁹ In describing such a writer-reader relation as “confidently and insistently putting her reader in a dependent, submissive position to the speakers of her poems,” Hoff slights not only Bishop’s more supple play, but her Pragmatist project of transition (584). “Helpless... dependent ... submissive”—this is not the situation of a reader who takes up her ever present, ever receding invitations to play, to meet or make, who feels these tiny blurs and bursts, their sonic boons, conversational possibility and opening *abymes*—who wonders, *who?*—but treats words as grim counters, as placeholders and not events. Identity politics also has to scrap humor in order to work because both humor and wordplay plays with rigid identities, but any ideology or angle of approach will be hobbled by its refusal of experiential invitations, to “come closer,” to “see and hear / the writing paper lines of light.”

In her own wish to catch “consciousness in the tongue” she was particularly dismayed with “reviewers” who, as she wrote Anne Stevenson, “really very rarely pay much attention to what they’re reading & just repeat each other says,” and even here she gave her biographer a hint, as a bit of Joycean “nonce-ends,” that these only repeating readers are ignoring what they’re eating, what can be turned on the tongue (WU, March 18, 1963; FW 149.22). But consider those chances of change Bishop’s “wave theory” of pun and drift, with sensationally instructive, benefit: “I have a vague theory that one learns most—I have learned most—” she wrote to Anne Stevenson (in an overlooked portion of her “Darwin letter”)—“from having someone suddenly make fun of something one has taken seriously up until then. I mean about life, the world, and so on” (WU March 8, 1964). Certainly our meanings are something to make fun of (and with) too,

²⁹ Ann Hoff, “Owning Memory: Elizabeth Bishop’s Authorial Restraint of the Reader,” *Biography* 31.4 (2008), 584, 586.

and particularly as they bend upon that sense of *aesthetic* employed by Joan Richardson, restored to its etymological source “in feeling as a body in its environment” (*Natural History* 256-57n).

Like Gillian White in her explorations of Bishop’s early understanding of “readerly contingency,” Thomas Travisano extends appreciation for Bishop’s de-privileging narrative techniques that “deflect modernist conceptions of the ordering self,” with elements of “postmodern skepticism, indeterminacy or heterogeneity” within more commonplace narrative elements.”³⁰ Both propose a “postmodern” Bishop, but I think neither make the case for contingency quite radically, or roundly, enough, without linking it to her particular bid of cross-pollinating thinking with the finer, animal “fact of feeling.” For what’s curiously powerful about Bishop’s proliferal aesthetic, is how its openness to accident, chance, the play of projection, contingency, the indeterminate term—postmodern idols, all—operates within a formal rigor and turns us toward such fundamental, questions of what “we have in common(s),” as “O Breath” provokes in a dilapidated reading. It turns the willing reader toward things that swing between sensational events and imagination which, it was Darwin’s genius to recognize, “is the organ through which chance operates on the human scale; its function, to effect variability” (CP 79; Richardson 120). As with this breath that “maybe lives and lets / live, passes bets” she stages a quietly passionate chance in “Jerónimo’s House,” where when we maybe have agreed to “come closer” what we end up hearing is not *his* voice but something strangely pluralized and bracketed by chance in “the voices of / my radio // singing flamencos / in between / the lottery numbers” (CP 34). Such numbers only “mean” something if you’re playing, if you’re in it, and she maybe invites the reader to feel these distant voices closely enough to throw off a singeing flame.

³⁰ Travisano, “Elizabeth Bishop and the Origins of Narrative Postmodernism,” in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed. Lionel Kelly (Atlanta: Editions Roponi, 2000), 92.

In this it's important to note that the ear's role, or rule, in conjunction with the tongue, is proven for Stewart not as "the organ of a unified perception," but rather this "decoding and remembering ear" registers "as the instrumentation of a sequence," and Bishop banks on its organic deformations, and a willingness to take a chance on them (98). With sounding breath she relies on that common bond, complication, and freedom, of errors and even the most basic acts of perception she registered in a notebook from the time of her proliferal operetta, "the mind's deliberate, though unconscious falsification" and "misinterpretation of everything real & seen" (VSC 75.4).

Building on such appreciations for errancy, Bishop's proliferal "evolution" of Poe was to turn his claim for mechanical exactness in aesthetic effect, which she felt impossible in a world always evolving toward quiet assaults of proliferal fringes for a better sense of the stochastic. In the unpublished poem (from which Alice Quinn takes the title for her collection of Bishop's drafts and fragments), "Edgar Allan Poe & the Jukebox," Bishop questions Poe's perverse insistence on "unity of effect" in composition and reception.³¹ But "*exact*" is the word she adapts, besetting it with sub-sides of bodily passions set in a seedy "honkey-tonk" where the "juke-box burns" and "The music pretends to laugh and weep / while it descends to drink and murder" (EAP 49). Even the music has ulterior motives, but knowing what folks are after, here, even when she says "Poe said that poetry was *exact*," there's a surreptitious liaison, desire incited, vaguely precise, much as we hear how the "juke-box burns," and "(sp)urns" at once.

Across the drafts she augmented proliferal effects till they told a mini-narrative (in phonemic

³¹ It is to Moore, just days after the letter to Frani Blough, that Bishop specifies her drawing from Poe's theories in particular (OA 73). In "Philosophy of Composition" Poe argues that only after the author has decided on the ending, and the precise emotional response, or "unity of effect" he wishes to elicit in the reader may he proceed, subordinating all elements of tone, theme, setting, characters, language, plot to that singular effect. So absolute is his insistence that it's been suggested he was joking. Cf. Kenneth Silverman. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 296. Bishop makes hilarious play with a stiffly absolutist character in "In Prison" describing with rigorous exactitude the dimensions and qualities of his (ideal) cell, while bumping up against and again, and gracefully adjusting, into matters of chance.

waters) coming down to “all your horror / half as exact as horror here” in which a certain “*whore-er*” in transegmental liason becomes “*sore-er*” with just “*half a(s)ex-act*” in between. Maybe vagueness *can* have its accuracies, if one’s willing to feel them out, that is to say, take a transitional chance.

Recalling Ann Hoff’s description of the “helpless,” “dependent” reader she feels Bishop to position, we may follow one other arc in the poem, a grave, or at least gravitational, one where the nickels fall down the slots of the jukebox, and

drinks like lonely water-falls
in night descend the separate throats,
[...]
—much as we envision
the helpless earthward fall of love
descending from the head and eye
down to the hands, and heart, and down. (EAP 49)

“Envision,” yes, in the mind’s eye, but her invitation is *always*, “come closer.” Love was a figure she thought much of, but never as a victim. Down into that burning jukebox, into the night descending the separate throats we follow “a helpless earthward fall” yet may feel it on the lips, one labial lazing into another, as otherwise: “the hell-*bless* earthward fall of love / descending... down... and down” converting gravitational circumstance to action, power even. But this is hardly the sort of accuracy described by Helen Vendler in her introduction to *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, which nonetheless expresses a prevailing view, when she draws from Bishop’s poem, “Poem,” to say that she hopes readers will be provoked by the poems to say “Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!”³² For Vendler’s mechanical metaphor that a great poem “insists on a spooling, a form of repetition, the reinscribing of a groove, the

³² Vendler, “Introduction” to *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985), 2. And see Charles Bernstein’s famously livid response to such a view, in “Artifice of Absorption,” not regarding Bishop but what some poems might rather like to do: “I would hope of readers to be provoked to say of some poems, ‘Hell, I *don’t* recognize the place or the time of the ‘I’ in this sentence. I don’t know it. *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 42.

returning upon an orbit already traced,” that musical-mechanical metaphor, is just what Bishop besieges with proliferal possibility, inscribing it with chance and desire (2). For Bishop, repetition is geared to queer things into mysterious mis-steerings, gleeful leaps, dubious events at their very best.

To allow such sound-creations their proper potency is not only to trouble the eye/image’s dominion but to invert Pope’s dictum to “tuneful fools” that “The Sound must seem an Echo to the Sense.”³³ If with that admonition and his practice Pope was avoiding at all costs the sense that the mind is a suggestible thing, but was rather capacious and divine, Bishop’s poetics grow from an appreciation of the deeply chancy and adaptive aspects of thinking’s pleasure-bound relation to its verbal environment and a more sidewise and immanent sense of the transcendent. Its experimental basis rests (and moves) in sound avowal, in humoring audition gone oddly wrong, dreamily drifting, or rather, functioning perfectly properly while pulling “perfectly off-beat,” as her syncretic claves play in “The Bight,” (CP 48). They juke with and *against* the graphic grain and ocular orders, against any given rhyme scheme, narrative lock-down, syntax and even lexical integrity, as we’ve heard, in phonic slippages with half-joking thetic proposals. She assaults (often phallic) figures who would too snootily ignore these sensational waves, as in “Seascape,” and “Cootchie,” too, where a stolid lighthouse would “dismiss all as trivial” (CP 46), in the interest of some other “there” of otherworldly, written distances solidly bound by “argument” and the *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric and logic. Those fixed, rule-bound forms deafen these figures to event, to “the sea” of living motions that “desperate, / will proffer wave after wave” (CP 46). Part of her affinity for Stevens, as we’ll see, was his manner of tracking a life “Unpurged by epitaph” and with “a harmony not rarefied / Nor fined for the inhibited instruments / Of over-civil stops.” and (SCP 59, 35). She had his *Harmonium*, she often proudly

³³ “Essay on Criticism,” Part II, online: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174163>.

noted, “almost by heart,” and we can readily see that it’s not the poet of central claims and heroic rhetoric that found a welcome place in her developing aesthetic, but a fellow poet of the fringe, flashing aspect, “ephemeras of the tangent,” as he called them—what leads Helen Vendler to feel, for instance, that “if he has a dogma, it is the dogma of the shadowy, the ephemeral, the barely perceived, the iridescent”—and his much noisier bruited of such things will help, I think, to approach Bishop’s more casual, but perhaps even slipperier, proliferal play.³⁴

Bishop needed to clear space for spiritual aesthetic cut free from foundational systematic imperatives, and the first chapter, “Teasing Belief: The Bishop’s Religious Wit,” takes up some of this ground-clearing activity. She aimed her more puncturing wit at debased forms of her religious inheritance, often turning to scripture to attack nostalgic longings, bland pieties and chiseled orthodoxies. Accusations of Bishop’s religious nostalgia miss not only these full frontal attacks, but also her quieter adaptive strategies and proliferal wit, and I find a certain lack of listening or gaming entertainment to be behind that misguided but common narrative. One of these early adaptations, her notion of “the motion church,” free of foundational claims suggests how she sought to keep things in oscillating actions, her claim that “God is for *in*” suggests yet another. Depending on the poem and the weather, Bishop’s humor may seem deeply devotional, as Richard Wilbur felt her “religious concerns and habits of feelings” (p. 275, below), in others a wickeder wit, but through the oscillations of time and tone, it remained firmly *ear*-religious, honoring the chances of various instrumentations of a sequence in a queered foreign ear.

Chapter Two, “Tongue-Timed: the Contrapuntal Note” traces her early and radical propositions to get a sense of “intense consciousness in the tongue,” and draw it out as a matter of ever-revising “moments.” To hone a taste and gather the somatic ground for these lingual

³⁴ Regarding *Harmonium*, to Anne Stevenson, WU March 6, 1964; Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems* (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1969), 35.

events we briefly take up some research into the subvocal nature of reading, and Bishop's experience of this physiological aspect as provoked particularly in her reading of Stein, and how in just a roughly one-year span at the end of her time at Vassar she had staked out her major aesthetic propositions, and co-founded a forum, the fractious magazine (dubbed by "The Bishop") *Con Spirito*, in which to carry it her experiments. Recognizing how her prose laid the fertile turf from which her poems would spring, Marianne Moore encouraged Bishop to publish them together, essays included, assuring that they "support [...] and necessitate one another"—a quirky idea, but apt, and I think you'll agree that it might have tilted the readers of her poems, early and late, in some different directions (p. 106, below). A key work extendedly explored in the chapter, "Seven Days Monologue" (1933), cannily steeps readers in a dialogic sense of textual-phonotextual relations and lays out the tropes she would continue to explore across her career.

One of these tropes, the sea and the coast, subtends Chapter Three, "The Creations of Sound: Bishop's Hear-Say Sea," where we find how she carried this experimentation into her geographies of *North & South*, with surprising jibes of transformative spirit. While shifting her experimental aesthetic quietly toward more colloquial tones, traditional forms, and descriptive modes, the de-scriptive, fractious force of their phonemic undertow slurries things no less. Her split self-directions to "Pound out the ideas of sight" and "Always to live over water / & never resists its verses" suggest some of that subversive phonotextual activity. The supposed "anti-vital" or "sublime" longings in which critics often position some of her early work that we take up here, like those engaging Christian nostalgias, I argue, have also turned an ear from their dilapidating phonemic actions, adaptation and transitional gambits.

“The Religious Contingencies” of Chapter Four speak to a dual set of contingencies where sound is concerned, of a certain au/oral rupture with a mourning mother, as Bishop framed it in her stunning autobiography “In the Village” (1953), and in contingencies of wordplay around it and as more widely writ in “The Wit” (1956) and moments of particularly exuberant oscillations in some other poems of exuberant oscillations. The reader will be pleased or displeased to find that I offer no sturdy psychoanalytic framework with which to diagnose the speaker’s trauma and its aftermath. My effort here is rather to trace that trauma’s transformations in resiliencies of wordplay at overt and covert levels of text and phonotext, and follow her gestures of assent into this temporal stream. We follow a “religiously” repeated gesture of Bishop’s obliquely recalling and transfiguring these earliest losses in perishable balances, and fluctuations of wordplay that quicken the optative spirit upon inescapable pivots; and look extendedly into the stunningly strange, “The Weed” (1937) that steeps its spiritual struggle in a Jamesian “stream of thought,” a rushing, “half-clear,” “weed-deflected stream” “made / itself of racing images” (CP 20).

Gathering the strands of my argument and expanding a sense of Bishop’s unstinting rituals of assent in the Conclusion, it will also solidify a sense of her unassuming but quietly adamant Darwinian adaptations. We trace her re-crowning of “kings of old” into adaptable chances, in game flavored dartings and gnawings over of chance and change. Three such adaptations, “A Miracle for Breakfast” (1937), “North Haven” (1978) and “Crusoe in England” (1971) cast assents toward repetitions that revise, echoes that alter, and reveal how slightest, intimate slips in sound can open onto most stunning vistas. “Soonest Mended,” John Ashbery’s poem written in honor of Bishop’s “2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” will give us a generous sense, in closing, of a singularly important contemporary American poet’s deep

appreciation for her experimental and liquidly spirited poetics, whose challenge is always to be beginning again. It offers an exquisite sense of the oscillating scales upon which this quiet poet of “moments” wrote, captures in its own zigzag action the feel of a reader tending “a mind thinking” through her words, at the extravagant tidal level of breath.

Consider this a study in effects, in a literary physiology, or “affective stylistics” if you will.³⁵ Not, I hope, a cadaver’s anatomy. We humor the stochastic, not the grimly definitive, but nor am I suggesting an abstract, over-arching matter of “ambiguity,” but, rather, the need for an expanded sensorium, for “having an experience” in Bishop’s poems, by somatic attentions that release thetic possibilities, in waves of sensational energy. We navigate twin mysteries of will and whimsy, the formally fabulous and natural fact, for this ear-religious business, pleasurably ushering sense back to the senses and the sense that “belief,” religious or otherwise, should go no farther than it may in play, something one humors, does, richly feels, and maybe as soon forgets. This bumps us up again against our paradox, or impossibility, flagged by Barthes: “No ‘thesis on the pleasure of the text is possible’—and pleasure *is* in large part our topic—‘barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short.’”³⁶ We will, I fear, fall short and into gaps again and again, for that is where Bishop proliferal wit pitches its contrary claims. But only by getting some feeling for how ubiquitous this play is can one begin to judge its field of force. And precisely because it involves risk, the *chance* of enhancement, we admit the exponential values of these little, momentary, breathed-into incidents. Only there, perhaps, attending to transitional spaces of feeling between text and its bodily mirages, blurrings, sparks—perhaps there, with meaning ever more on the felt, resonant edges of non-sense, the accidental, or the next or other meaning, may a deathly self-seriousness be put to rest.

³⁵ Stewart adapts the term “affective stylistics” from Stanley Fish toward a more somatic sense I also seek to entertain (*Reading Voices* 24).

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 34.

Bishop noted “God is for *in*,” but even before she turns God *in* and onward as “image within image, metaphor of metaphor of metaphor,” the immanent claim, quick as it’s made, has fallen out, or maybe transcended itself, as *foreign*, a traveler (VSC 72.1). My title, “The Foreign Ear,” hopes to hold out some similar wanderings in honor of this poet who works the edges of things, rendering intimate voices strange. In agreeing to tend this inner ear as “an instrumentation of a sequence” rather than an “organ for unified perception” we catch at balances as we can, and some surprising sensations of between being, or *inter esse*. It may feel at times like listening to a foreign language, not music quite, not noise, but language thickened and a little strange, straying between speech and sound, on “the weirdest scale on earth” which Bishop’s Crusoe found his home-made flute to follow (CP 164).

In lovely fluxes and flexes of lexemes and shearings of self in hearing strangely new nothings we tend that “cheapest music” in which her Love “finds interesting dissonance” (EAP 18). This queer kind of music we make—cheap, but not *quite* free—has interested other poets more recently, such as Lyn Hejinian in *The Cell*, who seems to accept both the more gleeful and interested conditions of Bishop’s proliferal “prison.”³⁷ That is, she grants an intensely visible world (if more abstractly), that “Everything is subject to visibility,” but also how “the represented model is / wobbling,” and vastly so. She agrees with proper gusto and gravity what it will be our pleasure to meet and pursue, below:

Everything is subject to visibility
and the represented model is
wobbling
Living things in their redaction
decide to yodel
Thanks to a psychoacoustical transformation
they laugh
Ah! Dark clipping shifts
Never alone in the chest

³⁷ Hejinian, *The Cell*. Online <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/hejinian/cell.html>.

tone

**Chapter One:
Teasing Belief: The Bishop's Religious Wit**

The oldest gibe of literature is the ridicule of false religion. It is the joke of jokes.
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Comic"

Some of you have good ears. I think it's a gift of God.
Elizabeth Bishop on her first day of teaching
(University of Washington, January 1966)

"I have never been religious in any formal way," Bishop wrote to her biographer Anne Stevenson in 1964, "and I am not a believer. I dislike the didacticism, not to say condescension, of the practicing Christians I know (but maybe I've had bad luck). They usually seem more or less on the way to being fascists."¹ "But I am interested in *religions*" she quickly added, suggesting them to be as various as the people she went on to name, including George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, St. Theresa, Augustine and Ignatius, Martin Buber, Simone Weil and that canniest of religious comedians, Soren Kierkegaard, whom she pointed out to Stevenson, with some pride, as having read "in vast quantities long ago, before he was fashionable" (PPL 861). Reared in the Christian doctrine and hymns of her devout Protestant grandparents in Great Village (and her paternal grandparents briefly in Boston), she would cast her family, such as it was, as "nice watery Baptists" ("Gwendolyn," CPr 215) though "*ice-watery*" is the cool-to-frozen sense of belief delivered in her stark story from 1937, "The Baptism."

With barbed wit she delivers the religious lay of the land in Great Village of her earliest years: "The village was divided into two camps, armed with Bibles: Baptists and Presbyterians"

¹ WU January 8-20, 1964 / PPL 861. In a postscript to this important letter she expanded on her distrust as a matter of humor, and various forms of blind self-imposition: "The good artist assumes a certain amount of sensitivity in his audience and doesn't attempt to flay himself to get sympathy or understanding. (The same way I feel the "Christians" I know suffer from bad manners—they refuse to assume that others can be good, too, and so constantly condescend without realizing it. And—now that I come to think of it—so do communists!) (PPL 864-5).

(CPr 161). Puncturing the religious ideal as a unifying principle of the human “family” with its lapsed, fragmented actuality in this little northern village, she frames doctrinal faith as a sore source of misplaced, squabbling zeal, what E.M. Forster would call in “The Caves” section of *A Passage to India*, a “poor little talkative Christianity,” whose Word splits like a pun, but not one either barricaded camp is willing to hear.²

But “good ears” (plural) she thought “a gift from God,” and urged her students (and readers) to tend them, particularly in the matter of puns, transegmental drifts and phonemic fractures, au/oral dispersions breaking down words and building a feel for the reader’s spirited activity. With her sense that “the spiritual must be felt” in poetry, she would adapt Christian literature and language across her career, its rites and symbols, parables and imperatives (VSC 72.2). Many of her most celebrated puns and best poems continue a conversation with this Christian language, translate and adapt it toward open-ended matters of chance, mysteries of being and becoming, in questions rather than assertions of value.

She expressed surprise to Joseph Summers, scholar of the poet dearest to her heart, George Herbert, that he was “a believer,” for instance, while observing “how really concerned” Herbert was “with all those insoluble and endlessly nagging problems of man’s relationship to God,” passionately adding “It is *real*. – It was real and it has kept on being and it always will be [...] it is still real for all of us, after all.”³

Bishop’s interrogative mode is sometimes recognizably “religious,” as when Elizabeth, in “In the Waiting Room” wonders “How had I come to be here?” or “Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone? / What similarities [...] held us all together / or made us all just one?” or when

² Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 166.

³ Summers, “George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop,” *George Herbert Journal* 18.1-2 (1995), 53-54. Bishop’s accent on the *questions* goes hand-in-hand with her wariness of a “Summers-Tuve, *What Herbert really meant* line” (with Vassar professor Rosemond Tuve), that she told Lowell (in May 1955) “rather bleeds the life out of him, as though his lines really were stones that could be fitted together to build a temple without flaw or despair” (WIA 157-58).

the speaker of “Anaphora” seeks a source of morning sounds, “Where is the music coming from, the energy?” or when her Crusoe, high on home-brew, plays his flute and dances and shouts “Home-made, home-made! But aren’t we all?” (CP 161, 52, 164). The sheer amount of questioning in Bishop’s poems is notable for the relatively few that she published—by rough count some 130 questions across 89 published poems—and would appear content to gather whatever tenuous community may form around such open-ended constellations that a question admits, perhaps never more glorious than in the transient epiphany of “The Moose”: “Why do we feel / (we *all* feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?” (CP 173). If joy has a religious component, she underlines it as a gathering in “sensation,” a taste-able *weal* an animal might scent as well. But “why do we feel...?”—she leaves that end open, recognizing the incommensurability of knowing, and having an *experience*, which was, as Emerson and James also emphasized, the far juicier thing, a matter of passionate attention.⁴

It is undeniable that religious questioning lent texture and gravity to her imagination, though it also provoked fractious dissent and mordant retort. I am thinking of the quasi-liturgical “Anaphora,” of the military-religious fable “Roosters,” the Christian symbolism of “The Fish,” the admonishment of “Love Lies Sleeping,” the adaptation of “A Miracle for Breakfast” and quasi-allegories “The Unbeliever” and “The Weed” in her first collection; the religious allusions overlapping signs of sexual awakening in “A Cold Spring,” the dwelling upon “infant sight” in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” the scattering of spiritual “correspondences” in “The Bight,” and another, more liturgical, sweep of “At the Fishhouses,” as well as the bitter history of “Brazil, January 1, 1502” and playful engagement “Twelfth

⁴ Cf. Elisa New in *The Line’s Eye: Poetic Experience and American Sight* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998): “In the end, for James, as for Dewey and the more sapient Emerson, the great thing is this *having* of experiences, which—all concur—only comes to those who, like the artist, lend themselves as faithful and invested, rather than detached and disinvested, attendants on events” (13).

Morning; or What You Will” in her second and third; and the commuting of religious language in “The Waiting Room,” and “Crusoe in England,” “The End of March” and “Sonnet” among her later poems. Regarding the thickness of religious reference in her work, C.K. Doreski usefully reminds us how the “old correspondences” littering even her last volume, *Geography III*, can “easily lure us into misreading, searching for poems definable by cultural or political communities Bishop herself rejects.”⁵ Subverting restrictive identities, she casts her readers toward the shifting middle ground of experience, especially the mysteries of its more liminal fringes.

As it comes to divisive *doxa*, Bishop claimed an interloper between those two armed Great Village “camps” as a familial inheritance, writing to Anne Stevenson with evident pleasure of her maternal grandfather who refused to be singly conscripted: “My grandfather went to two churches: one Presbyterian, one Baptist. He’d go to one church in the morning and one in the afternoon. So I’m full of hymns” (WU March 6, 1964). Full of *him*, too, as a camp-crasher, she keeps a sense of the sacred tipping into the profane and quotidian—and vice versa—in the laughable off-balances she described in this letter to Robert Lowell from Brazil in 1955:

here, particularly, one feels more and more disgusted with the Catholic Church, I’m afraid. Although a couple of my best and brightest friends are very Catholic. I wish I had the 39 articles on hand. I also wish I could go back to being a Baptist! —not that I ever was one—I believe now that complete agnosticism and straddling the fence on everything is my natural posture—although I wish it weren’t. (WIA 161)

Wending her way back to the Baptist she never was, she remains also comically akimbo by “straddling the fence on everything.” It recalls belief (and non-) to the body and its proprioceptive capacities and its personal investments in the senses, a crucial component of her wordplay. So too does the sturdy, sensible work of a “complete agnosticism” submit serious

⁵ Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 63.

endeavor and respect for mysteries and relations beyond rational cognition.⁶ In one of those straddling acts, as guest editor of *The Poetry Pilot* in 1964, she steered the secular vehicle toward her favorite hymns, and their spiritual imperatives. “My reasons for admiring these hymns” she half-apologetically assured, “have almost nothing to do with theology and possibly as much to do with music as with poetry, since I can’t separate the words from their familiar tunes” (WU and VSC). And yet being stripped of their “familiar tunes” may have made for a fresh appraisal of those imperatives for praise and assent, for gladness sacrificing mourning, patience, renunciation, if not otherworldly reward.⁷

The dominant critical line reads such engagements and the density of religious reference in her poems in terms of an unfortunate “religious nostalgia,” with comments that can verge on the condescending, as when Jeredith Merrin finds them “permeated by religious nostalgia, and haunted by what she called the ‘old correspondences,’” making Bishop over into a “victim of her own belatedness, her archaic codes and assumptions.”⁸ Similarly, Laurel Corelle finds the formal structures of her poems and their language to mark a “linguistic and psychological entrapment,” their speakers held “unwitting captive of a system of belief to which [they] no longer subscribe[], but whose semantics continue to shape [their] imaginative and emotional frames of reference.”⁹ Helen Vendler first suggested that nostalgia in general terms, and Cheryl Walker submits it as a wish for religious certainties, Jeffrey Powers-Beck for unifying iconography, and Bonnie Costello imagines especially in her first collection a “haunting” and persisting “wish for transcendence and epiphany,” a search “for a supersensible meaning or authority to which she

⁶ The primary sense of *straddle*’s Germanic root, like the cognate *strive*, is “strong effort” (OED).

⁷ “The foundations of her work are recognizably Christian,” Thomas Travisano finds regarding “the virtues of humility, patience, and renunciation” (*Artistic Development* 33).

⁸ Jeredith Merrin, *An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990), 9, 10.

⁹ Laurel Snow Corelle, *A Poet’s High Argument: Elizabeth Bishop and Christianity* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2008), 45.

might submit.”¹⁰ But what is missed or minimized in repeating this prevailing narrative is her activity of adaptation and how, in her musicalized meanings, Bishop so often jokes, undercuts and disperses the very nostalgias the critics more steadfastly find.

From whatever angle of approach Bishop, “to her credit, has always been hard to ‘place,’” as David Kalstone observed, and given her canny equanimity and resistance to ideologies of all stripes, it’s unsurprising that critics find support for radically contradictory theses.¹¹ Cheryl Walker treats Bishop almost as a closet pietist illustrating Christian doctrine, while Nathan Scott finds her, quite oppositely, “the most thoroughly secular poet of her generation.”¹² Better balanced but also pulling at opposite poles, Elisa New considers Bishop the “culmination of an Edwardsian continuum” and “nourished” by the three “states of soul [awe, wonder, wit] occupying cardinal points on the Calvinist register,” while in *The Unbeliever* Robert Dale Parker finds her work firmly rooted in an unrelenting skepticism.¹³ The critic’s avid paradigms often speedily dissolve the anomaly or point of opposition that a criticism less predisposed to distrust the ultimate value of ambivalence, variation or dissent might pick out. It’s better said by John Unterecker that she’s “a poet of options and echoes,” and to grant that the

¹⁰ Helen Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly,” *World Literature Today* 51.1 (Winter 1977); Walker, *God and Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 17; Powers-Beck, “‘Time to Plant Tears’: Elizabeth Bishop’s Seminary of Tears,” *South Atlantic Review* 60.4 (November 1995), 82; Costello, *Questions* 91.

¹¹ Kalstone, *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 12.

¹² Walker cites Bishop as “an outspoken critic of Christianity” without exploring the terms of critique, proposing rather to undertake a series of “meditations on religion and poetry” to “reexamine some traditional Christian concepts such as sin and spiritual love, using the life and poetry of Elizabeth Bishop for inspiration” (2). Bishop’s ironies, antithetical words and images are ignored, and the machinery of her interpretation again and again tilts away from Bishop’s hard-won, refractive ambiguity. Oppositely, in his chapter on Bishop in his *Visions of Presence in Modern American Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), Nathan Scott denies the influence outright, finding her poetry “unregulated by any metaphysic wherewith the things and creatures of earth might be ordered into a system of total meaning” (133).

¹³ New, “Awe, Wonder and Wit: Elizabeth Bishop and the Modernization of the Calvinist Mood,” in *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*, ed. Aliko Barnstone et al. (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1997), 112; Parker, *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988).

“ability to see and describe things from two or more perspectives with clarity and generosity” as Laurel Corelle stresses, “is an indispensable element of Bishop’s work.”¹⁴

Bishop draws on the rhetorical traditions of the Bible and its literary afterlife for its “affective resonance,” Corelle finds, and I propose to treat questions of resonance a bit more literally, in words’ reverberant adventures and transitions beyond the linguistic formulations which give rise to them (12). Similarly, where New folds Bishop’s limber wit into a Calvinist rubric of existential absurdity and dread, “the ludicrousness—of our confidence in stability,” I turn the question of existential instability toward the agitations and instabilities of reading print (“Awe” 121). Bishop’s sense of the spiritual that must be *felt* is of a piece with these sensed instabilities and hazarded balances, the throbbing “options and echoes” of puns and otherwise sliding lexical intervals, liminal solicitations, and the bodily contingencies in which they oscillate. The challenge of her “proliferal style” is to humor liminal potencies, and it means drawing New’s claim that “deep time” is “one of Bishop’s chief interests as a poet” up into another even more pressing for her poetics, I think, of the travelling threshold in sounding rhythms of felt thinking, surfing the surfaces of an echoing field (“Awe” 122).

She quite often sets this proliferal wit directly against the prerogatives of institutional religion, one aspect of which is readily apparent in what she recorded of her visit to St. Peter’s in 1937: “I never had so clear an idea before of the vast commerce, *the tides of gold*, of the church,” she wrote in her travel notebook, “and I never disliked it so much” (LM 130). Against this weighty booty of pious tithing, commercial plunder and “Roman pomposity” she posed a pre-Christian partiality: “I like Etruscan things because they are simple, ‘free,’ cheerful, and often

¹⁴ Unterecker, “Elizabeth Bishop,” *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, ed. Leonard Unger, Supplement I (New York: Scribner’s, 1979), 87; Corelle finds Bishop’s “love of scripture” was not only compatible but often put subversively to work in her “consistent and substantial skepticism toward organized religion generally and Christianity specifically” (10, 11).

humorous.”¹⁵ Her spiritual sensibility is like that too, opposed to the weighty chains of hierarchical control that she also figured during her earlier stay in Douarnenez, Brittany, where she saw, “The Bible kept chained in the church like a mythical beast,” though its unleashing may portend no better (VSC 72A.2). The breezy scene at St. Peters, that monumental hub of Christian authority, composed for her poem of reading-and-travel, “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” can begin to suggest her manners of subversion both overt and oblique:

And at St. Peters the wind blew and the sun shone madly.
Rapidly, purposefully, the Collegians marched in lines,
crisscrossing the great square with black, like ants. (CP 58)

This stern march uneasily teases an Orthodox toeing of the line of militaristic rigor, made strange under that “madly” shining sun, even before the form is rendered formic. But if the play delivers a blow to otherworldly hubris it also reaches beyond the image both as a possible linguistic rebus, and in subtle surface events of sound.

As black ants, the common *carpenter*, they might conjure that most *uncommon* of carpenters with whom these stolid criss-crossers are supposed to square. It would overlay one prophetic “carpenter” who builds with another that ‘bores.’ *Is* there a rebus here? Some of her very earliest poems like “Behind Stowe” and “To a Tree” suggest yes, though neither here nor there could we devise anything like “proof.” But taking a cue from the windy image and that mad sun we might recall Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “The wind bloweth where it listeth”—where it likes, where it pleases—“and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and wither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8), which makes this linear march perhaps even more suspect. We may feel the reading line just slightly disheveled as well with certain ear-rationalities, like the “blue” that blows easily into the sunny

¹⁵ LM 131. See <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=etruscan+objects&qpv=etruscan+objects&FORM=IGRE#> for a variety of Etruscan objects, which are indeed “often humorous,” with people and animals portrayed with teasing tongues and in surprising positions, versus the intently replicated poses of suffering and piety in Roman art.

scene, the “grey” phonemically infiltrating “the great square” (it is), the strict *allegiance* the word “Collegians” loosely conveys—bringing eccentric pleasure of meanings that moves in what “thou hearest” (and sayest). And at that punchline juncture “like ants” a tactile catch against the grain of ocular march dangles “(c)ant” that accents the perfunctory and mechanical, a repetition “without genuine expression or sentiment.” It takes aim at a busy but “false religion” that Emerson reminds is the oldest job of the comic to demolish: “In religion, the sentiment is all, the ritual or ceremony indifferent,” he signaled in “The Comic,” “But the inertia of men inclines them, when the sentiment sleeps, to imitate that thing it did; it goes through the ceremony omitting only the will, makes the mistake of the wig for the head, the clothes for the man.”¹⁶ It is this pivoting of will upon a musically provoked chance that Bishop’s proliferal wit would instigate, the taking up of possibilities floating a “sudden movement” that turns “up or over” a novel perspective (OED, *cant*).

Bishop allied herself with thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic who blasted religious pieties to save this more comic sense of spirit. Kierkegaard in particular would have provided her a fine model for her anarchic operations as well as a lucid defense of the moving uses of irony and humor, and the ever-presence of comic-sacred possibility.¹⁷ She cheerfully assented to his system-crashing belief in the implacable value of the absolute in any moment that Bergson, Emerson, Thoreau and James would also emphasize, and concurred that the more attentive one is

¹⁶ Emerson, *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2 (New York: Wise & Co, 1929), 777-78.

¹⁷ In the first volume of his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1992), Kierkegaard writes of “three spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Two boundary zones correspond to these three: irony, constituting the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical; humor, as the boundary that separates the ethical from the religious,” and earlier he had explained how humor itself will not allow one to remain in the boundary zone but will push one towards the religious: “if the individual regards the comical as the highest, then his own comic consciousness is ipso facto lower; for the comical always lies in a contradiction, and if the comical itself is the highest, there is lacking the contradiction in which the comical consists, and in which it makes its showing” (77, 74). With that the comic trap is sprung: it is not possible to accept the ubiquitous inevitability of comedy without also invoking the Holy for whom all must appear as wholly other than it does for us.

to one's own finite freedom and relations beyond doctrinal encrustations emotional fixations, and habit, the more comic consciousness comes into view. "Here is the difficulty," Kierkegaard posited in his fragmentary *Unscientific Postscript*, "For if, in disingenuousness or thoughtlessness or in breathless haste to get the System finished, we let this *one thought* slip away from us, it is in all simplicity, sufficient to decide that no existential system is possible" (112, my emphasis). It is not just that Bishop was similarly wary of systematic "programs," but was suspicious even of static images, lyrical "thoughts" or "emotions" confessed or "recollected in tranquility" with no explosive *report*, vibrant undermining in chances of change.

Thinking his audience suffered from too much knowledge, too much self-serving "reason" blocking movements of passionate attention, Kierkegaard considered his art of tireless irony, elaborate satire and parody and subtle deconstruction to be the ethical art of *taking away*, especially from those pastors and assistant professors of the crucifixion that would annul the immediate, and "bamboozle God world-historically and systematically" (*Concluding 181*). "One cannot live on nothing," begins a fine instance of this sleight-of-hand demolition:

One hears this so often, especially from pastors.
And the pastors are the very ones who perform this feat: Christianity does not exist at all—yet they live on it.¹⁸

In renaming the state of inert, wooden "Christendom" as he found it in 19th-century Copenhagen "nothing," Kierkegaard snatches it back from claspings or chaining hands, and one must wrest from this demolition a question: what *else*, could "Christianity" mean? To *that* there is no pat answer, and responsibility for this existential question rests roundly on the reader. If Kierkegaard held in reserve an underlying Protestant faith that Bishop did not precisely share, they nevertheless both posed a radical openness to mystery, and to those questions that Heidegger

¹⁸ *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 205.

called “the piety of thinking,” as more fitting response to a pluralistic universe utterly incommensurable with reason and the insularities creedal clubbishness.

An anarchic blast from “Seven Days Monologue” (*Con Spirito*, 1933) brings an implacable *boum* upon that “little talkative Christianity,” catching out an articling congregation:

One man had blown up a whole Episcopalian church, timing it particularly so that just as all mouths were opened on the words, “We praise Thee, oh Lord. We acknowledge Thee to be the—” bang, crash, thud. (1933, VSC 88.1)

We’ll surprisingly find wordplay to subtend this blast in the next chapter, but may note here that the timing, and language, is exact, and we may pause here to ask: why “*Episcopalian*”? Drawing the congregation “under the authority of a Bishop,” does this un-churching enact or rebel against authority? Does it seek to explode the religious legacies inhering in our author’s very name—or own a still more complex nexus?¹⁹ The blast suspends the *Te Deum*’s next line, “All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting,” as someone evidently begs to differ, we guess, but perhaps also to recall that *other*, older face—Father ever-blasting?—of this awful object of worship. Where Lord-praising is in-laid with razing ordnance a question floats free: is it just such perverse, obliterating contingency, utterly heedless of merit, that any worship worth the word must war with or compass? Is that, too, a measure of the absolute in any moment? Perhaps in such a manner Bishop may share that faith which, as Kierkegaard wrote, “is *always* in mortal danger in that collision of the infinite and the finite that is precisely a mortal danger for one who is composed of both” (*Concluding* 233). At any rate the utter abruption of “We acknowledge Thee to be *the...*” appends us with a word whose sole purpose is to anticipate the next *particular*

¹⁹ OED. The *Con Spirito* pieces were published anonymously, though this rebus signs Bishop’s name loud and clear. Not only did she inherit a pointedly religious “Christian” name, but “Elizabeth” is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *Elisheva*, meaning “God’s promise” or “I am the daughter of God” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth>). But the explosion draws on the chances of a familial inheritance, or burden bound up with the religious, “*Boomer*” being the pronunciation of her mother’s maiden name, Bulmer.

something to come, in line with her Protestantism of temperament, if not of creed, and pragmatist appreciation for possibility.

The weight of Bishop's religious inheritance as a burden to be shed is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than "The Baptism" (1937), her first published story after graduating from Vassar. Of it George Lensing writes, "Though she had not been a churchgoer except during her childhood years, the story appears to be a kind of farewell to the religion of her devout grandparents in Nova Scotia."²⁰ Fond it is not. Decidedly dour, it's more a religious horror story. Menaced by extremes of salvation and damnation, disturbing fervor and guilt, and the divisions of doctrinal ground in those opposing Protestant "camps," both "armed with Bibles," the human middle of mutual concern is sadly occluded. Three orphaned sisters at the story's center (Presbyterian, but with "friends in both camps") are worried about surviving a long winter, while the youngest, most fragile and evidently impressionable of the three, Lucy, grows increasingly fanatical as the winter wears on. Keeping a "record of spiritual progress," spending hours in prayer on the cold wood floor, she is overwhelmed both with wracking guilt and blinding and burning visions, first in the freezing, glitteringly sunlit snow on her way to get wood from the woodshed:

She was staring at the blinding dazzle the sun made on the ice glaze over the next field. She seemed to be humming a little, and the glaring strip made her half shut her eyes. Emma had to take hold of her hand before she would pay any attention. Speaking wasn't enough. (CPr 164)

Her favorite hymn, we're earlier told, is "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings," and here gentle surprise has turned visual fixation (CPr 162). Perhaps humming that hymn, absorbed in the glittering distance of "the next field," she cannot hear her near sister who

²⁰ Lensing, "Elizabeth Bishop and Flannery O'Connor: Minding and Mending a Fallen World," *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century*, eds. Angus Cleghorn et al. (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012), 192.

comes searching, and with a horror story's foreboding the narrator adds "It was the night of the day after this that the strange things began to happen" (CPr 164).

Lucy cannot pray long enough to please herself, keeps asking her sisters "if she were good enough," and after extended bouts of crying over her soul and a terrible storm splintering the trees she hears Christ's voice near her bed and writes in her journal: "At last, at last, I know my own mind... or rather I have given it up completely. Now I am going to join the church as soon as I can. But I am going to join the *Baptist* church, and I must not tell Flora and Emma beforehand. I cannot eat, I am so happy" (CPr 165). So happy, indeed, that she gleefully ignores her sisters' wish to sleep, pulling them from bed to pray on the cold floor without even the comfort of a rug, saying "Why do we need rugs when we have all Christ's love to warm our hearts?" and she increasingly neglects her own already feeble body (CPr 166). Alternately warmed by Christ's love and the threat of hellfire at her feet, she heeds the stilted call of doctrine, coming to "believe[] ardently in the use of total immersion as practiced by the Baptists, according to their conception of the methods of John the Baptist" (CPr 166). Anxious of her soul that threatens to be "eternally lost," she insists on being baptized with the river's first spring thaw. She had imagined the water would be "crystal clear, or pale blue" but finds it lamentably "muddy" and "dark brown," vaguely fecal, and urinary "with spots of yellow foam" (CPr 168, 169)—and so cold it kills her.

The story's pervading chill has to do not only with Lucy's fanaticism and deterioration, but an unnervingly flat, humorless tone in which relations and conversation are commandeered by doctrine, disturbingly delivered first when Lucy gives up her mind completely to Jesus, then at the baptism when the minister holds "a clean folded handkerchief to put over Lucy's mouth at the right minute" and as the choir sings "I am coming, Lord, coming now to Thee" takes her

down “without a movement,” mute and moribund (CPr 169). There are no overt judgments, the narrator rather letting such images and Lucy’s susceptible, self-destructive fanaticism ironize her desires. After her conversion but before the icy baptism Lucy sees God on the kitchen stove: “God, God sat on the kitchen stove and glowed, burned, filing all the kitchen with delicious heat and a scent of grease and sweetness [...] His beautiful glowing bulk was rayed like a sunflower. It lit up Flora’s and Emma’s faces on either side of the stove. The stove could not burn him.”²¹ “His feet are in hell,” she remarks, which perversely cheers her. While suffering the fever from her baptism Lucy sees God glowing there again, but this time evoking a terrible scream, even before she burns “her right hand badly” reaching for him in a hysterical confusion of horror and attraction. The sisters “got the doctor, but the next night Lucy died, calling their names as she did so” (CPr 169-70).

Bishop would stage such appalling crossovers of belief and the body more obliquely but just as certainly some twenty years later in “The Armadillo,” written in Brazil where fire balloons, first beautifully “rising toward a saint / still honored in these parts” splatter in a downdraft “like an egg of fire” scorching an “ancient owls’ nest,” sending the titular armadillo skittering off, and rendering a baby rabbit “a handful of intangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes,” generating the speaker’s cry, “*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!*” (CPr 104). In “The Baptism” Lucy’s late return to her sisters—calling on them, not God—and the hint of a more human trace of mystery between that burning “sunflower” and the “Flora” it illuminates, makes her doctrinally-motivated death all the more awful. No blithe irony, it suggests a desperately painful, personal nexus of domestic rupture and otherworldly fervor. Bishop’s disastrous early childhood—“almost good enough for the text-books” she’d later joke—is commonly recounted,

²¹ CPr 167. The image suggests to Laurel Corelle the tradition of Christian martyrdom poetry, “written to galvanize the faithful for their own martyrdom at the stake. There is something wickedly humorous, therefore,” she comments, “in Bishop’s image of God as a crisping steak” (47).

her father dying from Bright's disease when she was eight months old, and her mother unable to come out of mourning.²² The dizzying instability of these early years Bishop sketches in "In the Village" (that we take up in chapter four), with the mother in and out of institutions, who disappears for good with a scream, and for the next 17 years Elizabeth did not see her until her death in May 1934, just weeks before her Vassar graduation.

This much the letters tell. But what is left out of the letters to Stevenson and just barely hinted at in "In the Village" seems to me as crucial as what they disclose. In Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau's oral biography, Gertrude's sister Grace recounts that as Gertrude became increasingly deranged she also grew more and more fanatical in her belief in a Christian God, Election and Damnation, Heaven and Hell, suggesting such doctrine to be tied up with Bishop's bodily loss of her mother.²³ Though Fountain and Brazeau cite as catalyst for "The Baptism" the death of two girls in the village "who were baptized in cold water and died from the chill," it is hard not to read Lucy's fate, given these links with Bishop's own abandonment, as hovering uncomfortably between an attempt at compassion and a kind of punishment fantasy, with the later decidedly gaining the upper hand (11). Such a perspective, at any rate, provides a deeper bite to Laurel Snow's observation that the church in this grim tale "fails to fulfill its mission of mercy even among its own" (48).

Bishop's bitterness with "otherworldly" fixation is anyway unmistakable. Longing, guilt and dogma occupy Lucy while that transitionally habitable but feelingly shared middle ground

²² "Although I think I have a prize 'unhappy childhood, almost good enough for the text-books,' she wrote to Stevenson, "—please don't think I dote on it.—almost everyone has had, anyway—and since then I have been lucky in many ways" (WU March 6, 1964). See Seamus Heaney essay "Counting to a Hundred," in *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), on the spiritual achievement of Bishop's "not doting."

²³ Fountain and Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: an Oral Biography* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994), 4-5. As early as 1914, Grace notes that she "became very religious" (4) and by 1916 remained in an insane asylum in Nova Scotia. Among Bishop critics only Cheryl Walker (10) has mentioned this significant fact that helps explain, for her, why Bishop was irrationally "angered and frightened by those who were too fervently evangelical about their religious beliefs" (10).

withers between the sisters, and the split village. Her fervor obscures, as dogma does, the local need, and grief, as when Mrs. Peppard reveals the death of her sister's baby and in place of caring words, or touch, or any sign of genuine warmth or compassion, instead "they discussed infant damnation at some length" (CPr 161). Blunting or blocking death's and grief's acute actuality, intellectual doctrine, or the System (and not a terribly comforting one at that), proves not only woefully inadequate but quietly plants the insidious seed of Lucy's onset of guilt, soul-obsession and disastrous baptism. "The day she was buried," we're informed "was the first pleasant day in April, and the village turned out very well, in spite of the fact that the roads were deep with mud" (CPr 170). There's no insinuation that anyone's faith has been shaken, but for the writer (reader) of these lines, the whole split, religious village "turned (d)ou(b)t."

The few glimmers of wit in the grim tale are aimed at the exporters of faith, emerging also from within the visual evidence of their success. Revisiting the military metaphor between the baby's and Lucy's death, Bishop casts a half-deaf "mustached" "Miss Gillespie" back from India "on furlough," who in a public talk doesn't talk but "almost shouted, for hours about her lifework" (CPr 163). (One might find Ambrose Bierce's diabolical definition of "certainty" as "being mistaken at the top of one's voice," and "Christian" as "One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the needs of his neighbor" much to the piercing point.²⁴) Miss Gillespie's loud, long-winded exposition ends when she passes around suspiciously unconvincing photos of her conversions that "represented" (doubtful word)

gentle-faced boys and young men, dressed in pure-white loincloths and earrings. Next, the same boys and young men were shown, in soiled striped trousers and shirts worn with the tails outside. There were a few photographs of women, blurred as they raised a hand to hide their faces, or backed away from the camera's Christian eye. (CPr 163)

²⁴ Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (Owings Mills, MD: Stemmer House, 1978), 36, 37.

In this incarnation faith is framed as convertible costume, and even without their being “soiled,” those trousers and shirts with evolutionary “tails” laughably attached seem both a dubious improvement over their loincloths and ludicrous proof of the mission’s success. It is quite explicitly to “mistake . . . the wig for the head, the clothes for the man,” as Emerson said, but this flimsy skin is of course all this monocular “camera’s Christian eye” can capture, all Miss Gillespie can espy. In those traces of motion, a blurred changing of field in resistance to specular evidence and doctrinal conscription, Bishop figures an aspect of her own evolving poetic project already well underway.

“Our audience eyes”: Rapacious Gazes

Even in boarding school Bishop had begun to distance herself in print from her Christian inheritance and, by her time at Vassar, wielded a wicked satirical blade against pernicious religious nostalgias, mechanical ritual, poses of knowing and other emotional and otherworldly fixities. If Stevens had shown in poems such as “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” how a (k)nave-built “haunted heaven” and “hankering for hymns” could be converted into gentle, or not so gentle mockery, Bishop’s earliest satire converts Hopkinsian density and intensity to the task (SCP 59). Published with that Episcopalian blast in *Con Spirito*, her “Hymn to the Virgin” (April 1933) explodes a venerable tradition to vent against otherworldly lust first staged as a theater piece:

Pull back the curtains, quick now that we’ve caught the mood of
Adoration’s shamefaced exposé and brazen knee-bending.
Let’s see, and quick about it, God’s-beard, Christ’s crown, baby-brood of
Strawberry ice-cream colored cherubim, tin-winged, ascending
Chub-toes a’ dangle earthwards, fat-fists a-pat-a-cake for Thee, oh wooed of
Erstwhile eye-raised mortals! Show where you’ve been spending
Storage years in that great attic, all the red plush portieres food of
Sacramenting moths, and all the gilded ropes and tassels spotted

By the doers-of-the-Word flies, midst magnificence and plunder rotted! (CP 221)

With particularly Protestant disdain Bishop clots the lines with the clichéd accoutrements of a moody, brooding faith of impatient voyeurs. “Pull back the curtains... Let’s see... Show....”

Along with a touch of “rouging rust” below, Bishop wields scriptural wisdom against these heavily invested believers: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal” (Matthew 6:19). It turns Jesus’ injunction regarding earthly versus heavenly treasures toward treasured faith itself. While the moths and flies feast, these starved believers bid the passé parade of “God’s-beard, Christ’s crown” and “oh wooed” Mary (one gathers a wood one will do) with her “baby-brood” of cherubim like a pack of brats tipping toward a tantrum.

When that falls flat they try a different approach, bidding “faith’s fall’n paraphernalia rise!” like illusionists, and when Mary still fails to appear they let slip their mechanical savvy with “We aeroplane-wise raise our eyes!” That pose of expectant, not-so-patient waiting insinuates in its lift the tumescent pressures building toward this missing Mary, this need to *see* overlapped also with a knowing-telling *not* to be refused:

We know a thing or two
 Mary, Mary,
 Which we will tell to You,
 Mary, Mary.

As you once housed the Truth
 Belly-within,
 Whom else should we tell it to,
 You, without-sin?
 [. . .]

Ah! wouldst not, wax-faced, wooden-bodied one, have us to worship us-wise?
 Turn not aside Thy pretty-painted face, parade and meet our audience-eyes you must.
 [. . .] we bear ark-like our great trust.
 What, take it not? Oh petulant and cranky princess, shall we force it on Thee lust-wise?
 We cannot bear to draw the curtains back, leave Thee to barrenness and rouging rust.

Come, Blessed Mary, hear our prayer!
Come, Blessed Mary, stand on air—
Rorate coeli desuper! (CP 222)

Self-whipped to that orgasmic edged, pulling out their learned Latin, these knowing “doers of the Word” aim a stiff inquisitional vehemence at the icon of spiritual Truth. They’re a bit like Stevens’ “disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed, / Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade, / Proud of such novelties of the sublime,” but about to turn their disaffection on this “wax-faced, wooden-bodied... pretty-painted” Mary (SCP 59).

Both blast “high-toned,” outmoded belief, but for Bishop frigidity is hardly the issue. Where Stevens wallops this proud egotistical sublime with the slapstick falling of “Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,” Bishop sustains a grotesque inquisitional unease. Her nursery rhyme-invoking “Mary, Mary” insinuates, beyond these believers’ infantile neediness, a historical-political nexus in which “spiritual” prerogatives were bloodily abused. The well-known rhyme is short and sweet:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockle shells
And pretty maids all in a row.

Less well-known is that it likely refers to the murderous papist Queen Mary I of England, Bloody Mary, whose “garden gr[ew]” with instruments of torture and execution, expressly for Protestants, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and printers of the first English Bible.²⁵ The latter were the first to be burned at the stake, followed by hundreds of others that would not admit, even with great *encouragement*, the True faith. It gives a more terrible turn to these high-toned knowers about to thrust it “lust-wise” upon a barren Mary. And so though

²⁵ Cf. http://www.rhymes.org.uk/mary_mary_quite_contrary.htm; and <http://www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/queen-mary.html>. “Silver bells” are nicely designed to crush fingers, “cockle shells” testicles, and “pretty maids” (maidens) for execution. The latter site suggests also Catholic nuns all nicely aligned.

certainly the gendered pun on “hymn” is in full tilt, this added slant expands the aim of this “shamefaced exposé” toward political abuses in the Word’s wielding and the fanatical pose (or *uses* of the pose) of “knowing,” a pose not predicated upon one’s genitalia. All that’s left of “Christian” virtues in the poem is this thorny crown.

If “Blessed Mary” gets knocked down to a bloody Tudor queen, then mere “petulant and cranky princess” under the press of a “great trust,” and finally washed up (in the need to keep her from “barrenness”) as a terribly barren “baroness,” these besotted believers fall farther. Rather than suffer unrequital from this “pretty-painted” object they devolve into a pack of barking curs where they aver “we bear ark-like / our great trust.” And worse, from the devolution of that sticky, thickly alliterative clash of ‘*ar*’s, their polite invitation to rape, “shall we force it on Thee, lust-wise?” has these hounds about to mount and impale themselves upon the rotted icon. We take up more explicitly her wish to break down the margins of poetry, as she felt Hopkins did, “blurring the edges with a kind of vibration and keeping the atmosphere fresh and astir” in the next chapter, but here can see how she turns his vocative intensity to a ruthless critique of faith’s fanatical excess.²⁶ It is the “kind of vibration” we may feel, for instance, where that doggish “great trust” auto-erodes in a phonemic stream to inflict the very “rouging *rust*” to which they say they “cannot bear” to leave her. Such an oxidized “great [*r*]ust” inflicts a kind of auto-critique in no need of so much “tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk” from above—though Stevens was no less a devious arranger of those erosions.²⁷ The “well-stuffed,” muzzy-bellied “disaffected flagellants,” for instance, ridiculed for their self-displaying self-abasement, vibrate with more comic “evil” of “disaffected *flatulence*.” Such an event trusts to a more local audacity of thinking, what he poses in the poem as “our bawdiness” (and body-ness) “Unpurged by

²⁶ Bishop, “Gerard Manley Hopkins: Some Notes on Timing in His Poetry,” PPL 667.

²⁷ He’d later string up Christ as a hapless marionette, a grotesque “old fantouche” attached to rusty wires, with “his eye / A-cock at the cross-piece on a pole / Supporting heavy cables, slung / Through Oxidia” (1937, SCP 181-2).

epitaph” (SCP 59). That theme is grotesquely extended in Bishop’s believers who will not let a retired Mary rest in her sinless-ness, but as it concerns the epitaphic aspect of print, Bishop (as Stevens) would continually steep readers in the feel of its bawdy, bodily oscillations.

Her vibrating sound-scape adds comic possibility to their dour fixations, leaving no idol unscathed. In it “Christ’s crown” is rendered sonically *scroungy*, sordid and shabby. And even at the specular opening gambit for a comfortably anthropomorphic god, “Let’s see, and quick about it, God’s beard,” God is audibly “speared” (whether speared dead or just punctured), and the insistent bidding that “faith’s fall’n paraphernalia rise!” *in toto* oneirically spikes as “nail yar eyes.” Grotesque as the ocular slit in Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) but only in a reader’s foreign ear, struck from the phonemic stream, such a spike accents the bullying up-thrust of this belief as replaying, even taking up a notch, their own brutal Crucifixion. Bishop indeed offers the scene outright in the *nowest* moment of the poem, where the fixated faith in need of “pure portals” for these cock-eyed, “(ire)-raised mortals,” enacts a fantasied requital:

We mortals //
Intrust now wistfully
 Into thy tender side
Our Truth, to keep till it
 Gets itself crucified. (CP 221)

Where “Our Truth” is possessed and “now wistfully” is in-trusted, a “tender sigh” receives the full thrust of “Dour Truth.”²⁸ This extended, ruthless satire on repugnant knowingness, rapacious gazes, and nostalgic fixation lays out several lines of critique Bishop would continue to take up, if in less frontal assaults. Though she’d later regret publishing the poem more broadly—her first post-Vassar, publication in the fall of 1934 in *The Magazine*—in defending its excess from the charge of blasphemy, she clarified its target: “I was writing of the people who can’t leave things

²⁸ It turns a speared Christ’s odd invitation in George Herbert’s “The Bag”—“And straight he turn’d, and to his brethren cry’d, / If you have any thing to send or write [...] here is room, / Unto my Father’s hands and sight, Beleeve me, it shall safely come” (H 151)—virulently into an only dreamed consent, and upon an inert idol.

to retire peacefully, who ‘know a thing or two’ . . . really it’s supposed to be quite sad.”²⁹ Sad, that is, with happiness of happenstance. Opening against the deadly collective chorus of made-up minds, “unpurged by epitaph,” it begins to suggest her manner of staging in poems of all sorts, a contrapuntal drama for “audience eyes” (L. *audire*, “to hear”) in which “fictive things” livingly “wink as they will” (SCP 59)—or yodel!—what Virginia Woolf called (and enacted in) “the flickering moth-wing quiver of words” in *The Waves*—all bodily borne, and thankfully nothing one can build a camp around.

A heavy nexus of bodies and religious belief bears upon “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” begun in January 1952 soon after Bishop arrived in Brazil, though not published until January 1960 in the *New Yorker*. It allies Christianity with imperial power and sexuality without an out of satirical distance. “Januaries, nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs,” it opens, “every square inch filling in with foliage,” and the following “filling in” of this abundant Eden is a dazzle of lavish color, of leaves “blue, blue-green, and olive,” ferns “in silver-gray relief, and flowers “purple, yellow, two yellows, pink, / rust red and greenish white” (CP 91). Just that “rust red” intimates any bit of what these eyes first find all bright and “fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame” to be made of decay—but the corrosion that comes seems of a moral sort (*rust* n1 OED), of something secret, withheld:

and perching there in profile, beaks agape
the big symbolic birds keep quiet,
each showing only half his puffed and padded,
pure-colored or spotted breast.
Still in the foreground there is Sin:
five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.
The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts
splattered and overlapping,
threatened from underneath by moss,
in lovely hell-green flames,

²⁹ OA 11. “I wish to goodness I hadn’t let it get printed,” she wrote Donald Stanford. Stanford, “From the Letters of Elizabeth Bishop, 1933-1934.” *Verse* 4.3 (November 1987), 22.

attacked above
by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,
“one leaf yes and one leaf no” (in Portuguese). (CP 91)

In this new regime of grave ideality gaily tapestried, nature takes on a dire aspect of constant assault, an allegorical imposition of heavenly ladders and-hell-bent seductions. In it the inert, “massy rocks” take center stage, a petrified Christian ideality hinted in that adjective. The kaleidoscopic superabundance comes down to this ostensibly purifying rite of Mass as means of resistance and transcendental gateway, and seemingly easy as a righteous choice between “yes” and “no”—though, it’s also hinted, in need of learned translation.

This Christian view of heroic resistance to sinful, sexed nature draws down to a “wicked” scene of necessary intercourse with her:

The lizards scarcely breathe: all eyes
are on the smaller, female one, back to,
her wicked tail straight up and over,
red as a red-hot wire. (CP 92)

Perspectives of nature and culture compete right at the site of that red-glowing “wicked tail,” where the proto-Darwinian torque of impending sexual competition is taken into the cultural coding of a Christian “tale” of wickedness, though under the breath that coding is called out as “all (lies)” and can even be “read as a read-taught why are.” The clash and collusion of Christian and Darwinian paradigms is underlined in a devastating “Just so” introducing desire-driven Christians into the scene, faith-fortified, on their own errand of forcible reproduction:

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
tiny as nails, and glinting,
in creaking armor, came and found it all
not unfamiliar:
no lovers’ walks, no bowers,
no cherries to be picked, no lute music,
but corresponding, nevertheless,
to an old dream of wealth and luxury
already out of style when they left home,

wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure.
 Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L'Homme armé or some such tune,
 they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
 each out to catch an Indian for himself—
 those maddening little women who kept calling,
 calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
 and retreating, always retreating behind it. (CP 92)

The concisely inflicted equation between creaking Christians “hard as nails” and scaly lizards is given extra pinch in hearing them “hard as (s)nails, / tiny as (s)nails”) on their ostensibly God-guided mission, and all the colors of the tapestry’s fabric are washed out in the glinting of that shiny armor. That terrible, post-coital turn from “came and found it all” in New World fervor to “not unfamiliar” draws on into continuing need to re-fasten that “old dream of wealth and luxury,” and an imperial press of “pleasure” dangerously blended with discontent and the need for a forced correspondence.

Bodily embarrassment of spiritual pretensions is a central strategy of the poem. Even the opening lines pose it, as does the aural vibration of “some massy rocks,” and the drifting ambivalence of that “Directly *after* Mass” as sign of conjunctive pursuit—signaling the queerly congruent incongruence of these energies—and also how the grammatical hesitation comically devolves into an “*aft-term ass*” within dire earshot of “erectly.” By bringing such dual devotions of a sexual-spiritual pursuit, Bishop pegs the hypocrisy of 16th-century Catholicism that proposed salvation to the natives while failing to condemn the real violence inflicted by their glinting brethren with savage song (their own) stuffing their ears (“the armed man, / The armed man is to be feared”). Certainly tracing sin “to religion’s door,” as Doreski notes, “accusing Christianity of sanctioning, or worse, ignoring true sin,” the scene’s complicity is yet more deeply seeded, genetic to the myth (36). “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it,” God grants from the Garden, “and have dominion . . . over all the earth and over every living thing

that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Faithfulness to that command, that “old dream,” drives them as it does the lizards, however sorely delusive it may prove to their diminutive pomposity, and frenetic chase (at a snail’s pace). Yet with the jungle’s fatally “hanging fabric” posed to swallow them up, they hum “a bawdy popular air set to a sacred text,” as Thomas Travisano reminds, again rendering those sexual and spiritual imperatives genially congruent (*Artistic Development* 141).

And as with that “after Mass,” and “great []rust” earlier turned upon Mary, the “old dream” erodes to map its own eros and historical decompositions. From the threshold of its geminated dentals an “old ()ream,” a calling animal cry or clamor falls out, and a human wail of lamentation or distress, what we hear where “those maddening little women . . . kept calling, / calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)” At this threshold moment of animal contact it speaks also to the imperial drive of an insatiable reaching after, a violent clearing of an obstruction, and violating sexual penetration, condensing in its oscillation with clamor or lament some drives and responses, motives and effects of these symbolic animals on their sexual errands (OED). In weaving the systematic aggrandizements of Christian history and nature-swallowing doctrine in and out of aggressive sexual scenes, neither quite consummated, Bishop posits tensions overflowing the subject. Poet and reader are not immune: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes...” and the felt pique of “a rise” is immediately met “(s)ex-actly as she must have greeted theirs.” (Recall her more extended sex-act play with Poe, noted in the introduction.) The ardors of interest and expenditure follow on matters of bodily contact with text, even as the plainest statement that “The lizards scarcely breathe” on the breath’s bidding shudders into motions of “leap” and “wreathe,” a tussle of violent attraction subsiding into “sleep” and “breathe.”

Bishop was masterful at twining lexical stillness and straying motions of thought, and diametrically opposed emotions too, as in the aural peripheries of “The Prodigal.” There the outward turns overtly inward where “the bats’ uncertain staggering flight” becomes the prodigal’s “shuddering insights, beyond his control, touching him” (CP 71). And covertly we gather that action in feeling the pluralization of a scene said to be “safe and companionable as in the Ark” though pitched among “pitchforks”: “The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored” (CP 71). This adorable porcine scene staggers in the recursive swerve of “stuck pigs,” layering a terrible squeal within the cozy snores. By lending a queer, foreign ear to such things, I hope to open the conversation beyond, say, the way that Bishop “implicates herself in the lust, catches herself in the erotic spectacle she has constructed from nature,” as Costello finds in this poem of Christian conquest, but how she catches readers into it as well (*Questions* 148). She hints quite precisely at the aural means toward the close of this poem. Recalling those “photographs of women, blurred as they raised a hand to hide their faces, or backed away from the camera’s Christian eye” in “The Baptism,” these vividly sonic callings evade the press of the nails that have generated and would fasten (would *know*, would silence) this mobile, retreating, waking soundscape (CPr 163). Bishop posits these women as she posited “God” in her notebook, as “for *in*” and *foreign*, drawing in and *on* as “metaphor of metaphor of metaphor,” in which vertigo and oscillation appear to be a part of the traveler’s pact (VSC 72.1). In them Bishop renders tangible the fractious force of an undertow of sound unfunded by “higher” presence, asking a bit of visual skepticism, or lending a more dual credulity including one’s own responses drawing a positively fractious wit—whose?—to bear.

“The motion church:” In the Off-Balance

In both “Hymn” and “Brazil” the question of coercive belief presses as sexual threat, but to get a sense of a subtler ambivalence in erotic ironies we can look into the generously syncretic “Santarém,” one of Bishop’s last poems, published in the *New Yorker* February 1978. About a trip on the Amazon she’d taken some 18 years prior. In it, “God” appears as one who “knows,” though apparently no one else does, at this “conflux of two great rivers, Tapajos, Amazon, / grandly, silently flowing, flowing east” where the human surface is “full of crazy shipping— people / all apparently changing their minds, embarking,/ disembarking, rowing clumsy dories”— everyone and everything comic and agile in transition (CP 185, 186). One of the few critics to take up Bishop as an “experimental” or “postmodern” writer, Thomas Travisano introduces her “narrative postmodernism” in quoting the opening lines of this poem, “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after— how many years?”³⁰ Such a “postmodern gambit,” he finds, “de-centers the authority of each detail” that follows, calling into doubt “not just the modernist poet’s aspirations to an ordering vision, but even those more modest claims to exactitude of recollection and observation that critics both friendly and unfriendly had long since granted to be Bishop’s forte” (*Midcentury* 181). And yet her oneiric conjuring of the scene, or scenes “under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds,” is no less riveting for that epistemological qualifier, and the claim for contingency based upon it is a rather distant, diluted one.

Something else may also be afoot in these mixing rivers:

I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
Two rivers. Hadn’t two rivers sprung
from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
and they’d diverged. Here only two
and coming together. Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations

³⁰ Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), 181.

such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
—such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
in that watery, dazzling dialectic. (CP 185)

With these dichotomies Bishop consigns that most dichotomous and foundational of “literary interpretations,” with its good and evil, heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, split spirit and body, back to washing waters and notions of a “dazzling dialectic” that include the feelings of a person in the slippery “place” of language. And within this flowing locale it seems to play out a dialectic between the straight and straying, the more strictly seen and wandringly heard:

Amazon hints of visual *amazement*, and the *other* “great river” converging there, “Tapajós,” whispers of eyes covered (Sp. *tapa-ojos*) to name this real-time rhythmic experience of listening to reading’s half-blindly veering steerage.

Even if she might have been “remembering it all wrong,” she assured Jerome Mazzaro that the poem “*happened*, just like that, a real evening & a real place.”³¹ But even as fact and fiction necessarily meld in a making, the reader’s adhesion to *l’actuelle* strays feelingly, put into salient play “straight off / in that watery, dazzling dialectic,” where, abetted by neighboring *ds*, the tug of “*stra(yed)* off” may be entertained. Our tributary rivers of sound draw down to these river-like streets, “deep in dark gold river sand” where

teams of zebus plodded, gentle, proud
and *blue*, with down-curved horns and hanging ears,
pulling carts with solid wheels.
The zebus’ hooves, the people’s feet
waded in golden sand,
dampered by golden sand
so that almost the only sounds
were creaks and *shush, shush, shush*. (CP 185-6)

³¹ This April 1978 letter to Mazzaro ends with an oft-quoted consideration of what goes into (or comes out of) the making of a poem: “Well, it takes an infinite number of things coming together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, last night’s dream, experiences past and present—to make a poem. The settings, or descriptions of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts—or as close to the facts as I can write them. But, as I said, it is fascinating that my poem should arouse in you all those literary references!” (OA 621).

In those wooden-wheeled creaks (and tiniest of rivers, *creeks*), and this *shush, shush, shush*, the “distance” across which she’s “remembering” seems to have vanished, as she often stages with sound. She swerves back out with a bit of history to explain the sudden appearance of dories and oars on this part of the river (dugouts and paddles on the rest of it):

(After the Civil War some Southern families
came here; here they could still own slaves.
They left occasional blue eyes, English names,
and *oars*.) (CP 186)

“What were once facts of oppression,” Costello notes, “are absorbed into charming oddities and local color”—and literally so (*Questions* 174). But it whispers of other northern imports like sexual shame that came with those eyes in an audible dispersion of “and *doors*,” which a certain “miracle” will be heard to expose.

Among skittering “mongrel riverboats,” “clumsy dories,” “side-wheelers,” and “countless wobbling dugouts” we find a slightly sterner and stable craft, but also gaily on the go:

A dozen or so young nuns, white-habited
waved gaily from an old stern-wheeler,
getting up steam, already hung with hammocks
—off to their mission, days and days away
up God knows what lost tributary. (CP 186)

Waving with the river, and gleefully “getting up steam” with the “old stern-wheeler,” the thetic swerves excite participation, a humoring of a gaily inclusive humor. Followed all the way “up God knows what lost tributary” *their* faith may hold (that God *does* know) even as the colloquial cluelessness of “God knows what” disperses the assurance, and a lightly ironic edge rifts in a wry appraisal of this wish to “save” the “lost.” Though Bishop was especially wary of the

converting urge, having had to deflect many times its claim of concern, that at the same stroke fashions its object as damned, the irony barely disturbs the supremely catholic, syncretic mood.³²

Vagrant perspectives and bodily consummations constitute a primary humor, here, as when, drifting by in one those “countless wobbling dugouts” we find “A cow stood up in one, quite calm, / chewing her cud while being ferried, / tipping, wobbling, somewhere, to be married” (CP 186). Apart from some repeated colorings, this couplet *ferried/married* bears the poem’s only full rhyme, submitting across the wobbling a sureness of consummation—if not, exactly with *what*. The speaker’s repeated mistake of calling the Cathedral (its “belvedere / about to fall in the river”) a “church” insinuates her northern, Protestant eyes into the scene, and extends in its second instance, suggesting how the “miracle” which follows upon it turns also on questions of perspective/misprision:

A river schooner with raked masts
and violet-colored sails tacked in so close
her bowsprit seemed to touch the church

(Cathedral, rather!). A week or so before
there’d been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral’d
been struck by lightning. One tower had
a widening zigzag crack all the way down.
It was a miracle. The priest’s house right next door
had been struck, too, and his brass bed
(the only one in town) galvanized black.
Gracas a deus—he’d been in Belém. (CP 186)

³² Bishop wrote with “humor and affection” of religious people who often surrounded her, such as her neighbors and landlady in Key West, as Laurel Corelle observes, commenting, “the attention she pays to the vitality of their faith attests to her lifelong interest not only in religious questions and practices, but also in the particularities of religious expression and imagination” (6). It is the turn of those habits upon others that made her particularly uneasy. She recalled the religious fervor of Marianne Moore and her mother, for instance, whom she calls “a special woman, though somewhat odd. She was always trying to convert me, holding my hands while she prayed for the salvation of my soul” (C 67). And in her memoir “Efforts of Affection” she remembers Marianne “worrying about the fate of a mutual friend whose sexual tastes had always seemed quite obvious to me. ‘What are we going to do about X . . . ? Why, sometimes I think he may even be in the clutches of a *sodomite* . . . !’” Bishop comments sardonically, “One could almost smell the brimstone” (CPr 130).

When Jane Shore thought Bishop to be “deriding,” here, Bishop offered sharp response.³³ If it joshes Providence it also obliquely underlines another maybe sacred convergence (or accident of perspective). The expansion of a casual contraction draws a vaguely “drawled” conspiracy with those southerners in foreign territory, underling an erotic tease of reading that the “miracle” quietly consummates. First hesitating between the material resilience of the tower and the priest being in Belém (Bethlehem), the detail that his “brass bed / (the only one in town)” was “galvanized black,” turns to materialist critique of priestly privilege.³⁴ But within that slippage it also enacts her much-repeated gesture of eroticizing spirit, but with more neutral or even positive erotics than we’ve previously seen as it zigzags to draw on local knowledge, “of acquaintance.” For in addition to that Brazilian port town—you may find it on the map—upping the stakes of a straying *and/or* aesthetic and erotic undertow, “Belém” was (and is) in the heavily Roman Catholic country a fairly common female name, turning the gently ironic “miracle” of being “*in* Belém” into quite another material matter.

If it too would “pull back the curtain” on fraudulent righteousness, in this case a vow of chastity, it is maybe less a “shamefaced exposé” than a celebration, seconded by sound. An electrical-sexual charge touches down in that “brass bed,” achieving release in phonotextual contact where the sibilant slips the gap as *sped*, “discharged,” however it may speak to some other bed’s events. Such an illicit excess of meaning we might call the erotic double of a spiritual excess, and its activation not in contexts of aggression, but a lightly jibed “miracle” might incline a humoring of Justus Lawler’s argument in his fascinating *Celestial Pantomime* that the sexual

³³ Always generous in allowing readers their varied interpretations, she uncharacteristically wrote to Jane Shore to “take exception” to some comments Shore published in “The Art of Changing your Mind,” *Ploughshares* (Spring 1979). Bishop bristled particularly at the idea that she “systematically derides,” organized religion (182): “I never meant to do that,” she wrote Shore and added, “& when I speak of the ‘miracle’ I’m repeating what was told me, and I suppose making fun a little of the local simplicities—but I hope I wasn’t deriding” (VSC 18.7).

³⁴ A detail drawn from Darwin’s journals, Francesco Rognoni observes in “Reading Darwin: On Elizabeth Bishop’s Marked Copies of *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*,” *Jarrell, Bishop, Lowell, & Co: Middle-Generation Poets in Context*, ed. Suzanne Ferguson (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2003), 243.

may in fact not merely deflate but approximate the sacred, and both approximate the natural or historical.³⁵ But it involves erotic feeling in which precise attention creates indefinable edges, a living experience that religious orthodoxy can never quite contain, or no more than print can its voicings. And voicing comically oscillates and surges here. Across languages and cordoning dash, “*Gracas a deus*—he’d been in Belém,” a mongrel “seed” is planted in passing in the lightning-strike of a sensation’s “conception.” And, miraculously apt, it further germinates in this far-flung and fecund Belém, a “seed-bin in Belém,” as both flash of sexual deposit and faint tracery of that distant manger, so the story goes, where “God was borne with beast in bynne” (OED). Of course, I may be re-membering it all wrong.

But it would be in the spirit of her “motion church” that engages and adapts her Protestant upbringing, cross-breeds it with the active frictions of event. It’s open-air church, we gather in this image from her Key West notebook, submitting “the book” to feral winds like those blowing about the scene at St. Peters:

The motion church
Christ wasn’t insured by God
What balanced there—hung in the balance?
Wild winds can blow the book around. (VSC 75.4b)

In Kierkegaardian and Emersonian fashion, the fragment shifts the question of the religious from historical assurance or worship, to a restless condition of present contact, and a certain pneumatic looseness. Neither buckled down “with brass clasps” as she’d reported in “Picking Mushrooms” nor heavily “chained in the church like a mythical beast,” this book is lifted, tossed or torn with “wild winds,” rifting animal wildness and will *and* the scriptural challenge “of the Spirit” back upon its claims of sacred history. It turns upon words, and Jesus, Jesus’ words about the wind that “bloweth where it listeth,” and makes insatiable re-arrangement a promise and premise of

³⁵ Lawler, *Celestial Pantomime: Poetic Structures of Transcendence* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

meaning that moves as restlessly as breath is abandoned and taken up again. In removing God from the insurance racket, “Christ wasn’t insured by God,” the rumble of an under-voice can re-expand the contraction: “Christ *was (se)nt* insured by God,” giving still more force (in motion) to the ensuing query, “what balanced there—hung in the balance?”

No petrified “rock” or anchor in sight, the motion imagined for this church is closer to what church fathers imagined as “the bark of St. Peter,” tossed on the sea of disbelief and worldliness. The early theologian Clement of Alexandria thought to lighten “the bark” further in writing “Let the dove or the fish, the vessel flying before the wind [...] be our signets.”³⁶ We’ll see Bishop further disperse even these, catching an “occasional” fish in “Seascape” in a piscine leap and an unstoppably oscillating “spray of spray,” where she invites that readers undergo, as Stevens staged for Crispin in his “Comedian as the Letter C,” a “Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,” while leaving this feel of vagabond chance to her readers (SCP 39). In such fitful varieties of strange making, Bishop invites saving hesitations, and we come closest to the spirit of her work when we as readers get into the chancy action, entertain fringe feelings and thetic bets. As Peggy Samuels argues in an engaging analogy of Bishop’s aesthetic with the mobiles of Alexander Calder, “hesitation” could have “a humanist quality, and gathered the sensation of freedom (one was not locked inside a rigid system; there was space for ‘wandering’ and for surprise) as well as a sensation of gentleness and privacy.”³⁷ Such unpredictable systems as Calder created, “harboring spontaneity, playfulness, pleasure, humor, buoyancy, and a sense of private celebration,” Samuels suggests, “counteracted and replaced the more frightening characteristics of the ‘system’ of a world that had moved to a scale too large to accommodate

³⁶ Cf. <http://www.jesuswalk.com/christian-symbols/ship.htm>.

³⁷ Samuels, “Composing Motions: Elizabeth Bishop and Alexander Calder,” in Cleghorn et. al., 157.

individual desire or defiance” (156). The suggestion is a fresh one, and catches effects and affects of her mobile wordplay in ways that painterly or photographic analogy quite slight.

A vivid instance of Bishop’s masterly descriptive powers, “Seascape,” published in the Fall 1941 *Partisan Review*, gives an equally fine idea of her more Stevensian slipperiness, and ranging joy in phonotextual mobilities that pluralize the picture and the mood, here yoking angels and grief, apes and Popes, liveliness and dour darkness, with an exploding joke-structure more or less at its core. If Brett Millier is right that the poem’s “cartoon” casts a glance to Raphael’s “A Miraculous Draught of Fishes,” Bishop quite undoes its subject of Christ’s conversion of amazed apostles, releases its symbolic bounty of netted catch back into a field of “occasional” liquid leaps and a casual fishing-scene, keeping its dearest “meanings” in motions and comic off-balances (LM 131). The first breathtakingly long sentence wends its way to something “like heaven:”

This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,
flying as high as they want and as far as they want sidewise
in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections;
the whole region, from the highest heron
down to the weightless mangrove island
with bright green leaves edged neatly with bird-droppings
like illumination in silver,
and down to the suggestively Gothic arches of the mangrove roots
and the beautiful pea-green back-pasture
where occasionally a fish jumps, like a wild-flower
in an ornamental spray of spray;
this cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope:
it does look like heaven. (CP 40)

Conscripting art and nature to this celestial mood or imperative, this “cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope” playfully engages the idea of a postmortem haven as a kind of cartoon sublime, on which that anachronistic wobble from the funnies cannot but impinge.³⁸ Or even a

³⁸ A cartoon is a full-scale sketch, or draft on paper for a painting in oils, a mosaic, or tapestry, and where Raphael was concerned, a work of art in its own right, often more refined, in its subtle color palette, than the final tapestry.

car-tune, swerving its passing song in wonky parallax. It's a whimsical notion that holds a central sense for Bishop, that we cannot gather any sense of the past but through the present's distorting lenses, as her positing a post-Wordsworthian Crusoe writes most boldly. Other pasts-and-presents are linked in how Eleanor Cook finds the heron's dramatic "get up" to introduce "in the quietest way, an argument for the naturalistic origin for angels," whose verticality turns "sidewise" in the pun on "tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections."³⁹

The watery "tiers and tiers" of reflected herons in angelic flight cannot but rift in a more maculate reflection on the gravity of grief, quickly limning from *what* the wish for such a celestial image or haven might spring. The poem's undercurrents of grief, waste and war—those "bird-droppings" glance at earlier falling, flaming birds in the military fable "Roosters"—serve to reinforce how the wish to *scape*, or shape, in "celestial" arts emerges from the shocks one would bodily *escape*, even as the syntax compellingly enacts the long-drawn-ongoing-ness that seeks a rest in "heaven." First published as a hyphenated "Sea-Scape," it accented that bond of shaping and escaping a bit more, bending toward symbolic perception Hopkins' peculiar use of *scape* to emphasize shaping sensory processes of perception to gather a thing's dynamic identity and (for him) holy vocation.⁴⁰ Bishop insinuates a more pragmatic aspect in a comic comedown, or so it would seem, where at the gates of this "heaven," with the historical long-shot of "this cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope," a keen threshold contingency floats a funny subversion where the authority of "a Pope" wobbles into the symbolic-bodily comedy of "ape hope" on conspiratorial lips. If this simian slippage shatters "official" (and ocular) history, it adds, on

See <http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/paintings/features/raphael/what/index.html> for a discussion of Raphael's cartoons, and for an image of "A Miraculous Draught of Fishes," which Brett Millier claims the poem recalls, Bishop having seen it in the Vatican Museum in 1937, finding it "very Florida-like and calm" (LM 131).

³⁹ Cook, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 178.

⁴⁰ Though *inscape* is Hopkins' better-known term, he uses it interchangeably with *scape*, as in "The soul then can be inressed in the species or scape of any bodily action, and so towards the species or scape of any object, as of sight, sound, taste, smell. *Sermons & Devotional Writings*, ed. Christopher Devlin (New York: Oxford UP, 1959), 136.

the traveling threshold, another perhaps vaster, while quietly alerting the reader to an “unofficial” event of the thetic-soundscape that’s underscored in the more overt “punchline” above.

When “occasionally a fish jumps, like a wildflower” the temporal tensions accelerate in the force of inquiry—how can a fish be like wildflower? how wild must a wildflower be to leap?— to be released in the surprise splash and spry delight of a silently suspended “ornamental spray of spray” in which vehicles and tenors keep exchanging hats.⁴¹ Drawn into the stammering balance in a sameness that “moves” again when sensing the repeated word needing to be altered to “make sense” of this “spray of spray,” thetic and sonic reciprocities fold in upon one another. Bishop had recently distilled St. Theresa on prayer in a notebook from this period with “It’s all about how to get in a state of ‘suspension’” (VSC 72.2), and this form of suspension frames more precisely a motion toward a meaning, the kind of life that Emerson found and framed in that foundational passage of transition in “Self-Reliance:”

Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim” (VSC 72.2; EL 271).

Readers are suspended doubly in this darting that converts a slippery Christian symbol into slipperier senses of “occasional” piscine leaping and quietly hangs the reader in life-and-death matters of hunger and transitional dartings of fish to feed (or flee the proverbial bigger fish) in this splash of a “spray of spray.” We feel also how it holds us in precise oscillation those poles Wittgenstein makes refreshingly clear in his *Philosophical Investigations* in asking

⁴¹ Simon Critchley adduces the temporal sensation of joking moments: “In being told a joke, we undergo a particular experience of duration through repetition and digression, of time literally being stretched out like an elastic band. We know that the elastic will snap, we just do not know when, and we find that anticipation rather pleasurable. It snaps with the punchline, which is a sudden acceleration of time, where the digressive stretching of the joke suddenly contracts into a heightened experience of the instant.” *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

What would you be missing if you did not experience the meaning of a word? What would you be missing, for instance, if you did not understand the request to pronounce the word “till” and to mean it as a verb,—or if you did not feel that a word lost its meaning and became a mere sound if it was repeated ten times over?⁴²

Even as the “meaning” of the image hovers amid blossoming and shattering, breaking spray, the sound blossoms meaning and sensational decay. Strangely suggestive, it fairly distills the “literary” in Derrida’s highly-qualified sense, in that it “suspend[s] the ‘thetic’ naivety of the transcendent reading” to facilitate “‘phenomenological’ access to what makes a thesis a thesis as such.”⁴³ I do not mean to burden a joyous image-joke with jargon, but rather suggest the expansive “literal” vistas this little fishing scene contains, including the crucial activity of depending and intending in print, around which hints of prayer and a solemn amen playfully hover.

Every heaven its hell, apparently, and against such play, Bishop poses this:

But a skeletal lighthouse standing there
in black and white clerical dress,
who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.
He thinks that hell rages below his iron feet,
that that is why the shallow water is so warm,
and he knows that heaven is not like this.
Heaven is not like flying or swimming,
but has something to do with blackness and a strong glare
and when it gets dark he will remember something
strongly worded to say on the subject. (CP 40)

Like Blake’s out-of-place characters in “The Garden of Love,” those “Priests in black gowns [...] walking their rounds, / And binding with briars my joys and desires,” this damnation-preaching caricature, erect, apart, ostensibly self-secure, is one of many aggressive, overbearing

⁴² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 2, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 214.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear-Say Yes in Joyce,” *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 45-6. Derrida’s grammatological interest leads him to emphasize visual difference, as with the capitol “Yes” that concludes Molly’s monologue, for him a quintessential gramme, activated only “in the eye of language,” or when Molly claims, “my eyes said yes,” with its visual, not aural confirmation (47). I briefly take up some of Bishop’s play in the visual register below, p. 154.

mental/ocular authority figures and phallic foils Bishop would employ.⁴⁴ True to his “nature,” he serves an essential purpose of warning (though not in ways he intends) in display of a joyless, play-less intellect that subsumes living perception and possibility in knowing and negation. The one hint of a physical attunement in those “warm” waters is quickly assimilated to the dogma of hell. And his off-putting future promise to “remember something / strongly worded to say on the subject” swerves all around the sounding *now* in which attention, observation, and felt change might abide. Less bland than damning, he nonetheless suggests Stevens’ displeasure over romantic/religious displacements, those “bland excursions into time to come, / Related in romance to backward flights” (SCP 39), and with him she pitches one to find life in the slim and slippery turning in between.

To be sure, Bishop takes aim in this stiff figure, all blare and moral glare, at the abuses she found most odious in the “religious” or simply “self-satisfied” type: self-righteous condescension, dullness and the “lack of observation” which she called a “cardinal sin” (PPL 860). But thin hints suggest this one in “black-and-white clerical dress” reflects aspects of the printed product of any “clerk or penman”: abstracted and frozen poses of “knowing” or “showing” sub-tended by that absence that runs all reference into the grave (OED). He is grimly definitive of that gap or impossible cross, from life to the “prison-house of language,” that interest some with guilt and conviction; and a lack of interactive affect that Bishop punned in “Argument,” whose rhetorical angle overlaps as an interpersonal falling-out, hanging about “like some hideous calendar, / ‘Compliments of Never & Forever, *Inc*’” (CP 81).

But Bishop hinted she was fishing for signs of life in the same shifty waters as Stevens. In notes for a reading among her papers at Vassar, she planned to recount being out “in a small inboard motorboat, fishing in the evening in that [Key West] harbor where Stevens dreamed of

⁴⁴ *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Johnson and John Grant (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 51.

living on a houseboat” (VSC 71.8). Recalling that she knew *Harmonium* “almost by heart,” I wonder if she wasn’t teasing out a relation of this “C-Scape” and his thorny “Comedian as the Letter C.”⁴⁵ They share movements from sweeping romanticism to a disillusioned fatalism, and certainly a deep appreciation for the surreptitious surface activity of phonotextual liquidity and the different intelligences of soil versus sea (roughly ‘eye’ versus ‘ear’) that Bishop has framed to oscillate in that “spray of spray,” in “tiers and tiers,” the simian intrusion upon the papal seat, and in a multitude of other surreptitious slippages we turn to below.

The comedy of the “Comedian,” as Stevens remarks in a letter of January 1940 to Hi Simons, has less to do with the letter than the “THE SOUNDS OF THE LETTER C,” a cypher “meant to suggest something that nobody seems to have grasped.”⁴⁶ Had Bishop’s “Seascape” already been in print, he might have reconsidered. Likening these c-sounds to the bells St. Francis wore around his ankles, he suggests to Mr. Simons that they follow Crispin around to provide a “whistling and mocking” background—“to say it as a lawyer might say it, ‘In, on or about the words’” (*Letters* 352). Imminently alterable in its phonemic continuum, at one end it sounds like a hard *k* (*immaculate, cartoon, dark*), blurring towards *g* in the affricate (*edged/etched, Gothic arches*), or an *x* where *k* and *s* kiss (*thinks*), and also precisely like the sibilant *s* (*celestial sea/see/c-scape*). One line he quotes to Simons particularly thick with these sounds, “Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed” suggests the re-arranging potential for the sounds, and in a postscript he says “The natural effect of the variety of sounds of the letter C is a

⁴⁵ PPL 861. Ample evidence confirms that Bishop felt Stevens to be a formative influence, and that she was particularly engaged with his work at Vassar and the decade after. Several other of her early poems are in conversation with his, “The Unbeliever” (1938), “Wading at Wellfleet” and “The Monument” (both 1939), though it’s only been taken up regarding the latter in more political terms by Barbara Page, in “Off-Beat Claves, Oblique Realities: The Key West Notebooks of Elizabeth Bishop,” in *The Geography of Gender*, 196-211. Guy Rotella also construes the dialogue between “The Monument” and Stevens’ *Owl’s Clover* in *Castings: Monuments and Monumentality in Poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Derek Walcott, and Seamus Heaney* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

⁴⁶ Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), 351.

comic effect. I should like to know whether your ear agrees” (*Letters* 352). We may test the proposition in Bishop’s “C-Scape.”

Even what’s held only in the mind’s eye frames its slippery comedy, where in the muscled leaps framed in the “ornamental spray of spray” we may see a bodily C-shape hanging, at whatever canted tilt, further attuning to its fishy swimming out of sight. Without otherwise underscoring the issue of this “vocable thing, / [...] belched out of hoary darks,” Bishop’s poem plays out a comedy not simply in how they glide across phonetic registers, but phonemically slurry lexical edges to provide a reader—if your ear agrees—that “Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event” as dogs Crispin at every turn (SCP 28, 39). Letting the foreign ear roam and linger with these interstitial sea-sounds it is worth engaging another angle on “scape” as a “break from moral restraint” (from which “scapegoat”) and “a mistake, especially a slip of the tongue” as we encounter teasingly meaningful transgressions in phonotextual errancy across the worded gaps (OED). Dense with these seas, the poem’s opening words, “This celestial seascape” immediately steals the suppressed antithesis of “hell” (in an elision) right into the seen “celestial,” or, “*This hell-less teal seascape*” (or veiling sea’s cape), and through the tiers of “immaculate reflections . . . the highest heron” is held (sidewise) on “the highest stair” before it tumbles “on / down to the weightless mangrove island” where the sea or *c*-sound goes *unsounded*, dissolved for the knowing pronunciation of an “eye-land” The quasi-comic “cartoon” takes on an incidental *scar* that she’d earlier edged from a punning sea onto Love’s intent focus on “face cards” in “Three Poems” where “in dreams seeking his fortune / He sees travel, and turns up strange face cards” (EAP 19).

But these subversive sea-sounds grow particularly intense around our skeletal lighthouse, undermining his emphatic assertions and negations with counter-voicings of adolescent

adamancy and emergent meanings that outstrip his for a resounding siege of his stolid posture. Twice, when he declares his knowingness of what is *not*—“heaven is not like this. / Heaven is not like flying or swimming”—an insolent slide or poet who happens to believe in such things activities draws “snot” (anciently of the vulgate) half-vulgarly across it, whose effect is to keep one to *this* sound-surface that is and *is not* heard—even as “an expression of contempt” it doubles back on his rejection.⁴⁷ All of his knowing is menaced by them with thetic-bodily vengeance, as when “he thinks he knows better” sputters as a snot-“knows (sp)etter,” where thinking slipping back to the mouth’s expectorant ejection. Where “He thinks that hell rages below his iron feet, / that that is why the shallow water is so warm,” questions of “*his* ire” (like those “*eye-raised* mortals” of “Hymn”), not *hell’s* raging arise. The hell he creates is tolled as a silent “*siren*” of warning/attraction in an erosion of “his iron feet,” and even the safely “shallow water” infects with “*ater*” with “poison, venom, bitterness,” hell-heated, and audibly threatening to rise, or “s()warm” this abode of knowing. And when he ventures that *his* heaven, in opposition to all this unhandsome lubricity “has something to do with blackness and a strong glare” the guttural *c*-sound slips out to trace glaring projection more vaguely and particularly to his own nervous and skeletal animal *lair* (or grave), and the act of lying down in it (OED).

These *c*-sounds indeed call him dead already. Both stiffening the critique and/or dire prophecy, one other *c*-scaping where it “gets *dark*” underlines the *starkness* of his nature as “rigid and stiff, incapable of movement,” “hard and unyielding,” “stern and inflexible” in judgment.⁴⁸ “Sheer, absolute, unqualified”—is death such a one? Certainly these contrasts of

⁴⁷ Since 1425, the OED shows. How many thousands of thousands of children have burst their sides on the transegmental gag, “You may *think* it’s gross, but it’s *not*,” with fractious delight at the sidewise impropriety? We will hear Bishop joining in the play, complete with phonemic “ew” of disgust. Writing to Lowell in July 1960, encouraging him to teach his daughter Harriet to swim, Bishop stated *some* “beliefs” unequivocally: “I believe in swimming, flying, and crawling, and burrowing” (WIA 335).

⁴⁸ “How found you him?” Aruiragus is asked of Imogen (dead), replying “Starke, as you see” (*Cymbeline* IV.ii.210).

night and day, vital engagement and deadly negation stage a scene stiffly ironic and dualistic in its manner, “a simple ironic contrast of two limited perspectives, one celestial, one diabolical” as Costello finds, particularly compared to a late poem such as “Santarém” (*Questions* 36-7). But threading through the obvious contrasts, there’s ample evidence of the mobile “mode of consciousness” that “resists tonal as well as conceptual stasis” that Costello attributes to those later poems, though it’s only to be met in the said-surfaces of its travelling threshold (250n). Quite honed by this time, Bishop’s experimental vigor roams beyond the given image or argument, tentative, improvisatory, eclectic, and happily contradictory.

What I elaborate below in continuing to trace these questionable presences are some ways Bishop trumps, or sidesteps, a sense of the sentimental and nostalgic (so commonly levied upon her poems) in phonotextual motions set to undermine even the plainest of statements or moods. It is this slippery, spraying, spitting “polyphony” of language generation-and-decay, “beyond [our] baton’s thrust” that promises the proper tropic of refreshment beyond moral warnings, or painterly gazing (SCP 28). Uniquely low-key, without Stevens’ heroic or didactic poses, Bishop too supposes one might be “made vivid by the sea,” in “a flourishing tropic,”

an abundant zone,
Prickly and obdurate, dense, harmonious,
Yet with a harmony not rarefied
Nor fined for the inhibited instruments
Of over-civil stops. (SCP 35)

A sense of abundance, in other words, “Unpurged by epitaph.” In her more conversational manner she also posed its flourishing “In, on or about the words” still under but slipping from a stern glare.

“God’s Spreading Fingerprint,” or, Not Looking Particularly Holy

The proliferal pulls of Bishop’s sacred “motion church” go naturally in hand, indeed in need, of profane breakings, windy wincings that we might consider low brow forms of thetic-slapstick—slipping, falling, breaking wind, or otherwise blurting the verboten. The meaning of such events draws down to this “comic reminder,” in the words of John Crossan in *Raid on the Articulate*, “that *he* [who sits in the chair not there, etc.] *and all of us there present* were playing out a scene and that it took only a slip to involve us all in a very different as-if, a very different play at being.”⁴⁹ The question of “play at being” and “as-if” is of course writing’s slick home-turf, but it is in particular the tasted, sensational change entertained by a foreign ear that can contingently secure what the eye-mind cannot for poets such as Bishop and Stevens, interested in eccentric propositions of “a mind thinking,” open to and inviting “all the arrant stinks” (or erranced inks?) that might happily “round [a] rude aesthetic out” (SCP 36).

“I am sick of sounding so quiet,” Bishop wrote to Lowell when sending him her stunning “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” before its publication in the June 1948 *Partisan Review*, a quietness she felt acutely against what her friend wonderfully dubbed Lowell’s “blacktongued piratical vigor” (WIA 32). But quietude is just what her windy, off-color wordplay bucks in noisy and noisome revolts against ideal silence in fixed print. The last scenes of travel frame motives for retreat to the book in erotic and thanatropic assaults, first where “pockmarked prostitutes” “flung themselves / naked and giggling against our knees, / asking for cigarettes,” then a still more grotesquely pocked open grave:

A holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin
open to every wind from the pink desert.
An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid

⁴⁹ Crossan, *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 77 (his emphasis). “Comedy,” as he defines it, “is the conscience and consciousness of the inevitability of play” (77).

with exhortation, yellowed
as scattered cattle teeth;
half-filled with dust, not even the dust
of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.
In a smart burnoose Khadour looked on amused.

Everything connected only by “and” and “and.”
Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn’t we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it? (CP 58)

Seeking shelter from such obliterative threats and demands of travel the speaker retreats, seeks comfort in a still Nativity picture she goes on to describe. But even before it, the only “I” of the poem is rifted into stunned speculation before illegible epitaphic exhortation, “carved solid” with inscribed absence. Its presence as color, simile and sound, “yellowed / as scattered cattle teeth,” cannot but evoke *Cadmus*, whose teeth-scattering sowed a host of blood-thirsty warriors. It might bend wariness to the spread message, and the lonely ideality pictured here, given that Cadmus is credited with bringing Phoenician letters to Greece, pivotal to the dawn of print-culture, of words first loosed from flesh.⁵⁰

Evacuating Christian teleology while adapting its measure from biblical syntax, the parataxis opens onto a touch, literal and affective, which changes the nature of those *ands*. Its singular metaphorical renovation echoes and alters in its imaginative contact with the grit of local incident, a conversion story of guilt and repentance central to church history. These bracketing commands (or self-reports) of “Open the book” recasts Augustine’s foundational conversion story in which, in a moment of deep despair, he hears a child’s voice (boy or girl he cannot tell) outside his window, “*Tolle, lege; tolle, lege*” (“Pick it up, read; Pick it up, read”). Heeding the voice, he opens at random to a passage that hits him with oracular force, leading to

⁵⁰ The relation is strengthened also by Laurel Corelle’s suggestion that these graves near the brothel district of the city may refer to what’s known as “Koutoubia Mosque, also known as the Bookseller’s Mosque” (33).

his repentance and infusing his heart “as with the light of full certainty” (*Confessions* VIII.12). No merely ironic foil for the bewildered tourist, that background limns something of Bishop’s faith or feeling for contingent accidents and what one might make of them. Inverting the wisdom that one mustn’t touch gold idols lest the gilt come off on one’s fingers, she adapts a trust of Divine authority to accidental pollinations in what “rubs off the edges / of the pages,” or calls (*pages*) at the *edges* of things that incorporate the laughable gap or leap. It writes more minutely of the leakages between Book and Travel that Costello notes across the stanza break, in which “the white space is not absolute” (*Questions* 136). Much less absolute is that white space between her words, should we lean to listen there.

If we see with Costello that Bishop breaks down the “fundamental opposition between text and world” where “the book mingles with life, turning to dust, dispersing itself into the guilty world, yet also disseminating into that world its abiding mythic values” (136), we *feel* it where “the gilt (d)rubs” from the thumbed pages. And where Augustine’s voice-to-text conversion turns him from “unholy loves” with a passage admonishing to “make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof,” Bishop provides for voiced desires to press back against oppressive guilt and text. Her passage is a picture, and a query:

Why couldn’t we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
—and looked and looked our infant sight away. (CP 58-59).

Whether finding this key instance of religious nostalgia positively “poignant and powerful,” or merely a measure of “archaic codes and assumptions,” or “not a religious return” at all, but one that “would retain our imaginative response to mystery without attaching it to any system of

belief,” critics tend to sweep aside any suggestion of the skepticism displayed (as we’ll see) in the earlier reading of the book.⁵¹ The reverent longing of the passage, to be sure, “is true to a whole penumbra of desire,” as David Kalstone broadly suggests, “witnessed with a swoon of desire, an undistinguished desire and envy” (*Becoming* 129, 131). But it is also one from which she wonders if we mightn’t “look away.”

The antithetical ambivalence of that phrase draws on the polar pulls of a hopeful death of despair, particularly (message-bearing) Christ’s invitation in Herbert’s “The Bag,” concluding, “Sighs will convey / Any thing to me. Harke, Despair away.”⁵² But in “look away” that transformative hope is turned more toward inward listening, away, in part, from what the syntax posits as doubly backward looking, figuratively upon the travels in memory, and at the scene of this “old Nativity.” Apparently multiply indulging nostalgic “thought backwards,” in the registers of travel, family and religion, the poet-traveler is plainly guilty of that “perversity” of spiritual sensibility she’d drawn a dime on right out of Vassar, of using “the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and *poetic*, to produce the *material*,” as we heard in the introduction, and what she called “the way of the Romantic [...] and a great perversity” (p. 7 above). Had she lapsed? or simply wished to dramatize the motives—yawning graves and a traveler’s exhaustion—for fatigued retreat? Or is there another angle?

She had first written of a “silent sight” to be antithetically “looked away” whose doubled *sighings* and “*sigh-lent* sight” drew even closer to Herbert’s “sigh”-transmuting, though not

⁵¹ As remarked above, Jeredith Merrin finds Bishop a “victim of her own belatedness,” haunted by her own “archaic codes and assumptions” (9, 10). Langdon Hammer specifies this “poignant and powerful” nostalgia “not so much for the holy as for the family once constituted by their relation to the holy, for a family gathered through religious practice.” In that, he continues, “looking expresses a primal longing for community and for human connection.” ([Http://oyc.yale.edu/transcript/529/engl-310](http://oyc.yale.edu/transcript/529/engl-310)). Laurel Corelle who often finds Bishop entrapped within her religious language, suggests this as “not a religious return at all” (35). “The beholder seems to feel no ambivalence toward this image,” Costello finds, and that it wistfully reintroduces the “Christian appeal which the middle of the poem eroded” and “a nostalgia for the kind of epiphany she knows the world defies” (*Questions* 138).

⁵² H 151. In inverts the univocal “Away Despair” of the poem’s opening through the resolving gesture of Christ’s message-toting wounds and resurrection.

without fractious commentary on the longing, breaking in, say, the strains of “Silent Night” (VSC 56.9). She traded that more solemn reverberation for an agitation of etymology: *L. infans*, “unspeaking, speechless,” making for a pedigreed play on “infant sight,” which since Kalstone first observed it has been one of the very few wordplays *de rigueur* to note among her critics. “Why couldn’t we have . . . looked and looked our infant sight away?” John Ashbery and Eleanor Cook celebrate the ravishing mobility of that query, and Cook extendedly explores the force of its perpetual motion mechanics in *Against Coercion* by asking in what senses can we look our infant sight away?⁵³ At the infant-mystery, and *with* its innocent wonder? Certainly to “our heart’s content,” and maybe “averting our eyes,” but because innocence erodes or history continues? Are they the same thing? “And if removing ‘infant sight’ then what follows?” “Speech, words? Or grown-up sight, and what would grown-up sight be?”

In this simply worded but intricate paronomasia, Bishop has laid out our possible responses to the Nativity scene. It’s remembered from a book. It’s not to be seen by traveling to the area where it happened. It’s desired. It might fulfill desire and at the same time necessarily translate desire into something ordinary and familiar, so that we would be back where we started in one way if not another. (181)

This concise distillation of desire’s double-bind and inevitable domestication of the strange also suggests how both desire and memory (personal, cultural) conspire to transform, mollify and idealize, what might (or did) in fact affront one on arrival. But Cook’s accent on the ocular, like Hammer’s bond of “looking” with “primal longing,” and Kalstone’s with “a swoon of desire, an undistinguished desire and envy” skirts the sounds and “erranced inks” that might provoke the transition from sight to event that the passage heavily hints. The tired, “grown-up sight” is what we’re given, and we might have to feel our way back to a more playful (*and* more empirically

⁵³Ashbery, who in 1969 considered the poem “possibly her masterpiece” later added, “After twenty years I am unable to exhaust the meaning and mysteries of its concluding line. Ashbery, “The Complete Poems” (review), rpt. *EHA* 203; and “Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop,” *World Literature Today* 51 (Winter 1977), 11.

grounded) *speaking*-sight of that restless and slippery stratum subtending print, maybe finding a blooming satisfaction or two.

It means we take the etymological play to offer comment on *these* words, not only *that* image. The fatigued retreat touches on Eliot's "Gerontion" (1919) where "The word within a word, unable to speak a word" is swaddled with gerontological exhaustion—the source, Cook suggests, for modern prominence of the play on *infans*—but given her absorption of *Harmonium*, a more marine creature might also be heard, who "roamed / In the roamings of her fan / Partaking of the sea / And of the evening / As they flowed around / And uttered their subsiding sound" ("Infanta Marina," SCP 8). Closer to the writing of her own poem she would also have heard "The Red Fern" goad readers beyond a sense of unspeaking infancy:

Infant, it is enough in life
to speak of what you see. But wait
until sight wakes the sleepy eye
and pierces the physical fix of things. (SCP 365)

Though sometimes taken to be courting mystical vision, a Blakean mandate to see "not with but through the eye" into our spiritual imaginations, or hearts vaguely cast, "the physical fix" that Stevens would pierce here, and Bishop too, is more locally and subvocally to do with words icily fixed on the page, inviting janglings that jostle them. Stevens' question, as in so many of his poems, is of the entry of the unfamiliar into the familiar, what "opens in this familiar spot / Its unfamiliar, difficult fern," found in swarming "doubles of this fern in clouds,"

Less firm than the paternal flame
Yet drenched with its identity,
Reflections and off-shoots, mimic-motes

And mist-mites, dangling seconds, grown
Beyond relation to the parent trunk
The dazzling, bulging, brightest core,
The furiously burning father-fire... (SCP 365)

However antithetical the tones of Stevens' rapture and Eliot's desiccated lament of sexual and spiritual fatigue, they both openly display their hands as source-seekers, versus Bishop's of the traveling easy-going inquirer, though all three tease out a faith in the renewable "juvencence of the (year)," as Eliot embedded it, in conjunction with what Stevens' hints as the "parent (y)unk" (drawn out from obsolescence) of "to whisper, murmur, speak secretively" (OED).

And so one possible response to the wry query, "Why couldn't we have seen / this old Nativity while we were at it" is it's not to be seen at all, but bends to a humming accompaniment in au/oral "off-shoots, mimic-motes" with their chutes and moats, "Less firm than the paternal flame / Yet drenched with its identity." Though the traveler "seems to feel no ambivalence" toward "this old Nativity," a wavering into the half-tired, half reverent tone lets an emergent third half-tone impinge upon "this (s)old Nativity." Such an odd, half-audible, half-made vacillation registers both a skeptic's playful resistance to what's been proliferated from pulpits and presses, and how "infant sight" might meet both a more receptive and ferociously roving dispersing and circulating field or force, a key condition for poetics of transition.

A corollary to that query "Why couldn't we have seen..." could be because *we* (Fr. *ouïe*, "hearing") is blind.⁵⁴ I'll defer making a grim 'case' for that unlikely claim, but even casual readers of Bishop will recognize *we* to be a pronoun she never casually bandied, doing so often in contexts of borders overflowing or posed to overflow, or making an erotic "stroke" in "The Map" where the poem's one "we" is swimmingly permitted: "We can stroke these lovely bays, / under a glass as if they were expected to blossom" (CP 3). The only other "we" in "Over 2,000

⁵⁴ Stevens writes it in bolder strokes of "Negation": "Hi! The creator too is blind / Struggling toward his harmonious whole" (SCP 97). Bishop would never have declared with him that "French and English constitute a single language," but a handful of French titles and settings, and hints of her Francophilia in "In Prison," and "I Introduce Penelope Gwin," and of course Crusoe's triumphant trans-Atlantic christening of a peak "*Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*," speaks to a certain ease of navigation between them (OP 202; CP 165).

Illustrations” is summoned in sound, an animal-to-animal call that Bishop poses as transitional threshold from “the book” to the scenes of travel, with biblical resonance:

Entering the Narrows at St. Johns,
the touching bleat of goats reached to the ship.
We glimpsed them, reddish, leaping up the cliffs,
among the fog-soaked weeds and butter-and-eggs. (CP 57)

Is it sound—or ship—or listener entering here, gathering into this glimpsing “we”? God’s revelatory Word from John’s Gospel is not so much parodied as put into play in this lightly “touching” summons and response, when a motion sets the ear-drum aquiver in alternate compressions and rarefactions of air blending into the mystery of emotion that flutters the blood. Bishop casts it on (or as) an entity vast as “the ship” to catch this intimately self-less event, and I wonder if it doesn’t signal a “complete concordance,” however fleeting that inter-action: “come *bleat* concordance?”⁵⁵ From “bleat” to “blood,” and the vaguely “reddish” figure among “butter-and-eggs” (the perennial *Linaria vulgaris*) it breaks the fast of textual silence as a ship’s morning meal. And to the point of the wordplay we engage, of the symbolic sinking back, or bounding out of more “animal” sounds, Crusoe brackets his quirky version of a “christening” with these bleats:

One billy-goat would stand on the volcano
I’d christened *Mont d’Espoir* or *Mount Despair*
(I’d time enough to play with names),
and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air (CP 165)

—as if to sniff a suspicious change there.

“Over 2,000 Illustrations” stages incursions upon ideal silence most overtly but not exclusively in the long second stanza of travels, of “excursive vision” in which, as Costello observes, “particulars challenge and assault the mind’s forms,” versus the first of “monumental

⁵⁵ Critics usually take Bishop at her word that the poem’s title was taken from the Bulmer family Bible. But as Cheryl Walker notes, the Bible (published in 1870) in the Bishop archive in Nova Scotia contains the long subtitle *with Dr. William Smith’s Complete Dictionary of the Bible and Embellished with over 2,000 Fine Scripture Illustrations* (73), which omits the word “concordance” entirely. It is one of Bishop’s most cherished religious fictions, not to be found, but *invented*.

vision “in which the mind’s forms preside over particulars” and the third of the “domestic” where “the mind outdistances the monumental with its idea of home” (*Questions* 138). The first, “monumental” stanza is textual, and begins in conclusion. In an attitude of dearth and distance, dominated by pattern and archetype, the vulgar and sacred are cordoned off as idea and sight/Site overrule sound and the animal-in-man, and the moral-plot of friend and enemy is equally pat.

Thus should have been our travels:
serious engravable.
The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
innumerable, though equally sad and still,
are foreign. Often the squatting Arab
or groups of Arabs, plotting, probably
against our Christian Empire,
while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand
points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher.
The branches of the date-palms look like fils.
The cobbled courtyard, where the Well is dry,
is like a diagram, the brickwork conduits
are vast and obvious, the human figure
far gone in history or theology,
gone with its camel or its faithful horse.
Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds
suspended on invisible threads above the Site ... (CP 57)

This “squatting Arab / or groups of Arabs” catches them out on *our* Christian property, while oscillating in a suspicious glimpse of a defecatory squat that casts the body and its “dirty” doings as enemy and threat to “our Christian Empire,” or purely spiritual kingdom. Such a squat extends in a straight shot to the unredeemed “Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher,” as over-determined symbolic objects and Ends, over which a top-down sense of speculation in those silent “specks of birds” hangs on disembodied cognitive God-threads. In granting a “grim lunette” through which to view these arrangements, the plain sense of “spectacles” blends another of top-down lighting as a ceiling’s arched aperture, and one of hierarchical control as the circular crystal case in which

the Host is placed for exposition. Such specular/expository distance turns sharply grim, as the piece of a guillotine cradling a waiting victim's neck (OED).

In short, this “monumental” manner in which symbolic sight rules bodies Bishop figures as both coercive and grim, keeping “the human figure / far gone in history or theology”—the speaker decides not to decide which, but “gone with its camel or its faithful horse” (CP 57). But between Book and Travel a transitional passage, what the drafts at Vassar reveal to be the most labored over lines of the poem, puts the eye into motion, steeps it in dispersive slips and tugs, proliferal pollutions of associational scatter-logic that disturb the reader's incognito:

The eye drops, weighted, through the lines
the burin made, the lines that move apart
like ripples above sand,
dispersing storms, God's spreading fingerprint,
and painfully, finally, that ignite
in watery prismatic white-and-blue. (CP 57)

The drafts reveal Bishop's conscious augmenting of the sense of process, paradox, and subliminal tugs in which the body and its processes, first ejected onto some foreign other, are made a matter of approach to “God's spreading fingerprint.” They first drew a more personal drama of “letters [that] ran with a tear” and a “stinging” rainbow, “& no one talking the way I talked / & no one being ironic” (VSC 56.9). Counterbalancing her dissatisfaction with scripture that she felt to foreclose on irony's positive negations and “the way I talked,” she offered paradoxical charts of the un-chartable in “intangible / charts” of “hidden ocean beds.” These submerged topographies with their textured “notion-beds” or floated “bets” disperse, in her final version of the section, among a number of subtler liminal tugs.

The “eye” immediately “drops” into one such ‘pleural’ pull, pulled down before moving “through the lines / the burin made”—and then again through the senses of that *through*, and other words that “move apart” like the heard-swerve of *urine* in “the lines the burin made.” Kin

to leaves laced “with bird-droppings, like illumination in silver” in “Seascape,” here too the swerves link sacred creations and waste, and where intimations of breath blow into the lines, “like ripples above sand, / dispersing storms, God’s spreading fingerprint,” body-doubles of that rip-pulling wind are cast where the simile dissimulates “like (c)ripples above sand.” It propagates those “storms of decision” that call on readers to perform, as Richardson, suggests, the paradigmatic Pragmatist act”:

within the seemingly stable grammatical structures, semantic equivocations, not apparent at first, create storms of decision: either a sentence is read attending to its structure or attending to structure is suspended to allow semantic resonance and ambiguity. Readers sensitized to these permutations are, in consequence, called on to perform the paradigmatic Pragmatist act, to choose a way of reading that will make “truth happen” to the shimmering ideas offered, to reach at least temporary closure. (*Natural History* 22)

Such storms are quiet but rarely relenting in Bishop’s poems. And here such contrapuntal tugs between structure and resonance come on the cusp of the perfectly contrary pull of disseminating and putting to flight in that trace of “dispersing storms” on which senses of Christian divinity are constantly revolving.⁵⁶ By the final igniting, the “eye” has been subsumed into a trebled object of lines, ripples, and storms “that ignite / in watery prismatic white-and-blue.”⁵⁷

If indeed the “particulars challenge and assault the mind’s forms” in “excursive” travel, the challenges are particularly incongruous assaults of sight *and sound*, written widest in Mexico where an anonymous “dead man” is laid out in a blue arcade while the incongruous “jukebox went on playing ‘Ay Jalisco!’” At “Volubilis” all is silent with “beautiful poppies / splitting the mosaics” though the Latin place-name silently contains speech-sounds as “fluent, voluble,” also “changeable, inconstant,” and perhaps like those poppies in natural disregard of monumental

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Hill discusses the “key-phrase” of his “Annunciation,” “Our God scatters corruption” in just this split sense: “Our God puts corruption to flight” and “Our God disseminates corruption.” *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 188.

⁵⁷ The order of these colors inverts would have provided a resonant final rhyme but here it flashes an off-color “tan” or acid-soaked “tanned” between the white-and-blue,” or even the chance of a (Chinese) gambling game, “tan,” short for “*fan-tan*” (OED).

significance. Only formally stilted, “informing” speech sounds are heard at Dingle harbor where “The Englishwoman poured tea, informing us / that the Duchess was going to have a baby”—some annunciation—before the many Magdalenes “naked and giggling,” fling themselves at the tourists’ knees (CP 58). There is no precise biblical correspondence with the seven scenes of travel, but as loose allusions Bishop would “disperse myth into life,” as Costello adduces, refusing to “relinquish symbolic patterns and values, but [merge] them with the haphazard and the vital, where their hold is precarious” (135).

A still more precarious, more haphazard *and* vital merger and dispersal is hinted in the traversal of breath through the phonotext, at angles to epitaphic exhortations and reportage. Intending the suppressed but *volubilis* ruck and hum polyvocal perspectives arise in surface sounds. Even as it had collapsed a cast of cripples upon airy spiritual ripples, it inflicts fanatical fury into the scripted scene of exhortation and elemental sacrifice. *Listening* in upon “a holy grave, not looking particularly holy . . . / of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there,” we may feel he “once (s)lay there,” whirled around with the dust of soldierly doubles. And we may sniff out in the scattering of old exhortation fanatical fury: what (in fear or collective projection) might make “*a whole league rave*,” a holy league indeed *not* looking “particularly holy.” These uncharted au/oral notions drift in those most pernicious of choral forces, doctrinal strongholds and crusades of the regimented Word. It makes the hint of a merely “(s)old Nativity” scene seem positively tender and mild. Such under-the-breath slayings and ravings arise like demonic doubles of that sleepy dream of domesticity, the wish, or nostalgia, as Langdon Hammer has it, “for the family . . . constituted by their relation to the holy” (p. 75, above).

In returning to Bishop’s quirky version of “this old Nativity,” we may feel the “domestic” vision newly schooled in erosion-as-pollination and in all manner of sound travel. Recalling the

“touching bleat” of immediacy, the mad blowing at a slant to rapid purposiveness, the wildly inappropriate blasts upon a solemn scene, picture-splitting volubility, laughter and utter dullness of merely “informing” speech, we can re-hear this ostensibly unbreathing thing:

Why couldn't we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
—and looked and looked our infant sight away. (CP 58-59).

Is there really no sound in those “rocks breaking with light” or does its leakage lend a “spraying,” drift, in “an undisturbed, unbreathing flame, / colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,” a roister in the cloister? “But for the ‘unbreathing flame’ to breathe,” Laurel Corelle comments in *A Poet's High Argument*, “for the ‘colorless, sparkless’ imagery to burst into rainbow colors, the reader must be willing to ‘disturb’ the surface of the text,” “must bring to bear all that she knows of history, her heart, and her intellect in order for scripture to remain vital” (34). But there’s no hint that any such disturbance has been heard, or how these three kings of “intellect,” “history” and “heart” are entwined and disheveled on the lowly pulse of breath’s textual cont(r)act.

Yet just a little “blow or pressure” (*dint*, OED) reveals Bishop’s structures to be remarkably re-markable, a quality of textual representation more generally that her proliferal style exploits and invites. Upon one such sensational pressure, a nexus of the repressed uncannily returns to this holiest of scenes, the “dark Kajar” for instance, and on another the foreign Arab’s camel (*delul*) pokes its head in on the coziest moment: “and, [*de-*]lulled within, a family with pets.” It laces birth with death as well, exhausting the spiritually stilled “unbreathing flame” as more morbidly “*done*-breathing.” Such chances revolve on the claim that the past is not past, that lack and absence is not all that’s pictured or printed, that even the lost-time of “while we were at

it,” conflated syntactically with the Nativity, might strangely vibrate, “while we *whir, a’tit,*” a pulse that in-lays a readerly suckle in a less differentiated au/oral liquidity in which the symbolic must of necessity pitch its tents.

We’ve perhaps taken that quasi-comic and -consummate turn in Stevens’ “On Modern Poetry” where that “insatiable actor” “In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat[s], / Exactly, that which it wants to hear” (SCP 239). But such turns teased out of a phonemic stream render palpable how Bishop’s “questions of mastery” open out for readers too “between desire and representation, between cultural order and deviant reality, and between imagination and experience” should we take these words hospitably out from behind their “grim lunette” (*Questions* 138). Recalling Bishop’s contrast of the “simple, ‘free,’ cheerful and often humorous” with stale piety, this flame “freely fed on straw” (etymologically, “that which is strewn”), releases in the agitated draft of reading voices one of her most ‘religiously’ repeated puns of a flame “free, *lief*-fed,” by your granted leave, punning upon the fact and force of an responsive *inter-esse*, or between being, to give things shape.

These proliferal echo effects of *speaking*-sight cannot be summed up in any hierotactic “therefore,” but like Stevens’ “tootings at the weddings of the soul” in “The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man” they “Occur as they occur”—are “heard” to weave a fuller, more intimately strange and inter-adaptive sense of our sensorium into “a mind thinking” and “the life / That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze,” or staged Nativities (SCP 222). Bishop’s allows heartfelt readings such as Alfred Corn’s that

She is like the Hardy of “The Oxen,” who reflects on Christmas Eve that, if someone told him the animals were kneeling in a barn nearby (if the Nativity were being reenacted), “I should go with him through the gloom, / Hoping it might be so.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Corn, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Nativities,” *The Metamorphoses of Metaphor* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 163.

But under this there is another reading that draws the worldly tit back into the picture of a newborn babe, or the spiritual longing for it, may burst the ostensibly solemn scene if one is willing to risk more drenched “Reflections and off-shoots.” This “family with pets” recalls the animal back to the faux-naif scene in a jocular mistake about the Nativity, if still pretty “far gone / in history or theology”—even slightly *de-lulled* with that camel—though it is precisely these “*pets*” that further burst the reverential quietude. Blending whimsy and earnestness in an image of unselfconscious animal energy, “pets” may veer slightly as a comforting or erotic touch—or blast the nicely silent affair with the body’s *other* breath, in perfectly learned fashion, where foreign “farts” (Fr. *pets*) just might break in upon “the delicatest ear of the mind.”⁵⁹ It may be indelicate, I admit, to ask indulgence of noxious effluvium as a variety of proliferal or *ear*-religious wit, but I do. The very offensiveness offsets the temptation of rest in solemn withdrawal—whether to heavenly haven, lost familial seat, imagistic cloister, or authorial intent, the happy home-that-never-was—for the happiness of a dawning aspect. In carnivalesque contrast to the un- or done-breathing flame, the slapstick spark of raw bodily wit on the pneumatic principle tumbles idea back down and out from the wit of event.

Such a word that breaks wind hangs together with her feral “motion church” and wish to keep questions of death and decay entwined with blossom and pollination, of *our souls* within earshot of more bodily (de)compositions. With no overt “tootings,” she lets these “pets” pass as naturally as any Christ-child might.⁶⁰ But it twines and culminates two leitmotifs of winds

⁵⁹ Thought to be onomatopoeic in origin, the French word had a quickly dissipating life in 16th- and 17th-century English. In English it continues to contain its own “offense at being or feeling slighted” (OED). On fart-humor’s ancient pedigree and medieval ubiquity, see Valerie Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁶⁰ Bishop’s translation of Aristophanes’ *The Birds* as her final project in Greek at Vassar would have provided advanced scatological training, as would have Joyce’s roiling *Wake* (VSC 53.1 and 72.2). She would also certainly have heard of the acclaimed French *artiste*, Joseph Pujol, “Le Petomane” (1857-1945) performing on Paris stages while across the channel the publisher of an English translation of Émile Zola’s *Earth* was on trial for obscenities such as this regarding the besotted peasant “Jésus-Christ”: “a very windy fellow. Continual explosions blew through

(blowing at St. Peters, visibly rippling and audibly crippling upon the page, and gritty at the desert grave) and another menacing more distantly “symbolic” reading with the body’s abject *ejecta*. What was exiled as alien other in the plotting, “squatting Arab,” or held above in holy hush over the Site takes on weight of tears, urine, blood and the heard dung- and tinkle- harboring uneasily in the “Dingle harbor” of “rotting hulks” and “dripping plush.” Closest kin to the comic-solemn Nativity, though, is the correspondingly veering Easter scene:

In Mexico the dead man lay
in a blue arcade; the volcanoes
glistened like Easter lilies.
The jukebox went on playing “Ay, Jalisco!” (CP 58)

Like the simile, the geography of this configuration is odd, those close volcanoes alerting to an explosive force *within* the arcade. (And “glistening” things are always a hint to be *listening* in.) The bursting “Ay, Jalisco!” disperses solemn observance, but a more random anarchy of home-grown phonemic derangement trumps that blast with another. Just where the volcanoes are tamed, “like Easter lilies,” the glisten of “*keister* lilies” unfurls its own pungent transegmental bloom. The trumpet of a prophecy? Impetuous revenge on pictorial quietude or holy hopes? Natural enough, such flourishings of ferment, and for animal or infant, or the dead, carry nothing of social shame. And whatever interpretative indignity visits the voicing of such “errant stinks,” the jukebox comedy suggests it may displace those old holy hopes with a spirited play.

Entertained, such moments perform still more fractiously, urgently and emergently what Costello suggests of the travel scenes that “disperse myth into life,” merging these symbolic patterns and “merely textual representations” “with the haphazard and the vital, where their hold is precarious” (135). In this drift of differentials between the familiar and foreign, design and

the house and livened things up. Damn it all, no one could ever be bored in that rascal’s house, for he never let fly without blurting some joke or other as well. He never emitted anything but frank detonation, substantial and ample as cannon shots.” Zola, *Earth*, trans. Ann Lindsay (New York: Grove P, 1955), 117.

accident, a graven stasis of “infant sight” and affective, evolving body, such *pets* and *keister-lilies* keep a “motion church” in motion. Planted or projected, they rove in the spirit of those impetuous, “wild winds” and the proliferal “comic operetta” she hoped to stage upon the wonky malfunctions of that aural instrument “always going wrong.” Bishop no doubt “found fresh ways of seeing” as Thomas Travisano avers, “and of making her readers see creatures and objects that many would consider beneath civilized attention.”⁶¹ Complicating takes on Bishop’s “delicacy” and “modesty,” Travisano expands Marianne Moore’s observations of Bishop’s “flicker of impudence” in her review of *North & South* into a “signature characteristic” of her style (112). Tracing a “skillful and frequent” “method of embedding indelicate details inside a delicate frame” strictly in images, he finds such “vulgar detailing [woven] so skillfully into the fabric of her verse that most casual readers and many not-so-casual ones have failed to notice them, although they will not have failed to feel their effects” (115, 114). It is well seen, but Bishop also leads readers to feel sight as a bit too “civilized” in itself, too identity-bound and transcendental both, and devised soundscapes to solicit those repressed, wilder energies borne of bodily binds while floating “home-made” claims.

Bishop’s restless wordplay seconds and augments Travisano’s claim for her daring that brings dreamy “realism, comedy, bawdiness, local color, and [Bishop’s phrase] ‘violence of tone’ into a verbal field that might otherwise seem just pretty” (115). In attending to attention-events, the sinking into the stream of sensation, and things *ouïe* happen(s) to hear, we experience both the pleasure of a making and the liberating excellence of surprise that Bishop felt was the most vital attribute of a good poem. And at the end of “Over 2,000 Illustrations,” embedded in the most sacred of frames, or objects of longing, it has the effect of, well, a fart during a sermon.

⁶¹ Travisano, “The Flicker of Impudence’: Delicacy and Indelicacy in the Art of Elizabeth Bishop,” *Geography of Gender*, 124.

But in *this* Bishop's church, our perishable parish, it is quite alright that we snicker a little. We will even see her pay reverent attention to those explosive tensions of thought and bodily ruptures of laughter that beautifully enact the prime kind of "coming to know" Ashbery finds her poems to provide: "coming to know ourselves," but "as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being" ("Second Presentation" 10). Bishop would have us feel it lustily straying, riding on the tongue's embodied chances that make for words' divergent, changing tastes and foreign ear-fulls, in a feel both far and near. This challenge of a proliferal, contrapuntal aesthetic of revisionary "moments" Bishop was steadily tracing as early as her last years at Vassar, to which we turn.

Chapter 2 Tongue-Timed: The Contrapuntal Note

*...what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?*
Gerard Manley Hopkins

*For it is not abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul,
but the inward sense and taste of things.*
St. Ignatius Loyola

Bishop copied out both of these passages in her notebooks just after Vassar, finding kinship in their sentiments with her own wish to get “a feeling of intense consciousness in the tongue,” that erogenous zone in which, as Anca Parvulescu observes in her book on laughter, is “most associated with passion and a quasi-union of body and soul.”¹ In the following exploration of the nexus of interests and commitments that the poet began to formulate in her last years at Vassar, a “Bishop” who is a bit foreign to the critical construct we’re accustomed to emerges: a contrapuntal musician in place of the painter, a passionate experimentalist underlying the quiet conversationalist, a poet of the revisionary spirit in text-au/oral travel from tongue to foreign ear right in and around and among this other of more comfortingly familiar ocular returns.

In returning her to these playful experimental origins, evolved from her musical interests, spiritual commitments, and immersion at Vassar (and after) in the work of Stein, Stevens, and Hopkins in particular, with a key revision of Eliot (grounded in Bergsonian and Jamesian kinships), we may greatly expand an appreciation for her “proliferal style.” Its experimental challenge—and, make no mistake, it is a radical one—turns upon the proposition made most vividly and famously by Gertrude Stein in “Portraits and Repetition,” that poetic genius is “most

¹ Hopkins in VSC 72.2, Loyola in VSC 74.11; “consciousness in the tongue” OA 18; Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge: The MIT P, 2010), 9. “Quasi-union” because, as she notes, the mouth is “in charge of both logos and animal functions [...] the site of an incommensurable ‘quasi-union.’” See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham UP, 2008).

intensely alive at the same time talking and listening”—and the corollary that readers naturally share in it. “It is necessary,” Stein proposed in the 1934 lecture,

if you are to be really and truly alive it is necessary to be at once talking and listening doing both things, not as if there were one thing, not as if they were two things, but doing them, well if you like, like the motor going inside and the car moving, they are part of the same thing.²

“Stein seeks the engine’s movement in her portraiture,” comments Steven Meyer in *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*, “the current that makes machinery crackle [...]”³ “Language as a real thing,” he quotes from her “Poetry and Grammar,” “is not imitation either of sounds or colors or emotions it is an intellectual recreation and there is no possible doubt about it and it is going to go on being that as long as humanity is anything” (*Lectures* 238; Meyer 115). A profound and passionate matter of play, we have to hear the revisionary prerogative here, of “intellectual re-creation,” and we will hear Bishop and James making similar claims and challenges to recognize this on-warding (for Bishop in un-wording) spiritual matter of change.

Bishop’s relation with Stein was a fraught but productive one, physically and mentally discomfited by her manner of “intensity” in *The Making of Americans*, as we hear below, while likely provoked by her and Virgil Thomson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the premiere of which she saw in Hartford in March 1934, to have her own go at an odd sort of Greek drama or masque soon after (REB 363n). Her “Prince Winsome Mannerly” (the “Winsome” later expunged) is cast between a chatty prince musing on aesthetic modes and manners, and a chorus of comically commenting angels “with the patience of Saints and the tact of / tact of the Lord” (VSC 72.2). They listen in on the Prince’s gamble on certain anamorphic reflections (in breath-polished silver

² Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 170.

³ Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the correlations of writing and science* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), citing Stein’s crackling comment from “A Long Dress” (115).

spoons, or tea pots, or “eyeglasses [...] on a silver chain”) extending from the possibility of “nicest conversation” in an adaptation of “talking and listening” with the proposition, “In point of fact, my Count, everyone should talk / So that each well might be a double line” (VSC 72.2). It points toward the fact that we *do* “talk” while reading, and proposes dramatic counter-pointing directions when we actively engage with this “point of (o)act.”

As we’ll take up more at the end of this chapter, Bishop was sketching this spiritual “double line” in contra-distinction to “confession,” “confidences,” and “story,” for “Poor people” with “their eyes popping,” and the intensity of its contrapuntal potential moves within attendance upon subvocal processes that Stein made viscerally evident (VSC 72.2). “When I first read that Wyndham Lewis said Gertrude Stein’s writing tired his throat,” she writes in her Vassar essay “Time’s Andromedas,” “I accepted it as an idiosyncrasy, then after doing some reading for myself, as an inexplicable fact. There are people, it seems,” she continues,

who possess auditory imagery to the exclusion of every other sort; that is, in order to understand what they are reading, what any one is saying, even what they themselves are thinking, they must say it silently themselves with actual motion of the throat muscles. Although most of us are affected in the same way by onomatopoetic words such as *buzz*, or *click*, we do the greater part of our thinking and reading by visual imagery. If Miss Stein belongs to the group of people who have auditory imagery only, or even possess it more strongly than other sorts of imagery, may it not account for a great deal of her writing technique? It might just possibly account for Miss Stein’s *continuous present* itself.⁴

Whatever we may think of this as a “theory” regarding Stein—and surely it slights her compositional goals in the gesture of diagnosis—it is provocative evidence that as early as Bishop’s undergraduate studies she was attuned to subvocal effects, feeling them in her own throat becoming “almost, if not actually, hoarse.”

⁴ PPL 657-8. Thinking of *Tender Buttons* she writes “it is hard to believe Miss Stein was not seeing the picture too” but returns to her feeling of “the fact of her writings making the reader almost, if not actually, hoarse” (PPL 658).

The equine pun is entirely apt to this emergent animal matter, an “intensity of existence” belonging to “entity” cut free from “identity” and “memory,” as Stein would put it in a lecture that Bishop attended in Paris in 1936, “What are Master-Pieces” (LM 93). What *The Making of Americans* made so salient for Bishop at Vassar, that texts are largely produced by the latent mouthing of the reader’s animal body, would accumulate a considerable amount of scientific evidence in the decades after Bishop’s observation. Ake Edfeldt’s *Silent Speech and Silent Reading* (1960), for instance, summarizes a great deal of research on muscular responses (of lips, larynx, pharynx, tongue, palate, etc.) in silent reading, to confirm it as a far less “imaginary” or simply “auditory” experience than “*a more or less restrained speaking or acting.*”⁵ In *Voicing American Poetry* (2008) Lesley Wheeler updates research on these “unconscious whispers,” noting that silent reading of difficult passages and metrical poetry produces “particularly marked” effects, activating “the premotor cortex, *as if the brain is priming the body to speak,*” a radically different process than simply listening to someone talk or “give a reading.”⁶ “Any act of silent reading engages our physical selves,” Wheeler summarizes, “but poetry’s strategies of sound saturation, and the very expectations of sound saturation we bring to poetry, may intensify how the silent reading of poetry involves our bodies” (27). However skirted in the criticism, this manner of the body’s physical involvement is crucial to Bishop’s dramatic standard of “a mind thinking,” and her concomitant wish to get “an intense sense of consciousness in the tongue”— it is, in conjunction with language, our proliferal instrument.

⁵ Edfeldt, *Silent Speech and Silent Reading* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960), 13; my emphasis. See also Garret Stewart’s *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, especially 127-30.

⁶ Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008), 24, 25; my emphasis. Even thought, as William James adduced over a century ago, is just as clearly mediated by these subvocal processes (PP 63). For recent research see Barry Cohen, “The Motor Theory of Voluntary Thinking,” *Consciousness and Self: Advances in Research and Theory*, vol. 4, ed. Richard Davidson et al. (New York: Plenum P, 1986); also Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention* (New York: Viking, 2009) regarding the debate over meanings as accessed by a “direct route” versus the “phonological loop” of sound and other strategies of word “decoding.”

One particularly remarkable cognitive study (not cited by Wheeler) accents the collaborative complexity of this instrumentation and activity, and notes that, of several interacting parts, the subvocal motions of the mouth are the most crucial to detecting puns or bridging letters, phonemes and words.⁷ The tongue's active creation of a silent phonological stream in the most minimal of motions was found to be more crucial in this loop than the attending "inner ear" that tends to be idealized. Bishop's wish to draw consciousness down to, and out from, this animal activity she'd variously frame throughout her poems, one quite overtly that we've heard in "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (CPr 92) where in that drift from calling "speech" to "sound" of the retreating mad-dinning women swerve, "(or had the birds waked up?)." We will tend this bird-trope further below and in the following chapter as it overlaps her most "religiously" repeated trope of liquidity, but take up first her early models and engagements in her essays.

It was the same semester of her writing about Stein that she noted to Donald Stanford her wish to get "consciousness in the tongue," in defending a phrase "meditate your own wet" in an early version of "The Reprimand," and for several letters after would develop the meaning of such awareness among the mouth's wet membranes and tonal taste buds.⁸ Often at odds with her

⁷ In "The role of subvocalization in auditory imagery" researchers tested the effects of phonological feedback loops in understanding written and spoken language. In one test subjects were asked to mentally repeat the word "stress," upon which 100% reported that it began to suggest "dress"; but when the phonological loop was disrupted with extraneous sounds distracting the "inner ear," or with the tongue or teeth immobilized, only 25% and 13%, respectively, noted a change, leading researchers to emphasize it as "a *perceptual* discovery" (1434-36). Similarly, in being asked to decode words (NME as "enemy," etc.), the non-interference group achieved 72% success, while those given irrelevant auditory input fell to half that, and, *consistently lowest*, among those whose subvocal impulse was blocked the rate dropped to 21%. J.D. Smith et al., "The role of subvocalization in auditory imagery," *Neuropsychologia* 33.11 (December 1995), 1433-54.

⁸ OA 18. Remotely introduced by Ivor Winters at *Hound & Horn*, Bishop and Stanford exchanged poems, flirtatious repartee, and a great deal of discussion regarding poetry in general for several months before they met in person. Upon their meeting, however, Bishop reported to her friend, Frani Blough, that she found Stanford "very sweet but extremely young," after which their exchanges rapidly trailed off (LM 55). Langdon Hammer reasonably guesses that the end to their epistolary dalliance may have had quite as much to do with the more stimulating mentorship and practical guidance of Marianne Moore. Hammer, "Useless Concentration: Life and Work in Elizabeth Bishop's Letters and Poems," *American Literary History* 9.1 (Spring 1997), 165.

correspondent over questions of prosody, rhythm, indelicate content, and the basic conventions they set for themselves, she deflected Stanford's more Romantic standard of an "uninterrupted mood" and a smooth meter to declare instead "I think that an equally great 'cumulative effect' might be built up by a series of irregularities" that might get, she felt, the (plural) "moods themselves into the rhythm" (OA 11). Wary of "perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness," it came down, for Bishop, to a question of motion and *action*, the "point of (a)ct," telling him in the November 1933 letter, "for me there are two kinds of poetry, that (I think yours is of this sort) at rest, and that which is in action, within itself. At present it is too hard for me to get this feeling of action within the poem unless I just go ahead with it and let the meters find their way through" (OA 11). The nearest example of such poetry, she noted to Stanford, was Gerard Manley Hopkins, and with the help of Morris Croll's essay "The Baroque Style in Prose" which, she felt, "perfectly describes the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself," she staked her much-quoted goal "to portray not a thought, but a mind thinking," to catch a mind in "the act of experiencing [an] idea," the emergent "ardor of its conception in the mind" being for her "a necessary part of its truth" (OA 12).

What are we to make of this "mind thinking"? The catchphrase is so broad, as Michael Theune notes, that it would apply quite as readily to a Victorian or Shakespearean monologue, and Charles Bernstein, James Logenbach and others commonly invoke the phrase to describe quite diverse aesthetics.⁹ But if it has little to say particularly about Bishop it is because the dramatic standard is commonly cited but slighted in its link with her avid interest in a tongue-tripped consciousness (shared with Hopkins and Stein), allowing "everyone should talk [and listen] / So that each well might be a double line." Her apparent digressions and casual self-revision, parentheses, ellipses, and open-ended questions are a clear consequence of this wish to

⁹ Theune, "Some Thoughts on 'A Mind Thinking,'" *Iowa Review* 33.2 (Fall 2003), 165-77.

portray “a mind thinking,” but it’s under-appreciated how she provokes the bodily *feel* of “a mind thinking”—a *reader’s* mind thinking, it’s in-lit stream—in proliferal, straying counterpoints, vague sensations inciting extravagant thetic bets, in a certain waking, ear-rational excess of the linguistic and imagistic givens.

She underlined in “Gerard Manley Hopkins: Some Notes on Timing in His Poetry” (February 1934) that the poems require a bodily sounding that slurries the borders of words and poems (and persons), undermining any sense of “a fixed apparition,” in a “fluid, detailed surface” “breaking down the margins of poetry, with a kind of vibration and keeping the atmosphere fresh and astir” (PPL 665-67). Paying particular attention to his “quasi-apocope” (“hear / Me . . . wear- / y”) and his fondness for “the odd and often irritating rhyme” overrunning lexical borders (“England . . . mingle and”), she found them to “‘come right’ on being read aloud,” and contributing “to the general effect of intense, unpremeditated unrevised emotion.”¹⁰ Beyond this vocative model of dramatic action, though, she quietly but unmistakably signaled the volatile gestalt of his “timing”: “I have heard that dropping shells from an aeroplane onto a speeding battleship below, in an uncertain sea, demands the most perfect and delicate sense of timing imaginable” (PPL 665). Delicate, indeed.

A matter of repetition, those explosions of phonemic fracture and emergent re-creation they follow from Hopkins’ delineation of the poetic as “speech which afters and offends its inscape,” inflicting the kinetic trace and aftermath of one word heard reverberant in its

¹⁰ PPL 667. She echoes Hopkins’ wish that the reader “take breath and read it with ears.” Re-reading his *The Loss of the Eurydice*, he writes that it “struck me aghast with a kind of raw nakedness and unmitigated violence I was unprepared for: but take breath and read it with ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right.” Qtd. in Gerald Bruns, *Inventions: Writing, Textuality and Understanding in Literary History* (New Haven, Yale UP, 1983), 138.

successors, “*oftening, over-and-overing, aftering* [...] in order to detach [the inscape] to the mind.”¹¹ He proposes a liberating pattern of changes, of “speech framed”

to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter of meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ *the shape which is contemplated for its own sake*. These speech-sounds are shaped *for the inscape’s sake and to be dwelt upon*. (xxii; my emphasis)

It is telling that Hopkins remains a poet of great interest for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and other contemporary “experimental” writers, and notable too that most of them miss (or dismiss) this intensity in Bishop, deceived by her more casual language, painterly pleasures and formal choices into thinking her poems do not demand “close listening.”¹² But her bond with Hopkins is a meaningful one in their shared development of a poetry “in action, within itself,” that can be, as she describes a “single short stanza” of his “as full of, aflame with, motion as one of Van Gogh’s cedar trees” motions similarly built up (if more quietly for Bishop) “up by a series of (*ear*)regularities” (PPL 667). Like Stein, Bishop and Hopkins treat language as urgently re-creative matter, “*as a real thing*,” not as “imitation either of sounds or colors or emotions” but as “the shape which is contemplated for its own sake,” speech-sounds (Gr. *phonē*, “voice, sound”) formed “for the *inscape’s sake* and to be dwelt upon.” And again, it is a temporal dwelling between air and water, and geared to explode, undo, alter.

How, we may gather in just a snippet from the thick and shifty Hopkinsian soundscape of “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” (April 1933). This playful experiment in dilapidating lexical borders also opens, in Stevensian terms, a sort of comic discourse on intelligences of soil versus sea, and a whole host of what he’d later call “comic colors” in the first of the three sonnets:

¹¹ “Poetry and Verse” (1874), *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), xxii. My emphases.

¹² Or so Charles Bernstein’s edited collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) would lead one to believe. Critics engage there with the poems of Vachel Lindsay, Robert Creeley, H.D., Hugh MacDiarmid, Kenneth Rexroth, Langston Hughes, John Ashbery, Gertrude Stein, Kurt Schwitters, John Cage, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Laura Riding, Robert Graves, and Pound, Eliot and Zukofsky, but in its 390 pages there is not *one*, even *passing* reference to Bishop.

I / Tidal Basin

Withdrawing water would be thus discreet
So as to make us think 'twas in our mind
—That sickening rupture happening there. “How blind
Are eyes!” says it, (dragging its slippery feet)
“Now they’re left vacant truths, like angel eyes on
The old gravestones; seeing into the graves.
Your own heart beat your own eyes’ color to waves
And filléd blue this full to the horizon.”

Oh wait! off there it mends revenge on colors, gains
Brilliantest interest on its interrupted wealth . . .
Soon it all the awful socket’ll flesh to health,
Over the sunk sides steal its iris sweet blue veins.
Sight from the senses not thus easy’s sprung. And see
Thine eyes new-spheréd, held whole, shine to thee! (CP 223)

The poem is often knocked as a “slavish imitation” of Hopkins, its effect found “vaguely disgusting,” leaving the play it proposes unread.¹³ This associational play begins in dropping from the title to “Tidal Basin,” and our spiritual-material base in this liquidity. It floats through a thickened phonemic soundscape’s tentative accords between visual and au/oral mind-wirings, the latter calling the eyes “blind” in this internal regard. The plain enough statement “‘How blind / are eyes!’ says it” yet provides a counterpointing yodel or two—“*Arise!*” then “says (*s*)it”—as this “withdrawing water” drags across the lips, the stuff we “draw” *with*, just for a time, “withdrawing” whispers.

In that grave stare, Bishop bends the eyes to a certain angelic-deadly verticality where “angel eyes” peer upon print’s epitaphic aspect, into the graves with a sort of X-ray vision of disembodied meanings. This mode she expands, through rhyme, as a kind of horizon-mindedness, called back to a local subvocality in the comic colors of phonemic fracture. The speaker indicates that she’s “heard” this “with-drawing water” in the turn from octave to sestet, and if we “talk and listen” closely too, we may enjoy the way that this archaic “filléd blue” drops

¹³ LM 92, 50. Barbara Hicok also calls it “slavishly Hopkinsesque” in *Degree of Freedom: American Women Poets and the Women’s College, 1905-1955* (Lewisburg, PA.: Bucknell UP, 2008), 114.

vaguely admixed with *lead* into the vocative rupture “Oh *weight!*” in the fracturing drag of phonemic water (Fr. *eau*). Floating upon networks of waking, perishing pulses, the repeating and pulverizing pulse of “a mind thinking” through a “heart beat[ing] your own eyes’ color to waves” draws an anamorphic “eyes’ skull” or active “sculler,” a play we’ll hear repeated in “How to Detect a Moderate Rain” and “The Map.” It finds a conforming thetic echo in “the awful socket” sinking in a tide’s rising, but as, the speaker assures, “flesh[ed] to health” when “Over the sunk sides steal its iris sweet blue veins.” Tasted c-sounds steal in among this “sweet blue” to turn it “teal,” as inky blue over bone white might, in a certain con- and dis-junction with the eye-mind.¹⁴ Among other agitations the stanza comes to a sort of ear-rational accord where it audibly draws the heart-blood’s color to these “new-spheréd” eyes, more healthily, stealthily, and wholly held. This fuller sphere, we’re invited to feel, touches on the eye’s sight, the skull behind it, and the circulatory forces pumping through, filling out the liquid sphere that it is. Such vaguely emergent, liminal solicitations advise a refinement on Peggy Samuels’ excellent study, *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art* (2010). For if color is indeed the “boundary crosser par excellence” for the painter-poet, as Samuels finds Bishop masterly in its deployment, the honor is certainly more deservedly the phoneme’s for this proliferal poet of split interests.¹⁵ For the way it youthfully ranges while intimating breakdown and decay, Bishop exhibits a particular affection for the phoneme that serves and swerves, softens and severs the relation of meanings and words, tethers a reader’s mind to body, lends a body to mind.

¹⁴ A wilder, more proliferal bet within this phonemic chain reaction draws on her interest in Berkeley and invitation of a certain “health” through the water stealing “over its (*s*)iris sweet blue veins.” It was Berkeley’s cure-all as detailed in his 1744 “Siris: A chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar Water, And divers other Subjects connected together and arising one from another.” He hails this spirit in his introduction with a certain musical analogy: “For if the lute be not well tuned, the musician fails of his harmony. And in our present state, the operations of the mind, so far depend on the right tone or good condition of its instrument, that any thing which greatly contributes to preserve or recover the health of the body, is well worth attention to the mind” (online at google books)—Bishop’s sentiments of fully-fleshed thinking too, however obliquely expressed.

¹⁵ Samuels, *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010), 46.

In expanding on her desire for a cumulative, network effect “from a series of irregularities” to catch “consciousness in the tongue” she provided an explosive report on the body. “Have you ever noticed,” we may be surprised to hear the “Famous Eye” asking Stanford, that you can often learn more about other people—more about how they feel, how it would feel to be them—by hearing them cough or make one of the innumerable inner noises, than by watching them for hours? It has a lot to do with what I am attempting to write, so I guess I shall explain it to you. Sometimes if another person hiccups, particularly if you haven’t been paying much attention to him, why you get a sudden sensation as if you were inside him—you know how he feels in the little aspects he never mentions, aspects which are, really indescribable to another person and must be realized by that kind of intuition. Do you know what I am driving at? Well, if you can follow those rather hazy sentences—that’s what I quite often want to get into poetry. (OA 18)

A hiccup? In underlining such a bodily shock she’s positing an aesthetic in which poetry communicates less by statement than by implicating the lives, the bodily activities, of other people in its movements—au/oral projections of a literal sort, coordinating mouth and ear and mind. It is importantly *not* “thoughts” that are conveyed, not fabricated access to another’s mind. In her wish to resist mirroring structures she returns Stanford in this letter to an impersonal traversal that “must be realized by a kind of *intuition*,” adapting that word crucial to Henri Bergson in *Matter and Mind* to describe the nub of an indivisible *experience* in the continuous heterogeneity of duration. Tended sound holds that threshold like no other sense, she suggests, and in outlining these bodily emanations of coughs or hiccups, any of those “innumerable inner noises” *readers* make to themselves, the re-conceptual challenge she cast (unsuccessfully) to Stanford was of the feel of tasted re-creations, its object to augment the *present* aspects of experience broken down to this capacity for infinite transitional adjustments in language.¹⁶

¹⁶ Stanford later expressed his view that “She wrote no major poems,” a “major poem” defined by him as having “an important theme, and it should arouse powerful or profound emotion appropriate to its theme.” Her poems, for him, are “carefully designed to exclude powerful feeling. She appears to be afraid of it.” Stanford, “The Harried Life of Elizabeth Bishop,” review of Brett Millier’s *One Art* and C.K. Doreski’s *The Constraints of Language*, *Sewanee Review* 102.1 (Winter 1994), 163. Similarly, in Nathan Scott’s continuation of the myth of her “unquerulous, and sometimes even exuberant, submissiveness to the hegemony of *l’actuelle*,” he lauds her refusal of “false sentiment”

In her notebooks she mused over this ideal reciprocity as questions of manners, attention, curiosity, creative mediation, which she also sometimes called love, all seemingly linked with her peculiar sense of the religious. It is one she shares with William James, as he provisionally lays it out in his “Circumscription” of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*” (V 42). For writer and reader, alone with words, she draws the experience down to a breathing “taste of things” a tactile flush of “a motion” made in the mouth. As such it’s notable that she cuts “what looks” from Hopkins’ “Hurrahing at Harvest,” epigraph to this chapter, to begin with “*what lips yet gave you a Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?*” (VSC 72.2). Her vow was a double one, as we’ve heard: “Pound out the ideas of sight.”¹⁷ The foundational duplicity of “just description,” providing the “ideas of sight” and a sense of identity and memory, are to be quietly pounded, punned, phonemically fractured *out*, for quite another bodily-cognitive intensity of close-honed but foreign re-creations in charged (*L. hic*) hiccups of “*here*.” Though seemingly dreamier in their emergent drift, we might weigh them with Hopkins and Bishop as “realer [...] rounder replies,” their fleshed, spirited bets a cure for more distant, nostalgic ocular longings.

Bishop beautifully expands our sense of the “seen” in poetry, to be sure, and to “creatures and objects that many would consider beneath civilized attention” as Thomas Travisano has noted (p. 88 above), but again she also frames sight as a bit too “civilized” and “transcendent,” as those stony staring angel-eyes may lead us to feel. It is tricky business but, I think, a key proposal of hers, that a commitment to an observable world involves tending these momentary,

and “specious eloquence,” while finding her “no doubt not a major figure” (135). But clearly her powerfully low-key manner has done a great deal to shift the terms of what we might take “major” to mean.

¹⁷ 72A.1 and p. 25, above. She’d happily hold with Stevens’ “I believe in the image”—but only with his corollary that “The tongue is an eye” (OP 193).

ephemeral thought-things “(which after all / cannot have been intended to be seen),” such as she holds at the heart of her first volume (“The Monument,” CP 25). Rare are notations that a sound’s been savored, an emergent word humored in her poems; apart from Eleanor Cook, notably by poets: Lowell and Marianne Moore, James Merrill and John Ashbery most delightfully so. Mostly, though, the poems are (man)handled under the aegis of a crushing superstructure. Given quickly to discursive long views, back from the spray-wet, crumbly cliff-edge, it is Bishop’s “mind thinking” branded (as if we had access), rather than tending the bodily processes of thinking *through* her words. That mind is cast as “inherently devotional and contemplative” (Lafford), extending the possibilities of imagism (Travisano) or “visionary mystical exaltation” (McCabe), or making “the Sublime [...] possible once more” (Diehl), when not thought giving quotidian reports, submitting “to the hegemony of *l’actuelle*” (Scott), or finding artful ways to mask personal (read sexual) confessions (Diehl, Lombardi, Harrison, et. al.).¹⁸ But always *seeing* is the privileged and often exclusive sense addressed, and with it the agitations of words as (phonotextual) matter are given short shrift. Where “Baroque writers had dramatized the act of *writing*,” Thomas Travisano, for instance would have us know, “Bishop’s linear structures dramatize the act of *seeing*” (*Artistic Development* 72). But her structures are set to dramatize other matters too when they crumble, queer, scramble linearity not only in certain traditional prosodic “returns,” but in reciprocal, recursive pressures and the “inscape” of phonemic fracture that invite dramatic re-renderings of narrative or “the ideas of sight.”

Between musings on Stein’s “talking and listening,” and her own “idea of the ‘story’” as “proliferate / al”—what she presented in a letter to Frani as “a new Theory-of-the-Story-All-My-

¹⁸ Erin Lafford, 253; Travisano, *Artistic Development*; Joanne Feit Diehl, *Women Poets and the American Sublime* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1990), 91; Nathan Scott, 135; Susan McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994), 94. Marilyn May Lombardi, *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995).

Own”—she cast as an inner outing into “the queer land of kissing” that intimates both how “the logic of sensation in Bishop,” as George Lensing asserts, “is moreover the logic of visualization”¹⁹—*and* alerts one to taste one’s way beyond the chorus of such claims. It also helps to show why we might want to expand more restrictive biographical readings of her work.

In the queer land of kissing,
Creeping under over-hanging boughs
In the dew-drenched total dark
Meeting a hollow wind like a coffin in the air,
Searching for that rumoured pool—

There are stars in the roof of your mouth.
And a glow-worm at the root of your tongue. (VSC 75.4a)

Finding the scene conjuring “all the topoi of vampiric love: the stygian atmosphere, the coffin, ‘that rumoured pool’ of blood and the deadly kiss,” which she links to the “fatal sting” of non-reproductive “same sex desire,” Marilyn Lombardi satisfies a drive to “penetrate the poet’s intended obscurity,” that yet minimizes other cloaked potencies of this erogenous zone for readers as surreptitious paramours.²⁰ Moreover, it is less the “fatal sting” that Lombardi finds delivered here than a swerve of “subject”—a tactile discovery of those icy “stars in the roof of your mouth,” and a sea-green bioluminescence aglow at the tongue’s moving root, the tasting place of phonemes slapped and ladled out, where senses and sensations moistly mingle.

The coffin (a bit more abruptly, say, than that “withdrawing water”) draws the withdrawing bargain with air down to a “*cough*” struck off, phonemically speaking, from the stuttering “*coffin in the air*.” Left aside by Lombardi is a speaking-image just below these stars and glow-worms that clearly voices this fractious phonemic force:

The bureau trapped in the moonlight, like a creature
saying “oh” (VSC 75.4a)

¹⁹ Lensing, “Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop: The way a poet should see, The way a poet should think,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1995), 117.

²⁰ Lombardi, *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995), 54-5.

It provides for a veering “weird pleasure” (Bishop’s phrase in the same notebook) even as we vividly “see.” Sarah Riggs’ sense of a Bishop poem as “a trap in which we have to see something,” of being “boxed in or fixed on visible details” is perhaps pertinent, but doesn’t account for the “weird pleasure” of that trap being sprung in a lovely reciprocal moment of self- and phonemic-feeling (51). When this moonlit bureau kind of speaks, “like a creature / saying ‘oh,’” the surprise is ignited in what the *reader’s* caught out mouthing, this little, minimal inscape of: “oh.” This vocative taste, in a ranging nexus of sense might draw out the watery dilapidations (Fr. *eau*) of the moonlit waves of wood-grain of the “bureau,” or the minimalist “o” print provokes the lips to shape. Between “a creature saying” and *écriture* (Fr. “writing”) being said the sound-image keeps readers in an undulating, transatlantic flux.

This is to say that Bishop’s scaping of this “queer land of kissing” *does* prove resistant to “patriarchal” fixities and heterosexual norms, but by drawing attention to those au/oral cavities and events that might entirely elide differentials of gender. It may be that “weird pleasure,” as Lombardi supposes, was Bishop’s phrase “for erotic delight that does not end in reproduction,” evading “the cultural imperative to be fruitful,” but to break beyond the confines of homoerotics we may feel it to limn a surprisingly *productive*, proliferal erogenous zone (50). Her Crusoe’s “home-made flute” he thinks to have “the weirdest scale on earth” (as we’ll see further below) and that wind instrument bears also on ours, in textured contact with text-in-time, a rhythmic space of constant rupture and fabrication.²¹ Not reproduction, to be sure, this “weird pleasure” is

²¹ CP 164. What’s repressed in the social mechanism of language Julia Kristeva writes in *A Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), is “an unlimited and unbounded generating process,” “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases,” which she calls the maternal or semiotic “*chora*,” melodic and pulsional though not yet circulatory (28). “All discourse”—the “Father’s Law” of rhetoric, etymology and grammar—“moves with and against the *chora*,” she suggests, “in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it” (26). “Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm.” With “no thesis or position” its “rhythmic space” “effectuates discontinuities by temporarily

yet involved in an excessive generativeness and plays on a peculiar scale of “time, change, becoming,” preserved within its Old English *wyrd* (OED).

The “sterile desire” that Lombardi underlines as what in “lesbianism love [is] most frequently condemned” Bishop early on deflects, as we’ve seen in her “Hymn,” toward the more *visually* fixed or nostalgically fixated, with those doers mounting a wax-faced Mary, and in those angel eyes seeing freely *through* the graven space (*Body* 50). She underlines this sterility in the opening of the second sonnet with: “They all kept looking at each other’s eyes. / “Look, here I am, in here! You’re warm—oh look again!”—the under-plea to *hear* rising again through and against them (CP 223). Joanne Feit Diehl finds in Bishop’s “Sexual Poetics” a “definition of erotic pleasure through absence and the unspoken.”²² However apt as regards the manner Bishop hints and skirts questions of sexual identity, it wants modulation in turning from pre-plotted biographical readings to the lively over-ridings that actively range in the genial mediations of a suppressed subvocality that is neither *altogether* an absence nor *entirely* unspoken. In the *do-* and “dew-drenched total dark” of this buccal, “queer land of kissing,” Bishop hints broadly of active eccentricity and obliquity, from a seed sense of things “going wrong” (OED, *queer*)—as she did to Frani regarding that “nice little operetta” and the “ecclesiastical” looking Miss Lula listening through her errant instrument for her fortunes as the teller cuts the cards.

articulating them and then starting over, again and again,” “preced[ing] symbolic articulation by providing its raw material,” founding and fracturing it (26, 28).

²² *American Women Poets*, 93. She also notes there a kind of intimacy Bishop is able to activate “through absence, departure, and death [...] as if, like Dickinson, [she] believed that ‘absence makes the present mean’” (96). In placing Bishop in a “tradition of women poets whose redefinition of the Sublime centers upon the interrelation of the imagination and [homeroetic] sexual identity” Diehl claims gender and sexual identity underlines Bishop’s rejection of an Emersonian ethos—hardly an Emersonian gesture, to be sure (91). Relocating that “interrelation” between the imagination and bodily soundings, I find her entirely, joyfully amenable, to an Emersonian “poetics of transition” as Jonathan Levin has outlined such a tradition of language games, as I’ll take up below.

Under Your Eyes: 2/3 Time

Though Bishop would not dub her style “proliferal” for several years, at Vassar she was already developing bold and nuanced ideas of writing in her essays, and putting them into action in her stories and poems. Recognizing how her prose laid the fertile turf from which her poems would spring, Marianne Moore encouraged Bishop to publish them together, *essays included*, assuring that they “support [...] and necessitate one another”—a quirky idea, but keenly apt, and I think you’ll see how it might have tilted her readers in some different directions.²³ As the letters to Stanford also indicate, she’d come to a fairly firm idea of the felt flux she wanted “to get into poetry,” and her thoughtful essays on her reading provided a forum for considering dramatic possibilities. How to get the feel of *time*, a textured sense of revising time, into writing, was perhaps the most urgent question with which she grappled, returning to it at various slants within and across each of her essays, as we’ve already heard explosively rendered in the question of “timing” in Hopkins’ poetry.

One measure of her own (*partial*) success is how critics readily acknowledge that “time provides the plot” within Bishop’s narrative and lyrical descriptions, as David Kalstone for instance, distinguished them from Moore’s more “timeless studies” that take “seemingly instantaneous possession of her subjects.”²⁴ Looking into these early essays and experiments, my hope is that they augment an appreciation for how she meant time’s plot to thicken still more into *our own* in contrapuntal commentary and a wit of the proliferal. It is not just that Bishop began developing in this writing, as James Logenbach argues, a theory of poetry that valued “hermeneutic indeterminacy,” which, like “a mind thinking” is a little too abstract a measure of

²³ Moore to Bishop, March 1, 1937, quoted in Kalstone, *Becoming* 77.

²⁴ Regarding her “Roosters,” Kalstone expands: “Nothing is sustained for long, neither the glimpses of savagery that link human and nonhuman survival, nor the memory-tinged scrutiny of the physical world, nor an ongoing natural harmony impervious to human pain” (*Becoming* 94-6).

what she was up to.²⁵ Her measure was a musical one, rooted in the moving but irreducible value of the moment, and attendance upon its emergent events. Though considering prose fictions in “Time’s Andromedas” and “Dimensions for a Novel” that we turn to, she signaled the essays’ continuity with her thinking about poetry in part by taking epigraphs from the two poets most important to her at the time, Hopkins and Stevens: “*Now Time’s Andromeda on this rock rude...*” and from Stevens’ “Stars at Tallapoosa,” “The lines are straight and swift between the stars.”²⁶

In taking up the “peculiar time-feeling” of several novelists in “Time’s Andromedas,” Gertrude Stein’s and Dorothy Richardson’s most extendedly, her pluralization of Hopkins’ “Andromeda” nods to the differences of these writers’ “time-feelings” and draws Hopkins’ Christianization of Greek myth into a radically expanded pluriverse beyond all conceivable bounds.²⁷ It sets the concept of “now” awash on a mind-boggling scale of heterogeneous creation, and speaks to her ideal that kairotic re-creation—in moments “filled full”—might infuse the feel of a reading. She first captures a mingling of times in an embarrassed blush upon the page: “I had dug myself a sort of little black cave into the subject I was reading [...] expecting Heaven knows what sudden revelation. I heard and saw nothing—until the page before my eyes blushed pink” (PPL 641). Preceded by Platonic and religious language, the “blush” bumps the cave-dweller into diurnal time in which other scales also revolve, as she first hears “a multitude of small sounds [...] sounds high in the air, of a faintly rhythmic irregularity, yet resembling the retreat of innumerable small waves, lake-waves, rustling on sand.” Heeding that distraction from her project, she offers a moving account:

Of course it was the birds going South. They spread across a wide swath of sky, each rather alone, and at first their wings seemed all to be beating perfectly together. But by

²⁵ Logenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 24.

²⁶ The essays were published in the *Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies* (December 1933 and May 1934).

²⁷ The Andromeda Nebula was the first star system decisively shown, with the Hubble telescope in 1925, to be an independent galaxy outside of our own. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/dp24ga.html>.

watching one bird, then another, I saw that some flew a little slower than others, some were trying to get ahead and some flew at an individual rubato; each seemed a variation, and yet altogether my eyes were deceived into thinking them perfectly precise and regular. I watched closely the spaces between the birds. It was as if there were an invisible thread joining all the outside birds and within this fragile net-work they possessed the sky; it was down among them, of a paler color; moving with them. The interspaces moved in pulsation too, catching up and continuing the motion of the wings in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does—not a blankness but a space as musical as all the sound. (PPL 642)

Engaging a musical language, she finds each bird “a variation,” some of an “individual rubato,” and the pulsing interspaces, like those lake-waves “continuing the motion of the wings in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does—*not a blankness* but a space as musical as all the sound,” weaving a symphonic sense of interpenetrating particularity and overlapping pattern. More than an incidental rhyme suggests this minutely perceived flight scene of variably repeating birds to touch upon the flux of repeated words.

As in her sandpiper’s peering between his toes where all of an Atlantic is found washing Bishop notably lingers with the “interspaces” here, a pulse, “not a blankness but a space as musical as all the sound” (CP 131 and p. 208, below). She works from the throb of those “individual rubato[s]” toward a progressive coalescing of differences through various wakes and waves to arrive at the condensed abstraction of “the migration idea,” an “immutable” thought, probably “as mathematically regular as the planets,” “a thing so inevitable, so absolute, as to mean nothing connected with the passage of time at all—a static fact of the world” that stands “still and infinite” (PPL 642-3). Bishop’s installing herself “in a phenomenal movement,” as James expressed in his appreciation of Bergson, and her expressed mistrust of conceptual stilling, of experiential flux cut up into neat words, the “static fact,” lends a Bersonian/Jamesian edge at the very outset of the essay, particularly in their shared appreciation that, as James

emphasizes, “To know adequately what really *happens* we ought, Bergson insists, to see into the intervals” (WWJ 557). And perhaps hear into them too.

Bishop traces “what really *happens*” by zigzagging across and into the intervals between absorption and abstraction, the weave of her own “momentary sense of time,” first absorbed in the birds’, then when looking away, still conscious of theirs “pulsing against and contradicting my own,” before it slips to become “a fixed feeling, a little section of the past [...] become timeless” (PPL 644). It provides a rough analogy for time-patterns within novels, their “suppositious length of days, hours, or years” set against the “literal time” “used up [...] while the book is being read” (PPL 643). In the tradition of “Dickens, Hardy, or Somerset Maugham” she suggests that one accepts “the time-system of the book” without it ever spreading out, taking hold “in our own time-scheme,” while modern “‘experimental’ writing,” such as *The Waves* and *Ulysses* means to distend classical unities of time, augment a sense of contrast. Noting Proust as master of the distended “time-district,” achieving “the perfect acquiescence of the past with our own time-pattern” she also admits a mistrust of his procedure, or effect: “One of the chief difficulties of Proust for me,” she admits, “has always been a Puritanic conviction that so much thought *backwards* from a sitting posture, no matter what wonders it brought to light, must be a sin against the particular beauties of the passing minute” (PPL 644, 650). Bishop’s ideal as to these “particular beauties”—and it applies directly to her poems early *and* late—involves a certain tension of “*partial* acquiescence” to the writing’s time-pattern “in counterpoint or in unison with our own” (PPL 645).

The contrasting narrative strategies of Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1919) and Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (1911), “both excessively time-conscious,” best represent to Bishop “two distinct ideas of *time* in writing: time that can be felt and realized but that is not our

own, going on elsewhere; and time actually our own” (PPL 659). Her ideal of a counterpointing fusion of the two first emerges in admiring the manner in which the protagonist of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam, slips “simply and slightly into our own time,” her thoughts seemingly striking off, “spark-like, from the present.” She mimics this spontaneity when asking without skipping a beat,

Have you ever drawn lines with your fore-finger-nail on a window-pane just beginning to freeze over? The line remains clear on the opaque frostiness for just a minute [...] and then suddenly at angles away from it other lines spring out of their own accord and branch and grow under your eyes, with clean, crystalline edges. (PPL 648)

The surprising query threads the essay into *our* time and experience—and only gradually do we gather that she draws these wandering lines to adduce fracturing temporal expansions of Miriam’s “stream of conscious” narrative (“tomorrow...,” “last week...,” “it would be...”) brought in “of their own accord” with the narrative present. She contrasts the procedure with the Builders and Contractors Method of the 19th-century novel “clearing ground, measuring and digging for the basement” or “polishing off the whole window, systematically” (PPL 648). These fracturing lines are also, Bethany Hicok invites us to consider, “an elaborate visual representation of what Bishop means by time,” and we can perhaps particularize it as an emblem for the proliferal surprises of contrapuntal notes that might spread out in our own time, arising “of their own accord” with the poet’s line.²⁸

And as she performs in her poems, the crisp image floats upon shifting phonemic intervals: the lightning cracks “grow (*wonder* your eyes” and the *rise* of a piqued interest. This threading-within-a-threading into the reader’s time arrives with just a brush of Christic hint underscoring such material-spiritual conjunctions: the off-hand indication of “your fore-finger-nail” drawing into those “clean, *crystalline* edges.” Such things, like Miriam’s story, are “brought in off the beat, so to speak, in a form of syncopation” that involves giving “equal time,”

²⁸ Hicok, *Degrees of Freedom*, 114.

Bishop underlines, to “unequally important events [. . .] emphasizing no one thing more than anything else (excepting some underlying sense of *life*)” (PPL 652). For Bishop such life is less capable of being told than tolled, and this democracy of bodily attention strikes her “as almost the secret of the whole thing” (PPL 652). This emphasis on underlying life, to which James and Bergson (and Emerson) are ever returning their readers finds expression in her proliferal fable “In Prison” where the would-be prisoner hopes to discover, in the walls of his cell, “the regularity of the brickwork beneath” some peeling (or peeling) paint, as of the “painted” scenes of her poems, the generous experimental challenge of her quirky proliferal style that turns upon a reader’s tactile tongue, foreign ear and proliferal wit (CPr 185).

The easy-going “*motion*” of Miriam’s story gives Bishop tangible pleasure in the essay and a sense of burgeoning *life* “underlying” it all *and* posed to overflow, “with a trembling surfeit,” as she posits in another thrilling image with surreptitious tugs, “almost as if it were that poised, miraculous, extra water *above* the edge of the tumbler” (PPL 651-2). The downward tug of tumbling in that “tumbler” intensifies the naturally “miraculous” measure of above-the-rim surface tensions, augmenting the feeling of tenuous but adhesive life in wandering commentary. Bishop drops these casual hints of religious language around appreciations for the casual balance of life and artifice felt in writing, and contrasts these more organic images with others of mechanism to express the mode of the traditional novelist who would be “our mechanical band-master” with “conversation, description, thought all [...] led to the same tune,” also like train “conductors” pointing out the sights and producing only a “jaded recognition” (PPL 650, 651). She ushers them also with a different sort of religious imagery for the overbearing apparatus in Stein’s nearly “thousand pages of a continuous present” in *The Making of Americans*.

Brevity was one mother of Bishop's wit, the anti-systematic another, and as she handed on Richardson's casual provocation of curiosity with a quick visual and au/oral provocation of her own, she front-loads the discussion of Stein with seven excerpts of *Composition as Explanation*, as if to encumber with its theoretical ambition, including these:

Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.

For a long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts.

Automatically with the acceptance of the time-sense comes the recognition of the beauty and once the beauty is accepted the beauty never fails any one.

It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition. (PPL 654)

She'll later question the premises, but is first more interested in pointing out how "Miss Richardson left us to our own devices, but Miss Stein believes in speaking her mind," adducing something of Stein's static, mechanistic conception of mind in the early stages of her "first manner."²⁹ For all its exuberantly experimental play and *vanguardiste* combatting of traditional narrative and historical teleologies, Bishop found it a sad book of repeated belief no less odious than the Christian fanatic's, foreclosing on the chances of change. Stein's wish to get "the whole being all of one's living" into the thing Bishop found too "god-like" a project, and sets the image of the avant-garde atheist on its head. She finds the Dehnings' and Herslands' lives assuming "god-like stature in the mind's eye, and their 'complete living' a term synonymous with immortality itself," taking on "divine aspects by dint of their reiterated lives" with a gruesome intensity, as they "turn slowly on an enormous wheel, like so many St. Catherines" (PPL 657,

²⁹ The challenge Stein posed herself in her monumental novel was "of putting down the complete conception that I had of an individual, the complete rhythm of a personality that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience," as she framed it in "The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*," "but when I had it I had it completely at one time [...] whole there then within me and as such it had to be said." Stein, *Lectures*, 147. Bishop's images of mechanism reinforce what Steven Meyer describes as Stein's earliest conception of "an atomistic and ultimately materialistic and deterministic model" of mind that she was in the process of revising in the second half of the work (5). The shifted experiment of her portraiture seeks, as we heard, "the current that makes the machinery crackle' [...] what it is that 'inside any one, and [...] is 'intrinsically exciting'" (*Lectures* 183; Meyer 115).

655-6). She turns this sadistic trope one more awful notch in her essay for the same professor the following semester, noting Stein's "iron bound" front to be "as terrifying as a crusade of vacant-faced children" ("Dimensions," PPL 678). Crusade of theory and belief overrun receptivity to event, deadly mechanism and self-seriousness squelch the feel of responsive life, its emergent permeabilities and partialities. ("Half is enough" her gently comic "Gentleman of Shallot" shall offer [CP 10].) *The Making of Americans*' "continuous present" Bishop feels finally not to "cope with time" at all, "except by *putting it in* as it continues," she stresses,

and since, as Bergson says elsewhere, "Of the discontinuous alone does the intellect form a clear idea," perhaps of necessity we must be left with a none too clear idea of *The Making of Americans*. In it there seems to be a group of movements prolonged to numbness, then repeated; the whole producing a static, a frieze, certainly with more of time in it than other novels, but time that is frozen and expanded. (PPL 656)

No liquid shifts, in other words, no explosions. Where the frieze feels slightly less frozen, she notes, is a "curious trick," "seemingly very simple" but "very important" in her use of the present participle. "That very ending has a peculiar ringing effect," she feels, "carrying the word on from the actual sense of the verb into the realm of present time, into action."³⁰

That a reader's "literal time" might keep a feel of emergent "action" was at the core of Bishop's more Hopkinsian affinities and proliferal project, and she felt Stein's "truly magnificent abstraction" impermeable to it, where "[n]ever a color, a smell, or a sound breaks through to mar the great grey web of her book," "separated from our own mussiness of senses and impressions."³¹ It is not only that no mussy "senses and impressions" have entered from the

³⁰ "Listen to this" she asks, quoting Stein: "Very many like it that they are doing something, living, working, loving, dressing, dreaming, waking, cleaning something, being a kind of a one, looking like someone, going to be doing something, being a nice one, being a not nice one, helping something, helping someone, winning, conquering, losing, forgetting. . . ." "Even when speaking of something actually past, Miss Stein seems almost to avoid the straight past tenses—to get them over with and sweep us off into a sort of back-wash of the present" (657). But in such number the monumental novel becomes "a sort of enormous buzzing bee-hive" for Bishop, with "quicker appeal to the sense of humor than to the sense of time" (PPL 656-57).

³¹ PPL 657. Where Bishop lamented such "Olympian" aloofness, it is precisely this lack of "mussiness" that William Carlos Williams applauds in Stein's anti-Romantic "feeling" for words, that he found to be "like Sterne's," a feeling

world “behind” its “great grey web”—like the “migration” idea with nary a bird seen or heard—but, equally key, no sounds or comic colors come *in* between from the world encountering it in watery commentary (what the oceanic pun on “mar” might hint). Those throaty motions making her “almost, if not actually, hoarse” find no contrapuntal accommodations, no transitional chances (PPL 658). However fundamentally unlike Proust’s sense of time “not our own, going on elsewhere,” Stein’s expansion on “time actually our own” Bishop felt to be also walled off from “the particular beauties of the passing minute.”

Her revisionary bent is unequivocal in the essay written the following semester, though its seeds are planted here. Taking up the claim in *Composition as Explanation* that “For a long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts,” she wonders *how*, if “‘the time and the composition’ is in perpetual flux, what happens in that ‘for a long time’ before various compositions are all accepted? Will they not have changed too?” (PPL 654). She applies this intuition of a “constant process of adjustment” going on in the present and “about the past” dizzyingly in “Dimensions for a Novel.” It turns a sense of constant adjustment in upon a self-reflexive process of “composing as revision,” we might call it, a compositional goal “thoroughly frustrating in the impracticality of its ambition,” as Zacariah Pickard feels it.³² Impractical as it may be, it stems naturally from a Jamesian understanding that she in fact shared with Stein. “*Thought*,” as James underlines in a subheading of his famous *Principles of Psychology* chapter on “The Stream of Thought” “*is in Constant Change*.” He insists that nothing is identical in succeeding states of thought:

When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relations from those in which it last

“of words themselves, a curious immediate quality quite apart from the meaning, much as in music different notes are dropped, so to speak, into repeated chords one at a time, one after the other—for themselves alone.” Williams, “The Work of Gertrude Stein,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), 114.

³² Pickard, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2009), 128.

appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context. (PP 224 227)

Thoughts are always thoughts *in relation* to “all that dim context,” and “*nothing*,” he later reiterates, “*can be conceived twice over without being conceived in entirely different states of mind*” (PP 453). Bishop echoes such acuity in seeking to combat an “amazing sameness” in symbolic usage by noting how a symbol’s “implications shift [...] come and go, always within relation to that particular tone of the present which called it forth” (PPL 674).

Her essay progresses by a “perpetually changing integration” readjusting the lights on the well-known passage from T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” about “what happens when a new work of art is created” as she first quotes Eliot:

what happens [...] is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (PPL 672)

She shifts the ground from the appraisal of past literary “monuments” to first consider a person’s reassessments of past events, how, in memory, “every ingredient dropped into it from the present must affect the whole,” as in a piece of music past and present “combine to define and expand each other,” “the relations, proportions, values”; and she considers this activity might ideally hold “equally true of the sequence of events or even pages or paragraphs in a novel” (PPL 673).

Circling back upon Eliot she makes a more explosive revision, re-quoting with a shift petitioned:

“The existing monuments [read moments] form an ideal order among themselves . . .” and “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives . . .” (PPL 675)

—“moments.” Bishop narrows Eliot’s broader historical-cultural swath down to matter of “moments,” soliciting at a single sweep what is radically contingent nested within his more

numinous sense of adjusting wholes, and turning it toward a Jamesian/Bergsonian sense of evolutionary continuity and discontinuity. To my mind even just this single, vivid solicitation of *moments* (literally) from within Eliot's monuments more than confirms Gillian White's sense that "Bishop's fascination with reception" in this period "makes it difficult to imagine that she ever found the notion of readerly contingency threatening."³³

The *newer* "new work" of a finely honed sense of contingency, as Bishop plots it, involves the "perpetually changing integration of what has been written with what is being written, but also the *recognition* itself of what is being written must be kept fluid" (PPL 676; her emphasis). For all of her impatience with Stein's monumental novel, this challenge sounds remarkably similar to what Steven Meyer calls the "form of recognition that she took to be the *sine qua non* of writing, namely," quoting Stein, "'recogniz[ing] what you write as you write,'" even as her emphasis on the focused *physicality* of the reading and writing process echoes Stein's sense of a concentration solicited in attending "the physical something that a writer is while he is writing" (Meyer 52). Bishop's model for such physical recognition is rhythmic, which encompasses for her musical, conversational, and dramatic senses. "We live," she richly envisions, "in great whispering galleries, constantly vibrating and humming, or we walk through salons lined with mirrors where the reflections between the narrow walls are limitless, and each present moment reaches immediately and directly the past moments, changing them both" (PPL

³³ White. "Readerly Contingency," 333. I think it might also slightly undermine her argument about Bishop's sense of "threat" the evidence for which is a bit scant, relying primarily on a story she never published, "The U.S.A. School of Writing"—though our arguments about her work are otherwise complementary. She takes up the resistance of critics even sympathetic to a "postmodern" Bishop to find it signaled so early, and clearly, she argues, "Bishop was keen to imagine a form of writing that could approximate and recognize instabilities of meaning rather than fix them" (337-8). James Logenbach considers the complicated critical history around Eliot's famous passage, from the New Critical emphasis on "order" and "monuments" to more recent reading soliciting from it his "investment in post-Hegelian skepticism and his awareness of the contingency of anything like impersonality" (23). Finding Eliot to hold in solution "contradictory tendencies, which, isolated and exaggerated in postmodernism, look startlingly opposed" (24), Logenbach's assessment is confirmed in Marjorie Perloff's about face regarding the poet in first reading his "Prufrock" in a conservative, symbolist vein in the *Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999), 117, only to reclaim him for the avant-garde that she'd earlier contrasted with his work in "Avant-Garde Eliot," http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/21/21_eliot.pdf.

674-75). Such pulsational perceptions, as of “wave packets” in modern physics,³⁴ Bishop also greets with her own sort of uncertainty principle of “conversational” influence and inter-adaptation as she expresses a certain striving to achieve “a motion between two things and a balancing of them:”

In conversation we notice how, often, the other person will repeat some word or phrase of ours, perhaps with a quite different meaning, and we in turn will pick up some adjective or adverb of theirs, or even some pun on their words, all unconsciously. This trick of echoes and re-echoes, references and cross-references produces again a kind of “conformity between the old and the new.” (PPL 674)

But just possibly everything I have been saying could be set down under the heading of *rhythm*. [...] And my belief in the peculiar cross-hatchings of events and people also amounts to a feeling for rhythm. A superstition or coincidence, even, is ‘rhythmical’ in that it achieves a motion between two things and a balancing of them. (PPL 679).

Turning awareness toward a version of experience open to these fringe feelings of “superstition or coincidence” and reciprocal, rebounding influences in this “trick of echoes and re-echoes, references and cross-references,” she recognizes how they create the gel of human relationships, and consolidate our relations with our environment more generally, even as the gel is forever melting away. She opens up “rhythm” to include feelings of synchronicity and premonitory events “arriving out of accepted order” but “nevertheless arriving in their own order,” “moments” that “occur so sharply, so minutely that one cannot say whether the recognition comes from the outside or the inside, whether the event or the thought strikes...” (PPL 675-76). Conceiving awareness as a vibration incorporating wavelengths of past and future, rhythms of tendency, coincidence and dream and other liminal solicitations too fine for the rational mind, she evinces a Jamesian generosity to these vague and extra-rational modes of thought, that whole mysterious shadow world of feeling, intuition, implication and change that undergirds thought and motivates action. We may even feel these “peculiar cross-hatchings” a

³⁴ Cf. Milic Capek, *The Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1961), and Richardson, *Natural History* 108, 120.

kind of religious adaptation of “belief” toward a “feeling for rhythm,” involving a hybrid of engraver’s markings and the hatchings of event: “All our sensible experiences, as we get them immediately change by discrete pulses of perception” James wrote, again in his lecture on Bergson, as “a chicken either makes a whole egg at once or none at all” (WWJ 563).

Bishop inverts the potential accusation of “magical thinking” with the wave of a wand: “Over all the novels I can think of the author has waved a little wand of attention, he holds it in one position, whereas within the shiftings produced by the present over the past is this other shifting, rhythmical perhaps, of the moments themselves” (PPL 675-76). The more “magical” thinker, she puts forth, is the writer (or reader) who’d suppose to keep perspective still, unimpeded by changes, “rhythmical perhaps, of the moments themselves.”³⁵ A curiosity toward what may be felt to change in an explosive moment is something of a sacred exercise for Bishop, more various and astonishing than has been dreamt, and is unabashedly enchanted. Her Christian inheritance, musical training and experimental vitality converge in the imperative that these moments be met and made *Con Spirito*, with an ebullient agility and creative capacity.

Counterpointing Voices

It’s often forgot from the hindsight of her brilliant literary career that Bishop arrived at Vassar intent not on becoming a writer but a musician. She took three years of music courses and sang in the choir as long, and only her anxiety before the required solo recitals prevented her from pursuing it further (LM 44). For a musician there’s no room for philosophical dispute about a live, vibrating present: it is the time, more or less expansive or acute, in which receptive action is taken, or is not, feelings generated, or are not. As a singer she was also well acquainted with

³⁵ Evidently unafraid of Virginia Woolf where she is famously writing “to a rhythm, not to a plot” in *The Waves*, Bishop takes her to task for being too static with her symbols, of not minding that revising “relation to the particular tone of the present which called [them] forth” (PPL 674).

the body as a vibratory wind instrument in conjunction with organic deformation (her asthma rendering these deformations all the more acute), and in a good position to grasp a model of physical and psychic realities shifting away from the spatial and atomistic toward a dynamical pattern more like “a polyphonic musical phrase,” if a wonky one, evolved upon “the weirdest scale on earth” (Capek 374; CP 164).

Tracing the change in what we mean by “music” in relation to poetry in his 1951 essay, “Effects of Analogy,” Wallace Stevens shifts an old version of the musical metaphor toward the feelings of “a measured voice.”³⁶ Nudging aside the regular metrics, rhyme schemes and stanzaic patterns that once created through their recurrences “harmonious sounds” in which “there actually was a music”—what he calls “a bit old hat: anachronistic”—he suggests something closer to a theatrical, intoning “figure concealed.” “It is like,” he puts forth,

the change from Haydn to a voice intoning. It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed, so that we cannot identify him, who speaks with a measured voice which is often disturbed by his feeling for what he says. (126)

Bishop the musician would balk before conceding that meter and rhyme were “a bit old hat,” even as she was happily breaking their bounds, adapting their forms in surprising manners. Regarding the sameness of Stevens’ metrics she complained to Moore just after Vassar of his occasionally making “blank verse *moo*”—a bit too lugubrious, I guess, and she held rather with Herbert that every poem demanded a new form (OA 48). Her prosodic mastery is sometimes underlined as a romantic hanging-on to outmoded forms by critics less attuned to the “weird pleasures” of her particular music and its ample provisions for this actor’s “voice intoning,” surprised by what it says. And much as Penelope Laurans has shown how her rhythmic dexterity

³⁶ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 125-26.

to often *deflect* lyric intensity for conversational nonchalance, I think it's precisely her musical dexterity that contributes to what is most uniquely and fractiously experimental about her work.³⁷

When compared to Moore, as she often was (with which she grew increasingly impatient), Bishop deflected the yoke (to Miss Moore herself in a 1954 letter) by saying "I think my approach is much vaguer and less defined..." (LM 68). And later to Anne Stevenson she pointed out the minimum of a rhythmic difference in her own "umpty-umpty" rhythms as against Moore's harder edges and typographically fracturing syllabics—perhaps, in part, as a joke.³⁸ We may toy with her "umpty-umpty" comment to suggest her own mode of "vaguer" associational play with shimmering peripheries, and of the phonemic fracture and contrapuntal re-pair she was also quietly but determinedly pursuing, a "[h]umpty [d]umpty" affair in which "all the king's horses" join in putting this fragile egg-head "back together again." Such play, at any rate, she puts at the heart of her "Seven Days Monologue" which, following a "contrapuntal" note or two more, we will take up below.

She clearly saw her musical studies as allied with her poetic craft, and read widely in music theory, history, and the relatively new field of phonology initiated by mechanical recording. Taking up Henry Lanz's *The Physical Basis of Rime* (1931) at the New York library after graduation, for instance, along with Alexander Bell's graphic representations of speech-sounds, she found rendered graphically questions of rhythm and resonance and the musical uses

³⁷ Laurans, "'Old Correspondences,' Prosodic Transformations in Elizabeth Bishop," EHA, 61-74..

³⁸ Alicia Ostriker *Stealing the Language* (Boston: Beacon P, 1986) for example calls Bishop the "successor to Marianne Moore in the sharpness of her observer's eye, the affectionate-ness of a sensibility that searches out oddness and obscurity to celebrate, and the perfection of her artistry" (70). "I believe that everyone has the right to interpret exactly as they see fit, of course," Bishop counseled her biographer, "It is just that I am rather weary of always being compared to or coupled with Marianne—and I think she is utterly weary of it too! [...] [E]xcept for one or two early poems of mine and perhaps some early preferences in subject matter, neither she nor I can see why reviewers always draw her in with me! For one thing—I've always been an umpty-umpty poet with a traditional 'ear.' Perhaps it is just another proof that reviewers really very rarely pay much attention to what they're reading & just repeat each other says" (WU March 18, 1963). Nor have reviewers tasted "what they're (eat)ing," she hints.

of language.³⁹ She was less taken with Lanz' claim for rhyme's melodic motions "furnishing [poems] with a definite center of reference" than his noting of melody as "a variety of *desire*, a longing or craving" and his documenting of change, how "pronunciation is in the process of change from one generation to another," to which she adds a note that it's "subject to individual variation" and underlines it as "(useful)."⁴⁰ "*Useful*," we may hazard, in soliciting and expanding a peculiarly proliferal sense of variation. She considered it down to the way phonemes differently refract and dilapidate up against their neighbors, asking for instance if "sound of vowel goes back and forth between the walls of consonant?" (VSC 68.3)—the recursive affirmation of which seems, here, to allow "sound *avowal*" to rebound around a bit as well.

That she considered her art even much later in terms of musical movement and vaguer associations we can gather from an offhand segue in one of her first letters to biographer Anne Stevenson. "I use dream-material whenever I am lucky enough to have any" she mentions, and then "I studied music—piano and counterpoint—for some years" (WU March 20, 1963). Her stressing "piano and counterpoint" is odd, factual, but funny in skirting all literature courses and that in fact conducting was her first major, but registers the register of low-key punning and counterpoint. *Piano* her wordplay typically is, *pianissimo* even, "turned as low as possible" like the ocean's gas-flame color in "The Bight," which turns tempo on the tongue: "as (*s*)low as possible," an *adagio* from which this dodgy counterpoint springs (CP 60).

Neither is the analogy of "counterpoint" an incidental one, but echoes her essays' concerns of counterpointing time zones and revisionary "moments" and the question of "sound

³⁹ For a sense of her engagement at Vassar, Bishop's copious notes from her music classes, in terms of sheer volume in the Vassar archives, easily outweigh all others.

⁴⁰ VSC 74.11. The musical nature of rhyme, Lanz argues, is responsible for its historical resilience. Drawing on Bell's phonetic representations of regular speech and rhyming verse, and comparing the latter sound charts to those of music, Lanz writes: "Physical analysis shows the presence of musical motion in a series of uttered words. It further shows that only rime, i.e., a return to the original tone, makes the motion actually melodic by furnishing it with a definite center of reference." Lanz, *The Physical Basis of Rime* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1931), 199.

avowal.” Moreover, while she was writing those essays, she was also taking an advanced course on “Contrapuntal Writing,” a form of musical composition dominant in the Baroque period, and for modern composers used mainly “in the arrangement of isolated components of sound.”⁴¹ Threading a relation between two (or more) voices harmonically interdependent but independent in contour and rhythm, at times running in “unison,” at times put into “oblique” motions where “one voice moves while the other is stationary,” contrapuntal compositions provided a musical model of independence *and* intimate relation.⁴² In them all-resolving “vertical” harmonies are subordinate to co-incidences of dissonant “passing” tones or “neighbor notes.” Accompanying the “plain-song” while “pointed against” it, these interweaving “neighbor notes” may, in modern forms, be either a planned part of the composition or improvised on the fly by the whim of the counter-pointing interpreter. In either case they remain based on a tension of “meaningful relation” and “some degree of independence or individuality within the lines.”⁴³ To imagine reading Bishop through such a rubric may account for some of their paradoxical sense of intimacy and gleeful wandering in fleeting particulars met in equal degree with receptivity and improvisatory gusto.

It is just such a musically quickened and conspiratorial model, modulating the Christian concept of spirit, that Bishop fashioned in the briefly bubbling effervescence that was *Con Spirito*, the jaunty, fractiously experimental venue whose local goal, as she told Donald Stanford, was “to startle the college and kill the traditional magazine” (OA 13). Running just three issues in 1933 (January, April and November), it was a crucial forum, as Bethany Hicok notes, for Bishop’s early experimentation and developing “a provisional, experimental community that

⁴¹ [Http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/140313/counterpoint](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/140313/counterpoint). Thomas Benjamin’s *The Craft of Tonal Counterpoint* (New York: Routledge, 2003) provides an excellent overview.

⁴² See <http://wiki.youngcomposers.com/Counterpoint>, and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counterpoint>.

⁴³ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/140313/counterpoint>.

embraced possibility and shunned fixity.”⁴⁴ This “counter-establishment blast,” christened by “The Bishop” in a Poughkeepsie speakeasy, in protest of the stodgy *Vassar Review*’s rejections of their more daring experiments, they also more broadly considered “a tiny part of a worldwide literary revolution stretching, in variegated forms, from Walt Whitman to *Finnegans Wake*.”⁴⁵ Positioning it at the forefront of literary debates in the 30s explicitly against the “aggressively male” chauvinism and “bilious eye” of the *American Spectator*, on one hand, they also set it against the more stereotypically “feminine” *Vassar Review* they felt to be too “aristocratic,” “dull and old fashioned” in the “oh, the pain of it” vein Millay.⁴⁶ *Con Spirito* distinguished itself in its emphasis on the spirited and improvisational against ocular, sentimental and self-aggrandizing regimes with anonymous pieces burgeoning with verve and wit.

Its conspiratorial kiss among friends provides a fine instance of what Mary Douglas calls (*à propos* jokes in general) “the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones,” and is made even racier in their editorial standard, “We demand nothing but fresh conception”—an old call for the new fresh with sexual charge.⁴⁷ “Frankly,” it went on “we are more interested in experimental than in traditional writing. Anything—politics, science, art, music, philosophy—anything that is spontaneous, that is lively” (VSC 88.1). That jazzy musical virtue, and explicit designation of a way of playing in language

⁴⁴ Hicok 130. Her “Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Queer Birds’: Vassar, *Con Spirito*, and the Romance of Female Community” in *Degrees of Freedom* is the fullest discussion of the “dual challenge” of this Vassar circle (with Eleanor and Eunice Clark, Frani Blough, and Margaret Miller) “to boundaries of literary and sexual convention” (85).

⁴⁵ Eunice Clark Jessup, “Memoirs of Literate and Socialists 1929-1933,” *Vassar Quarterly* 55 (1979), 17. In conversation with Ashley Brown in 1966 Bishop remembers the speakeasy, Signor Bruno’s, and drinking “dreadful red wine” out of teacups during its inspired inception (C 21).

⁴⁶ First issue of *Con Spirito*, VSC 88.1. If it found closer affinities with *Hound & Horn* (founded also in rebellion, against the *Harvard Advocate*) that emphasized the “well-made” in a period when much writing was co-opted by fashionable politics, its emphasis on energy and anonymity and against a “criticism that stands in awe of names” also positioned them in contrast to the Harvard magazine that took its title from Pound’s “The White Stag”: “Tis the white stag Fame we’re hunting, bid the world’s hounds come to horn.”

⁴⁷ Douglas, “Jokes,” *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975), 98. See Hicok (87-8) on how such language rebelled particularly against the chauvinism of *American Spectator* that would pose literary production and sexual reproduction as mutually exclusive.

as in music, *Con Spirito*, “with spirit,” “with zest,” is richly in evidence in the genre-bending hybrid of “Seven Days Monologue” (April 1933), which Logenbach suggests as the closest Bishop came to realizing the non-linear compositional ideals outlined in her essays in story form (24). More, its non-linearity is explosively posed between a written and spoken form, a diaristic miscellany and a gleeful “tea-party” of phonemic fissure, a shifty allegory, *ars poetica* and (de)creation tale that dramatically fractures into a self-split dialogue and counterpointing poetry of sorts on its central, yet multiply liminal day. Though, again, Bishop was years from christening her “proliferal style” with “In Prison” (1938) and “The Sea & Its Shore” (1937), which Gillian White finds “pivotal” in marking Bishop’s “full embrace” of “readerly contingency” (326), the dialogic dramas of this “monologue” and ready deployment of the tropes for surreptitious soundings she would “religiously” return to across her career suggests this “full embrace” maybe came a bit earlier.

“Seven Days Monologue” and the Original Explosionists

When on the seventh day the speaker of this “monologue” teasingly reveals and re-veils her “identity” with, “Damn it all—I’m the Bird-Catcher, that’s it. I must start going around balancing innumerable small silver-gilt bird-cages on my head and arms, to catch them in, and keep them all singing in the closet” (PPL 540-41), the trope draws *Con Spirito*’s forum for suppressed experimental voices down to those “innumerable” anonymous voice-sounds suppressed but bubbling up in reading. After water, birds are indeed Bishop’s most common trope for a close-honed but freer-flying phonemic speaking that she’d begun to engage as early as boarding school with “I Introduce Penelope Gwin” and would continue through to one of her last poems, the elegy for Robert Lowell, “North Haven” (December 1978) that we take up in the

conclusion. More locally, in the second of the “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” published in the following *Con Spirito*, crying birds descend “on the elms / As if t’uproot them, carry them by storm and singing.” Likewise in “Prince Mannerly,” which she was working on just after graduating, the winsome prince remarks of his split affinity: “Part of my mind talks in ordinary words, / But the rest of it’s up among the birds” (CP 223; VSC 72.2).

We’ll hear more from such birds in the following chapter, but even these may be enough to suggest why we need to expand the more singularly homoerotic manner in which Bethany Hicok frames “Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Queer Birds’” in her discussion of the story and the *Con Spirito* circle more generally. Hicok may be entirely right to associate this Bird-Catcher’s “closet” with sexual confession and the female boarding house where the monologue largely takes place as a space “virtually synonymous with lesbian community,” and that Bishop is testing the boundaries “of both literary and sexual possibility,” in a “limited” kind of “‘com[ing] out’ as both a writer and (perhaps much more provisionally) a lesbian.”⁴⁸ But despite her hedging here, Hicok’s analytical emphasis is decidedly upon the latter—one I would flip and open out to a wider weirding and queering of words upon the tongue (in “the queer land of kissing”) that Bishop was closely attending. Hicok’s historical contextualization is superb and has greatly broadened my own sense of Bishop’s Vassar experience, but the emphasis on sexual identity serves to hem in the more radical nature of her experimental project that’s a good deal more concerned with a self-forgetful “intensity of existence” in emergent moments, or what Stein would call in the lecture Bishop attended in Paris “entity,” versus the restraints of “memory” and “identity.”

⁴⁸ Hicok 91, 85. Even four or so years earlier, Bishop had been hinting of her sexual proclivities against the pressure of heterosexual norms in the precocious poem of introduction, “I Introduce Miss Penelope Gwin” (EAP 3-4).

Moreover, Bishop is positing a slippery allegory of writing-reading, or eye-mind-au/oral body relations on which Hicok offers no comment, at the open, close and center of which is the vastly enigmatic inhabitant of the boarding house's parlor (Fr. *parler*, "to speak"), its proprietress, in fact, with which the strange fable opens:

September 1st

I don't know the landlady's name. She is large, looming seriously now into my life, but unlabeled. I keep putting it off—the question that of course I'll have to ask her soon. When I do, something will leave her, a power go out of her. She'll sit there in the parlor, another Mrs. Kelly or O'Sullivan with her faults blamed on her race, her virtues likewise, and a very small percent of her accounted for by the originality of the creator. Last night I went down stairs to see if she would kindly start the hot water heater for me so that I could take a bath. She was sitting in the parlor, as usual. It is a dark, high room, with dark wall-paper, a sparse population of dark furniture, a black marble mantle and hearth above and below a mysterious black monk's cowl (or knight's helm) of sheet iron.

There she sits on the sofa, like an ancient unculled pearl in a battered shell. She is constantly bedewed with perspiration and invariably wears a lavender dress. Sometimes she holds the newspaper up in the lamplight—but I don't think she ever reads it. (PPL 535)

This mix of ignorance, awe, dependence, subtle unease and condescension toward the landlady's self-containment sets the ground for the shifting allegorical explorations of brain-body, sight-sound and mind-mouth relations found between the weighty, exaggeratedly corporal (and *seen*) owner of the house and its clever, flighty, and differently anonymous lodger. The religious language regarding "the originality of the creator," devolves into unease regarding her dampness, "constantly bedewed with *perspiration*," which is also an archaic form of "breath," and her dark surrounds. Her medieval associations with "a mysterious black monk's cowl (or knight's helm)" lay out a religious mistrust of the body, a divide so absolute from the spirited mind that the narrator snootily sees "she holds the newspaper up in the lamplight—but I don't think she ever reads it." The unease is augmented on the second day, variously concerned with time in the abstract—diurnal shifts, clock time (daylight savings), dates—when the landlady becomes suspiciously linked with sleep:

“Did you sleep well, Miss?” “How did you sleep, Sir?”—as if she were directly responsible for our sleep. She takes an unusual amount of interest in it, at least, and perhaps she does practice, below in the kitchen, a black art. Up the dismal stairs wafts a sleeping potion, to sift under the doors, through the keyholes. (PPL 536)

Her kindly concern is comically dramatized, and further draws on familiar terms of Christian hierarchies and mistrust of bodily plumbing, the zig-zag passageways described here as “dismal stairs,” from *L. dies mali*, “evil days” (OED), and involving “black turns,” with aural bearings as well. In that dark parlor the “monk’s cowl” most notably casts an audible “(s)cowl,” a dismal *stare*, apparently, in a contrapuntal vocal swerve, that assails as well this heroic “knight’s helm,” spinning it toward blind night’s and threatening to take it to sea. The dramatizing lodger imagines the landlady feels “‘the house’ floating above her, like St. Paul with his church,” its lodgers “all closed behind” “shut, white doors” “over her head, spidery arms and legs, little buttony heads,” many-eyed, and surreptitiously spying.

The lavender landlady is furtively linked with washing water, animal sound, song and echo-location, first as ensconced on the *so-fa* that strikes two rising notes at the heart of the octave in her “battered shell.” Hicok finds her lavender dress “a fairly obvious clue” of “lesbian sexuality” and central bit evidence in this “coming-out” tale, while slighting a whole host of other associations.⁴⁹ It vibrates as a washed-out Christic purple, of a piece with her watery iconography that also fractiously but plausibly draws on the *lave* (Fr. “wash”) within it. She indeed controls the hot water, and so is “behind” (and below) some erotic washings the speaker listens in on, indulging on the first day this “dirty” pleasure of eavesdropping through thin walls on what she describes as the intimately “*distinguishing* splashes of the baths taken here.” They give “amusing” “anatomical glimpses” in an auto-erotic arc from “large loose” splashes to

⁴⁹ Hicok, 91. Or perhaps a parody of the “aging Lady in Lavender,” she adds, “a persona for the independent woman that appeared in male literature of the 1920s” who “preyed upon the innocence of young girls, teaching them to fear men and their own sexual impulses” (92). Lavender” has “probable” etymological links with “laundress,” making this “landlady” something of a washer-woman, a *lave-vender* (OED).

“insistent scrubs, then a grand splatter, then dry, monotonous rubbings, then—” in a breakaway shift to interior sounds outside she attempts to transcribe: “The cats are yowling below the fire-escape. How is it spelled—rrghoow, mowrghrr.... then one that’s all gutturals” (PPL 535).

A gradual rapprochement between writer and speaker, seeing mind and erotic body, transcendent thought and thinking-in-time, involves a few instances of bodily comeuppance in gravitational tugs and phonemic fillips to the philosophical mind that culminates in the literal, surprise arrival of the landlady in all of her “lavender-ishness and vastness” up into the writer’s room. After an abstract, mutually uncomprehending conversation between the practitioner of “a black art” and her lodger about “Daylight Saving time,” a dizzying spatio-temporal zigzag gag is enacted with punchline effect. Chomping on “dates” out on the fire-escape, a-historically floating, freely feeling in the tropical heat, “in turn like a monkey, a Zoave [...] and an ibis,” the flight of fancy bends to particular event: “Then a library book fell through, accidentally somewhere, and I had to go down the four flights to the cellar and out and back and up and out and on—It was *Albertine Disparue*, damn her. (Or is it him?)”⁵⁰ The speaker regains in this gag with Proust’s weighty tome, needless to say, no *temps perdus* but a sense of its expenditure, in the “literal time” (spatially distended) it takes her to retrieve it. It comically converts Bishop’s professed “Puritanic” mistrust of all that “thought backwards” in “Time’s Andromedas” into this perhaps rued expenditure—was the punchline worth it?—that also begins to suggest her more condensed effort to thread contrapuntal time zones and voices through the happiness (and temporal gravity) of chance.

⁵⁰ PPL 536. If “The accident of encounters, the pressure of constraints are Proust’s two most fundamental themes” as Giles Deleuze has remarked in *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Athlone P, 2000), 16, Bishop proves herself his able reader. His further comment, “It is the accident of the encounter that guarantees the necessity of what is thought” (16) also speaks to this encounter.

A variation of the gravitational gag, inflected with ocular and symbolic voraciousness, follows on day three:

I read and read and read, then got a little drunk on a bottle of wine from the Greek restaurant. Smoked on the fire escape. The smoke went right straight up as if making for one particular star. I almost broke my neck, dizzily trying to ascertain. (PPL 537)

Her particular turn on that oldest of jokes by which a variously star-gazing or philosophizing Thales *does* tumble into a well or mucky ditch (at which a Thracian girl giggles) casts it as an ocular order untroubled by atmospherics. Peter Berger in *Redeeming Laughter* claims as “only a slight exaggeration” that the “history of Western philosophy begins” with this joke.⁵¹ And it is certainly a rupturing foundational gesture, dizzily varied, of Bishop’s poetics, writing wide her contrapuntal ideal of returning free-flying symbolic sight, past- or distance-oriented, to more local sensations of atmospheric inter-actions. Bonnie Costello’s describes this repeated rhythm of thought in her poems: “She often begins by approaching a scene or landscape as a timeless tableau, masterable and uniform. Such static observation quickly yields to an iridescent, fluent reality, exhilarating but also threatening” (*Questions* 8). And it is often (if surreptitiously) fracturing sounds that correspond to more self-evident ocular wobbles and contribute to this more exhilarating, waking, but also “realer” field. The epigraph to her “Dimensions” essay from Stevens, “The lines are straight and swift between the stars,” she envisions here, but also in gravity’s rounder rejoinder, what Stevens would frame as an “undulating” “deep-oceaned phrase” (SCP 71). And in its dreamy au/oral d/rift as a “de-potioned phrase” the oscillation invites the same query that she asked in that essay, *who* is the more magical thinker, the one who feels things fixed or moving, still in space or on waves of passing, pulsing sensation? Which involve the “greeting of realer, of rounder replies?”

⁵¹ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimensions of Human Experience* (New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997), 15. Plato puts the anecdote in the mouth of Socrates, he points out, in the dialogue *Theaetetus*.

Peter Berger wonders about the anecdote that Bishop adapts, “why a *Thracian* girl?”, and offers, admittedly “unencumbered by the weight of classical scholarship,” that perhaps because Thrace is “where the cult of Dionysus is supposed to have originated”; Bishop too confronts “the protophilosopher with the protocomedian” (15-16). Both the thinking, the fall and the burst of laughter are movements that change life, or change our relation to it, and even such a sober cogitator as Walter Benjamin suggests in “The Author as Producer” (1934) that “there is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more generally, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul.”⁵² Bishop, I think, would heartily agree, and such a startling notion leads Anca Parvulescu to ask, “What would it mean to risk the proposal that the situation of new thought (and perhaps of the new more generally) is a burst of laughter?” (13). The dialogic eruptions of the central of these “Seven Days” invite us to keep the query open for the poet of “a mind thinking” down and out from a tongue-tripped consciousness.

Under the sign of strange proportion, the monologic voice severs into two in a tangle, prose swerves into protopoetry where syntax falters, words pun and sheer into phonemes in a dislodging deluge of play. The day’s epigraph, “In all beauty there is some strangeness of proportion,” attributed to “Bacon,” cracks the comedy of contingency open: a French intellectual with the *nom de famille* of a cured slab of pig’s rump holding forth on the beautiful. We’d be thinking “all the wrong things,” to be sure, as the speaker admits she did, as the rupture unfolds:

But then of course I thought of all the wrong things, Mr. M’s ears, for example.
The trouble with you is an irremediable lightness. Your mediations upon ‘the strangeness of proportion’ become nothing in the least resembling beauty. But you ought to try to stop—Now then, Refrain:

Oh Canute couldn’t,
Canute cant,

⁵² In *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1973), 101, and Parvulescu 12.

So how the hell
Do you think
You can?

What?, attempt What is Impossible, Express the Inexpressible, etc. Something about ‘cat’s cadenzas’ might fit in nicely, too. And it will all go into that old comedy:

How they used to roister
In the cloister
When they found an oyster
In the stew—ew—ew. . . . (PPL 538)

In Freudian lingo we might say the speaker’s ego splits into fractious id and punishing, super-ego, or that Dionysian laughter interrupts the Apollonian ideal. But the voices weave and riff off one another, as Bishop would lay out in “Dimensions,” notably in the unconscious uptake of one voice’s “ears” into the other’s accusation of “*irremediable lightness*,” and the hybrid hearing of an “*ear-remediable lightness*” somewhat inverts the flighty claim, as Bishop was wont to do with free-flying eyes. Sound may free from fixities, but only in giving things temporal weight, a saving, maybe momentarily self-less, hesitation, and an edge, even as the first word of “The Wit,” “Wait,” would invite, or in the lead that fell from “*filléd*,” (p. 98, above). We feel it here less in that antithetical chastisement (or punishing pun) of “Now then, Refrain” than in the gentle hesitation of a softened skepticism, sliding almost to gaming entertainment bidden by the space (time) through which the refrain’s made to meander. Paced by the spaced fall down the page, the governing syntax with its “How the hell” loosens, swerves even, into its own slowed, self-generating counterpoint with the hinted indecision of an open-ended “Do you think / You can?” And so the skeptic’s voice is hushed, or melded with the gaming one in a contrapuntal movement. That first object lesson in how reading’s pacing impacts, can even utterly invert, syntactical demands and tone, prepares the latter savoring of phonemic sounds that still more anarchically derange lexical, metrical and syntactic hierarchies in their counterpointing crackle.

That “old comedy” tolls a guilty pleasure, but as a surprising spiritual prerogative to “Express the Inexpressible,” indistinguishable from the erotic groan or flourish of those “cat’s cadenzas.” Drawing out a temporary disregard for strict tempo, like Bishop’s birds’ “individual rubatos,” they allow a certain flourish of expressive quickening or slowing, a suspense of strict chronology. Questions of spirit (and beauty) are drawn to the savoring crawl, and what comes out of it. A great deal is packed into this silly ditty about an oyster, with aphrodisiac, oral and sexual overtones, and maybe the base note of Erasmus Darwin’s protoevolutionary “*Omnia conchis*” (everything from oysters), all of which would indeed roister the cloister. Its phonemic stir and lingering “stew—ew—ew. . .” rebels against that repeated exorcising effort, as Mladen Dolar traces Christian decrees in “The Object Voice,” “trying to re-establish the dominance of intelligibility versus voice” in the fraught relation of musical feeling with the spiritual Word in hymns and liturgical music more generally.⁵³

Unpinned in fractious *jouissance*, the savoring of this phonemic ingredient beautifully complicates the meaning of disgust, and “an oyster” dilapidates into a *noise-stir* that *annoys* and titillates the cloister. Published in the same *Con Spirito*, “A Word with You” underlines this attraction/repulsion: “Why just one luscious adjective / infuriates the whole damned band / and they’re squabbling for it”—“the whole damned band” being a zooful of apes, parrots, monkeys and cockatoos—mimicking, “aping” animals all, and intruding upon that titular wish. The meddling of their furious desire Bishop limns as overflowing strict, religious repression:

⁵³ Dolar, “The Object Voice,” in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 22. “All the documents seem to have been written by the same hand,” writes Dolar, “and guided by the same single obsession: to pin down the voice to the letter, to limit its disruptive force, to dissipate its inherent ambiguity” (22). Questioning the coherence of Derrida’s account of the phonocentric bias, Dolar reminds that “the voice, far from being the safeguard of presence, is considered dangerous, threatening, and possibly ruinous. [...] Not just writing, but also the voice can appear as a menace to metaphysical consistency and can be seen as disruptive of presence and sense” (16). Against this exorcising formula she notes mystical countercurrents (finding the devil a devil, because he can’t sing) and so a conundrum: “What raises our souls to God makes God ambiguous [...] Music may well be the element of spiritual elevation beyond worldliness and representation, but it also introduces, for that very reason, the indomitable and senseless *jouissance* beyond the more tractable sensual pleasures” (23).

some people manage better. How?
They treat the creatures without feeling.
—Throw books to stop the monkey’s squealing,
slap the ape and make him bow,
are firm, keep order,—but I don’t know how. (CP 218)

Instead of throwing books bowing, the speaker just suggests, “Try your ring” [...] Get his attention on anything— / anything will do, there, try your ring” (CP 218). We can recall Stevens’ “Every sexton has his sect. The bells have none” (SCP 461) for the sect-less, gender-less and even self-less sense of erotic attention the poem proposes an opposition to “knowing.”

Like the laughter that exposes the grotesque in the open mouth, as Parvulescu comments, “lips parting, exuberantly displaying the mouth’s tissues, fluids tongue and teeth. [...] its ‘inside’ touching the ‘outside,’” these gleeful deformations of language touch on the abject (9). An *oyster* stirs not only noise but a punning bit of spittle or chunk of phlegm into the stew, that dismal mouth-and-throat matter that’s supposed to *stay* there, in the *parlor*, so to speak. “Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes,” as Julia Kristeva observes in *Powers of Horror*, “what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings [...] gives rise to abjection,” an idea she traces to the stunning reversal of logics of purity from Judaism to Christianity.⁵⁴ “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man,” as Matthew (15:11) has Jesus saying, “but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.”⁵⁵ Quite another angle on a “coming out” drama, then, opens out in this awful (but cheerful) oyster, even as its edges overlap homoerotic hints on the one hand, and the autoerotic and even kairotic in those “cat’s cadenzas” and the bodily washings (within and without) from which they explode. From *kairos*, ‘the right, opportune moment’ the kairotic burst of the present is revolutionary time, “not a seizing of the moment, but the moment seizes the subject,” as Parvulescu distills its ripeness: “A caesura in chronological

⁵⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 108.

⁵⁵ Mark also exemplifies this inversion of Levitician dietary restrictions: “There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man” (7:15).

time, this is still a time within time, acquiring, however, a different quality. Time contracts. Time is ‘filled full’ with ‘now,’ and it bursts” (14).

The matter of “Canute” speaks obliquely to this ripeness too. History or myth, the Danish-born king who briefly ruled England in the eleventh century purportedly rebuked his courtiers by showing how regardless the waves of the sea were to even a king’s authority. As a possibly apocryphal or strategic act of piety (“Canute *cant*”) he commanded the tide to stop, which continued to rise over his royal feet, upon which he’s said to have hung his crown on a crucifix, and never wore it again.⁵⁶ The shift toward gaming entertainment regarding his story asserts a different prerogative, certainly not of stopping, but maybe of riding these waves in phonemic play, say, where pressures of “couldn’t” and “cant” draw the opposite affirmative “Can” to vaguely undo historical rule with *can new’t*.

On the heels of this Dionysian rupture or rapture dawns a scene of newly awkward intimacy entre lodger and landlady, writer and speaker, or pen and postman in Joycean patois. That “bedewed” proprietress, earlier pictured inert “like an ancient uncultured pearl in a battered shell” (but colluding with this slimier seafood) within the squall of this central day is shown to be mobile and making a surprise, overflowing, crepuscular entrance up above:

Early this morning she came into the room like a thundercloud with a silver lining, her smiling face above all the rest of her lavender-ishness and vastness, and a long white slit down the side where her dress had burst open. We sat on either side of my bed and talked over the yellow and white bedspread about the other people in the house. Rather like a wake. (PPL 538)

Having left her shell she roams explosively (“In the roamings of her fan”? [SCP 8]), a silver-lined (tongued?) “thundercloud,” and her smiling guise oddly bobs on the overflowing-ness like Orpheus’ severed singing head. Even her feet are seen in flow beyond her shoes as “they bulged

⁵⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Canute_rebukes_his_courtiers.gif for a drawing of the event in question. Below we hear “Queen Elizabeth adopted a different policy” from this “Canute” in “Britannia Rules the Waves.”

out and over and made themselves at home.”⁵⁷ This intimately situated conversation opens impersonally out, “about the other people in the house. Rather like a wake,” whose Joycean hints also overlap the notion of Prince Mannerly: “Between friends, gossip can be perfectly impersonal. / It is a matter of rhythm, as in classical music” (72.2).

If upon that waking thought death has lightly entered the house, more or less at the center of the central day, where one keeps vigil over and takes care of death, we may feel it to feed the entente between the would-be transcendent eye-mind of the writer and the wet-sounding, devouring mouth and erotic body. A reciprocal meeting to this bedroom scene is staged down in the parlor, now seen to be slightly cheerier, also a place of writing, as she recounts being shown “postcards, Gloucester, Prince Edward’s Island, etc.” and other “greeting cards” from past “Christmases”—“I like to keep them round,” the landlady says. A casual but thick nexus of play between a image, written record and constant washing, and places, persons and waking words, is rendered in several “realer ... rounder replies” to sharp lexical edges. Is it just a place, or is the character from *King Lear* who gains some emotional insight only after he’s blinded being brought to bear? (Even blind he’d still rudely command, “Do as I bid thee,” but then more amenably, realizing an inter-dependence with his servant, “Or rather, do thy pleasure” [IV.i.50]). And is that ocean-stroked “Prince Edward’s Island,” to be parlayed: “Prince said” or “Print-said words?”⁵⁸ The greetings from past “Christmases” phonemically *says*, and the lodger’s given to feel through the landlady’s display of affection for these things, that she’s to send such written

⁵⁷ PPL 538. For Hicok these feet symbolize “the excess of same-sex desire—[...] what falls outside the boundaries of what can be narrated and thereby labeled within a story,” its mix of “the grotesque with eroticism” “reminding that sexologists called the lesbian (and the educated woman) grotesque because she crossed acceptable gender boundaries,” which, again, may be, but she fails to note how the overflow of other boundaries are at issue as well.

⁵⁸ She’d expand the play in the dedication of “Little Exercise,” the last poem she wrote to include in *North & South: For Thomas Edwards Wanning*. It shifts, *For Thomas Said Words*, *Swanning*, the latter sense of “to declare” also bearing “to move about freely or in an (apparently) aimless way,” solicited in the poem with wandering dogs and random flashes of a thunderstorm’s dimly-lit battle scenes, “each in ‘Another part of the field’” (OED; CP 41).

tidings for this waterier “Yuletide,” expanding from the diurnal cusp of the bedroom greeting to a wider, annual cycle of light’s rejuvenation.

And across the cusp of this entente between the laundress/landlady and lodger, questions of more local, felt atmospherics, wetness, distortion and play displace the salience of distantly spatialized sight, and abstract, chronological time. The march of diaried days take on stranger, more revolutionary actions and mystical tints as Bishop revolves aspects of her aesthetic predilections and plans. A diptych of attraction and repulsion, for instance, closes out the central day, framing awful impositions of memory and identity in logocentric confession, and a moving image that hints of complaint’s suppression. Here are the two panels, the first prefaced as if a moral warning:

Something else to remember: the man in the park who told you in about ten sentences the story of his life. It was so awful that both he and you had to pretend it was a lie, and you said, “Tell me another.”

The girl who walked along the sidewalk so lightly, although her ankles were blurred by the heat waves. She had, somewhere, remotely, an affinity for water, which still cooled her blood. (PPL 538-39).

This “man in the park,” parked in the past, imposes *his* story upon *her*, sentenced as his confessor. Decades before a confessional aesthetic would overrun much American poetry, one which “seemed to require, as one of its presiding fictions, theatricality,” as Dan Chiasson observes, and of the reader (certainly silent) to keep “a kind of shocked or sympathetic quietude outside the bounds of the poem,” Bishop is making clear her aversion.⁵⁹ “You just wish they’d keep some of these things to themselves” she’d protest much later, and soon after this story, in “Prince Mannerly,” she underlined her displeasure, “Oh dear, how they formulate confessions!”

⁵⁹ Chiasson, *One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), 51. Its more contemporary reflection for Bishop would have been the “oh the pain of it” vein of Millay.

and “Oh pray! No confidences in a formal garden!”⁶⁰ Keen to keep this “formal garden” a play-space, Bishop’s dismay with confidences and confessions suggests one reason those hunters of “cloaked” confessions can be vaguely distasteful, quite missing the mark of her more feral, and tongue-timed experiment. This early instance of “the joking voice, a gesture / I love” (as she’d frame it in “One Art” [CP 178]) reveals one way such a confessional sentencer can be parried. The contrasting panel of attraction offers another.

Not just a visual counterpoint, she hints of complaint’s veiling in this mapping of a motion, with her atmospheric shimmer and vague “affinity for water,” in genial overflow like the landlady’s feet were felt to be. She travels somewhere between Stevens’ “Paltry Nude” whose “heels foam” as she goes “Noiselessly, like one more wave,” “ceaselessly / Upon her irretrievable way,” and maybe “some little language such as lovers use” that Bishop heard Bernard yearn for in *The Waves*, “broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffle of feet on the pavement.”⁶¹ The image of sexual desire is not deflected as Stevens did with his Venus—“She too is discontent / And would have purple stuff upon her arms”—but with an *ear*-remediable lightness and lover’s tongue. Drawn down to shimmering interference where “her ankles were blurred by the heat waves,” atmospherics thicken in the “queer land of kissing” and waver where “her (r)ankles,” whatever complaint or discontent, are quietly revealed and re-veiled.⁶²

Through atmospherics—a variety of her trope of liquidity—fixities of “argument” are softened on the following evening. Though Hicok assumes it “a ruse for what is really going on

⁶⁰ “Now the idea is we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world” she commented on confessional poets in *Time*, June 2, 1967. “The tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they’d keep some of these things to themselves” (LM 323). VSC 72.2.

⁶¹ SCP 5; Woolf, *The Waves* (London: CRW Publishing, 2005), 204.

⁶² The play may touch on Browning’s dramatic monologue “Youth and Art,” whose speaker makes overt rhyme of “rankles” with “her ankles,” and whose business, like Bishop’s (disclosed in her bird image), is “song, song, song.” *Poems of Robert Browning*, ed. Donald Smalley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), 299, 297.

in the story” since this quarrel and the intimate pillow talk following upon it are spent with a newly introduced male character, S, we may want to take it a bit more “literally” (92).

September 5th

Like two dim forests edging together the Now and the Then stood, almost silent. What strange animals crept to the verge of each and stared at one another from their own territories? What rough or velvet coats, and fearful eyes, bright claws and teeth, did each side see? Their shadows wove together and their sunlight and moonlight were the same, but they never approached each other, never mated.

S. came at last today—on his way back home of course. After supper we came up here with two bottles of wine. (I thought defiantly of the Rules and Regulations posted beside the telephone on the first floor, ‘No female lodger shall be permitted to take to her room any male unknown to. . . .’) It was hot as hell; we quarreled slowly, back and forth [...]. The air was rigid; people’s voices outside held to the same accent on and on [...]. I never thought the church steeple clock would have dared to strike the hour—or if it did, it would declaim it like a death sentence and seal us all in leaden immobility.

Finally, thank God, it rained, a wonderful rain, almost like mercury, fluid and metallic. Everywhere it bounced and shot off spangles, and gurgled and cracked. With the help of the street lamps it polished off every leaf and cobble-stone and brick wall. It grew very cool; we put up the window-shades and turned out the light, then lay on the bed and talked. Every now and then I got a little spray from the rain landing on the fire-escape. (PPL 539)

Though I’ve treated it as plain, it is only in the defiant thought of these “Rules and Regulations” that the lodger’s sex becomes indirectly evident at all, and their location “beside the telephone,” the *phonē* of voice/sound, hints of the wider flouting of fixed gender identities. That “never mated” anxiously hangs temporal discontinuity close into this lover’s spat, but renders most explicitly the sense of un-intersecting time zones that Bishop detailed in “Time’s Andromedas” as a matter of eyes—“fearful eyes,” withdrawn, and maybe full of *feir*, “appearance, show” (OED). But these peering forests of “the Now and the Then” are only “almost silent.” Some murmur slips perhaps back and forth or “every now and then” as the occasional spray will splatter from that “wonderful rain” for which a God is thanked, though we might feel a certain silvery thundercloud to be surreptitiously involved.

A subdued pun on *rane* (“to utter a continuous noise,” rare) may lightly link them, what can refract and revise the feel of those divided time zones, potentially open a “conversational” space. A poem from the same period, “How to Detect a Moderate Rain,” invites the gamble, as it plays with a “fearless” “Friend of man” who

travels in air incognito.
His color won’t allow for any tests
Nor self-arrangements up against perspective.
But take that distance or time a shadow casts
In going to shadow from its parent leaf,
And there you can discern the moderate rain
Forced to confess his fine-drawn name.⁶³

Paradoxically postured on the page, this transitional itinerant of untestable colors (but full of fleeting skull-lore), is measured in a “going to” (as Emerson would have it), neither self-arranging, nor self-proving “up against perspective.” Hesitatingly revealed or created apace where self-conscious reticence limbers a bit, culled or called out, this “Friend-*dove* man” is “fearless enough to dance / Country-style, on strangers’ open palms,” the slippery chances of a spiritual-material traveler re-casting a submissive position of prayer (and less “invested” ways of reading). His “fine-drawn name” is caught only in extra-vagant, emergent situations, toward the wavy thing “*find*-drawn,” say, necessarily oscillating upon a sensation and “fine-drawn *aim*.” “Life only avails, not the having lived,” it will be good to hear Emerson again in considering this self-declared “descendent of the Transcendentalists.” “Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim” (p. 65, above; EL 271).

Such play as this poem engages, along with the substantial evidence of her essays and this “monologue” that still has more to disclose, suggest she felt fitting this lineage of transition

⁶³ VSC 64.2. Though the poem was “finished” Bishop never published it—does it too evidently underline her Emerson affinities? It is curious, at any rate, that Quinn opts not to include it in her selection that contains many much more fragmentary drafts.

from very early on. What it means for her to stake the claim, has everything to do with her proliferal and contrapuntal gambits, that ask of readers the rounding out of conversational possibilities; a manner of making and speaking with time too on the tongue. Opposed to the proleptic “Now then” of a stern talking-to, and the awfully stopped recollection *of* a life, where “the Now and the Then” confess their helpless separation, Bishop frames in those occasional, sensational sprays of rain/rane felt “now and then” the *tic* and *toc* of a casually random, feeling-infused clock of “talk.” Recall Stevens’ new music of a speaking “figure concealed . . . often disturbed by his feeling for what he says” and I think we come close to what Bishop is after, though her feel for, and tending that we may tend, this conversation, is likely even finer.

As she would with the playful prominence of her “Sea-Scape,” Bishop intimates the esteemed role of “S” in this, surely the prime slurrier of lexical edges.⁶⁴ The pleasure of treating language as a glorious “intellectual recreation” takes central if enigmatic stage on day six, “a beautiful day with S.” Almost golden after the threat of leaden death-knells the day before, it’s prefaced with “He looked so funny at tea, under a yellow umbrella with his face tinted like a Chinaman’s and eating *blackberry ice*” (PPL 539; odd emphasis in original). Refiguring a “holier,” awkward scene of tea earlier “with E. and her brother,” both “as languid and blond as angels,” this S revises E’s brother’s response to an occasional feel, when “now and then” his hair “fell into his face from either side, in thin golden loops” across his face. Plying Hopkins’ trope of the changeable “golden echo” into hers of hair (shared with Stevens), she notes that he removes it with awkward jerks of his head, one of which spills “his iced tea on his knee.” ““Let’s be spectacular,’ he kept saying,” and makes a spectacle of himself in rejecting those accident-

⁶⁴ It slips across to plant some wetland rushes, or “sedge” between the two forests, for instance, and amends the claim that these wood-animals “never mated.” Just where “their shadows wove together” they also “*swove*”—a doubly improper conjugation.

events. But under the altered Chinaman's tinge these two, the speaker and S, sally forth into a queer, conspiratorial revel:

Walking around among the recent, thorough-enough-for-most explosion, picking up this bit and that, and trying with the very air, perhaps even exaggerated, of the original explosionists, to find a fragment of something large enough to blow up again.

But all possibilities have been defaced by the first one, their edges dulled at least. (Yes,—“The Convention of Bomb-Hurlers.”)

The record would be, in one edition: 2 kings, 1 duke, 2 barons, an infant princess, and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

One man had blown up a whole Episcopalian church, timing it particularly so that just as all mouths were opened on the words “We praise Thee, oh Lord, We acknowledge Thee to be the—” bang, crash, thud (PPL 540)

Absorbed in a mutual doing—just *what* we may wonder—they've disappeared. But re-writing an oppressive summer into fall, rigorous or languid religious faith into the word-work-and-play as a falling event, let me suggest that Bishop turns a Thoreauvian anarchy of words' “volatile truth” in this “recent, *thorough-enough-for-most* explosion” across Hopkins' “Hurrahing in Harvest” where “Summer (r)ends now; now, barbarous in beauty,” in “wind-walks! [...] wilder, wilful-wavier.”⁶⁵ This comic “Convention of Bomb-Hurlers” shuns convent and blasts ritual for the discipline of linguistic-spiritual agility. For these with the “very air . . . of the original explosionists,” weighty *decreation* is made happily companionable with creation, revising the speaker's earlier bowing to “the originality of the Creator.”

The game's guidelines are simple enough: “trying with the very air . . . to find a fragment of something large enough to blow up again.” (“Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath” “The Golden Echo” invites.) Schooled by Hopkins in such spiritual intensities in verbal relations while dismantling dogmatic apparatus, rendering in this oriental (and Thoreauvian) tinge an appreciation for fleetingness and an antinomianism cut free from

⁶⁵ Thoreau's famous conclusion to *Walden*, of course: “The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly *translated*” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton UP, 2005), 325 . Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* 31.

Christian eschatologies, Bishop's volatile contrapuntal project affirms the writer's gaming pact with the body's dark parlor, sensationally made with "the very air" one is breathing *out*. I will not number the ways, but I submit that the scene is engaging what Garrett Stewart calls "the obliterating waves of enunciation" to invite this "record" edition of "2 kings, 1 duke, 2 barons, an infant princess, and the Archbishop of Canterbury" be utterly undone, re-chorded upon such things as "toukings," trumpet blasts or any instrumental "soundings," and "tube errance," and signs a collusion between the "*in-fans* print's S" (this "character" and figure for voraciously dislocating wave-shapes) and a wildly *arch* Bishop.⁶⁶ Even the kings' horses have cantered near. "The syllabic spin on one word sets up a chain reaction," as Stewart describes extremes of such play, allowing one to "blow up," such a line as also "a whole Episcopalian church" with alien fillips of breathed derangement down the line (*Reading Voices* 121).

This liquid sound-voice (*phonē*) is often sexed feminine (think of Kristeva's "maternal" *chora*) against the semiotic Law of the Father, the "inaudible voice pertaining to logos," as Mladen Dolar notes, the feminine being an "anathemized voice bringing unbounded *jouissance* and decay," though she proposes finally there is but one "object voice, which cleaves and bars the Other."⁶⁷ But long before such notions were afloat, Bishop, with a crucially Jamesian attunement to this sensational stream of thought, made of this reciprocal cleave something of a fabulous joke in the fable's very title: "Seven Days Monolouge," it was spelled, or mis-spelled in the original rebel rag (VSC 88.1). This overwrite of the "logue" of *logos* with "*louge*" cracks the Monologic even as its posited, with the pluralizing phonemic hint of a Day's dark *de-louge*

⁶⁶ Stewart, "Modernism's Sonic Waiver: Literary Writing and the Filmic Difference," in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustic Technologies*, ed. Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1997), 239.

⁶⁷ In his Lacanian reading of this self-generated, generative yet also self-estranging "object voice" Dolar asks, "Is the *jouissance* that the Law persecutes as its radical alterity other than the aspect of *jouissance* pertaining to Law itself? Is the voice of the Father an altogether different species from the feminine voice? The secret," he answers, "is maybe that they are both the same; that there are not two voices, but only one object voice, which cleaves and bars the Other in an ineradicable 'extimacy' [Lacan's term]" (27).

or destructive flood at play with the writer's diaried days. For a poet famously raising a poem upon a misprint it's not *too* far-fetched, but we are on, as Bishop would have it, the very edge.

I hear the rumble of a fair protest, though, that such enigmatic, anarchic play put on display in the title, on the central day or the "beautiful" one coming on its heels, looks nothing like the quietly observant surfaces of the poems she'd become dully more famous for, by that painterly poet "All Eye." My modest appeal is simply that this fractious early work not only alerts to the dual energies subtending those poems, but also to how vital Bishop felt this interactive agon of sight and sound to be, contributing to the feel that "All things are subject to visibility / and the represented model," in Lyn Hejinian's words, "is wobbling" (p. 29, above). In "talking and listening" to Bishop's words in our always surprising, embodied minds we also find

Living things in their redaction
decide to yodel
Thanks to a psychoacoustical transformation
they laugh

For Bishop too it is a beautiful, dark laughter—"Ah! Dark clipping shifts"—brought to the lips, in an owned accord with the dying we carry with us—"Never alone in the chest / tone." We may sense something of that balance of letting in of light and dark Flood, at once in the monologue's cool coda, training our eyes, in this descriptive denouement, in a workplace of written accounts and washing water.

First following a yellow mist floating down the streets in a saturate atmosphere swallowing the street lamps, turning them "signs and portents" the speaker heads out to get her laundry, and in the first "interior" seen external to the boarding house, this foreign/domestic accord unfolds in a whispering gallery of surreptitious links and translations:

The Chinaman's son was sitting at a little cloth covered table, turning pairs of black socks inside out, with the toe up inside and smoothing them. He was in his undershirt; all his hair hung down over his face in a slippery black curtain. The father was making out

accounts in a black note-book,—erect lines of Chinese lettering. He had a little round wooden dish of black paint... On the wall is a large calendar, just the ordinary girl kind, but she's a Chinese girl, and all the printing is Chinese. The walls are bright blue.

There was a lighted candle beside the father's note-book and it had burned down on one side and left a thin shell of wax on the other. The hollow was full of light, like an ice cavern lit by its own midnight sun.

I asked the landlady her name today and it's O'Toole... (PPL 540)

There is hardly a salient detail from the other days that is not here transmuted, though I will just comment on a few. The dark parlor of the landlady (lave-vendor kin to the Chinaman) is here rendered quietly inviting, with more tactile blacks to be used for accounts drawn in "black paint" in a "round wooden dish," presently, after those postcards the landlady liked to "keep round." All the self-assaulting and -protective hints of her parlor and the "dismal stairs" leading there are also altered: modulating the sofa's "battered shell" and medieval "monk's (s)cowl" and "knight's helm," as if amid evil, a child sits at a cloth-softened table, and a dim flame openly glows with a half-open (and waning) "shell of wax." The voices antagonistically split out as raucous child's delight and scolding parent here have reached a quietly cooperative accord, of an inward turned, feeling touch (recasting mistrusted "black turns" in the boarding house) and father's outward accounts. Even the detail of that slippery hair calmly covering the son's eyes recasts those neurotic jerks of E.s brother to get his looping and swooping hair out of his face. Upon all this a Chinese Venus arrives in a suspicious shift to present tense.

From eye-mind to mouth, the dimmed echoes here, and tactile activities within the Chinaman's Laundromat, the cool casually receptive activity, down to these ear-eked (eked) lines of Chinese lettering indeed seem to frame a kind of meta-pun on the instrumental kin to the mouth's dark parlor as *oreillant* (Fr. *oreille*, "ear"). Joyce put it into play in his *Wake* that may indeed be the closest literary kin for this shifty fable, as she signaled in that intimately situated

impersonal conversation “like a wake.”⁶⁸ He made it the epically extended *métier* of his polyphonic and polyglot washing to tease with that anonymous abundance “in soandso many counterpoint words,” and told his readers precisely how to find them: “it is an openear secret, be it said” (FW 425.16). Said, that is, and in tending the heard swerves of what is sounded. The off-hand unveiling of the landlady’s name (“it’s O’Toole,” decidedly Irish, as she guessed), within this oreillental Laundromat quietly reiterates the watery kinship. Named so, it is perhaps less that a power has gone out of her than the Irish, “the greatest talkers since the time of the Greeks,” as Joyce has quoted Oscar Wilde, are joined in a Sino alliance with signs, a near yet foreign ear tending the fleeting gab and rivery genius generated by it.⁶⁹ How the joint-power’s agreeably drawn to chance and *use*, the audible wash of *eau-tool* might clue, its dilapidations even brought into the domestic registry of a “*sew-tool*,” or the wet and sheer stuff as “*eau-tulle*.” Perhaps, weirdly, Canute *can*.

It is in a kind *quid pro quo* in the revelation of this O-, or *Eau*, or *Sew-tool* (or *tulle*), after asking the landlady’s name, and paying the week’s rent, that the speaker agrees to be the darkly comic “Bird-Catcher,” caught up in a Christic *and* Bird-Cat oscillation, the chir stirred from *that*, “balancing innumerable small silver-gilt bird-cages on my head and arms, to catch them in, and keep them all singing in the closet.” “Closet” is odd here, her already having vividly laid out these many “small silver-gilt bird-cages,” and for reasons of “sexual confession” (Hicok) seems

⁶⁸ FW 357.18. Though not published in full under that title until 1939, his *Work in Progress* was already in circulation, and her mention in “Dimensions for a Novel” suggests Bishop was reading it (though no correspondence or notebook entries that I’ve discovered record her reactions). See Cordell Yee, “Metempsychosis: Confucius and Ireland in *Finnegans Wake*,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 20.1 (Spring 1983), 115-24, regarding the resonant Chinese influence and motifs within his ever-wavy *Wake*.

⁶⁹ “‘We Irishman’, said Oscar Wilde one day to a friend of mine, ‘have done nothing, but we are the greatest talkers since the time of the Greeks.’” *The Complete Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (New York, Viking, 1959), 174.

dubious.⁷⁰ The image overlaps one of gruesome crucifixion—needn't the balancing arms be outstretched?—with a comically raucous balancing act between head and body (even as a yodel oscillates “head” and “chest” tones) in a circulatory “going around.” In this light the traveling “closet” may learnedly link to a place of private devotion or study, derived from Fr. *closette*, a small enclosure in open air (OED), but where this phonemic Bird-Cat and visually Christic matter is concerned, that happy bird-song perhaps emerges from the awful *claw-set*. If that seems the more dubious proposition recall the Darwinian under-story to that pretty, fish-framing “spray of spray,” in “Seascape,” and we will at length see several more such gestures.

These “innumerable” twitters are caught in a certain counterpoint with our own “innumerable little noises we make to ourselves” of which she wrote to Stanford, these coughs and hums and hiccups, certain catches of the breath (in thought) that return us to what's withdrawing, what we're “drawing” on for thought, for life. In proposing how to keep the birds singing “in the closet,” the monologic speaker opens, in one last turn, toward conversation, providing a kind of toolbox of things “for conversational purposes only,” which is to say for the feel of accidental, contrapuntal encounter, for *wrecks ample*:

All of my yesterday's tea-party, for example. Do it in china, do it in lace, do it in silver and sound, *catch* it in cages and teacups and combs. . . .

One box of various articles to hand around, for conversational purposes only. The fans and tweezers and an occasional hat-pin for M. The anvil and hammer and the beautiful knives and forks for F. And a couple of genuine phallic symbols for E., nothing else. A new box of tricks. (PPL 541)

All seems rather *bedewed*, here (in accord with that wet and portly proprietress), aimed at the balance of a certain receptive *being* and *doing*—of making “truth happen” that way. Recasting the enigmatic anarchy of that “Convention of Bomb-Hurlers” as a tepid “yesterday's tea-party,” Bishop domesticates it with the reading trope she shared with Stevens, laying out the

⁷⁰ It would be, at least, rather anachronistic. Though the OED is hardly infallible in such things, its first printed instance of “closet” or “closeted” for hidden homosexuality is in 1967, 34 years after this strange fable.

accoutrements —*ecoute-trements* (Fr. “listen”), better said—tending a tongue’s tasting, *and* giving it some ‘political’ clout that it will take a moment to tease out.⁷¹

A pair of infamous tea parties may come to mind: one, “the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life,” as Alice describes that Mad Tea-Party in Wonderland where nothing is served but unanswered riddles, most notably about saying and meaning—are they the same or not?—where stopped watches are oddly dipped in tea, and Time, the Mad Hatter reminds, is not to be beaten or wasted, but *spoken to*.⁷² Alice too is “at sixes and sevens” about all this, confused, as Bishop is content to leave the reader, but we may forge a tentative sense woven from contrapuntal hints of tea and Time and “representation” unpacked from that other infamous open-air tea-party that opens onto an iconic moment of New World revolt. Originally called simply “the destruction of the tea,” where loads of it got dumped into Boston harbor, this tea-party drew on the basically democratic ideal and catchy slogan: “No taxation without representation.” Bishop’s boldly budding experimental project, including spirited anti-nominal, and antinomian riddling, quieter than Stein’s or Joyce’s, is infused with Hopkins’ spirit if not his faith, and a Transcendentalist synthesizing of what Miss Moore would call (regarding Stevens’ *Harmonium* that Bishop had “almost by heart”) “the mind and method of China.” She based it also on the contrapuntal premise, or promise, that as readers, it is our *time* not to be taxed

⁷¹ Eleanor Cook notes Stevens’ “trope of drinking tea as a metaphor for reading (ingesting a drink from leaves)” in *A Reader’s Guide to Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 85. And for him too it’s usually a sea-side activity, as in “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” whose mystical Hoon wonders, “What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?” Even taken in an inland study, the lamp-light of “Tea” falls in “sea-shades and sky-shades” (SCP 65, 113) both from *Harmonium* that Bishop had at Vassar “almost by heart.”

⁷² The March Hare’s watch is stopped at 6 (tea-time) and so their party continuous, but his clock tells only the day of the month. Bishop’s “tea-party” too takes place on the 6th, and we’re told that S leaves at six o’clock (the only hour mentioned in the seven days) which might lead one to question the nature of that *leaving*. Recalling the party of the sixth on the seventh also nods to the Wonderland party takes place on the sixth in chapter seven. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).

without “representation” of our own, that our “literal” and limited time be brought to creative account.⁷³

The bodily *oreillation* and heated revolutionary tinge against Old World structures of day six, soothed in the oriental serenity of day seven, her “re-seeing” of one day through the other, suggests as aptly applicable the revision that Joan Richardson lucidly lays out regarding Stevens, also obviously drawing on the Transcendentalist example. The “most salient feature of the ‘mind and method of China,’” as Richardson reads in her biography on Stevens, “was that it focused on the minute particulars of experience,” a focus that “allowed him to transform the Puritan values with which he had been reared into a set of qualities that nurtured instead of starved his spirit.”⁷⁴ The nurturing qualities include “meticulous attention to detail, self-containment, quietness:”

The very same control and retentiveness that for the Puritans and their heirs, with their time-bound myth of progress, meant closure and deprivation, for the Orientals, with their sense of continuity in change, meant an openness to what surrounded them and a celebration of the fleeting. (33)

Bishop’s torquing of the more Puritanical boarding house toward Chinaman’s Laundromat, Lavender, Irish-Catholic Landlady, and a cloistered roister toward a candle-lit accord of Chinaman and son, and further tipping the Oriental toward the *Oreillant*, reveals an equally profound sense of “continuity in change,” an openness and celebration of what surrounds one, and is irremediably “fleeting.” Her revision or adaptive solicitation of Eliot’s “monuments” with “moments” in “Dimensions for a Novel” also lays it out in one fell swoop. Her immense respect for the reader’s time, not to be overtaken with “thought backwards” (nor “bland excursions of time to come”) is of a piece with her esteem for the contrapuntal propositions of what continues, what changes, what goes on while we read.

⁷³ Moore, “Well-Moused Lion,” review of *Harmonium*, *Dial* LXXVI (January 1924), 84-91.

⁷⁴ Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 33.

With that “anvil and hammer” Bishop comically hits readers on the head to speak to those most delicate of the ear’s bones that tap out their codes in inner pools, waking through minute stereocilia into electrochemical pulses of the brain. And that “occasional” gift “for M” lends a learned drift for an anonymous *aurem* (L. “ear”) too, even as the disproportions of “Mr. M’s ears” that began this fractious adaptation of “beauty” dilapidates upon the tending tongue as a more mysterious, foreign (though home-made) “*misterium*’s ears,” whether we find them “*tremendum et fascinans*,” or not. From so many angles, acute and oblique and nearly straight-on propositions, minute d/rifts and meta-puns and laying out the very tools of acutest au/oral play, does Bishop trace the contours of her “conversational” trade, that the critical resistance to “taste and see” to parlay-*view*, is more than a little bewildering. But on second thought, the reader clings to a more apparently straightforward story line or imagistic given in order to avoid the vertigo of falling off into the laughable projections that these sheering sounds can induce. But her sense of the “spiritual-material” revolves upon these possibilities of riding toward the crumbling edge in phonemic waters, on this waking cusp of (de)creation, of feeling a native tongue, and time, strangely in action. There is no rest in consoling statements, or distant views (beautiful as they often are): her experimental challenge is to feel a thing being *met* and *made*, *done* and *undone*, be-dewed with breath.

Bishop would write to Robert Lowell in September 1948 of “Oh, dear Mr. E,” Eliot, presumably, quoting, “The spiritual is the fascinating,” and proposed to Lowell a comic project: “Let’s publish an anthology of haunting lines, with a supplement on how to exorcize them” (OA 171). That devilish pact advises that she never abandoned this spiritual-material project, but continued to refine its casual visual and narrative surfaces, while the surface of sound, the sounds of phonotextual contact, remain as raucously comic as ever. We may admire the finish, a phrase

well- turned, but unless we too are turning it, feeling their amazingly rephrasable potencies, there may be something missing.

Chapter Three

The Creations of Sound: Bishop's Hear-Say Sea

The little school children in the school across the way are down on their knees saying their last prayers for the afternoon. Now they're up again saying some more, with their hands together. I am carrying on a correspondence of waves and giggles with a little girl beside the window who will undoubtedly be moved tomorrow.

Elizabeth Bishop to Charlotte Russell, July 1939

Ears for the Poet (the Reader) "All Eye"

Because Bishop gradually honed a manner of writing (to borrow Moore's wonderful rendering of Williams) in "plain American which cats and dogs can read," shorn of her early Hopkinsian thickness, without the wild swerves of diction and the jangly edge of non-sense that Stevens loved to dip in and out of, or the strains upon syntactic coherence regularly imposed by Dickinson, one "hears" her words quite easily, quite naturally in the service, it seems, of engaging descriptive narratives.¹ It is this pleasant but reified idea of Bishop's "voice," that singularly casual, companionable guide, that easily has one hesitate before the contrapuntal propositions of our own. But when we turn Bonnie Costello's question in "Elizabeth Bishop's Personal Impersonal," "Who speaks for Bishop?" toward the fact that we all do, if subvocally so, in the course of a reading, we come closer to the fuller tongue-timed act of realizing "a mind thinking" that remained her experimental challenge.²

It involves close listening to a "voice" neither strictly hers, nor quite our own, but voice as the instrumentation of a sequence.³ Bishop's would-be prisoner makes clear, in a sidewise sort

¹ Moore's remark is repeated in her poem "England," *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 53.

² Costello is worrying claims for "identity-political" purposes "Elizabeth Bishop's Personal Impersonal," *American Literary History* 15.2 (2003), 334, seeking to redirect them toward more general cultural ambivalences in language.

³ Dickinson studies have been exemplary in questioning John Stuart Mill's definition of a lyric intimacy as "the utterance that is overheard." Sharon Cameron coins the phrase "extruded interiority" to describe the effect of Dickinson's lyrics in which, she argues "the presumption of speech is not that it is to us, but that it is ours. [...] Even when there is an articulated 'I' [...] it is the function of the poetry to unravel the coherence of that 'I' so that speech is dislocated, has no discrete origin." Cameron: *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 186.

of way, the “dramatic” associations that arise in tending this instrumental voice in saying, “Ridiculous as it sounds, and is, I am looking forward to directing the prison dramatic association, or being on the base-ball team!” (CPr 190). With a feeling for our speaking roles, own subdued fluency, we find room for certain surprise, improvised flourishes, “cat’s cadenzas,” or “individual rubatos,” queer veerings caught out in hesitations of meeting and making. And when the poet-prisoner plots “the power of details” “by means of these beginnings, these slight differences” we may even feel drafted into the field with that baseball team upon the drift of “these *speak-innings*,” “ridiculous as it sounds, and is,” but always beginning (CPr 190).

I mentioned toward the end of the last chapter a certain understandable critical resistance before these “ridiculous” events, and the lack of critical dialogue about these mightily subdued “creations of sound” may have also to do more basically with the fact that our capacity for describing—often rather inventively—imaginative “seeing” is much fuller, abetted by a lexicon that leans that way, than what we can muster for the fleetingly rhythmic and richly liminal experience of verbal sounds. Why “the mind’s eye” is a standard expression while “the mind’s ear” sounds eccentric. We tend not to expect much from the “aural” imaginings of sounded forms of speech, probably, in part, because we consider them ineffably private or illusory, a trivial minimum, too speedily dissipating, in regards to verbal meaning. Despite intervening epistemological changes, such attitudes are to some extent a holdover from romantic models of selfhood, and a prejudice from still further back; to treat sound as a soft adornment to the hard truths of sense. Contemporary post-structural emphasis on text and textuality and critiques of verbal meaning with vocal effects and a metaphysics of presence conspire too with a continuing diminution of dialogue around sound-sensing’s impingements and alter(c)ations, which discourse-oriented identity politics and biographical approaches also almost universally tend to

shelve.⁴ But even Bishop's generously attentive critics such as Bonnie Costello, Thomas Travisano, Peggy Samuels and David Kalstone, among others, are generally content to treat her poems as "records of beholding," often with fine psychological nuance, to be sure, but never quite humoring her more fully equivocal, physiological challenge to "Pound out the idea of sight."

She found it mannerly to call her poems "just description," or "plain description"—a foundational fiction she wished to foment—augmenting a tension of sensory registers, and making those sonic side-swipings, the "wobble" of the "represented model," all the more vital and surprising.⁵ This ubiquitous term in Bishop scholarship expresses something anyone will grant, that her poetry is turned outward, concerned with "objective" aspects of the physical world and can convey them with unusual force and clarity.⁶ It is a crucial half-truth; but an unfortunate rash of "photographic," even "documentary" analogies cast not only the creations of sound fatally far from her poems, but also ignores the way she bends our attention to the phenomenal engagement of words on a page. Among the many ways she would complicate or "queer" the feel of "seeing things" *through* her poems, one of the most beautifully basic is to catch readers out at the act of reading—basic, but freighted with a humorously mobile sense of shifting "subject," and maybe some of that magical strangeness Nabokov's Charles Kinbote invites in *Pale Fire*, asking "I wish you to grasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being

⁴ Or as John Hollander curtly characterizes the scene greeting the arrival Richard Poirier's *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1977): "a time when tone-deaf deconstructors were inviting all readers to share their disability" (xi). I should note that I claim in my own uses of the word "presence" no metaphysical pretensions. "Presence" is simply what is established experientially by the imagination's involvement in the poem. It is the moving point of felt projection into this experience that we can recognize at least in part because we have participated in it imaginatively.

⁵ Cf. NY 38 and WIA 85 regarding "just" or "plain description," her "George Washington handicap:" "I cannot tell a lie, even for art, apparently; it takes an awful effort or a sudden jolt for me to alter the facts" (WIA 402).

⁶ In finding "description" as "the basic fact of her intellectual method" and "way of looking at the world," Zacariah Pickard (like Riggs), voices what criticism broadly takes for granted. Pickard, *Poetics of Description*, 4.

readable.”⁷ This thing that proceeds by seeing words on a page (and saying and tasting them between tongue and a foreign ear), she reflexively aligned in an early notebook as “reading along the scenery of a line,” limning a keen interest in the sense of “scenery” tipping in and out of its textual ground (VSC 72.1). From various angles, she stages the act of engaging words on a page in “sidewise” travel and zigzag turns, their half-ragged edges or ledges hanging into blank space, together with narrowings and expansions and even the chance of overflowing “hangers.” She teases out their shifting bedrock of literal letters in infinitely recombinant configurations and conformations, by both splintering letters free, or the queer feeling of “descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters” as we do in “Arrival at Santos” (CP 89). She reflexively teases even her own titular headings, as we heard in “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” falling into the sub-titled “Tidal Basin,” immediately catching eyes into an au/oral network.

Just so, where Pound commands “Hear me” in the stentorian tones of his epic *Cantos*, and Williams gently asks “Listen, while I talk on” in his *Paterson*, and H.D.’s Helen wonders, “Do you hear me?” Bishop begins her mysterious poem “The Man-Moth,” based upon a misprint, “Here, above...,” having one hear sounds sounding all around, and slipping their tracks.⁸ In this “shifter” shifting we may feel the phenomenological wobble of being “Here, above” the poem, and at the tip top of its page, ready to descend. Strangely paged, another voice invites “*Hear*, above,” troubling from the get-go Erin Lafford’s stabilizing claim that we have here “a poem built by the eyes, for the eyes” though its views, too, are enticing: “Here, above, / cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.”⁹ But “*battered*”? Such play with shifting perceptual/conceptual fields keeps “vision” easing in and out of phenomenological

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 289.

⁸ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1989), IV/13; W.C. Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1992); H.D., *Helen in Egypt* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 175; CP 14

⁹ CP 14. Lafford, “Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Dappled Things’: Visual Counterpoint and Devotional Attention in ‘The Man-Moth,’” *Literature and Theology* 25.3 (September 2011), 258.

reflection on our points and angles of contact with the poem, including our echo-locations, “always going wrong.” Not as echo echoes, but as echo alters what the eyes provide.

Such activity not only calls on readers “to perform the paradigmatic Pragmatist act, to choose a way of reading that will make ‘truth happen’ to the shimmering ideas offered” but also accords with a Pragmatist sense that art neither explains nor necessarily corresponds with the world but may instead intensify one’s relationship to it. Reading Bishop’s poems as “built by the eyes, for the eyes,” through spotless “viewing optics” (Riggs) is to downplay that maximally generative conjunction Bishop sought of the visual, semantic and the sonic—inflecting what Garrett Stewart calls “semantic excess” upon “somatic access” (*Reading Voices 2*). In his version of the “spotless,” Eric Ormsby finds her “plain” words “panes of translucency through which a once-glimpsed world, an instantaneous vista, is surveyed in a succession of ghostly flashes, like scenes viewed in a slide-show,” and Alfred Corn too notes in the travel sequence of “Over 2,000 Illustrations” “an evening’s slide show in Kodachrome,” if fearfully inflected in retrospect, both seating readers as merely spectral spectators in a photographic analogy she found most unlovely.¹⁰ It is such analogies that invite their wielders to find the objects “under the lens of her image-craving eye,” as sadly distant, full of nostalgic longing (recall Corn’s link of Bishop’s “old Nativity” with Hardy’s “The Oxen”) without a hint that the ears are nearer, and geared for comic crossings with the eye.

¹⁰ Ormsby 92. Corn, “Nativities” 162. Gender easily creeps into such treatments, as Ormsby finds her “almost documentary” images “prim” or “chaste” (96). In his 1956 review of *A Cold Spring* Edward Honig both approves a “good camera-eye realism” and “scrupulous representation [...] like a cartographer’s depiction” while lamenting it as “a plan for suppressing rather than compressing contours, dimension, tonality, emotion” finding it to amount to “a dressing up of coy attitudes” (115, 116). The photographic focus is expanded in Lise Lalonde’s thesis on Bishop’s “Photographic Poetics” (Université de Lile, 2006). Katie Ford is thrillingly posed in ““Visibility is poor”: Elizabeth Bishop’s Obsessive Imagery and Mystical Unsayings” (2007) to enter the realm of said sound, but ends up mainly documenting those things Bishop returns to view: “The map. The moon. The sudden animal. Oil. Gasoline. And, perhaps most famously, colors” (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19646>). Regarding Bishop’s “cinematic” take on “Love” see “Three Poems” (EAP 6-7).

Carol Frost's study of "Elizabeth Bishop's Inner Eye" marginally complicates the fiction of witnessing, if only by noting her poems as composites from various sources and events. It is however, only in the penultimate paragraph that she appends, "Moreover, art, too intervenes, as does language itself"—but not what one's to do with that potentially up-ending afterthought.¹¹ In her more nuanced exploration of "what it means to be a visual poet," Bonnie Costello suggests that Bishop's "records of beholding" disavow "camera-like mastery," while finding her to invent "a rhetoric of exact recall," which folds into others' assertions that hers is "an art of nostalgia and melancholy," or an "autobiography told from the 'inside looking out,'—a slide-show of places, people, creatures and small events, all of which have been seen, enacted and carefully noted down to be carried ever afterwards in the clear mirror of the writer's memory."¹² This "primary fidelity" to "the Real and to Things" assumes "she could find nothing else to depend upon except what she could *see* and *observe*," quite eliding what the poet most obviously relies on and relays: language, and the pleasures (and pains), the limitations and playful, joyful possibilities and intensifications of life in engaging it (Scott 131, 133).

Siobhan Phillips in *The Poetics of the Everyday*, takes up the notion of "creative repetition" to better capture her poems' complex tones and temporality within natural continuity and the necessary challenge of "Yesterday brought to today," as her "Five Flights Up" describes the endeavor.¹³ But it is a challenge she extends to her readers as well. Even readers posed to entertain "playfulness" (Murray) or "comedy, wit, and existential happiness" (Menides) evade

¹¹ Frost, "Elizabeth Bishop's Inner Eye," *New England Quarterly* 25.1/2 (Winter/Spring 2003), 256.

¹² *Questions* 5, 9, 11. LaLonde finds Bishop's "camera-pen" "implacably turned towards her past" (39), and George Monteiro gives her the dubious title of "the dominatrix of depressive art" (173). Her biographer, Anne Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* (London: Bellew, 1998) naturally finds the poems "autobiographical" (109-10), though Lorrie Goldensohn, on another common tack, posits Bishop as "the ultimate realist" while deploring her reluctance to represent the autobiographical (i.e., sexual) in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), 119.

¹³ Phillips, *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012).

the happy agitations of sound and the existential pleasures of re-creation. Most recent among those displeased with her poems' supposed object-reification, Gregory Murray reads in them a "poetics of untouchability," "an object-based, typographically-fixed, left-justified, and 'high'-language poetics" involved in "polishing the object and preparing it for a life immutability," or, as he also calls it, "museification."¹⁴ "It's hard not to admire the varnish," he admits, "But there is no 'vulgar beauty of iridescence'"—and as if he heard the unwarranted, vulgar tug of the *ear* in "iridescence" (from "Roosters") he reassures that these are poems "properly set off and preserved, *never misheard*" (211, my emphasis). Her "Prince Winsome Mannerly" thought about polishing, and explained his "earliest failures" with "I polished tombstones, blew into the ashes," but as the speaker pledges at the end of "Seven Days" to do "yesterday's tea-party" "in silver and sound," among other *ecoute-trements*, Prince Mannerly proposes to take his polishing to teaspoons, and teapots in hopes of provoking some anamorphic distortions, and thetic bets, we may guess, "A process, perhaps, merely of alternating / the breathing on, the polishing, the breath," but "As *you say*," he says to his (personal impersonal) companion, the Count, "this depends on observation" (VSC 72.2).

The observations required to entertain Bishop's "proliferal style" palpably rest on a rather opposite proposition of a thing "museified" and "never misheard," as Murray puts forth, but his sense of her poems—and we see that he's far from alone—speaks to the degree that Bishop vividly provides for the imagination's visual satisfactions. He draws his idea of "museification" from Louis Martz, who in his review of *Questions of Travel* suggested the poems' "stagy,

¹⁴ Murray, "A Performative Study of Playfulness in Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Frank O'Hara and Elizabeth Bishop," PhD diss. (U of Minnesota, 2011), 175, 209. Murray affirms the view of Robert Mazzocco who, in his review of *Questions of Travel* in the *New York Review of Books* (October 12, 1967), 4, finds her "true tenor" to be "measured distances, scales, steps; side-stepping the 'vulgar beauty of iridescence,' and side-stepping, too, the intimate" (14).

factitious quality as of some ‘quaint’ souvenirs carefully arranged upon a mantelpiece.”¹⁵ But they are “carefully arranged” to be deranged, to bend or disperse in “a vivid apprehension,” as Stevens framed it in “Jasmine’s Beautiful Thoughts Under the Willow,” “beyond the mutes of plaster, / Or paper souvenirs of rapture [...] In an interior ocean’s rocking” (SCP 79).

Of these sometimes twining lines of criticism of her “camera-eye” object-interest, and “cloaked” autobiography of variously sentimental and distance-burdened nostalgias, it’s not too much to say with Wittgenstein’s sweeping assessment of Western philosophy in his *Investigations*, “A picture held us captive,” even if that’s to render it a bit, well, melodramatic.¹⁶ More her style, perhaps, is his musing on perspectival captivity in *Culture and Value*: “Someone is imprisoned in a room if the door is unlocked, opens inwards; but it doesn’t occur to him to pull, rather than push against it.”¹⁷ “Visibility is poor” runs one of her versions, in her inversion of landscape-as-scene-of-writing, “12 O’Clock News,” and the pun on “pore” pertinently reminds that “visibility” is (literally) of words, and what the process of poring over them may bring (CP 174). “Poor people” runs another, spoken by “Prince Mannerly:”

—Poor people, while their eyes are popping. Lately
I’ve but abused their nicest conversation
to count the ambushed exits for a story. (VSC 72.2)

He proposes moving beyond a narrative lock-down, and Bishop also made jabs at hard-edged sculptural imagist aesthetics foreclosing on the conversational possibilities of this “nicest conversation” her first summer after graduation, parodying their self-containment as

The numb style of writing
Glasses of wine held against the sea

¹⁵ Martz, *Yale Review* (Spring 1966), 458.

¹⁶ “A picture held us captive,” he comments in section 115 of his *Investigations*, “And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably (PI 48). James similarly found, “so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone,” as he wrote in his “Stream of Thought” chapter, “that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use” (PP 238).

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G.H. von Wright (Cambridge, MA.: Blackwell, 1998), 48.

Eyes like a pair of levels
Things crawling under the surface of the water (VSC 72A.1)

The *imagiste* levels hold steady in judicious measure, without a waking field, in a ring-less till or register, and she felt symbolists differently fixed, relying, upon “totem” images (VSC 75.3b). Critiquing such sculptural stiffness, and symbolic dead-weight, narrative lock-downs, and “fearfully” fixed divisions of “the Now and the Then,” or ocular longings impossible to consummated—“They all kept looking at each other’s eyes” in “Three Sonnets”—Bishop underlined again and again how seen things were only a beginning, needing a rounding out of a fuller sensorium. Too languid and “civilized” those “wine glasses held against the sea,” like the glossy cover of a travel magazine, promising simply escapist leisure, not the work of something done. But even here we are to hear those possibilities of these crawling sea creatures as “(s)crawling,” providing an audible under-script (“on an interior ocean’s rocking”).

And so to champion or critique Bishop as a poet of the window (or doors that only open out), making “I require of you only to *look*” the “moral imperative” of her poems, and her whole corpus “an extended meditation on how and why and where to *look*,” is to miss her Pragmatist project, to let the tongue wither in deference to a supposed sturdy empiricism that is not quite sturdy, or radical, enough.¹⁸ We can grant the visualists’ rationale: “What is available to us is physical reality,” as Pickard writes, “and it is only by focusing diligently on it that we arrive at anything else” (4). And certainly Bishop is part of that pragmatic shift in gravity toward this “earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether,” as James grounded his own attentive form of “philosophic protestantism” (“Some Philosophic Problems,” WWJ

¹⁸ Scott 118; Pickard, *Poetics of Description* 11. In his constant effort to connect wholes and parts, rationalism’s emphasis on universals and empiricism’s “stress upon the part, the element, the individual,” James’ radical empiricism, as he described it in “A World of Pure Experience” (1904) would include elements and their *experienced relations*: “For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything in the system*” (WWJ 195).

404). But if the poetry of *things seen* helped Bishop to turn away from tired teleologies in vivid detail, with the likes of Stein and Stevens, Frost and Dickinson, she helps to propel further into language, the feel of being intensely in and through and beyond it, being both a part and eventuating particle of this “earth of things,” but also in transit. Those organic deformations and dilapidations between the tasting tongue and foreign ear are absolutely crucial to this sense of eventuation, evolution, and why mechanical models of the photographic slide show, or jukebox music, as she framed and besieged it in her poem of dispute with Poe, are entirely antithetical to her proliferal project.

Transitional Challenges: Paddle your own Canoe

Emersonian—“all symbols are fluxional”—pragmatists, as Richard Poirier has remarked, build on the “recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness.”¹⁹ “It is in short the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life,” James announced in the “Stream of Thought” chapter (and nearly verbatim in his *Briefer Course*), “which I am so anxious to press on the attention” (PP 246). In doing so he famously shifted attention from those substantive resting places toward the transitional in the still vivid proposition, “we ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*,” validating the most liminal of experiential sensations (PP 238). And we may sense at the root of this refinement that Emersonian sensibility that Bishop evinced as well in what James originally

¹⁹ Poirier, *Poetry & Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 3-4. Pragmatism for Poirier is “a form of linguistic skepticism” by which it is possible to reveal, “in the words and phrases we use, linguistic resources that point to something beyond skepticism, to possibilities of personal and cultural renewal” (11).

prepared as part of his opening paragraph to his *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*:

Here or nowhere, as Emerson says, is the whole fact. The moment stands and contains and sums up all things; and all change is within it, much as the developing landscape with all its growth falls forever within the rear windowpane of the last car of a train that is speeding on its headlong way. This self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal which characterizes all reality and fact, is something absolutely foreign to the nature of language, and even to the nature of logic, commonly so-called. Something forever exceeds, escapes from statement, withdraws from definition, must be glimpsed and felt, not told.²⁰

This “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal” strikes me as a key facet both of Bishop’s creation of waking fields of language inviting the self-forgetful feel of tending them, as it is to Poirier’s suggestive notion of “writing off the self,” which in certain gestures of self-evacuation and renewal discovers the vitality of human presence linked with those energies that also mark its limits. In language, “the implication is,” he writes in *The Renewal of Literature*, “that what is able to be understood between writer and reader is already superannuated”—one must “draw a new circle that will seem, for a time, an act of extravagance....”²¹

He notes some of the key signposts for writers in this tradition: “for Emerson the word is ‘abandonment,’ the giving up of positions already taken; for Thoreau it is ‘extravagance’ or wandering off; for Whitman it is his reiterated ‘negligence’ and images of lolling about; for James it is ‘vagueness’ or ‘fringe’; for Stein it is an effect of what she calls ‘repetition’; for Stevens a reiterated ‘as if’; for Frost in evocations of sleepiness or the dream state” (*Poetry* 85). Bishop’s own, lower-key penchant for the repeated word or phrase; her many, many crepuscular evocations of “sleepiness or the dream state”; her happy inclination to ponder a thing “blurr’dly

²⁰ Qtd. in Giles Gunn, *Thinking Across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 113. Such psychological fineness involving his wish to validate the minutest movements of mind among felt relations seems entirely compatible with Kierkegaard’s anti-systematic spirit, and renders clear why he might call his a brand of “philosophical protestantism.” “For if in disingenuousness or thoughtlessness or in breathless haste to get the System finished,” we heard from Kierkegaard above, “we let this *one thought* slip away from us, it is in all simplicity, sufficient to decide that no existential system is possible” (p. 39, above).

²¹ Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), 194.

and inconclusively” (“Questions of Travel”); her suggestive “proliferal” term and sense that her approach was so “much vaguer” than Miss Moore’s; her guiding commitment to revisionary “moments” and moments of joyous extravagance, in “The Map,” in “Sonnet,” “Santarém” and elsewhere; even her much remarked preference for the balance of simile over metaphor—all suggest not only that she would be happily at home, but positioned herself firmly—which is to say vaguely—within this exilic, exhilarating tradition and challenge of transition. But the phonotextual waving of her proliferal practice, this shimmering iridescence of an exceeding life that cannot be told, but perhaps *tolled*, still more deeply implicates her *and* the reader among its challenge of transition: “The uncertainty,” as her “Gentleman of Shallot” meets its unknown edge, “he says he / finds exhilarating. He loves / that constant sense of readjustment” (CP 10).

Bishop variously indicated some Pragmatist affinities in regards to sound in particular, once in regard to concern for a certain “glass eye” that endured across her career. Sarah Riggs (of the “viewing optics”) is candid in voicing a common critical leap of faith when she says that in Bishop’s poems the “real eye” sees “through the glass eye,” language, and “the reader’s awareness of making language ‘see,’ against its own logic, is elided” (*Word Sightings* 45). The “glass eye” to which she refers comes from Bishop’s notes in her Florida notebook on “Grandmother’s Glass Eye,” recovered some twenty years later for a talk on poetry she was to give in Brazil, and nearly another twenty years after that for a (1978) Guggenheim application, where she indicated it would be the title of her next volume of poems, the completion of which her untimely death prevented. Clearly, whatever it represented was important to the poet.

Recalling this eye that “fascinated me as a child,” Bishop writes (as cited by Riggs):

Quite often the glass eye looked heavenward, or off at an angle, while the real eye looked at you. . . The situation of my grandmother strikes me as rather like the situation of the poet: the problem of combining the real with the decidedly unreal; the natural with the

unnatural; the curious effect a poem produces of being as normal as sight and yet as synthetic, as artificial, as a *glass eye*. (44)

Riggs omits this walleied skewing of attention, the tension of registers, which is of vital interest here. Her material concern with a “sensuous, everyday, and historically, technologically situated world” leads Riggs to leave out a detail that the maternal grandmother “was religious, in the Puritanical Protestant sense and didn’t believe in looking into mirrors very much”—we might ally it with her own “Protestant” resistance to “thought backwards” expressed in “Time’s Andromedas”—and with her ellipses, Riggs leaps over Bishop’s gesture of Christian adaptation with Herbert’s lines:

“Him whose happie birth
Taught me to live here so, that still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which is on high.”²²

Neither the religious resistance to mirrors, nor Bishop’s Christic invocation, linked to the *unseeing glass eye*, quite jibe with Riggs’ narrative of magnifying, hypervisual “viewing optics.” But the gesture is no mere nostalgic ornamentation, submitting, rather, the challenge of events and intensities posited beyond the realm of memory and identity. The poet adapts from Herbert’s poem on Colossians 3:3 (“Our life is hid with Christ in God,” adapted, at a slant through *his* poem), the question of a “happie birth” that teaches one “to live here so, . . .” The comma is a curious one, bending any supposedly “otherworldly” aim back “here *so*,” rendering it more of an intensifier than a logical bond or explanation.

Further, Bishop may have had in mind one of our literature’s more famous glass eyes. I am thinking of James’ *Principles* where he observes how a much-repeated word or phrase “ends by assuming an entirely *unnatural* aspect”—Bishop’s word as well in her projected essay and talk, “Writing poetry is an unnatural act”—in which it “stares” back at the repeater “like a glass

²² Riggs 45. The complete passage appears in a Key West notebook entitled “Grandmother’s Glass Eye—an Essay on Style,” and later notes for the poetry talk under the heading, “Writing poetry is an unnatural act” (P 327-31).

eye, with no speculation in it. Its body is indeed there, but its soul is fled. It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity” (PP 726). We don’t notice it as such, James underlines, because we’ve always “habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it” (PP 726). The word wounded or queered in its phonic body loses “its soul” as James describes it, while Bishop’s soulfully wanders, comes alive with her spiritual speculation.

The invitation for re-creative, re-writerly work Bishop would signal as a “method of composition” in a context that further draws on James’ sense of “sensational nudity,” but afloat upon a flowing river. In a poem she variously titled “Letter to Two Friends” or “A Letter Home” or “Letter Back,” written in Brazil where she had re-immersed herself in James and an attempt to “cope with Pragmatism” (p. 17n, above), a dreamy slippage ensues when

the poem I was trying to write
has turned into prepositions:
ins and aboves and upons—

what am I trying to do?
Change places in a canoe?
method of composition— (EAP 113)

The shifty liquid underpinnings of this “method of composition” involve the challenge (as in her play with Canute) that the reader can *new* it, can navigate wave-motions too. That navigational/conversational possibility converges with James’ famous illustration of “sensational nudity” in his *Principles* where he explains how in a sensation-infused “higher state of mind” a word/object’s “sensible quality changes under our very eye. Take the already quoted *Pas de lieu Rhône que nous*: one may read this over and over again without recognizing the sounds to be identical with those of the words *paddle your own canoe*. As we seize the English meaning the sound itself appears to change” (PP 726). This challenge of sensational change—*paddle your own canoe*—is one quietly submitted in Bishop, and far too little entertained.

Among her co-poets “of transition,” to adapt Jonathan Levin’s term for this Emersonian inheritance, I find it useful to draw on Wallace Stevens, not only because she regularly credited him as an early and major influence, but because he also thought of his poetry in conversation (or argument, quite as often) with his protestant inheritance, and played some similar games, and he also nicely expresses some aesthetic predilections that Bishop, I think, shared, but was too busy putting to work to be caught out talking about them.²³ The way he imagines in “The Creations of Sound,” for instance, words on the margins of the mind, “words / Better without an author, without a poet, / An accretion from ourselves,” a “secondary expositor,” “A being of sound,” and his phonemic affinity with “syllables that rise / From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.” Like her aversion for the “man in the park” in “Seven Days,” Stevens imagines in this poem, “a man too exactly himself” (Eliot, Williams, Tate?—various names have been suggested) who “lacks this venerable complication:”

His poems are not of the second part of life.
They do not make the visible a little hard

To see nor, reverberating, eke out the mind
On peculiar horns, themselves eked out
By the spontaneous particulars of sound. (SCP 311)

This non-secondary, essential, ongoing “second part of life” in which silence is soiled is fertile field and a fluent mundo that “X” lacks, or the more constipated state of his poems. The low comedy in honor of this “venerable complication” (if one imagines it) serves that oldest of jokes

²³ Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, & American Literary Modernism* (Durham, NC.: Duke UP, 1999). Leaving little doubt of her early absorption of Stevens’ work during and after her Vassar years, when questions of influence arose she regularly turned the conversation from interviewers’ or correspondents’ interests in Williams, Auden, and even Marianne Moore, to whom she clearly owed a great deal, to Stevens. When Anne Stevenson was pursuing a link with Williams, for instance, she asserted plainly “Stevens was more of an influence (WU January 8, 20, 1964), and similarly, when asked about Auden in an interview with Ashley Brown, she said though she’d “bought all his books when they came out and read them a great deal [...] he didn’t affect my poetic practice”—and turned immediately to Stevens as “the contemporary that most affected my writing then” (C 23). She also tellingly adds “But I got more from Hopkins and the Metaphysical poets than I ever did from Stevens or Hart Crane. I’ve always admired Herbert” (C 23). Her sense that “the spiritual must be felt” in poetry certainly owes a great deal to these acknowledged influences.

by which self- or spiritual posturing takes a bodily dump or tumble. It is a manner of reminding, as Stevens dons his professorial hat, that “speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier. / It is more than an imitation for the ear.” Exceeding imitation, drawing lexical intervals into oscillating possibility upon a phonemic stream, and countering with play the too-fixed visibility of self and word and poems that “do not make the visible a little hard // To see, nor, reverberating, eke out...” washed and soiled syllables sprout some reverberant “*sce-ner-y*” of their own. “And wouldn’t that be imagery?” as Bishop had asked (above, p. 8).

Humoring such sound-based “scenery” expands the phenomenological latitude in George Lensing’s notion that Stevens helped to reinforce Bishop’s developing ideas about “how poetry might set about addressing the observed world, especially how it could portray verisimilitude, on the one hand, and imaginary projections that violated it on the other.”²⁴ Both poets celebrated and troped these wayward blossomings especially in various intelligences of soil and sea, tea (at least early, for Bishop) and animal racket, bird-twitter especially, in atmospheric tropes and others of leaves and hair, Bishop also in things “weird” and “queer”; and always more obliquely within the more self-evident satisfactions of a vivid visuality and colloquial ease as against Stevens’ mystic riddling and raptures, comic come-downs and professorial discourses. If for Stevens there remained a shadowy drama of ends and origins, possible perfections of virile heroes, first ideas, and supreme fictions, and always, always “the mind” (some 221 times a concordance reveals), Bishop planted most of her poems in local, lived contingencies. If in Stevens we sometimes feel a mind struggling primarily *against* or to create a new system that might validate his perceptions, in privileged moments that derive their power from constructive acts of imagination, in Bishop the accent is always keyed upon shifting relations with the more

²⁴ Lensing, “Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop: The way a poet should see, The way a poet should think,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1995), 118.

local ‘reality’—and the local, subvocal realities of reading, both predicated on a keen responsiveness to the world one bodily inhabits, including, and especially, language. Her own comments of admiration were not for the poet-philosopher of visionary thrust, but tended to focus on the sheer unstoppable energy of his wordplay, his responsive aesthetic of a reciprocal imaginary-in-process, of “ideas... making poetry, the poetry making them.”²⁵

Stevens was ever soliciting those “slight incipencies” and “ephemeras of the tangent” for which he had so many vivid names, “off-shoots” and “mimic-motes / And mist-mites,” “unherded herds / Of barbarous tongue,” and if Bishop has any sort of “dogma” it is the one Vendler posits for Stevens, of the “shadowy, the ephemeral, the barely perceived, the iridescent.”²⁶ Bishop’s would-be prisoner posits himself as “rebellious perhaps, but in shades and shadows,” which can be found in a telling-tolling conjunction with his wish for “interestingly” peeling walls (CPr 167, 185). Unlike Stevens, though, Bishop lets the tensions of competing registers speak for themselves, seeming to provide a “definite image [for] the mind,” but only as James characterizes it; quite awash in the infinite ephemeral shimmer of “free water” flowing:

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that has fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh. (PP 246)

Consider too the shiftiness with which James describes “The Continuity of Experience” (1909):

²⁵ OA 48. Certainly in other ways they are comically at odds. Where a theoretical aspiration was for Stevens most acute—“There is nothing that I desire more intensely” he wrote to William Van O’Connor “than to make a contribution to the theory of poetry” (*Letters* 585)—Bishop lamented his theorizing as part of her own acute resistance to the programmatic in any form. She felt in particular that his later, longer, more “frankly philosophical” poems tended to “*drag* a little” (VSC 26). But even when leveling some criticism his way, of tiring of his philosophizing (as she told Anne Stevenson in the mid-sixties) as “romantic and thin,” she was quick to add that she continued to find him “very cheering, because, in spite of his theories (very romantic), he did have such a wonderful time with all those odd words, and found a superior way of amusing himself” (WU March 6, 1964).

²⁶ I cobble these phrases from “The Red Fern” and “The Auroras of Autumn” and “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” (SCP 365, 415, NA 87, 84). Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969), 35.

My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more. I use three separate terms here to describe this fact; but I might as well use three hundred, for the fact is all shades and no boundaries. Which part of it properly is in my consciousness, which out? If I name what is out, it already has come in. The centre works in one way while the margins work in another, and presently overpower the centre and are central themselves. (WWJ 296)

For Bishop as for James, we might say, “The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it....bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh,” this “subconscious more” that might slip at any moment into fuller awareness. And it is telling in this regard that by the 40s, Stevens’ poems for her were not shadowy or iridescent *enough*. “What I tire of quickly in Wallace Stevens,” she wrote in her Key West notebook of the early-40s, “is the self-consciousness —poetry so aware lacks depth. Poetry should have more of the unconscious spots left in” (VSC 75.3a). Bishop’s subliminal solicitations were often quietly comic, as when Crusoe recalls “Dreams were the *worst*. Of course I dreamed of food / and love...” (CP 165; my emphasis), and would engage all sorts of associational play, but I want to try to hone particularly to transformative “creations of sound.”

The slightest shift can have the widest reverberations. In “Quai d’Orleans,” for instance, where in a waking scene near the Seine,

We stand as still as stones to watch
the leaves and ripples
while light and nervous water hold
their interview. (CP 28)

Dedicated to her close friend Margaret Miller after an appalling automobile accident severed the painter’s arm, this interview of “light and nervous water” speaks to emotional and bodily ruptures and accords in ever-shifting, vibrating frequencies, as we stand only as “still as (t)ones,” a sound-shift hints. And the gentle nudge of the poem is to counterbalance the feel that these leaves and ripples are merely gravity dragged, in the wake of a “mighty barge.” Its wordplay’s

charge to grant our being agile, navigable crafts in the last words that seem just to be looking back, and *not* saying what they're saying:

“If what we see could forget us half as easily,”
I want to tell you,
“as it does itself—but for life we'll not be rid
of the leaves' fossils.” (CP 28)

She grants a shocking event shall stay, like a delicate leaves' fossilized imprint in clay, while the complex sense of that “*for life*” lightly balances its compact with a surging on. A heard swerve avers, where each of “the leaves' fossils” has also got their “foc'sles,” a sailboat's bow (above or below deck) “forward of the after-shroud,” suggesting a vessel neither wake-dragged, nor wind-tossed but responsive, will-driven if always upon the chances of shifting currents, waves and winds (OED).

My appeal to let rest the overdeveloped notion of Bishop as documentary photographer, painter, naturalist, or national geographer stems from a wish to give the experimental poet-musician a bit better hearing, and take up that Pragmatist challenge of drawing new, perhaps extravagant circles, of writing a “Letter Back,” but in breath events, “A process, perhaps,” as her Prince thought it might be, “merely of alternating / the breathing on, the polishing, the breath” (VSC 72.2). Observing these “creations of sound” returns one to that suppressed material base of subvocalization, the animal fact, or being *in* the “sound there is” that comes out of anyone.²⁷ Within this thinking-thing, the second, transitional sense of “the creations of sound” involves the feral fringe it opens out from this “fringe of free water” in shades and shadows, the spontaneous germinations of which may occasionally seem germane; and the third is a certain manner of

²⁷ Gertrude Stein underlines this felt fact behind different relations to intellect and emotion and spiritual experiences. “How might contrary valuations of intellectual analysis” asks Steven Meyer, “nonetheless be correlated with similar features of expression and experience?” and answers in Stein's words: “The sound there is in them comes out from them” (*Irresistible Dictation* 338n). But people tend this sound differently, Stein suggests in the double portrait, “Two,” just one remaining “in” it: “He was in thinking being one having sound coming out of him. He was thinking in this thing. He was thinking about this thing about being one having sound come out of him.” “She was thinking this thing. She was thinking in this thing. She had sound coming out of her. She was thinking in this thing” (338n).

balancing them, between the poem's field and these proliferal, eccentric propositions, finding one's way, perhaps, to at least a tentatively "sound" balance.

Entertaining such creations might enliven our appreciation for this matter of "moments," for the dramatic role of the fleeting particular, and her revisionary challenge. Her "poetic protestantism" (to shift James' philosophic mode) seems to me caught up in this much fuller phenomenology, as she found it less fruitful, incomplete, even potentially *antithetical*, where questions of "presence" in poetry are concerned to pursue them in doggedly visual terms (as Scott's hieratic *Visions of Presence* specifically invites but most "visualist" criticism assumes), than in what she commented on (from reading Stein) as "the perpetual *presentness* of sound."²⁸ "I will serve and serve / with lute" says her Buster Keaton, that most heroically agile of somatic comedians, "or I will not say anything" (EAP 116). Such a serve we must return.

For all their uncanny ability to pierce one with a haunting glance from the past, what Roland Barthes has called their *punctum*, "a sting, spec, cut, little hole," the silent otherness of a photograph's record—or the common object-oriented view—does not invite those live vibrations of passionate co-creation crucial to her musically moving proliferal aesthetic.²⁹ "Those photographs are animals" ran her preemptive sabotage of static snapshot, waking readers dead center of "Sleeping on the Ceiling," "The mighty flowers and foliage rustle." Her parting challenge in that poem, "We must [...] leave the fountain and the square," more than the

²⁸ PPL 657. Though the phrase "poetic protestantism" is my own adaptation of James, I am much indebted to several lucid accounts of the relations between pragmatism and the projects of several modern American writers from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein, most notably Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, Richard Poirier's *Poetry & Pragmatism* and *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, and Jonathan Levin's *The Poetics of Transition*, Giles Gunn's *Thinking Across the American Grain*, and Steven Meyer's *Irresistible Dictation*, all previously cited.

²⁹ In his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) Barthes reports in a way Bishop's image critics often do not, upon a bodily consciousness of his own feelings that guides his viewing of photographs, steering him away from reductive observations and allowing him to realize that some images provoke "tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic and lacerating value" buried in himself (16). He builds his theoretical approach upon the *punctum* he treats as a bodily wound from an image.

challenge of parting (though that too), urges we ex-foliate from the more whimsical stream-speak in tentative if powerful flowerings (CP 29). For all of her ostensible “records of beholding” (Costello), it’s also worth noting how Bishop often makes the visible “a little hard // To see,” seems even, with Stevens, to mistrust “scenery” for its tendency to petrify, epistemologically speaking, the sense of self that would think to have it caught it without “impediment.”³⁰

“Visibility is poor” we heard her warn, and she continues, “Nevertheless we shall try to give you some idea of the lay of the land and the present situation” (CP 174). In sticking with “the lay of the land” (but not the pun embedded in it), the porous nature of “the present situation” all too rapidly shrinks. But if “Visibility is poor,” a silently sounded-and-heard “Visibility is (*spore*).”

The Hear-Say Sea

Of Bishop’s love for the coast, the water’s edge, we are quite certain, if not just what it meant, as she told an interviewer, “I am always looking for the coast,” or deflected her biographer’s queries regarding particular dates and places of the composition of her poems: “I feel the biographical facts aren’t very important or interesting. And I have moved about so much, mostly coastwise, that I can’t keep the dates straight myself.”³¹ “The larger meaning of this [first] ‘back-to-the-coast’ remark,” her interviewer noted, “is suggested by a hazy look.” What he makes of it, “Poems are poems. It is up to the reader to give them sense” (C 67), is true as far as it goes. But John Ashbery, one of her keenest readers, I’ve come to feel, better intuits her nexus of overlapping tropes when in his 1969 review of her (incomplete) *Complete Poems* he notes Bishop’s interest in the “life of dreams” and “the oddness of waking up in the morning,” sliding directly into “the sea, especially its edge, and the look of the creatures who live in it” (EHA 201).

³⁰ Jerome Mazzaro’s apt word for her estranging swerves in “Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Impediment,” *Salmagundi* 27 (1974), 134-47. See the brief appendix for some of her casual but consistent means of “impeding.”

³¹ J. Bernlef, “A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop” (C 66); PPL 853.

He approaches “its edge” where others hang back, and tilts us toward the Janus aspect of that “look of the creatures who live in [the sea],” hinting that we too may be such sea-creatures, even if living on land.

We recall her sense that lack of a physical engagement in analysis of poetry, as she responded to John Ciardi, was rendering that analysis “more and more pretentious and deadly,” risking little, and like “those places along the coast where warnings are posted telling one not to walk too near the edge of the cliffs because they have been undermined by the sea and may collapse at any minute” (EHA 281; p. 7, above). She sees such spoilsport criticism not only not being *in*, or on the edge of “the thin(kin)g” itself in a poem, but ruining that pleasure for others, for her in particular. The real excitement, she knew, was the feel of being where the thing just might be “undermined by the sea” and “collapse at any minute.” The way, say, in “Cape Breton” “The wild road clammers along the brink of the coast,” and though “The road appears to have been abandoned,” we feel it a little livelier in a transitional interval of sensing “the (e)rode” just a little less stable (CP 67). “Cape Breton” even intimates this sensational game of textual abandon right in the title with hear-say-tones reciprocally set off by and re-tuning the written, with colliding and eliding labial plosives “Cape” (L. *cap*, “head”) and “Breton” drawing *re-ton*, audibly to minded mouth, and stretching the written toward “*re-tone*,” upon the Anglo-French pun. In the same vein, the changing “same mist” of this poem (*say-mist*) first pulses with a motorboat’s engine, is then found in “gorges and valleys,” and finally following the “white mutations of its (*s*)*dream*” charting various pluralizing pulls at each turn (CPr 67-8). Though “these regions have little to say for themselves,” our subvocal saying of them is posed to abrade inscribed silences and visual distances, to say much.

Having spent her earliest years in “The Maritimes” in Great Village, Nova Scotia, ocean mists and winds and its always washing water and rising and withdrawing tides were part of her geography of the mind. In an early article for her boarding school journal they found analogic company: “in being alone, the mind finds its Sea, the wide, quiet plane with different lights in the sky and different, more secret sounds. But it appears we are frightened by the first breakings of the waves over our feet” (PPL 323). But even that little stream she posited at her feet in “Picking Mushrooms” (a drink from which is needed to get to those “open-up lands”) was made both to erode and grow a little liminal sedge in these “different, *more secret sounds*,” to turn water into wine, or diluted grape juice at least: “At my feet, between the road’s edge and the embankment, ran a silent little stream over the grey pebbles” (p. 15, above). She thought we might feel a little water, or whole sea under, or over our feet, as she noted of her sandpiper, “poor bird,” careful reader on the shifting shore, who runs through sheets of glazing water, “watching his toes.”

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. (CP 131)

We’ll have more to hear from this “poor bird,” or the more secret sounds surrounding it, at the close of this chapter, after tending her career long development of her coastal/watery trope. To Stanford, distinguishing her kind of poetry “in action, within itself,” and his, “at rest,” she wrote in December 1933: “for people like myself the things to write poems about are in a way second-degree things—removed once from this natural world. It’s like Holland being built up out of the sea—and I am attempting to put some further small structures on top of Holland”—again, structures comically poised to bodily topple, or teeter at least.³²

³² OA *xxii*. It is such a leveled and shifty sense, I think, that John Hollander has in mind when he calls Bishop’s images “tropes of psyche, not mere reports from the psyche.” “Elizabeth Bishop’s Mappings of Life” (EHS 247).

Where Canute abdicated his crown before those unstoppable waves, “Queen Elizabeth,” with “a dress of eyes” in “Britannia Rules the Waves” tips one who would “Drink in a million grey visions / From garret or attic” into the drink itself.³³ If “Canute couldn’t, Canute can’t” (the line repeated from “Seven Days Monologue”), we learn in the poem’s last lines that “Elizabeth adopted a different policy, / As long as seas can always look their fill” (CP 203). She invites these sea-soundings to have their say, competing in “a dress of *(vi)es*.”³⁴ In this slightly earlier version of her split commitment to “Pound out the ideas of sight” phonemic fracture even posits the possibility of a *polis* in the sea, “adopted,” provided for, banking on the longevity of fleeting interest within a field of force that “at once supports and shatters the self;” as Jonathan Levin posits, these processes of transition and abandonment that “mark the limit of the self’s agency and self-control” (3).

Bishop’s proliferal poetics center upon extravagant acts, and the structural centers of her poems (even some prose pieces) often underline them. Her compelling prefatory poem, “The Map” (*Trial Balances* 1935), is widely read as confirmation of Bishop’s interest in geography, space, description. Margaret Dickey underlines its erotic aspect, finding “This poem was written under the sign, ‘I have felt this,’ rather than ‘I have seen this’ or ‘I have a special way of seeing that always involves feeling.’ And what has been felt but the body of the world, a body, someone’s body?”³⁵ We will also particularly hear a certain eros in cross-washings of soil and sea, seeing and saying.

Land lies in water. It is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges,
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges

³³ Bishop sent the poem in an April 1935 letter to Marianne Moore, and collected it as “Occasional.”

³⁴ This historical dress, “a curious—even horrifying—garment,” had ears as well as eyes, though “Elizabeth” cannily removes what cannot be seen. Richardson, *The Lover of Queen Elizabeth* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1908), 129. The dress is viewable online at <http://books.google.com>.

³⁵ Dickey, *Stein, Bishop and Rich: Lyrics of Love, War & Place* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997), 129.

where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
—the printer here experiencing the same excitement
as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,
lending the land their waves' own conformation:
and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,
profiles investigate the sea, where land is.
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?
—What suits the character or the native waters best.
Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors. (CP 3)

“Knowledge” is conspicuously missing here, truncated and turned at these “edges” and “ledges,” but as the speaker tries out representational truth claims, land is the oddly active agent, even dormant as it “lies in water,” maybe caring or condescending to “lean down to lift the sea from under,” to draw docile water “unperturbed around itself,” or “tugging the sea from under,” but always as the controlling agent.

The longer central stanza, abandoning rhyme altogether, indulges the whim of playfully imagined gambits, the excess of which the speaker would reign in with the re-regimentation of rhyme and repetition in the third. But it plumps for neither soil nor sea as names and haphazard fancy roam, to draw out this “hear-say sea” of sound-thinking that binds and roams sensationally between, holding us to that questionable threshold of “what counts as inner life and what counts

as objective forces” that Charles Altieri finds most vital in the Stevensian inheritance.³⁶ I said there were no rhymes in the central stanza, which is not quite right; an “internal rhyme” to shift the sense of the prosodic term, most gleefully surprises, providing a contrapuntal note of ear-rational extravagance silent-sounding at the poem’s precise structural center.

The poem is scrupulously framed to in- or un-fold (as a map might) from this hinging phonemic seam where “The names of seashore town run out to sea.” As if they want something (as we do), those names run out in the act of hear-saying them: *to see!* Two deviously embedded, irregularly rhymed sonnets overlap on that extravagance (8 5 1 5 8) with mirroring end-rhymes in the two octets and none in the overlapping “sestet,” except for this central stutter or “sea”-change in this “internal rhyme,” or perfectly ear-rational middle *c*-note. The other rhymes swerve irregularly beyond single words, as if instructing in sound’s unbounded and re-binding potential in excess of more self-evident sight.³⁷ Puns are indeed a key figure for Altieri, “as if hearing the pun within the master term provided reason enough to align oneself with more mobile versions of subjective agency” (*Postmodernisms* 44). Always running away from the places they’re supposed to name upon a reader’s sounding body, they yet can most delicately effect “a motion between two things and a balancing of them,” as Bishop underlined in her “Dimensions” essay (PPL 679, p. 117, above). Carefully placed at the center fold, or interior threshold of her introductory poem, Bishop reveals a certain affection for the “internal” pun’s conversational possibilities and how, its oscillation distills a poetic synchrony in which “being” and “becoming” might exist on the same ontological plane.

³⁶ Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1998), 5.

³⁷ Full and nesting rhymes like “ledges” and “edges,” mix with several *same-word* rhymes, recursively moving through “green” to “from green,” in reflexive comment. Repetitions extend beyond the border of words just barely, as “land is” to “land is,” or more, as in the backwash of “the sea from under.” The recursive strangeness and variation of such fluid echo-effects are indeed “musicianly” as Moore had heard, and more, are a kind of syncopating ear-training in slurring the borders of rhymes, amplifying the matter of puns and drifting reconfigurations.

We note it in those moments of excess, traced again with “the names cities cross the neighboring mountains / —the printer here experiencing the same excitement / as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.” We imagine the printer’s glee, and may hesitate—the “printer *hear*”—and where seeing “as when emotion too far exceeds its cause” and maybe hearing “a motion,” Newtonian mechanics take a gleeful quantum leap. It is for such “dark-clipping shifts” Bishop’s exactitude is pitched. Reading the map is mapping reading, as she hinted in responding to an interviewer inquiring about the poem: “The poem to which you refer had to do with a red map. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about it, but I was attracted by the way the names were running out from the land to the sea.”³⁸ It’s not the color she cared to reproduce, but the emotional strain of response, conveyed in attractive extravagances both visual and au/oral in a flush of feeling.

The question of colors may help to further tease out some subtler shifts. The speaker asks, “Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors? / —What suits the character or the native waters best,” and whimsically assigns just one country a color: “Labrador’s yellow where the moony Eskimo has oiled it,” for a good waterproofing maybe- a pragmatic act that overlaps the holy association of *Christos* (in classical Greek: “covered in oil”). But both subtend the dawning possibility that the “moony” Eskimo, a bit tipsy, “has (s)oiled,” pissed it. Such yellow “native” watering’s liminally solicited by the doggish tug of a (yellow) Lab and even huge Newfie above it. The perspectives blend in overlapping waves of thought upon “obliterating waves of enunciation” (Stewart), always eroding the coast. It is a key distinction Bishop made to herself regarding hers and surrealist projects in an early Key West notebook: “some surrealist poetry terrifies me” she wrote there “because of the sense of irresponsibility & *danger* it gives of the mind being ‘broken down’—I want to produce the opposite effect” (VSC

³⁸ J. Bernlef, “A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop” (C 66).

75.4b and EAP 272n). But again—it is a building up that involves an experience of language also breaking down, and balances in a certain manner that “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal which characterizes all reality and fact,” of which James wrote (p. 161, above).

By the final stanza, where “Mapped waters are more quiet than land is, / lending the land their waves own conformation” (“more quiet,” perhaps than the visual evidence, the graphic fact of print) they have yet become the newly active principle, lending the land their “wave-*sewn* conformation,” perhaps. In this, Bishop takes up her sheering and sewing O’Toole from “Seven Days Monologue” while turning a hint of a Catholic sacrament, confirmation, towards these waves that both erode and sculpt wave-shapes from the land, the infinitely more active and adaptive principle.³⁹ In the great deal of commentary upon the poem’s last line, “More delicate than the historian’s are the map-maker’s colors,” there’s oddly been no remark on the tacit oral and gustatory suggestiveness. The sense of “refined” or “subdued” in that key word “delicate” expands through others of “a thing that gives pleasure,” and particularly pleasure to the palate (OED). It is either no accident or a wonderful one that “delicate” breaks down between mouth and desiring mind a *lick* and *ate* (or *et*), and still more so, that “*more delicate*” brushes into it the first bite (L. *mordeo*, Fr. *morder*) of such phonemic savoring, breakdown and making, with just a hint of mortal (Fr. *mortel*) meaning falling out in humoring the delicate (dis)juncture. It *seems* to be answered, at the far end of the line, by an anamorphic *skull* shallowly, natively shaded, as if that vague Jamesian fringe of “free water” around the image had indeed become “bone of [the image’s] bone and flesh of its flesh.” Such an anamorphic *memento mori*, written in water, so to speak, at the churning verge of words, shares a vessel with the “map-maker’s *scullers*” a possibility heard in both “Three Sonnets” and “A Moderate Rain,” differently fulfilling

³⁹ Bishop would likely have known a relatively recent (since the late-20s) and surprisingly proliferative sense of “conformation” related to twisting molecular wave shapes in which they can have “only one configuration” yet “an infinite number of conformations” (OED).

something of the odd promise that *we* (or *ouïe*) that “can stroke these lovely bays.” Part of that *polis* in the sea? These skulls and scullers, oilings and soilings, the feel of greeting these towns running out to *see*, may lead us to map a tentative equation: sight is to sound, or seeing to secreted sounding, we may say of the given “history” of her poems, as the historian’s are to the map-maker’s colors. The map-maker’s colors in this framing are a temporal refinement, and perhaps kairoitic blast, made of those revisionary “moments” she’d stressed in “Dimensions,” and less predisposed to narrative totalizing, than the finding or forging of passing, contingent satisfactions, the inscription of a new circle.

Bishop’s early poetry has been commonly characterized, mistakenly I think, as both enchanted with an “anti-vital ideal” and yearning for sublime epiphany, as Costello suggests, or as Heather Treseler finds, “pay[ing] homage to instances of autotelic and moribund beauty.”⁴⁰ Both have in mind a poem such as “The Imaginary Iceberg” that we take up below, but it will be helpful to preface our discussion with something Bishop noted soon after graduation, mentioning in her notebook a distaste for the “plump, solid sort” of girl favored by Russian filmmakers; but also unlike her friend Margaret Miller, who “always likes to see the skeleton,” she writes, “I myself prefer an equilibrium of life and death in the face” (VSC 72.3). This equilibrium was integral to the tone of her poems and often restlessly awash in their changing faces on our hear-say seas. “It was when life was framed in death” wrote Henry James in *A Sense of the Past*, unfinished at the time of his death, “that the picture was really hung up.”⁴¹ Her wish to keep just one eye, or one ear, on our quickness, perhaps to spur what the other James called “this pungent sense of effective reality,” sees her drawing down to those most fragile feelings of being, in

⁴⁰ Costello, *Questions* 10, 73, 92-4; Treseler, “Lyric Letters: Elizabeth Bishop’s Epistolary Poems” (diss. U of Notre Dame, 2010), 150.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the passage in context of the queer reversals of the dead and living in the novel, see Sharon Cameron’s *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 152.

“*perishing pulses of thought*” that “*recollect and know*” (PP 1153, 350). As Joan Richardson underlines, “the distinguishing features of religious experience, no matter the variety, spring from facing death and/or non-being, the ultimate ‘NOT ME’ (*Natural History* 104).

Yet “facing” death was not quite right either, in the same way one cannot look straight into the sun. The access is granted as “whatever it is one can really never see full-face, but that seems enormously important,” as she wrote in her “Darwin letter” to Anne Stevenson—also importantly about humor, too—evincing her Jamesian sense of the conscious-unconscious fluidities:

There is no “split.” Dreams, works of art (some), the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?) catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can really never see full-face, but that seems enormously important. Reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful and solid case being built up out of his endless heroic *observations*, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one *feels* the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.⁴²

There is something of a subliminal argument here regarding the inevitable passing of the person, that keeps pressing on edges regarding Darwin’s “heroic *observations*” and “beautiful, solid case” and “the strangeness of his undertaking” in which he “sinks or slides “giddily off into the unknown.” In them all sorts of borders collapse, and aesthetic experience is importantly part of it too, as she notes in the sliding or slipping from the self in this “self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.” The point of such fringe awareness is less that she lets fall the most consequential blow Darwin’s theory of evolution dealt Christian belief, but how it hovers ever on the fringe, not quite dawning, not being said, yet lending urgency to this “undertaking” that

⁴² WU January 8-20, 1964 / PPL 862. For an extended discussion of this (much discussed) “Darwin letter” in the context of surrealism and other modernist invocations of scientific models, see Pickard’s *Poetics of Description*, 52-64, also Samuels’ *Deep Skin*, esp. 32-7, and Frances Dickey, “Bishop, Dewey, Darwin: What Other People Know,” *Contemporary Literature* 44.2 (2003), 301-31.

would find projected meaningfulness in light of past and projected, and indeed presently ongoing obliteration in the perishable patterns that we are, “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal.”

Immediately following “The Map” in *North & South*, “The Imaginary Iceberg” (1935) takes the reader into cold, hard seas, a poem commonly found to outline her sublime or “anti-vital” ideal. But we might more properly feel its frozen fascinations taking up her argument with “the numb style of writing” in some of its modernist incarnations.⁴³ Where abstract “things crawling under the surface of the water” disturbed the level of the eyes in her fragment from the summer at Cuttyhunk, here she sees that (warmer) seas raucously wake, offering contrapuntal comment in the conditional mood of a present declarative, even if eyes are quite blind to them. Here are the first two of its three unrhymed stanzas, but for a couplet ending each:

We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.
Although it stood still like cloudy rock
and all the sea were moving marble.
We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship;
we’d rather own this breathing plain of snow
though the ship’s sails were laid upon the sea
as the snow lies undissolved upon the water.
O solemn, floating field,
are you aware an iceberg takes repose
with you and when it wakes may pasture on your snows?

This is a scene a sailor’d give his eyes for.
The ship’s ignored. The iceberg rises
and sinks; its glassy pinnacles
correct elliptics in the sky.
This is a scene where he who treads the boards
is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain
is light enough to rise on finest ropes
that airy twists of snow provide.
The wits of these white peaks
spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares
upon a shifting stage and stands and stares. (CP 4)

⁴³ Its images were inspired, Marilyn Lombardi observes, by a travelogue of a polar expedition, R.H. Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast* (1840), from which she’d copied out many passages in her Key West journal (*Body* 92-5).

The repetitions “We’d rather have... We’d rather have... we’d rather own... This is a scene... This is a scene...” notably prefigure those for another sad sailor, Ezra Pound, in her poem “Visits to St. Elizabeth’s” (1950), written just after her punishing year in Washington as the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress: “This is the house of Bedlam... This is the man... This is a sailor... the silent sailor... the staring sailor... the crazy sailor” (CP 133-4). The poems are differently chilling, though below *this* one there are ripples of warm laughter.

The question posed about this unseen bulk at the end of the first stanza is not *entirely* rhetorical, in fact speaks to what eats rhetoric out from the bottom up, and it surreptitiously adapts religious language on its happy way. The sailor would like a rest from all this bother with the ship and Bishop tilts a common saying (“I’d give an arm...” etc.) toward a voracious ocular fix, “This is a scene a sailor’d give his eyes for.” The line is curious not just in the paradox, as it involves some leaky overlap of the conditional mood of the first stanza into the present declarative of the second, as if one could will it so, could, visually at least, “own this breathing plain of snow.” But differently involving a “conditional mood” (the creaky *wood* of the ship) as well as a different, real-time sort of “present declarative,” a hear-say “say-lord” contingently appears, and in a favorite fashion of expanding a contraction. That it is a (spiritual) matter of tending the image *and* “the ship,” the words and the scene and the literal-bodily means of conveyance, the central stanza emphasizes. Flatly told “The ship’s ignored” (by the sailor visually transfixed), for that threshold say-lord, the “ship’s (*s*)*ignored*,” captained if in drift, the ship’s sails a bit differently “laid upon the sea” of drifting *c*-sounds beyond the vessel’s prow. In both of these transitional chances we may feel “The gaiety of language is our seigneur” (SCP 322) a playful “faithfulness of reality,” as he’d later call “this mode, / This tendance and venerable holding-in” that “Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces” (SCP 472).

Catching us in the dramatic (and extravagant) act, the center “The Iceberg” swerves from sight to ship, or “tread[ing] the boards” to sight again, but more airily, then. The incursion of this thespian lingo (with a liminal hint of swimming), “he who treads the boards,” subtended by the slightest phonemic draw of “he who (*dr*)eads the boards,” along with the longer line planking out into white space, provides in a thetic leap an urgent underside of why such a one would be “artlessly rhetorical.” We hope it is not, at any rate, simply pre-scripted speech. If you’ve followed me off the deep end, here, you’ve gathered how the freedoms of thetic wandering in her poems grow from sensational, crackling interactions of visual, vocal and phonemic and rhetorical elements, and how her poems hold wayward life and death in, as Joyce held them and let them stray in his *Wake*, “any way words all in one soluble” (FW 299.3).

The curtain rises with these phantom doubles of wood, chancy, new-born *say-lords* and *signors* and artless last words, we hope, again, to be beyond a silly repeating. as her volume frames *en face*:

Love’s the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite ‘The boy stood on
the burning deck.’ Love’s the son
stood stammering elocution
while the poor ship in flames went down (CP 5)

Like Kierkegaard’s deconstructive torpedoings, it has us ask, well, what *is* Love then really? Or, what is this repeating of words for? If I am at least partly right in my sense that Bishop sought those “realer... rounder replies” of conversational possibility, wandering or sturdily paddling your own canoe, as it were, in a play of re-creation—again, a gambit posited while she was still at Vassar, this deadly visual fix is just what we need to joust with. But in critical accounts of this “timeless symbolic vision” (Costello), a supposed “sublime representation of the soul”

(Bromwich), something “pure, Godlike, incorruptible, not of human making” (Stevenson), one would never know there’s been a stage set for sparring.⁴⁴

With the sun, water in all forms quite suffuses the poem, changing states even as we speak, “in, on, or about” the monstrously looming vision: “its glassy pinnacles / correct elliptics in the sky,” more warmly “seep in,” a cull that also can “correct elliptics in the sky.” And where “the snow lies undissolved upon the water” that crisp threshold softens and re-blends, “the snow lies *(s)un*-dissolved,” seeping back to water, and the wind-woven snow of “finest ropes / that airy twists of snow provide” *tear* and *re*-twist (as they do) and keep these “finest (t)ropes,” turning and twining (as we tarry), even as freeze-thaw and pasturing seas are always melting, re-molding and slicing that iceberg.

The poet turns to think of the thing from the inside out, dark-brightly of the roughly nine-tenths of it sub-surface, not privy to the eyes:

This iceberg cuts its facets from within.
Like jewelry from a grave
it saves itself perpetually and adorns
only itself, perhaps the snows
which so surprise us lying on the sea.
Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off
where waves give in to one another’s waves.
Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible. (CP 4)

Even if we attended this business of a cutting “from within,” say 50-50, with what the eyes provide, it would draw us better toward the dual duties of her art. Laid down, perhaps piqued, we are to say good-bye, “Good-bye, we say,” in the lively manner of a wake, and in these overlapping waves of adieu (“God be with you”), the waves sway a little more gaily, in what

⁴⁴ Costello, *Questions* 92; David Bromwich, *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), 167; Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* 73. Beyond a witty glittering, *spars* are the general terms for a ship’s masts, yards, booms, gaffs, etc, everything that helps it catch the wind, and so involving, beyond a visual jousting, both a darting and a fastening (OED).

Costello well calls the warmth of a mutual greeting and making and change. What are we to make of the Christian rhetoric? In comic contradiction to what we “know” of icebergs adrift, shifting, sheering, indeed anything *but* “indivisible,” and shorn, “calved” from much more massive forms, the poet yet assures that “icebergs behoove the soul . . . / to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.” With such a comforting fiction we may see ourselves, though also of patterns in flux, not *quite* holding, but forming and deforming, or (James again): “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal.”

In “elements least visible,” we may attend such flux with the interest of a *say-lord*, increasingly beastly, regarding this crystallized H₂O in a vibrating hexagonal frieze, “much like a beehive” at the level of molecular conformation.⁴⁵ From the sea’s very first motion a subliminal field has been hovering under the scene, as if “the sea were moving marble” warmly worms into a *moo-(v)ing mar-bull* that might indeed *pasture* on these snows. The bull, for breeding, becomes in another queer veering as “the ship *steers* off,” newly slated to be beef. And if we have heard anything of this *sotto voce* drama, the arrival of these beastly, buzzing be(e)-*hooves*—ever so lightly suggests the minded body, embodied mind, lightly bearing this grave weight on the go.⁴⁶

Consider such a manner in light of Herbert’s desire to

trust
Half that we have
Unto an honest faithfull grave. (“Death,” H 186).

And of Stevens, finding “Freedom” something

⁴⁵ Of ice Peter Wadhams explains that it is one of the very few structures where the solid is less dense than its molten form. Around the oxygen molecule’s “principle, or c-axis” in the crystal cell the hydrogen molecules are arranged so that “the whole structure *looks much like a beehive*, composed of layers of slightly crumpled hexagons.” http://www.arctic.noaa.gov/essay_wadhams.html.

⁴⁶ Wasps, in particular and wasps’ nests show up in several of Bishop’s stories and poems including a key juncture in “In the Village,” in “Jeronimo’s House” and “Santarém,” and she wrote to May Swenson regarding a link she made, “But the connection between wasp, wasps’ nests, and brains is very vivid and right—having just pulled down one that had got a good start, off a beam of my porch here, I know exactly how busy and venomous and brain-like they are” (WU February 18, 1956).

like a man who kills himself
Each night, an incessant butcher, whose knife
Grows sharp in blood. ("Dutch Graves in Bucks County," SCP 292).

In Bishop's "proliferal style" (though again she hadn't yet dubbed it as such), she would in all seriousness have us consider what "behooves the soul," what gives it fleshy feet and motion in light of the passing of the person, but whose "artless rhetoric," even as it broaches our beastly meanings, adds laughter, of finding-making, perhaps the most graceful grace one could offer. For Bishop the key word was *manners* (as her masque "Prince Winsome Mannerly" makes readily evident), and for her as for Emerson, they seek the freeing up of life: "Manners aim to facilitate life," he considered, "to get rid of impediments, and bring the man pure to energize" (EL 517). For her Prince it is a "process," we recall, "merely of alternating / the breathing on, the polishing, the breath," or, her Grandfather's good manners also had it: "Be sure to remember to always / speak to everyone [read every word] you meet," "Man or beast, that's good manners / Be sure that you both always do" ("Manners," CP 121).

Bishop's opening the energies of our hear-say seas has everything to do with grace of these manners, and, I hope you agree, are amply provided for in the poem. And so I find that critics insisting upon Bishop's supposed "haunting" and persisting "wish for transcendence and epiphany" or staging the "sublime supremacy of the mind over the senses, over the material world" (Costello, 91, 94), a "sublime form" "not vulnerable to the predations of time and death" (Walker 29) as missing the ship, as it were, or is. These looming forms rise, maybe as part warning, and a backdrop for play. Just so, this *image* of the whole, "fleshed, fair, erected indivisible" more airily "(from elements least visible)" submits also to a wounding "*fleched*," shot full of holes (as it is, why it floats), and perhaps a more edible, to-be-pastured-upon "*fare*," both "e(a)rected" and "(*din-*) divisible." One nation, in the sea...

And if indeed the repeated “recognition in the story of soul” as Richard Poirier remarks regarding Emerson’s “shooting of the gulf” “the darting to an aim,” “is that its progress is forever threatened by textuality, by contraction of work into a text,” these liquidities suggest what presses back against, at the same time with, and through those contractions, and also how fractious must be “the creative impulse which the soul discovers” in managing “to reach out beyond any legible form [...], to seek the margins, to move beyond limits or fate” (*Poetry* 24-5). Keenly aware of such threats of textuality, feeling even *most poems* too self-securely “at rest,” as she told Stanford, she sought to give these freer, “native waters” their say (OA 12).

Bishop distilled the spiritual matter to a single drop of water, one tear in “The Man-Moth” (1936) that’s squeezed from his eye, “all dark pupil, / an entire night in itself,” that “like the bee’s sting, slips” CP 15). Even before it’s suggested it can be passed palm to palm (again undoing self-contained positions of prayer), and tasted, “cool as if from underground springs, and pure enough to drink,” we may feel in the sting of a tiny, sensational change, a mammoth oscillation of a “beast” or “beasting,” brought to, or slipping from the lips. If it recalls for a reader that extinct creature beneath the misprint that ostensibly spawned the poem, it is certainly not to right all this wrong but to sense another circle tightening, a slow motion wink within these waking words. And given her chance, Bishop lightened up its sacramental solemnity, making a footnote joke to the poem in this phonotextual stream that yet broadly underlines its joko-sacred au/oral challenge. Providing a note for the volume *Poet’s Choice* in 1962, she wrote:

An oracle spoke from the page of *The New York Times*. [...] One is offered such oracular statements all the time, but often misses them [...] or the meaning refuses to stay put. This poem seems to have stayed put fairly well—but as ‘Fats’ Waller used to say, “One never knows, do one?” (rpt. EHA 286)

The feeling of meaning (and identity) that’s “stayed put,” un-stung by the wound of ambiguity, a transitional gambit and participatory problematic, is what her proliferal precisions exactly

combat. Following on that conditional taste of one tiny tear, “cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink,” the canny “explanation” invites the adaptive, contingent bridging-in-watery, wandering motion where the silently *said* “Fats’ Waller” wobbles into an unemphatic but “Fat (*S*)waller,” that puts one of two minds—not knowing, but enjoying an ear-rational “creation of sound,” that *seems* to be making sense. But “One never knows, do one?”

The Sea, or, the Moderator Modulated

It’s such rising tides, or surprise tidings that the speaker in “Three Sonnets for the Eyes,” we recall, thought might round out, “mend revenge on colors” and soon “all the awful socket’ll flesh to health” with its tasted wheat, teal and red (and lead) it does just that, phonemically coloring the black and white canvas (CP 223; p. 98, above). But such off-colorings are left out of critical accounts. One reader to take up Bishop’s trope of water (at least partially), Peggy Samuels argues in her fine study *Deep Skin* (2010) that she tropes the surface of verse “like the surface of water” in their shared variability as a “threshold that registers but also intensifies, transforms and refracts the variety of the mind’s as well as nature’s materials” (25). She draws on an odd fragment (“bitterly humorous, rather unpromising,” she calls it [38]), that Bishop had titled “The Sea, or, the Moderator Modulated”:

Always to live over water
& never to resist its verses,
with seagulls with their domineering moods for poultry
floating quietly in lines or screaming
above the swill / around my garbage (VSC 75.3b)

But she draws only on the first two lines, and takes up mainly the titular “moderator,” the device on an oil lamp controlling the intensity (and color) of the flame: Bishop’s “private term,” she surmises, “for the way that the sea worked as screen and projector of luminosity and color” (38).

Nuanced in her language and feel for these “interpenetrating materials” of the “mind’s as well as nature’s materials,” engaging in her historical links of Bishop’s experiments with experiments in modern painting, she yet has little, nearly nothing, to say about sound, nothing of the subvocality that is, absolutely central to Bishop’s deployment of the trope, as I understand it, touching on our most basic and changeable manner of textured contact and rupture with these networks of words. She notes Bishop’s appreciation of meter (from an early notebook) as “a tangible surface of rhythm” and interestingly if a bit cryptically suggests that as “water has its depth in space; the verse line has its depth in the weightedness of syllable,” but nothing more on how that weight lends to fracture and re-formulations of comic colors that bring out the native play of free and “mapped waters” to bear (39, 44).

Samuels sees the waves but offers nothing toward the surreptitious giggles or murmury “dark-clipping shifts.” Not in name, but action, Bishop brings this “moderator” to bear in “The Bight,” where the sheer sea is seen to be “the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible,” and “White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare” straight through it (CP 60). But as we tended the subvocal modulation, picture turns to tempo, “as (s)low as possible,” to which the view of “The Monument” too is tuned, or “is geared / (that is, the view’s perspective) / *so low* there is no ‘far away,’ / and we are far away within the view” (CP 23). But Bishop’s play with this moderator modulated (multiply provoked in those adagios) involves the writerly reversal she hinted with “what am I trying to do? / Change places in a canoe?”—those most satisfying of reversals as, say, the player played, the thief thieved, (the reader read?) or as the first of film comedies caught it, “*L’Arroseur arrosé*” (“The Waterer Watered,” 1895). It suggests the real *weight* of syllable in such temporal slips—“Oh wait!” in “Three Sonnets”—slides and fractures, contrapuntal coughs and creations. Again, she was quite clear about the dual duty to “Pound out

the ideas of sight” (and with it more sculptural imagism), and as she posed her poems to Stanford to be hovering over Holland over water she re-stakes the shaky claim yet again “Always to live over water / & never to resist its [*versus*].”

By images alone we know Bishop as a poet of stunning metamorphoses, but “modulation” opens beyond a shiftiness of image toward what is re-markable in reading voices. Even as “modulated” seems to add an undulation to a mere “moderator” we should hear it vaguely to do with this phonemic slipperiness of sensation, of a thinking attuned to this middle-sea that doesn’t quite fit in words. It is likely the musical term she sets in part *against* the device of light, to speak of these vaguer changes: “to vary or adapt to a new tone,” and it can involve a sense of physical interference, varying “the amplitude or frequency of an oscillating signal with the variations of a second signal” (OED).

And what of the gulls? It’s certainly the critic’s prerogative, duty even, to pick and choose, but considering Samuels has an entire chapter on “The Sea, or the Moderator Modulated” those gulls certainly deserve a word or two. We may recognize them as more boisterous kin to Prince Mannerly’s “Part of my mind talks in ordinary words, / But the rest of it’s up among the birds,” of those that “cried all, descending on the elms / As if t’uproot them, carry them by storm and singing” in “Three Sonnets for the Eyes,” and those chirring and chittering in “innumerable small, silver-gilt bird cages” in the traveling closet of the Christic Bird-Catcher in “Seven Days.” It is, as I’ve mentioned, Bishop’s second most “religiously” employed trope for phonemic sounding (and we’ll hear other instances below). Sometimes “floating quietly in lines,” when they give this screechy “screaming,” we may hear it in relation to “that wonderful loud *harshness*” Bishop’s imagines in her comic “little operetta” featuring that aural instrument “always going wrong” (p. 16, above). Even among this double, liquid and

sonic muck Bishop adapts religious language. In their squawky calls a question of “*domine(a)ring* moods” might arise, and, however jettisoning the question of “God’s will” as so much historical trash, it too hovers about in this “swill.” A euphemistic form for it, this “swill” is historically hardened, notably, as Bishop certainly knew, from bodily phonemic “assimilation,” a once drifting but fossilized sound d/effect. It is also just watered down fodder, fit only for animals, hog-wash, but also in verb form (for some 1300 hundred years to now) a vigorous washing with water in the mouth (or some other vessel).

Where Samuels and I quite agree is upon Bishop’s sensual sensitivity, and her pragmatist project. She finds Bishop in the mid-30s in the process of exploring pragmatic models of experience and “profundity,” that did not depend on Christian doctrine and definition.⁴⁷ But what strikes me throughout her work, as I’ve mentioned and I hope to become clearer, is her consistent, continuing engagement and adaptation of Christian language and rites, its symbols and forms for her secular, reflexive and pragmatic “poetics of transition,” suggesting she may have felt her pragmatist project to extend lines of reform rather than rupture. Jonathan Levin emphasizes as did James, the continuities of pragmatist attitudes with protestant reform. Wholly rejecting “all explicitly supernatural trappings,” Levin’s poet-pragmatists yet follow “the Emersonian pattern by which habitual and therefore degraded forms of spiritual and imaginative experience are rejected in order to open the space for a more authentic experience of spiritual and imaginative ideals. In a sense, the pragmatists are never more ‘spirited,’” he underlines, “than when insisting on the wholly secular dimension of the pragmatist project.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Samuels suggests in particular John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934) as providing “a definition of ‘profundity of experience,’” that argues for an acceptance of “life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge, and turns that experience [in imagination and art] upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities” (Dewey 41, Samuels 33).

⁴⁸ Levin, *The Poetics of Transition* 5. Although neopragmatist Richard Rorty has described pragmatism as a “de-divinizing” of the world in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 22, by which he means a coming to terms with the absence of any transcendent values or ideals to guide human actions, Levin

If I've lingered overlong with those gulls squawking around Bishop's swill, it is to prepare for a turn through "The Unbeliever" in which one such gull is the central character, structurally and functionally, and, I hope to show, extending Bishop's adaptation of religious belief to proliferal sensations of subvocal activity. It is maybe more than disorienting irony that she'd take as epigraph for a parable of *unbelief* a line from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that most central of Christian allegories: "He sleeps on the top of a mast." Addressed to Sloth, Simple, and Presumption, the passage runs, "You are like them that sleep on the top of a mast, for the Dead Sea is under you, a gulf that hath no bottom; awake therefore, and come away; be willing also, and I will help you off with your irons."⁴⁹ "The unbeliever" quite believes in the fatal nature of this Dead Sea, as we'll see (though his brightly glitters), though the parable is much slipperier, cannot be easily summed up, shifting its lights in quiet turns.

First published in the July 1938 *Partisan Review*, its cloud, gull and "unbeliever" are all seemingly caught into various aspects of what Baudelaire had called "the rock crystal throne of contemplation [...] so aloof, so serene" (though "serene" is hardly the word for its titular figure).⁵⁰ "Like "The Map" it has a structurally underlined "middle c" or "sea-note," though this one is deadened, not ours to bring, but muffled up in self-absorbed, self-proving sight:

He sleeps on the top of a mast.
with his eyes fast closed.
The sails fall away below him
like the sheets of his bed,
leaving out in the air of the night the sleeper's head.

considers it as "only a further stage, even the logical development, of the religious reform set in motion by Emerson" (5). James for one, in his lectures comprising *The Varieties of Religious Belief*, and *The Will to Believe*, made clear the compatibility of pragmatist philosophy and personal religious experience even as he recommends that, rather than circumscribe ourselves with abstractions, with "fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins," a turn toward "concreteness and adequacy, towards fact, towards actions, and towards power" ("What Pragmatism Means," WWJ 379).

⁴⁹ Its source in Proverbs 23:34 is a warning to the besotted: "yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast."

⁵⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), 26, 27.

Asleep he was transported there,
asleep he curled
in a gilded ball on the mast's top,
or climbed inside
a gilded bird, or blindly seated himself astride.

I am founded on marble pillars,"
said a cloud. "I never move.
See the pillars there in the sea?"
Secure in introspection
he peers at the watery pillars of his reflection.

A gull had wings under his
and remarked that the air
was "like marble." He said, "Up here
I tower through the sky
for the wings on my tower-top fly."

But he sleeps on the top of his mast.
The gull inquired into his dream,
which was, "I must not fall
The spangled sea below wants me to fall.
It is as hard as diamonds. It wants to destroy us all." (CP 22)

Critics mostly associate Bishop with the heroic unbeliever—Harold Bloom and Bonnie Costello, among others, Robert Dale Parker titling his Bishop book upon that premise. Unabsorbed in such transcendental projects as the gull and cloud are engaged in, the argument runs, he has a firm grasp of mortality. Parker in addition oddly recuperates this obstinate one with his "eyes closed tight" to an ideal figure of wide-eyed sight, standing in "for all those Bishop observers—usually speaking in her own voice—who awake to look at the world anew, often to look down on it from a high place as if looking down at a map, and so to rediscover it empirically."⁵¹

⁵¹ To be an unbeliever, in Parker's sense, is to "rediscover with the uncertainty, the unbelief, inevitable in someone who relies empirically on ever-renewing sight instead of on trusted faith" and "can be to reduce yourself to your own resources, the most powerful of which is often dream" (32). Costello is essentially in agreement with Parker, while describing the unbeliever, oddly to my mind, as a visionary "beholder" who "trusts to the power of his soul, trusts his fantasy, thus making his unbelief a kind of belief, though not the final thought of this agnostic" (*Questions* 96). Costello goes on implicitly to connect Bishop with a secularized Pilgrim who criticizes all three stances, as Bunyan does of Simple, Sloth, and Presumption: "They ignore Pilgrim and he continues on his travels, just as Bishop will return to inquiry and travel as the appropriate mode of consciousness" (96-7).

But again such plumping for the hard-headed empiricist is not quite empirical *enough*, as, for starters, 1) it's an *idea* he's entranced by, fixed upon; and 2) Bishop is always comically tugging these high-chairs of sight's privileged seat and the soapbox of prophetic prerogative out from under their bearers for chances of transition. If cloud and gull are happy but deluded, the man is miserable, pent, as he chants his paranoid prayer, and both in the excess of his triplet to the couplets of the others, and his attitude of stiff resistance he comes off like nothing more than the cocky, wounded "Roosters" "flying, / with raging heroism defying / even the sensation of dying" (CP 37). In his adamant hold and spangled fixation the triplet "must not fall ... wants me to fall ... wants to destroy us all" brings "us all" under the guise of assault, like Stevens' "central man, the human globe [...] / Who in a million diamonds sums us up"—although it's not likely she'd read that particular poem ("Asides on the Oboe," CP 250). But deadly, deadly dull, and blind, Bishop says of such summations.

Casting Bishop with the others in the role of unbeliever, Harold Bloom with his usual dispatch frames the parable as commentary on the tradition of the sublime, exemplifying "three kinds of poet, or even three poets [...] The cloud is Wordsworth or Stevens. The gull is Shelley or Hart Crane. The unbeliever is Dickinson or Bishop."⁵² The cloud, for Bloom "regards not the sea but his own subjectivity. The gull, more visionary still, beholds neither sea nor air but his own aspiration. The unbeliever observes nothing, but the sea is truly observed in his dream" (p. x). We have to ask, would Bishop really identify (or ask we do) with one holed up in a "gilded ball" or astride a "gilded bird"? who observes nothing and spouts prophetic warning from a crow's nest of heroic self-elevation? With such bad manners? To be sure, Bishop is tilting at *any* adamant stance, each being self-ironized by it, as Marianne Moore observed regarding the faithless one in particular: "The unbeliever is not ridiculed; but is not anything that is adamant,

⁵² Bloom, Foreword to EHA, p. x.

self-ironized?” She asked that key question while recuperating “Miss Bishop’s speculation [...] concerning faith—religious faith” to “a carefully plumbed depth” and “much instructed persuasiveness [...] emphasized by un insistence,” with the idea that “with poetry as with homiletics, tentativeness can be more positive than positiveness” (“A Modest Expert,” EHA 179). “Tentativeness” is certainly the key word, even in a parable as seemingly plain as this, but I wonder how Bishop felt about Moore’s recuperation “concerning faith—religious faith” to a “much instructed persuasiveness.” That recuperation, like Bloom’s to the sublime, or Parker’s and Costello’s to a visionary “beholder” underlines the flexibility of Bishop’s ways with language, and how difficult it is *not* to read her poems in light of our own theoretical instincts and investments “[O]ur thoughts are reflected back to us,” as her would-be prisoner quotes Valery’s M. Teste, “too much so, through expressions made by others” (CPr 187) But as he continues, “I have resigned myself, or do I speak too frankly, to deriving what information and joy I can from this—lamentable but irremediable—state of affairs” (CPr 188)

With that I offer what may frankly be a perverse misprision, but one I hope more joyful than lamentable, and a manner of suggesting as *ear*-remediable the poem’s more stiffly ironic and ocular distances. Just perhaps this gullible gull, like the others above Bishop’s swill, evades the “religious” fixities and fixations, whether in blind disbelief, or wide-eyed credulity of the others flanking him, and even as he weaves the “scene” together.

Most linguistically “religious” in a commonly cited, if “insipid and incorrect,” etymological sense of *re-ligio*, “to link back,” the cloud “founded on marble-pillars” is not *altogether* wrong: his vertical peer hits upon a “foundational” fact of “cloud” as a written word: “a mass of rock.”⁵³ He’s fashioned that more amorphous mass, to be sure into a “Columnar Self /

⁵³ Recorded 893 to 1300 in the OED, of which our softened “clod” remains a cognate. “The term *religio*,” writes Giorgio Agamben in “In Praise of Profanation,” *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), “does not derive, as

How ample to rely / In Tumult,” and with an eye-mind’s “Conviction—That Granite Base—” (Dickinson, P 789). But between the sea’s and self’s unacknowledged tumult, seeing only rock-solid self in the sea, he is pilloried. Looking straight down, the cloud is clapped in a *pillory* (for public “instruction”)—or so the tumult of shuffle-able sounds around those “watery *pillars*” may conspire with the positional hint. Though he speaks he “never move(s),” and may, in that attitude, be found *dead* already.

If the cloud has missed a massive historical, (l)existential drift in its adamant self-arrangement, as a lexical reflection the “unbeliever” can more justly claim a heroic holdout. Though much younger, since his printed appearance in the 1500s this “unbeliever” has not budged, however the “feeling” about it may have changed. In his gilded ball or bird-riding the cheeky play with Yeats’ Byzantine bird of hammered gold suggests this “unbeliever” himself a sort of youthful “monument[] of unageing intellect.”

The gull is (linguistically) a bit more difficult to pin down, seems to be the joker, the wildcard in the pack. A *word* of “questionable or mixed origin,” as the agnostic allows we all are, this gull is neither self-founded nor mythically gilded, and between those poles of projections in origins or ends, sight and thought, the gull of dubious pedigree curiously navigates this “rock-crystal throne of contemplation.” A creature of feeling, he mediates reflections and beliefs, remarks and inquiries, waking self-deception, pragmatic action and dreamy revelation. It’s twice emphasized that the unbeliever sees nothing, and if we are to take seriously his “visionary” status, we might consider his a “vision” of an immobilized body lulled or assaulted

an insipid and incorrect etymology would have it, from *religare* (that which binds and unites the human and the divine). It comes instead from *relegere*, which indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relations with the gods, the uneasy hesitation (the ‘rereading [*rileggere*]’) before forms—and formulae—that must be observed in order to respect the separation between the sacred and the profane. *Religio* is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct” (74-5). Marianne Moore clearly grasped this division, asserting in her own mnemonic from “Avec Ardeur,” “Nothing mundane is divine; nothing divine is mundane” (*Complete Poems* 239). Bishop may feel a little more vaguely about the matter.

in the dark sound-speech to which the ear is ever subject, this “blink pitch,” even as we sleep.⁵⁴

The wind in the rigging, the constant wash of waves, the snap of a sail, ghostly creaks, the gull who “inquired into his dream”—all this vibratory ob-literary flux of the a-literate body’s speech blends mightily into this dream fixing a figure of libidinal destruction.

But somewhere between this one of aural assault, projecting a malevolent desire from unbounded sound, and this other all eyes, the gull flies, is blown about, but the only one to note and navigate the air. And, *pace* Bloom, his project and projections are modest. At first glance adamant as the rest, he’s perhaps less the Shelleyan or Cranian visionary, secure in “his own aspiration,” than a maker on the out-breath, of being in “the sound coming out of him.” Again:

A gull had wings under his [reflection]
and remarked that the air
was “like marble.” He said, “Up here
I tower through the sky
for the wings on my tower-top fly.”

His *inter-esse*, his between being, we sense in the first hesitation—*whose* “his”?—syntactically it could be the cloud’s; are they maybe blended? is his “reflection” visual? or is it a *feeling* he reflects upon? Softening the cloud’s metaphoric marble with Bishop’s preferred figure of simile, keeping equivalence at a certain distance, the air is “like marble”—but how? Smooth and cool to its feathered wings? Made stable with speed? Slippery but somehow constructive stuff? He’s a creature of casual “remark.” No punishing punster, “See the pillars there in the sea?”—he allows rooms for readerly (re-writerly) re-mark, and many times over “Up here... a *pier... a peer*,” the companionable middle term of a hear-say-see, this conjurer of transitional chances in any moment might say: “*appear*.”

⁵⁴ FW 92.4. John Bishop gives some wonderful insights into this aspect of *Finnegans Wake* in *Joyce’s Book of the Dark* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1986).

Seagulls see and sound, hover around, maybe even savor the swill of Bishop's garbage, as we've seen. They've suggestive names too: herring quite commonly, or Heerman's gull, the ring- or swallow- or red-tailed type, the laughing gull—and both as a sole lexeme and in the breathed reading of the words used to “fix” him, the gull is utterly shifty, polyphonic. Of the “laboratory state of mind,” we learn, upon a dew-wet dental that he has “do-wings,” or “doings” under his (reflection), that also “(s)under his” same reflection. Neither pillared or pilloried like the cloud, nor fearfully besieged like the unbeliever, the gull rides the line of an under-ring and sundering, and even his felt pediment that is or “was ‘like marble’ audibly slimes or slides (*slike*), and his self-possessed “*my tower-top*” offers out a power or possibility (might) into an “*our*” or “*hour*” part ours. Even his flying or flight “tower” oscillates as a defensive fortress into what's mobile and made to “top” and storm such a fortress, as, in his formed and stormed self-fortress he phonemically wavers between the living gull, and *cull* of something picked out, and indeed, where birds (or free-floating sounds) are concerned, selected to be killed.

And in this flux of “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal” between the booming platform manner of the unbeliever (even asleep), and the cloud-grimed sky, this gull signals a certain singularly gaming Pragmatist spirit as Benjamin Paul Blood's, that William James made famous in his “Anaesthetic revelation” which Bishop has noted (below). “My worldly tribulation reclines on its divine composure” begin Blood's fiercely ecstatic last lines regarding his explorations of fringe states of consciousness, “and though not in haste to die, I care not to be dead, but look into the future with serene and changeless cheer. This world is no more than alien terror which was taught me. Spurning the cloud-grimed and still sultry battlements whence so lately Jehovan thunders boomed, my gray gull lifts her wing against the night-fall and takes the

dim leagues with a fearless eye.”⁵⁵ Beneath the appearance (feir)-fixed cloud and the blind but fearfully fixed unbeliever, this (maybe gray) gull wings its way. We will, at any rate, see this gaming spirit of fierce assent repeatedly manifest in the following chapter and conclusion.—and it is one seeking to keep readers also at an ever-churning verge of words.

It is the nature of churning sounds, in language, to surrender up some meaning, the comedy of which she caught in a battle scene just after Vassar: “Not a land-battle nor a sea-battle, but a fleet surrendering to troops there on that headland” (VSC 72.2). That nonsensical surrender of fleet to troops on land gathers how fleet sensation is always surrendering to “sense,” or proliferal “senses,” constantly coalescing into bright ideas recuperated to that headland “cape.” (But here even in the “fleet surrendering” it slips back in a “fleet’s *ur*-rendering” re-poising its primitive, inarticulate sound in oceanic revolt.) The gull is posed between such self-holding and destruction, a moderator of constant modulation.

Exceeding his apparent fate as ironic exemplum of self-reliance, this “bird much found among the Worshipful” (the OED would have told her), but gullible, she puts in partial cahoots with the besieged unbeliever, though not so paranoidly poised against destruction, a destroyer himself. With particularly buccal hints, most notably a cisatlantic “mouth” (Fr. *gueule*, also fig. “face”) and older “throat” (L. *gula*), in English he bends toward the “gullet” and voracious “guzzling” and “hollowing out” as “a breach or fissure made by a torrent” or sea, or the hear-say sea we may feel in “obliterating waves of enunciation.” Critics find Bishop to “confront the challenge our corporeal, historical being makes to all fixed and totalizing forms, all illusions of immortality,” to “[redefine] the body’s relation to language”; she “reconceptualizes the relation of surface to depth” and “resituates the place of the lyric speaker in the materials of verse and

⁵⁵ James, *Essays in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 189. We will hear its continuation below, p. 297.

environment.”⁵⁶ But the question of speaking her words is averted; the more fractious conversational possibilities politely declined. And yet this figure for a ranging between bright eye-mind and dark-ear-mind, and various lexical sedimentations, this sturdy if fickle go-between we too can consider our constant companion.

Stevens and Joyce are particularly flamboyant in their vocal tropes. Stevens’ papal re-writing “Roamer,” for instance, hovers higher than even the world’s largest trees in “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” “a voice taller than the redwoods,” but stoops to be a “voice (s)taller,” too, for just one instance of “A sound producing the things that are spoken” (SCP 287). And a bit more like Joyce’s erotic squeeze of “this tickler hussy [...] occupying my uttentions” (a “stickler” for uttered details) another of Stevens’ for these “unherded herds, / Of barbarous tongue,” are stinging and “slavered and panting halves // Of breath, obedient to his (s)trumpet’s touch” (FW 166.29; “Auroras of Autumn,” SCP 415). Bishop was pleased to embody such things in a (not so common) common gull, or sandpiper perhaps, and in just gentle hints of liquidity. Though my misprision may be as gleefully unfounded as the next person’s, my hope is that it navigates her proliferal challenge by following thinking back to some feeling things, leaves the theorizers on better defended turf to hang at the edge of these cliffs, crumble, or gleefully “run out to sea” for the feel of meeting her words in our rounder element. They involve “questions of travel” in Costello’s sense where “Questions about the world become, then, obliquely, questions about ourselves” (*Questions* 109). But her proliferal challenge of navigation is, in Emerson’s terms, to balance “speculation” with pluralizing “action,” and to tease belief,

⁵⁶ Costello, *Questions* 250; Diehl 110; Samuels, *Deep Skin* 15. At such a threshold, Samuels sees, “the discursiveness of metaphor and meaning can emerge quietly from and sink back into the material of the sensory world” (11), and emphasizes how Bishop’s “tactile empathy [...] spatially locates consciousness inside the diverse material of the surround” and “diffuses the sense of the ‘I’ so that it is stretched among the atmospheres, textures, and objects of the surround” (43). Finely seen and said as it is, it leaves aside the question of Bishop’s acutely temporal positionings and diffusions, and the conspiratorial oscillations that are her most intimate means of modulation, and most importantly “resituates” the very concept of a “lyric speaker” among her words.

tease “knowing,” back down and out from the bodily seat of this *other* first circle of (or wish for) earliest nourishment, and the making of new ones.⁵⁷

Stevens’ words are also happily apt where he notes those dim intimations of a “bright *scienza* outside ourselves,”

A gaiety that is being, not merely knowing,
The will to be and to be total in belief,
Provoking laughter, an agreement, by surprise. (SCP 248).

Such things, “instantly in themselves are gay,” no matter the matter. The “unbeliever” in his hermitic self-sealing and high-toned prophecy will have none of it, and is certainly the most “religious” of his elemental and animal companions, like her lighthouse figures awash in while spurning hear-say seas of action and its chances. He’s still asleep—“But he sleeps on the top of a mast,” we hear for the third time—but don’t believe it. The third time’s a difference. First in how it hesitates, momentarily there, between gaming gull and unbeliever (who’s infiltrated his stanza and his dream), and more so upon the phonemic pressure of that conjunctive “but” (ridiculous as it sounds, and is), “But tease *leaps* on the top of *his* mast” a joyful jig and ob-literary plunge.

Pleasure Seas and the Shoals of Distraction

As I’ve been concentrating on some of Bishop’s earliest poems, it will be useful to briefly expand the range of these tropes to mark ways she kept them in play, particularly as teasingly touching on her Pragmatist affinities and visual dis-orientations. Giorgio Agamben continues his discussion of the root-sense of “religion”—not in binding but indeed in *separating* the mundane

⁵⁷ “If speculation tends thus to a terrific unity, in which all things are absorbed,” Emerson writes in his 1850 “Plato; or, the Philosopher,” “action tends directly backwards to diversity. The first is the course of gravitation of mind; the second is the power of nature. Nature is the manifold. The unity absorbs, and melts or reduces. Nature opens and creates” (EL 639). Emerson prevents these terms from settling, though, elsewhere attributing these acts of resistance and diversification to the human mind in opposition to its animal or natural destiny, which is ultimately death. These tensions of the gravitation of mind as part of culture and a power of nature are never reconciled in Stevens or Bishop any more than it was by Emerson or Joyce.

and holy, noted above—by opposing to religious belief not “disbelief and indifference” toward the divine, but a freer form of “negligence” and “use,” and a term particularly key for Bishop in these dis-orientations: “distraction.”

It is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine [...] that stand in opposition to religion, but “negligence,” that is, a behavior that is free and “distracted” (that is to say, released from the *religio* of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning. To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use. (*Profanations* 75)

He would praise such profanations, Bishop too would have us put them to use. It was Emerson’s challenge, as we heard in the introduction, to “honor every truth by use” (p. 9 above); and if he was sometimes displeased with daily distractions, as in his oft-cited Journal entry, “We try to listen to the hymn of gods, and must needs hear this perpetual *cock-a-doodle-do*, and *ke-tar-kut* right under the library windows,” Bishop sought to bless even their wounding.⁵⁸ It is the echo of Emerson we can hear just slightly turned in her “Roosters” where “poor Peter, heartsick” after his panicked betrayal of Christ in her poem

still cannot guess
those cock-a-doodles yet might bless
his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness. (CP 38)

After repeated “screaming” and mindlessly repeating, “uncontrolled, traditional cries,” it’s left to those comically loosened “*cock-a-doodles*” to project a blessed balance between the given betrayal, separation and possible, just possible amends—he “still cannot guess....” The heart-heavy yet “comic sense” of this cartoon imitation of natural sound finesses the conflict of animal and symbolic senses of projection, teases self-seriousness even as it adjusts that cock’s encrusted significance with a *doodle*—that only half-consciously willed, half-distracted doing.

⁵⁸ Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1849-1855*, vol. 3, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), 55.

Bishop places her Love in “Pleasure Seas” (1939) also at such a divide.⁵⁹ We may find this Love refiguring the zigzag interaction of eye and ear in that off-beat (half aural) image of her “grandmother’s glass eye,” also fulfilling that dueling self-direction to “Pound out the ideas of sight,” and her promise, from the “The Sea, or, the Modulator Modulated;” “Always to live over water / & never to resist its verses,” in a freer spirit of attention and distraction. But first the painter takes out her brush:

In the walled off swimming pool the water is perfectly flat.
The pink Seurat bathers are dipping themselves in and out
Through a pane of bluish glass.
The cloud reflections pass
Huge amoeba-motions directly through
The beds of bathing caps: white, lavender, and blue. (CP 195)

Lovely, the pointillist dots, “white, lavender, and blue,” still as flowers within their protected bed, and we may gaze as securely as the cloud (in “The Unbeliever”) upon his own reflection. The bathers pass in and out of the glassy water with nary a ripple. But then immediately we’re turned more hazardously “out among the keys:”

But out among the keys
Where water goes its own way, the shallow pleasure seas
Drift this way and that mingling currents and tides
In most of the colors that swarm around the sides
Of soap-bubbles, poisonous and fabulous. (CP 195)

Among these shifty “keys” and “currents and tides” this partly soiled sea “goes its (s)own way” and the “pleasure seas” sway as they drift “this (s)way and that” (and *here* and there) and quite as casually shore up on their way an incidental sand-bar between those “currents (s)and tides.” She called it “her most extraordinary feature,” hair that “goes its own way,” in one of her first flirtatious letters to Stanford, helping him toward another of her early *oreillental* tropes.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The poem was accepted for publication in *Harper’s* in 1939, but never printed.

⁶⁰ She was deflecting his wish that she send a photograph, offering instead this wonderfully teasing description that speaks to some of her *oreillentions*: “I’m five feet four I think, rather small, with rather large grey or blue eyes and

After many vivid modulations and sudden shifts of perspective (nicely described by Samuels in *Deep Skin* 43-55), in lovely lulling distances and startling neon shocks, the sea becomes a slippery “dance floor,” “a well-ventilated ballroom,” and as if picking out that first pun of pain under the heading of “Pleasure,” a brief allegory of motion and emotion ensues:

Pleasures strike off humming, and skip
Over the tinsel surface: a Grief floats off
Spreading out thin like oil. And Love
Sets out determinedly in a straight line,
One of his burning ideas in mind,
Keeping his eyes on
The bright horizon,
But shatters immediately, suffers refraction,
And comes back in shoals of distraction. (CP 195-96)

“Experience is emotional,” wrote Dewey, “but there are no separate things called emotions in it,” and Bishop splits this trio out, it seems, all the better to explore their ever-shifting admixtures.⁶¹ Evidently many, and always young, “Pleasures strike off humming,” and Bishop provides the childish glimpse that they “trike off” on their little three-wheeled bikes in our subvocal hum, even before they visibly “skip / Over the tinsel surface.” The colon, though, argues intrinsic relation with a vaguer “Grief floats,” as if in the wake of a pleasure craft’s passing. “Spreading out thin like oil” it audibly *coils*, and also “lies concealed” (obs. *lotes*), perhaps ready to “strike” with Pleasure again.

Love was one of those “power-bringing terms” Bishop could never quite put down, and she most often made it a measure of close attention and easy-going (and mannerly) navigation. Love here would lift our gaze beyond Grief and Pleasures, and in his ideal ocular ambition resembles the transcendentalist of “Circles,” whose eye is the “first circle” (“the cipher of the

a very intelligent expression. My hair is my most extraordinary feature—it’s brown and carries on an independent life of its own—a tactful admirer recently told me it looked like something to pack china in” (Stanford, “Letters” 19).

⁶¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1929), 48.

world”) and heads “determinedly” for the horizon’s second.⁶² But the “terms” in which we hear him tug and tear: with his “eyes on” the “bright horizon,” audibly secured within it, as it were, it leaves an easy whore out in the air, besieged even by *sighs* and *sawn* and a tearing *tore*; his “straight line” strays and “his burning ideas” insinuate, upon the tongue, a “(sp)urning”—in the attitude of visual distance? of a present pain? A thinker, a maker, Bishop might feel with James in his *Principles*, that “to sustain a representation, to think, is, in short, the only moral act,” and her bargain (also James’) with such sustaining is to be responsive to the process achieving itself (PP 1170). This Love, constant in setting out *and* coming back, steadily obstructed “shatters immediately, suffers refraction / And comes back in shoals of distraction” zigging and zagging. As shallow breaking waters those shoals sound close and constant shipwreck, and audibly propose *reef* and *wrack* and *shun*. Or are they “shoals” (schools) of glittering fish? Travelling out to meet the water coming in, he constantly “comes back” in those closer shoals of dis-traction, the local, perhaps subvocal, as he “comes (*sp*)ack,” a bit more “intelligent, of *sound* mind”—it recommends the pleasures, tensions, and non-stop oscillations that her “verses” endorse (OED).

But “Pleasure” is granted the titular honor, what Darwin too knew to be at the center of things, of chances and choices.⁶³ A many-in-one “Pleasure,” here, it suggests, by your leave upon slippery seas, that a self-listening (and abandoning) “Pleasure Sees” (as it did a little differently the middle-c or central fold of “The Map”), and Pleasure can relax, with “Pleasure’s Ease,” and may be pricked into—“Pleasure Seize”—attitudes of grasping. At angles to the more overt allegory below, it draws Grief and Love under *its* signature. These wandering modulations,

⁶² “The eye is the first circle,” Emerson famously wrote, “the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the cipher of the world” (“Circles,” EL 403). See “Three Valentines” and “Three Poems” for two of Bishop’s early figurations of Love (CP 225-7; EAP 18-9).

⁶³ From Richardson’s invaluable *A Natural History of Pragmatism*: “The force figured by Darwin as motivating one choice over another, and stated simply as such by him, was pleasure, the satisfaction at some level at a given moment of appetite, whether for nutriment, water, sleep, or sex” (86). We will look further into this below.

aspectual chances of choice in repeating a made-thing, endorse William Empson's feeling in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which Bishop read with great interest and approval, that "Unless you are enjoying the poetry you cannot create it, as poetry, in your mind."⁶⁴

Bishop had heard,

Pleasure is spread through the earth
in stray gifts to be claimed by whoever shall find;
Thus a rich loving kindness, redundantly kind,
Moves all nature to gladness and mirth

and put Wordsworth's "Stray Pleasure," in a certain conversation with hers. Some years after the poem she'd call herself "a minor female Wordsworth—or least, I don't know anyone else who seems to be such a Nature Lover," but was ever signing her difference, queering such a Love.⁶⁵

Wordsworth's poem is one of abundance, three are dancing and filling the air with song, a happy ménage-a-trois of "The Miller and two Dames, on the breast of the Thames." In such joy, abundant as mother's milk, where "Pleasure is (b)read" and "bred" through the earth and air of these erotic pulls, just this hint of distance: "They dance not for me, / Yet mine is their glee!" From this Bishop strays, not only in breaking this ménage, perhaps temporally, as revolving elements of Pleasure, Love and Grief, but in proposing finally just one, not three dancing:

And out there where the coral reef is a shelf
The water runs at it, leaps, throws itself
Lightly, lightly, whitening in the air:
An acre of cold white spray is there
Dancing happily by itself. (CP 196)

Happily, as it happens. But hers is a rockier proposition as well, as we hear with the lingering echo effects of that "reef," and even the "acre" spreads a wide ache there too.

⁶⁴ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions [1933]/1966), 248. Stein thought too of "there being some connection," as she wrote in "Two Women," "between liking and listening." In *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulysses E. Dydo (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern UP, 1993), 113; and such a minute movement fulfills two, or all three, Notes toward Stevens' "Supreme Fiction": It Must be Abstract. It Must Change. It Must Give Pleasure.

⁶⁵ "On reading over what I've got on hand," she wrote Lowell in July 1951, referring to the poems for *A Cold Spring*, "I find I'm really a minor female Wordsworth—at least, I don't know anyone else who seems to be such a Nature Lover" (OA 222).

How Bishop would keep these things returning to a matter of the mouth we may feel in the slight hesitation found at the start of “Florida” (1939) where “The state with the prettiest name” in the turn of a line becomes “the state that floats in brackish water,” oscillating there as the ocean-licked tongue that it is, and, after the comment suggesting the savoring of a name, as if *in* a brackish mouth’s measure (CP 32). The “perishable clapboards” holding together the “love nest” or “fairy palace” of “Jéronimo’s House” (1941) do so in the buzz of “my gray wasps’ nest / of chewed-up paper / glued with spit” allying the tearing and tethering cleave where tongue, teeth and tissues sever effluent air into linguistic bits in the mouth’s warm, dim dome (CP34). But also, the chewing over of “chewed-up paper” switches in the shadow subject of an “aper” the silly repeating mimics that we readers animally are, from which strange changes like this may spring. Minutely tuned, freely following the “distractions” that arise in being steeped in sensation, it manifests imagination as “the organ which chance operates on the human scale,” as Joan Richardson describes Darwin’s rewriting of this faculty, “its function, to effect variability” (*Natural History* 120). It may also pose us, recalling those *clap*-boards in that beautiful in-between of a thing met and made in the joyous visitation of insight described by Emerson in “Experience”:

I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. (EL 485)

Bishop honored this place of sensational change and “insight” in “The Bight” (1948), where we’ve heard the sheer ocean-gas color turn tempo, the flame escaping “as (*s*)low as possible,” to name the pace to take her poems, even as the title names the place they might round out. We see (and hear) “The little ochre dredge at work off the end of the dock / already plays the perfectly off-beat claves,” a Latin polyrhythm of two against three always self-breaking, a little

off-balance, but balancing no less a unit of making and breaking (even as you might see *clave* as past tense of that antithetically “cleave”) (CP 60). But in Spanish it means “key,” not to a door, but the kind that breaks a code, a cipher. And if we see and hear it, it is in a tasted sensation where we to might get in on the “perfectly off-beat” in a gleeful shift from the *illo* to the *ex tempore* where, say, the two visual descriptors, “little ochre” modifying the dredge are modulated by a tasted-thetic third, *loquor* (L. “to say, speak”) cheerfully active in the gap, triangulating our time into its.

And to round out our discussion we might take up once again with her “Sandpiper” (1962), “poor bird,” scanning the shifting grains at the very edge of land and sea. In the washing and “withdrawing water” we heard early as “Three Sonnets,” he joins these tropes of sea birds and wet, slippery feet and those between-spaces that Bishop hung high in the sky in “Time’s Andromedas”; the bird links these with buccal activity and (sub)vocal spiritual hints as he runs, once again, through the sheets of glazing water, “watching his toes.”

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn’t tell you which.
His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed! (CP 131)

Bishop sometimes likened herself to this sandpiper—“(no detail too small)”—as in her acceptance speech for the Neustadt Prize in 1976, “Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper—just running along the edges of different countries and continents, ‘looking for something.’ [...] Naturally I know, and it has been pointed out to me,

that most of my poems are geographical, or about coasts, beaches and rivers running to the sea [...]” (LM 317). With just that last hint she traces the temporal freight of her geographical waters, and in the poem they keep washing up and withdrawing, providing the chances for this “poor bird’s” “darting to an aim.”

For it is just before the more famous portion of Emerson’s passage on transition that he notes, “Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea,—long intervals of time, years, centuries,—are of no account. This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death. Life only avails, not the having lived...” (EL 271). Bishop’s tropes of subvocality are keyed *this* widely and minutely, in the kairotic bursts of revisionary “moments,” “minute and vast,” our sense of which will expand still further in the following chapter listening in more particularly upon puns, and in the conclusion. Letting that Atlantic slide through his toes, Bishop’s sandpiper is also a “student of Blake,” which critics again generally gather to ocular emphasis, the finding of “a world in a grain of sand,” etc. And he *does* see them quite particularly: “The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst” (CP 131). But the stakes for this spiritual-materialist are held elsewhere. Drawing down, on higher or lower tide (“He couldn’t tell you which”), “His (*sp*)eak is focused; he *is* preoccupied” which might alight with the feel of a *spree*, or better yet, of his being (our being) “*esprit*-occupied,” taken up with a trans-Atlantic sense of “spirit” beautifully congruent with a certain sprightly liveliness of wit, as Bishop’s certainly is, and may be, *must* be, vaguely met in our own phonotextual particulars.

Chapter 4 Religious Contingencies

In the beginning was the pun.
Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*

*For Time is
nothing if not amenable.*
Elizabeth Bishop, "The Shampoo"

There passes through this sentence what it can contain only by bursting.
Maurice Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*

Bishop mistrusted stories of origin, although she crafted a few. And in her beginnings as a word wielder (to take her at her word) in her masterful autobiography, "In the Village," was the pun. It looked like an accident, of the aural sort, when her newly nascent "I" keeps hearing a repeated "mourning" as "morning." But then in the slim but living difference of a word brightly heard and blackly meant, she decides to keep *her* meaning in play against the grain of the belated. It lays some existential grit into Wallace Stevens' claim, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," that "the slightest sound" can matter, and matters as a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36). Basic to Bishop's resistance to foundational claims, stiffened myth, and despair, she gave them grace of place, opening out the centers of things, oscillating origins, rendering ends, and always to "Pound out the ideas of sight." In notebooks she recorded some groaners, still revealing of the more delicate movements she sought in her poems:

Truth, the spotted leopard
moving in leaf shadow,
impossible to spot— (VSC 72A.1)

Spotted, or not? For attitudes of grasping that naturally moving thing she unsheathed a sharper wit, as we thoroughly heard in the first chapter. And often, while all the more vividly "painting"

a scene, she could musically undo it, as when she saw a “confessional,” in a cathedral in Ouro Prêto, Brazil, “its carved and painted boards upright / looking like a musical instrument,” adding archly, “a lyre perhaps” (VSC 67.20).

In an abrupt shift from more transitive language in a poem from that place, from a “plain” sense of overhearing folks at a fountain in “Under the Window: Ouro Prêto” gabbing about how “Transistors / cost much too much,” and other sundries, summarized with “The seven ages of man are talkative / and soiled and thirsty,” its tercets crack in half, sheer from thirsty to see:

Oil has seeped into
the margins of the ditch of standing water

and flashes or looks upward brokenly
like bits of mirror—no, more blue than that:
like tatters of the *Morpho* butterfly. (CP 154)

The painterly precision is rife with liminal tugs. Along with that *Morpho* of such brilliant blue, James Logenbach surmises *Morpheus*, god of dreams, presides over the scene, and it is apt considering its wash of peripheral glimmers (44). When the oily water weirdly “flashes or looks upward brokenly,” for instance, it solicits not only the latent pun on *oeil* (Fr. “eye”) and the “lashes” within that “flashes,” but a bit of oblique (non)sense from that “standing water” as well, a play of angles that may slightly change our “acquaintance” with that phrase. And the language liquidly thickens, too, “more” most notably sheering from the *Morpho*’s “truer,” luminous blue, the diverging line of a making “more *faux*:” more false, feigned, concocted, cocooning there too. Or perhaps they are twined. “The truest poetry is the most feigning” says Touchstone in *As You Like It*, on which the poem’s just touched with that “seven ages of man” business. The image “more blue” is more morbid too, in phonemic “tatters” that yet (as “tatters”) we mend, and

instantly, tating emergent embellishments (*morf-aube-utter-fly?*) in the naturally weaving textures of the “real” and “dream” in what Barthes calls “the unreal reality of language.”¹

Such clipping drifts, dark and bright with in-built oscillations expand a reader’s reagent agency in that collaborative space of play Bishop so loved, so labored for. To her recursive swerve upon that feline “Truth” moving in leaf-shadow she added a queer query, “but can she beat her own record?” If speed is at issue it’s of the instantaneous sort in which a pun can contrapuntally “pulverize” the sense of a “record” of things seen or done or thought, into a new doing and sensational sense of the dawning-possible. When we begin to treat this liminal, sometimes maligned figure of eccentric pleasure, the pun, often disparaged as “the lowest form of wit” (famously by Samuel Johnson among others), as an explosively anti-foundational foundation of Bishop’s poems, it opens up some infinite vistas and ongoing “conversational spaces,” caught after a blast of laughter in “The Wit.” This universally neglected and admittedly odd sonnet written during her intensely productive early years in Brazil and published in *The New Republic* in February 1956, is immensely instructive in some minute matters, and with Beckett’s Murphy, undoes the Word with the pun’s ear-rational ‘beyond-logic’ of cosmological proportion—or is it distortion? Either way, as Bishop frames it, it turns moral gravity to mortal levity, thought into felt thinking, and a Newtonian view to anonymous quanta in the flash of fresh conception riding wild upon bodily rupture.

¹ Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992): “The most ‘realistic’ work will not be the one which ‘paints’ reality, but which, using the world as content [...] will explore as profoundly as possible the unreal reality of language” (77). Unlike Stevens Bishop did not overtly struggle with this split, go round and round the wheel of the “real” and “imagination,” just as she had no wish to posit a “split” between the conscious and unconscious, but let them drift and blend in her superfluent style and what she called in “Santarém” “that watery, dazzling dialectic” (CP 185). Samuels contrasts Stevens’ “hard-edged clashing of mind against a surface” with what Bishop conceives of a more porous interchange that “multiplied the variability of the textured minds’ relation to the surface” (54).

THE WIT

“Wait. Let me think a minute,” you said.
And in the minute we saw:
Eve and Newton with an apple apiece,
and Moses with the Law,
Socrates, who scratched his curly head,
and many more from Greece,
all coming hurrying up to now,
bid by your crinkled brow.

But then you made a brilliant pun.
We gave a thunderclap of laughter.
Flustered, your helpers vanished one by one;
and through the conversational spaces, after,
we caught,—back, back, far far—
the glinting birthday of a fractious star. (CP 199)

It was not merely for the poem’s mild deviations from proper sonnet form, we may suppose, that when submitting it to Howard Moss at the *New Yorker* she called it a “little bastard sonnet” (NY 166). The Christian Father’s puissant Word’s been obliterated from this more orgiastic blast and the cartoon tour of Occidental Philosophy, its faceting of a fall with “Eve and Newton with an apple apiece,” and a still weightier “Moses with the Law,” lightened up a bit with Socrates the teasing lover of aporia, who scratches not in stone, but his own “curly head.”²

The intimately heard pun in disperses them all in erotic shock. Like those great carnivalesque celebrations elucidated by Mikhail Bakhtin, this parable of the free-floating pun perhaps flips intellectual masters and servants, in this animal laughter that “degrades and materializes,” as he writes in *Rabelais and His World*: “To degrade an object does not imply merely to hurl it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction,” he holds, “but to hurl it

² I am certainly being facile in the contrast, as there are resonant foundations of laughter in Christianity as well, as I take up more below, and Jesus laid it straightly upon the pun of Peter in Matthew 16:18: “Thou art Peter [*petros*] and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my Church,” which evidently “works also in the Aramaic that Jesus was more likely to have been speaking,” Northrop Frye notes in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 54. And Kierkegaard in blasting dogmatic structures, in motions of suspense suggested one believes only *by virtue* of the absurd.

down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place.”³ Such humor, he puns, “is always conceiving [*concevoir*]” (21). Bishop traces this bodily compact in “The Weed” as well, first in an embedded octave in which it’s stiffly pinned:

I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
I lay upon a grave, or bed
(at least, some cold and close-built bower).
In the cold heart, its final thought
stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
stiff and idle as I was there;
and we remained unchanged together
for a year, a minute, an hour. (CP 20)

The lines provide a succinct description of an initial state of mental abstraction that fancies itself transcendent (L. *immensus*, “unmeasurable, boundless”) ultimate, and snug, perhaps like “the word of our God” that “stands forever” in Isaiah 40:8, thought’s idolatry. This end-stopped eighth line provides the poem’s only true, if distant, end-rhyme (*bower / hour*) which vibrates as “a *now-were*,” or “*now-whir*,” setting a permeable boundary of that retentive present, on the other side of which, beyond the *volta*, as it were, voltage:

Suddenly there was a motion,
as startling, there, to every sense
as an explosion. Then it dropped
to insistent, cautious creeping
in the region of the heart,
prodding me from desperate sleep. (CP 20)

This first phenomenal hint of “a motion” jolts “final thought” into other, ongoing orders, countering the enclosed with visceral charge, the unavoidably felt but eccentric overflow of “emotion” *creating* that higher excitement.

In just such terms did James, in light of what Joan Richardson calls the “Darwinian information,” reorient the meaning of personal religious experience as this “added dimension of emotion” that “vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste” (V 55). And

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 20, 21.

readers must add this dimension in Jamesian fashion, that is, as a secretion in experiential accord with a science of events that tell themselves in with that particular “sensational *tang*” however hidden the source. ”Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible,” he opened the third lecture of his *Varieties*, “one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (59). It is an act of adaptation accommodated with pleasure, an activity of intelligence in which the erotic “fact of feeling,” so strong in Bishop’s low-key puns—“a motion,” “run out to sea,” etc.—is essential.⁴ The affective taste, or physiological, *tang*, as we recall James from the introduction, differs from “‘*thoughts*’ (in the narrower sense of the word) *in the fact that nerve-currents coming in from the periphery are involved in their production*” (PP 656, 652).” The errancy of puns and transegmental drifts invite a bodily confirmation of how emotion springs, as Multu Konig Blasing has noted of those seafaring names in “The Map” “as much—or more—from the disjunction as from any supposed equivalence, or concordance.”⁵ There’s some neurological evidence to suggest this as a physiological fact, that we feel for instance, a stronger wash of electro-chemical charges in “wrongly” hearing-projecting “emotion” or “to see” where only “a motion” or “to sea” is seen.⁶

⁴ Richardson in *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, and Gillian Beer in *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) both emphasize that *pleasure* is quite as central to the survival of texts as species.

⁵ Blasing, “‘Mont d’Espoir or Mount Despair’: the Re-Verses of Elizabeth Bishop,” *Contemporary Literature* 25.3 (Autumn 1984), 347. For Bishop, she suggests, “representations counter nature: they “re-verse” the world, turn it around, and right its wrong,” if a bit paradoxically, since “a work of art is just as incomprehensible as experience; it signifies nothing beyond the emotion invested in it, the fragments of memory it contains, its allusions to past meaning... its expression of desire—the desire merely to commemorate” (349, 345).

⁶ In *Irresistible Dictation* Steven Meyer cites an anecdote recounted by Harvard neurophysiologist J. Allan Hobson, about the behaviorist B.F. Skinner’s participation in “some of the earliest experiments on the brain basis of consciousness.” Having been hooked up to an EEG by his friend and colleague Hallowell Davis one day in 1937, “Davis asked Skinner to solve some difficult math problems in his head. Amusingly, the most impressive EEG activation occurred when Skinner was told that one of his calculations was incorrect” (292).

And as we return to this “fractious birthday” we can keep in mind Gillian Beer’s sketch of the “material of sustained change” underpinning Darwin’s theory as “[d]eviance, divergence, accidentals” (80).

In “The Wit” these lofty luminaries of Western consciousness more or less embroiled in questions of right and wrong, truth and falsity, leave “flustered” by this explosive third thing, tinged in pleasure’s electro-chemical charge, and edged over as mere “helpers” to a naturally intimate event also beyond them all. Like that reptilian scene of implacable biological drive upon which Bishop spun her Christians, “Just so,” in “Brazil,” this one takes these luminaries under Pleasure’s brighter shine. They’re seen embarrassed in the aftermath of that perhaps blinding flash. And such a prospect might draw out the more seminal nature of that “semantic explosion” which tends to dominate discussions of the pun, from Descartes to Kant, Baudelaire to Breton. That “fractious star” is ours, in real-time, still dizzyingly spinning.⁷ As a chance-and-pleasure-bred wave-born fact of feeling, the pun’s micro-macrocosmic scale accents the “Darwinian notion” stressed by James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, whose subtitle, it’s worth recalling, is *A Study in Human Nature*:

Our solar system, with its harmonies, is seen now as but one passing case of a certain moving equilibrium in the heavens, realized by a local accident in an appalling wilderness of worlds where no life can exist. [...] The Darwinian notion of chance production, and subsequent destruction, speedy or deferred, applies to the largest as well as to the smallest facts. (440-41)

That last sentence is an astounding one. And it is part of Bishop’s proliferal project to “cope” with this Pragmatist understanding by connecting largest and smallest facts into a feel for, or questions of “chance production, and subsequent destruction, speedy or deferred.”

⁷ For an historical summary (and a particular bounty of puns in French) see Walter Redfern, *Puns* (New York: Basic Blackwell, Inc., 1984).

If “Every moment instructs, and every object,” as Emerson felt, we know some instruct more than others, especially “wisdom” that, as he carries on in “Representative Men,” “has been poured into us as blood; it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure” (EL 555). “The Wit” draws on the volatile wisdom of pleasure and laughter both. This rich material lurch of erotic self-expenditure in “hermeneutical laughter” joyfully explodes in “a physiological squeal of transient delight,” not for joy’s sake, but “because one has understood.”⁸ Then again, can something like “erotic knowledge” keep these fields together? James certainly felt we’d better. That prophetic voice of the comic spirit, G.K. Chesterton, had no reservations about aligning laughter with “the ancient winds of faith and inspiration,” for just that self-forgetful aspect that we heard Bishop celebrate in her famous Darwin letter: “it makes people forget themselves in the presence of something greater than themselves; something (as the common phrase goes about a joke) that they cannot resist.”⁹ However culturally keyed, this language- event yet utterly exceeds it, and for the “symbolic animal” it may begin to suggest how this “fact of feeling” or “sensational *tang*”—vast fact, particularly impinging—might open into moments of shared subjectivities in the flux of the otherwise before it hardens into otherness.

The scope and timing of this chance eruption of laughter, both in Bishop’s life and a wider cultural conversation, invites further speculation. Both as an avid reader of Darwin, particularly in Brazil where she wrote this (and was also re-reading James), and newly living

⁸ “Hermeneutical laughter” is Ruth Burke’s term in *Ludic Criticism and Postmodern Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994), 42; “physiological squeal” Simon Critchley’s marvelous denomination (recalling Hejiniian’s “*yodel*”), in *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

⁹ Cited in Richard Cote, *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (Whitinsville, MA., Affirmation Books, 1986), 58. Although one is hard-pressed to find examples of gleeful laughter in the Bible—most instances are scornful or in disbelief—and such “hermeneutical” moment comes from Nehemiah 8:12: “And all the people went their way... to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.” “One laughs and one believes and if it is not laughable it should not be believable,” argues John Crossan in a more Kierkegaardian vein. “Abraham and Sarah are the parents of faith for both Judaism and Christianity and they are also the parents of *laughter* [Isaac]. With this most auspicious beginning the god of the Hebrew imagination was declared to be fundamentally and intrinsically comic. Existent but aniconic, named but unmentionable, present but invisible.” Crossan, *Raid on the Articulate* 48.

with Lota, a fierce atheist, she would surely have been attuned to evolutionary debate most recently abuzz about the “spark-flask experiments” of Stanley Miller and Harold Urey, published in *Science* in May 1953.¹⁰ Bringing Darwin’s conjecture of a “little warm pond” into the laboratory, the two chemists fired sparks to simulate lightning into a combination of gasses and water vapor thought to approximate the earth’s atmosphere billions of years ago, producing organic compounds including those amino acids that form a living cell’s essential, and essentially protean, matter. Bishop’s adaptive project sees that religious and secular perspectives on this preposterous, *ab-surd* event (*L. absurdus*, out of tune, ridiculous) genially compete and entwine.

After Howard Moss had declined her “bastard sonnet” for the *New Yorker* with “we shouldn’t leave it up to *our* readers to decide what you intended, when we couldn’t reach an agreement ourselves,” Bishop graciously explained the cosmic impromptu: “I’m afraid that sonnet *is* confusing. I meant that making a pun is unlike logical thought; instead of building up, it fractures, in a contrary way—as we might imagine the birth of a star, or creation itself, as taking place against or outside the order of human thought” (NY 168, 171). In posing her poems often on the cusp of waking, or as a dream’s report, or even on the sea’s shore, Bishop conceptually keeps thinking just a little closer to irrational fringes, while her puns enact this liminal nature, dive in and out of dim, chancy vibrations. In tending “The Call of the Phoneme,” Jonathan Culler suggests that we feel foregrounded “an opposition that we find difficult to evade or overcome: between accident or meaningless convergence and substance or meaningful relation,”

¹⁰ Though there’s no evidence in letters or elsewhere that Bishop read of the Miller-Urey experiments, as it was widely reported in major newspapers internationally and excitedly debated far beyond scientific circles, it seems unlikely that they would not have been a topic of passionate conversation with Lota, at the very least. See <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn14966-volcanic-lightning-may-have-sparked-life-on-earth.html>, and Christopher Wills and Jeffrey Bada, *The Spark of Life: Darwin and the Primeval Soup* (New York: Perseus Books, 2000), for discussions of this replication of a key moment in evolutionary process that continues to support the most widely accepted theory for how life may have begun on the planet.

an opposition we usually treat “as a given, presuming that any instance must be one or the other. But puns, or punning,” he suggests, “may help us to displace the opposition by experiencing something like “meaningful coincidence” or “convergence that affects meaning,” convergence that adumbrates “an order *to be* comprehended or explored.”¹¹ Whether or not Bishop was thinking of the spark-flask experiments or not, her pun-scape certainly reflects the attitude of the “laboratory habit of mind”—Peirce’s coinage—in its “conversational spaces” and that “fractious birthday” in whose vibrations Christian and Darwinian frequencies shimmer.

Insofar as the Christian tradition is imprinted on our language, it would be nearly impossible to keep it from impinging—as she would underline in “Brazil”—but that word “fractious” strikes a particular polytonal chord, most obviously of “discord,” to place this light-bearing wit in the line of Lucifer (Prometheus too) as a fugitive, disobedient will. Bishop accented the guilty pleasure of puns in noting of her beloved, devout landlady in Key West, “*original sin* is so completely lacking in Mrs. Almyda that she can’t [...] understand puns, and if she tells a story that involves one she explains it so carefully & so many times that you realize it is still a mystery to her—like the Trinity” (VSC 77.3; EAP275n). But this fortunate fall from “*original sin*” to the triune divinity suggests something of their slippery mobility for Bishop, a sense she apparently shared with Baudelaire (another “favorite” poet she paired with Herbert) who wrote in his book on laughter, “The phenomena engendered by the fall become the means of redemption.”¹² And even as she turns that sense of sin toward the Trinity in her notebook, this “*fractious star*” winks with a double aspect. For its Christian origins stake a contrapuntal claim,

¹¹ Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme,” *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 16.

¹² “[L]es phénomènes engendrés par la chute deviendront les moyens du rachat.” Charles Baudelaire, *De L’essence du rire*, (Paris: Éditions René Kieffer, 1925), 25. “Two of my favorite poets (not best poets) are Herbert (I’ve read him steadily almost all my life), and Baudelaire,” she notes to Stevenson, just after a mention of James’ “Anesthetic revelation” that I take up below, “I can’t attempt to reconcile them—but you are obviously a very clever girl and perhaps you can!” (PPL 861).

the Latin root *fractio* drawing on a very particular “breaking,” made in reference to Communion bread.¹³ Notable here, though, is the adaptation of a tasted leap of faith of Christ’s body to the felt fact of the shared, erotic body across great gaps, *enacted* in a conspiratorial surge of reverberating peals of laughter. Anca Parvulescu cites a wonderful passage from Georges Bataille on this instantaneous community of laughter that

opens itself at the same time to the contagion of a wave which rebounds, for those who laugh, together become like the waves of the sea—there no longer exists between them any partition as long as the laughter lasts; they are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters. (Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* 90)

And the anciently erotic nature of these agitated waters in which the laugher is laughed, blasted, spent would even appear to be intuited, as David Abrams notes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, by the proximity of the Hebrew TSaHaK (“sexual intercourse”) and TSaHok (“laughter”).¹⁴

In helpfully bold strokes “The Wit” writes the pleasure and chances of change in even “silent,” solo reading, revolving both words and “a mind thinking” upon their permeable sounding bodies, with explosive result. From “wit” to ‘wait’ to “in the minute we saw” the temporal pressures are acutely mundane, but shattered in the call and response of certain vaguely anonymous surges. Though we see “And *then you* made a brilliant pun,” the second-person slips in a felt appreciation of thinking’s incognito: “And [*the new*] made a brilliant pun,” flush in the feel of a sudden becoming. As Parvulescu describes the kairotic moment of laughter, “Time contracts. Time is ‘filled full’ with ‘now,’ and it bursts” (14). And in the rhythmically balanced

¹³ Certainly, the earlier meaning is neither purer, nor truer than the “unruly” use. The supposition of “authentic meanings, although it flirts with history” Derek Attridge pragmatically warns in *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), “is a deeply antihistorical attitude, replacing the social and historical determination of meaning (operating upon the arbitrary sign) by a transcendent ‘true’ meaning. Just as some literary theorists cling to the notion of authentic meaning for a text, not because this notion is consistent with itself or with the facts of literary history but because they assume that to give it up is to invite unbridled relativism [...] so there is a common assumption that every word must have its authentic meaning or else meaning could not exist at all” (100).

¹⁴ Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 300n.

compact of this inspired linguistic activity (the first four-by-four balance in lines previously alternating with three beats), the convulsive, instantaneous out-breath of “We gave a thunderclap of laughter” announces the responsively anonymous “phonemanon” (FW 258.22) should one humor the cisatlantic pun on “hearing” (Fr. *ouïe*). And even without it we may taste the difference of “in the minute we saw,” to “We gave...,” and “[w]hat the burst of laughter bursts is time itself,” Parvulescu continues, “producing a subject at the crossroads of freedom (laughter’s ‘spontaneity’) and necessity (it’s ‘overwhelming’ quality). Laughter is a moment of affirmation, a yes to ‘now’ as the time of a kairotic burst” (14). As more particularly a moment of thinking-laughter, both bursting light and sound aspects of this one perishable event affirms that disorienting Jamesian appreciation in “The Stream of Consciousness”:

If we could say in English “it thinks,” as we say “it rains” or “it blows,” we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that thought goes on. (PP 225-26)

Such radical revisions were rendered necessary, as Joan Richardson underlines, “by what Darwin had uncovered” and “James’ understanding of the most essential feature of organic life, the electrical polarity, ‘sometimes leaning one way [being an objective person], sometimes leaning the other [known by a passing subjective Thought],’ on which change, growth, depends” (103-4). And, once again, “subsequent destruction, speedy or deferred”—something more like that *spanda* of Vedic tradition, “the cosmic vibration that brings things into being and tears them apart in a single pattern of convulsive energy.”¹⁵ It was such a vibration that Emerson was riding in “Wood-Notes II,” converting *lux* to *flux* when *his* “God said, ‘Throb!’ and there was motion / And the vast mass became an ocean”—a *notion*?¹⁶ And if in the wavy m/notions of his “eternal

¹⁵ Rasula, *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration: The Shadow Mouth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 21n.

¹⁶ Emerson, “Wood-Notes II,” in *Collected Poems and Translations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 48.

Pan” he could still discern an “incessant plan” that later poets “of transition” were less in need of affirming, given quantum yodeling and the like, the uncertain flux remains quite as instructive.

A subspecies of such echo, a crucial focus for vigilance is kept alive in the pun’s concentrations.¹⁷ If we word-wise moderns can no longer claim that words in these flat towns hold any necessary or natural correspondence to the spinning 360-degree, *n*-dimensional “objective” reality, to dream them as exact descriptions of multiplicitous, superabundant sensory experience is to make language a joke.¹⁸ And it *is* rather funny: “The common behavior of mankind” as Wittgenstein finds, “is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (*Investigations* 206). Or, again: “One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it” (129). Bishop joked that potentially grievous gap in her “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” “We can [...] play at a game of constantly being wrong / with a priceless set of vocabularies” (CP 83), which yet bends upon the double sense of that “*constantly*.”

“Be careful with that match!” puns in one voice warn, and in another casually ask one accepts “a Lucky Strike,” adducing the slippery volatility of a style of writing that courts the force or friction of material features (CP 127, 64). Putting projection and relational play consciously into language, puns of a certain low-key tone may sharpen awareness of the engaged “play” already there, help to create the more pragmatic mood of a doing, an inquiry also into one’s own affective interests and investments. One question puns pose is how can language hold together what it proclaims by its own fractiousness? Another, its corollary or possible response, how does it make one’s feeling and pleasure a measure of the poem, make them available for a

¹⁷ Culler in “The Call of the Phoneme” observes how the term “echo” itself conflates “an automatic acoustic process with a willful mimetic one, but echoes whose signifying status is doubtful, connections which one hears or imagines but cannot demonstrate by any code or rule. This, I submit, is language” (14).

¹⁸ “Language is a comic form,” Iris Murdoch has written in *The Black Prince* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), “and makes jokes in its sleep” (55).

more transformative sense of attending? Faced with Bishop's casually descriptive surfaces and deadpan puns, what David Kalstone calls her "apparent lack of insistence on meanings beyond the surface of the poem" (*Becoming* 53), readers navigate a cusp of wondering—how *much* is *meant*? (or are you hearing things?) what *is* and *is not* properly part of this event?—questions we notice only when the obvious draws back, and print takes on the life of our inquiry.

For we feel it makes all the difference: a pun forced on one versus one that quietly arises, to borrow Wittgenstein's resonant phrase from his *Investigations*, as "the dawning of an aspect" (193). Bishop's exquisite reticence invites maximum effect in the felt zing of an articulated line tugging urgently off in another direction. And so the very hiddenness and casual passage of the vast majority of Bishop's puns, phonemic drifts, and liminal, peripheral play (content to be met halfway, or not, always with the tinge of comic partiality and contingency), make them differ in kind, though no amount of theoretical defense can fix this distinction—there is a "sensational *tang*" or there isn't.¹⁹ I do hope, though that some of these tangs are transmittable, and that the proposition that Bishop's proliferal style responds to intensities of attunement is by now abundantly evident, either at oblique angles to mimetic, propositional syntax, or even quietly besieging it with what Wolfgang Iser calls "alien associations;" shifting interest to the signs—the portals—themselves so "as to bring with them the seeds of their own modification or even destruction."²⁰ Below we approach this curiosity of pleasure-and-rupture in puns and other sound

¹⁹ Not entirely above the pummeling pun, she often uses it for its own unsubtle force, as in "Seven Days Monologue" when that super-ego figure punishes its id: "Now, then, Refrain," or the rebellion in "Exchanging Hats" (1956) grows extreme in a music that sticks: "And if the opera hats collapse / and crowns grow draughty, then, perhaps, / he thinks what might a miter matter?" (CP 200). And like a magician distracting with one hand while the other's at work, her more trumpeted, triumphant puns, on spiritual "correspondences" in "The Bight," or "infant sight in "Over 2,000 Illustrations," or Crusoe's christening of "*Mont d'Espoir*, or *Mount Despair*," can cover for a host of quieter wordplay coming in under the radar.

²⁰ In *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) Iser posits a range of textual strategies including the didactic that devises a text "in such a way that the range of virtual possibilities—bound to arise out of each selective decision—will be eclipsed during [its] processing" (126-7). On the other end of the continuum, Bishop's, to be sure, he posits strategies that "increase the pressure exerted by the 'alien associations'—i.e., the equivalence of the signs

surprises as Bishop rendered them expressive in contexts of familial fracture, religious revisions, and recuperations of the “mother tongue.”

First Morning: “In the Village”

Honing closer to the grain of narrative particulars, especially as she has crafted them in her autobiography “In the Village,” we glimpse a network of mixed attraction and aversion, dissonance and rebellion touching on her Protestant upbringing and fractured family romance. She reflected on her familial origins in a notebook from the 1970s with a terse image of sorrow and religious response gone comically askew under the tongue of an animal companion:

She cried but tried
to say her prayers
while Juno licked her ears. (VSC 74.9)

Even this bare scenario, before a bed where “later I was born,” and likely imagining Bishop’s mother, richly limns some aspects of Bishop’s art, its coiled grief, irreducible enigmas, surprises, and humorous, heartening play, always calling with a local licking at the ears. This sideswiping by Juno, like horizon-headed Love by those “shoals of distraction” in “Pleasure Seas,” or “final thought” called into “a motion,” derails prayer in a reminder of the life that “wags on” all around us as James colorfully called up (WWJ 404). As a variety of *feeling*, “we receive both light and sound waves,” Susan Stewart observes in her “Letter on Sound” in Bernstein’s *Close Listening*, “as we receive a touch, a pressure,”

Yet when we hear, we hear the sound *of something*; the continuity of sight does not provide an analogue to this attribution of source or cause in sound reception. And we do not pinpoint sound in space. We see properly only what is before us, but sound can

represented in a gestalt no longer corresponds to the apparent intention,” creating a text “in which the original implications of the signs themselves become the objects of critical attention” even “so formulated as to bring with them the seeds of their own modification or even destruction” (127).

envelop us; we might, as we move or change, have varying experiences of sounds intensity, but it will not readily ‘fit’ an epistemology of spatiality, horizon, or location.²¹

It ‘fits,’ rather, an epistemology of time, of something always *going on* and *going off*, and whether as compassionate answer, or simply salty thirst, this pagan god-dog’s tongue is agent, a “vital force.”²²

I suggested in the first chapter that Bishop’s visceral mistrust of the “otherworldly” aspect of Christianity seems linked to her earliest, still more visceral, losses, particularly that of her mourning and increasingly unstable and fanatical mother at a very young age (p. 44). It was in response to an observation of Anne Stevenson’s regarding her poems that Bishop assured, “You are probably right about a “sense of loss,” and it is probably obvious where it comes from—it is not religious. I have never been religious in any formal way and I am not a believer” (WU January 8, 20, 1964). Anyone passingly familiar with Bishop’s biography will know the “probably obvious” source, knocked off in a single sentence in “Primer Class,” “My father was dead and my mother was away in a sanatorium” (CPr 6), embedded, not incidentally, within the child’s fascination with her grandmother’s glass eye that we heard Bishop take up in considering the walleied tensions of her proliferal craft. Here it also arrives in the context of surprise and a “deep but intermittent concern with the *hereafter*” that we may also hear to veer:

My grandmother had a glass eye, blue, almost like her other one, and this made her especially vulnerable and precious to me. My father was dead and my mother was away in a sanatorium. Until I was teased out of it, I used to ask Grandmother, when I said goodbye, to promise me not to die before I came home. A year earlier I had privately asked other relatives if they thought my grandmother could go to heaven with a glass eye. (Years later I found out that one of my aunts had asked the same question when she’d been my age.) Betsy was also included in this deep but intermittent concern with the hereafter; I was told that of course she’d go to heaven, she was such a good little dog, and

²¹ Stewart, “Letter on Sound,” in *Close Listening* 45.

²² “Vital force” is the sense at the heart of the Roman goddess’s name (a cognate of *young*), split among a vitality invited in the clash of combat, at death’s edge, or as a divine protectress of a sovereign state among states. In her aspect of a moon goddess, Juno is also linked to rites of purity, fertility and renewal, and long believed to be etymological kin to “love” (*Jove*). See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juno_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juno_(mythology)).

not to worry. Wasn't our minister awfully fond of her, and hadn't she even surprised us by trotting right into church one summer Sunday, when the doors were open? (CPr 6-7)

Is there a hesitation or two with this "Betsy?" For a moment do we feel it might be mother? And when we learn it's a dog what does it say for the child's feeling for her? Only an aporia? And when Betsy "one summer Sunday, when the doors were open," we feel it turn otherworldly or dogmatic concern back down to that life that "wags on" in surprising ways all around us, provoking happy convergences and thetic bets (*bet-sea?*)—or so we may be pleased to feel Bishop's "deep but intermittent concern" with *our* "hereafter."

"Here is a coast; here is a harbor" opens Bishop's third volume of poems, *Questions of Travel* (1965), replacing church and steeple, and bending "Here is *say*-coast (or ghost); here is *say*-harbor (CP 89). Suspiciously slippery are the country's stamps, "either because the glue here is very inferior / or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior" (CP 90). After an allergic reaction to the fruit of the cashew nut delayed her around-the-world trip, Bishop was cared for by a "dear friend" as "The Shampoo" describes Lota de Macedo Soares, who provided a harbor of sorts in her home and affection, and Bishop decided to stay, soon beginning a remarkable outpouring of childhood stories and poems, from "the interior."²³ And if one reading this arrival poem in its original volume thought to thumb on that advice to *its* interior one would have found a prose piece waiting there. Written soon after recovering in an atypically rapid outpouring, "high" on cortisone for her asthma, the tour de force of, "In the Village," may indeed be as Anne Stevenson suggests, "the pivotal fact of Bishop's lifework,"

²³ CP 90. She revisited this explosive material from the distance of middle age and Brazil where she felt paradoxically most "at home" for some fifteen years. "It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia," she wrote to Kit and Ilse Barker, "geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even" (OA 249). Heather Treseler suggests that sessions in the mid- to late-40s with the psychoanalyst Dr. Ruth Foster, whom she would tell Marianne Moore, helped her "more than anyone in the world," likely also spurred the productive outpouring (50-62; OA 206). The bodily trauma may have contributed as well. The reaction resulted in a horrible swelling of her face and hands, so she could neither see nor write and subsided a week or so later into asthma and eczema "very bad, the worst on my ears and hands," as she wrote her physician, Anny Baumann, "just like I had it as a child, but I've never had it since" (OA 231).

opening inroads of memory and volatile emotions that Bishop would continue to explore for years afterwards.²⁴ The tale never stayed still in her descriptions of it: at first she felt it a “fantasy,” later it became “all straight fact” —but whether as a “story” or “autobiography” or even tilted toward “prose poetry,” when it was published in the *New Yorker* in December 1953, with uncharacteristic pride she called it her “masterpiece” (OA 291, 476, 272, 451, 268).

Sounds bracket the story and the ear-rationalities of puns punctuate it, most notably a nascent “I” arising in “mo(u)rning,” born in a scream’s aftermath. It opens:

A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotia village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies that travelers compare to those of Switzerland, too dark, too blue, so that they seem to keep on darkening a little more around the horizon—or is it around the rims of the eyes?—the color of the cloud of bloom on the elm trees, the violet on the fields of oats, something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. [...] Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it. (CPr 251)

There are memories, Bishop has written, that she does “not even have to try to remember, or reconstruct; [they are] always right there, clear and complete” (“Primer Class,” CPr 4), and one imagines that scream to be one such, though even here it keeps moving and eluding. “No one hears it...you will hear it.” Soaked into the beauty of the place, the dark-rimmed “pure blue skies” (or eyes), the elm’s bloom, “the violet on the field of oats,” this comfortless extremity, (perhaps “Pitched past pitch of grief” with Hopkins) is yet “the pitch of my village,” a resinous scent and proprioceptive wobble. The village green it is not, more like a boat on high seas, and at its steepest pitch aims straight up in that lightning rod, waiting to be released.

The tale’s temporal progression is no more secure as it woozily churns around the instability of “she who gave the scream” in a dress-fitting scene. A confusing absence, even when present, the mother in mourning is never actually accorded the name, or blame, of

²⁴ LM 262; Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* 58.

“mother.”²⁵ Rather, she’s a “she” in off-kilter views, first “in the large front bedroom with sloping walls on either side,” then dizzily with or without her child, at home or away:

First, she had come home, with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again.

Unaccustomed to having her back, the child stood now in the doorway, watching. (CPr 252)

The language again enacts a vertiginous unease, and even as the zigzag tacking of “then gone... then come... then gone” draws to an anxious “now,” the child facing her still uncannily has only “her back,” not her gaze, or care. “I lost my mother’s watch,” as the winning villanelle of loss, “One Art,” casually tossed off the missing comfort of a trust.²⁶ Such Janus-faced queasiness precedes the moment multiply approached and averted, but just once rapidly unfolded when the mother is being fitted for a purple dress, a kind worn in “unlovely” bible illustrations:

The dress was all wrong. She screamed.
The child vanishes. (CPr 253).

The terrible, chopped geometry says all that cannot be said of such a rupture, Bishop’s final experience of her (she was five), before the mother was removed to a sanatorium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia in the spring of 1916.

It is a “becoming” dress (twice underlined), but rejected; and as the “child vanishes” indeed from the story, a writer’s “I” emerges here, in a mishearing:

Before my older aunt had brought her back, I had watched my grandmother and younger aunt unpacking her clothes, her “things.”

[...]

“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.

²⁵ “When we say ‘mother’ in poems,” Robert Hass notes a subtle shading of accusation in his poem “Dragonflies Mating,” “we usually mean a woman in her late twenties / or early thirties trying to raise a child. // We use this particular noun / to secure the pathos of the child’s point of view / and to hold her responsible.” *Sun Under Wood* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco P, 1996), 9.

²⁶ Just so, in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” over which a “stuffed loon” frozenly presides, her call “Come” slides into “good-bye”: “‘Come,’ said my mother, / ‘Come and say good-bye / to your little cousin Arthur’” (CP 125).

“There’s that mourning coat she got the first winter,” says my aunt.
But always I 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? (CPr 266; 254)

A natural misprision: how *might* a child of five grasp “mourning,” unmovable grief, death, and madness? They simply are not in her vocabulary, yet. Yet it is also paradigmatic of that most *questionable* bond between sounds and senses, on the confused cusp of night and light and the way words too are turned with the burden of memory, habit clad, and dawning possibilities in always dawning constellations, provocations to wonder, wander, strike an improvised balance. It may be that the one born into this pun, does so in a “fault of ignorance and inattention” as one critic notes, but it is quickly converted to the proud tongue-in-cheek nature of her being, closer to Beckett’s “*fallor ergo sum*,” “I err therefore I am,” Emerson granting “spectral Wrong” as one of his seven lords of life.²⁷ In effect blessing the misprision, she keeps the misheard word pragmatically in play, outlining a difference against the burden of over-determination. The chance accident is converted into a fully willed one—there is something sacred in that.

This light-bearing pun could scarcely be clearer about the power of humor, guilt-tinged as it may be, making a *morning* where the mother’s *mourning* (and mourning and/or hope *for* the mother) was. It’s an accident or unconscious surge that underwrites the adult’s most sacred and saving motions of mind, a misprision perfectly right, and consciously treated as such by the new narrator. She agrees to (re)produce meaning not as authority but play, and at that oblique angle, in a certain light, it brings these “things” to life when we hear of “Handkerchiefs with narrow black hems—‘morning handkerchiefs.’ In bright sunlight, over breakfast tables, they flutter” (CPr 255). Is there a wind there? The child’s play on this vulnerable cusp doesn’t negate the grimmer givens—every “morning” in the rest of the story (indeed, in all of Bishop’s oeuvre),

²⁷ C.K. Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 88. Beckett from his 1930 poem “Whoroscope” in comic conversation between Augustine and Descartes. *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Sean Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 27; EL 469.

brushes a dormant “mourning,” here folded under in the “narrow black hems.” But it also flexes relational awareness beyond in affirming a native state of play, of words with the taste of a making in them.

In the agreement to play—the narrator continues with this *mis*prision of “morning,” and expands its repetitive divestment beyond hats and coats and handkerchiefs to include fixed photos of “a morning friend” and more fascinating crumbling postcards “from another world” (CPr 255, 257)—we sense a test flight of the optative willing to humor ‘the’ world in all its awful contradictions, and in which language is every bit involved. Just after her mother had died and Bishop graduated from Vassar she approached this explosive material in fragmentary “Reminiscences of Great Village,” staging a vaguely religious parable with the mother-figure called “Easter” who lacks “family feeling,” and the child a guilty “Lucius.”²⁸ Within “In the Village” it retreats to distant obliquities: gilded bibles and bible illustrations the child finds “unlovely”; about the mother’s broken china and abandoned dress hears, “Heaven knows how much it cost” (CPr 265, 256, 266). And of the place where the mother’s silver is, “in the vault, in Boston,” locked up and linked maybe to a heavenly vault, she comments “Vault. Awful word” (CPr 256). And taken into the background, the child yet can’t get away from the church steeple: it remains “In the middle of the view” stuck “like one hand of a clock pointing straight up” (CPr 264)—and missing a hand.

The paradoxical fixities and flux of language, its savored tastes and bland absences come acutely to light in binaries defined between the removed, nugatory mother and the oral, tactile, intensely attentive child, at an earlier dress-fitting we see them:

²⁸ The child in the fragments collected under “Reminiscences of Great Village” at the Vassar library “feels (indeed, is made to feel),” as Brett Millier describes it “that he is somehow responsible” for the mother’s madness (LM 7). “My life has been darkened always by guilt feelings, I think, about my mother,” Bishop wrote to Dorothee Bowie on June 14, 1970, “—somehow children get the idea it’s their fault—or I did. And I could do nothing about that, and she lived on for twenty years more and it has been a nightmare to me always” (VSC 27.5).

“I don’t know what they’re wearing any more. I have no *idea!*” It turns to a sort of wail.

Light, musical, constant sounds are coming from Nate’s shop. It sounds as if he were making a wheel rim.

She sees me in the mirror and turns on me: “Stop sucking your thumb!”

Then in a moment she turns to me again and demands, “Do you know what I want?”

“No.”

“I want some humbugs. I’m dying for some humbugs. I don’t think I’ve had any humbugs for years and years and years.”(CPr 267).

The narrator quietly links absorption in these “light, musical, constant sounds” and thumb-sucking, an au/oral bond that the mother ruptures even as it distracts her from her troublesome mirror image, and brings up some oral urges of her own. Stuck, repeating, “humbugs... humbugs... humbugs,” “years and years and years,” the look is all ‘back.’ While delighted to be sent to fetch them—“To be sent on an errand!” sign that “[e]verything is all right”—the narrator notes the meting out of five pennies, then one more, “That one’s for you. So you won’t eat up all my humbugs,” and reflects on the candies they care for:

Humbugs are a kind of candy, although not a kind I am particularly fond of. They are brown, like brook water, but hard, and shaped like little twisted pillows. They last a long time, but lack the spit-producing brilliance of cherry or strawberry. (CPr 267).

These long-lasting “humbugs” freeze what in nature flows, and as “twisted pillows” also stiffen the soft, promise uneasy sleep, while the child is drawn to an explosive event of “spit-producing,” flow-*inducing* “brilliance,” as aspects of words themselves seem to hover on the periphery. Further, ever since Dickens’ miserly Scrooge grumbled his chilly disbelief in the “Christmas spirit” of family and community-care and celebration, “humbug” has been suffused with his withdrawn, impoverished nay-saying. The child favors intensities of bodily reaction, even the feel of fiery morning in her mouth. So too does an anecdote of silver refigure the mother’s locked in the “vault,” when the child takes on her tongue “for greater safety” a five-

cent piece with “King George’s beard like a little silver flame” and accidentally swallows it, thinks of it “transmuting all its precious metal into my growing teeth and hair” (CPr 259).

These oral intimations, and there are many more, come into awful abruptness and inversions of nourishment in the contents of a package sent weekly to the sanatorium:

Fruit, cake, Jordan almonds, a handkerchief with a tatted edge.
Fruit. Cake. Wild-strawberry jam. A New Testament.
A little bottle of scent from Hills’ store, with a purple silk tassel fastened to the stopper.
Fruit. Cake. “Selections from Tennyson.”
A calendar, with a quotation from Longfellow for every day.
Fruit. Cake. Moirs chocolates.
[...]
The address of the sanatorium is in my grandmother’s handwriting, in purple indelible pencil, on smoothed-out wrapping paper. It will never come off. (CPr 272)

The contents and that “indelible” purple address loom even larger than the little, tilted post office itself, that “sits on the side of the road like a package once delivered by the post office” (CPr 272). Even ushered farther apart, the Fruit and Cake keep pairing within, a sign too vague to drive away amid the weekly ritual and its variations.²⁹

The child is bestowed with a soul in a scene of awful Flaubertian irony, when grim Mr. Chisolm, owner of the pasture where Nelly, the family cow, feeds, confronts the narrator to ask, as she writes, “how my soul was. Then he held me firmly by both hands while he said a prayer, with his head bowed, Nelly right beside us chewing her cud all the time. I had felt a soul, heavy in my chest, all the way home” (CPr 264-5). But the tongue can push back, as Nelly’s later does, “scratchy and powerful,” “almost upsetting me into the brook” (CPr 265). Bishop pressed another “Oh curious [...] / Tongue” (*eau*-curious?) in an early version of “The Reprimand” (1934) to learn (even in a lachrymose poem of grieving) “grief’s (s)not for you, too softly

²⁹ “It is very strange that she whose life always broke up somehow our other regularities our meal times, bed-times and way of getting along,” Bishop wrote in “Reminiscences,” “should now begin to be one of them herself. It’s strange that all the wildness and excitement, when we thought we could never do anything in the same way we had before, has quieted down with her, Easter, represented in it by a series of neat, brown-papered boxes” (VSC 54.13).

pent.”³⁰ In her exploration of the “constant vibration” between the “domestic and the strange” in Bishop’s work Helen Vendler argues for her modernity that finds a consoling alternative to the human not in the divine but in a sense of animal life as “pure presence, with its own grandeur [that] assures the poet of the inexhaustibility of being,” and in such scenes we can see what she means.³¹ But from some of her very earliest poems, like “I Introduce Penelope Gwin” and “A Word with You” she’d woven animal racket as a trope for the “pure” (and often distracting) “presence” of tasted sensation.

The two makers of the tale, the dressmaker Miss Gurley, and Nate, the blacksmith, provide telling contrasts in this animal regard, and other symbolic matters and manners. One is of visual fashions, historically demarcated, the other of more timeless “light, musical, constant sounds”; one of refusals, absence and tears, the other of laughter and elemental presences; one capricious and fantastic, the other more pragmatically fitting folks and animals for work and travel. Nate deftly manages potentially overwhelming forces, while the dressmaker, Miss Gurley, refuses to join the sisters in a sour drink of “diluted ruby: raspberry vinegar” after the scream, leaving holding the rejected dress “to her heart”; and even later when the scream is “settling down” she is pictured “at home, basting, but in tears. It is the most beautiful material she has worked on in years. It has been sent to the woman from Boston, a present from her mother-in-law, and heaven knows how much it cost” (CPr 253, 254). All backward glance, hers is not a craft of transmuting. Echoes hold in her abode, or threaten to, when the narrator sees the “purple stuff” from the fitting on the table and has to “look away . . . before it echoes, echoes what it has heard!” (CPr 259). Her letters are made of negative space, pin-pricks, “littered [...] tissue-paper patterns, yellow, pinked, with holes in the shapes of *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D* in them.”

³⁰ Cited in Stanford, “Letters” 24.

³¹ Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly,” *World Literature Today* 51.1 (Winter 1977), 28.

She has a bosom full of needles with threads ready to pull out and makes nests with. She sleeps in her thimble. A gray kitten once lay on the treadle of her sewing machine, where she rocked it as she sewed, like a baby in a cradle, but it got hanged on the belt. Or did she make that up? (CPr 258)

Even as a threader of things she is allied with the discontinuous, a kitten was killed or was not; her foot keeps just a needle's time, where Nate's shop is a place of continuities, arcs are traced, steady bellows breathe, elements transmute, horses act rather human, and humans as horses, things and shadows keep a certain reciprocity, and things ring.

In Nate's shop, the pumping hot heart of Bishop's more powerfully reciprocal, transformative economy, into which the child quietly vanishes after the scream, "things hang up in the shadows and shadows hang up in the things" and "there are black and glistening piles of dust in each corner" (*L. cornu*, "horn") (CPr 253). Here dangerous forces are turned to use, transmuted, and Nate, a friend not in pity but joint action, is a presence "behind" the speaker against the audible background of the liquid steady breathing of the bellows: "Nate sings and pumps the bellows with one hand. I try to help, but he really does it all, from behind me, and laughs when the coals blow red and wild."³² Desire here finds certain, if slightly imperfect, fulfillment: "Make me a ring! Make me a ring, Nate!" the speaker sings out, and "Instantly it is made; it is mine," hesitating as the 'ring' she'd just made.

Here the question of "fit" is fitted out for travel, in the widest cycles and daily work to be done, reimagining the "fit" of the mother's scream in more cyclical-elemental terms.³³ In this pivotal locus of protest and acceptance arcs are repeated and time widens as when "The

³² CPr 257. Andre Furlani, in "Elizabeth Bishop's Stories of Childhood: Writing the Disaster," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43.2 (Winter 2002), links Nate to the ancient, "predestined artificer" Hephaistos, who "like the child in the story is fatherless and rejected by his mother" (153).

³³ Furlani gives a sharp summary of readings that assume Nate's clang "'compensates,' 'modulates,' 'subsumes,' 'transmutes' or 'matches' the scream" (156), and argues that the tale is rather more interested in the "preservation of disarray within the concord of a strictly organized [...] work of Mnemonic art" (151). And surely this "disarray" and bewilderment remains, though this is just what Bishop's exercise in assent, deflected as a bit of horseplay, would attempt to acknowledge *and* move through.

horseshoes sail through the dark like bloody little moons and follow each other like bloody little moons to drown in the black water, hissing, protesting” (CPr 253). Making that path from forge to a “tub of night-black water” they sail and drown, “hissing, protesting”; but other sounds and animals intervene, and under the “wonders” of Nate’s hands, the cyclical protest is modified into a repeating nod and “peace treaty”:

Outside, along the matted eaves, painstakingly, sweetly, wasps go over and over a honeysuckle vine.

Inside, the bellows creak.

Nate does wonders with both hands, with one hand. The attendant horse stamps his foot and nods his head as if agreeing to a peace treaty.

Nod.

And nod. (CPr 253)

It’s odd, but an act that needs repeating, a treaty that needs constant re-signing. In this comic get-up—horse as diplomat or dignitary—Bishop dares to broach most cherished spiritual stakes.

How ubiquitous these gestures of assent are in her work we trace below and in the conclusion, but here can pause to note how the horse’s spirit of acceptance not only refits the steamy protests of those “bloody moons” when baptized in the “night-black water.” Its repeated “nod” somewhat literally “consume[s] the lower ‘noes,’” as James describes “the new ardors which burn in [the] breast” of one “actuated by spiritual enthusiasms” to do (V 216). Like Nate’s *Clang!* Bishop lets it resonate on a line of its own, a trebled god-rhyme and anodyne.

If James’ *Varieties* might have reinforced the priceless “cash value” of such gestures of assent in “*Human Nature*,” Bishop was first most intimately schooled in this transformative urgency (even particularly as spiritual horseplay) by the poet she always claimed to be “the most important and lasting influence” (C 112) on her life both in literature and out, the metaphysical poet George Herbert. She admired him as a craftsman for his versatile and inveterate particularism and for portraying movements of the heart, not propositions of theology, and

traveled everywhere, she told Herbert scholar and friend Joseph Summers, with *The Temple*, that weighty devotional tome, in her suitcase.³⁴ She knew his poems, Summers surmised, “better than anyone else I have known” (50), and we can guess that his “Longing” is on her mind, seeking to transmute an unspoken scream of its own:

My throat, my soul is hoarse;
My heart is wither'd like a ground
Which thou dost curse.
My thoughts turn round
And make me giddie; Lord, I fall,
Yet call. (H 148)

A *soul-horse* is all but named in the first line, even, in slippage, as *source*, and in the goad of a shriveled “wither’d” beckoning the strength of its *withers*, or muscular upper back. Just so, *curse* contains its *cure*, the *ground* a *gourd*, the spiral sign of life’s bounty (wounding too) audibly taunted by the *hoarse/horse/source* above it. Turning thoughts ride such ghostly withers and the quickening “giddie” (etym. “god-possessed”) to create a ghost of “giddy-up,” by which “I fall” calls out a trusting into living quickness. In such sublimities Bishop was trained, and for her as for Herbert the path from protest to peace-treaty, withering curse to enthusiastic re-verse, protest to a transformative motions of assent, is *the* quintessential spiritual act, ever needing to be renewed, a dying to and through.³⁵

How she might pass certain chances of transformation onto the reader she hints, I think, in noting the package-like post office to be “as chewed as a horse’s manger” (CPr 272), sacred in

³⁴ Summers, “George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop,” *George Herbert Journal* 18.1-2 (1995), 51. Mildred Nash offers another measure of his importance. When helping Bishop organize her last library at Lewis Wharf, she took note that the books she kept closest to her writing desk were several dictionaries, and Herbert. Nash, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Library: A Reminiscence,” *Massachusetts Review* 24:2 (Summer 1983), 436.

³⁵ In dreamy wordplay one wakes, she seems to say, in a fiercely inverse image of this wish of equanimity in “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” a nightmare of being blocked “by a huge horse, coming out. The horse filled the doorway, towering high over me and showing all her big yellow teeth in a grin. She whinnied, shrill and deafening; I felt the hot wind coming out of her big nostrils; it almost blew me backwards. I had the presence of mind to say to the horse, ‘you are a nightmare!’ and of course she was, and so I woke up” (CPr 244). And also of course at play with dissipating something of the mother (Fr. *mere*) of night-black.

a profane sort of way, and with another oral image of two men, nearly equine in their equanimity, watching at another fitting, “chewing or spitting tobacco, matches, horseshoe nails—anything, apparently, but with such presence; they are perfectly at home” (CPr 257). And Bishop’s transformative action and polyphonic finesse we can gather in returning to chew over what I passed over between hissing protest to nodding peace treaty, the seemingly incidental drift of aural attention between outside and in:

Outside, along the matted eaves, painstakingly, sweetly, wasps go over and over a honeysuckle vine.

Inside, the bellows creak. (CPr 253).

Split between inside and outside, these sounds are the first we “hear” after the mother’s scream and red-hot horseshoes’ hissing. The blend of bellows and the buzz of sweetly “painstaking” activity soothes, it seems, though that “painstakingly,” balances uneasily between the minute attentions and a pain re-staked, stingingly “over and over.”³⁶ And carrying into it, a hanging-over of sound-texture in those “matted (*d*)eaves” absorbs or re-echoes a bewildering confusion, “esp. by dinning in one’s ears,” and the contribution to the mind-and-soundscape from “inside” where the soothing steady breathing of the “bellows creak,” is no better, as a shrill scream, a “(*sk*)reak” also repeats and repeats its antithetical intimation. This kind of steeping pain in the interstices of words is one testament to the subtlety of her art, like Herbert’s, that can hold contraries and polytonal possibilities in play, here between a repeating sting and soothing counterclaim by which we may feel this *pain* only almost *taking leave*.” Her (and our) more close-honed gestures of assent must bend to both, fretting the “awful” to the “cheerful.”

They blend again, when, skirting Nate’s shop on her way to mail the weekly package, she stops on the village bridge to stare into the sluicing water where flanked by moony trout she sees

³⁶ We recall Bishop’s feeling that May Swenson’s, “connection between wasp, wasps’ nests, and brains is very vivid and right [...] I know exactly how busy and venomous and brain-like they are” (p. xx above).

“the old sunken fender of Malcolm McNeil’s Ford. It has lain there for ages and is supposed to be a disgrace to us all” (CPr 273). Though her own shame is mixed up in this “disgrace,” she demurs with this “supposed” concerning what’s made a scapegoat of sorts, hinting of “evil” (*mal*), and even a prevailing religious response (in both “camps”) of repentance and prayer: *Mal – come – Make – kneel*. More inclined, as we find, to make puns, and pay very close attention to things, rather than dote upon this immemorial sin (“for ages”) she follows the motions of foraging fish, and in the lap and palpitation of the acoustic stream becomes a maker:

The leaning willows soak their narrow yellowed leaves.
Clang.
Clang.
Nate is shaping a horseshoe.
Oh, beautiful pure sound!
It turns everything else to silence.
But still, once in a while, the river gives an unexpected gurgle. “*Slp,*” it says, out of glassy-ridged brown knots sliding along the surface.
Clang. (CPr 274)

She has shaped a horseshoe of her own, bending from *leaning* at one end to *leaves* at the other, *willows* to *yellowed*, with *soak their narrow* at the tight turn. “Oh, beautiful pure sound!” Also transfiguring as Nate has taught her, their “leaning” murmurs of an earlier fire at *McLean’s* that threatened the scream, which is quelled to a *yell* but colored in a seasonal cycle and thread through with one’s *will* and *leaves*.³⁷ For merely melodious flow is not this maker’s goal, but something slipperier still, as we catch in the way “the river gives an unexpected gurgle. ‘*Slp,*’ it says....” In one such gurgled burp the “ri(for)gives,” if meeting it there, in one of those “brown knots, sliding” *slip-and-sliding brow-nods*, given leave, and given again in a stream’s properly

³⁷ A fire thought to be at “McLean’s” barn is earlier entangled in “a skein of voices,” the din of church bells, and threat of the scream. Puzzled why Bishop changed the name from MacLachlan, Sandra Berry posits, “because she never mastered the spelling of MacLachlan” (http://elizabethbishopcentenary.blogspot.com/2010_06_01). But *New Yorker* readers would have instantly recognized in McLean’s that pedigreed mental institution listing Lowell, Sexton and Plath among its distinguished guests. Bishop wrote Lowell there in the spring of ‘58, “McLean’s is a good place, I think. I’ve been to see friends there and my mother stayed there once for a long time” (OA 254).

nautical measure (*knots*), puzzling “*brow-knots*” but giving out even “anything at all” (*aughts*)—in those *nods* of optative interest. Bishop’s “soul-horse” drinks from this source. Unlike that which grim Mr. Chisolm leveled upon the child, asking “how my soul was”—Bishop’s soul *does*, in assents of making-meeting, always perishing but never just “*is*” let alone “*was*.”

This perishable human nature including “subsequent destruction, speedy or deferred,” is gathered indeed “to the largest as well as to the smallest facts” in following out these sea-ridged knots, gathering even a “frail, almost-lost scream” on its way:

Clang.

And everything except the river holds its breath.

Now there is no scream. Once there was one and it settled slowly down to earth one hot summer afternoon; or did it float up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky? But surely it has gone away, forever.

It sounds like a bell buoy out at sea.

It is the elements speaking: earth, air, fire, water.

All those other things—clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened and destroyed; even the frail, almost-lost scream—are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?

Nate!

Oh, beautiful sound, strike again! (CPr 253)

The passage sweeps the scream’s settling “down to earth” or “up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky” quietly out to sea in sound and this plea for the perishable. It accommodates, in what David Kalstone aptly finds an “almost a musical” task, voice to voice, Nate’s forging clang and mother’s “too-mortal” scream of pain, in the ambivalent syntax of this “it” that “sounds like a bell buoy out at sea” and speaks all the elements’ tongues (*Becoming* 165). It revolves aspiration and limitation, and draws out to a sound naturally brief that would like to last longer.

Contraries are joined so their inextricable unity and sharp differences are simultaneously felt, as if laments too were naturally part of these elements” (also the bread and wine of a Eucharistic sacrament), even while calling out in a most resonant, polyphonic note, “Nate! / Oh, beautiful sound, strike again!” The actual name of the blacksmith from Great Village, Peter

Sanger points out, was “‘Mate’ (for Matthieu Fisher),” and though he supposes it to be misremembered, Bishop was certainly adapting its expansive etymology: “Nate,” a relation of “nature,” translates from Hebrew as “gift of, or from, God,” and it puns upon “*nait*” to include senses of skill, exertion, and intention.³⁸ To what degree his “beautiful sound” (and soundness) is a gift or attentive creation or accidental convergence is cusp on which Bishop would not mind us to be, minds her words that we might.

This call to the (slightly forged) friend of the child, and skillful maker “behind” her draws on (and in) the responsive mind (or *nates*, involved in seeing and hearing), underlining an adaptive psychology compatible with spirit, natality keeping pace with all these crumbling and damaged, wasted things. That always dawning desire she misheard first in “morning,” dawns more surreptitiously in “Handkerchiefs with narrow black hems—morning handkerchiefs,” fluttering in “bright sunlight” where an *aube* (Fr. “dawn”) is dimly hinted before the evident “bright sunlight.” Such “spit-product[ed] brilliance” takes the place of the “morning” play, and in each of the three responses to Nate’s clangs, “Oh, beautiful sounds,” “Oh, beautiful pure sound!” “Oh, beautiful sound, strike again!” in which a dawning “*aube*-beautiful” remains constant, three nods like the horse’s, but phonemically sheers that “beautiful” too: “aube-ew-tiful, as the phonemic-deluge of “Seven Days Monologue” had de-constructed it. We may feel it a fit possibility licking at our ears, at least, given the scene, and maybe knowing how Bishop stacked the deck toward its dawning in a comma-less “O Breath,” part ode, part lovers’ aubade (if one nears it).

³⁸ Sanger, “Elizabeth Bishop and Nova Scotia,” *Antigonish Review* 60 (Winter 1985), 33.

Nascent “I”s and Some Other Voices

Writing to Stevenson she agrees about some affinity with Thoreau, then says “At the same time I’ve always thought one of the most extraordinary insights into the ‘sea’ is Rimbaud’s *L’eternite: / ‘C’est la mer allée / Avec le soleil.*” This approximates what I think is called the ‘Anesthetic revelation’ (William James?)” and goes on to confirm Stevenson’s sense, “You are probably right about a “sense of loss,” and it is probably obvious where it comes from—it is not religious“ (PPL 861). It ranges across the Atlantic in puns that seem to take the mother (la mere) with the (Christic) son—“eternity” for her. And she’s held in that punning nexus of “I lost my mother’s watch,” as we also heard in “One Art,” with the first “I,” midway through the poem, dispatching all of that awfulness with lightness that bespeaks of rupture and guilt.

From her very earliest poems Bishop was honing her subtly punning art, subtended by hosts of floating ghost rhymes and delicate transegmental drifts in scatter-logical play. They not only suffuse pain in play, but precociously pose the question of what kind of spaces, what feelings, what thoughts, open up when the idea of the self is sacrificed. It was something of a sacred center, a religiously repeated ritual even in her breeziest of moments. An excessively slippery and seductive poem she sent to a friend in boarding school, “I Introduce Miss Penelope Gwin,” for instance, upon the confident column of a self-declared “I” impinges a rather dual sense of “self-expression.”³⁹ “This family life is not for me,” declares Penelope,

“I find it leads to deep depression.
And *I* was born for self-expression.”
So you see, it must be owned,
Miss Gwin belongs to *le beau monde*. (EAP 3)

³⁹ Never published in her lifetime, she sent the poem, fully illustrated in a letter to a boarding school classmate in the late-20s. Detailing strategies of pun and paradox, even tropes of subvocality involving birds and drink, the playful, prescient poem is reproduced as the first piece in Alice Quinn’s collection (EAP 2-4).

Funny, but no joke, “*And I was born for self-expression*” solicits at the threshold of silent enunciation the sense of a self’s “expression,” pressed *out* in the colors of the phonemic “(die)” even as making a stand for self. This play speaks to another kind of “family life,” combatting “deep depression” while laying the speaker in another. Even here the sea was to have its say. Happily taking on the role of exile already felt as fact, breezily crossing linguistic borders, this cosmopolitan kin to “*le beau monde*” packs a pair of surprises. Perhaps the earliest instance of those “ghost rhymes” Eleanor Cook has touched upon in *Against Coercion* in some of Bishop’s later poems (226-8) by which two off-rhymes generate a phantom third (or fourth), the tug from “owned,” to “*monde*” draws out a ghostly “moaned” between them. My point is less the “secret” pain revealed by such a “moaned,” but the delicacy of suggestion, and its emotional tension, arriving as it does in a wave of complex aspectual pleasure. And upon a vaster vague change, beauty turns to bomb, all the world to wave, charging what “you see” in “*le beau monde*” with the sea-change of what you say, its contours wobbling over into the utter and explosive flux of “*le bomb onde*.” The spirited anarchist, but just awake, was already at large.

The poet’s always sparsely deployed “I” is also unveiled (in a veiled way) in *North & South* as a punster. Delaying presentation (for the sequential reader) for some six poems, it arrives with the opening of “Chemin de Fer.” French for “railroad,” it translates more literally as “the path, or way, of iron,” and we cannot help but see “defer” and upon that liminal hint the poem darkly delivers. The first lines provide this punning point of departure:

Alone on the railroad track
 I walked with pounding heart.
 The ties were too close together
 or maybe too far apart. (CP 8)

That “precarious Gait” that Dickinson calls “Experience” (P 926) Bishop binds to “ties” imperfectly pitched, pinching the gait, or needing greater (somatic) leaps and tending. No Stars

about her head, no Sea around her feet, just some “impoverished” scenery, “scrub-pine, and oak” and an awfully brackish pond, that lies “like an old tear / holding onto its injuries / lucidly year after year” (CP 8). In the rhythmic pinch of that “lucidly” past pain is rendered blinding, and we gather that the ear’s gone a bit deaf too, taken in by that “old (t)ear.” Embodying such deafness, suggesting its source, is the double detonation when an “old hermit” “shot off his shot-gun” and “screamed” some scriptural wisdom:

“Love should be put into action!”
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo,
tried and tried to confirm it. (CP 8)

Awash in awful ironies from every angle, the echo of Jesus preaching to his “Children” in John 3:18, “Put your love into action. Then it will truly be love,” comes up against its proselytizing, project, weapon at the ready. It also speaks of the mother’s withdrawal in some combination of madness and dogma, and the child’s confusion, guilt and shame (and blame?) in its wake. And as James Merrill has heard, that “act” is viciously cleaved from “action” in echo leaving just “*shun... shun... shun.*”⁴⁰

The hermit’s notably un-sexed, though the imagery is phallic. “Strong spear” is the stiff meaning of *Gertrude* Bulmer’s given name and a painful irony might lie in an inverted “with her” (Ger. *mit* her) mixed up in this offensively exhorting, but withdrawn hermit. And yet we cannot quite rest in other-oriented irony. Bishop’s most important battles were turned urgently inward, as Susan Schweik adduces in proposing that her “first book might be read as a war book in-directed,” and one clearly hears urgent in-direction here.⁴¹ It asks: beyond pain and blame,

⁴⁰ “An Elizabethan poet would have quoted the echoing syllable” notes Merrill, in his afterword to David Kalstone’s *Becoming a Poet*, “Bishop leaves it to echo in the mind’s ear” (253).

⁴¹ Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991), 213.

beyond regret, beyond that deafening and blinding, lucidly stagnant “old tear,” what *might* love, or putting love into *action* mean? How to achieve the heart’s release?

The poem offers no leap to comforting answers, to a soporific “knowing.” And every moment of action is in the act of moving past the last. It was Kierkegaard’s most sacred mode to destroy comforting structures so more urgent matters might arise, in that absolute value, or question, of the moment. Bishop further complicated the irony of this hermetic scene, even dismantled it, we may find, in her response in June 1979 to a Miss Mullen who’d inquired about the poem, telling her that it was “more or less, mostly more, a ‘true story’, as most of my poems are. He didn’t scream that—but all the rest is true. He was supposed to have become a hermit because his wife and child died in a fire—or an accident” (VSC 38.7).

“Accident.” It was a governing star for Bishop. As her second biographer, Brett Millier, writes, “Elizabeth liked to say that most of what she had ‘decided’ to do in her life had happened by accident or chance” (LM 250). Millier is quick to adduce the second star, “decision,” but there was something quite graceful in the space Bishop gave to “accident,” and it was also a powerful mode of releasing blame and bitterness, self-pity, too. Millier supposes “one suspects that there was more intention” in decisions Bishop attributed to accident, though again we might see rather something again “sacred” in this pivot of accident upon action, action within accident (LM 250). We felt such a nexus around that “accident” of “morning” becoming an accident quite happily entertained. Such healthy-mindedness—given over to God or the impersonal principle of chance, or accident, of thing-that-has-happened and yet already just passed, as James documents at length in his *Varieties*, was a fiercely liberating “religious experience.” Upon chance accidents intention ever pivots (and vice versa). Down to this Bishop’s proliferal fable, “In Prison” draws

to an open-ended close. On the necessity of chance and necessity, and of a mediating choice, the prisoner (or would-be prisoner) is clear, even if it leads to some comic confusions of syntax:

You may say—people have said to me—you would have been happy in the more flourishing days of the religious order, and that, I imagine, is close to the truth. But even there I hesitate, and the difference between Choice and Necessity jumps up again to confound me. “Freedom is knowledge of necessity”; I believe nothing as ardently as I do that. And I assure you that to act in this way is the only logical step for me to take. I mean, of course, to be acted *upon* in this way is the only logical step for me to take. (CPr 191)

Even as he dismantles that nostalgic trap, so does a fitful shimmer in the phonotext: would that erstwhile fit “in the more flourishing days of the religious order” be “*close* to the truth” or “*closed* to the truth” or mere “*clothes* to the truth”? The religious habit is irrelevant, it reminds, though habits, manners of attention are not, pivoting freedom upon necessity, spinning it. But even there I hesitate—and those hesitations are the happiest of all. Was it a flourish of a *spiritual* (sw)order?

In Bishop’s bid for revisionary moments, there is something of a ritual movement, always different, but one that hints moving-through, a re-figuring of those early, traumatic losses and longings. There is no confessional dotting on pain, but a transfiguration, maybe, another mode of adaptation under the reign of an optative mood, enacting that ever-sacred “nod. And nod.” We hear the sounds of it in “Florida,” “The state with the prettiest name,” that track through transformations of that material breach with the mother, through self-conscious shame, turned outward into self-forgetful play and a glowing if shifty affirmative. We first hear vertical shrieks:

unseen hysterical birds who rush up the scale
every time in a tantrum.
Tanagers embarrassed by their flashiness,
and pelicans whose delight it is to clown;
who coast for fun on the strong tidal currents
in and out among the mangrove islands
and stand on the sand-bars drying their damp gold wings
on sun-lit evenings. (CP 32)

After a repeating screeching shadow of hysteria, a “rush up the scale / every time in a tantrum” these “*Tanagers*,” phonemically overlapping that *tantrum*, are self-split, leaving *tan-adjures* (“exhort” or “bind under penalty of punishment” [OED]). The birds are bright and abashed, “embarrassed by their flashiness,” irrationally self-shamed.⁴² But the scene moves quickly past them in an adoring depiction of these sane, sacredly playful pelicans, at ease in unself-conscious flow, and feeling the sun on their feathers. Bishop wrote of them in terms of self-sacrifice, employing an old Christic association, regarding her devout, much-loved landlord from her earliest time in Key West, Mrs. Almyda, whom Brett Millier notes was also her “nurse, advisor, even a mother figure.”⁴³ In a never-finished poem Bishop linked her with “former birds / who tore their breasts / for lining for their nests / or otherwise expressed / that love was difficult” (LM 144). The existential inverse of those birds both of self-indulgent tantrum and (and differently self-indulging) self-judging shame, these pelicans sacrifice self happily in play, doubly pictured as receptive to their surroundings and the changing moment, and the (repeating) image in which they hold steady converges on a Christic hint in the glimpsed position—is it?—of their touchingly posed wings stretched wide to be momentarily shaken and dried “on sunlit evenings.”

It is indeed a sacred balance they strike, of moving and feeling and responsive interaction. They may also reflect (if we do) a felt flow of subvocal currents and tidings of perishable, more musical things. For even as these flow-riders settle, they “stand on sand-bars,” those most notoriously shifty of land-forms, and partly in a musical frame (bars). Their “damp gold wings” are felt as breath-wet “(do)ings” too, and the sandy bars they stand on liquidly shift, on another

⁴² Shame is that affective state in which, as Eve Sedgwick claims, “the question of identity arises most originally, and most ‘relationally.’” Qtd. in Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 12. Even an essay closely focused on “Bishop’s Birds” (McKendrick, in Anderson and Shapcott) oddly has nothing to say about how she deploys them in tropes of voice, nor how, here, this avian progression might refigure religious hysteria, irrational shame, and counterbalancing bequests in pelican play.

⁴³ LM 144; EAP 53. The Christic association draws on Christ as the reviver of the dead in spirit by his blood (see Psalm 102, also Dante’s *Paradiso* XXV.113), which comes from the (mistaken) belief that pelicans fed their young with their own blood (OED 1b).

aspirate's addition, fetching *dabar*, Hebrew for "word-event" in which one (but who?) hovers between intensities of inspired linguistic play playing upon subvocal bets of a tended out-breath.⁴⁴ The general direction of such things we gather in the last birds to be seen (and heard): "Thirty or more buzzards are drifting down, down, down, / over something they have spotted in the swamp"—but not a Stevensian "downward to darkness." Even in their settling there's a little lift, something surprisingly stirred up: "down, down, down" they drift, but "like stirred up flakes of sediment / sinking through water"—even these are *in* the stream, in little opening feelings *between* things said and meant, their clear carrion-call drawn into things blurrily heard, crackling with current.

This minute care Bishop lavishes upon the possibilities of the tongue's drift between sensational saying and meaning, I feel, is one of her most central, most profound, of transformations of that mother-rupture, of the sound (the scream) that "meant" breach. It involves, too, an acute adaptation of her Transcendentalist inheritance. "[T]here is a memorable interval," writes Thoreau in his "Reading" chapter of *Walden*, "between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read."

The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak. (63)

Between the mother's scream in "In the Village," and another "Mother's voice" ugly as sin" in "Squatter's Children," and a related aunt's cry, "an *oh!* of pain" in "In the Waiting Room," Bishop renders such an "almost *brutish*" mother tongue acutely visceral, steeped in both presence and pain. And though Thoreau would, in closing his book, famously defend the more "volatile truth of our words," here he stages implicit flight from the body into a "select

⁴⁴ Also "Divine Word." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabar>.

expression.” But in Bishop’s volatile work what Thoreau would separate out are in constantly fraught, even alluvial interaction, competing, unsettled. Imagine Crusoe’s queer archipelago of “fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes,” washing through with waters and even if apparently “dead as ash heaps” ready to rupture into life again on the hot body. Bishops “select expression[s],” these poems she labored over some for a decade, or two, or three, are best said as agons of mother and father tongue (or Kristeva’s seething semiotic ‘chora’ and lawful symbolic), of restless phonemic wash and lexical/syntactic propositions, crisp (if shifty) image and darting, sensationally heterogeneous textures of response.

The sort of “knowledge” it offers is “utterly free,” free from utterance like the conditional taste of that cold sea in “At the Fishhouses”: “If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue,” and she brings it to (or from) a mouth, and mother, of sorts, a hard one, but deriving all this liquidity,

drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown. (CP 66)

David Kalstone tells us that when Lowell first read the poem (in the *New Yorker*), he wrote Bishop that the word ‘breast’ in its close seemed “a little too much in its context perhaps; but I’m probably wrong.” “What he picked up, of course,” Kalstone comments, “was the flicker of human drama, of a vestigial implacable female presence behind the scene....” (*Becoming* 121). It is her conversion of that implacable presence and rupture, we might say, always entwined.

But there is a gentler maternal presence in the poem as well, the poet’s own, the speaker’s where she turn’s a hymn’s otherworldly subject matter wonderfully out into sound-vibrations even a curious seal can pleasure in. In an absurdly lovely reconfiguration of that mother of rupture the speaker gives us this curious scene, “evening after evening”:

One seal particularly
 I have seen here evening after evening.
 He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
 like me a believer in total immersion,
 so I used to sing him Baptist hymns
 I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
 He stood up in the water and regarded me
 steadily, moving his head a little.
 Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
 almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
 as if it were against his better judgment. (CP 65)

A repeating scene, consider it a touching conversion, too, of that satirically vicious attack on religious nostalgia, "Hymn to the Virgin," here accommodating hymn to whoever might like its vibrations, offering sympathetic versions of immersion, beyond ironic contrast. It's an "immersion" that cannot be fixed, teaching transition. "Every thing," as Emerson had noted in his Journals for June 1847, "teaches transition, transference, metamorphosis: therein is human power, in transference, not in creation & therein is human destiny, not in longevity but in removal. We dive & reappear in new places" (qtd. in Gunn, *Thinking Across the American Grain* 141). This seal dives and arises "almost in the same spot" and he half-miraculously "stood up in the water" too. As Bonnie Costello sees it, the playfully anthropomorphic seal "serves as foil to the meditative speaker and her culture, who respond to natural flux by invoking spiritual heights," which is certainly right (*Questions* 113). And at a more speculative edge we may feel it not only to refigure emotions around rupture and the mother's otherworldly hopes, but to posit the dislodging force of repetition, of "seals" in a moving sea of sound, or "one seal particularly" that looks steadily back at us (James' sonically-denuded "glass eye"), shifts in a saying-singing ("moving his [said] a little") and comes up in a slightly different spot, even if "against [our] better judgment."

“Squatter’s Children” enacts several such moments, also with an awfully-calling mother’s, or Mother’s voice calling. Written soon after “In the Village,” about the time of “The Wit,” it has echoes of both, almost as if Bishop sought a sort of treaty, or inter-adaptation of their prerogatives: of the kairotic burst of laughter, instantaneous joy, and heavy memory, identity and fleet feeling even as she felt them on her own body.⁴⁵ Here are the first three of its four stanzas:

On the unbreathing sides of hills
they play, a specklike girl and boy
alone, but near a specklike house.
The sun’s suspended eye
blinks casually, and then they wade
gigantic waves of light and shade.
A dancing yellow spot, a pup,
attends them. Clouds are piling up;

a storm piles up behind the house.
The children play at digging holes.
The ground is hard; they try to use
one of their father’s tools,
a mattock with a broken haft
the two of them can scarcely lift.
It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads
effulgence in the thunderheads,

weak flashes of inquiry
direct as is the puppy’s bark.
But to their little, soluble,
unwarrantable ark
apparently the rain’s reply
consists of echolalia,
and Mother’s voice, ugly as sin,
keeps calling to them to come in. (CP 94)

I leave off the complex benediction of the last stanza to focus on this progression from distant spectatorship on “the unbreathing sides of hills” through waves of atmospheric mediation, a ritual enactment of her poems. It frets “father’s tools” to “Mother’s voice” with both a crisply resonant clang, and a grossly soiled *klang* association (involving our “mussiness of senses and

⁴⁵ It was published both in the *New Yorker* in September 1955 and in April 1956 in the Brazilian journal *Anhembi*.

impressions” [p. 113, above]), with effulgent laughter spreading in between. Further lifting that leaping glee of “a dancing yellow spot, a pup,” do you feel the tug of “*up up*”? It’s such a thing by which the scene may no longer be said to be “unbreathing.” Offered a “weak flash of inquiry / direct as the puppy’s bark,” or (*sp*)*ark* (do you feel?) of living emotion, we attend these specks (and ourselves) a little more closely. They are “little, soluble, / unwarrantable (l)arks,” the chance of experiential swerves within the plotted compact of a reading, bodily bets she thought we might naturally enjoy. As in “The Wit,” her reverence for the unselfconscious burst of laughter is clear, spreading “effulgence in the thunderheads,” of a body-brain’s neuronal nets as well, and reflecting even these littlest of sensational shifts and shimmers.⁴⁶

Both in the overt setting and the undersong of the Mother tongue, “ugly as sin,” this earthier anecdote draws such effulgence among bodily facts and abject processes, but only as slipping in on pleasure’s dime, as it were. She was “quite certain” in sending the poem to Katherine White at the *New Yorker* in May 1955 that it would be “too grim” for the magazine, though they surprisingly accepted it, as the grime is held to liminal tugs, a shifting of intervals (NY 147). Drawing on the scatological hint of the title, and the peripheral pressures of clouds “piling up” and “a storm piles up behind the house,” “one of their father’s tools,” “drops and (k)langs” a dropping down to what Wylie Sypher calls “the bottom of the comic scale—where the human becomes nearly indistinguishable from the animal and where the vibration of laughter is longest and loudest—the ‘dirty’ joke.”⁴⁷ “[U]gly as sin” such brutish “(s)tools.” But as just breath held, the *New Yorker* could hardly be held to going low-brow, anyone must wonder, is it *there?*

⁴⁶ May it take a turn on the Miltonic promise that “Impresst” on Christ “the effulgence of his Glorie abides” (*Paradise Lost* III.388 [OED])?

⁴⁷ Sypher, *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 207.

The joke, if we let these feeble “father’s tools” fall into the phonemic stream, makes available abject bodily contingency, the passing of the person even as that crap passes from persons. The cosmic expansion on that thought—of what processes are we the passing product?—Bishop, again only in the intervals, draws to her more personal contingencies in the way this “Mother’s voice, ugly as sin / keeps calling them to come in.” Critics sometimes remark on Bishop’s supposedly privileged distance in observations such as these, the speaker from her modern mansion lording it over these squalid squatter’s children below.⁴⁸ But the chill of a sinful “Mother’s voice” that “keeps (*s*)calling” sonically layers her own bodily traces of maternal absence and self-recriminations. *Scall* is another name for eczema, which recently afflicted her, as I noted, “very bad, the worse on my ears and hands—just the way I had it as a child, but [had] never had it since,” along with enduring asthma, both of which she’d understood, had psychosomatic roots.⁴⁹ Far from being the self-secure, aloof observer, the speaker is multiply implicated it, receiving one of those post-cards from “the interior,” legible on the body and in the lick and dilapidation of a soiled, but always washing mother tongue.

In bridging these contingencies we may take Bishop’s proliferal wit as deeply involved in what Peter Robinson calls “the poetry of reparation,” which, he observes, “so as not to be merely wishful, is obliged to include an account of actual damage as irreparable. What is required for reparation is not the replacement of the object lost, or the undoing of the damage done, but an

⁴⁸ Gregory Murray, for instance, finds her registering “disdain for Manuelzinho’s wife, Jovelina” and a cruel humor directed at the children’s ineffectual play (191). Bishop’s “elected displacement” situates her for C.K. Doreski “in a most congenial role, that of (as Pound would have of James) ‘true recorder’ . . . [in] these foreign settings” (112).

⁴⁹ OA 231. Bishop’s asthma, though exacerbated by wet weather, was nearly continuous for the decade previous, and she had earlier observed to her physician, Anny Bauman, “Every magazine or paper I pick up has an article proving that asthma is psychosomatic, everyone now thinks it is almost entirely, if not entirely mental” (August 5, 1948, OA 163). These inflammatory reactions, Marilyn Lombardi comments, “accorded somehow with what Bishop calls [...] her ‘morbid swellings of the conscience’—lasting anxieties rooted in childhood sadness that rise up unpredictably to overwhelm her, like bad dreams” (*Body* 19).

emblematic action that makes a reparative gesture even as it narrates the damage.”⁵⁰ I suggest that avian progression in “Florida,” those coastal hymns between singer and seal in “At the Fishhouses,” and the cheerful cast of laughter and awful scalling in “Squatter’s Children” to be some key repetitions of her transformative ritual. And though I do not mean to reduce the long, lovely bus ride of “The Moose” to this—its pleasures, as in every poem, are many—another instance of these adaptive motions is noteworthy, where, as a “dreamy divagation / begins in the night, / a gentle, auditory, slow hallucination” “somewhere / back in the bus” we hear

He took to drink. Yes.
She went to the bad.
When Amos began to pray
even in the store and
finally the family had
to put him away.

A fragment, it’s unclear whether the beginning or end of this sentence is lopped, its origin or end and we are caught in an ongoing middle of this shadowy fact that removes a couched corporal love, *amo* (L. “to love”) and an inversion of “*soma*,” from the Greek *σῶμα*, “body,” turned the “wrong” way. The speaker hears too somewhere a “Yes...” that peculiar / affirmative. “Yes...” and it is not long upon it “a moose” appears, “grand, otherworldly,” “high as a church” though “homely as a house.”

Returned by this moose to a native state of wonder, “the fact of a feeling” sparked in encounter, Bishop has neither skirted “an account of actual damage,” nor, certainly, suggested any replacement for loss, but in this motion from Amos to “a moose,” a massive moose “high as a church,” *around* which curiosity and joy flares up (passengers whisper “childishly”), a sacred turn is made. To call it a religion of nature would not be wrong, but also of human nature, and explicitly includes the natural transitivity of language as we see (and hear):

⁵⁰ Robinson, “Pretended Speech Acts,” *Poetry, Poets and Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991), 132.

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

“Curious creatures,”
says our quiet driver,
rolling his *r*'s.
“Look at that, would you.” (CP 173)

We would linger with that joy, and as “Curious creatures,” gleefully met in the mirror of that moose (she earlier “sniffs the bus’s hot hood”) she posits another sacred source of a natural balance, or soundness. But ever the magician, dazzling with one hand while the other gets to work, the image, and even the directly attended *r*'s of our quiet driver, are subtended by another of a still more quietly transitive *s*, curiously slipping to limn that matter of maternal rupture..

One gathers Bishop’s wish to lay the stakes of consolation right into the place of pain (and often the reverse) where the child in “In the Waiting Room” (1971) is waiting for her aunt at the dentist’s, reading the pictures and a caption or two from *National Geographic*, studying the cover, the date, when.

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain,
—Aunt Consuelo’s voice—
not very loud or long.
I wasn’t at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn’t. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*,
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt... (CP 160)

It is the vastest of slips from the self—without thinking at all. She'd pitched its possibility to Donald Stanford in the miniature of a hiccup, almost 40 years before, underlining *this* rupture or leap, as just what she wanted “*to get into poetry*,” right from the start (OA 18; p. 100, above). The mother's scream here transmutes in her sister's voice to an instantaneous animal cry of pain, “an *oh!* of pain” that yet contains a trace of felt rejection, “a *no!* of pain,” a watery bond that she strangely puts in the mouth of “*Consuelo*”—her own. A breach and consoling both upon a mother tongue.

It is the speaker's attempt to recover a sense of self that Marjorie Perloff cites as a convenient contrast to more avant-garde poets of embodiment.⁵¹ While a poet such as John Ashbery establishes a relationship between writer and reader, she argues, that “looks ahead to the poetics of ‘embodiment’” as practiced by Bernstein and others, with the appreciation that, the words of Ashbery's “*Syringa*,” “All things change,” Bishop's “drive” for “stabilized meanings” amounts for Perloff to a kind of “worried continuing,” of modernism and its Romantic roots. It's not just that she ignored this narrative of bodily permeabilities in sound, but misses Bishop's manner of passing this embodied activity onto her readers. While a glance at the passage below that she quotes would seem to confirm her point about Romantic self-securing, to sound it out, and listen in, is to experience the very blush of wavering change upon thought's erotic body, and perhaps to understand a bit better Bishop's own imperative of transition:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*. (CP 160)

⁵¹ Perloff, “Normalizing John Asbhery,” <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/perloff02.html>.

Bishop leaves to the reader to sense the massive subduction of this expressed struggle with self-identity, to *feel* it: “But I felt: you are an *I*. / You are an *Elizabeth*. / You are one of *them*.” They unbuckle before breath, leave imaginary ash in a dead bedrock of letters: “U R N *I*. / U R N *Elizabeth*. / U R one of *them*,” slipping us into the experiential riddle of falling through even the “simplest” of words, as the speaker has fallen between bodies. “Had a family voice misled me,” ran an earlier draft, “into the land of 10,000 smokes?” (VSC 58.14). In a Jamesian manner she stages a feel for “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal,” a gesture she’ll “religiously” return to the fact of the self’s ultimate, and ongoing self-evacuation.

Mont d’Espoir or Mount Despair

Among the many contingencies of her poems there seems to be a recurrent absolute, one framed in “The Shampoo”: “For Time is...” This phrase hangs at the end of a central line in that love poem closing her second volume (as another closed her first), where it is momentarily suspended as an implacable fact that then turns companionably toward “nothing if not amenable.” It is code for what the speaker’s become at the moment, accepting the unstated proposition of a “dear friend” who’s been “precipitate and pragmatical.” The rhyme alone, *amenable/pragmatical*, distills her religious-pragmatic adaptations. And it precipitates a change: from her earlier reticent talk of the “the Heavens” attending on the two, the speaker’s draws the heavens down into the lover’s hair (and her sidewise trope for hearing):

The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
—Come, let me wash it in the big tin basin
battered and shiny like the moon.

These “shooting stars” draw into earth’s gravitational field, but as “flocking” things, they’ve room, need even, for willing flight, allowing for flocking together and those “individual rubatos.”

This regular part of Bishop’s proliferal project to keep one eye, or one ear, on our quickness resembles James’ appreciation for the fragile feelings of being, in “*perishing pulses of thought*,” that he felt to be “the distinguishing features of religious experience, no matter the variety,” as Richardson underlines, and “spring from facing death and/or non-being, the ultimate ‘NOT ME’” (PP 350; *Natural History* 104). Aesthetic experience is one of the most powerful forms of this exercise, through passionate attention to that space opened when the idea of the self is loosed a bit, even “sacrificed.” For Bishop this involved re-writing religious consolations, and enlivening a sense of the stochastic and pluralistic. On occasion she said as much. Regarding her late poem “Crusoe in England,” from among the many influences that went into it its writing, she underlined to George Starbuck having re-read the story in one night, “I had forgotten it was so moral. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to re-see it with all that left out” (C 88).

And yet there are vestigial traces, most notably Crusoe’s “christening,” which we listen further into, with its billy-goat framing the flourish of the language-using animal:

One billy-goat would stand on the volcano
I’d christened *Mont d’Espoir* or *Mount Despair*
(I’d time enough to play with names),
and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air (CP 165)

In that iridescent christening he’s given himself swing room to live, for the fact of where he does live, within those “moods” that, as Emerson famously sketched them in “Circles,” “do not believe in each other” yet buoy us hence (EL 406). But the two tongues, if *we’ve* “time enough to play with names,” start to share an emergent spiritual imperative. Already softer than the grim sound of “*Mount Despair*,” the foreign “*Mont d’Espoir*” softens further in the saying, on the

assimilating tongue by which *Mont* hovers in oscillating possibility with “*Mon*,” “my”—like Shelley’s sublime blank (“*Mon Blanc*”). But Bishop’s is “My Hope,” and the force of the wavering play is to tilt the scales, even so the other comes tumbling over, turning “Mount” to a task, in apposition with hope, the everyday duty, shipwrecked or no, to “*Mount Despair*.” And with “[a]ll that Christianity . . . left out,” *that* spiritual imperative is at least as great. (A footnote to this in a moment.) In the poem we arrive at that christened bit of wordplay-within-wordplay through Crusoe’s wondering if the goats weren’t “island-sick,” tingeing that scene of bleating with a bit of animal-madness, and the feeling-steeped wordplay has a hint of it too—or is it *his* way, of keeping that fragile balance?

No such play for a soul-sick Peter in “Roosters,” Bishop’s complex fable of aggression and betrayal that notably declines religious consolation in both public and private fashion.⁵² I offer just a footnote or two as it bears on a wobbly hope. Turning from the grotesque virility of its military fable, the abrupt shift to Peter’s sin of the spirit, his “falling ‘among the servants and officers’” fingers his complicity, and after the scene of betrayal we hover here:

There is inescapable hope, the pivot;
 yes, and there Peter’s tears
 run down our chanticler’s
 sides and gem his spurs. (CP 38)

It’s certainly such a poem that invites David Kalstone to find Bishop “at heart” a “theological” poet (*Becoming* 254), and a theological reading recommends the hope that the New Testament writers relate to faith and love as referring to the future and the still potential. (One may lose hope for some specific thing, but it may not be psychologically possible to lose altogether the

⁵² There have been many incisive readings of the poem, with two of particular interest being Heather Treseler’s and Eleanor Cook’s. In a detailed historical account Treseler links the poem (over which Moore’s mentorship of Bishop effectively drew to a close) to the subtext of a riposte, or *dis*-invitation in “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” written soon after. In her chapter on “Fables of War in Elizabeth Bishop” in *Against Coercion*, Eleanor Cook gives a broad scope to the moral/historical questions it raises.

hope that the future may bring something more than the past would lead us to expect.) All hopes, Emily Dickinson reminds, are written in the literary or fictional mode: “Could Hope inspect her basis, / Her craft were done: / Has a fictitious charter, / Or it has none” (P 1283).

But I want to suggest that Bishop’s “inescapable hope” has just a slightly less “fictitious charter,” the “inescapable” nature of which may involve Bishop’s rejection of comprehensive theological structures, embroiled as both are in a more particular family plot. Among a tiny minority of Bishop’s critics unafraid to tread where only aural ghosts can go, Eleanor Cook suggests we hear among “tears... chanticleer’s ... spurs,” the “ghost rhyme” of an imaginary “spears” that “cannot but evoke the memory of the wounding of Christ” (*Against Coercion* 227). This “spear” in the hearing spurs further speculation, as oblique indication of her mother’s name, “Gertrude” (“strong spear”), as noted above, but here bound up with the biblical suggestion and the puzzling nexus of “inescapable hope.” The “yes” that follows upon it, with a “sharp intake of breath” Kalstone felt (84), disrupts the usual 2-3-4 beat surging of her tercets. In fact, it’s the only stanza to *contract*, visually, and stutters at 3-3-3, with the falling rhythm sticking in the last line. This “yes” is as curious as the “inescapable hope,” might have easily been elided; but something hovers here, needing that *yes*. If it ever so obliquely speaks, in tremors of disruption, of a past, fractured family romance, it speaks also of a present fact for the poet in that both her mother and father lay in Hope cemetery, Worcester, Massachusetts. There Elizabeth’s ashes would ultimately be added (with her favorite line from all her poems, “awful but cheerful”). “*There* is inescapable Hope, the pivot.”

It provides a particularly vivid instance of how not only “Old Holy sculpture / could set it all together / in one small scene, past and future...” (CP 37), but also casually deployed if deep-reaching wordplay. Upon that hope, and the sharp *yes* arriving with it, the poem does seem to

turn a sort of corner. Though there's no overt reconciliation, and Peter never gets to forgiveness, this *yes* seeds the rhymes and prospective possibility of *guess/bless/forgiveness* two stanzas below, in which blame or shame *might* be washed, softened, perhaps even extended to friend and enemy alike, if one can tell them apart, which the poem does not make easy. The final movement of "Roosters" turns its fabling out into the everyday where

In the morning
a low light is floating
in the backyard, and gilding

from underneath
the broccoli, leaf by leaf:
how could the night have come to grief?

gilding the tiny
floating swallow's belly
and lines of pink cloud in the sky (CP

Our moods may not believe in each other, but Bishop's wordplay asks they hear each other, at least, in the "morning" and softened guilt of "gilding," and whatever ghostly spears there were intruding around those tears is only a ghost of a ghost of an idea hovering about this nourishing broccoli touched minutely, in minute attention to a gilding, "leaf by leaf." If in it a grief is both recalled and swallowed, she invites the heave of surprise as the syntax of light surges on through that backward glance, "gilding the tiny / floating swallow's belly," as a taste one may be thankful for. Bishop's sun doesn't "come up," is not Christ the riser, but

The sun climbs in
following "to see the end,"
faithful as enemy, or friend. (CP 39)

To see the sun "faithful as enemy, or friend" is perhaps to ask, "what are *you* projecting?" as the poet had of those cocks. The proliferal wit there, as here, is in the grotesque growth of projection from just vocal (or subvocal) vibrations to cruel construals hardened into projectiles and frozen

fables of betrayal and forgiveness. But to return to that “almost brutish” tongue, the “almost inaudible sounds” that only *now* can know, is to humor her more anarchic bent, or our own potential for play, for “wandering in marble” like the pink lines of her sky. We hear “to see the end” clearly enough, and the sun’s being “faithful” too, in this measure. But “as enemy, or friend” it wages an unstoppable skirmish, if we tend it: “as enemy, (*your*) friend” it can bend, or maybe, oppositely swallowing all sense of enmity, “as (*an ami*), or, friend.” What Bishop’s personal investment in “inescapable hope” held for her she suffuses in this stubborn, sunny “friend” in whom of course we continue to hear the resonant “end.”

Promised note, or queries, rather: does this “inescapable hope” tighten again the sense(s) of Crusoe’s christened “My Hope, or Mount Despair” upon that emergent spiritual imperative? And what to Peter Robinson’s suggestion, that Crusoe engages in “wit for its own sake, but a wit that somehow does not come over as funny, or helpfully playful, merely a futile pastime”?⁵³ And what does it do to his sober joke of having all the time in the world, “(I’d time enough to play with names)”? If it lends an urgent edge to the first and last of these queries, certainly it should overturn Robinson’s sense of this wit’s futility. Everything might even depend upon it.

For Bishop the spiritual stakes of attention were too sacred to be muddied up or meddled with by systematic consolations. Even when she gave some herself it was with a split tongue, as at the expansive close of “Filling Station,” tracking from the fastidious first line, “Oh, but it is dirty!” to the resonant “Somebody loves us all.” The poem has drawn down to sighted sound, or a sounded sight where “Somebody / arranges the rows of cans / so they softly say: / ESSO—SO—SO—SO / to high-strung automobiles. / Somebody loves us all” (CP 128). This “ESSO—SO—SO—SO” has proved to be a veritable Rorschach blot of critical interest. Vicki Feaver

⁵³ Robinson, “The bliss of what: Bishop’s Crusoe,” in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed. Lionel Kelly (Atlanta: Editions Roaponi, 2000), 138.

suggests it as a motherly “comforting ssshushing to sleep of a small child”; Elisa New finds in it a buried SOS (“Awe,” 122); for Costello it anticipates “Jasper Johns or Andy Warhol, [alerting] us to the layering of representation” (*Questions* 97); George Monteiro hears its skeptical commentary on transnational coopting of Brazilian politics; and Andre Furlani construes in it a reference to *The Tempest*, where it suggests forgiveness and humility: “Somebody indeed does love us all: Prospero!”⁵⁴ Such a beguiling cacophony of interpretation is noteworthy in itself, and speaks both to our various critical contingencies, and how Bishop’s poems can “But roughly, but adequately [...] shelter what is within” their readers, allowing these splintery snags for our projection and incipient balances. Bishop always turned interviewers and correspondents toward “the phrase people used to calm and soothe horses,” something cordially passed between man and animal though comically offered in the poem to those “high-strung automobiles” (OA 638, PPL 900). It folds a soothing shush toward the “intensity of being” Stein posited in “talking and listening / doing both things, not as if there were one thing, not as if they were two things, but doing them, well if you like, like the motor going inside and the car moving, they are part of the same thing” (*Lectures* 170; p. 91, above). The soothing sound reflects a joint sowing and sewing of sounds with a certain force of *thisness*, carrying into the perfected “so” of alignment and adjustment and the “so” of method, echoing out of a punning assent: “*eso*” a Spanish approximation of “like *that*,” or more joyous “that’s it!” a Yes writ wide, and sustaining.⁵⁵ It lifts not into theological proposition, but the flash of a momentary feeling: “Somebody loves us all.”

⁵⁴ Feaver, “Elizabeth Bishop: The Reclamation of Female Space,” Anderson and Shapcott, 96; Monteiro observes that the rallying cry for development in Brazil that emerged from the “Aliança para o Progresso” (Alliance for Progress) was “soon parodied as the “Aliança para o Progresso da Esso” (47); “Bishop greatly admired *The Tempest*,” Furlani reminds, “to which her letters frequently allude [...] In the last scene of that play, Prospero summons the shipwrecked party [...] to extend forgiveness to the men who betrayed him [...] and declares, in his last manumitting words to the sprite, “Why, that’s my dainty Ariel! I shall miss thee, / But yet thou shall have freedom. So, so, so” (95-96).

⁵⁵ Her command of Spanish evidently stayed with her over the years. In a letter to Seldon Rodman of February 11, 1971, she described attending Octavio Paz’s first lecture on Spanish-American poetry at Harvard, “and to my surprise understood every word. I’d thought my Spanish hopelessly drowned in Portuguese by now” (OA 558).

And at the “station” in the spirit of aesthetic possibility it leaves room for rapturous expansion and the suspicious skeptic’s curt return: “Somebody love: sus all.”

Such acts of de-description suggest one way to take Bishop’s comment to the poet Richard Wilbur. He recalled her once taking him to task over drinks at a party before a bit of croquet when mentioning having come from church: “You can’t believe all those things,” she reportedly protested, and after listing points of Christian doctrine she found “intolerable to believe,” continued, “No, no, no. You must be honest about this, Dick. You really don’t believe all that stuff. You’re just like me. Neither of us has any philosophy. It’s all description, no philosophy” (REB 348). In her interest in the fleeting facts of feeling, what James calls “the compound world, the physical facts and emotional values in indistinguishable combination,” the spaces created for chance and intention combine in a proliferal weave. And in her faithful returns to ever dawning drops of sensational change, vibrations of chance happenings, speedily arising and dissipating and the lively lightness spurred by grave weight in this sense of “self-sustaining in the midst self-removal,” Bishop has indeed, as Henry James discovered to his delighted surprise, “unconsciously pragmatized” all her literary life. Though probably quite consciously too, as “The Weed” (1937) invites one to feel.

I noted in the introduction that Bishop mentioned in a letter of March 1956 to Kit and Ilse Barker that she’d read both Jameses thoroughly some twenty years before, putting that investigation squarely into the time of writing “The Weed,” which most strikingly poses a subject-in-traversal and spiritual stakes of attention. It sturdily works the fringes of awareness and the margin of Christian language and sacrament, folding them into oneiric descriptive and de-descriptive intensities caught up in bodily report, bidding a spiritual quickness within a condition of constant rupture and change. It hovers at a number of paradoxical crossroads,

between waking and dream, death and life, feeling and thought, steering and mis-steering, description, emblem, and surreal invention. “‘The Weed’ was influenced, if by anything,” she’d revise her earlier attribution to Herbert’s dramatic allegory, “Love Unknown,”—and customarily discussed in the criticism— by a set of prints I had of Max Ernst—lost long ago—called *Histoire Naturelle* (something like that) in which all the plants, etc., had been made by frottage, on wood, so the wood grain showed through. I’m perhaps saying too much, Lota always said I did—it was much better to keep people in the dark!” (OA 478). Like the weed in the poem, it is shifty. But I suggest this play on the optative *would*—central and repeated in her “Monument” (of moments)—places the poem cannily in a pragmatist tradition of transition.

A certain (which is to say uncertain) palimpsest of Herbert, James, and Ernst hovers here, but converging, perhaps upon a question of wood—and leaves. Easily her own most fantastic poem, among her early work, she yet considered it (with “The Imaginary Iceberg”) her “most characteristic, and best.”⁵⁶ We’ve had a foretaste of its explosive report of “a motion” that turns with its “sensational *tang*” a cold heart’s “final thought” toward an uneasy reawakening. Tumbled down and out from a stiffly holding grief or grievance, a nostalgic and monumental “final thought” that “stood frozen, drawn immense and clear, / stiff and idle as I was there” (see p. 202xx above for full “octave”), we hear the bomb drop again:

Suddenly there was a motion,
as startling, there, to every sense
as an explosion. Then it dropped
to insistent, cautious creeping
in the region of the heart,
prodding me from desperate sleep. (CP 20)

⁵⁶ Of the two she told James Laughlin at *New Directions* in March of 1939, “eventually I hope to be able to make a whole book of poems all along [their] lines . . . which I feel are the most characteristic, and best” (VSC 32.6). A key link with Herbert is her admiration for his writing “about the most fantastic things imaginable in perfectly simple everyday language,” or “absolute naturalness of tone” (C 112, 23). The first quote paraphrases Coleridge’s remark on Herbert, to which she added for interviewer Sheila Hale, “That is what I’ve always tried to do” (C 112).

Romantic echoes abound in the explosively counter-arguing sestet, particularly a Wordsworthian stutter of “sense,” and Coleridge’s Aeolian “one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all Motion and becomes its soul,” even Keats’ sleeper’s awakening in *Endymion* when “a gentle creep, / A careful moving caught my waking ears.” But it becomes something more of an extended study of attention and change itself, where one sleepy head meets another:

I raised my head. A slight young weed
had pushed up through the heart and its
green head was nodding on the breast.
It grew an inch like a blade of grass;
next, one leaf shot out of its side
a twisting, waving flag, and then
two leaves moved like a semaphore.
The stem grew thick. The nervous roots
reached to each side; the graceful head
changed its position mysteriously,
since there was neither sun nor moon
to catch its young attention.
The rooted heart began to change
(not beat) and then it split apart
and from it broke a flood of water. (CP 20)

In this rush of a new inter-cut fluidity, the weed’s foreign, “nervous roots” become intrinsic as nerves, spreading sensory in-formation to animate the physical body that “final thought” forgot, and their shared phenomenal capacity for change. If one ineluctable question from this ‘surreal’ scene is “Are we not ourselves part of nature?” the poem would certainly appear to embody the affirmative—if mediated by the reflection that the very ability or wish to make statements about nature as a separate entity suggests a “nervous” symbolic divide, along which language nervously vibrates.⁵⁷ “One reads poetry with one’s nerves,” Stevens averred in one of his epigrammatic *adagia*. Long before he penned that imperative, Bishop put it a little

⁵⁷ It seems important, in this ambivalent relation, that “nervous” has been, historically, a rather contrary word. Nerves’ sinuous resilience splits, inviting one sense of “vigorous and powerful,” and in their electrical sensitivity, its more mental/emotional reflection is contrarily “anxious, hypersensitive” and “dominated by uncertainties” (OED).

more loosely: “It was my dream society should have nerves” (OP 189; VSC 64.4). It was a “dream” she turned into emblematic action, while stirring the nerves, here.

Weathering this nervous adventure of a drama of consciousness permeable and in-formed by the foreign, with no hint of Herbert’s model Christic assurance that “I hold for two lives, and both lives in me” (H 129), “The Weed” vividly *enacts* a bi-local holding-in-change with this green creature, planted in dream, and even holds where Herbert grumbles.⁵⁸ Bishop’s speaker holds with this “companie” (with no choice, at any rate), as to a changing strain, changing inside and out. A poem of acute and unrelenting arrival and departure, it reveals how description, as Angus Fletcher argues, is “always a meditation on human time.”⁵⁹ While the alliance of a descriptive poetics “with change and the unstable” mark for Fletcher “its independence from various irrelevant ideological orthodoxies” (182), Bishop again and again turns her inherited Christian language toward this mobile, permeable threshold of responsive attention and contingent inquiry, lingering longest with attention itself as a mysteriously proffered quality (“I raised my head”) after a jolt and as an utterly altering force all the more sacred for its being inexplicable, while naturally caught and/or tendered.⁶⁰ Charles Altieri finds this question of

⁵⁸ The dream-frame invites the hesitation as the “evil enemy” is said to plant weeds during sleep (Matthew 13:25), while, just a few verses away (13:32), Christ compares his coming reign to a weed grown big enough so that “the birds of the air” can nest in its branches. Herbert complains to his deity in “Employment [I],” “I am no link of thy great chain, / But all my companie is a weed” (H 57).

⁵⁹ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 30. Fletcher suggests such descriptive poetics may achieve an “immanent transcendence,” borrowing Husserl’s paradoxical term for the mixing of inward and outward apprehension. This “middle voice” (a grammatical form lacking in English) crosses between active and passive perceptions, and “back and forth between an inner self and a world out there, as if in a peculiar way perceptions resembled gifts exchanged back and forth between persons” (165).

⁶⁰ William James’ much-quoted proposition that “Everyone knows what attention is” (PP 381), runs quickly into trouble as a matter of definition. Grappling with it just years after the publication of James’ *Principles*, Karl Groos remarked “To the question, ‘What is Attention?’ there is not only no generally recognized answer, but the different attempts at a solution even diverge in the most disturbing manner” (qtd. in Christopher Mole, “The Metaphysics of Attention,” *Attention: Philosophical & Psychological Essays* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 60. James highlighted divergent senses including responsive “sensory clearness” and will (“volition is nothing but attention” [424]). One could read Bishop’s “A Word with You” (CP 218), almost as a gloss of the tensions in attention, between the “top-down,” goal-driven modes according with one’s desires and interests, and “bottom-up” stimulus-driven

attention “the blind spot in systems,” writing in his subtle study of affect, *The Particulars of Rapture*, “Knowledge can tell us what the object is but not why it could have the power to solicit the subject’s attention or offer it a call to which the subject responds. And the subject is necessarily incomplete to the extent that its position as mastering subject depends on responding to such calls.”⁶¹ With no teleological system Bishop yet offers a stem and spreading roots and leaves through which “grace,” quite casually graces the page, or rather “graceful,” a manner in motion, where after “nodding” the fluidly rooted “graceful head / changed its position mysteriously” without the stable coordinates of celestial light (or Lord) to guide it.

The flood that springs from the weed’s rooting motions in the heart or farther body is a rather ambivalent wash, destructive, cleansing, soiling, lifted in a few baptismal drops. With this softening water both Christian allusion and the loosened (mis)steerings of subvocal liquidity grow particularly intense:

Two rivers glanced off from the sides,
one to the right, one to the left,
two rushing, half-clear streams
(the ribs made of them two cascades)
which assuredly, smooth as glass
went off through the fine black grains of earth.
The weed was almost swept away;
it struggled with its leaves,
lifting them fringed with heavy drops.
A few drops fell upon my face
and in my eyes, so I could see
(or in that black place thought I saw)
that each drop contained a light,
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed-deflected stream was made
itself of racing images.
(As if a river should carry all
the scenes that it had once reflected
shut in its waters, and not floating

impingements he colorfully describes as “strange things, moving things, wild animals, bright things, pretty things, metallic things, words, blows, blood, etc.” (394).

⁶¹ Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003), 267n.

on momentary surfaces.) (CP 20-1)

Those rivers glancing “one to the right, one to the left” glance horizontally off Luke’s description of Christ at Cavalry between two thieves, “one on the right hand, and the other on the left” (23.33), and the rib-fallen waters follow those that flowed pinked with blood from his wounds (John 19:34). The “lanced” lurking in “glanced,” and suspicious tint of this “*assuredly*” further pique the possibility, in conjunction with the more quietly explosive “*went off*” in distant aftershock of that blast of arrival, upon which all of a grainy “earth” arrives.

And it turns. In this “close-built bower” a faceted atmosphere lifts these motionless “black grains” sieving the dream streams into “black ()rains,” with a reciprocal nod to that *rane* (“continuous noise”) inviting them. And we may trace the wetness to a first slip of a slippery *c*-sound over the lip of that “close-(*sp*)ilt bower,” a *sotto voce* foreshadowing of the flood that comes. Most irresistible where “there was a motion,” the phonemic leakage is trickier in the sway of “*say*-motion,” or, stranger thought still in its implication of a willed flux, of accident awash with intention: “*aim-ocean*.” And even as a “*bomb onde*” utterly undid Penelope’s “*beau monde*,” a further massive if subtle subduction of “earth” in those already thickly watered “black (g)rains of earth” meets “a firth,” a “fjord” or “arm of the sea”—a word any Nova Scotian well knows. Such liminal slippages, always arriving, always departing, catch into conscious thinking only occasionally, but have grown particularly slippery here, and where “The weed was almost swept away; / it struggled with its leaves, / lifting them fringed with heavy drops.”

In the lateral wash “The weed was almost ()wept away,” though host to the wish or wisdom of the psalm (30:5) that “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning,” a first hint of light that soon arrives within each drop. The obliquity and struggle being merely that of a pesky dream-weed inoculates against melodrama in approaching the ineluctable

economy of leave-taking, of being made of “a motion,” with no still point in sight, certainly none in the ears. This participation in the struggle of another *not quite* other loosens a spiritual glimmer in liaison “with its (*sleeves*),” that ideal limit and imagined fabric of matter. It begs the question of what, what pulse and hunger to be moves *through* that fabric—through *these* words?—finally inseparable from the process of engaging them. The weed’s struggle with a shearing, uprooting force (the liquidity in which it thrives) is phonemically thickened with the “cleavings” of “its *sleeves*” (OED) also menacing these leaves’ said edges. In process, the weed’s “lifting them fringed with heavy drops” is not, we imagine, a one-time act, but ongoing as the rushing water continues to tug its leaves. It vaguely presents a restlessly onward “nodding” refiguring the first lolling “nodding on the breast,” intensifying a wakeful attention (within dream) to the perpetual task of assent to and upon “momentary surfaces.”

This Herbertian drama of the heart hovering here too may also turn on a perversely “literal” embodiment of scripture. To wit: Jesus said, said John, said the creators and compilers of the *King James Bible*, “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). In her fondness for prepositions as a pivot place of perspectives, the play upon this exceedingly odd prophecy swings a question of “belief” toward a bi-leaf weed seen (and felt) to “be-leaveth *on*” the speaker-making the speaker’s belly, weirdly, but perhaps naturally, the *weed’s*. Its version of conversion is in the ongoing bind and rupture of puns, of “every sense,” “a motion,” “nervous roots,” these “leaves,” “drops,” all awash in this quite vivid and vividly shifting “stream of thought,” in which each “definite image,” as James wrote, “is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead” (PP 246 and p. 158, above)

Inverting the speaker's distant affiliation with "the cold heart," "the rooted heart" and "the ribs," a quiet dawning of personal possessives gives all the more startling charge to the "baptismal" moment when "A few drops fell upon my face / and in my eyes, so I could see..."⁶² As elsewhere, Bishop's Christian resonances paradoxically contribute their force to what is most revisionary in her work, and that suspense, momentarily sensed as intransitive, briefly lends its miraculous slant into a reciprocal seeing *into* and "*on* momentary surfaces." It turns Herbert's "Scripture-dew drops fast" securely holding in "The Bunch of Grapes," just before "Love Unknown" in *The Temple* (H 128), out into the fast-rushing precariousness of encounter, and perhaps that fringe of "free water" in which James felt any "definite image"—or "small, illuminate scene"—to be "steeped and dyed," a river "of racing images" beyond number on as many "momentary surfaces." "Thought deals solely with surfaces," James posited to his audience regarding Bergson and their shared struggle against "intellectualist" bewitchments, "It can name the thickness of reality, but it cannot fathom it, and its insufficiency here is essential and permanent, not temporary."⁶³ In giving crisp religious resonance to these perceptual "drops" in which, as James said in the same lecture, "Time comes" to us, Bishop perhaps signals a kind of irreducible value to these vaguer perceptual particulars that we "'concretely divine'" (WWJ 573).

These "momentary surfaces" are themselves multi-perspectival, chancy, fleet, yet on which one may *tarry*, feel their *re*-surfaces. In this pluriverse a chance hesitation may lend an anti-gravitational splash: "A few drops fell *up/on* my face," even as "(a)motion" "exceeds its

⁶² Critics agree in calling these waters "baptismal," but of different sorts, signaling for Jeredith Merrin "spiritual renewal or rebirth" (*Enabling* 45), while for Laurel Corelle a baptism "apart from any Christian doctrine," "an entirely secular, deeply personal ritual of emergent selfhood" (53, 48). For Bonnie Costello this baptism "does not revitalize anything, so that we cannot make the easy choice of life over death, but can only witness a transition from stasis to change" (*Questions* 59). More, we *feel* it in the questionable activity of the phonotext.

⁶³ James, "Bergson and his Critique of Intellectualism," WWJ 573. "All our sensible experiences [...] change by discrete pulses of perception [...] Time itself comes in drops" (563).

cause” in “The Map,” and in these aural glimpses sparked in the suppressed saying of script, the unstable tide of reading’s insurgent material base surges. These drops lead to the rhythmic insight (possibly) that the *oui-* or *ouïe-* “deflected stream was itself made of racing images,” more truly and strangely like a stream of thinking. Racing, but tasted with the relational drag of “*of*” it invites the wave-sown conformation “of (*phras*)ing images,” of “talking and listening” through whatever we see, opening the contrapuntal looseness of a pace that may be more or less metrically regular, but, like the spacing of lexeme and blank, never immune to these liminal lurches and flourishes.

These low, floating lights realized in the contact of eye-alighting drops revise a sense of unmediated Lord-light from on high to accent linguistic contingencies, a language-source full of trans-personal memory flashing past in chancy “momentary surfaces” and unfixable flux.⁶⁴ The poem offers no sort of metaphysical center from which everything becomes clear—even in play, like Frost’s quaff in “Directive” that would make one “whole again beyond confusion.” No divine purpose “to mend what you had marred” backs with Herbert the challenge of change, and keeping pace with it. But we are confronted within the poem’s “aboriginal privacy and vagueness”—in which James considers all experience to be shrouded (WWJ 573)—an exquisitely intimate and vastly dislocating experience of these “sight”-bringing and din-producing drops—“and (d)in my eyes”—that opens, it begins to seem, into a choice “linguistic moment,” to borrow J. Hillis Miller’s well-travelled phrase.⁶⁵ Opening onto an historical abîme

⁶⁴ Bishop’s notable preference for low, floating lights, as we glimpsed at the close of “Roosters,” is at least partly indebted, it is my bet, to an insight or accident of Latin. Given that she felt her translating Latin to have been the best training for her poet’s career (REB 24), she likely delighted in the semantic nexus that links light (*lumen*), with the eye (*lumen*), both of which are found, within “The Weed” and the chances of Latin, in flowing water (*flumen*).

⁶⁵ It is a “moment of suspension,” Miller writes in *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), “when a poem, or indeed any text, turns back on itself and puts its own medium in question” (339). Miller traces three conflicting theories of poetry which “may be followed throughout all the languages and culture that inherit the Greek tradition,” namely: poetry as imitation, *mimesis*, analogy, copy, a mirror; poetry as unveiling, uncovering, revelation, *aletheia*, a lamp, an “act of the mind seeking a revelation through the words and

of linguistic deep-time shut up in these word waters, floating on equally accident-and-emotion prone chances of hearing/voicing on momentary surfaces, this vertiginous glimpse of living linguistic contingencies is like the unmooring strangeness of Ashbery's "waking up" in "No Way of Knowing," "In the middle of a dream with one's mouth full / Of unknown words."⁶⁶ In motion between binary yet proliferal articulation and parallel representation and figurative levels in this compellingly mysterious moment, there *is* no way of "knowing." It revolves in particular tension with *unknowing*, even down to the balance of Latinate extravagance in the mostly one- and two-syllable context: that "small *illuminated* scene" being offset by the earlier "mysteriously," and the timeless "meditating" before by the counterweight of these "*momentary* surfaces."

"Thought," across the course of this symbolic drama, has been turned from immense and retentive eternities to emerge newly schooled in assent to fluent processes. Unfrozen from a "final" guise of visionary stillness, heart's thought thaws to go with more bi-local flows of sensation, mined with "a motion" after motion after motion. Through the many oneiric metamorphoses of the weed and the feelings of alterable attentions to them, "thought" in its second appearance turns recursive, recalling that momentarily intransitive "so I could see" to this black bower of dream with the rib-held, "(or in that black place *thought* I saw)." It pauses in see-saw-oscillation before seeing that "each drop contained *a light*," which au/orally reiterates the *alighting* described. More quietly than Coleridge's "a Light in Sound, a sound-like power in Light" in "The Aeolian Harp," and without his rapturous expansion, it yet expands in the low-key dawning thought on the assimilating sly that each drop may contain "*(day)light*." In the

in the words"; and poetry as creation, not discovery, a *metapoetry* in which nothing exists outside the text. The basic problem lying at the heart of this matter is, as he notes, that the three theories are not alternatives among which one may choose. Their contradictory inherence in one another is what generates the richness of poetry, the poetic act.

⁶⁶ Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Viking, 1975), 55. Considering his long-standing relation with the ravishment of Bishop's poems, I wonder if his waking image of epistemological free-fall doesn't involve a debt, conscious or not, to this one.

“creations of sound”—“in *that* black place”—there appears to be a project for the sun, after all, alighting to offer a reflexive analysis of reading itself under the alternating regulation of eye and ear to name the procedures of its own decoding.

Voice is rendered more reciprocal with thought and inquiry in its third guise involving, in the poem’s last turn, hearing and seeing the weed with a self-listening wit:

“What are you doing there?” I asked.
It lifted its head all dripping wet
(with my own thoughts?)
and answered then: “I grow,” it said
“but to divide your heart again.” (CP 21)

All of this happens in a dream, after all, and the speaker here wonders aloud about the *thou art that* axiom of their interpretation that yet touches on that slippage of identity we can only guess to be the oceanic up-thrust of mystic revelation. Though finding it unrelated to Christian rites, Laurel Corelle employs Christian language in assuring that within this “ritual of emergent selfhood,” an awakening into “the process of individuation as a psychological birth,” the speaker “can know redemption [...] by learning the grammar of the fertile weed, the language of her own heart.”⁶⁷ But this compact with division deeply troubles the very notion of an “*in-dividual*,” and I wonder what kind of “redemption” is possible. My sense is that the poem enforces individual emergence indistinguishable from a further immersion, and dispersion in the world—that that is its dual challenge. The speaker’s “I” has become part and particle of “it,” what gathers peculiar force where the symbiotic weave of the different and same grows phonemically intense, in how “It lifted its head” (*it said*) wanders “(wet with my own thoughts?)” into “‘I grow,’ it said” (*its*

⁶⁷ Corelle, 48, 51, 54. Thomas Travisano also finds in the poem’s close an affirmation of “the ineradicable vitality of life and love, which even the speaker’s cold, imprisoned heart cannot kill” (*Artistic Development* 37). Less sanguine, Jeredith Merrin finds only that the speaker’s “heart has been mangled” (*Enabling* 44). A bit more evenly, Kalstone feels its “overriding impression” to be “the calmness, almost the indifference, with which the speaker undergoes both the trancelike state, close to death, and the nervous gaiety with which the weed draws her back to life,” while noting how “physical vision seems tied to separateness and loss, and somehow to guilt” (*Becoming* 17).

head), soaked in roaming *c*-sounds. This “it” hovers ominously through those changes, though taken in by a wider, mongrel intelligence of “*wit* said,” or “*wit*’s head” where those different “voices” are attested, and deconstructed.

Offering no heavenly joys or justifications, Bishop’s rending conclusion pulls wildly apart from Herbert’s faith-based assurance, though their equally exigent counter-voicings dovetail toward a similar spiritual quickness urged within earshot of shared perishing. After the heart’s trials, the pressing end of Herbert’s poem is that God’s love be *known*, be felt in the heart’s afflicted core: “*Truly, Friend,*” a voice beseeches, “*For ought I heare our Master shows to you / more favour than you wot of.*” The bid that this Friend “*wot*” (know) this favor (as a savior), urgently quickens in the body rhyme of “*For (rot) I heare...*” Herbert’s dual charge to “Mark the end” in divine purpose or unredeemed mortality—or, indeed, *eternal* Affliction—is brought sharply to the point:

*All did but strive to mend, what you had marr’d.
Wherefore be cheered, and praise him to the full
Each day, each hour, each moment of the week
Who fain would have you be new, tender, quick.* (H 131)

The temporal designations quicken with spiritual urgency in the pun on “week” and “each hour” that threatens a tumble into *chower* (“to grumble”) where cheer and love and praise are still unknown. Such liminal pressures visit the last words of Herbert’s “Paradise” that instruct in fruitfully pruning husbandry, of “cuttings” from this “FRIEND” that “rather heal then REND; / And such beginnings touch their END” (H 133). Menacing the voiced fringe of this wished-for END, the discordant fruit that falls suggests against that transcendent teleology a merely repeated “[r]END,” by which, in Garrett Stewart’s fine reading, “Lexical slack becomes spiritual lapse,” staging “at the poem’s metalexical climax, a miniature ritual of resurgent doubt exorcized by prelapsarian faith in God’s spiritual gardening” (*Reading Voices* 79).

The weed's first words, "I grow," echo in minor-key and miniscule Herbert's Lord's first lesson of "Paradise," "I GROW," though Bishop's poem, much as it accents the rushing velocity that would be fastened in Herbert's "Scripture-dew drops fast," keeps to the logic of repeated rending without even apparent consolation of some other END. If critics have not failed to expand that flat calculus with their own thoughts in any number of directions from rebirth to a merely mangled heart, they've yet to entertain it as a species of divisible word-wit. Historically unchanging and etymologically indivisible, *divide* has meant divide (ME *dividen*), from a root sense of, well, divide (L. *dividere*, to force asunder, cleave, apportion, separate, remove) as far back as the OED is able to trace it. That would seem to be that: the weed assures further rending, again and again, a rather disheartening colloquy. Grim, but no groaning. Or is there a bit of life's "maimed happiness" and hope hidden even here?⁶⁸ A final flourish of wordplay?

If we fractiously reflect, in a *ouiè*-deflected stream, upon what Authority holds indivisible we may feel that very *di-vide*, or "double vision," that the poem's been troping all along. Blunt mortal notice and an integral invitation to spiritual quickness fall out right at this di-vide if one may (dividedly) hear: "I grow,' w/it said / 'but to di-..." *Die?* Willful, such abruptness mid-breath, mid-word, but such is wit's (and death's) perishable prerogative offered here in an anamorphic distortion. Not a death sentence, though: carried on, it reads "*vide* your heart again." "See your heart again"?—or, hearing in the "dead" Latin a living French *vide* (that rhymes with *weed*) "*empty* your heart again." "He emptied himself," reminds Northrop Frye in *The Great Code*, is "Paul's brilliant phrase for the Incarnation" (in Philippians 2:7).⁶⁹ Such emptying Buddhists speak of as the heart's only proper adjustment to what is, at heart, emptiness already,

⁶⁸ "I ask you what is life?" James quotes from Frederick Lampson's *Confidences*, "Is it not a maimed happiness...?" (V 40).

⁶⁹ "The AV's rendering," as Frye assails it in *The Great Code*, "is not a translation but an inept gloss" (129). In "The Bag" we recall Herbert's rendering "and so one day / He did descend, undressing all the way" (H 151).

an imperative into which modern physics has infused some new life. What might it mean to *feel* as coeval these deities of germination and decay, sun and dark sundering, emptiness and a redolent fullness, each moment? “I grow but to die”—it needs a measly weed (by our leave) cut free from the wish for heavenly redemption to admit it. But cut from the syntax of a sentence that promises to diminish it, we may read as “a small, illuminated scene” the gift of the last three words as well, “your heart again.” If not a prophecy, it is at least a spirited chance to limn the heart’s partial contents. How to pronounce the last word?

The pun-like weed with its first explosive seed of “a motion,” its “nervous roots,” the signaling “semaphore” of its leaves and sleeves, and the whole wash of language/thought in its wake, may contain a plainer pun on a widow’s mourning clothes, especially the veil also called “weepers” (OED). To re-see “The Weed” through such a scrim is to feel it involves another story still, and maybe to find it still more dialectically expansive in its transformational challenges writ wide regarding leave-taking (and leave-giving), and the quieter, perishable ones writ only in the tending tongue.

Conclusion

Gestures of Assent & The Chances of Change

In a memorial tribute for his friend and fellow poet, Richard Wilbur noted that Bishop's favorite hymn was the Easter one which begins "Come ye faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness" (EHA 266). It was a strain her poems would faithfully raise, if often accompanied by the inevitable rhyme, sounded or not. It was a sacred challenge needing no theological justification, of course, but with a worth proved in the doing. A secular sacrament of praise is offered again and again in her attentions to the world in its minute, moving details and to the details, equally minute, of the possibilities for musical movements of the words she would fix in print. Adapting her Christian inheritance toward a definitively Darwinian understanding of her place in 'the' world, was also a "religious" part of that practice.

She smears religious gold with black, hints of an altar cloth with waking-deadly altering in "Sunday 4 A.M.": "black-and-gold gesso / on the altered cloth," as a cat's then caught at the window, and "in his mouth's a moth" (CP 129). And she offers a quiet revision on her favorite hymn, at its suspended end. Where in the hymn "God hath brought forth Israel into joy from sadness; / Loosed from Pharraoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters / Led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea water," Bishop's foot is notably wet, drawing back even to that "withdrawing water" that spoke in "Three Sonnets for the Eyes" by "dragging its slippery feet:"

The world seldom changes,
but the wet foot dangles
until a bird arranges
two notes at right angles. (CP 130).

We may imagine those crisp notes, an early call of dawn, and if that foot just "dangles" lazily on the page we may feel upon the geminated dentals an emergent "angles," an angling after; and her

bird in surreptitious liaison both arranges and (de)ranges it begins to feel, a lay-bird or labor deranges, so by the last line those crisp “right angles” have utterly twisted, de-tuned and (d)evolved into “wry tangles” (even as Keaton’s did). The metamorphoses in these Red Seas might ear-rationally continue, given leave, but I won’t belabor the play, and turn to a pair of her most “religiously” repeated puns, vitally involved in her assenting practice.

“Belief” seems to have a two-pronged etymology: be-lief means be-glad, as in “I’d just as *lief*,” *lief* being related to love; belief is also connected with *leave* in the sense of “allow.” Our belief is what we should be glad to think, then, when it is allowable to do so: exactly James’s position. Bishop leaves questions of systematic Belief quite behind—“It’s all description, no philosophy” as she’d rebuked Wilbur—but pitched her poetics firmly between both of its under-senses, “be-glad,” and “allow.” Turning “grotesque grieves” toward “infinite’s mal leaves” in the earliest of her collected “Poems of Youth,” “To a Tree,” even here she indicated something of the infinite worth in tiniest attentions (CP 212). These photosynthetic puns for a loving leave, in the casual and sustained actions of responsive curiosity, are sometimes aflutter, and most often awash in her poems, as we saw the weed “[struggle] with its leaves, / lifting them fringed with heavy drops,” nodding on, never quite finished with it. She almost calls them God, though it’s just a goad to the quickness found in “Quai d’Orléans” where “throng of small leaves, real leaves [...] go drifting by / to disappear as modestly, down the sea’s / dissolving halls” (CP 28). They throng through many poems, but we might recall just one other to which “Roosters” draws down, in the low light gilding “from underneath / the broccoli, leaf by leaf” (CP 39). We see, but they say: thriving on invitations, we can choose to be nature’s guests, with a slender leave to stay.

We heard her revise an attribution of influence regarding “The Weed” from the divine dialogue of Herbert’s “Love Unknown,” to Ernst’s *Histoire Naturelle*, those “frottages(s) on wood, so the wood grain showed through” (OA 478). It adduces her complementary photosynthetic pun for the between-being of intense attention, responsive curiosity: “Look at that, would you?” “our quiet driver” asks in “The Moose” and of the moose that emerges from a wood as well. Wood of a particularly splintery sort catches all through “The Monument,” sea and sky included. Both these leaves and wood are age-old puns, of course and “Repeopling the woods” is a way Thoreau thinks of his task as a writer.¹ But Bishop, as would Ashbery after her, turns them toward the minutest movements of language, and particularly those “against the grain.” “Take a *frottage* of this sea,” we remember her self-direction joining tropes of wood-grain and a waking hear-say sea. And Ashbery, after finding “all / The possibilities shrouded in a narrative moratorium” notes a motion in *A Wave*, “where the grain of the wood [...] pushes through and becomes part of what is written.”² Perhaps the wood grain shows through or “pushes through and becomes part of what is written” particularly through the interstices, across the blanks, at “sidewise” angles to the epitaphic and encrusted habits of words, from within the images and syntactic demands and “narrative moratorium[s].” Bishop had pitched her proliferal art of contrapuntal possibilities right here from the start, close honed to the possibilities of an erratic music of *air-ors*.

The few critics that have taken up Bishop as an “experimental” or “postmodern” writer have tended to do so from a distance, whether narrative or visual, as Thomas Travisano considering her “narrative postmodernism” and how “Bishop’s lifelong absorption in the

¹ Qtd in Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 122. Knowing Bishop’s love of *The Tempest*, Caliban’s ringing, “[*Within*] There’s wood enough within,” the wood-note echoed by Ariel’s “My lord it shall be done,” might also be hovering near (I.ii.460, 466).

² Ashbery, *A Wave* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 79.

complexities of perception, like her fascination with shifting lighting effects, show how consistently she was engaged with a postmodern reconfiguration of the problem of “the mind in action” (*Midcentury* 181). But in more minute matters of contact, and those “innumerable little noises” we make to ourselves, we’ve *felt* that action of a more feral aesthetic, in drops of experience, in joyful yodels and ridiculous bets and possibilities like the waters washing through Crusoe’s archipelago of “fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes” (which he could climb “with a few slithery strides,” rounded out by “overlapping rollers—a glittering hexagon of rollers / closing and closing in, but never quite”— ever not quite (CP 162). Regarding being on the speaking edge of these things ever not quite fully achieved, she perhaps passes onto her readers Emerson’s prerogative of “The Poet,” “the man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” in the guise of her jaunty and well-mannered “Gentleman of Shallot”:

The uncertainty
 he says he
 finds exhilarating. He loves
 that sense of constant re-adjustment.
 He wishes to be quoted as saying at present:
 “Half is enough.” (448; CP 10)

That “he *says* he . . .” is fishy (as if we might know better). But the Emersonian challenge that words be deeds is to be more fully *in* this half-ness of an expression, this feeling for what *we* are “saying at present” (and hearing and assaying). Even the flattest, half self-sacrificial statement—“Half is enough”—might bubble up half-*fizzy*, a celebratory cork fully popped in the drop of a sensation entertained. It’s in the spirit of his felt reflection: “And if half his head’s reflected / thought, he thinks, might be affected” (CP 9).

It is the task of “Anaphora” too, to bear both back and on, where the second of its twin sonnets re-writes the first that falls to “memory and mortal / mortal fatigue” with the muster of “stupendous studies: the fiery event / of every day in endless / endless assent” (CP 52). From just

these, the last words of her first volume, and the gentleman's jaunty gambit alone, we can gather why Lloyd Schwartz considered her first collection in supremely catholic terms:

For all its literary perfection and its great appeal to a literary audience, it is not really a 'literary' book. It is a book about coming to terms with the real world—every day and night, whoever and wherever we may be, whatever we may have done, however we may decide to continue. (EHA 8)

We cannot get around the "literary" nature of this "coming to terms" with the real world, and she didn't wish we would, but ever posed them to be turned on our feeling for their said edges, subliminal pulls and contrapuntal possibilities. As against the heavy tug of "the helpless earthward fall of love," we felt working its turn on Poe's mechanical exactness the liminal appeal of "hell-bless," turning weakness into a willed down-ward diving, as gestures of blessing can, with a willingness that is itself a sort of salvation.

Her hints were quiet but clear about a disquieting mix of her mother's madness and otherworldly Christian consolation—in those "unlovely books," the "becoming" dress recoiled from—and it seems reasonable to feel that it contributed a certain intensity of devotion to the changeable moment, the willing risk of hazarding it. And "When 'I think' rather than 'god is' becomes the ground of certainty," as Karen Mills-Courts observes in *Poetry as Epitaph*, "how I think becomes of utmost importance."³

Bishop planted herself firmly in the moving tradition of an optative mood, of transitional chances and a keenly spirited willingness to live in and upon them. We should hear from James' in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* to perhaps better clarify the manner of this spiritual quickness:

"I accept the universe" is reported to have been a favorite utterance of our New England transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller; and when some one repeated this phrase to Thomas Carlyle, his sardonic comment is said to have been: "Gad! she'd better!"

³ Mills-Courts, *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1990), 155.

It was James' always winning manner to take his most cherished beliefs into the lion's den of opposition, and he takes up Carlyle's puncturing scoff, so:

At bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily and altogether? Shall our protests against certain things in it be radical and unforgiving, or shall we think that, even with evil, there are ways of living that must lead to good? If we accept the whole, shall we do so as if stunned into submission—as Carlyle would have us—"Gad! we'd better!"—or shall we do so with enthusiastic assent? (49-50)

Holding for the grace of a certain manner, in fact balancing "the whole concern of both morality and religion" on this "manner of our acceptance," James left no room for grudges, nor merely "stunned . . . submission." No abstract value, this moral force he claimed for the optative mood, for "enthusiastic assent," was the spirit's battle cry, for Bishop as well.

She found the matter quite perfectly distilled in a snippet she copied out from the *New York Times* shortly after Vassar.

From a child in the 3rd grade— I told my little brother that when you die you cannot breathe and he did not say a word. He just kept on playing. (VSC 72.2)

"Surely there is an element of mortal panic and fear underlying all works of art?" she asked (CPr 144). And kept on playing.

It is this quality of ungrudgingness underlined by James that Bishop makes the final word of her praise for the poet May Swenson, with whom she corresponded for the last twenty years of her life, reflecting her own most earnest engagements: "A great part of one's pleasure in her work is in *her* pleasure; she has directness, affection, and a rare and reassuring ungrudgingness." She sent the blurb to Swenson for her 1963 collection, *To Mix with Time*, adding this note, "Use what you want—& turn it around anyway you want. The only things I want to keep especially are the 'ungrudging' business (I'm proud of that) & 'one's pleasure is in hers'" (WU November 5, 1962). In both the hesitation of "I'm proud of that" (the phrase, or the quality? in Swenson or

herself?) and the overlap of “one’s pleasure is in hers” Bishop emphasizes the meeting of the poets’ minds in that graceful “ungrudgingness.” It was a regular rite of passage in her poems to achieve it, needing repeating, and the savored repeating of her readers.

We have traced varieties of it regarding earliest losses in the last chapter, and in wider scope it’s a passage by which *any* kind of grievance, mumping complaint, fastidious stiffness or stinginess, backward glance, visual fix or distancing, self-satisfied irony turns (or seems to turn) a sort of corner, by surprise, or a gradual accumulation of detail, or some other mysterious influence, toward a quickened sense of a motionable presence, appreciation or munificence, or maybe just an unstinting nod to one’s perishable place in a baffling web of relatedness beyond all possible measure—and in these gestures among wood and leaves we’d have to had those “cans” as well, like those in “Filling Station” that “softly say: / ESSO—SO—SO—SO” (CP 128). The fastidious voice that begins this poem, “Oh but it is dirty!” has kin in in “A Cold Spring”—“the violet was flawed on the lawn”—and in “Questions of Travel,” “There are too many waterfalls here,” in the “self-pitying mountains” of “Arrival at Santos,” and the “outsize” pelicans in “The Bight” plunging “unnecessarily hard, / it seems to me” into an explosive ocean; and (CP 55, 93, 89, 60). It was a serious joke she couldn’t get enough of, hung up first in those childhood skies, “too dark, too blue [...]—or is it around the rims of the eyes?” (CPr 250). And if Bishop trained those eyes scrupulously on the details of the world around her to recalibrate in the wake of a scream, as Kalstone and others have observed, she also underlined the warmer au/oral forms of redress: as the Almanac advises in “Sestina,” “Time to plant (t)ears,” or we felt Juno licking the crying prayer’s ears, and the child herself calling on a dawning, “Nate! Oh beautiful sound, strike again!”

As counterpart of Bishop's "devotional, anti-romantic 'spiritual exercises'" that discipline the ego, "devoting it to the stuff of external appearance" (Travisano, *Artistic Development* 104-5) she devoted herself to self-deconstructing utterances. It may have been a phonemic matter she was offering Wilbur: "it's all *description*, no *philosophy*," or, not to fill, but empty poses of knowing for a transitional chance at the churning verge of words, or the tasted pleasure of a "Fat (S)waller."

To this end she adapted the old religious language, its sacred places, rites and symbols to the wholly open prerogative of the moment, to a religion of nature, which is to say of chance, and change and pleasure, the web in which we feel "a mind thinking" navigating and adapting upon bodily process. She regularly unclasped the hands from attitudes of prayer to place a tear or dancer there instead, or for "a correspondence of waves and giggles." The titular figure of "The Riverman" travels from "here to Belém" (Bethlehem) "and back again in a minute" then reconsiders, "In fact, I'm not sure where I went, / but miles, under the river" (CP 106). She adapts Christ's miracles at Canna (the multiplication of loaves, the turning of water into wine), in "Twelfth Morning; or, What you Will" toward a certain balancing of water and wine in the mind. The boy who arrives with a flashing four-gallon can atop his head, is Herbert's "willing shiner," who helps to revise the hearing of "heartbroken cries" to "the water, now, inside, slap-slapping."⁴ As "*Balthazar*" he is a *container* for the miraculous wine, being a massive wine bottle (about 4 gallons worth, to match the head-balanced water can). And with the matter of a Portuguese accent on *Balthazár*, she has turned the king of old toward "*azár*" "chance" in both senses of

⁴ All along in the drafts at Vassar this boy is kin to the "willing shiner" that Herbert seeks in "Christmas": "searching, till I finde a sunne / [...] A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly, / As frost-nipt sunnes look sadly," but one notes the distilling, crowning moment of her adaptation when after many drafts of "the black boy" remaining nameless through to the close, she found the perfect christening (H 81; VSC 58.5).

randomness and a “risk involving danger.”⁵ When William James in the concluding postscript to his *Varieties* wrote “no fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance,” he highlights this terrible thrill, where accident and “what you will” might negotiate an ongoing balance, being made much of the same stuff (405).

She staged an involved adaptation in her early sestina “A Miracle for Breakfast” (1937), where first a crowd mills about, waiting for that miracle from above:

At six o’clock we were waiting for coffee,
waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb
that was going to be served from a certain balcony,
—like kings of old, or like a miracle.
It was still dark. One foot of the sun
steadied itself on a long ripple in the river. (CP 18)

The “charitable crumb” turns out to be just that, just “one rather hard crumb,” for each, “which some flicked scornfully in the river.” One emerges to report:

I can tell you what I saw next. It was not a miracle.
A beautiful villa stood in the sun
and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
added by birds, who nest along the river
—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—

and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
working the stone. (CP 19)

Laurel Corelle finds the sestina “a formal sign of the beggar’s predicament, his linguistic and psychological entrapment [...] the unwitting captive of a system of belief to which he no longer

⁵ The Portuguese is roughly equivalent to the French “*hazard*,” but extending beyond the English and French meanings to name the part of grammar that deals with the *inflections* of words, how a sound might actually exit a mouth, or enter a (mind’s) ear. The chance riches of Bishop’s punning balances the willing reader just here in a tension between the dignity and distance of denotation with the Christian myth and the more maculate accents and associations visited in the line of writing.

subscribes, but whose semantics continue to shape his imaginative and emotional frames of reference.”⁶

Or perhaps something subtler is at work. Bishop called it “my ‘social conscious’ poem, a poem about hunger” (C 25). In some intertextual and phonotextual echoes we can gather what kind of “breakfast” she served. It takes a turn upon Herbert’s “The World,” where “Love built a stately house,” but “Then Pleasure came, who, liking not the fashion / Began to make *Balcones*, *Terraces* / Till she had weakened all by alteration” (H 84). Bishop’s speaker’s Italianate villa and baroque balcony touch on his Italian *Balcones*, whimsically constructed from the broken crumb, and indeed on the brink of crumbling again, but holding with just “one eye close to the crumb.” Seeing interior galleries and marble chambers (do we hear them echoing?), Bishop takes up their strange makers, “through ages, by insects, birds, and the river / working the stone” which aims the ear at Darwin’s famously “entangled bank” beginning the concluding paragraph of *The Origin of Species*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing in the bushes, with many insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth...⁷

She has notably altered his “worms crawling,” with “*the river* / working the stone”—both eroding and *making*, it would seem. In a quite liminal nexus Bishop’s inter-adaptation of this passage within the sestina’s Christian framework also draws the question of that “charitable crumb” to the reader’s re-marks earning their keep. Posed between liberal charity and the conservative view that one should work for one’s supper—breakfast in this case—her charitably anarchic aesthetics brokers a compromise where animal relations are brought to bear, this miracle-and-not “through ages, by insects, birds...” includes the “(w)ages” of a happy chance

⁶ Corelle, 45. Multu König Blasing, at somewhat an opposite pole accents Bishop’s regal alignment through her “ritualistic form” “with a patriarchal tradition” and “privilege” (86).

⁷ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1975), 689.

(she also called it her “Depression poem” [C 25]) in investing an erotic share in the sensational event, to “buy in-(sex),” to this phonemic stream. Emerson too suggested a certain balance of what one puts in and gets out in “Experience”: “We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate” (EL 473).

The crumby miracle may amount to *aim-ear*, a *cull* “for breakfast,” if one soaks it in this dark-working river. From “a certain” balcony to the baroquely imagined one, the speaker alights (visually) upon a “wrong” while au/orally, crowning it with irreverent indirection:

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.
A window across the river caught the sun
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony. (CP 19)

Upon that dark (but stimulant) swallow, with our writer “wages” of play, this little stutter of “as if the miracle were working,” re-ups the stakes of a wager “as if the miracle were *were* king.” And as the “were” (or subvocal *whir*) serves to crack that quirky *working* king (or *whir*-king) loose, the phonemic draw of a trebled “on” bites into that “balcony,” crumbling it. But balkanized it genuflects, “on knee,” as if in deference to this “king of [new],” neither old, nor knowing, but one that ear-tickler Joyce too had triumphantly crowned in his *Wake*, as your “aural eyeness” (623.18). It has no truck with the *re-ligio* of norms, of Eliot in “Little Gidding” wishing “to kneel / Where prayer has been valid,” but kneels only to a convergence of affective chances, figuring-in, extraordinary kinships in the ordinary, allowing one to fleetingly inhabit contradictory experience without moralizing it. Regarding that building up from tearing down, we recall her comment to Lowell on Eliot’s fascination with the spiritual: “Let’s publish an anthology of haunting lines, with a supplement on how to exorcize them” (OA 171).

A central challenge of Bishop’s seems to have been how to encompass chance and change without denying their force. In some moods she was very clear what change “meant,” as

in this unpublished fragment from “Florida Revisited” (about the *impossibility* of revisiting it), caught as a godly concept:

Change is what hurts worst; change alone can kill.
Change kills us, finally—not these earthly things.
One hates all this immutability. (EAP 178)

The obverse of a self-forgetful concentration, or a lively flashing aspect, this same “change” encroaches and kills. Turning an earthly fate surprisingly *unearthly* in that Latinate leap of an orotund “immutability” bears the death-mask of ethical *pronunciamento*, and the fixing on this living principle (as her unbeliever did) as what “one hates”— much more fatal than change itself. It is a hate for nothing heard. The language doesn’t change. But like Henry James’ picture in *A Sense of the Past*, death for Bishop was not to be hung up on, but rather hung up *in*, moving at the edges and through the things themselves, blowing the book around, spicing the food, spiking the drinks, “for *life*,” and making all the difference.

Change may naturally be the subject of any elegy, but Bishop’s piques in the manner it visits, and visits again. It is only after three stanzas of free-flying sight, each separated by two to three lines of white space, hovering on their own in her moving elegy for Robert Lowell, “North Haven,” that the poet enters this Darwinian world of change. The first italicized stanza, almost as epigraph flies far and near, “*I can make out the rigging of a schooner / a mile off; I can count / the new cones on the spruce*”; the second muses, neither here nor there, about the islands drifting “in a dreamy sort of way” though she knows they haven’t (they have); and then finds a lush island full of flowers, a bright canvas of “Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch, / Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright,” all in a substantive plumpness in which time (or death) is still not quite “hanging up” the picture.

Then the return of some birds, and a a keen piercing in sound that expands, and voraciously so:

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the White-throated Sparrow's five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise. (CP 188)

Each line is broken but for “the White-throated Sparrow’s five-note song,” its stinging “pleading and pleading” both wounds and bleeds, and it seems this one little Sparrow spares none, *wide-throated* to swallow all: “*repeat, repeat, reap-eat; revise, revise, rive eyes,*” a change insatiable and blinding. Lowell’s name is written in a rebus of tears in it too, as (Fr.) “*rive eyes*” draws the *river*-ing down of the water (*l’eau*) welling above.

And nothing more is “seen” in the poem as it shifts ground to a suspended memory, some telling words remembered, and then an address:

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue... And now—you’ve left
for good. You can’t derange, or re-arrange,
your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
The words won’t change again. Sad friend, you cannot change. (CP 189)

With those Sparrows she delicately inserts *her* trope for sensational de- or re-arrangements worked on words that, on the page, “won’t change again.” But wasn’t this the Wide-Throated horror? Yes and no, she proposes. Their river-and-riving lends a rhythmical sight as they “(s)can their song,” “*can* derange, or re-arrange” things in the throat’s and mouth’s motions. Spoken to Lowell, the phrase “Sad friend, you cannot change,” is doubly touching as it regards those manic revisions of his poems come to an awkward (or maybe peaceable) halt. But is there also just a little slip towards the reader being spoken to? Only if caught speaking, I submit, if willing a happy catch (sad friends), of double voicing: “Sad friend, you can *not(ch)*ange,” and do, and

must. Such a notch caught serves to underline Bishop's chancier and collaborative mode of "revision," of revision-in-repetition ever offered to others. And chewing it over perhaps it draws down to this: "Sad friend, you can (*gnaw*)change," and at any moment, know it there upon the tongue, almost taste its nonce-ends. Felt in the lexical fray, such events fully include the reader in the pathos of change, the elegiac, prophetic and the play-full, prerogative of the living up to death: "*repeat repeat repeat, revise revise revise.*"

Bishop's argumentative insistence on metamorphosis in all of the shifty glimpses, revisions, surprising turns of her poems where "everything is always turning into something else" (Merrin, p. 1, above), is played out most subtly, intimately and instructively, regarding the mind's own capacity for growth and change, in the deranging and rearranging of the phonemic stream. That material concern draws on a Darwinian insistence on the relation between an organism and its environment, of "what we have in common(s)": the power of observational detail, the mind's adaptive capacities, and the centrality of pleasure and gaming, improvised, contingent balances in an evolving measure flowing through fixed words, a life that laughably exceeds them in de-scriptive possibilities, of organic decay and growth both.

However differently and uninsistently, Bishop's proliferal style is certainly hospitable to Stein's feeling in "Portraits and Repetition" that there is no such thing as repetition, but *insistence* and shifting emphasis, "if there is anything alive in the telling," and however many times told over, "There was no repetition. This is what William James called *The Will to Live*" (*Lectures* 167, 169). Will (chance) turned upon words proliferates. It's not so much that in the sensed "sensational nudity" of a phonic body that a word's "soul is fled," but, as Bishop felt, can come wildly alive. An experimental note stunningly reveals the workings of human desire and improvised balances in things that repeat. In his illuminating lecture "On Constructing A

Reality,” Heinz von Foerster reports a fascinating investigation in which a single word, *cogitate*, is recorded and repetitively looped for subjects to attend. The word, at first clearly perceived, after a number of repetitions, abruptly changes, then changes again upon far fewer repetitions, then yet again more rapidly. He gives a small selection of the 758 alternates reported by subjects listening to *cogitate*: “*agitate; annotate; arbitrate; artistry; back and forth; brevity; candidate; can’t you see; can’t you stay; cape cod you say; card estate; cardio tape; car district; catch a tape; cavitate; cha cha che; computate; conjugate; conscious state; counter tape; count to ten; count to three; count yer tape; cut the steak; entity; fantasy; God to take; God you say; got a date; got your pay; got your tape; gratitude; gravity; guard the tit; gurgitate; had to take; kinds of tape; majesty; marmalade.*”⁸

Of course words on the page do tether such wild arrangements in the mind’s psychoacoustics, but such truly seething, proliferal superabundance, she noted even in her early (unpublished) “Three Poems” of Love, “where he dotes, / Leans on abysses in a flat town” (EAP 18). Even in precocious Penelope’s cosmopolitan claim to “*le beau monde*,” and that volatile wave that can come crashing in upon it; her early tasting of a tongue “too softly pent” at Vassar, she was betting on a wandering give-and-take. In her exquisitely split self-instructions to “Pound out the ideas of sight” and “always to live over water / & never to resist its verses”; in Cruseo’s home-made flute “(I think it had the weirdest scale on earth),” she plots the possibilities of change, inescapable, sounds found in the environs of “what you will,” where there is *life*. It’s in *this* prison her proliferal poet would find himself an actor always wandering from his subject.

In a nightmare image of hell, he is dressed “in an *unbecoming* costume of gray cotton,” and shuns a “shortsighted and shiftless conception of the meaning of prison” (CPr 183). As a critical community we’ve maybe been a little shortsighted, in taking too long a view, not tasting

⁸ Von Foerster, *Observing Systems* (Seaside, CA.: Intersystems Publications, 1984), 290.

the language, tending the foreign ear. But it was her profliferal condition: “One must be *in*; that is the primary condition.” Her would-be inmate has set his hopes on gaining one “intimate friend” (Sp. direct object “you”) through a fleeting “influence”—*in-flew-whence?* With “wicked cogency” (Kalstone, *Becoming* 61) this materialist of the mind fashions every detail of his possible worldly circumscribing, the dimensions of the cell, the placement of its iron bed, the shelf, the crucial confining walls, the window, the view he’d like from that window of a paved courtyard paved and the kind of stones and patterns (a “lozenge design,” or “interlocking cobblestone fans”) and the way the light might slant across them that last “half an hour of heavy gold” (CPr 187). Every so often, on the heels of such flights regarding these would-be solid surrounds this hard-headed realist of the comic optative catches himself up, stops short: “But it is a difficult question, and is probably best decided, as of course it must be, by chance alone” (CPr 187). Of course we *know* for this would-be prisoner to write his “short, but immoral poem” (a midget divinity), the *real* “primary condition” is that “One must *be(g)in*.” Such beginnings, of the sort felt in the throat, on the tongue, shaped between the lips, her words are ever inviting. But it is chancy, of dis-figuring figuration, as we may feel in his musings upon the fundamental matter of the walls he has “in mind,”

The walls I have in mind are interestingly stained, peeled, or otherwise disfigured; [...] The prospect of unpainted boards with their possibilities of various grains can sometimes please me, or stone in slabs or irregular shapes. I run the awful risk of a red brick cell; however whitewashed or painted bricks might be quite agreeable, particularly if they had not been given a fresh coat for some time and here and there the paint had fallen off, revealing, in an irregular but peeled frame (made by previous coats), the regularity of the brickwork beneath. (CPr 185)

A good decade before Stevens would declare in his “Notes,” “The air is not a mirror but bare board” (“tragic chiaroscuro // and comic color of the rose, in which / Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips / Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them” [SCP 384]), Bishop was

figuring the condition, the appeal of things peeling “or otherwise disfigured,” the “possibilities of the various grains” of bare, “unpainted boards,” stone slabs in “irregular shapes,” even the breaking of waves in upon those “whitewashed or painted bricks” where “here and there,” now and then “the paint had fallen off, revealing in an irregular but peeled frame [...] the regularity of the brickwork beneath” –that more solid if queer, quirky stuff of an interested doing and being-done-to. But again, “it is a difficult question, and is probably best decided, as of course it must be, by chance alone.” Or chance dancing to choice. Or is it choice to chance? Certainly they dance slippery, hand in hand, and to “the weirdest scale on earth.”

That scale etymologically tells, we recall, of a playing upon “time, change, becoming.” And in the off-balance balance of it Crusoe woozily gets his broadest bearings. One is in sound, “an oak, say” mentally provoked when “all the gulls flew up at once,” “like a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves.” And the other from taste. On his “one variety of tree, / a sooty, scrub affair,” there’s no fruit, but,

There was one kind of berry, a dark red.
I tried it, one by one, and hours apart.
Sub-acid, and not bad, no ill effects;
and so I made home-brew. I’d drink
the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff
that went straight to my head
and play my home-made flute
(I think it had the weirdest scale on earth)
and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats.
Home-made! home-made! But aren’t we all? (CP 164)

Rewriting a story or two, it returns the knowing animal, *homo sapiens* to a tasting, a making, a glorious fit of feeling and animal romp, and a query. “Home-made! home-made! But aren’t we all?” Telling Crusoe’s tale without “[a]ll that Christianity,” in just five words regarding that berry—“sub-acid, and not bad”—she’s rewritten a creation tale with Darwinian dues. In a de-and re-creation of sound, the fruited fall into evil is uprooted (“not bad”) with a vertiginous shift

upon a dimly dawning and dizzying idea, that the human animal, the symbolic user and abuser, is *sub-ascidian*, come from a mollusk. Bishop invites the pleasure of a reader's creative adaptation of a sensational stretch of sound, "sub-acid an..." out to that proto-evolutionary moment infuriating clergyman when Erasmus Darwin put forth the wild idea, from observations of his own, and still granting God as all-powerful origin, that man had descended from bi-valve ascidians, or "sea-squirts."⁹ A mega-plot borne in micro-form, a taste constellating a most explosive pleasure not quite describable, though Lowell perhaps said it best: "the bomb in it in a delicate way."¹⁰

Always the consummate mental-musician, playing upon the subliminal fringes of things, Bishop prepared for this wilder leap with a milder one just above it, where, beneath his "sooty scrub affair,"

, Snail shells lay under these in drifts
 and, at a distance,
 you'd swear that they were beds of irises. (CP 164)

This cochlear image, the distantly seen shift of dead snails "in drifts" drifting into "beds of irises" seeds the weirder au/oral evolution "of viruses," vitally alive and proliferal indeed. With that "sensational *tang*" on our tongue we can consider, "Profusion is a necessary component of its explanation," as Gillian Beer notes of Darwin's theory: "Selection is crucial also but it is a selection relying on hyperproductivity, upon a fertility beyond use or number," evolution's

⁹ Ventured in *Zoonomia* (1796), there he goes also back to a hypothetical "filament": "would it be too bold to imagine, that all warm-blooded animals have arisen from one living filament, which THE GREAT FIRST CAUSE endued with animality, with the power of acquiring new parts, attended with new propensities, directed by irritations, sensations, volitions, and associations, and thus possessing the faculty of continuing to improve by its own inherent activity, and of delivering those improvements by generation to its posterity, world without end!" See **Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia*: Project Gutenberg text XXIX.4.8**. See also <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/08/110802090407.htm> for more recent investigations into the relation between these "sea-squirts" and the human heart.

¹⁰ Lowell wrote Bishop regarding her poem "Armadillo" "I see the bomb in it in a delicate way," to whom she responded, "I love your expression, "the bomb in it in a delicate way." That was my idea exactly, I suppose" (WIA 594). In using it for her blurb she dropped the "I see."

movement being “one of proliferation and enhancement” (16, 64). The words upon which we reflect—those we differently repeat—do not admit open revisionary “proliferation and enhancement” of any new making and choosing, though the range is wider—the mind’s need for change is wilder, as we’ve seen—than one might think. But even when the prisoner gives up his silly willing, admits that the matter of this prison “is probably best decided, as of course it must be, by chance alone”—even there, was there a trace (upon a tongue “too softly pent”), an adaptation, of holy intoning? by *chants* alone? Such thoughts yield only suasions, and these subject to change. But I do take it as one of the loveliest adaptations of Bishop’s religiously proliferal wit. Afloat on a breathing, comic optative it holds as holy these transitional *chant-says*, this pro-fane play and “gaiety of being, not merely knowing.”

Of the many wonderful poems written for Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery’s “Soonest Mended” must be one of the most delightful, written in appreciation for her “2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” that provided some surprises in Chapter One.¹¹ He’d devotedly “read, reread, studied and absorbed” *North & South*, recall, feeling “drawn into a world that seemed as inevitable as ‘the’ world and as charged with the possibilities as the contiguous, overlapping world of poetry,” and regarding that matter of “infant sight” in “2,000 Illustrations” felt it happily unexhausted after some twenty years.¹² In “Soonest Mended” he honors her always rending-and-mending balances, how “the fantasy makes it ours, a kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal,” and with moral force:

learning to accept
The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,

¹¹ He’s on record saying so in an audio archive from the Key West writer’s conference in 2003, in which he reads the poem as part of a “mini-lecture” on her titled quite fittingly, “*The Beautiful Changes*.” You may listen to his appreciative words here: http://www.kwls.org/podcasts/john_ashbery_on_elizabeth_bish/.

¹² EHA 203; “Second Presentation” 10; and p. 76, above.

Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.¹³

So he closes the poem on her mending and rending, the “beautiful changes,” with the feel of a certain carelessness amidst sturdy preparing, an action allied with “not being sure,” returning and “Making ready to forget,” and a last nod to this need of always beginning (so long ago). But we return to its beginning, and all of a long first stanza, to get a sense not only of his gratitude, but also his adaptations of her exuberantly proliferal, prepared carelessness. Ashbery honors in broad dramatic swerves these minutely shifting balances and the true scale, it seems to me, in which this poet of “moments” wrote. He enacts the *feel* of a reader tending, beyond, or through the shifting “picture” or “narrative moratorium” the fitful portal of “a mind thinking,” as she wished.

Barely tolerated, living on the margin
In our technological society, we were always having to be rescued
On the brink of destruction, like heroines in *Orlando Furioso*,
Before it was time to start all over again.
There would be thunder in the bushes, a rustling of coils,
And Angelica, in the Ingres painting, was considering
The colorful but small monster near her toe, as though wondering whether
forgetting
The whole thing might not, in the end, be the only solution.
And then there always came a time
When Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile
Came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was O.K.
Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused
About how to receive this latest piece of information.
Was it information? Weren't we rather acting this out
For someone else's benefit, thoughts in a mind
With room enough and to spare for our little problems (so they begin to seem),
Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid,
To reduce all this to a small variant,
To step free at last, miniscule on the gigantic plateau—
This was our ambition: to be small and clear and free.
Alas, the summer's energy wanes quickly,
A moment and it is gone. And no longer
May we make the necessary arrangements, simple as they are.
Our star was perhaps brighter when it had water in it
Now there is no question even of that, but only

¹³ From *The Double Dream of Spring* (New York: Dutton, 1966). <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177260>.

Of holding on to the hard earth so as not to get thrown off
 With an occasional dream, a vision: a robin flies across
 The upper corner of the window, you brush your hair away
 And cannot quite see, or a wound will flash
 Against the sweet faces of others, something like:
 This is what you wanted to hear, so why
 Did you think of listening to something else? We are all talkers
 It is true, but underneath the talk lies
 The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose
 Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor.

From God-thoughts to the question of “a small variant,” in-formed—but “*was* it information?”—free-feeling plateaus open and collapse back, one’s thrown off balance with “an occasional dream, a vision . . . you brush your hair away / And cannot quite see.” But who *is* this technologically marginal barely tolerated “we”? “The Eye of the Outsider” as Adrienne Rich dubbed Bishop’s exilic eye and marginalized sexuality?¹⁴ Or *ouïe*, maybe? Momentary assents, a *oui* needing rescue again and again and again? Maybe those things Bishop felt “flying almost intolerably on your own breath” (passing and passing bets)? We saw them long ago in the introduction as “the thin flying of nine black hairs / four around one five the other nipple,” grossly tethered and afloat, split out into the twin nipples of an *oreiliental* death and Christian sacrifice/resurrection.¹⁵ On such a dawning-dying, surprise, and felt flashes of (f)light that glorious “Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile” comes “plowing down the course,” breaking in on more desperate (suicidal even) thoughts in fixed pictorial pondering.

This loveliest of tributes to Bishop’s carefully crooked sowing of feels of flourishing, invitation of baroque tangles and a readiness for anything, expands her circles, the flush of feeling and confusion in the heard thing, the hair swerving into the eye, that’s also a sign of time, a wound too. These minutest things, always “on the brink of destruction,” are hung up by

¹⁴ Rich, “The Eye of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop,” *Boston Review* (April 1983), 15-17.

¹⁵ CP 79, and p. 12, above. Regarding the number four, associated with “death” in Asian culture, for its near homophony in several Asian languages—an instance of the inescapable nature of “sound thinking.” See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Numbers_in_Chinese_culture.

Ashbery in this ever-onwarding pull where each emotion overlaps the next and that thing freely cherished has already slipped and was maybe meant to be forgot, or as Bishop held it in a visceral turn of “One Art,” “so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that there loss is no disaster” (OA 178).

This feel of meeting accidents with intent, and their constant loss, hanging happily in an uncertainty, spinning them on spirit in this un-moored mooring is also seen in William James who made a spiritual axis of sorts in his coda to *A Pluralistic Universe*, from which we earlier heard regarding Bishop’s (maybe gray) gull. James warmly celebrates Benjamin Paul Blood’s “ever not quite:”

Certainty is the root of despair. The inevitable stales, while doubt and hope are sisters. Not unfortunately the universe is wild—game flavored as a hawk’s wing. Nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, save to bring the different. The slow round of the engraver’s lathe gains but the breadth of a hair, but the difference is distributed back over the whole curve, never an instant true—ever not quite.¹⁶

Bishop’s proliferal style dubbed it truly wild as well, deadly wild and with a gaming flavor—but as ever only at her words’ said-edges. In a (never published) poem written in Paris the fall/winter after her Vassar graduation, “Luxembourg Gardens” (of Stein’s “Pigeons on the grass alas” from “Four Saints in Three Acts”) Bishop framed a somatic, joking “Guignol” with erotic, “ingenious puff(s)” and game flavored sniffs to devour old signs of spirit in their horribly homogenous symbolic architectures. It opens with

Doves on architecture, architecture
Color of doves, and doves in air—
The towers are so much the color of air
They could be anywhere (VSC 72.A / EAP 27)

In this chiastic cross of (rock?) doves and blandly Catholic claims and iconography of the Holy Spirit, their towering self-sufficiencies “could be anywhere.” Unless. Released in that scattering

¹⁶ James, *Essays in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 189. Many thanks to Steven Meyer for bringing this energetic passage to my attention.

flutter of “doves in air”—is it roundly met?—there’s an audacious flurry of “doves in (n)air,” a hawk’s nostril (OED). It would “explain” these thrice-sighted doves disappearance from the rest of the poem, replaced by that joking Guignol and his vaguely “ingenious puff[s] of wind.” It is entirely apt as well to her Emersonian pleasure and bidding of “the darting to an aim,” and James’ appreciation that “*perishing pulses of thought recollect and know*,” and has even, on the other side of that hawk’s nostril, already devoured the dove, phonemically speaking, to distill this pivotal matter of a relation: “and *ofs* in air.” But *was* it information? All of this draws down to the free-feeling fact, as Ashbery honors Bishop’s “primary condition,” that “We are all talkers, / it is true,” before drawing on to another of “The moving and not wanting to be moved” and, loose, being strewn to the threshing floor (where something might flower again).

“I have been attempting to keep meaningfulness up to the pace of randomness,” Ashbery has often been cited as saying, distilling a nodal key of his ever shifty aesthetic, “but I really think that meaningfulness can’t get along without randomness and that they somehow have to be brought together.”¹⁷ Whatever else is also included in his desire and capacity to do so, Ashbery’s intimate absorption of Elizabeth Bishop’s quietly “ravishing” balance-off-balance of chancy design, “sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,” between image and yodel, “plain description” and some other exquisite plane or plateau, can have played no small role.

And I am happy, after all, to leave you with an image or two, or three. Caught, created by a character “living on the margin / of our technological society,” quite literally at its edge, in “The Sea & its Shore” (1937), the companions piece to “In Prison” (1938). There it is the job of “Mr. Boomer, Edwin Boomer,” to keep the shore free of scraps of print overflowing from our presses. Casually decked with Bishop’s initials and the explosive pronunciation of her mother’s

¹⁷ Ashbery, *The Craft of Poetry* (1974), qtd. in Mills-Courts, 268n..

family name, *Bulmer*, Boomer's tending to his task, it's joked and is not, is materially involved with a spiritual calling (in words from Keats' "Bright Star") and the "laws of nature":

Of course, according to the laws of nature, a beach should be able to keep itself clean, as cats do. We have all observed:

*The moving waters at their priest-like task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shore.*

But the tempo of modern life is too rapid. Our presses turn out too much paper covered with print, which somehow makes its way to our seas and their shores, for nature to take care of herself.

So Mr. Boomer, Edwin Boomer, might almost have been said to have joined the "priesthood." (CPr 172)

Our seas. This tongue-in-cheek priest "lived the most literary life possible" in his concentration on "the life of letters," we learn, but it's not quite what it seems. As material matter sickeningly dissolving in sea, ornate in air, as amenable to "a little rough modeling" he tends them. Keeping in one ear that spirit that "bloweth where it listeth" and in the other how Lyn Hejinian's "Living things in their redaction / decide to yodel" (p. 25 above)—and in a third Bishop's wonky operetta of the erratic—we can tend Boomer's attentions. Unlike the "often pig-headed" birds in the plainer lines of their flights, "inspired by a brain, by long tradition, by a desire that could often be understood to reach some place or obtain some thing," the papers he sees on windy nights by his dim lantern-light

had no discernible goal, no brain, no feeling of race or group. They soared up, fell down, could not decide, hesitated, subsided, flew straight to their doom in the sea, or turned over in mid-air to collapse on the sand without another motion.

If any manner was their favorite, it seemed to be an oblique one, slipping sidewise.

They made more subtle use of air currents and yielded to them more whimsically than the often pigheaded birds. They were not proud of their tricks, either, but seemed unconscious of the bravery, the ignorance they displayed, and of Boomer, waiting to catch them on the sharpened nail. (CPr 174)

With half a brain in their indecision, hesitation, soaring and subsiding, in sensational ignorance, they oscillate in a whimsical yielding and making "*more subtle use* of air currents." A tutelary

spirit regarding these uses, as chance would have it, washed up on *Bishop's* shore (along with several of the other scraps that Boomer ponders, from her notebook). "JOKE SPECS WITH SHIFTING EYES" it reads (Boomer calls it a "self-riddle"):

JOKE SPECS WITH SHIFTING EYES. Put on the spectacles and place the mouthpiece in the mouth. Blow in air intermittently; the eyes and eyebrows will then be raised and lowered. [...] If the earpieces are too short in case of a large head, bend the curved portion behind the ear. (CPr 177)

This silly slip may be a fitting token, not final, but to find what is poised to begin again in her poems if the body's breath is drafted. Its material Marxist (Groucho) comedy will lift and lower those bushy brows and their eyes in phonotextual potencies in the constantly wandering patter of its innuendo.

Use it to play with the close of Bishop's "Sonnet" (CP 192), which ends with what Charles Altieri considers in *The Particulars of Rapture*, "what might be the most affectively engaging and expansive exclamation mark in American poetry" (253). Often feted as her "coming out" poem, maybe it's as well to be an offer of onwarding, where "A creature," is first "divided" and "undecided," but then we find arising the beautiful

rainbow-bird
from the narrow bevel
of the empty mirror
flying wherever
it feels like, gay!

Does it catch just a little in throat? More quietly, just one last shimmering image, awash in au/oral opalescence may also interest upon a puncture or slip and an expansion or two in this little gift of her "Giant Snail" (CP 141):

My wide wake shines, now it is growing dark. I leave a lovely opalescent ribbon; I know this.

Appendix: Dimming “the scenery of a line”

I offer a swift summary of some commonly observed, if differently construed, properties of Bishop’s poems. For all their hallucinatory force, “dim” often lowers her poems’ lights (fourteen times), and cracks into her important undergrad essay, “Dimensions for a Novel,” the aural matter of “dim mentions,” that also complicates (or fulfills the promise) of her early (unpublished) allegory of Love, whose eye “is stereoscopic, / Seeing in vistas many more dimensions” (EAP 18). Still much more pervasive in her poems, the diminutive “little” keeps things paradoxically intimate and distanced, dimly “lit.” Sometimes a source of critical dismay, I would suggest that this insistent diminution also augments, or toys with augmenting synchronies of affection and subtly diachronic sense of play.¹ Admitting in some contexts the brush of emotion that “small,” say, does not, it is also possibly cognate with *L. ludus*, “play.” Noting the “miniaturization” of things as key in the transformation into a realm of play—the toy car, the toy pistol—and drawing on analogies of bricolage from Levi-Strauss, that uses crumbs and scraps belonging to other structural wholes, Giorgio Agamben suggests that miniaturization is not just a “reduced model,” but “the cipher of history.”² The “little” object, in this sense contains both a “once upon a time” and a “no more,” is “eminently historical in this diachronic and synchronic sense,” and “renders tangible human temporality in itself, the pure differential margin between the ‘once’ and the ‘no longer’” (72). We may see too how engaging Bishop’s words neither as monumental markers or antique parts of a picture, but as objects of play, further renders

¹ In his review of *Questions of Travel*, William Jay Smith, for instance, finds “Miss Bishop overworks the adjective ‘little’; there is something little on almost every page—little pearls, little bottles, little people, little moons, a little filling station.” He doesn’t specify his objection, but finds the effect to somehow “put things in proper perspective.” Smith, “New Books of Poems” *Harpers* 23.3 (August 1966), 90. That “little” is Bishop’s second-most employed adjective, preceded only by “white” and followed by “black,” as calculated by Anne Greenhalgh in her concordance to Bishop’s poetry, suggests this “perspective” to involve that odd oscillation she’d captured in that fragment as “reading along the scenery of a line.”

² Agamben, “In Playland: Reflections on History and Play,” *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993), 72.

“tangible human temporality in itself” precisely in that oscillating margin “between the ‘once’ and the ‘no longer’” in these “hear-say seas.” In her minor-key but rapturous expansion at the end of “Poem” she celebrates just this temporal interweaving of “art ‘copying from life’ and life itself” in asking “Which is which?” both seen to be “dim, on a piece of Bristol board, / dim, but how live, how touching in detail / —the little that we get for free, / the little of our earthly trust. Not much.” In it these signs of “our abidance” this “little” floats nearly free in signaling a reciprocal liveliness of cherishing—“how touching in detail” perhaps also enacted where on its way to “our earthly trust” this “little of” phonemically carries a “little love” toward it too. Not much, but again, a certain satisfaction of “touching detail.”

From some of her earliest publications Bishop conjoined her signature shifting mists with her most intensely explored temporal zone of “earliest morning” and its still half-dreamy states of consciousness, as in “Picking Mushrooms” (December 1928), where she posed her readers in a village “filled with the blue-grey mist peculiar to early mornings in a low place near the sea, mornings when the day will be clouded and dreaming, never more than half-awake.”³ Such mist obscures and impinges on her “poor bird,” the “*esprit*-occupied” sandpiper, where “The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear,” hinting at first of things *amiss*. In “Cape Breton” it “incorporates the pulse” (a motorboat’s), and, found in “valleys and gorges” “like rotting snow-ice sucked away / almost to spirit,” this “same mist” (*say*-mist?) later follows “the white mutations of its dream” (CP 131, 67, 68). In this corporal spirit or dream-stream white space mutates too, another variable juncture. Dream has been widely recognized as a curiosity of Bishop’s, if mostly associated with her “surrealist” phase, but much less (of a piece

³ Thomas Travisano collected this story of Bishop’s along with several of her early poems in “Emerging Genius: Elizabeth Bishop and the *Blue Pencil*, 1927-1930,” *Gettysburg Review* 5 (1992), 32-47.

with the paucity of aural attention/invention) how it reflects on the waking state of reading her poems.

Analogies of the photographic such as Ormsby, LaLonde, and Riggs employ are particularly apt to misrepresent this moveable, participatory, au/oral quality of her poems. And if the camera can be called “the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood” as Susan Sontag crisply conjures a greedy “scopic drive,” Bishop’s favored space-time of intimate, liminal “earliest morning” pulls from a much more receptive state, where attention to sounds is particularly acute.⁴ They wake one as “Anaphora” “begins, with birds, with bells / with whistles from a factory,” or more rudely in “Roosters,” and the uncanny crepuscular setting of “Sunday 4 A.M.” stages an “acousmatic voice” as it waffles toward waking—but in reading, really, how to distinguish these real reveries?⁵ “A high *vox / humana* somewhere wails.... *It’s always the same! / What are you doing, / there beyond the frame?*” and even evidently “awake” we confront a vertigo of “Dream dream confronting” (CP 129). Alerting to the reality of subliminal pulls, and the dreaminess of what we call or feel to be the “real,” many poems waver in this fluid zone where waking thought and subliminal dream make their competing claims on consciousness: “Love Lies Sleeping,” “Five Flights Up,” “Rain Towards Morning,” “Electric Storm,” “Some Dreams They Forgot,” “Song for the Rainy Season,” all tilt toward it.

Hesitating between conscious reports on the unconscious and merely more fluid registers of a “mind thinking” in felt musical movements and subliminal pulls of epitaphic print, the very meaning of “dream” is difficult to pin in her poems, as in the complex hypnogogic space-time of

⁴ Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 4, from the chapter “Plato’s Cave.”

⁵ Cf. Michel Chion on the “acousmatic voice” in *Sound-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994). “A sound or voice that remains acousmatic creates a mystery of the nature of its source, its properties and its powers, given that casual listening cannot supply complete information about the sound’s nature and the events taking place” (72). In *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2006) Mladen Dolar carries this farther to suggest that *every* vocal act is acousmatic in character, traveling through the body without one being able to assign a visual point of origin for its activity (70).

“The Weed,” that opens “I dreamed that dead, and meditating...”; in “A Summer’s Dream” the dream is neither possessed by a person nor opposed to a waking state when in the last stanza “We were wakened in the dark by / the somnambulist brook / nearing the sea, / still dreaming audibly”; we are similarly surprised to find the eponymous “unbeliever” dreaming a dream strangely available to a gull’s inquiry; and after the lulling “Lullaby” of “Songs for a Colored Singer” rapid metamorphoses follow “like a dream,” we’re told, but “too real to be a dream” (CP 20, 63, 22, 51). Several of these come from her second and third collections, and even the late bus trip of “The Moose” takes a swerve through a “dreamy divagation.... / a gentle, slow / auditory hallucination” (CP 171). As explicitly as the “Imaginary” governs “The Imaginary Iceberg,” late poems like “Santarém” and “Crusoe in England” have us “see” across a great gap that suspends their acutest conjuring in a certain paradoxical ratio of dreamily inventive remembering, catching that state of “exceptional lucidity and an acute awareness of distance” with which Georges Poulet has framed “the phenomenology of reading.”⁶

Augmenting awareness of the literal, letteral base of this activity, Bishop subjects her words to phenomenal wobbles, as when everything “seen” in “Filling Station,” “oil-soaked, oil-permeated / to a disturbing, over-all / black translucency” gives the glimmer of a hint that it passes through the sheen of print’s “black translucency,” a sense abetted by the fact that “black” and “white” are the two most common colors in Bishop’s poetic palette. These ways of making language itself seem inseparable from one’s hold on the scene are little discussed, though Costello has made some gestures in this direction with the suggestion that “Bishop strives for a kind of supermimesis, in which the sensation of imitation slipping away produces its own reality effect” (*Questions* 43). From her earliest poems to her last she could cheerfully fracture words

⁶ “Santarém” gathers the accent, incidentally, on a deep sleep/dream state cognitively similar to waking states, (REM) that sleep-researchers call “paradoxical sleep” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradoxical_sleep); Poulet, “The Phenomenology of Reading,” *New Literary History* 1 (1969), 64.

down to the strangeness of their material letters to intimate this slippage, ostensibly for the sake of a rhythm or rhyme as in “Pink Dog”: “Now look, the practical, the sensible // solution is to wear a *fantasia*. / Tonight you simply can’t afford to be a-/n eyesore. But no one will ever see a // dog in *máscara* this time of year” (CP 191). That *n*’s a kind of eyesore in itself, though a “funny” one. Her early “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” makes a more extended drama of such fracture, at first in the casually common drift and elision of “‘twas,” then, more oddly extended with “Evening overwhelms / We thought (I knew *we*) ‘t fortunately covers / With lashes, lids of reticence...” and again as a ringing sun goes “Down ground, ‘s gold splintered,” where it most notably solicits a transforming *cold-* or *scold-*splintering (CP 223).

Perhaps most gleefully marking this scandalous transit, “Arrival at Santos” visually dislocates a fellow passenger’s, Miss Breen’s, “home, when she is at home” as “Glens Fall / s, New York” (CP 89-90). Materially troping dis-orientation (ostensibly to rhyme with “six feet tall”), the unsettling typographic activity of that stranded *s* obliquely confirms the queasily proliferal (non)sense of “descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters,” our most “literal” means of conveyance. But Bishop gives the material matter a further “turn and flourish” within our “falling flight.”⁷ For within that willful disjuncture another plane convenes: from the singular to plural “Fall / s,” we have in fact risen across the page, in the geography of our reading. “There, we are settled” she cheekily appends. “People wish to be settled”—we do; but Bishop keeps readers in transit among shifting senses of “reading along the scenery of a line,” certainly with the Emersonian appreciation in “Circles” that “only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them” (EL 413).

⁷ She once praised Hopkins in terms of the intricate skill and “caprice” of the trapeze artist in a breath-taking performance: “falling through the air to snatch his partner’s ankles he can yet, within the fall, afford an extra turn and flourish, in safety, without spoiling the form of his flight” (PPL 663).

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