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# Elizabeth Bishop's voices

William Snelling

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of MPhil in the Faculty of Arts, School of English, January 2022.

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## Abstract

Though often considered a poet of solitude and loneliness, Elizabeth Bishop was deeply interested in the voices of other people, places and things - particularly those that are difficult to interpret, or which do not seem to express anything in particular. This thesis argues that these voices represented for Bishop a form of expression that might create unexpected moments of sympathy, or convey ambivalent emotional states, without actually revealing concrete details about the speaker, a quality which Bishop incorporated into her impersonal, evasive poetic voice.

While visual perception is undoubtedly important to Bishop's work, the act of listening ought to be recognised as equally crucial to her aesthetic. Listening, in Bishop's writing, is often associated with uncertain states of consciousness, and that uncertainty was essential to achieve the 'self-forgetfulness' and loss of ego that Bishop described as part of her ideal for poetry. That link between sound and self-forgetfulness is also present in Bishop's approach to translation, which involved a kind of negative capability, wherein Bishop was guided, in a state of 'enchantment', by the sound of the original language, while allowing her poetic voice to bleed through. Sound is also important to Bishop's readings of her work, which evince a subtle, quietly hypnotic musicality, despite her dislike of performing her work; Bishop's 'performance', moreover, with its interruptions and self-corrections, continues the play of evasion and intimacy that characterises her poetry. This thesis considers these three strands of Bishop's work - her original poems, her translations, and her readings - in relation to her notion of the 'voice', how it conveys meaning, and what that meaning might be.

## Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: .....Will Snelling..... DATE:.....25.01.2022.....

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# Contents

7	<b>Introduction</b>
16	<b>Chapter one: The human voice</b>
17	The family voice: 'In the Waiting Room'
23	Desire and utterance: 'O Breath' and other poems
28	<b>Chapter two: Hearing nature</b>
29	Key West: 'The Bight' and 'Florida'
34	Brazil: 'The Riverman', 'Twelfth Morning', and 'Questions of Travel'
46	<b>Chapter three: Translation</b>
50	Bishop and Lowell
51	French and Brazilian poetry: 'Seven-sided Poem' and 'Ravignan Street'
62	<b>Chapter four: Reading aloud</b>
	Bishop's recordings
70	<b>Conclusion</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>



# Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop was fascinated by the noises people make. In a letter to Donald E. Stanford from 1934, she describes the effect of overhearing another person cough or hiccup:

Have you ever noticed 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? 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.<sup>1</sup>

That phrase, 'the sudden sensation as if you were inside of him', echoes one of Bishop's most famous poems, 'In the Waiting Room'; in that poem, an aunt's cry heard from the dentist waiting room while the poem's speaker reads her *National Geographic* similarly creates a 'sudden sensation' of being 'inside' another person's consciousness: 'What took me / completely by surprise / was that it was *me*. / my voice, in my mouth'.<sup>2</sup> In these two instances, hearing a voice, 'particularly if you haven't been paying much attention [to it]', occasions a kind of ghostly transference in which someone else's voice becomes one's own, at least momentarily.

One might argue that these are barely voices at all, but merely noises, expelled without the willed intention of the speaker, inarticulate and somatic, without 'meaning', per se. Of course, these noises can be willed and meaningful; someone might cough to signify their presence, or to break a silence. Mladen Dolar writes that 'presymbolic' noise 'acquires its value only through opposition to the symbolic, and is thus laden with signification precisely by virtue of being non-signifying'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for Bishop, it is the 'presymbolic' nature of these noises that seems to allow them to have the effect they do. Those from animal or otherwise non-human sources also figure heavily in her work, either in the form of noisy onomatopoeia, like the 'Click. Click' of the dredge in 'The Bight', or surprising simile, such as the rain compared to 'politician's speeches' in 'Questions of Travel'. These voices lend her poetry a bustling musicality, and a sense of a landscape's sonic richness, while avoiding the symbolic or

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994) p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop, *Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011) p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006) p. 24.



allegorical. It is perhaps unsurprising that Bishop's favourite part of William Carlos Williams' poem 'The Sea-Elephant' was apparently Williams' made-up word for the creature's roar: 'Blouaugh'.<sup>4</sup>

David Nowell-Smith defines voice as 'excess over speech', the sensuous part that does not contribute to the meaning, beyond speech, and these kinds of voices are a pure excess - speech as pure sound, rather than a mere medium for language. The stubborn materiality of language permeates Bishop's poetry, like the oil permeating her famous poem, 'Filling Station'.<sup>5</sup> That material, sensuous quality is suggestive of a desire for grounding in the poems, which are usually rooted in the physical world, in contrast to the inward flights of association of a poet like John Ashbery. Mladen Dolar suggests, however, that though the voice is material, and therefore linked to the earth, it also offers the possibility of 'transcendence':

[Voice] seems still to maintain the link with nature, on the one hand - the nature of a paradise lost - and on the other hand to transcend language, the cultural and symbolic barriers, in the opposite direction, as it were: it promises an ascent to divinity, an elevation above the empirical, the mediated, the limited, worldly human concerns. [...] When Orpheus, the emblematic and archetypal singer, sings, it is in order to tame wild beasts and bend gods.<sup>6</sup>

Dolar describes the fundamental paradox of voice: its materiality and its seeming transcendence of the material, as it floats through the ether. Bishop is a resolutely non-transcendental poet, but her poetry teases out those tensions within utterance, expressing conflicting desires to be grounded in the real world, to belong, and to transcend the worldly through language. A comic moment in 'At the Fishhouses', when the poem's speaker sings a baptist hymn to a seal, who is apparently 'interested in music' and a 'believer in total immersion', seems to hint at and deflate the possibility of song to transcend those categories of nature, culture, and religion.<sup>7</sup> In 'The Riverman', the voice offers the possibility of joining a spiritual underworld, but the poem remains concentrated on physical, sensual apprehension - the smell of the river on a comb, the particular sound of the river. Rather than the possibility of transcendence, Bishop seems to emphasise the overlaps between these categories: the

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<sup>4</sup> Dana Goia, 'Studying with Miss Bishop', from *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Montiero, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) 139-157 (p. 144).

<sup>5</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Dolar, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 62.

affinity between natural and human or unnatural voices, the quasi-religious loss of ego, of ‘self-forgetfulness’, that might be found through attentiveness to the material world and the voices within it.

Rousseau, in his ‘Essay on the Origin of Languages’ (1781), delineated the unique connections between voice, intimacy, and nature, in contrast to the visual arts:

Painting is often dead and inanimate; it can transport you to the depths of a desert; but as soon as vocal signs strike your ear, they proclaim a being similar to yourself; they are, so to speak, the organs of the soul, and if they also depict solitude for you, they tell you that you are not alone there. Birds whistle, man alone sings, and one cannot hear either a song or an instrumental piece without immediately saying to oneself: another sensitive being is present.<sup>8</sup>

While hearing a voice ‘may depict solitude’ for the listener, it also reminds the listener, in a way that art forms like painting cannot with the same immediacy, that ‘another sensitive being’ is present. Perhaps this is because, while visual art might depict or imply the presence of another sensitive being, a voice *is* that presence, physically felt through vibrations in the air. It is important that it is song that does this, not just speech: it is the musicality of the voice that allows for a sense of intimacy, rather than the bare conveyance of words. Rousseau also seems to be implying that birdsong suggests the presence of a ‘being similar to yourself’ in the same way that a piece of music might. Like music, birdsong implies a ‘soul’: Bishop’s depictions of nature are suffused with that idea that the soulfulness of nature, as well as the human, non-organic world, can be heard through its musicality, like the ‘the sad, two-noted, wooden tune / of disparate wooden clogs / carelessly clacking over / a grease-stained filling-station floor.’<sup>9</sup> It is the musicality of those inanimate clogs which imbues them with affect, and makes them things that feel.

The voices I have mentioned so far are the literal, bodily kind - I also want to consider the literary kind, and how this interacts with the former. Bishop’s poetic voice oscillates between musicality and material ‘excess’, as I have already explored, and the prosaic language of conversation.<sup>10</sup> Bishop described rhyme as ‘mystical’, filling notebooks with end-rhymes, and self-deprecatingly described herself an an ‘ompadiioom’ poet, writing ‘a kind of blank verse’; she evidently found the musical

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<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, (Dartmouth: University Press of New England College, 1998) p. 326.

<sup>9</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> David Nowell-Smith, ‘Fragments on/of Voice’, *Sound and Literature*, ed. Anna Snaith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 56-73 (p. 56).

qualities of language beguiling and essential to her poetic practice, offering a way to write that allowed the conscious, rational mind to partially recede, and the magic of association to guide the poem.<sup>11</sup> Sound, for Bishop, seems to often be linked to escape from the ego - as in her story about getting a sudden sensation of being 'inside' another person's consciousness. Other references to sound in her poems suggest states of irrationality: the 'gentle, slow / auditory hallucination' of 'The Moose', the brook 'dreaming audibly' in 'A Summer's Dream', the reference to 'hearing things' in 'Twelfth Morning'.<sup>12</sup> Her deliberate use of form indicated at the same time, however, that following sound was not entirely a surrender to the unconscious, as the capital-S Surrealists might have surrendered to the unconscious; there is instead a necessary tension between control and freedom. The 'perfectly useless concentration' that Bishop described as essential to her poetic practice was still a form of 'concentration', however 'self-forgetful', after all.<sup>13</sup> The prosaic and the incantatory alternate in her long poem 'At the Fishhouses', while 'The Moose' employs rhyme and then intermittently abandons it.<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Ellis writes insightfully that 'Bishop is always in a sense quarrelling with verse forms. It is perhaps this element of her work that makes her so imitated and loved by poets and readers. One *bears* a human voice that never quite conforms to tradition even when it seems to be following most of the rules.'<sup>15</sup> The tension between form and freedom meant Bishop's poetry did not attest to any kind of 'mastery' of language, but instead drew attention to the musicality and 'form' of everyday language - that is what makes Bishop's poetry 'human', both sonorous and alive to the awkwardnesses of speech.

If the sonorous voice offers an escape from the restrictions of the body, the body that produces that voice can still put limits on it. Elizabeth Bishop suffered from debilitating illnesses throughout her life, from severe allergies to asthma, which could literally impede her ability to speak. Bishop's sexuality also meant that, for her, the body and its desires were transgressive and, in the mid-twentieth century, dangerous to speak of. Those tensions and restrictions are explored most vividly in 'O Breath', one of

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<sup>11</sup> Bishop, "Letter to Marianne Moore, October 24, 1954," quoted by David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press) p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, pp. 60-193.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 414.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, pp. 62-189.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, p. 80.

Bishop's oblique love poems, and the final part of a four-poem sequence; I will return to this poem in my chapter on the human voice in Bishop's poetry, but it is worth touching upon as emblematic of Bishop's anxieties about voice, communication, and intimacy. The other poems in the sequence similarly dramatise verbal miscommunication between lovers, in an elliptical, fragmentary style that seems to perform that very miscommunication. The voice is both 'what we have in common', and the thing that bears our essential difference, our specific worldly situation; the connection that voice engenders is therefore always 'equivocal'.<sup>16</sup> Our voices can never therefore express ideas entirely as we choose; they are subject to the body and the restrictions placed on it from within and without.

Perhaps poetry, then, is the means by which Bishop is able to both escape the burden of embodiment, and of stilling the ephemeral moments of connection that surface in life. Lorrie Goldensohn describes Bishop's 'sense of poetry as a weight-lifting assignment, defining language as a weight to be sent upwards in transport, away from the strain of its tie to the material'.<sup>17</sup> As I have written, Bishop is actually committed to the materiality of language, so it would be misleading to characterise Bishop as desiring to transcend the material. As well as this, however, we see in Bishop's poetry how the enclosing categories of the material world, separating people, or separating the human and non-human worlds, are temporarily transcended via the voice, that liquid, unstable entity without apparent origin. For Heidegger, poets must surrender to a 'painstaking listening', a listening that incorporates the other voices that make up the world.<sup>18</sup> In that sense, the poet is 'spoken by language': the poem is not quite the poet's voice speaking, but the emergence of something that they did not know already.<sup>19</sup> The difficulty in placing the voice of Bishop's poetry is because of its 'painstaking listening': Bishop constantly incorporates other voices into her work, whether of other people, or of the natural world, without eliding her own poetic voice and its particular habits of diction. Though Bishop cannot escape her own voice and its limitations, her poetry enables her, through that listening, to achieve that 'sudden sensation' of being 'inside' another the subjectivity of another self, human or

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<sup>16</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) p.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001) p. 214.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

non-human, to achieve a kind of sympathy for the other, however fugitive or fragile. In the process, that other is not rid of its strangeness, yet it is not seen, or heard, as wholly separate either.

In my first chapter, 'The human voice', I discuss the development of Bishop's depiction of the voice as transpersonal, embodied, and borrowed, in light of writings on voice and language by Heidegger, Mladen Dolar, and Denise Riley. In Bishop's earlier love poems, and particularly 'O Breath', we see an emphasis on the limits of human expression, and Bishop's ambivalence towards the ability of the voice to bridge the gap between people. In 'In the Waiting Room', from Bishop's last collection *Geography III*, meanwhile, that pessimism turns into a vertiginous awareness of the indelible ties between people that the voice can bring to the surface. In this later poem, an encounter with the voice of another person becomes an encounter with one's own voice. Bishop appears to be struck with an awareness of the echoic quality of the human voice, and of the hopeful possibility for fleeting connection, something which characterises her later poems in contrast with the distanced impersonality and pessimism towards human connection we see in her earlier work.

My second chapter, 'Hearing nature', attends to Bishop's preoccupation with nature and landscape, and the problem of translating the 'voice' of the nonhuman into language. I argue that Bishop presents us with poetic 'soundscapes' which allow us to hear the natural world as a musical score. Rather than presenting us with an image or idea of a place, Bishop draws attention to its myriad sounds; encountering the natural world through this way is a means by which a place might be conveyed without symbolism, but rather merely as it is, in all its uncertainties. The reader is guided by their ear, as opposed to the 'empirical' eye; the landscape must be, to an extent, reconstructed in the reader's imagination. The second half of this chapter focuses on Bishop's Brazilian landscapes, which encourage the reader to draw parallels between human speech and animal, or non-human, sounds. Bishop is able, then, to trouble binaries between nature and culture, and emphasise the enmeshment of the human and natural world.

My third chapter, 'Translation', focuses on Bishop's writings on the practice of translation, including her correspondences with Robert Lowell, and on her translations of poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Max Jacob. Marilyn May Lombardi writes that Bishop aimed to 'silence' her voice when translating poems, which prompts the following questions: to what extent can Bishop's 'voice' be heard

in her translations, if at all?<sup>20</sup> How did the sound of the original poems factor in Bishop's decisions when translating? And what relationship did the poems that Bishop chose to translate have with her own poetry? We see how these poems both influenced and were influenced by her 'poetic voice', and offered her a means of extending that voice outward, allowing her to adopt different personas and styles while continuing to inflect those translations with her own voice. The result is a poetics of translation that is echoic rather than silent, and involving a kind of negative capability or surrender to the original.

In my fourth chapter, 'Reading aloud', I explore Bishop's recordings of her own poetry, and her unique 'performance of non-performance'. The sound of Bishop's poetry performance might seem like a counterintuitive area of study, as Bishop was hardly famous for her readings. That received opinion is slowly changing, however, and we can see how Bishop's reading voice developed over her career from nervous stiltedness to a slower, more considered style. That style, I argue, is in fact musical, incorporating alterations in speed and intonation that alter our reading, or listening, of the text; Bishop also makes herself 'present' in her readings, through her apparently improvised or unintentional asides and interruptions. The result is a partial concealment of the self, which avoids bringing excess emotion into the performances, while, paradoxically, creating a sense of intimacy with the listener.

A handful of critics have investigated Bishop's interest in voice and sound, though rarely at length. Linda Anderson writes perceptively that voice for Bishop is a way of conveying the particularity of people and things: 'listening means hearing the interval, the difference'.<sup>21</sup> Angela Leighton discusses Bishop in her monograph 'Hearing Things', named after Bishop's poem, 'Twelfth Morning', drawing attention to the link between sound, uncertainty and wonder in her poetry.<sup>22</sup> Andrew Eastman's essay in *Elizabeth Bishop and the Music of Literature* provided the impetus for this thesis, for its exploration of the indeterminacy of the voices in Bishop's poems, and the ways in which Bishop blurs the boundary

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<sup>20</sup> Marilyn May Lombardi, *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1995) p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Anderson, *Elizabeth Bishop: Lines of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things: the work of sound in literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018) p. 10

between self and other.<sup>23</sup> I am also indebted to Vidyan Ravinthiran's writing on the forms of attention generated by the sound of Bishop's prosody.<sup>24</sup> Where I will differ is by attempting to delineate the importance of sound to Bishop's artistic vision as a whole, and how this affects other strands of her work, including her translations and her readings of her own work. This thesis will also incorporate hitherto unexamined biographical factors which affected Bishop's attitudes to voice, sound and speech.

In examining her original poems which stage occasions of hearing and encounters with ambiguous voices, the translations which channel voices different to her own, and the subtle musicality of her readings, we begin to see the often overlooked importance of sound to Bishop's work and her notion of selfhood; we see the voice as both expressive of and separate from selfhood, both unique and resonant with other voices. In listening closely to the sound of Bishop's poetry, furthermore, I hope to throw light on the ways in which Bishop was able to create that effect of self-forgetfulness for the reader, so that the poetry becomes a place where one might find oneself 'hearing things', as Bishop writes in 'Twelfth Morning' - to intuit an uncertain world 'out there', beyond the self.

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Eastman, 'Hearing Things' from *Elizabeth Bishop and the Music of Literature*, ed. Angus Clegborn (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), pp. 41-50.

<sup>24</sup> Vidyan Ravinthiran, 'On Elizabeth Bishop', <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=10052](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10052)> [accessed March 2021]

## Chapter 1

### ‘My voice, in my mouth’: The human voice

One is always slightly estranged from one’s own voice. No-one will ever truly hear themselves as others hear them; even a recording will never be an entirely accurate replication, always a little altered by the technology you use. A voice will also always, whether you like it or not, contain traces of those around whom you learnt to speak; as Mladen Dolar writes, ‘incorporating the voice of the other is essential if one is to learn to speak’.<sup>25</sup> Hearing the voices of others is a similarly ambivalent experience: to be called by another person can bring the comfort of the familiar, or the tension of being singled out, defined against a white background. Hearing your name from another mouth, as Denise Riley observes, jars with its ‘unsparing admixture of finiteness with arbitrariness, of the given with the contingent.’<sup>26</sup> Our voices are similarly governed by a mixture of ‘finiteness and arbitrariness’: they make us who we are, they form our ‘identity’, and yet both our speech and the timbre of that speech ultimately originates from outside us - we are ‘thrown’ into our language and our voices.

One source of the confusion is that the voice exists perpetually between states, as Mladen Dolar writes: ‘the voice ties language to the body, but the nature of this tie is paradoxical: *the voice does not belong to either*. It is a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal.’<sup>27</sup> Both bodily and ‘emancipated’ from the body, the voice can acquire a ghostly quality, conjuring both presence and absence - particularly when the speaker cannot be seen. That ghostly voice, which seems to breach the boundary between self and other, is at the centre of Bishop’s poem ‘In the Waiting Room’. Dolar also captures the way a voice can *strike* the listener, almost in the same way touch might, acting as a kind of projectile ‘missile’. Sound is inherently an assault; we might close our eyes to things we do not want to see, but sounds are less easily avoided. The voice similarly exists somewhere at the juncture between subject and other, belonging to neither, since voices emerge out of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> Dolar, p. 73.



‘incorporating the other’. The voice’s inner tensions, between language and the body and between subject and other, are a preoccupation of Bishop’s throughout her work. In this chapter I aim to set out how Bishop’s approach to these tensions changes from her early work in *North and South* and *A Cold Spring* to her last volume, *Geography III*, where we see a gradual drift from a sense of the inadequacy of voice towards one of its ability to cross the boundary between self and other.

### ***Desire and utterance: ‘O Breath’ and other poems***

In her memoir ‘The Country Mouse’, Bishop describes her early experience of having the ‘wrong voice’: she feared that her being moved away from her maternal grandparents to her paternal grandparents in her childhood was a way ‘to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, perhaps even from the inverted r’s of my mother’s family.’<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, her grandfather mocked her for her ‘farm language’.<sup>29</sup> Denise Riley describes the fear one might feel of being heard primarily as a ‘speaking thing’: ‘I know how distracted by any unfamiliar accent or mannerism of speech even the best listener is. Or I’ll try hard to subdue my stammer from overwhelming what it is that I want to convey.’<sup>30</sup> The embarrassment of being singled out for her accent can be detected in Bishop’s early poem, called ‘Casabianca’, subverted onto an image of a boy standing on a ‘burning deck’, while he recites ‘the boy stood on the burning deck’, from the poem by Felicia Hemans that Victorian schoolchildren were often forced to learn, and which shares its title with Bishop’s poem.<sup>31</sup> The repetition of ‘love’s the boy stood on the burning deck’, which subtly alters throughout the poem, gives the strange impression that the boy is reciting the very poem he is in, trapped in a reverberating echo-chamber. The boy stood ‘stammering elocution / while the poor ship in flames went down’, an image that mocks the futility of mindless memorisation, and perhaps suggests

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<sup>28</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> Goldensohn, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Riley, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 7.

Phil Caradine, ‘The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck’, BBC online, 2013 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/f0cc4ee5-8a28-3b39-b214-dbbe9e2bcb2a>> [accessed Jan 2022]

the impossibility of true linguistic fluency: perfect ‘elocution’ will always be broken by the too-human ‘stammer’ that intercepts our words, revealing our vulnerable status as ‘speaking things’.

The poem is also, of course, about love, and the seemingly futile need to be ‘obstinate’ in securing it. Love and desire seem inextricably linked with the difficulty of expression in many of Bishop’s poems. ‘Varick Street’ obliquely addresses frustrated love by describing a city scene, lingering on its degraded state: ‘At night the factories / struggle awake, / wretched uneasy buildings / veined with pipes / attempt their work.’<sup>32</sup> The wretchedness represented by these buildings stretches into the speaker’s bedroom: ‘Our bed / shrinks from the soot / and hapless odors / hold us close’.<sup>33</sup> Each stanza is bookended with the refrain, apparently from a popular song, ‘And I shall sell you sell you / sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me’.<sup>34</sup> The looping refrain, as in ‘Casabianca’, expresses a tie between love and loss, its repetition embodying the inescapability of that tie, while the image of the ‘elongated nostrils’ of chimneys ‘trying to breathe’ conjures the suffocation felt by the two lovers, and, indeed, the difficulty of expressing love at all. That situation, however, is not one of total abjection: they are still held ‘close’ to one another, despite it all. Song, and perhaps the voice in general, is a comfort amid degradation, but inadequate as an escape. ‘Late Air’, meanwhile, is pessimistic about the ability of song, particularly popular song, to provide anything other than vague ‘marrow piercing guesses’, which are ‘whatever you believe’; instead, the poem’s speaker finds that ‘Five remote red lights’, up on the ‘Navy Yard aerial’, a visual emblem instead of an aural one, to be ‘better witnesses / for love on summer nights’, perhaps because of their impersonality and distance.<sup>35</sup>

The last two stanzas of another early poem, ‘Chemin de Fer’, conjure a similar sense of frustrated expression caught in a cycle of repetitions:

The hermit shot off his shot-gun  
and the tree by his cabin shook.  
Over the pond went a ripple  
The pet hen went chook-chook.

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<sup>32</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

"Love should be put into action!"  
screamed the old hermit.  
Across the pond an echo  
tried and tried to confirm it.<sup>36</sup>

The shot-gun and the scream both create responses in nature, that seem to be at once willed and unwilled: while the 'chook chook' of the hen is an automatic response, emphasised by the childlike rhyme with 'shook', the pond is personified as having 'tried and tried' to respond, albeit hopelessly. This poem acts like a microcosm for Bishop's ambivalent feelings about the communication of strong emotion (she told her creative writing students she hated the word 'communicate': her students 'are not here to *express* themselves')<sup>37</sup> The hermit's passionate speech is unable to put anything into 'action', but instead his speech is stuck listening to itself over and over again. Riley offers a useful formulation when she says that language is 'neither my master nor my instrument', but is instead 'amiably indifferent to me'; the hermit's language is willed and personal, but it does not behave in the way he wishes, seeming to take on a life of its own. The divide between echo and original speech begin to blur, in the poem's reverberating echo-chamber of call and response. The language of the hermit's desire only seems to keep its satisfaction at bay, as it creates that cycle of confirming repetition.

In 1949, Bishop wrote to a friend that she was working on an 'unfortunate' sequence of poems, which became 'Four Poems', featuring in her collection *A Cold Spring*.<sup>38</sup> These 'allusive, underarticulated' poems, to borrow Victoria Harrison's description, seem to embody in their elliptical nature the division between lovers that language cannot quite bridge.<sup>39</sup> The first and fourth of these poems most explicitly centre on speech and voice, and so they will be my central focus. 'Conversation' describes, if describes is the right word, a process by which 'uninnocent' conversations, that seem to go nowhere, eventually reach a point wherein 'a name / and all its connotations are the same'.<sup>40</sup> For Lombardi, this is an 'unanticipated release into authentic expression'.<sup>41</sup> How we get there is unclear,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Bishop, *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> *One Art*, p. 191.

<sup>39</sup> Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 74.

<sup>41</sup> Lombardi, p. 34.

though we can try to find a path: the ‘senses’ are engaged, up to a point where ‘there is no sense’, or finally it appears that language, in failing to mean, becomes meaningful: the inadequacy of words, of ‘names[s]’, is apparently dissolved.<sup>42</sup> That process appears to mirror the ‘freeing’ that takes place in the next poem, ‘Rain Towards Morning’, where the ‘puzzle of their prison’ is solved with an ‘unexpected kiss’.<sup>43</sup> That kiss mirrors the ‘senses’ that become engaged in ‘Conversation’: they are both an alternative to the frustrations of speech, of questions and answers between which ‘No one could tell the difference.’<sup>44</sup> It is when the ‘senses’ overwhelm ‘sense’ that a barrier is broken: listening to the tone, the melody of the voice of the other, allows for a greater intimacy than conversation. Self and other are no longer divided, as the lovers’ names begin to share the same ‘connotations’. Of course, the epiphany is kept under control by a diction that is largely abstract and opaque. ‘While Someone Telephones’, meanwhile, similarly imagines talk and conversation pessimistically: ‘Wasted minutes that couldn’t be worse, / minutes of a barbaric condescension.’<sup>45</sup>

Of these four poems, it is ‘O Breath’ that has received the most critical attention and which considers the problem of communication, of literally *speaking* and being known through that speech, most directly.<sup>46</sup> Critics have so far emphasised the poem’s sense of frustrated connection, allowing for varying degrees of ambivalence into their interpretations. Italics are mine: for Lorrie Goldensohn, the poem has ‘named its separations as *unbridgeable*’; Lombardi writes that “‘O Breath’ focuses on the *barely endurable* proximity of the loved one’s body, awakening a longing for still-deeper contact that *may not be achieved*”; Jonathan Ellis, like Lombardi, meanwhile, alludes to the ambiguities of the poem, suggesting that its blank spaces act as the ‘figurative space between intimacy and strangeness’ within the poem; communication between two people inevitably involves gaps, elisions, distortions, which is not to say

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<sup>42</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 74.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

that people can only ever be unknowable to one another.<sup>47</sup> Instead, following on from these analyses, I will argue that the poem centres on the paradoxes of voice, the ideas of both difference and similarity that it can conjure. In this poem from early in her career, we see Bishop reaching towards ideas that would come to their full realisation in 'In the Waiting Room'.

The title itself, 'O Breath', reminds us of the physical nature of utterance: without breath, speech is impossible.<sup>48</sup> When reading the first four lines of the poem (and the title), the physicality of one's own speech is brought to the foreground with the repetition of those voiced plosive 'B' sounds: 'beneath', 'celebrated breast', 'bored', 'blindly', 'bets'.<sup>49</sup> Such noisy effects emphasise sound over sense, in keeping with the opacity of the poem's broken lines and fractured syntax, which suggest a speaker gasping for breath between each clause. Bishop's struggles with asthma inevitably informed 'O Breath'; as Lombardi writes, the poem's broken lines give 'the agonies of asthma visible shape'.<sup>50</sup> The physicality of voice is even obliquely suggested by the image of 'nine black hairs' 'flying almost intolerably on your breath': breath, and in turn speech, can literally act with physical force, making things move, which seems to contrast with the earlier poems, in which the voice is unable to make anything happen.<sup>51</sup> That 'nine black hairs' is also a surprising instance of specificity - why nine? By isolating this detail, Bishop seems to be emphasising the particularity and uniqueness of each body. This, perhaps, is the part of the sense of separation which pervades the poem. The sound of another person's voice may afford a kind of intimacy, and conjure 'what we have in common', but that voice, the real voice, has a kind of opacity because of its specificity, unable to transcend the particular body that it comes from. Therefore, what it can communicate is restricted; perhaps all it can communicate is the bodily presence of the speaker.

However, the poem reaches beyond the particularity of the bodies and voices that the poet is describing, to the uncanny quality of voice in general, as something physical and yet invisible, unique

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<sup>47</sup> Goldensohn, p. 281.

Lombardi, p. 35.

Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006) p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Lombardi, p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 77.

and yet universal, just beyond language. To hear is to ‘touch from a distance’, in R. Murray Schafer’s words, while for Rousseau, ‘vocal signs’ can intimate to someone that ‘another sensitive being is present’ - the voice creates a particular kind of intimacy.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, it is an inherently ungraspable thing, issuing unseen from inside the body, and therefore mysterious: ‘something moving but invisibly’. ‘O Breath’ seems to embody the paradoxes of voice which Mladen Dolar highlights when he writes that the voice is ‘not part of linguistics’ - it is beyond, or separate from, language, but ‘it is not part of the body either.’<sup>53</sup> The voice in ‘O Breath’ is nonverbal, but seems to also transcend the body, detaching itself from its speaker, while still bespeaking its speaker’s particular subjectivity and bodily existence: the lover’s voice is ‘equivocal’, and yet ‘what we have in common’s bound to be there’.<sup>54</sup> These elusive lines suggest how utterance is what enables us to understand one another, and yet that utterance cannot facilitate a being ‘with’, but only ‘beneath / within’, a seemingly oxymoronic combination of prepositions which suggest neither connection nor total separation. The inherent paradoxes of voice mean that this play between the separation implied by the voice that can seemingly only utter its own being-there, and the possibility of connection implied by the fact that the voice travels beyond the speaker, continues interminably.

The ambiguity left unresolved at the end of the poem, is emblematic of Bishop’s approach to voice and its role in the communication of feeling. In her early work we see a pessimism about the voice and its ability to express profound emotions: attempts to utter true feeling in poems such as ‘Chemin de Fer’ and ‘Casabianca’ only result in the speaker hearing their own voice echoes back at them. In ‘Four Poems’, meanwhile, Bishop’s voice becomes more tentative, deliberately ‘underarticulated’, as she draws attention to the limits of speech, while suggesting the intimacy that might be created by disregarding language and emphasising the sensual, where some form of connection, however limited, might be found. Now, I will look forward in Bishop’s oeuvre to ‘In the Waiting Room’, where we see the connection created by voice as total and vertigo-inducing.

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<sup>52</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The soundscape: our sonic environment and the tuning of the world* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994) ebook.

Rousseau, p. 326.

<sup>53</sup> Dolar, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 77.

*'The family voice': 'In the Waiting Room'*

'In the Waiting Room' is the poem which, among Bishop's oeuvre, tackled the problem of voice and identity most explicitly. We are faced with the problem of simultaneous dislocation and connection that might arise when a familiar voice is overheard: the voice of the speaker's aunt, an '*Ob!*' of pain, triggers the speaker's realisation that there is nothing that meaningfully distinguishes her relative, or anyone else, from her:

Suddenly, from inside,  
came an *ob!* 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.<sup>55</sup>

Lee Edelman usefully explains how Bishop establishes a sense of the 'outside' intruding on the 'inside' in this poem *before* the moment of the aunt's cry, examining instead the earlier description of reading, where 'everything that "Elizabeth" encounters in the pages of the *National Geographic* serves to disturb the stability of a binary opposition', including the volcano, whose 'rivulets of fire' from the 'inside' run down the 'outside' of the volcano.<sup>56</sup> The cry itself is then a continuation of that reversal of inside and outside, coming from Elizabeth and her aunt and Elizabeth's magazine at once, unlocatable. I want to add, however, a sense in which that '*ob!*' is presented here as physical and embodied for the speaker: 'my voice, in my mouth.' Although the voice connects Elizabeth with her aunt, it also, paradoxically, belongs to her and makes her unique: it is not Aunt Consuelo's voice in her mouth, but her voice in her own mouth, a voice which contains echoes of her aunt's, but is *not* it. That voice therefore marks their simultaneous separateness and connection; rather than being an apparition, I want to argue that Aunt Consuelo's cry draws Elizabeth's attention to its presence in her own voice.

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<sup>55</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 179.

<sup>56</sup> Lee Edelman, "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room"", *Contemporary Literature*, 26.2, (1985), 179-196 (p. 188).

We might return to Bishop's early letter in which she outlines her interest in the strange things that a voice can do to one's conception of 'inside' and 'outside': '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 [...]'.<sup>57</sup> The wordless, unwilling sounds we make are more revealing than 'meaningful' conversation, perhaps because there is no performance or pretence to them. Unexpectedness is also important – if we were deliberately paying attention to these sounds, they might lose their uncanny quality. Heidegger writes that in order to hear a 'bare sound', a sound as it *is*, not as we imagine it, we must 'listen away from things, divert our ears from them'; this captures, I think, the importance of distraction to Bishop's ideas about the effects of sounds on the self.<sup>58</sup> Aunt Consuelo's cry occurs when the child of the poem is absorbed in her copy of *National Geographic*: it is that distraction which allows the child to confuse the voice for her own, to momentarily feel as though she is 'inside' her Aunt's consciousness, privy to her 'indescribable' inner life; the sound of her aunt's cry is no longer just her aunt, or the idea of her aunt. To concentrate on the voice is to objectify it, classify it, distance oneself from it: its transpersonal quality emerges when we hear our own voice in the voice of the other without expecting it.

The surprise of this encounter with the voice of another, and the sense of dislocation created in the poem therefore fosters an idea of the voice as existing both within the body and elsewhere, and this notion is intensified by the speaker's nervous question:

What similarities--  
 boots, hands, the family voice  
 I felt in my throat, or even  
 the *National Geographic*  
 and those awful hanging breasts--  
 held us all together  
 or made us all just one?<sup>59</sup>

That phrase, 'the family voice / I felt in my throat', is suggestive of the shared nature of our voices, which seem to only partially belong to us: while the voice is part of the body, felt in physically the

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<sup>57</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger, p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 180.



‘throat’, and therefore one’s own, it is also to some degree a foreign element imposed from the outside; the ‘family voice’ is given but never chosen. To become aware of this is to realise the ‘finiteness and arbitrariness’ of one’s speech. Feeling a voice in one’s throat might also suggest the possibility of choking on that voice; there is the suggestion of the limit that such an imposition might place on anyone’s ability to truly *speak* for themselves.

Denise Riley suggests a means by which we might avoid being endlessly ‘spoken’ by our ‘inner-voices’, that hidden part of our speech over which we have no say:

‘Inner language is not composed of graceful musing, but of disgracefully indiscriminate repetition, running on automatic pilot. Nevertheless, even if such reflections mean that I’m displaced as an original thinker, I’m not quite evacuated. Even if my tawdry inner language is thinking me [...] there’s many a slip between inner thought and lip. It’s certainly speaking in me; but I can subdue it before it fully speaks me, I can edit or inhibit the invading words.’<sup>60</sup>

Riley is speaking of the unfiltered language of the id that we repress in order to function in society, but we might extend her notion of ‘inner language’ to include the background chatter of consciousness, the un-willed language that hums in the back of our minds. ‘In the Waiting Room’ presents the fear of the kind of arbitrary, free-floating being that such ‘inner-speech’ might create, the ‘sensation of falling off / the round, turning world’.<sup>61</sup> And yet, the poem does not wholly succumb to it; we feel the presence of an author who can ‘edit or inhibit the invading words’. As Lee Zimmerman writes, ‘the child “didn’t know any / word” (161) for her predicament, but the poet knows the poem’s words’, and keeps up the task of ‘writing her way between nameless dread and the dread of being named.’<sup>62</sup> Selfhood may be salvageable in that between-space, which one might argue the poem creates in its hybridity of voices.

Critics agree on the disturbing nature of the existential realisation Bishop narrates: for Craig Raine, the ‘enigma of the ordinary in tainted with disgust and horror’.<sup>63</sup> For Helen Vendler, the poem’s

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<sup>60</sup> Riley, p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 180.

<sup>62</sup> Lee Zimmerman, ‘The Weirdest Scale on Earth: Elizabeth Bishop and Containment’, from *American Imago*, 61.4 (2004) 495-518 (p. 510).

<sup>63</sup> Craig Raine, *More Dynamite* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013) National Poetry Library ebook.

endpoint is a slide ‘into an abyss of darkness.’<sup>64</sup> Perhaps, however, the shifting diction of the poem might be Bishop’s gesture towards how one could face that ‘abyss’, and the terrible contingency of identity. By initially making use of childlike language, Bishop suggests a child’s way of viewing the world:

Babies with pointed heads  
wound round and round with string;  
black, naked women with necks  
wound round and round with wire<sup>65</sup>

The rhythmic repetition and assonance of ‘wound round and round’ suggests an almost dazed absorption in the magazine pages, perhaps a ‘perfectly useless concentration’, to borrow a phrase Bishop uses to describe her aesthetic ideal in poetry. Intuitive connections are occurring through sound and language, indicative of a child-like openness to the world; can that openness be a way of describing Bishop’s aesthetic? Although it leads to the child’s disgust, I believe that that aesthetic of openness is what gets us to the poem’s final stanza, which shifts dramatically from the voice that came before it.

The childlike diction becomes something cooler, and more expansive, like a camera taking a wide-angle shot at the end of a film:

Then I was back in it.  
The War was on. Outside,  
in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
were night and slush and cold,  
and it was still the fifth  
of February, 1918.<sup>66</sup>

The apparently objective relay of facts lifts us beyond the subjectivity of the child, out into the world. In doing so, Bishop avoids the ‘abyss’ by bringing the multiplicity within the human voice, which had troubled her speaker, into her poem. By inhabiting two dictions, we are exposed to the speaker’s variedness: the lost child, and the controlled, objective adult, sharing the same space of the poem, in a manner which avoids chaos and meaninglessness by landing on the certainty (yet almost arbitrary specificity) of that final date, ‘the fifth / of February, 1918’. And there’s the polysyndeton of ‘night and

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<sup>64</sup> Helen Vendler, ‘Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly’, *World Literature Today*, 51.1 (1977) 23-28 (p. 25)

<sup>65</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 179.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 181.

slush and cold’, which carries over a hint of the rhythmic connection-making of ‘wound round and round’. The childlike voice and the adult voice are not entirely discrete, then, but connected. Perhaps the difficulties of voice, and the possibility of speaking in a way that is not inhibited by history, is through a poetic language that can incorporate, not disavow, the echoes that make a voice.

This survey of poems by Bishop which centre on the human voice, and what that voice might communicate primarily as sound, suggests a gradual shift in Bishop’s poetic thinking. Each of these poems, in different ways, speak to anxieties that Bishop would have felt around her own speaking voice, about having the *wrong* voice, stemming from the dislocation of her upbringing and the necessity of keeping aspects of her identity (such as her sexuality) private. Though emerging out of these autobiographical factors, however, the poems are never explicitly about her life; instead, they imply a more universal condition: the ‘finiteness and arbitrariness’ of one’s voice, both shared and unique, and the idea that the sensual aspects of voice communicate something that words cannot. The early poems, from ‘Casabianca’ to ‘O Breath’, concentrate on the failures, or partial victories, of voice, to communicate; ‘In the Waiting Room’, meanwhile, stages an encounter with a ‘pure’, presignifying voice that reveals the arbitrariness of one’s relation to the world, and which in turn renders the speaker voiceless. However, the poem’s polyvocality, shifting from childlike to coolly objective registers, prevents it from hovering too close to the abyss. It allows the poem to incorporate the hybridity of voice into its form, and in turn suggest a kind of unity, emblematised by the poem, amid that arbitrariness. In my next chapter, I will look at several of Bishop’s nature and landscape poems, which draw attention to the musical voices of nature; these voices are similarly ‘impure’ or echoic, evoking both human speech and music, and troubling the boundary between the human and non-human.

## Chapter 2

### ‘A language I don’t know’: Hearing nature

In her book *Hearing Things: the work of sound in literature*, Angela Leighton compares listening to seeing, characterising the former as the inherently less ‘certain’, empirical sense; to interpret the world through listening would ‘require a wholesale reordering of our language of argument and enquiry’.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, while ‘seeing is believing’, as the cliché goes, listening seems to require a degree of faith. Sounds vanish as soon as they come into existence, though they might resonate in the imagination. Of course, certainty can be imposed on one’s hearing, since one can decide to hear what one wants to hear, to ‘listen determinedly’, and the fact that our hearing is affected by our conscious and unconscious minds is key to much of Bishop’s nature poetry; nature is never just nature, one can never look into a ‘virgin mirror’ to see things with untainted eyes, as the speaker of ‘The Riverman’ desires.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, Leighton’s argument for a new form of inquiry grounded in *listening* rather than *seeing* will help us read Bishop’s poetry, which often seems to resist argumentative structures, preferring to retain an enigmatic aura that lingers after the last line has been read, and to understand Bishop’s ear for the strange voices that arise out of nature. Of course, ‘nature’ itself is difficult to define, and these poems vary from landscape poems to more otherworldly depictions of the non-human, as in ‘The Riverman’ - in fact, the difficulty of defining nature is a central problem of Bishop’s poetry, which explores the enmeshment of the human and natural worlds. That enmeshment can be found, furthermore, in the way Bishop’s landscapes imply an emotional subtext which is never explicitly revealed. This chapter will first examine poems set in Key West, Florida, where Bishop lived from 1938-1948, and their anxious soundscapes; then, I will turn my attention to three of Bishop’s ‘Brazil’ poems, from her collection *Questions of Travel*, in which Bishop draws attention to the affinities between language and natural sound, drawing on her experience of living in a country whose language she could, at first, scarcely speak.

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<sup>67</sup> Leighton, p. 10

<sup>68</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 103.

## **Key West: 'The Bight' and 'Florida'**

Robert Frost, interviewed by W. S. Braithwaite in 1915, explained his concept of the 'sound of sense':

What we get in life and miss so often in literature is the sentence sounds that underlie the words.... [L]et us take the example of two people who are talking to each other on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. This is because every meaning has a particular sound-posture, or, to put it in another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with....<sup>69</sup>

Frost's image of speech heard from behind a closed door offers a way of reading some of Bishop's 'descriptive' poems, such as 'The Bight' and 'Florida' that attends to the meaning that might be overlooked if we only pay attention to the words, ignoring the 'sound-postures' of Bishop's language. These poems command the reader to listen both in the images of listening they contain, and in the sound of the language, which is where I will argue the emotion and argument of the poems is communicated.

'The Bight', from her second collection, *A Cold Spring*, is a descriptive poem that consists of a succession of sometimes bewildering images and sounds. The bight is rich with auditory detritus, pointing towards no argument, both alluring but difficult to decipher. That allure is there in the first line, 'At low tide like this how sheer the water is', with its euphonious iambic pentameter (with the exception of the extra syllable of 'at').<sup>70</sup> That pentameter then begins to crumble as the poem continues, like the dry 'ribs of marl' of the next line, with the lines lengthening and shortening. Bishop's assonantal groups, 'tide', 'like' and 'this', 'low' and 'how', 'sheer' and 'water', absorb the reader into the landscape through their euphony, an idea which is alluded to in the ambiguous lines 'absorbing rather than being absorbed, / The water in the bight doesn't wet anything'.<sup>71</sup> One would usually say they were 'absorbed' in a work of art like a poem, but Bishop's reversal suggests another kind of state, wherein, as the water absorbs moisture from the beach rather than being absorbed by it and making it wet, the reader or listener 'absorbs' the poem and its sounds, without necessarily understanding or

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Frost, quoted by Robert S. Newdick in 'Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense', from *American Literature*, 9.3 (1937), 289-300 (p. 292)

<sup>70</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 59.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

being able to interpret it, guided along by sound. This image is suggestive of the ideal of readerly receptivity that Leighton describes, an almost passive absorption that does not demand answers, but allows for a total immersion unguided by narrative, and an acceptance of unknowing.

Critics have often drawn attention to the psychological anxieties and undercurrents of loss underpinning Bishop's 'awful but cheerful' bight. Frances Leviston has persuasively argued that Bishop's mother's death is the semi-submerged anxiety that underlies the poem, with its repeated bone imagery, the protruding 'ribs of marl', the 'jawful or marl', allowing us to 'infer the presence of a complete skeleton submerged in the bay', which Leviston suggests might be Bishop's mother.<sup>72</sup> Leighton, meanwhile, links the 'torn-open, unanswered letters' to the letter that Bishop received from a 'repudiated lover' before her death.<sup>73</sup> Key West itself was an escape for Bishop from what she called her 'prize unhappy childhood' in Worcester, Massachusetts with her paternal grandparents, and a place where she was able to be productive as a poet; the underlying anxieties of childhood loss and displacement in these poems are tempered, therefore, by the newfound freedom from a traumatic past that Key West offered.<sup>74</sup> I want to look more closely therefore at how the rhythms and musical images of this poem suggest those mixed feelings, of both anxiety and freedom. An intimation of death is created by the ticking clock that seems to soundtrack the poem, in the 'off-beat claves' played by the dredge and the onomatopoeic 'Click. Click' sound that occurs near the poem's end, a forward march that is not the smooth flow of pentameter but the harshness of grouped stressed syllables.<sup>75</sup> The sound of 'off-beat claves' creates discord, both in its suggestion of a disorientating offbeat rhythm and in its (arguable) three bunched stresses, if one hears 'beat' as stressed, as that hard *b* sound suggests it should be. 'Click. Click. Goes...', meanwhile, with those disjunctive full-stops, creates a similar effect, and is more unarguably spondaic. Other grouped stresses of three include 'last bad storm' and 'blue-grey shark', a repeated technique that dislodges Bishop's otherwise iambic line and whimsical tone with a

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<sup>72</sup> Frances Leviston, 'Mothers and Marimbas in "The Bight": Bishop's *Danse Macabre*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 61.4 (2015) 444-445 (p. 444)

<sup>73</sup> Leighton, p. 184

<sup>74</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 431

Thomas Travisano, 'Elizabeth Bishop in Key West, Island of Her Dreams' in *LitHub*, (2019) <<https://lithub.com/elizabeth-bishop-in-key-west-island-of-her-dreams/>> [accessed January 2022]

<sup>75</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 59.

hammered knell of unease. Beyond autobiographical intimations of personal tragedy, Bishop weaves anxiety into the musical texture of the poem.

And then there are those lines which are particularly difficult to make sense of, their whimsicality contrasting with the subtle mood of dread elsewhere: 'one can smell [the water] turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire / one could probably hear it turning to marimba music'. Leviston argues that the poet's changing perception changes the bight itself, as the supposedly inaudible marimba music later becomes audible with the dredge's 'off-beat claves': 'the scene is as suggestible as Bishop's own consciousness, as the mere mention of "marimba music" is enough to activate [its sound]'.<sup>76</sup> Zachariah Pickard similarly suggests a kind of logic to the fanciful image, noting how the mention of marimba music chimes with the 'Click. Click' of the dredge; he also argues, however, that the 'level of detail and steadfast attention' mean that the bight is a 'real landscape', and is ultimately 'unaffected' by Bishop's 'associative leaps', rather than being fluidly 'suggestible', as Leviston puts it. What might be the purpose of such associative leaps, then? There is, I think, a combination of that fluid suggestibility and more solid materiality in Bishop's poetry, which is part of strategy that deliberately engages and distances the reader at the same time, concealing when appearing to simply describe.

Bishop's foregrounding of the rhythms of the bight reflects a desire to reach for music in her portrayal of nature. She evokes the combined tangibility and intangibility of sound, physically vibrating in the ear-drum but also vanishing as it resounds. That perpetual vanishing is suggested by her image of water turning to gas, and then to 'marimba music', shifting states. Bishop wrote that writing poetry is an 'unnatural act', and here, she refuses to render nature *too naturally*; while immersed in the materiality of the landscape, the unreal and dreamlike cast a light haze over proceedings; Bishop blends the solid and the abstract, the physicality of 'crumbling ribs of marl', with adjectives like 'impalpable', and strange formulations like 'absorbing rather than being absorbed'.<sup>77</sup> There is a sense of the abstraction of music here, while 'a jawful of marl' towards the end of the poem opens up the possibility of the landscape's

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<sup>76</sup> Leviston, p. 446

<sup>77</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 327.  
*Ibid.*, *Poems*, p. 59.

utterance, a kind of musical speaking.<sup>78</sup> By figuring the bight as able to speak, without giving us access to what it is saying, we are both called to listen to the landscape and denied access to it. In Bishop's portrayal, the landscape is therefore autonomous; we struggle to affix a meaning, to get a clear grasp of the poem.

Don Ihde, in *Listening and Voice*, describes how 'music that is a mélange of "natural" sounds draws attention to the musical character of all sound [... ] The aim is a transformation of listening, a listening to the music of the World.'<sup>79</sup> By collecting natural sounds artificially, one can renew our perspective of the natural world, and create a 'transformation of listening': is this what Bishop achieves with "The Bight," with her defamiliarising similes and jarring musicality? With Bishop's comparison of boats to 'torn-open, unanswered letters,' a littering of 'old correspondences,' we might find a further trace of that musical collage that Ihde describes; while letters are silent language, as opposed to music, their place here on the bight indicates a kind of language whose content is hidden from the reader, akin to the uncertain language of music.<sup>80</sup> Zachariah Pickard writes that Bishop 'never achieves the "transport" of association', failing to find 'union' and meaning in the landscape; beyond meaninglessness, however, I would argue that the landscape is pregnant with the meaning that we might find in music, which does not reveal anything easily translatable into words.<sup>81</sup> The 'Click. Click' following and alliterating with 'correspondences' further indicates that link between wordless musical sound and communication; what is communicated, however, is a mood of strangeness and anxiety, that retains the mystery of the landscape while imparting onto it a kind of 'voice,' suggesting ways in which the landscape might speak when listened to, and, furthermore, how language itself function like the wordless music of the bight, something that 'absorbs' you without your full understanding, acting on you almost physically. The meaning the reader gathers is by intuiting the meaning of the poem's 'sound-postures', its combination of dissonance and a more regular iambic beat. Listening in, we can infer the muffled conversation to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) p. 159

<sup>80</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 59.

<sup>81</sup> Zachariah Pickard, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Description* (McGill: Queen's University Press, 2009) p. 184



which Frost refers, gathering the ambivalent associations of Key West for Bishop, of death and freedom, without these topics being broached in a remotely explicit way.

In another Key West poem, 'Florida', the sound of nature is similarly both alluring and unsettling. Initially, the musicality of the natural life of the innocently-described 'state with the prettiest name' is foregrounded in a way that, again, draws attention to the unnaturalness of nature, and how human ideas necessarily tint our perceptions of it: 'The mosquitos / go hunting to the tune of their ferocious obligatos', while 'unseen hysterical birds [...] rush up the scale / every time in a tantrum'.<sup>82</sup> Christopher Spaide describes this as the poem's 'ethnomusicological fieldwork', its organisation of the natural world in terms of European classical music.<sup>83</sup> That organisation ultimately fails with the final lines, however, as the animal sounds of the alligator can no longer be classified in terms of measurable 'scales' or refined, Italianate 'obbligatos':

The alligator, who has five distinct calls:  
friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning--  
whimpers and speaks in the throat  
of the Indian Princess.<sup>84</sup>

This is a strange conflation of the utilitarian animal call with the voice of an 'Indian princess' and its contrasting connotations of sophistication. While this ending seems to offer confusion in the place of closure, its image is suggestive of how nonlinguistic sound can be a kind of speech. Though Spaide argues that meaning has lost its footing in the final lines, as the distinct calls of the alligator simplify into 'whimper[ing]', those sounds might be argued to represent an approach towards greater clarity, or freedom. Karmen MacKendrick, in *The Matter of Voice*, discusses the pull of the 'universal, mythical original' language, from before the Tower of Babel, and goes on to suggest the possibility of an original language that, while not having the words, might have 'the set of sounds' which all languages use to make meaning; here there is 'gathered the potential of *all the voices*.'<sup>85</sup> We might contain some of that universal language within us: MacKendrick notes that 'we are born with a fullness of vocal possibilities; it is only after coming into one language that we lose the easy ability to make the sounds

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<sup>82</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 33.

<sup>83</sup> Christopher Spaide, 'Music', from *Elizabeth Bishop in Context*, ed. Angus Cleghorn, 233-244 (p. 236)

<sup>84</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 33.

<sup>85</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, *The Matter of Voice: Sensuous Soundings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) p. 73.

characteristic of others.<sup>86</sup> The alligator's call is suggestive of that 'fullness of vocal possibilities', before the musicality (and, therefore, the universality) of language has been constrained. The chaos of what has come before in the poem, made audible in the bunched consonants of lines like 'cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed / and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks', and the constant movement suggested by seemingly endless present participles, is diminished in the final two lines, which read as one line of iambic pentameter slowed by being split into two lines. Semantic meaning is gone, but Bishop delicately draws our attention, through her use of sound, to the proto-voice of the alligator, as if to suggest that it is more meaningful, more worthy of attention, than the frenzied clamour that preceded it.

***Brazil: 'Twelfth Morning; Or, What You Will', 'The Riverman' and 'Questions of Travel'***

Like her Key West poems, Bishop's poetic depictions of Brazil are attuned to the strange sounds of the environment, drawing attention to the act of listening both through her imagery and the 'sound-posture' of her verse. A different location implies a different relation to the landscape, and these Brazil poems are inevitably inflected with Bishop's position as outsider, a white, relatively wealthy northerner in a poor southern country, with only a partial grasp of the language; the otherness that imbues all of Bishop's poems of place and environment is, in these poems, intensified by cultural difference.<sup>87</sup> The listening that takes place in these poems is all the more aware of what the listener might bring to what they hear *because* of their position, and the positioning of hearing as central in these poems seems to suggest the possibility of transformation that this 'uncertain', less empirical mode of apprehension can bring.

In 'Twelfth Morning; Or, What You Will', one's ear is first pricked by the title, the first transformation of the poem: Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* turns diurnal, fittingly for a poet uniquely interested in the dawn, that numinous space between waking and dreaming, explored in dawn poems

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Bishop wrote a note on arriving in Brazil that read, 'it is hell not to be able to speak the language.' From Goldensohn's *Biography of a Poetry*, p. 24.

such as 'Paris 7AM', 'Sunday 4AM', 'A Miracle for Breakfast', and 'Anaphora'.<sup>88</sup> *Twelfth Night* is of course a play about transformation, and the unreliability of perception is the governing principle of 'Twelfth Morning.' This is suggested both aurally and visually in its first stanza:

Like a first coat of whitewash when it's wet,  
The thin grey mist lets everything through:  
The black boy Balthazar, a fence, a horse,  
A foundered house [...]<sup>89</sup>

Beginning the poem with the word 'like' immediately introduces a hesitation, not only in its claim of similarity rather than identity, but in the extra, quiet foot that it lends to an otherwise iambic line; the rhythm of the poem hiccups before it has even started. And then there is of course the 'thin gray mist,' that softens but does not hide anything; the ear also catches, however, that half-rhyme of 'horse' and 'house,' that almost suggests a trip of the tongue and a confusion between the two rather than an intentional rhyme. The two words are also brought closer together by that shorter final line, as though to make their similarity more audible. That uncertainty is made explicit in a later stanza, where the horse is described as 'bigger than the house' – is this house really a horse, is this horse really a house? Both visual and auditory perception are compromised here; and yet, the reader is given the imperative to 'listen' a few stanzas later, as though it were the only way to enter the landscape fully.<sup>90</sup> If *Twelfth Night* is a play about concealing one's identity through how one looks, it could be a clue to how a form of listening, with its inherent uncertainties, may actually be a less hazardous mode of apprehension than seeing.

The landscape begins to speak in the third stanza: in contrast to 'The Bight's 'off-beat claves,' this beach releases an 'expelled breath'; the sandpiper's 'heart-broken cries', meanwhile, are 'faint faint faint,' each stressed syllable like a breath of its own.<sup>91</sup> Andrew Eastman argues that it is at this point that the reader is brought into the poem, through the use of voiceless fricatives, which 'draw attention to

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<sup>88</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, pp. 28-127.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

speech-sound', and that repetition of 'faint': 'one is led to *perform* the aural quality of the sounds'.<sup>92</sup> There is another way in which the reader is brought into the poem, beyond the auditory texture of each word: the invocation to 'listen' to the sea 'doing nothing' appears to be a paradoxical demand at first, and even when we hear the sea's 'breath', we are made to doubt ourselves, with the parenthesis '(or are you hearing things?)'.<sup>93</sup> By being commanded to listen to what may not be there, the reader must be active and searching, open to the possibility that they might hear nothing at all. That activity draws the mind to Stevens' 'The Snowman', and its listener who 'beholds / Nothing that is not there and nothing that is'; in both poems, there is a kind of faith amid the emptiness of *something* being there, however intangible.<sup>94</sup> As well as drawing attention to the sounds in the words and their material reality, Bishop draws attention to the sounds that are *not there*, as though to emphasise the inherent ambiguities of sound, and the degree of interpretation that must go into understanding what we hear.

In the final stanza, the location of 'voice' shifts between the human and natural worlds.

[...] You can hear the water now,  
inside, slap-slapping. Balthazar is singing.<sup>95</sup>

One is drawn towards that adjective, 'inside', to describe the water; surely the water is outside, on the beach? Is Bishop referring to a sound, that 'slap-slapping' coming from *inside* the water? Perhaps the sound is coming from inside our heads, and we are again just 'hearing things'? Bishop seems to be again suggesting ways in which what we hear is partly imagined, or transfigured by our own imaginations. Furthermore, there is a suggestion that the 'inner-voice' that would normally reside inside our minds is replaced by the sound of the sea, and its 'slap-slapping'. There is also the enjambment that separates the sea's 'slap-slapping' and Balthazar's singing on the same line: both natural and human voices are paralleled, sharing that gerund and sibilance, indicating similarity, or interchangeability. This affinity between human and natural voices suggests that, as in 'The Bight' and 'Florida', a landscape can have a

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<sup>92</sup> Andrew Eastman, "Hearing Things": Voice and Rhyme in the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, from *Elizabeth Bishop and the Music of Literature*, pp.46-47

<sup>93</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 108.

<sup>94</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Harmonium* (Faber: London, 2001) p. 11

<sup>95</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 108.

voice of its own, and a musicality, that is both similar to a human language and inherently inaccessible and foreign. It also suggests the ways in which our own voices may be estranged from us, as distant and unknowable as the wordless ‘slap-slapping’ of the waves of Cabo Frio, since hearing is, as the poem shows, so fraught with uncertainty, and charged with the associations we bring to it. Voice here is material, a sound that means in the same way the sound of lapping waves might mean. To return to Stevens, the listener amid the landscape is, like that empty landscape, ‘nothing himself’, but instead fashions the landscape just as he fashions himself. The poem’s rhyme scheme fades in and out, until the resounding full-rhyme of the final couplet: “‘Today’s my anniversary,” he sings, / “the Day of Kings.””<sup>96</sup> The certainty emerging from confusion enacted by that rhyme suggests that the poor ‘black boy Balthazar’<sup>96</sup>’s imaginary self-fashioning is actually *real*. His fantasy becomes true by virtue of it being sung. This is not to say that his poverty is alleviated, but it is suggestive of how the voice might bring things into the world, as the sounds of the beach are *more* than just noise: they can become an ‘expelled breath’, something living.

Self-fashioning and transcending one’s worldly limitations are the subject of another ‘Brazil’ poem from *Questions of Travel*, a dramatic monologue called ‘The Riverman’. Again, voice is key to that self-fashioning. The poem describes the journey of a Amazonian villager who is summoned by a dolphin into the Amazon river; he learns the language of the river by listening to the inscrutable voice of the ‘river spirit’ Luandinha, in the hope of becoming a ‘*sacaca*, a witch doctor who works with water spirits’, and ultimately abandons village life for ‘travelling as fast as a wish’ through ‘the river’s long, long veins’.<sup>97</sup> Other voices populating the poem include non-linguistic human voices and the sibilant, watery sounds of the river itself. For the villager, the understanding of the river-world he gleans from these voices allow him to become another of the river-spirits, free from the hardships of village life.

Walt Whitman’s phrase, ‘The sea whisper’d me’, from the end of his poem ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’, is useful for its suggestion of a link between the non-linguistic voices of the natural

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

world and poetic language.<sup>98</sup> Here, the poet surrenders their own voice to nature, with the implication that they are no longer the original source of their language. Heidegger declares enigmatically in *Poetry, Language, Thought* that ‘language speaks’, and that ‘mortals speak insofar as they listen’, while poetry emerges out of a ‘painstaking listening’: speech does not therefore originate from the person, but from language itself; the speaker is spoken by language, or rather their speech emerges out of language already heard.<sup>99</sup> Both ideas suggest an unexpected reversal: the speaker is no longer the origin of their speech, but is guided by a presence outside of themselves, be it their natural surroundings, or language itself. Bishop’s voicings of the natural world speak to this sense of the externality of language, and to Whitman’s idea that language is not merely the domain of the human world. For Heidegger, poetry is that which is ‘purely spoken’; to achieve this, that ‘painstaking listening’ must occur, which means being attuned to the non-linguistic voices of nature.<sup>100</sup> ‘The Riverman’ is a poem centred around listening, and particularly to the ‘excess’ of language - its musicality and texture.

For all this talk of being ‘spoken by’ nature, the voice of Bishop’s poem is distinctly human and almost childlike. It is important to emphasise the fundamental unrealness of the poem; she is not conjuring the Amazon as it really is, but through her imagination, and she planned to write a poem about the Amazon that was more ‘authentic’. ‘The Riverman’ is not written from experience, but from reading Charles Wagley’s *Amazon Town*, as the opening note advertises (although it was written while she lived in Brazil). It is also likely that it derived from a dream.<sup>101</sup> That unrealness is detectible in the voice of the poem, which is acutely aware of the limit of its own words to describe. A naïve, childlike quality is created through short, declarative sentences often starting with ‘I’: ‘I got up in the night, / for the Dolphin spoke to me’, ‘I threw off my blanket, sweating; I even tore off my shirt. I got out of my hammock / and went through the window naked’.<sup>102</sup> A rough three-beat line, which Bishop went on to use in ‘In the Waiting Room’, a poem from a child’s perspective, also imbues the poem’s voice with an

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<sup>98</sup> Walt Whitman, ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’, *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48858/out-of-the-cradle-endlessly-rocking>> [accessed June 2021]

<sup>99</sup> Heidegger, p. 214.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Bishop tells Anne Stevenson she uses dream material ‘whenever [she is] lucky enough to have any’. Bishop, *Prose*, p. 394.

<sup>102</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 103.

air of child-like awkwardness because of its deliberate, somewhat truncated rhythm. The scene of leaving one's room in the night, following strange sounds, implies a metaphor for a dream-world being entered; these simple, yet fantastical, declarations seem to draw on Freud's notion of the 'primary processes' awoken by dreams, the 'irrational kind [of thinking]', found in 'hysterical patients' and 'infants'; these primitive desires 'reassert themselves most riotously in dreams'.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps then we can see the fantastical narrative of 'The Riverman', of a villager escaping village life through his window, as reflective of a desire to reject adult, waking rationality, and re-embrace the Id-like fantasies of childhood.

The dreamlike and fantastical quality of the poem is accompanied by an emphasis on sensual, rather than intellectual, apprehension. 'The Dolphin spoke to me. / He grunted beneath my window [...] I heard the dolphin sigh / as he slid into the water'; there is an ambiguity here created by the verb 'spoke', in the absence of any dialogue, about whether the dolphin really speaks, or simply grunts and sighs.<sup>104</sup> Here we see the power of a voice to enact, to do things, even when unintelligible. Mladen Dolar writes of the authority that words can take on when spoken aloud:

The voice seems to possess the power to turn words into acts; the mere vocalisation endows words with a ritual efficacy, the passage from articulation to vocalisation is like a passage a l'acte, a passage to action and an exertion of authority.<sup>105</sup>

It is as though, when contrasting the voices of the naïve speaker and the grunting dolphin, Bishop is hinting at the limits of words themselves, their inherent clumsiness; instead, it is the *sound* that allows the river man to commune with the water spirits; the dolphin's 'grunt' takes on an authority because of its unintelligibility. Linda Anderson suggests that this emphasis on listening to nonverbal sounds reflects Bishop's loose grasp of Portuguese when living in Brazil: 'A renewed awareness of listening, and of the vital dimensions of voice which escape the purely linguistic, could well have been an aspect of her life in a country whose language she never spoke with confidence.'<sup>106</sup> This is persuasive, but

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<sup>103</sup> Ritchie Robertson, Introduction, Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. xvi (Oxford: OUP, 2008)

<sup>104</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 103.

<sup>105</sup> Mladen Dolar, p. 55.

<sup>106</sup> Anderson, p. 130.

listening appears to do more than just allow the Riverman to understand an animal language; the rest of the poem charts their involvement in a fundamentally alternate way of knowing the world and nature.

That new 'way of knowing' is gestured to by the following passage, as the speaker is initiated into the underworld of the Amazon river:

She complimented me  
In a language I didn't know;  
But when she blew cigar smoke  
Into my ears and nostrils  
I understood, like a dog,  
Although I can't speak it yet.<sup>107</sup>

The process of having cigar smoke blown into the ears of the speaker does not render the mystical language familiar, yet it does somehow make it intelligible, as though the speaker's senses have been heightened enough to interpret the musical texture of that language, where meaning might be encoded. Bishop noted that, while living in Brazil as a foreigner without a strong grasp on the language, 'one realizes in a dim way how the world must seem to a very young child, or perhaps a dog', and her joke about understanding 'like a dog' seems to directly refer to that kind of half-understanding.<sup>108</sup> Behind the apparent whimsicality of the line, there is also the suggestion of something more serious about non-human intelligence and its not-yet-understood depths. Is Bishop suggesting the preferability of a kind of understanding without knowing with regards to the natural world, an intuitive understanding led by the senses? The passage recalls the aforementioned Heidegger quotation: the poet must submit what they say 'to an ever more painstaking listening', allowing themselves to be 'more open and real for the unforeseen'; the river man's knowledge is one borne out of that 'painstaking listening' that makes a kind of knowledge out of the unknown.<sup>109</sup> We can therefore see him as a kind of analogue for the poet, opening herself to what is out there in her poetry through that listening.

The river man of course still desires to 'know' things, believing knowledge to be the key to their initiation into the Amazonian underworld: 'I know some things already / but it will take years of

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<sup>107</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 104.

<sup>108</sup> Bishop, quoted in *Lines of Connection*, p. 110

<sup>109</sup> Heidegger, p. 214.



study, / it is all so difficult.<sup>110</sup> The acceptance of the need for ‘years of study’ is a counter to the epiphanic quality that poetic encounters with nature might be expected to assume, particularly in Romantic poetry (Bishop labelled herself a ‘minor female Wordsworth’, suggesting both a Romantic lineage and a divergence from that lineage) where, typically, as M. H. Abrams writes, ‘the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem’; instead, Bishop’s speaker must move tentatively towards that insight, without any certainty that they will get there.<sup>111</sup> Helen Vendler describes Bishop’s view of art as ‘sheer ongoingness’, suggesting her notion of knowledge as ‘flowing but never flown’ from ‘At the Fishhouses’, and in ‘The Riverman’, the villager’s desire to learn the mythical secrets of the Amazon is presented as a kind of perpetual progress.<sup>112</sup> The vagueness of ‘some things’ is an acknowledgement of the frailty and fluidity of their knowledge, and the difficulty of putting that knowledge into words. The tone is of self-effacement, shying from any sense that mastery of the natural world might be suddenly, or ever, achieved; instead, the speaker of the poem evinces an openness to otherness, their understanding of which can only be partial. There is an underlying sense that it is ultimately the river-underworld, or nature, which decides who will be granted understanding, not the other way round, as in Whitman’s phrase, ‘the sea whisper’d me’; a degree of surrender to forces beyond one’s control is what allows one to glean anything from nature.

Bishop has a habit of inscribing otherness into the natural world by connecting it to the human, the ostensibly ‘familiar’. In ‘The Riverman’, this technique is brought to Bishop’s rendering of the acoustics of the river, which ‘breathes in salt / and breathes it out again’, and makes a ‘fast, high whispering / like a hundred people at once.’<sup>113</sup> Environmental composer R. Murray Schafer writes in *Soundscape*s that ‘the rivers of the world speak their own languages’, as each is uniquely voiced: uniqueness and individuality

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<sup>110</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 104.

<sup>111</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 222.

M. H. Abrams, quoted by Susan Rosenbaum in ‘Bishop and the Natural World’, from *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Angus Cleghorn, (Cambridge: CUP, 2014) 62-73, ebook [accessed January 2021]

<sup>112</sup> Helen Vendler, ‘The Numinous Moose’, from *London Review of Books* <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v15/n05/helen-vendler/the-numinous-moose>> [accessed Dec 2022]

<sup>113</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 106.

are not therefore exclusive properties of the human voice.<sup>114</sup> In Bishop's image, the river does not speak in one 'voice', or even one language, necessarily, but contains hundreds of voices: to extend Schafer's claim, then, the sound of the river is not just different from other rivers, but is different from itself. While Bishop is on the one hand conjuring the sibilant sound of the river, both in the aural image of whispering and the mimetic string of 's' and 't' sounds, she also suggests, through her idea of the river as comprised of multiple voices, the unrecordability of the river which never stays still, or its untranslatability into words. By bringing the human into her description of the river, Bishop paradoxically renders the natural more faithfully, capturing its complexity.

As well as speaking in an almost-human voice, the river is permeated by the voices of the speaker's relations:

Godfathers and cousins,  
Your canoes are over my head;  
I hear your voices talking,  
You can peer down and down  
Or dredge the river bottom  
But never, never catch me.<sup>115</sup>

Here, the speaker's family is at once present and distant; their voices are audible, but the speaker is confident they will 'never, never catch' him. Perhaps these godfathers and cousins are simply looking for the speaker, who is missed on dry land; but perhaps they are part of the familial symbolism with which Bishop imbues the river, which 'sucks [the earth] like a child'. On the one hand, in Lorrie Goldensohn's words, the river is symbolic of the desire to escape from 'the exasperating confinements of the body', and from one's own history, offering the chance 'to dissolve within a larger community of spirits'.<sup>116</sup> On the other, we may be able to link the voices of these 'Godfathers and cousins' to the river's sound of 'a hundred people at once', suggestive of the voices of the living and the dead that reverberate within the sound of the rushing river. Perhaps, as well as offering an escape from history, the river echoes it back, since what one hears is always inflected by one's history. Rivers have language, then, in a sense that their sound brings to mind other voices that may have been forgotten, in the space that its 'fast high whispering' makes.

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<sup>114</sup> Schafer, ebook.

<sup>115</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 106.

<sup>116</sup> Goldensohn, p. 51.

The desired 'virgin mirror / no one's ever looked at' is perhaps illusory, therefore – one cannot regain their untainted childlike perspective; one is forced to hear the voices of 'Godfathers and cousins' chattering overhead, for good or bad. Yet a kind of innocent wonder, in the 'deep enchanted silt', in the voices of the river, is still integral to Bishop's poetic vision. Such wonder appears to embrace hybridity, as opposed to purity: we see it in Bishop's imagery that muddles the human and the natural, such as the rooms of Luandinha which shine from overhead in a 'steady stream of light [...] like at the cinema', or the 'worms / with tiny electric eyes / turning on and off and on', evoking, peculiarly, a faulty light bulb rather than the sublime wonders of the deep. Susan Rosenbaum describes Bishop's use of culture as the 'artificial optical lens' through which to view the natural, a way to throw light on the 'particular extensions of and limits of the human, as nature is transformed into culture, or conversely, as it resists such transformation.'<sup>117</sup> By including imagery that occasionally sits awkwardly, that shows 'resistance', with its blend of the prosaic and strange, Bishop defamiliarises both the human and the natural worlds, and confuses imagined binaries between them.

Nature is never purely nature then, nor can it be seen innocently, for the first time, through a 'virgin mirror': it is always seen in light of the human world, transfigured and shared by it (partly because the natural world makes the human world possible). Stacy Alaimo's theory of 'transcorporeality' is perhaps useful here; she describes the physical 'enmeshment' of the human and natural worlds:

It's important to realize that there's no nature that we just act upon. Instead, it's also acting back upon us, as we are always already the very substance and the stuff of the world that we are changing.<sup>118</sup>

This idea of being acted upon by nature as we act upon it recalls Heidegger's sense that language acts upon us, that we speak by listening. Nature and language are, in that sense, intertwined: they are both forces which we do not control or wield: instead, we are enmeshed within them. 'The Riverman' throws light on that enmeshment. Bishop's 'impure' presentation of the natural world is ultimately truer, because instead of flattening its strangeness out, Bishop's portrayal includes child-like enchantment (the

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<sup>117</sup> Susan Rosenbaum, 'Bishop and the Natural World', from *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis, 62-73, (Cambridge: CUP, 2014)

<sup>118</sup> Stacy Alaimo, 'Transcorporeality: An Interview with Stacy Alaimo', from *Ecozono*, Vol 11.2 (2020) <<https://ecozona.eu/article/view/3478>>

‘steady stream of light ... like at the cinema’) as well as pathos (the ‘worms / with tiny electric eyes / turning on and off and on’).

‘Questions of Travel’, the title poem from the same collection, lingers on the Brazilian soundscape through language which similarly melds the human, the inanimate and the natural. Bishop wonders whether, if she had ‘stayed at home’, it would have been a pity

[...] not to have had to stop for gas and heard  
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune  
of disparate wooden clogs  
carelessly clacking over  
a grease-stained filling-station floor.  
(In another country the clogs would all be tested.  
Each pair there would have identical pitch.)  
- A pity not to have heard  
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird  
who sings above the broken gasoline pump  
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:  
three towers, five silver crosses.

[...] - Never to have studied history in  
the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages.  
- And never to have had to listen to rain  
so much like politicians’ speeches:  
two hours of unrelenting oratory  
and then a sudden golden silence <sup>119</sup>

Goldensohn writes that Bishop imbues objects here with ‘musical speech’, a ‘speaking subjectivity [...] transforming’ the landscapes to which they belong.<sup>120</sup> The ‘musical speech’ of the landscape allows the landscape not only to have ‘subjectivity’, to ‘speak’ autonomously, but the focus on aural sensation is where the poem shifts toward an emphasis on the *difference* of this landscape; we are not in some other country, where each pair of clogs ‘would have identical pitch’; we can hear the particular grain of the Brazilian soundscape - the sound of its rain, its birdsong. Bishop’s ‘artificial optical lens’ is a way of viewing nature not as idealised or ‘untouched’, as Rosenbaum writes: nature is not presented in opposition to the human world, but involved with it, altered by it just as it seems to alter the human world. The ‘less primitive music of the fat brown bird’ is a form of anthropomorphism that avoids the usual risks of simplifying nature and rendering it more comprehensible, but instead reverses the usual binary, implying that it is humanity which is ‘primitive’, nature advanced. As in the alligator’s call, sound seems to evade these binaries. The ‘weak calligraphy of songbirds cages’, meanwhile, turns objects into

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<sup>119</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 92.

<sup>120</sup> Goldensohn, p. 35.

writing, resonant with meaning, though soundless. Bishop's landscape is rich with 'saying'; in these poems, vitally, language does not only belong to the human speaker. The language the landscape is granted is at once familiar, recognisable, but it does not seem to communicate anything other than its self: to quote Hopkins, a key influence on Bishop, each thing 'finds tongue to fling out broad its name', each thing 'selves.'<sup>121</sup>

In the Key West poems, each poem is crowded with voices and noises of indeterminate origin, imbuing the landscape with opaqueness. The ambiguous feelings of Bishop's childhood, combined with the more positive feels Bishop attached to Key West, seem to be absorbed into these strange poems, colouring her depictions of nature. In the Brazil poems, the uncertainty is now coloured with a desire to 'understand' another country, to 'listen' attentively, with an awareness that the knowledge gleaned from such listening can only be partial. 'The Riverman' suggests a way in which the self might be transcended by surrendering oneself to what one does not understand, or attempting to understand 'like a dog', with the senses rather than the intellect - it is this 'painstaking listening' through which the other can be apprehended and known, while 'Twelfth Morning' gestures towards the ability of the voice to summon something out of nothing. In all five poems, the voice displays its resistance to categorisation: the river is almost polyphonic, melding natural and human voices, while the alligator's voice seems to straddle the animalistic and the sophisticated. That avoidance of categorisation is, perhaps perversely, what makes these pure sounds meaningful, and what causes them to linger on the mind. After all, a poet must be, in Heidegger's words, 'open and real for the unforeseen', and Bishop's concentration on 'unforeseen' voices that resist interpretation, that *are* just voices, allows her to demonstrate the extent to which all voices, to an extent, have a life independent of their speaker. All voices are 'echoes', and are freighted with other voices natural and human; each voice is ineluctably itself, but always resonates with other voices. Bishop allows the echoic, hybrid quality of voice to be more easily heard, and the ways a voice might 'speak' beyond semantic meaning. In these last two chapters I have outlined Bishop's interactions with other 'literal' voices within her poems; in the next

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<sup>121</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', from *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44389/as-kingfishers-catch-fire>> [accessed January 2022]

chapter, I will turn to Bishop's poetics of translation, in which Bishop's poetic voice comes into contact with those of other poets.

## Chapter 3

### ‘those luscious Latin languages’: Translation

When a poem is translated, to what extent should the voice of the translator be heard, if at all? Bishop seemed almost determined to distance herself from her translations of Brazilian poetry, describing them to Anne Stevenson with a sense of detachment and indifference, portraying them as almost closer to exercises than ‘real work’.

I wish you'd skip the translations. They amount to next to nothing, no real work, and no real interest. Or just say I have translated some prose & some poetry, from the Portuguese. I can't be considered a cultural go-between, *nor do I want to be*. The fact that I live in Brazil seems almost entirely a matter of chance ... *perhaps not, but that's the way it seems to me*.<sup>122</sup>

Bishop seemed to fear she might be seen as in some way commenting on Brazil and her relationship to it if her translations were anything other than objective, or if she allowed her ‘voice’ to be heard in them. The equivocations of ‘almost entirely’ and ‘perhaps not’ complicate the matter, of course; they point towards the idea that, despite one’s intentions, the act of writing is never entirely impersonal, and one’s personal history will invariably make itself heard.

Paul Muldoon’s line on the unexpected by-products of translation is instructive: ‘there is indeed a tendency for translators to tinge, or taint, the poem for which they are a medium, in the way that storage in an oak cask will tinge, or taint, a red wine with tannin.’<sup>123</sup> While Marilyn May Lombardi writes that Bishop was ‘at pains to silence her voice’ in her translations, ‘silence’ might not be an accurate characterisation of Bishop’s approach.<sup>124</sup> Maria Machova, meanwhile, offers another ‘sound’ metaphor to describe Bishop’s approach to translation, calling it the ‘basso continuo beneath the main voice of [Bishop’s] poetry’, conjuring the idea of two voices, or pitches, running together, creating a kind of co-mingling or polyphony.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, when we consider Bishop’s writings on translation, there

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<sup>122</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 444.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, (London: Faber, 2011) p. 204.

<sup>124</sup> Lombardi, p. 138.

<sup>125</sup> Maria Machova, *Elizabeth Bishop and Translation*, (Langham, Md: Lexington Books, 2017) p. 3.

is a detectible ambivalence between the desire to be absent, or silent, and the knowledge that each translation will inevitably be inflected by the voice of the translator.

Sophie Collins describes translation as a ‘bodily act’, in the sense that the translator internalises the original poem, living the emotional world it dramatises.<sup>126</sup> There is the implication here that the translation is affected by the translator’s ‘bodily’ experience, and will therefore inevitably be different to a translation written by another poet, for example.<sup>127</sup> Bishop’s own writings on translations also suggest translation’s physicality, its ‘bodily’ aspects, albeit subtly, such as when she tells Robert Lowell that ‘the whole business of translating is fascinating, like living in some[one] else’s house and being carried by their framework.’<sup>128</sup> This seemingly throwaway sentence is a clue to the extent to which Bishop placed *herself* in her translations. There is an implied passivity in that word ‘carried’, as though one could step into another poet’s shoes and let that new perspective guide the translator into previously unthought of environs, leaving behind wilfulness; Bishop’s simile suggests a kind of domestic Keatsian negative capability. Later in the letter, Bishop describes translation as ‘enchanting hard work, enough firewood to last me till I tire’, as though it were an exercise that is almost hypnotic, engaging the senses rather than the intellect.<sup>129</sup> Again, there is the sense that translation is somehow impersonal and practical instead of creative. And yet, that word ‘enchanting’ makes room for surprise and wonder, and therefore for the subjectivity of the translator. Bishop’s idea of ‘living in someone’s house’ carries similar connotations: it does not mean *becoming* that original poet, but rather *inhabiting* the world of the original poet, while presumably bringing one’s own singular subjectivity and perspective, tinging the original with those new outside elements of difference.

Walter Benjamin employs a striking metaphor of the translator as a figure outside of a forest, listening out for an echo:

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<sup>126</sup> ‘The Sound of Translation’, *The Verb*, BBC Radio 3, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2019, online sound recording, BBC Sounds, < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0006mz7> > [accessed 01.08.21]

<sup>127</sup> Translation might be a bodily act in the sense that the meaning of the original has to be *felt* in order for the translation to convey the original poem’s emotional tensions, though that meaning will be felt in different ways by different translators.

<sup>128</sup> Bishop, *Words in Air*, p. 339.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*



Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.<sup>130</sup>

This image conjures an idea of translation as inherently hybrid and indefinite: the result should be an ‘echo’ containing the ‘reverberation’ of the original, neither a clean transference of that original into another language nor the creation of something wholly new. In this sense, there is a mingling, or a palimpsest, of voices. Rather than, to use Octavio Paz’s words, using the original ‘as a point of departure for [one’s] own [poem]’, the translator ought to catch the specific ‘reverberation’, or ‘effect’, the original poem, without intentionally altering it.<sup>131</sup> Muldoon’s chosen word, ‘medium’, suggests a similar notion of passivity: that of a translator almost *spoken by* the original. Muldoon and Benjamin share that sense of the near-passivity of the translator, as a medium who does not step in and alter the original poet’s meaning, but filters it through their own sensibility. The idea of translator-as-medium might sound too occult, too shamanic for a poet like Elizabeth Bishop, but it hints at the way that her translations might not be driven by ego or an overriding selfhood, while still allowing the voice of the translator to tinge the new work. While Bishop may have aimed to ‘silence her own voice’ in her translations, she knew that no translation would be a pure re-creation of the original in English, and that there could be no perfect translation: like Bishop’s figure of the translator as houseguest, the translator is always on the ‘outside’ of the ‘language forest’, and so always brings their own quality of difference to the work they translate.

Bishop was particularly conscious of the difficulties of carrying the music and sense of one language over into another. She wrote in a letter to Lowell that the poet Carbal de Melo doesn’t go well into English, joking that he is ‘too long-winded. Oh these luscious Latin languages and all that assonance and how tempting it seems to be for them to go on and on and on.’<sup>132</sup> Portuguese seemed to allow for a ‘long-windedness’, perhaps due to its plentiful vowel-sounds, and its greater abundance of rhyme-words, that would not work in English. This seems to reveal Bishop’s attitude to the relationship between writing and listening: the poet is guided by sound, and the sound of a language might exert its

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<sup>130</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, from *Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000) 15-25 (p. 20)

<sup>131</sup> Octavio Paz, quoted by Paul Muldoon, in *The End of the Poem*, p. 204

<sup>132</sup> Bishop, *Words in Air*, p. 341.

force on the poet, rather than the other way round. The content of what one writes can also be determined, to an extent, by the language one writes in: in a 1966 interview, Bishop claims (perhaps erroneously) that there is no word in Portuguese for ‘understatement’, and as a result Brazilian poets never moved on from Romanticism.<sup>133</sup> The implication is that, in writing, the ego dissipates, and, to an extent, language does the speaking instead; there is a surrendering to the music of the original, which is neither wholly passive nor willed, because what translates and what does not in the new language must be noticed and altered. There is a concession that translating a poem into another language will bend its voice in a different direction — the poem must alter as it takes on the restraints of a different language.

Bishop wrote in a review of the *Selected Writings of Jules Laforgue*, translated by William Jay Smith, that ‘it is impossible to translate poetry, or perhaps only one aspect can be translated at a time, and each poem needs several translations’.<sup>134</sup> That characteristic self-correction is there, towards greater precision: a proliferation of translations, not a perfect translation, is the aim. Earlier in the review, Bishop interestingly shows an impatience with the tropes of the typical review of a book of translation:

First, one says it’s impossible. Second, one implies that the translator is an ignoramus, or if that’s going too far, that he has missed the play on words; and then one carps about the inevitable mistakes.<sup>135</sup>

The implication, contrary to her previous statement, appears to be that translation *is* possible. She ironically undermines the view of translation as a quest for perfection: she argues that mistakes are ‘inevitable’, so ‘carping’ about them is boring and unproductive. Instead, an idea of translation that accommodates the idiosyncrasies of the translator, and that inevitably includes ‘mistakes’, comes into view. This is tempered, however, by her concern about a translator altering a poem to the point where it can no longer be recognised, a concern played out in her now-famous letters to Robert Lowell regarding his collection of French translations, called *Imitations*.

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<sup>133</sup> Bishop, from *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Montiero, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) p. 19.

<sup>134</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 270.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Bishop & Lowell*

Bishop sent Robert Lowell two letters in response to his translations of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Montale. The first, sent on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1961, is diplomatic, balancing criticism with praise:

I think Baudelaire is more sympathetic to you verbally (and probably emotionally) than Rimbaud—at least those early Rimbards you've chosen. Sometimes you've done wonders with Baudelaire's language: "mansards," "chain-smoking," "purring," "narcotics." (Couldn't she look for coco palms instead of coconuts, though?)<sup>136</sup>

There is the occasional nitpicking around the translation of words like 'tartines', which Bishop reminds Lowell are buttered bread, not raspberry tarts. This fastidiousness is accompanied by recurrent anxiety about the ramifications of translating poetry: 'I don't want to think of your being attacked for mistakes', and 'I just don't want you to lay yourself open to stupid or jealous misunderstandings'.<sup>137</sup> Bishop's desire for Lowell to get it right seems like a reflection of her own fear of self and poem becoming too intertwined: accuracy is a kind of shield against drawing too much attention to the poet doing the translation, when Bishop would rather disappear behind the words.

In a second letter, sent the next day as though in a panic, that anxiety comes to the forefront, and Bishop appears less keen to humour Lowell: 'I am very much worried by the French translations, particularly the Rimbaud ones.'<sup>138</sup> Bishop admits that she had not given the translations her full attention, and now, on close reading, realises the errors Lowell has made: while admitting that interpolation and changes in 'line-order' and in names are tolerable, she draws attention to changes that 'sound like mistakes', and are 'open to misinterpretation', as well as where Lowell has 'made the poet say the opposite of what he said in the original'.<sup>139</sup> Here, we can see that Bishop is interested in affinity with the intention of the original rather than replication: like the 'medium' in Muldoon's analogy, Bishop sees the role of the translator transferring the intention of the original poet into another language, which may in fact result in a poem that looks different to the original, with different line-breaks or names. Indeed, Bishop's statement about the propensity for Portuguese poetry to be 'long-winded' suggested that the poem *must* alter in order to fit the language it is being translated into.

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<sup>136</sup> Bishop, *Words in Air*, p. 354.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Though translation, for Bishop, inevitably involves a degree of ‘loss’ - she told Anne Stevenson that she tried to translate poems that would ‘go into English with less loss than usual’ - what is egregious is the loss of the original poet’s voice in the process: the ‘echo’ of the original must be there, to borrow from Benjamin’s metaphor.<sup>140</sup>

While illuminating Bishop’s attitude to translation, these letters also draw attention to Bishop’s anxieties about confessionalism. Colm Tóibín makes this parallel, writing that Bishop was ‘deeply uneasy about Lowell writing so openly about himself and his family as she was about the entire idea of the slackness of his translations’; Lowell’s freedom with his translation seemed to mirror his freedom with incorporating autobiography and personal details about people he knew into his poetry.<sup>141</sup> Bishop’s letters reveal how, contrastingly, a kind of poetic impersonality informed both her translations and her original poetry. In ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T.S. Eliot writes: ‘The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.’<sup>142</sup> Bishop’s notion of being ‘carried’ off by another poet’s framework, or ‘enchanted’ by the ‘hard work’ of translation, suggest a similar notion of ‘surrendering’ the self, albeit a surrendering that is still conscious. The ‘emotion’ of the translation is not brought by the translator and their poetic ‘personality’, but recovered by a ‘surrendering’ to the original, a surrender that results in a poem that is neither a lifeless copy nor a wholly new poem, but a translation that successfully marries the voices of two poets, without either poetic ego dominating.

### ***French and Brazilian poetry: ‘Seven-sided Poem’ and ‘Ravignan Street’***

In order to determine how Bishop applied this mode of translation, it is worth comparing her translations with translations of the same poems by others. I want to begin with ‘Poema de Sete Faces’, or ‘Seven-Sided Poem’, by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and its translations by Bishop, Richard Zenith, and Mark Strand respectively. Bishop’s translation has received little critical attention and is only

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<sup>140</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p.

<sup>141</sup> See Bishop’s response to Lowell’s transformation of letters from Elizabeth Hardwick into poems in his collection *The Dolphin*.

<sup>142</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (2009) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>> [accessed 6 August 2021].

mentioned in passing in Machova's book and Lombardi's chapter on Bishop's translations. It is also interesting as an unapologetically self-mythologising poem, a style that Bishop steered clear of in her own work - we can see the lack of Brazilian 'understatement' at work. Bishop's version begins:

When I was born, one of the crooked  
angels who live in shadow, said:  
Carlos, go on! Be gauche in life.<sup>143</sup>

Mark Strand begins in largely the same way, while Richard Zenith chooses to write 'a misfit' instead of 'gauche'.<sup>144</sup> Immediately, we see how Bishop and Strand have chosen to remain closer to the original, which begins:

Quando nasci, um anjo torto  
desses que vivem na sombra  
disse: Vai, Carlos! ser *gauche* na vida.<sup>145</sup>

'Gauche' and 'misfit' of course mean quite different things, and I believe that Bishop chose the former in order to remain close as possible to the sound of the original, while remaining true to her own poetic voice. Lombardi writes that Brazilian poetry provided a 'confident sensuality and emotional bravado alien to her own recognisable genre and style', which may have made the way for poems of selfhood like 'In the Waiting Room'.<sup>146</sup> While the sentiment of these lines from 'Seven-Sided Poem' does seem 'alien' to Bishop, with their explicit exploration of self-creation, and the angel's imperative to be 'gauche', a word that could not be used to describe Bishop's persona or poetry, that word does suggest something of Bishop's own refinement and reserve, her distaste for 'emotion [that] too far exceeds its cause', as she writes in 'The Map', in a way the Anglo-Saxon 'misfit' does not.<sup>147</sup> Michael Donaghy characterises Bishop's tone as 'a somewhat campy note of displacement resolved by conspicuous technique [...] irony, seduction, and playfulness alloyed with reserve.'<sup>148</sup> 'Gauche' does, in

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<sup>143</sup> Carlos Drummond de Andrade, translated by Elizabeth Bishop, in *Poems*, p. 137

<sup>144</sup> Carlos Drummond de Andrade, translated by Mark Strand, from 'Excerpt from *Looking for Poetry*' <<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/174452/looking-for-poetry-by-translated-by-mark-strand/9780375709883/excerpt>> [accessed June 2021]

Carlos Drummond de Andrade, translated by Richard Zenith, *Seven-Sided Poem* (2014) <<https://modernpoetryintranslation.com/poem/seven-sided-poem/>> [accessed 6 August 2021].

<sup>145</sup> Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Multitudinous Heart: Selected Poems* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) ebook.

<sup>146</sup> Lombardi, p. 138.

<sup>147</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>148</sup> Michael Donaghy, 'The Exile's Accent' from *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002)

English at least, strike that ‘campy note’, with its subtle ring of Latinate refinement. In choosing that word, Bishop also allows the ‘luscious Latin language’ to be heard in her translation. A merit of Zenith’s choice is that it is closer to everyday language than Bishop’s, but in these first lines, we can see how Bishop was exploring that ‘playful’ and ‘campy’ side to her poetic persona, ‘alloyed’ somewhat by her typical reserve, while remaining faithful to the original poem.

Interestingly, Bishop’s version, along with Strand’s, appears to stray from the original in the next lines, which read in Portuguese:

A tarde talvez fosse azul,  
não houvesse tantos desejos<sup>149</sup>

A literal translation would be: ‘The afternoon might be blue, / If there weren’t so many desires’. Zenith’s translation, ‘If desire weren’t so rampant, / the afternoon might be blue’, appears to be more literal, though he inverts the phrase by placing ‘afternoon’ in the second line.<sup>150</sup> Bishop’s and Strand’s translations, in contrast, cleave to the original word-order while suggesting a different meaning:

If the afternoon had been blue,  
there might have been less desire. (Bishop)<sup>151</sup>

If the afternoon were blue  
there might be less desire. (Strand)<sup>152</sup>

For Bishop and Strand, the afternoon being ‘blue’ is what lessens ‘desire’, while for Zenith, desire is what causes the afternoon to be ‘blue’. The tone of Bishop and Strand translations is certainly more reserved than Zenith’s, with its ‘rampant’ desire. However, the placement of the word ‘desire’ at the end of the two lines in Strand and Bishop, as opposed to the beginning of the first line in Zenith, is ambiguous: is emotion kept in check, with ‘[d]esire’ made secondary by moving it to the second line, or is it emphasised by being put at the end of the stanza? The ‘might have been’ of Bishop’s version is also more ambiguous than the ‘might be’ of Strand’s: the former is imagining a past that does not exist (but could have), while the latter is imagining what might happen in the future. Bishop’s version is, again, at a greater remove from the action, while in Strand’s line, the event is ongoing; there is the

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<sup>149</sup> Andrade.

<sup>150</sup> Zenith.

<sup>151</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 137.

<sup>152</sup> Strand.

possibility of the afternoon becoming 'blue'. In Bishop's version, desire is both doubtful and present: her syntax has a circumlocutionary quality, as though to heighten that ambivalence. Bishop's usual evasiveness seems to have influenced her translation on a syntactical level.

Another area of difference is how the three translators have chosen to approach rhyme. It is worth reproducing the three different versions of the penultimate stanza of 'Seven Sided Poem' in full.

Universe, vast universe,  
if I had been named Eugene  
that would not be what I mean  
but it would go into verse  
Faster.

Universe, vast universe,  
My heart is vaster.  
(Bishop)<sup>153</sup>

World so large, world so wide,  
if my name were Clyde,  
it would be a rhyme  
but not an answer.  
World so wide,  
world so large,  
my heart's even larger.  
(Zenith)<sup>154</sup>

'World, wide world,  
if my name were Harold  
it might be a rhyme  
but no answer.  
World, wide world,  
my heart is bigger  
than you are.'  
(Strand)<sup>155</sup>

I think Bishop 'Eugene' / 'mean' rhyme conveys best, out of the three, the poem's joke about the pleasures and arbitrariness of rhyme: meaning might flow from rhyme, but the rhyme scheme ought not to mold the meaning. Perhaps Eugene McCarthy, an American poet and a Senator between 1959 and 1971, was on Bishop's mind as she penned these lines; indeed, McCarthy was the judge for a poetry prize for which Bishop was being considered, and he was the father of Mary McCarthy, a friend of Bishop's whom she knew from Vassar College.<sup>156</sup> If Bishop were Eugene McCarthy, she might be able

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<sup>153</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 137.

<sup>154</sup> Zenith

<sup>155</sup> Strand

<sup>156</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 496.

to write more poetry (counter-intuitively, seeing as McCarthy only published one collection of poems) but it would ‘not be what I mean’.<sup>157</sup> We can see how Bishop, obliquely, seems to bring her personal history into her translations, while maintaining some fidelity to the sense of the original.

Bishop’s rhyme scheme is arguably closest to the pure rhymes of the original, ‘mundo / Raimundo’, ‘solução / coração’, and yet she diverges dramatically from Andrade’s rhythm. Her addition of the enjambed ‘Faster’ at the end of the stanza creates an unexpected jolt in the otherwise regular rhyme and rhythm of the lines that came before it, until it finds its rhyme in ‘vaster’. It recalls Bishop’s own slightly rickety use of rhyme to comic effect, like her rhyme of ‘tall’ with ‘Glens Fall’ in ‘Arrival at Santos’, enjambling the ‘s’ of ‘Falls’ onto the next stanza in order to keep the eye-rhyme pure.<sup>158</sup> It also echoes Bishop’s ‘One Art’, which similarly features ‘faster’ and ‘vaster’ as rhyme-words.<sup>159</sup> All three translations, however, stray from the shape and regularity of the original:

Mundo mundo vasto mundo,  
se eu me chamasse Raimundo  
seria uma rima, não seria uma solução.  
Mundo mundo vasto mundo,  
mais vasto é meu coração.<sup>160</sup>

Andrade described Bishop as having a ‘sense of nuances’ in his original poems; overall, Bishop’s version appears to preserve a degree of coolness and formal rigour in Andrade’s poem, while allowing the form and vocabulary to, at times, diverge from the original, reflecting her suggestions to Lowell about the acceptability of interpolation, name-changes, and different line-breaks, as well as her letters to Portuguese translators of her own poetry, which apparently did not specify that the form of her own poems must be maintained.<sup>161</sup> Bishop’s use of pure rhymes, following the original, illustrates her desire to follow the *sound* of the original poem, even though the words and shape of the poem are changed. These translations gives us a greater sense of Bishop as a ‘medium’, tinting her translation with her own voice and while striving to maintain the meaning and musicality of the original.

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<sup>157</sup> ‘Eugene McCarthy’, from *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugene-McCarthy>> [accessed 01.08.21]

<sup>158</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 87.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>160</sup> Andrade.

<sup>161</sup> Machova, p. 6.



Through this translation, Bishop was able to play with persona more freely than she ordinarily would. She said of Andrade: ‘He’s supposed to be very shy. I’m supposed to be very shy’, and ‘Seven-Sided Poem’ suggests the extent to which this was and wasn’t true of both poets’ work.<sup>162</sup> Andrade’s poem contains elements of Bishop’s sensibility: both personal and impersonal, referring to a ‘self’ without revealing very much; an almost ironic use of form. The playfulness and exuberance of the poem is more heightened than Bishop’s poetry ever was, however. The final lines, about ‘brandy’ playing ‘the devil with one emotions’, meanwhile, inevitably bring to mind Bishop’s own struggles with alcohol, a subject she never broached in her work.<sup>163</sup> There is a sense in which, by translating this poem, Bishop was able to access both a stranger and more candid poetic voice than she could in her original work, without entirely doing away with her characteristic tone of ‘playfulness alloyed with reserve’.

In the 1930s, when Bishop lived in Paris, she became ‘very interested in surrealism’; that influence is felt most strongly in her first collection, *North & South*, and is overtly explored in ‘The Monument’, a knotty experiment in perspective influenced by Max Ernst’s *frottage* drawings.<sup>164</sup> Frottages are a kind of automatic art that Ernst believed might reveal something about the artist’s subconscious, or ‘the first cause of the obsession’, and Bishop produced many herself.<sup>165</sup> She remained interested in the dreamlike and the unconscious throughout her career, often using ‘dream-material’ for her poetry, albeit only when she was ‘lucky enough to have any’.<sup>166</sup>

Bishop later disavowed that inheritance, however, describing her preference for the ‘always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life’ in a letter to Anne Stevenson which has since come to be seen as Bishop’s quasi-artistic-manifesto, aligning herself with the rationality of Darwin (albeit of the ‘self-

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<sup>162</sup> Bishop, quoted by Machova, p. 60

<sup>163</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 87.

<sup>164</sup> Bishop, *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 25.  
Ibid., *Poems*, p. 25.

<sup>165</sup> Goldensohn, p. 122.

<sup>166</sup> Bishop, quoted by Pickard, p. 51.

forgetful' kind, suggesting her continued interest in the unconscious).<sup>167</sup> Zachariah Pickard suggests that Bishop believed that the unconscious could be made use of in poetry precisely by *ignoring* it: 'For Bishop, being heroically active in the conscious sphere creates a state of passive receptivity in the unconscious sphere, allowing the unknown to emerge.'<sup>168</sup> Surrealism, on the other hand, involves 'forcing the unknown to surface', through an automatism that surrenders to the accidental.<sup>169</sup> Mark Ford highlights at the tightrope between rationality and the unconscious walked by Bishop's early poems: there is a 'yearning to confound the rationalist assumptions implied by [the poems'] strict and elaborate forms'.<sup>170</sup> Lorrie Goldensohn, meanwhile, suggests that those 'strict and elaborate forms' are in fact Bishop's means of summoning the unconscious: Max Ernst with his frottages 'rides the wood-grain to arrive at first causes, or at least at a "simulacrum thereof"; when Bishop rides what she was pleased to call the "umpty, umpty-um" of her habitual metric, she no doubt expected the same conclusion'.<sup>171</sup> A common thread between these approaches is that Bishop was tantalised by the unconscious, but believed it should be tempered by the conscious, rational mind: 'enchantment', for her, necessarily also involved 'hard work'.

Perhaps that conflict is why Bishop chose, in 1949, to translate Max Jacob, a dreamlike and otherworldly poet for whom the label 'surrealist' does not, however, easily fit.<sup>172</sup> As Machova notes, Jacob was 'a generation older than Breton', the founder of the Surrealist movement, but his methods, such as 'free-association of thoughts or exploration of dreams' are 'close to surrealism'.<sup>173</sup> 'La Rue Ravignan', a Jacob poem translated by both Bishop and John Ashbery, occupies the space between surreality and mundanity that might be familiar to readers of Bishop's earlier work, though it is, on the surface, closer to Ashbery's brand of surrealism.<sup>174</sup> While Bishop is known for her attention to detail

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<sup>167</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 414.

<sup>168</sup> Pickard, p. 55.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Mark Ford, 'Early Bishop, Early Ashbery, and the French', *PN Review* < [https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=873](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=873) > [accessed 01.08.21]

<sup>171</sup> Goldensohn, p. 125.

<sup>172</sup> Machova, p. 23.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>174</sup> The strange imagery of 'The Bight' is an example of that surrealistic impulse, tempered by a fixation on materiality.

and accuracy, Ashbery admits his reputation as a ‘harebrained, homegrown surrealist’ (although Ashbery greatly admired Bishop and was influenced by her).<sup>175</sup> The overt whimsicality and abundance of exclamation marks leads the poem away from Bishop’s more typically restrained voice. The choices made by these two poets in translating these poems, however, illuminate the ways in which it contains traces of *both* poets’ voices, traces which are brought out by their respective techniques.

“One does not bathe twice in the same stream,” said the philosopher Heraclitus. Yet it is always the same ones who mount the street! Always the same time of day they pass by, happy or sad. All of you, passers-by of the Rue Ravignan. I have named you after the illustrious dead. There is Agamemnon! There is Madame Hanska! Ulysses is a milkman! When Patroclus appears at the end of the street a Pharaoh is beside me! Castor and Pollux are the ladies of the fifth floor. But thou, old ragpicker, who comes in the enchanted morning to take away the still living rubbish as I am putting out my good big lamp, thou whom I know not, mysterious and impoverished ragpicker, I have given thee a celebrated and noble name, I have named thee Dostoievsky. (Ashbery) <sup>176</sup>

“One never bathes twice in the same stream,” the philosopher Heraclitus used to say. However, the same people always turn up again! They go by, at the same time, gay or sad. You, passers-by in Ravignan Street, I have given you the names of Historical Defuncts! Here’s Agamemnon! Here’s Madame Hanska! Ulysses is a milkman! Patrocles is at the foot of the street while a Pharaoh is near me. Castor and Pollux are the ladies on the sixth floor. But you, old rag-picker, you who, in the enchanted morning, come to get the garbage, the garbage which is still fresh when I put out my nice big lamp, you whom I do not know, poor and mysterious rag-picker, you, rag-picker, I have named you a noble and celebrated name. I have named you Dostoyevsky. (Bishop) <sup>177</sup>

An immediately noticeable difference between the two translations is Ashbery’s use of antiquated diction, such as ‘thou’ or ‘thee’, while Bishop simply opts for ‘you’. On the surface, this contrasts with Bishop’s use of the elevated ‘gauche’ in her translation of Andrade, but the ‘toi’ of the original is the informal singular subject pronoun; ‘vous’ would be the formal form. Ashbery is therefore straying further from the original. ‘Turn up’ similarly contrasts starkly with Ashbery’s ‘mount the street’, while Bishop chooses the American ‘garbage’, Ashbery the slightly more elevated and anglophone ‘still-living

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<sup>175</sup> John Ashbery, ‘Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop’, *World Literature Today*, vol 51.1 (1997) 8-11 (p. 8).

<sup>176</sup> Max Jacob, translated by John Ashbery, *Collected French Translations: Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014) ebook.

The original reads:

“On ne se baigne pas deux fois dans le même fleuve”, disait le philosophe Héraclite. Pourtant, ce sont toujours les mêmes qui remontent ! Aux mêmes heures, ils passent gais ou tristes. Vous tous, passants de la rue Ravignan, je vous ai donné les noms des défunts de l’Histoire ! Voici Agamemnon ! voici Mme Hanska! Ulysse est un laitier! Patrocle est au bas de la rue qu’un Pharaon est près de moi. Castor et Pollux sont les dames du cinquième. Mais toi, vieux chiffonnier, toi qui, au féérique matin viens enlever les débris encore vivants quand j’éteins ma bonne grosse lampe, toi que je ne connais pas, mystérieux et pauvre chiffonnier, toi, chiffonnier, je t’ai nommé d’un nom célèbre et noble, je t’ai nommé Dostoïevsky.’  
From *Collected French Translations: Poetry*

<sup>177</sup> Max Jacob, translated by Elizabeth Bishop, *Paris Review*, 226 (2018). <<https://www.theparisreview.org/poetry/7240/ravignan-street-max-jacob>> [accessed July 2021]

rubbish'. Ashbery's embrace of the oddly, almost awkwardly antiquated, when most contemporary translators would, like Bishop, try to bring the poems into the twentieth century, is perhaps reflective of Ashbery's ironic, post-modern pose, with its mingling of the high and the low, and his interest in the deliberately bad.<sup>178</sup> Bishop, in contrast, made clear her preference for sincerity over irony. In an interview she noted her frustration with the popularity of ironic 'anti-poetry'.<sup>179</sup> Of course, Bishop also made use of irony, and the anti-poetic, but as a self-described 'minor female Wordsworth', a kind of simplicity closer to the 'real language of men' could be said to describe Bishop's sensibility.<sup>180</sup> That meant a simplicity of diction that approached the anti-poetic, but with an intention of clarity that contrasts with Ashbery's playful postmodernism.

The importance to Bishop of the 'real language of men' becomes clearer in some of her word choices elsewhere in the poem. Ashbery's 'illustrious dead' is more high-flown and literary than Bishop's 'Historical Defuncts'; while the noun 'defunct' also has the meaning of 'the dead, deceased', here is a greater sense of pathos to Bishop's phrase, with its hint of the disused and the obsolete. With Bishop's 'nice big lamp', in contrast to Ashbery's 'good big lamp', that unassuming, unpoetic word 'nice' again suggests the homely and the ordinary, even recalling the 'very nice old man' at the end of 'Santarém', who goes on to call the speaker's 'admired' wasp nest an 'ugly thing'.<sup>181</sup> Bishop's translation is almost like that 'ugly thing', humble though carefully constructed. Bishop's approach is perhaps more contemporary in its diction, while Ashbery's is more faithful to the diction of the original poems. The tone of Bishop's is not of definitiveness, or even of 'beauty', but one that gets closer to modern speech

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<sup>178</sup> Ashbery's writings on his translations of Arthur Cravan are illustrative of this attitude: 'It turned out to be very easy to preserve those limping rhymes in English just by making all the inversions that you're not supposed to. [...] It had a very nice quality as a result of that, a sort of combination of high-flown rhetoric and a very limping, bad, patched-together quality. And I liked that damaged would-be nobility of the language.'

John Ashbery, quoted by Rosanne Wasserman and Eugene Richie in 'John Ashbery's French Translations', from *The Massachusetts Review*, (winter 2013), Vol54.4, 578-60 (p. 596)

<sup>179</sup> Bishop, *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, p. 55.

<sup>180</sup> See the deliberately awkward rhymes and ironic stoicism of Bishop's villanelle 'One Art' or . Bishop, *Poems*, p. 198.

'On Elizabeth Bishop', *Close Readings*, from 'London Review of Books', online sound recording, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts/close-readings/on-elizabeth-bishop>> [accessed July 2021]

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor-Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1800 edition*, Project Gutenberg (2005) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8905/pg8905.html>> [accessed December 2021]

<sup>181</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 207.

in all its mundane pathos; interestingly, Bishop seems to have adopted some of Ashbery's penchant for contemporary speech in her translation, while Ashbery has gone in the opposite direction.

Bishop's decision to repeat the word *ragpicker*, or 'chiffonier', twice, in the penultimate sentence of her translation, shows fidelity to the original, where 'chiffonier' is also repeated. More importantly, it demonstrates her willingness to allow awkwardness into her translations. Ashbery's version elides what might be seen as a superfluous repetition; Bishop, however, stated her belief in the importance of leaving in those repetitions that other translators might think to leave out. She told a translator of her poems into Portuguese that they 'should really repeat a line exactly if the original repeats it exactly [...] You should pay attention to repeated words and phrase—etc'.<sup>182</sup> That commitment to accounting for each word in the original seems part of Bishop's desire to transmit the original meaning as faithfully as possible, even at the cost of superficial 'beauty'. Of course, Bishop's own poetry is filled with repetition, and particularly triplets ('Rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!', 'Revise, revise, revise', etc).<sup>183</sup> Such repetitions draw the reader's attention to the 'thingness' of words, as they start to slightly lose their meaning with each repetition. Bishop's own poetry is certainly more concerned with the material and sensuous than Ashbery's more highly abstract poetry; while being more accurate than Ashbery, her translation is subtly shaded with her own poetic voice.

Fidelity is also demonstrated in Bishop's translation of 'disait' in the first sentence as 'used to say', in contrast to Ashbery's 'said'. While Ashbery is not exactly wrong, 'distait' is the imperfect form of the verb 'dire', to say, and so translates literally as 'used to say' – in other words, Heraclitus no longer says this. This distinction might seem trivial, but it demonstrates, again, Bishop's commitment to fidelity and specificity even at the cost of concision. That distinction in tense might be essential to the meaning of the original; indeed, the imperfect tense casts a shadow of doubt over the quotation in a way that Ashbery's 'said' does not, recalling the ambivalence that Bishop brings to her translation of Andrade's lines, 'If the afternoon had been blue, / there might have been less desire.' If that meaning was lost, it would be a tragedy for Bishop; we see here again her anxiety about allowing what might 'seem like mistakes' into her poetry. Ashbery's inaccuracies in his own poetry, according to Mark Ford, were

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<sup>182</sup> Bishop, quoted by Maria Machova in *Elizabeth Bishop and Translation*, p. 6.

<sup>183</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, pp. 43-210.

‘obvious, excessive, and legion’, while Bishop fretted over the edition of *National Geographic* mentioned in her poem ‘In the Waiting Room’.<sup>184</sup>

In translating these poems by Andrade and Jacob, we can see how Bishop was able to partly eschew her usual meticulous imagery and reserve and access a more playful, surreal register instead. She did this, however, without losing her own poetic voice; rather, she extended her own poetic voice with the help of these poets. There is therefore something unwilled about Bishop’s translations, which chimes with Muldoon’s metaphor of translator as ‘medium’ transferring a poem from one language to another, and indeed Bishop’s own sense of translation as ‘firewood’ or ‘enchanting hard work’ to sustain her, a state perhaps closer to negative capability than the masculine act of assertion we might associate with Lowell’s *Imitations*. The act of translation is therefore involved with the unconscious, and ‘self-forgetfulness’, which the poem in the foreign language filters through while maintaining the essential core of the original. The rational mind is not eschewed, and Bishop shows in her writings and interviews that translation is a conscious act, that involves careful attention to the original and target languages, and how these languages inevitably exert their force on what is said. The result is a mingling of voices and sensibilities, where one does not overwhelm the other, but engages with it to create a new work of art.

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<sup>184</sup> Ford.

## Chapter 4

### ‘like a fish being angled for with that microphone’:

#### Reading aloud

Elizabeth Bishop has not been widely praised for her performances of her work. Indeed, she does not appear to ‘perform’ her work at all; there is a casualness of tone that might be confused for disinterest, or even a ‘lackadaisical’ quality, as Ernest Hilbert puts it.<sup>185</sup> May Swenson said, of Bishop’s recording of ‘The Fish’, ‘you couldn’t ruin it, even with that awful reading that sounded like a stock market report.’<sup>186</sup> Colm Tóibín describes it as a style of ‘speaking rather than performing’, where ‘any obvious or easy drama is withheld’.<sup>187</sup> Crucially, however, Toibín’s description gestures towards the intentionality behind Bishop’s style, and the sense that that style is entangled with her poetics of submerged drama, rather than working against it. We might look to Tom Paulin’s account of the ‘anti-aesthetic’ of Bishop’s letters, and their disinterest in ‘posterity’, contrasting with her poetry’s ‘obsession with craft’, for a parallel with her performance style.<sup>188</sup> Like those letters, and the prosaic asides and self-corrections that embroider her verse, her undramatic readings can be heard as a performance of non-performance, deliberately undercutting the formal qualities of her work (while highlighting its preoccupation with the quotidian and ostensibly unremarkable). This ‘anti-aesthetic’, I will argue, covertly heightens the affective qualities of her poetry, by mingling the intimacy of the conversational with the distance created by non-performance.

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<sup>185</sup> Ernest Hilbert, ‘The Voice of the Poet: Elizabeth Bishop’ (2005) <<https://www.cprw.com/Hilbert/poetvoice5.htm>> [accessed 1 July 2021].

<sup>186</sup> May Swenson, quoted by John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) p. 239.

<sup>187</sup> Colm Tóibín, *75 at 75: Colm Tóibín on Elizabeth Bishop* (2013) <<https://www.92y.org/archives/75-at-75-colum-toibin-on-elizabeth-bishop>> [accessed 1 July 2021].

<sup>188</sup> Tom Paulin, Introduction, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) pp. ix-xx-ix (p. xv).

In an early letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop described the experience of having her voice recorded as ‘rather fun – like a fish being angled for with [a] microphone - but my results were rather dreadful.’<sup>189</sup> That Bishop uses an image of being caught by a fishing line to evoke ‘fun’ is interesting in itself: what fun can there be had in being caught like a fish? It seems to capture her ambivalence towards reading aloud, her sense of its danger as well as its potential rewards. Throughout her correspondence, Bishop describes her distaste for reading aloud, and her feeling of inadequacy as a performer: in 1948, she describes being pleased with her recording of ‘Songs for a Colored Singer’, while she deems her recording of ‘At the Fishhouses’ to be ‘sheer torture to listen to.’<sup>190</sup> In 1949, Bishop resolved ‘NEVER to attempt to write a review, make a recording, or do another reading [...]’.<sup>191</sup> In 1960, she claims to ‘have a strong aversion to poetry recited out loud, poetry recordings, etc. [...] ..but I realise I am probably wrong about it and that when it is done well it is a good idea.’<sup>192</sup> Although Bishop was not a natural performer, and suffered from crippling shyness, she was driven to try, and she evidently believed in the possibilities of poetry read aloud.

Listening to an early reading of ‘The Fish’ might lend weight to Bishop’s fears about her abilities.<sup>193</sup> Her soft-spoken intonation follows a relatively rigid pattern, each sentence ending with a similar falling cadence, symptoms of what Marit MacArthur calls ‘monotonous incantation’, or ‘poet voice’. MacArthur enumerates the characteristics of monotonous incantation as:

- (1) the repetition of a falling cadence within a narrow range of pitch; (2) a flattened affect that suppresses idiosyncratic expression of subject matter in favor of a restrained, earnest tone; and (3) the subordination of conventional intonation patterns dictated by particular syntax, and of the poetic effects of line length and line breaks, to the prevailing cadence and slow, steady pace.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Bishop, *Words in Air*, p. 6.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>191</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 190.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>193</sup> *Elizabeth Bishop reading “The Fish”*, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnkD\\_m3rhn8&t=59s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnkD_m3rhn8&t=59s)> [accessed July 2021]

<sup>194</sup> Marit MacArthur, ‘Monotony, the Churches of Poetry Reading, and Sound Studies’, *PMLA*, 131.1, (2016), 38-63 (p. 44).



Charles Bernstein refers to this phenomenon, meanwhile, as ‘anti-expressivist’ reading.<sup>195</sup> Some of its characteristics can be found in Bishop’s reading: she ignores, for instance, the ‘poetic effects of line length’, her pauses instead dictated by the sentence, creating the effect of hearing prose, not poetry, read aloud. Her reading can hardly be called ‘incantation’, but her range of tone is restricted enough to have a lulling effect on the listener. It is difficult to say to what extent this was intentional; Bishop was clearly not yet confident yet as a reader. The neutrality of her reading voice here is, however, inevitably tied up with her disinterest (particularly in her early poetry) in writing poems overtly centred on the ‘self’. In ‘The Fish’, and many other early poems beginning with ‘The’, there is a concentration on the exterior world, and on the drama of found in objects, animals, and unpeopled landscapes, and the impersonality of her voice means that we, as listeners, do not hear Bishop as the source of the drama, but what she is describing. In her reading, Bishop avoids what Bernstein calls ‘a style of acting that frames the performance in terms of character, personality, setting, gesture, development, or drama, even though these may be extrinsic to the text at hand.’<sup>196</sup> In making her reading as unremarkable or ‘unpoetic’ as possible, the subject, not the voice describing it, becomes central.

Although the reading rarely varies its rhythm, there is one noticeable exception. A break from the regular falling cadence comes in the final line, where the ‘go’ of ‘and I let the fish go’ is stressed, as though italicised. This brought to my mind Seamus Heaney’s reading of the final line of ‘Digging’ as ‘I’ll *dig* with *it*’ (my italics), where the final word is stressed as though to give the poem a strong, ‘masculine’ ending, rather than a weak, ‘feminine’ one.<sup>197</sup> Although Bishop is audibly not quite comfortable during this recording, that final stress suggests that Bishop is able to perform, and to surprise the listener’s ear, albeit only if that listener is listening attentively. The emphasis is all the more noticeable for the absence of any surprising stress-patterns throughout the rest of the recording, and that minute variation saves the recording from being wholly affectless. There is an indication here of the tension between performance and anti-performance; Bishop’s reading style is therefore neither exactly ‘monotonous incantation’ as MacArthur describes it nor the more actorly mode of reading

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<sup>195</sup> Charles Bernstein, ‘Introduction’, from *Close Listening*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 11.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Seamus Heaney reads his poem ‘Digging’*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNRkPU1LSUg?>> [accessed July 2021]

denounced by Bernstein. In her later readings, we begin to hear her relax into a style that is more her own.

As an aside, we might link the prose-like rhythm of Bishop's reading to the fact that many of her poems had their origins in prose, including notebook entries and letters; Joelle Bielle notices that Bishop's 'letters from the 1950s contain many examples of descriptions that eventually went almost word for word into her poems.'<sup>198</sup> Bishop complained that, if she wrote in regular meter, she found herself 'perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness'; using prose seemed to allow her to move on from the formal rigidity and anachronism of some of her early poems, such as 'Hymn to the Virgin' and 'Three Valentines', and achieve the more conversational tone that characterises her mature work.<sup>199</sup>

In 1974, Bishop gave a reading with James Merrill at the Coolidge Auditorium in Washington, DC.<sup>200</sup> JD McClatchy argues that, late in her career, Bishop sounded 'bemused by her lines' at her readings, and her voice is certainly wearied and unemphatic.<sup>201</sup> Her readings of 'Large Bad Picture' and 'Filling Station', reveal a more engaging presence, however, far from the 'monotonous incantation' of her earlier readings. In the former, Bishop interrupts her own reading after the lines '[b]efore he became a schoolteacher, / A great uncle painted a big picture', to apologise for their inaccuracy: 'And I must change that - he never was a schoolteacher. I think I liked the rhyme...'<sup>202</sup> Somehow, the interruption does not jar, perhaps because self-correction is already such a marked feature of Bishop's poetry, so full of 'I thinks' and 'maybes'. Her voice as a performer is therefore very much an extension and continuation of her voice as a poet. Furthermore, the poem itself is designed to appear provisional, slightly rickety, such as in the rhyme of 'Belle Isle, or' with 'Labrador', as though mimetic of the amateur art that the poem describes. Bishop's apparently self-undermining performance is in fact the

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<sup>198</sup> Joelle Bielle, "Revise, Revise, Revise!": *Elizabeth Bishop's Writing Process*, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Maryland, 1998) p. 5.

<sup>199</sup> Bishop, quoted by Bielle, p. 10.  
Bishop, *Poems*, pp. 219-223.

<sup>200</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, 'Elizabeth Bishop and James Ingram Merrill reading their poems in the Coolidge Auditorium', *Library of Congress* (1974) <<https://www.loc.gov/item/94838829/>> [accessed 1 July 2021].

<sup>201</sup> JD McClatchy, quoted by Ernest Hilbert, <<https://www.cprw.com/Hilbert/poetvoice5.html>> [accessed July 2021]

<sup>202</sup> Bishop, *Library of Congress*

opposite: it enforces the meaning of the poem itself, of the importance of the imperfect, and, through the pause for thought it creates, of ‘contemplation’.

Bishop’s idiosyncratic voice is very much present in her readings, despite, or even because of, her disinterest in being a performer. Lombardi writes that Bishop’s poetry oscillates ‘between self-exposure and concealment’, and her mode of reading is caught on a similar tightrope, between coolness and intimacy; the absence of ‘performance’, the self-conscious asides, seem to suggest Bishop’s slight disinterest in the whole endeavour of poetry-reading, while at the same time tricking the reader into thinking they are simply overhearing Bishop have a conversation with a friend.<sup>203</sup> That combination is particularly noticeable in Bishop’s reading of ‘Filling Station’, from the same event, which Andrew Motion describes as, ‘for all its modesties, absolutely mesmeric and authoritative’.<sup>204</sup> Bishop introduces the poem by warning her audience that ‘this one will have to be changed as you’ll see, somehow, I don’t know how, at the end... but I’ll read it the way it is now.’<sup>205</sup> After reading the poem, eliciting laughter from the audience and laughing herself, she laments: ‘I’m afraid that’s wasted.’<sup>206</sup> This self-deprecation is a form of ‘self-exposure’, a show of vulnerability to the audience, despite that weary, half ‘bemused’ tone that seems at first to ‘conceal’ the real Bishop. Of course, self-deprecation can be a form of self-concealment too, being a form of politeness that may not always be honest. Its use in this reading, before and even during the poem, however, disrupts the formal, rarefied nature of the poetry reading: it is the opposite of the ‘decorporealised’ reading that T.S. Eliot achieved in his recordings of ‘The Waste Land’, for example, with his dry monotone: by interjecting, Bishop makes her presence as a person, fallible and occasionally even ‘bemused’, known.<sup>207</sup>

Rhythmically and tonally, the later recordings show development in Bishop’s performance style. The tempo is relaxed, even stately, while the intonation is far less monotonous than the early recordings. The effect is indeed closer to ‘mesmeric’ than those slightly panicked earlier recordings. Vidyan

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<sup>203</sup> Lombardi, p. 29.

<sup>204</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘The 10 best recordings of poets’ (2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2014/jun/06/the-10-best-recordings-of-poets>> [accessed 1 July 2021].

<sup>205</sup> Bishop, *Library of Congress*

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Jason Camlot, *Phonopoetics: The Making of Early Literary Recordings* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 151.

Ravinthiran writes, however, that Bishop was ‘suspicious of her [own] tendency toward an iambic beat’, fearing ‘it could be seen as the metrical equivalent of a mesmerist’s swinging watch.’<sup>208</sup> There is that allusion to the ‘mesmerising’ again; while Ravinthiran is right that Bishop avoids absolute regularity, the casualness of Bishop’s reading is strangely hypnotic.<sup>209</sup> We are able to ‘enter into’ and ‘get lost’ in Bishop’s reading; as Bernstein suggests, this is a possibility unique to the experience of listening to a reading.<sup>210</sup>

The tension between casualness and form seems crucial to the quietly ‘authoritative’ nature of both Bishop’s poems and her readings, and the sway they can have over the reader and listener. For most of her reading of ‘Filling Station’, Bishop leaves a pause at the end of line-breaks, bringing a kind of audible shape and subtle rhythm to her lines; the faint trimeter of ‘Filling Station’ surfaces, most noticeably when Bishop leaves a short pause between the enjambment of ‘a set of crushed and grease- / impregnated wickerwork’.<sup>211</sup> Her new style brings the form out of the poem, without making it sound rigid. In her reading of ‘Large Bad Picture’, the line-breaks are not observed, partly because the rhyme-scheme makes those breaks audible anyway, and partly to create the kind of tension that Ravinthiran hints at, between regularity and imperfection. Furthermore, Bishop slows down towards the end of each stanza, creating a ‘rubato’ effect that brings musicality to her otherwise conversational tone. That slowing pace sets up the final lines, ‘[i]t would be hard to say what brought them here, / commerce or contemplation’, as though Bishop were making room for contemplation herself. It is that shifting rhythm that catches the listener’s ear, thus making their contemplation of the poem possible, too.

Bishop’s tone is also able to reshape the meaning of the poem. The opening line of ‘Filling Station’, ‘Oh but it is dirty!’, appears campily throwaway on the page, but Bishop reads these lines with an almost mournful cadence.<sup>212</sup> ‘Be careful with that match!’ sounds more concerned than ironic, too,

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<sup>208</sup> Vidyan Ravinthiran, ‘On Elizabeth Bishop’, <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=10052](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10052)> [accessed March 2021]

<sup>209</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p 189.

<sup>210</sup> Bernstein, p. 11.

<sup>211</sup> Bishop, *Library of Congress*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

when Bishop reads it.<sup>213</sup> That initial weary tone makes the comedy of '[s]omebody waters the plant, / or oils it, maybe' all the more unexpected, and funnier; the playfulness of the lines creep up on the listener because of the straightness with which Bishop reads; a more dramatic reading would, paradoxically, have less dramatic and comedic effect.<sup>214</sup> As with the unexpected final stress of 'I let the fish go', Bishop is able to bring surprise to her reading of 'Filling Station' by *not* reading dramatically. The break in her voice when she reads 'ESO-SO-SO-SO' is illustrative of the limit of her reserve when reading, how the submerged pathos and humour occasionally surface in her voice. Bishop *does* perform, then: that is, by almost obscuring emotion with her reserve, but not quite.

There is also the problem of Bishop's performances of voices which are very different to her own. It might be surprising to contemporary readers that Bishop chose to record herself reading 'Song for a Colored Singer' in 1948.<sup>215</sup> The poem itself would be considered uncomfortably close to a kind of literary blackface today, with its attempts to mimic the black vernacular. The poem itself was written out of admiration for the blues and the lyrics of Billie Holliday, however, and, though it might be problematic today, its humour and pathos elevate it above caricature.<sup>216</sup> Though the reading is unavailable online, we can look to Bishop's reading of 'Manuelzinho' for a indication of how she might have approached a reading of 'Songs for a Colored Singer': though 'Manuelzinho' is written in the voice of a 'friend', whom Bishop reveals in a letter is meant to be her partner Lota de Macedo Soares, and includes dialogue from the titular Brazilian gardener, Bishop resolutely reads the poem in her own voice, which suggests she was not interested in trying to mimic other voices in her performances in a way which might render them ridiculous or comical.<sup>217</sup> Here, Bishop's 'non-performance' can be seen as a form of sensitivity towards those voices in her poetry which are not her own. Bishop fretted about being seen as 'condescending' in poems like 'Manuelzinho' and 'Cootchie', which depict people of a different race and class to her, and her 'anti-expressivist' reading voice can be heard as a means of

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 155.

<sup>216</sup> Anne R. Newman, 'Elizabeth Bishop's "Songs for a Colored Singer"', from *World Literature Today*, 50.1 (1977) 37-40

<sup>217</sup> Bishop, 'Manuelzinho', from *Elizabeth Bishop Reads her Works*, (1947), Soundmark Records, track 8, Spotify, <<https://open.spotify.com/track/2FyFZpsy3J9QapyjB90mqD?si=652fd79752344d22>> [accessed Dec 2021]

allowing those voices to speak for themselves.<sup>218</sup> We might call her reading voice ‘self-forgetful’, though not coldly impersonal; Bishop’s performances are not quite an Eliotic ‘escape from personality’, but play with the tension between performance and non-performance, personality and impersonality, in the same way we can often locate Bishop as the speaker in her poems, while the drama and interest of the poem often reside elsewhere.

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<sup>218</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 479. Bishop defended these poems by writing that ‘Brazilians like “Manuelzinho” very much’.

## ‘a gentle, auditory, / slow hallucination’:

### Conclusion

The quality that Bishop’s original poems, her translations, and her readings share is a reluctance to inhabit, or concentrate on, one voice for long. Other voices are always interrupting, when Bishop is not interrupting herself, either in the self-corrections in her poems or the improvised ones of her performances. Though Bishop’s poems usually seem to come from one speaker, that speaker is often absorbing the voices around them, from the noisy shoreline of ‘The Bight’ to the mythical languages of the Amazon river; the speaker’s voice might also shift within the poem, as it does in ‘In the Waiting Room’. That tendency seems central Bishop’s evasive ‘poetic voice’: Bishop is neither confessional nor wholly impersonal, neither wholly sincere nor artificial, neither wholly realistic nor surrealistic. The strange voices of her poetry feed into this deep ambivalence, resulting in a voice that can best be characterised as possessing a kind of ‘betweenness’.

The impetus for that ‘betweenness’ in Bishop’s voice, and the questions of utterance as an expression of identity that resurface across her work, can be connected to some of the hardships of Bishop’s life. Her father died when she was eight months old, and her mother was admitted to a mental hospital when she was four; her mother later died when Bishop was only twenty three.<sup>219</sup> That trauma is dealt with explicitly in ‘In the Village’, Bishop’s autobiographical short story, and more obliquely in poems such as ‘Sestina’ and ‘In the Waiting Room’. In ‘In the Village’, the scream of an unnamed mother, an analogue for Bishop’s own, is described as a ‘stain’ on the landscape:

‘A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies.’<sup>220</sup>

We see here another of the paradoxes of voice: while sound, unlike an image, is durational, it can resonate endlessly outside of its fixed temporality. As it resonates in the story and in ‘In the Waiting Room’, it becomes a kind of emblem of Bishop’s estrangement and lack of belonging, as well as a

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<sup>219</sup> ‘Elizabeth Bishop’, *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop?>> [accessed December 2021]

<sup>220</sup> Bishop, *Prose*, p. 62.

reminder of her inescapable tie with her mother - like 'the family / voice in the throat' in 'In the Waiting Room'. The ambivalence of that poem towards the 'family / voice' seems to align with Bishop's ambivalence towards the loss of her mother; in 1934, she wrote in a letter: 'I guess I should tell you that Mother died a week ago today. After eighteen years, of course, it is the happiest thing that could have happened.'<sup>221</sup> That ambivalence towards voice, shaped by her early loss, can even be located in the anxious rhythms of 'landscape' poems such as 'The Bight', or the frustrated expression of oblique love poems such as 'Casabianca', 'Chemin de Fer', 'Late Air' and 'O Breath'. The voice, in these poems, is portrayed as restrictive, as though it were too charged with history - unlike, for example, the 'Five remote lights' of 'Late Air', 'where the dew cannot climb'.

These latter poems express the difficulty of voice as a means of communicating desire, a difficulty that Bishop's sexual identity would have heightened. As a lesbian or bisexual woman writing in the forties and fifties, any kind of expression of her sexuality would have still been highly taboo, and that sense of restriction is, as critics have widely noted, felt in the poems. Explicit references to queer love can only be found in unpublished drafts, such as 'Vague Poem'.<sup>222</sup> Beside this, living in Brazil for twenty years, adapting to and often writing about a foreign culture, meant Bishop was an outsider in more ways than one. That desire to understand a 'language I do not know', of nature and of a foreign culture, and being partly excluded from the world she found herself in, can be felt across the 'Brazil' section of her collection *Questions of Travel*, and particularly in 'The Riverman', and 'Twelfth Morning', which I discuss in chapter two. The strange, enchanting voices of these poems, the river 'like a Primus pumped up high', and the 'expelled breath' of the sea, gesture to the possibilities of voice as pure body, untethered from the weight of the specificity of language, its binaries and oppositions: an emphasis on voice as sound gestured towards an escape the categories which placed her on the margins in her life.

Meanwhile, Bishop's approach to translation and performance suggest similar anxieties around using one's voice as an expression of selfhood. In both cases, she opts for an aesthetic of 'betweenness', a kind of anti-aesthetic, in which her singular voice, with its Bishopian characteristics, is present yet subdued. The interplay of similarity and difference which characterises 'voice' - as both unique and

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<sup>221</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 25.

<sup>222</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, pp.323-324.



resonant of other voices - informs Bishop's translations; Bishop emphasises fidelity to the original, but her translations are inevitably inflected with her own poetic voice. Her translations seem to neither radiate with Bishop's voice (as Lowell's 'free' translations did with his voice) nor that of the poet she translates. In Bishop's readings, meanwhile, her anti-aesthetic, or performance of non-performance, is carefully orchestrated so as not to overshadow the words she is reading. Furthermore, her disinterest in 'performing' other voices in her poems when reading, as in 'Songs for a Colored Singer' or 'Manuelzinho', similarly results in a mingling of the voice on the page and Bishop's own voice. We hear Bishop's desire to not to 'wear' the voices of others, while never quite revealing what her 'own' voice might be, in readings that are simultaneously relaxed and guarded.

I will close by turning to 'The Moose', from Bishop's final collection *Geography III*. This, to me, is the poem in which Bishop's interest in voice, and its tensions between the shared and the individual, culminates. Various voices are woven throughout the poem: the voice of the narrator, the voices of the people on the bus as they travel through a Nova Scotian landscape and are ultimately faced with the 'grand, otherworldly' presence of the moose on the road.<sup>223</sup> The voice of the narrator is peculiar; it seems to have two modes. At times it gives the impression of belonging to someone inside the bus, signalled by the use of the collective pronoun: 'Moonlight as we enter / the New Brunswick woods', and later, 'A man's voice reassures us'.<sup>224</sup> At others, the speaker is a kind of omniscient narrator—would someone on the bus be able to notice the fog's 'cold round, crystals / form and slide and settle / in the white hens feathers, / in gray glazed cabbages', or the 'bumblebees creep / inside the foxgloves'?<sup>225</sup> And at the very end of the poem, how could the speaker notice, from within the bus, 'a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline'?<sup>226</sup> This indeterminacy must be intentional, for the poem goes on to include voices which are similarly difficult to place.

The first voice (other than the speaker's) that we encounter is relatively unproblematic: a woman, 'brisk, freckled, elderly', says: "'A grand night. Yes, sir, / all the way to Boston.'"<sup>227</sup> The particularity of

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<sup>223</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 193.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-193.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

the speaker and of her destination mean that we are comfortable, as readers, that we are on firm ground: a ‘real’ person is being described. There is a shift, however, as voices change from belonging to definite speakers to almost blending with the noises of the bus, as a ‘dreamy divagation / begins in the night, / a gentle, auditory, / slow hallucination’; a dreamier space of self-forgetfulness is being entered, in which, by listening, the lives of other people become momentarily accessible.<sup>228</sup> An ‘old conversation’ begins amid ‘Snores. Some long sighs’, and ‘creakings and noises’, and the definite is replaced with the general: ‘names being mentioned, / things cleared up finally’.<sup>229</sup> There is a sense that the overheard voices are a kind of creaking or rustling, saying nothing specific and yet still being meaningful, perhaps more meaningful, for the emphasis that Bishop places on the noise, rather than the content, of the chatter drifting through the bus. The voices come from ‘somewhere, / back in the bus’: the line-break here, before the clarification of ‘back in the bus’, leaves a lingering implication that these voices come from nowhere in particular, have no clear source, that the speaker might be hearing things.<sup>230</sup> We begin to see the uncertainty that Bishop gradually draws into the poem, almost without our noticing it.

The inherent uncertainty of hearing becomes an important theme of the poem, and it is that uncertainty which heightens the possibility of readerly identification with those voices. Bonnie Costello writes of the use of the collective pronoun ‘we’ in the poem, that, with its inherent indeterminacy, it can ‘suggest broader gatherings so that the sense of the general does not withdraw from the particular into impersonal abstraction, or the local hide itself in a false universal’; as well as Bishop’s use of ‘we’, it is the fragmentary nature of the poem’s eavesdropping, and the fact that these half-heard conversations often float speaker-less, and avoid particularity, with the use of those deliberately vague words ‘somewhere’, ‘something’, which allows those voices to take on a quality of universality without wholly eschewing the particular.<sup>231</sup> We might return to Frost’s notion of ‘sound-postures’, the meaning gleaned from conversations heard behind a closed door; these voices are similarly muffled, but they still radiate

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) p. 7.

with their miniature dramas. To know more about these voices, to have each speaker described visually (it is the scenery outside the bus, not the people inside, for which Bishop reserves her usual meticulous observation) would leave us too grounded in reality; it is the dreaminess of the poem which you might say renders the inhabitants of the bus more real, more like people, than mere detailed description would suggest.

In the following stanza, we encounter the idea that a voice might ‘mean’ without saying anything:

“Yes...” that peculiar  
Affirmative. “Yes...”  
A sharp, indrawn breath,  
Half groan, half acceptance,  
That means “Life’s life that.  
We know *it* (also death).”

Michael Taussig writes that ‘weather talk is like wind rustling through our bodies as acknowledgment of sociality.’<sup>232</sup> The ‘yes’ of this stanza is like that rustling, less a word than a ‘sharp, indrawn breath’ or a ‘groan’, which carries more meaning though its very inarticulacy: it acknowledges everything, by seeming to say nothing; an attempt to explain ‘*it*’, life and death, would ultimately say less, because that ‘yes’ acts primarily as a response to the voice of another person, a recognition of their presence and a signal of the speaker’s own—an ‘acknowledgement of sociality’, in Taussig’s words. In a letter to James Merrill in 1972, Bishop gave some background to the origins of that indrawn “Yes”:

Did I tell you that I visited my aunt in Nova Scotia two or three weekends ago? I was taken on drives to see the “fall colors”—better there than anywhere else—graveyards, old places where I used to live long ago, etc. But one thing struck me—calling on the woman who now lives in my grandparents’ house. She was entertaining the lady who runs the village telephone switchboard for tea—so there were five ladies, with my aunt, cousin and me. They ALL, except me, did that queer thing with the indrawn breath, saying “ye-e-es” to show sympathetic understanding. I wish I could imitate it better—it is almost an assenting *groan*.<sup>233</sup>

That ‘yes’, closer to a ‘groan’ than a word, is able to ‘show sympathetic understanding’, because, I think, of what it excludes - details of one’s own life, opinions about the other person’s. Instead, it is self effacing. It also brings us back to Rousseau’s notion of the singing voice as uniquely affecting, because it can ‘proclaim a being similar to yourself.’ It is the sound, which ‘strike[s] your ear’, that creates that intimacy, not primarily the words themselves. Inarticulacy and intimacy are therefore intertwined.

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<sup>232</sup> Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004) p. 45.

<sup>233</sup> Bishop, *One Art*, p. 573.

Cliché is another form of ‘rustling’, language that acts more like agreeable noise than the articulation of meaning we might usually associate with speech. In ‘The Moose’, it appears to be the only possible response to the strangeness of this encounter with the ‘grand, otherworldly’ moose. When the moose appears, it is described by the speaker as ‘homely as a house / (or, safe as houses)’, the repetition of the same idea, reformulated into another cliché, seeming to mirror the ‘childish’ whispers of the passengers: “‘Sure are big creatures.’/ ‘It’s awful plain.’ / ‘Look! It’s a she!’”<sup>234</sup> While cliché might ordinarily be associated with the mundane, here it is associated with wonder. That is because cliché, we might say, is a kind of bodily speech, a noise ‘rustling through our bodies’, and this encounter with the otherworldly moose engenders a childlike wonder that bypasses rationality. Taussig goes on to write that ‘[w]eather talk is soft and sweet, acknowledging our alienation from nature no less than from one another’: and while the passengers in ‘The Moose’ may be ultimately alienated from nature and each other, they lean on cliché as a way of expressing the inexpressible ‘sweet sensation of joy’ they all feel, in a moment of temporary egolessness, as each passenger is united in their attention towards the unknowable creature stood outside the bus, and each is freed from the desire to know; they simply express their shared experience of wonder.

Close attention is also paid by Bishop to the particular texture and tone of the voices on the bus: while the passengers ‘exclaim in whispers, / childishly, softly’, the ‘quiet’ driver is described as ‘rolling his *r*’s’, echoing Bishop’s memory of being scolded for her ‘inverted *r*’s’ in her childhood, a trace of her Nova Scotian upbringing apparently unacceptable to her paternal grandfather. Perhaps Bishop is sympathetically projecting herself onto the bus driver; voice seems to allow for such transference, never wholly attached to one body. Although no character is described visually, (apart from the ‘freckled’ elderly lady), Bishop creates an impression of their reality, their solidity, through attention to the texture of their voices. It is a peculiar combination of specificity and vagueness which hands over part of the work of interpretation to the reader’s imagination; as in many of Bishop’s other poems which I have discussed, such as ‘The Bight’, the reader is necessarily *involved* in the poem. There is no worldview presented to the reader, and there is no dominating voice; instead, the voices in Bishop’s poems are entangled, and the reader might even begin to hear their own voice amid the poem’s murmurings. John

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<sup>234</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p 193.

Ashbery describes his poetry as a kind of ‘one-size-fits all confessionalism’, one that includes autobiographical detail without being strictly *about* him.<sup>235</sup> Such a label might be applied to Bishop too: ‘The Moose’ and its tapestry of voices seems to include so much, both ‘life’ and ‘death’, even within the limits of the modest scene it describes, because of its attention to voices which convey both grounded reality and reach beyond it to include every voice, including the reader’s.

If ‘In the Waiting Room’ is the poem in which Bishop’s anxieties about voice, identity and history reach a dizzying climax, ‘The Moose’ is perhaps a resolution to those anxieties. The voices, while uncertain, are no longer disconcerting, but conjure the comfort of daily language, and suggest the poet’s and the reader’s inclusion within that tapestry of voices. Of course, the speaker merely observes, or listens; they are not involved in the chatter on the bus, just as they are distanced from the moose at the end of the poem by the glass of the bus window. That undercurrent of alienation, from other people and from nature, is a signature of Bishop’s work: but here, that alienation is unimportant by the time the final stanza is reached, where the silent presence of the moose, and the self-forgetful effects of mere apprehension, seems to obviate the divisions between nature and culture, and between people.

[...] by craning backward,  
the moose can be seen  
On the moonlit macadam;  
Then there’s a dim  
Smell of moose, an acrid  
Smell of gasoline.<sup>236</sup>

The delicate rhyme-scheme, ending on the near-perfect rhyme of ‘can be seen’ and ‘gasoline’, is casually authoritative, almost suggesting closure — though that seems far from what we get. Instead there is the presence of the moose, both separate from and enmeshed with the human world, with its ‘smell of gasoline’. Through a fine tissue of imagery and sound, Bishop is able to conjure that ambivalence.

Her poems emphasise the way of saying over what is said. This can be said of all good poetry, but Bishop is unique in her use of evasive, impersonal poetic mode as a means of expressing the personal and painful - her anxieties around identity and expression, shaped by early loss, illness, and living as a queer woman in the middle of the twentieth century - while extending her reach beyond the particular

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<sup>235</sup> John Ashbery, quoted in ‘John Ashbery in Conversation with John Tranter’, *Jacket* <<http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html>> [accessed January 2022]

<sup>236</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, p. 194.

in a way that pure confession might struggle to. In his late poem 'Epilogue', Robert Lowell asks 'why not say what happened?': Bishop's poetry was often taken from life, but her apparently truthful description is often tempered by her use of uncertain voices, which put the question to the reader: how is my voice shaped by others, and how are the sounds of the world an extension of my voice?<sup>237</sup> 'What happened' is ultimately less important than the utterance itself, and the various selves it contains: 'the joking voice, / a gesture I love', to 'the family / voice in the throat'.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Robert Lowell, 'Epilogue' from Poetry Foundation <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47693/epilogue-56d22853c55c0>> [accessed January 2022]

<sup>238</sup> Bishop, *Poems*, pp.179-198.

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