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The Baroque and Elizabeth Bishop

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Seventeenth-Century English poetry, especially the lyric, has been twice blest in the twentieth century by two poets of remarkable talent. The story of T. S. Eliot's epochal "discovery" of Donne and the Metaphysical poets in 1921 has often been told, and from many interested perspectives, including the perspective, as scholarly research has shown, that Eliot's discovery was not quite so epochal as his 1921 review would have it.[1] And now there is emerging a no less compelling sequel, this one concentrating on Elizabeth Bishop and George Herbert in particular. The latter narrative is, appropriately enough, more modest in scope, a story of personal intimacy and authorial influence. The originating moment occurs in the form of a now celebrated dream the twenty-four-year-old Bishop reported:

> Dreamed I had a long conversation on meter with George Herbert: we discussed the differences between his and Donne's and touched upon Miss Moore's, which was felt, in the dream, to beat Donne's but not his. This may have been subsconsious politeness on my part. He had curls and was wearing a beautiful dark red satin coat. He said he would be "useful" to me . . . Praise God.

And from this dream, it is possible to create a deep reading of one poet by another, as Jeredith Merrin has done in her exemplary 1990 study

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[1]See especially John Guillory, "The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 173-98, and Dayton Haskin, "New Historical Contexts for Appraising the Donne Revival from A. B. Grosart to Charles Eliot Norton," *ELH* 56 (1989): 869-95.

An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition.[2]

Part of what makes Merrin's study of special value to scholars like myself, located primarily in the seventeenth century, is not just the light it sheds on Herbert and Bishop, but the link it makes between Moore and seventeenth-century prose, especially that of Sir Thomas Browne, and the subsequent orchestration of another modernist tradition that, as Eliot himself understood, affects our understanding of the past, even as it directs attention away from his legacy. While Robert Lowell was wrestling with the likes of Donne and Milton, another version of the seventeenth century was beginning to take hold: Moore was discovering her cabinet of curiosities (as exemplified in a poem like "The Pangolin") in the writings of the Norwich physician, and Bishop her polite plain-spokenness in the poems from *The Temple*. For those fascinated by the unfolding saga of literary forms, watching the re-emergence of past figures—whether authors or the tropes by which they or a period are often known—carries with it some of the excitement of watching, say, a new performance of a Renaissance play, in this case written by a dramatist other than the canonical Shakespeare. How will these earlier writers be re-engaged? What new opportunities does the past afford? What will be the new directions? the surprises? Where will the new links, in turn, lead?

Although my focus here is on Bishop and the baroque, I want to preface my essay with several general remarks about the production of literary history and then to enter a caveat peculiar to Bishop and anyone attempting to analyze her use or uses of tradition. The first has to do with scholarly habits of annotating seventeenth-century poetry. From paperback "lite" to variorum heavy, these texts almost always privilege literary sources over later uses. Because editors are generally committed to the reasonable proposition of providing information to the reader that might have been available to the author, this practice

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[2]Quotation from Bishop occurs on page 39 of *An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990). For an even more finely tuned assessment of the Herbertian echoes in Bishop, see Joseph H. Summers, "George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop," in *George Herbert in the Nineties: Reflections and Reassessments*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post and Sidney Gottlieb (Fairfield, Ct.: *George Herbert Journal*, Studies & Monographs, 1995): 48-58.

is hardly surprising, but it frequently means relegating a poem's later life to a few observations—usually made in the introduction and often of the most general kind. And even here the remarks refer more often to the ongoing scholarly reception of a poet than to the later uses to which the author or poem has been put by fellow practitioners. In this regard, poets may often depend on the work of editors, but editors rarely recall poetic works later than the ones they are editing and thus miss a signal opportunity to advance their own cause, which is, presumably, to argue for the continuing importance of their poet.

The second point has to do with how we construct narratives of influence at the core of many literary histories. The critical need to tell a story, whether of the nationalistic kind typical of the nineteenth century or of the heated agonistic family variety produced by Harold Bloom in the 1970s and then retold by feminist critics in light of gender difference, is almost always a necessary reduction of the complicated interplay between past and present.[3] Those elements that do not fit the chosen narrative are often ignored or discarded. Donne, for example, all but disappears in Merrin's account, in spite of Bishop's nearly life-long obsession with travel and associated geographical tropes like maps, islands, and compasses that resonate far more audibly in Donne's poetry than in Herbert's. Or else the proposed connection can assume an exaggerated place in the story because of a particular, albeit belated or anachronistic, twist within the scholarly tradition. Bishop's often-admired modesty is an important element in her poetry; to many readers, it is equal to the value she places on accuracy. But for humility to be isolated as singularly enabling seems as much a response—surely a necessary and refreshing one—to the dominant critical tradition of strong poet talk of the 1970s and 1980s (descending from Bloom and redetermined, especially, by Gilbert and Gubar) as a solitary virtue in either Herbert or Bishop. Reaching out—indeed, sometimes overreaching—counts, too, in both poets: "I struck the board and cried 'no more'" ("The Collar"); "Then practice losing farther, losing faster" ("One Art"). And in Bishop's case, reaching includes exploring places well beyond those

[3]This is the subject of David Perkins's *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

found in Herbert's hemisphere or in her own New England, in poems like "Jerónimo's House," "Florida," and "Brazil, January 1, 1502."

Criticism and readers of criticism need a narrative or theory, but poets don't, especially lyric poets, and—here's my caveat—few poets escape the critic's loop more skillfully than Bishop herself, in both lyric practice and epistolary riposte. Here's a particularly memorable example of the latter: "Your piece about my 'Recent Poems' fascinates me," she wrote in a 1978 letter to the literary critic Jerome Mazzaro. "I never dreamed of *Alice in Wonderland* in connection with 'Crusoe in England'. I don't believe I ever read *The Little Prince* & when I wrote the poem I hadn't re-read *Robinson Crusoe* for at least 20 years." And her confession of ignorance continues: "I never heard of Katherine May Peek and many other writers you mention—or haven't read them, not even Virgil's *Eclogues*! You reduce me to illiteracy! In the Duxbury poem ["The End of March"] the water *was* the color of mutton-fat jade; I wasn't aware of any echo until you pointed it out. And my feelings are hurt by your thinking I'd *gulp* 'grog a l'americaine'." Then, in the wake of these embarrassing admissions, she asserts a poet's brief cri de cœur:

> Well, it takes an infinite number of things coming together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, books, last night's dream, experiences past and present—to make a poem. The settings, or descriptions, of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts—or as close to the facts as I can write them. But, as I said, it is fascinating that my poem should arouse in you all those literary references![4]

Rhetorically, Bishop surely wins the day. (One of the underrated freedoms of writing on Donne or Marvell is never having to worry about getting a letter like this.) But protestations aside, she has hardly been reduced to "illiteracy." Her credo of "just plain facts" is itself twice qualified, and, perhaps even more to the point, she numbers "books" among the infinite things, "forgotten or almost forgotten," that come together in the making of a poem. In fact, she mentions them first. In this representative clash of different temperaments, the

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[4]*Elizabeth Bishop, One Art: Letters,* ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 621.

issue is not really between "books" and "facts," or between "art 'copying from life' and life itself," as she says in "Poem," but between "bookishness" and "books," between a poetry constructed out of "literary references" and a poetry that includes the literary as part of life. While artfully side-stepping Mazzaro, Bishop need not have had the counter-example of T. S. Eliot in mind for us to see how differently these two poets, both well read in the seventeenth century, engaged their literary pasts. Indeed, if Bishop's poetry now enjoys an especially wide audience, male and female alike, ranging from initial readers of verse to professional critics and fellow poets, it is largely because few poems depend on our getting "all those literary references," but a good many do invite, at some level, a knowledge of specific literary traditions or forms, as in the case of this late "enigmatic" poem—the adjective belongs to Bishop's biographer, Brett Millier[5]—published in the year of her death (1979):

Sonnet

Caught—the bubble
in the spirit-level,
a creature divided;
and the compass needle
wobbling and wavering,
undecided.
Freed—the broken
thermometer's mercury
running away;
and the rainbow-bird
from the narrow bevel
of the empty mirror,
flying wherever
it feels like, gay![6]

"From how many angles can I engage the sonnet tradition," this slim poem seems to ask? Upside down, yes, by reversing the normal

[5]Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 101.

[6]Quotations from Bishop's poetry are taken from *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979).

octave/ sestet order. Inside out, too, by registering the signs of emotional disturbance but not identifying the object of address that causes the inner turbulence. As an elemental reflection on writing in one of the most conventional of poetic forms ("Caught," "Freed"). As a devious salute to the sonnet's age-old subject matter of love ("flying wherever/ it feels like, gay!"). As metrically deformed, "wobbling" and "wavering" in its skittery rhymes; as a beveled edge sending a shard of light into the past. Bishop's slice-of-life "Sonnet" is a minimalist poem, not a "gilded monument," but it inhabits a maximal field of reference, in which, just perhaps, it might even arouse slanted memories of Donne in the refigured image of the compass cut (or "Caught") from "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," not a true sonnet, either, but placed among his "Songs and Sonnets." Were Bishop's poem less striking—less knowingly modest, that is, and moving in both senses of the word (rhyming "gay" with "away")—none of the above would much matter. But who would want this elusive little poem to be less allusive? Not even first-time readers, in my experience.

What follows might best be described as an introduction, addressed primarily to readers of the early seventeenth century, for understanding the place of the baroque as a field of maximal reference in Bishop's poetry. I have chosen the general term in the hope of broadening, not displacing, the Herbertian narrative currently connecting early modern and modern critical responses to Bishop's poetry. And by "baroque," I mean, at the simplest level, merely to call attention initially to the sizeable constellation of poets from the early modern period who, along with Herbert, figure prominently in Bishop's imagination.[7] As a poet who began writing in the "Eliotic"

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[7]In *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), Thomas J. Travisano writes: "if there is one artistic movement to which [Bishop] felt closest, it is an older one—the baroque" (p. 11). My essay might be said to extend and particularize Travisano's perception and also, by referring to the baroque as "a maximal field of reference," to underscore the "conditional" in his sentence. I think Bishop generally found poets and poems (and the traditions they embodied) more useful than "artistic movements." Hence the wisdom of Jorie Graham's recent remark: "Elizabeth Bishop was a remarkably original poet whom it would be difficult to place in any particular school." (*Poetry Speaks*, eds. Elise

1930s, Bishop, like many of her generation, was well read in English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Donne and Herbert, of course: their combined influence can be readily glimpsed in "The Weed" (originally published in1937), which begins by fusing the situation in "The Relic" or "The Damp" ("I dreamed that dead, and meditating, / I lay upon a grave, or bed") with transposed amatory language reminiscent of "The Extasie" ("and we remained unchanged together / for a year, a minute, an hour") and then proceeds in the conversational mode of Herbert's "Love Unknown" to describe, with some incredulity, a lurid vision of the heart's growth by division.[8] But

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Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby [Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2001], p. 186.) Underlying my general sense of the baroque are the studies by Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888; trans. by Katherin Simon [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966]), Donald Sutherland, *On, Romanticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (1987; trans by Charles Lambert [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992]), and Austin Warren, cited below.

[8]In general, Donnean echoes are strongest, as we might expect, in the small number of privately imagined, first-person plural scenes of Bishop's amatory verse: the never published poem "It is marvelous to wake up together," for instance (see Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1992], pp. 44-45), or the allusion in "Roosters" to "The Sun Rising" mentioned below. But Bishop's memory was long, and I find it difficult not to hear, in a late poem like "The End of March," with its dour weather conditions reported in the extreme at the poem's outset ("It was cold and windy, scarcely the day / to take a walk on that long beach. / Everything was withdrawn as far as possible, / indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken"), overtones of the beginning of "A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day": "Tis the yeare's midnight, and it is the dayes, / *Lucies*, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes, / The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks / Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes; / The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk, / Whither, as to the beds-feet life is shrunke." At the very least, too, the movement of the bus that "through late afternoon . . . journeys west" in "The Moose" invites comparison with Donne's "Good Friday, Riding Westward."

Herbertian echoes and effects are manifold in Bishop and too extensive to begin enumerating. Along with Merrin and Summers, cited above, see also Jeffrey Powers-Beck, "'Time to Plant Tears': Elizabeth Bishop's Seminary of Tears," *South Atlantic Review* 60 (1995): 69-87, and Richard Howard's impeccable two pages on "In the Waiting Room" in *Preferences* (New York:

she was also becoming well versed in Crashaw—the secular as well as the religious poet. "Musick's Duell," "Wishes to his Supposed Mistress," "The Weeper," and the Teresa poems were among Bishop's early favorites, and her poetry from this decade, capped by the publication of Austin Warren's seminal *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility* (1939), reflects an interest in Crashaw's mix of florid imagery, formal experimentation, feminine subjects, and unusual conceits, especially those involving tears.

To be more specific, readers of her much celebrated "Roosters" have often noted the novel purpose to which Bishop put the expanding, courtly tercets of Crashaw's idealizing "Wishes."[9] Rhyming tercets was common enough in the Renaissance. Herbert used them to great effect in "The Sacrifice," a poem Bishop thought "one of the wonders of the world."[10] But not rhyming lines of different length, and the mere fact that Crashaw's poem was fashionably elegant and not a sacred wonder—"the poem might have been composed by any one of the young Elizabethans or Jacobean poets," writes Warren,[11]—also meant that Bishop was free to scramble the form. In place of Crashaw's plaintive musicality,

> Who ere shee bee,
> That not impossible shee
> That shall command my heart and mee,

Bishop saw the potential for something cruder, something far more explosive, dissonant, and immediate in her own "bad case of the *Threes*," to borrow her description of the stanza from a letter she wrote to Moore:[12]

Viking Press, 1974), reprinted in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), pp. 21-22.

[9]See Charles Sanders, "Bishop's Roosters," *Explicator* 40, no. 4 (1982): 55-57.

[10]Summers, "George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop," p. 51.

[11]Warren, *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility* (1939; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 97.

[12]*One Art: Letters*, p. 96.

At four o'clock
in the gun-metal blue dark
we hear the first crow of the first cock

just below
the gun-metal blue window
and immediately there is an echo

off in the distance,
then one from the backyard fence,
then one, with horrible insistence,

grates like a wet match
from the broccoli patch,
flares, and all over town begins to catch.

Bishop completed "Roosters" in late 1940, on the eve of World War II. By her own admission, it was her most ambitious poem up to that date, and, against her mentor's attempts to make "Roosters" more decorous, Bishop defended her "rattletrap rhythm" (and other "sorditities" like her reference to a "water closet") as appropriate to "the essential baseness of militarism": the successively expanding lines further suggesting graphically the noisy rooster's vulgar, garish, chest-thrusting desire to dominate. The bird is likened at different points to both a military commander and a fighter plane. It's also seen by the speaker to threaten, like Donne's masculine "unruly Sun" (in "The Sun Rising"), the private sphere of the bedroom. But at the same time that Bishop begins by resolutely modernizing Crashaw, she also might be said to perform a Crashavian pilgrimage of sorts toward the religious baroque. As Bonnie Costello has remarked, the form's Trinitarian symbolism anticipates the quieter reality that becomes, in diptych fashion, the poem's other subject: one of "inescapable hope, the pivot," as spelled out in Peter's penitential tears and the subsequent, remembered, artifactual history, both high and low and across Rome's skyline, of Christianity's representations of "cocks."[13] The dramatic shift in perspective is exactly that: not an "escape," as some critics have argued, but a reminder, at this troubled juncture in

[13]Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 66.

modern history, that "'Deny deny deny' / is not all the roosters cry." There's more than one kind of cock in Bishop's barnyard aubade.

The image of a tearful Peter points, too, toward the impact of "The Weeper"—and weeping, more generally—in Bishop. Hints of that poem have been found in "The Unbeliever," which appeared in *The Partisan Review* in 1938.[14] And almost two decades later, in the mysteriously sad and brilliant "Sestina," beginning "September rain falls on the house" (first published in *The New Yorker* in 1956 and much anthologized thereafter), the influence of "The Weeper" can still be seen both in Bishop's choice of "tears" for one of the six terminal words disposed according to the strict rotational rules of the form and in the punning wit that discovers *tears* to be everywhere, even in a cup of *tea*, in this earthen, domestic seminary of unspecified feminine sorrow. The plot of that poem ("*Time to plant tears*") specifically calls to mind, as well, Crashaw's equation of seeds and tears, encapsulated in the line "'Tis seed-time still with thee."[15] But the most resonant redetermination of "The Weeper" can perhaps best be seen in a poem that finds an altogether happier, more sensuous, use for water. "The Shampoo," written with Lota Soares in mind, is the last poem in *A Cold Spring* (1955). Called simply "Grey Hairs" in earlier drafts, the three-stanza poem, with its baroque swirls and cosmic imagery, concludes with a Crashavian conceit that compares the grey in Lota Soares's hair with heaven's stars, as if Bishop were initially addressing a heavenly Magdalena, then inviting her down to earth, where Bishop will be the one to do the washing:[16]

> The shooting stars in your black hair
> in bright formation
> are flocking where,
> so straight, so soon?

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[14]Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, p.141.

[15]See Powers-Beck, "Time to Plant Tears," p. 84.

[16]Susan McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 128, comments perceptively on the poem's "metaphysical" features and sees the connections, through Herrick, with the poem immediately preceding it, Bishop's "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," discussed below.

—Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
battered and shiny like the moon.

More surprising, although less lasting, was an early interest Bishop took in Ben Jonson. On several occasions she spoke of renewing her attempts to write a masque: perhaps "an American Pastoral might be excellent—something a little fantastic, anyway," she remarked in a letter to her college classmate, Frani Blough (thus unconsciously responding to a seventeenth-century genre in which aristocratic women played important parts).[17] And while at Vassar, she experimented with decoratively mythological subjects, of which the brief suite, "Three Valentines," is the best example. Although Bishop was never to experience the kind of "total immersion" in Jonson that she found in Herbert and the metaphysical poets more generally (for reasons both obvious and interesting), she could still realize distinct strains of a familiar classicizing kind when circumstances required, as in her "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore." Written in 1948, in part to cheer up a grieving Moore, who had recently lost her mother, the poem appeared initially in a special issue of *The Quarterly Review of Literature* honoring her mentor. And like "Roosters," it makes an inspired, fanciful use of an earlier poem, this time Herrick's "Corinna's Going a Maying," in conjunction with Pablo Neruda's elegy, "Alberto Rojas Jiménez Viene Volando." Bishop's refrain, disposed with greater freedom, is a direct echo of Neruda, but the repeated invitation for Moore to come out and play "this fine morning" ("The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged. / The waves are running in verses this fine morning") turns the occasion into an act of decorous female wooing:

Come with the pointed toe of each black shoe
trailing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat,
please come flying.
.....
We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,
or play at a game of constantly being wrong

[17] *One Art: Letters*, p. 36.

with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but please
please come flying.

In all but name, Mazzaro gets the Herrickian note right when he refers to Moore appearing here "as a fairy godmother."[18] Indeed, Bishop's playfulness, including a "cavalier" poet's sense of time passing ("we can sit down and weep"), was thought by some early readers to be insufficiently respectful, although apparently never by Moore herself. As James Merrill recalls many years later, this was among the poems Bishop read one evening at the Guggenheim Museum, "with Miss Moore at the end of her life, accompanied by a nurse, settled in the front row."[19] Moore had a soft spot for Herrick, and I suspect that she heard again what some of her defenders have missed in phrases like "a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots": a tribute to a self-styled baroque virtuoso, whose stringent advice regarding the indecorous "Roosters" the young Bishop had earlier resisted. The flamboyant poet, who consciously inhabited two cultures, regarded her writing in terms that Herrick surely would have recognized when she once described it as "if not a cabinet of fossils, a kind of collection of flies in amber."[20]

Some years later still, Bishop's need to meet a greater personal crisis prompted yet another classicizing moment of a different order. This time it involved the death in 1977 of her long-time friend and fellow poet, Robert Lowell, and it centered on re-turning the familiar flower passage from Milton's "Lycidas" in the middle of her late, indeed belated, pastoral elegy, "North Haven." The elegy begins as a

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[18]Mazzaro, "The Poetics of Impediment," in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 42.

[19]Quoted in David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop With Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell,* (New York: Farrar Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 260.

[20]Quoted in Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), p. 277. For appreciative remarks, early and late, about Herrick, see *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), pp. 228, 521. In the latter review, Moore even speaks of Edith Sitwell revealing a "wand tipped with a diamond" in the examples from "Herrick, Blake, and Donne" she chose to include in her *Book of Winter* (1950).

dreamy reflection on a distant seascape, then shifts abruptly, letting the temporal sweetness of early summer flood the poem in a wash of color:

> This month, our favorite one is full of flowers:
> Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch,
> Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright,
> the Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars,
> and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.

That Bishop should recall Milton while commemorating the poet sometimes called the "lost puritan" seems, of course, right—the more so, in this case, given the large imprint "Lycidas" left on Lowell in his own turbulent marine elegy, "The Quaker Graveyard," and elsewhere, as Anthony Hecht has persuasively demonstrated.[21] In the passage above, Bishop has made her poem immediate with local flowers from Maine (the poem was begun years earlier as a sketch), but the Miltonic note rings in the sumptuous catalog of flowers and the manner in which the amplified pentameter line, stretching into the concluding alexandrine, absorbs smaller phrases from Moore ("incandescent stars") and Shakespeare. ("Daisies pied" and "to paint the meadows with delight" are from the closing song in *Love's Labour's Lost*.)[22] The train of associations through Milton is uncanny, given that Moore's Latinate reference to "incandescent stars" comes from a poem entitled "Marriage" featuring "Eve," and that the extra foot, "And more," in the alexandrine is dictated as much by punning sound as sense, as Bishop recalls the restless, relentless ambition that drove both poets—Milton and Lowell, that is—and one to "distraction" or "derangment," Bishop's word at the elegy's end that equates Lowell's habit of incessant revision with his moods of manic depression: "And now—you've left / for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange, / your poems again."

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[21]Hecht, "Robert Lowell," in *Obbligati: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), pp. 264-89, esp. pp. 268-76.

[22]See Bishop's comments on this poem to Frank Bidart in *One Art: Letters*: pp. 624-25 ("I think I felt the more literary the better!"), and also Michael A. Ryan, "Bishop's 'North Haven,'" *Explicator* 57.1 (1998): 48-51.

"Among topheavy wrecks, she stays afloat," wrote Merrill of Bishop, surely with Lowell in mind, although perhaps not Milton.[23] I can only imagine Bishop demurring from the further suggestion that her reference to "Eyebright" (highlighted by the rhyme with "delight") was intended to arouse memories of the flower that the angel Michael administers to the fallen Adam's blurred vision at the end of *Paradise Lost* (XI, 414). It's probably Milton enough for Bishop merely to describe, one "classic" summer, a lapsarian Lowell's amorous sport with Amaryllis in the shade, at least until we arrive at the parenthetically framed last line of the stanza:

> Years ago, you told me it was here
> (in 1932?) you first "discovered *girls*"
> and learned to sail, and learned to kiss.
> You had "such fun," you said, that classic summer.
> ("Fun"—it always seemed to leave you at a loss. . .)

How far "loss" is meant to resound would seem to be exactly the point of her particular use of ellipses here. For Lowell—as for Adam after the fall (and Bishop, too?)—"fun" must always come bearing quotation marks.

* * *

Even a sketch as brief as this points to Bishop's ongoing connection with the seventeenth century and the varied uses to which some of these poets could be put. The occasional poems to Moore and Lowell show an intimate valuation of decorum underlying, or in concert with, significant formal experimentation, and if it is possible to glimpse an overarching direction in, say, the shift from Crashaw to Milton as opportune models beyond the example of Herbert, it points to the increasing liberties Bishop took with verse. To press the point further, I think it possible, for instance, to regard an early poem like the appropriately named "Florida" as an exercise in Crashavian "baroque," that is, a poem of descriptive (not emotional) excess, largely and artfully concerned with sensuous images for their own sake:

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[23]From "Her Craft" in *James Merrill: Collected Poems*, ed. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), p. 822.

> The state full of long S-shaped birds, blue and white,
> and unseen hysterical birds who rush up the scale
> every time in a tantrum.
> Tanagers embarrassed by their flashiness,
> and pelicans whose delight it is to clown;
> who coast for fun on the strong tidal currents
> in and out among the mangrove islands
> and stand on the sand-bars drying their damp gold wings
> on sun-lit evenings.

Florid for sure, and in its playful orchestration of bird sounds and eccentric movements perhaps reflective of "Musick's Duell," but some distance still from a later topographical poem like the posthumously published "Santarém," which begins,

> Of course I may be remembering it all wrong
> after, after—how many years?
>
> That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;
> more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile
> in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon,
> grandly, silently flowing, flowing east.

If we called "Santerém" an exercise in Miltonic baroque, it wouldn't only be because of the epic presence of two rivers "flowing east," and the edenic memories they stir in the speaker, accompanied by (for Bishop) unusually ripe diction ("under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds, / with everything gilded, burnished along one side"). It would have much to do with the presence of the speaker. Her evident liberty to reflect—even to the point of voicing temptation—is fully a part of the luxurious story she is telling:

> I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
> Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung
> from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
> and they'd diverged. Here only two
> and coming together. Even if one were tempted
> to literary interpretations
> such as: life / death, right / wrong, male / female
> —such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
> in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

"Florida's" elegant "S" has turned into "Santarém's" dazzling "zig-zags"—to invoke the image Bishop uses later in the poem to describe the wacky, wobbling, unstable, yet miraculous world being remembered by the musing speaker.

Between these two versions of the "baroque," much happened both in American poetry and in Bishop, not least of which was Bishop's own deepening understanding, borne out in her verse, of what she initially took the "baroque" to be. As Bishop scholars have often noted, although sometimes only in passing, her early reading of Morris Croll's now classic essay on "The Baroque Style in Prose" while still a student at Vassar was a "formative" moment that helped to crystallize a number of important but, by her own admissions, loosely held ideas about poetry. In a 1933 letter addressed to Donald Stanford, aspiring poet and eventual editor of the Yale edition of *The Poems of Edward Taylor* (1960), Bishop spoke about observing "two kinds of poetry": "that (I think yours is of this sort) *at rest*, and that which is in action, within itself" (Bishop's italics). At issue here was a central concern of modern poetics, one, of course, rethought by almost every generation of poets: the relation of meter to meaning. (In the seventeenth century alone, Herbert and Milton offered different "solutions" to this problem.) Bishop had prefaced her observation with the candid admission:

> I can write in iambics if I want to—but just now I don't know my own mind quite well enough to say what I want to in them. If I try to write smoothly I find myself perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness. (And don't you do that sometimes yourself?) However, I think that an equally great "cumulative effect" might be built up by a series of irregularities. Instead of beginning with an "uninterrupted mood" what I want to do is to get the moods themselves into the rhythm.[24]

By way of grounding her explanation, she reports running "across a very good description of what I mean about poetry" in Croll's essay, from which she studiously quotes, with regard to the operations of the

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[24]*One Art: Letters*, p. 11.

"period" "as a series of imaginative moments occurring in a logical pause or suspension." Then she continues in a flush of enthusiasm:

> But the best part, which perfectly describes the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself (and which explains, I think, something of Hopkins), is this: "Their purpose (the writers of Baroque prose) was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking. . .They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth."

Along with the many prescient ideas expressed in these two passages—the idiom of *portraying* being one, especially given Bishop's lifelong interest in painting—it is possible to see why her assimilation of Jonson was bound to be partial. Jonson's smooth verse almost always aspired to the classical ideal of a poem "*at rest*," as Linda Gregerson has recently observed.[25] And surely, too, in Bishop's stated conviction that "an equally 'great cumulative' effect can be built up by a series of irregularities," we can glimpse a budding rationale for an ambitious, wide-angled poem like the forty-four-stanza-long "Roosters." Its many asymmetries, including the off-balance "pivot" at stanza 26, belong to a deliberately cultivated, anti-classical perspective appropriate to the suspended mood of uncertainty in 1940, a mood Bishop was not about to sacrifice to a surface concern for decorum, as her mentor had wished, and calibrated perfectly in her barnyard aubade's "open" ending, with its redetermined sense of imminence:

> The sun climbs in,
> following "to see the end,"
> faithful as enemy, or friend.

Matthew 26:58 speaks of Peter as sitting among the servants "to see the end" (in the sense of the outcome) of Jesus's trial, whereas Bishop transposes the Biblical meaning onto secular history and leaves the future very much open to interpretation, as indeed, it can only have seemed in 1940.

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[25]Gregerson, "Ben Jonson and the Loathèd Word" in *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), pp. 86-108, esp. pp. 101-103.

Still, if a Jonsonian classicism was not the way forward for Bishop, as she clearly understood, neither is "Roosters" altogether typical of how baroque asymmetries would develop in her work, as our brief look at "Santarém" perhaps suggests. In part, this is because "Roosters" only indirectly engages the concerns Bishop singles out in Croll's version of the baroque as "the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself": the emphasis on the "mind thinking" and the accompanying belief that "an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced." Croll can sound here a lot like Eliot—"a thought to Donne was an experience"—but his phrasing is relatively free of the canonical weight of a reconstructed history of poetry that Eliot had attached to Donne, and, for this reason, Croll's formulation, drawn from prose, was perhaps more immediately "useful" to Bishop in her early attempts to stay "afloat" amid the great Eliot-led Modernist debate with Romanticism over poetry's new direction. The formulation stuck, too. More than thirty years later, Bishop could still recite Croll's observation almost verbatim, even if she could no longer recollect his name.[26]

Before *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1976), in other words, there was the questing, questioning mind—Croll's baroque, Bishop's prosodic freedom, their combined interest in representing the truthfulness of process. ("Revise, revise, revise.") A seeming expediency ("I can write in iambics if I want to—but just now I don't know my own mind quite well enough to say what I want to in them") helped to spawn a lifetime poetics of experience, in which the idiosyncrasies and uncertainties, the ardor of the mental journey would become one of the absorbing features of her verse, from the sprawling dramatic monologue of a drunken Crusoe to the emotionally charged high-wire act of "One Art."

There was also the related matter of St. Ignatius, hinted at already in the pivot toward the penitential in "Roosters." Shortly after graduating from Vassar in 1934 and probably a result again of her keen interest in Hopkins, Bishop began taking notes on *The Spiritual Exercises*, that most influential of Counter Reformation texts which

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[26]See Bishop's 1966 "Interview with Ashley Brown," in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996): pp. 25-26.

sought to reintroduce the application of the senses into religious worship and much of the art that we have come to think of as characteristically baroque. As Merrin has suggested, the activity coincided with Bishop's own developing views over how poetry might best include the spiritual. Bishop had written in her journal that "genuine religious poetry seems to be about as far as poetry can go—and as good as it can be," but she pointedly dismissed the Romantic "way—of using the supposedly 'spiritual'—the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and *poetic*, to produce the *material*" as "a great perversity." She preferred, instead, a practice of beginning with an intense reaction to something material and then of extending this response into "something, I suppose, *spiritual.*" But she also included an important proviso (it would become another hallmark, in fact, of her mature verse): that "sometimes [the poem] cannot be made to indicate its spiritual goal clearly."[27]

Bishop's description of this process of indirection is especially striking and suggests how wary she was of the false sublime. The spiritual, she noted, "proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place." The images here are drawn in part from engraving—"the material eaten out with acid"—with a further emphasis on reducing, taming, and ordering, a practice of deliberate composition with strong analogues in *The Spiritual Exercises*, as Bishop's phrase "in its place" suggests. "Composition of place" was the first stage of Ignatian meditation. The method, in Warren's words, sought "to localize both the historic and the psychological, to realize in pictorial or symbolic form, the whole of religion."[28] A meditation on Hell, for instance—to cite from a passage Bishop herself transcribed—would begin by urging the exercitant to create, as a prelude, a composition of place, "which is here to see with the eye of the imagination the length, breadth, and depth of hell," and then, as a second step, to invoke each of the five senses as means to identify further with the object of contemplation, in this case the sinner's suffering.

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[27]Merrin, *An Enabling Humility*, pp. 57-58.

[28]Warren, *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility*, pp. 68-69.

> The first point will be to see with the eye of the imagination those great fires, and those souls as it were in bodies of fire.
>
> The second, to hear with the ears lamentations, howlings, cries, blasphemies against Christ our Lord and against all His Saints.
>
> The third, with the sense of smell, to smell smoke, brimstone, refuse and rottenness.
>
> The fourth, to taste with the taste bitter things, as tears, sadness, and the worm of conscience.
>
> The fifth, to feel with the sense of touch how those fires do touch and burn souls.[29]

From some sixty pages of reading, Bishop copied out two pages worth of notes. Besides the above, she included passages drawn from the Principles and Foundations involving mankind's duty to God and relation to the creatures as well as from the first Prelude stressing the importance of "visible meditation": "the composition will be to see with the eye of the imagination the corporal place where there is found the object which I wish to contemplate." She also jotted down the meaning of glossed words ("Colloquy": "mode, properly speaking, just as one friend speaks to another"); posed some questions of her own ("Composition": "influenced Gertrude Stein, with her love of 'Saints'?"); quoted from additional Spiritual Exercises "before going to sleep" and "on waking up"—the latter marking a continued interest in the aubade, as Merrin notes;[30] and observed the spiritual benefits of seclusion. The first passage Bishop transcribed reads, in summary fashion, "so it is not abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the inward sense and taste of things."

One could probably write a separate essay on each of these entries, but to speak generally for the moment we might simply say that to

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[29]*The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, Spanish and English, with a continuous commentary*, trans. Joseph Rickaby, S.J. (London: Burns & Oates, Ltd, 1915): pp. 40-41. A comparison of Bishop's notes against the Rickaby text and commentary reveals this to be the edition Bishop used.

[30]This and the following are quoted from Merrin, *An Enabling Humility*, p. 156. Quotations appear, respectively, in *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Rickaby, p. 23 (as part of the First Week) and 45 (as an "Addition" to the meditation on Hell).

Croll's emphasis on the "mind in action rather than in repose," *The Spiritual Exercises* brought a further emphasis on the senses in the meditative process and a "method" of structuring or organizing the thinking itself. The "world" as immediately represented through the senses and not just the "mind in action," in other words, was part of the provenance of the baroque in Bishop's thinking, and one of the important differences between "Roosters" and celebrated poems like "The Fish" and "At the Fishhouses"—all composed in the 1940s—has to do with the greater attention given to integrating these two strands of the baroque in the latter two lyrics. Where "Roosters," as a diptych, attends first to description (to the act of local composition), then to the act of contemplating the religious significance accorded the emblem—and thus reinforces a divided or double view of the rooster as enemy or friend—her two Fish poems invite us early into the sensory perceiving "mind in action" as it gradually identifies with the object of contemplation. Indeed, both poems are, in many ways, textbook illustrations of the different ways Ignatian practices could find expression in her verse. Or, to put it more accurately, both show how poetry could achieve expression by adopting and refining upon meditative practices found in *The Spiritual Exercises.*

As Susan McCabe has remarked, "The Fish" "demonstrates Bishop's method of catching the mind in the process of discovery."[31] "I caught," "I thought," "I looked," "I admired," "I stared and stared," and then, as climactic response to this gradually intensifying process of sympathetic understanding, "I let the fish go." From beginning to end, Bishop favors first-person identification, but her keen interest in "composition of place," of giving the object of contemplation its due—"the material etched out with acid, pulled down from underneath"—makes the poem something "other" than a Wordsworthian epiphany.[32] What we get is a fish with weight, with its own, apparently innate, resistance to visionary poetics, grudgingly meted out one monosyllable at a time:

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[31]McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, p. 94. See also her comments on Croll and the baroque on the preceding page.

[32]For different views of the Wordsworthian elements in "The Fish" see C. K. Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 39-41, and Merrin, *An Enabling Humility*, pp. 97-101.

> He didn't fight.
> He hadn't fought at all.
> He hung a grunting weight,
> battered and venerable
> and homely. Here and there
> his brown skin hung in strips
> like ancient wallpaper,
> and its pattern of darker brown
> was like wallpaper.

It is not merely that Bishop carefully eschews poetic effects like end-rhymes until certain "pivotal" moments in the poem. The repetitions here are of a deliberately flattening order, pulling, as it were, the material "down from underneath," ensuring that language has not "tampered" with what the eye sees. The already prosaic simile of "brown skin," for instance, hanging "in strips / like ancient wallpaper," gets further stripped of its value as simile the second time around, just as the speaker's attempts to personify the fish are constantly rebuked, most notably when the fish fails, un-Romantically, "to return my stare."

As with Ignatian meditation, "The Fish" is an exercise in contemplating a corporal body and its wounds (although not Jesus's)—in learning to "see" with the eye of the imagination, which is not quite the same as seeing with the eye of faith, as Bishop will subtly suggest. The change or "swivel" begins when Bishop says "I admired his sullen face," with "admired" retaining, I believe, a sense of its Latin root (from *admirari* meaning to express wonder). It then continues in the slight heart-skip involving the first end-rhyme in the poem (often overlooked by readers because of the more obviously triumphant final rhyme), in which Bishop plays off "jaw" and "saw," with the enjambment creating a further opportunity for admiration to widen as she begins to enumerate the fish's personal history—his (not "its") past victories:

> I admired his sullen face,
> the mechanism of his jaw,
> and then I saw
> that from his lower lip
> —if you could call it a lip—
> grim, wet, and weaponlike,

hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.

This time Bishop allows the simile full sail. The triumphant comparison to "medals with their ribbons" is not depleted through repetition but caught and amplified in the doubling of "I stared and stared." The additional recognition, "and victory filled up / the little rented boat," pushes the poem further in the direction of Herbertian Christian allegory, as many critics have noted, thus supplying the poem with a rapturously final Ignatian step. Or almost, since the poem concludes not with an imagined union between speaker and the object of veneration, but with the two going in different directions:

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

In the use of the understated final line Merrin is surely right to think of Herbert,[33] but in Herbert the clinch of rhyme usually symbolizes, or enacts, the desired clinch of "mine" with "thine"—think of "Love III" or "Denial"—whereas on this occasion Bishop exactly reverses the process. The long-awaited final rhyme announces the release that accompanies victory. With the flick of a wrist, she consequently separates herself from Herbert and rewrites the great American fishing story.

"At the Fishhouses" has none of the allegorical neatness of "The Fish," and for this reason perhaps has never quite achieved the same level of popularity. But few of Bishop's poems give the feeling of being more fully imagined, indeed to overflowing, as befits a meditation involving the sea that turns, quietly, into a meditation on time and eternity and on the middle term connecting the two: history. The poem requires a "total immersion," by speaker and reader, in sensate reality, and in more than the usual sense. With an abrupt dive ("Although it is a cold evening, / down by one of the fishouses / an old man sits netting") into a local composition made immediate through a sustained use of the present tense, it depicts in elaborate, sensuous, superabundant, silvery detail (like a Dutch still life showing the brush strokes) the sights and smells associated with fish houses:

> All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
> swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
> is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
> the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
> among the wild jagged rocks,
> is of an apparent translucence
> like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
> growing on their shoreward walls.
> The big fish tubs are completely lined
> with layers of beautiful herring scales
> and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
> with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
> with small iridescent flies crawling on them.

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[33]Merrin, *An Enabling Humility*, p. 101.

How real to the imagination can the scene be made to appear? The challenge even has Bishop placing herself in the scene: obliquely at first, as if she came out from behind a capstan to offer the fisherman "a Lucky Strike," then more comically in her singing encounter with the seal and hypnotically in her repeated incantation to the sea as "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear," when her reveries about the eternal sameness of the sea have her on the verge of being swallowed by her subject until, suddenly and climactically, she turns to address the reader and the immediate particularities of touch and taste as the way to knowing:

> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire
> that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
> If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
> then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

A lucky strike, indeed, and salvaged from the passage, quoted earlier, that Bishop transcribed from *The Spiritual Exercises*, although she has deftly reversed the order of the senses here. The route to the imagination goes from outer to inner, hand to tongue, touch to taste. As is her wont, too, she has transposed the purpose and practice of Ignatian meditation to describe knowledge of this life, not the afterlife, directing us to sense what's real, not eternal; and if the shift in tense at the end underscores the contingency of all historical knowledge, the final word, in this poem of "total immersion," invites us to consider as well the archaic sense of "flown," meaning "filled to excess, steeped"[34]—the world seen through her words.

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[34]As an example of this (obsolete) usage, *The American Heritage Dictionary* quotes from *Paradise Lost*: "then wander forth the Sons / Of Belial, flown with insolence and wine" (I: 501-02).

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In the remaining portion of this essay, I want to push some of these observations about Bishop and the baroque forward and outward: not simply to include the emphasis on portraying the mind thinking or the heightened role of the senses in comprehending the immediate world—those attributes we have been identifying with "Croll" or "St Ignatius" and that are traceable to Wölfflinian concepts of the "baroque" prominent in the 1930s—but to incorporate as well the related notion of "wonder" or the "marvelous" and the manifestation of this experience in her late verse especially. What makes Bishop sound so baroque at times has much to do with her inventing (and not just transposing) a vocabulary of awe. For readers responsive to the many forms of the marvelous in the late Renaissance—whether those associated with religion, art, or nature and often involving shock or delight in the new and the new world, as Stephen Greenblatt reminds us[35]—these crafted moments of awe in Bishop have an aura of uncanny familiarity to them and form perhaps the most potent link with baroque plenitude.

We might readily recall the much celebrated widening arc of "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow" at the end of "The Fish," recollected and complicated, in fact, by Bishop herself in the tiny image of the "rainbow-bird" of refracted light in "Sonnet." But even more ingenious is the "hieroglyph" Bishop created from an oil can label at the end of "Filling Station" (originally published in 1955). The capital letters, "ESSO–SO–SO–SO," mysteriously spell out the possibility of an unseen benevolent presence at work in the poem. (An analogue, not a source, would be Herbert's anagrammatic poem "Jesu," but seventeenth-century verse is rich in such examples of "wit," as the emblematic poetry of Francis Quarles amply testifies.) Whether we see the large letters as a call for help (in the manner of an extended SOS) or hear in the sounds a homophone for sewing and remember the mysterious female presence who has placed a doily in the dirty surroundings—Bishop has urged that we imagine the phrase to be spoken softly, as a kind of soothing mantra—the filling station, as both

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[35]See Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 14: "Wonder is, I shall argue, the central figure in the initial European response to the New World."

place and poem, suddenly becomes filled (or "flown") with meaning, enough so that the speaker can utter, as her last words, that "Somebody loves us all."

Bishop's later poems shy away from these rapturous endings, but many remain equally concerned with conveying a sense of the marvelous, the surprise of joy. Here, one thinks immediately of the personal epiphany near the center of "Poem": "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!"—with its startling recuperation of the colloquial "Heavens"—or "The Moose" and the sudden recognition of corporate belonging that issues from this strange moonlight encounter between man and beast :

> Why, why do we feel
> (we all feel) this sweet
> sensation of joy?

I don't mean to suggest these moments have passed unnoticed by Bishop's critics. ("Awful but cheerful" is, after all, the double-edged line from "The Bight" on her gravestone.) Joseph Summers, for one, is surely right when he notes that, in comparison with Herbert, "the moments of joy in her poems are for smaller, more individual epiphanies—and momentary ones."[36] But it is the case, too, that as part of Herbert's legacy—maybe the most important part—Bishop assumed with utmost seriousness the need to invent a language that could speak truthfully about these personal experiences; and if they seem "smaller" by comparison, they seem also no less authentic or earned, no less "individual"—and therefore, perhaps to modern readers of lyric, not so small at all, as Cheryl Walker has recently argued.[37]

Few poems, in fact, work more vigorously and resourcefully than "Poem" to confirm the paradoxically expansive value of modesty in art. Her now famous preference of "looks" over "visions," as John Hollander suggests, keeps the visionary in play (but on the poet's terms, as Bishop tightens down the purposefully casual free-verse

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[36]Summers, "George Herbert and Elizabeth Bishop," p. 55.

[37]Walker, "Metaphysical Surrealism in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," *Christianity and Literature* 48 (1998): 45-60, esp. 56-59.

beginning).[38] It lets a larger "look" back into art: a generational view of a place and its people, an acutely observed response to a "sketch," a meditation on no less a subject than mimesis, an example of poetry's venerable promise to confer fame: "*You know, he was quite famous, an R.A.*...." (The full story of "Uncle George" will always remain unfinished.) Indeed, even as Bishop seems most set on praising "detail / –the little that we get for free," the poem begins its outward (though not upward) closing spiral:

> the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
> About the size of our abidance
> along with theirs: the munching cows,
> the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
> still standing from spring freshets,
> the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Her habitual acts of self-correction (is it a church or a cathedral?) are a way to allow both the modest and the grand some room in her verse. Her best-known title of a poem is "One Art," but that title only begs the question, which one is that? The art of losing? Of loving? Of dying? Or of all three in one? The small is almost always the seed of the large, in Bishop, the baroque the underside of the baptist. The narrowly provincial "First Death in Nova Scotia" finds its antipodes in "Santarém," with its "teams of zebus plodded, gentle, proud, / and *blue*" and "Two rivers full of crazy shipping," or in the meandering midsummer night's dream of a New Brunswick woods. A close reader of Bishop (can there be any other kind?) will soon see the burden carried by her parentheses. Her practice is to mark off, not mark down, the significant, to appear to be withdrawing when she is often asserting, enlarging, defining: "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet /sensation of joy?" "This little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)" And my favorite: "(They were the artist's specialty.)"—that is, not her penchant for parentheses, but Uncle George's preference for depicting "steel-gray storm clouds." Bishop's parentheses enclose like a globe reflecting outward. They make a macrocosm out of an aside,

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[38]Hollander, "Elizabeth Bishop's Mappings of life," in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Bloom, pp. 77-78.

create a signature out of a curve. They remind us, above all, of Donne or Herbert or Marvell. They are her best "metaphysical" conceits.

I want to close by looking at two poems from *Geography III*, one well-known, the other less so, as epitomes of the baroque in Bishop. Both might fall into the category of "spiritual exercises" in more than the usual "American" sense of the term; both reflect her interest in older poetic forms, minor family relics, as it were, passed down from one generation to another: the villanelle and the aubade or dawn song, two staples of the renaissance and baroque. So much critical attention has been lavished on "One Art" that it is possible to miss its root association with the "practice" of ritualized preparations for loss, a kind of modified and modest *ars moriendi*, in which the sense of ritual is assumed by the burden of the form itself, with its strict rules of repetition, and then eventually by the speaker—in parenthetical fashion, as it happens. It was, of course, Dylan Thomas in "Do not go gentle into that good night" who was largely responsible in this century for turning this "light" mode, originally associated with pastoral, in a fiercely dark direction. With a characteristic recuperative turn, Bishop allows much of what was initially playful back into the mode and thus creates an opportunity for amplification as well:

> The art of losing isn't hard to master;
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost their loss is no disaster.
>
> Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
> of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.

So masterful is this tightrope walk with the insignificant that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the rhythms possess an "intent" beyond mere iteration. (Only the placement of the word at the end of the line gives it a touch of Frost's "Design.") But as "art" gives way to "practice " and "master" rhymes with "faster," the villanelle edges toward giddy confusion. "Practice" for what we might ask?

> Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
> places, and names, and where it was you meant
> to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

> I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
> next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.

After the whimsically reflexive "And look!," the rest of the poem veers sharply toward the marvelous, first in the romantic, then the rhetorical, sense.

> I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
> some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
> I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

To compare the loss of a continent to the fluster of losing one's keys is, simply, grand utterance, the kind of claim Cleopatra might make, or Keats—"some realms" appropriately recalls, as J. D. McClatchy notes, Keats's famous sonnet, "Much have I travelled"—until, of course, we arrive at "the terrible estrangement both recorded and enacted in the final stanza":[39] the vivid portrayal of "not a thought" (as exemplified in the reiterated phrase "the art of losing isn't hard to master") "but a mind thinking" about the ultimate consequences of the phrase, that is, in this case, the vivid portrayal of a deeply divided mind still trying to argue, with a desperation "evident" in the strained syntax, grammar, and punctuation, the poem's initial proposition.

> —Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
> I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
> the art of losing's not too hard to master
> though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

A rhetorical maze for sure. Initial parenthesis aside, I take it that Bishop's elliptical first sentence runs something like "even if I said losing you wasn't a disaster, I shouldn't have lied." But what is contained within the parentheses reveals another world entirely. The poem's whole complicated emotional strata, the story of intimacy that has been propelling the substantive need to practice the art of losing from the beginning, comes suddenly into focus. What could be more important to a poet, especially to this poet, than "the joking voice, a

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[39]McClatchy, "'One Art': Some Notes," in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Bloom, p. 155.

gesture / I love"? It is this intimate parenthetical admission, moreover—Goldensohn speaks of the "portrait of the beloved protectively wrapped in parenthesis"[40]—that propels the second parenthetical aside, the authorial assertion "(*Write* it!)," in which statement the poet's art is set against the "joking voice" but ultimately to little avail since the written aside reveals—"And look!"—what the poem attempts to defer: Bishop's heightened anxiety over mastering loss—indeed her fear of being left.

Viewed strictly as a "spiritual exercise," "One Art" can only be said to fail, albeit magnificently. All the practice in the world with losing things—even "lovely" things—cannot fully prepare the speaker (or reader) for the loss of the person she "loves." But just as surely, as a portrayal of a mind coming to terms with personal loss of a most intimate order, the poem stands as artful testimony to one version of the "baroque" observed many years earlier—the more remarkable, now, given the formal challenges of the villanelle itself and Bishop's "evident" determination to master its intricacies.

"Five Flights Up," the concluding poem to *Geography III*—Bishop's final collection of poems—is the most poignant of her aubades or dawn poems. It is a poem of utter solitude. Like many, it grew out of an observed event, this time with Bishop's having watched in June, 1970, "an awful scene . . . every afternoon" in which a man, attempting to train several dogs and puppies, "Corgies I think," would shout "'Stop!' and 'Stay!' and yesterday, in a horrified moralistic tone: you should be *ashamed*!' I tried to make out what the puppies were up to, but couldn't see for all the leaves."[41] When the poem was finally completed in December, 1973, Bishop had changed the time of the incident from afternoon to early morning, "Still dark." And in doing so, she quietly charged the temporal structure of the whole poem, making it now resonate with and against a long tradition of dawn poems, especially those associated with devotional exercises. Herbert's "Mattens," Vaughan's "The Dawning" or "Cock-crowing," and Milton's morning hymns spring to mind, and these poems, in turn, recall Bishop's own transcription of Ignatius's purposeful instructions "on waking up"—in which meditating on the creatures, in particular,

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[40]Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, p. 31.

[41]Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, p. 443.

is seen as a means of stirring the penitent to worship and settling fears. (We might remember the speaker's relief accompanying the "day's preamble" at the end of "Roosters": "how could the night have come to grief?") In keeping with this simple temporal alteration, Bishop also let the notion of "shame" run to the poem's outer edges, subtly coloring, as it were, the poem's moral geography. And she has added an "unknown bird," to give the dog a companion in innocence, and perhaps also to recollect, on a less portentous note, Hardy's century-concluding "The Darkling Thrush." Bishop is offering, after all, only a conclusion to a collection of verse. Yet for reasons that become apparent at the end, the poem must be quoted in full:

> Still dark.
> The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.
> The little dog next door barks in his sleep
> inquiringly, just once.
> Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
> once or twice, quavering.
> Questions—if that is what they are—
> answered directly, simply,
> by day itself.
>
> Enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous;
> gray light streaking each bare branch,
> each single twig, along one side,
> making another tree, of glassy veins . . .
> The bird still sits there. Now he seems to yawn.
>
> The little black dog runs in his yard.
> His owner's voice arises, stern,
> "You ought to be ashamed!"
> What has he done?
> He bounces cheerfully up and down;
> he rushes in circles in the fallen leaves.
>
> Obviously, he has no sense of shame.
> He and the bird know everything is answered,
> all taken care of,
> no need to ask again.
> —Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
> (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)

The unbalancing at the end is both precise and sweeping. Without the final, parenthetical line, "Five Flights Up" would remain a view from the top: a spirited meditation on the new day, with comfort drawn from the creatures and their instinctive knowledge of their place in the great scheme of things. Here's a poet, we might say, who can conclude a decasyllabic line—"lightly." "No need to ask again." Except, of course, Bishop always does. Upon reflection—hers, ours—we also register the note as false, as too light. ("I can write in iambics if I want to—but just now I don't know my own mind quite well enough to say what I want to in them.") Bishop's parenthetical revision in heptameter at the poem's end speaks to the need to ask again, and the moment coincides with her emergence in the poem as a named thinking subject—an "I": "(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)" A weightier parentheses would be hard to find, as Bishop's readers have noted. The view is clearly from below, at bottom depressed, "still dark," although now in a metaphysical or psychological sense, as if Bishop had suddenly fallen out of whatever secure niche the poem would seem to have promised and in some barely specified way come to share in the broader question of human "shame." So close, we might say, comparing one ending with the other, and yet so far. When you're not Herbert (or Vaughan or Milton), five flights up is a long way to climb. But the view "portrayed" here is utterly hers.

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