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My Higher Self: Elizabeth Bishop and the Endurance of Emerson

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“MY HIGHER SELF”: ELIZABETH BISHOP AND THE ENDURANCE OF EMERSON

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

While there exists some scholarship affirming the aesthetic and intellectual connections between transcendentalism and the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, there is to date no substantial study of what role Ralph Waldo Emerson singularly played in the inheritance of that tradition. This essay seeks to validate Emerson as Bishop's literary parentage, an influence that, though not immediately identifiable, greatly shaped her creative process. In so doing, it addresses the critical mistakes which have prevented a thorough discussion of Emerson's relevance and, moreover, negatively dominated the imagination of Bishop scholarship. As an exploration of the writers' shared iconography, their mutual metaphors, the following traces three common subjects: nature, language, and vision.

DEDICATION

This essay is for my wife, whose ready eyes and unending encouragement turn the arduous parts of writing into joyous ones.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth, for her patience, work and wisdom. Before the idea of pairing Bishop and Emerson was even begun, her listening and trusting calm allowed exploration, what in the end would define the entire project. It was her uncounted hours of careful reading and astute advice that purged many of unclear claims and much murky language. Dr. Cristin Ellis also granted incisive and supportive counsel, perhaps the most deliberate assessment I have ever received. To that, too, I am much indebted. I also want to express gratitude to Mr. Gary Short for his spirit, kind counsel, and willingness to jump into a non-creative project (even from abroad).

These three are only responsible for the paper's lucidity. Any errors or blunders herein are completely my own.

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FOREWORD

Had Emerson come upon Elizabeth Bishop's poems in the *Dial*,
I like to think he would have recognized the wildness in them.
—Patricia B. Wallace

Do what he will, [profane man] is an inheritor.
—Mircea Eliade

The close of the fifties found Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell glorying in relative prestige from their already impressive publications and awards, their independent successes stitched together in famous literary friendship. Lowell, reflecting on some eighteen years of their parallel paths, wrote warmly to Bishop, "What a block of life has passed since we first met in New York and Washington!" Admittedly, it was Lowell who sparked off recognition more quickly than Bishop: by 1947, he had a Poet Laureate term (then as "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress") and Pulitzer Prize under his belt. But by 1956, Bishop owned the same accolades (plus the Guggenheim it would take Lowell six more years to secure). Thus, by the turn of the fifties, they had found their congruent voices, their harmonious overlapping of separate lyrics, and that is why Lowell could rightly declare (even in the same letter), "we have more or less lived up to our so different natures and destinies" (*WIA* 582).

The new decade began for both with no less productivity. In the spring of 1960, Lowell received a National Book Award for *Life Studies*, his fourth collection and the dramatic redirection of an earlier aesthetic. Bishop obtained her fellowship with the Chapelbrook Foundation only a few months later. That summer, between Maine and Brazil, they continued their correspondence, and Bishop then sent Lowell one of her tenderest salutations: “Please never stop writing me letters—they always manage to make me feel like my higher self (I’ve been re-reading Emerson) for several days” (332). Looking back, the allusion seems uncharacteristic—and, therefore, playful and able to be ignored. But it is not so to all. Bishop scholar Susan McCabe draws out much from the detail: for her, Bishop’s intentional and serial reading of Emerson is enough to color the entire Brazilian phase in hues of transcendentalism. In fact, in *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, McCabe goes so far as to explain Bishop’s whole sojourn there through “Circles,” Emerson’s theory of history as a set of widening and concentric rings. She writes,

Emerson forsakes fixation upon the past and focuses on the continuously disclosing and volatile present...His is not a simple erasure or denial of the past but a commitment to change and movement...Bishop’s arrival in Brazil draws a new circle, and even as she throws off part of her own history, she redresses it as she looks to the history of another culture. (148)

For such a small, parenthetical aside, McCabe may seem to be taking a few too many liberties, but the 1960 letter to Lowell was, in fact, not Bishop’s only mention of Emerson around that time. In a missive to poet-critic Anne Stevenson written not three years later, Bishop admits the influence *again*, this time more broadly and with far more gravity. Summing up her own artistic heritage, she writes, “I...feel that Cal (Lowell) and I in our very different ways are both

descendents from the Transcendentalists” (*Prose* 396). This is, by all standards, a shocking profession. From a vantage point of comparative self-possession as a poet, Bishop places Lowell and herself in genealogical relation to the inheritors of German Idealism, to the likes of Amos Bronson Alcott, Charles Orestes Brownson, and Margaret Fuller. What is more, at the time of this correspondence, Stevenson was commissioned to write Bishop’s installment in the Twayne’s Author Series; she was gathering the poet’s biography directly. The exchange is therefore a professional one, and when Bishop submits her the lineage, she is fully aware of its biographical use and imminent publication.

Stevenson, however, takes a different tack from McCabe: she embraces the family tree while qualifying it, believing Bishop to be, as she sends in her reply, like “Thoreau...more than Emerson.” Here is her logic:

For the more intellectual transcendentalists, Nature was what Emerson called “a dream and a shade[,]” a veil in which God was immanent. They presumed that a moral order was present in the Universe...It’s hard for anyone now to regard things in so simple a manner. However, once the metaphysics fades, what remains is an amazing sense of nature itself, animals as animals, plants as plants;—
Thoreau’s views all along. (405)

Stevenson’s judgment follows Bishop’s secular trajectory and concludes that its “faded metaphysic” permits Thoreauvian “amazement” while preventing Emersonian spirituality or idealism.

Here is the rub: these two disparate and disconnected voices could be disregarded if not for their relationship to the whole of Bishop’s present readership. In the earliest formations of Bishop scholarship, Stevenson sets the tone for the next fifty years of scholarship: Emerson is

jettisoned for the ostensible lack of the supernatural in Elizabeth's poetry, and critics assume naturalisms. I am not suggesting that Stevenson starts this trend; I am saying that, as far back as one can go, the poet is positioned in a critical space which affords no spiritual dimension, no vertical axis—in a word, nothing truly transcendental—and Stevenson embodies the practice.

“Truly transcendental,” I say, because Stevenson's Thoreau is, in my estimation, a means of acknowledging Bishop's claim without honoring it. As represented by Stevenson, he is a transcendental container for fundamentally un-transcendental containables. Certainly, many will take issue with her summing-up of Thoreau's literary project. (I am one of them.) However, even if one ignores that snag, there is still one foundational problem with her dichotomy: secular artists are not *only* influenced by secular or non-spiritual forbears. Many times, these generations of inspiration are surprising for their senior's spirituality and junior's skepticism. There are a number of historical examples: in Nietzsche's anti-philosophy, for instance, his metaphysic did not just fade; rather, it was largely thrown out. Yet we know that in *his* transcendental inheritance Emerson became a “brother soul” (qtd. in Hummel 66).

The first imaginable and reasonable question in anyone's mind is the “So what?” question, and now it is not entirely unjustified. One poet critic (Stevenson) makes a dubious designation—so what? The repercussions of a single literary judgment are nearly invariably minuscule.” That *is* true, and it is especially true at present: so far, my reading has not looked at Stevenson's literary publications; it has only looked at evaluations lodged in the privacy of correspondence. But what I am about to argue should establish the relevance. The purpose of calling attention to the letters between Bishop and Stevenson is not what they (the letters) result in, but what they represent—a scholarly tendency to *completely* de-spiritualize, de-transcendentalize, Bishop's poetic worlds. Stevenson's appraisal is especially fascinating and

useful, I think, because it is offered directly to the poet, but its ultimate power is its representativeness for the tenor of Bishop studies.

Now to the point: this essay aims at restoring Emerson as a credible inheritance in Bishop's life and writing. Its intention is correcting and answering particular critical imprecisions and, in so doing, addressing a larger, more universal interpretive principle which often goes completely overlooked in literary studies: namely, that literary histories of secularization are rarely merely de-spiritualizations or simply subtractions of the metaphysical; that many so-called unbelieving poets show vestiges of a mystical heritage long after the unique, historic form of that spirituality has, so to speak, spirited away. Put simply: though secularism usually entails the theoretical dissolution of the metaphysical plane, it does not necessarily (or even often) mean the removal of practically metaphysical patterns of thinking. Stevenson aligns Thoreau and Bishop because she believes Bishop abandons the metaphysical as a philosophical category. Even so, her craft, her poesis, versifies the mind in pursuit of some degree of epiphany or revelation.

This interpretive principle has long been the postulation of studies in comparative religion, and it finds perhaps no better expression than in Mircea Eliade's now classic text, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Eliade explains,

[Profane man] cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that

behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being. (204)

In language faintly anticipating Harold Bloom's revisionary theory, profane man is said to construct a "world of his own" from the ruins of the old teaching. He is said to create his atheism negatively. While my essay traces no lines of anxiety, it does take stock in Eliade's emphasis on affect: old spiritualities, old metaphysics are always "emotionally present," persistent in undercurrents of poetic pathos. On the one hand, this principle demands careful and open-minded reading, but on the other it promises certain juvenescence for our studies. Eventually, if these time-honored tenets are taken as truth, Bishop's poetry and its place in the greater literary tradition may be opened to a surprising and revitalizing parentage. That is the purpose of these reflections, these redirections.

But why introduce Emerson and the transcendental element at all?, one might return. Is not naturalization of Bishop the real problem, and is not Emerson irrelevant to it? But this is to misunderstand my former point: the complete de-spiritualization of Bishop's poetry is necessarily a dismissal of Emerson as Bishop's potential literary ancestor. Moreover, it does not matter whether one buys Stevenson's summary of Thoreau's life and writings; her dichotomy dismisses Emerson because of those susceptibilities Stevenson's Thoreau typifies. Ultimately, those readerly inclinations have prolonged the conclusions presented in this paper. Again, Bishop and Emerson are the center of my essay, and Stevenson's letter discloses symptomatic practices of reading anti-metaphysically.

Still others might shrink from the thesis on grounds of poetic form. It might be wondered how Bishop's exacting detail, her self-restrained voice, can be considered in any way lineal to Emerson: How is the heritage possible with her poetry's baroque, contemplative style? But this

objection conflates *dianoia* and *lexis*, content and form, and the subject of the study at hand is artistic philosophy. It is true that the detail and ornateness in Bishop's poetry reflect, in some ways, an un-romantic regard for control. But Bishop's claim and Stevenson's distinction—together, the impetus for this paper—are observations of epistemology: that is, they are considerations of the ideas of knowing found behind and in the poems. Ultimately, I maintain, even if Bishop is aesthetically a classicist, she remains intellectually a transcendentalist.

Turning to the dispensations of this essay, I will now attempt, in Eliade's words, the "reactualization" of Emersonian transcendentalism in three distinct yet related spheres of Bishop's work: change and nature, meaning and the universe, sight and the human soul.

FIXITY AND FLUX: EMERSONIAN NATURE IN “THE IMAGINARY ICEBERG” AND
“AT THE FISHHOUSES”

I am not much of a Thoreau...All this leafiness is depressing.
—Elizabeth Bishop in her notebook

In this first chapter, I will seek to establish a continuity between Emerson and Bishop in the same realm where Stevenson suspects it: to argue not only for the *similarity* of intellectual frameworks, but also the notion that Bishop’s view of nature is, while undeniably de-spiritualized, a surprising *continuance* of Emerson’s. With this “diptych,” I take up two poems by Bishop which each illustrate a “half” of Emersonian nature. Before turning to these selections, allow a small review of what is meant by that philosophy.

In brief, it may be said that, for Emerson, the universe is a phenomenon of spirit and is thereby marked as both fixity and flux. On the one hand it reveals an established order in the cosmos; it points to eternities. On the other it shows itself to be, as he writes in “The Over-Soul,” a “whiff of mist or smoke” (388). This duality is fundamental to the author’s entire transcendental project, and it is established as early as *Nature*, the inaugural tour de force of 1836:

God never jests with us, and will not compromise the end of nature, by permitting any inconsequence in its procession. Any distrust of the permanence of laws, would paralyze the faculties of man. Their permanence is sacredly respected, and his faith therein is perfect. The wheels and springs of man are all set to the hypothesis of the permanence of nature. We are not built like a ship to be tossed, but like a house to stand. (32-33)

Here “the permanence of nature” is seen to be “the permanence of laws,” but as Emerson maintains in the next paragraph, it is the laws themselves that produce the phenomena, the “whiff of mist or smoke” that is nature:

[W]hilst we acquiesce entirely in the permanence of natural laws, the question of the absolute existence of nature still remains open. It is the uniform effect of culture on the human mind, not to shake our faith in the stability of particular phenomena, as of heat, water, azote; but to lead us to regard nature as a phenomenon, not a substance; to attribute necessary existence to spirit; to esteem nature as an accident and an effect. (33)

Thus, “the element of spirit is eternity,” and in “Prospects,” the last chapter of *Nature*, Emerson insistingly recapitulates that spirit is what “alters, moulds” and “makes” nature (48, 45). The way the individual perceives the world ideally, the way he or she “is gradually restored to perfect sight,” is through ushering “the influx of the spirit” (48-49). Once that which is behind the universe is understood, the spiritual laws and “other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry,” “the world becomes...only a realized will”—the “expositor of the divine mind” (41, 28, 42). Ideal theory then is that which answers Emerson’s strikingly catechetical “interrogation” at the beginning of the essay: “to what end is nature?” The ambition of theory is to “explain all

phenomena,” and in achieving this, he assures his readers, “it will be its own evidence” (7). Just as spirit “alters, moulds” and “makes” the plasticities of the world, so too theory, the idealistic comprehension of spirit and its “permanence,” rectifies those fluctuations, revealing behind them only the unity of the universe.

Turning to the poetry, now, it is important to keep in mind that the significance of Emersonian nature apropos of Elizabeth Bishop is not the *spirituality* of the model but the *spirit*—the recognizability of its interpretive framework. While Bishop’s oeuvre (digested as a whole) is far from any form of *Idealism*, it nevertheless holds *ideals* and inherits Emerson’s dichotomy of fixity and flux. In this first poem, moreover, the object of interest represents the same extra-natural attractions and auto-generative powers.

I

If Bishop’s poetry aimed to versify “a mind thinking,” then “The Imaginary Iceberg” traces a very Emersonian conceptualization or theorization of fixture behind nature—the crystalline autonomy of natural law. I argue, in fact, that the following poem is not merely suggestive of *Nature*’s epistemological claims, but is actually turning them into poetry and testing them with Emerson’s own analogical content. To be explored here are the three essential ways Bishop’s iceberg figures Emersonian “permanence”: its idealization, its interpretative or explanatory power, and its autonomy or autotelic energy.

Even as the poem opens, the quixotism of the iceberg is palpable in the subjunctive mood that dominates the first stanza: “We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship; / we’d rather own this breathing plain of snow” (5-6). There is a dreaminess here, but it is hardly mindless woolgathering. The speaker holds a visionary urgency, a sense of longing or *sehnsucht*. Bishop’s dilatory style will press back the motivating force, the reason for the iceberg’s magnetism,

beyond the first stanza. All that is here at first is will: not even the object, only the object's exigency. Consider this epitatic stacking of necessary conditions: the berg is preferred,

although it meant the end of travel.

Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock

and all the sea were moving marble.

.....

though the ship's sails were laid upon the sea

as the snow lies undissolved upon the water. (2-4; 7-8)

Striking is the immense consequentiality of the iceberg: to "have" it, to "own" it, is, perforce, a capsizing. There is a slow halting suggested rhythmically in the catalectic foreshortening of the second line, the amassed stresses of the third. All figures of speech point to a kind of cessation and are comically crowned in Bishop's simulaic punning on the iceberg's apparent inertness: the way it looks like "rocky rock" ("cloud" coming from the O.E. "clud"). This is her ec/static exchange wherein everything moves toward its terminus, and that distinct pairing of stillness and sublimity in the single image of ice is what first evinces transcendentalism.

If not Emerson's chief analogy, the phase transitions were certainly a favorite concretization of the mind and matter relationship he saw as operative in the world. "Nature," he writes in his second essay thus named, "is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas. The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought" (555). This is a particularly knotty simile, and representationally, it suggests more than ice as the manifested mind. Nature is only seemingly solid in its precipitation, for the "volatile essence" is constantly reverting to, "escaping again into," mind's current of permanence. And this is hardly the only comparison of

its kind: an almost identical use of the ice image is found at the beginning of “Circles,” although in that context, Emerson substitutes the natural for the artifactual:

There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees. Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts. The law dissolves the fact and holds it fluid. Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions. Let us rise into another idea: they will disappear. The Greek sculpture is all melted away, as if it had been statues of ice; here and there a solitary figure or fragment remaining, as we see flecks and scraps of snow left in cold dells and mountain clefts, in June and July. For the genius that created it creates now somewhat else. (403)

This last example (perhaps more than the first) shows the true transience of Emersonian materiality. Since his famous categorial divide of universe and soul (“NOT ME” and “ME”) makes art a part of nature, craft becomes, just as much as these crags, the detritus of time. But the reader notes here the lexical resurrection of “permanence” and “law.” More than spiritual centers of the crystallization process (immateriality at the core of form), these are *that which is* precipitated: the element that survives all phase transitions. The ice represents a particular instance of the universal which, one remembers, is “not...substance” or even “fact.” It represents only the presence of the “realized will.” Bishop’s iceberg, though clearly de-spiritualized, is also a manifestation of the ideal and the timeless, what James Longenbach consolidates as “completion” (26). And just as Emerson’s “volatile essence” is “forever escaping” from matter to mind, so too Bishop’s iconic berg is always on the verge of vitalization: “O solemn, floating field,” the speaker apostrophizes, “are you aware an iceberg takes repose / with you, and when it

wakes may pasture on your snows?” (9-11). In this way, an Emersonian *liminality* drives the first part of the poem, and in the next its agonic tautness of the eternal and ephemeral leads the reader to be ontologically less sure of, yet still all the more amazed by, the presence of the poetic object.

An exemplary moment of this de-familiarization occurs in the second stanza of “The Imaginary Iceberg” when the speaker insists on the arctic surrounds being a “scene.” The word is used not once, but twice: once in line 12 and again in line 16. As “scene” emerges from the Greek “skene” (meaning “stage”), the entire stanza is unified in a theme of histrionic imagery: the wind-whipped powder from the ice-sheets is imagined as a curtain; the sea is believed to be a stage. And Bishop makes yet another play on words, likening the ship to a theater: “This is a scene where he who treads the boards / is artlessly rhetorical” (16-17). Her imagery is intended to remind the reader that the iceberg is “imaginary,” and in one respect, this confirms its (the iceberg’s) ideality. But at the same time, the aide-memoire is radically disorienting. If Bishop’s *mise-en-scène* is mental, then a question of its trustworthiness arises: in what way, if at all, does the poetic object relate to reality?

According to Emerson, natural law—that which the iceberg has come to illustrate in its crystallization—is something both systematizing and systematized: that is, it provides mental categories for phenomena while itself being a mental categorization or construct. This point reintroduces the subject of theory, because it is through theorization, the conceptualization of a spiritual reality behind nature, that, Emerson claims, one arrives at natural law, the unity organizing the fluxing change of history and the world. If this sounds like self-fulfilling prophecy, that is because it is. In the introductory remarks of *Nature*, it is Emerson himself who says, “Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena” (7). More than his early intimations of pragmatistic thought, these twenty words

establish theory as a conceptual prerequisite to permanence and a distinctly subject-centered approach to the interpretation of nature. The analog in Bishop is that her iceberg is likewise “imagined” while being complete with its own *mindfulness*:

The iceberg rises
and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles
correct elliptics in the sky.
.....
The wits of these white peaks
spar with the sun... (13-15; 20-21)

Here the iceberg’s jags, its “glassy pinnacles” and “white peaks,” are given their own intelligence through Bishop’s conspicuous diction: the word choice of “wits.” Curiously, that mentality is regarded for its explanatory or hermeneutical power: the poet forms a dazzling double meaning in lines 14 and 15, where “elliptics” could either be meant geometrically (“ellipses” as plane curves created in conical points of ice) or textually (“ellipsis” as omission). In either case, the ice berg is a “correction” or justification of the light of nature. Lines 20 and 21 make yet another pun in the potential noun form of “spar” (one more kind of crystalline solid) but reveal the primary image to be a cognitive force that grapples with the cosmic. Again, in giving this precipitated presence as something constructed and constructing, the poet is clearly paralleling an Emersonian formulation.

In addition to these two ties, there is yet a more straightforward connection between the icons of Bishop and Emerson: at the most foundational level, both share a virtue of complete and utter autonomy. It becomes the subject of the last stanza in “The Imaginary Iceberg,” and the final simile encapsulates that self-sufficiency:

The iceberg cuts its facets from within.
Like jewelry from a grave
it saves itself perpetually and adorns
only itself, perhaps the snows
which so surprise us lying on the sea. (23-27)

If this simile is juxtaposed with the first, the “cloudy rock” comparison from line 3, it is impossible to miss between them a composite image of fashioning and formation. The opaque points of the first stanza are translucent gems in the third, and this transformation contributes to the overarching language of incarnation: “Icebergs behoove the soul / (both being self-made from elements least visible) / to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible” (31-33). Cheryl Walker insists here on echoes of “the word made flesh...infinitely inaccessible but infinitely attractive” (29). With the resonance of the *logos*, “self-making” is also self-definition and suggests the autotelic. Romantic analogs fail us: the iceberg would be evocative of the Coleridgean organic metaphor, were it not for its sheer lifelessness; and though indeed a form of pastoralism (remember lines 9 through 11), the berg remains, as a natural phenomenon, decidedly unlike the Keatsian “Cold Pastoral.” Yet for Emerson, *all* nature is (whether living or inert) an incarnation of the autonomous and divine mind: “The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man,” he writes in “Spirit,” “It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious” (42). There is thus no real antinomy between the iceberg’s insentience and sentience, and Bishop’s alliance between mind and matter stands.

Admittedly, to be “self-made *from*” anything sounds at first like nonsense. Robert Dale Parker notices this prepositional irony in the last stanza and believes the poet is fully conscious of it, letting the beauty rest in the impossibility: “Making of any kind, let alone self-making, is a

problem, Bishop knows, for she senses its root paradox—that whenever we *make*, we make *from*, and yet if we make from, then in some sense we never truly make, never create” (3). That may be true if the poet is speaking of poetry, but if the iceberg is a token of Emersonian materiality, its “self-making *from*” is entirely imaginable. In this account, nature is “precipitated” and is thereby both the product and process of the organizing law.

Through this transcendental grid, it can be concluded that the longing from the first stanza is a desire to break free from the constraints of physical and temporal reality. For the whole of his career, Emerson is consistent (despite the valorization of inconsistency) in the aim of his philosophy: the end of the acquisition of knowledge is an escape from the material world. “That which the soul seeks,” he propounds in his “Plato” lecture, “is resolution into being, above form, out of Tartarus, and out of heaven,—liberation from nature” (639). Bishop’s “[steering] off” at the end of the “The Imaginary Iceberg” signals the reader that the longing is unfulfillable (23). Since the poet cannot embrace a spiritual presence behind or in the universe, much less any “liberation” into it, such hopes remain as remote as the iceberg. That last simile returns the reader to the deadly reality at hand: this is *grave* jewelry. The perilous exchange is remembered, and the “snows / ...lying on the sea” recall the capsizing in stanza one. Now is granted the fullest grasp of the iceberg—not only its fascination, but also its figuration—and the trade is seen as impossible. The speaker relents, acknowledging that the only unity and timelessness available is death itself. Bishop’s tender use of the diacope creates a muted, but torn, parting: “Good-bye, we say, good-bye” (28). “Waves give in to one another’s waves,” as flux must once more reign (29).

II

Now Bishop's poetic vision pans, but it is not simply "naturalized": were she to unironically embrace materialism, her poetics would cease to be Emersonian. For both Bishop and Emerson, the knowledge of nature is just as other as the knowledge of spirit, because both exist outside the bounds of human subjectivity. This is a sober reality and the woe of Emerson's dismal essay "Experience." There he moans that "souls never touch their objects," and that "an innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with" (473). It is no surprise that Bishop, picking up the same epistemology, also borrows *oceanus dissociabilis* (the "separating sea") as a trope for her own poetry. "At the Fishhouses" visits the fluid side of Emerson's fixed/fluxed divide and "imagines" (for it cannot be experienced) an objective knowledge of the world (there echoing the chilly isolation of Emersonian experience). It turns from transcendental peaks to sublunary tides and in that shifting finds the "obliqueness" Emerson found in all acts of perception. His essay reads almost like a primer to the piece, as it ultimately underscores the ungraspability of things:

I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. We may have the sphere for our cricketball, but not a berry for our philosophy. Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual. (473)

From this passage, the next segment of my chapter takes "evanescence" and "lubricity" to be two essential qualities of Emersonian experience and also the two most important themes in "At the

Fishhouses.” The following reading of Bishop’s poem is designed to be a counterpart to “The Imaginary Iceberg”: if the first part of my essay illustrated something like *natural law*, this part concerns *nature* (or more precisely, nature’s distance from the individual cocooned in subjectivity). Correspondingly, if the first Bishop poem imaged the unchanging, the second imagines endless changeability.

“At the Fishhouses” resembles “The Imaginary Iceberg” in the immediate irony achieved through the contrastive conjunction; but note that instead of producing paradoxical *feeling*, this scene introduces paradoxical *fact*. Now it is matter (and not mind) that provokes inquiry:

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished. (1-6)

The oddity here is that, with such brisk conditions, the fisherman is neither fishing nor in the fishhouses. He and his gear are retired and together provide a picture of withdrawal. But there is something withdrawing in his soundscape too: vowels descend and retreat in their articulation, as the backing diphthong, /aʊ/, is repeated three times (“down,” “fishhouses,” and “purple-brown”) and the low-pitched /o/ six times (“although,” “cold,” “old,” “gloaming,” “almost,” and “worn”). This effect is reinforced in Bishop’s use of ellipsis (her excision of “is” in lines 3 through 6), and that deverbalization of the line also creates, even in the first sentence, a trajectory toward inaction. The “old man,” however, is not the only thing out of use; so is his backdrop:

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. (13-20)

In conflating the sea and the discarded fishing equipage, the poet classically brings together the images of fluidity and mutability. The steady flow of the ocean's liquid consonants "spills over" into this scene of abandoned objects, amounting to, in lines 15 through 20, ten iterations each of the lateral /l/ and rhotic /r/. The result is that, while the mind moves from sea to debris, the mouth, in salivary pronouncements, stays swimming. And though contrasted for their respective "opaqueness" and "translucence," these pictures of the water and the waste are fused in the fact that "all is silver." Bishop may be intimating "quicksilver" as the long-established symbol of change, since in some form of dissolution, *everything* is mercurially "running" (even the speaker's nose).

The liquefaction motif is continued in yet more forsaken fishery:

Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted. (26-31)

As the cylinder of the capstan wraps the ship's ropes, this "cracked" axis serves as a sign of lost command (the meaning being accentuated in the etymological link between "capstan" and "capability"). If one agrees with Lee Oser that the object "is a kind of cross" with its semblance of "dried blood," then all this is a crucifixion scene—a humiliation of human industry (135). Weathered and withdrawn, the "old man" and his setting represent, in the face of time, an old protean transiency. And just as the sea mimics these fluctuations of life and labor, so too do Bishop's prepositions. The poem is full of "ups" and "downs" that begin first with the fishhouses themselves: "narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up / to storerooms in the gables / for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on" (10-12). For just this descriptive turbulence, Zachariah Pickard calls the middle stanza "thoroughly bi-directional" (91). It is likewise subsumed in the same rising and falling action:

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet. (41-46)

The wave-form plots the exponential decay quivering through the first half of the poem, and its pattern (always emblematic to Emerson) begs the transcendental tie-in. In the poem that serves as an epigraph to "Illusions," mutability is what Emerson calls "the wild dissipation" of nature (25). In that little poem, the wave gives shape to the "shimmering" evanescence of all phenomena (24). "Flow, flow the waves hated," his speaker adjures, "Accursed, adored, / The waves of mutation: / No anchorage is" (1-4). More pitiable than this imperative mood for the

inevitable is the ephemerality of the dimeter line, and as the syllable-count is slimmed throughout the stanza, the effect is intensified:

House you were born in,
Friends of your spring-time,
Old man and young maid,
Day's toil and its guerdon,
They are all vanishing,
Fleeing to fables,
Cannot be moored. (7-13)

Emerson's nautical chaos promises a comic ending: "Horsed on the Proteus, / Thou ridest to power, / And to endurance" (35-37). Yet this is "law" recapitulated; the world still remains its "endless imbroglio" (31-32). "Experience" foreshadows "Illusions" with the same analogy of moorage, but it also establishes the bitter irony of change: "mutation" is both a human hurt (the source of the perceptual indirection) and a natural need (the very price of living). In Emerson's own words,

The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove*. When, at night, I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. (476)

For Bishop, as for Emerson, objects are only indirect, and flux is always ineluctable. The flotsam and jetsam, the ebb and flow, are oblique and obligatory, and furthermore they keep the reader

from anything but endless “circulations” and “wild dissipations.” If part one of the poem is absorbed in material distortions or instabilities, then part two moves to the senses’ preclusion from the Real.

The last stanza shifts away from the pathetic fishermen to consider the apathetic activity of the ocean around them. Bishop’s sea is totally insupportable to human life: “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,” an “element bearable to no mortal, / to fish and to seals” (47-49). There is a sense of obscurity here that resists apprehension and is conveyed in the densely adjectival language, the syntactic suggestion that modifiers are uncertain of what they are modifying. Line 47 is made a refrain in line 60 and musicalizes “Cold dark deep.” Interestingly, these are the only three words for which, during the proofing process, Bishop insisted on the original punctuation. In a letter to Katherine White, then editor at *The New Yorker*, Bishop writes, “I have left in all your changes except the commas between ‘Cold dark deep’ that occurs twice. For some reason or other it seems more liquid to me without them and I think in this case the sense is plain enough without them, don’t you?” (29). The final product is that chilling molossos foot metrically reminiscent of, yet even more massive than, Tennyson’s “Break, Break, Break.” Its complete impersonality is so staggering that, as soon as it is introduced, it must be abandoned through ellipsis. Perhaps reactively, the speaker turns jocose:

One seal particularly

I have seen here evening after evening,

He was curious about me. He was interested in music;

like me a believer in total immersion,

so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.

I also sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.

Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment. (49-59)

The seal, the creature for whom that “element” is “bearable,” the life that can actually penetrate that mystery, reports no such promises. Elsewhere, other Christian iconography experiences the same withering of significance:

Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas... (61-65)

Without any messianic interruption, the littoral world continues its empty unfoldment, and its eternity is figured in the repetition of words for repetition: “I have seen it *over and over*,” the speaker says, “*the same sea, the same / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones*” (emphasis added, 67-68). Anadiplosis links mellifluously the next two lines, extending this chain of indifference to a cosmic remove: “suspended,” the sea is “*icily free above the stones, / above the stones and then the world*” (emphasis added, 65; 69-70). The diphthongal rise of /ai/ and the tongue-heaving /i/ are scattered throughout and, when vocalized, contribute their own hovering sensation.

Bishop's sea is inexplicably distanced, and that feeling of an alien earthliness suggests the natural is just as inaccessible as the supernatural. Contact can only be imagined through the subjunctive mood:

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. (71-77)

Whereas earlier religious references are quieted by the immense mundaneness of these waters, the water itself, now the sole focus, shouts out with Pentecostal power of "tongue" and "flame." Were contact *actually* to be made, were the spirit to apply its understanding, it would not be, as the concluding passage proposes, like anything in human experience. It would be like this shapeless assimilation of phenomena:

It [the sea] 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. (78-83)

These last six lines are the poem's most important simile, but note the poet's qualification: the sea is not like knowledge; "it is like what we imagine knowledge to be." That which the sea

symbolizes, a reality utterly unmediated, is, by virtue of itself, a world which cannot be symbolized. The epiphany then is meta-revelational, a revelation about the nature of revelation, since “knowledge” of nature can be subjectively possessed (because it is “ours”) yet never objectively entered (because it is “imagined”). Here is, Bonnie Costello writes, “[Bishop’s] characteristic movement: horizontal images of transience and mutability dominating over vertical images of permanence and stasis” and “an obscure center of meaning, from which the beholder is excluded” (109). The reader and the speaker must come up against the same impasse, and the import of it is that, as we found with “The Imaginary Iceberg,” permanence (or law) can never be found through the senses.

III

This kind of slippery signified which, when looked at, slides out of view is wholly unlike the permanence of the iceberg. It bespeaks the “lubricity” of “Experience,” and suggests that the slippage is with perception. “Our conversation with nature is not just what it seems,” says Emerson in “Illusions.” “The senses interfere everywhere, and mix their own structure with all they report of” (1116). Both Bishop and Emerson agree that, if nature is not splintering the sensorium, sensation itself will barricade the psyche. In fact, in the latter’s judgment, mediated existence *is* our postlapsarian state:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. (487)

For both writers, the struggle against solipsism is in coming to terms with one's own divergence from the Real. Though the degree of the disparity is forever unknown, there is gain in knowing of that disparity at all. That gain is Emerson's "suspicion" and Bishop's subjunctive.

"Experience" ends with the necessity of partial knowing:

I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*. I observe that difference, and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepance. But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought. Many eager persons successively make an experiment in this way, and make themselves ridiculous. (492)

Bishop makes no "manipular" moves in "At the Fishhouses." She is content, like Emerson, to only "observe the difference"—to only "imagine knowledge" and, even in verse, not risk falsely claiming it.

To conclude, in both of these poems, we find that ignoring the metaphysical drastically alters the construal. If readers believe *A Cold Spring* leaves the sublime, they will likely consider "The Imaginary Iceberg" and "At the Fishhouses" to be an antinomy, not the mutually illuminating pair they are. Moreover, we see now how Emerson's dual insistence on transcendent truths and continual cosmic change provides a helpful language for the discussion of Bishop's varied and ostensibly contradictory observations.

“ADMIRABLE SCRIPTURES”: “CAPE BRETON” AND THE EMERSONIAN
PRE-CANTATION

Bishop recognizes that to keep faith with the natural world means not to force our motives on it,
not to take pride of ownership, but patiently to submit to its foreignness.

—Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon*

Oft-quoted and oft-anthologized, “Cape Breton” is undoubtedly one of Bishop’s most celebrated poems. Few of her works, however, are more widely contested. For example, Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil Estess deem the piece Bishop’s “glimpse into the heart of darkness,” a obsession like Conrad’s with the stygian invisible (161). Oppositely, C. K. Doreski finds something much more affirmative: “an opportunity to read the landscape for significance without plunging into epiphany,” a poem “which challenges the preconceptions and sensitivities of the reader as it prepares, shapes, and withdraws a glimpse of the otherworldly” (41). The question begged is, What *in* the text brings such a difference of critical opinion?

The poem’s unmentionable center, its disturbingly opaque core, is its stumbling block. Since the heart of Bishop’s piece is literally inaccessible, the reader is limited only to those arterial images conveying the central mystery. In this next chapter, I will again be looking at Bishop’s work through the grid of transcendentalism; I will again be arguing that one can (and

should) couch the conversation over the poetry in a transcendental vocabulary. But the following is not *only* that; it is also the exploration of what is at stake in Thoreauvian or Emersonian approaches. Accordingly, I will expound on the often overlooked Idealistic aspects of the poem and address, furthermore, the poem's most important image, a simile with roots in Emerson's transcendental philosophy.

Before going there, it is important to consider the ways critics have imputed to "Cape Breton" a Thoreauvian "faded metaphysic" which drastically alters the work's construal, downplays its mystical tone. It bears repeating that Anne Stevenson originally distinguishes Emerson and Thoreau by the latter's "amazing sense of nature itself" and that her association of Bishop with Thoreau is made on the grounds of this interpretation. Whether or not one agrees with Stevenson's reading of Thoreau, it is indisputably true that her estimation of Bishop remains the temper of contemporary scholarship: for most, that is, Bishop versifies a world like the one Stevenson described: a place with "animals as animals" and "plants as plants." The same lens is brought to "Cape Breton." In *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry*, Thomas Gardner presents the end of the poem as an abandonment of meaning and metaphysics. He targets the poignant debarkation of the nameless father and baby in the fourth stanza, a moment he finds actually anti-cultural: "[H]e [the father] moves down through a non-cultivated, non-meaning-making meadow to a place 'invisible' to us...He slips in easily, inviting us to follow" (53-54). Thus, to Gardner, the figure "beside the water" *is* a Thoreau of sorts, a solitary whose renunciation of civilization is Walden all over again (49).

Even Bonnie Costello, a critic largely willing to grapple with Bishop's search for a "spiritual center," reads Thoreauvianly, finds here a flattening cosmology—in a word, materialism (99). In *Questions of Mastery*, she compares the metaphysical trajectory of "Cape

Breton” to that of Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”: “Bishop turns from the religious sublime to a scene of natural mutability. She returns to the sensible world...just as Stevens returns, with more rhetorical flourish, to the casual flocks of pigeons with their ‘ambiguous undulations.’ Both poets displace timeless spiritual authority with beautiful, sensuous, but tentative, fleeting orders” (106). According to Costello, then, “Cape Breton” is, as Stevens said of “Sunday Morning,” “simply an expression of paganism”: simply another rhapsodizing of the “unsponsored, free” individual, the “old chaos of the sun.” Essentially, “Cape Breton” manifests Stevens’ “island solitude” (*LWS* 250).

The problem with these readings is that they ignore or fail to weigh three important tropes that make the anti-cultural and anti-metaphysical position entirely untenable. With the rest of the chapter, I will argue that these previous perspectives—readings generally classifiable as, on Stevenson’s terms, “Thoreauvian”—are more than limited in scope, that they are actually obscuring the message of the work. Looking at “Cape Breton” comprehensively, the next section claims and attempts to demonstrate that the poem is a surprising rejuvenation of Emerson’s ideas about nature and language—that Bishop echoes his idealities in her spiritualization, textualization, and primitivization of the Canadian landscape.

I

The opening scene of “Cape Breton” almost resembles a reflection from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s “Island musical with birds,” except that it does not move toward any exaltation. Instead, Bishop’s seascape is gradually complicated in style and substance, even as the poem unfolds in the first stanza:

Out on the high “bird islands,” Ciboux and Hertford,
the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand

with their backs to the mainland
in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff's brown grass-frayed edge,
while the few sheep pastured there go "Baaa, baaa." (1-5)

The first three lines show no traditional meter—just a form of *vers libre* with syntactical divisions. In the larger stanzaic context, a chunk of thirteen lines, they intimate the beginning of a rondel (*abb*). But the "round" seems structurally lost in "solemn, uneven lines," waters dispersing and "disappearing under the mist equally in all directions," and the poetic punning there shares a general resistance to symmetry. Shapelessness then, not shape, is Bishop's final design. The decanting of sublime forms continues with "silly-looking puffins" and bathetic "Baaa"-s, details Eric Ormsby deems "distinctly unpoetical" (95). And all this formal disorder points to the larger disquietude of the poetic subject, the muddle between nature and culture:

(Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede
and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)
The silken water is weaving and weaving,
disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,
lifted and penetrated now and then
by one shag's dripping serpent-neck,
and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,
rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat. (6-13)

Human presence in this seascape is unsettlingly mechanical, and the dynamo quickly turns diabolical, haunting the "Cape Breton" scene: Bishop's leaping sheep are certainly evocative of the Gerasene story, the possessed pigs of the Gospels, and her shag's "serpent-neck" contributes its own devilish dash. Too, where the scene is not fiendish, it turns phantasmal:

The same mist hangs in thin layers
among the valleys and gorges of the mainland
like rotting snow-ice sucked away
almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift
among those folds and folds of fir: spruce and hackmatack—
each riser distinguished from the next
by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,
alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view. (14-22)

Lines 14 through 17 contain six repetitions of /e/, the close-mid front unrounded vowel, in “same,” “hangs,” “layers,” “mainland,” “away,” and “glaciers.” Tensing and suspending the tongue, this sound is aptly pendent to describe the inscrutable mist, to “hang” like the specters suggested. The “rotting snow-ice sucked away” becomes “ghosts of glaciers,” and as that chilly spirit leaves its withering corpse, so too the voiced /g/ leaves alliteratively the voiceless /s/. The mist heads hauntingly for the woods with the bone-chilling drone of the low-frequency /o/ (“snow,” “ghosts,” “those,” “folds,” and “stereoscopic”), and the depth of articulation created between those front and back vowels, between /e/ and /o/, is mimicry of Bishop’s “stereoscopy.” Finally, the reader has a sense of direction: a motion inland emerges from the desultory descriptions (the “weaving” of “all directions”) in the first stanza. The *interior* of Cape Breton will now occupy the speaker’s attention.

Already the language and imagery of spirits (evil or otherwise) calls into question the “imaginative materialism” many critics ascribe to the poem. This is a setting which is analogically supernaturalized. Of course, the fact is not Emersonian *per se*, but it certainly is not Stevenson’s Thoreau (or any essentially anti-metaphysical expression). Indeed, to see here

spiritual rhetoric in service of larger poetic de-spiritualization is a reading that is shaky at best. Admittedly, Bishop's haunting language is not in itself a tie to Ralph Waldo, but it is allowance for supernatural themes (and thus, room for the Idealistic precepts of our other option). Returning to the poem, however, the third stanza and heart of the text, one does find a shift distinctly transcendental.

Notice the way Bishop evacuates the island's littoral space in lines 23 through 25: "The wild road clammers along the brink of the coast. / On it stand occasional small yellow bulldozers, / but without their drivers, because today is Sunday" (23-25). Here appears more evidence of mechanization, but the poem's sabbath setting surprises us by quieting all that labor. Even the houses of worship are disused and reported from, as Bonnie Costello paints it, "the angle of an archeologist contemplating ruins" (105). "The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills," the beholder says, "like lost quartz arrowheads" (26-27). The reader's attention climbs more "risers" of woodland as Bishop is centering all of the island's interest upcountry:

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,
unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
where we cannot see,
where deep lakes are reputed to be,
and disused trails and mountains of rock
and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones— (28-34)

These seven lines form an essential core to the poem over which I would like to pause. The passage is marked by a drastic change in perspective: that is, the four items comprising the upland ("deep lakes," "disused trails," "mountains of rock" and "miles of burnt forests") are

actually not observed at all; instead they are “reputed,” known through a mediation of folklore. Even our strangely untethered narrator, a speaker able somehow to cover several locations in the present tense, cannot quest into its secrecy, for the occlusion is something universally experienced (line 30 offers the striking, one and only use of “we”). Here Bishop’s casual cataloguing slows into a visionless, visionary moment: a flash of anti-epiphany in which not meaning but meaning’s absence is discerned. The scintillating irony: like all poems, this poem contains a *logos*, but the *logos* is locked up, an idea interned in (imagine it!) words.

Here is where the connection between Bishop and Emerson is first firmly established: the relationship between language and nature. The poet’s clever paradox is that the landscape itself would speak but for the speech that occults it. The textuality of the landscape in this passage clearly recalls the classic “Book of Nature” metaphor: the idea that nature is revelatory and can indeed be studied. Of course, in its Christian context, the device upheld the orthodox doctrine of general revelation, but Bishop’s sacralization of the interior presents the same heterodox adjustments Emerson made in his transcendental writings: nature and scripture are conflated, not separate, revelations. In fact, in “The Poet,” Ralph Waldo’s exposition on the man of Beauty, natural images are similarly sacralized and textualized:

The sea, the mountain-ridge, Niagara, and every flower-bed, pre-exist, or super-exist, in pre-cantations, which sail like odors in the air, and when any man goes by with an ear sufficiently fine, he overhears them, and endeavors to write down the notes, without diluting or depraving them. And herein is the legitimation of criticism, in the mind’s faith, that the poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature, with which they ought to be made to tally. (458-459)

Put more prosaically, these “pre-cantations” are a natural liturgy, a divine “text in nature” more pure than human discourse. (If anything, *our* speech will quickly “corrupt,” “dilute” and “deprave” the “super”-existent Word.) The parallel, then, between Emerson’s poet and Bishop’s beholder is that both recognize a sacred significance in the pristine wilderness, an essence prevailing before and above the ways and words of men and women. The “corruption” of these “pre-cantations,” the discord between nature and culture that Bishop depicts in “Cape Breton,” is what Emerson laments throughout his career. But neither author drops the relationship as an unredeemable antagonism. Both suggest a path toward accessing again some (if not the same) revelatory power of the cosmos. Of course, Bishop’s claims are tamer (her resolution less sublime), yet the call is the same: listen, attend.

Reasonably, readers might be wary of this explication of the third stanza: the image is a *simile*, they might say; the “gray scratches” are “*like* the admirable scriptures” and are not actually text. Naturally, this is a crucial difference, but it does not change Bishop’s purpose: to try to draw the reader’s attention to the revelatory powers of the untouched world. The image is indeed a simile, but it is for Emerson too. For him, nature is figuratively and not literally legible; it is *significant* because, though not literally script, it contains primeval meaning. To better establish this point, consider this reflection published eight years before “The Poet”: “A life in harmony with nature,” he says, “the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause” (*Nature* 25). That “primitive sense” is what drives Emerson’s (and arguably Bishop’s) poetic textualization of uncultivated country; it is what turns the former toward ur-language and the latter toward the ancient presence which characterizes the rest of the poem.

It is worth noting that critics generally interpret the material following the essential core—the denouement, perhaps—as a form of aporia. This reading is likely brought on by the momentary letdown at the end of the third stanza:

and these regions now have little to say for themselves
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets. (35-38)

Such a seeming shift from transcendence to immanence understandably produces a mistaken conclusion: that the speaker cannot enter the island’s sanctum and therefore gives up the hope of revelation altogether; unable to reach that hidden interior, the gaze of the speaker turns from the quixotic to the quotidian. On this premise, the Costello-stance makes sense: as the wilds cease to speak, being itself becomes suspect. The Stevensian speaker ascribes meaning to the scene, for inasmuch as the landscape is silent (“these regions...have little to say for themselves”), things are *invested* with significance (hence, one might say, the glut of modifiers). Gardner’s position is only another degree away: if the meaning is not even accessible, why insist on it at all?

But conclusions like these might be precluded (or at least tempered) by the four lines’ intriguing backstory in “Cape Breton’s” revisionary process. Apparently, the imagery even perplexed staff at *The New Yorker*. In the draft they possessed, “their” stood where “in” now stands in line 38. Few could determine what that possessive adjective modified, and in a letter to Bishop, Katherine White relayed their collective confusion:

Just what is your meaning here? Do you mean that the interior regions have little to say for themselves except in the songs of birds and except for the fact on this Sunday you describe so exactly the fishermen who live in the little houses of the

back country are mending their torn fish-nets? We realize that the lines are put in for texture, as in a painting, and for general atmosphere as well as exact description and that you may want to keep your ellipsis. Some have read the lines as if the “their” which has no antecedent applied to the birds whereas others have thought the songs were the songs of the men mending their fish-nets. I myself think it applies to the regions. (39)

The message is humorous for the almost tableau-like scene it depicts: many professional yet perplexed minds hovering over a single, innocently crafted text. In Bishop’s reply, the mystery is solved, but the mysteriousness of the passage is not dis-solved. “[T]heir’ referred to ‘songs,’” she writes as a postscript. The simile is clearly now a comparison between the risen bursts of birds and the threading of a net. The reader knows *certainly*, therefore, that the poet is intending to provide one last image from the interior (notably, phenomena the speaker experiences directly). The point is this: a faithful interpretation of the end of stanza three cannot dismiss the allure that these regions still hold. The import of the net is debatable, but the significance of the scene is not: despite the speaker’s ignorance, the world is still “canting.”

A careful perusal of the poem’s last lines, then, reveals not a movement away from the spiritual, but rather a subtle adjustment toward its “primitive sense,” toward Emerson’s “harmony with nature.” This begins in the fourth stanza, Bishop’s omnium gatherum made luminous by quiet detail:

A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes,
packed with people, even to its step.
(On weekdays with groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts,
but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a hanger.)

It passes the closed roadside stand, the closed schoolhouse,
where today no flag is flying
from the rough-adzed pole topped with a white china doorknob.
It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water. (39-49)

I say “quiet” detail, too, because human activity has somehow been delimited. If the first stanza describes its threatening presence, the last two limn its puzzling absence. The final quatrain drops another gear, voice reaching a liminal lumbering:

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks. (50-53)

These parting lines are enigmatical to say the least. Bishop here sacrifices clarity for loveliness (a rare move for her), relaxing the scene from its definite imagery and definite article. The speaker seems at once to withdraw from and gain on these natural phenomena, creating verbally a kind of vertiginous dolly zoom effect. The controlling image, the mist, is resurrected, this time with what Doreski calls an “otherworldly” aura: “The cloaking chill has its roots in *prehistory*,” she explains, “How different the effect of the last stanza would be if Bishop had chosen to retain the final word, to deliberately limit her poem’s world.” Doreski perceptively reads these last four lines as turning down the volume of human speech. Now the words of the *world* are audible (we

notice that the phenomena Bishop lists are mostly auditory). “[T]he poem halts,” Doreski notes, “at a moment in which nature and culture seem in verbal congruence” (45).

Now we see that Bishop offers a world which is still teeming with meaning and, because of an ancientness still surviving, theoretically still accessible. Like Emerson, she encourages us toward conversation with these places and toward the quiet lifestyle that would allow active listening, receptive searching. The end of the poem is not incredulousness in the face of the wilderness; on the contrary, it is a imaginative reorientation in light of the country’s supernal possibilities. That is the vaguely supernatural element which is so often denied in the dominant readings of this poem: the possibility of a revelational potential in the natural and, more specifically, the uncultivated.

If the poem is indeed, as I have contended, a resurrection of Emersonian sentiments, it is not surprising that such a congruence blooms in the “ancientness,” the “primitivity,” of the island, for language finds its genesis, so says Emerson, in the primeval world. These are his exact thoughts in *Nature*:

As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols...This immediate dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into a type of somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us. It is this which gives that piquancy to the conversation of a strong-natured farmer or back-woodsman, which all men relish. (22)

Certainly, Bishop is not advocating the possibility of an ur-language, but she is powerfully suggesting, in the poem’s larger movement toward sabbath, an order restored in taking up again one’s conversation with nature.

II

Although the claims of this chapter find much validation in the text of the poem itself, there is an enlightening biographical detail which may help to externally corroborate them.

Bishop's "Briton Cove" letter to Robert Lowell is generally regarded as the epistolary birth of "Cape Breton," for some of the same beauties she reports in 1947 survive through the 1949 poem. Here is its famous passage (with more noticeable nascencies italicized):

This is a very nice place—just a few houses and fish houses scattered about in the fields, beautiful mountainous scenery and the ocean. I like the people particularly, they are all Scotch and still speak Gaelic, or English with a strange rather cross-sounding accent. Off shore are two "*bird islands*" with *high red cliffs*. We are going out with a fisherman to see them tomorrow—*they are sanctuaries where there are auks and the only puffins left on the continent*, or so they tell us. There are real ravens on the beach, too, something I never saw before—enormous, with sort of rough black beards under their beaks. (emphasis mine, 6)

Bishop's bird-watching stands out, but fewer critics observe her linguistic interests: this seedbed experience, this summer sojourn, is top-dressed in a fascination with language—not just its locality, but also its antiquity. "[T]he people...*still speak Gaelic*." This historical significance, then, along with "the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins," must be part of the poem's nativity; it is the only mentioned attribute of that she likes "particularly."

Even before the poem becomes a poem, we can conclude, words are, for the poet, part of the magnetism in the Cape Breton landscape. Along with the many natural beauties that make it through the drafts and into the final product, language, ancient language, is simmering in Bishop's early creative process.

“INFANT SIGHT”: TRANSCENDENTAL VISION IN BISHOP’S LYRIC

If we live truly, we shall see truly.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

[A]ll her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*.

—Randall Jarrell on Bishop

Since many of Emerson’s most memorable and absorbing metaphors are visional in nature, there is little question that, among the five senses, sight his favorite faculty. The eye persists throughout his work as a controlling image for a career-long exposition on enlightenment. *Nature*, the first major essay, introduces this figurative power of seeing: Emerson writes to lead to light his un-illuminated reader, “the blind man” who to everything is movéd not, and promises nothing less than spiritually “perfect sight” (49). Our fall, he suggests, is perceptual; our lapse is not lapsarian. There is a high moral dimension to Emerson’s sensorium, and he pursues the insensible with pietistic vigor, calling all to his all-expounding vision.

Premised on a strong belief in the interdependence of spirit and sense, Emerson contends that spiritual blindness invariably results from a disempowerment of either the soul or the five faculties. The malaise of spirit he explains in *Nature*’s last chapter. Adapting Christ’s Sermon on

the Mount, Emerson declares not sin as the beam in the eye of all humanity, but a prevailing failure to achieve completeness in selfhood:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. (47)

Hence, without an alignment of the soul, the world cannot be seen (ontologically, at least), because the restoration of one's sight means the restoration of one's intuition. Emerson calls us to reauthorize our subjectivity. In doing so, he promises, "evil is no more seen." (49).

"Build...your own world," he encourages; after, and only after, phenomena will give way to the clearer vision of the Will (48).

The second reason the mind's eye is blinded is a converse of the first: our senses do not feed our souls because our souls disbelieve our senses. This opposite problem is taken up in Emerson's later, greater essay, "Self-Reliance":

Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed. My wilful actions and acquisitions are but roving;—the idlest reverie, the faintest native emotion, command my curiosity and respect. Thoughtless people contradict as readily the statement of perceptions as of opinions, or rather much more readily; for, they do not

distinguish between perception and notion. They fancy that I choose to see this or that thing. But perception is not whimsical, but fatal. (269)

The Will, the spirit, the purity of subjective consciousness is that to which we “conform...life,” but we cannot forget, Emerson insists, that the senses are part of that complex. This second point is crucial to Emerson’s Idealism. Lest one conclude his “kingdom of man over nature” simply translates as “mind over matter,” cognition conquering the cosmos, “Self-Reliance” bespeaks instead a kind of philosophical sensism—a priority of perception in the formation of the soul.

When soul and sense are in harmony, a quickening cycle of subjectivity is established: the individual perceives phenomena which constitute a subjective, poetic knowledge, and consciousness grows aggregately in more and more experience until all nature becomes a symbolic manifestation of the unique imagination. This is the soul’s solitary power, “the infinitude of the private man,” the world-marshaling forces of individual perception (qtd. in Marr 3). Emersonian individualism holds firmly to the trustworthiness of intuition, presents it metonymically as sight, and promises ultimately that faithfulness to one’s own perception ultimately equals—and this is truly what made him scandalous to his contemporaries—*visio beatifica*.

The correlation to Elizabeth Bishop is this: both writers represent the most visional/visual aesthetics of their respective literary contexts and, arguably, of their respective centuries. Fairfield Porter perceptively remarks that “To admire Elizabeth Bishop’s poems...is to admire a visual writer,” a visual artist with verbal means (qtd. in Spring 201). Emerson says as much of himself: “They mistook me,” he writes, “I am and always was a painter. I paint still with might and main and choose the best subject I can. Many have I seen come and go with false hopes and fears, and dubiously affected by my pictures. But I paint on” (*Journals* 204).

With this last chapter, I will once again be coupling the literary careers of Emerson and Bishop, this time, however, with the shared accentuation of sight in mind. These I will claim are Emersonian and thereby marry their arts. Since simply noting similar preoccupations with perception would be nothing more than an exercise in coincidence, the following seeks the same soul/sense harmony in Bishop that we find in Emerson. It surveys three pieces of an especially visual nature: “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” “The Fish,” and “The Moose.” The sequence is glaringly a-chronological because it orders three poetic attempts at aligning those aforementioned axes of vision and things. It begins with imperceptiveness and ends with the completest, most optimistic, and therefore the most “transparent” sight, the moment of theophany. What is stressed and at stake is the visionary acuity of Bishop’s verse, a quality which has not been—and, arguably, cannot be—realized under our present preoccupations and prejudices.

I

Although “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” was eventually published in the *Partisan Review*, it was first rejected by *The New Yorker*. The grounds: it was “too difficult for a general magazine” (36). Robert Lowell received it and found it “very brilliant,” but he told Bishop by post, “I want to read it many more times before saying anything” (33). These comments reveal a relative abstruseness about the poem that proved puzzling to her contemporaries. And though now “Over 2,000” makes it into most collections and compendia, the poem is still perceived as something of an outlier.

The reason, I think, is the poem’s seeming rejection *and* affirmation of the spiritual and the sublime. On the one hand, much of the tone is drained bathos, but on the other hand, there are candid and un-joking moments that border on religious inquiry and reverence. This strange

combination of the sacred and profane comes together even in the first lines of the poem, the initial description of the “illustrations.” Lines 1 through 5 are full of ennui:

Thus should have been our travels:

serious, engravable.

The Seven Wonders of the World are tired

and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,

innumerable, though equally sad and still,

are foreign. (1-6)

But lines 5 through 10 wax mysterious. The pictures show, with something of a dark and jocular commentary,

the squatting Arab,

or group of Arabs, plotting, probably,

against our Christian Empire,

while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand

points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher. (6-10)

Bishop hints at a religious tension in the speaker (and also in herself, perhaps) by inserting a religious antagonism early in the work—the Christian/Muslim conflict. By the end of the stanza, the ominous seriousness dominates the mood, and little but the mysterious, religious iconography remains. Looking at the page, the speaker suggests,

The eye drops, weighted, through the lines

the burin made, the lines that move apart

like ripples above sand,

dispersing storms, God’s spreading fingerprint,

and painfully, finally, that ignite
in watery prismatic white-and-blue. (26-31)

This last passage turns the poem toward the enigmatic or the unknown. As the speaker gazes into the page, the imaged engraving, its compositional qualities begin to figuratively “move apart,” “disperse,” and “spread.” In a transitional moment reminiscent of *Nature*, the illuminating movement from the “transparent” to the “opaque,” the picture begins to disclose some form on non-pictorial reality.

That solemnization is abruptly cut off, and the speaker accounts her un-serious and un-engraversable globetrotting. These photographic stills are mundane but still enticing; as sights, they form a collage of experience which is at most aimless peregrination. There is a sense, however, of the religious seriousness creeping back, for the second stanza becomes faintly haloed in hagiography (the mentioning of destinations St. John’s and St. Peter’s). Surely the speaker cannot keep the away the transcendental from her trip. The end of the stanza reads,

It was somewhere near there
I saw what frightened me most of all:
A holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin
open to every wind from the pink desert.
An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
with exhortation, yellowed
as scattered cattle-teeth... (54-61)

This grave marks a dead-end for the speaker: the holy site is not experienced holily. Although it be “open to every wind from the pink desert,” its significance remains inaccessible behind the

lock of the “keyhole-arched stone baldaquin.” Although the stones be “carved solid / with exhortation,” they can speak to the speaker no more than the memory of the cattle’s broken mouth.

Here is a final undulation of hope in the poem that arises in the last stanza:

Everything only connected by “and” and “and.”
Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn’t we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
—and looked and looked our infant sight away. (65-74)

This denouement is the densest passage—indeed, denser and more enigmatic than the end of stanza one—and it is the part of the poem with which I would like to spend the most time.

Because we are not commanded to “Open the book” until line 66, we can presume line 65 alludes to the world actually travelled and not the world represented in the “illustrations” and “concordance.” The speaker looks back upon all that wandering paratactically: “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” is a world without hierarchy, a world of things only coordinated and never subordinated (at least grammatically speaking). But to “Open the book” is to transform these images into pilgrimages, to infuse the pictures with life-giving, spiritual value and direction. A vision of death is turned into a vision of birth as the Nativity replaces the grave.

Everything is mystically enlivened, even the speaker, whose fertilized mind is touched by the gilded, pollen-like pages.

The doubling of the imperative in line 68 and the addition of “heavy” increase the gravity of the scene, yet we are left with the mystery of her interlocutor’s identity. If the speaker is talking to herself, telling himself to “Open the book,” then this suggests the tome has reached almost divine importance, that the speaker must prepare herself to receive its contained revelations. If, rather, the address is toward another (in the poem or without) the command is like unto the Magi: witness. The most likely scenario is that the speaker is addressing us, the readers, since the resulting effect of intimacy is far too dazzling to dismiss: asking the reader to “Open the book” only draws attention to what, in the act of reading the poem, the reader is already doing; the poet thus makes us enact the poem and begin to wonder whether we or it are more real. Of course, this is Bishop’s intent, for the next and final lines are that moment when “illustration,” the realm of representation itself, eclipses all else—when the Word is itself incarnated.

But before moving to those final images, we must address a most crucial couplet, for I am prepared to argue that one’s interpretation of the entire poem hinges on the question presented in lines 68 and 69: “Why couldn’t we have seen / this old Nativity while we were at it?” To answer this query is to answer what we must make of both the “illustrations” and the speaker’s relation to them. Critics who construe the poem as essentially the affirmation of a paratactic universe—or, in Eliade’s vocabulary, a “horizontal” world—*must* regard the question as rhetorical. It is not difficult to see why: in admitting that the representation actually re-presents reality, the speaker would be welcoming in the transcendent or “vertical.” This reading could be by placing its emphasis at the beginning of 69: “Why couldn’t we have seen / *this* old Nativity while we were

at it?” (In other words, “We couldn’t see this living, luminous, holy ground because it belongs only to the worlds of imagination and art.”) However, I think a far less rigid way to approach the couplet is found in allowing Bishop’s lineation to naturally create its own emphases. We notice that the last word in line 68, the word the reader is forced to hover over, is “seen.” The unselfconscious prosody, then, is, “Why *couldn’t we* have *seen* / this *old Nativity* while *we* were *at it?*” The difference is this: the first interpretation reads the question as a listless figure of speech; the second takes it as a genuine question. In my estimation, the latter is more faithful to the poem’s form and better explains the speaker’s longing: what is missing in this poetic world is the sight of the sacred, not the sacred itself. As lines 70 through 73 deliver the Nativity illustration in the form of a short catalogue, the absence of sight is central and imaged beautifully as an aura of “colorless” flame “undisturbed” and “unbreathing.” Perceived apophatically—that is, described mostly by what it is not—the fire suggests negative presence. Indeed, even Christ himself is negatively present: generalized beyond recognition, the holy stable scene becomes “a family with pets.” There is a sense of erasure here: the colorlessness is not merely a haloling; it is rather more a washing out of the subject matter. We see that in one last look at the book, the lyric arrives at a lacunary space through which the seer becomes sightless, in which his inklings find no ink.

In reality, it is not the illustration that the speaker fails to see; it is rather the sacred plane of existence the picture images. Here is exactly where Emerson’s doctrine of sight becomes relevant: if spiritual blindness is indeed Bishop’s topic in “Over 2,000,” and disharmony between soul and sense is, in Emerson’s understanding, the root of poor acuity, the poem’s finale must be, we deduce, a failure of the self-granted authority of the mind or the senses.

The question of which is answered in the final line, “and looked and looked our infant sight away.” Here, active voice ostensibly shows a voluntary turning. A twisting in the syntax, Bishop’s placement of the verb before the subject, suggests a wincing in the speaker. In this interpretation, the Nativity is not seen not because it is hidden in transcendence or otherness, not because the senses fail, but rather because the speaker’s gaze avoids it. I suspect that the confusion of the editors at *The New Yorker* and the puzzlement of Lowell come from this dazzlingly oblique utterance. But Bishop’s use of repetition is a hint unto this veering from splendor: “and looked and looked” reintroduces parataxis, the idea of “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and.’” Thus, we see the real collapse: Bishop presents in poetry a self who, in Emerson’s words, is “disunited with himself,” is unsure of reality, is unsure even of his own subjectivity. Certainly, the colorlessness so dominant in the last passage brings to mind the “opaque”-ness mentioned in *Nature*, but the reason for the ruin lies elsewhere: it lies with this uncertainty about the metaphysical qualities of these landmarks. And since we have no reason to disassociate the identities of speaker and poet, I think we as readers can reasonably conclude that Bishop is versifying her own understanding of the root, the cause, of this spiritual blindness, is sympathizing with such souls on the threshold.

The in-betweenness of the poem is its riddle. Rarely does one read a piece more simultaneously rakish and reverent. Yet that purgatorial middle is exactly the poet’s *logos*, and from it comes all the brilliant blankness of Bishop’s ingenious non-imagery.

II

Rewinding back a decade, we find a poem in which, instead of failing to see or look, the self temporarily achieves Emersonian harmony of spirit and sense: “The Fish,” Bishop’s glimpsed “victory” past the dullness of everyday phenomena. It is a story of watching, noting,

and noticing, ending in spiritual dilation and direct, radiant vision. It is a “big fish” tale beginning with the mundane and concluding with the sacred. “I caught a tremendous fish,” it starts, “and held him beside the boat” (1-2). We notice immediately that those first two lines already contain the dichotomous make-up of the human that will be poetized: “tremendous” evinces the spiritually “tremendous”—what in *Idea of the Holy* Rudolf Otto calls “mysterium tremendum,” “numinous experience”—while the tableau of the fortunate fisherwoman sizing up her prize pictures a bodily joy of sensory delight (12).

As the speaker begins to list the fishy features, the seemingly centuries-old creature becomes both magnetic and repellant in waves of strange otherness:

Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age. (9-15)

More flora punctuate the otherwise disagreeable images of sea-lice, gills, and other piscine properties and even come to stand, metaphorically, for the fish’s unsavory traits. The creature is, we learn, covered with “fine rosettes of lime” and has a “pink swim-bladder / like a big peony” (17, 32-33). Here, the synthesis of pleasant and unpleasant features is so complete, so unthinkable, that even the fish’s fishiness undergoes ontological freshening (for the speaker, anyway) and becomes beautiful—almost divine, one could say, since, as *ichthys*, the “five big

hooks / grown firmly in his mouth” form a “five-haired beard of wisdom” perhaps intimating the five wounds of Christ.

Also interesting is the speaker’s silent wonderment at the fish’s eyes, a scene that calls attention not only to the animal, but also the activity that constitutes the poem, the act of watching and observing:

I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass. (34-40)

The texture and delicacy of these eyes densified in internal rhyme is contrasted to the “far larger” eyes of the “I,” the only bodily presence in the poem. This eye contact would be a mystical instant, but without mutual perception, the fish can only be an “object”:

They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light. (41-44)

The fish possesses no subjectivity. Yet when the speaker arrives at this difference in being, notices more keenly its particular existence, begins to discern its uniqueness in their not unrelatable natures, then the radiance and power of perception is actuated. The poem’s tempo

increases, and phenomena shed their accidents until only a spectral essence behind them is visible:

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. (65-76)

Clearly, here, the soul marries sense; the speaker's nerves become Whitmanian superconductors. Bishop's sublime use of epizeuxis, the thrice repeated "rainbow," is rapid and ecstatic, and, leading up to that final exultant moment, end-rhymes gradually build in stronger and stronger couplets (e.g. "orange" with "thwarts," "strings" with "everything," and "rainbow" with "go"). Anaphora carries the reader from 72 through 74. Galloping anapests rush the eye, urge the ear, onward toward—what? It is "perfect sight"; it is "transparency" found in the unity of self. After reading "Over 2,000," it is exactly the contrast one imagines: vision's many-color deluge replacing the colorlessness of the lost manger bed. If the dimming of spiritual sight registers

most appropriately as blankness in the last poem, illumination in this is, naturally, the entirety of our scope.

Bishop snaps the line (of verse and perhaps of the fishing pole too) with profoundly ambiguous anticlimax: because of the vagueness of “let,” the reader cannot know whether releasing the fish is intentional or accidental; we can only know that, as Emerson earlier sermonized, to give up the grasp is to give up the glorified sight. Only when sense and spirit are married can the axes of vision and things be coincident. Our readings of Bishop must allow room for this informing spiritual sensism; otherwise, we miss the objective correlative of these narratives of sight, and the ecstasy may seem forced or, worse, strangely melodramatic.

III

To conclude, it must be said that Bishop’s “infant sight,” her “victory...rainbow,” is more than *akin* to Emerson’s “perfect phenomenon”: it rather *is* the very event of metaphysical lucidity. If critics continue to resist these dimensions, insist simply on the materialistic, there will be little to account for in either work discussed here. The narrative each presents will be flattened or, worse, contorted out of utility. More importantly, the stakes of seeing in both poems will be lowered, thus hollowing out the emotional core.

These are perhaps no better words to explicate Emerson’s interest in sight than David Jacobson’s salient book, *Emerson’s Pragmatic Vision*. Here we find a thinker reaching for some adequate expression for his radical individualism, some human analogy for the “influx of spirit” he thought possible:

[I]n [Emerson’s] early writings he sought a positive assertion of the humanist inheritance he identified for himself as the recognition of the founding capacity and scope of individual thought. A phenomenological interpretation shows the

extent to which he relied on a vocabulary of vision to formulate this assertion, and in the course of doing so it draws out as well the complementary sense that nature is not objectively infinite, but rather consists of the manifestations that gather around the individual, and is in this regard a finite appearance. (10)

The description is apt for Emerson, but it also is no less so for Bishop. She too sought an aesthetic that could capture her values and larger poetic drama: the self-searching, noticing, wondering in the world—a heraclitean world, certainly, but no less a stage for love, despair, hope, sadness, madness and melancholy. Bishop’s “visual writing” gained her that “capacity and scope of individual thought,” and it tied her work back to a tradition of, a valorization of, the subjective soul.

AFTERWORD

The readings, reflections, and redirections in this essay are admittedly conservative in nature: they aim to break the mirror that reflects solely our present political and theoretical interests and to offer again the poet's words free of those unexacting constructs. In allowing Emerson to inform a transcendental aspect of her heritage, we do more than widen her place in the tradition of American poetry; we also welcome fresh dimensions previously closed to or discouraged from conversation. We do not despair the formal and philosophical vicissitudes and instead accept them as undulations of spirit—fluctuations right and recognizable in the commonest expressions of Individualism. Allowing Emerson means admitting (and as I have argued, regaining) shades of transcendental subjectivity, Idealistic hues to brindle and enrich an otherwise monochromatic body of criticism. It means inviting one of the few conceptual paradigms which can remain, in the end, un-paradigmatic: a set of un-settling optimisms much in accord with the secret boundlessness of Bishop's quiet desire, which is the self-defined and self-secured emancipation of soul.

Naturally, desires of all kinds get far less assurance in a modern context of verse. Rare are the near-complete manifestations of any hope (much less hope transcendental). So it is that, for the greater part this essay, I have been piecing together contiguous images in order to

panoramically reframe a fragmented philosophy. Still, there is one poem of Bishop's over which I would like to pause—a poem which, I believe, does justice to the pneuma, the creative spirit, the total vision of the poetry. This is "Sonnet," her last published work. It is a piece loved for both its formal playfulness and its devastating brevity, but in my estimation, it is also a splendid culmination of her career, a crowning of her hope and, yes, even her heritage.

Starkly systrophic, "Sonnet" is simply the juxtaposition of two catalogues: one to describe "Caught," the other "Freed." They form a curtal sonnet reminiscent of Bishop's beloved Hopkins—not through the decrease of total lines, but by a quivering dimeter/trimeter line length that always appears on the verge of vaporization. It begins,

Caught—the bubble
in the spirit-level,
a creature divided;
and the compass needle
wobbling and wavering,
undecided.

Helen Vendler calls the items in this first list "inorganic devices of exact measurement" (97). They represent the human parsed out—pinioned and imprisoned by the scrutiny of standard. If such things stand for "Caught," the incarnationally incarcerated spirit, the curious transition to "Freed" becomes explainable. Bishop inverts the octave and sestet to create a formal break, a break *from* form, in a last, grand untethering:

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!

In an intriguing way, the poem feels like a gnostic version of “Prayer (I),” Herbert’s early systrophic sonnet, for here the awesome, almost untouchable Bird of Paradise is made a gorgeous, omnipresent “rainbow-bird,” a creature no longer bound by poles or by coordinates. It rises on quick, syntactic flutterings to exclamatory heights (rare voice for Bishop’s careful craft) and at an acme finds redemption for Emerson’s “parti-colored wheel,” finds—shall we even say it?—infinity, calm, dispersion, exactly what the Emerson called the realm of “blithe air” (*Nature* 10).

But that indeed is my whole and very point. This ancient, Platonic release in the sonnet is the hope of *both* authors: prismatic, immaterial bliss. We might say, borrowing Emerson’s words from “The Philosopher,” the reality that is the rainbow-bird finds a “union of impossibilities,” a liberating combination of “real and...ideal power” (641). It is the zone in which both minds converge, from which pour forth resonant harmonies of the philosophy of nature, the meaningfulness of the cosmos, and the power of individual perception.

How fitting, then, is David Scott’s 1848 oil portrait of Emerson: in lecture posture—one hand clenched, the other released—the man appears with signature gravity, behind him a dim rainbow splashed. While in Emerson’s lifetime the painting was consigned to oblivion, Edward Emerson (Ralph Waldo’s son) said positively about the artist, “David Scott, the Edinburgh painter, has this one merit in that wooden picture that he made of my father, in that he recognized

that my father stood for Hope, and he put the rainbow in the background—the symbol of hope” (126).

Yes, like the rainbow, Emerson *and* Bishop “stand for hope.” And this is not a hope in covenantal promise (like Noah’s rainbow); instead, it is a hope in hope itself—an optimism momentary in its perception, yet spectrally infinite. “Freed,” the soul escapes the impingements of measurement and representation, and for both authors, this liberating movement, this escape of the soul and psyche, begins flights of interminable wonder.

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