"Flowing, and Flown": Elizabeth Bishop and the Mystery of Closure

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A poem can be never finished, it can only be abandoned.
— Paul Valery

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Bishop published about 90 poems in her long writing career of nearly four decades. This is a remarkably small corpus of poetry for a poet of her weight and stature. It is more remarkable in the light of the large volume of unfinished poems, fragments, notes and sketches uncovered by recent scholarship. She also had unusually long gestation periods for her poems and often completed them even twenty years after a first rough draft. All this prompts an enquiry into this reticence and the will to not publish, even not complete. This paper tries to think a few thoughts on the poetics of closure and particularly the mystery of closure in Bishop's poems. Closely engaging with some of her poems, letters and prose writings, it tries to approximate a few principles which lie at the heart of Bishop's praxis as a poet, ideas dearly held whose rigour and vigilance allowed her to keep only this much as published literary legacy.

1

In 1967 Elizabeth Bishop wrote a short prose piece called 'An Inadequate Tribute' remembering the critic and poet, Randall Jarrell. Jarrell was a close friend for more than twenty years and

this may be one of the deaths she managed to write about, amidst the many that she did not. Bishop's observation of Jarrell is a good way of beginning to talk about her. The last paragraph of the piece runs:

> I like to think of him as I saw him once after we had gone swimming on Cape Cod; wearing only bathing trunks and a very queer straw cap with a big visor, seated on the crest of a high sand dune, writing in a notebook. It was a bright and dazzling day. Randall looked small and rather delicate, but bright and dazzling, too. I felt quite sure that whatever he was writing would be bound to share the characteristics of the day and of the small man writing away so busily in the middle of it all.[1]

Many things are signed by Elizabeth Bishop here. Closely observed details—odd, arranged and random (queer straw cap, big visor, high sand dune); the folding up of "bright and dazzling day" with Jarrell as "bright and dazzling too" qualified by "delicate"; and all the constellated details grounded in the small man writing busily as if nature and man are both alongside and apart, a distinctive and characteristic life "in the middle of it all." The image gains its potency, as art, Bishop 'felt quite sure', was 'bound to share' the day and the man—the word "bound" resonates in a multiple manner as cover, weave and assurance. The entire vision (or 'look', as maybe Bishop would have corrected as she does in *Poem*)[2] is invested with the typical Bishop gesture, "I like to think of him as I saw him." The famous Bishop eye sees, and sees with phenomenological concentration, to bracket the world out and call the world in, in a different, cleared plane.

All these are truisms about Bishop, felt anew in her little known prose. Since her death in 1979, her reputation has steadily

risen. She has edged out Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath in the run to posthumous poetic fame and there has been a remarkable consensus among scholars, academicians, poets and readers about her place as the foremost poet in the second half of the twentieth century. Thomas Travisano has called it, indeed, 'The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon.'[3] Some other truisms are: Elizabeth Bishop the descriptive poet par excellence, the descriptive-reflective artist, the master of control, reticence and form, the non-activist feminist and proto-queer poet (in and out of the closet) and Bishop the non-confessional ironist quietly taking a road not taken by the male Modernists. We have in the Bishop industry the poetics of loss, intimacy, everyday and the visual arts. We have Elizabeth Bishop the untiring letter writer.

Details about her life are now well known and regularly anthologized. The loss of her father at eight months, the institutionalization of her mother at five years, Vassar, the definitive meeting and friendship with Marianne Moore, the love affair with Lota de Macedo Soares in Brazil, the suicide of Lota, her friendship with Robert Lowell (Cal in the letters), teaching at Harvard, the famous avoidance of public role playing, her personality—both dry and warm, reticent and expressive, ordinarily extraordinary, carrying a lost home in the head and in the poems. What is equally well known but passed over in silence without interpretative questioning is the opening premise of this article: Bishop published 88 poems in her lifetime —wrote, rewrote, scrapped and finally abandoned hundreds of poems over nearly four decades of her writing career, and suffered unusually long gestation periods for her poems (some poems, for example *The Moose*, got woven and unwoven over 26 years). For a poet of Bishop's calibre and dedication, this is very strange. Why did Bishop end up as the poet of the published few and the unpublished many? Such a small number of published poems in forty years (two to three poems per year roughly) is truly

astounding, matched only by Philip Larkin (and we must remember that Larkin completely stopped writing poems in the last ten years of his life).

Let us make some common sense conjectures about this astonishing grit *to not finish*, not publish, and be finical in a state of controlled panic as the sandpiper (a self-comparison made by Bishop herself).[4] Poets may not publish poems because the satisfactory end is not reached, and this may happen out of sheer lack of will, a required tenacity. After all, writing a poem is difficult business. Bishop admits, "Writing poetry is an unnatural act."[5] However, admission of such difficulty, along with the admission of procrastination (". . . of course it should have been written long ago, but I procrastinate")[6] is negated by an insistent will to work present throughout her life. Bishop, we find, is always working on, working out, scraping and polishing words, much like Jarrell in her own words, writing away busily in the midst of it all. A sample letter reads thus: "I feel I *must* write a lot of poems immediately—that is my test for 'real poetry.'"[7] The emphasis on 'must' (Bishop's italics) and the equation with 'real poetry' conveys an anxiety about the dynamics of writing and the urgency of 'immediately' reveals desperation to finish. Written to Lowell, another letter makes clear her constant absorption in the working process: "The one poem I have done anything with since I've been back is a long one I started two years ago, to you and Marianne, called "Letter to Two Friends" or something like that. It began on a rainy day and since it has done nothing but rain since we've been back I took it up again and this time shall try to get it done."[8]

Getting it done is completing the poem (started two years ago) and the picture that emerges is of a poet who is prone to abandon poems, returning and circling around them for years. Proof of this is found in the extensive unpublished draft materials that Bishop left behind. A substantial amount of this has been

collected in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments*, edited by Alice Quinn in 2006.[9] Therefore Bishop had the will and the tenacity but could not bring her poems to an end. One wonders, whether the end of a poem is a great blockage in Bishop's poetics, a finite point which tormented Bishop with its possibilities of infinitude, a site of closure which refused to yield itself with a click and rather wanted to accommodate non-closure and a continuing disclosure. By implication can one assume that this points to an aesthetic of ending present in Bishop?

It shall be the contention of this article that Bishop's meagre published output of poems in a lifetime of ceaseless writing and the many poems left incomplete and abandoned—a phenomenon not yet probed interpretatively—points to a firm aesthetics of ending. This principle of ending can only be critically constructed by trying to understand how Bishop conceived a poem to be, its haecceity. One can only think of an end as it aligns to the whole. In all her prose and letters Bishop never approached this topic, perhaps confirming a diagnosis of anxiety. Interpreting a number of poems by concentrating on how they end, one shall try to illuminate a new dimension in Bishop's poetics. The end of the poem is loss and renewal, an arrest as well as a yearning to continue, and this contingent mystery beyond practice and obedience grants the poem its 'poemhood'. Evidence to strengthen this argument shall be mustered from some of her critical prose.[10]

2

When does a poem end? If a literal answer to this is that it ends with the last line, committed and given up to time by the poet, then with equal literalness one can say that, often, a large blank space remains after the last line on the printed page. If in its

printed form as artefact, a poem is the delicate, uncertain play of the printed black letter and the white textual surface, the white that remains at the end of each poem is the obdurate remainder and reminder of things going on and yet to be closed. When we move from the page to the dynamics of the mind, the question gets reframed thus: when and how does a poet know and feel, (rational or instinctive, predictable or contingent) that a particular line brings an ongoing process to a close?

Over the last hundred years, New Criticism has consolidated a critical and scholarly consensus that a poem is a discrete entity. As artefact, it is an artifice of eternity, a miracle of rare device, a well-wrought urn. If the poem is thus a substantive, the end of the poem is the function of the completed form—something that edits, evolves, modifies, reshapes and clinches to make the poem free-standing, autonomous, autotelic. The end may click in like an efficient door-knob or leave some spaces open, the poem ajar, which is the condition of multiple resonance and tensions harmonized within the limits of Empsonian ambiguity—seven types or less. It appears that we have two philosophies of the end of the poem. One: making the end correlate and cohere, the satisfying stone to complete the mosaic, the nub in the assemblage of parts which makes the machine tick. Two: the end, as not grounding, but hovering, an apparent spacing in which many thoughts converge, diverge and melodiously expire. However, both positions sponsor the stay of form over formlessness, the crafted symmetry of time holding the siege against whatever is past, passing and to come.

Frank Kermode refers to this line of Yeats when speaking about the sense of an ending: "You remember the golden bird in Yeats's poem—it sang of what was past and passing and to come, and so interested a drowsy emperor." He continues ". . . The artifice of eternity is a striking periphrasis for 'form', for the shapes which console the dying generations."[11] Apart from Barbara

Herrnstein Smith who has explored the concept of ending in *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (a book mainly empirical in its thrust),[12] Kermode is the only critic who has tried to address the fraught issue of literary ending with philosophical seriousness. *The Sense of an Ending*: *Studies in the Theory of Fiction* focuses upon literary prose fiction, yet its central argument can be summoned to testify for poetry too. Time's passage is recorded by Yeats's golden bird in an artifice of eternity, and artifice as consolation is the crux of Kermode's argument. Art, literature, poetry, sculpt in time. In a remarkable passage Kermode writes: "The clock's 'tick-tock' I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organisation which humanises time by giving it form; and the interval between 'tock' and 'tick' represents purely successive, disorganised time of the sort we need to humanise."[13]

Imaginative literature organises this disorganised time, says Kermode, and endings—prose, poetic and dramatic, impose a pattern of artificial time to heal the time out of joint and restore the human need for order. Kermode's book was published in 1967 and only two years earlier there had been a rather maverick publication which went completely against Kermode's proposition. Challenging the most accepted paradigm of art theory, Morse Peckham, in a swaggering book of volatile generalizations (probably critically neglected due to such faults), put forward the astonishing thesis that the domain of art was not one of order, flux tamed to a pattern or the consolation won from radical chaos. *Man's Rage for Chaos*: *Biology, Behaviour and the Arts* argues instead that art is unique in its embrace of disorder and uncertainty.[14] Peckham persuades that the experience of art is the experience of life in rehearsal, open to flux. Thus, end in art as well as the end of art, according to Peckham, lies in its vulnerable exposure to risk, incompletion and loss. Not the will to order but the steady look at the phenomenal world, awful but

cheerful.

Where does Bishop stand in the middle of it all? Perhaps in the middle, accepting something from Kermode and Peckham and differing too. Very much aware of New Critical fiats (the poem as self-sustaining artefact with an end that keeps alive the controlled play of tension), Bishop seems to be working out a path for herself not exactly similar. Let us now look at some of her poems to note how Bishop quietly shifts some ground in the formulation of her aesthetics. The poem *The Monument* is in her first published volume *North & South* (1946). It opens with a question that is simple and metaphysical, "Now can you see the monument?" The act of seeing is more than the fixing of an object of vision; it is looking into the essence of things which is always unfixed, flowing, and flown. Can we ever see something? Can we ever see something enough to say that we have seen, in art and in life? Do we see the poem when it ends, the poem as monument, and can we say that we have seen enough?

Bishop, next, scrupulously assembles all that may be seen about the monument: 'It is of wood', 'pierced with odd holes', 'one-third set against/ a sea'. However, with each examining look, the monument seems to lose specificity and the question is repeated with another attempt at an answer:

> What is that?
> It is the monument.
> It's piled-up boxes,
> outlined with shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off,
> cracked and unpainted. It looks old.[15]

The initial description "It is of wood" is repeated, but with a significant qualification, "It is an artifact/ of wood." And yet the "artifact" is now opened up and out of its self-consistent definitive clarity by making it partake in the mutable weather

(". . . rain falls on it, or the wind blows into it"); by introducing cognitive uncertainty ("It may be solid, may be hollow"); and by pointing out the presence of a sheltered secret which can never be seen ["But roughly but adequately it can shelter/what is within (which after all/cannot have been intended to be seen)"]. We generally think of what is within as something that may or may not be *known*, a secret is more usually known than seen. Bishop makes a tiny and imperceptible but significant shift—the monument's secret cannot have been intended to be '*seen'* (emphasis added)—emphasizing seeing as the way of knowing with the lightest of touch.

All this activity happens at the end of the poem. Bishop lets the monument try out several identities, renewals and beginnings in the last three lines of the poem: "It is the beginning of a painting,/a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,/and all of wood." Wood, monument, artifact, poem, painting, sculpture, rain, wind and secret all collapse into each other in a dizzy cognitive shape-shifting. As the poem ends, what we know, or think we can know, (knowledge as the definitive, clarifying, and interpretative withdrawal as we stop looking at an object, adjusting and ordering to begin knowing at the point of aesthetic ending) becomes provisional. New ways of knowing emerge as new ways of looking at the world and the text. The artifact in wood and words, is arranged, re-arranged and revised. The poem ends with three words which constitute a challenge, an invitation and a directive: "Watch it closely."[16] They also run a great risk in being the simplest of words, a most casual and everyday statement, as well as an intense metaphysical command that govern us, as we try to make sense of things. 'Closely' resonates with the procedural praxis of close reading in New Criticism and causes an implosion.

The world as phenomenon to be watched closely without end,

in the midst of which, sometimes, a form may be found in words or wood, poem or artefact, which crystallizes the world as phenomena to be watched closely without end (as happens in fractals), is an idea Bishop toils towards in all her poems. This is the difficult dialectics of the natural and the artificial. Repeating and revising, arranging and re-arranging ("no detail too small"),[17] Bishop nominates the end of life as the end of the poem in her elegy to Robert Lowell, *North Haven*. If repeating and revising and watching closely stand for life and living on, the inability to do that (caused by death) is the ghostly melancholic remembrance of everything that cannot be changed and be a part of life again. The poet is the unique figure who singularly identifies the image of the poem as caesura, a stopping which is only provisional in the midst of a living on, the immaculate and utter concentrated tension of collecting and releasing time which is the end of the poem and the end of life. We recognize it as end only and only against what does not end—the world. At the point where the poem most completely recognizes itself as poem, it must tear itself apart from the world and declare its inability to live on. This is the sadness of the success and failure of artifice. The end of the poem is the beginning ("It is the beginning of a painting.") of infinite loss, infinite abandonment, and infinite exile.

Talking about the template of Robert Lowell's art (which is an intimation of her art too), Bishop writes: "Nature repeats herself, or almost does:/*repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.*" Bishop places these six words in italics to ruefully and steadfastly acknowledge that this is what is granted no more to her "Sad friend." As the poem ends, Bishop repeats gestures of departure and loss: "You left North Haven . . . And now—you've left/for good . . ." and reminds Lowell that he cannot watch closely anymore: "You can't derange, or re-arrange,/your poems again . . .". The end is loss in finitude and fixity. However,

finitude and fixity also crystallize forms—inevitable and natural as death giving shape to life, and necessary and artificial as art giving shape to the artefact. Bishop writes: "The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change." This absolute inability to change, which is also the definition of the end of a poem or a work of art, is recognized as both trauma and the momentary satisfaction of completed form. And then, with a quiet parenthesis, Bishop surprises us in the penultimate line of the poem, ("... But the sparrows can their song").[18] A line of wondrous simplicity, again as ordinary as "Watch it closely" in *The Monument*, the finished poem *North Haven* rests and ripples on this line and brings to a crystallized form Bishop's profound meditation on how we may think of the end in life and art. Once again Bishop takes an enormous risk with a simplicity costing not less than everything. Engaging with Keats and Yeats, their nightingale and golden bird, (artificers of eternity), Bishop offers the sparrow as the humble, nominal face of flux which is life, necessary for the stay and arrest of death and art.

Reading these two poems, one early and another late Bishop, respectively, one senses a tentative pattern emerging in her poetics of what is a poem and how an arrangement of lines become a poem when it ends. It gives us an insight into the blockage about ending that Bishop may have had which resulted in the very few poems she finished and published and the hundreds left unfinished like "torn-open, unanswered letters."[19] For Bishop a poem is an artefact made of wood or words, a specific form that must end when the chisel, the brush and the pen must be put down and one cannot change, the concentrated look which must see and see and then look away. What is looked at is the world, "vast and minute and clear", the world as and in a grain of sand "where the millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray/mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst";[20] what is looked at is the world "littered with old corres-

pondences."[21] Yet the artefact is also open, processual, unfinished, unfixed, permeable to wind and rain and the elements, permeable particularly to the elements of history, flowing and flown. Incorporating repetition and revision, arranging and re-arranging, the poem plays out the dialectics of rage for order and the rage for chaos, the form and the formless, consolatory form rhyming life and time and sparrows singing on beyond human participation and frame.

The poem as close and open, fixed and deranged, art and history is what Bishop aims at. And that can only be when the dialectics come to a standstill in the always un-anticipatable, contingent, risk-laden end of the poem in a line or a phrase or a parenthesis which is always already familiarly there in the poem and yet mysteriously looms up (like the moose) as something "otherworldly."[22] It crystallizes the poem as a mystery, the 'Suddenly' that happens which can never be a protocol or practice or principle. The ending as unsummonable makes the poet grapple with it. The risk is the end of the poem, which by accomplishing a sealed form unseals infinite abandonment and loss: the double bind of home and exile, centre and displacement. It is the act of arresting time, to bring it to a standstill so that one may most intensely immerse (Bishop the "believer in total immersion")[23] in the wound of time. This is accomplished in two different ways in *The Monument* and *North Haven* responding to two different assortments of details in each poem. In both cases the poems live in and out of time as artefacts with the ability to revise (and not revise). "Watch it closely" and "(But the sparrows can their song)" are moments of mystery—prepared for yet wholly taking us unaware—that give each poem its object-status as a poem while inviting ceaseless thinking on the phenomenon of arrest amidst motion.

Each poem that Bishop could finish is blessed with this mystery. If we consider some of them, primarily Bishop's

acknowledged masterpieces, we can point to that moment at the end of the poem when the large volume of specific details, the infinitesimal grains of sand form an integral. This constitutes the recognisability of the poem, fixed in mystery. In *The Bight*, it is a generalization that structures the untidy world to an axiomatic combination of awe, woe and cheer—"All the untidy activity continues/awful but cheerful."[24] *Cape Breton* unveils the natural and human landscape as the weaving and unweaving of water and mist almost as if life on earth is being given its primary description by the elements in a manner which is uncanny:

> 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."[25]

The Moose tracks an overnight bus journey through the countryside. It is a "dreamy divagation", a "gentle, auditory/ slow hallucination" that carries the entire dream burden of the ordinary lived life punctuated by death, disaster and madness. Amidst the voices of the murmuring grandparents, mystery happens, as "—Suddenly the bus driver/stops with a jolt/turns off his lights." A moose has come out of the wood and stands "grand, otherworldly." After a while when the bus moves on "the moose can be seen/on the moonlit macadam" by craning backward. What persists is "a dim/smell of moose, an acrid/ smell of gasoline." What one carries as the burthen of the mystery is the sweet epiphany along with the acrid gasoline: "Why, why do we feel/ (we all feel) this sweet/sensation of joy?"[26] Bishop who habitually uses parenthesis for uncertainty and correction, uses it only once in her poetic oeuvre to affirm ardently. Finally, in *At the Fishhouses*, we have the spectacular leap, when Bishop

connects "Cold, dark, deep and absolutely clear" water to knowledge: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:/dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free." Building on the image Bishop goes even further. The correspondence of water and knowledge, "flowing and drawn" is given a momentous additional fold—history and the historical is attributed to water and knowledge bound in the image of *flow*. The poem ends with the utterly strange yet simple equation, "and since/our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown."[27]

The principle of mystery characterizes all the finished poems of Bishop, at least those that she chose to publish. Only some of them have been read due to paucity of space. However, it is a general quality operative in all her poems, and one shall try to show some suggestions towards this from her prose. The mystery that we are talking about is both a risk and a gift. Perhaps it is also a burden. It is something that is unbiddable, which appears with equal possibility of failure and redemption, and is hard to sustain, though one feels its spectral presence all the time. Going by her own words mystery is the ultimate component of poetry, the third term in a triad that she identifies as essential for her work: "The three qualities I admire in the poetry I like best are: *Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery*."[28] It is her emphasis and Bishop is particular about this order. "*Mystery*" is placed at the end as her choice, because we notice that she speculates on other orders for other poets. Quoting a passage from Herbert's *Sacrifice*, she questions, "He has spontaneity, mystery, and accuracy, in that order?"[29] This prose note from which I quoted (a draft for a lecture to be given on poetry), catalogues various examples of accuracy, spontaneity and mystery illustrated by poets of her choice. What is interesting is the way she connects all three qualities in two of the examples. She quotes the last four lines of Auden's *The Fall of Rome*:

> Altogether elsewhere, vast
> herds of reindeer move across
> miles—miles of golden moss
> silently and very fast

and then comments: "It's accurate, like something seen in a documentary movie. It is spontaneous, natural sounding...And it is mysterious."[30] Later, writing on Baudelaire, she states—"Baudelaire: 'Les soirs illumines par l'ardeur du charbon . . .' where *charbon* is the telling word—surprising, accurate, *dating* the poem, yet making it real, yet making it mysterious."[31]

Always suggestive, Bishop translated the three qualities into poems about animals. Written in the 1950s and published in *New and Uncollected Poems* (1969), the *Giant Toad*, *Giant Snail* and *Strayed Crab* refer to the qualities of accuracy, spontaneity and mystery respectively. The toad says: "My eyes bulge and hurt. They are my one great beauty, even so. They see too much, above, below . . .".[32] The snail says: "I give the impression of mysterious ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks . . . Withdrawal is always best . . . My wide wake shines, now it is growing dark. I leave a lovely opalescent ribbon: I know this."[33] Finally the crab: "I believe in the oblique, the indirect approach . . . I admire compression, lightness, and agility, all rare in this loose world."[34] We cannot but marvel at Bishop's self-reflexive critical acumen. We also become aware that mystery is the oblique and the indirect, the moment of compression, lightness and agility, crystalline and expansive, weightless, aslant and coming from altogether elsewhere. And all of Bishop's endings have these features, composing poems as artefacts "rare in this loose world."[35]

Let us now try to bring together all the diverse threads and come to a fair sense of what a poem is for Bishop, and the crucial

element of the end of the poem as the reticent strand in her poetics. A poem is a closed, finished "artifact" and also a process. It is a moment of arrest, a coming to a stand-still in the flux of time and yet opens to the wind and rain of history. It is the most concentrated look at the real phenomenal world, a series and sequence of arranged details. All the details mysteriously cohere and congregate in the always un-anticipatable, unbiddable end of the poem. Bringing to a fragile perilous point the tension between form and chaos, the tick-tock of the clock and the abyss between the rhymes, the end of the poem is the mystery of loss and affirmation, exile and home. The end of the poem commands that nothing can change. But one must keep on watching closely, arranging and re-arranging lines and losses and gains in the crypto-space of the blank page where the poem continues. Art as the difficulty of looking, in which the real and the artificial come together in stereopsis to produce a mysterious effect, is proposed by Bishop in a homely meditation on her grandmother's glass eye. It reads:

> My maternal grandmother had a glass eye. It fascinated me as a child, and the idea of it has fascinated me all my life. She . . . didn't believe in looking into mirrors very much. Quite often the glass eye looked heavenward, or off at an angle, while the real eye looked at you...Off and on I have written out a poem called 'Grandmother's Glass Eye' which should be about the problem of writing poetry. The situation of my grandmother strikes me as rather like the situation of the poet: the difficulty of combining the real with the decidedly un-real; the natural with the unnatural; the curious effect a poem produces of being as normal as *sight* and yet as synthetic, as artificial, as a *glass eye*.[36]

Bishop had an obsessive eye for detail. The sandpiper with his

focussed beak "is preoccupied,/looking for something, something, something."[37] Each Bishop poem is loaded with a vast amount of detail—voices, memories, objects, creatures, the speck of colour on a leaf, the sheen of silver on water, the scratch mark on the knife, the click-click of the dredger (one cannot list enough). Each exists in its own being, a part of the world, assembled in the flow of time as the eye records and language inscribes one after another. It is a sequence and the potential of a shape rife with tension. The moment when the tension is the greatest is the moment when thinking stops and there is a halt in motion. By stopping and fixing time, the poem releases its own form as poem. Perhaps this makes the end of the poem messianic in nature, the redeemer of loss, the victim of delay and deferral. There are 88 poems of Elizabeth Bishop: and thousands of pages of abandoned words.

NOTES

1 'An Inadequate Tribute' in Elizabeth Bishop, *Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 354. Henceforth all prose quotations will be from this text and shall be referred to as Bishop, *Prose* with page number.

2 Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), 197. Henceforth all poetry quotations will be from this text and shall be referred to as Bishop, *Poems* with page number . The relevant lines are 'Our visions coincided—"visions" is / too serious a word, our looks, two looks' (lines 50-51). Bishop's poems have many such instances of correction, a drawing-in of the voice and often meaning gets clarified by an extra shade. The gentle, almost mocking tone in these lines subdue 'visions' to 'looks' and ground Bishop's poetry as the ordinary way to see into the extraordinary life of things.

3 Thomas Travisano, 'The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon' *New Literary History* Vol. 26, No. 4, Philosophical Resonances (Autumn,

1995), 903-930.

4 Bishop, *Poems*. 129. Bishop describes the sandpiper as 'finical, awkward' that nervously and rather defiantly walks along the edge of the water as it moves in and away along the shore. The combination of concentration and jitteriness perfectly embodies the quality of absorbed vigilance that is a hallmark of Bishop's poetry. Bishop famously compared herself to the sandpiper: "All my life I have lived and behaved very much like [the] sandpiper—just running down the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something', having spent most of my life timorously seeking for subsistence along coastlines of the world." Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton, ed., *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 768.

5 Bishop, *Prose*. 327.

6 Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton, ed., *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 706.

7 Robert Giroux, ed., *Elizabeth Bishop, One Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 409.

8 Giroux, *One Art*. 348

9 Alice Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006)

10 Elizabeth Bishop's obsession with visual detail constitutes merely a part of her poetic tact. They only constellate when the mystery and risk of the ending (oblique and indirect, ordinary and unreal, yet rooted in the poem) construct and deconstruct the poem as artefact. While this is outside the scope of this essay, one may search for an approximation of this poetic complexity in the concept of monadic constellation offered by Walter Benjamin in his late writings on culture, history and the philosophy of history. For Benjamin, a historical event formed a monad when a constellation of details converged around it. This convergence is not a regular given, but a mysterious, redemptive moment when the dialectical tension between the constellated parts crystallize with a shock to reveal the true face of history. According to Benjamin this cessation

of process, a dialectics at a standstill, is the only moment which redeems the suffering of homogeneous time where we live with loss, death and disenchantment. Benjamin's nuanced meditation can perhaps be a helpful model for understanding a Bishop poem as a monadic constellation crystallized by the risk and mystery of the end of the poem.

11 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 7.
12 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
13 Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*. 45
14 Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage For Chaos: Biology, Behaviour and the Arts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).
15 Bishop, *Poems*. The Monument, 26
16 Bishop, *Poems*. The Monument, 25-27
17 Bishop, *Poems*. Sandpiper, 129
18 Bishop, *Poems*. North Haven, 210-211
19 Bishop, *Poems*. The Bight, 59.
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