LYRIC LETTERS:
ELIZABETH BISHOP’S EPISTOLARY POEMS

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“Lyric Letters: Elizabeth Bishop’s Epistolary Poems” sets forth the untold story of the letter’s rhetorical influence in postwar poetry. It traces Bishop’s paradigmatic use of the epistolary mode as an extension of psychoanalytic narration, as a means of witnessing to war and the ways of empire, and as a vehicle of queer intimacy in the first decades of the Cold War. Drawing upon Bishop’s unpublished poems to her psychoanalyst, Ruth Foster, the epistolary poems of A Cold Spring (1955) and Questions of Travel (1965), and the rich legacy of her correspondence, “Lyric Letters” establishes the central role of epistolarity in Bishop’s oeuvre.

While Bishop and her Middle Generation peers (b. 1910-1920) have been acknowledged for restoring “personality” to poetics after Modernism, this genre study explicates some of the specific narrative techniques and historical conditions that made their biographical aesthetic so appealing. Bishop figures prominently in many accounts of American poetry because her oblique lyricism and intimate apostrophe appear to bridge the modernist/postmodernist divide. This project materially legitimates that claim by
showing how, in the epistolary poem, Bishop manifests a genius for both the reinvention of traditional forms and the assimilation of popular cultural tropes. By the mid-century, Bishop had honed her ambidexterity, drawing with two hands on literary inheritance and contemporary inference, gathering “from the air a live tradition” with discerning acuity.

Figuratively, Bishop’s “lyric letters” accomplish the necessary postal errands of psychic life, addressing the garrulous ghosts of the dead and exploring the potency of dreams and memories. Yet Bishop also used the epistolary mode to redress amatory and filial contests of desire and individuation; to subvert heteronormative scripts of “Ulysses” and “Penelope” wartime gender roles; and to queer the privacy crisis of the Cold War.

Epistolary poems--and their narrative cousins in the diary, the travelogue, and psychoanalysis--foreground the stylized apostrophe, quotidian detail, and psychological realism that define Bishop’s aesthetic and structure her engagement with historical and social concerns. Thus, “Lyric Letters” asserts Bishop’s enduring legacy and challenge: the integration of generic literature with the media of everyday life in the authorship of lyric verisimilitude.
For my sisters, muses three:

Lucie, Michelle, Nicole
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CHAPTER 1:

DEFENDING POETRY

Emperies of Imagination

“In his earlier stages the poet is the verbal actor,” Elizabeth Bishop conjectures in the “Mechanics of Pretense” (1937), a review of W. H. Auden’s poetry in which she lodges an exposition of the poet’s socio-political role (*Edgar Allan Poe* 183).¹ With an analogy that speaks to her own ambition, she compares the literary artist’s self-authorizing reinventions of language to imperial anima: “The growth of the small nation into the empire contains infinities of such pretense, gradually turning to the infinite realities of empire” (EAP 183). Bishop never published this half-finished review with its emboldening claim that the poet’s ability to shape linguistic reality rivals the theatrical aggrandizement of the nation-state. Indeed, for decades this instance of Bishop’s own verbal acting effectively remained off-stage: tucked into archives with other reviews, poem drafts, memoirs, and fictional narratives that the poet left incomplete or deemed unfit for publication.

At age twenty-six the Vassar College graduate was already a stern critic of her own work, holding her literary efforts to a draconian standard that exceeded those of her

¹ *Edgar Allan Poe and the Jukebox* (2006), hereafter cited as “EAP.”
more prolific Middle Generation contemporaries, a coterie of American poets born between 1910-1920 who came to their literary maturity during and after the years of the Second World War. Yet as James Longenbach, Thomas Travisano and others have noted, Bishop’s acknowledged influence in American letters has redoubled in the decades since her death in 1979, a burgeoning reputation that pays ironic tribute to her life-long strategic reticence (Longenbach 17 Modern Poetry; Travisano “Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon” 229).3

Once considered a peripheral “verbal actor” on the stage of postwar poetics, Bishop and her seemingly eccentric geographies increasingly center critics’ assessments of the Middle Generation coterie that includes as major figures Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Randall Jarrell (EAP 183). Bishop’s œuvre has proved to be the keystone for a more incisive reading of these peers; for a less disjunctive understanding of modern and postmodern aesthetics; for discernments about the ostensible “impersonality” and heightened “personality” of the lyric mode before and

2 Bruce Bawer’s book-length study, The Middle Generation, the Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell (1986), offers a generational assessment of these four poets who were born between 1913 and 1917. “Middle Generation” has since come to denote a larger cadre of American poets whose work assumed national prominence during and after the wartime crisis (Axelrod “The Middle Generation and WWII” 2). Born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1911, Bishop is typically included in this American coterie, although she spent the first six years of her life in Canada and maintained a sense of divided allegiances. Writing to her biographer Anne Stevenson in 1963, Bishop described herself as “3/4ths Canadian, and one 4th New Englander” and noted that she had ancestors on both sides of the Revolutionary War (Washington University Olin Library archive, March 18, 1963).

3 The eloquence of Bishop’s “reticence” or her strategic gaps and ellipses, her patterns of displacement and sublimation, has been the subject of both praise and debate. In 1975, Octavio Paz published a short essay titled “Elizabeth Bishop, or the Power of Reticence,” in which he presented Bishop as the paradigm of this literary virtue: “From political discourse to ideological sermon, twentieth-century poetry has become garrulous…. We have forgotten that poetry is not in what words say but in what is said between them, that which appears fleetingly in pauses and silences…. The enormous power of reticence--that is the great lesson of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop” (213). From Paz’s perspective, Bishop’s “reticence” is wholly positive, a characteristic reserve rather than a habit of suppression.
after World War II; and finally for studies of the formal innovations—such as the epistolary poem—that illustrate the especial nature and legacy of Bishop’s generation (Longenbach 17-18; Hammer 164).

Bishop composed the “Mechanics of Pretense” at a moment in which her determination to have a literary career required imaginative valor. Living alone in a “two-dollar room” at the Murray Hill Hotel, a strange little depot for persons of enough means and cleverness to survive respectably in New York City, Bishop struggled with bouts of asthma and loneliness while trying to fashion a futurity for herself as a woman of letters: as a poet, a book reviewer, a travel writer and—briefly—as a pseudonymous writing instructor (“Mr. Margolies”) at a shady correspondence school (Millier 121, 133; Bishop Poems, Prose, and Letters 449-60).

Bishop’s review of W. H. Auden, one of her early formative influences, provides a startling portrait of her own ambition. Moreover, her description of the poet’s task fitsful in her travels, Bishop lived temporarily at the Murray Hill and a few other hotels in the 1930s and 1940s. In July of 1938, she wrote to Marianne Moore from a Spanish-speaking “dormitory” named “La Residencia” on West 113th Street, making light of its oddities:

[It]… seems a very good place to work. … This place is very battered, and has a slight madhouse air, but I don’t mind it at all. Everyone is very friendly and the food—Spanish, which I prefer to the same class of American food, at least—very good. Everyone sings all the time. The cook and the housekeeper meet on the stairs and have a duet. … For a few weeks, as a gangster hideaway, it is all right, I think (One Art [hereafter cited as “OA”] 76-77).

In “A Brief Reminiscence and a Brief Tribute,” Bishop writes of Auden’s pervasive influence on her generation in the 1930s and 1940s and the traits for which they championed him: “His then leftist politics, his ominous landscape, his intimations of betrayed loves, war on its way, disasters and death… . We admired his apparent toughness, his sexual courage… . [H]ere was someone who knew—about psychology, geology, birds, love, the evils of capitalism—what have you? They colored the air and made us feel tough,
illustrates her generation’s characteristic self-consciousness about their formal aims, methods of composition, and broader social role: vocational anxieties that the domestic mobilization of World War II and the ideological embattlements of the Cold War would only serve to intensify (Axelrod “Middle Generation” 2-3; Brunner xv). In 1937, Bishop’s faith in the poet’s ability to structure the metaphysical and physical realities of his age is both poignant and revealing.

In his earlier stages the poet is the verbal actor. One of the causes of poetry must be, we suppose, the feeling that the contemporary language is not equivalent to the contemporary fact: there is something out of proportion between them, and what is being said in words is not at all what is being said in ‘things.’ To connect this disproportion a pretence is at first necessary. By ‘pretending’ the existence of a language appropriate and comparable to the ‘things’ it must deal with, the language is forced into being. It is learned by one person, by a few, by all who can become interested in that poet’s poetry.

But as this imaginary language is elaborated and understood by more people, it begins to work two ways at once. ‘Things’ give rise to the language; now the language arouses an independent life in the ‘things,’ first dimly perceived in them only by the poet. To the initiate, the world actually manages to look like so-and-so’s poems—the poems that he first carefully fitted to the ‘ways of the world’ himself. The play becomes a play on a stage dissolving to leave the ground underneath. The tendency, described by William Empson, of what a poet writes to become real; the tendency towards ‘prophecy’; obscurity, and ‘influence,’ are all [departments] of this original act of pretence.

(EAP 183-84)

To buttress her claims, Bishop draws upon William Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity, from Edward Gibbon’s Journal, and from D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature, assembling these glosses in the pastiche-like manner of Marianne Moore, who had befriended her in 1934, the year Bishop moved to New York City. Bishop does not ready, and in the know, too” (PPL 729). Bishop’s homage tonally mimics Auden’s own tribute to Freud, whom he credited with being “no more a person / now but a whole climate of opinion” (“In Memory of Sigmund Freud” 166).
mention Auden in her draft’s first three lengthy paragraphs, but her jaunty discursive momentum slows—like an acolyte entering a place of worship—as she approaches specific examples from Auden’s *Poems*. Curiously, Bishop characterizes Auden’s poetry with reference to Humphrey Bland’s “Treatise of Military Discipline,” and she cites a passage in which Bland praises a military regiment that practices realistic “‘street-firings’” while it is in motion, giving “‘a lively representation of action, [that] raise[s] the imagination to a higher pitch’” (EAP 184). In this analogy, the poet’s theater of “pretense,” wherein lyric verisimilitude gives new forms to life itself, is akin to an empire’s stylized display of power, which enunciates a forcible intention to shape the course of history.

Yet Bishop’s depiction of imperial élan in 1937 is utterly different from her perspective in 1950. Thirteen years and a world war later, Bishop and her Middle Generation contemporaries had new reason to suspect the arrogations of empire and to worriedly reckon the influence of atomic warfare on the seemingly atomistic activity of the lyric. In 1957, the expatriated Theodor Adorno would observe knowingly in “Lyric Poetry and Society” that “The tenderest, most fragile forms [of poetry] must be touched by… precisely that social bustle from which the ideals of our traditional conception of poetry have sought to protect them” (21). Adorno’s axiom bears out its truth in relation to Bishop and other Middle Generation poets, whose lyric letters indeed serve as a “philosophical sundial of history”: their epistolary poems make manifest the especial conjunction of historical and ideological pressures that rendered many of their received poetic models inadequate, necessitating—in Bishop’s words—their own “original act[s] of pretense” (Adorno 221; EAP 184).
Borrowing from Bishop’s canny phraseology, in mid-century America what was “being said in words [was]… not at all what… [was] being said in ‘things’” (EAP 183). And it was the garrulousness of “things”—or the structuring events of material history and their ontological influence—that was indeed outpacing the techne of the New Critical and Modernist poets in the 1940s, a generational linguistic gap that Bishop anticipates in 1937 and, in her homage to “imaginary language,” prepares to answer (EAP 183).

Lyric Letters

Bishop’s early essay on Auden, her experiments in Washington, D. C. with satire in the epistolary mode (1949-1950), and her oblique epistolary reconnaissance of the “Defense of Poetry” gathering (August 14-17, 1950), collectively reveal the nexus of conditions likely to have inspired and sustained the Middle Generation’s use of epistolary poems. Avid letter-writers and analysands, the Middle Generation poets assimilated the analytic-like address of the personal letter as a rhetorical model for their biographical lyrics: poems of quotidian texture, psychological verisimilitude, and intimate apostrophe that define their legacy in the American canon. Since 1950, critics have alternately termed this mode “personalism,” “confessional[ism],” “narrative postmodernism,” a “Chekhovian mode” and “culture poetry,” striving for nomenclature that might approximate these poets’ varied but persistent penchant for historical narratives; for their post-Freudian investigation of selfhood and subjectivity; and for their negotiation of the geo-political and technological complexities of their age—from the advent of the atomic bomb and the surfeit of mass consumerism to the wane of liberalism and the alienating
fears of cold warfare (Davidson 270; Rosenthal 109; Travisano 182; Perloff 75; von Hallberg 2).

Reading the Middle Generation through the portal of genre—through their use of epistolary poems and letter-like apostrophe—draws their overarching characteristics into a legible microcosm, one that reveals the links between their lyric innovation and the “collective substratum” of their age (Adorno 220). Epistolarity is the organizing conceit or coordinating leitmotif in a striking number of these poets’ postwar collections including Elizabeth Bishop’s *A Cold Spring* (1955); Robert Lowell’s *Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1952) and *Dolphin* (1973); Randall Jarrell’s *Losses* (1945) and *Selected Poems* (1955); Gwendolyn Brooks’ *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); and John Berryman’s *Sonnets to Chris* (1967) and *Love & Fame* (1970). Assimilating the conventions, intersubjective address, and in some cases the actual material of personal letters, the Middle Generation’s epistolary poems respond ingeniously to the heteronormative “romance” of the soldier’s letter; to a popularized understanding of psychoanalytic narration; and to the national obsession with civic privacy during the first decades of the Cold War.

For Elizabeth Bishop in 1937, however, private correspondence was not yet a viable metaphor for *poesis*. In linking the bristling engagement of Auden’s stanzas’ “higher pitch” to the convincing pretense of a military drill, Bishop intensifies her analogy between the poet’s influence on the contours of linguistic reality and an empire’s display of martial skill. She asserts that like imperialists, poets attain their power, their

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7 Bishop quotes three passages from Auden’s *Poems*, asserting that as in Bland’s soldiers’ convincing drills of “street-firings,” Auden’s stanzas seem like “real service.” One stanza that Bishop cites features Auden’s praise of restraint as the measure of valor, as the anti-heroic virtue of modernity: a curious analogue to her own seeming reticence, poetical and political.
“mounting, uncalculated waves of influence,” through a “pretense” exercised in their particular genre of persuasion (EAP 185). Hence she describes poetry not as post facto mimesis, but as a catalyzing Orphic art that adjusts “contemporary language… to the contemporary fact” such that “language is forced into being” (EAP 183). This genesis in language—in new ways of structuring apperceptions of an historical reality—influences both human understanding and the concrete world in Bishop’s model.

To the “initiate,” she writes, assuming the rostrum of seniority, “the world actually manages to look like so-and-so’s poems… The play becomes a play on a stage dissolving to leave the ground underneath” (EAP 184). Bishop’s belief in the emperies of the imagination and in poetry’s dissolution of the “stage” between life and art might at first seem like the bravura of a neophyte. But Bishop’s faith in the power of poetry to engender the “real… [with] ‘prophecy’, obscurity, and ‘influence’” was not simply the product of a collegian’s naiveté. Rather it was a conviction shared by many in her Middle Generation, likewise working in the shade of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and W. H. Auden: Modernist figures who had attained, by 1940, the status of cultural archetypes. The Middle Generation’s young faith in lyric power—and the cultural role of the poet—would find its maturing in the political climacterics of the 1940s and 1950s, when the tasks of imperium and poetic imagination rivaled, rebuffed, or uncomfortably

And bravery is now
Not in the dying breath
But resisting temptations
To skyline operations.

(qtd. in EAP 184)
elided with each other, engendering the necessities of new language and the canny reinvention of literary forms (von Hallberg 3).

View of the Capitol

Twelve years after drafting the “Mechanics of Pretense,” Elizabeth Bishop had graduated from a bare life at the Murray Hill Hotel to the Poetry Consultant’s office at the Library of Congress: the most prestigious public office for a poet in the United States. Aside from a short stint at a correspondence school in New York City and five days of work in a Key West Navy optics shop in 1943, Bishop had never held a full-time job. Suddenly, at age thirty-eight Bishop found herself with official tasks, a seasoned secretary (Phyllis Armstrong), and an attractive office in the Library of Congress building (Roman 115). The “verbal actor” had arrived in the theater of Cold War Washington, a

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8 Robert von Hallberg’s *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980*, describes the postwar generation’s self-conscious riposte to a perceived need for a recognizably American national culture, one commensurate with the United States’ militaristic and economic supremacy in 1945. Glossing this phenomenon, von Hallberg writes: “We answered this challenge by assuming the outward signs of European tradition, the way one might undertake the administration of a museum—vigorously, ambitiously. Americans suddenly recognized a new relationship not just to their own past but to the entire history of the West” (3). The lyric rendering of narrative histories became a defining motif among the Middle Generation poets as a means of engaging with the nation’s postwar triumphalism and as a way of bridging a perceived gap between the petite narratives of ordinary life and these meta-narratives of the public sphere (Nadel 3-4). Steven Gould Axelrod cites this penchant as the Middle Generation’s defining difference from their Modernist predecessors and Postmodernist peers, parsing these divergences simply: “Whereas the Modernists and Postmodernists tend to foreground language, pattern, and style, the Middle Generation poets foreground public and private histories” (“Middle Generation and WWII” 2).

9 Bishop made a pencil sketch of a room at the Murray Hill Hotel on the hotel’s stationary in the 1940s (Ellis 158). Her drawing features the blank seat of an upholstered chair, the vacant lower half of a mirror, an ornate reading lamp and bureau, a heavily curtained window, and the far edge of a closed door. As Jonathan Ellis indicates, there is no evidence of human habitation in this detailed interiority—no baggage, clothing, or personalizing accoutrements. Noting the sketch’s hard lines and fastidious details, Ellis finds Bishop’s drawing rife with “edginess,” an oblique portrait of the anonymity she seems likely to have suffered there, “rely[ing] on hotel accommodation whenever Thanksgiving or Christmas came,” and whenever she found herself between apartments or invitations to stay elsewhere (159).
locale that would offer new provocations to Bishop’s poetics and nudge her aesthetic toward the intimate tonality and textual codes that marked her mature voice. This shift in style includes, as its characterizing feature, Bishop’s use of epistolary and letter-like poems: a mode in which Bishop could satirize the jingoism and compulsive heteronormativity she encountered in the capital’s increasingly persecutory atmosphere (Corber “All About the Subversive” 39; Davidson “From Margin” 274).10

Since her post-collegiate days of struggle and uncertainty, Bishop had managed to publish her first collection *North & South* (1946) with Houghton Mifflin and, in the wake of its positive critical reception, to secure a first-reader’s contract with Kathryn White, the poetry editor at the *New Yorker* (Millier 187-88). In addition, the shy poet found herself befriended by the studied eccentric Marianne Moore and by the Byronically mercurial Robert Lowell. While Lowell was instrumental in Bishop’s garnering of the Poetry Consultant position, which he himself had occupied in 1947-1948, both Lowell and Moore would champion Bishop’s poems and prospects for the rest of their careers. By any rough measure, Bishop was handsomely enfranchised in 1949-1950 to reconsider

10 Roman notes that Bishop’s notebook from 1950 begins with an entry about the capital’s post office building as a *locus amoenus* in a city that otherwise felt quite alien to her (122). In this way, Bishop mimics Anthony Trollope’s travelogue, *North America* (1862), in which he gives a detailed assessment of the capital’s major buildings with especial attention to the post office (312-14). Bishop used passages of Trollope’s *North America* as the basis for the other Washington-related poem considered here, “From Trollope’s Journal.”

“In the Village,” an autobiographical story Bishop wrote in 1952, likewise features the local post office in Nova Scotia as a place of fascination, a transmission zone for privately legible secrets. Bishop’s child-narrator situates it tellingly: “The post office is very small. It sits on the side of the road like a package once delivered by the post office. … Its face is scarred and scribbled on, carved with initials. … There is no one except the postmaster, Mr. Johnson, to look at my grandmother’s purple handwriting” (PPL 116). Letters, and the rituals attending their receipt and delivery, seem to have offered Bishop a mechanism of restorative home-making (of domesticating the strange) during her first highly public job and, earlier, during the bewilderment of her mother’s mental illness and institutionalization.
the “mechanics of pretense” involved in the aggrandizing growth of empires and the humbler demesnes of literary influence (EAP 183).

Bishop’s arrival in Washington coincided with a pivotal moment in U. S. history. In the fall of 1950, a series of events almost immediately complicated the world of postwar cultural politics and enhanced Bishop’s discomfort in her governmental position. On September 24, 1949 during Bishop’s second week as the Poetry Consultant, the United States officially confirmed that Russia had indeed tested its first nuclear weapon on August 29, 1949, a fact that shattered the “atomic hegemony” that most citizens and officials in the United States believed would secure and maintain the Pax Americana (Engelhardt 58; von Hallberg 129). Less than a week later, Mao Zedong effectively declared the triumph of Communist forces in China’s civil war, establishing the People’s Republic of China with its capital city in Beijing (Engelhardt 58).

11 Millier notes that Bishop worked part-time alongside Leonie Adams during her first week in Washington and began working independently as the Poetry Consultant on September 19, 1949, just before Russia’s proven nuclear capacity was officially announced (219-20). This news was a decisive blow to the popular hope that the American lifestyle might be imported to every country on the globe, establishing a commercial empire of subsidiary democracies, one reinforced by the United States’ possession of atomic weaponry. Engelhardt pithily glosses this aspect of postwar mythology, satirizing the notion that “swords might be beaten into refrigerators… that the ‘super’ power with the ‘super’ weapon might also become a supermarket dispensing goods to the whole planet” (Engelhardt 56). Several of Bishop’s contemporaries would query and lampoon this notion. Randall Jarrell, Norman Mailer, and Allen Ginsberg, for example, all wrote provocatively about the supermarket in relation to socio-political power. Mailer’s essay on John F. Kennedy’s campaign stops at shopping malls during the presidential election of 1960 is entitled “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” and one of Jarrell’s most famous poems, “Next Day,” features the epiphanies of a middle-aged housewife as she shops for groceries (Leuchtenburg 10; Jarrell Complete Poems 279). In a similar vein, Ginsberg’s poem, “A Supermarket in California” (1956) addresses Walt Whitman, whom he conjures in the aisles of a grocery store in order to query the ethical status of a materialist America that enlists its citizens in a Babbitt-like quest for goods. The speaker asks of Whitman, “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue auto- / mobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” (136) Acquisition, in Ginsberg’s poem, estranges citizens while conjoining them in their isolated desires; the supermarket, with its dazzling “peaches and what penumbras,” epitomizes this state (136).
Together, China’s “loss” to Communism and Russia’s demonstrated preparedness for nuclear warfare amplified red paranoia in the United States. In Washington, D. C. a blossoming of federal surveillance agencies marked the institutionalization of this fear; between 1946-1955, no less than five federal agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Intelligence Authority (NIA), were created to protect democracy from all genres of subversion, a category that included Communism and homosexuality as understood threats to national integrity (Davidson 271). A Senate Appropriations Committee Report titled “On the Employment of Homosexuals and Other Perverts in Government Office” (1950) stated with axiomatic aplomb: “[One] homosexual can pervert a government office” (qtd. in Davidson 274). And within five years, the U. S. Defense Advisory Commission would make the Cold War’s program of social “hygiene” and conscription of domestic life explicit: “The battlefield of modern warfare is all inclusive. Today there are no distant front lines, remote no man’s lands, far-off areas. The home front is but an extension of the fighting front” (qtd. in Gilbert 96). By 1953, more than 13.5 million people (or 1 in every 5 Americans) had been subject to a “loyalty-security check” as the fight against Communism resulted in an unprecedented policing of the populace (Engelhardt 122).

Elizabeth Bishop, in occupying the Library of Congress position from September of 1949 to September of 1950, directly witnessed how Containment ideology—with its emphasis on civic health and propriety—was being used to inform the rhetoric of the Korean War, to justify the tribunals of Senator McCarthy and the House of Un-American Activities Committee, and to legitimate staffing “purges” in Hollywood, government, and
the academy (Nadel 16, 74). One of the poems Bishop composed in relation to her stay in Washington, “From Trollope’s Journal,” strategically adopts the persona of the nineteenth-century British novelist and post office administrator. As the title suggests, Bishop borrowed passages directly from Trollope’s travelogue, *North America*, about his visit to the U. S. capital in “Winter, 1861” (PPL 126). Observing the city with Trollope’s scrutiny and genial crankiness, Bishop satirizes the Cold War’s emphasis on moral hygiene to suggest that the conditions of protracted warfare are in fact the cause of the nation’s disease.

In a letter to Robert Lowell dated November 18, 1965, Bishop terms “From Trollope’s Journal” her “anti-Eisenhower poem,” confirming that the poem is in fact a critique of the eight-year president and not of the “superficial condescending Englishman,” as Lowell had first thought (*Words in Air* 591-92). The poem’s political

12 Political anxieties turned inward in a persecutory scrutiny of so-called “subversion” and “disease” among United States citizens themselves. In 1949, Senator Joseph McCarthy declared that the victory of Communism in China was the result of Communist spies secreted in the State Department, and his public investigations capitalized on the notion of patriotic hygiene—or the need to cleanse the U. S. citizenry of its supposedly morally and psychologically weaker parties—in order to resist Communist “infection” (Engelhardt 48; Gilbert 96). George Kennan, one of the authors of containment policy, had described the stakes of this contest with the metaphors of health and contagion in his iconic “long telegram” of 1947:

> Much depends on [the] health and vigor of our own society. World communism is like [a] malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is the point at which domestic and foreign policies meet. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve the internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, [the] morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués.

(qtd. in Davidson 271).

13 *Words in Air* is hereafter cited as “WA.” Lowell had written to Bishop with detailed praise for the poems in *Questions of Travel* (1965). About “From Trollope’s Journal,” he commented: “…the more I read it the more I think he [Trollope] was right about Washington--at first I took the poem as a spoof at the superficial condescending Englishman” (WA 591). Having mistaken Bishop’s satire as directed at Trollope himself, Lowell quickly caught onto its true object. But to be certain that Lowell understood her critique, Bishop notes in her next letter: “Well—Trollope was actually an anti-Eisenhower poem, I think—although it’s really almost all Trollope—phrase after phrase” (WA 594). Lowell, in his response, duly reports that he finds “Washington is now even more like your Trollope poem” (WA 597).
import did not go unnoticed by readers like Kathryn White, who delayed its publication in the *New Yorker* until after the presidential election of 1960, which concluded Eisenhower’s reign in Washington (Roman 136). Fittingly, Bishop’s poem invokes the air of a private confidence: while ostensibly a letter-to-the-self, “From Trollope’s Journal” also seems expectant of a public readership with its elaborate editorialized descriptions and Trollope’s qualifications to his own persona.

The poem begins colloquially, its conversational tenor masking the intricate schema of a modified double sonnet.

As far as statues go, so far there’s not much choice: they’re either Washingtons or Indians, a whitewashed, stubby lot, His country’s Father or His foster sons. The White House in a sad, unhealthy spot just higher than Potomac’s swampy brim, --they say the present President has got ague or fever in each backwoods limb.

(PPL 126)

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14 As a national figure, Eisenhower embodied the demobilized vigilance of the Cold War. Having served the United States as a decorated general in World War II, he resumed civilian clothing during his presidency and transmuted his martial approach into pragmatic policies (Roman 137). His “New Look” plan for combating Communism entailed a scaling back of ground forces and instances of armed engagement in favor of building up an arsenal of nuclear weapons and an enhanced Air Force; accordingly, he developed the country’s “weapons-delivery system” with additional planes and approximately thirty thousand men (Donaldson 76-77). Thus, Bishop’s lampooning of an Air Force band, specifically, in “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” as well as the critique she offers through Trollope’s persona suggests that she was targeting the foreign policy of Eisenhower’s regnant years. Implicating the visual politics of this Cold War, Bishop casts a stern “look” in both poems at Eisenhower’s “New Look” agenda, which aimed to maintain the United States’ martial supremacy as inexpensively as possible (77).

15 The twenty-eight lines of the poem, divided into two sonnet-like sections of fourteen lines, mirror each other with the following rhyme scheme: ABAB, ACAC, DEDE, FF (with different rhymes in each sonnet). While the first details Trollope’s ambulatory observations of the capital and of Pennsylvania Avenue, the second sonnet begins with Trollope’s sustained description of the Army’s cattle. Two whole quatrains are devoted to the discomfort of the bovine creatures, and Trollope cites their “effluvium” as the antagonist of his inflamed skin infection. Curiously, “effluvium” can signify a foul smell, a vapor, or the sickening aura of radiation, a linguistic hinge that subtly parallels the pairing of Trollope’s Civil War narrative with Bishop’s Cold War critique.
Trollope locates the capital city in a “sad, unhealthy spot” where unceremonious dampness complements the absurd monumentality of its statuary. Describing the statues’ homage to patriarchal colonialism with the casual deixis of a travel letter, Trollope addresses a conjured correspondent (or the journal’s verbal mirror) in phrases such as “As far as statues go,” and “--they say the present President…” (PPL 126). With this casual tone, he observes that the statues commemorate either George Washington as the symbolic “Father” or the forcibly colonized Native Americans as “His foster sons”: a sardonic characterization that gives the lie to this fable’s mendacity and, by extension, to the Cold War’s fetishization of wholesome family life as the bastion of civic virtue (PPL 126; Nelson 42-43, 74-75; May *Homeward Bound* 206). In Trollope’s persona, Bishop suggests that colonial genocide has been “whitewashed” by these statues’ representation of Native Americans as voluntarily adopted “foster sons,” a familial narrative of unity aggressively promulgated in the Cold War (PPL 126). Hence within coded terms and in a (colloquially) renegade sonnet, Bishop undercuts the triumphalist narrative of conquest and assimilation: one that inhered in American cultural life through the confusion of the

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16 Bishop resurfaces Trollope’s account in order to satirize the family romance of American colonialism. In the “Washington” chapter of *North America*, Trollope classifies the city’s statuary in two categories to which Bishop adds her own Freudian flavor and political leavening. His original text makes clear Bishop’s interpretative license:

Statuary at Washington runs too much on two subjects, which are repeated ad nauseam; one is that of a stiff, steady-looking, healthy, but ugly individual, with a square jaw and big jowl, which represents the great General; he does not prepossess the beholder, because he appears to be thoroughly ill-natured. And the other represents a melancholy, weak figure without any hair, but often covered with feathers, and is intended to typify the red Indian. The red Indian is generally supposed to be receiving comfort; but it is manifest that he never enjoys the comfort ministered to him. (Trollope 310)
Korean War, the paranoid ambiguities of the Cold War, and until the definitive debacle of Vietnam (Engelhardt 6).17

Roman conjectures that Bishop chose to use the sonnet form because it has “long [been] associated with conquest and political struggle as well as [with] courtly love and chivalric culture” (134). But Bishop might also have recognized that the sonnet’s typical emphasis on apostrophe--for intimate, aphoristic address of the beloved (or would-be beloved)--fittingly stages the “public secret” of a political confidence. Situating her Cold War critique within the Civil War experiences of a British novelist penning modified Shakespearean sonnets, Bishop plays with the masque and manufacture of national and literary identities. “Americanizing” the sonnet with casual phrasing, simple rhymes, and homely imagery, Bishop reinvents the form such that it approaches the similarly encoded, strategic apostrophe of explicitly epistolary poems such as “Letter to N. Y.” and “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” which similarly qualify the jingoist scripts of mid-century warfare.

In a voice of convincing incredulity, Bishop’s Trollope indicts the Cold War’s rhetoric of disease and “containment” in the poem’s secondary sonnet, which positions Trollope on the muddy road that is Pennsylvania Avenue. There, he encounters not the bivouacked soldiers, but the “hoof-pocked uncultivated” cattle maintained to feed the Army. Dedicating eight of the poem’s twenty-eight lines to the “starving” and neglected livestock, Bishop suggests that the soldiers’ bloodshed and carnivorous diet are part of a coextensive economy of suffering, one that blurs martial sacrifice with the domestic

17 Engelhardt asserts that a “‘tacit forgetfulness’” about the Civil War largely allowed Americans to understand the “American war story” as a tale of unmitigated triumph until the “ambush” of this narrative in August of 1945 with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (6-7; 30).
privations induced by war (PPL 126). Indeed, a description of the cattle occupies nearly a third of the poem:

There all around me in the ugly mud
--hoof-pocked, uncultivated--herds of cattle,
numberless, wond’ring steers and oxen, stood:
beef for the Army, after the next battle.
Their legs were caked the color of dried blood;
their horns were wreathed with fog. Poor, starving, dumb
or lowing creatures, never to chew the cud
or fill their maws again! . . .

(PPL 126)

Bishop’s Trollope turns his novelistic eye on the circumstances of the Army’s cattle, whose pitiful condition metonymically stands in for the bodies of the soldiers themselves, who likewise suffer “ugly mud,” “dried blood,” and the war’s appetite for slaughter. At the end of the poem, the ambient pestilence leaves its mark on Trollope too: he must seek the ministrations of a surgeon who lances an infection suggestively positioned on Trollope’s forehead. Their encounter and indirect discourse conclude the poem.

… Th’ effluvium
made that damned anthrax on my forehead throb.
I called a surgeon in, a young man, but,
with a sore throat himself, he did his job.
We talked about the War, and as he cut away, he croaked out, ‘Sir, I do declare everyone’s sick! The soldiers poison the air.’

(PPL 126)

It is a wounded surgeon who attends Trollope’s infection of anthrax, a bacterium that causes serious cutaneous or respiratory infections in humans. Hence by narrative degrees, Bishop intensifies her critique of Containment’s rhetoric of bodily infection: in Trollope’s pity for the Army’s badly kept cattle, in his own painful anthrax sore, and
finally in the surgeon’s condemnation of the soldiers as infectious agents themselves. Both the unknowing cattle and Trollope himself suffer the somatic distress that Bishop posits as part of the non-combatant experience of warfare. Spicing this colloquial journal entry with simple rhymes (throb/job, but/cut, declare/air), Bishop’s sonic patterning simultaneously reminds the reader of the poem’s existence as an aesthetic object: one reconstructed--or exhumed--from the narrating bodies in the body politic.

Given the implications of Bishop’s Cold War critique, it is not accidental that she delivers one of her sternest indictments of domestic militarization in the protective sartorial dress of a double sonnet; in an adjacent century; and, in the surgeon’s “croaked out” exclamation, through a persona doubly removed from her own. Indeed, “From Trollope’s Journal” evinces a letter-like schema that Bishop would increasingly render to her advantage. With scene-specific description, bits of indirect discourse, and self-interrupting, self-qualifying narration, the poem’s lapidary perceptions are directed toward the journal-writer’s audience of self and, with the journal’s anticipated publication, toward the audience of others interested in its piquant biographical narration. Hence the simultaneous address of self and “other” in the letter (or in the travel journal meant for publication) frames and enriches the intersubjective texture of the lyric, seeming to grant its anonymous tertiary reader inclusion in a privileged dialogue. As a literary artifact fictively drawn from the traffic of life, the epistolary poem (or travelogue

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18 Bishop removes the Union and Confederate distinctions in Trollope’s account to emphasize instead the connection between the bivouacked soldiers and civic infection. Yet Bishop’s narrative is clearly derived from Trollope’s own: “I was hardly out of the doctor’s hands while I was there [Washington D. C.], and he did not support my theory as to the goodness of the air. ‘It is poisoned by the soldiers,’ he said, ‘and everybody is ill.’ But then my doctor was perhaps a little tinged with southern proclivities” (319). In excluding Trollope’s concluding riposte to the doctor’s remark, Bishop downplays the Civil War context, giving his depiction of mobilized Washington trans-historical significance.
poem) foregrounds poesis as the reassembly of experience in language and as a missive
directed toward a putative audience.

Writing about the sociality and “interrogative attitude” of epistolary novels in the
eighteenth century, Elizabeth MacArthur asserts that epistolarity generally tends to
destabilize the narrative closure emphasized in “novelistic and critical traditions,” lending
itself to the kind of socio-political critique that appears in Trollope’s North America and
in many of Bishop’s epistolary and letter-like poems (14). Struck up between
correspondents--real or conjured--epistolary narratives enact the “nature and limits” of
voluntary exchange as they strive to maintain their participants’ curiosity and reciprocal
engagement (14). Hence generically, correspondence foregrounds the ongoing
displacement of narrative desire while other signature epistolary elements--including an
emphasis on “mediation, confidence, and [methods of] reading”--underscore the
complexities and “problems of communication” between the letter-writer and letter-
reader in their modes of address and redress, in their colluding (and competing)
inscriptions of self-and-other (MacArthur 19).

While miscommunication inevitably attends letters’ exchange, letter-poems (or
journal-poems) also emphasize the necessary vitality of the writer-reader circuitry in the
rendering of experience, however mediated or potentially mistaken. Hence Trollope’s
intended audience--beyond himself--is indicated in the ways in which he periodically
asserts himself as the orienting subject, as the narrating consciousness of the scene he
reports.

On Sunday afternoon I wandered--rather,
I floundered--out alone.

... A hunting man, I found
the Pennsylvania Avenue heavy ground…

…

…Th’ effluvium
made that damned anthrax on my forehead throb.

(PPL 126)

Like the letter, the travelogue is a symbolic fulcrum of literature’s capacity for relational exchange, for the “spoken-ness” of lives down to their biological signatures. Hence in Bishop’s poem, Trollope’s bewildered revulsion manifests as a somatic symptom. His anthrax infection functions as part of the poem’s critique, a “Chekhovian” detail that enlivens a civic crisis, namely: how military mobilization might become a domestic malaise in the republic (Perloff 476).

Epistolary and journal conceits recur in Bishop’s oeuvre and in those of her contemporaries, demonstrating a sustained generational interest in dialogical imagination, in constructions of the intersubjective, and in a provocative admixture of genres (and generic expectations). These concerns were apropos of the American mid-century: as the democratic polis simultaneously valorized and trespassed upon civic privacy, new and recuperated technologies would be required to establish the authenticity of the lyric voice (Nelson xx, 76; Gaddis 50).19 The letter, the psychoanalytic dialogue, and the journal entry all would inform and instruct the narrative biographical aesthetic of Bishop and her contemporaries, a coterie that combined generic literature with contemporary media to reinvent the lyric’s traditional monologic voice.

19 In Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America (2002), Deborah Nelson provides a convincing account of how the lyric poem was understood to demonstrate democratic privilege in the 1940s and 1950s, providing a rhetorical location “for the individual, private character of the citizen” (108). Nelson asserts that the Cold War privacy crisis invoked constructions of subjectivity more generally contested in modernity, including the conceit of an authentic and innately choate self.
“From Trollope’s Journal,” for example, captures the ardor of the diarist who clearly wishes to be read, to be appreciated for his incisive socio-political critique as well as for his own half-hidden complexities (19). Whether commenting on the health of the U. S. President who “has got / ague or fever in each backwoods limb” or sympathizing unabashedly with the Army’s cattle, whose legs are “caked the color of dried blood,” Trollope’s reportage consistently reflects the particularities of his own consciousness, his vocational ability to enliven a scene from a collage of telling details (PPL 126). Conflating Abraham Lincoln’s arthritis with the cattle’s muddy discomfort, Trollope likely registers Bishop’s own chagrin at a government that would situate its capital at the brim of a disease-ridden swamp, a climate that inflamed her own auto-immune disorders (Roman 11; Millier 219-20). Moreover, Trollope’s observant notice of his surgeon’s sore throat, the capital’s strange cycles of weather (“a frost, and then a thaw, / and then a frost”), and the statuary’s laughable caricatures (of the paternal colonist and the obediently colonized) allow the reader a peek behind the narrative arras: they show the literary imagination at work in a private and sociological vein, compiling a story from circumstantial particulars.

A significant corollary to Bishop’s adaptation of Trollope’s travelogue is her own travel essay, “A New Capital, Aldous Huxley, and Some Indians” (1958), in which she details her journey to Brazil’s newly ordained capital city in the company of Huxley and his wife (PPL 365). With lavish detail, Bishop relates their state-sponsored tour of the capital, which was written into legal existence by the Brazilian constitution of 1891 and coached toward actual physical existence by President Juscelino Kubitschek in the mid-1950s (PPL 366). Built at a remote inland location 600 miles from Rio de Janeiro,
Brasília seemed very unlikely to flourish in Bishop’s assessment—indeed, she found the embryonic city “remarkably unattractive and unpromising” (PPL 368). As in Trollope’s critique of Washington, Bishop records with mock-empiricism the gross discrepancies between the presidential palace (with its swimming pool’s decorative island) and the squalid living conditions of the laborers employed to construct such opulence. Insinuating a connection between the U. S. and Brazilian capitals in their decadence and colonial dependencies, Bishop quotes a lengthy passage of Trollope’s *North America*, wherein he asserts the unlikelihood of Washington becoming a hub of commerce and culture. Hence, Bishop invokes Trollope’s critique of the American capital in both her poem and in her travel essay, and in ways that frame her persistent questions about the power of human imagination—imperial or Orphic—to will a capital city or a literary work into existence.

In this vein, Bishop confesses her fascination with Huxley’s reaction to Brasília, in whose observations she finds a modern-day Trollope. She recounts, for example, the apt thrill of discussing Huxley’s notions of utopia (realized in his next novel, *Island*) while journeying back to Brasília after a visit to the Ulialapiti Indian tribe in the interior: “five thousand feet in the air, deserting one of the most primitive societies left on earth, [we were] rushing towards still another attempt at ‘the most modern city in the world’” (PPL 398; note 398.20, 942). Bishop’s travel essay, unpublished during her lifetime, reveals its likely debt to Trollope in its epistolary-like *confiance* with its reader; its critique of imperial hauteur and imbricated position vis-à-vis colonialism; and in its canny balance of contraries—sharp critique and modified praise, portraits of public spaces and private faces.
Seamus Heaney, among other critics, has praised this aspect of Bishop’s oeuvre, her “Cordelia-like… reticence” behind which dwells “‘a certain satisfactory
doughtiness’” and a desire to be privately understood, privately found out (“Counting to
One Hundred” 167). Heaney also identifies Bishop’s tendency to portray both the
“marvel” and the “endangering negative conditions” that attend living with a receptive,
historically responsive consciousness (172). While Bishop’s reticence governs the
narrative mien in “From Trollope’s Journal” and in her essay, her fealty to textural details
and to the motions of psychology is sufficiently “intense [such] that the detachment
almost evaporates,” permitting readers access to her faceted perspective (Heaney 172).
Since the letter and the travelogue foreground the inherent artifice of articulated
experience, it is not surprising that Bishop borrowed the stagecraft of these para-poetic
forms to inculcate a mediated immediacy in her lyric voice.

Lynn Keller and Langdon Hammer have both argued that Bishop’s trademark
passionate detachment is tonally honed in her letters (414; 164). Bishop’s careful
preservation of her journals and correspondence suggests that she too sensed their
importance as literary works and as complements to the ingenious mechanisms of her
poems. As the conjunction of Bishop’s acknowledged strengths, the epistolary poem
lends the reader a mixed-genre perspective on the aggregate particularities of her style,
including the ‘reticence’ that speaks with audible eloquence in the political clamor of
postwar America.

With an almost antiphonal pattern of rhetorical assertion and descriptive
qualification, apperceptions unfold within nuanced, Trollope-like narratives directed
toward specified or understood recipients. Poems of this category include her
unpublished letter-poems to her psychoanalyst Ruth Foster from the late-1940s, her epistolary and letter-like rendering of scenes from Washington, D. C., and her queer subversion of the heterosexual epistolary war poem in odes to Marianne Moore and Louise Crane. Lyric letters—and their narrative “cousins” in journal and notebook poems—are an apt form for tracing the Middle Generation’s increasingly complex poetic negotiations of public and private life or, to borrow from Bishop’s critique of Frank Bidart’s *Golden State* (1973), for limning “the poet’s personal history and History itself, literary Life and plain Life, at the same time” (PPL 734).

A Postcard from the “Attic”

As the confidence of America’s postwar triumphalism transmogrified into the paranoid surveillance of the Cold War, Bishop acquired an especially close view of this metamorphosis during her year as Poetry Consultant for the Library of Congress (1949-1950). Official photographs from the Library show Bishop wearing the proverbial gray suit of her era, sitting awkwardly by her desk in the Consultant’s office (Roman 111-113). In these photos, Bishop’s demure profile is overshadowed by the large picture window behind her desk, which features the Capitol Dome and the muscular masonry of...

20 Roman highlights a feature story on Bishop’s tenure as Poetry Consultant in the *Boston Post Magazine*, indicating the ways in which the journalist Sally Ellis depicts Bishop as a gentlewoman poet carrying out a domestic and Dickinson-like existence unthreatening to the status quo (95). Roman quotes from the first line of Ellis’ article: “—There are strange goings-on up on the attic floor of the Library of Congress!” (95).

21 My reading of “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” is indebted to the archival material and astute assessment of Bishop’s cultural position in Camille Roman’s *Elizabeth Bishop’s World War II-Cold War View* (2001); to Jonathan Ellis’s explication of the poem’s queer subtext in *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (2006); and to the thorough political and biographical analysis offered in Steven Gould Axelrod’s article, “Elizabeth Bishop and Containment Policy” (2003). Axelrod reads Bishop’s “View of the Capitol…” as an exemplar of Cold War poetry; my own interpretation concurs with and extends this claim, considering the poem’s longitudinal relation to Bishop’s earlier formulations of *poesis* and empire as forces akin in their imaginative specie (843).
a veranda banister (Roman 111-113). Bishop was gazing from this window--and at the Capitol’s imposing facade--as anxiety that America was losing the Cold War dramatically amplified homophobia and xenophobia: fears that formally registered in federal hearings and legislative policy (Davidson 274).  

Bishop’s official duties as Library Consultant were not altogether onerous. They entailed responding to research questions, organizing a schedule of poetry readings, visiting Ezra Pound in the psychiatric ward of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, and hosting distinguished visitors (Millier 219-26). But given Bishop’s temperament and hidden liabilities, serving as a figurehead for American poetry in an atmosphere of increased governmental scrutiny was taxing. As Fountain and Brazeau note in their oral biography, Bishop failed to give any public readings during her time as Consultant or to speak at luncheon meetings (115). Indeed, the mere prospect of organizing and attending a Board of Fellows meeting at the Library in January of 1950 sparked a two-day drinking spree (115).

As she fled the official spotlight, Bishop did not have a private residence in which to take refuge. Staying for part of that year at a Georgetown boarding house ironically named “Miss Looker’s,” she again had difficulty mitigating her loneliness, living among strangers, and maintaining some modicum of sobriety as she witnessed the Cold War’s persecution of difference (Fountain and Brazeau 114-15). In a candid letter to Lowell

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22 Bishop mentions the view from her office in a New Year’s letter to Robert Lowell, which begins with this remark: “I like it in here over the week-ends, so nice and silent, even the view looks improved somehow. It’s the only time I can think about my own WORK, too” (WA 93). Curiously, the poem inspired by this perspective, “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” was in fact the only “WORK” (the only poem) that Bishop managed to finish in 1950.

23 Apparently Bishop was without a monogamous companion during her year in Washington, but she may have sought several lesbian liaisons despite the evident political danger of doing so. Maia Wojciechowska Rodman, the wife of poet Selden Rodman, recounts meeting Bishop for “lunch or dinner”
several years later, Bishop characterized her tenure as Consultant rather bleakly, referring to “that dismal year in Washington… when I thought my days were numbered” (WA 143). Relative sobriety, the stability of a salubrious love, and the safety of an expatriate existence in Brazil eventually would curb the extremes of illness and despair that Bishop experienced in Washington that year, which seems to have been as personally difficult as it was instructive for her sensibility.

According to her biographer Brett Millier, Bishop was frequently absent from her workplace due to problems with asthma, bronchitis, bouts of influenza, poison ivy, and periodic drinking binges (220, 223-25). But her absenteeism—her status as a “nearly disabled, reclusive employee”—might also reflect Bishop’s avoidance of the hubbub around events such as the U. S. Senate Appropriations Committee’s hearings in 1950 about the government’s employment of homosexuals and “‘other sex perverts’” (Roman 11; Corber “All About the Subversive” 39).

During these hearings, the chief officer from the District of Columbia vice squad publicly stated that “thousands” of federal employees had been arrested on “morals charges,” and that many of them had been apprehended in the district directly across from the White House in Lafayette Square, “a notorious cruising venue” (Corber 39). Senator Kenneth Wherry, a gadfly in the Senate’s investigation, announced that he was personally

in New York City’s Washington Square in 1950 and receiving a phone call later that night from Bishop, who asked Rodman to come to her hotel room because she was feeling ill (Fountain and Brazeau 118). After Rodman arrived, Bishop propositioned her and subsequently confessed to being “in a horrible state of mind” (118). Rodman also reports that Bishop telephoned the following day with an apology: “She said she was sorry she had made a pass at me, which surprised me tremendously, because I thought she was way too drunk to remember. … I thought that that scene in the hotel was one of many nights like that” (119). If Rodman’s intuition was correct, Bishop might have been in the habit of approaching potential lovers after she had been drinking heavily.
on “‘a crusade to harry every last pervert from the Federal Government Services’” (qtd. in Faderman 143). 24 Hence while Bishop occupied a site of privilege—her Consultancy was as much an honor as a source of employ—she was also a closeted lesbian with ties to leftist literary magazines in danger of losing her job. At any moment her less than wholly discreet liaisons with other women might have been exposed, a circumstance that likely would have resulted in her being identified as a potential security risk and removed from her position. Ventriloquism, displaced eroticism, and narrative personae understandably proliferated in Bishop’s writing at this time, registering the anxiety that she transmuted into the doubled voices of the epistolary and letter-like poems of her middle period (1947-1965). 25

Bishop’s barely tenable position—and the necessity that she keep her sexual predilections hidden—was part of her generation’s Cold War experience. In many ways, the textual codes of her mid-century poems reflect her awareness of the literary

24 Three years earlier, President Truman’s Executive Order 9855 had authorized the dismissal of any employee in the federal government found belonging to a Communist, Fascist or another subversive group (Donaldson 41). As Cary Donaldson describes, the Attorney General’s Office, newly authorized by Truman’s order, proceeded to scrutinize the professional conduct and private lives of three million federal employees under this act, firing 1,210 workers and prompting the resignation of 6,000 others (41). Donaldson reports: “Everything was examined [in these investigations], from memberships in organizations to sexual habits and orientation, personal associations, and political affiliations past and present” (41). One could become the target of suspicion by innuendo or by casual association with an organization thought to be subversive. Hence, the Senate hearings of 1950 were part of a broader, sustained attempt to remove supposedly errant individuals from government positions.

25 Institutionalized homophobia was only one likely cause of Bishop’s worries in 1949-1950. Axelrod observes that Bishop’s taking large amounts of adrenaline and ephedrine to control her asthma that year probably exacerbated the reactive sensitivities of the temperamentally shy poet (“Elizabeth Bishop and Containment” 844). Joseph Frank, a biographer who befriended Bishop during her stay in Washington, recounts Bishop’s air of generalized nervousness: “Elizabeth certainly had lots of anxieties. I’m not so sure they were connected specifically with the job or her official post at the Library of Congress. [She was] very, very much [an anxious woman]. … Things would slip out in conversation…. I always had the feeling that she didn’t want to talk about anything personal” (Fountain and Brazeau 116). While Frank surmises that Bishop’s circumvention of “anything personal” was linked to residual childhood woes, Bishop had other reasons to remain ambiguous about her private life.
establishment’s conservatism and evidence the disguise required of homosexuals desiring
the attainments available to the educated classes (Faderman 145). Virtually any hint of
sexual suspiciousness could be damning: in Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, Lillian
Faderman reports that between 1947-1950 about five thousand men and women were
dismissed from military or government service after being accused of homosexuality,
which was thought to make an employee more vulnerable to blackmail and the wiles of
foreign espionage (140). Robert Corber also reports that more suspected homosexuals
were removed from government office in the 1950s than were fledged members of the
Communist party (In the Name... 8). In essence, it was more dangerous to be covertly
gay in Cold War Washington than it was to be a Communist believer.

In a now predictable inversion of logic, the U. S. defense against Communism—a
mutable target nearly as vague as a war on “terrorism”—resulted in this domestic
persecution of difference, and a neo-Calvinist desire to discipline and punish the enemy
from within. Thus in a highly personal way, Bishop was made to live the operative
paradox of Containment policy, which included the trespass and codification of civic
privacy, the very prerogative thought to distinguish American citizens from their
Communist counterparts (Nelson 108). Privy to the mechanisms of political theater in
Washington, Bishop became newly conscious of a strident gap between what was “being
said in words” and “said in things”: a contradictory zone in which the poet could—by her

26 Nelson provides an epic catalogue of the theaters and zones in which privacy and its trespass were
dramatized in the 1950s and 1960s: “journalistic exposes, television programs, law review articles, mass-
market magazines, films, Supreme Court decisions, poems, novels, autobiographies, corporate hiring
manuals, scientific protocols, government studies, and congressional hearings—and in response to an
extraordinary range of stimuli—satellites, surveillance equipment... job testing, psychological surveys,
consumer polls, educational records, databases and computers in general, psychoanalysis, suburbs,
television, celebrity profiles, news reporting and more” (9).
own formulation—perform an ameliorative “pretense,” linguistically apprehending the inherent threat and bewilderment of her circumstances (EAP 183).27

In “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” Bishop revisits her youthful conjunction of poetic license and imperial display, setting aesthetic force against the totalizing music of warfare. Bishop’s poem title invokes the instructive photographs and ready-made narratives of commercial postcards. According to Roman, Bishop did send this poem to her married friends, the painter Loren MacIver and the literary critic Lloyd Frankenberg, after sending them several standard postcards “depicting the Washington Monument, the cherry trees, and other national sightseeing spots” (Roman 121; Millier 141). Perhaps tellingly, Bishop waited until her term at the Library was completed and until she had left Washington for the Yaddo Writers’ Colony before sending them this poem-postcard in November of 1950, enclosed inside of a more traditional letter (OA 210).28

Five years later, after “View of the Capitol…” had appeared in print, Bishop would coyly acknowledge its subversive qualities in a letter to two other friends, Joseph and U. T. Summers, whom she had met through MacIver and Frankenberg (Millier 192). Bishop wrote to them from her expatriate post in Brazil: “Well, the letter cheered me

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27 In a much-quoted letter to Pearl Kazin in September of 1949, Bishop describes her new environment as a surreal locale of hyperbolic architecture: “Washington doesn’t seem quite real. All those piles of granite and marble, like an inflated copy of another capital city someplace else (the Forum?). Even the Lincoln Memorial, which I went to see, affected me that way” (OA 194). A few months later, Bishop was still searching for a fitting analogy for the city’s climate and honorific landscape. To Lowell she wrote in December: “Everything has suddenly become very hectic and unpleasant here, with holly ground into the linoleum and the page boys behaving worse than usual. Also it’s so DAMP. Washington winter weather is rather like Paris, I find, without the compensations. … I seem to be losing my grip on poetry completely” (OA 196).

28 Bishop off-handedly introduces her poem at the end of her letter: “Well I guess I’ll wind up this spiel by sending you a little number I turned out the other day [“View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress”]. If I could only get on with those wretched sonnets” (OA 210). “From Trollope’s Journal” may have been a part of the sonnet sequence Bishop refers to in her letters from Washington and Yaddo.
enormously, made me very happy, in fact, and I am so surprised that the ‘View of the Capitol’ means something. I was really quite unaware of it, until you pointed it out to me! Now I see it does. Please don’t tell anyone this!” (OA 307). Joseph Summers was a critic and professor of literature who shared Bishop’s love of George Herbert, and the Summers’ opinion of her work appears genuinely to have mattered to her (Millier 192). Bishop, however, seems less than sincere in her claim that she was “unaware” of her poem’s import: what the Summers presumably had identified in their previous letter, a subtext she asks them not to share. Bishop’s playful exclamations evoke an air of mock-emergency in this epistolary confidence. And she protests suspiciously much about the poem’s “meaning” being unclear at the time of its composition. This same attitudinal stance—a claim to ignorant, apolitical observation—is also the rhetorical disguise in Bishop’s postcard-poem, one that belies her sharply nuanced perspective.

Invoking the innocence of a tourist’s impressions in her title, “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” Bishop inscribes her own counter-surveillance of congressional activity, asserting the power of the epistolary observer in a narrative that extends and intensifies Trollope’s sardonic reportage. As Roman’s archival exegesis has revealed, the version of “View…” that Bishop sent to her friends was a sanitized and discursive rendition of what began, in her notebook, as a crude sketch: a meditation on the appetitive economy of human desire, a perspective elsewhere represented in the half-neglected cattle of “From Trollope’s Journal” and the sustaining (but badly abused) hens in “Roosters.” Roman has culled from Bishop’s January, 1950 notebook entries the seedling fragment of what became “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” a notation striking in its obscenity.
Bishop conflates the military-industrial complex, figured here in the Congressional dome, with a maternal breast that succors the nation’s sweet-tooth. But an “elaborate sugar-tit” is at best a primitive pacifier: a means of placating a baby absented from its mother. Given to a mewling infant as a substitute for mother’s milk, as a temporary means of abating cries of hunger or pain, a “sugar-tit” is as unhealthy as it is solacing. Here Bishop’s use of “elaborate” connotes both the architectural complexity of the Congressional building and, perhaps, the bureaucratic armatures needed to support imperial ventures.\(^\text{30}\)

As Roman observes, Bishop’s “Dome” draws the insect-like “planes” toward it with its saccharine enticement, which might symbolize the relative ease of money-

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\(^{29}\) Items from Bishop’s archive at the Vassar College Library are hereafter cited as “VSC.”

\(^{30}\) Bishop’s sardonic sketch echoes Trollope’s account of Civil War Washington. To illustrate the popular apathy he perceives in relation to the war, he offers this bit of indirect discourse, meant to typify sentiments about the conflict and its commercial underpinnings:

‘They [the residents of the capital] were mainly indifferent, but with that sort of indifference which arises from a break down of faith in anything. ‘There was the army! Yes, the army! But what an army! Nobody obeyed anybody! Nobody did anything! … There were, perhaps, two hundred thousand men assembled round Washington… the contractors, in the meantime, were becoming rich. And then as to the Government! Who trusted it?’ (326)

Trollope’s commentary anticipates many twentieth-century plaints about imperial capitalism and its discontents. And his mimicry of the *vox populi* accords with Bishop’s depiction of the suspect business of warfare.
making in wartime, the comforts of mass-market capitalism, or the candied rhetoric of American exceptionalism (124).\textsuperscript{31} A “sugar-tit,” however, might also prove dangerous—stifling a healthy democracy’s dissenting voices with its distracting sweetness. Titillated (but not nurtured), Bishop’s “nation” is addicted to a food source artificially supplied by the government itself. Hence, she intimates the juvenile dependency of “Washington airplanes” and, by extension, the American citizenry on the commercial invigoration of the war. Jonathan Ellis, commenting on this fragment, notes a similarity between Bishop’s gloss of “sugar-coated nationalism” and Pauline Kael’s critique of the recipe-driven Hollywood cinema of the 1960s, which similarly infantilized its audience and, according to Kael, dulled the critical edges of national discourse (136).

If Bishop’s stone “sugar-tit” had been allowed to remain in the poem’s published version, it would have appeared in \textit{A Cold Spring} between “At the Fishhouses” and “Insomnia,” poems that invoke the “rocky breasts” of human knowledge and a verboten love in a “world inverted” (PPL 50-54). Thus what would have been a consistent queer subtext shared among three adjacent poems became instead a subterranean theme, tacitly discernible. In Bishop’s published version of “View of the Capitol…,” she uses a series of oblique, multi-valenced images to complicate heteronormative binaries and the monomodal affect of patriotism, ingredients of wartime rhetoric and Cold War policy against which she rebelled.

\textsuperscript{31} In his aptly titled history \textit{A Troubled Feast, American Society Since 1945}, William Leuchtenburg limns American postwar prosperity with a few startling statistics. These include that by the mid-1950s, Americans on average had seen a fifty percent increase in their salaries from 1929 even with adjustments for tax increases (6). Moreover, while the American population accounted for just six percent of the world population in 1955, Americans were using over a third of the world’s total services and manufactured goods (37-38). Finally, a significant portion of this consumption (about one-seventh of the gross national product in 1950) was spent on leisure goods and entertainment; Bishop’s poem-fragment, with its possible link to the addictive “sugar” of mass-market consumption, associates national appetite with the prosperous industries of war (59).
It seems relevant that while Bishop sent MacIver and Frankenberg several commercial postcards from Washington, she waited until after she finished her consultancy in October of 1950 to send them this postcard of her own design (Roman 121). Circumstantially, the full-length poem can be read as Bishop’s veiled critique of Cold War fanfare and as her own farewell to the capital city with its grand-scale martial displays and symbolic performances of power. The postcard-poem begins mysteriously in medias res and immediately plays upon the postural politics of surveillance.

Moving from left to left, the light
Is heavy on the Dome, and coarse.
One small lunette turns it aside
and blankly stares off to the side
like a big white old wall-eyed horse.

(PPL 52-53)

In this published version, Bishop removes the stony breast of meretricious nurture and replaces it with a micro-vignette dramatizing an accusatory gaze.32 Hence the poem begins cinematically, in motion, as a “heavy” and “coarse” searchlight—or another focused beam—moves across the surface of the Congressional dome, as if it were looking for blunt anomalies along its curved plane (PPL 52). Cleverly, Bishop blurs the subject-object dynamics in this illumination: it is unclear who—or what—is the object of the light’s survey. “Moving from left to left,” the light source scours the Dome’s port side, or

32 Trollope’s account of Washington includes a passage on the architectural physiognomy of the Capitol Dome, one of the few buildings to which he gives his qualified approval. Yet, like Bishop, Trollope finds fault with the Dome’s “view,” which to him seems to look upon nothing at all (310-311). Indeed the titling circumstance of Bishop’s poem might have been cued by Trollope’s critique. In North America, he writes:

The architect who designed it must have had skill, taste, and nobility of conception; but even this was spoilt, or rather wasted, by the fact that the front is made to look upon nothing, and is turned from the city. (Trollope 310)
the portion of Congress directing its vision at the political “left,” a zone associated with liberalism and Communist sympathies. The Dome itself, meanwhile, operates like an ineffective Orwellian eyeball, using a delicate “lunette” to refract the glare of the light directed at its facade.33

Steven Axelrod, in an astute parsing of these lines, plausibly interprets the “small lunette” to be one of the arch-shaped windows along the front of the Dome (“Elizabeth Bishop and Containment” 851). The Dome’s distinctive half-moon apertures certainly seem the likely literal referent. But Bishop’s “small lunette” has a range of additional connotations, given the word’s alternate definitions as a two-faced (and double-flanked) military fortification, the blinker for a horse, a pair of spectacles, or a flattened watch-glass (OED). Whether turning aside the searchlight’s glare with a horse’s blinker or a protective watch covering, Bishop’s “lunette” suggests a delicate look rather than a penetrating stare. Moreover, as a fortification, a “lunette” is walled on both sides, a sense that amplifies the Dome’s “wall-eyed” vision as a defensive stance—a perspective maintained in order to deny an acknowledgement of critics or enemies.34

33 The Capitol Dome remained an iconic image for Bishop after she moved from Washington. In a letter to Kit and Isle Barker from Brazil in October of 1952, she irreverently compares the Dome to a makeshift Brazilian bird cage: “They [Bishop’s new pet birds] came in a big old homemade cage rather like the Dome of the Capitol in Washington… but that was just to say that my head is full of cages of one sort or another because I am having some made now” (Princeton University Library Special Collections, Box 1 Folder 1). Bishop might have perceived the Capitol Dome as a place of imprisonment well before requisitioning her own bird-cages.

34 Elsewhere in Bishop’s poetry, the “left” appears to animate a code for lesbian desire. In “Insomnia,” for instance, the narrator pines for an unrequited love that could only be possible in a “world inverted / where left is always right / where the shadows are really the body…” (PPL 54). Axelrod cites these same lines in reading Bishop’s “left” as a coy re-appropriation (or renaming) of “rightward” political action in “View of the Capitol…,” whereas I read the poem’s first line as a more literal depiction of Cold War surveillance—a movement of searchlights across the left side of the political spectrum, which included government employees in its scrutiny (851).
Bishop’s image potentially belittles the seemingly omniscient gaze of congressional investigators such as Senator Joseph McCarthy, who inaugurated his five-year vigilante investigation of alleged Communists during Bishop’s term of office. Narrowly “Moving from left to left,” McCarthy victimized “homosexuals, liberals, intellectuals, and cultural producers as a whole” (Roman 124). His tribunal, carried out with an abundance of televised braggadocio and a criminally scant amount evidence, did not convict any of its targets in the end, although McCarthy seriously damaged many people’s reputations by accusing them of Communist beliefs or activities (Engelhardt 122). Bishop was privy to McCarthy’s witch hunt as it got underway in February of 1950, and she would express her relief in being removed from its scaffold drama after she established residence in Brazil in 1951 (Donaldson 40-41).

In Bishop’s poem, the Congressional Dome appears unable to perceive anything outside its narrowed field of perception, staring “off to the side / like a big white old wall-eyed horse.” The asyndeton in this last clause grammatically invokes an impermeable wall with its masonry of modifiers (“big white old wall-eyed”), but Bishop implicates and undercuts another national icon in these lines: namely, the white horse pictorially associated with George Washington’s martial leadership of the Revolutionary Army. In Bishop’s rendering of the Federalist *equus*, the Congressional Dome is a myopic battlefield stallion no longer equipped with the requisite valor or vigilance. Hence Bishop’s description of the Dome’s physiognomy intimates the ineptitude of stereotypical congressmen, who were themselves (in the 1950s) typically “big white [and] old.” Prohibitively “wall-eyed,” the old Federalist horse—and the aging, ideologically
blinkered congressmen—cannot be entrusted to lead the nation into war or to be attentive to dangers outside of an occluded purview.  

As in the compressed, disjunctive narration expected of a postcard’s message, Bishop’s poem abruptly switches its focus in the second stanza to “the Air Force Band,” a troupe of uniform bravado. Bishop’s analogy, years earlier, between an empire’s convincing displays of martial power and the poet’s “verbal pretense”—or provisional extension of language into historically new terrain—is an operative subtext in this section of the poem, wherein Bishop appears to question the legitimating mechanisms of empire, specifically its “force” of air.

On the east steps the Air Force Band
in uniforms of Air Force blue
is playing hard and loud, but—queer—the music doesn’t quite come through.

It comes in snatches, dim then keen,
then mute, and yet there is no breeze.
The giant trees stand in between.
I think the trees must intervene…

(PPL 53)

As in “From Trollope’s Journal,” seemingly incidental details insinuate a secondary layer of meaning, one that belies the child-like rhymes of “blue” and “through,” “keen,” “between,” and “intervene.” Axelrod has delineated how Bishop reinvents “intervene,” a predicate used to describe the United States’ realpolitik of alliances in Eastern Europe

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35 Bishop’s notebooks contain many conjectures about sense perception and the ways in which the unconscious might shape apprehension. In her Key West notebook, Bishop rues her own psyche’s distortions, its pattern of self-defensive redirection: “Misinterpretation of everything real I’ve seen = probably not due so much to ignorance as to deliberate, though unconscious, fortification” (VCSC Folder 75.4, 10; emphasis added).
and action in Korea, in order to insinuate “aesthetic resistance to power” (853). Hence the “giant trees” that “intervene” are lauded as “Giant shades,” as if the hallowed dead or arboreal nature itself has cancelled out the military’s music. Similarly, the phrase “east steps” intimates a secondary register. Since “West” and “East” were common referents in Cold War rhetoric, single words that invoked global axes of competing ideologies, Bishop lends the Air Force Band a slight accent of totalitarianism by placing them on the Capitol’s “east” staircase: another fillip in the poem’s pastiche of directional innuendoes (Nadel 16-17; PPL 53).³⁶

Like the Congressional Dome wielding its effete “small lunette,” the Air Force Band’s appearance runs counter to the military’s claims to virile competence and controlled force. Although the band appears nattily dressed in brand—“in uniforms of Air Force Blue”—and though it plays “hard and loud,” it suffers some nebulous interruptus whereby it cannot convey meaningful sound. Bishop’s postcard-writer notes this phenomenon with a Trollope-like air of detached bemusement: “hard and loud, but—queer—/ the music doesn’t quite come through” (PPL 53). Typographically, in placing “queer” at the end of the line and between dashes, Bishop stresses the isolating oddity of this phenomenon: the double dashes enact both auditory blankness and the listener’s expectant durée.

In his literary taxonomy of “queer,” Eric Haralson dates its first usage in published fiction to explicitly denote homosexuality to Gore Vidal’s “Pages from an

³⁶ In his narrative, Trollope approves of the Capitol’s east-facing façade and eastern staircase, which were completed after the Battle of 1812. “It [the Capitol building] was then finished according to the original plan, with a fine portico and well-proportioned pediment above it,—looking to the east. The outer flight of steps, leading up to this from the eastern approach, is good and in excellent taste” (309).
Abandoned Journal” (1956). But throughout late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century modernist fiction, “queer” accumulated homosexual innuendos and was used to connote a general “internal heterogeneity—perhaps a character who was a ‘queer mixture’ of contraries” (5). “Queer,” in this secondary sense, is the governing axiom of Bishop’s poem, which strategically recombines stereotypes with their opposites, contesting the paternal omniscience of the governmental gaze, the supportive maternalism (or heavy censorship) of nature, the masculine competence of the military, and the mature valor of warfare. Thus, Bishop’s stanzas consistently register the return of the repressed: each inflects an undertone of “otherness” within the Cold War imaginary, within its stiff scripts of normality.

In the final two stanzas, Bishop’s parody intensifies in a playful but ultimately lethal critique of imperial energies as a set of simplistic and dangerous drives—a violence that threatens the “Great shades” of the natural landscape and an historical continuity with the past: with the illustrious “shades” of prior centuries. Mimicking the intuitive logic of Trollope’s conjectures, Bishop’s postcard-writer surmises that it is the trees on the Washington Mall that have acted as absorbing devices, disarming the music of its peri-performative blare.

catching the music in their leaves
like gold-dust, till each big leaf sags.
Unceasingly the little flags
feed their limpid stripes into the air,
and the band’s efforts vanish there.

Great shades, edge over,
give the music room.
The gathered brasses want to go

*boom-boom*.

(PPL 53)

Jejune in its syllabic double-punch, Bishop’s postcard-poem concludes with language alternately classical (“Great shades”), colloquial (“The gathered brasses”), and cartoonish (“*boom-boom*”). With the magical realism germane to fairytales, the postcard-writer surmises that the “giant trees” and “Great shades” are “catching the music in their leaves,” snuffing out the band’s sonic trajectory.37

This passage is striking similar to the child-narrator’s meditation on the mystical mechanisms of postcards in Bishop’s “In the Village,” a story she completed in 1952 (Millier 252). In both instances, postcards broker a conjunction between the concrete and the surreal; the signification of verbal pictures and of pictorial words; the parish of the epistemological self and a half-knowable world; and the intuitions of childhood with the rational historicity of adult perception. Hence, in “View of the Capitol…” the epistolary narrator claims—with poetic impunity—that the trees’ leaves imitate the flaccid music they have absorbed, behaving “like flags / that feed their limp stripes into the air” (PPL 53). Similarly in “In the Village,” the narrator claims—with the obsessively recursive remembrance of a trauma victim—that the glittery captions on her mother’s postcards, “[the]words written in their skies,” inflect every aspect of their tableaux (PPL 102).

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37 Roman interprets the poem’s “‘fairy-tale’” tenor as according with the “vulnerability of a revered pastoral world of innocence” that stands to be undone by military violence (120-21). But I argue that Bishop’s tone is another instance of her ingenious disingenuousness since nature itself is a variegated category in this poem, a heterogeneous agent irreducible to the pastoral. Attuned to castes of discernment in her audience, Bishop likely used a child-like voice to disguise the ultimate import of her critique, which is both hieratic and condemnatory (120-21).
These shining inscrutable words are said to be “raining down” on the postcards’ “little people” much the way the mother’s airborne scream of madness, which begins and concludes the story, informs and bewilders nearly every aspect of the child-narrator’s reality (PPL 102). In both Bishop’s poem and memoir, postcards emphasize the scene-making effects of deictic words or proscriptive music, the “sent” flecks of language that succeed or fail to signify upon delivery.

“View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” is a darkly magical postcard of multiple delivery systems. In its stanzaic progression, mimesis becomes a redoubled mirror that turns (or renders alter idem) that which is received: thus, nature freely imitates artifice, image enacts music, patriotic flaccidity manifests in pathetic fallacy. As a paradigm of the interplay between art and affect, “View of the Capitol…” could be understood as a petite ars poetica, one in which Bishop underscores the intersubjective nature of the lyric. Since the music of the Air Force Band depends upon the

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38 In “In the Village,” the child-narrator studies her mother’s postcard collection, which precedes the mother (along with the delivery of her clothes and other belongings) in her final visit home from the asylum. Proleptic artifacts, the postcards figuratively testify to the mother’s shuttling journeys between sanity and madness, institutionalized life and the bucolic charm of the Nova Scotian village. To the child-narrator, these postcards seem to come “from another world,” a world of mysterious inscription and consequence (PPL 102):

Some cards, instead of lines around the buildings, have words written in the skies with the same stuff, crumbling, dazzling and crumbling, raining down a little on little people who sometimes stand about below: pictures of Pentecost? What are the messages? I cannot tell, but they are falling on those specks of hands, on the hats, on the toes, of their shoes, in their paths—wherever it is they are.

(PPL 102)

The postcard’s skyline captions are like the mother’s airborne scream, which appears in the story’s first line as a disembodied aurality: “A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies….” (PPL 99).

39 As an epistolary poem, “View of the Capitol…” reflects the context of the original ars poetica: a statement of poetics that Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) inscribed in a letter to his friends, members of
conscription of feeling listeners to maintain its melody, to complete its affective circuitry, an immovable entity—such as post-Romantic nature, or the longer score of history—can “intervene,” canceling out the song’s didactic, phathic existence. The music of the “Air Force” (a descriptor Bishop repeats twice in the second stanza) cannot remain air-borne because it has failed to enlist a recipient of adequate sympathies. Given the venue of the band’s performance—an open-air, well trafficked part of Washington—Bishop’s scene also might depict the populist deafness that met politicians’ efforts to rally support for the Korean War, a conflict that garnered no more than thirty percent of the nation’s approval in its three-year duration (Donaldson 77).

Bishop prized music of various sorts throughout her life, stylizing poems after blues songs and transporting an unwieldy clavichord—her own instrument of study—to various locales. In one of her notebooks from the mid-1930s, Bishop has copied out in a deliberate hand Walter Pater’s adage: “All art tends to the condition of music” (VSC Folder 74.5, 45). Pater’s maxim, in its fin de siècle moment, echoed the acoustical fetish of modernist decadence. Yet it also could serve as an epigraph to virtually any of Bishop’s collections, as she maintained the modernists’ fealty to the piquancy of the senses and to the subjective correlatives of inner life. In a Key West notebook likely dating from the 1940s, Bishop appears to function as her own analyst, noting her inability to hear the soundtrack of troubling memories.

the Piso family. One of Bishop’s post-collegiate notebooks contains notes on this famous letter, a text she was equipped to read in the original (VSC Folder “Reading Notes, 1934-1935,” 78).
No matter how unpleasant the days in certain periods of the past were, it’s infuriating not to be able to hurry them back— but to find this the imitation, the pain, the brass band [or ‘bars’],— have all gone completely—and left then a silent film ‘high and dry,’ and far away.

(VSC Folder 75.4, 113)

It is difficult to discern, given Bishop’s punctuation of this note’s internal clauses, the exact syntax of her thoughts, but the cause of her frustration is clear: she is chagrined to find that she cannot recall distinct moments from the past with the vividness of their “imitation, the pain, the brass band” (VSC Folder 75.4, 113). Her memory of a certain “unpleasant” period has lost its aesthetic frequency, the “pain” of its music, the quality that would lend itself to “imitation.” If poetry approaches some maximally generative conjunction of the semantic and the sonic— inflecting the “surplus sense” of language— then the sudden lack of sound in Bishop’s recollection signals a flattening of its piquancy, a loss of the auditory excess that enlivens poetic potential (Blasing 28).

Bishop’s handwriting is difficult to read in this portion of her notebook, but the “brass band” in this passage might be a telling analogue to the “gathered brasses” that threaten to displace the “Great shades” of Washington, D. C. in “View of the Capitol…” Denied the soundtrack of memory (and, perhaps, its Nova Scotian scream or its military brasses), Bishop is left with a “silent film” of remembrance, a lack that renders it “‘high and dry,’ and far away” (VSC Folder 75.4, 113). This cinematic metaphor recalls the opening montage of Bishop’s postcard-poem in which she describes the panning motion of a searchlight and, subsequently, the Air Force band’s sudden “queer” loss of sound.

Hence within her notebook’s letter-to-the-self and in her postcard-poem, Bishop uses epistolary modes to explore a specific consequence: namely, what occurs when
Pater’s “condition of music” is removed by the psyche’s self-protective censorship or by the lyric’s interruption of nationalist rhythms. In both instances, when absented from *melopoeia*, the “art” of memory and the “art” of imperialism lose an irrecoverable portion of their affective powers. Thus in Bishop’s half-private epistolary argot, to remove the music is to rescind the possibility of “imitation,” that zone of provocative modulation she had early identified with the mechanics of empire and the machinations of poetic language: “arts” allied for the young poet in the sheer hubris of their imagination.

“One Art,” the title of Bishop’s famous late-life *summa*, might imply that for the matured poet, art’s ultimate task was lodged in the work of productive mourning, of domesticating life’s happenstance devastations within structures of apprehension, within the “little houses” of the villanelle or sestina. But “art” is not an endeavor wholly consigned to the elegiac in Bishop’s oeuvre. On the contrary, in Bishop’s mid-century poems and letters the term signifies a broader array of activities including, ironically, participation in the destructive “art” of war: the ultimate, concretized expression of empire.

Consider a passage from Bishop’s letter to Robert Lowell on August 23, 1950, in which Bishop continues their epistolary dialogue about a “Defense of Poetry” conference

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40 Bishop had good reason to associate the animating music of warfare with devastation. In reviewing the Nova Scotia Hospital medical file kept on Bishop’s mother, the Canadian scholar Sandra Barry has ascertained that Gertrude Bulmer Bishop suffered her last consequential bout of insanity when she became convinced that she had caused the Great War and would be made to die for her country (97). Barry notes that Gertrude voluntarily committed herself to the Nova Scotia Hospital in June of 1916, a few months after a major recruitment of troops in all six of Nova Scotia’s eastern counties, a campaign that may have intensified Gertrude’s illness (96-97). Hence in turning down (or off) the volume of the Air Force Band in her poem, Bishop imposes a stop-gap against wartime hysteria, against the catalyzing music that may have claimed a casualty in the psychiatric incarceration of her mother. Absconing with the sound of the “gathered brasses,” Bishop replaces the military’s music with her own monition about the reductive hyperbole of such songs or gun-fire: the “boom-boom” that could destroy, in the new atomic age, the continuum of historicity or—with the thrall of ordinary bombs’ two-beat music—the subtler cadences of private subjectivity itself.
that Lowell had attended the week before at Harvard University. Bishop’s letter is typical in its air of propinquity, its sardonic humor, and its crucial parenthetical aside—here, about a wholly new “art” of the Cold War era, as practiced by her friend (and possible lover) Jane Dewey.

I must write to Marianne [Moore] immediately to get her version of the Harvard [Defense of Poetry] Conference, & to hear how she enjoyed ‘Pakistan’s Leading Poet’ (so he said, but I guess it was true), whom I sent on to her in despair. He wanted to meet ‘poets,’ while here he called on [Ezra] Pound but seemed to retain a very confused impression of his visit, since Pound talked about nothing but Confucius…

From here I am going (the 15th, I hope) to visit Jane Dewey for about 10 days, then a week at the new Weston in N. Y., then to Yaddo October 1st. I’m going to try to get passage—probably to France—around the end of January. (I think I’ve told you about Jane D. —the physicist daughter of John D.? At present she is in charge of ‘Terminal Ballistics’ at the Aberdeen proving ground, & when I stay at her farm, on week-days, the rural scene shakes slightly once in a while as Jane practices her art about 15 miles away, & then there is a faint ‘boom.’ It seems there are three kinds of ballistics: Internal, External & Terminal.)

(WA 107-08)

With a slightness of touch—an almost haptic irony—Bishop intimates to Lowell her redoubled perspective on empire. In the first portion of her letter, Bishop glosses the “Defense of Poetry” symposium, an event that convened two dozen prestigious literati (including John Crowe Ransom, Kenneth Burke, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Mary McCarthy) for four days of speeches at Harvard University about the role of the poet-citizen in the atomic age. Predictably, the crowd-shy Bishop had not attended, though given her status as Poetry Consultant and her stature in American letters she might have been expected to appear.41

41 The “Defense of Poetry” conference transcript, hitherto cited as “DP.” The Houghton Library at Harvard University owns the original transcript and an audio recording of the conference; a copy of the
Stating her intention to “immediately” seek Marianne Moore’s account of the conference, Bishop plays upon the gathering’s air of exigency. As the unpublished transcript denotes, the “Defense of Poetry” symposium was broadcast on the radio, announced in the *New York Times*, and subsequently featured in the *Harvard Advocate*, the *New York Review of Books, Partisan Review, America*, and *Poetry* (DP front matter). While Bishop’s letter expresses her curiosity about this national conference, her subtext undercuts any sincere alliance of the *polis* and *poesis*. Telling Lowell that she had sent “‘Pakistan’s Leading Poet’” to meet Moore at this “Defense of Poetry” symposium, Bishop conveys her bemused suspicion of national appellations although her position at the Library of Congress ostensibly lent her the epithet of America’s “Leading Poet,” too.

Bishop reasserts her distrust of overtly politicized poetry—and national poetry stars—by invoking the specter of Ezra Pound, who had been assigned by federal ruling to the psychiatric ward of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D. C.. Pound’s regrettable admixture of fascism, anti-Semitism, and absurdist economics had cost him, in that interval, his physical freedom and a significant portion of his artistic reputation. Much like Bishop’s late mother, Gertrude Bulmer, Pound had become obsessed with finding a perpetrator—and assigning blame—for the cataclysm of world war. Hence in Bishop’s letter, Pound’s fate functions as a cautionary (and personally resonant) caricature,

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former is also available in the Special Collections division at the Washington University Olin Library, and I am grateful to John Hodge, the curator, for access to this copy.

42 Lowell had already offered, in a letter, his less than complimentary view of the symposium, but his account—with its long jeremiad about Randall Jarrell’s juridical airs—has the tell-tale petulance of a young star made to perform among his rivals. He had written to Bishop on August 20, 1950: “The conference was a crazy jumble with [Peter] Viereck talking like an incoherent manic Merrill Moore, and Randall [Jarrell] tense and inspired, very profound, cogent, rude—full of disgusts and enthusiasms—Miss Moore was our belle. … Peter Taylor and I have agreed that Randall is a terror for his friends in public—you are either corrected, ignored or expected to loudly agree. You end up feeling like a boor for supporting as much as you do and a hypocrite for not going further” (WA 106).
warning against the fatal misalliance of imperial and lyric energies, the confusion of geopolitics with one’s private psychomachia.

As in the subtexts of “From Trollope’s Journal” and “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” there are niches of secondary meaning in Bishop’s letter. One such niche resides in her parenthetical aside, which serves as a typographical closet. Consider it again singularly, as a semantic unit akin to a Shakespearean aside:

(I think I’ve told you about Jane D.—the physicist daughter of John D.? At present she is in charge of ‘Terminal Ballistics’ at the Aberdeen proving ground, & when I stay at her farm, on week-days, the rural scene shakes slightly once in a while as Jane practices her art about 15 miles away, & then there is a faint ‘boom.’ It seems there are three kinds of ballistics: Internal, External & Terminal.)

(WA 107-08)

Bishop’s trademark parentheses function like the absolute value sign in mathematics, isolating the integer of some secret or emotional truth. Here, Bishop offers Lowell a profile of Dewey, tucking a portrait of her friend and their “intense” liaison into the projected displacements of her itinerary (Roman 108). Indeed, Bishop discloses to Lowell that she has been staying with Dewey at her Maryland farm on week-days and plans to spend ten days with her before heading to New York (Millier 223). These details cautiously suggest a more than platonic attachment, a possibility supported by the lush and unmistakably erotic paean, “A Cold Spring,” that Bishop dedicated to Dewey in her next Pulitzer Prize-winning collection.43

43 “A Cold Spring,” which introduces the eighteen new poems in that volume, thematically rhymes with “The Shampoo,” the poem that concludes the collection. Together, they offer homage to the two women who informed Bishop’s life, domestic circumstances, and amatory imagination in the 1950s.
Like Bishop, Dewey was employed by the federal government for her “art” during a particularly tense phase of the Cold War: not as a cultural figurehead, but as an expert in projectile weaponry. The tacit dangers of working for—or simply living within—an empire echo in Bishop’s epistolary lexicon. Hence the ballistic “boom” in Bishop’s letter threatens the “rural scene” she shared with Dewey while the “boom- boom” at the end of “View of the Capitol…” threatens the “Great Shades” of the trees (and the venerable occupants of Hades). Addressing Lowell, Bishop could jest about the military’s euphemistic categories, “Internal, External & Terminal,” while hinting at these weapons’ degrees of damage and invasion. Indeed, Bishop’s imperial “boom” signals the possible mortality of signification itself: a potential outcome of civic intimidation or atomic annihilation. Like the mother’s scream that suffuses the atmosphere of “In the Village,” the devastating mono-syllables of warfare threaten to foreclose subjectivity’s idiosyncratic music and the privacy of a tender relation (PPL 99).

Collectively, Bishop’s mid-century letters, letter-poems, notebooks, and notebook-poems demarcate the necessary complication of her voice in response to the newly sinister, newly intimate ways of war. As an analysis of Bishop’s Key West letter-poems will reveal, however, her sense of the lyric’s narrative possibilities was enhanced significantly by her experience of psychoanalysis in the 1940s. It was in the latter years of that decade that Bishop first located a medium in which to address the psychic empire of ghosts and the government of dreams.
CHAPTER 2:

DREAMING IN COLOR: BISHOP’S NOTEBOOK LETTER-POEMS

Postcards from the World of ‘Morning’

In an interview with Elizabeth Spires about a year before her death, Bishop spoke with unprecedented openness about her experience of psychoanalysis, letter-writing, and the composition of poems. When Spires asked Bishop if she ever had a poem come to her as donné, Bishop claimed that she had written her famous elegy, “One Art,” with remarkable ease; it was, she stated, “like writing a letter” (118). Bishop’s alliance of her villanelle with the praxis of letter-writing reflects the definitive turn that her poetry took in the late 1940s prior to her tenure at the Library of Congress. In the notebook letter-poems from the latter part of this troubling, alcoholic decade, Bishop found a means of transmuting the pain of maternal loss and early deprivation into a mode that enabled her to use poignant material while avoiding the New Critics’ frequent charge against women poets for so-called “baroque” or emotional tendencies (Brunner 74-75).

This chapter reads several previously unpublished letter-poems from one of Bishop’s “Key West” notebooks (Folder 75.3b): “I see you far away, unhappy,” and two poems from a series titled “Dear Dr.--.” These epistolary poems indicate the significance of Bishop’s relationship with her psychoanalyst, Ruth Foster; her sustained interest in Klein, Freud, and psychological models of psychic life; and Bishop’s use of the letter to
extend the lyric’s capacity for intimate address. Tellingly, these unpublished letter poems contain images and narrative features that reappear in two of Bishop’s most well-known poems, “One Art” and “At the Fishhouses,” suggesting the importance of the epistolary poem in Bishop’s evolving “narrative postmodernism”: a distinctly relational aesthetic that appears in the lyric letters of *A Cold Spring* (1955) and in the “alluvial dialect” of her mature voice (Travisano *Midcentury* 182; Gray 57).

The epistolary tropes in Bishop’s published mid-century poems and in her autobiographical story “In the Village” (pub. 1953) have often been read within the context of her expatriate residence in Brazil, during which time she came to understand letter-writing as an extension of her poetic labors or, as she wrote to Kit and Ilse Baker in 1953: “like working without really doing it” (OA 273). Critics have also intuitively linked the seemingly playful epistolarity of *A Cold Spring* with the gravely casual, self-interrogatory narratives in the free verse poems of Bishop’s final decades. Langdon

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44 Epistolary mourning is a leitmotif in Bishop’s “In the Village,” a story she composed during her first year in Brazil, and which she published both in the *New Yorker* (1953) and between sections of poetry in *Questions of Travel* (1965). The child-narrator in Bishop’s story is fascinated with her mother’s collection of “crumbling postcards,” which the child reckons “come from another world, the world of the grandparents who send things, the world of sad brown perfume, and morning” (PPL 102). Her homonymic conflation of “morning” and “mourning” foreshadows the imminent disappearance of her mother, whose mental instability seems linked to her inability to cease mourning for her late husband. After the mother has vanished, the child is given the task of delivering care packages, addressed to the mother’s sanitarium, to the Great Village post office. Poignantly, she keeps her arm and hand held over the mailing label as she walks through town; she also notes that the institutional address, written in indelible purple ink, “will never come off” (PPL 117). Intuiting her mother’s permanent removal, the child partakes in this weekly *fort/da* errand but seemingly without hope that this one-way correspondence will be answered. At the story’s conclusion, the narrator cites a list of signifying objects and wonders if these artifacts will continue to hold meaning, to speak of their association with the beloved and of her traumatic removal. Postcards fittingly appear in this elegiac catalogue: “All those other things—clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream—are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?” (PPL 118).

45 Susan McCabe notes that *A Cold Spring* reads as “a series of correspondences with significant others” (135). Of the eighteen poems in this modest volume, at least three are explicitly epistolary: “Letter to N. Y.,” “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” and, as a verbalist postcard, “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” (PPL 61, 63-64, 52-53). Two other poems reference letters to indicate the frustration or abbreviation of relational connection: the “unanswered letters” in “The Bight” and the letters with
Hammer, for example, argues that poems like “The End of March” and “Poem” evince the poet’s sustained fascination with the “rhetorical gestures” and tonality of letters (164, 177). Hammer conjectures that the letter-poem essentially enabled Bishop to develop a “trope of thirdness”: a Winnicottian dimension in which the anonymous reader is the privileged participant in the reciprocal play of correspondents (164). Bishop’s notebook letter-poems also accord with Joanne Feit Diehl’s observation that much of Bishop’s œuvre seems informed by a desire to “make reparation to the abandoning mother”—to give a poetic gift that will simultaneously “replenish” the author, suffusing the lyric voice with this twinned psychic necessity (Diehl 8, 108).

In Bishop’s two explicit, gift-like, and “subversively celebratory” letter poems, “Letter to N. Y.” (dedicated to Louise Crane) and “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” it is the narrowed address of a specified recipient that, ironically, enhances the reader’s sense of the letter-poems’ tacit communiqués (Gilbert and Gubar 211; PPL 61; 63-64). Bishop’s unpublished notebook letter-poems, however, in voicing the psychoanalytic material of dreams, screen memories, and the garrulous ghosts of regret, appear to grant the reader full warrant to the literary artifact’s revelation of selfhood. In these lyric letters, the poet’s polyphony of voices, Freudian symbology, and Kleinian exploration of the mother-daughter dyad further establish Bishop’s position as a precocious “postmodernist” among her mid-century peers (Longenbach 22; Travisano “Bishop Phenomenon” 229). With these letter-poems’ play of multiply authoring selves and destinataires, in their especial (but necessarily trespassed) confiance, Bishop emphasizes unreliable stamps in “Arrival at Santos” (PPL 47, 66). Coded lesbian love-letters also appear, albeit within the envelopes of natural and astrological imagery in “A Cold Spring,” “Insomnia,” and “The Shampoo” (PPL 43-44, 53-54, 66).
the constitutive “triangulation” of the lyric poem in which a third unnamed reader is required to complete the circuit of its intersubjectivity, its rendering of individuation into a rhetorically social form (Miller 140; Altman 186; Stewart 13).

Given these letter-poems’ similarity to psychoanalytic dialogue, with the patient (or poet) narrating biographic stories to a specific other, it is not surprising that Bishop turned to the epistolary mode in the late 1940s following her second stint of psychoanalysis with Dr. Ruth Foster, a New York clinician. By all accounts, Bishop’s work with Dr. Foster was a great solace to her during an uncertain and often turbulent phase of her life. Millier reports that Bishop and Dr. Foster “spent two years…[investigating] the origins of [Bishop’s] depression and alcoholism,” and that she had assured Bishop that she was “lucky to have survived” the grievous losses of her childhood (180, 194).

Shortly after Dr. Foster’s death in 1950, Bishop would write to Marianne Moore that Dr. Foster had been “so good and kind” and had “certainly helped… [her] more than anyone in the world” (Millier 180; OA 206). Bishop’s superlative praise may have been an intentional snub of Moore, who could be overweening in her concern for the younger poet’s health, ambition, and grammatical specificity; it is clear, however, that Dr. Foster was a major influence on Bishop’s reckoning of her early losses (Diehl 36-38).

Throughout the spring of 1946, Bishop struggled to maintain some modicum of sobriety while she did analytic work with Dr. Foster, negotiated with Houghton Mifflin about the belated appearance of North & South, and wavered about whether to abandon Key West and her tempestuous relationship with Marjorie Stevens (Millier 180-87). By the fall of 1946, however, Bishop’s North & South had been published to admiring
reviews and she had signed a first-reader’s contract with the *New Yorker*. Bishop’s poetic career, as Millier notes, had finally earned its “proper beginning,” and despite the profound suffering in her private life that year (188).

Bishop’s notebook letter-poems appear to have been written in the intermediary months between her work with Dr. Foster and her book’s generally positive critical appraisal in the fall of 1946. And they may have been composed during the pilgrimage that Bishop made to Nova Scotia and to Cape Breton in July, which was her first trip to Canada since her mother’s death in 1934 (Millier 180). These letter-poems to Dr. Foster and to an incarcerated beloved reveal Bishop’s ingenious use of the letter’s anticipated “encounter” with a specified addressee, its related attempt to “revise both self and other,” and its *fort/da* tropes of rejection and redress (Bower 5; McCabe 26-27). Like a psychoanalytic dialogue, the personal letter served Bishop as a narrative epistemological frame in which to explore the phantasmagoria of dreams, the residual injury of maternal loss, and the unstable nature of memory itself.

Finally, while the poem, “I see you far away, unhappy,” and the poetic series, “Dear Dr.--,” are of certain literary value in themselves, they also supply some of the imagery and underlying psychic grammar for a few of Bishop’s most admired poems. These include the “rocky breasts” of “historical, flowing and flown” knowledge in “At the Fishhouses” and the lost “mother’s watch” in “One Art” (PPL 52, 167). The latter, when juxtaposed with the tropes of surveillance (or who “sees,” “watches,” and “looks”) in Bishop’s letter-poems, seems assuredly a pun on both a lost timepiece and the traumatic loss of maternal “watch” or care.
Millier notes that Bishop left for Nova Scotia on July 1, 1946, and made the somewhat unlikely decision to stay alone at the Nova Scotia Hotel directly “across the bay” from the Nova Scotia Hospital where her late mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, spent the last eighteen years of her life (180). As a notebook entry quoted in Quinn’s volume reveals, Bishop may not have caught her first close look at her mother’s sanitarium until a taxicab ride from the Dartmouth airport during a subsequent trip in 1951 (300-01). Reporting this second trip and its unexpected sights in her journal, Bishop tried to suppress the audible shock of her surprise.

N. S. looked lovely from the air—fresh dark greens, red outline, glittering lines of rivers—more animated than Maine looked, & that amazing cleanness that strikes me every time. We landed in Dartmouth—a clearing in the fir woods—the taxi comes across on a little ferry—1st driving right by the Insane Asylum (I was quite unprepared for this.) A beautiful, dazzling day, & the unparalleled dullness of everything—I feel it in everything here, shop-windows, food,—the smallest trifles. Depression here must be worse than anywhere—only fortunately I’m not depressed.

(VSC Folder 43.6, qtd. in Quinn 300-01)

Depicting this scene with her proverbial map-makers’ “[m]ore delicate… colors,” Bishop contrasts the vividness of the natural landscape with the “unparalleled dullness” of the human culture, the lack of flavor in the local store-fronts and cuisine (“The Map,” PPL 3; Quinn 300). But she appears to take some comfort in travel’s headlong parataxis, or “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’”: an equalizing logic by which she gives as much narrative attention to the topography of Nova Scotia as to the typographically accentuated “Insane Asylum” (“Over 2000 Illustrations…” PPL 46). As if to distance
herself from the latter, Bishop adopts a mock-clinical posture, noting that a stay in Dartmouth would be sure to worsen one’s “[d]epression.” But she quickly adds, in a line of almost comic self-defense, that she is “fortunately… not depressed” (Quinn 301; emphasis added).

Aside from this clinically toned assessment, Bishop allows but one parenthetical admission of emotion in this passage:“(I was quite unprepared for this)” (Quinn 300). This line is strikingly similar to the tense imperative in “One Art,” in which the narrator likewise embeds a stern note, or letter-to-the-self, within protective parentheses: “though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster” (PPL 167). If the task of “writing it” is essentially the task of authoring a recognition—one akin to an epiphany coached by an analyst or enabled by the biographic narrative of a letter—Bishop appears to strain against her repressive instincts although she presumably addresses only herself in this journal entry, acting as her own audience and clinician (PPL 167).

The tensions inherent in psychoanalytic anagnorisis are audible in the polyphony of this journal passage and in Bishop’s notebook letter-poems. In “I see you far away, unhappy” and the “Dear Dr.--” series, Bishop works from the conceit of psychoanalysis as a constructed narrative in which “a person’s life unfolds backwards, like a Greek tragedy, from effect to cause” (Feirstein 179). Hence, Bishop uses the letter’s “intercourse with ghosts” (or the epistolary imagoes of self-and-other) to trace the etiology of loss; to explore the borderland between actual and screen memories; and to make poetic reparations for the primary and defining loss of the abandoning mother (Kafka qtd. in Miller 135; Diehl 109).46

‘[L]ike an animal at Bronx Park’

Bishop’s handwritten notation, “from Halifax,” at the top of page 153 in her Key West notebook (75.3b), suggests that she composed her letter-poems during or proximate to her two to three week stay in Nova Scotia in 1946.\textsuperscript{47} The first of these letter-like poems, “I see you far away, unhappy,” appears in the legible, but agitated-looking script on page 152 of the Key West notebook (75.3b).\textsuperscript{48} Despite its textual clarity, this poem was not included in either Quinn’s or Schwartz and Giroux’s recent anthologies. Yet this thirteen line \textit{cri de coeur} has keen literary and biographic import. It also provides an invigorating context for the “Dear Dr.--” series, which directly follows it. Given the poem’s likely locale of composition, the narrator might be addressing the ghost of Bishop’s institutionalized mother and, by extension, the mortmain of the past on the psyche’s present tense.

\begin{verbatim}
I see you far away, unhappy,
small
behind those horrible little green
grilles
like an animal at Bronx Park
& I want to do something about it
but [of course] I can’t\textsuperscript{49}
because time (capitalized)\textsuperscript{50} for
\end{verbatim}

is, in fact, an intercourse with ghosts, and not only with the ghost of the recipient but with one’s own ghost which develops between the lines of the letter one is writing” (135).

\textsuperscript{47} The “from Halifax” notation, positioned in the top left-hand corner of notebook page 153, above one of the first “Dear Dr.--” poems, effectively mimics the placement of a letter’s return address, a subtle gesture that Bishop, with her usual attention to visual and typographical detail, may have playfully intended.

\textsuperscript{48} Bishop’s script in “I see you far away, unhappy,” appears in a much larger and more loosely written hand than the drafts of the “Dear Dr.--” poem. The difference suggests that the former might have been written in a state of emotional upset, while the latter might have been attempted from a calmer perspective.

\textsuperscript{49} “Of course,” while legible, is crossed out in Bishop’s draft.
some reason or other
has put his big hands
in between us.
Otherwise you know perfectly
well I’d do everything I could.

(VSC Folder 73.5b, 152)

Bishop’s poem works from the premises of a personal letter in its particularized address, its simultaneous invocation of distance and intimacy, and its attempt to reconcile a shared traumatic memory. The narrator, in addressing someone “far away,” implicates the poem’s tacit epistolarity: only a letter-like poem could convey intimate speech across such a surreal distance, rendering the force of its tenderness. As Gerald MacLean observes, letters are always “directed from here to there, across a space between, the abode of the never entirely absent other,” and Bishop’s addressee, while seemingly “far away,” becomes eerily present within this letter-poem’s rhetorical, displaced “abode” (177).

It is the conjured visual presence of the addressee that catalyzes the narrator’s speech, “I see you far away, unhappy,” and the telegrammatic missive that follows depends upon this operative distance between correspondents as well as the conceit of the letter as an enabling “bridge” (VSC Folder 75.3b, 152; Altman 13). In the poem’s opening tableaux, the narrator envisions the addressee imprisoned behind “horrible little green / grilles,” an image that suggests the barred windows of an institution, backlit with the green fluorescence characteristic of clinical settings. The addressee also appears

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50 Bishop’s own notation, presumably a reminder to capitalize “time” in another draft. This note suggests that she anticipated revising the poem, developing it beyond the palimpsest of this notebook page.

51 Altman defines epistolarity as “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning” (4).
“small” (152). Fittingly, both this word and “grilles” sit independently on the second and fourth lines, spatially overshadowed by the full-length lines above and below them. This lineation typographically mimics the addressee’s circumstance as a kind of zoo specimen, someone forced to live “like an animal in Bronx Park” (152).

Within five compressed lines, Bishop recreates the uncomfortable exposure of institutional life: the addressee is visibly “unhappy” and “small” in her human menagerie. Indeed, the loved one essentially lives in a Foucault-like institution that cages (and displays) its occupants’ unprivate lives, a circumstance that the letter-poem—with its own public/private play—uniquely memorializes. Altman observes, “as a reflection of the self, or the self’s relationships, the letter connotes privacy and intimacy; yet as a document addressed to another, the letter reflects the need for an audience, an audience that may suddenly expand when that document is confiscated, shared or published” (186-87). While Bishop did not choose to publish this poem, with its likely reflection of a troubling maternal relationship, she did bequeath her notebook to Linda Nemer with the understanding that Nemer might later sell Bishop’s materials for a “good price” (Quinn xii). Hence, true to Altman’s supposition, the ultimate privacy of this letter-poem has at last come into public purview, attaining its “third” audience well over sixty years after its inscription.

Witnessing the addressee’s miserable captivity, the narrator expresses an immediate desire “to do something” (152). The narrator’s ability to affect change, however, is summarily foreclosed in the seventh line—the poem’s midpoint and subjective hinge—wherein the narrator’s eagerness to help is abruptly thwarted by the real-world constraints of “time” (152). The latter is synecdochically (and somewhat
frighteningly) featured in the disembodied “big hands” of a clock or a watch: a decidedly child-like aperçu. Indeed, visual echoes of this image recur in the “watch” of a mother in “One Art” and in the wristwatch of an addled psychiatric patient in “Visits to St. Elizabeths,” extending Bishop’s associative matrix between the caprice of temporality, madness, and the abandoning mother (PPL 167, 127-29).52

A Student of Case Studies

To better understand her own psychic troubles and those of her friends, to explore the well-springs of the imagination, and to reckon the trauma of her early years, Bishop was an avid student of psychology for most of her adult life. Her post-collegiate notebooks are peppered with notes on Freud and psychoanalysis as well as reading lists for articles in academic journals such as Psychological Review and the American Journal of Psychology. One such list contains the following article titles: “Absolute judgments of character & traits in self and others,” “A study of revised emotions,” and, perhaps most tellingly, “Affective sensitivities in poets & scientific students” (VSC Folder 74.11, 61). Once she settled in Brazil, Bishop reported to friends that she was reading Lota’s “large psychological library,” Ernest Jones’s “wonderful and fearful” biography of Freud, and Klein’s Envy and Gratitude (“superb in its horrid way”), as well the popular child development theories of Benjamin Spock and Arnold Gesell (OA 283; WA 173; OA

52 “A Short, Slow Life,” a notebook poem that Schwartz dates to the “mid to late 1950s,” also features “Time” as the villainous agent. In this ten-line lyric, Time’s “hand [has] reached in” and “tumbled” the speaker from her surroundings, fracturing a bucolic, Great Village-like scene wherein, “[the] houses, the barns, the two churches, / [were] hid like white crumbs” (PPL 235).
462; Millier 267). Most revealingly, when Bishop’s companion, Lota de Macedo Soares, began to show signs of mental strain in 1967, Bishop commuted to Rio de Janeiro twice weekly so that Soares could see an analyst there who had trained with Klein (OA 462). Bishop saw this Kleinian analyst too, during this interval.\footnote{In her letter to Lowell about the Kleinian analyst in Rio de Janeiro, Bishop confessed: “I am telling you all my troubles again—I have no one else to tell them to!—except once and a while I see the analyst, too—but he is not of much practical help to me, much as I like him” (OA 462). Tellingly, in the absence of a helpful analyst, Bishop turned to personal letter-writing to explicate her sorrows. Since her manic-depressive addressee, Robert Lowell, could hardly be relied upon for sound psychological advice, it seems likely that Bishop understood epistolary exchange itself to be therapeutic, a “home-made” version of the analytic hour (“Crusoe in England” PPL 154).} Hence, it seems apropos and even necessary to read Bishop’s post-1946 poetry in the context of her early experiences with psychoanalysis, her ongoing study of psychology, and her subsequent interest in Kleinian therapy.

Bishop’s “I see you far away, unhappy” operates as a mechanism of sublimation, a “memento” in its displacement of desire into a narrative wish imaginatively sent across geographic, temporal, and mortal divides (Lombardi 192). The poem also partakes of the “reality-testing” that Freud believed was essential to the mourning process: although the narrator initially regards the addressee as if she indeed were alive and able to receive this missive, she eventually concedes that “time” has intervened, rendering any amelioration of the circumstance impossible (“Mourning” 244). An inability to revise the past or to live fully within the present persists as a motif in Bishop’s oeuvre; this recurrent impasse might reflect Bishop’s own struggles to introject the lost mother, to redirect the libido of a thwarted primary investment (Lombardi 192-93).

Bishop’s post-analytic attempts to reckon with maternal loss and early traumatic memories might also help to account for the decided psychological thickening in her later
work, its “almost exaggerated awareness of subjectivity” (Gray 60). In her last three volumes—*A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), and *Geography III* (1976)—Bishop utilizes a range of narrative forms to answer the “old correspondences” featured in “The Bight,” a poem composed on the poet’s birthday (PPL 47). Indeed Bishop’s use of the letter-poem in the late-1940s suggests her effort to reply to the “torn open, unanswered letters” of unearthed psychoanalytic material and to maintain—in the form of the letter-gift—the ongoing work of relationality. In this way, letters appear to complement and extend the activity of the Freudian dredge in “The Bight,” which plumbs the harbor’s depths and lifts to the surface a “dripping jawful of marl” (PPL 47).

In the “awful but cheerful,” decidedly “untidy activity” of psychoanalysis and narrative poetry, Bishop evolved an aesthetic governed by an elegiac selfhood, one that accords with Freud’s notion of the ego as a “precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes” (PPL 47; “Ego” 29). Like her survivalist animals—the hooked fish, the blood-spattered armadillo, and the darting sandpiper—Bishop’s poetic “self” often appears to be a reliquary of loss and yearning, a persona of storied scars (PPL 33, 83-84, 125). The letter-poem, in its narrative capaciousness, lent Bishop a model for admixing psychoanalytic insight, natural description, and casual parable into an other-directed missive, an interiority that invites a response from its long-distance interlocutor.
One Gregarious Green Light

While it is possible that Bishop had her then-estranged lover, Marjorie Stevens, or some other amorous addressee in mind in writing “I see you far away…,” it seems likely that Bishop was rueing a more primary genre of love-lost. The poem’s final, chastising lines, “Otherwise you know perfectly / well I’d do everything I could,” have the unmistakable air of a child imitating a parental tone of voice, chiding a wish for the impossible (152). Bishop’s tonal shift—from the pitying sympathy of the poem’s first six lines to the child-like bargain at the conclusion—accords with Melanie Klein’s observation that in mature relationships of any complexity, individuals continue to enact (and negotiate) the structure of their earliest relations; as such, they may play the role of “parent” or “child” interchangeably, a protean dynamic Bishop manages to inflect within the brevity of thirteen lines (“Love” 324-25).

Given Bishop’s decided interest in Klein’s essays and her later work with a Kleinian analyst, it seems likely that Bishop composed her notebook letter-poems having some familiarity with Klein’s theories. In her landmark essay, “Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse” (1929), Klein asserts that daughters suffer an anxiety similar to sons’ Oedipal conflict. It involves the daughter’s desire to “rob” the mother’s body; a subsequent fear of maternal aggression; and, ultimately, the daughter’s overriding worry that the mother’s actual presence and affection will be lost (217). As in Bishop’s letter-poem, the child’s anxiety in Klein’s model is initially generated by “seeing” or “not seeing” the mother.

When the little girl who fears the mother’s assault upon her body cannot see her mother, this intensifies the anxiety… At a later stage of development the content
of the dread changes from that of an attacking mother to the dread that the real, loving mother may be lost and that the girl will be left solitary and forsaken. (“Infantile” 217; emphasis in the original)

A Kleinian mother-daughter dyad seems to be at work in “I see you far away, unhappy,” in which the speaker conjures the addressee from her “far away” place in order to “see” her and, perhaps, to relieve the intense anxiety about maternal attack and abandonment that Klein identifies. Such an “attack” and maternal disappearance are subsequently the subjects of Bishop’s short story, “In the Village,” wherein the mother—unmoored by excessive grief—frightens the child with her erratic behavior, verbal attacks, and sudden disappearance. As McCabe notes: “The dead still participate in our imagination of them. …[P]oems become ceremonies to mourn departure through repetition” (214). Bishop makes her cyclical returns in this letter-poem, in several published poems, and in many of her prose stories, revisiting the alarming disappearance and sharply felt absence of a mother in a young child’s life.

The separation between the speaker and the addressee in the letter-poem, enacted by the “big hands” of “time,” invokes a child’s distinct sense of arbitrary loss and, perhaps, the fear that “some reason or other”—including unreason—could reunite them in death or in the institutionalized world of the mad (VSC Folder 75.3b, 152). As Millier and Lombardi note, during the crisis moments of her alcoholic and depressive troubles in the 1940s, Bishop was haunted by the real possibility that she could slide into alcoholic decline and, like her mother, lose her mind. Writing from the Yaddo Writers’ Colony in 1949 to her physician, Anny Baumann, Bishop expressed her renewed determination to abstain from drink, mentioning the stern advice she had once received from Dr. Foster.

… I suddenly made up my mind. I will not drink. I’ve been stalling now for years & it is absolutely absurd. Dr. Foster once said: ‘Well, go ahead, then—ruin your
life”—and I almost have. I also know I’ll go insane if I keep it up. I cannot drink and I know it.

(OA 210)

Hence, when the poet-speaker in “I see you far away, unhappy” writes that she cannot counter time’s “big hands” in her letter-poem, nor can she trespass the “horrible little green / grilles” separating herself from her addressee, it may have been with the tacit understanding that to do so would be, in effect, to renounce a sane life (VSC Folder 75.3b, 152). The mother must remain a ghostly conjured presence, someone the speaker can only address across the impossible postal distances of mental dissolution and death.

While “I see you far away, unhappy” recreates the narrative circuit that Bishop was constructing in the late 1940s among psychoanalytic themes and epistolary conceits, it also shares an economy of symbols with the “Dear Dr.--” sequence that directly follows it in the poet’s notebook, a sequence that makes the poet’s overlay of analytic narratives, letter-writing, and dream-work even more explicit. Bishop’s description, for example, of her addressee being trapped behind “those horrible little green grilles” in “I see you far away, unhappy,” would seem to share some connection with the “green light” that recurs in the letter-poems to her analyst, where it alternately appears to represent the extreme isolation of madness, the benign watchfulness of a mother, and the “particular & brighter” color of dreams themselves (VSC Folder 75.3b, 157).

This “green light” appears in what seems to be the very earliest draft of the “Dear Dr.--” sequence. Quinn, in making her selections for Edgar Allan Poe & the Jukebox, may not have considered all of the poem’s drafts as she does not refer to three unnumbered versions, each written on unbound scraps of paper, which were found inside of the Key West notebook near the other “Dear Dr.--” poems (VSC Folder 75.3b). When
Vassar College acquired some of Bishop’s Brazilian materials in 1986, these three poems were removed and stored separately in order to prevent their loss or damage (Rogers).

Indeed Quinn cites only “four copies with just slight variations” of the “Dear Dr.” poem, when in fact there are at least seven copies and several with significant variations (286). This poetic septet includes a version on notebook page 153, a version on page 155, three unnumbered versions beginning “Dear Dr. Foster,” “Dear Doctor Foster,” and “For Dr. F.” (stored in VSC Folder 75.1), and the two versions on notebook page 157. One of the three unnumbered drafts appears to be the original version; it captures the poet in an almost undressed state of *homo faber*, an early moment of poetic making. Like the initial drafts of “One Art,” this page (with its two miniature “Dear Dr. Foster / Dear Doctor Foster” drafts) contains the seedling essence of the full poem.

are in color

Dear Dr. Foster, yes dreams do have color & memories have colors. are in

in time? [this phrase is circled]

gas tank
1 gregarious [“gregarious” underlined] like loaves of bread rising

[“gas tank” and “like loaves of bread rising” are written on a steep upward slant]

1 greg [crossed out]
gregarious green light

Dear Doctor Foster,

yes dreams are in color & memories are in color too [word is circled]

harbor

(VSC Folder 75.1)
Bishop’s epistolary address of her psychiatrist seems to direct and sustain the activity of
her dream-reportage. In a December 1947 letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop praised his
dream poem, “Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid” and mentioned that her own “psychiatrist
friend” was writing an article on color in dreams, a phrase which intimates the warmth
and alliance she felt with Dr. Foster (OA 151).

“I’ve heard quite a lot about it,” Bishop added, as if her “friendship” with Dr.
Foster placed her in the psychoanalytic-know. “I gather from it [Lowell’s poem] that
when you dream you dream in colors all right” (OA 151). Bishop’s exchange with
Lowell elucidates the interplay of letters, analytic insights, and the back rooms (or dream
rooms) of poesis. It seems to be understood, in Bishop’s remarks, that Lowell has drawn
upon his own dream work—the Freudian task of translating latent thoughts into visual
images—to create what Bishop admiringly calls a “stirring” poem (OA 151;
“Introductory Lectures” 170). For Bishop and for many in her post-Freudian generation,
dreams were understood to be idiosyncratic in their “residue” from an individual’s life,
but also to serve as a key to a common symbolic language: one inflected, as Freud had
argued, with the particular concerns of the dreamer’s historical age (“Introductory
Lectures” 98-99).

Bishop’s letter-poem appears to extend an analytic conversation as she gives Dr.
Foster an impressionistic description of a recent dream or, perhaps, an associative survey
of the objects near the bay in Dartmouth. When Bishop begins the draft anew, at the
bottom of the page, she adds the word “harbor,” which anchors her conjuring to a specific
place. The poem’s intermediary images—the “gregarious” or friendly, outgoing “gas
tank” and “green light”—suggest sociality and relationship or, in the Latinate sense of the
word, a “group-seeking” nature. If, however, these images stand in metonymically for the desired mother, “gregarious” might have the connotation of disturbed extroversion as in the outward, talkative anxiety of the unhinging mother in Bishop’s short story, “In the Village.”

The phrase, “loaves of bread rising,” which Bishop abandoned in subsequent drafts, might have seemed too obvious an association with nurture, domestic life, and the maternal body. \(^{54}\) In Klein’s “Love, Guilt and Reparation” (1937), the analyst specifically allies poets’ interest in nature and natural scenes with the warmth of feeling that the child retains for the mother’s breast (336-37). Describing a harbor view with the vaguely mammary images of a “gas tank” and of “loaves of bread rising,” Bishop may have been consciously or unconsciously recreating a Kleinian rubric in which the poet projects his or her benign imagoes onto a landscape. Indeed, when Bishop published “At the Fishhouses,” a poem closely allied with the aqueous feminine images in the “Dear Dr.--” series in 1947, Lowell told Bishop that he thought it was one of her best. But he also admitted that he found the breast imagery in the last stanza to be “too much” (qtd. in Millier 192). Perhaps Lowell could not envision his native Atlantic as a source of maternal succor, having written in “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” a Virgilian “piscatory ecologue” and an homage to “military violence” (Dubrow 48).

Less speculatively, the “gregarious green light” in this version of the “Dear Dr.--” sequence seems an obvious parallel to the “green grilles” that restrict the addressee in “I see you far away, unhappy.” The green light in the latter, possibly from a mental

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\(^{54}\) As in the mammary imagery that appears in the earliest draft of “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” but is suppressed thereafter, Bishop abandons the rising “loaves of bread” image in her longer, more finished versions of this letter-poem.
institution’s windows, and the “gregarious” green nautical light in the harbor of the “Dear Dr.--” poem appear to play with notions of parental surveillance, a trope that recurs in “Squatter’s Children,” “Manners,” “Sestina,” and, perhaps most memorably, in “One Art.” If the “green grilles” in “I see you far away, unhappy” signify the mother’s institution, where she is carefully watched and monitored, the green light in the “Dear Dr.--” poems might represent the monitory gaze of the mother herself, stationed across the bay, or that of the psychiatrist, stationed across the room from the analysand.

In the draft that appears on page 153 of her notebook, Bishop writes that the green light “comes to look,” a phrase that she subsequently replaces with “watches this one now unenviously” (in the drafts on pages 155 and 157). The changed predicate intensifies the action of the “green light” from that of a casual spectator to that of a parental figure or guardian. This reinstatement of the parental gaze in an inanimate object fits the interpretative schema that Diehl proposes for the surfeit of visual detail and natural imagery in Bishop’s oeuvre: namely, that the poet regularly compensates for the abandoning mother’s inattention with attachment to “transferential objects… a world that is reinvested with a displaced domesticity” (8). In the evolving process of the “Dear Dr.” sequence, Bishop complicates (or removes) some of the more apparent maternal images and expands her frame of reference considerably, linking conjectural ratiocinations to concrete, ungendered objects.

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55 Bishop may have also been alluding to the iconic green light in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*, a novel that she enjoyed and taught in one of her courses at Harvard University. In Fitzgerald’s tale, the protagonist harkens after an elusive “green light” at the end of a dock in East Egg, which symbolizes his wish to reclaim the past, to capture the affections of his beloved, and to revise history’s sharp delineation of possibility (182). In Bishop’s letter-poem, the narrator similarly wishes to break the literal stronghold of time: to elude its “big hands” and to rescue a symbolic female figure from the disciplinary “green / grilles” of an intractable past.
The expanded version of “Dear Dr.--” that appears on notebook page 155, for example, considers the influence of emotions on memories in a fragmentary syntax of psychic life, one that suggests Bishop’s engagement with Freud’s notion of the screen memory. (This draft does not appear in Quinn’s or in Schwartz and Giroux’s anthologies.)

Dear Dr. Foster
yes, dreams are in colors
and memories come in color
though that in dreams is more remarkable.
particular & brighter,
at their first like that green light in the harbor
which must belong to a [scratched out word] society
just itself of its own
& watches this one just for now unenviously.

The past are from
memories
all those photographs waters
con
manufacture, their fluences or
[indecipherable line]
with all the photographs & notes
manufacturing fluences every minute

rotogravure
with the photographs water
manufacturing fluences every minute--

insidious
(VSC Folder 75.3b, 155)

Describing the “green light” as belonging to a “society / just itself… of its own” intimates the isolation and frightening singularity of madness, especially if the “green light” in this poem is aligned with the “green / grilles” in “I see you far away, unhappy” wherein it seems to represent the barred windows of a hospital or psychiatric ward. Despite the
green light’s isolation however, it “watches this one just for now unenviously.” Hence, the green light gazes without jealousy at the dreaming narrator, who has suddenly (and perhaps very alarmingly) discovered her dreams to be far “more remarkable / particular & brighter” than her memories’ more sedate hues.

In his work on screen memories, Freud theorized that individuals create self-protective memories “relating to” and not “from” childhood (“Screen” 322). As instinctual autobiographers, individuals renarrativize stories of their early years, which allow them a psychically guarded, if somewhat distorted, access to the past (“Screen” 322). Bishop seems to have believed in this defensive mechanism, as Freud had described it. In her late-life interview with Spires, Bishop mentioned that her psychoanalyst was impressed with her ability to remember events from a very early age:

I went to analyst for a couple of years off and on in the forties, a very nice woman who was especially interested in writers, writers and blacks. She said it was amazing that I would remember things that happened to me when I was two. It’s very rare, but apparently writers often do. (126)

Although Bishop may have been able to recollect memories from an age that impressed Dr. Foster, in her analytic-poem she questions the strength and validity of those recollections. Memories, she asserts, are subject to the false “photographs” that “waters / manufacture,” or the false screen memories generated by emotion. Indeed, Bishop gives “the past” plurality in stating that it comes from “memories,” which implies a multiplicity of sources and competing versions of “fact.”

Hence, even “rotogravure… photographs” are subject to the “insidious” force of “fluences,” a truncated aphaeretic version of “influences” that suggests a range of connotations. Bishop, as a student of classical languages, may have had in mind the Latin fluentem, “a flowing, a stream,” or the contemporary English version of “fluence” as the
application of a “mysterious, magical, or hypnotic power to a person” (OED). The in-
fluence of tears, the con-fluence of harbor waters, and the black-magic force of false
memories are all valences of meaning in Bishop’s fragmentary verse.

If mental images from the past are indeed shaped by the “manufacture” of
emotions, then “the past” in this letter-poem is arguably as destabilized as “knowledge” is
in the concluding lines of “At the Fishhouses.” In that poem’s crescendo, human
knowledge is portrayed as a radically unfixed entity: not an inert store of sapientia, but a
process at once sempiternal and transient, fluid and already “flown” (PPL 52). Like the
powerfully “dark, salt, clear” waters in “At the Fishhouses,” the “fluences” of
“photographs & notes” are forces of mutability, inducing an “insidious” change of
memory, of fact.

Metapoetically, Bishop questions the role of “notes” as she is, presumably,
making them, writing another poem that might serve to aestheticize her sorrow or induce
uncanny metamorphoses of memory. This anxiety swirls in her letter-poem’s last lines:
“rotogravure / with the photographs water / manufacturing fluences every minute /
insidious” (VSC Folder 75.3b, 155). In a juggling match of subjects, predicates, and
objects, Bishop mimics the enmeshed circuitry of memory, emotion, and the distortions
attendant in high feeling. All is mixed into an ongoing “insidious” amalgam, resistant to
linear narrative, but one permitted in a letter-poem modeled on the intrapsychic “play” of
the analytic hour. Ritualistically, Bishop returns to the epistolary address of her
psychiatrist throughout this series. With its air of especial confidence, its invocation of an
absent presence, and its conceit of reciprocity, the analytic letter was an inviting form in
which Bishop could explicate the subterranean forces of the mind and the unwieldy life of feeling.

In choosing to feature only one neatened version of the “Dear Dr.--” sequence and not to publish “I see you far away, unhappy,” Quinn overlooked the fascinating qualities of these letter-poems, which seem critical to assessing the role of psychoanalysis, filial grief, and epistolary apostrophe in Bishop’s psychic cartography. As a poet who frequently rejected the strictures of linear narrativity, of “historians’… colors,” Bishop borrowed both from the modernists’ legacy of open forms and from emergent models of narrativity to depict the mutability of an historical selfhood (PPL 3). Or, as she wrote in “Dimensions for a Novel”: “A constant process of adjustment is going on about the past—every ingredient dropped into it from the present must effect the whole” (PPL 673). Bishop’s associative letter-poems experiment with the extent to which the dynamic processes of subjectivity, half-culled from the unconscious, might be effectively “sent” to an interlocutor.

The quotidian thickness and psychological verisimilitude that mark Bishop’s mature aesthetic may owe more to her assimilation of para-poetic forms and to her years of psychoanalytic work than has been previously acknowledged. As she subsequently negotiated her public role as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (1949-1950) and composed *A Cold Spring* (1955), Bishop appears to have drawn upon the tender archaeology of these notebook letter-poems, incorporating their explorations of polyvocal grief, the plurality of memory, and the dyadic fluidity of subject-object relations. Thus by the time she began to reckon with (and to parody) the political theater of Cold War Washington, she had already begun to attain the difficult grace of the “water-spider,” the
creature she cites in her admiring review of Emily Dickinson’s correspondence in 1951 (PPL 689-90). Giving a psychoanalytic update to Keats’s Negative Capability, Bishop lauds Dickinson’s late letters for their enhanced “structure and strength,” their ability to hold an “upstream position by means of the faintest ripples, while making one aware of the current of death and darkness below” (PPL 690). Bishop, in her daring notebook-letter poems, had begun to skate across the dark waters of the bight, noting the wreckage on the littoral and literal shores of her early life’s symbology, progressing by means of her own generative action: that of the continually redressing, addressed letter.
CHAPTER 3:

MISSIVES FROM ULYSSES

Mid-century Mythologies of the Letter

While the epistolary poem enabled Elizabeth Bishop to render the ultimate privacy of her dreams to her psychiatrist, Ruth Foster, and to redress the ghostly presence of her late mother in the 1940s, the “scene of the letter” was assuming a prominent position in America’s wartime and postwar imaginary (Schweik 80). During World War II, the American soldier’s letter to his sweetheart at home achieved iconic status in both literary and popular culture, wherein it was implicated as a technology of relationship—between the fighting front and home front—and in widespread anxiety about gender roles (Schweik 8).

The war’s enforced separation of “marriageable” Americans as well as women’s sudden emergence in the labor force galvanized concern about the security of the nation’s sexual and financial economies in the 1940s. These anxieties strengthened an alliance between heteronormativity, democratic ethos, and capitalism in the popular imagination, the language of government dictates, and in some of the most noted lyric poems of the
era (Nelson 9; May 130; Faderman 140). In “Rosie the Riveter Gets Married,” Elaine Tyler May notes that worries about the potential promiscuity of single American women led to “wartime purity crusades” as well as to a proliferation of prescriptive films, books, and advertisements featuring conjugal reunions in a postwar Eden (134).

Poetry was not immune to this gender anxiety and domestic fantasia. In the 1940s, the soldier’s epistolary war poem emerged as a stock product in popular literature, reanimating Petrarchan tropes and reinforcing wartime’s supposed polarization of gender roles. In A Gulf So Deeply Cut (1991), Susan Schweik explains that the epistolary war poem became “a kind of fad in the early forties… [because] it could both affirm an alliance between men and women and confirm the true centrality of the men’s position, of the ‘man’s hand’ in that alliance” (85-86). Hence, non-combatant poets like Elizabeth Bishop, who became a figure of national literary consequence during the war years, not only were expected to issue fitting responses to the war, but to reply reassuringly to the secondary sociological shifts engendered by the war’s protracted “emergency” (May 135; Roman 38). Hence in the 1940s and 1950s, Bishop labored to formulate authentic responses to the war and its straightening of gender roles in ways that would not endanger her readership or her status in the literary establishment. The stakes of politic, poetic statement were high: several of her contemporaries, including Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams, would be accused of Communist sympathies and

56 Between 1940 and 1945 the number of American women in the labor force grew by fifty percent (May 130). This shift instigated widespread concern that women’s financial empowerment would destabilize the nuclear family and the bonds of heterosexual marriage; hence, even during the crisis years of active warfare, women already were being urged to maintain their “femininity” and to resume their places as wives and household managers after the war emergency had passed (May 130).
temporarily blacklisted from some of the appointments, fellowships, and academic posts through which American poets increasingly could earn a living (Roman 8; Brunner 1-3).

While the epistolary war poem, in the hands of soldier-poets such as Karl Shapiro (1913-2000) and Selden Rodman (1909-2002), addressed heterosexual ardor to sweethearts on the home front and patriotic homosocial sentiments to fellow soldiers, Bishop initially used letter-writing privately, to negotiate her war witness and felt civic responsibilities. In January of 1945, Bishop wrote anxiously to Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton Mifflin, imploring him to add an apologia to her first collection, *North & South*. “The fact that none of these poems deal directly with the war, at a time when so much war poetry is being published, will, I am afraid, leave me open to reproach,” Bishop explained to Greenslet (OA 125). “The chief reason is that I work very slowly. But I think it would help some if a note to the effect that most of the poems had been written, or begun at least, before 1941, could be inserted at the beginning, say just after the acknowledgements” (OA 125-26). When Greenslet appeared to balk and claimed he had “mislaid” the foreword in April of the following year, Bishop sent it to him again, insisting that its inclusion in the volume was “still… very important” (OA 135). The disclaimer added to Bishop’s book simply read: “Most of these poems were written, or partly written, before 1942” (qtd. in Schweik 341). Bishop hoped this prolegomenon would be sufficient defense against critics who might otherwise accuse her of political apathy or of suspicious disregard.

World War II was indeed the preface—the establishing circumstance—for virtually any public or private activity between 1941-1945. Bishop was familiar with at least two soldier-poets who were closely associated with patriotic poetry and,
specifically, with the epistolary war poem. While she admired Shapiro’s and Rodman’s coordination of public and private histories in the letter form, Bishop would substantively challenge the “feminine” and “masculine” categories of behavior in these soldier-poets’ work. An investigation of Shapiro’s tropes of epistolarity—the ways in which his letter-poems dramatize the dynamics of heterosexual desire, the “authoring” circumstance of war, and contests of gendered power—evinces the strategic daring in Bishop’s queering of the epistolary war poem in works such as “Letter to N. Y.,” “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” and “Four Poems.”

Like Shapiro, Bishop would exploit the traditional associations of the letter “from the Restoration into Romanticism… [with] a private, sometimes feminine site where the inner-life achieves self-expression in the search for truth” (MacLean 176). But, while Shapiro’s epistolary poems made public the supposed “inner-life” of the conscripted soldier, giving lyric substance to popular stereotypes of the martial psyche, Bishop would use the camouflage of epistolary tropes to re-dress the “truths” of her own “inner-life”—its amorous contests, filial rebellions, and shifting alliances. Writing letter-poems to her

57 Bishop knew Rodman and Shapiro from literary circles, and she critiqued both soldier-poets’ works in her letters. Writing to Rodman about the appearance of his Amazing Year (1947), a poetic account of his military service, Bishop praised his intimate rendering of the public events of war in poems that alternately address epistolary interlocutors or the diary page: “I think the diverse, casual tone is right for that kind of thing, also its being so personal. In fact I could wish it were more personal, I think, since that seems to be the only possible way now of producing an impact with such large & terrible material as you are using. … Some of the more personal ones seem to me the best ones, to have a little the tone of D. H. Lawrence’s love poems” (OA 149-50). Rodman had given Bishop’s North & South a positive review in The New York Times Book Review, and Bishop may have felt obliged to reply in kind. Nonetheless, the terms of her approbation are revealing: by 1947, Bishop may well have believed that “the only possible way” of rendering the cataclysmic events of war was through “personal” poems capable of inducing an “impact,” or some affective response in the reader. Rodman’s collection includes poems about Berlin, Hiroshima, and Pearl Harbor, as well as love poems that trace the trajectory of a Ulysses/Penelope-like affair over great (geographical and experiential) distances. Bishop concludes her remarks gratefully: “Thank you very much for giving me the book. I have learned a lot from it & hope you won’t think me too overcritical” (OA 150). Bishop’s schoolgirl gratitude may or may not have been sincere. Yet her careful reading of Rodman’s book, which included comments on several individual poems, demonstrates that she was aware of—and had some admiration for—the epistolary and diaristic tropes her peers were using.
adventurous lover Louise Crane, to her mentor Marianne Moore, and to sympathetic friends Loren MacIver and Lloyd Frankenberg at the height of Cold War homophobia, Bishop challenged the masculinist bombast of war and meaningfully represented the relational riddles in her bonds with women (MacLean 176).

The relevance of epistolarity for American poets in the postwar/Cold War period—as a literary conceit and as para-literary praxis—is itself suggested by the fact that poets as differently toned as Bishop and Shapiro made the romance of the letter the fulcrum of their “breakthrough” collections: volumes that won Pulitzer Prizes, secured their authors’ national reputations, and foregrounded a narrative, biographical style in mid-century poetry. Moreover, the intensified apostrophe of the “lyric letter” and the gender masquerade enabled by epistolary personae allowed Shapiro and Bishop to exercise or to resist dominant tropes about private desire at a time of collective action, conflating themes of the oikia and polis as they juxtaposed the semantic richness of subjectivity with the structuring events of public history (Axelrod “Middle Generation” 2). The epistolary poem, reclaimed in this period as a technology of the lyric voice, enabled these poets to wear Auden’s aphoristic “private faces in public places” in a decade hungry for moral reassurances, biographical authenticity, and the superficies of “normality” (Auden Orators; Faderman 135).

In the 1940s, military service all but assured an aspiring poet a foothold on Parnassus. Karl Shapiro, who served as an army medic on the Pacific front, achieved

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58 In a letter to Oscar Williams, who was gathering poems for his anthology The War Poets (1945), Randall Jarrell remarks: “The Anthology is a good idea: if anybody can write a good poem about anything, he ought to do it about a war he’s in—or so one would think, but I haven’t seen much good about this war—you’d think Shapiro would have written something good about it” (SL 115). At this point, Jarrell had not yet seen Shapiro’s V-Letter, which appeared in 1944.
virtually instantaneous national fame when his epistolary collection, *V-Letter*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944. In his preface, Shapiro signals his veteran “authority of experience,” explaining that his collection was written in Australia and New Guinea “under the peculiarly enlivening circumstances of soldiering” (Schweik 8; vi). It is these heightened experiences of war that are symbolically reduced to epistolary size and scope in his *V-Letter*. The organizing conceit of Shapiro’s volume is the practice of “v-mail,” a procedure adopted in 1942 wherein soldiers’ letters, edited by military censors, were miniaturized and placed on microfilm for efficient transport to the home front (Duis 23; Oostdijk 448). Hence Shapiro’s *V-Letter*, the moniker for “Victory Letter,” serves as a metonymic emblem for the necessary syncopation of his experiences, fulfilling the popular motif of the “male soldier who was understood to have experienced too much [and who addressed]… the woman left behind who was understood to have experienced nothing at all” (Schweik 6). V-letters also effectively removed the letter from the realm of private correspondence: viewed by censors, shipped on microfilm reels, and then photographed for delivery, each soldier’s letter was read and processed by several hands before it reached its final destination (Duis 23).

The V-letter’s public processing was apropos for Shapiro’s collection, which centers on the soldier’s conversion of his diverse experiences into poems for a non-combatant audience. Thus, his *V-Letter* collection depicts a comrade’s death, the tense joviality of a troop train, amorous dreams of a beloved, and a soldier’s fraternal attachment to his gun. In Shapiro’s preface he states that his interest in depicting the “private psychological tragedy of a soldier” is delimited by the extent to which it relates to civic life (vi). Hence, the poems that directly address or include his beloved (“V-
Letter,” “Sunday: New Guinea,” “The Bed,” and “Birthday Poem”) are at the center of this endeavor: they invoke a dialogic intimacy that heightens the lyric’s privileged inclusion of a tertiary, civilian audience.

Indeed, the reader of Shapiro’s letter-poems cannot readily occupy the perspective of the poem’s speaker in propria persona as Helen Vendler has described the psychic vicariousness of the “normative lyric” (xi). Rather, as Gerald MacLean observes of epistolary fiction, the reader is a desired interloper: one who extra-legally enjoys the especial disclosure that the letter’s ostensible “privacy” invites (178). Emphasizing the necessity of the letter’s third audience to its rhetorical (and social) relevance, MacLean argues “letters—like identities and possessions—have little meaningful existence outside the predication and signification of the third-person other or others to whom they simultaneously are and are not addressed” (178). Shapiro’s V-letters are, in fact, written to be intercepted: in the didactic platform of his introduction, Shapiro asserts that the soldier’s letter provides a miniature moral allegory for la condition humaine, a message with relevance for the non-combatant.

To Shapiro, the V-letter was an allegorical bridge: a technology that miniaturized the soldier’s travails in order to convey their moral meaning to a civilian audience. This desire to relate the soldier’s hard-earned wisdom to non-combatant life is the feature that Shapiro claims as his distinction from “the Georgian writers,” or the Great War poets in whom he was “shocked to discover… [that] an old war remained the most cogent
experiences of their lives” (vi). As if to repudiate the models of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Shapiro’s poetry is almost defiantly vitalistic, “more boisterous, more heterosexual, and more overtly sentimental” than his peers (Axelrod “Middle Generation” 10).

Shapiro’s poems also differ from his Great War predecessors in their recurrent, narrowly formulaic apostrophe of a female beloved. It was in fact Shapiro’s actual address of his fiancée, Evalyn Katz, that enabled him to write poems and to secure their publishing success (Oostdijk 445-446). In his study of Shapiro’s popularity, “The Wartime Success of Karl Shapiro’s V-Letter,” Diederik Oostdijk observes that the poet composed and sent his poems in V-letters to Katz, who effectively served as his critical amanuensis, editor, and literary agent (446). Conveniently, Katz lived in the publishing hub of New York City, where she worked as a secretary for a physician on Park Avenue. Through Katz’s savvy auspices, Shapiro would publish four volumes of poetry while serving out his four-year term in the military (446).

Katz also successfully submitted Shapiro’s poems to a host of high-brow magazines such as The New Republic and The New Yorker, the same venues in which Bishop had begun to publish her poems with the guidance of her own unofficial New York agent and arbiter: the elder poet Marianne Moore (456). As in Bishop’s submission to Moore’s affectionately bossy, quasi-maternal steerage of her career, Shapiro depended upon Katz as his epistolary muse and upon the assurances and coaching of her replies. When Katz, suspicious of Shapiro’s flirtation with Catholicism in the early months of 1943, refused to answer his letters for a four-month interval, Shapiro found he was unable to write poems; in fact, he wondered if he would be able to write again (445).
Thus, both Shapiro and Bishop were dependent upon the encouragement of epistolary interlocutors as they produced the wartime collections that secured their places in national literature. Their concurrent interest in the epistolary poem as a vehicle for the lyric voice suggests that their “lyric letters” formalized a governing mechanism in their compositional practices while responding to the letter’s enhanced currency in popular discourse. Writing epistles to specific, affectionately endeared recipients during a time of national crisis primed them to compose poems of compellingly intimate address: the poems on which their unequal reputations largely depend.

Reviewing Shapiro’s collection for *The English Journal* in 1946, the soldier-poet Dayton Kohler stressed the poetic challenge for those in uniform (or for those employed by an institution with its own centralizing idiolect and ideology). Kohler wrote: “[the war poet] must maintain, at all cost, his own integrity as an artist while conforming outwardly to a military ritual that is always against the privacy of the individual” (63; emphasis added). Shapiro’s *V-Letter* bears the mark of such a “military ritual” in that it affirms the gendered stereotypes of war experience and adheres to the superficies of general statement. Yet his privileging of the letter as a technology of heterosexual romance, a morality drama, and a psychological elixir would be relevant to Bishop’s more inventive uses of the epistolary form.

In Shapiro’s collection, it is the letter that enables the soldier to redeem his human significance and to prove his masculine position in relation to his feminine-Other. “Mail-day” features the soldier’s performance of identity within the anonymity of conscripted service; received letters, moreover, are what connect him to the domestic world of sentiment and anticipation. Hence Shapiro’s opening poem, “Aside,” begins:
Mail-day, and over the world in a thousand drag-nets
The bundles of letters are dumped on the docks and beaches,
And all that is dear to the personal conscious reaches
Around us again like filings around iron magnets,
And war stands aside for an hour and looks at our faces
Of total absorption that seem to have lost their places. (3)

For Shapiro, letters locate the soldier, displaced from his identity—and, figuratively, from his “face”—within the rigors of army life. It is “[t]hese letters, the battle in progress, the place of the act,” that provide a moral schoolhouse for the soldier inside the leviathan endeavor of war; they are “the place of the act” in which the soldier can, chastened by “agony,” reclaim his life’s significance in an literary, affective economy: “[h]ow to love and to hate, how to die, how to write and how to read” (Shapiro 3-4). Here the soldier’s experience finds its articulate value in correspondence: an epistolary hermeneutics whetted by warfare’s catastrophic circumstances, such as those detailed in Shapiro’s “Elegy for a Dead Soldier” and “The Leg” (38-39; 42-46).

Theorizing about the malleable performativity of the epistolary form, Janet Altman comments, “[g]iven the letter’s function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize the distance or the bridge” (26). In Shapiro’s poems, it is the pressure of the distance—experiential and geographic—that heightens the exigency of the letters as a bridge to civilian life and to a recognized, individuated self. “[L]etters still fresh from the kiss and the tear,” or fresh from the semiotics of feminine sentiment, tether soldiers’ hope for the “year of our war to end” (4). Shapiro explicitly allies a beloved woman with his letter-poem’s destination; in the title poem, he conflates his beloved’s physical body with her sexual patience and with the capacious pleasures of a house. Addressing his recipient
with the bland admission “I love you first because you wait,” Shapiro’s speaker shares his vision of a postwar paradise, conjugal and suburban (62).

You are my home and in your spacious love
I dream to march as under flaring flags
   Until the door is gently shut.
Give me the tearless lesson of your pride,
   Teach me to live and die
As one deserving anonymity,
The mere devotion of a house to keep
   A woman and a man. (63)

Shapiro’s conflation of his addressee’s body with a house—the object most closely aligned with privacy in the Cold War period—typifies the epistolary war poem’s function as an amorous blason both to women and to the material prerogatives of American citizenship (Nelson xiv, Schweik 90). Shapiro’s speaker declares that his beloved’s “spacious love” will become his postwar campaign, inspiring his “march” and his phallic “flaring flags” as he relearns the “deserving anonymity” of civilian life (63). Shapiro personifies the home and its dedicated connubial pleasures nearly to the point of self-parody, lauding “the mere devotion of a house to keep / a woman and a man,” as he forecasts their “dowry” of consumer goods:

As groceries in a pantry gleam and smile
   Because they are important weights
Bought with the metal minutes of your pay,
   So do these hours stand in solid rows,
The dowry for use in common life. (63)

Shapiro wagers that the routinized monotony or “metal minutes” of his beloved’s workdays will constitute a hard-earned “dowry” once their long separation is relieved in wedlock and, by extrapolation, once she retires from wartime employment to the more leisurely, womanly work of the household (63). The speaker’s ardor becomes almost
ludicrous as he praises his beloved’s eyes, face, cheekbones, and “candle-glowing fingers” alongside their future home with its pantry of smiling groceries, gently shutting doors, and spacious windows. Celebrating a domestic and thoroughly domesticated heterosexuality, Shapiro’s speaker does all but furnish the bedroom and itemize his grocery list.

In her exegesis of civic privacy in Cold War lyric poetry and Constitutional law, Deborah Nelson argues that the house was the dominant metaphor for privacy in the 1940s and 1950s, a material signifier of the civic autonomy and marital sexuality upheld as the normative model for citizens of democracy (74). In Shapiro’s collection, the house is the blissful bower for the soldier’s sexual hunger, grown “starved and huge” (62). His expression of eros, however, complies with the wartime’s emphasis on the hygienic deployment of the soldier’s virility in monogamous heterosexuality (May 134). Hence, Shapiro claims that his beloved’s “imperfections and perfections,” “magnitude of grace,” “woman-size” form, and “full length” will be adequate to his desire, “meet[ing] my body to the full” (62).

Ellen Tyler May notes that Shapiro’s homeward bound libido was not atypical: “In keeping with such expressions of enthusiasm for marriage and the family, even men’s sexual fantasies were often publicly constructed around images of conjugal bliss” (139). In Shapiro’s letter-poems, the speaker envisions his position in a postwar paradise, in “the intimate suburbs of ice-cream and talkative houses” (10). Thus the pleasures of the settled middle class will reward the maturity of the returning soldiers, those “good-bad boys of circumstance and chance / Whose bucket-helmets bang the empty wall” (10). As Linda Kaufmann has argued, “every letter to the beloved is also a self-address, the
heroine’s [or hero’s] project… also involves self-creation, self-invention” (25). True to Kaufmann’s observation, Shapiro’s “lyric letters” are reflexively diaristic, enabling him to situate the exceptional experiences of war in counterpoint to feminine, domestic tranquility. Framing his “soldiering” within a gendered dichotomy and in relation to a romantic plot, Shapiro reduces the overarching Manichean contest of war to a Hollywood quest to secure a beloved’s affection (vi). Shapiro’s *V-Letter*, as Schweik has argued, essentially rehabilitated the Petrarchan sonnet in military fatigues.

… the literary soldiers of the 1940s invented, or rather rediscovered and transposed into epistolary form, the war poem as heterosexual love poem, reintroducing a comfortable, mainstream erotic tradition—the conventions of English and European love poetry dating back to Petrarch—into the dusty, barren, no-man’s-landscape of modern war literature. (90)

The epistolary war poem, even in the blunt hands of a poet like Karl Shapiro, popularly renewed an emphasis on lyric apostrophe. This specified address of self-to-other would mark the biographical aesthetic of the Middle Generation poets, signaling their divergence from both their Modernist and New Critical predecessors.

The epistolary poem also captures the generative interaction of so-called “high” and “mid-cult” categories of postwar readership and literary production (von Hallberg 14; Brunner 11). The Second World War poets’ dramatic, amorous address of Penelope figures and stoic, homosocial address of other soldiers was likely to have been a discrete catalyst for the queer, parodic letter-poems in Bishop’s *Cold Spring*. In her collection, the experiential wisdom popularly accorded to soldier poetry extends to the battlefield of non-combatant life in a Freudian agonistic portrayal of human relation.
CHAPTER 4:

QUEERING PENELope

“A Separate Peace”

In his war poetry, Karl Shapiro conspicuously occupies the “Ulysses-like” perspective of the hardened soldier: one disciplined into poetic wisdom by the rigors of conscripted service and his recurrent proximity to death. The battlefield is the necessitating circumstance of his V-Letter. It is the obstacle that his speakers attempt to bridge, while simultaneously utilizing their experiential distance from the home front to emphasize the “peculiarly enlivening circumstances of soldiering” and a gendered “authority of experience” (Shapiro vi; Schweik 5).

In counterpoint to Shapiro’s epistolary persona as the valiant Ulysses of the Pacific Front, Bishop’s “Penelope-like” reticence in her war letters and letter-poems depends upon (and reinforces) a strategic distance from others, even those with whom her speakers appear to have shared a physical closeness (Roman 77). In this way, Bishop subverts the popular trope associated with the “scene” of the war letter: missives that stage the reunion of a demurring, sexually loyal “Penelope” and a battle-tested “Ulysses” in an idealized version of heterosexual matrimony (Schweik 85). Instead of the union and univocality of such love, intimate relationships in Bishop’s oeuvre require the continual
negotiation of difference, a dialectic that lends itself to the dialogic conceit of the letter-poem.

Bishop’s qualifications to the Penelope archetype and her insistence on the “gentle battleground” of everyday life appear in the epistolary poems she included in *A Cold Spring*, wherein she uses the letter’s staging of intersubjectivity to broker a half-closeted intimacy with her reader (“Argument” PPL 61). While Camille Roman has emphasized Bishop’s bravery in publishing a “lesbian-focused” collection at the virtual height of the Cold War, none of Bishop’s reviewers noted its lesbian eros, a credit to the formal ingenuity with which Bishop covertly deployed a queer aesthetic (119-20). Bishop’s “Four Poems,” a tortured amorous paean that serves as the collection’s tacit centerpiece, reveals Bishop’s letter-like flirtation with the closet door. In it, she preserves the New Critical division between the speaker and poet with an ambiguous circuit of pronouns and subject-object displacements that obscure the genders and physical interactions of the speaker and addressee. The poem’s fourth and most intimate section, “O Breath,” evinces Bishop’s use of letter-like apostrophe to address her beloved as an equal, a tacit reversal of the idealization in Ulysses and Penelope archetypes. Composed over three years, the poem maps Bishop’s migration from the sublimated world of objective correlatives toward the intimate region of epistolary address.

Bishop appears to have begun “Four Poems” in 1946 and to have concluded a full draft of the poem in 1949. (In this interval, Bishop experimented with an epistolary poetic mode in her notebooks, beginning with letter-poems addressed to her late mother, Gertrude Bulmer, and to her psychoanalyst, Ruth Foster, in the summer of 1946.) Millier surmises that “Four Poems” also may have been composed in connection to Bishop’s last
likely heterosexual affair: a relationship with Tom Wanning, a depressive alcoholic with whom she had been friends for several years (57, 200). Millier conjectures: “Elizabeth’s six-month-long crisis may well have been precipitated by the end of the relationship with Tom Wanning. If it was, then the pain of its ending may also have involved the end of her hopes for a so-called normal heterosexual life” (219). Whether clarity about her sexual preferences coincided with Bishop’s difficulties in the late 1940s is subject to conjecture. The roiling tensions of these years, however, are manifestly evident in Bishop’s correspondence and in “Four Poems,” a lyric that turns characteristically letter-like as it seeks a resolution to a heartfelt crisis.

Bishop enclosed the fourth and final section of “Four Poems” in a letter to Loren MacIver in August of 1949 when she was trying to maintain her sobriety at the Yaddo Artists’ Colony following a two-month stay at Blythewood Hospital, a psychiatric rehabilitation center in Connecticut (Millier 231-32). Uncomfortable at Yaddo, Bishop had fallen into a pattern of drinking excessively, making desperate telephone calls to friends late at night, and then writing sheepish apologetic letters in the days thereafter. While the telephone served as Bishop’s drunken confessional, letters frequently were the reparative medium in which she tried, like a competent analyst, to get at the root of her difficulties and to reaffirm the friendships on which she was increasingly dependent. Indeed, the circumstances Bishop often described to her epistolary confidants are those one might expect to hear in psychotherapy or in another clinical milieu. As in Shapiro’s praxis of correspondence during the war years, Bishop’s interest in (and dependence upon) the relational work of letters would noticeably shape her maturing poetic style.
Shapiro composed letter-poems and poetic letters as a means of psychically surviving his military service. Bishop also used hybridized forms of these genres to negotiate her own set of war-related crises. These included the question of her civic responsibilities—and legitimate allegiances—during World War II; her position in the emergent ideological embattlements of the Cold War; and her relationship to the “Penelope” ideal of womanhood in wartime America (Roman 15). The public pressure to make patriotic gestures in the 1940s only intensified in the next decade; for Bishop, this tension coincided with a time of generalized personal crisis. Without a fixed place of residence or steady companionship, Bishop suffered through an extended period of depression and ill health in the immediate postwar years that, given a slightly different course of fortune, might well have cost her life (Fountain and Brazeau 124-26).59

When Bishop sent “While Someone Telephones,” (the third section of “Four Poems”) in a letter to her friend MacIver, she admitted to feelings of the bleakest despair.

The last six months have been a total loss… I don’t want to go on living. I can’t work on any of the old things anymore and I’m so bloody lonely I think I’ll just die of that.

... They [Wallace Fowlie and J. F. Powers] told me last night how beautifully Léonie Adams [the poet then serving as the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress] reads and now I’m scared all over again about that [i.e., public readings] and wish I could give up the whole thing and feel so sure I’m no good & am dreading the year in Washington so.

59 Maia Rodman, Selden Rodman’s wife, was staying with Bishop in Key West when Bishop drank from a bottle of rubbing alcohol (Fountain and Brazeau 113). Rodman discovered Bishop unconscious on the apartment floor and contacted Bishop’s companion, Marjorie Stevens, who had Bishop rushed to the hospital in an ambulance (113). After recovering in the Miami hospital, Bishop was transferred to Blythewood, a treatment facility in Greenwich, Connecticut. Rodman claims that Bishop fully reckoned the severity of this occurrence. “Elizabeth realized that she had to get well after that incident. She had said that this was like a breaking point or the low point. I had a feeling that there had been attempts at suicide prior to this incident or a fear that Bishop might commit suicide” (Rodman qtd. in Fountain and Brazeau 113).
Forgive my writing this to you. I simply have to say it to someone and maybe you can think of something vaguely reassuring about my situation because I certainly can’t. All my affairs are still in chaos, clothes, papers, belongings, work—and I CAN’T GET OUT OF IT and I’m scared scared scared scared scared. And I’m scared of seeing Anny B. [Dr. Anny Baumann, Bishop’s physician]—terrified. . . . I’m afraid she’ll just suggest some place like Blythewood again…

(OA 188)

In a centrifugal swirl of anxieties, Bishop worried about losing the care of her physician, Anny Baumann, to whom A Cold Spring is dedicated; the performative duties of the Poetry Consultant position at the Library of Congress; the “chaos” of her work and belongings; and a persistent, potentially lethal genre of loneliness. As Millier and Roman have documented, acute cyclical problems with drink, with asthma, and with depressive despair dogged Bishop’s stay at Yaddo and her unhappy year in Washington, D. C. Although she would be bolstered during her tenure at the Library of Congress with long stays at Jane Dewey’s bucolic farm in Maryland, Bishop’s internalized homelessness and witness to the growing stigma of lesbianism likely added to her stress and estrangement.

It seems probable that Bishop was reckoning with her sexual identity just as the Cold War began to criminalize homosexuality (Roman 98). In 1950, the year in which Bishop served as Consultant to the Library of Congress, Senator McCarthy famously denounced the State Department for harboring homosexuals and, by his notorious witch-hunt logic, imperiling all U. S. citizens’ security (Roman 98; Faderman 141). McCarthy’s reign of terror, as Roman reports, would result in an acceleration of homosexuals’ dismissal from government service to an average of more than sixty employees per month. Hence, while assuming her first professional job at age thirty-eight, Bishop had
the additional, frightening pressure of potentially being accused of the “crime” of lesbianism and dismissed from office as a “security risk” (Roman 98).

Since homosexuality was conflated with the “perversion” of Communism in popular discourse and medicalized in the psychotherapy “conversion narratives” of the 1940s and 1950s, Bishop is likely to have felt vulnerable in the performance of both her personal and professional lives (Faderman 135). In one of her “Key West” notebooks from the late 1940s, Bishop took notes on Wallace Stevens’ *The Owl’s Clover* (1936) that suggest she was thinking seriously about the pressure of local politics on poetic discourse (VSC Folder 75.4, 1). On the first notebook page, Bishop has copied out a line from the fourth section of Stevens’ poem, “Mr. Bungalow and the Statue,” and has underlined its last phrase: “A time in which the poets’ politics will be a world impossible for poets, who complain and prophesy, in their complaint, and are near of the world in which they live” (VSC Folder 75.4, 1). Bishop may have felt too “near of the world” in the 1940s-1950s and endangered by her compunction to write with nuance about the empire in which she was a citizen, a non-combatant, and a federal employee (VSC Folder 75.4, 1). Bishop’s eloquent plaints in these decades would frequently bear the import of Stevensian “prophesy,” although typically within an epistolary (or another, similarly rhetorical) disguise.

A cryptic entry on the subsequent page of her Key West notebook (page two) suggests that she was keenly interested in the protective costumes a writer might assume in order to render “prophesy” without persecution. In the privacy of her notebook, Bishop sets forth the question of sexuality and public persona as a verbalist’s algebra problem.

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60 Stevens himself suppressed *The Owl’s Clover* after its publication, partially sublimating what was probably his most politicized book of poetry into the text of *Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937).
G. Stein’s reason for “concealment” of the “automatic” nature of her writings— or, is another form of her “concealment” of the “homosexual” nature of her life— False Scents, we all give off.

(VSC Folder 74.5, 2) 61

Bishop’s quotation marks around “concealment” and “automatic” ironize their veracity: the highly public “secret” of Stein’s automatic writing may have seemed to Bishop an ingenious ruse, one meant to detract attention from—or add mystique to—the “homosexual” nature of her life (VSC Folder 75.4, 2). In her use of “we all,” Bishop implicates herself as a manipulator of enabling, distracting mythologies. Thus, the epistolary conventions and personae that appear in Bishop’s mid-century poems could be considered part of Bishop’s own repertoire of “False Scents.” In her lyric letters she stages daringly erotic (and parodic) renditions of military postures and rituals; ripostes to heteronormative imagery; and queer takes on the Penelope/Ulysses archetypes of the soldier’s letter.

Beside this curious observation about Stein’s “False Scents,” a phrase suggestively close in sound to “False Sense,” Bishop includes another note on this page of her notebook that vaguely links a desire for metamorphosis to poesis.

Valid distinctions: to be to become to suddenly become [this line crossed out:] poetry insists that the differences are equal.

[a line is drawn from the word “homosexual” further up the page to the single, half-discernible line that follows:]

cf. Freud as “misplaced [indecipherable word, possibly “occult”]” in dreams

(VSC Folder 75.4, 2)

61 Jonathan Ellis also presents and discusses this notation in his chapter, “Exchanging Letters” (168).
In very few lines, Bishop suggests that poetry is in fact a synchronic discourse in which “being” and “becoming” can exist on the same ontological plane. Haunted as she was in the 1940s by a sense of inadequacy (and delinquency) in her “work habits,” in her barely controlled drinking, and in her loneliness, Bishop might have found some comfort in poetry’s equalized status of “to be” and “to suddenly become,” given the disorienting flux of her circumstances. If being is becoming, lyrically, then some spiritual evolution might occur on the page, contrary-to-the-fact of one’s actual existence.62

The personal metamorphosis Bishop seems to have desired would not be easy to enact, however, and the discordance in her life at this time is audible in her letters and in several of her letter-like poems. Whether Bishop addressed issues pertaining to her sexuality while at Blythewood is unknown; dissatisfied with the treatment she received there, however, Bishop would turn increasingly to correspondence as a space in which she could ameliorate her lonesomeness and confess her troubles with varying degrees of candor. Like her war-poet peers Karl Shapiro, Selden Rodman, and Randall Jarrell, Bishop found herself estranged in institutional settings—whether in the loose sociability of an artists’ colony or in the atmosphere of scrutiny and triumphalism in the nation’s capital (Miller 215-19; Roman 115-16). To perform her own Cold War service and to survive love’s “gentle battleground,” Bishop would rely upon the structuring intimacy of the letter to mitigate her isolation and to render the bewilderment of these years into organized narrative frames (PPL 61). Reading the curious, searching letters that Bishop composed during and after World War II against the letter and letter-like poems of A

62 Bishop’s obscured note about Freud, and the arrowed line drawn from “homosexual” to the Freud notation, suggests that she was familiar with Freud’s writings on homosexuality, a fact potentially relevant to understanding the homoerotic gestures in A Cold Spring.
Cold Spring reveals how the conventions of one genre readily transmogrified into the other, heightening the dialogical intimacy of Bishop’s narrative style.

Letters were a literal and literary tether for Bishop in her more acute moments of despair. When problems with drink and social anxiety hampered her circulation at Yaddo, correspondence was the medium in which she sought reassurance, psychic bolstering, and some narrative clarity about her life’s direction. In a particularly desperate letter to MacIver in July of 1949, Bishop confessed to fears of imminent dissolution: “I don’t want to be this kind of person at all but I’m afraid I’m [really] disintegrating just like Hart Crane only without his gifts to make it all plausible” (OA 188). Writing to MacIver again the following week, she resolved to repair the disorienting heartache that had precipitated her “troubles.” She insists, too, that she will cure herself without any further help from psychiatry: “… I suppose nobody’s heart is really good for much until it has been smashed to little bits. But no more doctors. I’m going to get my repair work done at the doll hospital from now on” (OA 191).

Bishop’s “doll hospital,” an evocative phrase she does not explain, might signify a collection of childhood catexes, the affective remainder that she would subsequently draw upon in poems such as “Sestina” and “In the Waiting Room,” and in memoirist stories such as “The Country Mouse” and “In the Village.” In these lyrical narratives (and narrative lyric poems), Bishop’s ghostly presences are conjoined with the memorabilia of nostalgia—“clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed”—objects that continued to haunt Bishop well into adulthood (PPL 118). Tellingly, epistolary themes and conventions appear in this archaeology of
childhood and in depictions of failed (or troubled) love, suggesting that they might share an origin in her poetic imaginary with the early, primary loss of her mother.63

Two explicitly epistolary poems in *A Cold Spring* address women who were of great importance to Bishop in her adult life: Marianne Moore and Louise Crane. Both of these poems, however, are informed by the implicitly letter-like mechanics of “Four Poems,” which serve as a keystone in Bishop’s architecture of an epistolary-lyric mode. “Four Poems” turns letter-like in its final section, “O Breath,” after the narrator has exhausted—or been thwarted—in other modes of discourse. Thus the poem offers a cross-sectional perspective on the evolution of Bishop’s dialogical style, a mode in which the letter is the phantom model. Initially, “Four Poems” reads as a diaristic meditation on a romantic crisis diffused into a dialect of Eliotic impersonality.

The tumult in the heart
keeps asking questions.
And then it stops and undertakes to answer
in the same tone of voice.
No one could tell the difference.
Uninnocent, these conversations start,
and then engage the senses,
only half-meaning to.
And then there is no choice,
and then there is no sense;

until a name
and all its connotations are the same.

(PPL 58)

63 Diehl convincingly reads the child-narrator’s epistolary homage in “In the Village” (1953) as a symbolic gesture that undergirds much of Bishop’s aesthetic: the child’s postal errands become the artist’s lyric letters, which repetitively displace or sublimate other grievous woes. Diehl argues: “At the heart of Bishop’s work lies a desire to make restitution, to find a compensatory gift that will make up to the wounded, abandoning mother all that her daughter has paradoxically lost” (108-09). Letters perform similar acts of ambivalent homage in poems such as “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” and “Letter to N. Y.,” in which the letter-poem functions as a distancing gift, inserting a narrative and seemingly necessary space between the sender and addressee. In both “Invitation...” and “Letter to N. Y.,” Bishop utilizes the personal letter as a miniature editorialized biography and as an instrument of relational negotiation.
While Bishop’s speaker cathects her heart’s riotous question-and-answer to a “name / and all its connotations,” her poem simultaneously resists nomenclature or any conclusive identification of the amorous subject. The speaker finds “there is no choice / and then there is no sense,” phrasing that echoes Bishop’s notebook observation, perhaps, about the “False Scents” and false “sense” (or reason) for Stein’s supposedly automatic writing and the open secret of her sexuality. Bishop, in fact, refers to the five senses earlier in this passage: “Uninnocent, these conversations start, / and then engage the senses” while she leaves us guessing as to the concrete situation—and the genders—of the speaker and addressee. Bishop’s own “False Scents” might be at work here, giving the casual reader but a “sixth sense” of her poem’s implications.

The slippage of nomenclature—what one calls an ambivalent lover, for instance, or the practice of forbidden love—is at issue in the poem and in Bishop’s notebook assessment of Stein. In both instances, dramatic tension centers on a writer’s (or speaker’s) attempts to articulate, to linguistically control, the power of a “name / and all its connotations” (PPL 58). Unlike the carpe diem letter-poems of Karl Shapiro, in which the returning soldier trysts unblinkingly with his beloved in the generalized warmth of suburbia, Bishop’s poem is not an attempt to persuade an identified, Penelope-like lover to amorous action or to envision a bower for their ultimate bliss. Instead, it performs the pained, painstaking work of trying to situate the speaker in sustainable (if unnamable) relation to the addressee. The rhetorical awkwardness of obscuring the genders in a physical love poem mirrors the apparent difficulties in the relationship itself. In this circumstance of “no sense” Bishop may have found “False Scents” quite necessary. While she uses the pronoun “his” once at the end of the poem’s third section (“might they
not be his green gay eyes”), the gender of the addressee remains unclear. Bishop’s skillful ambiguity is striking, especially since two scenes describe the boudoir and minute details of the beloved’s physique.

Ironically, the poem’s four sections demarcate four approaches to communication within the desperate, riven language of an estranged relationship. Here the letter makes an oblique appearance as the model for the poem’s final oratorio, the medium in which the speaker is most expressive. While the first section, “Conversation,” details a contentious, socratic debate within the speaker’s own heart, the second, “Rain Towards Morning,” inverts pathetic fallacy to depict the physical colloquy of bedfellows’ circular caresses and kisses as an interiorized rainstorm. The third section, “While Someone Telephones,” continues this trope of deflecting erotic weather and its attendant sorrows onto a natural landscape. The speaker intimates betrayal and a keen sense of angst while meditating on a stand of fir-trees from a bathroom window, where she reckons the trees’ “dark needles, [are] accretions to no purpose / woodenly crystallized” (PPL 59). Unable to overhear the telephone conversation indicated in the section’s subtitle, Bishop’s speaker hears only “a train that goes by, must go by, like tension.” Hence, without overtly stating the human circumstances, the speaker conveys the general tenor of her anxiety in a series of displacements (PPL 59).

The fourth and last section, however, features another form of communication altogether: a letter-like address of the sleeping lover and a meditative homage to her (or his) “loved [ ] and celebrated breast.” This sustained blason is akin to the circumstance of a soldier addressing his fallen comrade or enemy, a tableaux that often includes the soldier-speaker’s projection of fraternal feelings onto the body of the
deceased. Moreover, “O Breath,” in following upon “While Someone Telephones,” suggests Bishop’s preference for the courtliness and formality of the letter over the “barbaric condescension” of the telephone’s casual sally and reply (PPL 59). Addressed to the sleeping lover, “O Breath” reads as a realist’s billet-doux. It expresses tender sentiments, but within a rational and rationalizing frame of assessment.

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

ing [your own breath].)
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(PPL 59)

The lines’ spatial caesuras suggest the cleavage between the lover and beloved as the speaker engages in ekphrasis, noting the unlovely aspects of the “celebrated breast” in its boredom, gambles, “clamor,” and “nine black hairs.” This anti-Petrarchan, letter-like apostrophe of the beloved’s body recalls Shakespeare’s “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” although without the humoring in that stark sixteenth-century gaze. Instead, Bishop lends her reader the slight thrill of dramatic irony—and privileged voyeurism—in being privy to this bodily address of the beloved. Indeed, the anonymous reader is given a glimpse of the document the beloved might encounter belatedly in a pillow-note left by the bedside or, perhaps, in its poetically incorporated form. The speaker’s staccato qualifications, moreover, suggest the narrow and precise approach required by this tenuous relationship: one better managed in the formal purposefulness of a letter (or letter-poem) than by the telephone’s mechanical, casual ease.
About thirty years later, Bishop would expound meaningfully on the conventions of letter-writing versus telephoning in an unfinished review of Sylvia Plath’s *Letters Home* (1975). In her notes for this review, she states her preference for the decorum of the epistle.

Writing letters, not telephoning, is, or was, a bit like getting dressed up and going to the symphony concert instead of sitting at home in pajamas and listening to it on the radio: no matter how illiterate, ignorant, or inarticulate, once one takes a pen in hand, one has to make an effort; certain formalities are to be observed, unless one was either an eccentric or a literary genius. It may be a foolish notion, but I sometimes think that [anyone?] who wrote at all, who was not unalphabetic [sic.], wrote better, or at least found it easier to express himself straight off, when letter-writing was both important and common.

(VSC Folder 54.20, qtd. in Ellis 145)

Letters require the decorum of dress—of address—whereas “telephoning,” in Bishop’s view, is akin to listening to a symphony in one’s pajamas: it circumvents the letter’s staged politesse and written manufacture of personhood in favor of seemingly spontaneous exchange. If bedclothes are not adequate to the occasion of hearing a symphony, then the telephone—as a technology of spontaneity and happenstance interruption—is also inappropriate for certain kinds of discourse, including that of intimate life.

Bishop’s poem subtly juxtaposes communication in these two media. In “While Someone Telephones,” the section that precedes “O Breath,” the speaker invokes a painful moment of vulnerability spent waiting to “hear” or, perhaps, *overhear* a telephone conversation. Similarly, the speaker desires “the heart’s release,” embodied in the figure of some “relaxed uncondescending stranger” who seems to signify a desired declaration of feeling (PPL 59). While the dramatic action is unclear, the speaker’s
meditation takes place in a bathroom—the one private, unassailable retreat in a shared
house or circumstance. Indeed, the only other time Bishop’s poetry ventures to this
domestic locale is in “Roosters,” wherein the “water-closet” is tyrannized by the war-
mongering birds, whose crude invasion of private space is meant suggest, in Bishop’s
terms, “the essential baseness of militarism” (PPL 27; OA 96).

In “While Someone Telephones,” Bishop introduces the reader, albeit obliquely,
into the psychic violence of some unnamed shame: the humiliating vulnerability, perhaps,
associated with waiting for another’s feeling reply, for the “heart’s release.”

Wasted, wasted minutes that couldn’t be worse,
minutes of a barbaric condescension.
--Stare out the bathroom window at the fir-trees,
woodenly crystallized, and where two fireflies
are only lost.
Hear nothing but a train that goes by, must go by, like tension;
nothing. And wait:
maybe even now these minutes’ host
emerges, some relaxed uncondescending stranger,
the heart’s release.
And while the fireflies
are failing to illuminate these nightmare trees
might they not be his green gay eyes.

(PPL 59)

Having described the frights and ambivalences of the boudoir in the poem’s first two
sections, Bishop intimates, with modernist obliquity, a protracted interval of suspense:
her speaker “hear[s] nothing,” while waiting desperately for some response or indication.
The desired “release” seems contingent upon a resolution, or the appearance of “green
gay eyes” from the forest of indecision.

Curiously, on the heels of this vaguely narrated crisis—and a stint of waiting (or
hiding) with the speaker in the privacy of a privy—the poem turns to its letter-like, mock-
Petrarchan conclusion. Here, Bishop’s speaker addresses his/her sleeping bedfellow with the ambiguous pronoun “we,” a status of togetherness that has been carefully negotiated and, it seems, barely maintained. Meditating on her lover’s breast, the speaker assumes the posture of a soldier addressing a fallen comrade but with an unromanticized realism antithetical to soldier-poets’ usual expressions of homosocial fraternity. Bishop conflates the terms of war and wary reconciliation, depicting a genre of relational complexity absent in the tropes of popular war poets whom she knew, including Karl Shapiro and Selden Rodman.

Hence her speaker considers the “bargain” of ardor, depicting her lover’s breast as a seasoned croupier, an entity that “lives and lets / live, passes bets”; “bored” and “blindly veined,” the breast is marked with the “thin flying of nine black hairs /.../ flying almost intolerably on your own breath” (PPL 59). Deromanticizing the lover’s physique and the idealized project of love, Bishop’s speaker eventually states her wish

64 Shapiro’s poem, “Elegy for a Dead Soldier,” invokes this posture. In his narrative’s fourth section, he depicts the dying soldier metonymically in a tattooed arm outstretched to receive a transfusion. Death itself is characterized as a strange theatrical act, unbecoming to the life of the departing. “The end was sudden, like a foolish play, / A stupid fool slamming a foolish door, / The absurd catastrophe, half-prearranged, / And all the decisive things still left to say” (43). In Shapiro’s and Bishop’s poems, the body is described primarily through single parts, namely the “tattooed arm” and “celebrated breast.” Shapiro and Bishop both turn from physical description to abstract elaboration, switching (with varying degrees of dexterity) from the signifying somatic to the metaphysical.

65 In “V-Letter to Karl Shapiro in Australia,” Rodman addresses Shapiro directly, asking him whether warfare does in fact strengthen men’s fraternal bonds and heartfelt morality. “Tell me the score: Are men more nearly brothers / Under an iron heaven? Is the heart / ‘Made great with shot’—or hard? We soldiers, Karl, / Are lonely men who cannot be alone” (16). In the final passage of his poem, Shapiro adds: “Distance unites us. War engenders love / No less than hate: the edge of what we are / Tuned to a prop’s pitch on that terrible thinness” (17). Bishop radically questions such fraternal (or sororal) bonds on “the gentle battleground” of “Four Poems” and “Argument.” In the latter, Bishop’s speaker addresses a loved one from whom she is separated by “Days and Distance.” Seemingly, she directs her “argument” at time and space themselves, although the poem traces the shoreline of the addressee’s ardor: “dim beaches deep in sand / stretching indistinguishably / all the way, / all the way to where my reasons end?” (PPL 60). Unlike the typical soldier-poem’s emphasis on fraternity with fellow soldiers and on epistolary intimacy with a distant beloved, Bishop’s speakers are keenly aware (and even preoccupied) with the fissures in relational bonds. Human closeness in Bishop’s poetry is almost always scored with ambivalence and negotiation whether across a bedroom or across a continent.
for a “separate peace”: a rapprochement with the beloved that must be grammatically and
pre-positionally attained (PPL 60).

Equivocal, but what we have in common’s bound to be there,
whatever we must own equivalents for,
something that maybe I could bargain with
and make a separate peace beneath
within if never with.

(PPL 60)

The speaker depicts her lover’s temporarily felled body as a foreign territory: a
geography of desire that necessitates strategic grammatical deployments of intimacy such
as might be maintained in an epistolary relationship. In the poignancy of a desperate and
rationalized love, the speaker is willing to tailor her feeling “with,” “beneath,” and
“within” the limits of a narrowed erotic economy, within an “equivocal” connection.
Notably, the ardor the speaker describes has nothing of the spontaneous rapture of
Shapiro’s epistolary poems. Instead, this fragmentary, respiratory ode cautiously seeks
something “in common” with her companion’s “loved [ ] and celebrated breast” in an
act of effortful metalepsis.

The noticeable gaps in the lineation of “O Breath” suggest the asthmatic’s
staccato struggle—a chronic ailment that motivated many of Bishop’s peregrinations—
while underscoring the ontological impossibility of the speaker’s being “with” the
addressee (Lombardi 59-60).66 Unlike Shapiro’s beloved, whose love awaits him “snowy,
beautiful, and kind” and “spacious” as a suburban house, Bishop’s speaker hopes only for

66 Lombardi reads this section of the poem as a textual embodiment of the asthmatic’s difficulty and
of the estranged lover’s effort to speak around a dense network of inhibitions. “All we do see clearly is the
broken contours of this poem as it appears on the page—as though it were determined to speak though
under enormous pressure to hold back. The poem’s gasping, halting rhythms and labored caesuras mimic
the wheezing lungs of a restless asthmatic trying to expel the suffocating air” (59-60).
a careful truce, a “separate peace” with her beloved that will require the scissures and repressions suggested by her raspy lineation (“Sunday: New Guinea” 13; “V-Letter” 63). Moreover, in wishing to negotiate a “bargain” with the beloved, figuratively slain in sleep, Bishop recalls the resolving moment of another anti-aubade that similarly transposes the battlefield onto the boudoir: her anti-war poem “Roosters,” in which the rising sun is said to reveal the speaker’s bedfellow as “faithful enemy, or friend” (PPL 31). Ardor and enmity warily co-exist in both of these poems, wherein even the most intimate of human bonds requires compromise and risks betrayal. In Bishop’s verse, the enemy does not stand behind a foreign demarcated boundary, and may in fact share the bedstead.

Of Mail and Maquillage

Carefully obscuring the personae in “Four Poems,” “Letter to N. Y.,” and other “lesbian-focused” poems in A Cold Spring, Bishop remained chary of any identity-based qualification to her role as a poet (Roman 119). Or, as Marilyn May Lombardi writes, “She chose, instead, to cloak and recloak her own flesh, to cross-dress, displace, or otherwise project her most intense feelings onto a variety of poetic protagonists to escape the stifling categorization and conventional definitions of identity” (“Closet of Breath” 67). In his commentary on “Roosters,” James Longenbach asserts that it is Bishop’s “linkage of national and sexual aggression that marks it as a product of the Second World War” (41). Following on Longenbach’s observation, I would assert that Bishop’s portrayal of relational warfare—the plainclothes ‘battles’ of non-combatant life—distinctly marks A Cold Spring as a product of the Cold War, wherein the fighting front subsumed the domestic sphere in the national imaginary.
Epistolarity is a sustained style in Bishop’s wardrobe of rhetorical disguise: one in which the authorial persona is instated through an evocation of the addressee, a rhetorical interdependency that heightens the dialogic conceit of the lyric.

Foregrounding the poetic self as a nexus of exchanges, Bishop and several of her Middle Generation contemporaries would anticipate the epistolary metaphor of Jean-François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* (1979), in which he defines selfhood as a kind of ambulatory post office.

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. … one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent. (15)

Implicated in systems of receipt and delivery, Lyotard’s subject and Bishop’s mid-century narrators negotiate an interiority not as an absolute space, but as an agonistic theater, a zone of interpolations. In these postmodern models, selfhood is a set of ongoing dialogues and deliveries: a perpetuating system of correspondences.

Langdon Hammer reads the “privacy” in Bishop’s poetic post office as a queer means of achieving intimacy with her audience. This rubric emerges in the erotic and mock-martial poems of *A Cold Spring*, which ostensibly reflect Bishop’s relationships with the women who were her lovers, mentors, and companions. Hammer conjectures that

being a lesbian did not foreclose for Bishop an intimate relation to her reader. It meant that she had to create a relation (different from the one in confessional poetry) in which it would be possible for poet and reader to be alone together, safe from public exposure. That intimate relation is structured like the poet’s relation to the addressees of her letters, with whom she shared her solitude. (173)
In “The Bight,” a poem in *A Cold Spring* that Bishop subtitled “On my birthday,” the poet stylizes herself as the curator of “unanswered correspondences” (PPL 47). Meditating on the bight’s “untidy activity,” she compares ships beached from the last storm to “torn-open, unanswered letters,” an image that suggests the poetic and even psychoanalytic function of “letters” in her oeuvre (PPL 47). In many ways, the tenuous cheer in this birthday poem quietly heralds Bishop’s interest in a poetics of metaphysical sustenance and, increasingly, of human commerce—however belated the letter. The resolving image in “The Bight” of the dredge, with its “dripping jawful of marl,” intimates the surfacing of submerged material: what might reissue the beached boats and permit replies to the “unanswered letters.” Here Bishop signals a determination to engage in the “untidy activity” of the dredge and the harbor’s cycles, however “awful but cheerful,” and figuratively implicates letter-writing as a means of recovering from “the last bad storm” (47).

Not all the letters in Bishop’s *Cold Spring* are “torn-open,” however. In the title poem of the collection, Bishop uses letter-like address to flirt with direct erotic statement. The poem is dedicated to her friend Jane Dewey, whose Maryland farm served as Bishop’s retreat during her year at the Library of Congress (Roman 126-27).68 Bishop’s poem brims with imagery that personifies a tenderness barely kept inside the envelope.

Finally a grave green dust
settled over your big and aimless hills.

Four deer practised leaping over your fences.
The infant-oak leaves swung through the sober oak.

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68 The exact nature of Bishop’s relationship with Dewey is unknown. The two women had met in Key West, and Roman notes that during Bishop’s year in Washington their connection became “intense” (107-108).
Praising Dewey’s “big and aimless hills,” “white front door,” and “shadowy pastures,” Bishop lends a geography to feeling, eroticizing features of her addressee’s bucolic property in lieu of Petrarchan paeans to the beloved’s actual physique. Yet this natural description’s secondary register seemingly went unnoticed—or unacknowledged—by readers immured to the possibility of desire between women. Strategically unnamed and unassigned, Bishop’s poeticized ardor largely slipped past her contemporaries’ notice, a fact that Roman and other critics have rightly found “astonishing” (120).

With greater daring, other poems in *A Cold Spring* divulge scenes of acrobatic female prostitutes in Marrakesh (“Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance”), the washing of a woman’s hair (“The Shampoo”), an epistemology derived from marine “rocky breasts” (“At the Fishhouses”), and a love only possible in a “world inverted” wherein “left is always right” (“Insomnia”). The penultimate poem in the collection, “Arrival at Santos,” indicates Bishop’s shift to intimate themes: at the conclusion of this newsy travelogue, Bishop’s speaker signals a departure from such official correspondence and, in its place, the contrapuntal intention of “driving to the interior.”
Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap, but they seldom seem to care what impression they make, or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter, the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps—wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat, either because the glue here is very inferior or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once; we are driving to the interior.

(PPL 60)

Correspondence is destabilized in these figurative tropics, wherein “the heat” or the substandard glue does not assure the “stamps” of the speaker’s intentions or, more literally, the certainty of her letters’ deliveries. The speaker implies that like the “Ports…postage stamps, or soap,” she herself may no longer care “what impression” she makes (PPL 60). Signing off from long-distance epistolary engagements, the narrator declaratively leaves Santos for the “interior” of the Brazilian countryside and, metaphorically, for an inner terra incognita in need of exploration.

Tellingly, the poem that follows this unapologetic inward turn, “The Shampoo,” is one of Bishop’s finest love poems, and it reveals the narrative potency of extending the letter’s dialogic intimacy—and the quotidian matrixes of a tenderness—to a tertiary readership. The speaker reverses the haste and idealized household setting of the typical soldier’s letter-poem, inviting her addressee to have her hair washed in a tin basin out-of-doors. In the second stanza, Bishop’s speaker acknowledges her beloved’s “precipitate and pragmatical” appearance in her life; the surprise of shared ardor; and the semipeternal nature of their love.

And since the heavens will attend as long on us, you’ve been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.

(PPL 66)

While “Time” plays the villain in Bishop’s letter-poem, “I see you far away, unhappy,” inserting his “big hands” into the circumstances of human fate, here time proves an agreeable force, partial to the lovers’ hours. This description of benign temporality accords with the assertion Bishop makes in the first stanza, wherein she updates the carpe diem mode for the Einsteinian age such that earthly flora mirrors—and meets with—the lunar rings, an imaginative possibility in relativity’s new dimensions.

The still explosions on the rocks,
the lichens, grow
by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.
They have arranged
to meet the rings around the moon, although
within our memories they have not changed.

(PPL 66)

Bishop’s speaker proposes that “memories” and erotic ardor can be bent and extended in a space-time continuum exemplified by the “concentric” lichens’ encounter with the moon’s rings (PPL 66). In a metaphysical conceit apt for the Cold War—a conflict often figured as a careful courtship of alliances, and stoical perdurance—Bishop’s lines assert that there is both world and time enough for the “still explosions” that might be induced by a loving shampoo (Nadel 17, 30-31; PPL 66). Benignly reorienting the imagery of the Atomic Age, this gesture also seems indicative of the “idiom of care” that object-relations theorists have associated with the “reciprocal attunement” of a stable maternal or erotic
love, a condition Bishop seems not to have experienced until her arrival in Brazil in 1951 and her seventeen-year liaison with Lota de Macedo Soares (Benjamin 27).69

Within the context of Bishop’s collection, a poem like “The Shampoo” is only possible after the narrator has declaratively abandoned letters of reportage in “Arrival at Santos,” wherein the slippage of postage stamps allows for the breakdown of established correspondence and its attendant social responsibilities. Metapoetically, “Arrival at Santos” enacts the larger dare of Bishop’s volume: by including lesbian expressions of ardor in A Cold Spring, Bishop gambled that her letter-poems’ “postage stamps” would be “slipping away” and that the full import of her poems would not be recognized by New Critical arbiters nor subject to their notoriously punitive book reviews (Brunner 73-75).

Correspondence Schools

While it took Bishop several decades to navigate her sexual predilections and to explore erotic nuances in verse, it is clear that she knew early—or at least by her junior year at Vassar College—that she would depend on the technology of the letter to inscribe a necessary distance into some of her closest friendships and alliances. “I sometimes wish here that I had nothing, or little more, to do but write letters to people who are not here,”

69 From an object-relations perspective, the stability of parental attention and the mother’s ongoing responsiveness to a child’s needs largely determines the individual’s adult capacity for erotic play and reciprocal affection.
she wrote in 1934 to Donald E. Stanford, a Harvard graduate student and poet with whom she enjoyed about a year of flirtatious epistolary badinage (OA 11; Millier 51).  

Revealingly, Bishop curtailed her epistolary flirtation with Stanford in 1934 when she met Marianne Moore, the esteemed Modernist poet, and began an epistolary dialogue with Moore that supported—and substantively challenged—the conversion of her talent and ambition into the trajectory of a career. In May of 1934, Bishop graduated from Vassar College into typical post-collegiate anxieties about employment, companionship, and place of residence. Letter-writing was Bishop’s mainstay in this liminal state, an “interiorizing” geography in migratory years spent between New York, Florida, North Carolina, and Washington, D. C., with two additional trips to Europe (Moore in a letter to Bishop qtd. in Keller 418). Indeed, Jonathan Ellis argues that correspondence served Bishop in these years as both a psychic mirror and as a relational masque, returning a reassuring image of self to herself and to others that hid the disruptions of her drinking problems, her years of unhappy love, and her ongoing health difficulties. “Bishop,” Ellis asserts, “saw letters themselves as a home, a place to feel safe in. She wrote in search of home, rather than to an identifiable place and person” (145).

70 Remotely introduced by Ivor Winters, Bishop and Stanford exchanged poems, photographs, and witty repartee for several months before they met in person. Letters had obfuscated the disappointing immaturity that Bishop discovered in meeting Stanford, however; she reported to her friend, Frani Muser, that she found Stanford “very sweet but extremely young” (Millier 55). Thereafter, Bishop lost interest in him as an epistolary coquette. But as Langdon Hammer conjectures, Bishop’s dismissal of Stanford in 1934 might have had as much to do with her finding a superior candidate for her epistolary attention in Marianne Moore as it did her wish to avoid a heterosexual liaison in which she had little genuine interest (165).

71 Keller quotes from Moore’s letter to Bishop in May of 1938: “I can’t help wishing you would sometime in some way risk some unprotected profundity of experience; or since noone admits profundity of experience, some characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable. … I do feel that tentativeness and interiorizing are your danger as well as your strength” (418). Moore’s influence was likely part of the reason that Bishop’s work took on such “interiorizing” as the poems that constitute her first collection reliably transpose experience into impersonal structures imitative of Stevens, early Auden, and Moore herself.
While Ellis’s claim about Bishop’s epistolary home-making seems accurate, I will contend that the conjured addressees of Bishop’s letters and letter-poems are also critical to the conceit of their composition and, identifiably, to their tacit subversion of the gender roles and images presented in the traditional epistolary war poem. Bishop displays her skill as an epistolary ventriloquist in explicit letter-poems such as “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” where the speaker’s address of a specific other reveals, inversely, the corollary construction of her narrative persona, enriching the reader’s sense of the lyric as a social artifact, a formalized palimpsest of exchanges. To borrow Bishop’s phraseology, the epistolary poem foregrounds the lyric’s “getting dressed up” for the intersubjective “symphony” of the writer-and-reader’s encounter. From a Derridian perspective, and to the extent that the recipient completes the letter’s delivery—if not its original intention—the lyric letter also emphasizes the contingency of metaphor, the reliance of poetry on linguistic slippage, and the necessary complication of the subject/object, writer/recipient, male/female binaries that informed mid-century notions of genre, gender, and the proprieties attending literary and social form.

Bishop began drafting “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” in 1940, shortly after she and Moore had a definitive disagreement about the comprehensive revisions that Moore made to Bishop’s anti-war poem, “Roosters,” in October of that year (OA 96-97). Bishop’s “Invitation” showcases the lyric letter’s capacity for gender maquillage and interpersonal negotiation specific to a (real or elaborated) biographical occasion: in this case, Bishop’s gentle disinvitation of Moore’s role as her primary critic and reader. Indeed, the coordination of contraries and the campy hyperbole in “Invitation” reflect the poem’s origin in the psychodynamics of Bishop and Moore’s epistolary relationship as
well as in the wartime’s perceived testimonial imperative. These two forces—
interpersonal and historical—figured significantly in Bishop’s development of letter-like
apostrophe, a form of address she found conducive to mimicry and polyvocality.

Bishop’s epistolary ventriloquism parallels Eric Haralson’s two-fold definition of
“queerness” in the early twentieth century as a term that was associated with “the murky
dynamics of modern sexualities” while also suggesting “an internal heterogeneity… a
‘queer mixture’ of contraries” (5). Speakers in Bishop’s Cold Spring are reliably queer in
both historicized senses. Indeed, during the wartime crisis, Bishop effectively learned
how to “queer” others’ voices within her own, much like the canny alligator in her
famous poem “Florida” who “speaks in the throat / of the Indian princess” and inflects
“five distinct calls: / friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning” (PPL 25). As in
“Roosters,” wherein the barnyard birds incite “unwanted love, conceit and war,” Bishop’s
epistolary personae query—and, in many cases, queer—the misalliances of love and
embattlement, communion and conceit: binaries heightened in the hyperbolic
circumstances of a national crisis (PPL 28).

Bishop’s increasingly varied epistolary vocality is evident in her years of
correspondence with Moore, from which about 150 of Bishop’s letters and 200 of
Moore’s letters remain extant (Keller 407). In her scrutiny of this copious
correspondence, Lynn Keller concludes that Bishop’s letters to Moore, particularly in the
years of their most avid exchange, 1934-1940, constituted an “apprenticeship” in which
Bishop honed an epistolary mode that would suffuse her mature style. As a figure of
problematic “mother love” and literariness, Moore would become, in Millier’s
estimation, “without a doubt the most important single influence on Elizabeth Bishop’s
poetic career and practice” (125, 67). Forming an essential attachment to Moore, one
maintained by letters, Bishop replicates the gesture of her child-narrator in “In the
Village,” who acknowledges her institutionalized mother in her weekly deliveries to the
Great Village post office. Unlike the abandoning mother in Bishop’s story, however,
Moore was able not only to reply to Bishop’s epistolary “efforts of affection” but to
meaningfully respond to the seriousness of her ambition—a constitutive feature in the
enabling epistolary relationships that Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, and other war poets
maintained in the 1940s (PPL 471).

Bishop’s interest in the didactic capacity of letters and in the epistolary genre’s
possible succor of literary ambition tellingly intersect in her short and often overlooked
memoir, “The U. S. A. School of Writing,” which draws on experiences Bishop had in
1934, the same year in which she met and began her correspondence with Marianne
Moore (PPL 449-60). In her memoir, Bishop recounts working for a few months with a
shady “correspondence school” suspiciously housed in “an old tumble-down building
near Columbus Circle” in New York City (PPL 450). Hired as an epistolary instructor at
this “school” shortly after graduating from Vassar College, Bishop’s job entailed
conducting critical “analyses” of writing lessons completed by the school’s mail-order
subscribers, a heterogeneous group that included “cowboys… ranch hands… [a]
sheepherder… sailors… [a] Negro cook… a petty officer on a submarine and a real
lighthouse keeper” (PPL 456-57). Working within the prescribed “lessons” of the
writing school, Bishop replies to her students with a rudimentary, commercialized

72 Bishop recounts being endeared by her students’ letters, especially those from Mr. Jimmy O’Shea
of Fall River, a seventy-year old gentleman who writes in giant, Gertrude Steininan script, and practices the
special art of making “exactly a page of every sentence” (PPL 459).
version of the tailored encouragement she had begun to receive in generous doses from
Moore. Hence “The U. S. A. School of Writing” provides a portal into Bishop’s formal
fascination with the letter, with epistolary pedagogy, and with the thrilling license of
adopting epistolary personae, including those with a “slight transvestite twist”
(“Exchanging Hats” PPL 198).

Somewhat comically, Bishop is required by her employer at the U. S. A. School
to use the epistolary pseudonym “Fred G. Margolies,” the name of a former instructor, in
all of her correspondence with students. Yet Bishop expresses no discomfort with this
epistolary cross-dressing. In fact, she reports that she likes writing to strangers with the
friendly authority of an avuncular male. Bishop discerns from her students’ letters that
Mr. Margolies must have been a kindly, encouraging instructor, and she tries to mimic
his persona. “I felt I’d probably like to keep on being Mr. Margolies, if I could,” she
admits with campy winsomeness (PPL 450). “In fact, for a long time afterwards I used to
feel that the neurotically ‘kind’ facet of my personality was Mr. Margolies” (450).

In addition to Bishop’s evident enjoyment of this gender-bending impersonation,
the faux-national affiliation of “The U. S. A. School of Writing” subtly satirizes the
liberal notion that any democratic citizen could become a writer through a mail-order
education and, secondarily, the notion that a broadly participatory national literature
would in fact be desirable. In many ways, this memoir—which Bishop wrote in 1966—
suggests her suspicions about democratic liberalism, the justice of capitalism, and the
likelihood of “high” culture’s accessibility to the uneducated. Depicting herself in the
memoir as formerly one of Vassar College’s “puritanically pink” alumnae, Bishop
intimates that her sympathies for Marxist causes were tempered by her experience of mass-market epistolary education (PPL 456).

Bishop’s memoir of this dubious correspondence school echoes the playful epistolary cross-dressing and critique of nationalism in her wartime letters to Moore in which she effectively establishes a “queer” relation to patriotic poetry and to compulsory heterosexuality. Unlike the generalized encouragement that Bishop, writing as “Mr. Margolies,” tried to offer her epistolary students in the “U. S. A. School,” Moore used her letters to Bishop as a monitory rostrum in which she didactically espoused modernist, Presbyterian, and chivalric scruples. Often, Moore explicitly encouraged Bishop to adopt a stronger moralistic agenda in her stories and poems. In a letter from 1937, for example, Moore urges her protégé to strengthen the overt ethical import of her poetry: “…[A] thing should make one feel after reading it, that one’s life has been altered or added to…. I wish to say, above all, that I am sure good treatment is a handicap unless along with it, significant values come out with an essential baldness” (qtd. in Keller 418). Appointing herself the younger poet’s editorial guardian, Moore took an almost proprietary interest in Bishop’s career, giving her detailed criticism on her poems and stories, arranging for her first anthology appearance in *Trial Balances* (1935) and, upon the publication of *North & South*, giving Bishop’s first collection a handsome review in *The Nation* (406).

As Bishop’s poetic star began to ascend, however, Moore became increasingly controlling, wishing to tailor Bishop’s emerging sensibility. Betsy Erkkila asserts that Moore had essentially taken “charge of Bishop’s work… [b]etween 1936 and 1940, she revised, edited, commented on, and sometimes even typed final drafts of the work that Bishop sent to her” (113). Bishop’s effort to individuate her voice while accepting
Moore’s advocacy is played out in the dynamics of their epistolary “gift exchange” of poems, critique and counter-critique, exotic objects, and fussy expressions of familial concern. Given Moore’s well-documented effort to “conscript” Bishop in her “battle-dressed” program of modernist feminine restraint and Christian morality, it would take all of Bishop’s tactical forbearance and epistolary skill to maintain this relationship while she attained the confidence of her mature style (Erkkila 104).

The “queer” space that Hammer identifies in Bishop’s letter-poems is operative in her correspondence with Moore: a zone of gender playfulness, guarded intimation, and oblique subversion that productively complicated Bishop’s aesthetic. From the beginning, Moore and Bishop’s epistolary relationship had a Ulysses/Penelope-like tenor as they consciously or unconsciously appropriated these gender roles from popular culture, from a dichotomy reinforced by both world wars. In April of 1935, for example, Bishop writes to Moore suggesting a double-date with her erstwhile lover, Louise Crane, and with Marianne’s mother as the elder chaperone.

The friend I have been visiting [Louise Crane] is coming to the city this weekend, and she has a very large safe car. We wondered if possibly we could persuade you and your mother to permit yourselves to be driven to Coney Island for supper, on Monday night? We went down last Sunday, and it was really very nice, although a weekday is probably better. We thought we could start about four-thirty or five, which would give us time for a merry-go-round ride or two before supper. I have found a merry-go-round there which I hadn’t noticed before, one with particularly

73 In their epistolary dialectic, experience provides a friendly contest for its descriptive imprisonment in elaborate, particularized, surprising description. It is also evident that Moore gave especial attention to the letters she received from Bishop as literary compositions and as reflections of the younger poet’s evolving persona. Bishop reports that when she told Moore that she was seeing a psychoanalyst in the 1940s, it was “one of the very few occasions on which we came close to having a falling out” (“Efforts of Affection” PPL 498). While Moore’s distaste for psychoanalysis was presumably a “moral” one, it is also likely that Moore may have seen Bishop’s analyst as a threat to her own directing influence or as a possible diversion of her protégé’s daughterly affection.
pleasing horses, I think you might like. My friend is an awfully good driver and I shall request her to go just as fast or slow as you prefer. . .

(OA 33)

As in her very first letter to Moore, in which Bishop famously invites the older woman to the Ringling Brothers’ Circus, Bishop proposes an outing to Coney Island, in which all the activities have been properly assessed beforehand. Bishop’s invitation seems designed to preempt Moore’s concerns for safety, over-excitement, or excess of adventure. In proposing a “merry-go-round ride or two” before dinner, Bishop entices her older mentor with a modicum of entertainment and the promise of control: Bishop assures Moore that she will be able to direct their driver (Louise Crane) in exactly how fast they travel in the “very large safe car” (OA 33). In this particular instance, Bishop assumes the courtly carefulness of a young gentleman seeking the attentions of a delicate young woman and the approval of her mother. In playful response, Moore often styles herself as a paradigmatic Penelope: a virtuous celibate, a devout Presbyterian, and an acolyte of Victorian proprieties whom Bishop had to coax to enjoy New York’s seemingly perilous adventures.

Bishop parodies Moore’s fearful caution in her epistolary poem, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” when she cites the city’s “accidents… malignant movies… taxicabs and injustices at large” and promises that the “weather is all arranged” (PPL 64). Bishop’s caricature, however affectionate, depicts Moore as a figure of melodramatic anxieties and possible agoraphobia. Her preemptive, poetic attempt to mollify Moore’s objections, moreover, is a gesture that had characterized their relationship virtually from the beginning. In “Efforts of Affection,” Bishop describes her first date with Moore, for which they arranged to meet at a bench outside the third-floor reading room in the New
York City Library, their subsequent outings to films and readings, and Bishop’s visits to Moore and her mother at their eccentric Cumberland Street apartment in Brooklyn (PPL 492). The “manners and morals” of these activities would be replicated—and negotiated—in their decades’ long correspondence, a sustaining element in the relationship of these two fairly reticent women (Erkkila 107; “Efforts…” PPL 499).

Bishop’s letters to Moore during World War II trace Bishop’s eventual separation from Moore’s supererogatory influence in an epistolary discourse that was arguably as formative as Shapiro’s wartime correspondence with Katz, his fiancée and editorial arbiter. In her missives, Bishop used Moore’s keenly attentive audience to try out different responses, practical and aesthetic, to the crisis of the war; Keller correctly observes that Bishop’s experimentation in these letters with her voice and style was a way of “testing her audience’s response in preparation for more public forays” (414). Moreover, Bishop and Moore’s fluid masquerade of roles and modes—Ulysses/Penelope, maternal/filial, properly Presbyterian/dangerously secular—hints at the greater degree of play, of ‘queer’ space that Bishop inculcated in her letters and letter-like poems as she formulated an idiosyncratic response to wars hot and cold, filial and erotic (Kent 175).

As Benjamin Kahan and Kathyrn Kent have asserted, Moore and Bishop’s relationship does not fit the maternal/filial model to which it has been frequently assigned. Kahan describes Moore’s “celibate engagement” as a constitutive enabling factor in her tutelage of Bishop (523). Kent, however, identifies a “queerness” in Moore and Bishop’s relationship in the surplus of emotive and affective bonds within the charged verbalist play of their letters and encounters (175). Bishop’s and Moore’s epistolary relationship certainly had its own sets of referents and fluid innuendos, which
suggest an intimacy in excess of the maternal/filial dyad: one based on a mutual contest of identifications. Kent wagers that Moore and Bishop’s play within (and against) traditional roles was the generative fulcrum of their creative liaison.

… it is precisely the slippage between mother and “others” that is so powerfully productive of the new identificatory erotics between women in the late nineteenth and, in this case, the early twentieth century. In some ways Moore may have mothered Bishop, or at least viewed their relationship in this light, but to restrict readings of their relationship to this easy appellation denies the complexities and the power of the fact that it was precisely because Moore was not a mother and Bishop was not her daughter that so much of the productive, queer, and wonderfully powerful valences of their relationship could exist at all. (175)

In the absence of a strictly familial or heteronormative bond, Moore and Bishop structured and amended a relationship outside of—and in recombination with—the given social scripts of mother/daughter, mentor/protégé, and Ulysses/Penelope roles. Their richly complex, poetically generative connection manifests elements of courtship, flirtation, and contestation as recorded (and enacted) on their epistolary stage, a theater that Bishop profitably extends into her published poems.

Much like her projection of forbidden desire onto the charged landscapes of “A Cold Spring” and “The Shampoo,” Bishop provides an analogue to her epistolary masquerade with Moore in the ventriloquism that appears at the end of “Florida” (PPL 43-44, 66, 24-25). In this poem, included in North & South, Bishop describes America’s iconic land-of-leisure as a place of insidious beauty, of moribund and meretricious ornamentation. The whole state of Florida, Bishop concludes, is “the poorest post-card of itself”: it is inherently unable to hide its ugliness, even in the miniature communiqué of the postcard (PPL 25). At the end of the poem, Bishop localizes this critique on the figure of the alligator, that wily inhabitant of Florida’s islands, of the Everglades’ mountains
and swamps, and of various backwoods menageries. Curiously, Florida’s existence as a kind of cheap postcard is epitomized in the alligator, whose language of “calls” includes the mimicry of “the Indian princess,” who was presumably once a victim of his appetite or, to historically extend the metaphor, a victim of colonial soldiers’ libidinal desires. After dark, the pools seem to have slipped away. The alligator, who has five distinct calls: friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning—whimpers and speaks in the throat of the Indian Princess. (PPL 25)

Unlike Moore’s virtuous animal creatures—“The Octopus,” “Pangolin,” and “The Paper-Nautilus”—Bishop’s alligator bests his environment’s “poorest / postcard” to practice epistolary-like mimicry, a language of “calls” that structures his relations along appetitive lines: platonic, erotic, martial, and monitory. In many ways, the alligator is a negative caricature of Bishop’s darkly maturing voice with its polyvocal strains. Indeed, as she gained dexterity in issuing her own highly coded “calls,” Bishop would defy the Modernist/Christian/chivalric triad of Moore’s tonality to practice her own alligator-like range of vocality. In a letter dating from May of 1936, Bishop writes to Moore about their postcards, verbal and pictorial, and their epistolary rivalry of description. Your careful appreciation of my post-cards always shames me—I’m afraid I won’t have really made this trip at all until I have lured you into commenting on every bit of pictorial evidence I can produce. (qtd. in Keller 414)

Bishop suggests that epistolarity completes the circuit of experience; without the challenge of describing the flora and fauna of Florida to Moore (such that Moore herself
can characterize them) Bishop wagers that she will not “have really made this trip at all.” Moore’s “careful appreciation” of Bishop’s postcards, moreover, evinces the letter’s function in their relationship as a means of submitting experience to the rigors of co-articulation. In Moore’s commentary on Bishop’s postcards, their correspondence assumes a shuttle-and-loom collaborative integrity as well as a narrative rivalry about who might best evoke the geography of a scene, character, or local mood.

The drama of Moore’s exacting nurturance and Bishop’s gradual rebellion is discernible in their correspondence as early as February of 1937, when Moore chides Bishop for her hesitation in showing Moore a draft of a new short story. “Your considerateness in wondering how things may be regarding another’s choice of occupation is much felt by me, but you should let me see all that you do” (qtd. in Keller 420). Ultimately, Bishop and Moore’s “lifelong, complex, and embattled” connection reached its clarifying crisis in relation to World War II and the seeming ethical imperative for all American poets, of any or aspiring consequence, to register a declarative response: a daunting task for Bishop as a closeted lesbian lyric poet with pacifist and socialist leanings (Erkkila 101). While Shapiro’s primary epistolary relationship had enabled him to frame and reify his experiences of war service, Bishop’s wartime letters to Moore from Key West are riddled with angst and a discernible struggle to position herself, psychically and psychologically, in relation to the war’s hyperbole, its “terrible generalizing of every emotion” (OA 113). Bishop’s discomfort with the heteronormative binary reinforced by wartime rhetoric is one likely cause for her silence: “daunted creatively” by the war, she published nothing at all in 1942 or 1943 (Travisano 73).
“The Ethics of It All…”

Bishop was essentially displaced from her peaceful home in Key West as World War II “literally sprang up in [her] backyard” with the U. S. Navy’s construction of barracks for new employees in the vacant field directly across from her house on White Street (Roman 55). In September of 1940 Bishop confessed to Moore a growing sense of desperation. “I shall probably stay a few weeks someplace [. . .] to see if I can’t get something done that will make me feel better able to face my friends. The [war] news seems to fill me with such frantic haste and I am so worried about what may come of Key West” (OA 93). Bishop keenly felt her inutility in the mobilized economy that simultaneously drew middle-class women into the workforce and recruited poets to perform the patriotic music of “Pindar’s brass drum” (Pound qtd. in von Hallberg 4). Clearly, too, Bishop’s search for a quiet home in which to conduct poetic work had a social component: she did not wish to appear at leisure—or worse, at fretful loggerheads—within the war’s domestic ambience of dedicated, participatory labor.

Internalizing this necessity to “get something done,” Bishop turned to the study of poets’ letters as she tried to fashion her own sincere poetics of war witness (OA 113). In September of 1940, she reports to Moore that she is reading Rilke’s Wartime Letters, an epistolary account that she found “terrifying, but full of wonderful things” and, in July of 1941, Bishop mentions that she has also been reading Henry James’s “Letters (the autobiographic ones) all week,” and that she is “particularly impressed with the War [sic] letters” (OA 92, 103). Following the attack on Pearl Harbor (December 11, 1941), Bishop’s anxieties were on alert; her worries about national and household security
intermingle in her missives. In several letters, Bishop seeks Moore’s advice about
whether she should take leave of her island home, made noisy and bothersome by the
accelerated operations of the Navy base.

… I am rather depressed about Key West—and my house—just now [three weeks
after the Pearl Harbor attack]. The town is terribly overcrowded and noisy (at
least on White Street) and not a bit like itself. It is one of those things one can’t
resent, of course, because it’s all necessary, but I really feel that this is no place to
be unless one is of some use. They are talking of evacuating the civilians… I
haven’t given up the idea of South America. I’m not a bit sure of the ethics of it
all—what do you think? If the government stops issuing passports, I guess I’ll
stay.

(OA 104-05; emphasis added)

It is clear that Bishop was concerned about staying on in Key West where, not actively
employed by the war effort, she felt of no “use.” Yet she also worried about the “ethics”
of taking off for Mexico—with the wife of a Navy officer, no less—while so much of the
country was actively mobilizing. Without mentioning the amorous complications in her
life, or her awkward positioning as the lesbian lover of an official “Penelope” (Marjorie
Stevens), Bishop seeks Moore’s guidance on a publicly propitious course of action.

Over the next few years, Bishop essentially took two approaches to the wartime
crisis of testimony: the public expectation that all Americans of mild fame or distinction
would demonstrably ally themselves with the war efforts of the U. S. military (Schweik
60). For a brief interval in 1943, Bishop temporarily joined the domestic ranks by
working in a Navy optics shop. As Millier relates, Bishop was employed for about five
days before it became clear that the assigned task of grinding binocular lenses
exacerbated her eczema and asthma, and strained her eyesight (117; Keller 425). Though
she was forced to quit for these health reasons, Bishop’s post facto letters to Moore
proudly depict her service as a covert infiltration of the gargantuan institution of war.

Anxiously noting that this short-lived employment “hasn’t proved I couldn’t work, I trust,” Bishop reports on her insider’s glimpse of the Navy’s activities and on the wartime gender divide (OA 116).

But I’m glad I tried it. It was the only way of ever finding out what is going on in Key West now, seeing the inside of the Navy Yard and all the ships, and learning lots of things I had no idea about before. It took three whole days of red tape to get in, before I could wear a large tin button with my photograph on it and ‘Industrial Worker’ printed underneath, and it is taking me at least two weeks to get my ‘honorable discharge.’

... I don’t believe I could bear office workers, in whose ranks the labor board are very eager to place me. They seem to comb their hair and file their nails most of the time. The men I worked with were all sailors. They worked in their undershirts and were all, every single one, heavily tattooed. I’ve never seen so much tattooing, some very interesting Oriental varieties, too. The foreman was a great big Scot—a sort of Spencer Tracy type—who was endlessly patient in teaching me, and called me ‘kiddo’ and ‘sis.’... they really worked awfully hard and I never saw anyone idling and I was infinitely impressed with the patience of these men fiddling day after day with those delicate, maddening little instruments.

... Thank you for returning the grade C-minus poem [unidentified]. Does that mean I should send yours back? I’ve always held on to them like—a barnacle. I want so badly to get something good done to show you. I don’t know what the obstacles are or why I don’t really take up lens grinding. (OA 115)

Bishop’s Whitmanesque epistolary style includes a child-like vaunt about her infiltration of the Navy, and her stated preference for the company of tattooed sailors over the ranks of the aggressively groomed secretaries. In its air of jejune sophistication, Bishop’s description alternately has the tone of a daughter seeking maternal approval, a poetry tutee guiltily reporting to her mentor, a self-ironizing “Industrial Worker,” and a homespun spy. Proudly, she reports her resistance to the Navy bureaucrats’ eagerness to
place her in a secretarial position: abjuring the ranks of the well-coiffed and endlessly manicured, Bishop reports that she enjoys the company of the “great big” sailors.

As Kent and Kahan note, Moore herself frequently asserted resistance—in public comments, in the anachronistic costumes of her dress, and in poems such as “And Shall Life Pass an Old Maid By?” and “Marriage”—to gendered stereotypy of her persona.74 Wearing her bright red hair in braided coils and, in her last and most spot-lit decades, a “George Washington” outfit of a black cape and tricorne hat, Moore seemed to create her own standards of comportment. Her physical style and poetics defied the historicity of gender (and genre) norms in amalgams of her own design (Kent 180-81).75

Kent observes that Moore practiced “gender fluidity” in her epistolary personae as well, and that she refers to herself as “the Uncle” in letters to her mother and brother Warner (Cristanne Miller qtd. in Kent 186). Bishop also would partake in this queer epistolary play. After writing to Moore with a description of her Naval service in 1943, Bishop builds upon her established Ulysses-like role to cheekily request that Moore pose as her “pin-up girl” (OA 117). In essence, Bishop invites Moore to send her a sexually charged photograph as Penelope-like sweethearts were wont to send soldiers in order “to

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74 Kahan reads Moore’s ingeniously disjunctive poetics and subversive dress as part of her “celibate engagement … [with] progressive politics,” which included a positive recuperation of the “spinster,” historically maligned as a barren signature of parsimony, an icon of failed development, or a harbinger of death (529).

75 Bishop reports that when she first met Moore, who was then forty-seven, she was wearing “a blue tweed suit… a man’s ‘polo shirt,’ as they were called, with a black bow at the neck” (PPL 473). Of this assemblage, Bishop remarks: “The effect was quaint, vaguely Bryn Mawr 1909, but stylish at the same time” (PPL 473). Both antiquated and, in the manner of a women’s college at the turn of the century, vaguely subversive, Moore’s costumes seemed deliberately contrived to unsettle preconceived expectations, much like the schemata of her syllabic poems’ “unique, involuntary sense of rhythm” that Bishop attributes to Moore’s psychological and physiological idiosyncrasy in “Efforts of Affection” (Kent 183-184; “Efforts” PPL 486).
encourage” them during World War II (OA 117; May 139-40). Bishop also coyly reports that news of Moore’s activities has reached Key West, and that excited gossip about Moore’s spectacular appearances—poetic and corporeal—is circulating among their mutual New York friends.

I’ve had quite a bit of news of you from various sources the last few days, but the most important was that you were, or had been, sick—and I think Loren [MacIver] said *bursitis* but I’m not sure. [. . .] She also said that in spite of it you gave a talk at the Library, which she and Margaret [Miller] and [E. E.] Cummings enjoyed very much.

[. . .]

Then Margaret wrote me about seeing you at the Calder show opening—described a beautiful pale blue dress, taking pictures, etc., and asked me if I had seen a poem about ‘Elephants’ in *The Nation*. I must see it, also the one in the Oscar Williams anthology, but I guess I can wait until I get to New York, eager as I am. Please don’t dream of bothering to satisfy my curiosity now, will you? What Margaret said about the pictures reminded me again, though, that I wish I could have one, too, sometime. Please, won’t you be my pin-up girl?

(OA 117)

This moment of laughable gender play catches Bishop adopting the “Ulysses-like” role of a tattooed Naval officer to flirt with Moore, whom she casts as an elegant, reserved Penelope. As Elaine Tyler May notes, the typical “pin-up girl” of World War II fame was a fairly traditional-looking Hollywood star such as Betty Grable, who was much praised for her “rather wholesome look” (140).76 Hence, Bishop’s flirtation with Moore seems unlikely to have offended her. It also coincides with Kahan’s reading of Moore’s celibacy

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76 May observes that Betty Grable’s popularity only increased when she got married during the war and that Grable encouraged young American women to send their soldier-sweethearts photographs of themselves in bathing suits, images that would presumably “inspire them to fight on and come home to an erotically charged marriage” (140). Moore, of course, made a “wholesome” look the mainstay of her public persona and her poetry, particularly after her editorship of *The Dial* (1925-29), a position that marked the beginning of her ascent in national public life (Molesworth 208-46).
not as failed homosexuality or a “periperformative” identity, but as a legitimate
“organization of pleasure” and a sexuality of autonomous “strength” that defined her
social persona (521, 510, Moore qtd. in Kahan 513).\textsuperscript{77}

In her letters’ innuendo-laden banter, Bishop recombines the mentor/protégé,
mother/daughter, Modernist/postmodernist, queer/celibate modalities in which she and
Moore exchanged their currency of poems. Within a masquerade of wartime gender
personae, Bishop subtly intimates her own sexual predilections while teasing Moore
about her reserve in sharing poems or photographs. Kent argues that Bishop and Moore,
in occupying a rhetorical space outside of heterosexual, reproductive marriages, could
safely play with (and from) a closet of sexual personae. “Bishop seems to have existed in
a kind of implicit ‘I know that you know’ agreement with her friends,” Kent posits (183).
“Both women [Moore and Bishop] were engaged in a much more subtle form of
acknowledgement/ disavowal of one another’s identities” (Kent 183).

The impish import of the question Bishop directs at Moore (“Please don’t dream
of bothering to satisfy my curiosity now, will you?”) formally recurs in the first stanza of
“Letter to N. Y.” Bishop dedicated this letter-poem to Louise Crane, the wealthy heiress
of the Crane Paper Company who was her friend and erstwhile lover. Yet “Letter to N.
Y.” also describes the city with which Moore was commonly associated and makes use of
the “‘I know that you know’” representation of queerness that appears in the innuendos of

\textsuperscript{77} In the introduction to his biography of Moore, Charles Molesworth rues that he was not able to
quote from Moore’s then-unpublished correspondence, an epistolary record that scholars have since begun
to utilize. Shortly thereafter, Molesworth notes: “Moore never, as far as I can tell, had an affair or a lover.
Yet, paradoxically, Kenneth Burke called her one of the most sexual women he ever met. He meant, I
think, that she was fully aware of all the dimensions of experience, physical and mental” (xxii). Burke’s
comment lends additional ground to Kahan’s reading of Moore’s distinctive status as a “celibate celebrity”
inhabiting a sexuality disarticulated from sexual acts (513).
Bishop’s and Moore’s correspondence (Kent 183). Chronically misread as one of Bishop’s more trivial lyrics, “Letter to N. Y.” features an explicitly epistolary scenario in which the letter-writer urges her addressee to detail her nocturnal adventures in the metropolis.

In your next letter I wish you’d say
where you are going and what you are doing:
how are the plays, and after the plays
what other pleasures you’re pursuing.

(PPL 61)

Within these seemingly light and sing-song lines, Bishop intimates an ongoing epistolary relationship: from the addressee’s “next letter,” the speaker hopes to glean full knowledge of Crane’s “going” and “doing.” Invoking “the plays” twice in the third line, Bishop’s speaker (or letter-writer) suggests that attending a Broadway show or a cabaret might induce the pursuit of other “plays” and other unspecified “pleasures.” As additional contextualized analysis will reveal, Bishop essentially experiments with epistolary drag in this letter-poem. Much like her letters to Moore, Bishop works specifically with (and against) the rigid gender personae of the daring Ulysses-like soldier, whose masculinity is affirmed in his confrontation with danger, and the demurring Penelope-like homebody, who is entirely innocent of any high jinks, sexual adventure, or the twilit pursuits of “plays” and “other pleasures” (PPL 61).

To make a full reconnaissance, however, of the theatrical drag in Bishop’s letter-poems, it is necessary to revisit Bishop’s earliest parody of wartime gender tropes in her publication of “Roosters” in the New Republic, a gesture that effectively disrupted and resettled the epistolary—and actual—boundaries of her relationship with Moore in 1940-1941. Although Bishop’s “Roosters” offers an oblique critique of total warfare, it
established her position as a war poet among her peers. Several contemporary critics such as Margaret Dickie and Victoria Harrison have read “Roosters” more generally, as indicative of Bishop’s engagement with warfare as a trans-historical allegory for all human conflicts. Indeed, Dickie reads Bishop’s depiction of warfare as a transposition of the defining struggles in the poet’s own life.

Distanced as her poetry might have been from the wars she knew, Bishop invariably interjected into the subject of war and political upheavals some concern of her own—troubled sexual relations, conflicted love affairs, personal misery… [she] wrote one of the most powerful antiwar poems [with “Roosters”] and also placed conflict not just between men as soldiers, but between lovers, between different classes and races, between servants and mistresses, at the center of so many of her poems. (160)

In more recent assessments of Bishop’s generation, however, critics such as Camille Roman and Steven Gould Axelrod have praised “Roosters” for its revealing historical particularity. Axelrod terms it “the most brilliant poem to emerge from WWII” and one centrally engaged in the politics of the 1940s—and, hence, not merely a general anti-war polemic or a dramatization of “some concern” from Bishop’s personal life (Axelrod 21; Dickie 160). Thus, while some critics have read “Roosters” as Bishop’s retort to all wars, there are grounds for considering Bishop’s poem primarily as a specific, coded response to the United States’ domestic climate in the years leading up to the Second World War. Bishop’s roosters crow a condemnation of a particular species of warfare germane to her historical moment and poetic apprehension: one based on a misalliance between Christian mythos, masculine bellicosity, the impersonalized devastation of aerial bombardment, and the institutionalized subjugation of women in marriage.

Bishop parodies the gendered virtues of wartime—of masculine aggression and feminine sexual forbearance—in her depiction of the “raging” and “uncontrolled”
roosters and their downtrodden hens (PPL 27). She also complicates and extends this barnyard allegory of gender relations with a Biblical gloss on the Apostle Peter’s denial of Jesus (PPL 29). Viewed in connection with the major poems of *A Cold Spring*, it seems likely that Bishop depicts Peter’s panicked betrayal of Jesus in order to enliven the predicaments of wartime’s testimonial imperative: the felt necessity of declaring one’s allegiances to empire, divinity, and Christian values. In depicting Peter’s disloyalty as a “sin of spirit” and the prostitution of Magdalene as a “sin… of the flesh alone,” Bishop problematizes the wartime dichotomy of Penelope’s sexual virtue and Ulysses’ rational conscience. This secondary narrative reinforces Bishop’s association of a heterosexual libidinal economy with the homicidal hysteria of war (PPL 29). Indeed, Bishop’s covert subject in “Roosters” are the birds’ “wives” who sadly “lead hens’ lives” of being “courted and despised” (PPL 27). Despite performing “Penelope-like” roles of home front support, submission, and sacrifice, these “hens” meet no redemptive or transcendent end: instead, they are “flung / on the gray ash-heap” of an unceremonial bier, where they join their death-silenced husbands (Roman 14; PPL 27).

As Millier and others have delineated, “Roosters” proved to be the denouement in Bishop and Moore’s epistolary tutelage; their disagreement about this poem essentially closed down their “correspondence school.” Reading Bishop’s draft of “Roosters” in the fall of 1940, Moore strenuously objected to Bishop’s use of “water-closet” and ironically suggested retitling the poem “The Cock,” seemingly without an awareness of the word’s vernacular meaning (Erkkila 125). With her mother’s assistance, Moore

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78 Bishop would send Moore unpublished work a mere five or six times in the next decade, no longer relying upon Moore’s review before deeming a poem or story complete (Keller 424). Whenever Bishop did subsequently share her work with Moore, Keller notes that Moore curtailed and softened her criticism, “no longer produc[ing] long lists of suggested changes” (424).
manually un-wrote the poem’s tercets, changing the rhymes and lineation, and removing some stanzas altogether (Keller 423). According to Erkkila, Moore and her mother stayed up all night to make corrections to Bishop’s draft and, with an air of emergency, mailed their revised version back to Bishop the next morning (125).

In her epistolary reply, Moore urged Bishop to embrace “the heroisms of abstinence,” a phrase that seems directed at Bishop’s conflation of warfare and sexuality (qtd. in Keller 423). Tactfully, but with a new and certain definiteness, Bishop declined to adopt Moore’s editorial suggestions. In a letter from Key West, she carefully set forth the terms of her dissention.

I cherish my ‘water-closet’ and other sordities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. In the first part I was thinking of Key West, and also of those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland or Norway, when the Germans took over, and their atmosphere of poverty. That’s why. . . I want to keep ‘tin rooster’ instead of ‘gold,’ and not use ‘fastidious beds.’ And for the same reason I want to keep as the title the rather contemptuous word ROOSTERS rather than the more classical THE COCK; and I want to repeat the ‘gun-metal.’ (I also had in mind the violent roosters Picasso did in connection with his Guernica picture.)

[. . .]
It has been so hard to decide what to do, and I know that esthetically you are quite right, but I can’t bring myself to sacrifice what (I think) is a very important ‘violence’ of tone—which I feel to be helped by what you must feel to be just a bad case of the Threes [a reference to the poem’s tercets]. It makes me feel like a wonderful Klee picture I saw at his show the other day, The Man of Confusion. I wonder if you could be mesmerized across the bridge to see it again with me?...

(OA 96)

In this act of disobedience, Bishop reset the boundaries of her relationship with Moore: in choosing to “cherish” the “‘water-closet and other sordities’” of her poem, Bishop asserts an authorizing version of self-love, a protective amo

originally fashioned it. And the poem is distinctively Bishop’s own: drawing synthetically on the palette of Picasso’s “Guernica” and from “aerial views” of towns in Norway and Finland suffering under German occupation, Bishop forged her own nightmare imaginary of modern warfare (OA 96-97). Violent dreams of weaponry, wounds, and refugees recur in Bishop’s notebooks from the 1930s and 1940s, and subtly appear in the surreal imagery of “Sleeping Standing Up” and “Songs for a Colored Singer.” This record suggests that Bishop had been meditating—in her waking and sleeping hours—on the human nature of warfare long before the Pearl Harbor crisis, long before she was moved to crystallize a radical “relational reading of history” in “Roosters” (Harrison 87).

The truculence of battle literally invades the boudoir in Bishop’s “Roosters” when lovers abed are startled at four o’clock in the morning by the “uncontrolled, traditional cries” and “virile presence” of these barnyard creatures (PPL 27, 29). Listening to the roosters’ incendiary calls, Bishop’s speaker conjures a nightmare tableaux of the birds’ war-mongering, including their demand that all civilians “‘Get up! Stop dreaming!,'” an imperative that seems to forbid excursions in the unconscious. The poem’s homicidal atmosphere completes its invasion of the lovers’ intimate space in the concluding stanza when, in an intensification of the *alba* trope, the sunlight literally “climbs in” to the lovers’ bed where it will remain, “faithful as enemy, or friend” (PPL 31). Here friendship and enmity hinge contrapuntally on a comma, suggesting a radical instability at the heart of all human relations, however trusting or close. The conflation of violence with lovers’ relations in “Roosters” illustrates how Bishop’s mid-century aesthetic works against the simplistic binaries established in the epistolary war poems of Shapiro and Rodman, in
which the realm of domestic love resides at the antipodes of worldly violence, a peaceful reward for the soldier’s perdurance of human cruelty.

As Erkkila notes, Bishop began composing “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” directly following the “Roosters” debacle as if to complete the half-begun task of redefinition—and disinvitation—that attended this moment of their relationship and its epistolary dimension (131). In fact, Bishop’s actual letter to Moore about “Roosters” contains the likely epigenesis of “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”: at the conclusion of her missive, Bishop wonders if Moore might be “mesmerized across the bridge” to see the Klee exhibit. This invitation to travel across the Brooklyn Bridge reappears in the published “Invitation” as the poem’s incantatory refrain: “From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning, / please come flying” (PPL 63). Given Moore and Bishop’s epistolary skirmish about the nature of “Roosters,” Bishop’s subsequent poem might seem a peace-offering, a Moore-knows-best acknowledgement—that is, if the letter-poem were sincere. Instead, Bishop grants her mentor a facetious epistolary tribute to her correctness, grammatical and moral, and one built upon a queering of a traditional V-Day parade. Conflating Moore’s righteousness and otherworldly airs with jingoist fanfare, Bishop refutes a genre of Pollyanna naiveté that might accompany a nationalistic parade or obscure the actual violence of human relations.
An Empire of Epergnes

While the conclusion of World War II foreclosed Shapiro’s intensive epistolary exchanges with Katz, his amatory arbiter, for Bishop and Moore it was the commencement of the war that served as the denouement of their epistolary tutelage: global conflict drew their personal and political differences into undeniable opposition. In “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” Bishop undertakes the repair work needed to substantiate and abridge the shifts in their personal alliance. Hence, “Invitation” firmly differentiates their personae while parodying the trappings of a V-day celebration and its pro patria figures. Bishop’s epistolary poem, wearing the fey colors of satirical disguise, undercuts Moore’s authority by allying it with the suspect powers of imperialism, the secondary target of the poem’s critique.

“Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” has often been read as “subversively celebratory”: an ironic portrait of Moore as a storybook witch, a moral didact, or a curator of personal oddities (Gilbert and Gubar 211; Erkkila 133). Superficially, Bishop’s poem seems a positive tribute to Moore as a decorous champion of morality and verse, a feminine Eisenhower. Invoking wartime displays of heroes, weaponry, and the occasional captive, Bishop’s first stanza rattles all the bells and whistles.

From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning, please come flying. In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals, please come flying, to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums descending out of the mackerel sky over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water, please come flying.

(PPL 63)
Bishop conflates Moore’s belletristic flourishes with the sanitized bellicosity of military parades, figuring Moore as a mock atomic bomb of “fiery pale chemicals” and subsequently (in the seventh stanza) as “a daytime comet” (PPL 64). Moreover, the “drums” and “grandstand,” recruited from the natural elements of sea and sky, initiate a parody of Moore’s nature-oriented parables and the creatures of her anthropomorphic menagerie.

Like one of her valiant, slightly absurdist elephants or jerobas, Moore appears in Bishop’s “Invitation” as a triumphant V-Day figure. Here Bishop draws upon the tradition of the victory parade (and its accompanying poetic odes) as a cultural practice that dates back to Roman antiquity, when generals marched through the capital, brandishing their spoils and enchained captors. Bishop cleverly tropes this *mise-en-scène*, playing Horace to Moore’s risible Augustus.

> Whistles, pennants and smoke are blowing. The ships are signaling cordially with multitudes of flags rising and falling like birds all over the harbor. Enter: two rivers, gracefully bearing countless little pellucid jellies in cut-glass epergnes dragging with silver chains. The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged. The waves are running in verses this fine morning. Please come flying.

(PPL 63)

Bishop assembles the accoutrements of a military festival—whistles, pennants, smoke, and flags—as she implores her notoriously cautious mentor to “come flying” from her home in Brooklyn (an apartment Moore shared with her aged mother) into the restless heart of Manhattan. Although downtown New York is elsewhere figured in Bishop’s
work as a locale of peril, mercenary love, and lurking danger (e.g., “Varick Street” and “Letter to N.Y.”), Bishop sweeps these associations aside, promising to greet Moore with all the psycho pomp and ornament of a military parade.

Like the ineffectual melody of the Air Force Band in “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” the celestial parade Bishop offers Moore is only superficially celebratory. In the poem’s next, barely subcutaneous layer of meaning, Bishop inscribes a satire of Moore’s otherworldly airs, armaments, and costume “of butterfly wings and bon-mots, … [and] angels all riding / on the broad black rim of your hat” (PPL 63). Dressed in metaphysical kitsch, Moore is also described (in the sixth and fifth stanzas) as an empress of “dynasties of negative constructions,” and a conversationalist who plays “at a game of constantly being wrong / with a priceless set of vocabularies” (PPL 64). These allusions to Moore’s prohibitive grammar signify a career (and a public persona) conditioned by its refusals, including her status as a “celibate celebrity” in her middle and later years (Kahan 513). At times, Moore’s disengagement from the heteronormative economy seems to have invited critics’ dismissal of her poetry as psychically insufficient; in 1945, for example, Randall Jarrell sharply criticized Moore for her popular war poem “In Distrust of Merits,” which he disparaged as a shallow gloss on the complexities of evil and the legacy of the Holocaust (44-45).79

79 Jarrell reviewed Moore’s collection Nevertheless (1945), which contained her famous response to the war, “In Distrust of Merits.” Lodging his complaint in an animal fable (of a jeroba) designed to mock Moore’s own, he adds this stinging conclusion: “We are surprised to find Nature, in Miss Moore’s poll of it, so strongly in favor of Morality. … To us, as we look skyward to the bombers, … [she] calls Culture and morals and Nature still have truth, seek shelter there, and this is true; but we forget it beside the cultured, moral, and natural corpse…. At Maidanek the mice had holes, but a million and a half people had none” (qtd. in Schweik 45). Schweik notes that Jarrell’s review “employs… an underlying image of an oblivious woman, ‘timid’ and ‘private-spirited’ in her patterned garden while war rages around her, a figure whose presence pervades literature about women’s roles in wartime” (46).
Bishop registers her own disapproval of Moore’s politics more subtly: cheerfully describing Moore’s “Mounting the sky with natural heroism,” Bishop suggests that this method of transport enables her to fly over the twentieth century’s more troubling ontological questions (PPL 64). In Bishop’s poem, Moore appears to worry instead about the trivial nuisances of urban modernity—“the accidents… the malignant movies, / the taxicabs and injustices at large” while listening to a “soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer” (PPL 64). In the organization of this stanza, Bishop intimates that Moore’s “uninvented music” is an avoidant melody, a set of Romantic headphones that drown out the automotive “horns” of the city traffic and the feckless ways of the metropolis. Hence, Moore is beckoned to “come flying” far “above the accidents” and the microcosm of happenstance that is a city sidewalk, an appeal that suggests Moore’s narrow, other-worldly, and ahistorical perspective (PPL 64).

As in Bishop’s actual epistolary invitations to Moore, Bishop promises her chary mentor that she will not fall victim to meteorological caprice, crime or danger. Strenuously, Bishop assures Moore that she will find the weather, waves, “Facts and skyscrapers” fittingly arranged for her triumphant flight across the skyline (PPL 64). Experience itself will be “arranged” and hence sanitized of worldly occurrences. In these mollifications, Bishop depicts Moore’s sensibility as simultaneously enabled and disoriented by the delusions of her moralizing will.

Drawing upon her classical training and likely familiarity with triumphal odes such as Horace’s famous “Nunc bibendum est,” Bishop also parodies Moore as an imperial war hero, a portrait that addends Bishop’s derision of bellicose passion in the “senseless order” and a “raging heroism” of the “Roosters” (PPL 27, 29). Instead of
leading a manacled Cleopatra through the streets of Rome in a triumphal march, however, Moore will lead “countless little pellucid jellies dragging with silver chains” across the Hudson’s tributaries (PPL 63). Traveling in “cut-glass epergnes” (or the long-armed table centerpieces used to hold flowers, sweetmeats, or fruit) these jellyfish, with their generally inconsequential sting, are further emasculated by their encasement in Victorian furniture. Hence as the captor of domesticated jellyfish and, in stanza five, the placator of the lion statuary outside of the New York Public Library, Moore appears to be a dotty pedant, the tamer of stone “wildlife,” and the dominatrix of tiny marine invertebrates. Caricaturing Moore’s persona, Bishop situates her as the Noah of a rather strange ark.

In the third stanza, Bishop turns meaningfully to Moore’s physical person, depicting her mentor in the “George Washington Crossing the Delaware” costume for which she became well-known (Kent 181). Kent convincingly interprets Moore’s George Washington costume as a “cross-gender” claim to poetically “father” America and, in this way, to place “herself outside the norms of bourgeois femininity and reproductive heterosexuality, allying herself instead with a vision of queer cultural reproduction” (181). In Bishop’s description of Moore’s outfit, she hints that Moore’s costume makes an impotent claim to federalist fatherhood, and evinces a rather decorative sense of valor.

Coming with each pointed toe of each black shoe trailing a sapphire highlight, with a black capful of butterfly wings and bon-mots, with heaven knows how many angels all riding on the broad black brim of your hat, please come flying.
Bearing a musical inaudible abacus
a slight censorious frown, and blue ribbons,
please come flying.

Facts and skyscrapers glint in the tide; Manhattan
is all awash with morals this fine morning,
so please come flying.

(PPL 63-64)

Bishop depicts Moore not in the stars and stripes of a general, but wearing actual stars,
bon mots, butterfly wings, and angels. These otherworldly accessories, with their
allusions to the feminine spaces of the drawing room, garden, and chapel, serve to
undercut Moore’s investiture of George Washington’s iconic leadership and virtue.
Instead of bravely crossing the Delaware in the colonial war for independence, Moore is
invited to cross the Hudson to Manhattan, which is “awash with morals” or duly scrubbed
up for her arrival. And instead of facing the formidable foe of the dynastic British empire,
Moore will confront “dynasties of negative constructions” in discourse itself. Bishop
proposes that these hierarchies of linguistic negation will in fact begin “darkening and
dying” with Moore’s approach (PPL 64). Thus Moore’s verbal imperialism, however
formidable, is essentially conquered in the text of Bishop’s epistolary poem, which
repudiates Moore’s influence in a gentle satire of its vanities.

The concluding stanzas of the poem intimate the specific strains in Bishop and
Moore’s relationship, tensions elsewhere revealed (and manipulated) in their epistolary
exchange. Occupying the role of a Penelope inviting her Ulysses’ triumphant return,
Bishop delimits Moore’s mock-martial power as a costume shop of gestures, ungrounded
in historical realities. Hence, instead of singing of “arma virumque” (arms and the man),
Bishop’s epistolary mock-epic sings of a woman and her self-disarming armaments, a
repertoire that includes “a musical inaudible abacus / a slight censorious frown, and blue ribbons” (PPL 64). In a series of epic catalogues of Moore’s person, Bishop pokes fun at Moore’s syllabic rhymes, her generalized air of disapproval, and (in her “blue ribbons”) a jejune notion of merit. Similarly, the epic adventures that Bishop’s letter-poem proposes hardly require daring; indeed, they suggest that Moore’s “natural heroism” is based upon a strange form of aggrandizing abnegation: a magisterial, hieratic anti-heroism.

We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping, or play at a game of constantly being wrong with a priceless set of vocabularies, or we can bravely deplore, but please please come flying.

With dynasties of negative constructions darkening and dying around you, with grammar that suddenly turns and shines like flocks of sandpipers flying, please come flying.

Come like a light in the white mackerel sky, come like a daytime comet with a long unnebulous train of words, from Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning, please come flying.

(PPL 64)

Proposing that they “play at a game of constantly being wrong / with a priceless set of vocabularies,” Bishop glosses the endless “game” of incorrectness that attends Moore’s casual, poetic, and epistolary uses of language. The populist didacticism of Moore’s mid-to-late career reappears even more dramatically in the final stanza, when Bishop invites her to fly “like a daytime comet / with a long unnebulous train of words” in route to the empyrean (PPL 64).
Bishop’s depiction of Moore as a sky-writer of “unnebulous” messages is her last and perhaps most riddling taunt. It might imply that Moore is less a poet than a self-appointed prophetess or propagandist: a messenger whose import can be reduced to the slogans of skywriting, a newly popular advertising technique in the 1930s, particularly along the New York skyline. Deriding Moore in this way, Bishop obliquely defines herself in the negative space unoccupied by Moore’s persona. To Bishop’s credit, her own poetic strengths would increasingly reside in preserving the nebulousness of words: in allowing for the play of all seven ambiguities, in training her discursive eye/I on externalized inscapes to startling effect.

“Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” exemplifies the ways in which Bishop used epistolarity and the letter-poem to conduct a virtually life-long reconnaissance of the borderland between self and other, tracing along the seam of the intersubjective. While some critics have read in Bishop’s “apparent objectivity and naturalism… a dismissal of any sense of a unified self,” the epistolary poems of this middle period arguably assert and validate the very processes of individuation: or how a lyric narrator might recognize, with equal measures of liberation and horror, that “you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth, / you are one of them” (McCabe 3; “In the Waiting Room” PPL 150). In thinking about the appearance of epistolarity in twentieth-century fiction, Ann Bower notes: “Letter writers, ‘real’ or fictitious, attempt to create and revise both self and addressee; they must believe they have this power or they would not write. … In the private space of letters, women, so often silenced in public life, have personal freedom in which to rewrite the self and even, sometimes, to rewrite others” (5). If the letter is, as Bower suggests, an historically feminine space of negotiation, Bishop effectively broadens the gestalt of gender personae
within this space. Alternately occupying Penelope and Ulysses-like roles, Bishop claims the *auctoritas* of soldier-poets such as Karl Shapiro and Selden Rodman in their conscription of the letter-poem to depict romantic eros, fantasies of private enclosure, and the dynamics of homosocial bonds.

“Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” mimics the courtly address and solicitation of Bishop’s actual letters to Moore seeking out her company or advice; yet, it is also an incisive satire of Moore’s “manners and morals” and the fixity with which Moore assigned notions of propriety, dress, and worldly order to her would-be disciple. Hence “Invitation” occupies the liminal (and typically renegade) space of the public letter, a forum that Bishop’s cohort Robert Lowell used to establish his status as a conscientious objector to World War II in 1943 and, decades later, to officially decline his invitation to attend an artists’ forum at President Lyndon Johnson’s White House (Hamilton 87; 320-321). While Bishop’s disinvitation expresses some affectionate regard for Moore’s quaintness of thought and presentation, its ultimate task is individuation from her mentor’s abiding influence. The poem’s epistolary form (and self-characterizing invocation of the other) captures the multiple valences of Bishop and Moore’s relationship, and the ways in which letters brokered the relational richness and generative complication of their dynamic.

**Letters to Louise**

Bishop seems never to have written explicitly to Moore (or to several of her other, fairly intimate correspondents) about the nature of her relationships with her lovers
Louise Crane, Marjorie Stevens, or Lota de Macedo Soares. Such reticence may have served Bishop as an epistolary closet with a half-opened door: a structurally tacit implication of her romantic alliances. In the Moore-Bishop correspondence, however, especially during the early and most intense years of their correspondence, this is a noticeable lacuna in their epistolary intimacy. Keeping the nature of her troubled love life out of view may have been a strain for Bishop since she sought Moore’s advice about most other aspects of her life, especially between 1936 and 1940.

In actuality, Bishop’s professed crisis about the Navy’s invasion of the island occurred alongside another traumatic event, one associated with the rise of lesbian subcultures in major American cities during the war years. Bishop had been close friends with Louise Crane, the heiress to the Crane Paper Company fortune, since before their days at Vassar College, where Crane was known to be as lively a companion as she was undistinguished a student (Roman 33). Crane and Bishop took several extended trips together after their graduation. Following a particularly enjoyable series of fishing expeditions in Key West, the couple decided to purchase a house there in 1937 (Roman 76-77). Very shortly after the purchase, however, Crane began spending increasing amounts of time in New York City, mixing with members of the jazz demimonde. Eventually, it became clear to Bishop that Crane was infatuated with the Blues singer Billy Holiday and had no intention of returning permanently to Key West or, presumably, to resuming an intimate life with Bishop (Roman 77). In her letters to Moore, Bishop makes mention of Crane’s extended absences.

[N]ow… all [is] very quiet and hardworking, particularly since Louise has gone North for a couple of weeks. She seems to be a magnet for all odd people, animals, and incidents.
(OA 80)
In a letter to Moore some months later, Bishop suggests her temperamental difference from Crane and their mild estrangement, invoking a Ulysses/Penelope economy of roles.

… Louise came down a week ago today, full of New York news, but also fatigue, so that she slept most of the time since arriving… and we are just beginning to get the benefits of her New York experiences now. (OA 89)

Although Bishop relates her vicarious Penelope-like enjoyment of Crane’s adventures, these unchaperoned trips were also the cause of Bishop’s heartbreak. When Crane definitively broke off their romantic relationship in July of 1941, it supposedly left Bishop depressed and suicidal (Fountain and Brazeau 86).

An acquaintance of Bishop’s, Mary Megis, who subsequently became one of Crane’s New York lovers, explains the double-walled taboo that existed for her generation, a code of silence that may have exacerbated Bishop’s suffering.

Elizabeth and I belonged to a generation of women who were terrified by the idea of being known as lesbians, and for Elizabeth as a poet, the lesbian label would have been particularly dangerous. One of the side effects of lesbians’ fear of being known to the world was our fear of being known to each other, so that a kind of caution was exercised (certainly it was by Elizabeth) that no longer seems necessary today. (Fountain and Brazeau 86)

In Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, Lillian Faderman describes the thriving lesbian subculture in urban centers during the war, a new night-life that included the appearance of all-lesbian bars and nightclubs such as the “181 Club” on New York City’s Second Avenue (127). Urban cafes and drive-ins also became known as likely locales for homosexual rendezvous, a circumstance Bishop plays upon in “Letter to N. Y.,” the epistolary poem in which she seemingly transmutes her broken liaison with Crane into a Ulysses/Penelope dynamic.
Traditionally misread as one of Bishop’s slighter poems, “Letter to N. Y.”
undercuts the experiential (and temperamental) divide between the soldier-adventurer and
the domestic-homebody as fixed, polarized positions mitigated only by the institutional
force of heterosexual marriage (Schweik 106). Most conspicuously, “Letter to N. Y.”
places the “Penelope” figure in the authoring position, reversing the gendered subject-
object (writer-recipient) coordinates in the traditional epistolary war poem. Initially, the
letter-writer appears to express sincere concern for an urban Ulysses’ pursuit of city
“pleasures” in an atmosphere of moral (and sexual) dubiousness.

In your next letter I wish you’d say
where you are going and what you are doing;
how are the plays, and after the plays
what other pleasures you’re pursuing:

(PPL 61)

Citing the addressee’s “next letter,” the speaker invokes an on-going epistolary
relationship and, in a wistful tone, the “wish” to have her curiosity satisfied by postal
dispatch. As the letter-writer presses her addressee for the details of her social calendar,
she masks quasi-libidinal interest in puerile echolalia: the music of a playground taunt or
a street-corner ditty. Alliterative and repeated words give these lines their aural skip:
“going…doing,” “plays…after the plays,” “pleasures…pursuing” (PPL 61). The
jauntiness of these sound devices render, in ironic mimicry, the supposed innocence of a
Penelope figure eager to know the urban soldier’s engagements, all of her “going… [and]
doing” (61).

In anticipation, however, of the peccadilloes forthcoming in Crane’s “next letter,”
Bishop’s letter-writer also reveals less-than-innocent knowledge of the night life she
ascribes to her addressee, complicating her stance as an innocent homebody. As Altman notes, “depending on the writer’s aim, the letter can be either portrait or mask” and in Bishop’s “Letter to N. Y.,” the epistolary narrative catches the letter-writer in the falsity of her masquerade: in her detailed projection of her addressee’s activities, she betrays her likely knowledge of the nocturnal adventures from which she supposedly demurs (43). A worldly narrator peeks from behind this Penelope mask as the poem continues in its mock-accusatory vein.

\[
\begin{aligned}
taking cabs in the middle of the night, 
driving as if to save your soul 
where the road goes round and round the park 
and the meter glares like a moral owl, \\
and the trees look so queer and green 
standing alone in big black caves 
and suddenly you’re in a different place 
where everything seems to happen in waves \\
and most of the jokes you just can’t catch, 
like dirty words rubbed off a slate, 
and the songs are loud but somehow dim 
and it gets so terribly late…
\end{aligned}
\]

(PPL 61)

The letter-writer depicts Crane as an urban Amazon, sampling from the night’s possibilities. Intensifying the anticipatory drive in this epistolary apostrophe, Bishop structures the first five stanzas as a single headlong sentence wherein she mimics Crane’s frantic activity in antic grammar: a barrage of gerunds (“going,” “doing,” “pursuing,” “taking cabs” and “driving”), a fusillade of adverbs (“where,” “what,” “how,” “what,” and “where”), and the anaphora of “and,” which introduces more than a third of the lines in the poem. The effect of this grammatical parataxis—with references to shows, taxi-
cabs, jokes, and songs—is an atmosphere of continual movement: a restlessness for which Louise Crane was well-known (Millier 139-140).

Bishop’s letter-writer conjures the potential “danger” of the addressee’s activities more through these stylistic postures than through sheer narrative content. Yet in her reference to Crane’s “driving as if to save your soul,” the letter-writer hints that Crane may have hijacked a taxi-cab or, at the very least, urged its driver to speed. The second and third stanzas heighten this sense of daring with the taxi-cab meter that “gleares like a moral owl” and the riders’ sudden arrival “in a different place.” These details build upon the poem’s subtext: the “dangers” associated with the urban lesbian subculture of the war years. When Bishop’s letter-writer accuses Crane of “driving… / where the road goes round and round the park / and the meter glares like a moral owl,” she might be referring to the vigilance with which suspected homosexuals were monitored in the Cold War. Crane is among those women whose desires are literally off the metered economy of heteronormativity. Bishop’s park trees, “so queer and green,” also suggest some arboreal wildness unassimilated into the heterogeneity of city life.

The conclusion of “Letter to N. Y.” shifts to a morning-after scene as the letter-writer chides Crane for her risqué evening. Much as in the anti-aubade at the conclusion of “Roosters,” the coming of daylight does not inspire a lover’s lament but rather suspicion of the beloved’s fealty.

and coming out of the brownstone house
to the gray sidewalk, the watered street,
one side of the buildings rises with the sun
like a glistening field of wheat.

-- Wheat, not oats, dear. I’m afraid
if it’s wheat it’s none of your sowing,
nevertheless I’d like to know
what you are doing and where you are going.

(PPL 61)

Bishop features the addressee’s departure from an anonymous residence with some intimation of shame—that affective state in which, as Eve Sedgwick claims, “the question of identity arises most originarily, and most ‘relationally’” (qtd. in Haralson 12). As the addressee leaves a nameless “brownstone house,” she encounters the city street “watered” or cleansed of its grit and nocturnal debris. Striking a mock-pastoral note, the letter-writer states that one side of the building “rises with the sun / like a glistening field of wheat,” a parody of the carpe diem mode, which in the literality of Horace’s metaphor involves a speaker’s urging an addressee to carnally “harvest the day.”

Bishop’s letter writer sounds like a bromide-toting aunt—or a miffed Penelope—when she comments wryly, “if it’s wheat it’s none of your sowing” (PPL 61). Here the allusion to illicit sexual adventure is unmistakable: reinventing the heterosexual agrarian metaphor of a young man “sowing his wild oats,” Bishop’s letter-writer reiterates her initial appeal for information, for knowledge of the recipient’s “doing… [and] going” with a half-sincere air of prudence (PPL 61). Reversing the current of the traditional epistolary war poem—with its rigid poles of male and female experience, the soldier’s declarations of ardor and the beloved’s mute loyalty—Bishop’s “Letter to N. Y.” portrays the tensions in a lesbian relationship in which the addressee plays the “soldier-like” role and the letter-writer voices the (typically silent) perspective of the Penelope-figure, one concerned with her partner’s welfare and fidelity.

Unable to freely relate her disappointments in love in her otherwise candid letters to Marianne Moore, Bishop used the popular Ulysses/Penelope personae of the epistolary
war poem to comically deflect this source of pain. Inscribing the circumstances of her
split with Crane in child-like rhymes, Bishop half-hid her heartbreak in the queered roles
of the adventuring soldier and the neglected sweetheart awaiting the “next letter.”
Lamenting that the “wheat” of her partner’s ardor has been sown elsewhere, Bishop’s
epistolary poem daringly intimates its likely biographical coordinates.

Aside from its possible personal redress, “Letter to N. Y.” also offers a subversive
critique of the rigid, heteronormative, and potentially lethal gender roles of soldier-
warriors and their Penelopes. Like “Four Poems” and “Invitation to Miss Marianne
Moore,” Bishop’s “Letter to N. Y.” daringly places a Penelope-like speaker in the
authoring position, reversing the gendered subject-object (writer-recipient) coordinates in
the traditional epistolary war poem, extending Bishop’s queer voice into its own
triumphant register.
CONCLUSION

In “The Eye of the Outsider” (1983) Adrienne Rich’s iconic review of Bishop’s *Complete Poems*, Rich recounts her experience of reading Bishop’s poetry as “a still younger woman poet… looking for a female genealogy” (125). With the discerning honesty that often marks her assessments, Rich describes feeling “drawn” but also “repelled” by the hard-surfaces of Bishop’s *North & South* (1946) and specifically by elusive masterpieces of shapely sublimation such as “The Imaginary Iceberg” and “The Map,” poems that seemed to Rich “intellectualized to the point of obliquity” (124-5). In these early architectures of sensibility, Bishop pays homage to instances of autotelic and moribund beauty. Hence her conjured iceberg “cuts its facets from within” and, “Like jewelry from a grave, / saves itself perpetually” (PPL 4). A curatorial and proleptically elegiac impulse governs much of Bishop’s first collection as if each polished “poem-as-artifact” were threatened by an ebb tide of loss: a neurotic undertow that supplies the singular tear of the “Man-Moth” and suffuses the lachramatory music of “Anaphora,” “Songs for a Colored Singer,” and “The Weed” (Rich 125; PPL 10, 39, 36, 6).

While Bishop’s early poems often rescue symbolic meaning from the waters of its daily erosion, they simultaneously question the dualism of such a metaphysic. In “The Map” for instance, the speaker wonders whether “the land [is] tugging at the sea from under / drawing it unperturbed around itself” (PPL 3). On the unstable ground of such perception—and in concert with the subterranean currents of emotion—the poet locates
the geography on which she tests her Orphic powers. Thus in “The Map,” the speaker admires the pell-mell spillage of towns’ and cities’ names across the map’s mountains and oceans, a typographical gesture she links to those human instances in which “emotion too far exceeds its cause” (PPL 3). Here, in the first poem of Bishop’s first published collection, the interplay of naming text, signifying picture, and underground feeling appears as a governing triad. It recurs as a structural leitmotif in Bishop’s later work: one that ultimately exceeds the Horatian notion of *ut pictura poesis* as it takes on intersubjective dimensions in the complex affective economy of her epistolary poems.

Thus “The Map” prepares Bishop’s readers for the startling counterpoints of media—of text and image, melody and picture—that occur in her postcard-poem, “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress”; the triumphal letter-poem, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”; the paratactic carnival of “Letter to N. Y.”; and the ominous postcards in her analytically themed memoir, “In the Village.” Uncanny conjunctions of scene and sound, staged in the narrative frames of letter, notebook, and diaristic poems, effectively trace along the seam of the intersubjective, rendering poetic subjects that are defined increasingly by their relations with others. It is this epistolary selfhood—a poetic persona in active, ongoing receipt and delivery of messages—that informs the radical epistemology of Bishop’s late poems “In the Waiting Room” and “12 O’Clock News,” wherein the occupants of a dentist’s office and the viewers of a news broadcast live within earshot of history’s *vox humana* and the more violent images of warfare.

Marilyn Lombardi associates Bishop’s authorship of “In the Village” (pub. 1953) with the marked *volta* in Bishop’s mid-century poems, but she does not mention this story’s likely genesis in the psychoanalytic work that Bishop completed in the late-1940s.
nor the analytic themes that suffuse this narrative. Lombardi surmises: “After writing the story of her mother’s madness, personal revelations came a bit more easily for Bishop. The poet’s rapprochement with the past culminated in her last, and most personal, collection of poems” (217). While Lombardi’s observation is accurate, it tells but half the story. Relatively few critics, in fact, have investigated the reasons why Bishop began writing poems with audible historical and social resonances at the mid-century, and why she did not persist in writing neo-Modernist, obediently Moorish poems, which, in the doxology of Eliot’s objective correlative, ably achieve that “continual extinction of personality… [a] depersonalization [that] approach[es] the condition of science” (7).

James Longenbach provides one answer to this riddle of Bishop’s metamorphosis in *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (1997), in which he argues that Bishop inherited a version of Modernism virtually unfettered by New Critical restraints unlike her peers Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Randall Jarrell, who were subject to the magisterial tutelage of Allen Tate, Mark Van Doren, and John Crowe Ransom (14-21). Longenbach observes that with comparatively less anxiety of influence, Bishop was able to appropriate the Modernists’ legacy of collage, polyphony, and incorporative media without the New Critical yardsticks of helical paradox, wrought ironies, legible symbolism, and the neo-Hegelian standard of the concrete universal. Longenbach also notes that Bishop met T. S. Eliot in 1933 when she was a junior at Vassar College and interviewed him for the *Vassar College Miscellany*, and he suggests that Bishop’s subsequent essay, “Directions for a Novel,” showcases her incorporation of Eliot and Stein’s more experimental views of aesthetic possibility (22-23).
Longenbach’s historical reconnaissance fills in one lacuna in the narrative of Bishop’s development, which has become important not only for better approximations of her influential art, but also as a means of understanding the broader currents to which her mid-century peers were subject. Prior accounts of Bishop’s trajectory have not fully explained how, exactly, her poetry migrated toward the intersubjective address, psychological verisimilitude, and associative narration that defines her mature voice and acknowledged legacy in the American canon.

Ultimately, Bishop’s mid-career shift underscores the importance of para-literary technologies—specifically, the influence of the letter as a rhetorical form—in the postwar/Cold War period. I argue that poems’ postal errands of affective relay became increasingly important to Bishop’s work when a set of personal and historical crises precipitated a subtle but ramifying change in her perspective. The constitutive roles played by the letter, the psychoanalytical narrative, the notebook poem, and the travelogue become clear in Bishop’s unpublished Key West notebook and in a generic consideration of the published epistolary and notebook poems in *A Cold Spring* (1955) and *Questions of Travel* (1967). Bishop’s two spells of psychoanalysis with Dr. Ruth Foster, a New York clinician she shared with her friends Louise Crane and Thomas Wanning, seem to have facilitated Bishop’s transition to a more narrative and strategically interpersonal style in the late 1940s. The petite agonies of “I see you far away, unhappy” join the exploratory reconnaissance of the “Dear Dr. Foster” sequence to evince the centrality of the letter as a rhetorical form of intimate address and redress. Within these notebook epistles, Bishop poignantly negotiates with the ghosts of the dead,
the colorful haunt of dreams and memories, and the filial bonds binding the subject’s past-to-present.

Langdon Hammer, Betsy Erkkila, and Joanne Feit Diehl all have productively investigated Bishop’s relationship with Moore and her mid-century aesthetic from an object-relations’ perspective. Hammer, for instance, locates a Winnicottian aesthetic in Bishop’s published epistolary poems, which involve the non-climactic experiences of play and the protected space of “disengagement” that marks a secure parent-child bond (Benjamin 42).

I argue that Bishop’s epistolary relationship with Moore frames the enhanced role of the letter in Bishop’s poetic imaginary and in national culture during the Second World War. When Bishop and Moore’s connection experienced its defining crisis, the romance of the soldier’s letter was achieving its popular zenith, a phenomenon exemplified by Karl Shapiro’s *V-Letter* (1944). The polarized heteronormative roles that appear in Shapiro’s collection provide a rather dramatic example of the lettered conscription of men and women during this second debacle. Moreover Shapiro, as a suburban Petrarch dependent upon the coaching and editorial support of his fiancée, Evalyn Katz, serves as a caricature of the mentor-protégé psychodynamics of epistolary influence. His mawkish recipes of postwar romance literally line the pantry shelves and the boudoir with fantasies of abundance; they depend, moreover, on the evocation of stock “Ulysses” and “Penelope” roles that circulated in wartime propaganda, reinforcing gendered codes of expression in the psychological mobilization that accompanied both the Second World War and the first decades of the Cold War.
Bishop’s clever exploitation of such scripts in the queer valences of “Letter to N. Y.,” “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” and “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” enlivens the parodic capacities facilitated by the letter’s personae. Evincing Janet Altman’s observation that the letter serves as both masque and mirror, as a bridge and a mechanism of displacement, Bishop’s lyric letters enact the theatrics of individuation, frustrated desire, and satiric critique that reflect the poet’s maturing as a citizen, protégé, literary friend, and lover. These epistolary poems, considered in connection to Bishop’s notebook and travelogue poems, frame the conversion of experience into the “transitional object” of the poem: a structure that provides a “passage toward the awareness of otherness, toward establishing [an unhardened] boundary between inside and outside” (Benjamin 27). The letter’s carapace of intimacy (and its staging of dialogic, reciprocal privacy) grants the reader inclusion in a privileged exchange, a mutuality that can exist in the public forum of literary discourse.

In essence, Bishop’s assimilation of the letter as an extension of psychoanalytic narration, as a protected means of witnessing to imperial warfare, and as a vehicle for a queer intimacy anterior to heteronormative binaries, captures her genius for recombining traditional genres to fashion a timely poetics of tested appeal. In this project’s next iteration, a study of the letter’s role in the development of several other postwar poets will addend this consideration of Bishop. It will take as its aim an historical situation of the Middle Generation’s legacy in American poetics, adding to the critical nomenclature evolving in our belated receipt and response to this generation’s lyric letters.
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