

Rhythmic Looking: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry of Perception

Jason M. Baskin

In Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, perception is never a one-sided affair. There is a moment in the poem "Quai d'Orleans" when the speaker, fearful that leaves drifting on the water are looking back at her, wishes that "what we see could forget us half as easily ... as it does itself." In "The Armadillo," a baby rabbit emerges into view and surprises the speaker with its "fixed, ignited eyes." It is not merely the sight of an empty, sand-swept grave that "frightened" the speaker of "2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" most of all, "but the eyes of another person watching her: "in a smart burnoose Khadour looked on amused." And in "The Moose," an encounter with this "grand, otherwordly" animal provokes an unanswered question, "why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?"¹

The unsettling physical encounters—with plants, animals, humans and some fantastical forms in-between—that proliferate in Bishop's writing highlight a perceptual world constituted by the ineradicable presence of others. In these moments, perception does not merely involve an active subject and a passive object. As the "object" of perception returns the perceiver's gaze, the viewer becomes the viewed—a body that can be looked at by others who share the same world, rather than an isolated mind that surveys from above. Whether registered as pain, fear or joy, the result is a negation of the speaker's autonomy and self-sufficient authority. Bishop's poetry continually explores these negative moments of perception, which involve a precarious loss of individual

sovereignty. Yet this loss is always weighed against the emergence of a social relation based on embodied cohabitation in the world.

This essay considers the substantial connections between Bishop's poetry and the phenomenology of embodied perception developed by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to establish a new line of thinking about mid-century literary modernism. Bishop never read Merleau-Ponty, but she shared his phenomenological understanding of perception as embodied. Idealist philosophy has traditionally reduced perception to the mental processing of immediate sense data. For both Merleau-Ponty and Bishop, however, perception depends on a dimension of embodiment prior to both sensation and cognition. Embodied perception gives us the sensible world *directly* (not merely as a mental representation), but this access is only *partial*, limited by the contingencies of temporal and spatial variation, the shifts and movements of our incarnated, situated presence in a three-dimensional social world.

Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied perception illuminates Bishop's suggestion, in one of her earliest essays, that poetry is "rhythmic looking."² For Merleau-Ponty, as for Bishop, embodied perception is inherently rhythmic because it involves the same alternating play of presence and absence, action and passivity, accent and rest, as poetry. In her *ars poetica*, "The Monument," Bishop develops an aesthetics of rhythmic looking that emphasizes the blurriness and opacity of embodiment rather than the transparency of cognition. Despite its title, "The Monument" turns out not to be about a unique object; nor is it about the individual subject who sees it. Instead, Bishop's poem brings out the rhythmic, social dimension of embodiment, through which subjects relate to the world and others in it.

Recognizing the phenomenological dimension of Bishop's work has significant consequences for how we understand late modernist aesthetics. Bishop developed her poetry of perception in response to the social crises of the 1930s, which raised urgent questions about modern art's political significance. However, amid late modernist debates over engagement and autonomy, Bishop located poetry's value in its affirmation of an ontological entanglement rooted in embodiment, which can serve as the basis for new forms of social being.³

The Rhythm of Embodiment

The concept of "rhythmic looking" appears in one of three essays Bishop wrote between 1933 and 1934 on time, experience and poetic form.⁴ In these essays, Bishop explores the idea that rhythm is not simply a formal property of the poetic object—an abstraction that can be reduced to precise measurement. Rhythm is also embodied and enactive. It is a specific dimension of bodily experience, one that language also shares, and which poetic language, in particular, can access. Like physical movement—birds migrating, acrobats performing, racehorses running, a crew of oarsmen rowing, and a man executing a single tennis stroke—poetry involves "timing." "Considered in a very simple way," she explains, "[poetry] is motion too: the releasing, checking, timing and repeating of the movement of the mind according to ordered systems."⁵ For Bishop, this overarching "order" of rhythm is important because it coordinates the play of accent and rest into a durational pattern of presence and absence, and thereby allows for moments of surprise and discovery. Blanks and absences play a crucial role in a rhythmic structure because they create the space for discontinuities to arise. Bishop concludes that through its

engagement with rhythm, poetry can engage subjective experience more directly than even the radical narrative experiments of Woolf and Joyce. As a “method of looking . . . more rhythmically,” poetry can further modernist innovations—not by presenting a clearer picture of reality. Instead, poetry “blur[s]” the reader’s vision by bringing out this embodied, rhythmic dimension of experience that is punctuated by opacity, absence and discontinuity (“Dimensions,” 103, 108).

Though Bishop’s meditations on poetry and rhythm pre-date both *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, translated 1962 [PP Smith]) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964, translated 1968 [VI]), Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology helps elucidate Bishop’s idea that poetry is closely related to the “rhythmic” activity of looking. Since Descartes, modern philosophical accounts of perception have privileged cognition, reproducing the mind-body split by aligning perception with mental representation and reducing bodily experience to the immediacy of sense data. However, Merleau-Ponty argued that perception is not a fundamentally cognitive process. Rather, perception depends on a dimension of embodiment more primary than either immediate sensation (the body’s physiological response to external stimuli) or the representational act of cognition (the mental processing of physical stimuli). Pointing out that the seeing eye is in direct physical contact with the world, Merleau-Ponty speaks of “the grip of our gaze” and “a certain ‘hold’ of the phenomenal body on its surroundings” (PP Smith, 305, 311). “To the extent that I have a body,” he writes, “through that body I am at grips with the world” (PP Smith, 353). All perception marks the intertwining of body and world, the “active transcendence of consciousness . . . which carries it into a thing and into a world by means of its organs and instruments” (PP Smith, 176). Because embodiment forms the ever-

present but invisible background to conscious experience, perception always involves activity and movement. “My eyes make the world vibrate,” Merleau-Ponty notes, “without disturbing its fundamental solidity” (VI, 7). Though we rarely notice such “vibrations”—or refuse to ascribe meaning to them—they are always there, revealing perception to be a mode of participation and engagement in the world, rather than a detached or static recording of it: “My point of view is for me not so much a limitation of my experience as a way I have of infiltrating into the world in its entirety” (PP, 384).

Unlike a camera lens, the lived body does not serve as a fixed and static frame beyond which there is simply nothing. It is a point of orientation around which meanings cohere. Merleau-Ponty insists that even “what is behind my back is not without some element of visual presence” (PP Smith, 6). For, beyond both the perceiving subject and the object of perception, there is a whole world to which both belong—a world that precedes and makes possible both subjects and objects, meaning and experience. By reconceptualizing perception as an embodied action rather than an act of mental cognition or representation, Merleau-Ponty insists that perception is always to some extent “blurred” by the irreducible thickness of this spatial and temporal world we inhabit (PP Smith, 338). Just as perception unfolds temporally (through duration) and spatially (in depth), it also unfolds intersubjectively. My gaze intersects, though it never aligns with, the gazes of others who inhabit the same world. Embodiment is not subjective but social, shared—the embodied subject is a part of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “intermundane space (*l’intermonde*)” of the perceived world (VI, 48). This is why Merleau-Ponty insists that “I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, not that I perceive” (PP Smith, 250). The

perceiving subject is not “I,” but an anonymous, social “we” or “one” (in French, the pronoun *on*).

Therefore, there is no such thing as the ideal, static view, such as a photograph appears to give. The presence of the world in embodied perception is immediate, but at the same time distanced, dispersed. Embodied perception necessarily includes the “indeterminate presence” of what can’t be seen directly: “There occurs an indeterminate vision, a vision of I do not know what ... [which] is not without some element of visual presence” (*PP Smith*, 6-7). If the eye itself is part of the field of vision, one never sees an object from all sides at once, but always from a particular perspective. Thus, what one sees depends on what cannot be seen. Traditional accounts of perception, including even Edmund Husserl’s, insist that these gaps are irrelevant, simple absences that cognition can overcome.⁶ Given enough time, presumably, one could move around the object and accrue enough data to ‘see it whole.’ Yet in order to summarize this discrepant data, one would still somehow have to transcend, via God or mind, the situated nature of embodied experience.

For Merleau-Ponty, such a view from nowhere is impossible, a residue of “high-altitude thinking” (e.g. *VI*, 88). This is why he insists, however paradoxically, that these gaps are not simply absences, but a specific form of “indeterminate presence” within the field of vision. In other words, they “count in the world” (*VI*, 228), as a rest does in a musical score. Whereas for the idealist philosopher, these gaps are simply “non-visible,” something not-yet-seen, for Merleau-Ponty, however, the structure of embodied perception includes the immanent and constitutive negativity of the “invisible” as a presence in the visible world, lurking “behind the visible...as another dimension” (*VI*

228). Because embodied perception involves this essential negativity, it contains a “dimension of indeterminacy or retreat” that is rhythmic.⁷ The “object” thus never attains the stability or determinacy that traditional accounts of perception have assumed, and indeed which our everyday experience seems to confirm. Embodied perception is fundamentally non-coincident, structured by the patterned play of presence and absence.⁸

Along the same lines, Bishop characterizes perception as an anxiously (but also joyfully) indeterminate “interstitial situation” that produces only “oblique realities that give one pause, that glance off a larger reality” (“KWN” 2, 189).⁹ The “pause” Bishop evokes here is the mark of a non-coincident, rhythmic temporality accented with irregularities. In her notebook, Bishop presents the following scene of apprehension, offering a brief account of what happens when we see rhythmically—not only with the mind’s eye, so to speak, but with the whole lived body:

I see the man hammer, over at Toppino’s (or saw him chopping wood at Lockeport) then hear the sound, see him, then hear him, etc. The eye and ear compete, trying to draw them together, to a ‘photo finish’ so to speak ... Nothing comes out quite right (“KWN” 2, 189).

Unable or unwilling to arrest the object in a single, determinate moment, Bishop’s embodied, “rhythmic looking” recovers what Merleau-Ponty calls the “living cohesion” (*PP* Smith, 447) of experience as it occurs in time, wonderfully evoked here by the metaphor of a race (“photo finish”). But photography is ultimately not the right metaphor, because the rhythmic cohesion of perception is always “oblique”—never a stable whole but non-coincident or, as Bishop puts it, “perfectly off-beat” (“The Bight,” *CP* 60).

Thus, even though the object of perception remains singular, Bishop's embodied, rhythmic view is split into two senses (sight and hearing), two tenses (see, saw) and two locations in space (Toppino's, Lockeport). It is striking that for all this distracting and distorting doubling in which "nothing comes out quite right," there is still a unity of process that occurs alongside but is irreducible to—and, to follow Bishop's metaphor, "competes" with—the illusion of synthesis achieved by a photograph. The passage's rhythmic repetitions unite into a dynamic counterpoint. They invoke and elaborate each other, just as the playful mixing of tenses ("see"/"saw") blend together into a continuously alternating, up-and-down motion. But they never settle into a permanent equilibrium. Instead of the death-like stillness of a photograph, which can only seem like "reality" if we accept a cognitive model of perception, Bishop's related but ever-separate views constitute a rhythm—located in the sensing body—a cohesion united in an active dynamic of perception that never "quite" synthesizes into a single object. Bishop suggests that perception consists in a never-ending balancing act (hence, the pun on see-saw) in which something always remains unstable, unseen, and spurs one on to keep looking.¹⁰ Embodied perception, like the continual rhythmic movement of a seesaw, necessitates unevenness and incompleteness; perfect balance, by contrast, would result not in clear vision, but stasis, blindness, death.

The objects and images that pervade Bishop's poetry are thus not presented clearly, as are objects of mental reflection, but "blur[red]," as she put it in her early essays, by the opacity of embodied experience ("Dimensions," 108). In a letter to a poet Anne Stevenson, Bishop emphasizes the unseen or invisible remainder of perception, on

which visibility depends. She suggests that a poetry of rhythmic looking is important because it establishes a social relation, which she hesitantly calls “empathy.”

Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never see full-face but that seems enormously important.¹¹

Many critics cite this passage as evidence that Bishop’s visual poetry expresses a devotion to recognizing and identifying figures of otherness that remain marginal to dominant ways of seeing and the hierarchical structures they enforce.¹² Yet, Bishop actually emphasizes the *impossibility* of identification and recognition. Her aim is not to bring the previously unobserved, marginalized figure into view: these “peripheral” figures, she says, will “never” be seen “full-face.” Some aspect of the visible will always exceed one’s view of it.

Reading Bishop alongside Merleau-Ponty clarifies Bishop’s hesitation with the term “empathy”: the element of identification it implies undermines the fundamental opacity of perception, which is crucial to her understanding of poetry. Always rhythmic and “interstitial,” perception is not a mode of recognition or identification, both acts of consciousness predicated on mental representation: after all, “nothing comes out quite right.” Rather, it is an embodied act carried out in a whole spatial, temporal and social world. This means that perception always leaves something more to be seen. The inability to see the world “full-face” is not a failure, though it might feel like one. Rather, it is constitutive of embodied experience. Bishop understands poetry’s inability to get a clear view of its object to be the very reason for its unique importance. Poetry draws

attention to the limits and opacities of perception, which direct consequences of the fact that perception is embodied: it takes place in a social world constituted by the presence of others.

Watching Closely

Rightly construed as one of Bishop's most definitive artistic statements, "The Monument" represents the culmination of Bishop's early ideas about poetry and perception. One of several poems from her first volume *North & South* (including "The Fish," "Quai d'Orleans" and "Florida") that sympathetically portray an abject or "homely" object (*CP*, 42), "The Monument" has often been read an egalitarian repudiation of high modernism's cloistered elitism.¹³ I suggest here, however, that such readings simplify Bishop's relation to modernism by failing to grasp the phenomenological framework of her poetry of perception, which does not offer identification with marginal figures but rather probes the limits of perception in order to uncover the social dimension of embodiment.

The poem presents a decaying but visually arresting object as seen from a split perspective of two distinct observers. The first is a knowing, pedagogical character, the second a dubious, inquisitive one. Initially, in a long description offered by the first speaker, the monument appears a solid, visually overwhelming, indeed disorienting, presence: "Now can you see the monument? It is of wood/built somewhat like a box. No. Built/like several boxes in descending sizes one above the other" (*CP*, 23). In a neutral tone of disinterested certitude, the speaker describes the object carefully (taking time to correct herself) and with the eye for detail generally characteristic of Bishop's poetry. Marked by jarring enjambments (built / like, sides / of) and a confusing accumulation of

visual details, the lines establish a subdued, halting rhythm that is subordinated to the speaker's main goal of presenting an accurate visual account of the object. This objective descriptive is interrupted by the second speaker's seemingly irrelevant questions (““Why does that strange sea make no sound? / Is it because we're far away? / Where are we?””) and dismissive judgments (““It's like a stage set; it is all so flat! /...It's piled-up boxes ... cracked and unpainted. It looks old.””). The first speaker can only reply by drawing attention to the “conditions of its [the monument's] existence”: “the strong sunlight, the wind from the sea.” Over the course of the poem, the object is ultimately located within a larger temporal and physical environment that conditions not only the monument itself, but the speakers' view of it as well. ““I am tired of breathing this eroded air,”” the second speaker complains, ““this dryness in which the monument is cracking”” (*CP*, 24).

By the last stanza, the monument is no longer a visually overwhelming presence that can be objectively described. Ultimately, perception does not reveal the object more clearly. Rather, the monument becomes “nothing at all” (*CP*, 24)—not a concrete object but what Merleau-Ponty calls an “indeterminate presence.” Thus, by contrast to the long visual description with which the poem begins, the poem's final lines offer little concrete description:

The monument's an object, yet those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;
wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.
The crudest scroll-work says “commemorate,”
while once each day the light goes around it

like a prowling animal,

or the rain falls on it, or the wind blows into it (*CP*, 24).

These lines dissolve the monument's objective presence through a stylistic and tonal shift. Unlike the first speaker's earlier disinterested certitude, on the one hand, and the second speaker's bewildered enthusiasm on the other, this final stanza approaches a new voice, assured amidst uncertainty. Unlike the uncomfortable, halting rhythms of the opening stanza, the final stanza builds on syntactic repetition to gently propel the reader forward, as if physically traversing space. In contrast to the poem's static opening lines, these swarm with verbs of motion. Playing past and present verb forms against each other, as in the "see-saw" fragment discussed earlier, Bishop nevertheless frames the long series of active verbs (chose, give, goes, falls, blows) with two pointed uses of "is" in the first and penultimate sentences of the stanza: "it is an artifact / of wood ... It is the beginning of." Yet by the end of the poem, the copula no longer refers to an object but an ongoing temporal process. The opposition of verb forms lends the passage a sense of finality and determination that emerges directly from the internal indeterminacy (the gaps and absences) of the visual experience that the poem foregrounds. Here as elsewhere in Bishop's work, perhaps most notably her elegy "One Art," poetry's success (its achievement of formal completion) is inextricable from a certain failure—or better, its refusal—to present the world as a set of determinate objects which the individual subject can possess.

In "The Monument," the poem's visual failure is a direct result of the speaker's recognition of a certain excess: the larger environment—the light, wind and rain—that conditions the object's visibility but cannot itself be brought completely into view. These

environmental conditions are not a collection of discrete objects simply added to the monument or seen alongside it. Rather, as the active verbs highlight, they constitute a whole world that both subject and object inhabit. The speakers have already registered their effects, but only indirectly, as they feel them on their bodies (“I am tired”), or notice them in the subtle physical changes marked on the monument’s surface (“shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off, cracked and unpainted. It looks old”). Enveloping the object, this environment creates the conditions of visibility at the same time as it obscures some part of the object. The speakers no longer “see” the object by itself, as in the first stanza, but perceive it according to the irregular rhythms of a temporally unfolding process (“light goes,” “rain falls,” the “wind blows”) in which they also participate, with their entire bodies. We are, as the first speaker notes, “far away within the view.”

Because it takes place in a whole world, embodied perception necessarily entails the lack of visibility that accompanies one’s situated, incarnated presence. No matter how clearly one sees, in the act of embodied perception the “object” is never fully present; it never attains “full determination.”¹⁴ While the opening description of the monument emphasized its overwhelming visual presence, the final descriptive detail the poem offers is not simply seen—indeed, by now the monument “look[s] like nothing at all.” This detail is also heard: “the crudest scroll-work says ‘commemorate.’” This line enacts the concluding stanza’s most striking, if subtle, reversal of the poem’s earlier emphasis on visual presence. The word “says” not only implies the object’s animation—we are told in the previous line that it appears to “hav[e] life”—but the shift here away from the overwhelmingly visual to include the aural as well foregrounds the embodied, rhythmic dimension that is always present in perception, though it is denied by traditional idealist

accounts. Indeed, Bishop's idiomatic use of "says" to imply both vision and hearing resonates with Merleau-Ponty's unique understanding of all perception as synaesthetic because it always involves the entire body. Because hearing entails a physical proximity that inherited notions of the nobility of vision lead us to ignore, this call to collective remembrance (com-memorate) is the moment when the poem articulates the idea of rhythmic looking most dramatically.¹⁵ Perception appears to offer a detached recording of the world, but in fact it depends on the rhythmic dimension of embodiment through which the subject is fundamentally entangled with the world. As the final line of the poem suggests, perception always involves an element of physical proximity: "Watch it closely."

As the speaker registers this relation between themselves and the object, she draws attention to a previously unnoticed absence, which inspires the aforementioned command, or invitation, to remember together (commemorate):

It may be solid, may be hollow.
The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.
But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen) (*CP* 25).

Here, Bishop's predatory metaphor for the movement of light on the monument's surface ("like a prowling animal") becomes significant: the monument asks its beholders to commemorate not someone else's death so much as a shared vulnerability to and immersion in time. Because attention depends on physical co-presence within the world,

the rhythmic experience of perception is never an experience of fullness or complete, timeless presence but rather of our finitude—the second speaker’s “tired” breath or the “mortal / mortal fatigue” Bishop speaks of in the poem “Anaphora” (*CP* 52). Explicitly linked, now, to the act of mourning, the poem’s final command to “watch closely” (*CP*, 24) attains an elegiac force absent from the speaker’s earlier exhortation to “see.” Bishop hints here at a point she makes explicit in a later essay on Marianne Moore: the word “observation” partakes of the “ritualistic solemnity” of “observance.”¹⁶

Understood as the result of just such a ritualistic “observance,” the monument’s value no longer lies in its purely visual details. The last of these visual details (the “crudest scroll-work”) is presented as a rhythmic and aural, and thus more immediately physical, “call” to (or re-“call” of) the subject’s relation to others in the world. This social dimension of embodiment is occluded by individualist accounts of experience as the immediate and full self-presence of an object to a subject—a self-presence that the poem’s visual indetermination ultimately dissolves. Though Bishop highlights the monument’s objective, artifactual quality and its endurance through time—“wood holds together better / than sea or cloud or sand”—she ultimately locates its meaning elsewhere, in the relation established through the embodied experience of perception.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Bishop recognizes that the encounter between subject and object is not the most important aspect of perceptual experience. Indeed, the traditional (Cartesian) separation of subject from object misses the rhythmical structure of exchange (of call and response) that, like the “see/saw” of Bishop’s contemporaneous fragment, “balances” subjects and objects within the medium of the temporal world.¹⁷ For this reason, the monument is ultimately both more and less than an object, and the speaker’s

injunction to “watch closely” addresses not a specific person (the speaker’s skeptical interlocutor), but anyone at all: the anonymous, social subject of embodied perception, the impersonal “one” that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “perceives in me” (*PP* Smith, 250).

It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely (*CP*, 25).

The object establishes a relation, just as a rhythm or melody, once heard, is picked up unconsciously by one’s body and repeated in one’s mind. This is a relation that the poem, which in these final lines signals its status as an *ars poetica*, now presents not in terms of poetry specifically, but in terms of aesthetic activity more generally (“a painting, / a piece of sculpture...”). Likewise, the “poet’s proper material,” as Bishop remarks elsewhere, is not objective reality, nor her subjective consciousness or even imagination. It is her innate perceptual apparatus: the bodily capacity for “immediate intense physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything.”¹⁸

This invocation of perception, I have been arguing, can only be properly understood phenomenologically, as a reference to what Merleau-Ponty identifies as the living body’s unconscious, “grip” on the world (*PP* Smith, 305). In a note written around the same time she began composing “The Monument,” Bishop compared art to the living body’s direct engagement with the world: “form of art—an artificiality we lay over the world as [we] prepare to grasp it—taking a cloth to unscrew a bottle-cap.”¹⁹ Rather than identifying an object to be valued for its heroic resistance to the world surrounding it, “The Monument” underscores the “invisible,” rhythmic dimension of embodiment that transcends the individualizing categories of philosophical rationalism in order to relate

the living subject to the world and others in it. In conclusion, I will show that this phenomenological aesthetic of perception represents an important intervention in mid-century debates over the politics of modernism.

Unconscious Spots

In “The Monument,” Bishop rejects the notion that the work of art is valuable because it is a special kind of object, one that exists apart from the world inhabited by the perceiver. Though typically associated with modernism as a whole, this idea that the work of art exists apart from lived experience becomes prominent in the mid-century decades, initially arising as a characteristic late modernist response to the social and political turmoil of the 1930s.²⁰ This period saw a broad turn to realist and documentary modes across the arts, exemplified by writers such as John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Muriel Rukeyser and Richard Wright, who sought to directly address the pressing social realities of the moment. By contrast, late modernists like Clement Greenberg, and the writers associated with the journal *Partisan Review*, argued that modern art represented a source of social value precisely in its freedom from determination by society and history. Bishop, however, advocated neither political engagement nor autonomy.²¹ She located art’s importance in its potential to highlight the “invisible,” social dimension of embodiment that makes lived experience possible in the first place.

As a young poet beginning her writing career, Bishop was acutely conscious of debates over modernism’s politics and entered them often, if hesitatingly and indirectly, mostly in private writings rather than in public forums.²² Indeed, Bishop began “The Monument” in response to the controversy surrounding Wallace Stevens’s *Owl’s Clover*

(1936), in which the eminent modernist explicitly defended poetry against left-wing critics. This volume stirred particular controversy because, in a section of the volume's title poem, Stevens directly confronts (by name) the critic Stanley Burnshaw, who had penned a negative review of Stevens's collection *Ideas of Order* in the left-wing magazine *New Masses* a year earlier.²³ Other writers attacked Stevens's representation of Burnshaw, and Moore defended Stevens's work in turn. She praised Stevens's imaginative "conjuries," and suggested that rather than give in to the "actualities of experience," modern art is valuable precisely because it "endures" within the margins of a broken society: "So long as we are ashamed of the ironic feast and of our marble victories—horses or men—which will break unless they are first broken by us, there is hope for the world." For Moore, Stevens's poems "embody hope that in being frustrated becomes fortitude."²⁴

Although Bishop deeply admired and personally depended on Moore, the famously reticent young poet nevertheless must have felt strongly enough to differ with her mentor. In a letter to Moore, Bishop offers what she considers to be a "more simple and 'popular'" response, suggesting that Stevens was "confessing the failure of such art ... to reach the lives of the unhappiest people, and the possibility of a change—of something new arising from the unhappiness."²⁵ While she appears self-deprecating in describing her thoughts as "simple and 'popular,'" she nevertheless marks a clear distance from Moore. Bishop's statement begins from a cold-eyed recognition of the necessary "failure" of modern art to improve people's material existence. Whereas Moore's reading rests secure, ultimately, in the value of an "ironic," "frustrated" art that opposes itself to "the actualities of experience," Bishop prioritizes the "lives of the

unhappiest people” above the heroic ambitions of advanced art. She affirms art’s social importance, but this affirmation is both more robust and more precarious than Moore’s: its positive moment (“change” “something new”) is optimistically marked, yet merely left open, unspecified, even absent—a negative “possibility” rather than the dependable fact of Moore’s “fortitude.” If Moore affirms the potential for the “broken” monuments of modernism to endure amid historical turmoil, Bishop suggests that a more transformative possibility can emerge, but only after a concession of art’s actual limitations.

While it is possible to dismiss the pointed absence in Bishop’s argument as a gap in a young poet’s thinking—a symptom, perhaps, of her chronically hesitant nature (or a reason for it)—for a poet with Bishop’s particular technical obsession with precision and reticence, this absence deserves more serious attention. Indeed, absence takes on a greater significance in another, separate response to Stevens’s work, which Bishop did not share with Moore, but recorded in her journal alongside a sketch of what would become the final lines to “The Monument.” Here Bishop relates her disagreement with Moore to her emerging poetics of rhythmic looking. Frustrated by Stevens’s “self-consciousness,” Bishop asserts that “poetry should have more of the unconscious spots left in”: poetry as “self-aware” as Stevens’s, she claims, “lacks depth” (“KWN” I, 89). These “unconscious spots” are precisely the rhythmic discontinuities that mark the limits of cognition and reveal perception as embodied participation in the world. They uncover, albeit indirectly, the social dimension of even “individual” experience.

Bishop’s critique of Stevens’s lack of “depth” picks up on what Merleau-Ponty calls “the originality of depth” (*PP* Smith, 308), which ultimately characterizes embodied experience as social, rather than individual. Unlike other dimensions, Merleau-Ponty

argues, depth opens us to a whole world. We cannot measure out depth like we do length and breadth. To translate depth into another dimension would require an aerial view that somehow overcomes our incarnated and situated presence in the world. Our embodied perception, by contrast, is constituted by “this opacity and this depth, which never cease” (VI, 77). Irreducible to a two-dimensional, geometrical flatness, the world is a three-dimensional, social environment that one explores but never exhausts. The “originality of depth” is crucial because it discloses the “indissoluble link between things and myself” that makes perception possible, revealing the viewer to be actively “involved” in the world rather than a detached observer (*PP Smith*, 308, 298, 311). Depth is therefore the source of the “tacit sense of belonging” that comes with one’s presence in a lived world that includes other points of view.²⁶ The moments of negativity that constitute embodied perception—the “unconscious spots” Bishop missed in Stevens’s poems—are the products of a the three-dimensional, cohabitational structure of a world constituted by the always unsettling presence of others, the “single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception” (VI, 83; *PP Smith*, 411).

This link between sociality and the depth of embodied experience highlights the connection between Bishop’s critiques of Stevens and Moore, which ultimately come together in “The Monument.”²⁷ That poem’s central shift—from the clear, visual presentation of the object to a rhythmic announcement of a collective remembrance (“commemoration”)—depends on the revelation of the object’s previously hidden depth, the speakers’ recognition that the monument has an “inside.” Only by shifting emphasis away from the work of art’s status as a unique object—a monument, for Moore, of

heroic, enduring value—can the rhythmic emergence of perceptual “depth” become the basis for an unreflective and embodied (in Bishop’s terms, “unconscious”) social relation.

Bishop’s statements about Stevens in her notebook—his poem’s lack of both “depth” and “unconscious spots”—directly signal the importance of the embodied aesthetic of rhythmic looking articulated in that poem. A few pages later in the same notebook where she had commented on Stevens’s work, and in language that clearly echoes her letter to Moore (the indeterminate “possibility of change, of *something* new arising from the unhappiness”, [my italics]), Bishop included an initial sketch of what would later become the ending to “The Monument”:

This is the beginning of a painting

a piece of statuary, or a poem,

or the beginning of a monument.

Suddenly it will become something.

Suddenly it will become everything. (“KWN” 1, 100)

“The Monument” rejects the idea underpinning Moore’s defense of modern poetry: that the aesthetic object attains a social value through its separation from the world. Bishop does not grant art this absolute autonomy. Instead, she posits that out of aesthetic experience, a previously unknown capacity for sociality emerges. Art contributes to this capacity through its aesthetic form, but not because the work of art is more valuable than that of a valueless society, as Moore suggests. Rather, poetry loosens the mind’s hold on experience and brings out a form of embodied, social connection that is not immediately available in ordinary lived experience.

This is why her monument ends up “looking like nothing at all,” and why a painting in one of her last works, another *ars poetica* entitled “Poem,” is “useless and free,” even though it is “about the size of an old-style dollar bill” (*CP* 176), and why, when compared with life, poetry itself, as she insisted to her friend Robert Lowell, “*just isn’t worth that much.*”²⁸ Bishop’s poetry of perception resists all figures of objective value, including the governing abstraction of the “dollar bill,” because perception is no one’s product or possession; or, rather, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, it is the product only of the “anonymous,” social subject of embodiment. Bishop’s poetry risks the acknowledgment—“risks” because it cannot be proven—that another mode of relationality persists, though we are unable to bring it into view. Affirming this possibility in spite of its uncertainty—the impossibility of grounding it in discourse or representation—necessitates what Bishop calls an “earthly trust.” Although it remains uncertain and ultimately un-grounded, this agreement or covenant is something one establishes, risks and observes every day, without knowing it: it is “our abidance” in the world (*CP* 177).

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 28, 108, 54. Hereafter cited as *CP*.

² Elizabeth Bishop, “Dimensions for a Novel,” *Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies* (May 1934): 103. Hereafter cited as “Dimensions.”

³ For a fuller account of this mid-century “aesthetics of embodiment,” see Jason M. Baskin, *Embodying Experience: Modernism Beyond the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ These are “Time’s Andromedas,” *Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies* 7 (1933), “Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry,” *Vassar Review* 23 (February 1934): 5-7 and “Dimensions for a Novel.”

⁵ Bishop, “Gerard Manley Hopkins,” 5.

⁶ On the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s differences with Husserl on this point, see Sean Dorrance Kelly, “Seeing Things” in Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, ed. *The Cambridge*

Companion to Merleau-Ponty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 79-81, and Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: An Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006), 35.

⁷ See Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*, 73-74.

⁸ I borrow this concept of “non-coincidence” from Jennifer Wiskus. See *The Rhythm of Thought: Art Literature and Music after Merleau-Ponty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2013), 116.

⁹ “Key West Notebook 2” in *The Elizabeth Bishop Papers, 1925-1979*. Series VII, Folder 75, 189. Vassar College Library Archives and Special Collections, Poughkeepsie, NY. Hereafter cited in the text as “KWN” 2.

¹⁰ In her early writing on rhythm, Bishop defines it as “a motion between two things and a balancing of them.” See “Dimensions,” 103.

¹¹ Quoted in Anne Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Twayne, 1966), 66.

¹² See Adrienne Rich’s influential essay on Bishop, “The Eye of the Outsider,” *Boston Review* (April 1983). For important extensions and adaptations of Rich’s argument within the context of poststructuralism and feminism, see *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993).

¹³ See, for instance, Betsy Erkkila, “Elizabeth Bishop, Modernism and the Left” *American Literary History* 8.2 (Summer 1996): 284-310 and John Lowney, *History, Memory and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry 1935-1968* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 67-98.

¹⁴ Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*, 74.

¹⁵ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 100-101.

¹⁶ “Although the tone is frequently light or ironic the total effect is of such a ritualistic solemnity that I feel in reading [Moore] one should constantly bear in mind the secondary and frequently somber meaning of the title of her first book: *Observations*.” Elizabeth Bishop, “As We Like It: Miss Moore and the Delight of Imitation,” in *Elizabeth Bishop: Complete Poems, Prose and Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 683.

¹⁷ On the separation of subject and object in traditional philosophy, see Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought*, pg. 16.

¹⁸ Quoted in Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁹ “Key West Notebook 1” in *The Elizabeth Bishop Papers, 1925-1979*. Series VII, Folder 75, 95. Hereafter cited in the text as “KWN” 1.

²⁰ See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: An Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2003), 162-179.

²¹ Recent critics have argued that the longstanding divide between realism and modernism is not the best way to understand the literary history of the 1930s. See, for instance, Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), Tyrus Miller, “Documentary/Modernism: Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s,” *Modernism/Modernity*, 9.2 (April 2002): 226-241, and Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

²² See James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapters 2 and 3; John Palattella, “‘That Constant Sense of Re-adjustment’: The Great Depression and the Provisional Politics of Elizabeth Bishop’s *North & South*,” *Contemporary Literature* 34.1 (1993): 18-43; Betsy Erkkila, “Elizabeth Bishop, Modernism and the Left” and John Lowney, *History, Memory and the Literary Left*.

²³ The back-and-forth between Burnshaw and Stevens is thoroughly documented and analyzed in Alan Filreis, *Modernism From Right to Left* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and

James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 135-148.

²⁴ Marianne Moore, "Conjurings That Endure," in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia Willis (New York: Penguin, 1986), 349.

²⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 48.

²⁶ William Connolly, "Materialities of Experience," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, ed. Samantha Frost and Diana Coole (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 192-3.

²⁷ For alternative readings of Bishop's comments on Stevens, see Barbara Page, "Off-Beat Claves, Oblique Realities: The Key West Notebooks of Elizabeth Bishop," in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*, ed. Marilyn May Lombardi, and Peggy Samuels, *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 9-10.

²⁸ Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 708.